

Chapter One

Dust and rubble pierced through the arid desert sky as Sgt. Ryan Paxton stood up, his ears still ringing from the explosion. The only sounds that pierced the disorienting silence were the muffled screams echoing across the landscape. Blood mixed with sweat trailed down his cheek, cutting through the dirt that had caked onto his face during the day's exertions. His heart thudded violently against his ribs, fueled by adrenaline, yet paradoxically, everything around him seemed to move in slow motion.

Paxton's gaze dropped to the ground, catching sight of his Kevlar helmet, now shattered from the blast that had nearly claimed his life. As he lifted his head to survey his surroundings, smoke had filled the sky, painting it a dark, charcoal gray. A looming migraine

throbbed at the edges of his consciousness, and he squinted against the pain, seeking a moment of relief.

"Sgt. Paxton!" The urgent shout snapped him back to reality.

Turning, Paxton saw Corporal Ortega struggling to drag a wounded Marine to safety. Without hesitation, Paxton dashed over to assist, helping Ortega carry the injured man behind the relative cover of a blown-up car.

"Where the hell did that come from?" Ortega yelled, wiping the sweat from his brow as they crouched behind the vehicle.

Paxton took a quick glance through the broken window of the car. A small glare from across the street momentarily blinded him, marking their position all too clearly. "Second building on the rooftop," he responded, pinpointing the source of the threat.

"Where?" Ortega peered over the hood, trying to spot the danger.

"Across the street!" Paxton yelled again, urgency lacing his voice as gunfire began to erupt from the surrounding buildings. "Let's get to that house now!" he commanded, pointing to a nearby building that promised more substantial cover. "We can get a head count and get our bearings from there."

Ortega nodded, his expression set with determination. "Clear!" he shouted.

"Moving!" Paxton responded, and together with Ortega, they hoisted the wounded Marine, each taking an arm over their shoulders. They sprinted towards the house, dodging debris that littered the ground. The distance was only about twenty meters, but under fire, it felt like miles. Their hearts pounded as they reached the door, kicking it open to find their squad already positioned inside, laying down suppressive fire on the enemy positions across the street.

Inside the relative safety of the house, they carefully laid the wounded Marine on the floor. His face was

badly burned from shrapnel, and the acrid smell of charred flesh filled the air. "We need a Corpsman now!" Paxton yelled, ripping off his dark sunglasses in frustration.

"Corpsman!" Ortega echoed urgently

"Where the fuck is the Corpsman?" Paxton's voice boomed, trying to cut through the cacophony of gunfire that surrounded them.

As they waited for medical help, Paxton looked down at the battered Marine, whose injuries were severe. He knew that without immediate medical attention, the young Marine's chances were slim. The urgency of the situation weighed heavily on him as he scanned the room for the missing medic, hoping they would appear before it was too late.

Paxton stood up abruptly and bolted up the stairs, Ortega close on his heels. The entire house seemed to shudder violently, resonating with the constant barrage of gunfire echoing through its walls. As they

ascended, the clatter of brass shell casings hitting the floor punctuated each step they took. Room by room, Paxton frantically searched for the Corpsman, his hope diminishing with each empty space. What he found instead were remnants of the house's past life: broken glass scattered across the floors and old beds coated in layers of dust, untouched by time but for the chaos of war.

"Paxton, over here!" Ortega's voice cut sharply through the noise, pulling Paxton from his frantic search.

Rushing to where Ortega stood, Paxton's heart sank as he saw the scene before him. "Damn it," he cursed aloud, kicking a chair out of his path in frustration. The urgency was palpable. "Let's go, Ortega!"

Together, they darted back down the hallway towards the stairs. As they turned the corner, time seemed to stretch and warp, enveloping Paxton and Ortega in a surreal slow motion. Ortega's eyes caught a glint of

danger through the window, an RPG rocketing straight towards them. “Move!” he shouted, his voice a mixture of fear and command. With a forceful shove, he pushed Paxton out of the line of fire, sending him tumbling to the ground.

The moment Paxton’s body hit the floor, the stark reality of the situation vanished. His surroundings shifted dramatically, the harsh sounds of war replaced by the dull hum of an aircraft. Panting heavily, Paxton opened his eyes to find himself lying on the floor of a plane, not a war-torn building. It was all a vivid, terrifying dream.

As he slowly sat up, disoriented and still feeling the adrenaline of the dream coursing through him, he noticed a man outside the plane window. The ground crew member, clad in a high-visibility vest, wielded safety wands, skillfully directing the massive aircraft towards its gate. The contrast between the calm, orderly movements of the airport routine and the

chaotic violence of his nightmare struck Paxton with an overwhelming relief mixed with residual tension.

Ryan sat back in his seat, his breathing gradually slowing as he tried to shake off the remnants of the dream. He glanced around the cabin, the normalcy of the other passengers in stark contrast to the turmoil he felt inside. As the plane continued its smooth taxi to the gate, Paxton felt a profound sense of gratitude for the safety of the environment around him, yet he couldn't shake the vivid images of the dream. It was a stark reminder of the stark realities he had faced and the memories that, like shadows, followed him even into the supposed safety of his return home.

Five years had slipped by, an almost surreal span of time since Ryan had last seen his family. His tenure in the Marine Corps had primarily been spent deployed overseas, in what he nonchalantly referred to as "the sandbox." The farewells had always been the hardest part for him, laden with a weight too heavy to bear repeatedly. So, he made the difficult choice not to

return home during his service. In his mind, it seemed easier for everyone—less painful for his family and for him.

Ryan was a man of few outward emotions, finding it challenging to navigate the sentimental displays that often-accompanied departures and reunions. His mother, especially, was prone to dramatic displays of emotion. Although he sometimes thought her tears were excessive, a part of him wondered if perhaps that was simply how she coped, how she was supposed to express her fears and love. Either way, Ryan had chosen to stay away, believing absence would somehow make the heart grow fonder, or at least not as fractured.

Stepping off the plane at Will Rogers Airport in Oklahoma City marked the end of that prolonged absence. As he made his way through the airport, the hustle of the environment enveloped him. The familiar scent of Aunt Annie's Pretzels filled the air, a stark contrast to the arid desert winds he had become

accustomed to. The terminal was bustling with life and noise, a vivid tapestry of humanity in motion.

Around him, the scene was vibrant with activity. Hundreds of people lounged on the floor and in seats, some engrossed in their devices, others chatting animatedly. Families buzzed with excitement over upcoming vacations, laden with luggage and travel guides. Businessmen, poised in their suits, talked over their phones about deals and meetings, a stark reminder of the life he had left behind. Soldiers, some young and untested, shared anxious glances and stories, on their way to their first duty stations, their faces a mix of nervous anticipation and resolve.

As Ryan walked past them all, he felt a peculiar sense of detachment. Each step through the terminal was a step back into a world he hadn't been a part of for half a decade, a world that had continued to spin without him. The reality of his long absence hit him then, a mix of apprehension and relief swirling within. What had changed since he'd been gone? Would his family even

recognize him, or he them? And deeper than that, had the distance altered how they felt about each other?

He followed the signs down the escalators, he knew the only person who would be there was his younger sister Rachel. Ryan had called her and told her not to bring anyone. It would be too early in the morning, and he also didn't want the over dramatic welcome from his mother. She especially would have gone overboard. Huge banners and signs welcoming him home. It's not that he wouldn't be thankful, but it would have been too much for him.

Rachel had just finished her second year at OSU, and he knew she would probably have time to pick him up at the airport. He was right, she sounded so excited over the phone. Growing up her and Ryan were really close. Up until she started high school, they did just about everything together. A lot of time she would run around with Ryan and his friends, playing cops and robbers with air soft guns in the woods. For a while she

was mad at Ryan for leaving her behind when he joined the Marine Corps.

Ryan looked down at his watch: 0300 hours. His internal clock, honed by years of military discipline, noted that his flight was scheduled to land in fifteen minutes, though they had clearly touched down early. A part of him was certain Rachel would already be waiting at baggage claim; punctuality was a shared trait.

In the Marines, Ryan had learned to always have a plan, and then a backup to that plan. His time overseas, which he often referred to simply as "the sandbox," had instilled in him the necessity of constant readiness. When chaos erupted, he prided himself on being prepared, though he humbly acknowledged that sometimes things slipped through the cracks. Ryan's mindset wasn't like most; he believed deeply that everything had its structure and, within that, its way of naturally resolving.

He didn't enjoy war, but he excelled in it. He'd made a solemn vow to bring back every Marine under his command. He'd kept that promise, bringing everyone home, though not all in the way he would have hoped. This was a burden he carried silently, a weight invisible to others but ever-present in his mind.

As he reached the bottom of the escalator, his eyes scanned the crowd and quickly found Rachel. She hadn't noticed him yet. Her attention was fixed on her phone, the welcome sign she'd brought dangling idly by her side against a pillar. Ryan couldn't help but smile wryly, probably scrolling through Facebook or Tweeter, or whatever it was called.

He stepped off the escalator and walked quietly towards her. "Hey you," he said gently.

Rachel looked up, blinking in momentary confusion before recognition dawned on her face. "Ryan?" Her voice carried a mix of disbelief and hope.

He nodded, his smile widening. Dropping the sign, Rachel leaped into his arms, her tears of joy wetting his shoulder as she clung to him. It was their first reunion in five years. Ryan embraced her tightly, feeling the solid reality of her presence. Though tears were not his way, the swell of emotions was undeniable. He was home, truly home, yet as he held her, a nagging sense of something amiss tugged at the back of his mind. Was it something he forgot? Or perhaps it was the larger, more disquieting feeling of adjusting to a life far removed from the immediacies and clear structures of military conflict.

As Rachel continued to sob softly in relief and joy, Ryan let out a long, slow breath. He was back, not just in location but among those who loved him, in a world that operated on very different principles than the ones he had lived by for so long. This transition, he knew, might prove to be his most challenging mission yet.

Ryan gently set his little sister down and took a step back, watching as Rachel wiped away her tears with a mixture of laughter and relief. "How the hell are you?" she asked through a final chuckle, dabbing at her eyes.

"I'm okay," he replied with a modest smile, feeling the familiar comfort of family start to ease the sharp edges of his recent past.

"You look like you've gained a hundred pounds." She grinned broadly, eyeing him up and down. "I didn't even recognize you."

"Eighty-five pounds, to be exact," Ryan quietly laughed along, a soft pride flickering in his eyes.

"Last time I saw you, you were a scrawny little thing," she reminisced, a playful tone in her voice.

"I know," he acknowledged with a nod, his smile lingering.

When Ryan had left for boot camp, he was indeed just 128 pounds, barely making the minimum weight

requirement with a special waiver due to his thin frame. Now, he was a solid 200 pounds, his physique markedly transformed. His arms, tanned and muscular, stretched the fabric of his shirt almost to its limit, hinting at the potential to rip through the seams. Veins traced up his arms, prominent against his skin, and his jawline was sharply defined. Ortega, his comrade, often joked about his size, dubbing him "Moose" in good humor. Unlike Ortega, who was shorter and more solidly built, resembling what he jokingly called a "buff potato," the added weight suited Ryan well.

"So, I know it's like 3 AM, but are you hungry?" Rachel's question brought him back to the present as she glanced around the nearly empty airport.

"No sis, I'm okay," he assured her, his voice carrying a tinge of fatigue.

"You sure?" she persisted with a knowing smile, as if challenging his polite refusal.

"I'm sure," he grinned back, his eyes crinkling slightly at the corners.

Together, they strolled over to the conveyor belt to wait for his luggage. Ryan traveled light, carrying only one bag filled mostly with uniforms and a few pairs of civilian clothes he had picked up in Seattle during his connecting flight.

"So how was it?" Rachel nudged him gently, her curiosity piqued.

"How was what?" he responded, playing dumb for a moment.

"Being overseas, was it scary?" she asked, her tone softening as she looked up at him with a mix of awe and concern.

"Sometimes," he admitted, his voice low. The understatement masked the multitude of experiences, both harrowing and routine, that defined his time away.

"I can't believe it's been five years," Rachel murmured, shaking her head in disbelief.

Ryan only nodded in agreement, his gaze fixed on the slow-moving conveyor belt.

"You seem different," she observed after a pause, studying his face more intently.

"How so?" he asked, turning to look at her directly.

"You're so serious and short with your answers," Rachel pointed out with a smile, trying to lighten the mood.

Ryan leaned over and offered a broader smile, "It is three in the morning."

Rachel laughed, her spirits visibly lifted by the exchange. The moment felt lighter, threading the familiarity of their old rapport through the new dynamics shaped by time and distance. As they stood side by side, waiting for his single bag to appear, there was a comfort in their shared silence, punctuated by

occasional bursts of laughter, a reminder of the bond that, despite years and changes, remained unbroken.

As Ryan's bag appeared on the carousel, he moved to retrieve it, but Rachel, ever the eager younger sibling, darted in front of him. "No, I got it, brother," she declared, a playful challenge in her eyes.

Ryan stepped back, arms raised in mock surrender, and grinned. "Go for it."

With both hands, Rachel gripped the heavy green sea bag and yanked it off the conveyor belt, only to drop it almost immediately to the ground with a thud. "What the hell is in this thing?" she gasped, slightly winded by the weight.

Ryan chuckled, amused by her reaction. "Just gear and clothes," he replied nonchalantly. He bent down, scooped up the bag with one hand, and slung it over his shoulder as if it weighed next to nothing.

“How did you get so buff, I don’t get it?” Rachel laughed, shaking her head in disbelief at the ease with which he handled the heavy load.

“Three tours in the desert with a bunch of time, weights, and grunts,” he said with a smile, his tone light but proud of the physical transformation he had undergone.

“What the hell is a grunt?” Rachel asked, her eyebrows knitting together in confusion. The military jargon was new to her, and she was genuinely curious about the world her brother had immersed himself in.