

PART 2

SURVIVAL

CHAPTER 4

ALIVE DAY



The wreckage of my Humvee after the IED exploded.

Certain death was arrested by four words.

“Sir, I’ve got you!”

Within an inferno of isolation and overwhelming despair, I suddenly heard Kevin Jensen’s voice.

He was screaming. I would learn later that he, too, was on fire. But that didn’t stop him from extinguishing the lie that I was alone, nor the flames that were eating me alive.

I had been utterly convinced I was already dead. Already ash. The encompassing darkness had buried me.

But then Kevin’s voice cracked open the lid of my coffin. As his words broke through, death retreated.

“Sir, I’ve got you!”

I heard the thumping of boots hitting the ground as others converged on me. Each miraculous thump hit against despair and new realizations flooded in: *I’m not alone. Someone else is alive. Help is here.*

I felt dirt and dust being thrown over the top of my body. Other voices joined Kevin’s—I heard Anthony. They were burying me, scooping dirt on top of me, smothering the flames. The crushing fear that was rooted in isolation gave way to hope. “Hang in there, Sir!” I heard someone yell. My soldiers, my brothers were actively fighting to save my life.

Only seconds prior, I had accepted death as a fact. The certainty of it went beyond knowing; I was *waiting* for it. The question hadn’t been “if” but “when,” and death promised to bring relief—it would be my escape from the pain.

But as Kevin’s words shattered my sense of isolation and despair, they also shattered my certainty of dying. My position completely changed. I didn’t want to die. In fact, I knew I *wasn’t* going to die. Even if I had continued wanting to die—I wasn’t about to.

I was going to live. I was certain I was supposed to live. And I knew I was meant to live for a reason.

With the same clarity that shaped my final three thoughts—or, what I assumed would be my final thoughts—a new conclusion

formed. *My life has been spared for a purpose.* I didn't know what that purpose might be, or why, or what God might have in mind. All I knew was that this was a day that would be defined by living, not dying, and that life on the other side would look forever different than how it had before.

But that didn't mean surviving was about to be easy.

Under the thick layer of dirt, I became vaguely aware of the sounds around me. Roszko's voice was shouting directions amidst a rattle of gunshots. "Skotnicki! I want you working on the LT! Who's here, who's here? Kevin, Philip, Mike, LT—"

"Winston's still in the truck!" someone called out. Mike's voice.

"Cheney, come with me, we're going back for Winston—Skotnicki, you watch the rest of them—" Anthony's voice disappeared and Justin Skotnicki, one of my EMT-trained infantrymen, took top volume. His voice was a jumble of interrogations—questions to me, which I couldn't answer; questions to Kevin, Philip, and Mike, all of whom, I began to realize, had sustained burns of their own. He shouted instructions to the others; there were shouts of dismay; and over all of it, a cacophony of gunfire.

My eyes were still closed under the layer of dirt that had been my saving grace. But through my coated lids, I suddenly saw a flash and heard a boom. *Another explosion.*

"We've got to take cover!"

"Get him up," I heard Skotnicki order. Someone grabbed my hand and started pulling me to my feet. "LT, I need you to get up, if you can. He's shaking—help him, he's shaking. Clear his eyes—!"

"I'm still burning!" I said thickly. The heat of flames pressed hard against my back.

"You're not burning, Sir! We've got to take cover!"

How was it possible I wasn't still on fire? My back felt hammered by excruciating heat. Then I realized what must be happening—*my body armor. My kit—all of it was cooking along with me—*

"Get this fucking kit off me!" I pulled at the straps but my hands were useless. The soldiers around me yanked off the melted kit and

let it fall to the dirt. They hoisted my body armor over my head and chucked that aside too.

I stood there, swaying on my feet—no helmet, no kit, no body armor, no weapon, no ammo, no radio. Everything I had relied on for safety, protection, and communication had either been incinerated or thrown away. I was a soft target, totally exposed in the middle of an ambush.

“We’ve got to *fucking take cover!* Run, Sir!” Mortar shells exploded nearby. Machine gun fire rattled on every side of us.

“This way!” One of the guys pulled me into a hunching run and directed me toward the vague shape of a mud wall nearby, on the outer side of a small compound. As soon as we reached it, we collapsed down against the berm. My consciousness was suddenly horrifically absorbed by everything causing me pain. Being alive *hurt*.

As I’d tried to run, each movement had caused friction with the environment around me. Even the air on my raw nerves was anguishing. Every contracted muscle created new signals everywhere, flooding my brain with the recognition that something was hurt, something wasn’t right, something was very, very wrong. The flames that had burned me were gone, but it still felt like my body was on fire.

Sitting against that mud berm, I winced as the different parts of my body each demanded attention. My legs were bad. Although my boots had protected my lower legs, everything above them had been burned. But the pain in my legs was nothing compared to the throbbing pain in my arms, and more intense still was the agony concentrated in my face and hands.

My hands. The pain centers in my brain decided my hands deserved the bulk of their attention, and sent waves of torment through my nervous system, crashing into my wrists, fingertips, and the backs of my hands. I stared down at my gloves. They looked half melted. Through the fog of the pain, it occurred to me that I had been trying to beat the flames out with my hands—that’s what I’d used to scoop dirt on myself, and take off my flaming helmet. The charred leather of the gloves was coated with dirt and sand. I wanted them off.

I tried to take off my left glove and immediately realized that was

impossible. I had lost all dexterity and strength. More concerning still, the gloves appeared to have fused with my skin.

I called Skotnicki over next to me and once again tried to speak. “Take my gloves off.” My tongue felt like cardboard.

Skotnicki reached down to comply but then hesitated. “They look melted on,” he said.

“Pull it off,” I repeated.

“I don’t know if that’s—”

“Get them off!”

He grabbed one firmly and tugged. The gloves were tight to begin with and made of thick material—leather and fire-resistant Nomex. The left one didn’t move.

“LT, I think I’m going to pull skin off if I—”

I nodded my head violently to urge him to *do it*. He pulled again, hard, and the glove started peeling off. “Pull harder,” I said thickly. He yanked. The glove came off.

My flesh peeled off with it.

Underneath, what was left of my hand looked like raw meat. It was shiny and oozing. Amidst the blood and shreds of melted fabric that still clung to the tissue, I could see exposed muscle and the thick strands of my tendons. He stared down in horror. I looked away.

“Do the other one,” I commanded, but he shook his head violently. I thrust my right hand toward Hayes, another young private. “Pull my glove off.” He stared at me in disbelief and began to protest. “Pull it off, Hayes!” I repeated and put the glove in front of him.

He gave the second one a hard pull, seeing how hard it had been to rip the first one off. The right glove came off halfway. He looked at me, his eyes pleading. “Are you sure, Sir?” His plea may have been more for his own behalf than mine—who knows what sort of nightmares followed him after this moment. But I was desperate. And I was incapable of helping myself.

“Yes! Take it off!” I yelled.

He finished ripping off the second one. Once again, my outer layer of flesh peeled off along with the glove.

I had hoped for some relief, but there was none. My raw nerves, now exposed to the air, radiated pain with even more intensity. I squeezed my eyes shut, but that only sharpened my awareness of my body's pain. My forearms ached with a deep throbbing as though they'd been crushed—like someone had pulverized them with a hammer. The pain in my hands and face was sharper and more piercing. I opened my eyes again and tried to focus on something else—anything else.

Anthony had rejoined us and was barking communication into the radio, then shouting instructions to all of us. His presence was a relief. I'd always known that, if anything had happened to me, my squad leaders would be able to assume command, and Anthony was proving me right. At the same time, I again registered the fact that I now had no radio, no weapon, no pack.

No command.

No authority.

As I waited for instructions from Anthony, my attention was caught by the flaming wreck in the distance, which illuminated our surroundings. With a shock, I realized it was my own vehicle. The top had split apart like an opened aluminum can and several of the doors had blown off. Suddenly, I remembered something—Mike's words. *Winston's still in the truck.*

"Roszko—where's Winston?" I asked.

He ignored me. I could hear him communicating via the radio with Austin. We'd been on our way to help First Platoon. From the sound of it, First Platoon was now sending help to us.

I stared helplessly at the flaming vehicle. "We need to go get Winston!" I said. No one responded. Who could help me get him? Kevin, Philip, and Mike all crouched near me, looking dazed.

Over the booms of mortar rounds and gunfire, Anthony yelled for some of the soldiers to go into the mud compound behind us and clear it. Several of the soldiers beside me peeled off and ran, following his instructions. I stared at my Humvee. It was completely engulfed in fire. I could feel the heat emanating from it, even though it was thirty or forty yards away.

“Roszko, *where’s Winston?*” I repeated.

He turned toward me, his face crestfallen. “Sir—” He began to speak and then stopped. When he spoke again, he struggled to get the words out. “Sir, he didn’t get out of the vehicle.”

“We need to go *get* him—”

“I already tried!” Anthony said huskily. “Cheney and I already tried. The ammo started going off.” As if on cue, an enormous blast suddenly shook the vehicle, the flash momentarily blinding us. A detonated grenade. “There’s a couple hundred of those in the ammo crates on the back,” Anthony reminded me. “The heat of the fire is setting them all off.”

I stared in horror. *Winston’s still in the truck.* “There’s nothing we can do,” Anthony said. “It’s suicide to try to get him out, and I’m not about to lose anyone else.” His voice faltered.

Anyone else. I didn’t want to register the meaning of what he’d just said.

Lose anyone else.

We’d lost Winston.

Another blast went off, leaving a crater around the vehicle; each grenade had a kill radius of five meters. Winston couldn’t possibly be alive, and there was nothing anyone could do to change the situation. But the futility of trying didn’t change the overwhelming sense of failure I felt.

I had lost one of my troops. Vincent Winston—the heart of our unit, everyone’s little brother—was dead.

Anthony began calling into the radio again with renewed force. “Mud compound is clear!” he yelled. “Let’s go!”

The few of us still sitting against the berm struggled up and ran, following Anthony into the compound. I tried to register which direction the gunfire was coming from. We’d been taking fire from the east initially, but now, as we moved around the south side into the compound, I could hear gunfire from behind us. Were we approaching exposure to a new direction of attack? I shook my head. It was hard to think. I focused on keeping up with the soldiers in front of me.

At the last corner on the west side, we found the compound's entrance and ducked inside. Immediately, behind the thick mud walls, the volume of the gunfire fell. Anthony motioned us into a smaller enclosure, and we dropped down. Inside these walls, I felt secure for the first time since the explosion.

But that created a new challenge. As adrenaline ebbed away, pain once again demanded all my attention. My hands still clamored in agony. A close second in discomfort now was my thirst.

I had never been so thirsty in my life. I learned later that, physiologically, the flames hadn't just charred my skin—they had literally burned up most of the moisture in my body. I had been thirsty plenty of times before, after a good workout or after being out in the sun. But this was thirst on another scale, at a *cellular* level. My body was so depleted of fluid that every cell screamed for water.

On top of that, the powdery moon dust of the Afghan desert covered me. When I'd been on fire, I was screaming face-first in the dirt, scooping that dust all over myself, inhaling it, trying to smother the flames. As a result, the dirt now covered my face and coated my mouth. The rattling noise from the machine gun fire, the threats we still faced, the excruciating pain I felt in the rest of my body, even Skotnicki's physical manipulation of my body as he examined my wounds—all of it seemed to shrink into the background. I became consumed with one myopic obsession: *I need a drink of water.*

"Hey," I spoke hoarsely to the soldier next to me. "Can you put the straw of my CamelBak into my mouth? I can't use my hands." He lifted the hose of my CamelBak water bladder to my charred lips, and I tried to suck through the dust-covered mouthpiece. But there was no relief. No water seemed to be making it through the hose. Frustrated, I muttered, "Something is broken or blocking the hose."

The soldier pulled the hose close to him in the dark. "The plastic's all burned! The whole thing is burned, all the way through to the water bladder. It's empty."

That's when I started to feel not just the pain of the burn, but the *life energy suck* of the wounds. My body was slowly shutting down.

My soldier hurriedly pulled out his own CamelBak straw and held it up, but Skotnicki called out, “NO! Don’t give him water right now!”

“Do NOT give the LT water!” Anthony repeated. His attention, which had been diverted by the firefight, suddenly turned on me. “He needs an IV. Get him prepped to transfer.” Just as quickly, he faced back out toward the window and fired off his gun.

“In EMT training, they taught us—” Skotnicki’s eyes were wide with regret. “Burn victims can’t drink water—”

“I’m *thirsty*,” I said, nearing desperation. I was going to die if I didn’t drink something.

My young soldier put his CamelBak straw in my mouth. “He can have a sip, at least!” he insisted to Skotnicki. I sucked. A small amount of water leaked into my mouth. He quickly pulled the straw away.

That single sip was so far short of what my body needed. It did nothing to alleviate the anguish my body was in—not even to cool or clean my mouth. All it did was turn some of the dust I’d inhaled into a little muddy trickle down my throat. My craving for water intensified. The world contracted even more.

Clearly, there was intense activity happening all around me, but I struggled to process any of it. Later, I learned that Philip was lying beside me and had gone into shock. Kevin, like me, was pleading for water. Another soldier was bouncing back and forth between the two of them, trying to help, while Skotnicki was working on me. Mike was in a rage, trying to take weapons from the other soldiers to go out and fight, even though his face and arms were burned. Anthony was yelling at him—“Sit down! I don’t want to worry about you getting hurt more! You need to *calm down* and stay here. Let us do the fighting!” Meanwhile, soldiers were firing off their guns. Gunshots were firing at us. Anthony was yelling into the radio again. “He is in the room—he’s barely speaking. He’s covered with burns from head to toe. He’s only asked for two things: he asked for water, and he asked about Winston... Listen, *I need to get him out of here*, I need someone to come get him!” He began cursing. He didn’t like the response he’d heard.

These were the sorts of things that, only an hour earlier, I would have felt deeply interested in. But paying attention to them would have meant keeping my senses on high alert, and the pain was too intense to allow any sensory information to penetrate. I shut my eyes. Maybe I could hide from the pain in a place deep inside myself. I imagined emptiness—something void, something dark.

Everything except the pain receded as though I was in a fog. The rattle of gunfire, Anthony's hoarse calls on the radio, the scrambling activity of the other men—all of that faded into the background as I tried to hide from the physical agony. My senses were consumed entirely by the pain. It defined reality. It overwhelmed everything else.

Finally, a familiar rumble brought me back to the present. I felt the ground vibrate and opened my eyes. "Wait for the signal," Anthony commanded. I tried to peer out from behind the mud wall. The dim light from the fire, which still burned around my vehicle, just barely illuminated two Humvees pulling up. A third Humvee followed them, parking itself horizontally behind the other two as a shield. They were American vehicles—from First Platoon, by the look of it—the very platoon my troop had intended to aid. Their lights were off so as not to draw fire.

Skotnicki pulled me into a crouch. My body tensed, preparing to run. A new wave of adrenaline coursed through my system, and the increase in awareness once again amplified my brain's recognition of pain. My sensory nerves were burnt to full exposure across my arms, face, neck, and upper legs. I had managed to run into this mud compound, unassisted. Now, I didn't even know if I could stand.

Anthony gave the signal. "LT, I want you in the third Humvee with First Platoon's medic. Now everyone, go! Go! Go!" The guys around me exploded to their feet and darted to the Humvees, firing their machine guns in the direction of enemy fire. The guns on top of the Humvees joined in, rattling with the increased rapid rate of fire to try to provide cover for us.

I got up out of my crouched position, feeling my entire body violently protest. As painful as it had been to hold still, it was infinitely

worse to move. I had once been the fastest runner in our platoon but now, doubled over in pain, my movements were horribly slow.

The guys ahead of me jumped into their Humvees and slammed the doors, with Anthony leading them in the first vehicle. The first one took off in a cloud of dust, followed quickly by the second.

I forced myself to traverse the open space toward the Humvee. Each step required me to stretch and contract my muscles beneath the raw, burned skin that only delicately covered most of my body. It was impossible not to register the fact that I was starting to succumb to the severity of the burns.

My stumbling finally brought me to the Humvee, and someone wrenched open the back door. I clumsily slid into the back passenger side seat, registering a young private at the wheel and a medic in the front passenger seat.

I leaned back, too pained to try to sit up straight. Somehow, I sensed I was coming to the end of whatever I had left. It was like seeing a “low battery” signal on my phone—I had just a little juice left, but didn’t know how much longer I could hold out until the screen went black. As shock began to set in, the ability to do anything beyond just breathing was escaping me. I felt an ominous feeling. I’d been so confident I was going to live—I was *still* confident I was going to live—but I was running out of energy and time to be able to do anything for myself.

Up above me, I could see the vehicle’s gunner. He was firing the huge M2 .50 caliber machine gun, still at a relentless rapid rate of fire. Despite the noise thundering over me, time suddenly seemed to slow down. Almost in slow motion, I could see the large, brass shell casings rain down through the turret hole onto the metal floor area next to me, could hear their metallic jingle as they hit each other, the clank as they hit the floor. For the first time since the explosion, I felt some relief. I felt protected by superior firepower.

The door slammed shut. I could feel the Humvee lurch forward. “Hang on tight, Lieutenant,” the driver called back. “We’re not taking our chances on any more IEDs in the road, so we’re going through the poppy fields.”

The poppy fields in Afghanistan consist of a large grid of mounds in roughly ten-meter squares, about eight inches high, with irrigation ditches that hold water when the fields are flooded. In other words, we were driving over a series of floral speed bumps.

It was agony, bumping along like that—but it was a *steady* state of agony. The pain was less piercing than it had been earlier. And it wasn't anywhere near the horror of fear and isolation I'd been consumed with when I was still on fire. I knew I was going to safety. We were headed to the Helicopter Landing Zone, the "HLZ." Soon, I'd be MEDEVACed—I had a destination to look forward to. That made the pain—even as the Humvee rocked up and down—somehow easier to bear.

Suddenly, the truck stopped. No one spoke to me. Up front, the driver and medic exchanged a few quiet comments to each other.

It was terrible to feel the vehicle stopped, to feel the idle of the motor. *Why aren't we moving?* I wondered. I didn't have much longer before I was deadweight to the people around me.

Painfully, I pulled myself up and tried to look out the windshield. The dust kicked up by the vehicle curled in a cloud around us. I called up to the gunner above me. "What's going on? Why'd we stop?"

The young private driving the Humvee turned around and looked back at me. He hesitated. "Sir, I don't—I lost sight of the vehicles in front of me."

"You don't need to see them," I said. "Just go to the HLZ."

The driver must have known we didn't have time for anything but the painful truth of our situation. I could hear his fear as he spoke again. "I don't know where I'm going! I was just following the other guys."

I tried to force my brain to focus. At any moment, the enemy could spot our vehicle and converge their fire on us, and I was minutes away from being no help to anyone. We had to figure this out fast.

Sensing that the driver's panic would soon become its own threat to our survival, I turned my attention to the gunner. "Can you see any better? Do you see any signs of the vehicles ahead of us?"

"No, I can't see either!" he called down.

I couldn't clearly hear the exchange of machine gun fire anymore—that meant we were far enough away from the engagement area that we weren't under fire. But now, we were in no man's land. I peered through the windshield into the dark. The other vehicles had completely disappeared. The driver and medic looked back at me nervously.

"Do you know where to go, Sir?"

I tried to pull my thoughts together. Somehow, I had to summon enough focus and strength to help direct our next move. Our survival hung in the balance: *we* didn't know where we were, but there was a good chance the Taliban did. Even if they didn't find us, I knew my life span was hanging by tenterhooks; each passing minute was a more tenuous hold.

Less than an hour ago, I'd completely surrendered my will to live. Now, that will to live was in full force. *We are not going to die here.* I forced myself to fully sit up and block out the pain.

I said, "Look—get on the radio and find out where the HLZ is. Get the eight-digit grid."

The medic picked up the radio and called back to the First Sergeant, asking for the location. The First Sergeant rapidly read off eight digits. "Good," I spoke to the medic. "Plot the digits into the navigation grid and you'll see our position. Then you can get us there."

"I don't know how to operate it," the medic said, panicking. I wanted to fire back, *Yes, you DO.* Surely he had been trained on this system. But then I registered his breathing—he was taking short, shallow, fast breaths. Was it possible his panic was putting *him* into a state of sympathetic shock? I tried to force my brain beyond my own pain for a moment and recall what I knew about the young man in front of me. This was his first deployment. Most likely, my burns were his first serious casualty. Who knew what kind of anxiety my own charred presence was stirring up in him? In this moment, his memory was failing.

From the back seat, I was the only other person in the vehicle who could see the navigation screen. *Pull yourself together, Sam,* I thought. *These guys need you more than you need them.*

The First Sergeant on the radio had read off the eight-digit grid location rapidly, but—bizarrely, miraculously—I realized I could recall the numbers with total clarity. They seemed seared into my brain. Normally, I would have to write something like that down, but I *knew* what they were. Maybe they stuck in my head because the stakes were so high. Our lives literally depended on us getting to that HLZ, fast.

I pulled myself forward and leaned over the back of the seat in front of me. I studied the map grid on the touch screen. “Look,” I said. “We’re right here—” I pointed to the screen. “The HLZ is right here,” I said, and touched the screen. “That means we’ve got to go due south for about 1,800 meters, maybe 1,900. So, just go south a couple kilometers. You’ll get there.”

I collapsed back against the seat. *This is not my day to die*, I reminded myself. I thought back to the certainty I’d felt, just after Kevin Jensen had finished extinguishing the flames. I knew then I was going to live—that my life had been spared for a purpose.

But what would be left?

A sinking realization dawned on me: survival did not necessarily mean I would get to return to my old body, my old capabilities, my old authority and strength. It was impossible to inventory all the ways my body was shutting down. The thirst alone was about to undo me. Would it be a life I returned to, or a half life? Would it be anything like it was before?

What would remain of *me*, when all was said and done? What would be left of the life I’d known?

I glanced at the medic to ensure he’d understood what I’d said. He was staring in horror at the grid. Where I’d touched it, there was a thick smear.

I had left my charred flesh on the screen.