

Vellakari

By
Anna Siduri

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OR

©2021 Anna Siduri. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information and retrieval systems without written permission of the publisher. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Published by
Hellgate Press
PO Box 3531
Ashland, OR 97520
hellgatepress.com
email: sales@hellgatepress.com

Interior design: Sasha Kincaid
Cover design: Patti Robrahn, L. Redding

ISBN: 978-1-946754-11-9
Printed and bound in the United States of America
First edition 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1



BAGHDAD, IRAQ
APRIL, 2009

It was captivating to stand in a place so genuine. No false admiration, nothing hidden or censored, just the quiet beauty of a city ravaged by conflict since the beginning of time. I stood arrayed in full battle gear, rapt in this dangerous, war-torn location... and felt strangely at peace, quite possibly for the first time in my life.

Deployment was just shy of a year and this mission brought me here... inside the Green Zone. The vast history of the area gave rise to my intrigue as savage as the unforgiving sun. Desert heat had crept to hazardous levels again and it was barely seven a.m.; its scorching, hazy air radiating tints of orange, a clear indication of a sandstorm fast approaching. Foul scents of burnt garbage and diesel infiltrated the neck gaiter covering half my face as I traversed the dismal city park. It resembled a city dump more than a place to take children.

Ahead, the Swords of Qadisiyah loomed in the near distance, a majestic landmark serving as the gateway to Saddam Hussein's former parade ground. Worn combat boots faintly crunched the sand with my cautious saunter beneath the arches. Massive sword-wielding steel arms crossed over like an entrance to the Garden of Eden. The mighty Hands of Victory they were called, and they glowed in the morning sunlight with intricate detail.

Stadium ruins emerged to my left as I wandered further; all windows blown out, bullet holes bestrewn remaining walls. The only noise present stemmed from blowing debris circulating the arena... and galling,

relentless crows. The ambiance was surreal and eerie, yet so enticing. I could hardly believe I was within the Cradle of Civilization.

The indistinguishable click of a pistol advanced my succeeding step... and I froze in place. It didn't take long to figure out a gun barrel was pointed at the back of my head.

“Nahn hizb Allah! Alshiyeat al 'Islam!”

My heart raced aberrantly at the arrival of this unexpected visitor. I failed to remember the reason why I joined the Army in the first place, but in this moment, wondered what the hell was I thinking. There were limitless things in life I still wanted to do, and now feared I may never get to. The irritating pessimist in me prodded at a slim chance of survival... but the faint, near-fleeting optimist didn't want to give this asshole the satisfaction of taking my life away.

The city's loudspeaker suddenly blasted the Muslim call to prayer, contributing to the authenticity of the situation, though it wasn't hard to forget where I was. The man to my six kept spewing Arabic at a resounding volume, as if chanting in a rage. Though his words unknown to me, his hatred was easily interpreted from accusatory screams searing through the mere inches between us.

I firmly gripped my M16, finger inching slowly over the safety.

Okay, here we go, I readied myself. Time to do what you were trained to do. Let's fuck him up...

A deafening gunshot rang out at close range before I could turn, warm blood spattering onto my upper body in spurts. If there was ever a time when my life flashed before me, it was now.

“Oh, shit!”

It played out almost in slow mode as I hunched over and covered my right ear, now ringing from the blast. My eyes squinted under the bright glare while struggling to regain my bearings, my gaiter now drooped around my neck. Coming into focus, Master Sergeant Perez approached with all the speed of a tiger in pursuit of prey. Though his sizable, husky frame would otherwise intimidate people, his dimpled cheeks and thick black mustache gave onlookers the impression of a big teddy bear, and they would be correct. My ever-dependable section leader would do anything for someone in need, as has often been the case before, and it was a riveting relief to see him.

“Jesus Christ, Sergeant Don!” the familiar Mexican accent called out. “You almost gave me a heart attack!”

His M16 pointed at the man trembling on the sand as I straightened my back, breaths laden with shock.

“I’m so glad you saw me!” My hearing gradually started to return. “Thought I was done for.”

“I am so sorry about that, Don,” panic dominating his voice. “I was taking a couple pictures over there and then I look and see this guy had a gun on you.”

“Wasn’t your fault, Master Sergeant,” I reassured him, breaths still erratic. “I should’ve been covering the area, but got distracted.”

We both glanced down at the man, now bleeding out from his right shoulder. Our rifles remained in his direction as he struggled for his gun, which had dropped several feet away.

I sighed in relief. “Thank you for not killing him.”

He nodded. “Iraqi officials will want to question him. Find out who he is.”

A local guard raced toward us from the nearby Monument to the Unknown Soldier, his AK-47 battle-ready as he stopped to survey the scene. Perez spoke with him in fluent Arabic before turning back to me.

“Hang tight, Don. I’ll call the Commander. He can notify the Iraqi government.”

I gave a sharp nod, agreeing with his protocol, then he pulled out his cell as the guard returned to his post. I knew it had to be done, but I dreaded the idea of returning to base to face the consequences, being quite certain the Commander would not be happy about this incident.

I stepped back, analyzing the mysterious, craven attacker. He wore a long white robe with detailed leather sandals and a red and white-patterned ghutra around his head. His ash-skinned face evinced a bristly beard and Middle Eastern features that had been slashed at one time, leaving behind a long, grotesque scar from eyebrow to chin. Judging from his fanciful clothes and excessive gold jewelry, I assumed he was a man of some importance.

Perez tucked his cell away and came up beside me. “Iraqi police will be here soon. Let’s head to the flight line and get back to base before this sandstorm hits.”

“Roger, Master Sergeant,” I replied, now wanting to leave as soon as possible. “If I ever come back, I sure hope you’re with me.”

We were silent for most of the chopper ride back to Balad, the terrifying incident replaying in my mind despite efforts to block it out. My fingers trailed the base of my neck, and I cringed at the texture of dried blood splotches. At least the flight offered the opportunity to calm my nerves down some, even with the distracting loud rotary blades overhead. I glanced out from our Blackhawk helicopter over the boundless Persian Gulf. The water and desert seemed to extend forever.

“Hey Don, look.” Perez broke my thoughts as if he knew I needed it. “There’s a herd of camels down there. You see the white one?”

I smiled in awe at the white camel trotting amongst a herd of tan ones. “That’s really cool. I’ve never seen a white one before.”

“It’s rare to see one in the wild. Some people say it’s good luck.”

We watched them lope along the desert until they faded off to a speck of dust in our view.

I leaned back, turning my head inward. “Thanks for the diversion. Aside from the obvious fact that we’re in the middle of a war zone, it’s still amazing to see normal life happening around the world.”

“This is your first tour, right?”

“Yeah. Been in six years already. Contract’s almost up.”

“Oh, so you joined after 9/11.”

“Sure did.” My exhale sprouted modest frustration. “And here I thought the National Guard handled peacekeeping missions like assisting with earthquakes or Hurricane Katrina.”

“Welcome to the suck, Don. We all end up in theater sooner or later, Active Duty and Guard alike. This war keeps sending soldiers back here three or four times. Some of these guys have kids they’ve never met.”

“Is this your third tour?”

“Fourth.”

“Damn.” I raised both eyebrows. “How’s your family handle that?”

“It’s fine.” His shrug wasn’t entirely convincing. “Rosa’s a devoted Army wife. She enjoys it, for the most part. And Jairo’s still young enough to not really understand what’s going on. Just three years left and I’ll get my twenty. Besides, I really do love this shit. Far more exciting than a

civilian desk job back home... and you get to experience things that most people don't. How many can say they've sacrificed all for something they believe in? Or fired a grenade launcher off a helicopter? I grew up a poor chico in Guadalajara and look at me now."

As a full-time, highly-decorated National Guard NCO back in San Jose, Perez's experience far exceeded my own, so I often asked him to share his stories. Our unit was well-aware of his accomplishments, but I always wanted to know about his grittier memories, such as how many people he's killed, what countries he's traveled to, or what the male soldiers acted like off-duty. I wasn't particularly close to my father, so on more than one occasion, I treated Perez as such, which he accepted graciously.

I sat contemplating his words of wisdom, trying to apply them to my own life when he pat me on the shoulder, most likely sensing my distress.

"No regrets, right?"

A slightly forced grin reflected my skeptical thoughts. "Right. No regrets."

He leaned over me, scanning the ground. "We're here, Don."

I took a deep breath, slinging my rifle over my shoulder. The Blackhawk descended closer to our home base, giving us an overview of metal container housing units and tents that extended for miles. Our mission had been brief, but seemed far longer due to the unfortunate event that transpired.

We landed on the tarmac and hopped down, racing across the flight line as an F16 fighter jet took off to our rear, long blue flames blazing out the back.

"Sergeant, you can head back to your CHU!" Perez yelled over the piercing sound of the jet. "Change your ACUs and get cleaned up, then hit the mess hall before going back to the office. I'll go speak to the Commander."

"Thanks again for this morning, Master Sergeant," my response bursting with incomparable appreciation.

He simply grinned and replied with "Hooah" before turning in the opposite direction.

Back at my room, I set my heavy kevlar on the bed and pulled a fresh uniform from the locker before following the sandy trail to the latrines. Eight shower stalls lined the far walls of the trailer, just large enough to turn around inside. With no one else using the facilities, I savored the

quiet moment of hot streams cascading down, dissolving all traces of the murderous coward's blood. At the mirrors, I tucked a blonde hair strand under my patrol cap while adjusting the tight bun into place before heading out.

Hunger was just hitting me as I arrived at the mess hall. Outside the monstrous metal shed, I dropped the rifle's magazine and fired empty rounds into the clearing barrel before stepping inside. With the late morning hour, the usual long line was now gone. I grabbed a tray while observing the breakfast selection, which was the same nearly every day.

"Morning, ma'am." The flamboyant Iraqi cook smiled while pouring a spoonful of grits onto my tray. Food splotches and dirt clung to his apron and unkept beard stubble.

"Hey, Khalid. How's the kitchen this morning?"

He giggled. "Good, ma'am. Your smile very beautiful." An observation he conveyed every day, yet still brought a smile to my face. A fried egg and chopped mango was placed on my tray as well.

"Thanks, Khalid. I'll see you for surf and turf tonight."

He giggled again. "Ah yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."



A ten-minute walk across base and I strolled into the one-room S4 office, a wave of cool air blasting out from the generously air-conditioned space. Three other soldiers from my section sat at their desks, and all heads spun toward me in anticipation.

"The Donegal Son returns!" Lieutenant Belinsky blurted out with his arms raised. "Way to waste a Haji, girl!"

While out on mission, behaving in a professional manner was something we all took seriously, but inside the office, our close-knit team spoke more informally. Our months of pre-mobilization training had brought us together like a family, though an occasionally obnoxious one.

Corporal Becker hurried across the room and embraced me in a tight hug as the door closed from behind. Gratitude didn't come close to how

I felt. Years ago, I never would've guessed my best friend since childhood would become my roommate during a war. She joined the Guard only a few months after I had and we've been inseparable since.

"I'm so glad you're okay, babe." Her deep, bosom voice brought much-needed alleviation.

"I'm fine. Just shaken up." I sighed, wanting to brush off all the attention. "Glad I had Perez with me." My glance over to his empty desk brought an immediate sinking feeling. "Where is he? He hasn't come back yet?"

"Nope," her answer ripe with trepidation. "Not sure if that's a good or bad thing."

I frowned. "With Ryder, that can't possibly be good."

"If anyone can handle him, it's you, babe. Did you get your passport?"

My mouth curved, remembering why I went to Baghdad in the first place. Even as a child, I dreamed of traveling the world, and was one of the reasons I joined the Army. I handed my new and very first U.S. passport over with all the elation of a compulsive shopper setting foot inside the Mall of America for the first time.

"Sweeeet." She flipped through the crisp, empty pages. "You ready to take the world by storm, babe? Go see how the other half lives?"

"Definitely." My excitement bloomed, but waned in remembrance of the earlier near-tragedy. "Getting this thing almost cost me my life. Better make use of it."

Perez walked through the door, his face displaying slight disappointment, but greeted me with a warm smile, nonetheless.

"Sergeant Don, the Commander wants to see you in his office."

"Oooohhhh snap, Sergeant Don!" Lieutenant Belinsky belted out, still tuned into our conversation. "Time to start burning shitters."

Lieutenant VonRutenburg sat motionless across the room, not offering any words of encouragement, which was expected. The enforcer of our group rarely showed emotional support and kept to himself, unless we made some minor error, at which, he was always quick to correct.

Corporal Becker offered her sympathy. "Good luck, babe. Maybe he'll be in a good mood and let this one slide."

I shot her an unconvinced look in response, my words dripping with sarcasm. "Yeah, right. We've all been here for ten months without any

booze, sex, or good entertainment. Pretty sure I'm fucked." I held out my rifle. "Can I leave Xena with you?"

She nodded and took it. Perez gave another pat on my shoulder before I walked out with all the enthusiasm of a prisoner on death row bound for the electric chair.



Commander Ryder's office stood a few meters across the open-air office complex, a sandy area lined with metal office units, picnic benches, and tarps offering minimal shade from the hot desert sun.

Stepping up to his door, I paused to adjust my uniform. The last thing I needed was a patch out of place during an already tense situation, then knocked three times.

"Come in." His stern voice was as raw as it was intimidating, his tone more of a direct order than an invite.

I slipped off my patrol cap while entering, closing the door behind. The entire trailer served as his personal office. While still relatively small, most soldiers in our brigade packed at least eight in offices of the same size. Despite our instructions to bring minimal personal items overseas, the Commander managed to transport numerous awards and trophies from home, displayed proudly around his desk. He always did think highly of himself, whether justified or not.

My attention drew to him staring down, shuffling through paperwork. I stood at parade rest, waiting for him to speak. The rigidness in the room brought back memories of the gas chamber exercise during Basic Training, and the tumultuous retching that followed.

"How are you, Sergeant Donegal?" he finally asked without glancing up. "Have a nice time this morning?"

My prediction was correct: he was pissed. We were all well-acquainted with his usual calm before the storm. I was hoping he would ask me to sit down to break some of the tension, but he didn't.

“What do you mean, sir?” My casual response masked the calamity in my head.

His arms crossed his chest while leaning back in his chair, emerald eyes piercing mine. “You were almost killed by a Saudi terrorist this morning,” his tone more sagacious. “You don’t have any thoughts about that?”

I assumed I had ample time to think over my response during the flight back, but suddenly, I couldn’t speak. My head dropped, scrambling to find the right words.

“Don’t look at your boots, Sergeant!” he snapped. “Look at me. How in the fuck did a Haji get a gun to the back of your head in broad daylight?”

My gaze locked onto his face, words still unable to find themselves, but at least he moved the conversation along.

“Part of your mission was to obtain your passport from the Embassy. Tell me what happened.”

My throat cleared. “I wanted to see some of the sights in Baghdad, sir. Perez was showing me around since he’s been there before. We took a walk to Zawra Park before heading back to the chopper, but I went further out than I probably should have, and...”

He stared back, arms still crossed. “So, you both could’ve been killed because you were sightseeing?”

I swallowed in nervousness. “That’s an accurate assessment, sir.”

He sat up, removing a folder from his drawer. “I’m reducing Perez’s pay for the next two weeks.”

My eyes widened with guilt. “No sir, please. It wasn’t his fault. It was mine.”

“It was his fault, Sergeant. And yours. You both should’ve been maintaining your situational awareness. Just because Baghdad is now a Green Zone doesn’t mean you can let your guard down. We’re still in a foreign country and not everyone wants us here.”

It was hard to argue with his logic, so I didn’t bother with excuses as his drilling continued.

“I’m placing you on additional duty until your leave. You’ll be on cleaning detail starting tonight.”

Blatant dismay shrouded my face. Latrine detail was a shit duty for the most useless soldiers in the battalion and everyone knows those soldiers

have fucked up badly. I actually would've preferred a reduction in pay to save myself the humiliation.

"Is there a problem, Sergeant?" his query smug as he considered my reaction. Ryder was not the type to have his directives questions, so I clenched my teeth and remained agreeable.

"No, sir. That's fair."

"Good." He exhaled while removing a paper from his folder. "On a more positive note, the man who attacked you turned out to be Payar Mohammad al-Nasser."

Immediate recognition registered in the photocopy he handed over.

"He's been on FBI's Most Wanted list since '98 when he and his brother, Abdel Karim, blew up the Khobar Towers, killing nineteen of our airmen stationed there."

I nodded and returned the sheet of my attacker's face. "I remember when that happened, sir."

"He's now being questioned by the Iraqi government in hopes of locating his brother. They're both Shia leaders in the Hezbollah terrorist organization and last we knew, they had fled to Iran."

I smiled coyly. "Glad to see there's a silver lining, sir."

He glared back. "And that's the only reason you're on extra duty instead of being demoted, Sergeant."

I nodded reluctantly. "Roger that, sir. This momentary negligence won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't. You're one of our best NCOs and the soldiers look up to you. Don't let me down again." He took in another breath while pausing, his expression softening. "So, your R&R is coming up soon. Are you planning to go home? Spend some time with your family?"

"I won't be going home, sir."

He raised an eyebrow. "Where then? Going to go see your roots in Scotland?"

"New Zealand, sir." Saying the name aloud brought a smile back to my face. "I'll bring over the paperwork for your travel approval by this afternoon."

The raised slant in his mouth told me he remembered my interest in seeing the country, which I expressed in detail some time back.

I elaborated. "I've never been outside the U.S. aside from this deployment and I don't know when else I'll be able to travel that far. Life gets hectic back home and travel plans often get delayed, but this is something I don't want to put off."

His pen tapped the desk, and expression thoughtful. "That makes sense. You'll get to see Cali again in a couple of months anyway." He paused for another moment and frowned. "I thought you always wanted to see Egypt."

"Oh, I still do. I mean, it's on my list of top places to see, but I'm getting sick of seeing sand. Hate brushing it out of my ass crack every day."

His laugh brought some much-needed repose and I smiled, glad that the hard part of the conversation was over. His hands linked atop his desk, gaze lingering long enough to be marginally uncomfortable.

"Was there anything else you needed me for, sir?" I asked, still standing at parade rest.

His eyes trailed over the length of my body in a manner that was clearly not intended to be discreet. "Are you still spending time with that young mechanic from 837th?" His tone was accusatory, and expression one of combined concern, disappointment, and jealousy. "What's his name? Private McDouchefuck?"

His insulting question caught me off guard, and my tone turned defensive in response. "It's McDee, sir..." pause to sneer. "...though you seem to already know that."

"I do," he confirmed with arrogance. "Nothing occurs in my brigade without my knowledge. Did you really think I wouldn't find out?"

I was taken aback by his divulgence, but quickly realized my relationship with a subordinate soldier was probably no secret amongst the battalion, even if it was just temporary. Now would've been the perfect time for excuses, if I had any.

"Sir, I..."

He shot up from his desk and charged toward me, his intentions suspect. I backed up against the door as his hand planted on the wall behind. He leaned in so closely that I felt his warm breath at my neck, a sensation I both adored and despised.

“Scaith,” his whisper slayed my ear. “Why would you ever be with someone who doesn’t deserve you?”

Upon hearing my first name addressed, I knew we were no longer on official duty, and my professionalism dropped in favor of spite.

“Why don’t you ask your wife the same thing, Jason?” I whispered back in the same accusatory tone, a snarl emphasized at his name.

His fierce eyes bore down to mine. “I hate it when you sass me.”

My lips curled to a cunning smirk, one he was acquainted with. “Yeah, I know.”

Our eyes met and within a second, his hand grasped behind my neck, tilting my face as his lips pressed firmly over mine. I should’ve panicked, but the scent of his cologne and feel of his muscular chest were so inebriating, I welcomed it. When his hand soon found its way to my belt buckle, I shoved him back, shaking my head at my own feebleness.

“Stop, sir.” My palm held firmly against his chest, keeping him at arm’s length. “Let’s hold off until we’re done here. We already agreed.”

A long sigh escaped him as his fingers ran over light chestnut, buzz cut hair. He seemed frustrated, but understanding.

“I get so hard when you say my name, Scaith. This feels like the longest deployment of my life and I could’ve lost you today.” His hand reached up to stroke my cheek, then ran down my arm, fingers tracing the tactical American flag. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

I now understood where his anger originated from. Our affair had lasted on and off since his reassignment as Commander of my unit three years ago. He also became subordinate to his estranged wife, the Brigadier General of Rear Detachment back home. At this point, I wasn’t sure where our relationship stood, or his, though this incident may have reignited us... something I’d been trying hard to avoid.

He cleared his throat, returning to his desk as though it were a throne. “Here.” He handed over a folder. “I need these memos typed up and back to me EOD.”

I took it absent dialogue. His commandeering self had obviously bounced back, which was my cue to exit. I saluted and turned to leave.

“One more thing, Sergeant...”

I reluctantly spun around to see his demeanor turn more sentimental.

“I meant it when I said you’re a good soldier, Scaith. I feel proud to have taken someone of your caliber and potential under my leadership. You’ve always worked hard and done the right thing.”

“Until you, sir,” my response emanating impudence.

His gaze dropped a notch. “I hope I’m not holding you back or clouding your judgment, because I don’t want to do that to you.”

I was tempted to agree, but decided against it. When it came to him, I never felt in control, but wasn’t about to admit how utterly vulnerable his presence made me. His elevated ego didn’t need more fuel to burn.

“You’re not, sir. I’m in control of my own actions. I know what I’m doing.”

“Good to hear. There’s an E6 slot opening up soon and I’d like to see you apply. I know you only have four months of service left, but it would be nice to promote you before you get out.”

I showed no countenance. “I’ll consider it, sir.”

He added, “If you bring your travel request documentation to me this afternoon, I’ll approve it,” his smile subtle. “I’d like to see you take that trip.”

“Thank you, sir. I will.” I saluted again and quickly left his office, feeling instant consolation once back outside.



Only Corporal Becker sat at her desk when I returned to the S4 office, her back facing me.

“Hey, where’s everyone else?”

Her headphones dropped into her hands as her chair twirled around. “The LTs are at supply and Perez went to the gym. I’m already caught up on my stuff, so now just fucking around on this Facebook site and listening to some tunes.”

“Good. I could use some peace and quiet.” I settled into my desk next to her as she returned my rifle.

“How’d it go with Mr. Hot Head?” Her knowing, umber eyes revealed she knew what was going on, and smirked with bawdy approval.

I shook my head, flustered with discomposure. “Nothing gets past you, does it?”

“Not when you stroll in here with an obvious ‘I just got ravaged’ face.”

Becker was the only person I trusted, having known about my affair with Commander Ryder since the beginning. She never judged me for it, even when I judged myself, and once again, I felt relieved to have her by my side.

“Nothing quite that taxing.” I set the folder on my desk. “We haven’t talked about anything other than work since before pre-MOB.”

“I’m not surprised he came onto you again. You’re hot, his wife’s a power-hungry cunt, and he’s gotta have some serious blue balls. I’m sure all these guys do. I know I do.”

I chuckled softly. “How’s it going with Specialist Vernon?”

“It’s great. For now, anyway. She’s clingy, but I always remind her that she’s going back to Texas in two months.”

“You’re gonna break her heart, aren’t you?”

She winked, her smile self-assured. “Won’t be the last one, babe.”

My attention turned back to my computer. After inserting my CAC card in the reader, I started typing up the Commander’s memos until Becker reached under her desk, placing a bottle of detergent next to me.

Confusion swelled. “Uh, you want to go on a date to laundry later?”

“Open it,” she stated enthusiastically.

I twisted the cap off and looked inside to see a clear liquid, inhaling a very strong alcoholic smell. “Whoa!” My head snapped back. “What the hell is that? Turpentine?”

She giggled deviously, a reaction well known to me.

Tsk. “What have you gone and done now?”

“It’s homemade moonshine. I got it from Raj, that Indian contractor in transient housing.”

I smiled in anticipation, grateful to have such a resourceful friend. “Pretty sure that stuff burned my nose hairs just now, but I could use something strong. Let’s definitely break this out tonight.”

She let out a humorous scoff. “Who says it has to be tonight?” She

chugged the remaining water from her canteen and began replacing it with moonshine.

“Careful, hon. If VonRutenberg’s anal ass comes in here and sees you, yours is grass.”

As if on cue, Lieutenants Belinsky and VonRutenberg strolled through the door a moment later. I shot Becker my best ‘See, I told you so’ look before she swiftly concealed her contraband. It didn’t take long before Belinsky’s obnoxiously overpowering voice filled the office, ricocheting off the stark-white walls.

“You know why I hate these DoD civilians?” he boisterously entreated aloud to no one in particular.

“Do you want a list, sir?” I asked facetiously, but he kept grumbling as if he didn’t hear me.

“Aside from them earning three times what we do and not having to carry a rifle and gas mask everywhere, they don’t know how to do their fuckin’ jobs. They just approved Specialist Bentz for forty percent VA disability. You know why?”

Becker and I shrugged while glued to our computers, hoping he’d sit down and shut up for once.

“Because he’s got the shits!” he laughed maniacally. “I’ve had the shits since we got here. Where’s my rating?”

“A little Saddam Soup never hurt anyone, sir,” I teased him. “We’ve all been there. I lost like ten pounds the first month we got here.”

Becker chimed in. “Maybe you’re just not sucking the right dicks, KGB.”

“Why don’t you go suck some for me, Becker?” he quipped back. “Take one for the team.”

She cringed in disgust. “No thanks, sir. I like my men with tits and no wieners.”

Belinsky flopped down at his desk and kicked his feet up, nearly knocking over his laptop. There was a brief moment of silence until he pulled out a bag of Cheetos.

VonRutenberg turned toward me with his usual authoritative stance. “Sergeant, did you complete that HIPAA training yet?”

Brief panic arose as I had yet to check my email. “Uh, not yet, sir. I’m opening the attachment now.”

“Make sure you get it done. Commander wants all the printed certificates by today. Don’t turn it in late like you did with your Hazmat training.”

His snide tone was infuriating, and annoyingly frequent, but I kept my opinion to myself. “Roger that, sir. Got it.”

VonRutenberg always came off bossy, his sense of superiority to those he outranked evident. He joined our unit specifically for this deployment after completing ROTC. His family was said to own several upscale seafood restaurants in San Diego and were well-known in wealthy southern California social circles. Some people even claim they changed their last name from Rutenberg to VonRutenberg, just to sound more entitled. When I first saw him, I thought he resembled Jared Kushner, and I still do.

Belinsky was at least the entertaining one of the officers; a short, burly Russian-American with tawny hair and an eccentric personality. If he’s bothered by the fact that we call him KGB, he doesn’t seem to show it. He could spend an entire day expressing his obscene sexual fantasies over every woman he crosses paths with, though here in the sandbox, there weren’t many.

I worked in silence, occasionally daydreaming of my upcoming trip to New Zealand. With an already-created list of things to do, I was ready to book my hostel stay pending flight approval. Perez entered the trailer just as I finished my online training.

“Hey, how was the gym, Master Sergeant?” Belinsky mumbled across the room through a mouthful of Cheetos.

Perez set his rifle in the corner next to his desk. “Packed. Everyone’s bored with not much work left to do.” He checked his watch. “It’s almost noon. You guys wanna head to chow?”

Everyone got up except me. I opted to stay and finish a few things. Translation: Clear my head of distractions; namely a spineless terrorist who wasn’t worth worrying about... and a certain other man who kept invading my thoughts.



After about two hours of cleaning detail that night, I took another shower and returned toward my room sporting my usual off-duty wear: a grey PT shirt and black shorts.

The sun was just setting as I swung the door open, revealing a petite African-American girl hovering over Becker... topless.

My lips twisted to a smirk as I cleared my throat, trying to face toward my side of the room. Being too late to retreat now, I embraced a more comical route than one of embarrassment.

“Hey, Specialist Vernon. Nice tits.”

She sat up with a proud look on her face. “Thanks, Sergeant Donegal,” her voice high-pitched and almost childlike. She pulled her hair into a bun with her entire upper body on clear display. Becker continued to lay on her bed, her hands interlaced behind her. The gaze she gave me begged approval of her latest fling.

I had to laugh. Neither of them had any shame, which I admired. One of Becker’s finest qualities was her effortless dismissal of anyone’s judgment, a trait I unfortunately lacked.

“Hey babe, Dee was here earlier looking for you,” she informed me. “He probably heard about what happened in Baghdad. You know how emotional he gets.”

“Okay, I’ll head over there. You two can continue your... thing.”

I pulled my PT jacket from the locker and headed out to the male housing area. Many soldiers were hanging out in front of their rooms while some were sneaking off to hook up.

In the few minutes it took to walk to Private McDee’s door, it was already pitch black outside. His door cracked open before I could knock, his inviting smile showing off white teeth contrasted against beige Puerto Rican skin. His Army dog tags hung loosely over his bare chest and light grey sweatpants. Despite not working out much, I always thought he had a nice build. Though not the alluring Trojan that Ryder was, McDee’s affections were comfortable and safe.

“Baby girl, get in here.” He spoke with an adorable Texas drawl, as did many other soldiers from 837th, including Specialist Vernon.

After quietly stepping into his room, he slammed the door and hugged me. His distraught behavior over my near-death encounter was apparent. In comfort, I kissed the top of his shaved head, which stood a foot shorter.

“I heard what happened,” his declaration hushed and apologetic. “Glad you’re all right, baby girl.”

I sighed, tossing my jacket on his bed. I had been there many times before, but he now lived alone since his roommate shipped home early for a family emergency. Lucky for me, what I wanted from McDee tonight didn’t require an audience.

My hands slid around his back, my gaze falling to his silver puppy-dog eyes. “You know what, Dee? I’m done talking for today.” My lips enclosed over his, and he happily obliged.

I couldn’t have found a more perfect friend and playmate during deployment. He was young and energetic, easy to be around, and eager to please. At just twenty years old, he was seven years my younger, whereas Ryder was fifteen my senior. I cared for them both in different ways, but knew neither relationship was meant for long-term. Once deployment ended, McDee would return to Texas with his unit and I would be back in California with mine, an arrangement we were both content with. Though my thoughts occasionally drifted back to Ryder, I remained in the moment, releasing my cares and concerns away to this ever-willing recipient, returning to my own bed hours later.