

## CHAPTER 2

# PERFECTLY PREPARED



*Crew at West Point. I'm in the first rowing position, in control as the Stroke. April 2005.*

**A LAKE OUTSIDE OF CLEMSON, SOUTH CAROLINA. SPRING  
BREAK, 2005. AGE TWENTY-ONE.**

I gave an involuntary shudder after tossing my sweatshirt on a rock and wading into the water. As soon as we began rowing, I knew I'd warm up. But at 7:30 a.m. in March, even "balmy" South Carolina temps were just above freezing.

"So damn cold out here," I heard Erik's grim mutter behind me as we guided the shell deeper into the water. He sat in the number seven spot, just behind the stroke seat where I'd been assigned.

"Better than the Hudson," I rejoined, trying to convey humor I didn't feel. "We'd be dodging hunks of ice if we were still in New York."

Our coxswain, Nick, counted us down—3, 2, 1... On the final count, the eight of us transitioned smoothly into the shell and Nick settled into the coxswain seat right in front of me. As we began pulling the oars, I felt satisfaction, sensing the uniformity of our movement and timing. My favorite part of rowing on the crew team was the sensation of moving as a single organism. Now that I was rowing Stroke, the *swing* of falling into synchronization was more than a pleasure; it was my responsibility to lead.

We took slow pulls, warming up as we moved toward the racing area. The Varsity boat cruised ahead of us. Several of the seniors called out trash talk as they passed my Junior Varsity shell. The rest of the Varsity boat was made up of Juniors—my classmates and best friends. They made eye contact with me apologetically as their shell pulled away from mine. Their sympathy stung. As of the previous night's posted seating assignments, they were all now Varsity rowers. Nick and I were the only two still relegated to the JV boat.

"The seniors are still pissed after last fall," Nick said.

"Yup," I agreed, exhaling on my pull in time with the *clunk* of our oars. Everything in the boat was done according to a strict rhythm and cadence—even when we were just warming up.

I knew Nick's comment was intended to soothe both of our wounded egos by bringing to mind the epic race where our JV boat

had smoked Varsity. I could still picture the big regatta that had been the culmination of our fall season. The Occoquan River, just outside Washington, DC, had been crowded with shells from a number of other colleges, in addition to the two boats from West Point. Army Varsity had been the favorite to win the entire race, but my JV boat had felt fast as we navigated the river course and passed other teams on our way to the finish. My thoughts went back to that moment—the yells from the viewing platforms; Nick's hoarse calls, urging us on; seeing us pull away from the trailing teams as we approached the finish line; the burn in my muscles; the rhythm of the oars.

When the results were posted, *Army-Junior Varsity* had topped the list, followed by *Army-Varsity*. It was a huge upset. And the people who'd been *most* upset were undoubtedly the Varsity guys and our coaches.

*What else could I have done to convince them?* I wondered. Nearly six months after I had led the JV boat to victory—after a winter's worth of gym workouts and the previous week of training—the memory of last fall's win caused me new irritation, mixed with regret. All week long during spring training, I'd given it my all, hoping to be assigned to the Varsity boat. I didn't care which seat I got; I just wanted to be on the Varsity boat.

Coach had posted the assignments the previous night. I'd searched the list under "Varsity," reading it over twice, sure I'd missed my name. It wasn't there. Then, I looked under JV. *Stroke: Sam Brown*. Same position as the previous fall.

No advancement.

I'd gone straight to bed, frustrated and confused.

*Maybe JV's where I belong*, I told myself, trying to talk down my ego. After all, I hadn't even been sure I would make the team the previous fall, after getting a knee injury that required surgery my sophomore year. In September, it had seemed like a miracle when the coaches assigned me as Stroke in the JV boat. "All that time in the rowing tank while you were healing made you a better rower," they'd remarked to me. "You've got better technique. Better control." And it was true—

our JV boat had killed it throughout the fall season, culminating in the upset where we'd beat the Varsity boat and everyone else in that final race of the season.

But that win hadn't been enough to earn me a Varsity seat this spring. And the senior Varsity rowers' trash talk didn't help. I pulled on my oar and clenched my teeth.

*Doesn't matter*, I told myself, not sure if I meant the JV assignment, the knee injury, the Varsity's trash talking, or all of the above. I tried to reorient my thoughts to my immediate surroundings. *Layer of fog on the water. Log cabins among the pines. The oars slicing in the water—listen.*

We rowed to the starting line. Given that it was Saturday, the last day of our training week, the coaches were racing our two boats against each other to establish a baseline. Typically, there was a wide gap between when JV and Varsity each crossed the finish line. Varsity always created a sizeable lead, which the JV boat would work to close all season.

Coach pulled up beside us in a speedboat and held out his stopwatch. Through his megaphone he lined our shells up with the bows even and called, "Ready...attention...GO!"

Our bodies exploded into action. I quickly found the rhythm that I'd practiced during all the tank sessions my sophomore year—the only rowing option available for me while my knee healed. What the coaches had said about me was true: the time in the tank *had* made me a better rower. I hadn't been able to exert myself at the same level as the other guys out on the Hudson; the only productive use of my time in the absence of strength was to focus on my technique. And that had made a huge difference.

The trick, I'd realized, was to establish a good ratio of speed in how fast I allowed my body to move toward my feet. Most people thought all the rowing power came from hauling the oar through the water: exploding backwards with your legs first, then following with your back and arms. But I'd discovered that the move *forward* on the sliding seat, with the oar out of the water, was equally as important. After such a powerful haul backwards, it was tempting for rowers to

slide forward with little control, saving their energy for another pull. But when we didn't control our slide forward, we created backwards inertia. Eight rowers slamming forward in their seats at the same time decreased the boat's forward momentum.

My approach as Stroke was to create a more intentional slide forward to reset the oar in a compressed position, then explode out. It meant we had to sustain more energy on both the move forward and the pull back, but it also meant we were more efficient. The boat had more of a chance to run forward between strokes.

I could feel the guys behind me trying to rush the slide. I resisted their speed, knowing I had to control the pace. So long as I held steady, they would eventually follow me.

With a few more pulls, I could feel us start to move as one. The momentum in our slide began to feel uniform. The oars splashed into the water all at the same time. I could hear the oarlocks click in unison as we feathered the oars from vertical to horizontal, and felt our breath exhaling hard on each stroke.

*"Lengthen, breathe. Lengthen, breathe,"* Nick called, matching the rhythm of his yells to the clicks of the oarlocks. All of us were moving in perfect synchronization.

"Two seats up on Varsity! Here we go. We're entering the second five hundred. Now, let's *really...set...that rhythm...and SWING!*"

We seemed to fly over those 2,000 meters. When we crossed the finish line, the Varsity boat was a full length behind us. A few guys in the JV boat whooped happily, but stopped as soon as they saw Coach's face.

Coach stared in disbelief between our JV boat and Varsity. "What the hell?!" he remarked. He scowled. Then, he cranked the wheel of his speed boat and moved it off a distance. We waited.

We couldn't hear what he was saying to the assistant coach, but it was obvious Coach was pissed. His gestures and tone all indicated he was angry by the unpredictable outcome.

He motored back. "We're going again," he said. "Line up for another head-to-head."

We rowed our boats to a new starting position and waited for the start. “Attention... *GO!*”

All of us hauled our oars back, this time finding our rhythm within the first few strokes. Despite the soreness we all felt from the week of hard training, finding our synchronized motion transformed our bodies. Just briefly, it was easy to forget the pain. We were flying.

“Thirty-four-and-a-half, *good*,” Nick guided. We were right on pace. His voice got louder and more excited as he called updates that alerted us to our gains on Varsity. “Four seats up on Varsity. Last 750... Let’s do a power ten in *three...two...one*, let’s *GO!*”

Once again, our JV boat sliced across the 2,000-meter finish line—this time, an even larger gap ahead of Varsity.

Coach swore audibly and motored away from us again. He and the assistant coach took longer this time. We saw them staring at us, motioning back and forth between the two boats.

“Nope, it’s not an anomaly,” Erik said cheerfully behind me. “JV’s just *that good*.”

“Coach doesn’t know what to do with us,” Nick said. “Bunch of underperformers beating his Varsity all-stars.”

“All that work, perfecting his new lineup all week,” I said. “Turns out it was a waste.” I felt a grim satisfaction. *Guess my name should have been on the Varsity list after all, huh, Coach?* The thought was validating. I wasn’t the strongest guy out there—not even close. But I knew what happened to a boat full of rowers when they followed my lead.

“I kind of like being the underdog,” I mused. “People have minimal expectations of what you can do and then...you go out and perform.”

Coach motored back over, scowling. Then he motioned to the Varsity boat. “I want Dan to switch with Jon. Dan, you take Stroke.” Dan was one of the most aggressive type-A personalities on the Varsity boat—ruthlessly competitive. Coach stared at the rest of us. “The rest of the lineup stays as is. We’re going again.”

I could hear scoffs and muffled groans across both boats. After a grueling training week and then going all out on two head-to-heads, a third race felt especially ruthless. I also knew that Dan would give

everything he had to beat us in an effort to earn the coveted spot as the Varsity Stroke. This third run was likely to be brutal.

"My hands are ripped open," Erik muttered as we rowed back into position.

"Mine too," I said, just as two other guys in the JV boat said the same thing. None of us had ever done three back-to-back-*to-back* races like that.

Coach called the starting, "GO!" We quickly locked into rhythm, ignoring the pain in our hands and our bodies. The morning chill had long given way to a warm March day, and all of us were coated in sweat.

Nick's voice was hoarse. "Let's *find*...our control, let's *find* our rhythm." I locked into our racing pace and the rest of the boat quickly followed. "Find that middle move! Let's stay long! I want *Varsity*... to *know*...that *they* can't catch us... That *we* are *elite*... That *we* are *unstoppable*..." Our oar locks smacked in perfect synchronization, making a cadence with the splashes of our oars slicing through water. Our bodies ached. The boat soared.

"We're entering *right* here! *Going* thousand, *middle* move! *Last chance* to black out, men! Right now, TEN—pick it up! NINE, that's it. EIGHT, good soldiers! SEVEN, let's go." I could see the Varsity boat's full length behind us and registered their coxswain's red, angry face.

Nick's yells intensified as we approached the finish line. "They're *eating*...our...*dust*, OPEN WATER! That's *three*...*two*...ONE, LAST PULL!"

For the last time, we flew across the 2,000-meter mark. As we crossed the finish line, it was clear to all of us that the JV boat had won by the greatest margin so far. We collapsed over our oars, exhausted, and dizzy with delight over our third consecutive victory.

Coach stared at us with a look of profound disappointment. He shook his head. "Take it in."

None of us spoke as we began maneuvering the boats back over to shore. It felt like we were kids who'd just been yelled at by a furious parent.

“What’s this mean?” Erik whispered behind me. I shrugged.

On Sunday, we made the long drive back to West Point. Monday afternoon, we met at the boathouse near the banks of the Hudson River, just an hour’s drive north of New York City. The sky was thickly overcast, matching the dark steel gray of the river. We began unloading the shells from the boathouse and fitting them out with our oars and shoe riggings. I glanced out at the water to see if there were whitecaps.

“Hold up on your riggings,” Coach called gruffly. “We’ve got a change in the lineup. Sam Brown.” Coach gestured to me. “You’re now the Stroke of the Varsity boat.”

My eyes locked with Nick’s. He swore.

“Let’s go, Sam. Get your stuff swapped over,” Coach called. Quietly, I began pulling my shoe riggings out of the JV shell and walked over to the Varsity boat. I avoided making eye contact with the scowling senior who walked past me with his own riggings, demoted from Varsity to JV.

As I got closer to the Varsity shell, my buddies in the boat beamed. “There he is!” one called. I grinned and shook my head, still in shock at what just happened.

As soon as practice began, I found my stroke. The Varsity rowers behind me fought my rhythm longer than the JV guys had, wanting to rush the slide. I held my stroke and waited for them to fall in line. As soon as they did, we picked up speed.

In the head-to-head against the JV boat at the end of that first practice, it was once again my shell that crossed the finish line first. The Varsity team pulled far ahead to a decisive victory.

I never gave up that seat again.

Army-1, the Varsity boat, went on to have its best season in West Point’s history. The next fall, during my senior year—this time, with Nick as the Varsity coxswain—we were invited to the most competitive autumn regatta in the country: the Head of the Charles, in Boston. We also qualified for the Intercollegiate Rowing Association’s premier spring season national regatta in Camden, New Jersey—the



first and last time an Army Varsity boat with eight rowers had ever been invited to compete.

Although I never said it out loud, I had the thought, plenty of times:

*I'm the key variable. When people follow my lead, it makes them the best version of themselves. That's when the efforts of everyone else are maximized.*

*That's when we win.*

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**KANDAHAR DESERT, AFGHANISTAN. SEPTEMBER 4, 2008. LATE AFTERNOON.**



*At the combat outpost, reading about surviving combat in Afghanistan next to my "stretcher" cot. September 2008.*

It felt crazy to turn my back on the man who had most likely planted the explosives intended to take the lives of my soldiers. Each step away from him seemed to sharpen the memory of his dark glare.

I breathed out heavily. Why did it suddenly seem even hotter than before? The desert sun beat down relentlessly.

"You okay, LT?" Anthony asked beside me.

"Fine. Just hot."

"I can't believe we're letting him go either," Anthony said grimly. We emerged from behind the wall of the mud compound. His tone changed abruptly. "Oh, *now* we're talking!"

I looked up and squinted my eyes in the direction Anthony was facing. While we'd been in the mud compound, the route clearance company had arrived. Their long train of vehicles gleamed in the harsh light, with the lead truck looking like something out of *Mad Max: Fury Road*. I felt a massive wave of relief.

A route clearance company is designed to detect and set off any buried landmines—thereby clearing a route. The heavily armored lead vehicle is equipped with what looks like a massive rolling plow on its front: a counter-IED package. Two long arms stretch out in front of the vehicle which hold either end of a wide horizontal axle. Attached to that axle is a line of thick, rolling tires. As the route clearance vehicle drives forward, that line of tires puts pressure on every inch of the road. If there's a landmine there, you can bet it will be detonated, and the vehicle is specially designed to withstand the blasts. That means any vehicle driving behind a route clearance vehicle is likely to come away unscathed—that is, so long as there aren't any bad actors hiding with a remote, ready to detonate a bomb *after* the route clearance company goes through. I pushed thoughts of the man with the black turban out of my mind. This route clearance company was exactly what we needed.

"Did they come here for us?" one of my privates, Winston, piped up behind me.

I shook my head. "They'd already been assigned to lead the last leg of the convoy's route back to KAF. But it sure is helpful that they're here."

I jogged toward one of the vehicles where I knew I would find the Company Commander. His towering MRAP had pulled up near the mangled remains of my own platoon's exploded MRAP, like a grisly "before and after" photo. I could see some of my guys still gathering equipment and cleaning up the debris.

"Make sure you're staying hydrated, men," I called to them. I made a mental note to chug a water as soon as I got back to my own Humvee. The heat was nearly unbearable this afternoon.

I slowed to a walk and trudged the final few steps toward the Commander's MRAP. "Captain?" I called.

After a pause, the Company Commander opened the door. Refreshing, cool air blew out from the vehicle. He lounged in the passenger seat and looked down at me.

"Lieutenant. How can I help you?"

"Sir, as you can see, our platoon has hit an IED. This was a concern I had to begin with, due to the fact that the convoy is coming back the same way it went to the Kajaki Dam. I came over to ask if you'll use your route clearance package to clear the rest of the route to the northern extent of our area of operation."

He didn't respond. Had he not heard me? I couldn't tell where he was looking behind his dark lens ballistic eye protection.

I tried again. "Sir—now that we've already hit one, can you just have your guys clear the rest of the route? We'll fall in behind and get into our secure positions, then your route clearance package can come back safely and stage where you need to be staged."

He turned his ballistic eye pro down at me. "Nah. I'm not going to do that."

*What?* I was in disbelief. I didn't think I was going to need to convince him to do this. Wasn't I making a commonsense request?

He started to close his door. I broke in. "Hey Sir, hold on. I just want to clarify—is there a *reason* that you can't do this? Clearly, the Taliban has taken the opportunity to plant bombs along this stretch and it's likely there are more. In fact, I just spoke to an Afghan in that mud compound over there who looks like he might have been the bombmaker."

None of this seemed to make any impression on the commander. He continued staring coolly down at me through his dark shades. I pressed on, growing increasingly frustrated by his icy countenance. "I didn't come over here just to be a pain or act entitled or anything. We've *hit* an IED—" I gestured angrily over my shoulder. "—And there are probably more. You and I both know the plan for the convoy's path of return violates the principles of security. Given that you have the specialized equipment necessary to clear and secure this route, would you please clear it?"

He smiled. His teeth were perfect and gleaming white. "Lieutenant Brown."

I nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"You're the one who was making all sorts of noise with Command about this return route. You and your squad leaders. Isn't that right?"

I tried to answer but he cut me off. "And now you're not getting your way. And that's upsetting to you."

"*Sir*—" I gestured to the smoldering MRAP behind me.

"My route clearance assignment is to stage at the intersection of *this* dirt road and *that* highway." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the paved highway we'd come in on. "And then we're supposed to lead the convoy back to the airfield. *Your* job is to provide security for the area just south of the pass to the paved highway right here. So, why don't you do your job, and let my company do ours?"

"But—but, Sir—" I was sputtering. "You have the flexibility on the ground as a commander to make adjustments based on the circumstances. Clearly, we have a situation—how much more justification do you need? You have the unique assets to clear the route, and—"

"Thank you, Lieutenant." He flashed another gleaming smile at me and shut the door.

I stood there, stunned. My own arguments whirled in my thoughts: even if the commander thought I was entitled or complaining, what about the large multinational forces convoy? They would have to drive over the same terrain we were supposed to secure—terrain likely pockmarked with explosive devices. If his route clearance company's

whole function was to clear the route for them—never mind his own fellow Battalion’s units—*why* wouldn’t he clear it for the bigger mission?

I wanted to wrench the door open and pull him down out of his air-conditioned fortress.

Instead, I turned around. There was nothing more I could do.

I took a few steps back toward the mud compound, planning to update Anthony and Steven, when my company radio popped again. “Comanche HQ, this is Ramrod HQ. Please update us on the status of the mission. Are you able to secure the route?”

The message had gone out to our entire company, but I knew it was mainly directed at me. I felt renewed frustration at the route clearance company CO’s glib refusal. *We SHOULD be able to secure the route.* “Ramrod HQ, this is Comanche 3-6,” I called back. “Stand by for an update.”

I looked over at my platoon’s destroyed MRAP. We were down one of our most heavily armored vehicles which made us more vulnerable. Being short a vehicle also meant that one of the squads had to be divided up and cross-loaded. And now that the route clearance commander had refused to clear the road, there was a chance that one of our four Humvees would hit another planted IED, further diminishing our platoon. Getting ourselves to the northern position did not look promising, either for our platoon or for the success of the mission.

I turned back toward the mud compound. A sight farther in the distance caught my attention—the glare of the harsh sun reflected off the vehicles of First Platoon, still idling on the highway.

I called through the company radio to Austin, my West Point classmate and the First Platoon leader. “1-6, this is 3-6.”

He responded immediately. “3-6, 1-6. You want us to leapfrog you and secure the northern route?”

I felt relieved that he’d come to the same conclusion I had. “1-6, 3-6. How does that sound?”

“Makes sense,” he said. “We’re fully intact and have both our

MRAPs. We'll head north, and you guys can secure the southern sector."

"1-6, 3-6, there's something you should know," I said. "Let's sync in person before you head north."

The line of First Platoon vehicles turned off the highway onto the dirt road, one by one. Austin slowly drove his vehicle over to me, staying in line with his platoon. When he pulled up next to me, he hopped out. "What's up, Brown?"

I walked close enough that I could speak quietly. "The route clearance package is not going to go north. I requested it—I just spoke to their Company Commander. But he's refused to clear the road any farther north."

Austin didn't hold back his anger. "What the *fuck*? Well, that's a bitch move. I wouldn't have expected that from him."

I would have laughed if I hadn't been so angry. "There's a chance you may hit another one."

He nodded. "Understood. We'll lead with the MRAPs and call you if we need your guys to be a quick reaction force for us."

I shook my head, feeling disbelief over what seemed like a senseless risk. "Good luck. You guys be safe. Keep your eyes out for any more IEDs. I'll look forward to seeing you guys back at KAF tonight."

Austin gave me a fist bump and jumped back in his MRAP. His voice sounded again over the company channel. "Ramrod HQ, this is Comanche 1-6. We are taking the northern sector of the route and Comanche 3-6 will secure the southern portion." Austin's group of vehicles peeled off from the larger group and continued heading north, the two MRAPs leading. I watched them, trying to will their safety as they drove up to the northern pass between the mountains. How many more IEDs had been planted along this route?

Anthony and Steven walked up to me. "Route clearance isn't going first?" Anthony demanded.

I shook my head. "Requested it. Repeatedly. Got shot down."

"*Why*?" Steven asked.

"He didn't really give a reason."

Steven stared at the dust trail made by First Platoon as they drove north. “Well. We should hurry up and finish cross-loading then. Cause we’re probably going to need to provide assistance if First Platoon hits an IED.”

I nodded tightly. “Let’s finish that up.”

I strode quickly back to my vehicle, trying to control the rage welling up. The day’s series of events seemed to compound, gather, and culminate in the commander’s, “*Nab*—I’m not going to do that.” First, there had been the warning signs we’d seen that morning, with the women and children fleeing the village and the “fighting-age males” darting between buildings. Then the first explosion. Then the lone Afghan man with the black turban, missing fingers, and glowering eyes—in my mind, I already thought of him as the bombmaker. And the multinational forces convoy’s return along its same incoming route, flouting the principles of security. As an infuriating final straw—this grinning, flippant rejection from a higher-ranking officer of a legitimate request that was in the interest of preventing further injury and saving lives.

My mind raced with all the decisions I would have made differently, but none of that mattered. My job was to follow instructions, and lead my men to the best of my ability.

As I got close, I could see the crew had nearly finished cross-loading equipment off the destroyed MRAP. I called out to the platoon sergeant. “Once we’re done with equipment, let’s get new vehicle assignments for the guys from that truck.”

I grabbed a water bottle off the back of my Humvee and slung myself into the front passenger seat, angling my legs out the door so I was facing away from Mike and Philip. They didn’t greet me. They must have been able to read from my body language that I wasn’t in the mood to chat.

*Focus on the mission, I thought sternly. Obstacles are a given. But at the end of the day, nothing outside of death itself needs to derail the mission.* I inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly.

Staring out at the flat desert expanse, my mind suddenly conjured



up a vision of flat, clear water. The lake in South Carolina. West Point rowing days. The memory filled me with a swell of pride that was instantly rejuvenating.

*I'M the one who controls my outcomes. I missed a half season of rowing and had to stay on that JV boat longer than I wanted. But the outcome was only delayed. I still made Stroke on Varsity. I still accomplished what I set out to do.*

*I accomplish what I set out to do, I repeated in my mind. I control the slide, and the others follow my lead.*

This was the pep talk I needed. With enough energy, with enough focus—nothing would permanently stop me. Not a bombmaker. Not an entitled commander. Not a poorly planned convoy route. There was no reason *any* of them should interrupt the pursuit of my goals and the execution of the mission, so long as I remained focused.

The company radio popped with Austin's voice. "3-6, this is 1-6. Thought you'd be glad to know First Platoon is staged in our position. Made it safe and sound."

I felt a massive wave of relief. "1-6, 3-6," I called back. "Very glad to hear it."

*Good.* First Platoon hadn't run into any more IEDs. *Maybe we hit the only one,* I thought. That seemed doubtful—more likely, First Platoon had just lucked out with their tire tracks. But for the sake of the returning convoy, I hoped First Platoon's successful drive north boded well for the whole mission.

My platoon sergeant's voice took over the radio as he began cross-loading the soldiers from the deadlined MRAP and calling out their new vehicle assignments. I watched him out the windshield; he was studying his vehicle seating roster. One by one, the soldiers gathered near him jogged to new vehicles.

I turned around in my seat to look at Philip. "Hey, Phil," I asked. "Would you be up for digging out those Canadian MREs? This is probably a good time to eat."

I peered back through the window at the platoon sergeant. Looked like he'd managed to cross-load everyone except for one guy. I squinted. Who was that? The soldier shifted and adjusted his gun. I grinned:



the only soldier with that small of a build and that large of a gun was Vincent Winston.

“We need one more seat somewhere,” the platoon sergeant’s voice came through clear in my headset. “Do any vehicles have an empty seat?”

*We do*, I thought. The seat right behind me where the interpreter normally sat was vacant. I started to speak up but then stopped.

For whatever reason, I didn’t want Winston in that seat. I didn’t want *anyone* in that seat.

The call came through on my headset again. “Please respond if you have any spare room in your vehicle. We’ve got to get Winston somewhere.”

I remained silent. Out the windshield, I could see the platoon sergeant studying the seating roster. He must not have remembered that my vehicle was down our interpreter—and I didn’t want to remind him. *There’s got to be somewhere else that he can go.*

I didn’t understand my hesitation. I liked Winston—everybody liked Winston. Anthony and a few others called me “the mind” of our unit, but everyone thought of Winston as “the heart.” His childlike innocence made us all feel like he was our kid brother. Even watching him now, seeing his expression screwed up in a squint while holding that heavy gun, I felt a surge of affection. But imagining him loading into the seat behind me caused an intense feeling of uneasiness. Deep in my gut, I sensed that seat needed to remain empty.

The platoon sergeant’s voice came through again. “We need one more seat somewhere,” he repeated. “As far as I know, every seat that was open has now been filled. Putting out one last call. Did I miss something? Is there another seat left?”

One by one, vehicle commanders began piping up. “3-3 is full, Sarge.”

“Full in 4 too.”

“Our truck’s full, Sarge.”

Every other vehicle except mine called in. *What’s your problem, Brown?* I wondered. *Call him over.* Still, I hesitated. Five seconds

passed. Then ten. Finally, it felt impossible to wait any longer. I held up my platoon radio. "Hey, 3-7, this is 3-6. I don't have our interpreter. We left him at the FOB. You can send Winston over to me."

I watched Winston start to jog over us, his big machine gun juggling around in his arms. The feeling of uneasiness grew stronger, like a weight on my chest. I tried pushing it out of my mind.

*Chill out, Sam, I told myself. First Platoon made it to the northern end of the route without hitting any IEDs. My platoon is stationed where we need to be. The only people under threat now are in the returning convoy before they get to us, and once they get to us, we follow them all the way back to KAF. Our risk of IEDs from here on out is effectively zero.*

Philip hopped back in the vehicle, his arms full of the Canadian MREs. Winston arrived, sweating. He looked at the Humvee's doors, which had all been pushed wide open. "How's the A/C in this one?" he asked.

"Like shit!" Kevin called out from his turret. His drawl elongated the second word: *shee-at*.

"Yeah, but we've got a decent consolation prize," Philip said cheerfully. "Gourmet meals."

"Hop in, Winston," I said. "We traded some of our American MREs with the Canadians this morning."

"Aw, really?" He hoisted himself up into the seat behind me. "What are they?"

Philip studied the boxes. "Beef teriyaki...veal cutlet...meatloaf..."

"I call meatloaf!" Kevin hollered.

Philip passed out the rest, handing me the veal cutlet which the others had passed on. I ripped into the box. "You guys missed out," I called, starting to feel better. "I've got blueberry cobbler for dessert!"

Kevin started piping a new song into my ear: "Bubble Toes," by Jack Johnson. I relaxed into my seat, one leg resting on the floorboard, and the other hanging out the door. In the evening light, the easy melody made the harshness of the desert feel somehow more benign. A breeze blew through the vehicle. I took a deep breath. In a few hours, we'd be back at KAF. Showers, a real bed, air-conditioned rooms.

*YOU control the slide, Sam, I thought. Just keep it easy and controlled.*

The company radio popped alive with Austin's voice. "Comanche network, this is Comanche 1-6. We're receiving indirect fire from a ridgeline to our Northeast."

I paused, a bite of blueberry cobbler halfway to my mouth. Kevin turned off the music.

I spoke into the radio. "1-6, this is 3-6. Understand you're receiving indirect fire. Is it effective? Have you been hit?" I waited for Austin to respond and took another bite. This was probably a situation where the Taliban would shoot a couple of badly aimed mortar rounds and then bolt before we returned fire. That had happened to my own platoon several times already. It had always turned out to be a non-escalatory situation.

While waiting for Austin, I radioed the Battalion back at the combat outpost. "Ramrod HQ, this is Comanche 3-6. Did you receive the report from Comanche 1-6, regarding receiving indirect fire?"

The radio sparked with the voice of one of the platoon leaders back at the FOB. "Comanche 3-6, this is Ramrod HQ. Negative. We did not receive a message from Comanche 1-6 regarding indirect fire."

That meant Austin's platoon was out of radio range with the Battalion and possibly our company. I was the only one close enough to receive his messages. "1-6, this is 3-6," I radioed to Austin. "Your radio transmissions aren't going all the way back to Battalion. You're too far out."

There was a pause and then Austin's voice came back through—slightly louder than the first update. "3-6, this is 1-6. The indirect fire is now bracketing our position." I stiffened and sat up. The Taliban hadn't bolted, like I'd expected. Whoever was firing the mortar rounds was altering their aim, zeroing in closer on either side of the platoon. The situation was suddenly much more serious.

"Men, this is 3-6," I called on my platoon network. "First Platoon may need our assistance. Stand by for orders on driving north immediately."

"Guys—" I said to the group in my Humvee. "Gather your trash. We may be going somewhere quick."

“Time to finish your dessert,” Kevin quipped.

In my mind, I was quickly trying to sort out how my platoon could maintain security over our own assigned sector, but also provide help to First Platoon. Our third squad—the men who had mostly been in the exploded MRAP, including Vincent Winston—had now been cross-loaded across all remaining vehicles. That meant Third Squad wasn’t intact to drive up north and provide assistance. I looked at the MRAP parked in front of me. Most of those guys were Anthony’s squad—and Anthony himself was in the Humvee behind me with the rest of his men. It would make the most sense for his squad to drive north with my vehicle if necessary.

I radioed Anthony, giving him instructions to prep his two vehicles for heading north. Then I radioed Steven and my platoon sergeant. “3-3 and 3-4, this is 3-6. I’m going to need your squads to work together to maintain security in this area. That might mean you need to spread out a little more.” They would be fine—Steven, especially, was a gifted leader.

But where was Austin? I was anxious for another update. I used the company radio to relay Austin’s updated status to the Battalion.

As soon as I released my own “talk” button, I heard Austin’s voice bark through again. “3-6, this is 1-6. We’re now taking direct fire from the village west of us!” His voice dropped off abruptly—a sign that he was delivering his updates to me as quickly as possible because he also needed to issue commands to his own platoon through their radio network.

“1-6, this is 3-6. Do you need support?” I asked. Mike stared at me, waiting for the command to start the ignition. Philip leaned forward from the backseat, staring at the MRAP in front of us. Nothing came through from Austin.

The radio sparked alive. “Comanche 3-6, this is Ramrod HQ.” It was the Battalion. “Can you provide an update from Comanche 1-6?” Hurriedly, I called Austin’s latest update back to the Battalion again and sent another message to the platoon, then waited for Austin.

“1-6, this is 3-6. *Do you need support?*” I repeated. Something was

occurring at the base of the mountains that I couldn't see and couldn't hear, and my buddy Austin was in the midst of it.

"3-6, confirmed! We are now receiving direct and indirect fire from three different directions. We need support!"

"1-6, we're on the way!" I switched radios to speak to the platoon network. "3-1 and 3-2, this is 3-6. First Platoon needs our support! Your orders are to head directly to the northern portion of the route until we can visually assess the situation with First Platoon. 3-3 and 3-4, maintain security here with 3-7. Let's go!"

In front of us, the MRAP rumbled to life, but such a heavy vehicle takes time to get started. "Let's go..." I muttered impatiently. Finally, they lurched forward and then quickly accelerated—probably two to three times faster than they would normally go. We took off behind them, our vehicles once again kicking up the fine, powdery dust of the desert. The evening light slanted into the dusty swirls, causing them to glow and obscure our vision at the same time.

Mike carefully kept our vehicle in the lead MRAP's tire tracks, which I appreciated. If there were any more IEDs in our path, the MRAP would detonate them first. It would be another vehicle lost, but the MRAP was built to withstand those explosions, as we'd all just witnessed. So long as the rest of us stayed in the MRAP's tracks, we'd all make it to the aid of the other platoon intact. A few inches to the right or left, on the other hand—we'd be taking our chances.

The lead MRAP continued to accelerate. It became harder to make out the road with the clouds of dust. We hit a pothole and my knees banged against the dash. I gripped the radio, holding it up to my mouth as our Humvee bumped over the uneven ground, juggling the chaotic communication of calling directions ahead to the lead vehicle, receiving updates from Austin, and passing news to the Battalion. I had to yell to be heard. The Humvee's engine roared, underscored by the loud metallic clanging of ammo and machinery bumping around as we sped over the uneven ground.

Low in the sky, the sun's light was piercing. It was impossible to see ahead clearly, so I focused on the navigation system in front of

me. We'd already gone 2,000 meters. Surely we were nearing Austin's platoon? I squinted through the window—I could see the ridges of the mountains through the dust. Dim shapes seemed to emerge—possibly the village that had been firing on Austin's platoon.

Over the roar of the engine and the clattering of ammo cans bouncing around the back of the vehicle, I suddenly heard Philip's voice yell over my left shoulder. "I love you guys!"

His words jolted me out of the frenzied radio communication and the mission at hand. For Philip to yell that out to a bunch of tough infantrymen running into battle—*I love you guys*—abruptly inserted our humanity into the war zone. With a shocking realization, it occurred to me that my platoon's survival might be at stake.

If it had been a stage play, everything else around us would have frozen. All other lights would have gone dark except for a spotlight on our own vehicle. The clatter and roar of the Humvee would have died away, leaving Philip's words to hang alone, suspended.

The rest of us were silent. Then, Kevin yelled down from his turret, repeating Philip's words. "I love you guys!"

"I love you guys too," I called.

"I love you guys!" Winston and Mike echoed at the same time.

Moments after Winston and Mike's words died away, the stage lights came back on. Everything was in a riot of motion and noise again, and we were hurtling forward.

Thirty seconds later, I could vaguely see the shapes of the vehicles from the other platoon through the dust and the low light. *Nearly there*. I held up the radio again and began calling out directions to the lead vehicle about where to go. "3-1, this is 3-6—"

I was interrupted—everything was interrupted—by the bright orange ball of fire that suddenly swallowed us whole.