

ABSTRACT

A Conflict of Interests

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This collection of fictional short stories relates the experiences of three different soldiers serving in the Afghanistan War. Each story takes a glimpse not only into their time in Afghanistan, but also into the situations and motivations which brought them into the military in the first place. This collection aims to explore how a wide variety of motivations can appear even in similar circumstances, and how different family backgrounds, experiences, and personal values continuously influences an individual's perspective on important events.

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PERSONAL REFLECTION

When I was in high school, one of the youth pastors in my church's student ministry opened his sermon with something that's always stuck with me. "We're living in a me-centered society," he said. "Just look at Apple. iPod, iPhone, iMac, iPad, iTunes, everything is 'I'. Everything is about me."

I don't really remember what the rest of that specific sermon was about. I'm sure it was something important to me at the time, because I remember thinking back on the sermon a lot. However, after nearly five years, that little piece of the sermon is all that I can still recall. I remember it word for word because it held such a profound effect on the way I thought and viewed people. Like I had been staring at this small painting of a flower for my entire life until I was forced to step backwards, and then saw that single flower was actually a part of an entire painted landscape. Even now, my pastor's statement continues to influence my worldview.

I can't deny that what he said is true. From personal experience, I've found that our society as a whole can often be self-focused and unwilling to consider the point of views of others. We make blogs and vlogs, post selfies, update our Facebook relationships, tweet about our lunch. Even on social media sites like Tumblr and Pinterest, which aren't as conducive to sharing our personal thoughts to the world, we still reblog and pin posts that reflect our interests until our personal pages act as vivid snapshots of who we are and how we think without using a single word. And we only briefly consider—if we consider at all—whether that Facebook post complaining about boring classes, or that tweet about the

amazing lunch we just ate are just as important to everyone else as they are to us. We just kind of assume.

I myself am guilty of this. Even as I write this thesis, I'm constantly checking and updating both my Facebook and Twitter, mostly with my own complaints and worries that I'm pretty sure most of my friends are ignoring, just like how I ignore their updates as well.

I don't think this is an inherently bad thing. It's important for us to know who we are as individuals, what we think and feel and desire. It's even more important for us to have confidence in who we are and not be afraid to express our thoughts. Websites such as Facebook and Twitter and Youtube create platforms for individuals to share their point of view with the rest of the world. The trouble, I believe, comes with our tendency to consume other points of view but not truly digest them, or understand the reasoning behind them. And not just with social media, but also with current events in the news, characters and plots within books, political decisions, religious decisions, cultural decisions, interests and hobbies, and even with comments made in one-on-one conversations. It was surprising to me, in making observations for this thesis, how often the people I talked with, even in speaking about mutual friends, made assumptions about another person's situation based on their *own* mental image of the person rather than on who the person actually is, or how that person might view the situation. There was often a large gap in perspectives which created a lot of misunderstandings.

Because of this, my goal in writing my thesis became centered around the idea of perspectives and how individual circumstances might influence differences in how a situation could be viewed. Originally, I was planning to explore this idea through a novella length story, which more closely aligns to my preferred length of writing than short stories

do. However, in trying to craft a story that might fully explore a multitude of perspectives based on experiences and backgrounds of various characters, I began to think that writing a series of short stories, each focused on a different character, might be more effective for what I wanted to present than a single novella. The short stories would allow me more freedom to deeply delve into the mind of each character and draw out their motivations and influences for the readers, which was my goal.

Once I had completely decided on the form my thesis would take, I started considering which setting and characters would be best for my purpose. I knew I wanted all of the short stories to be connected through a similar situation, if not the exact same situation, but it took me a while to figure out what that might be. Most of my first ideas were normal experiences that anyone might find themselves in, but I couldn't narrow the focus of the experiences enough to create the compelling story I hoped for. I then considered exploring different types of romantic relationships for a while, before switching my thoughts toward the experiences of various Christian martyrs in different areas of the world. Neither of these were what I was hoping for, however. Both felt too limiting for the character exploration I was aiming for. Instead, I needed a specific situation, preferably modern, that involved people of all different backgrounds. What my mind finally settled on was the war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

My original thoughts with this idea were still too broad for what I wanted, though it took a long time for me to hem the focus of the short stories into what they are now. At first, I had split the short stories up to catalogue the experiences of people in vastly different situations during the war, including their vastly different ages. One of my first characters was a mother whose father had died fighting in the Vietnam War, and who was now

watching her own son sign up to be a part of the Afghanistan War. I contrasted her story with that of a young Muslim girl living in America when the war breaks out, and then with the story of a soldier in Afghanistan who had lost his father to the attacks of September 11th. Each of these original three stories focused on the character's feelings toward the war, whether they were in support of it, like the soldier, or were against it, like the woman, and it was *almost* what I wanted. But after more thought, I wasn't satisfied with completely different their situations were. I wanted to explore how even people of similar age in the exact same situation could have perspectives just as varied as those in diverse situations. Certain points of view are not limited to specific ages or groups of people, and a soldier fighting in Afghanistan could be just as against the war as a woman who had seen the destruction of the Vietnam War decades before. Perhaps the two soldiers sitting side by side in their Humvee enlisted in the military for personal reasons, or perhaps out of a sense of duty, or because it was the only job option available to them.

Motivations for something as significant as war are never black and white. They aren't even grey. They're an entire spectrum of colors, some more vibrant than others. And sometimes the motivations of people can be so different that their colors never even overlap, despite living in close proximity to each other in harsh circumstances.

What I am presenting to you in this thesis after this long process of discovery are the stories of three different soldiers in the same troop in Afghanistan: Sergeant Michael Reed, Sergeant Beverly Wells, and Specialist Luis Ramirez.

Sergeant Michael Reed's story is perhaps the most personally motivated of the three soldiers, in that the war holds a very strong, very personal meaning to him. Like so many people, Michael's life was dramatically changed by the attacks of September 11th. He loses

family members to the destruction through their work as firefighters. This leaves Michael feeling very lost and very bitter, and he enlists in the military in order to get justice for their deaths.

I chose to write this story and to place it first in the collection because this was a feeling that many Americans had in the direct aftermath of the tragedy and the beginning of the war. For valid reasons. Many survivor stories of the September 11th attacks speak of the chaos and the destruction that came without any warning on an otherwise normal day. In the personal account of Michael Wright, a thirty year old account executive who had been on the 81st floor of the World Trade Center when the planes hit, he recalls seeing dead bodies everywhere on the mezzanine level of the World Trade Center and hearing the crack of the building beside his as it started coming down. He recalls getting free of the debris, covered in ash and blood, to run through the cloud of smoke and dust until the air started clearing up, seeing his building in flames, and then hearing another crack as it also crashed. “I stood there thinking, It doesn't make sense,” he says¹.

The same thought is echoed in the many first-hand accounts of survivors and witnesses across the internet, including the survivor stories in the Voices of September 11th Living Memorial collection. Brendan Chellis, who was lucky enough to be just outside the lobby of the World Trade Center when the first plane hit, describes the chaos of the streets in his account, of how people were almost trampled in trying to get away from the falling debris after the second crash and the despair of witnesses at seeing the first tower fall. “I saw the dust cloud about 30 stories tall squeezing down every street in Lower Manhattan.

¹ Michael Wright, "My Escape From the 81st Floor of the World Trade Center," *Esquire*, September 2015, accessed August 26, 2015, <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/interviews/a2038/esq0102-jan-wtc-rev/>.

I was thinking that anybody in the path of that thing was probably going to suffocate,” he writes, seeing the destruction from far away². It was the same cloud of smoke which Michael Wright had to run through as he escaped the tower, and almost all survivor stories include some mention of this smoke which spread over the city after the fall of the tower. Brendan Chellis’s account perfectly puts into words the emotions that so many people must have felt on that tragic day:

“As I saw the mass of refugees crossing the bridge and the destruction in the background, I just couldn’t believe what I was looking at. This was something we had seen in newspapers and on TV our entire lives going on in other countries around the world. People escaping from war, misery. And today September 11, 2001, the invisible shield which protected us from all the evil things that went on in other places around the globe was gone. War had come to New York City. And nobody even saw it coming.”³

The attacks on September 11th killed 2,977 people in total, 2,753 of whom were in New York⁴. Of those killed, 343 were firefighters of the New York City Fire Department who first responded to the attacks and saved thousands of people from the World Trade Center buildings⁵. They died in order to save the lives of civilians who never should have been in danger in the first place, but still came under attack by extremist members of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. It ignited the anger of the American public, who wanted justice for all of the innocent lives stolen in the attacks. I attempted to incorporate these feelings into Sergeant Michael Reed’s story and to explore how that anger might manifest itself when brought face-to-face with suspected Taliban members.

² Brendan Chellis, “9/11,” Voices of September 11th, May 29, 2015, accessed August 20, 2015, <http://livingmemorial.voicesofseptember11.org/911-stories/911-submitted-brendan-chellis>.

³ Brendan Chellis, “9/11,” Voices of September 11th.

⁴ “FAQ About 9/11,” 9/11 Memorial, accessed August 15, 2015.

⁵ Dean E. Murphy, “Honoring the Rescuers,” *The New York Times*, September 2001, accessed August 19, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/library/national/091101rescuers.html>.

Compared to Michael, the story of Sergeant Beverly Wells isn't as personally attached to the war, save for her older brother's service in the military and her own eventual enlistment. It's personally motivated in a different way, based more around her personal identity as a strong-willed female raised in a more traditional, agrarian family in Oklahoma.

Up until the law was repealed in 2013, women were not allowed to serve in combat roles in the military, though they were allowed to serve in such roles as gathering intelligence, operating vehicles, medics, field artillery officers, combat pilots, and special operations civil affairs officers. An estimated 300,000 women have served in Afghanistan and Iraq since the start of the war, many of them serving on the front lines despite the official ban⁶. However, women are still looked down on compared to their fellow male soldiers, even today. Women are allowed into combat roles if they meet the physical same requirements as men, though the requirements don't take into account the physical differences in male and female anatomy which make some exercises, such as pushups and ruck marches, more difficult for women than others. This is especially true with ruck marches. Both males and females are given gear weighing up to 60 lbs., which can be heavy for the guys but can also easily equal about half of a female's body weight, making it more difficult to carry over the many miles of a march⁷. Even outside of the physical requirements, or perhaps because of the image of weakness it creates, women in the military are frequently met with crude comments, sexual harassment, and distrust, at least until the female proves herself as a capable soldier in her position, (though oftentimes the

⁶ Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, "Women in combat? They've already been serving on the front lines, with heroism," *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 2015, accessed February 19, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-1204-lemmon-women-combat-20151204-story.html>

⁷ Jessica W, "What Women Should Know Before Joining the Army," Hubpages, August 13, 2015, accessed February 17, 2016, <http://hubpages.com/business/What-Its-Like-Being-a-Female-Soldier>.

crude comments and sexual harassment never truly go away)⁸. Scrolling through comments left on a female soldier's blog post, one can clearly see the patronizing attitude in most of the comments left by males. "Why do women have this incessant need to let everyone know how great and strong they are?"⁹ one commenter, a male having served in the military for almost ten years at the time of his post, asks, while further down the page a male air force group captain comments, "I am afraid my view of women in a combat role is pretty poor. Firstly they are unsuited for combat biologically and secondly most women in forces also lack mental toughness so essential for a warrior."¹⁰

This attitude ignores all of the contributions by women within our military. Women such as Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester, who earned the Silver Star, the third-highest award for valor in combat, after a firefight with the enemy near Salman Pak, Iraq; Specialist Van Wirt, who pulled her comrade's body from a burning vehicle while shooting at the enemy with one hand¹¹; and Captain Kristen Griest and First Lieutenant Shaye Haver, who became the first women to graduate from the grueling US Army Ranger School in August, 2015¹². These are the women I wanted Beverly to follow in her rejection of traditional gender roles and continual struggle to find respect among the male soldiers in the military. Though I chose not to highlight the issues of sexual harassment, which are extremely prevalent and well-documented by many former and current female soldiers, I tried to highlight various

⁸ Jessica W, "What Women Should Know Before Joining the Army," Hubpages.

⁹ Ryan, 2013, comment on Jessica W, "Female Soldiers Can Succeed," Hubpages, March 8, 2012, <http://hubpages.com/business/Female-Soldiers-Can-Succeed>.

¹⁰ Emge, January, 2016, comment on Jessica W, "Female Soldiers Can Succeed," Hubpages, March 8, 2012, <http://hubpages.com/business/Female-Soldiers-Can-Succeed>.

¹¹ Mark Thompson, "American Amazons: Hiding in Plain-Jane Sight," *Time Magazine*, January 28, 2013, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://nation.time.com/2013/01/28/american-amazons-hiding-in-plain-jane-sight/>.

¹² Eugene Scott, Barbara Starr, and Holly Yan, "History in the Making: 2 women will graduate from Army Ranger course," *CNN*, August 19, 2015, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/18/politics/women-graduate-army-ranger-course/>.

other struggles women face, such as grooming, ruck marches, and the general attitude of many males toward their fellow female soldiers.

Last of the stories is about Specialist Luis Ramirez. It is the most individually detached from the war of all three short stories, with Luis holding no connection of his own to either the war or the military before choosing to enlist. However, his decision to enlist in the military is still as personally motivated as the other two, though with more emphasis on both his relationship to his family, and his own identity in connection to his family.

Of all three short stories, this one was perhaps the most difficult for me to write, simply due to how strongly I relate to Luis's thoughts and emotions. I know what it is like to grow up as a younger sibling, constantly in the shadow of an older sibling's success despite assurances from parents saying otherwise. Seeing an older sibling excel, knowing you'll be expected to do the same, creates a heavy burden and bitterness that can't be lifted until you recognize the individual talents you possess that your older sibling does not. Though, even then, there are still moments when that feeling of inferiority creeps into the mind and casts doubt on certain decisions. Luis's story is a more exaggerated form of this inferiority; he's left in the shadows of two brilliant older siblings without any truly outstanding quality of his own, and he isn't sure what he should do because of that. He's comfortable in his hometown, comfortable with the simple work he's offered, but still feels pressured to aim higher in the same way his older brother and sister have. What the military represents for him then is a chance to escape the pressure, and to make more of himself using the physical skills he knows he possesses instead of attempting an academic pursuit he's almost certain he'll fail out of.

Neither Luis nor Beverly make any attempts at deciding whether the war is good or not. That's not something very significant to them, the way it is for Michael, so it plays no part in their exploration of their identity. And because the topic of this thesis is about perspective and not about the war itself, I didn't want to come to a conclusion on that matter either way, even in Michael's case. Instead, I wanted to focus on the characters' thoughts and the motivations that brought them into the war, particularly in the case of their families and identity. For all three of them, their families play crucial roles in their decisions. Michael enlists to get justice for his family members killed in the September 11th attacks. Beverly enlists with the support of her older brother in order to break out of the mold the rest of her family and her community seemed to be putting her in. And Luis enlists in order to satisfy his parents' expectations without having to force himself to match the brilliance of his older siblings. Their relationships with their families shaped their perspectives on their military experiences.

Writing this thesis and exploring these various perspectives forced me to consider points of views not only about the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also about motivations in general that I had never pondered before. I discovered many of the characters' thoughts with them as I wrote the stories, which often led me to new revelations about the characters themselves and the ways I could relate to them. For example, I never before considered how much I would have in common with a female soldier outside of our shared gender, but I actually discovered a similar desire with Beverly to be recognized for our skills outside the constraints of our gender, while, at the same time, recognizing a shared yearning with Michael for justice to be extracted for all the innocent lives lost in civilian attacks. By coming to know the characters' motivations and experiences, I came to understand the

decisions they each made in a far deeper sense than if I hadn't known of their experiences at all.

What I want with this collection of short stories is for the readers to find similar ground with each of the characters and come to see their decisions through their perspectives. Through this, I hope to inspire the same recognition in people that I've come to embrace of the need to understand an individual's situation before making any assumptions or judgments on their behalf. No single person thinks in the same way as another, which often leads to disagreements and misunderstandings. And while we won't always agree with another person's decisions, even after knowing their motivations, we can still come to understand those decisions and respect the motivations behind them.

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SERGEANT MICHAEL REED

Michael always remembered September 11th right before a mission.

It was just one of those things that happened. First few weeks in Afghanistan, only two years after the tragedy, it became hard not to think about when facing the very group that caused the attack in the first place.

He sat in his fatigues on the edge of his unit's perimeter as soon as they were given a chance to rest, his back against the rubber tire of a parked Humvee and a lit cigarette in his mouth, and just let the memories flow through him. It was something of a habit for him now after several months of repetition. A ritual even. Just as much as the pre-mission meetings between their First Sergeant and Captain to hammer out final details, or the weird, unnecessary scrub down Rambo insisted on giving his Humvee before heading out each day, even though the only thing he had at his disposal to scrub with was a dirty old rag, permanently stained from months and months of building dirt and engine grease.

All around, the members of his company went about their own business in the slowly fading light, as familiar to Michael as the tires at his back. They all had their own little rituals. Unchanging all throughout the months.

As usual, he saw Dan, their First Sergeant, buffing his boots and rifle off to the side as he watched a small group of guys playfully wrestle in the middle of the unit's resting spot, getting all their pent up energy and excitement out. Michael noticed his friend, Luis, among the fighting group, laughing as he flipped one of the younger Privates over his shoulder. Luis wasn't much older than the privates, having come into the military straight

after high school with his football physique and quiet manners. Didn't really stand out much at first that Michael could remember. Not until their first assignment together when Luis had taken enemy fire like a pro and gave hell right back to those bastards at least. But then, even in his silence, Luis always approached their missions with enthusiasm. Like he'd been given some sort of special task or something. Michael never really understood where his zeal came from, except that it had something to do with Luis's past. The one Luis never really talked about, hesitating even when the other guys shared their stories. And that, Michael understood very well.

Then there was Stumpy, sitting across from Michael and strumming his guitar with an easy smile stretched across his face. He was the music man of the 107th, and whenever he brought his guitar out Michael could feel a tangible change in the rest of the company's attitudes. They'd start throwing requests out one after another, and Michael never knew most of the songs but Stumpy apparently did. Country, rock, worship, pop: it didn't matter. Stumpy could still play it and play it with more skill than Michael ever hoped to have.

Michael often wondered why Stumpy never tried to make it as a musician. The guy was clearly talented, and had a nice enough face. The kind of rugged handsome that left girls daydreaming with his deeply tanned skin, strong jaw, and piercing grey eyes. If Stumpy had gone for it, Michael was sure he would have gained some sort of success. At least locally, if not nationally.

"Not my thing, dude," Stumpy told him when Michael asked about it. His fingers danced over the guitar strings, plucking out a quick sequence of falling notes, and he laughed. "I got too much to live for. Wanna get that degree and set up my own little shop when this is over. Only reason I joined."

Michael wasn't like that. No, Michael's decision came suddenly in the wake of September 11, born from his anger and sorrow and need for some sort of justice.

He'd come from a family legacy in public service of the most dangerous type. Like his great-grandpa, and grandpa, Michael's dad had dedicated his life to taming the flames of Upper Manhattan. Every few days he'd come home from the station, completely exhausted, but there'd be a proud gleam in his tired eyes that spoke of a successful week.

Michael was entranced by his dad's job. As far as he was concerned, his dad was just as much a superhero as all the cartoon men in capes that his friends idolized. He loved it most when his mom sent him with a packed lunch for his dad, who then let him help with small tasks around the firehouse if the day was slow. And then on Sundays he was allowed to help clean up the station and organize the equipment with all the firemen on duty.

Training for when he got older and joined the family business, his dad would say. Hearing that always made Michael happy. Made him feel proud and important.

"One day," his dad said when Michael asked to ride on one of the fire trucks with him. He had scrubbed the trucks down with the firefighters earlier that day, cleaning its sides until Michael could see his reflection perfectly in the shiny, red paint. His arms were sore, but he was filled with pride. He'd done as good a job as any of the men there. It made him feel awful grown up, even if his dad didn't agree. "Just wait a bit longer. You'll be sick of these old trucks soon enough."

"I dunno about that, Dad," he answered, to which his dad just laughed and gently flicked the fireman's helmet that Michael wore. The old, slightly cracked helmet that Michael was allowed to take home that afternoon, and that he still had packed away on some shelf in his apartment in the States.

Michael scowled at his dad. The smile on his dad's face was fond, indulgent even.

"Just trust me, Michael. You'll see."

Well, Michael had seen. And he had been right, just as he'd expected. He wasn't tired of fire trucks; he loathed them.

The gleaming red and silver of the trucks, with their flashing lights and blaring sirens, was something Michael didn't care to see again if he could help it. They brought back too many memories. Good and bad. But mostly memories of the crashing buildings, and wandering people, and the knowledge that his dad, along with so many other volunteers, would no longer be coming home.

Michael remembered all of this as he took slow, deep drags from his cigarette, the burn in his lungs almost as hot as the rage in his veins. He recalled the terror of that day, how no one believed the towers could fall until they actually did, and the thousands of people running from the wreck all covered in dust, filling the streets with hordes of living ghosts.

And many people were ghosts after that day. Empty shells of human beings wandering about the city in shock, or grieving at the wreckage site for lost ones, or barricaded quietly inside their own homes, too afraid to go out.

It all seemed like some kind of nightmare for Michael, only twenty-two at the time and already preparing to follow his dad into the profession. There'd been that terrorist attack on the North Tower back in ninety-three with the underground truck bomb, back when Michael was only a teenager, but that was nothing compared to the planes. To the smoke, and the flames. The people jumping to their deaths and the towers crashing atop all the fleeing victims. Where the towers had once stood, symbols of power and ingenuity,

there was nothing but smoking wreckage and death. So much death. And a nation left in complete shock.

Michael pushed the butt of his cigarette against the ground and withdrew a new one. He held it stiffly between his lips as he brought a flame to it. One puff, two puffs, and then the cigarette took and smoke crawled down his throat, burning and acrid and just what he needed to take the edge from his thoughts, even if the tobacco was shit.

His mind was a mess, as usual before missions. Outside, his face was stoic, blank to any soldier who bothered to look his way. On the inside, however, he found it difficult to contain his anger and sorrow in the neat little boxes he'd constructed for them two years prior, when he'd joined the army. His memories and emotions all bled together inside of him until he could no longer tell one apart from another. But maybe that was for the best.

He'd much rather deal with this muddled mess of emotions now than during the mission itself, when all he'd be able to see while looking at the Taliban suspects were the faces of friends now dead due to their actions. He wasn't sure he could rein in his venomous thoughts before hitting the front lines otherwise.

Cheers burst from the group of wrestling soldiers. One of the guys held Luis's hand up, declaring him champion over the rest of the contenders, like he typically was. The other guys never stood a chance. Just another part of routine for Luis to win—a superstition they just couldn't break. Not without fear of turning the mission sour and sending them all to hell along with it.

Dan shook his head and pulled on his boots. "Pack up," he called to the rest of the unit. Then stood up and slipped on his ruck with his rifle held tightly in his clenched fists. "Head out in five!"

He stood from the ground with a soft grunt. The half-smoked cigarette dropped from his lips to the ground, where he crushed it to death beneath the heel of his boot.

They'd been sent to clear out a compound somewhere on the fringe of the Tora Bora area, which they had been informed was some sort of terrorist headquarters. The mission was simple: get in, take out communications, and take all suspected terrorists into custody for later questioning.

The compound wasn't too far from where they'd stopped. Close enough to leave the Humvees behind with Rambo and Sergeant Wells, who'd guard their vehicles and extra equipment while the rest of the unit hiked across the desert region in the growing dark.

Michael followed behind the rest of the guys. They kept silent. Marching was no time for crude songs or good-natured insults. They had to keep focus on the mission. On the sky above their helmet covered heads and the dirt beneath their boots and sturdy rifles that shifted in their hands with every step they took toward their target. They didn't complain. Didn't ask questions. They just followed the orders they were given. As was expected of them.

The building came into sight as the moon rose over the rocky hills and sparse grass of the area. It was a simple, two-story rectangle of thatch and dried mud which sat alone and diminished amongst the gradually rising ground leading into the Tora Bora mountains. Didn't look to be a threat in Michael's point of view, but then neither did the 767 aircrafts before they slammed into the side of the World Trade Center.

Dan split the unit up and sent them around to the back of the building, where they'd infiltrate the compound and take the Taliban suspects by surprise. Their shouts broke the calm of the night as the team rushed in and started scouring the rooms. They broke off into

small groups to check each hallway, each stairwell, each and every nook and cranny, until every resident of the compound was accounted for. Running down the main hallway, Michael got glimpses of their shell-shocked expressions as his fellow soldiers barged into their rooms. Several high-pitched, female screams filled the compound, along with indignant arguing. Somewhere to Michael's right, a child began to cry.

Michael kept running, following Joshua down the hall. It was their first time working so closely together, and Michael didn't really know what to make of the young Private First Class. He'd heard from someone earlier that Joshua was married and had recently become a father, which was all well and good until Joshua got either hurt or killed in the line of duty, forcing his wife and daughter to deal with the fallout of the event later.

What would his wife do if he was taken out here? And what about his daughter? There was a high likelihood that she'd end up never truly knowing her father. Joshua probably should have considered that before both signing up with the army and settling down so concretely with his wife.

There was one thing Michael knew for sure though: Joshua was too optimistic. He didn't doubt that justice would triumph in the end. That all those who were considered "good" would make it back home without issue, because the universe dealt out what every man deserved. God wouldn't let a good man suffer.

Michael took issue with that point of view.

What had the passengers in those hijacked planes done to deserve such painful deaths? And the people killed inside the towers? Or under the falling debris? What had those firemen and police officers, good men just trying to recover as many survivors as possible, done to deserve their deaths in the aftermath of the attack? What had his dad, who

had only ever loved his family and dedicated his very existence to saving lives, done to deserve the faulty radio that kept him from hearing the evacuation order right before the collapse of the South Tower?

If God really cared, Michael thought, He'd wipe the terrorists off the face of this planet. He'd take His revenge for every soul stolen that fateful day.

Michael grimaced and shouldered his way past the rest of his troop into an upstairs hallway. The memory of his dad's death flared up like wildfire inside his mind, triggered by the proximity of the terrorist group that had ordered the attack in the first place. He couldn't shake the memories, and the images of his dad's funeral. If it could really even be called a funeral with an empty casket. They hadn't even been able to recover his body from the wreckage. His dad's grave was an empty one.

That wasn't right. His dad didn't deserve that. There was no way. And it filled Michael with so much anger to think of all the years that had been stolen from him while the terrorist group still survived. And they couldn't even bury his body.

He and Joshua stormed into a room at the end of the hall. Three men, barely out of their teens, shot up from their beds and backed against the wall, expressions pulled wide in confusion and terror.

"On the ground. Hands up," Joshua ordered. The three obeyed, probably more spurred by the threat of his and Joshua's guns than by the words they were barking.

They knelt on the floor and kept their heads bowed, submissive even as Joshua stepped out of the room to report to their commanding officer, leaving only Michael to watch over them. None of the men made any movements, there wasn't even a trace of resentment or rebellion in their expressions, and yet Michael's anger continued bubbling

to the surface. Looking at the men, Michael could only see the group they belonged to and the tragedy they caused. He could only see the faces of friends killed by the actions of the Taliban and Al Qaeda: fellow soldiers, family acquaintances who'd been caught near the twin towers, the firefighters from his dad's station whom had all been caught in the collapse with him. Worst of all, Michael saw the face of his dad, smiling like the picture they'd used at his funeral.

Michael's anger surged.

It wasn't right. It wasn't fair that his dad had to die while those three men, those *terrorists*, would get to live. Oh, they'd be questioned for sure, and probably convicted of something. But only enough to keep them locked away, not to give them the punishment they deserved for being a part of so many people's misery. Millions dead, and yet these three would still live. There was no justice in that, and it killed Michael inside. His rage burned through him, taking over his mind, and before he knew it, his finger was curled over the trigger.

The plastic was smooth against his skin. The trigger pulled so smoothly. And Michael was just so angry, filled with so much hatred.

His finger pressed against the trigger and fired a shot. The gun kicked back in his hand from the force just as one of the men collapsed back on his bed with a circle of deep red expanding across the fabric of his shirt over the wound.

The other two men, who'd been silent until this point, let out cries of anguish. One stood from the ground and began arguing heatedly with Michael in garbled Arabic or Farsi or whatever it was terrorists spoke. He gestured toward Michael in sharp movements to emphasize whatever he was saying. Michael fired another shot.

The man dropped to the ground with a pained groan, and then wouldn't shut up until Michael put another bullet right into his head. The last male only had a moment to protest before Michael shot him too.

Michael lowered his gun and stared at the wall in front of him, not caring about the three dead bodies scattered about the room. Not caring that they had families. They had dreams and goals. Just the price they paid for stealing the same things from thousands of others who never even had the chance to defend themselves.

The gun shots summoned Joshua, who burst into the room with heavy panting and alarm stretched thin with the muscles of his face.

"What happened?" Joshua demanded, looking at the three bloody bodies on the floor with wide eyes. Michael glanced down at the terrorists and tried to conjure some measure of regret. He failed.

"They got aggressive," he answered Joshua instead. "I shot in self-defense."

A weak excuse, considering how two of the bodies were strewn across the floor right next to where they had been kneeling. The only movement they'd made was in collapsing from the lethal shot. Not aggressive at all.

Joshua stared at him for a long time, gaze heavy and searching. Almost reproofing. They didn't dare to speak. Then Joshua sighed.

"No one will care anyways," he said. "I feel kind of sorry for them."

Michael shook his head.

He could never feel sorry for the terrorists. They brought it upon themselves, after all, and there was nothing that anyone could say to excuse them from that fact. As far as

Michael was concerned, those three men deserved exactly what he had given them. Finally, fate had dealt out some justice that was worthy of the crime committed.

Yet, no matter how much he told himself that, he couldn't shake the feeling of emptiness and regret. Like he'd somehow lost some vital piece of who he was somewhere in the deserts of Afghanistan.

SERGEANT BEVERLY WELLS

They were called “Wookies” by the boys in Basic Combat Training because of how they never had time to shave and so let their body hair grow long and natural, like Chewbacca from *Star Wars*.

Beverly had never actually seen the films before training—growing up on a busy Oklahoma farm never left much time or opportunity to watch movies like that, especially when her parents didn’t want their three kids wasting precious time on something so impractical—but she *had* seen enough advertisements and heard enough talk to understand the reference. And she supposed it made sense, with the hair and all, but it raised the hackles of some of her fellow female soldiers all throughout training.

Mabel Adams, who was also in Beverly’s training unit for BCT, was especially bothered by it. Deceivingly small, but full of sarcasm and fire, she was the kind of woman that took no shit from the world around her. Which was why she’d decided to enlist in the military after only two years at Tulane University, because without the G.I. Bill, the tuition was too much for her to afford, and she was, as she told Beverly, “too goddamn stubborn to rely on anyone else for paying my way through.”

Beverly remembered one time when they were on a ruck march with their unit and one of the guys fell to the back of the unit, making some sort of comment about keeping their Wookies company while laughing.

“Just call me Han,” he said with a wink. His tone was light, but short on breath, and after a few moments Beverly noticed how his gaze kept flickering from the two of them to

the other guys running ahead of them, as if expecting their judgment to come swinging down like a sword at any moment. Mab snorted.

The guy was panting pretty heavily, sweat soaking through the back and the neckline and under the armpits of his army-issued shirt. His straw-colored hair was damp across his forehead, clashing horribly with the bright red splotched across his face. He was clearly having trouble keeping up with the rest of their unit no matter what he said, and was just using Mab and Beverly to excuse himself, so as not to lose face.

“How about no,” Mab answered, short, to the point.

Beverly didn’t say anything beyond that. Less was always more in these situations and kept any true conflict from occurring, as Beverly had learned early into training, though the guy did scowl at them as she and Mab picked up pace and left him far behind, even though the pack Beverly carried easily matched up to about half her body weight. He refused to speak with either them for the rest of BCT.

(As far as Beverly had heard, he’d gotten shipped off to the Korengal Valley soon after training concluded, and had been a part of the conflict that labeled the area “The Valley of Death” by American soldiers. Whether he made it out alive or not, Beverly didn’t know, and she wished she could care, but she really didn’t.)

“I hate when they do that,” Mab complained after their run. “We aren’t damsels in distress. We don’t need their help. And calling us hairy just because we can’t shave? As if they aren’t just as bad.”

Beverly didn’t really like it either. It felt too much like her brothers’ mocking to be comfortable. And really, Mab had a point.

If they were being honest, the guys were worse than all the females. They just seemed to have hair *everywhere*. On their arms. Their legs. Their chests and backs. Some held a weird resemblance to their ape-like ancestors with how much hair they had all across their bodies. Dark, thick, curly, obnoxiously visible. Especially when the guys took their shirts off, which they did *all the time* outside of drills for some reason.

Really, what was it with guys and taking their shirts off? It wasn't even that hot at their base. Not the way summers in Oklahoma usually were. The action seemed somewhat illogical. It had nothing to do with temperature, and apparently everything to do with some sort of male brotherhood or ritual that made no sense to Beverly. It never had, even outside of BCT.

Beverly had grown up with two older brothers on a large farm in Washita County, just outside of Sentinel. Had been subject to watching them and their friends from neighboring farms and ranches toss footballs around all summer while their bare skin slowly roasted under the blazing Oklahoma sun. Even as teenagers, they were hairy creatures. Dust clung in sweaty clumps to the thin, coarse hair of their legs and arms and chests, stench of perspiration radiating so strongly from their skin that Beverly could sometimes smell it from her open bedroom window on the second floor of their small house. Usually on still days, when the heat just seemed to sit and simmer over the fields of golden wheat.

It was disgusting, but even so Beverly wanted to be a part of it. She wanted to play out in the sun with them, running through the dirt after the flying football, tackling others to the ground. Not shirtless like the rest of them, just sweaty from exertion. But she was too young, according to them. Too weak. Too female.

“Go play with your dolls,” her brother, Garrett, teased. He was the youngest of the boys, closest to her in age but furthest from her in understanding. They butted heads over everything under the sky, but this was the one thing that always came back to bother Beverly. So much so that she clenched her teeth and attempted appealing to their mother, even knowing what she thought of her only daughter participating in such roughhousing.

“He’s right,” her mother answered as expected. “Heaven only knows why you want to play with them in the first place. You’ll only get hurt. And I need you in here anyway. Company’s coming tomorrow, and the rooms upstairs all need a good cleaning.”

Beverly wanted to scream whenever her mother used that argument. But she sucked it up and did as her mother said, knowing all the while that she was asking God why He’d sent her such a strange daughter. Just because Beverly wanted to run around and get dirty instead of staying prim and proper inside the house.

Her mother would probably faint from shock when she learned of Beverly’s living conditions in BCT and Afghanistan, even among the other girls.

Basic Combat Training made any sort of bodily privacy among the female soldiers completely vanish due to limited grooming time and the resulting necessity of communal showers. Their drill sergeant allowed only a few minutes each night to clean up, so it was either join in or not shower at all, and none of them liked the latter option. Beverly often saw more of her fellow female soldiers than she ever wanted to, body hair and all. But at least they were *clean*. Most of them showered every night, so it wasn’t like they had dirt or grime caked on them the way the guys in Beverly’s troop usually did.

Beverly could remember only one time she'd actually been disgusted by one of the other females in their barracks, but even then it wasn't something Sadie had been able to help.

Regulations stated that any female with hair below shoulder-length had to twist it up in a bun for the duration of BCT. Unfortunately, Sadie was assigned one of the early night watches for the first few weeks. She had just enough time to take a shower after drills and throw her long, wet, auburn hair back into a bun before rushing back out of the barracks, and then she just left it up while sleeping to save time in the morning. Most of the girls did the same, including Beverly. It was just easier, and gave them just a few more minutes of blessed sleep before morning drills.

One morning Sadie woke with her hair a complete wreck. She needed to redo the bun before heading out, or else be scolded by her drill sergeant for her messy appearance. It was simple thing, she didn't even need a mirror for it. They were all experts at putting their hair up by now. So she sat on her bed and pulled the pins from the updo she'd worn through the night to let her hair tumble down her back.

The girl behind her gasped.

Off-white grime coated strands of auburn hair, particularly where they had been twisted throughout most of the past two weeks. The girls in the barracks all gathered around to gape at the sight, to commiserate and give advice, though Beverly felt her stomach churn at the sight. It was the first time she'd ever seen mold in someone's hair. And to think it was caused by something the majority of the girls did every day. Something Beverly herself did...

She checked her own dark hair later that night, just to make sure everything looked alright, and breathed a sigh of relief when she didn't find anything out of the ordinary. Nevertheless, she joined Sadie in getting her hair cut short at the base's barbershop, as did most of the other women in their barracks. Sure, the haircut wasn't the best looking thing, jagged and uneven and unflattering, and all of them ended up helping each other to fix the messy cut they'd been given, but Beverly far preferred that to the possibility of finding mold in her hair. Actually, Beverly found the short bob suited her. Gave her more confidence in the following weeks. Maybe would have given her the confidence she had needed while still living on her parents' farm as well. And part of her wished she'd thought of it earlier, if it wouldn't have broken her poor mother's old-fashioned heart to see her only daughter all made up like a boy.

It came in handy though. Especially after getting shipped off to join the 107th in Afghanistan. Nangarhar, where they were based, was humid and hot, though not any worse than some summers she'd experienced back home in Oklahoma. Still, having short hair helped. It kept her cooler than the heavy knot of hair she'd worn at the beginning of BCT would have at least, and was far easier to care for with the limited resources they had. Ideal for the hectic lifestyle that came with being a soldier in the 107th.

Beverly drove the Humvees and Land Cruisers and basically whatever other vehicle they acquired for the troop alongside Specialist Paul Ramsey, whom they all called Rambo. A goodly sort of guy, once Beverly got past the mottled scar on his right cheek and ever-present scowl that gave him a sort of rough and tough appearance. But really, he was a big softie at heart. Far better to her than guys like Sergeant Reed or Specialist Johannsen, who

both metaphorically turned up their noses at the mere idea of having a *female* as part of their team, no matter what role Beverly served in.

She expected this, of course. In some form or manner. It was the same story, whether in BCT or actual combat. They thought it was so *brave* for her to serve, and of *course* she was just as tough as the guys out there, she didn't need to prove herself she was just as much a soldier as any of them. But that was only when she wasn't a part of their actual unit. When it came down to it, regardless of what they said, they still saw her as the weak link. No business being there, a disaster just waiting to happen, just an extra burden they needed to shoulder on top of everything else. Didn't matter that she was only there to drive whatever vehicle they needed rather than take part in the combat itself.

"Don't let 'em get to ya," Rambo told her after a particularly bad day, when the guys in her Humvee threw badly hidden jeers and complaints around all afternoon while she ferried them safely from base to village. "A soldier's a soldier. They'll come round 'ventually." He tossed his cigarette to the ground and crushed it with the heel of his boot. Over the radio, they heard their First Sergeant issuing orders, and Rambo slapped the side of the vehicle, loud thump bouncing off the aluminum frame. "Come on. Time to move on."

He lifted himself into the Humvee, swinging through the open frame, and settled himself in the driver's seat. He drove a pretty deconstructed Humvee compared to Beverly's. All the doors had been taken off by the unit in order to make the vehicle lighter, more able to traverse the varied terrain of the region and more accessible to the soldiers hopping in and out of action as they traveled, so the only true protection that remained to the Humvee was the actual roof, where the heavy machine gun sat. The guys all called it

the “party van,” and they fought every day for the privilege of filling one of its four open spots: two in back, one riding shotgun, and one manning the machine gun turret up top.

Beverly found it all impractical. The Humvees were vehicles of protection just as much as of transportation, but without their lightly armored doors, they were about as effective as a wet tissue on a dusty day.

She kept her doors and all her equipment intact. It meant more careful maneuvering when she drove, but at least it offered some protection in the more hostile parts of the region. And if they happened upon an IED, which grew more and more likely with every passing day and every failed terrorist attack, then at least the soldiers in her Humvee wouldn’t all get blown to pieces or burnt from the explosion. But maybe she was just overly cautious.

When she was sixteen, her oldest brother taught her to drive the family truck instead of their father, who was too caught up in the issues of their farm to give the whole driving instruction thing a second thought. But that was fine. Beverly felt more comfortable with Ryan anyway, and relished the chance to spend time with her favorite brother when he finally came home from Basic Combat Training for a short holiday.

They drove circles on the dirt road around the farm until Beverly got the hang of braking and turn signals and staying in one lane, while Ryan told her funny stories from his training unit. About the guy forced to name a rock ‘Dignity,’ throw it across the field, and spend all day searching for it. And the guy told to slow dance with his mop for an hour after taking too long to complete his cleaning duty. But Beverly’s favorite story was the one about the recruit that fell asleep while on night guard and missed the arrival of his Drill Sergeant.

“So Drill Sergeant walked right up to him, all casual-like, and slapped her hand against the guy’s back and declared he was now dead,” Ryan said. He laughed and put his feet up on the dash of the truck, where Beverly would later find two dusty footprints with the same cats-paw design as the bottom of his boots. “He had to spend the rest of his detail acting like a ghost, spooky noises and all.”

“Seriously? That’s something they can do?”

“Oh, Drill Sergeant Mattis was super creative. She was a real hardass on us all.” Grinning, he ruffled the top of Beverly’s hair and ignored her glare as he added, “Always thought you two would get along.”

She laughed and knocked Ryan’s hand away. “If you say so.”

Ryan gave only praises to his female drill sergeant and how she whipped their unit into shape until they were the elite unit of the training base. How she’d served duty in Afghanistan when things first went to shit, and ended up pulling one of her fellow soldiers from a burning Humvee just to make sure they could bring his body back to his family in the States. Beverly imagined her as some sort of Superwoman, with cape and all. She wondered what it’d be like to be a hero like that in what she’d always considered to be a man’s field.

Part of her wanted to enlist. She knew serving in the army was no walk in the park, but it sure sounded better than just sitting at home and never getting to see the world. Never getting to live. Never getting to do anything worthwhile.

She thought about summers when her brothers and their friends played sports outside while she was stuck indoors, and her longing to join in despite it all. She thought of her mother, cooking and cleaning and mending all the days of her life to keep the house

running as her father kept food on the table. She thought of her future in a similar role, unless somehow she took control and made a change.

“I’m joining the army after school,” she declared at the dinner.

There was silence all around the table. Her mother actually swooned and collapsed into her chair, the salad bowl she’d been holding falling onto the table with a loud clatter and lettuce leaves flying everywhere. Her father just set down his silverware, then stood up and left. Beverly didn’t see him again for the rest of the night. She figured he was too much in shock.

Her brother was the only one who seemed even vaguely pleased from the start.

“If you really want to do it, then go for it,” Ryan told her in secret, after the lights in the house had been turned off and the two of them sat in a pool of moonlight on the front porch. “A soldier is a soldier, regardless of gender. And it’ll be tough. Really, really tough. But it’s worth it.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a bracing hug. “You’re stubborn and headstrong. You’ll do just fine.”

Beverly pushed away from the side of the Humvee and climbed into the driver’s seat, where she watched the guys of her troop approach from the dull, brown horizon of the Afghanistan village. They still had two more stops to make before heading back to the base, which meant several more long hours of listening to their hidden jeers.

To her surprise, however, her First Sergeant made his way directly to her Humvee and claimed shotgun right next to her.

“Wells,” Dave greeted with a nod. He took the headscarf she always kept on the Humvee dash, just in case, and tossed it her way. “Suit up. We’re going to need you in the next village.”

“Yes, sir,” she answered.

She wrapped the scarf around her head in the style of a traditional hijab, a sign of respect for the customs of the people that always made the villagers more willing to speak with their troops. It was rare that Beverly got to actually go into the field, especially on simple patrols and negotiation missions like this, but when she did it was always to try and speak with the women, who normally didn’t take kindly to the male soldiers.

It was one thing Beverly could do that the guys in her troops definitely couldn’t.

The losers of the mad scramble for Rambo’s open seats pulled themselves into Beverly’s Humvee, with Specialist Ramirez taking the gun turret and Sergeant Michael Reed and Stumpy filling the back. Michael saw the scarf wrapped around Beverly’s head and a small crinkle appeared on the bridge of his nose.

“We’re bringing the Wookiee?” he asked.

Beverly stiffened at the way he said the word, the same way half the guys at BCT said it after one of the females rejected their patronizing comments or unwanted advances, as if Beverly didn’t deserve to be there. As if she hadn’t proven her worth by passing BCT and AIT, just like the rest of them.

“Sergeant Wells can speak with the women,” Dave explained with a no-nonsense kind of tone. He narrowed his gaze at Michael and added, “You can stay with Rambo and guard the Humvees, Sergeant Reed.”

Michael grimaced, but didn’t fight back. “Yes, sir.”

He fell back against his seat, silent and defeated. And Beverly knew the decision would come back to bother her later, with more subtle comments and barbs aimed at her

and her gender until Michael was satisfied, but for now it didn't matter. She'd do her job, do all that she trained for, and do it to perfection so that none of the guys could complain.

"Alright Wells, let's get going," Dave ordered. He punched her shoulder the same way he would with any of the guys. Beverly grinned.

"Yes, sir!"

SPECIALIST LUIS RAMIREZ

Luis wasn't sure what he'd been expecting when they drove into the Wazir Valley from Pachir Wa Agum, but it certainly wasn't the warm wave of homecoming that washed over him upon seeing the sparse trees and open fields of the Khogyani district. Clouds of dust swirled around them as their vehicles crawled along the dirt roads into the village—known Taliban territory. That set all of them on edge.

Luis gripped the rifle in his hands more tightly. The weight of it was both a burden and a relief. A single shot from it could save his life in an ambush. The problem was, he wasn't sure who their enemies were or how to identify them anymore.

Villagers milled about the buildings as the troops passed by, all of them wary of the passing vehicles. They kept a safe distance. Watching the soldiers, whispering amongst themselves in a language Luis couldn't understand. How many of them were Taliban sympathizers? They certainly dressed like they were, in traditional Afghan clothing. Shalwar kameez, he seemed to recall it being called, or maybe perahan tunban. Loose pants and a long tunic, all in neutral colors. Most of the older men even wore turbans.

But then this was normal all across Afghanistan. It didn't indicate whether a person sympathized with the Taliban or not, as much as Luis wished it would.

The trouble with this war was that their enemies were almost always hidden amongst the populace when they weren't inside Taliban compounds. It left a lot of soldiers in the company, including Luis, confused about where to aim their guns.

“Eyes open, boys,” Dan, their First Sergeant, called out from the Humvee’s shotgun seat. “Can’t let them get the jump on us.”

Sure. But who would be getting the jump? Who were they watching for?

Michael grunted beside him and adjusted how he was sitting, shifting to lessen the stress of the jolting Humvee on his body. It wouldn’t do much good. The discomfort stuck around, no matter how they sat. Michael’s hands clutched around his own rifle, knuckles white with the force, shoulders tensed. His nose scrunched up as he gazed at the passing scenery.

“Just look at this place. What a dump.”

Luis shrugged. Maybe Michael had a point, but Luis didn’t quite see it the same way. Like there was no worse place on Earth.

The roads were all made of dirt, not one drop of concrete or asphalt anywhere to be found in the village except in small sections of the buildings themselves. Even so, the buildings weren’t in the best condition. None went over a single level, and their roofs were all flat, made mostly of dried mud or some sort of thatch. Crumbling walls, trash on the roadside and caught in the brambles of the fields, dirt covering everything.

Yeah, Luis could see where Michael was coming from. But at least the villagers had places to sleep. It wasn’t much different from the trailer parks back home, only with a different culture. It really almost reminded Luis of home, back with his parents and siblings in the metal walls of their small trailer.

Even the weather was similar. The other guys all groaned and complained, calling the Afghan desert all sorts of names. The most recent being the highly dignified and much-

beloved title of “Satan’s ass crack.” But what was so different about the weather here and the weather in Southern Texas?

Not much, Luis decided.

If he closed his eyes and ignored the presence of other soldiers beside him, the mumbled Farsi all around him, Luis could almost imagine the rumbling Humvee, with its cramped seating and missing doors, was his Papá’s old, teal pick-up. He pictured it crawling down the crumbling concrete road between El Refugio’s trailer park and their store just across the railroad on Acapulco Street, his sister in the front seat while he and his brother bounced about in the bed. Grass and wheat stretched all around them, baking in the sun just like Luis and Carlos. The only relief came from the wheat-sweetened wind blowing in their faces, and the knowledge they’d soon be in the blessed air conditioning of Papá’s *supermercado*.

The three of them always spent weekends in the *supermercado*, helping Papá take care of the store. It was a small shop compared to some of the big chains Luis had seen in the larger towns around them, but it kept a steady flow of people coming through on weekends, stocking up on rice and tortillas and tamales, among other groceries. Papá had been lucky in setting up the *supermercado* when he did. With a town as small as El Refugio, there was no room for more than a few small grocery stores, and Papá had managed to sneak right into the market before it became too full. He wasn’t the most popular of the stores even in their area—most residents preferring A&A Grocery or El Tigre near Santa Cruz—but he made enough to pay the bills. And that’s what mattered.

Luis liked helping out in the store. Particularly when he got to handle all of the merchandise. He wasn’t too hot with numbers, not in the way Marisol was, so Luis spent

most of his time restocking shelves and moving things in the back room instead. Large, wooden crates were always coming in and needed to be brought into the stock room, unpacked, and counted before the food could go out on the shelves. Luis was good at that. It made him strong, which made him popular among the neighborhood sports teams.

For a while, Luis considered taking over the business when his Papá retired. It wasn't such a bad idea. He liked the atmosphere and the work, and knew all of their normal customers by name. Liked talking to them whenever they came in and catching up on their life news. It made him feel connected to the community in a way that little else did. Even sports. And that was one thing Luis *knew* he was decent at. Not good enough to get a scholarship or anything, to his parents' disappointment, but good enough to help his high school's football team hold on to their district title for all four years he was in school. It didn't require any abstract thinking from him. Luis just needed to follow his coach's instructions and make sure to knock his opponent down, and that was that. A quick and easy success that always left the small crowd of El Refugio and Santa Cruz football fans cheering.

But while it was nice to have everyone supporting their team from the stands, Luis preferred getting to talk face-to-face with people and hear all about their crazy family or newest cooking experiments or other such tales. Luis didn't really dream for anything more than that. College wasn't exactly a choice for him, and he never really felt that itch of wanderlust that made Carlos so fidgety. Even Marisol wanted to get out of El Refugio and go to a good university. But Luis didn't really care. El Refugio or somewhere else, he'd be content as long as he had a job.

Mamá had a different idea entirely. She expected a lot from Luis, as did Papá.

Luis couldn't really blame them with the siblings he had. Marisol and Carlos were exceptional. The kind of kids every parent dreamed of.

Marisol was the genius of the family, smart as a whip and driven by some sort of unseen force. She loved numbers, loved logic and facts, and thrived in all of her academic classes. Even when they were young, Marisol preferred to be reading her books instead of playing outside with Carlos and Luis and the other neighborhood kids. It all paid off when she started getting offers from universities around the country, all of them wanting her for their engineering program or neuroscience program or something along those lines. Luis couldn't understand any of it, but Marisol took it all in stride.

"This town is quicksand," she told him one afternoon when the store was empty. She blew an off-white bubble with her Juicy Fruit gum, let it pop, and then added, "I'm getting out of here as soon as I'm able. I don't wanna be stuck in this dirty town for the rest of my life, cleaning houses and having babies like Mamá."

And when the scholarships and full rides started piling in later that summer, Marisol made good on her statement and chose the best university with the most reasonable price as far away from El Refugio as possible.

Carlos was the complete opposite of their older sister. He was the free-spirit, always off in his own world of pictures and colors. In summer time, he covered the pavement of their trailer park with chalk-drawn masterpieces that all the residents were reluctant to wash away. He wanted to create the world with his hands, a universe of his very own formed from the images only he could see. Luis always felt lost tagging along after him. Like they weren't even walking along the same streets, seeing the same trailers and buildings and

cacti. His drawings took him to another world, another lifetime. They took him all the way into a design school just an hour outside of El Refugio on a full ride.

With such incredible older siblings, Luis completely understood why his parents expected the same brilliance from him. But he didn't have it. He was average at best. Not like his siblings at all, no matter how much he wanted to be.

"Oh, another Ramirez kid," his teachers said whenever they saw his name on their roll call. They beamed at him with pride, as if he'd already shown some glimmer of rare talent like Marisol and Carlos. "I'm looking forward to seeing your work this year. I'm sure you'll do just as well as your siblings."

Yeah. That confidence never lasted long.

It was interesting. Luis could almost pinpoint the moment when those delighted smiles turned into something more like tolerance, or disappointment. It usually happened around the same time as his class's third test. He figured this had to do with some sort of thought process among the teachers. Maybe with the first test they excused his scores as just needing to adjust to the class's individual testing style. Then, with the second test, his scores must just be due to his laziness. Luis must have some of that intelligence his sister and brother both showed and he just wasn't showing it. They simply needed to interest him in the subject.

But then, by the third test, after they exhausted all their efforts in trying to cure his non-existent boredom, they knew. He wasn't like his siblings. He was just like every other kid that passed through their school. Average. Struggling. Lost in the material they were teaching. Probably not going anywhere exciting in the future.

"Why can't you be more like Marisol?" his parents asked.

“You should learn more from your brother,” his teachers insisted.

Just let me be myself, Luis wanted to scream right back.

What Luis hated most was feeling like he was in the shadows of Marisol and Carlos. Like he was being smothered by their brilliance, swallowed up by their unfillable footsteps and crushed underneath their pressure.

He knew he was a disappointment, unfortunately for his parents, who wanted nothing but the best for their children. Papá saved every penny he possibly could to put toward their future education, and Mamá spent every moment she had adding to these funds through her work as a house maid and self-employed seamstress. She came home every day exhausted, smelling like bleach and lemon dish soap, and proudly dropped her earnings into the college jar before sitting at her sewing machine for the rest of the night. But was Luis really worthy of that money?

If he went to college, if he tried to continue his education like Marisol and Carlos, would that money be well spent? He wasn't so sure. The money could be put toward groceries, or new clothes for both Mamá and Papá, or a small house they could call their own instead of their cramped, little trailer. Not toward an education that really wouldn't do Luis any good. Maybe he could get a business degree of some sort if he really tried, but what was that in comparison to actual experience in running a business? Papá was successful even without a college degree. Why did Luis need to have one?

He saw the way it worried his parents though. More grey streaks appeared in Papá's hair every week, and he spent longer and longer hours at the *supermercado* than he used to, while Mamá brought home more and more seamstress work and etched permanent

frown lines into the dark skin of her round face. And every dollar dropped into the college fund was a struggle just to earn, and made the guilt in his stomach just a little bit heavier.

“Luis, what if we need to close *el supermercado*?” his Papá asked, wringing his tanned, wrinkly hands in worry. “Where will you work then?”

“There are plenty of places to find work, Papá. Construction sites are always hiring. I could find work there if needed,” he answered.

A big guy like him, strong and good with his hands, could always find work among the construction projects that forever seemed to exist around the town. It wouldn’t be the worst job, to be honest. A little dangerous, perhaps, but that didn’t really worry him. Luis could take care of himself, as long as he was told what *not* to do and what he needed to avoid. Rules were easy enough to follow.

Papá shook his head, however. “They don’t pay enough. You need college for good work. We want more for you.”

Luis bit his tongue against the protests he wanted to give. Didn’t dare to mention the anxiety school always inspired in him.

Academics didn’t suit him. Never did. The words and numbers and facts all just swirled around inside his head in a giant hurricane, and picking through them kind of felt like swimming in a lake full of syrup—possible, but only with a tremendous amount of effort. Just thinking about going on to college and throwing himself back into the muddled mess that came with classes, all for a degree he would probably never use and actually be better off without, made the pit of his stomach curl up and flop over with dread.

What was Luis supposed to do? What choice could he make?

He wanted to make his parents proud, but at the same time he knew going to college would be a waste on him. Eventually, he'd flunk out, and all that money invested in his tuition would never return to his parents' pockets. And he really didn't want to keep going to school if he could help it. But how could he tell them that without breaking their hearts? His lack of ambition would only worry them more.

His high school hosted a small career fair every year for the students not looking to go to a university after graduation—which was most of the student body. Luis was somewhere in between the college and career routes, so he decided to visit the career fair with the rest of his friends, if only to see which jobs both interested him *and* needed a college degree. He hoped it would help make his decision on the matter easier.

Tables filled the small gymnasium in five long lines with plenty of room between each row for students to walk around, or to stop and chat with potential employers if something caught their eye. The loud buzz of conversation was everywhere. It couldn't be escaped. And Luis, trying his best to judge the different career paths being offered, could barely hear himself think over the noise.

Maybe that was part of the reason why nothing seemed to capture his interest. Not enough thinking room to fully consider each business. He'd settled for a simple yes-no system while wandering about the room, and found that pretty much every table he looked at ended up being categorized as a solid 'no' after only a few moments.

Vet, no. Marketing, no. Health care, no. Model, impossible. Teacher, definitely not.

Every passing booth left Luis feeling more and more discouraged, and even more unsure about his decision regarding college. He stopped in the middle of the walkway and stared down at the floor, trying to figure it out. Maybe he should go after all? Though he

had no idea what he'd study if he did, considering how uninterested he was in every job he saw.

"You alright, buddy?" someone asked beside him. A hand came down on his shoulder, and Luis looked over at a concerned face beneath the brim of a camo cap. "Need some help?"

The rest of his clothes were camo as well, save for the tan combat boots on his feet and the patch on his right arm of the United States flag. There was a little patch over his left breast pocket which read, "Jefferson." Probably his name. And even if Luis hadn't constantly seen troops patrolling up and down the Mexican-American border his entire life, it wouldn't have been hard to recognize this kind-faced man as a member of the US Army.

"I'm okay. Thank you, sir," Luis answered.

"Good man." Jefferson clapped him on his back, which probably would have hurt a lot more without the layers of muscle Luis had built up both as a linebacker and through lifting boxes at the *supermercado*. Something even Jefferson noticed. "You do sports then?"

"Football. And... anything else, really."

"Ever think about joining the army? We could use a tough guy like you."

Luis shook his head. It never once crossed his mind before, though the suggestion now seemed more appealing than anything else he'd seen that day. He'd probably be good at it. Following orders and taking down the enemy was already something normal for him, would really only take the slightest of adjustment to get used to, and it wouldn't require any abstract thinking from him at all. Even his parents couldn't argue against the idea when

Luis came home with a pamphlet and Jefferson's business card. It was a good opportunity for him.

The Humvee rolled slowly through Wazir. Up top, Stumpy held command of the vehicle's machine gun, ready to put it into action if Taliban members showed themselves as Dan believed they would. A cat and mouse game, essentially. Meant to draw the enemy out of the village with the two Humvees full of soldiers acting as live bait.

"Steady, Rambo," Dan said as their driver pushed the engine just a little too quickly. He kept his gaze on the villagers walking past, watching for anything suspicious, while Stumpy, Michael, and Luis all waited for his command.

There was a loud clink as something hit the back of the aluminum frame. Luis turned around at the noise, then ducked for cover as more rocks, and then bullets started raining down on the Humvees. Rambo pulled the vehicle around so they could engage in action, as did the other Humvee, driven by the only female soldier in their squad who joined in the fire fight as soon as she was able.

"Stumpy!" Dan yelled, unnecessarily as Stumpy started pelting the attackers with bullets before their first sergeant even had a chance to speak. The Humvee halted quickly, and Dan jumped from his seat. "All out, boys. Let's smoke these bastards."

Michael and Luis followed suit and fell to the dusty ground with rifles firing into the frenzied crowd of people—some civilians, many Taliban, all running every which way like a hive of ants suddenly exposed to water.

The first sergeant kept them shooting and shooting and shooting while the enemy's bullets continued flying right back at them. Luis still didn't know who he was supposed to

aim for, who was innocent and who was enemy, but apparently Dan did. Luis didn't question it. Wasn't his place to. He just trusted Dan and kept on firing as ordered.

That's what he was good at.