



"Fucking IEDs," White all but spat. "'Improvised explosive device' sounds so technical. They should just call them junk bombs. Or trash mines."

Foul language didn't bother Michelle. They were just words that society decided were taboo. But the fact that White had crossed the line back into using them was telling. She made her next statement noncommittally, curious to see where White took it. "Trash mines?"

"Yeah. The cowards hide them in trash. Just random shit in the middle of the road."

"And the one that hit you? Was that trash in the road?"

White's expression got distant for a moment. "Plastic garbage bag. And I didn't hit it."

"Oh really?" Michelle knew the facts, of course, but she needed to hear it from him. He'd unwittingly made it clear that he needed to be responsible for things that went wrong or at least not be held responsible for others' mistakes. Whatever he said next would say much about his perspective.

"Yeah. It was Freeman." Looking at Roberts, he added, "You remind me of him, actually."

The burly Lance Corporal shifted his weight to his other foot. "Why? Is he Black too?"

White either missed or ignored the fact that he was being called racist. "He was, yeah. But you remind me of him because he was a fucking idiot. And now he's dead because of it."

"Is that a threat?"

The look on White's face was pure exasperation. "You've got Kevlar, a baton, and a Beretta," he said, gesturing at Roberts' holstered pistol. "I'm all the way over here with nothing but my

boots. You really think I'm going to try and take you right now?"

"I'm only armed because of your escape attempt."

"Give me a fucking break. You and all your asshole friends just like getting off on the power trip."

Michelle stepped in just as Roberts took a step forward.

"Okay, let's all calm down, shall we? Let's go back to what you were saying, Jeremy. You said Freeman hit the IED?"

"Yeah," White nodded, leaning back against his chair again.

"Private Russel Freeman, right?" White grunted an affirmative. "Who else was there?"

White sighed. "It was my squad. Me, Freeman, Alcazar, and Dave."

"Lance Corporal Sergio Alcazar and Private First Class David Davidson?"

"Yeah. But we just called him Dave."

Michelle flipped a page in her notes. "This was February of 2008. You were a lance corporal and had been in Baghdad for five months. Were you in command of the patrol?"

White nodded again and crossed his arms.

"But Freeman had just been transferred. Why was he driving the Humvee?"

"He needed experience. Everyone has to learn."

White couldn't have made the lie more obvious if he'd set off an alarm klaxon. It wasn't technically untrue, but like his earlier comment about the recruiter, White was holding something crucial back.

"So what happened?"

"We were heading out on a standard courier run. Freeman ran over some garbage in the road. It exploded."

The answer was flippant. Another rehearsed line and another lie of omission. "What happened after that?"

"The explosion killed Freeman and Alcazar. Davidson was wounded. I got him out of the Humvee, but he didn't make it through the firefight."

The klaxon went off again, as White named his injured squadmate. Less than a minute ago, he had called the man "Dave." Interesting. In a way, it made sense that he was distancing himself from the events. The explosion alone would have been a traumatic experience, and everything else that had happened only made it worse. But Michelle needed White to open up. She needed to see how the event had affected him underneath the layers of armor he'd built on top of it. And to do that she'd have to get him to face his emotions about that day.

"There was a firefight?" she asked innocently.

White nodded and crossed his arms in a subconscious, defensive gesture. "It was an ambush. As soon as the bomb went off, the Taliban started shooting from the buildings around us. I pulled Davidson out of the car and got him to cover. He didn't make it. I did."

Michelle knew she had to phrase her next question correctly. He was holding back, but prying wouldn't get him to open up. Maybe she could appeal to his ego. "You had to have done more than just survive. You were awarded a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star for your actions that day." Roberts' eyes went wide at that, a fact Michelle noted filed away for later use. For now, her focus was on White. "How were you injured?"

"Shrapnel in my hip. And 12-gauge shot in my hand."

Interesting that he'd answered the "what" but not the "how." But she moved on. "And the Bronze Star?"

"I pulled Davidson out of the vehicle and got him to safety. Someone above me decided that deserved recognition."

White's response was strange. He should have been proud and eager to tell of his exploits, even if he'd avoided the details of his squad's death. Which, of course, was the answer. He didn't want to talk about it because he wasn't proud. Deep inside that fact was the kernel of truth that Michelle needed to know. She had to try something different.

"Gunny," she said, intentionally using his rank instead of his name. "If I wanted the bare account, I would read the report, and believe me, I have. This isn't a debrief, it's an evaluation. We can't move forward if you don't tell me what happened."

The pleading in her tone apparently reached him. White looked down at his hands and then up at her. "They gave me the star because I put myself in harm's way to get him to safety, and I wouldn't leave them until reinforcements arrived to exfil."

"You wouldn't leave your squad?"

"Yes."

"Even though it was Freeman who hit the IED?"

White's eyes flashed with anger, but he didn't raise his voice. "They were my squad. Never leave a man behind."

"But didn't you blame him? He was driving."

"It wasn't his fault," White said too quickly. "He didn't know what to look for. He'd only been there two weeks."

Michelle knew she was reaching the truth now. She continued probing. "Why was he driving then?"

"Everyone has to at some point. He just needed more experience and prep."

Michelle picked her next words carefully. He was moving the right direction, but she couldn't afford for him to backslide here. "You needed to prep him more?"

It took a few seconds before White replied. "Not prep exactly," White grumbled. "I mean, he'd been trained and briefed. He'd been on patrols. He just didn't have the experience."

"So was it his fault?"

"Of course not!" White snapped. Then he took a deep breath and continued. "No. The fault lies with the insurgents who planted the bomb." The phrasing of that sentence was suspect: another rehearsed line. "But it still killed three of my men."

Oh, that was good. He was taking ownership of them now, calling the squad "his men." Michelle pushed a little harder.

"Tell me about them."

"Freeman was an asshole. My kind of asshole. The kind that rips you a new one the second you make a mistake, but laughs it off when you do it to him. I didn't know him long enough, but I knew that much and I liked him. Alcazar was quiet. King of the one-liners though. He wouldn't say a thing the whole conversation, then let out one line and you couldn't breathe, you were laughing so hard. And then there was Dave."

White paused. Looking down again and taking a long, slow breath, he almost shuddered. Michelle didn't say anything. She waited patiently, hoping that he would continue on his own. When he finally did, his voice was wistful. "We called him that to make fun of him. Said his parents must have hated him to name him David Davidson. But he just owned it. He was like that, just easygoing. Nothing got under his skin."

He smiled at the ceiling as he remembered. "He was into music too. He wanted to be a producer or a DJ or something like that when he went home. He had a brand new iPod with him, a Nano, I think, back when those were the new thing. It was blue. It had a ton of memory, or at least it seemed like it back then, so he had basically any song you could think of. And his wife sent him these little speakers you could plug in so we could listen in the car. He always made playlists."

Michelle watched White as he spoke. The transition was so complete. It was almost as if he'd been waiting for an excuse to reminisce. She filed that knowledge away so she could use it again later, if needed, and asked gently, "What kind of playlists did Dave make?"

"All kinds," White chuckled. "He'd do techno or rock, or sometimes it was just songs that had the same word in the title. I remember that day it was all songs about birds."

"Birds?"

"Yeah. So we listened to 'Fly Like an Eagle,' 'Freebird,' fucking 'Rockin' Robin,' stuff like that. I was making fun of it when we got blown up."

There was something in the notes about White and music. It was a minor detail, but Michelle flipped through pages on her clipboard until she found it. There it was. One of the personnel reports from Captain Stirling said that White had regularly made playlists for CJTF-613 before missions. "Do you remember the song that was on?"

White grimaced. "Of course I do."

"What was it?"

A long exhale. "Alice in Chains. 'Rooster.'"

"I don't know that one," Michelle lied. "Can you sing it for me?"

White grunted. "You don't want to hear me sing. It's 90's grunge. About a guy who came back from 'Nam. His PTSD and shit. It says 'They come to snuff the rooster,' and 'Here come the rooster, he ain't gonna die.' Shit about how they didn't kill him over there but he won't make it back at home."

"Appropriate."

"Yeah, let's go with that." White looked away, as though seeking help to avoid the topic, and finally settled on his lap again. "It was still playing after the explosion. Somehow, it got put on repeat when the Humvee flipped and it played another three times before we got backup. It's 6 minutes and 16 seconds long."

Michelle actually blinked at that. This was new information. She noted it to file later but mentally took note of the important part. White knew exactly how long the song was, down to the second. "And Dave? The private who made the playlist?"

"PFC."

"Excuse me?"

"Dave was a private first class. Give him the credit he's due."

"Of course," Michelle acquiesced. "What did he do?"

"He was laughing when I started dragging him to better cover." White sniffed. He didn't cry, but though he tried to hide them, the emotions were apparent. "Not at first. But we could still hear the music after I got him to cover. Even over the firefight. And Dave started laughing. He was bleeding out and he knew it. Then that crazy fucker said he obviously wasn't



the Rooster because he was going to die. And then he did. Crazy motherfucker."

Michelle let the pause extend. There was still more here to unpack. "I'm sorry you couldn't save him," she said slowly, hoping that was the right move.

The jab hit solidly, and White blinked hard. "Wait, what?"

"I said it's too bad you couldn't save him. Since he was already hurt."

White glanced away from her, an instantaneous flash of guilt crossing his face. "Yeah. It is."

"But you stayed there anyway. You did the right thing."

"Yeah. The right thing." White agreed softly.

Aha. There it was. There was something else White could have done in that moment. Or, at least, there was something he thought he should have done. "How was Dave hurt?"

"I don't remember," White lied.

"Yes you do."

He took a long time to respond. "Yes I do."

"So tell me."

Another sigh. "His leg. But I'm not a corpsman."

"Don't you have first aid training?"

"I do."

"And there was nothing you could do?"

White clenched his teeth. Hard. "It was a firefight. We were outnumbered. I was the only one who could shoot back."

"But you couldn't help Dave? You'd already carried him that far."

"I didn't know."

"How couldn't you have known? You said his leg was hurt and you dragged him to safety."

"I didn't know, okay?" White yelled. "I was too busy trying to keep us alive!" He clapped his hands down on his legs in exasperation, and Roberts twitched toward his baton, reacting to the sudden outburst.

Michelle kept her eyes on White. "Then what happened? Tell me."

"I did tell you!" White spat.

"Tell me everything this time."

"I was putting up suppressive fire to keep them off us." White's tone was sharp, his words clipped, as he struggled to maintain his composure. It was actually impressive how well he was able to control himself after the sudden outburst. "I knew Dave was hurt, but I didn't know how bad. And then when he stopped laughing, I knew he'd lost blood, but I should have..." He trailed off and looked away again, but Michelle didn't let up. She had him where she wanted him now. A soft touch had gotten him started, but he needed toughness to get him to finish.

"You didn't know that you had saved your friend only to have him die because you didn't pay enough attention. You tried to do the right thing, and it was all for nothing. You think that you should have stopped the bleeding. You think you should have been driving. You think you could have avoided the whole situation if your career had just gone the way you'd planned."

White said nothing, clenching his teeth.

"So tell me why it didn't go the way you plan. Tell me why you aren't an officer. Tell me about Cody."