

CHAPTER 3

DEATH ITSELF



Getting ready to deploy. June 2008.

AN APARTMENT JUST OUTSIDE FORT HOOD, TEXAS. EARLY JUNE 2008.

Tonight was the night.

I'd been meaning to do this ever since I'd arrived at Fort Hood to prepare for deployment. Now—with training at a lull, days before our departure—I finally had the space to conduct my own personal training checklist.

I dumped the medical supplies I'd gathered onto the coffee table. Thankfully, one of the medics had willingly gathered some for me, so I didn't need to break into my personal medical kit. I flicked on the floor lamp and perched on the edge of my leather couch, studying the array. What should I do first?

I pulled a package of bandages toward me and ripped it open, making a note of how the bandages unfolded so that I would feel familiar with the process in combat. I tried to put myself in the mindframe of battle—*imagine explosions around you, you've just been shot in the leg, you've got to hurry*. Quickly, I began wrapping my leg with the pressure bandage. It was important to get the pressure just right—too tight, I'd cut off circulation; too loose, it wouldn't do any good. I finished and studied my wrap job. *Good*, I thought, satisfied.

I practiced a shrapnel wound next. That involved packing loose bandages into the hypothetical bloody cavity, then doing the pressure bandage over it. I tried to mentally envision the pain I'd be in. Would I be screaming? *No*, I decided. *I'd stay focused on getting out of there*. Adrenaline would serve me until I could get myself to a medic.

I turned my attention to my arms next, assuming that my body armor would take care of my chest and abdomen. *Besides*, I thought, *if I get blasted somewhere in my abdomen, my own bandages aren't going to do much good*. Better to focus on what I could control.

I practiced tying a tourniquet, first on my right arm and then on my left. I was considerably more clumsy using my left hand, which didn't bode well for the IV practice. I made a mental note to start doing things left-handed more often.

Ideally, of course, someone would be there to help if I got wounded.

But there was no guarantee that anyone would be around in those initial moments. And the initial moments, I knew, could be critical. I remembered what our training instructor had told us: "If you ask someone to help you in the middle of a firefight, they're likely to become a casualty themselves. You owe it to yourself, your unit, and the mission to be prepared to provide yourself initial aid until someone can safely get to you. Do *not* ask someone else to put themselves in harm's way." It made perfect sense. I had to expect to operate alone if I got wounded.

Even so, I mentally rehearsed several scenarios where I provided rescue or aid to one of my soldiers. I practiced unrolling the bandages quickly, making the long ties needed for a pressure bandage, thinking through the different ways to create cover so that I could administer aid to my wounded soldiers.

Those mental drills brought me back to the task at hand: the best way to practice helping other people was practicing on myself. I examined the morphine syrettes and picked the place on my thigh I'd insert it. What if I lost a limb? I mentally rehearsed losing a hand, a foot, an arm, a leg—imagining the blood, envisioning the fear, reminding myself I would need to focus on breathing evenly.

The sun set without me noticing. I moved closer under the light of the lamp next to the couch. Once I was done practicing, I'd eat something.

I did the IVs last. I took a deep breath and clenched and unclenched my left fist. A large purple vein swelled under my skin. In training, we'd practiced starting IVs on each other, but I'd never done one on myself before. I needed the muscle memory though. It was hard enough to do my own IV sitting on my couch in my apartment. It would be a hell of a lot harder if I was under fire.

Sweat rolled down my forehead and I impatiently wiped it with the back of my sleeve. *Come on...* I picked a spot to insert the needle into my skin. *There.* Quickly, I attached the tubing. I studied my work, proudly. I'd done it! That excited me. I moved on to my right arm, working awkwardly with my left hand, but finally successfully getting the second IV.

Satisfied, I decided my work was complete. I began gathering up the trash and glanced at the clock. It was nearly ten. No wonder I was so hungry. But I felt pleased—I was now familiar with all the materials and prepared to administer my own aid, whatever scenario might unfold in battle.

I moved from the living room into the kitchen. Opened the fridge. Assumed I had covered all my bases.

The one scenario I never prepared for was the one in which I got burned alive.

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KANDAHAR DESERT, AFGHANISTAN. SEPTEMBER 4, 2008. DUSK.



This is the last picture taken of me before the accident, from the morning's visit to the local village. The interpreter I worked with is on the right; he had been left back at the FOB. September 4, 2008.

How does one describe an inferno?

Everything went silent. The clattering of ammo cans and banging of equipment vanished. The engine's roar went mute. My own voice disappeared.

Sound was swallowed up.

Searingly bright flames engulfed what had been the dark cavity of the Humvee's interior. There was no horizon. There was no village. There were no other humans close beside me. There was only blinding, devouring fire.

I had the strange sensation of sinking down into my seat, like I was strapped into a roller coaster racing up an incline. I didn't realize that the Humvee had been hurled upward by the blast.

We've hit an IED—

A dim, horrific realization.

All of it in a millisecond, but time had slowed down—enough that I could register the strange horror of deafness, blindness, the sinking, the fire.

I was strapped in, with my seatbelt on. Trapped. Yet even as I tried to absorb the sensations of dying within the confines of my power—I was released. I felt the force of the vehicle being blown into the air, but I never felt it land.

Somehow, I was standing.

I was outside the vehicle. I was on my feet.

There wasn't time to register the strangeness of this, the miraculous improbability, because I was on fire.

The blinding orange flames had followed me. I was out of the engulfing inner space of the vehicle on fire, but now *I* was the tinder. The bright, orange light was inescapable—my face was burning.

There were horrible sensations—*searing heat—my flesh—the smell of it—agony—*

Almost worse than the pain of burning flesh was the sense of isolation. Everyone else in the vehicle must be dead. *How could they survive?* Any others were surely engaged in the fight. We had driven into the middle of gunfire and mortar blasts—I couldn't see how it

might be developing—it might be escalating—even if someone else could see me, how could they get to me?

Panicked realizations hit: *I am burning—I am alone—I am dying—*

Instantaneously and for the first time in my life, I realized with utter certainty that I had encountered a situation where I had no control over the outcome. The severity of my circumstances was overwhelming. This man-made inferno was about to kill me and I couldn't do anything to stop it.

I had zero expectation that anyone, especially myself, could save me. The only hope I could appeal to was my Creator.

Surrender.

I threw my arms in the air and screamed out, “Jesus, save me!”

I dropped to the ground and began rolling, trying to extinguish the flames. But the powdery moon dust of the Kandahar desert couldn't compete with the fire's greedy consumption of my body. I smelled diesel and fertilizer chemicals. Realizations crashed against each other: *I was sitting directly in front of the fuel tank. The fuel tanks were full of diesel for the drive back to KAF. The homemade explosives of the bomb blew upward. I'm covered in diesel fuel and the residue of homemade explosives.*

All of it, burning. All of me, on fire.

Something pierced through my deafness—a primal, guttural scream. I realized with horror it had come out of me.

I got up again and ran, giving into a primal urge to flee the danger. It only made the flames more intense.

Desperate to see anything or to wrestle some relief, I ripped off my helmet. But that only fed the flames. They rose higher. Licking my eyebrows, too intense for my eyes—I had to close them. *Darkness again—*

I threw myself back down in the dirt, face first. The scream came again and it was terrifying. I was familiar with the sound of my own voice, but I'd never heard my voice in the midst of a traumatic death. It shrieked and wailed—repeated cries for help from God—repeated cries for my mother—

The voice was like something from the underworld. It shocked

me to realize it was the sound of someone who believed he was about to die.

The pain was excruciating.

Pain so bad, it crushed my soul—

Pain so bad, I hoped death would come in seconds, not minutes—

Pain so bad, I wanted to die to escape it rather than survive and endure it—

Flames, yes, but the deeper gulf was fear: strength incinerating, abject vulnerability, total helplessness. It culminated in a complete loss of hope. Who could help me? Where was a defender, a protector, a healer? There was no one else.

I tasted ash and dust.

Was I already dead? Was this hell? It was total despair—cut off from every good thing—*there's no hope—I'm utterly alone—*

Memories raced, running out of time. Life had always been lived in the company of others. My earliest memories were with Daniel. High school meant sports teams. West Point was a shell of eight. Always partners, always brothers, always pushing each other to be our best, demanding excellence from one another. You couldn't take someone out of the boat. You couldn't take someone out of the family. And here, in Afghanistan—adversity was forged as a unit. We wrote each other's history. We knew our roles, knew each other's strengths and weaknesses—that's what gave us such offensive comradery—

But not now

No one is here

How long had I been on fire? Was it seconds or a lifetime?

The moment of death encroached like an enemy, and I lost the will to fight it anymore. Its defeat was inevitable. All I wanted now was for it to come quickly. *Let the pain and fear finish. Let it end.*

Face down. Eyes closed. I had been scooping the dirt over me as best I could, but as I waited for the end, I quieted down. It was impossible to catch my breath—with every inhale, I breathed in flames.

Three final thoughts suddenly emerged with crystalline clarity:

The first: *How long will it take to burn to death?*

I hadn't accepted that I was going to die—"accept" is too passive a word. I was searching for it, desiring it, *desperate* for it. Death couldn't possibly come quickly enough. Death was the only hope I had. In the absence of any influence or control over my own life, I was no longer an actor in my own story. I was a passenger with a one-way ticket to death, and all I wanted was for that train to plunge off the cliff and end the agony.

As quickly as the first thought articulated itself, the second tumbled on top of it:

What is the transition from this life to the next going to be like?

A terrifying realization hooked itself on the second thought: *I don't know where I'm going.*

I had grown up going to church, memorizing scripture, singing hymns. But in the crucible of those flames, a life's worth of pretense had burned away. Deep down, I was not convinced that I had done what I needed to do to have eternal life. I could not hope for heaven as an outcome.

"Get right with God"—I'd heard the phrase applied to deathbed moments, or foxhole fears in the midst of battle fire. It was a cliché. But now, it was my cross.

On the threshold between life and death, I knew in my heart and soul that I had fallen short. Jesus had never been the Lord of my life. *I* had been the lord of my life. Yet in my own self-idolatry, none of my accomplishments could render me atonement for my sins.

Every Sunday in church, every verse logged to memory, all the chapters I'd read in the Bible, every person I'd ever shared the gospel with—none of that mattered. They were diesel-soaked rags, already incinerated. The ultimate question was: *Is Jesus Christ the Lord of my life?*

No.

He'd never been.

The cry ruptured out of me again, though this time it was inaudible: *Jesus, save me.*

But I didn't expect that He would. I had lived my life. I had made my decisions. I had no right to ask for a literal last-second pardon.

The third thought followed this grim conclusion, and it was less of a thought and more of a decision:

I give up my will to live.

I had no idea what the Lord would do with me. But whatever God decided to do with me—either with the ashes of my current life or in the next life—was justified. I deserved whatever He had in store.

Never before had I been so aware of the truth of who and what I was. I was not invincible. I was no hero. I was completely crushed and humbled before my Maker, for the first time possessing a proper understanding of who I was, relative to Him. Every priority, every accolade I'd ever set my eyes on, all my toil, all the noble missions—none of it had earned me anything but pride. And the outcome of that was separation from God for eternity. It was me ignoring Jesus' invitation to be Lord of my life. It was me playing God.

But I couldn't save myself.

I was resigned. I had no ability or willpower to resist any longer. Death was the only next thing.