

CHAPTER 1

The fine sands of the Sahara Desert lifted into the sky and crossed the Mediterranean. Scirocco winds whipped the dust over miles of water, and the particles in the air added a golden tinge to the twilight's glow. At Sigonella Naval Air Station in Sicily, Gunnery Sergeant A. E. Blount took a deep puff of his Cohiba, looked up at a blood-red moon.

Blount sat at a table outside the base coffee shop. From across the street, just outside the air station, he could hear the thump and pulse of music. Some of his Marines, along with sailors and Air Force fliers, were starting the evening early at the Route One nightclub. Blount cared little for the crowds, the dancing, the hookups of the nightclub. And, anytime he entered a club or restaurant anywhere in the world, his size invited stares. Blount stood six feet, eight inches. Two hundred and forty-five pounds, close to the USMC's max weight for his height, but with the body mass index of a creekbed stone.

The big Marine did not begrudge the loud partying. Those boys needed to have fun while they could, because they might go into action any day now. The hopes of the Arab Spring were curdling into despair as terrorists took town after town in Egypt, Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia. Where unsteady administrations lacked control, Islamic militancy rushed into the vacuum. Revolutions had led to coups, and coups had led to chaos.

Blount, however, was going home. He had just wrapped up an exercise at Sig as a team chief with his unit, Fox Company, Second Marine Special Operations Battalion. His uniform bore the golden

wings and canopy of a parachutist, and he held a hard-earned military occupational specialty: MOS 0372, Critical Skills Operator. Blount had put in for retirement with an effective date in three weeks. His twenty years of service had taken him through firefights in Fallujah, sniper duty in the Korengal Valley, even hand-to-hand combat in an Afghan cave. He still carried scars on both hands and under his right arm from the cave fight.

Those battles had earned him the Navy Cross, the Bronze Star with a combat V, the Purple Heart, and every right in the world to spend the rest of his days in peace. Tomorrow, the freedom bird would take him to Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort in South Carolina. From there, he'd make his way to that big country house he'd bought on ten acres outside Beaufort for his wife and two baby girls. The girls didn't like it when he called them babies. They were eight and twelve.

They'd like it when he got them that pony, though. He had a plan for those ten acres, and most of it involved a pasture. The rest he'd plow into a great big vegetable garden. As he'd sweated in the Sunni Triangle or shivered in the Hindu Kush, Blount had planned every square foot of that garden: two rows of sweet corn, a row of Irish potatoes, a row of yams, two rows of tomatoes, two of okra, along with rows for black-eyed peas, butter beans, string beans, bell peppers, and hot peppers. Squash and cucumbers, too. Of course, his family could eat only a fraction of that. Bernadette would freeze and can some of it. The rest he'd place in baskets, load into the back of his Dodge Ram, and donate to the local A.M.E. Zion Church. The church held suppers for the homeless every Wednesday night.

The sound of a door squeaking open behind him interrupted his thoughts of home. A young corporal, Tony Fender, came out of the coffee shop with a steaming paper cup.

"May I join you, Gunny?" Fender asked.

Blount blew out a long plume of cigar smoke. "You may," he said.

With the tip of his boot, Blount shoved a chair out from under the table. He sat up straighter in his own chair and adjusted the blouse of his MARPAT camo. The tip of an aged and cracked leather knife sheath showed from under the blouse. The knife hung on a black web belt earned in the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program. A vertical red stripe on the belt indicated Blount's status as an instructor trainer.

"Still got that old KA-BAR, Gunny?" Fender said as he took his seat. "They could have issued you a new knife, you know."

"I'll keep this one."

His grandfather had carried that knife in the Pacific. Grandpa had served as a Montford Point Marine, one of the first black men to wear the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor. The knife had a more recent history, too. Not a lot of people knew about that. Just the Marines who were there at the time and a couple of folks from other services—an Air Force flier named Michael Parson and a real sharp Army interpreter named Sophia Gold. But Blount didn't like to tell war stories.

"We're gonna miss you, Gunny. You sure you can't stay with us a while longer?"

None of your business, Blount thought. This boy Fender wasn't a bad Marine; he just talked too much. Hair cut in a proper high-and-tight. Small tattoo on the inside of his left wrist—nothing badass, just a girl's name. *Anne*.

Blount took another pull at his cigar. The tip reddened like the moon above, and he held the smoke long enough to make it clear that was the only answer Fender would get. In the distance, twilight blurred the outline of Mount Etna's summit. Blount had heard the story of some ancient philosopher who threw himself into the mouth of Etna, an active volcano. Maybe the dude just got tired of dumb questions.

"Didn't mean to pry," Fender said. "Sorry about that."

Blount exhaled, tapped away a round of ash the size of a shot glass. "It's all good," he said.

“If you don’t mind my asking, Gunny, I’ve always wondered what your initials, A. E., stood for.”

“You can keep wondering, Corporal.”

Before either man could say anything else, a loud crump sounded from across the street. The thud came almost in time with the thumping of music. But it stopped the music. A power failure, maybe? Then Blount heard screams.

The two Marines looked at each other. Blount dropped his cigar and crushed it out with his heel.

“Let’s get over there,” he said.

With a clatter of overturned chairs, Blount and Fender sprinted for the front gate. The German shepherds in the K-9 compound just inside the perimeter fence began barking; even they knew something was wrong.

Blount ran up to two Navy MPs manning the gate, flashed his ID. Both MPs held rifles and stood guard behind concrete barriers. One spoke into his radio, called for backup. Blount understood why they held their position instead of rushing to help at the nightclub. Whatever had just happened at Route One could serve as a diversion for terrorists trying to get inside the base.

“What’s going on?” Blount asked.

“Don’t know,” one of the MPs said. “Some kind of blast, but it sounded weird.”

More screams came from inside the club. Blount could see people stumbling out into the parking lot.

Blount charged across the road. Fender caught up behind him. Some of the victims pouring out of Route One had bloodied faces and arms. Blount saw no serious injuries like limbs torn off; perhaps it was worse inside. He forced his way through the door as nightclub patrons staggered past him.

Inside, at least twenty people lay on the floor amid shattered furniture and spilled beer. Some wailed and writhed while others lay si-

lent. Some moaned and cursed in English and Italian. The air smelled of explosives, sweat, perfume, and . . . feces. Somebody had lost control of his bowels. Blount looked around, still saw no one with severe trauma. But some of the people on the floor weren't moving at all. A couple others were twitching uncontrollably. Blount kneeled beside a man suffering from convulsions, placed a hand on the man's shoulder.

The man rolled over and tried to look at Blount. He wore black jeans and an Under Armour polo shirt. Anchor tattoo on his bicep. Young guy, maybe twenty. A sailor out on a Saturday night.

"Where are you hurt?" Blount asked.

The sailor shivered and arched his back. Mucus ran from both nostrils. The man's eyes looked strange; his pupils had shrunk to pin-points. He tried to speak.

"Can't . . . can't."

"You can't what, bud?"

"B-b-b . . . breathe."

Just a few feet away, Fender tried to help an Italian girl. Her black dress clung to her thighs, the fabric wet with something. Blount caught a whiff of urine. On her knees, she pitched forward until she went down on all fours.

Fender put his hand on her back. "What's wrong?" he asked.

The girl muttered something in Italian, and then vomited onto the floor.

Blount put it all together.

"Nerve gas!" he shouted. "Fender, get out of here!"

The corporal looked over at Blount, glanced around the room.

"I ain't leaving without you, Gunny."

Blount thought for a second. If they'd gotten exposed to nerve gas, it was already too late. He felt all right, though. If he'd inhaled sarin, he'd know it. But he could still touch a droplet of it and get exposed through his skin. Didn't matter. These people needed help. And he did not have the only thing that could help them.

“Go to the fleet warehouse and tell ’em you need all the auto-injectors they can give you,” Blount ordered. “I’ll check the clinic. These folks all gon’ die if they don’t get some antidote.”

“Aye, aye, Gunny.”

Outside, flashing blue lights of military police cars and ambulances pierced the deepening twilight. Sirens split through shouts and screams. Blount and Fender pulled out their ID cards, held them aloft as they pushed their way to the base gate. No sense getting shot by an excited cop. MPs now swarmed the guard post. Some headed into the nightclub.

“Looks like a nerve gas attack in there,” Blount told an MP. “They show all the symptoms. I’m coming back with some antidote kits if I can find ’em.”

One of the cops started to ask a question, but Blount ignored him. Blount ran past a sign that read *NAS SIGONELLA. THE HUB OF THE MED.*

At the clinic, Blount gripped a door handle, pressed his thumb on the latch release, pulled. Locked tight. He shook the door in frustration. But he saw a light on in an interior room. Someone moved around inside. The gunnery sergeant banged on the door and began yelling.

“Open up!” he shouted. “Open up!”

A woman in Navy fatigues came to the door and unlocked it. She wore the insignia of a lieutenant commander in the Nurse Corps. Black hair tied in a bun. Rimless glasses.

“Ma’am,” Blount said, breathing hard. “We got a mass casualty event right outside the gate, and I’m pretty sure it’s nerve gas.”

“I thought I heard something,” the nurse said. “How do you know it’s nerve gas?”

“Symptoms,” Blount said. “Drooling and twitching. Ma’am, we gotta get out there with some antidote. You got any?”

The nurse frowned. “Wait a minute, Gunnery Sergeant,” she said. “Atropine is a controlled drug.”

Blount felt a surge of impatience. People were dying out there.

“Sweet Jesus, ma’am,” he said. “You folks gave it to me to carry in Iraq. I didn’t need it there but I need it here.” He used to keep doses right in his pocket. Why couldn’t he have it now?

The nurse picked up a phone and dialed a number, maybe the main hospital on the other side of the base. When someone answered, she said, “I have a Marine here who says that incident off base involves chemical weapons. You might want to get your chem response ready in case he’s right.”

In case I’m right, Blount thought. The Marine Corps taught me those symptoms. She thinks I’m just some dumb bruiser.

Blount followed the nurse down the hall and into a storage room. She unlocked a cabinet and began searching, but not nearly fast enough for Blount.

“Where is it, ma’am? Can I help you look?”

The woman unlocked another cabinet, motioned across its shelves. Blount rummaged, knocked over bottles and boxes. He found a case of the old Mark 1 kits, pairs of injectors stored together in vinyl pouches.

“Wait, Gunnery Sergeant,” the nurse said. “I have to . . .”

Blount didn’t hear the rest of the sentence. He grabbed the Mark 1 kits and a box of medical gloves, took off at a run.

A memory of childhood came to him. Back on the farm, in the summer of his tenth year, his beagle puppy was bounding around the trash barrel. The pup carried something white in its mouth. Young Blount called to his dog and took away the object, a screw-on cap from a plastic jug. Around the trash barrel lay several empty jugs, each bearing the label of an insecticide used in the tobacco fields.

“Stop it, Digger,” Blount said. “You ain’t supposed to play with that.”

Young Blount walked back to the weathered frame house where he lived with his mother—and his father, whenever the man wasn’t off on a drunk. The puppy followed him home, playful as ever.

Blount went inside and turned on the television. After the old set warmed up, Blount tried all three channels but couldn't find any cartoons. So he went back outside to play with Digger.

He found the pup lying in the weeds, trembling. Vomit covered its front paws. Green diarrhea issued from the other end. Digger looked up with misty eyes. He didn't have the strength to wag his tail.

Blount wrapped the puppy in a burlap sack and ran down the dirt road to the most reliable source of help he knew—his grandfather. He found Grandpa on the porch, smoking a Camel and reading the newspaper.

"Grandpa," Blount called. "Digger's real sick and needs to go to the vet."

The old man folded his paper, crushed out his cigarette in a bean-bag ashtray.

"What's wrong with him, boy?"

"He's throwing up and going to the bathroom. He's shaking all over." Blount thought for a moment. "He poisoned himself."

"What did he get into?" Grandpa asked. "Show me."

Blount handed the puppy to his grandfather and ran back to the trash barrel. He returned with the empty jug. By then, Grandpa was getting into his pickup; Blount jumped into the truck's passenger side. Grandpa looked at the jug's label, started the engine. He'd placed the dog in the middle of the bench seat, right where duct tape covered a rip.

On the ride into Beaufort, the pup kept shaking and throwing up.

"Son," Grandpa said, "we'll see what Doc Albright can do, but I don't believe Digger's gon' make it."

Tears slid down Blount's cheeks. He wished the old Chevy could go faster. Please, Lord, just let Digger have some medicine.

At the animal hospital, Blount ran inside with the dog in his arms. His grandfather brought the pesticide jug and showed it to the veterinarian.

"I'll be right back," Doc Albright said.

The veterinarian returned with a syringe. He didn't even take Digger into the examination room. Right there in the waiting room, with the puppy in Blount's lap, the vet pinched fur from the scruff of the animal's neck, inserted the needle. Doc Albright depressed the plunger, and Blount watched the clear liquid disappear into his best friend's veins. As soon as the needle came out, the beagle stopped shaking. The pup relaxed immediately. His eyes changed color. He wagged his tail, licked Blount's thumb.

"That was quick," Grandpa said.

"It usually is, if it works," Doc Albright said. "Bring him back if he don't look right tomorrow, but I think he'll be fine."

"What do you say?" Grandpa asked.

"Thank you," Blount said. "Sir."

On the ride home, Grandpa said, "I'm proud of you, boy. You found a problem, but you didn't go squalling like a child. You figured out the situation and took action. That's thinking like a man."

Digger lived long enough to greet Private Blount on his return from boot camp.

Back at Route One, Gunnery Sergeant Blount found men in full MOPP chem-protection gear: gas masks, charcoal-impregnated suits, butyl gloves. Blount snapped on a set of medical gloves and went to work.

In the parking lot, he found the Italian girl in the black dress. Somehow she'd crawled or staggered outside. Lying on the pavement, she looked even worse. Sweat beaded on her cheeks as if she'd just run a desert marathon. Wrinkles radiated out from her eyes, her face contorted. She continued to heave, though nothing came up from her stomach. The girl made a primal groaning sound and spat out a mouthful of mucus and saliva. Blount took a knee beside her, pulled out a pair of injectors.

"I gotcha, miss," he said. "I got what you need."

He took the first injector, a plastic cylinder the size and shape of a felt-tip marker. Blount removed the yellow safety cap at one end, arming the spring-loaded needle at the other end. The girl moaned again and rolled onto her side. That position was good; it exposed the fleshy backs of her thighs, and Blount didn't want to punch a needle into her bone. With his left hand, the Marine held her knees to keep her from moving again. With his right, he pressed the atropine injector to the girl's upper leg.

A click from inside the injector told Blount the two-inch needle had rammed home. If the Italian felt pain, she did not show it. She only continued to twitch and drool. Poor girl's nervous system is so jacked up, Blount thought, she probably can't tell one hurt from another. He counted ten seconds and pulled out the needle. Then he uncapped the other injector, the one labeled PRALIDOXIME CHLORIDE.

He pressed the injector against her other thigh, felt the snap of the spring. After another ten-count, he removed the needle. Blount rolled the girl over on her back.

The wrinkles around her eyes faded as the muscles in her face relaxed. She coughed, glanced around, focused on Blount. Now she looked at him with the eyes of a human instead of a dying wild animal.

"*Grazie,*" she breathed. A barely audible whisper, but Blount understood.

He stretched out her sleeve and poked both needles through the fabric. Using his thumb and forefinger, he bent the needles into fish-hook shapes so they'd hang from the dress. That way, other rescuers would know the girl had received one dose.

One was apparently enough. The girl probably didn't weigh a hundred pounds. She'd have been gorgeous, Blount thought, if she hadn't just been poisoned nearly to death. Her chest rose and fell evenly now. Blount left her and surveyed the mess around him.

The nurse from the clinic ran up, looked around, and bent over a

patient. She held an injector to his leg. A few feet away, Fender worked on another victim. Blount threw the box of gloves to the corporal.

“Put these on,” Blount ordered.

“Aye, Gunny.”

Sarin tended to disperse quickly. Blount figured that was the only reason he and Fender hadn’t dropped dead like tobacco worms sprayed with malathion.

Yards away, between two parked cars, a man lay shaking on the ground. Maybe he’d stumbled that far before collapsing. Blount stepped over both moving and motionless bodies to reach him. Blount felt a shock of recognition when he saw the face, twisted and smeared with vomit: his old platoon commander, Lieutenant Kelley. At least a major by now. Kelley wore a white civilian dress shirt streaked with dirt, blood, and spit.

“Sir, it’s me, Blount. Sir, can you talk?”

Kelley showed no sign that he even heard the question. He let out a long keening sound through chattering teeth. Blount uncapped a set of injectors, pressed both of them against the officer’s leg. The needles snapped simultaneously, and Blount felt the antidotes coursing through the plastic housing of the injectors.

Please let this fix him, Blount thought. Please don’t let me be too late. Blount counted to ten, pulled out the needles.

Kelley entered some deeper form of spasms. The officer’s fists clasped so tightly that his fingernails cut into his palms. His head slammed against the front tire of the car beside him. His knees knocked together, and his skin took on a gray cast. In the course of two wars, Blount had witnessed all manner of dying. But he had never seen anything like this. Nerve gas turned its victims into ghouls right before it killed them.

From his training he knew that, in severe cases, you administered three doses, one right after the other. If this wasn’t severe, then the word had no meaning. He armed another pair of injectors, jammed

them against Kelley's thigh. Once again he heard the twin snaps. Kelley continued to twitch and shake. After ten seconds, Blount pulled out the needles and uncapped a third pair of injectors.

Once more, he jammed the injectors against Kelley's leg, watched the spring-loaded needles strike through fabric and into flesh. He tried to hold the needles in place. In deep convulsions, Kelley wrenched and thrashed. As Kelley twisted to his left, he jerked his leg away from Blount's hand. Both needles came out of the officer's thigh. Blount found himself holding two injectors, each needle spewing liquid uselessly into the air.

"Damn it," Blount hissed.

Blount stabbed the needles back into Kelley's leg and held them there as the injectors emptied.

Kelley stopped trembling. Blount thought the triple dose had finally worked. But Kelley did not move at all. Blount yanked out the spent injectors and tried to roll the officer onto his back. The man's eyes appeared dull and fixed, pupils constricted to dots. Kelley had quit breathing. No pulse, either. If those shrunken pupils saw anything, it was not in this world.

Blount stared for a moment, a fistful of Kelley's shirt still in his hand. The antidote was supposed to work; he'd just seen it work fine on that girl.

He had shared long deployments and deadly firefights with this officer. But after all that, Kelley had to die like this? Without even getting a chance to fight back?

CHAPTER 2

The Omni Air International DC-10 rotated off the runway at Sigonella and climbed into the dusty Mediterranean sky. Blount had stayed up all night helping treat victims of the gas attack and load them into ambulances. At last count, the sarin had killed twelve American service members and four Italians. Twice that many people remained in hospitals.

Blount had wanted his final homecoming to be a joyous event, bringing him a sense of satisfaction and completion. Like the old song said, a time to lay down his sword and shield, down by the riverside, and study war no more. Enter a life of community and tranquility, family, and friends. Summer evenings with the girls on the porch, making ice cream the good kind of way, turning the crank by hand. Bass fishing and rabbit hunting.

But now he could feel only anger and guilt. Somebody had poisoned his friends and comrades in arms, along with defenseless civilians. Made them die in one of the worst ways you could think of. And for what? Even if the bad guys had any kind of legitimate grievance—and Blount didn't believe they did—nothing justified their tactics. His own people had suffered worse than anything most jihadists had ever experienced, and his elders had overcome through dignity and nonviolence. Nothing excused terrorism. Ever.

So Blount was mad, for sure. But what kept him awake now, even in his sleep-deprived state, were the questions. Could he have saved Kelley? Blount had let the needles come loose when administering the third dose, and some of the drugs had squirted onto the pavement.

Would that wasted antidote have been just enough, just in time, to help his friend? Maybe not. But guilt was the enemy that stalked Blount in his dreams, and now that enemy carried even more ammunition.

As the island of Sardinia slid under the wings, a flight attendant came by.

“Is there anything you need, sir?” she asked.

Blount liked the civilian crews of these Defense Department charters. Always respectful and appreciative. They saw the faces of the warriors every day, so they had some idea of war’s cost. For too many folks back stateside, combat amounted to nothing but a reality-TV show. A channel to flip through between *Wheel of Fortune* and the Home Shopping Network.

“No ma’am,” Blount said. “I’m good.”

What he needed waited a few thousand miles across that water. Bernadette and his daughters, Ruthie and Priscilla.

The DC-10 made a refueling stop at Naval Station Rota in Spain. Blount waited in the passenger terminal and saw a group of Marines who had just flown in from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Their battalion was attached to the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit. Blount’s battalion was attached to another Lejeune-based MEU, the 22nd. A young sergeant dropped his seabag on the floor and sat next to Blount.

“Where you headed?” Blount asked.

“Getting on the boat from here, Gunny. Sailing out on the *Iwo Jima*.”

The USS *Iwo Jima* was an amphibious assault ship, built specifically for taking Marines to a fight. With all the recent trouble in North Africa, maybe a strong force floating in the Med would make terrorists think twice.

Blount knew well the mix of excitement and apprehension the Marines of the 24th MEU would be feeling about this deployment. Another challenge, another chance to back up your buddies and

prove your worth to the organization you loved. But along with the anticipation came the fear of what might happen to some of those buddies.

In the snack bar next to the passenger terminal, Blount bought an egg sandwich and a half pint of orange juice. He didn't really feel hungry, just tired, but he still couldn't sleep. He sat in a booth, pulled off the sandwich's top slice of bread, and shook black pepper onto the fried egg. Put the bread back into place. As he ate, he gazed idly at the snack bar's display of a matador's sword, cape, and felt hat. Then he ordered the only thing the snack bar made really well, a cup of *café con leche*. He stirred the Spanish-style coffee, sat down at another booth under a television tuned to CNN. The anchor handed off the broadcast to a reporter speaking live from Sigonella:

"The death toll has risen to twenty in the nerve gas attack on a nightclub outside the American naval air station here. Some officials have compared this strike to the 1995 Tokyo subway incident, when the Aum Shinrikyo cult killed thirteen people with sarin gas.

"However, the Japanese attack involved liquid sarin carried in plastic bags. Last night's incident used weaponized sarin delivered by some sort of munition. Investigators say it appears an explosive device was planted inside the nightclub. The attack targeted only the club; the air station's security was never breached.

"The base here remains on its highest level of alert, which the military calls Force Protection Condition Delta. So far, no terrorist group has claimed responsibility."

A voice on the PA system called Blount's flight. Blount swallowed the last of his coffee, then joined the passengers filing up the air stairs into the DC-10. Minutes later, the jet thundered away from the ground and banked to the west. Blount watched the wide beaches of Rota pass beneath him; across the bay, he saw the ancient port of

Cádiz. Years ago he'd taken a walking tour of Cádiz's Old Town and learned how this region had once come under the rule of Moors campaigning north from the Sahara. For centuries, swords had crossed at this meeting place of continents. He thought of the Marines about to board the Iwo Jima, and he wished them Godspeed.

Blount finally fell asleep after the DC-10 leveled off above the Atlantic. About two hours later, he woke from his nap with a blank mind. For just a second, he had to ask himself why he felt anxiety. What was wrong? Then all the events of the night before came back to him, with the image of Kelley as he trembled, drooled, then stared blankly out of dead eyes.

Kelley and Blount had fought together a decade ago across the rooftops and back alleys of Fallujah. The town hosted a hornet's nest of insurgents, many of them not even Iraqi. Intel thought one of them might be Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian terrorist infamous for the on-camera beheading of American contractor Nicholas Berg. When the networks ran the Berg story, they cut away from the video after al-Zarqawi drew his knife. But at an intel briefing, Blount saw the entire thing. The sight sickened him and filled him with determination. Apparently, it had the same effect on his commanders. They decided Fallujah had to be cleared.

So the Marines, along with some real bad Scottish dudes called the Black Watch, sealed off the place after encouraging civilians to leave. Then Blount's platoon helped sweep through the town, house by house, bullet by bullet. They called it Operation Phantom Fury.

From Blount's point of view, the op went pretty well until Corporal Lane got hit. As the platoon advanced by ones and twos across a street, a boom scattered pigeons from the power lines drooping overhead. Warm blood spattered Blount's face like spray from a hot shower. Just in front of Blount, Lane collapsed.

Blount grabbed Lane by his tactical vest and dragged him to a house that the platoon had already cleared. The rest of the platoon took cover among riddled buildings lining the street. Kelley and a

medical corpsman followed Blount into the house. Just to make sure they were safe, Kelley swept the room with his rifle and checked a stairway at the back. No shots, no bad guys inside. Blount wiped his eyes and face. His glove came away bloody, with some kind of sticky matter mixed in.

The corpsman dropped his medical ruck beside Lane, who had taken a round in the mouth. Or maybe the cheek or chin. The high-velocity slug had torn up his face so badly it was hard to tell. Lane gurgled and coughed once. The cough sprayed blood. Then he seemed to struggle to inhale. Lane stared up at the ceiling, scraped the floor with his heels as if he needed to push himself up out of water to breathe.

“Damn it,” the corpsman said. “I gotta open his trachea.”

“How can I help, Doc?” Blount asked.

“Hold his head steady. Extend his neck just a little bit.”

Blount placed his knees on either side of Lane’s helmet. He put one hand under the wounded man’s neck and lifted as gently as he could.

“That’s good,” the corpsman said. “Keep him in that position.”

Kelley looked on as he spoke on his radio. “Anybody got eyes on that shooter?”

An answer came back amid electronic blips and pops: “Negative, sir.”

The corpsman dug a gauze pad and a curved plastic tube from his medical kit. He opened the blade of a folding knife. Tapped two fingers on Lane’s Adam’s apple. Lane clawed at the floor and tried to sit up. Blount held him down.

“Hold still, bud,” Blount said. “I know it feels like you’re suffocating. Doc’s gon’ fix you right up.” Funny thing, Blount thought, to cut a man’s throat to save him.

The corpsman placed the tip of his blade on Lane’s throat and made a vertical incision about an inch and a half long. A little line of blood appeared. He stroked with the knife again to deepen the cut,

and then pulled the edges of the incision farther apart. Dabbed away the blood with the gauze, then cut again.

The depth of the cut surprised Blount. He'd always thought a man's windpipe lay right under the skin. The corpsman sliced through yet another layer of tissue, and the light-colored rings of Lane's trachea became visible. Doc twisted his wrist and made a horizontal cut, this one much smaller. Air hissed through the opening. The corpsman shoved the tube into the hole, and the edges of the cut closed around the tube.

Lane's breath sounded strangely hollow as it flowed through the tube. He stopped struggling.

"You the man," Blount told Doc.

The corpsman ignored the compliment. "We gotta get him out of here," he said.

Automatic weapons fire sputtered from somewhere outside. The rip of an AK. Two pops on semiauto answered. That's what Fallujah usually sounded like: hajjis spraying and Marines aiming. The single shot that got Lane was an exception.

Outside, from behind doorways and courtyard walls where they'd taken cover, other members of the platoon sized up the situation and checked in with Kelley. Blount heard the calls over the officer's MBITR radio.

"We got multiple shooters in a building to the west," a squad leader reported. "They got a field of fire over anything that moves farther down the street."

Kelley tried to look out a window, but he couldn't have seen much from that vantage point. A ray of light through the cracked glass highlighted the name tag Velcroed to his vest. The tag bore his name and the Marine Corps emblem, along with other notations: *ILT*, *USMC*, *A POS*. Kelley put his hands on his thighs, sighed hard. Then he stood up and, with his thumb and forefinger, pressed the push-to-talk switch clipped to the front of his body armor. Spoke into his radio again.

“See if you can get up on the roofs and put some rounds on them. Hold them where they are until I can get an AT4 up here and shoot a rocket up their ass.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Blount liked the sound of that. Try to pin us down, will you? Better watch what you wish for.

“I’ll go up topside,” Blount said.

“Be careful,” Kelley said. “Make them keep their heads down.”

“Aye, sir.”

The stairwell led to parts of the house Blount could not see. He pointed his M16 up the steps, saw no threat. Charged upstairs. Nobody up there, either. The house remained clear. Just a bare mattress on a filthy floor, some scattered sheets and trash. Plastic soft drink bottles labeled in Arabic.

A ladder of rough-hewn wood led to a hatchway in the roof. Blount tested the ladder with his boot, hoped it would support his weight. The ladder sagged as he climbed, but the rungs held. Blount slammed the butt of his rifle against the wooden hatch.

The hatch slapped open. Dusty sunlight streamed in. Blount un-snapped his helmet and placed it over the muzzle of his rifle. Raised the helmet up through the hatchway. When the helmet drew no fire, he brought it back down, put it on, and climbed onto the roof. Moving in a low crouch, Blount took cover behind the low wall that rimmed the roof on all four sides.

From his elevated position, he had a view of the battle unfolding around him. A pillar of black smoke rose in the distance. Gunfire chattered and cracked both near and far. A pair of Cobra attack helicopters traversed the skyline like two lethal wasps. Several of Blount’s fellow Marines lay prone on nearby rooftops, weapons trained in the direction of the house where the insurgents were barricaded.

One of the Marines, Cooper, lay next to an M40 sniper rifle. He was alone atop the next building, separated from Blount by a gap of about seven feet. A narrow alleyway ran between the two houses.

Blount wondered what was wrong; Cooper should have had a spotter with him. Perhaps Cooper's spotter, Rossini, had been wounded.

Blount knew how to help, though. He'd attended Scout Sniper School the year before, along with Lieutenant Kelley. The lieutenant didn't have to go; sniping wasn't an officer's job. But officers up through the rank of captain could take the course to better understand the skills of the Marines they commanded.

"Cooper," Blount whispered. "Coming your way, man."

The sniper motioned for Blount to approach. Something looked wrong with Cooper's eyes. He kept blinking and rubbing at them. Blount took a running start, leaped across the alleyway. He landed on the balls of his feet, rifle in his left hand. Dived for the tiles of the roof, tried to make himself as flat as possible. Crawled next to Cooper.

"Lane's hit real bad," Blount said. "The lieutenant's trying to get weapons platoon up here to take care of those hajjis. What happened to you? And where's Rossini?"

Cooper's reddened eyes streamed with moisture.

"Fucker shot at us and the bullet hit the edge of the wall right here." Cooper pointed, his hand covered by a Nomex shooting glove. "Sprayed dust and shit all in my face. I should have been wearing my goggles, but I had just taken 'em off to look through the scope. The next round went right through Rossini's hand. He wasn't no more good to me, so I sent him inside to take cover."

"Stop rubbing your eyes, bud," Blount said. "Get downstairs to the corpsman and see if he's got some eyewash. Leave your stuff up here."

"Aye, aye, Staff Sergeant."

Blount watched Cooper low-crawl across the roof and descend through a hatch. With Cooper safely down, Blount pressed his talk switch to call Kelley on the radio.

"Hammer One Actual, Hammer One Bravo," Blount transmitted.

“Go ahead,” Kelley answered.

“I just sent Cooper off the roof. He’s got grit in his eyes. Sir, if you’re done talking to weapons platoon, we got a chance to use what we learned in school.”

“Be right up.”

Blount dug into Cooper’s pack and found an observation scope. He uncapped the lenses and set up the optic on tripod legs extended just a few inches. That way, he could stay low while glassing the target. From the pack, he also took Cooper’s DOPE book: Data of Previous Engagements. It recorded the scope settings and weather conditions for every shot Cooper had fired.

Through the mil-dot reticle of the observation scope, Blount saw the fuzzy outline of the house that shielded the insurgents. He rolled the adjustments for focus and magnification until all the edges came in sharp. Figuring by the dots in the reticle, Blount estimated the house at just under two hundred yards away.

The rear of the house gave onto an open area hemmed by a stone fence. A little urban goat pen or chicken yard, maybe. No animals in sight, though. No insurgents, either, at least for now. Blount took his eye off the scope for a moment, flipped open the DOPE book.

On the Zero Summary Chart, Blount found a row for the distance—two hundred—and a column for the temperature. The weather had been cool, typical for November in Iraq. But the sun shining on the rooftops this day probably raised the local temp to nearly seventy. He cross-referenced where the row and column met, and noted the elevation setting for the rifle scope.

Blount heard boot steps behind him. He turned to see Kelley leap over the alley and land on the rooftop. The lieutenant slid low next to Blount.

“If you want to shoot, sir, I’ll spot for you,” Blount said.

“That’ll work.” Kelley lifted Cooper’s rifle, examined the scope’s turrets.

“I checked his DOPE book,” Blount said. “Gimme two plus one.”

Kelley adjusted the elevation turret. He dialed in a two-hundred-yard setting, with one more click to fine-tune. “Set,” he said.

Blount peered through the observation scope again. A door opened at the back of the house. A man crouched within the doorway. Through the lens, Blount noticed a scrap of trash, maybe the wrapper from a cigarette pack, rolling in the breeze. The drifting cellophane suggested wind at about five miles per hour.

“See that guy?” Blount asked.

“Affirm.”

Kelley appeared ready to fire. He held his body straight in line with the weapon, heels down for the lowest possible profile.

But did he have a target? Blount could not see if the man in the doorway carried a weapon. What if he was just some poor, scared Iraqi?

The man eased out of the doorway. He held an AK. Propped the barrel on the stone fence. Gotcha, Blount thought.

“Spotter ready,” he whispered.

“Shooter ready.”

Blount felt the breeze on his face.

“Hold left lung,” he said. “Send it.”

Kelley fired.

Using 10X magnification, Blount saw dust fly from the insurgent’s shirt. The 7.62-millimeter bullet slammed into the man’s torso and exited through his back. His AK clattered to the ground. The target fell face down, and a pool of red spread beneath him.

“Good hit,” Blount said.

Kelley ejected his spent brass and chambered a fresh round. A rifle barrel appeared at the edge of the doorway where the last insurgent had come from. Whoever held that rifle remained cloaked in shadow. The weapon fired a blast, but all the rounds flew wild.

“Let’s put a round in that door,” Blount said. “Spotter ready.”

“Shooter ready.”

“Send it.”

The bullet smacked into the wood. Chips flew. The rifle barrel disappeared inside the house. Blount could not tell if the gunman was hit.

Kelley worked the bolt of the M40 again. In his role as the lieutenant’s spotter, Blount watched to make sure the next cartridge fed smoothly into the chamber. Blount actually preferred spotting to shooting: You glassed the target, observed the wind, checked the DOPE, fed the shooter with information. You got to think more. Talk that bullet right where it needed to go.

Blount placed his eye back to the observation scope. Nobody at the door, now punctured by a match-grade slug. But he saw movement behind a shattered upstairs window. Someone inside held a rifle, though not an AK. Blount zoomed in to 15X. The long-barreled weapon looked a little like the M40, but the forend and bipod were different. Maybe a Blaser R93, a German-made weapon. Good Lord, Blount thought, where did they get that? Must be the guy who shot Lane. All right, dude. Just come a little closer to that window.

“See that guy upstairs?” Blount asked.

Kelley shifted his rifle, peered through the scope.

“Ooooh, yeah. You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I think he hurt a Marine.”

“Then talk to me, Staff Sergeant.”

The gunman crouched beneath the window. No fool, he exposed little of himself. This would require more precision than a center-mass shot. Not a problem. Aim small, miss small, Blount’s instructors had taught him.

The wind picked up, swirled dust across the rooftops. The gunman slid the barrel farther over the windowsill, and his face became visible.

“Spotter ready. Hold left ear.”

Kelley exhaled and spoke as he dumped his lungs.

“Shooter ready.”

“Send it.”

The bullet struck the bridge of the insurgent’s nose. Red spray jetted from the back of his head. The force of the round threw him into the shadows, and he seemed to disappear altogether.

“Fuck you, you fucking fuck,” Kelley said.

Blount smiled. His fellow devil dogs had raised profanity to a high art. Any idiot could use “fuck” as a noun or a verb. But a Marine could make it a verb, an adjective, and a noun all in the same sentence. Blount, however, seldom cursed.

“Good shot, sir.”

Kelley chambered another round. Behind the two men, a hatch opened and two Marines climbed onto the roof. One carried something that looked like a large dark green tube, flared at one end.

“There’s the present I ordered for them,” Kelley said.

Kelley and Blount put another shot into the door, just to remind the insurgents that venturing outside was a really bad idea. The terrorists fired bursts into the street from their AKs. The fusillade hit nothing except dirt and concrete, but stopped Blount’s comrades from getting beyond that house.

The two Marines with the rocket launcher pointed and talked. One of them rose up on a knee and held the launcher across his shoulder. Their chatter fell into the cadence of a well-rehearsed drill.

“Prep rocket.”

The Marine holding the weapon smacked at a cocking lever.

“Rocket ready. Back-blast area secure.”

“Fire when ready.”

“Rocket!”

A white dart shot from the tube. Behind the Marine who’d just fired, dust spewed into the air and curled over the roof. The dart cut a straight line to the house where the insurgents hid.

Smoke and dust boiled from the doors and windows. Fire followed the smoke. The explosion created splashes of flame in almost liquid form; yellow and orange globules rolled within the dust. The

rocket didn't just burn the house; it blew away part of the supporting structure. One corner sank as if made of wet cardboard.

Blount's comrades cheered. Marine riflemen emerged from behind cover, dashed from walls and ledges, descended from roofs to press forward up the street. Not a single shot came from the insurgents' former hideout.

Kelley raised his gloved palm above his head. Blount high-fived him. In the lore of fighting men, the bond between an infantry platoon commander and his platoon sergeant bordered on the mythical. At that moment, Kelley became not just Blount's commander, but also his brother.

A helo came in to pick up Lane and take him to Bravo Surgical. Lane survived, but he needed six operations to rebuild his face. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi managed to slip away from the American forces in Fallujah. Didn't live much longer, though. Karma and laser-guided bombs caught up with him less than two years later.

Fallujah had been Blount's last op with Kelley. And now Kelley was dead, killed by an enemy he never had a chance to fight.

Blount hoped his mind would settle on some final thought, a concluding coda that would bring perspective. But all the memories and images remained a disordered jumble, like checking the index of a training manual and finding nothing in alphabetical order.

He leaned his head on the window and looked down at the ocean below. The blue-rippled Atlantic stretched wide and bright. Blount liked to imagine those waves holding their form across thousands of miles of water until they broke on the shores of home.