

BEYOND THE BLOOD CHIT



English
The United States has a long history of supporting democracy and human rights around the world. We have a strong commitment to the rule of law and the protection of individual freedoms. We will continue to work with our allies to promote these values and to support the people of the world who are striving for a better future.

Chinese
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Spanish
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Arabic
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Erv Barnes



When political violence engulfs America, Vietnam Veteran Kenny Brewster's obsession with freedom from duty and his compulsion to rescue others threaten his PTSD recovery and survival. The risk to his soul, however, is the war between the two. Beyond the Blood Chit explores recovery as a process of learning to celebrate the journey of life.

Beyond the Blood Chit

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BEYOND THE BLOOD CHIT

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ISBN 978-1-61434-483-4

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Published in the United States by Booklocker.com, Inc., Bangor, Maine.

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

ErvBarnes.com

2011

First Edition

Chapter One

Dawn, 17 May

Sunlight filtered through the jungle canopy as silence lay upon the land. A low, morning mist haunted dank earth, light and shadow dancing to the rhythm of treetop breezes. Through the shadows of his mind, Kenny Brewster ran alone and unarmed, pursued by angry Vietnamese faces, hearing only his own desperate breaths and uneven footfalls until the distant whop-whop-whop of a helicopter invaded his dream.

He ran through the shadows and the vegetation, feeling both brush against his face and arms. He ran from the pursuing shadows, the small ones with faces and the big one he could only feel. He ran for the helicopter much too far away.

Kenny snatched a look behind him at the faces that were no longer Vietnamese but American-looking kids, young men and women wearing expressions of surprised death. He felt his left foot snag on something hard and he fell, tumbling onto his back. All went silent. His eyes opened in search of reality.

Kenny's heart pounded in his chest, gulping blood from his veins, forcing it through his arteries, and throbbing in his ears. He felt the stillness of his abdomen and his tongue pressing hard against the roof of his mouth, and he commanded himself to breathe.

Twenty minutes. That's how much time he had to prevent the release of fight or flight hormones that would thrust the amygdala of his primitive brain into a wild ride of hyper vigilance, anxiety, and irrational judgment lasting three or four days. It was already too late to prevent a Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder reaction, but he might stop escalation into the wild ride his recovery group called the dinosaur dump. 'Breathe deep. Again.'

Soft light invaded the tiny window above the gray door of his little plastic shed at the edge of the hospital grounds. 'VA,' he reminded himself. 'Okay, it was just The Dream.' Kenny stretched his tired, old body and sat up. He heard the helicopter, closer now, and realized it was for him. Cold water on his face, a few toiletries, and he would be ready to report for duty.

Kenny Brewster was at war again—or yet—and a new mission called him. Any war is testament to the proposition that human life is expendable. This war was even more confusing than Vietnam, awarding relevance to the service of warriors too old to die young.

The Dream was back, only different now with the young American faces. His tired mind swam with memories and with blank spaces where memories should have been. He willed his conscious thoughts back to the present.

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Kenny buckled himself into the old Huey, like himself, called out of retirement for desperate duty. He settled into his seat, aware of familiar smells of hydraulic fluid and gun oil, riding the pitch and yaw of the climb away from the VA Hospital. Seeing the amoeba shape of the Northern Wisconsin lake beyond the open right door, he longed to be back there. Kenny heard the ringing in both ears and felt the aches and pains in his legs and back as he stretched uneasily in his lap belt.

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He rubbed his scruffy beard and thinning hair, adjusted his glasses, and gazed upon the wrinkles and brown age spots on his hands as he watched the helicopter's shadow swim along the green landscape below. 'When did I get so old?' He was used to asking himself questions almost audibly in his mind—and answering them. 'Yesterday,' he replied, thinking back to that conversation with Rick. Yesterday, everything changed. Today, yesterday still existed in his mind, and he held onto that like breath itself.

Yesterday, his friend and tactical partner, Rick Kowalski, told him about their last two-man mission together for the Wisconsin Army National Guard as LGs, or Last Generation Soldiers. Rick gave back what the prescribed anti-PTSD blackout drugs had stolen—his memories. The American faces in recent episodes of *The Dream* now made sense. Kenny sat sick in thoughts of what they had done in the name of duty, sick with apprehension for the next mission, sick and tired of fighting.

He looked back toward the lake, now just a dark smudge in the woods. 'Next time,' he promised himself. Next time he would stay home, stalk a few bass on the deep gravel bars, and maybe land an elusive walleye. He liked catching bass, but he loved eating walleye. Mostly, though, he missed the spirit of the few acres that had adopted him, the land he called Lonesome Pines. And, he longed for freedom from the shackles of duty and guilt that compelled him to serve and kill again.

He would see Rick today, the only best friend he ever had. They met at the Vietnam Memorial as both realized they had been in country in 1970 and had been at almost the same place in different units. Rick helped him through those dark times in 1984 after Bonnie kicked him out and his son, Kenny Junior,

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stopped talking to him. Rick later became a business partner with Vicky while she picked up the pieces and built a marriage with Kenny. He walked through grief with them when Amy, Kenny's sweet daughter with Bonnie, died in the sands of Desert Storm. He was there through Vicky's battle with, and surrender, to cancer. Rick was there through all their murky missions as LG volunteers for General Williams.

Kenny was on his way to report to the general today, his old friend and honorary nephew whom he had watched grow from a young boy, had taught history and psychology, and had coached in wrestling. Dick Williams was one bright spot of success in Kenny's life. He now commanded the Wisconsin National Guard and had created the LG paramilitary program that gave these tired old soldiers a way to help, a way of hoping to keep a few kids from dying young (or worse), and a way to repay the debt he and Rick and others like them felt for surviving Vietnam.

Kenny did not fully understand the economic and ethnic clashes spreading across America. He tried to avoid talk about ideological and political conflicts because it enraged him so, triggering PTSD flare-ups. He tried to avoid thoughts of conspiracy and treachery in the intelligence that drove their missions. He tried, but he failed.

Rick had chosen to work their last mission without the drugs, so he served as Kenny's memory. Like an old wound in his soul, Kenny's heart ached over what they had done, and he couldn't remember it at all. But, Rick could, and Kenny trusted that.

Memories are like dreams, but some dreams are nightmares. Kenny had asked himself yesterday, 'Should all nightmares be forgotten?' and had deliberately decided, 'no.'

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For the first time, he was working this mission without the safety net of the drug patch, and he was worried about what else he did not remember.

He became aware, then concerned, that they were heading south along US 141 rather than making a beeline toward headquarters. He studied the body language of the crew intent on the horizon ahead. Looking through the windscreen, he observed several smoke spires rising in the distance. Only then did he notice the large volume of traffic heading north. With a glance back at the smoke, he realized, 'Green Bay is burning.'

They proceeded just far enough to see that Lambeau Field was still there, and he felt relief settle upon the souls on board the helicopter. As they turned to the west, Kenny saw the military convoy heading up WI 29 away from Green Bay. He was acutely aware of the incongruity of the scene, yet his mind refused to consciously process the information. He had heard about troubles in Green Bay and other places around America since the previous election, but he was surprised it had become this bad.

'Why are they going away from Green Bay?' he wondered. They were pulling out. The Wisconsin Army National Guard was retreating. Immediately, he suspected their next mission would somehow be related.

Awareness had become his most important survival skill. Now he sat in a form of trance, perceiving everything around him as though he were watching himself in a movie. Rick's words about their last mission reverberated in his head while his recoil at hearing them churned in his belly. Even without memory, he knew—he felt—that what Rick said was true. Kenny understood that his little life approached a critical

moment, and he visualized himself alone in a canoe hurtling downstream toward Niagara Falls.

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They landed. Time had become strange to Kenny. That ride seemed so brief, yet almost an eternity, as dream and reality merged. He stepped gingerly from the chopper and signaled a wave of thanks to the crew. The chief gave him a thumbs-up, but the others just watched him go. He walked off the pad to a waiting utility vehicle.

The young driver greeted him, "Hey, LG, the general is waiting for you." Kenny smiled, almost, and sat down without response. Robins sang of spring, but the air whispered summer as they drove up the trail on the ski hill called Rib Mountain. Kenny became mindful of his breathing again, taking in the life and freedom of forest and meadow and exhaling dread. He hated that feeling, but he was in this thing now, he had made a commitment, and he was going over the falls.

Nestled in the beautiful woods on the highest point in Wisconsin was a plastic monster, a prefab structure serving as field headquarters for the Guard. It was out of place here, but Kenny knew the general preferred this setting to Madison or Fort McCoy. Kenny placed each foot on the gravel driveway with the deliberate movement of a fox or feral cat. Although he had ceased fussing over his appearance the day he buried Vicky, he straightened his camouflage hunting shirt and pants out of habit and tucked his boonie hat into a side leg pocket. He opened the door into a small lobby where a young lady sat in battle dress uniform. Well, she was young to Kenny.

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She looked up at him and smiled, "Good morning, Kenny." Her big brown eyes flashed a sincerity that shortened his breath. He thought she was pretty with shiny brown hair tied back, a round and slightly freckled face, well-defined and naturally pink lips, and a simple, healthy figure. He guessed thirty something and nearly as tall as he was, perhaps five seven.

'She knows me?' He looked at her nameplate: CWO 3 Lois J. Anderson.

"Good morning, Ms. Anderson."

She stood up and leaned over the desk, looking directly into his eyes, first one and then the other. Then she stared ever so briefly but intently at him. He thought he could feel her looking into his soul, and he almost liked it.

"I sent for you, LG. The general will see you in a few minutes."

Kenny backed away and sat down in a chair against a wall.

"So, how about brunch, Kenny?"

"Brunch?" He struggled to process her offer.

"Yeah, you know, substitutes for breakfast and lunch."

"Why would you want to have brunch with a scruffy old fogey like me?"

She looked down at some papers on her desk as though they had suddenly become important. "Brunch," she confirmed. "You're my favorite LG. Besides, it's my way of repaying you for saving my life."

'Saving her life?' Now, that was a memory Kenny dearly wished had not been stolen from him.

"Okay, brunch," he said, "after the meeting?"

"Immediately after," she nodded, turned her head, and pushed a button on the desk. "The general will see you now."

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Kenny stood as tall as he could, squared his shoulders, stepped to the door and snapped it open. General Williams was an imposing figure, six three and two forty, solid as the linebacker and All American wrestler he had been at West Point with a voice like approaching thunder. He moved around his desk with the agility of a cat, or *gato*, as he liked to say, and embraced Kenny in a bear hug.

"It's really good to see you, Kenny. I hear that you have recovered well from your last mission. Are you ready for another one?" He still held Kenny's shoulders and searched his face.

"Yes, sir."

"Sir? The door's closed, Uncle Kenny. Don't you think you could call me Dick? Just don't call me Dickie like you did when I was little."

"I'm not sure I remember you ever being little, Dick, and I never called you Dickie. That was Rick. How's your mom?"

General Williams walked over to a straight chair and sat down. Kenny sat in a chair near him and waited.

"Mom is doing well, as well as can be expected. She misses Dad terribly. We all do. But she is doing well, busy at church and at the scholarship committee at school. She would love to see you, Uncle Kenny. You are like a brother to her and Dad." He paused a moment and looked out the window at the landscape. When he looked back, he asked, "So, how is Rick doing? I saw him last night and, frankly, I'm worried."

"Rick is here, already?"

"He is. Rick came down last night and we had a chat. Is he as fit as you are?"

Kenny paused before answering, "I trust Rick with my life."

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"I know, I know, Kenny. Well, here it is. We have a mission for you, and it will demand everything you've got, both you and Rick. The survival of Green Bay through the summer may well depend on this mission."

'Green Bay...,' Kenny thought. He took a long look at his friend. Only now did he see the worry, the fear even, behind his eyes. "When do we start, sir?"

"You go into isolation today. I'll meet you at Line Camp for dinner." Kenny rose to go, but General Williams stopped him. "There's somebody I need you to meet before you go." He motioned toward another door.

Kenny followed the general into the private chamber, a library of sorts, where a familiar figure sat. Kenny's stomach lurched. He recalled the counsel of his spiritual teacher some years earlier. When Kenny told him about a kind of nausea experienced while visiting a famous tourist area out west, the teacher explained that the feeling was an alert to the presence of evil. That was the feeling in Kenny's gut now.

The familiar figure was a former Wisconsin governor. Kenny had heard that he was involved in one of those companies providing private protection on government contract, Samson Security. Kenny referred to such companies as *Manitowish*, meaning Bad Spirit. He couldn't tell if his gut reaction was to spiritual reality of evil in the room or if it was just political memory. His distrust and dislike for this man bordered upon hate, and Kenny detested that feeling, too. The figure rose to shake Kenny's hand, his fine expensive suit hanging on his almost shapeless body. As their palms connected, a wave of nausea crashed over Kenny.

"The governor has brought me some intelligence that requires immediate action." General Williams gave Kenny a look that told him to just listen. "You are that action."

The governor puffed up and started, "We've got solid intel that a large group of foreign nationals is coming through Canada to join the Unholy Alliance this summer."

"That's where you come in, LG," General Williams interrupted. Turning his attention to the governor, he said, "Governor, this is the man I told you about, LG Kenneth Brewster. He and his partner are being assigned this mission today."

"Good," was the governor's response. "That's good." He seemed quite pleased with himself although Kenny was sure that was a perpetual condition.

General Williams ushered Kenny out of the private chambers with an arm across his shoulders. At the office door, he leaned in and attempted to whisper, "I'll see you for dinner, Uncle."

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Nausea followed Kenny into the lobby but faded quickly as he noticed Ms. Anderson watching him. He paused while she put a few things away, locked her desk, logged out of her computer, and came around to meet him. He thought she was avoiding eye contact now. 'Strange.'

She allowed a small, sad smile and walked toward the door. As he held it for her, he caught a subtle, familiar fragrance that stirred something deep inside. 'What have I done?' Kenny asked himself. 'What have I done with all those

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pieces of my life lived but not remembered? Who is this woman to me?’

“Where are we going, Chief?” Kenny finally asked.

“Oh, how about a picnic?” She flashed a smile that allowed him to feel that some of what they shared must have been good.

“A picnic brunch? Sure. Why not?” Kenny answered. Then he thought, ‘Someplace private, I’ll bet. I guess I’ll find out soon enough what she’s up to.’

She unlocked the doors to a classic pale green Ford Bronco with a white metal top. Kenny ran his eyes over the machine like it was a work of art—which it was, in a way. It was absolutely original and as simple as the one Kenny bought in 1973.

“I know, Kenny, you had one very much like it when you were...,” She trailed off and looked straight ahead as they buckled in.

“Young,” Kenny finished for her, confirming with a little smile of understanding.

“This was my father’s, and he worked on it all the time. He never tried to improve it, just kept it original. Then he gave it to me,” she said with raised eyebrows and a shake of her head. “He didn’t leave it to me in a will, he just gave it to me one day. That was almost ten years ago.” She seemed to drift into a sad memory.

Kenny felt the discomfort of knowing, somehow, that he had heard this before, like he was living some kind of Groundhog Day, only....

“It’s okay, LG. It’s not your fault you don’t remember. It’s the patch—and the cocktail.”

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'Cocktail?' Kenny didn't know about the cocktail. He was sure she intended to say more but stopped herself.

They drove through the green Wisconsin countryside that looked all too normal for the troubles in the cities. But, looks were not deceiving Kenny today. There were signs of abnormality in unworked fields, in abandoned farms, and in the young people milling around the small towns. Soon, he realized they had reached the reservation. She turned onto a dirt road, then a two-track trail, and finally stopped in a turnout.

Ms. Anderson opened the tailgate. She set out a table and two lawn chairs while Kenny watched. Opening a wicker picnic basket, she produced a blue tablecloth and placed it with care, sweeping out the wrinkles. She laid out two settings with plates, silverware, coffee mugs, and stemmed glasses. She motioned for Kenny to sit. He sat.

She served cold sparkling water in the glasses, hot coffee in the mugs, and asparagus quiche on the plates. Before she sat down, she set out a fruit plate and two candles. She handed a lighter to Kenny, and he obliged, speechless.

They ate slowly and politely at first, attempting small talk about weather and clouds, the terrain, and fishing. Kenny began to enjoy waiting for her to say what was on her mind. Age offers the opportunity for patience, or at least an appreciation of it. He stared her straight in the eye, her right eye, much the way his Labrador Retriever used to do when she thought it was time for her treat.

Lois squeezed a broad, tight smile. "Okay, Kenny. This is it. We are worried about you and Rick."

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He stopped her right there with an outstretched hand. "Please tell me who we are—not the we you mean, the we sitting right here."

She dropped her head a bit. "I'm sorry, Kenny. I'm usually better at this, but right now something is very wrong. Okay, you are an LG and I am your liaison officer."

"Really?" Kenny raised his eyebrows, but she did not react.

"I am your connection to the Army National Guard while you are on missions, in recovery, etc. I manage your file."

"You're my handler," Kenny suggested.

"Okay, I'm your handler, and we are really worried about both of you."

"You're Rick's handler, too."

"No, that would be my friend, Sammi." Kenny felt a keen interest in the way she said friend.

"Ah, the other part of we."

"What? Oh, yeah. We, Sammi and I, are worried about you both.

"Well, Chief, how about...,"

"Ken!" She cut him off. "Sorry, Kenny, will you please call me Lois?"

"Sure, Lois. Maybe you could sort of lay it all out for me, because, in this jigsaw puzzle of my mind, I'm just not getting it."

"Kenny, Rick didn't come back from the last mission with you." Kenny felt his eyes widen and his breath quicken. He noticed Lois reading his body language before she hastily continued, "He came back, just not with you. He didn't come back for almost three weeks, and when he did, he refused to go to the VA. Sammi had to work with him for another week

before he checked in. Then he refused medication and left against medical advice."

"I know, Lois. We talked yesterday."

"You remember yesterday?" Lois sat wide-eyed, jaw slack.

"Yes, I do."

Her eyes welled up and her lips drew thinner and turned a paler pink. "What did he say? About the last mission, I mean?"

"Look, Chief, I'm skating on thin ice here, and I never did skate well." Kenny gave a nervous little laugh. "Rick spoke to me in confidence. I presume your friend has spoken to you in confidence. Are you telling me that she doesn't know? That Rick didn't tell her?"

"Rick told her, but she couldn't tell me the specifics because of confidentiality. If Rick told you, then I'm the only one left out, I guess."

"You guess?" Kenny paused for several moments, a skill of patience developed through years of teaching teenagers. If he waited long enough, they got nervous and actually risked sounding stupid by offering an answer.

"I don't know if General Williams knows," she said. "Sammi didn't tell him."

"Okay, let's see if I get this. There are two parts—no, three. One, do I know what Rick told Sammi? Two, did Rick tell General Williams? Three, would somebody please tell you so you can handle me?" He paused to think about what he just said.

"Well?" She interrupted his private conversation.

"Well, well. One, I think so. Two, I don't know, but I'll ask. And three, oh hell, I don't know, Lois. It's really not up to me at this point. What are you doing later tonight?"

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Lois looked at him, then down at her lap and into his eyes again. "Kenny, we all stay together at Line Camp until you and Rick are ready to leave, however long that takes."

"Really? That's interesting."

"Oh, yes, Kenny, it is most certainly interesting."

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Lois and Kenny packed the picnic and drove back to the dirt road where she turned right instead of left. She glanced toward Kenny. He noticed, but showed no sign of it. After some time, she turned left onto another small trail, following that for perhaps a mile. Then she just pulled into an opening in the trees, down a ravine, and stopped. She got out, put all the picnic items in a backpack, left the chairs and table in the Bronco, and headed off into the woods. Kenny followed.

He began to get a strange sensation, like he was living in The Notebook, only he was the one with memory gaps, and she wasn't reading to him. She was showing him. 'Okay,' he decided, 'she seems to think I'm going to remember something pretty soon. But the patch is a permanent amnesiac, if not complete. I hope she's right.'

They walked on through the woods for nearly an hour before they entered a clearing and approached a strange scene, only it did not feel strange at all to Kenny. There was a wigwam nestled in an aspen grove with a small sweat lodge off to its southwest. East of the sweat lodge and south of the wigwam was a large fire pit with a small, almost smokeless campfire. There sat Rick with another woman in camouflage uniform.

Lois stopped and watched Kenny. "Line Camp," she said. "You know Rick, and that is Sergeant Howell, Sammi, with him. You'll like her. Everybody likes Sammi." Lois paused and studied Kenny. "Ken, she's my best friend, and she's very fragile, especially now. Please?"

Kenny nodded slowly. "Okay." He added, "Why do you call it Line Camp?"

"You know how General Williams is about words. He comes up with terms for everything, and they usually have multiple meanings, you know, like Little Guerrillas for LGs, or his infamous *Lobo Gatos*. His official meaning for this Line Camp is 'line of embarkation,' but I really think this is his 'line in the sand'."

"I like it." Kenny affirmed. "I like them both. This is where we draw the line."

"Yes, we do, Ken."

Kenny walked into camp as though he were going into a familiar, old church. He knew what was behind the wigwam, precisely where the stream flowed beyond the little hill to the southeast, and where General Williams stood watching them at this moment. With no greeting, he sat on the west side of the fire directly facing Rick. Lois took the place on the south side facing Sammi.

Rick was a bigger man than Kenny, solid and hard looking with a short but full beard that refused to turn completely gray despite his age. Like Kenny, he wore commercial camouflage hunting clothes. He looked up now and made eye contact with Kenny. Kenny looked toward Sammi, noticing her reddened eyes, and back at Rick. Rick looked into the fire. Lois was already staring at the flames. Sammi sat fidgeting her long,

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lean frame in no defined way, her light blonde hair pulled behind a delicate, pale face.

Sammi spoke first, "Hi, Lo."

"Hi, Sammi, Rick," Lois answered.

Rick just nodded, eyes fixed on the fire.

Kenny looked over at Sammi again, "Hi Sammi." She tried to smile back.

Lois attempted conversation. "I wonder how the general will come in today, and when."

"He's already here," Kenny advised.

"He's been here awhile," Rick added. "I think he wanted to watch you two come in." The fire became very important to all of them.

Sammi asked, "Lo, should we get started on dinner, or...?"

"I don't know Sammi. I don't know. How about some tea, first?"

"No," Rick declared simply, "we'll smudge, first."

"Then drum a bit," Kenny added.

Sammi and Lois rose almost in unison and went into the wigwam. Each returned with two drums, about a foot across, a round one in the left hand and an octagon one in the right. The rims were made of unfinished wood and the skins of thick elk rawhide. The beaters were tanned leather bags packed with animal hair and tied to natural sticks. Lois gave Kenny the octagon drum with one large cougar print painted on the rawhide in rich, brown tones. Her round drum was a medium fawn color with some elk hair remaining in little patches. The octagon drum Sammi gave Rick bore two black wolf prints. Her round drum skin was almost pure white.

They carefully placed the drums on the dry ground outside the fire pit. Sammi reached into a pocket and offered

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Rick a bundle of sage folded with dry cedar greens, pieces of tobacco leaves, and strands of sweet grass tied with red cotton yarn. He picked up a glowing coal from the fire with a pair of green sticks, almost chopstick style, and placed it on a large river clam shell, then carefully set the smudge bundle on the coal. Lois offered a wing feather from a great horned owl to Rick, and he fanned the smoking bundle. When he passed the feather back to Lois, she stood up while Sammi took the shell with the smoking bundle in both hands and rose.

As the women moved behind Rick, both men stood. Lois fanned the smoke toward Rick as Sammi moved the bundle from his feet to his head and back. He turned around and they repeated, pausing while Rick drew some smoke up and around his head with his hands. He nodded, and the women repeated the procedure with Kenny. When they were finished, the process was reversed, Kenny holding the smudge and Rick fanning. Rick replaced the spent coal in the fire and drew a few fresh ones to the side of the fire pit. He placed the smudge bundle on those coals and all four returned to their places.

Kenny looked over at Rick and smiled with a slight nod. "Rick, Lois wants to know what I know about what you and Sammi know and if Dick knows."

"I know," Rick said.

Lois pivoted her head toward Kenny, who pretended to ignore her, then over to Rick, who said, "Lois, I promise it will soon become clearer."

She seemed to relax a bit and gave Kenny a softer look. Sammi fidgeted until Kenny started drumming. Rick, Lois, and Sammi all picked up their drums and beaters. Kenny developed a steady, slow rhythm: Bum, bum, bum, bum. Rick picked up the beat, keeping it soft. Lois and Sammi joined in

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ever so softly. They continued for some time—until time no longer mattered. Kenny began a second beat between the beats of basic rhythm. Soon, Lois interposed her own. It seemed to take a long time before Sammi added her drum voice. Rick kept the basic rhythm as all four held the beats soft.

Distinctions between individual beats and drums melted away. Other drum voices seemed to join the four, overtones or something else. They began to build in volume, intensity, and variety, but no one was leading. They improvised without violating each other. Kenny perspired, Rick breathed in rhythm, Lois danced from the hips up, and Sammi drained tears and fears down her cheeks. They faded, softened, and slowed. Kenny gave a series of seven sets of four beats: BUM, bum, bum, bum. All stopped.

Chapter Two

High Sun, 17 May

Silence seemed to echo from the surrounding forest and reverberate inside Kenny's heart. He felt the peace of acceptance, not that all things were as they should be or he wished them to be, but that it was okay the way things were. It didn't really make sense to him, but he was grateful for the feeling.

The sun had climbed to its zenith and begun descending. Their four shadows were short, just slightly east of true north. In a clearing among the aspen, they sat absorbing the heat, air as still as their drums. Even insects seemed to be in *siesta*. Like lovers in an afterglow, they were slow to awaken an awareness of reality beyond their own minds.

Rick gazed off to the southwest at the puffy white clouds forming, then at Kenny. "Well, Windy, it looks like you might have brought some storms with you again." The women looked at Rick and then at the clouds, but said nothing.

Kenny simply nodded, gradually becoming aware that he was quite warm. "I think I'll cool off in the stream." Lois and Sammi got up to put the drums away while Rick and Kenny walked to the little creek, took off their boots and shirts, and splashed their faces, heads, and necks. Rick sat on the near bank while Kenny crossed the stream. The women joined them but kept their shirts on, Lois beside Kenny and Sammi by Rick. The four sat there dangling their feet ankle deep in the cool water in the shade of a cottonwood tree just soaking in the day.

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Rick exchanged looks with Sammi and focused on Lois as he spoke. "I remember our last mission. I removed my patch before I left the hospital. That's why I didn't need the cocktail here. So I remember everything from before we arrived at Line Camp. I know what happened and I remember. Knowing and remembering is better than knowing and not remembering. Not remembering does not equal not knowing, and that is where we miscalculated."

Kenny couldn't discern if what he saw in Sammi was fear, anger, sadness, or all three. Lois was stone-faced. 'Denial.'

Kenny responded, "It seems a noble attempt to prevent the tragic casualties of combat post traumatic stress by inducing amnesia, but something isn't working. I see evidence of PTSD all around whether people are using the patch or not. Maybe they're just reading signs of the times. No, we know something inside, we just don't know how or why we know it."

"That's it, Kenny," Rick said. "We know—you and I anyway—we know enough about the human mind to realize that we don't know enough about the mind to predict the emotional consequences of conscious sedation. I mean, we were there, for chrise sake. We just don't have conscious memory. We still have some kind of emotional memory. We just can't process it consciously. What the hell good is that?" Rick rubbed the Cape buffalo tattoo on his right forearm.

Lois leaned against Kenny just a touch and asked, her voice small and trembling with innocence, "What are you going to do?"

"We're going to do our duty, Lo," Kenny answered, "but no more patches, and no damned cocktail, whatever that is. They don't work anyway. When Rick told me his memory of our last mission, I was not surprised. I was sick to my stomach,

but not surprised. It was like, yeah, I guess I knew that, at some level, anyway."

He hesitated while considering the recent changes in The Dream, the American faces. "I just wasn't letting it penetrate my conscious mind. It's another form of denial—denial by medication."

Lois looked right at Kenny, brow furrowed up and lips curled down. "What about the last mission, Kenny?"

"They were kids, Lo," Kenny responded as a reflex. "We killed kids, some no older than my daughter, Amy, when she died in Desert Storm. We thought we could help keep some of our kids from getting hurt by doing part of the job for them, and we end up killing kids, ourselves."

Kenny waded in his own silence, remembering what had just flooded out of him, wondering why he had opened up like that and why he had called Ms. Anderson, Lo, although it felt so natural. Now he noticed the silence of the others. Sammi leaned on Rick's right arm and Lois waited for the sky to reveal its secrets. "Ms. Anderson?" Kenny asked, "how about a little walk?"

"Sure, Kenny," Lois answered as she came back to Earth. She lifted her feet out of the stream and dried them off with her hands. Kenny did the same. They waited a few minutes without saying anything while they air dried, then put on their socks and boots.

Kenny slipped his shirt on and headed upstream with Lois beside him. They walked slowly away from Sammi and Rick, still not talking, pretending to notice the terrain until they were out of sight of Line Camp. Kenny paused, surveying the forest as Lois watched him. He turned toward her with a boyish little grin in his eyes and directed his gaze uphill a few yards toward

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a patch of brambles under the open scrub oaks. Lois followed his eyes with hers and searched. There, under the blackberry bush, lay a fawn as still as stone. Instinctively, they both panned the area for the doe, but she was not in sight. They looked at each other as though they both knew, or felt, that things were going to be okay.

They walked on in silence until they came to a spring area beside the stream and found another large cottonwood tree for shade. Kenny sat down slowly, his legs flexed out in front and his back against the tree. Lois sat cross-legged close by, facing him. This time she waited for him to answer her unspoken questions.

“You know my daughter, Amy, was killed in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, during Desert Storm,” he began. Lois waited. “It wasn’t news at that time because she was not officially in country at all. I think that whole thing killed my wife. She was Amy’s stepmom, but she loved her like a daughter. I know the cancer took Vicky, but I believe her grief made it impossible for her to fight the cancer, even from the beginning.

“Then, the second time around, our ears and hearts were full of Lori Piestewa and Jessica Lynch.” He paused for a few moments while Lois waited. “One evening I was watching Tom Brokaw when he showed a picture of a Marine in dress blues, and I said, ‘I know him.’ I still saw him as the high school freshman I had taught years before and now he was dead in Iraq. I was so tired of kids getting killed and hurt. We cried for Lori and her children. We cried for Jessica even after she got home, again. Or maybe I just cried for Amy, or for myself. Rick cried with me, Lo. Always there was Rick, and now it seems there is only Rick.”

He paused and came back to this warm beautiful day, noticing Lois wiping her eyes and nose. She gave him a look of compassionate understanding and began to reach out to him with her hands but stopped herself. She sat back, placing her hands at rest in front of her. "I knew the facts, Kenny, but I never heard you say it before."

Kenny gave a nod. "So Lois, what's your story? I suppose you've told me before, but this time I might remember."

"My story? Oh, wow. Can I get back to you on that?"

"When?" Kenny said.

"Yeah, when? Well, I joined the National Guard to pay for college, and I...," She looked at Kenny and stopped. "Oh, that's not what you mean, is it?" Kenny gave the slightest little shake of his head.

"I don't know what to say, Kenny. I mean, I'm not supposed to say much. That's my job, to know all about you but keep myself outside of it."

"How's that going, Lo?"

She gave a helpless little laugh. "Not so good."

"How's it going with Sammi? Are you staying outside of her problems too?"

Lois gave him a fried ice cream look, only inside out—sort of cold on the outside but warm on the inside. "Sammi and I have been friends for so long, much like you and Rick. I feel everything she's feeling, but she couldn't tell me everything she was thinking. It hasn't been much fun, Ken."

'She called me Ken, again. Interesting.' Then he asked, "Lo, is that my fault?"

"Ah, hmmm. Maybe I've been blaming you, Kenny. I'm sorry. No, it's not your fault. 'That is the way things are.' That's your quote."

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“Not really. That’s Chief Dan George’s quote, or actually, Old Lodge Skins in Little Big Man.”

“But, it’s yours too. You told me about that one walking vision quest you did.”

“Oh, I did? I must trust you, Chief.”

“Well, I hope so, because, here goes.” She inhaled and exhaled, looking into Kenny’s eyes. “How about Rick? Is he okay? Are you okay? Without the patch, I mean?”

“We’re not okay with the patch, Lo. Without it, I don’t know, but with it I know that we are not okay.” He sat, inspecting his thoughts. “Hey, look, one of the reasons—the big reason I think—that we do this, I mean Rick and I, is because we don’t have much to lose. I mean, we’re not kids. We don’t have our whole lives ahead of us. Realistically, how much life do we have to lose? One year? Five? Ten, maybe, in some old farts’ home? We’re just a couple of tired old men. Neither of us leaves anyone to grieve....”

Lois stopped him with another ice cream look, only this one wasn’t so warm on the inside. “First, Kenneth Luke Brewster, LG, you are not going to leave. Second, there are people right here, right now, who grieve the very thought of you leaving.”

It sounded like a long speech that ran out of wind and just ended abruptly. Kenny looked at her as though he had never really seen her before. ‘Why?’ he asked himself.

“Because, you are one of the most interesting...,”

“I’m interesting?” he interrupted.

“And exasperating, and gentle, and real—yeah, real—human beings I have ever met. Besides, you saved my life, remember?”

"No, Lois, I really do not remember, but maybe that's a story for another time. It looks like Rick was right, again." Kenny nodded his head toward the billowing thunderclouds forming in the southwest.

"Is that why he calls you Windy?"

"Sure, that's it."

Lois looked at him with a grin of amusement mixed with frustration and shook her head several times. Kenny rose carefully, stretching the kinks out, and they headed back downstream.

Early Afternoon, 17 May

As they approached camp, Kenny noticed Rick dragging some coals from the fire. He picked them up on a piece of bark and carried them into the wigwam. The thunderclouds had formed a dark towering thunderhead with a spreading anvil top, and it was headed right for them. Kenny walked around the wigwam to the east side and stooped to enter through the open door.

When Lois came in, Rick was arranging coals and Sammi stacking a few small oak pieces near the fire pit. Lois looked around and asked, "Where's General Williams? He's going to get soaked."

Rick looked up at Kenny and then at Lois, "He left soon after you got here."

Lois started to form some word with her mouth, but it didn't come out. She raised her eyebrows, blinked slowly, and nodded her head as if to say, 'oh, yeah.'

Sammi looked up and smiled at her, "Hi, Lo."

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Lois and Kenny both took a look at Sammi and then at each other. Kenny observed to himself, 'Well, her mood sure has improved.' Without turning his head, he shifted his eyes from Sammi back to Lois. 'Well, so has hers,' he answered himself.

Even inside the wigwam they could see that it had gotten much darker. Rick ducked outside and looked around. Kenny followed, then the women. There was a hush over the forest again only very different from the *siesta*. It was like the pause between breaths, after the exhale, before the inhale. Not a bird was on the wing.

The wind came cold and straight, and the sky was almost as dark as night. Sammi reached for Lois and pulled her back inside the wigwam. Rick simply looked at Kenny and shook his head. Kenny stood erect, looking off toward the west, tilted his head back, and took a large deliberate breath. As he exhaled audibly, he lowered his arms and head, then he knelt to touch the Earth.

Rick stepped into the wigwam, and Kenny soon followed. The wind velocity rose as the first rain fell followed by the hail. Sammi sat near the little fire next to Lois, still clinging to her arm. Rick sat next to Sammi, but Kenny kept his eyes on the weather as he knelt by the door. The ground was already nearly covered with hailstones as large as hen's eggs. Leaves and small branches littered the ground. As the hail stopped, it began to rain in earnest, like it was July. Kenny backed away from the door and sat next to Lois where they could all see outside.

Curtains of rain blew across camp, but the wind came from the west and their door was in the east. Rick had almost closed the smoke hole on top, so they stayed dry. Kenny looked

around at the others. Lois was stoic as she patted Sammi's hand that gripped her arm. Sammi leaned in wide-eyed terror onto Lois's shoulder, but she did not utter a sound. Rick carefully tended the fire with small, dry pieces of oak. Still, it rained.

Lightning flashes brightened their whole camp, even inside the wigwam. Thunder clapped and rolled, sometimes directly overhead. Kenny counted to himself the time between flashes and thunder, almost twenty seconds. That meant the lightning was four miles away, but directly overhead, so tall was this thunderhead.

The rain diminished and the thunder rolled more distant in the east. It even seemed to be getting lighter. Rick looked directly at Kenny and said nothing. 'Tornado?' Kenny asked himself, and gave a raised eyebrow look to Rick. Lois watched their every movement, but Sammi was oblivious to everything except Lois's arm.

Distant thunder rolled in the west. 'Another cell is coming,' Kenny advised himself. Rick already knew, and nobody else needed to.

Rick took a look at Sammi, Kenny, and then Lois. "Lois, did Windy ever tell you about his history with storms on vision quests?"

"What?" She awakened to a reality with human voices again. "Oh, uh," she looked directly at Kenny, "no, he has not."

Kenny scooted around the fire pit to face them more directly, his back to the door. "The first time I did a vision quest on my own land, it rained. The second night I had a significant insight, a profound question which I felt compelled to answer, 'Do you love enough?' When I answered, 'I don't know,' it felt unacceptable, and I heard the question again in

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my mind. Only when I finally answered, 'Yes,' did the question no longer persist. Then I heard the rumble in the west. This was evening twilight and it rained all night. Cell after cell came by until my little valley was flowing with water several feet deep, but I was on a hill many feet above the water level. People still refer to it as a storm of the century because it washed out several roads, including mine. But I just sat there on the hill and watched it all night. It was awesome!"

"Weren't you afraid?" Sammi asked with a child's innocence.

"No, not really," Kenny answered. "I was much more afraid of the question, or my answer, actually, than I was of those storms. I don't think anybody got hurt in that storm at all. It just rained."

"Good," Sammi said.

"So, Kenny," Lois began, "can you elaborate on your answer to that question?"

"I don't really know, Lo." He paused. "I suppose my life is the elaboration, I mean the way I try to live every day." He stopped.

"Yeah, I think so, too," Lois said.

The thunder grew louder again and more rain fell, only without the wind and hail. Sammi let go of Lois's arm who gave it a little shake as if to check blood flow and nerve function.

The wigwam was fairly traditional, although more of a winter model, and well suited to withstand storms. Neither Kenny nor Rick was Native American, but they shared a love of living close to this land. The traditions and technologies of people indigenous to the area had evolved as adaptations to

the regional climate and geography. It was also what they had learned in their shared wilderness survival school experiences.

Stout saplings had been staked into the ground in a circle about sixteen feet across. These saplings had been bent over in arcs and tied together forming a skeleton of a dome leaving a center opening on top. More sticks had been tied to these saplings, providing both strength and an anchor for still smaller sticks woven into place. Finer forest debris had been added and the entire structure shingled with bark slabs. They had even taken time to build an inner wall and insulate the space between the two. The east doorway and the center hole had mats woven of cattails and grass bundles tied onto frames with a kind of hinge made of cordage. It was a comfortable place, large enough to sleep all four on separate beds made of grass mats over leaf litter and still have some room to work on projects, cook, or just sit around and talk.

The air was fresher now, although not cold, as the second storm passed quickly. The ground was still covered with hail, a gift of nature that they accepted. Each grabbed a basket, some of woven vines and some bark, and went outside to pick up hail. Taking it into the cache, the underground pit like a root cellar out back, they deposited the hail into earthen crocks around the tiny cellar. This would save them work hauling water to keep their produce cool and fresh.

Midafternoon, 17 May

Sammi brought out a basket of romaine lettuce, celery, tomatoes, and green peppers. Rick retrieved two wooden cutting boards and a block of knives from the wigwam. Lois set a large wooden bowl on the ground along with a wooden

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condiment box. Kenny returned from the stream with a big bladder canteen full of filtered water. The four of them sat down, washing and cutting their produce for supper.

"Kenny," Lois hesitated. "I've never really heard how you and Rick met. You've both been kind of vague. Was it actually in Vietnam? I know your tours overlapped in time and place."

Sammi stiffened a bit as though she felt she had done something wrong. Kenny looked at Rick who gave a shrug as if to say it was okay with him.

Kenny shifted around in his position sitting on the ground. "We met at The Wall."

Lois continued to cut celery into the large bowl, focusing on her work. After a couple of minutes, she asked, "You wouldn't care to elaborate a bit more, would you Windy?"

Kenny felt a little right-sided smirk and glanced at Rick, who showed the slightest sign of amusement in his eyes. "It was 1984."

Lois stopped working, as if contemplating the significance of that elaboration, and raised an eyebrow with a kind of reverse nod, lifting her head in a way that told Kenny she had made a connection. "You went to the Vietnam Memorial during the time of your divorce."

Kenny gave Rick a look of smug understanding and said, "That's how she got this job, I'll bet. Brilliant powers of deduction. Need I say more?"

"Please," Lois said.

"Okay, Lo. It was right after Bonnie kicked me out of the house. K.J. was about fifteen and Amy twelve. I was angry and scared and I just woke up one morning that summer with a terrible hangover, loaded up my Goldwing, and ran away from home. I tried to run away from myself but that didn't work. I

headed east and rode all day and night. The heat and humidity both approached a hundred during the day, and the night was clammy wet. I really didn't know, I mean at a conscious level—well, I wasn't all that conscious anyway—I didn't plan where I was going. I remember stopping in Bethesda to drink a large Gatorade. I was so dehydrated, I figure I drank a couple gallons on that trip and peed a pint.

“Anyway, I decided to head for downtown D.C. It seemed like I just followed some kind of flow until I saw the top of the Washington Monument, so I went there. By this time I was thinking about The Wall, so I picked up information and located parking nearby.

“As I walked toward it, I remember thinking two things. First, I thought, ‘What happens if I don't feel anything?’ The second thing I thought was, ‘I probably smell about like most of these guys did when they died.’

“It just happened, I suppose, that I walked up on the short end of The Wall. I don't know, maybe they planned it that way, but anyway, the first name I saw was Brewer, and it triggered me to ask, ‘Where should my name be?’ I wandered around a bit, but I wanted to know where I belonged, so I asked a ranger, and he gave me the directory, or whatever, that showed the panels for my tour of duty. I found the names of those killed while I was in country. I only knew a few personally.

“Then I sat down. I just found a place in the grass back away from The Wall and sat. I suppose I was noticeable sitting there in corduroy jeans, cowboy boots, and long sleeve shirt on such a hot day, but I was glad to be wearing my dark riding glasses because the tears started flowing. Not a lot, but....

“I sat there awhile just watching people walk by, some looking over at me and others looking like me. I have never

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been any other place, not church, cemetery, not even Pearl Harbor, where people were more reverent. I watched young service men and women in beautiful summer dress uniforms pass by. At some time in there I remembered a line from The Green Berets where John Wayne holds up a weapon and says something like, 'It's a funny thing, a man carries one of these into combat and, by the grace of God, comes out in one piece, he carries a strange sense of guilt with him the rest of his life.' Then, I had my first real spiritual experience—at least, that I recall.

"I heard a voice, not outside, but inside my head, or heart maybe. It said, 'It's okay.' I sort of thought, 'What?' The voice answered, 'It's okay your name is not here.' I looked around to see, I don't know, if anybody else heard it, or if I was crazy or something. I sat there quietly and very relaxed now for some time, only it didn't seem to take any time.

"Then I heard the voice again, 'It's okay we died.' I wanted to scream, 'How can that be okay?' I didn't want to scream anymore. I think I knew it was okay, only I didn't know how I knew it. I still don't know how I accepted that, but I did.

"The voice spoke one more time. I had been angry, enraged even, at Nixon and Kissinger, and especially at Congress, for more than a decade already, only I hadn't always known it. Now the voice told me, 'It's okay it happened.' I'm still working on accepting that one. I know it's true, but I don't want to believe it yet."

Kenny stopped talking and looked around as though he had just gotten back from somewhere far away. Rick was watching Sammi season the salad with pepper and herbs. Lois was sprinkling nuts and raisins on top. She looked up with slow movement of her head. Kenny saw something in her eyes

that he had never noticed before. He couldn't define it exactly, but he knew it was good.

"Was Rick there?" Lois asked.

"Oh, yeah. Rick turned around and looked at me. He had been looking at the names on the same panels from 1970, so I guessed we might have been there the same time. Something in his look invited me to get up. Besides, I was feeling lighter and cleaner now, so I just stepped forward and we both extended our hands. Somehow, it was like we were old friends.

"We found out we had been in different units but, not only in country much of the same time, we were in the same place part of that time but never met. We both participated in the Cambodian Invasion—excuse me, Incursion. Rick got wounded and I only got sick, in the head. *Dingky dow*. That's what the Vietnamese called us, *Dingky dow hoi ki*, or Sick Head Flower Flag, their way of saying crazy Americans.

"I suppose this is an understatement, but there is a bond of trust that goes way beyond camaraderie among people who have shared such experiences. I don't think it's just trust in someone protecting your life. I think it's a kind of trust in someone understanding how you feel and maybe why you are the way you are, especially the way you don't want to be.

"And that's all I have to say about that," Kenny said in his best Forrest Gump impression.

"Thank you, Kenny," Lois answered.

Chapter Three

Late Afternoon, 17 May

General Williams approached camp from behind the sweat lodge, attempting to sneak up without appearing to be stalking. Sammi heard a twig snap and turned her head to see him slowly moving among the trees. She looked at Rick who returned a direct glance that told her he already knew. Lois picked up on their interaction and observed the general walking directly toward them in his normal gait.

Kenny said, "He never quite gets that stalking is more about the mind than the feet."

"*Lobo Gatos*," The big man called, or rather commanded. Sammi stiffened significantly and Lois focused on her boss.

Rick greeted him, "Hey, Dick."

"Welcome," Kenny said, "I'm glad you're here. I'm getting hungry and running out of things to say."

"Shall we get ready for dinner?" Lois asked no one in particular.

"On your command, Chief," General Williams responded.

Lois and Sammi set the bowl of salad in the wigwam and proceeded to their latrine area out back. Kenny and Rick each found a tree, and the general walked to the stream to wash his face and hands. The ladies went directly from their latrine to the creek a little downstream from the general.

"Well, ladies," he began, "what is your assessment?"

Lois answered, "Sir, I'm not sure just what is going on, but I feel better than I did this morning."

"You do?" Sammi asked.

"Well, sure. This morning I had no idea what was wrong or who knew what."

"Oh, yeah," Sammi said. "Sorry, Lo."

"No, no, Sammi. You did what you had to do. You did the right thing, keeping the confidence." Lois said.

"Yes you did," General Williams affirmed. "You both did. Very professional. Nice job."

"Thank you, sir," Sammi said. Lois responded only with a frail smile.

As the three of them approached the fire pit, Rick and Kenny just sort of appeared with five personal size wooden bowls and forks.

"I suppose you both heard what we were talking about," Lois commented, looking first at Rick, then Kenny.

"Didn't need to," Kenny answered, "but, yes."

Early Evening, 17 May

The sun had lost much of its intensity, but the air remained warm and humid. As the shadows lengthened, a promise of a pleasant evening emerged. Kenny breathed it in slowly and deliberately and exhaled with intent.

Rick and Kenny brought small dry wood and coals from inside the wigwam while General Williams carried large armloads of oak chunks from the stack in the lean-to behind the sweat lodge. Together, they prepared for a nice big fire, but Rick kept it small for now. The women set the salad bowl and condiments on the ground and they each served themselves.

"It is beautiful out here," General Williams observed.

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Sammi looked around as though this was something she had forgotten.

"Yes, it is," said Lois.

A pod of Blackhawk helicopters flew by to the southeast about then, and nobody said anything for several minutes.

"Green Bay is in turmoil right now," General Williams said, "as I expect you all know one way or another. I presume we are secure." He looked at Rick and Kenny. They both nodded. "The conflict between—well, among—the factions has spun out of control. It was the governor's assessment..." He paused as Kenny snapped a look at the general. "No, not him. The current governor's assessment is that citizens of Green Bay would be safer for now if we pulled the troops out because they were attracting all sorts of attacks, from all sides it seemed, and innocent people were being caught in the middle. There still are innocent people there." General Williams trailed off in uncharacteristic fashion. "The kinds of things we saw last summer in smaller cities around America has now found Wisconsin."

"Why Green Bay, Dick?" Kenny asked, "Why not Milwaukee or Madison?"

"That second question I do not ask," General Williams answered. "Why Green Bay I do ask, but I have no satisfactory answer, only so-called intelligence assessments." He stopped there and looked around the terrain outside their little circle. "But, it is what it is, and we are out for now. Officially, the blame is placed on this loose alliance among militant ethnic and ideological groups opposed to the Fight for Right people. I hate these names. They are so polarizing and inaccurate."

"I noticed you avoided that term the ex-governor used, Dick," Kenny said.

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Lois snapped a look at Kenny, and Sammi sat wide eyed and open mouthed.

"I'll explain it all after dinner, Chief Anderson," the general said. "Right now I want to know how the four of you are doing. Are we ready for this mission?"

Kenny glanced at Lois who was watching Sammi. He turned to see Sammi fidgeting and contorting. Kenny didn't know if she were going to speak or scream.

Rick spoke, "Yes, sir."

Sammi shook her head and looked at Lois in fear.

"What is it, Sergeant Howell?" General Williams asked.

"Go ahead," Rick said quietly.

Kenny watched the general.

Sammi started, "Well...Rick...I mean, something is wrong.

Everyone waited.

Sammi went on, "Rick is different. He doesn't laugh anymore—ever, I think. He's so sad and depressed. I just wish..."

Lois reached over and placed a hand on Sammi's knee. Rick tended the fire. Kenny breathed deliberately.

General Williams waited patiently before asking, "What do you wish, Sammi?"

Sammi softened to hear her general call her by her first name. Lois nodded, and Sammi blurted, "I wish they would take their medicine."

Kenny nodded gently. Lois released a combined sigh and shrug. Rick tended the fire. General Williams said, "I do, too, but it's not my call. Is that all that's bothering you Sammi? Lois?"

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"No, sir," Lois answered. "Green Bay is bothering us. The climate is bothering us. This election is bothering us." She paused and everyone waited for more.

In a child-like voice, Sammi added, "Turning forty is bothering us," then looked around in surprise as if to see who said that. Rick looked up at her. Kenny looked at Sammi and Rick and then met eyes with Lois.

"Hell, it's not so bad," General Williams offered as a tension release. "I can say from personal experience that there is life after forty. Good life, ladies."

Kenny flashed an attempted smile at Sammi, "There's life after sixty, Sammi," he said with a limping lilt in his voice.

Sammi looked at Rick, sighed, and waited. Rick finally responded. "It is okay, Sammi. One foot in front of the other, one day at a time. Tomorrow does not exist and may never exist for all we know. But tonight is here and it is beautiful." He paused before continuing. "Yesterday exists only in memories and today will cease to exist if we can't remember it. That's all. I don't want to lose any more todays because of those damned drugs and their amnesia. I want to remember today, here, with you, with all of you."

Sammi nodded tearfully, "I know, Rick, but you're so different now after that last mission without the patch. What? How...?"

"I was different before that mission, Sammi. You just didn't notice. I was hiding it, I suppose. But, I can do this mission. I need to do this mission. I need to be relevant, Sammi."

Sammi appeared ready to speak but bit her lip and nodded affirmation. Lois patted Sammi's knee. Kenny took a deep breath. Rick tended the fire. General Williams spoke softly, as

softly as his voice allowed, "I love you people." Immediately, he gathered up his general bearing and commanded, "Let's get ready for the briefing."

Full Dark, 17 May

The briefing was a new experience for Kenny's conscious mind. In the past, he had already been on the patch at the VA before reporting for isolation. He sat in disbelief as Lois and Sammi returned from the wigwam with hand-held computers. They sat on either side of General Williams, Lois on his right and Sammi on his left. The blue-green light from their computer screens gave them each a ghostly glow. Rick looked at Kenny and shook his head.

"Okay, Sergeant Howell," the general said.

Sammi began, "Yes, sir. Our most recent intelligence assessment is that sizeable groups including foreign nationals will be converging on Northern Wisconsin soon, perhaps already. These are reported to be professional cadres prepared to recruit and train autonomous cells in the Green Bay area to disrupt the Fight for Right campaign of the National Freedom Party. They are expected to assemble in significant numbers, perhaps a few hundred, in a remote area of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest where they will prepare for their assignments. This will be our only opportunity to interdict them as a group and disrupt their plans.

"They are expected to enter through Marquette and Escanaba, Michigan, and Duluth-Superior. The most convenient place to converge would be north of us, near the Wisconsin-Michigan border. The most opportune time to travel would be the few nights before and after the new moon when

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the roads are dark late for several hours. It is possible that they will move during this moon, but our assessment is that next month may help them to build momentum and affect the presidential election. However, we must be prepared for the contingency that the assembly has already begun.

“If our intelligence is sound, this is a dangerous group of professionals with significant capacity to kill using little or no visible weaponry. Conventional tactics are far too slow and cumbersome to find them, much less inflict any real damage because of their capacity to flee, blend in, live off the land and regroup at secondary or tertiary rendezvous points. That is why General Williams has chosen to use his favorite *Lobo Gatos*.”

“Thank you, Sammi,” General Williams said, “Chief Anderson?”

“Thank you, General Williams. Sammi gave you the best intelligence we have, so now I’m going to rough out the plan for you to develop. Our mission is to kill them, as many of them as possible, as quickly as possible. If this assessment is close to accurate, not only could Green Bay be in danger of collapsing completely this summer, but the presidential election could be usurped. It will depend entirely upon the two of you.

“First, you must find them without being detected. Then you must determine the location for the greatest assembly, tag it effectively, and get away undetected before the ordinance arrives. We will be using Rolling Thunder so that civilians will be less likely to recognize the explosions and so that the bodies will remain intact. The tags you will use are very small and inside fishing bobbers. LGs, you are going fishing.

“One more thing. If these intelligence reports are accurate, the assembly will break up very soon after the new moon. We may have a few weeks, but we may have much less, guys.”

“Thank you, Lois,” General Williams said. “Guys, you are not just my best LGs, you are my friends, my honorary uncles. At the very least, your success will likely decide the future of the Army’s LG program. You know how the brass hates this thing. At the worst, we lose Green Bay and the democratic process. Of course, I might lose my job, which is nothing compared to what you could lose. Any questions?”

“Yes, sir,” Lois asserted. “What ex-governor and what term?”

“Oh, right. An ex-governor, who shall remain nameless, helps to provide our intelligence.” General Williams paused, apparently measuring his response. “He used a term today that Kenny didn’t like referring to the groups that seem to be cooperating against the Fight for Right campaign.” He paused again and Lois looked directly at him, waiting. “The governor calls them The Unholy Alliance.”

“I see,” was all Lois said.

“My turn, sir,” Kenny said. “How far do we need to be from the tags, and how much time do we have from activation?”

“I expect you have never seen a demonstration of Rolling Thunder. It is a kind of neutron bomb, or timed cluster of bombs, that sounds like thunder and kills almost all life in a radius of four to five hundred meters, depending upon terrain and vegetation. That’s more than a quarter mile, boys. The good news is you can set the time for the missile to arrive—except, it is important to keep that time as short as possible so

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the targeted people are still there when the missile hits. Are you in?"

"Are there other options?" Rick asked rhetorically, glancing at Kenny. "We're in."

"We need a date, time, and location," said Kenny. "We'd better get to work, Rick."

Rick looked to Sammi, "We'll sweat tomorrow night." Kenny nodded.

"Then we'll get to specifics right away," General Williams said. Sammi immediately rose to go, but Lois hesitated, looking to the general. "Stay, ladies," he said. "There'll be no need for cocktails tonight since there are no patches." He looked at Kenny. "The cocktail blocks the hypnotics in the patch. That's why you can remember the details of mission plans, but not the initial briefings. The effect wears off in a matter of hours, and the patch-induced amnesia sets in again so you do not remember the details and trauma of the actual mission."

Kenny affirmed, "Okay."

Rick added, "That's why we never remembered the girls. They left before cocktail hour. We only saw them while we were wearing patches, except for me last time, that is. That's when everybody knew I was off the patch."

"Okay, men," the general went on, "we need to get specific about time and place. I think this will actually work better with the ladies here. I think they can help."

"Yes, sir," Rick agreed.

"First question?" the general asked.

"When?" Kenny answered. "Time might be easier to identify by moon phase and planet alignment. How should we start, Rick?"

"Let's take a walk, separate sit meditations. Give us a drum call back when it feels right. Will you do that, Sammi?"

"I will." Sammi answered with mild surprise.

Rick and Kenny rose, stretched, and disappeared into the moonless, starlit night.

Wee Hours, 18 May

When the embers faded to black, General Williams stoked and fanned the fire to high flames and Sammi began to drum softly. Rick appeared by the vigorous fire almost immediately, as though he had been waiting for the call behind a nearby tree. Kenny walked in several minutes later. They both sat by the fire in quiet reverence while the others waited.

"Windy?" Rick said.

Kenny took a big breath and said, "I've got a problem. I focused on the action night, and all I saw was dark. I saw no moon, no stars, no planets, no reference. I couldn't even see any terrain features in my meditation, it was so dark. It was quiet, too. I think it was drizzling."

"Ahh," Rick said, "that would explain it. I got a whole lot of blackness, too. Kind of freaked me out, until I stopped analyzing and just watched. Lots of people, though."

"You saw people?" Kenny asked.

"Well, no, sensed, I guess. I saw nothing."

"Yeah," Kenny agreed, "but I sensed small groups of people moving toward a bigger group."

"Yeah," Rick said slowly. "Okay, we're going to need to try something. Let's do this again in the morning, in daylight, and try to get a sense of location."

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“Okay,” Kenny added, “and maybe we should look to time features for the night before the action when we might have to plant the tags. How many tags will we have, General?”

“How many do you want?” he asked.

“Four,” Rick and Kenny said almost in unison.

“You shall have them,” the general promised. “Shall we call it a night?”

“No,” Rick said. “Let’s warm a bit then spread the fire and watch the embers for awhile.”

“I like that,” Sammi said, and settled in tight beside Rick.

Lois chanced a look toward Kenny, but he pretended not to notice and stirred the fire.

“I’ll see you tomorrow for supper,” General Williams said, and he walked off down a game trail. By the time the flames were gone, they heard his truck start and drive off. Stars came so bright the four could see the Milky Way overhead.

Kenny went to the wigwam first, his last thought before going to sleep being that there had been too many such nights erased from his memory. He felt the rage rising like a beast inside his chest. He tried the breathing and visualization techniques from his PTSD treatment, but the only thing that worked for him tonight was the sweet memory of Vicky and Amy playing like toddlers in the waves of Lake Michigan that week before she went off for active duty.

Breakfast Time, 18 May

Kenny first became aware of the smell of campfire coffee and hot cocoa, mixed he hoped. He looked over to see Lois’s and Sammi’s beds empty, but Sammi was curled up like a puppy in bed with Rick. He stretched the pains a bit and took

his ditty bag to the latrine and stream. He noticed Lois sitting by the fire, but he took care of business first.

She watched him walk back from the stream and said, "Good morning, Ken."

"Good morning, Chief," he answered. "What's for breakfast?"

"Your favorite—mocha."

Kenny smiled all the way to the wigwam and back to the fire. He sat on a dry camp chair and she gave him a metal camp cup of hot coffee-cocoa mixed.

"Why the smiles this morning, Ken?"

"First, tell me why you call me Ken, sometimes, when nobody else is around." He thought he saw her blush just a bit.

"I call you Ken because that is the way I think of you. Do you mind?"

"No, not at all."

"Why do others call you Kenny? Have you always been Kenny?"

"I reckon people call me Kenny because that's how I introduce myself. I was Kenny as a kid and hated it, so I became Ken as an adolescent. When I grew up, about your age, I decided that what my mother called me was just fine. How do you introduce yourself, Lois?"

"I introduce myself to strangers as Lois, but I heard you call me Lo, sometimes."

"Well, I noticed that Sammi calls you Lo, so I figured you must like it."

"I do, but only when it is somebody I care about." The mocha became quite interesting to both of them.

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"You still have the advantage on me," Kenny said. "You know my middle name, but I don't know what the J stands for in yours. Does duty prevent you from sharing that with me?"

"No," she said, hesitating. "The J is in honor of my father, as the Luke is in honor of yours...." She paused as Kenny looked intently at her. "I have seen all of your records—background, family." Kenny waited. "My father's name was Gerald, but my parents were kind enough to name me Jeri." She paused again. "Both my parents were killed four years ago in a car accident."

"I'm sorry, Lois Jeri." They looked at each other for a few moments.

"Well?" She asked.

"Well? You mean you know I love mocha but don't know what's funny about it?"

"Yeah huh."

"I loved to mix coffee, cocoa, and creamer when I was in the Army. It was my favorite in the field in the morning. Well, the first time I was in combat, we were attacked while I was having my morning mocha, and I hit the ground so fast I spilled it on me."

"What's funny about that?" she asked.

"What's funny is, when I felt the hot stuff on my leg, I thought I had been wounded."

"I didn't know that one, Kenny," she smiled. "Thanks for sharing." She looked to the wigwam. "Any signs of life in there?"

"Well, I'm not sure what the hell they're doing, but it appears to be living. What's up with that, Lo?"

"I'm not sure anybody knows, Ken. Beautiful morning though, don't you think?"

"Yeah, it is. I like the hazy mornings, and the dew. At least it's pleasantly cool. I think it's going to be muggy again today, damn near like Vietnam." He paused and looked at her. It occurred to him that that was not at all what she was talking about. 'What is she talking about?' he wondered.

Sammi stepped out, almost staggering, and headed toward the latrine area. Lois took off after her. Rick came out, scratched a couple of places, and headed elsewhere, so Kenny decided it was time for a trip of his own. He finished his mocha and headed to the woods.

Late Morning, 18 May

"Welcome back," Lois said as Kenny walked into camp. "Rick's been here for a couple of hours already."

"I don't think so," Kenny answered.

"A couple bowls of breakfast soup, though," Rick said. That's what he called coffee with anything in it.

Kenny noticed that Sammi wasn't hanging on Rick's arm but sitting next to Lois and working on her computer. "Well, partner?" Kenny asked.

"I drew something out. The girls are looking for it on the software."

"Good idea. What did you draw, place or time?"

"Both."

"Okay, Rick. I'll do the same."

"Here." Rick tossed him a small pack. Kenny sat down, pulled a pad and pencil out, and started drawing. First he sketched a kind of map with roads that bounded the area he had visualized. Then he sketched the southeast skyline with

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one planet and another close by, below on the left, and Mars, maybe, even lower and further east.

By the time he was nearly finished, Lois was looking over his shoulder. "Well, the sky looks nothing like Rick's. And what is that map?" she asked.

"Did he draw another road map?" Rick asked.

"Yeah," she answered slowly.

"Damn, boy, I wish you had a little infantry training," Rick chided.

"I draws what I sees, you crusty old fart," Kenny answered.

"Well, what does you sees?" Rick asked.

"Roads. I think I know the area where we should start."

Rick got up and came for a look. "Oh that must be, what? A hundred square miles?"

"Hey, if you're looking for a needle in a haystack, it helps if you can find the haystack, first," Kenny said.

"You are right, Windy. It will narrow their computer search," Rick answered.

"Is that what they're doing?" Kenny asked.

"Yep," Lois answered. "It's what we always do, but we usually do it behind the curtain. Hey, I think this might actually help. Look at this, Sammi."

Kenny and Rick followed her, kind of excited because they had never been able to work this way before. Sammi studied Kenny's map awhile and narrowed her search on the topographic computer map. Meanwhile, Kenny took a look at Rick's topographic sketch. Rick turned it so north was up.

"Rick," Kenny started slowly, "I think I know this place. It's isolated within a wilderness area—no machines allowed,

so, foot travel only." He looked on the computer screen. "Zoom out a bit, Sammi. I think it's over here."

"There it is!" Sammi yelled. "Isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Rick said.

"How sure are we, guys?" Lois asked.

"Not sure at all, yet," Rick answered. "We might need a group meditation this afternoon."

"A pipe ceremony this evening," Kenny suggested. "Then, there's the sweat lodge tonight," he added.

"Okay," Lois went on, "we'll work on the time fix."

"Their drawings don't match at all, Lo," Sammi said.

Lois asked, "Well, what about direction? Kenny marked southeast, and Rick's is sunset, waxing crescent moon with Venus above, and another planet, so..."

"West-southwest," Rick answered.

"Oh, okay," Sammi said, "And probably different times. Let's take a look."

"How does that work?" Kenny asked.

"Well," Lois answered, "we start today and run a sky program for the location you gave forward in time and stop it when we find a match. That is our date and time."

"How long will that take?" Kenny asked.

"That depends on how far it is into the future," Lois answered, "how much time we have to run the program beyond today."

"I think I'll take a nap," Rick said.

"Alone?" Kenny asked.

Lois's mouth dropped open and Sammi crawled inside her computer screen. Rick stopped and turned back to face them. "Yeah, I think that would be best," he said, and he grabbed a poncho from the wigwam and headed to the woods.

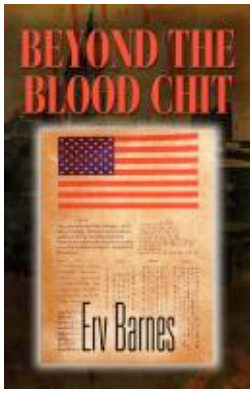
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"I think I'll snooze right here," Kenny said and laid a poncho on the ground by the fire pit. "Wake me when you have something."

"Wake up," Sammi said almost immediately. Lois and Kenny stared at her. "I've got something that matches on May 23rd." The three looked at each other in disbelief.

"Five days?" Lois asked. Sammi started to cry, quietly, and that feeling of dread that Kenny hated came back in his gut. Lois swallowed hard and asked hoarsely, "Should we tell Rick?"

"No," Kenny said, "something tells me he already knows."



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