

## *From Chapter 10*

Lieutenant Steven Pace lay back in his beach chair, glad to have his upper body in the shadow of the wide umbrella, the pole of which pierced the sand just behind him. The intensity of the late-February summer sun was unattenuated by the scattered cumulus clouds. He watched his buddy playing in the waves like a kid, boogie boarding, performing some impressive 360s in the tubular sets that had been rolling in for the last hour.

Major Rory Davis had been like a brother to him for the last three years, since he had first gone through boot camp and then Special Forces training with the South African army. The friends had converged via separate tracks on the reconnaissance division, and had served together on numerous missions. They'd each lost more friends than they cared to admit.

Steven was finally grounded enough to consider that this chapter in his life was probably at an end, but despite his lifelong abilities to think clearly and dream broadly, he was unable to imagine his next step. Part of the problem, he told himself as he struggled to reposition his body, was that he knew he might never walk again. His left leg was in a tension brace from his toes to his hip, with twenty titanium alloy pins holding his bones and tendons in place. Steven couldn't remember the explosion that had almost claimed his life, for the concussion had spared him the horror by way of traumatic amnesia. He

was told three days after the fact, upon regaining consciousness, that he was lucky to be alive.

Rory, with whom he shared an apartment, had driven him to the Durban Military Base Hospital earlier that morning for a two-week check-up.

“Good news, Lt. Pace,” the doctor had said. “For the first time, I’m confident that you’ll get to keep your leg. The question now is how much utility you’ll regain. The femur has accepted the bone grafts from your pelvis, but the shrapnel above your ankle is almost indistinguishable from what remains of your tibia and fibula. Head up, man, you’ve come a long way since they wheeled you in two months ago.”

That had been good news, of course, but now he had a decision to make. What next?

After surviving clandestine night missions in Eritrea, the demilitarized zone between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola, conflicts on the Zambian and Zimbabwean border, and even riot control in Johannesburg, it was ironic that he almost died in a training exercise. While practicing a modified technique for defusing explosives on a new type of detonator employed in the latest generation of IEDs, he had obviously made an error in judgment. It hadn’t been determined whether it was due to the substandard North Korean circuitry that had become commonplace, or if he had simply misread the pattern and cut the wrong wire. And, of course, he couldn’t remember.

The commandant had personally ordered the surgeons to spare no effort in putting the lieutenant back together: “My nephew is to make a full recovery, or somebody will have hell to pay.”

Now, gazing out on the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, Steven looked past his friend on the boogie board, past a cluster of surfers farther out, and he noticed a few specks on the horizon. He wondered idly whether these were ships, or sailboats, or drilling rigs. He did his best to let his mind float along with the gulls and the terns that wheeled and soared in the onshore breeze, opening himself to new possibilities that were still just beyond his reach. While feeling cared for and provided for in a way that he never expected to call upon, he began to look out, cautiously, into his own future, into several possible futures that seemed to lay before somebody in his predicament.

*What good is my commitment to honor and service, he asked himself, if I can't put it into action? There was a part of him, a part of every soldier he suspected, that had to come to terms with the next question he put to himself. If I leave the battlefield, what code can I live by?*

He was accustomed to setting fear aside in order to perform deadly tasks surrounded by combatants in faraway places, but he reeled with the sudden realization that he was afraid to bring up these issues with his best friend. Would Rory, two years his senior, sympathize with his questions and doubts? Or would he dismiss these concerns as lapses in courage – cowardly invitations to self-pity and psychic weakness unbecoming of a 'recce'?

For weeks, he had been wondering if he could trust his objectivity, directed inwardly at this problem that no training could ever really address, and he desperately wanted somebody to guide him through this mental minefield. Assuming that he regained at least fair mobility, he would have only a mild chance at remaining in the corps, as an analyst or administrator. With more than twenty successful missions and several

decorations to his credit, he could request and probably receive a desk position. After being part of the spearhead of military intelligence and technology for six years, and having experienced the rarified glory of life as a green beret, he cringed at the thought of a desk job.

He wondered if his friend, closer to him than his own brother, could really listen at this level. There, in the noonday sun, was an elite warrior who spoke the language of invulnerability, distilled in him by the most arduous training regimen on the continent. But would he understand when Steven addressed him in the language of mortality?

One hundred meters distant, Rory exited the surf and carried his board under his arm, the salt water dripping off his lean body as if he were a leopard or a gazelle. Cockiness dripped off him as well, as evidenced by the shit-eating grin on his face. It reflected the discipline and focus that all green berets had been selected and trained to exude.

“Nice ‘el rollos,”” Steven said as his friend threw the board on the sand and grabbed a beach towel. “That last set was pretty monstrous. I wish I had a camera. You caught some air on those last two waves.”

“Thanks, Stevie.” Rory plopped down in his chair and looked at his friend. “You doin’ okay? Can I get you anything?”

“I’m good, unless you want to round us up some company for lunch.” He pointed down the beach. “The blonde that walked by a few minutes ago was hot. What a goddess! And her friend was checking you out.”

“Sweet.”

Rory reached for the cooler and grabbed two beers, extending one to Steven. “It’s almost noon. Cheers!”

“Thanks. And thanks again for schlepping me to the doctor this morning. I really appreciate it.” They sipped their beers and listened to the waves. Rory sat back, stretched his legs, and dug his toes into the sand. Steven watched his friend and realized that his willingness to perform this simple gesture, in the sight of a friend who couldn’t, was not insensitivity, but a sign of loyalty to a friend who would recoil at pity. This gave him the final impetus to speak.

“Rory ...” His friend turned and looked directly at him, sensing the seriousness of the quiet tone. “I have something to tell you and I’ve been afraid to bring it up. I guess I didn’t trust you to understand ... but I think you can.”

“Stevie, you can talk to me about anything.” He paused, knowing that his friend was deadly earnest about something. “We’re brothers. No walls, no limits,” he said softly.

“Yes,” was all Steven could say as his voice grew husky with emotion. He leaned forward and carefully picked up his cast and repositioned it a few inches toward the center of the shaded area, and then turned his upper body a little more directly toward his friend. Rory took a deep breath and then released it slowly to demonstrate he was fully present.

Steven continued. “Since early high school, I’ve known what I wanted to do ... become a marine and then a recce. I knew that it was a way to live the fullest and most exciting life I could imagine. I’ll never forget the time I was visiting my uncle – he wasn’t the Commandant yet – when Jake Patterson showed up at the base. The grounds

were busy ... platoons were marching all over the campus, and this son-of-a-bitch comes tearing down the main dri--”

“*Dude,*” Rory interrupted, laughing, “I was *there*. A couple of us had to dive into the ditch!”

“*Really?* ... So ... you know what I’m talking about. I never imagined anybody could get away with a stunt like that, and still have generals eating out of his hands. It was *un-fucking-believable*.” Rory grinned and nodded. “After scattering 200 men in uniform, this guy screeches to a halt in the sweetest sports car I’d ever seen and hops out as if he owned the place. He had long hair, blue jeans, sunglasses!”

“I remember,” Rory said, smiling wistfully.

“So ... my uncle was talking to one of his officers and I was standing nearby. We were, I don’t know, fifty meters from the main building. The guy hops out of his car and walks into the headquarters without even bothering to look back at the drill instructors that he’d almost run over. I felt like I’d just seen the god of thunder land on the front lawn. I asked Uncle Harry, ‘Who *is* that?’ I’ll never forget what he said. With a look of awe I’ve only seen him show a few times in my life he said, ‘*That* is a green beret.’

“It was then and there that I knew what I wanted to be.” Steven paused and looked off beyond the waves for a moment. Then he continued.

“The rest is history. Boot camp, basic training, marine specialist training ... ‘the Walk.’ There aren’t very many who know of the intensity ... the suffering, beyond all comprehension, that we had to endure. Well, it was that vision of Jake Patterson that inspired me through my hell. My year, only nine of us made it to the finish. It took me a long time to see beyond the physical torture and realize it was all mental.”

Rory nodded sympathetically.

“That training served me well through dangers I couldn’t even imagine, and I’ve felt on top of the world more days than not. But that’s all changed now.

“I’m glad to be alive, and to have my leg still attached. I know I was lucky. But, even if I regain the use of it, I’m through with the army.”

“That’s not true, Stevie. You know there’s a place for you, even if it’s just as an instructor or a specialist. You’re *brilliant*, man! You can do whatever you put your mind to.”

“Thanks, but what I’ve been afraid to tell you is ... It’s time for me to move on. I’ve been afraid that you and the other guys would think I’m pussing out. And I guess I’m a little afraid of leaving the unit. Who’s gonna back me up when I’m ... you know, going solo?”

“Stevie, you won’t be alone. I will *always* help you, no matter what.” Rory looked at him with that piercing look he rarely demonstrated, a look of naked loyalty and love. “We’ve saved each other more times than we can count. It might seem I take it for granted, but I want you to know ... I *don’t*.”

Steven started to say something, but his emotions prevented him. He nodded solemnly.

“What will you do?” Rory asked.

“I’m not sure. I suppose my next assignment, or job, whatever it is, will have to be more mental than physical, maybe even creative.”

“The time’ll come,” said Rory, “when I’ll want to strike out on a new path myself. You’re just beating me to the punch on this one. As much as I love what I do, I know

there's more out there." He looked out over the waves and Steven followed his gaze. He wondered what his friend's sense of future possibilities looked like.

Rory continued. "You're a smart fucker, Stevie. You're good at music, computers, maths ... engineering. Any ideas?"

"Nothing specific. One thing I'll miss though," said Steven, "is the intensity and the excitement ... the sense that any given day could be my last. I don't know how I'm gonna manage civilian life. I just hope I don't get bored to death!"

Rory laughed.

"It's against your nature to play small, Stevie. You'll find your way to center stage, and the only question is where."