

Five Humvees

By Breck LeSueur

Shifting into fourth gear, Andrew leaned into the gas and watched as the speedometer climbed to eighty miles an hour. Below him the SUV's tires hummed softly on the asphalt of the highway slicing an even path through the national forest. Beside Andrew Jerry shifted nervously in his seat and took a peak at the speedometer.

"You always drive this fast?" Jerry asked, taking a deep breath and leaning back in his seat.

"Only outside the city," Andrew smiled as the speedometer crawled to ninety. "And just hoping we can arrive before nightfall. I hate driving in the dark." Further ahead he could see the road disappear around a bend and responded by nudging the wheel and easing off the gas. He followed the road around the mountain face and kept his hands wide on the wheel as the SUV zigzagged with the winding road, further down the mountain side. Soon they were engulfed in a dark sea of evergreens, and Jerry rolled down his window to let the sweet scented breeze flow through the car.

Despite being fellow travelers, the two men couldn't have looked more different. Andrew was tall, bordering on lanky, broad-shouldered with a full head of chestnut hair, prominent nose and high cheekbones; thin, tight lips and warm, concerning eyes set deep in their sockets. Jerry, however, was short, bordering on pudgy, balding with small, scrutinizing eyes magnified by oversized spectacles, large lips, and stubby fingers nervously thumping the armrests.

"How much did you say this place cost to build?" Andrew asked, the cabin had grown dark under the perpetual shade of the evergreens.

"I'm ashamed to admit it," Jerry said. "You know I don't like talking about my money."

“Right, I know,” Andrew said. “Just curious what the land and materials cost for a cabin these days.”

“I built it a long time ago,” Jerry said. “*Before...*”

“Right.”

“Jenny wanted somewhere we could go in the summer to get out of the heat—a place where the kids could play outside and breathe fresh air. Sometimes she still brings them up here,” Jerry said. “We’ve tried to share it. It’s not a problem as long as we don’t show up at the same time. They were here last week, as a matter of fact.”

“And she brings *him*?”

Jerry’s face flushed red for a moment as he nodded, and then seemed lost in his thoughts distracted.

“The cost?”

“Right,” Jerry said, blinking and looking back to the road. “Construction *and* the land--five million or so.”

“Or so?” Andrew smiled.

“Honestly, I don’t remember. When you throw money around like we did things were measured in millions—anything less was negligible,” Jerry said and sighed. “If I had my way now I’d sell it. At least my kids enjoy it.”

“Have you seen them recently? The kids.”

“I’m scheduled to have them next week,” Jerry said. “I don’t think they like me. I don’t know. Maybe it’s the things she tells them. If I’m not spoiling them with toys and day trips their entire visit melts into whining and complaining. I guess we’re both to blame.”

Ahead Andrew saw the road drop away and checked his watch. “A few more hours of sunlight. Is the turn-off soon?”

“Should be,” Jerry said, recognizing a clearing which suddenly spread before them on the right; he caught a glimpse of two elk grazing under trees on the opposite side. “It should be around the next bend. Slow a little and you’ll see the turn-off soon.”

A moment later Andrew was turning the wheel and guiding the SUV down a scraggy incline to a dirt road which led deeper into the woods. Speeding up, he followed the winding road through the trees and up along a mountain cliff and out into the open. The road hugging the mountain side led them out along an edge and then back into the wood.

Ahead and on the side of the narrow road Andrew saw something moving, and soon recognized it as a man waving his arms. From his khaki slacks, shirt and broad-rimmed hat the man appeared to be a park ranger in distress.

“I’ve never seen park rangers out here,” Jerry mumbled, motioning Andrew to slow. As the SUV rolled to a stop the man approached the vehicle. By all accounts he appeared to be a park ranger: khakis, signature hat, yellow national forest patch, the slight beard and grimy face typical of a mountain man.

Andrew rolled down his window. The park ranger appeared to be breathless. “Glad to run into someone on this road,” the park ranger said resting a hand on the mirror of the SUV. He looked back into the woods. “My truck broke down on the next road over and I was preparing to make the hike out.” He took a breath. “But got a little worried with night coming on.”

“Need a lift?” Jerry asked across the cabin.

The ranger nodded. “If you could take me wherever you’re going I’ll make a call and have someone pick me up.”

“Hop in the back,” Jerry said.

The ranger returned to the side of the road to pick up an olive backpack before climbing into the back seat. Pressing the gas pedal, Andrew eyed the park ranger in his rear view mirror. He wasn’t much shorter than himself, dark-haired, calculating blue-gem eyes, a scar under his lip and another on his upper cheekbone; Andrew’s mind wandered, imagining the scars a result of a deadly scuffle with a wild grizzly or mountain lion. A park ranger’s life was hardly so romantic, Andrew thought. The ones he knew were

awkward recluses who preferred the slow, quiet life of the backwoods; some of them spent weeks in the wild, living in secluded mountain huts, mending trails, tracking wildlife and keeping visitors in check.

“You have a radio, ranger?” Andrew asked.

He hesitated for a moment. “It broke, too.”

Andrew grunted and guided the SUV around a tight corner.

“I have a cabin just a few minutes north,” Jerry said. “There you can make a call. Unfortunately, my cell phone doesn’t work out here.”

“I appreciate it,” the ranger said and went silent.

A few minutes later they arrived at a fork in the road and Jerry motioned to the right. As Andrew prepared to turn the wheel he felt something hard jab the back of his neck.

“Left,” the park ranger growled below his breath. Andrew’s heart went cold as he looked in the rear-view mirror to see the park ranger holding a pistol to his head.

“Now,” he hissed, jabbing the pistol forward. Andrew winced and followed directions, turning left and pressing the gas.

Jerry turned in his seat in surprise. “What’s this all about?”

The ranger responded by whipping the pistol forward and cracking its barrel against Jerry’s skull. Jerry cried out and lunged backward in the cabin; he grabbed his forehead where the skin was broken and bleeding and a purple bruise was forming.

“Get into your seat and shut up!” The ranger barked jamming the pistol back into Andrew’s head. “Now drive!”

Andrew took a deep breath to try and diffuse the anger now boiling within him. “You didn’t have to hit him,” he said through his teeth. The ranger did not respond but just pushed harder with the pistol.

When Andrew looked into the rearview mirror he watched as the hijacker gazed out along the road, reading the

terrain. He wondered where the scars were from now: a territorial gang fight or a carjacking gone wrong? Slowly the face transformed from that of a lonely park ranger, to a common thug: the cold, determined eyes; the unkempt beard and scraggly black hair. How he had missed it beneath the disguise?

They followed the dirt road up a steep grade and then down a rocky incline leveling out into a long straightaway, which then cut through a trickling stream. A mile past the stream their captor eased pressure with the pistol and spoke again: "Turn here." He motioned to a break in the trees where Andrew could see an open meadow spreading out to the edge of more forest.

"Off road?" Andrew asked incredulously.

The captor responded with more pressure from the gun. Andrew huffed and jerked the SUV off the dirt road where it barreled down a gradual drop before leveling back out into the tall, wispy grass of the quiet meadow.

"To the opposite end," the hijacker motioned. "There's a break in the trees where you'll find a narrow path; follow that another hundred yards."

Andrew followed the hijacker's orders and guided the SUV out across the meadow. While crossing the meadow Andrew noticed the sky growing dark, and in the west caught a glimpse of the sun as it dropped below the trees. He reached forward and flicked on the headlights.

"Turn them off," the hijacker said, and Andrew did so.

Reaching the edge of the clearing, Andrew shifted into first gear and climbed the SUV up a small hill and onto a narrow, primitive path cutting through the trees. As their captor directed, Andrew drove for another hundred yards until reaching the edge of the path.

By now the forest was plunged into complete darkness, the moon nearly invisible, a thin sliver glowing in the panoramic map of a glittering sky. Below the sky was an expanse of emptiness; a deep blackness which Andrew

assumed to be a low valley of evergreens stretching outward and endless in all directions.

“Now give me the keys and get out of the car,” the hijacker said pushing the pistol deeper into Andrew’s head. Andrew turned off the ignition, pulled out the keys and handed them back to the hijacker who quickly snatched them from his hands. Jerry, Andrew and the hijacker simultaneously opened their doors and stepped out into the night. A stiff wind rushed down the side of the mountain and caused Jerry to grab his arms.

“Walk to the edge,” said the man, slamming his door shut.

“Where’s the edge?” Jerry said; he was having trouble seeing in the darkness.

“Tread carefully,” their captor snarled. “It’s a long drop.”

Andrew grabbed Jerry’s arm, and by the shallow glow of celestial light, inched toward the edge of the cliff. Beyond them Andrew could feel the emptiness, a coldness and strange gravity which felt to draw them out. A few steps further and they would have plummeted downward.

“One hundred feet straight down,” the man said leaning against the front of the SUV. “You try and escape that way, and by morning the mountain rescue will be scraping you off the forest floor.”

“You have the keys,” Andrew said. “Now let us be.” He pulled his wallet out and tossed it to the man who caught it and pulled out a few bills, which he stuffed in his pocket.

“You have anything worth keeping?” The hijacker eyed Jerry. Jerry loosened his Rolex, removed it, and tossed it him, along with his wallet. After thumbing through the wallet and dropping the Rolex in his pocket, their captor stepped toward them with the gun raised.

“You think this is all I wanted? You’d make me out to be some petty thief? You think I’d take such a risk for this SUV and a couple hundred bucks?” He was waving the

pistol, a deep frown cutting his grizzled face in the darkness. “I’ve been watching you, Jerry. I know who you are and I know how much you’re worth. I know that mountain retreat of yours is worth, what—five million? And your personal net worth is well over a hundred. With that in mind, you think I’d kidnap you and your buddy here and only walk away without anything else?” The man kicked up some dirt. “You think I’m an idiot!”

Jerry stammered, “Most of the money isn’t mine since my wife left me. We’d have to go through her lawyers...”

“Shutup!” The man barked. “You think I’m stupid enough to believe that. You think just because I’m not as rich as you I’m an idiot? You think your wealth makes you better than everyone else in the world?”

“I don’t think that,” Jerry whispered.

“Yes you do,” the man hissed. “For you all that matters are your things and your bottom line, willing to cut anyone’s throat to turn a profit.”

“I’m not that way,” Jerry mumbled.

“Yes you are!” The man screamed, jabbing the pistol forward and causing Andrew and Jerry to jerk. “It is who you are!” Little flecks of spit flew from his mouth; both men could see the hatred seething in the redness of his eyes.

“What do you want from him?” Andrew asked calmly. “He’ll give you whatever it is, and you can be on your way.”

When the man finally calmed himself he reached into his pocket and produced a small strip of paper. “This is the phone number to your bank and the account number for my foreign bank account. I want you to call in a transfer for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars--”

“But they won’t...”

“Yes they will,” the man said. “Your bank uses voice recognition technology and can transfer up to two hundred and fifty thousand. Don’t take me for a fool and think I haven’t done my homework.”

The man produced a satellite phone, walked slowly up to Jerry, and handed him the phone and slip of paper. He took several paces back and stood waiting with the pistol.

“Wait,” Andrew said holding out his hand.

“No,” Jerry said. “This is fine. What’s money to me anyway? I don’t want it. And besides, this is what I deserve.”

“What do you mean?” Andrew asked.

“Fate,” Jerry said. “I always expected this, maybe even desired it. Justice has always been after me, demanding it. And all these years I’ve accepted it, allowed the world to walk all over me, believing I deserved it; believing every misfortune was God, and His justice, punishing me for what I’ve done. And today *that justice* appeared in the form of *this man* to settle accounts. Maybe it will end in monetary loss, maybe death. However it happens, I’ll know I deserved it; and in the end a small payment to humanity for the mistakes I’ve made.”

Jerry prepared to dial the phone as the man watched confused and visibly agitated. Andrew noticed something different about him. He had seen it all along, but for the first time understood the truth. “He means to kill you.”

“What?” Jerry said. The man responded by raising his pistol.

“He hates you,” Andrew said, making eye contact with their kidnapper; he saw it in his eyes, he knew it was true. “The money transfer is just a ploy—it’s a cover for your murder.”

“What?” Jerry said.

Their captor said nothing.

“Don’t call it in,” Andrew said.

Jerry examined their captor. “So you’re God’s avenging angel?”

“That’s exactly who I am,” the man said. “An angel avenging the death of friends, and my own life you ruined.”

Jerry seemed surprised and unsurprised all at the same time.

“Who are you?” Andrew asked.

“I’m a soldier,” the man said. “And my name is Carl Braddock. I guess its only fitting I tell you why I’m here before I kill you.”

Andrew turned to look at Jerry whose brows were curled in concerned confusion

Carl began, “Seven years ago, month from last, I joined the Marine Corps. A few months previous my mother had been hospitalized for a drug overdose, I had dropped out of high school, and not long after arrested while burglarizing a neighborhood thrift store. I was told by the authorities I could go to jail or join the Marine Corps in hopes they’d reform me. I was seventeen at the time and knew what happened to men in jail, so I enlisted.

After boot camp I began my first tour of duty in Iraq as an infantryman. There I kicked in doors and patrolled neighborhoods with every other grunt who had the misfortune of carrying a rifle between the Tigris and Euphrates. Unlike many of my comrades, I survived the first tour and have sand in my lungs and shrapnel in my back to prove it.

After my first tour I returned to the States and, at the recommendation of my superiors, enrolled in Special Forces training in North Carolina. Having survived training, I joined a Marine Force Reconnaissance brigade and spent the following months preparing for a tour in the Middle East. After finishing our training we were flown to Afghanistan, where my unit and I conducted missions from Kabul to Kandahar. I saw friends die and enough blood spilled to last a lifetime.

Late in February 2010 orders came down from high command that a weapons cache had fallen into enemy hands. Apparently, the U.S. military was supplying a local warlord with rockets, ammunition and firearms to wage a war against

a neighboring Taliban army. But instead of using the weapons against the Taliban, the warlord decided to sell the cache *to them* and skip the country. To avoid embarrassment the military decided to reclaim the cache covertly using a Force Recon team. Our mission was to infiltrate the Taliban neighborhood, recover the weapons cache and return to base--plain and simple. After briefing we geared up, loaded into five humvees and headed to our destination. We planned on the mission being simple: take the Taliban by surprise, raid their designated headquarters, recover the weapons, and get out as fast as possible.

Much to our surprise, the Taliban were expecting us and we walked right into an ambush. After the first explosion we realized they were using the stolen weapons *against us*, attacking first with rockets and then small arms.” Carl paused for a moment--his chest was heaving and eyes growing wet. “From my humvee I saw rocket fire blasting the other humvees to pieces; and watched as my friends crawled from the fiery wreckage only to be gunned down by waiting insurgents. After the initial rocket-attack they stormed our vehicles and used *American* machine guns to kill any survivors. After my vehicle was attacked I sat inside, my body on fire, trying to decide whether I should stay, and be cooked alive, or climb out and risk Taliban small arms. I decided to crawl out the opposite window and fell into the sand where I rolled around until extinguishing the flames. Fortunately, a few attack choppers had dropped in for air support and held off the Taliban foot soldiers until further assistance arrived.

Yet there I lay, face down, third degree burns across my arms and legs, my murdered comrades scattered about the desert sand.”

It appeared as though Jerry wanted to speak but Carl raised his pistol in silence. “Let me finish,” he growled. Jerry knew Carl was someone who had killed before and was ready to do it again. Carl continued, “The only survivor, I

was recovered by an Army medical team and flown to a burn unit where I spent the next year recovering. Night after night I lay in my hospital bed in excruciating pain, unimaginably alone and confused. I lay awake wondering *why* this had happened, *why* I had survived, and *why* all of my friends died so simply--so quickly. There had to be a *reason* behind the failed mission, a *reason* behind their deaths and my suffering.

I soon discovered initial recovery was only the beginning of the pain I'd endure. From the burn unit I was transferred to a rehab ward where I spent countless hours relearning how to walk, move my arms--all the simple functions we take for granted. In many ways the second year was more painful than the first. Despite all my suffering, in surgery and therapy, I was still without this--" Carl removed a glove to reveal a plastic prosthetic hand; an outdated model, one of the primitive prosthetics which lacked a movable wrist and fingers.

"So without a hand, half my body burned, and the psychological trauma of losing my entire squad, I began asking questions. The problem was, I was stonewalled at every turn. Since the mission was considered 'top secret', I was blocked access to any information surrounding the attack. Eventually I was discharged from the Marine Corps for my persistent curiosity. However, expulsion wasn't going to keep me from finding out the truth. After returning to the States I put all my energy into finding out exactly what happened that night. It wasn't until a year later I came to understand why my friends had died." Carl paused for a moment. "The truth was the armored humvees *should* have sustained the attack. In 2009 advanced armor had been developed to withstand direct rocket attacks--and for the last year defense contractors had been outfitting humvees with this new-and-improved armor. Sure, a rocket would cause minor damage, but the damage inflicted on *our* humvees was unprecedented. I did a little more digging and it turns out all

our humvees were outfitted by a Phoenix-based defense contractor called Synapse Defense Systems. Ever heard of it?” Carl stared blankly at them, his eyes clouded over with rage. Jerry saw his chest heaving as his breathing quickened. Neither of them moved.

“You know exactly what Synapse Defense is,” Carl growled. “Because you worked there for fifteen years. Not only did you work there, you were the chief operator of Synapse’s Phoenix plant. After further investigation, which required breaking into Synapse Defense and ‘borrowing’ a company laptop and files, I discovered these particular humvees had been outfitted with lesser armor—the armor produced previous to 2009 which was weaker than the newer armor. Due to the exorbitant costs of the new armor a certain Synapse Defense executive decided to use the weaker armor—eventually killing my friends and leaving me with this—“ Carl raised his missing hand again.

By now Jerry was sweating profusely, his shirt black around the neck and armpits. He stared in shock, incredulous that this marred soldier had traced the attack back to him. In his dreams he had seen this day yet was surprised by its reality. “I told you justice would have its way with me,” he said, turning to Andrew. “You said things just happen and people make mistakes--but I know God has a way of making things right. He delivered me into this poor soldier’s hand to set things straight.”

“That’s not true,” Andrew said.

“The truth is I knew about what happened,” Jerry said. “But you have to understand I didn’t anticipate the consequences. Yes, as you said, I was chief operator of the plant in Phoenix. I had invested my life in Synapse Defense. The Phoenix branch was the product of my life’s work and its people and success meant everything to me. We all know in 2009 Congress began ordering troop reductions in Iraq and Afghanistan. This resulted in the military ordering less armor and a dramatic decrease in profits at the Phoenix plant.

Corporate estimates projected our plant would be shut down by the end of 2010—this would mean all of my employees, from the top of the chain to the bottom would be out of jobs. I sincerely cared about these people—sure, I’d be able to find something else, but we were in the middle of a recession and I knew my employees would be out of a job. At the time I was doing everything I could to cut costs. I weighed the options and with *my people* and *my branch* in mind, I decided to outfit the humvees with the inferior armor—“

Jerry looked up to see Carl, his teeth gritted and lower jaw extended, new sweat beading on his forehead and trickling down his neck. Slowly he extended his arm, the ugly mouth of the pistol waiting to receive him.

“Yes, my decision was selfish,” Jerry mumbled. “But not completely. From my desk I saw *my people*, not yours. It was their faces in my mind, not the distant faces of soldiers somewhere across the Atlantic. I’d never actually seen Afghanistan and the war happening there—to me it only existed in the media: news, movies, books and Internet images. I chose what was best for *my people* and ended up killing yours. I couldn’t have anticipated it. Yet here I stand a guilty man.”

“You knew?” Carl hissed, ripe, blue veins bulging on his arm, an extension the pistol.

“I knew,” Jerry nodded. “Not long after the incident the U.S. military cancelled our contract. When I asked ‘why’ the visiting official said a dozen soldiers had been killed during an attack on the humvees we outfitted. Upon investigation he said they discovered the inferior armor and traced it back to us. He said because it was a secret mission, and in light of the fact that we were going out of business, they didn’t plan on prosecuting. Five months later, without the government contract, our branch was closed down.”

“You deserved it,” Carl shouted through his teeth.

“I did,” Jerry said. “My people didn’t but I did. I don’t deny it. In fact, every day of my life has been miserable

since learning about the attack. I haven't tried to excuse my actions. I take full responsibility for what I've done. Not long afterward, I started donating large sums of money to Iraq and Afghanistan War vets, specifically those who had been injured during combat. I sold our home and bought a much smaller one, and dipped deep into my savings to try and pay for the mistakes I had made. Between selling off our material goods and the overwhelming grief caused by the incident, my wife left with my kids and eventually divorced me. I didn't blame her. After learning about the deaths of your comrades I melted into an emotional wreck—unable to sleep, the guilt and grief pressed constantly upon my mind. After my wife left, I quit Synapse Defense entirely and spent the next year in Iraq and Afghanistan trying to provide some comfort to those who'd been injured in battle. I continued to spend what money I had on injured vets and donate to military hospitals. Despite all these efforts, the guilt never went away. The money I spent may have diffused it for a while, but it's continued to afflict me and slowly ruin my life.”

Carl seemed surprised for a moment, confused by the new knowledge of Jerry's suffering. All those years he had imagined a heartless beast, someone so consumed with their own good, never knowing or caring what he and other soldiers had suffered during the attack. Before he knew about Synapse Defense, Carl blamed the Taliban and the insurgents who fired the rockets; but they had been killed by the rescue team leaving no one alive upon whom to hang the blame. Later during those agonizing, sleepless nights, Carl imagined his foe: and upon this bald, faceless stone Carl carved his hatred. There had always been a *reason* behind the deaths, someone to blame. In Jerry he found that *reason*; he found the cause and someone upon whom to focus his rage. With the *cause* fixed firmly in mind, Carl meticulously plotted Jerry's death; for somewhere in the hidden recesses of his mind he believed Jerry to be the sacrificial scapegoat

upon which all his grief, misery and pain would be expunged. This diabolical rage—ignited by the enemy rockets and fueled by months of painful, sleepless nights—had come to consume him; and now he believed the only way to free himself of the fire was to end the man who caused it. And after Jerry was burned to oblivion and gone, likewise the dark hatred which consumed Carl now; and in its place inner peace, the cool slumber of a mind refreshed and heart restored.

Yet suddenly Jerry wasn't the menacing scapegoat Carl had imagined: smaller, weaker, and more timid than the object upon which he focused all his rage. And as Jerry described his own grief and pain, Carl began to feel his own subside. Indeed, it still burned and had hold on his heart, however a cool hand beckoned him leave it be. To know another had suffered for his pain, albeit separated by space and time, was disarming and momentarily a balm on his harried heart.

Carl looked down at his feet and then the pistol. Is this what he had planned for? Is this the revenge he had fantasized? Examining his prosthetic hand, Carl remembered why he was here. The reason was written in the charred wreckage of an Afghan night; the reason was fifteen friends senselessly silent; the reason stood helpless before him now; and again he believed it would take a bullet to set things straight.

With renewed determination Carl prepared to fire.

Jerry closed his eyes and spread his arms, believing the end inevitable and spilled blood the solitary solution to his inexhaustible grief. Indeed, the guilt surrounding the attack had existed solely in his mind: a shadowy, nebulous fog, saddling his shoulder and clouding his mind. From first knowledge it had always been his imagination, he had never seen the soldiers, never heard the explosions, never witnessed the attack. In truth, it was the simple knowledge of the incident that had destroyed his life. Before Carl, no

one had accused him of the crime; no one had blamed him for the mistake he had made. In the end, it was he who had sentenced himself to the overwhelming guilt which consumed him now.

For Jerry the guilt, which until now existed only mentally, was now clothed in flesh; yes, had finally revealed itself in the form of the burned body, missing hand, and tormented face of this pitiable soldier. For the first time, the attack was a reality—and now more than ever Jerry believed fate had found him in the form of Carl who was prepared to settle all accounts before God.

Carl took aim and spoke again, “You can't begin to believe your guilt and money will atone for the blood of my fallen friends. It doesn't change anything. It won't bring them back from the dead, it won't undo the suffering I've endured. Your wrong choices caused their deaths, and justice demands your life in return.”

Jerry's head dropped. He dreamed this death before and now accepted it as a willing lamb. If this was the only way to end his grief, so be it.

Suddenly a cold wind caught Carl's broad-rimmed hat and tossed it from his head. Taking advantage of the moment, Andrew shuffled through the dirt and stopped between Carl and Jerry.

Carl wasn't sure how to respond to Andrew's sudden and unexpected move. “What're you doing?”

Andrew did not respond but stood his ground, now standing between Jerry and Carl, his tall frame blocking Jerry's smaller body. Jerry was also noticeable surprised by Andrew's move.

“You don't have to do this,” Jerry said from behind him. “I deserve it—I was the one who killed those men.”

“No one deserves this,” Andrew said.

“Move out of the way!” Carl screamed, shaking the pistol at Andrew. “I'll shoot you both!”

“No you won't,” Andrew said; his voice was calm and collected.

“I will,” Carl threatened and took a step forward, his pistol pointed at Andrew's chest. His plans didn't include killing anyone else; it was Jerry's face fixed firmly in his mind in the days leading up to the kidnapping. Besides, he'd never killed a white man, never a Caucasian like Jerry or Andrew. His victims had always been the dark-skinned Muslims who, during the course of the war, he had gradually dehumanized. To him they were no longer men but demons haunting the scraggy mountains of Afghanistan. For the first time he realized there was something entirely foreign about killing someone who *looked* like him. Cognitively, he wasn't sure if he could bring himself to do it. Yet the anger urged him on and he promised himself he'd shoot Jerry's companion if he had to. “And why don't you think I'll kill you?”

Andrew started slowly, “You told us your story...but it was incomplete.” Carl looked confused. “You told us of the mission, the ambush and your subsequent rescue. But you left out one significant detail.”

“What do you mean?” Carl asked.

“What happened when the rescue team arrived?”

Carl thought for a moment. “I was lying in the sand and could feel the heat from my burning humvee on my legs and back. I tried to move but had no feeling. A moment later I heard the choppers descending in the sand and heard the voices of medics as they rushed onto the scene. I felt someone grab me around the arms and drag me away, and then heard an explosion which left my ears ringing and my body half buried in the sand. A moment later two other medics lifted me onto a stretcher and carried me into the belly of a chopper. While we were flying back to base one of the pilots told me I owed my life to one of the medics—that he had pulled me to safety before my humvee exploded. And then they told me his name...”

“Private Jones?”

“Yes,” Carl exclaimed. “How did you know that?”

“Because I am Private Andrew Jones,” Andrew said. He reached down and pulled up the sleeve of his windbreaker to reveal pink scars from his wrist to his bicep.

Carl searched for words but found none, his mouth was wide in disbelief. After recovering and returning to the States he spent half his time investigating the attack, and the other half seeking out his rescuer. As with the rest of the mission, the military closed their records to Carl and wouldn't say who saved him that day. He had the medic's name but the military was large, and without access to its personnel database, he gave up his hunt for Private Andrew Jones. It was true what the pilot had told him: if Private Jones hadn't dragged him away from the humvee, he would've been killed.

“I don't know if I believe you,” Carl said, pondering the forest floor around him. “But how else could you know?”

Andrew continued: “When our chopper landed I saw you moving and realized the danger of your position beside the burning humvee. I jumped from the chopper, rushed to your side, and pulled you away from the vehicle. Moments later it exploded. I was fatally wounded--but I had saved your life.”

Now Carl was completely confused and most assuredly disarmed; he could feel his original plan falling to pieces with each new revelation. His plans to kidnap Jerry and murder him on this mountain had been so clear; yet now they were muddled by this stranger—his rescuer. The man on the other side of his pistol was his savior; and rather than pointing a weapon at him he should be bowing down and kissing his feet. The coincidence was too bizarre to be reality.

“During the explosion I received shrapnel wounds in my chest and thigh—and fire from the blast burned half my face,” Andrew said. “In a separate chopper I was flown to a

separate burn unit and there suffered just as you. I experienced those slow, painful, sleepless nights. After initial recovery the military surgeons revealed there was nothing they could do about my face. The burns and the damage inflicted were beyond their ability to repair. Truly, I felt like I was a monster with my face burned beyond recognition. What would my fiancée think? Physically, I was no longer the man she planned to marry. After gathering the courage I called her via videophone and revealed my face.” Andrew paused for a moment, tears gathering at his eyes. He put a hand to his nose. “When she saw my face she gasped and turned away sobbing. Later she said she was sorry for me and hoped I healed quickly. Two weeks later I received an email saying she met someone else and our engagement was off. She said they had met before my injury, but I didn't believe her. Upon seeing me she stopped loving me and abandoned me and my deformed face.”

Jerry reached up and rested an hand on Andrew shoulder. He, too, was shocked by the story of Andrew's rescue of Carl.

Carl wasn't sure how to respond. The grief Andrew had suffered now heaped itself upon his own, an even darker, more menacing cloud consuming his mind and heart. In some way he suddenly felt responsible for Andrew's injuries and subsequent losses. If only he had crawled away from the humvee, he might have spared Andrew's suffering. Is it my fault, Carl asked himself. And suddenly the suffering echoing out from the attack seemed limitless in its reach and endless in the grief it spread; the shockwave rippling outward and carrying with it an unending torrent of sadness and suffering to encompass the entire world; with each new story a new tragedy; with each new revelation, more fixed the belief that the evil released that night might never be vanquished. Could justice, satisfied in Jerry's death, somehow purge the world of this unleashed evil?

“He was the cause of your injuries and suffering!” Carl snarled, jabbing a finger at Jerry. “He is why your fiancé left you! And yet you protect him with your life?” Carl maneuvered in the dirt, thinking if he could position himself right he could shoot Jerry out from behind Andrew; but Andrew shifted in accordingly, keeping himself between them.

Carl’s determination to kill Jerry was only bolstered by the news of Andrew’s suffering. It only seemed right that he punish the man who injured the man who saved him. Yet in Andrew's story Carl felt some of his rage subside, some of his pain dispelled. To know someone had suffered as he, and had experienced the same dark hours of painful recovery, was somehow disarming. Now his savior and companion in suffering stood between him and the man in whose death he believed he could end it all.

“Why would you give your life for him?” Carl asked, his eyes so red and puffy they almost glowed in the dark. He was speaking in hushed tones now, the pistol lifeless at his side.

“Because he saved mine.”

Carl lost his breath, a look of sincere confusion spreading across his brow.

“After my fiancée broke off our engagement I lost all hope,” Andrew said, “She was the last meaningful thing in my life and the thought of losing her left me helplessly alone. In her I lost any reason to keep on living. The days ahead were dark and to continue living only meant a prolonged and, in my mind, endless suffering. At that time the depression completely consumed me and I saw no light beyond the dark valley of grief. The only road before me was one of perpetual torment; and the future appeared as one bottomless hole with nowhere to go but down. With no purpose to live I gradually gave up on myself. I fought the therapists and my nurses; I refused my medication; I preferred sleep to consciousness, and morphine to social

interaction. My caregivers observed my digression and warned me about the outcome—they said I needed courage and a reason to live, and tried to coach me out of my depression. But I'd already decided how it would all end. It had only become a matter of time."

Andrew turned and pondered the blackness into which the night dissolved; and for a moment imagined the vast emptiness swallowing the earth before him a manifestation of that depression which consumed him during those darker days.

"One particularly difficult night—I'm sure you know about these," he nodded to Carl, "—I felt as though my entire body was on fire. The pain began as a swelling in my face, which eventually spread down into my neck and finally to my chest and legs. I thought for a moment I had met my end, and I welcomed it. My instincts told me to call the nurse, but my broken heart said to suffer until my body could take no more. I believed if I let it go I might be released and forever free of this painful existence.

But much to my frustration I survived the night and in the end determined to take my own life the next day. I had devised a carefully calculated plan and considered all of the steps to ensure a quick and painless death. I was a doctor myself and knew well which combination of drugs and medication could make it happen. Across the hall from my room was where they stored the more lethal drugs, and having watched this room carefully over the last few days, observed there was a moment when a particular orderly would regularly unlock the door, unlock the cabinet to the drugs, and leave for a quick break before returning to finish restocking the cabinets and locking them and the door. I knew if I moved at the right time I could access the room, lock the door behind me and go about my dark deed. Later in the day when the opportune moment arose, I crawled into my wheelchair and hurried across my room. As I prepared to roll into the hallway I was approached by two doctors and

a man I'd never met before. He was a civilian, the doctor explained, and had come from the States to provide financial assistance to the military hospitals in Afghanistan. After I was introduced to the visitor, rather than continuing on with the doctor, he stayed and talked with me. With my goal fixed firmly in mind, I tried to ignore him, but no matter what I said or did he insisted we talk and seemed to be sincerely interested in me. He wheeled me back to my room and spent the remainder of the hour talking. For most of the conversation I remained silent and refused to speak. He said he didn't mind and just wanted to know more about my service and my family and whatever else I was interested in. After an hour of talking he left me alone, only to return a few minutes later with lunch for both of us.

Needless to say, by the end of the day I had opened up to this visitor and appreciated his attention. To my surprise, he returned the next morning and made subsequent visits for the rest of the week." Andrew turned to look at Jerry. He noticed the life pour back into his friend's face as the guilt from his heart subsided. "Not long after his first visit he convinced my superiors to let me return home. Once I returned to the States he flew me to one of the best surgeons in the country and there spent thousands for me to undergo a series of reconstructive surgeries until my face was restored to its former state."

Andrew ran a hand along the smooth skin of his cheek and chin which looked as good as new. "Over time we became the closest of friends and confided in each other our darkest secrets. I told him about the breakup with my fiancé, plans for suicide and how he saved me that day. He told me about his fateful decision at Synapse Systems, subsequent divorce and wanderings to try and make up for what he had done. Over time, we made the possible connection between what he had done at Synapse, the failed mission, and my injury." Andrew paused. "And I forgave him."

“You forgave him?” Carl said under his breath. “You are weak.” Yet these words sounded false in his mouth, he knew they weren’t true.

“Forgiveness is strength,” Andrew said. “Anyone can hate and spend their life plotting revenge.”

“But *he* did it!” Carl insisted. “He *caused* it to happen.”

“Often there isn’t much sense to what happens in the world,” Andrew said. “Sometimes there aren’t reasons. Our blame could begin at the Towers and the evil men who engineering their destruction; or we could hang it on our government who sent us to the Middle East; or maybe blame those who voted them in, or the officials at the Pentagon who gave the weapons to an Afghan warlord; or focus our hatred and anger on the tribesmen who fired those stolen rockets at our humvees; maybe blame God for allowing it to happen, allowing us to be there when fates collided.”

Andrew shook his head. “Terrible things happen; events we can’t attribute to anyone without implicating everyone. Large, widespread, complex things for reasons unknown where us little guys get caught in the middle. And the sooner you realize this the sooner you free yourself from this anger and move on with your life. Often these issues are too tangled to make sense of, Carl. Sometimes there are no reasons. Sometimes life is senseless. Sometimes there is no one to blame.”

Inside Carl felt the rage of his painful past slowly subside. He wasn’t completely sure why it was disappearing. Surely, it was connected to a series of the evening’s events: his unawareness of Jerry’s loss and perpetual suffering, the revelation of Andrew as his savior, Jerry’s relationship to Andrew and his saving him from suicide. All he knew was standing before him were two kindred sufferers; all having lost, all having grieved; losses distinct yet shared; all absorbed into one--a communal heart where burdens were freely distributed, and miraculously dispelled.

Carl looked down at the pistol now lifeless in his hands. Suddenly it had become an unwieldy, disgusting little thing; meaningless and silly, more prop than instrument of destruction. It slipped from his fingers and fell to the ground, and Carl followed with his knees hitting the dirt where his palms covered his face and he began to cry. With that, the last remnants of Carl's anger came flowing down his hands and arms in the form of warm tears; a final exorcism of the demons possessing his soul; and in their place something *new*—a strange baptism of heart where the soul surfaced guiltless and clarity replaced confusion; a surreal lightness of being.

“As I said before much in life is senseless,” Andrew said. “At the same time there is much that is miraculous, much that has purpose and much that make sense.” They all knew he was referring to that day--the miracle that they had come together when the redemption of each was inextricably tied to that of the other.

“I will do all I can to redeem what I've done,” Jerry pleaded. “I'll pay for a new hand, whatever it takes to makeup for the losses in your life and those of your friends. Before God I confess I'm a guilt man and only want to right my wrongs.”

Carl's head was buried in his hands, his tears mingling mud in the dirt. Endlessly he sobbed, his shoulders shaking and chest throbbing. Jerry and Andrew watched as the anguish came flooding out, streaking down his hands and heavy coat. They knew the rage within him was giving way to something new and, with hesitation, waited for his return.

Suddenly he looked up from his hands and both men saw the change. Beneath his red eyes and tear-streaked cheeks was a younger face, new and pure, washed clean by hot tears of grief. Gone were the hard chinks in his forehead and brow; absent the hot coals once smoldering as eyes. Instead the manifestation of a man puzzled, yet renewed,

glowing as if transfigured before the face of God—eyes translucent exposing a peaceful soul.

As Jerry watched Carl's transformation unfold he felt his own guilt swept away. In a symphony of reciprocal redemption, the guilt in his heart was replaced by a glorious lightness, a peace he forgot existed. He watched Carl stand and look to the east—anticipating--waiting for some new sign in the sky. For a moment gold glistened along the horizon, gathering at the edges—hesitating--until spilling out over the mountains, swallowing the wide valley and sky, the blackness giving way to color, rushing down from the horizon and up the mountain to meet them; darkness, and her emptiness, surrendering to superior light. And before them materialized an expanding vision of endless green, spreading outward in all directions, until blending upward into a boundless sky of brilliant blue.

Onto Carl's face flushed the color of a new day, warm light sweeping tears from his cheeks. And for a moment he felt as if his body was gone, obliterated by the warmth and pulsating energy of dawn's great flame.

The sign.