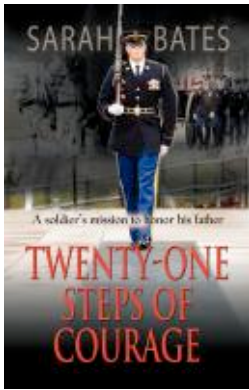




SARAH BATES

A soldier's mission to honor his father

TWENTY-ONE
STEPS OF
COURAGE



In 2006, with wars in the Middle East raging, Rod Strong enlists in the Army to seek the goal his father did not achieve when he tragically died in the Gulf War. His objective: The Old Guard regiment, the elite Soldiers who stand as Sentinels at the Tomb of the Unknown in Arlington Cemetery. He overcomes the setbacks that litter his path until an unexpected firefight in Afghanistan changes his life forever.

Twenty-One Steps of Courage

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CHAPTER ONE

US Army Forward Operating Base Miracle,
Hindu Kush Valley, Afghanistan 2008

"Strong, Lieutenant King wants to see you," Sergeant Morgan said as she shouldered into the tent where Army Specialist Rod Strong and Murphy and Thompson, two members of his squad played Poker.

Rod hadn't heard the NCO approaching. At the sound of the Sergeant's voice, he jumped to attention. The hand of cards he held scattered on his cot.

"At ease," Morgan said.

He tried to read her expression but the woman's face held no hint of the reason he was summoned.

Rod glanced at Thompson and Murphy then grabbed his weapon and followed the NCO out of the tent. No one spoke as the two soldiers made their way to King's tent.

Sergeant Morgan held the tent flap open for Rod then followed him in.

"Specialist Strong, reporting as ordered, Sir," Rod said, snapping a salute.

"Sit," the lieutenant said.

Rod placed his weapon across his knees, yanked off his patrol cap and sat down. He looked at the officer expectantly.

"Strong, you got a brother Mike?" Lt. King asked.

"Yes, Sir," Rod replied.

"I've been notified he was reported MIA several weeks ago. You were informed back at Ft. Myer?"

"Yes, Sir." Rod began to feel uneasy about this meeting.

Twenty-One Steps of Courage

"We learned there are two troops named Strong in the vicinity. One of 'em is you; the other's your brother, Mike."

"Here, Sir? What do you mean exactly?"

Rod leaned forward, feeling blood rush to his head and the weight of the weapon on his lap as it began to slide. He grabbed it.

"Best we can tell, he and two other men from the 82nd had been holed up in an outpost near Jalalabad. They were returning to Kabul in a Humvee, traveling by convoy with Afghan National Police. About six clicks along the route north of us, their vehicle was struck by an IED and ambushed. Two of the ANP troops and two soldier's bodies have been recovered. No sign of your brother yet. I'm sorry, Strong."

The news left Rod dry-mouthed. In a flash of black and white, he saw Mike's face, and could hear his voice, warbling as the doves did at nightfall; one of their childhood tricks to fool Mom when they hid from her.

"He's not dead then?" Rod managed to sputter then felt a flicker of hope.

"Didn't say that. Just don't know his whereabouts," Lt. King emphasized. "The 82nd's sending a patrol, but they're hours away. Until they check in we won't know any more. Go on back to bed, I'll send word when I have some news."

Rod stumbled to his feet then pushed through the open tent flap into the night. The winds scoured the landscape, revealing the expansive encampment bathed in moonlight. He turned toward his billet, head down against the gusts and hurriedly retraced his steps, all the while processing the stunning news. Ignoring the rumble of convoys setting out for nighttime missions and the drone of aircraft landing nearby, he began to formulate a plan to rescue Mike. It's what his dad would do, he reasoned. He'd promised Mom.

"Well, what did he want?" Murphy asked glancing up from the hand of cards he held as Rod returned in a burst of dusty air.

Thompson had taken Rod's place in the Poker game. A pile of chips lay on the cot in front of him.

The two men looked at him expectantly.

"My brother Mike's here in Afghanistan someplace," Rod blurted. He slumped down on the cot opposite and explained the circumstances.

"Man, this is huge! He could be anywhere," Murphy said.

"I didn't even know you had a brother," Thompson said. "Fuck, man!"

"Yeah, Airborne. We learned he was missing just before I got here." Rod stared down at the floor, then looked back at his friends feeling a surge of helplessness engulf him.

After lights out, Rod lay on his cot struggling to get comfortable and wishing sleep would take him away. Memories of Mike kept popping into his head. He imagined hearing doves, but there were no birds left near the area.

Finally, he sat up.

"Murphy," he whispered, reaching across the aisle to shake his teammate's shoulder.

The soldier sat up with a start. "What?" he said.

"I'm going to look for my brother," Rod said as he quietly tugged on his boots.

"Shit, that's stupid man," Murphy said. "Let's just wait for the 82nd. Sarn't Morgan'll clear it I bet, and we'll have support."

Rod knew the procedure, but Mike was out there somewhere and his promise to find him for Mom overcame all logic. He shook his head and bent to tie his laces, then shrugged on his ACU jacket.

Murphy groaned as his feet hit the floor.

"I'm going with you," he said grabbing his pants.

Twenty-One Steps of Courage

"This is my problem," Rod protested. "I don't want to drag you in."

Murphy had already done a tour in Iraq with the 25th MPs when the earthquake drew him to Afghanistan along with Rod and the other members of the Search and Rescue troops. The soldier reached in his duffel bag and pulled out his Kevlar vest.

"Put it on," Murphy said, gesturing at Rod. "Hey, we don't got a *trip tick*, how we gonna get around that?" Murphy then asked.

Having one was the only legitimate way they could leave the Forward Operating Base.

Rod held up a crumpled one he'd received the last time he went to the earthquake rescue scene.

"Let's go," he said.

When they left the quiet of the tent bivouac, Rod's heart beat faster than he'd ever remembered. Fleeting doubts about venturing into enemy territory beyond the safety of the FOB bubbled up. Fighting down the growing fear in his gut he focused on his objective. *Just keep listening for the doves*, he reminded himself.

The two men trudged toward Jalalabad, keeping to the narrow shoulder of the gravel road that marked the route. With evening, the winds subsided, freeing the ground of trash now piled in grotesque shapes against the concertina wire and rubble. The clear sky unveiled a canopy of stars and a full moon brightened their path. Walking six clicks in an hour to the site of the accident would be easy. Yet the fear of an enemy patrol spotting them kept Rod vigilant.

In every direction, the terrain's rocky surface resembled photos of Mars. Beyond the valley floor rose the craggy Hindu Kush mountain range with its infamous Khyber Pass. Murphy walked ahead, pausing every ten minutes or so to scan the horizon.

The moon was high when they reached the site of the accident. The Humvee lay on its side across the road. Rod approached it cautiously, tracing the burned out carcass with the small mag light he carried. Every bit of debris from the blast had been picked clean.

"Listen!" Murphy said, holding up his hand.

The two men ducked into the protection of the blackened metal, their ears tuning out the sounds of the earth settling. Faint voices were coming from the hills beyond.

"Someone's laughing," Rod whispered. "Taliban or ANP?" he asked.

"Wanna find out?" Murphy asked then took a long swig of water from his canteen.

Rod nodded. The two men were almost totally visible in the light of the full moon, their shadows disappearing into the wreck. It had grown cooler, and Rod pulled his handkerchief up over his mouth to keep warm.

Rod and Murphy started in the direction of the sounds drifting from a copse of low trees nestled against the mountainside, carefully picking their way around the boulders and scrub that dotted the landscape. Soon the sounds of voices became louder, and the smell of horses wafted toward them. Beyond a low hill, the light of a small bonfire flickered, throwing shadows of many men against a wall of rock protecting their encampment. Murphy motioned for Rod to drop down, then waved him forward to crawl nearer on their bellies.

Standing close to a group of ten or so people in Afghan robes and baggy pants, a tall bearded man with his head wrapped in a black turban hectored loudly. Murphy frowned.

"Taliban?" Rod murmured.

"Think so." Murphy nodded.

Rod pulled out his binoculars and inched closer to get a better look. Off to the side, near a group of horses tethered to a

Twenty-One Steps of Courage

stake, a soldier sprawled, his head down. A dirty bandana wrapped around his face hid his eyes but the top of his head glowed copper-bright in the light of the fire. The man's filthy Army uniform appeared torn, as if he'd been dragged.

With a shock Rod recognized the soldier.

He turned and motioned frantically for Murphy.

"My brother!" he whispered.

Murphy's mouth gaped.

"We gotta get help," he murmured.

Rod nodded, then looked again. Mike hadn't moved.

The two men scrambled back toward the road, keeping low to the ground, moving as silently as possible. They reached the wreckage of the Humvee in a crouched run, and then stopped to lean against it, their chests heaving from the effort.

"I'm going to call in," Rod said, grabbing his radio.

"Wait!" Murphy warned. "Who you gonna get? We're not supposed to be here."

"Sarn't Morgan. I trust her. She'll know how to contact the 82nd patrol. They may be near," Rod replied.

He began to speak into the radio, muffling the sound of his voice with his sleeve.

Before he got a response, Murphy grabbed his shoulder, spinning him around.

"Look!" He pointed in the direction of the road they'd just traveled.

Moonlight shimmering on a line of darkened vehicles indicated a convoy moving in their direction.

Rod punched the radio *OFF* and the two men knelt down in the shadows. Murphy flipped down his night vision goggles and motioned Rod to do the same.

Slowly the convoy rumbled closer. When the front end of the lead vehicle reached the Humvee, it stopped. Two men

exited the vehicle, popped open a cyalume stick and held the infa-red light close to a map.

"Patrol. Maybe the 82nd," Rod whispered.

"Yeah, and if we can see them, Hajji can too," Murphy said, heading out of the shadows toward the convoy.

Rod followed. Behind the up-armored armament carrier Humvee in the front, three more of the 13,000-pound vehicles emerged.

Murphy nudged Rod.

"Looke there, lots a fire power."

Rod stared hard to make out the silhouettes of the big machine guns. Looming low against the banked sides of the road, the battered camouflaged vehicles resembled craggy elephants on their knees. From a distance they could easily be mistaken for rock outcroppings.

"Who goes there?" Rod heard first, then the click of an M-16 safety latch releasing.

"Murphy and Strong, 25th MPs," Murphy called out.

When they reached the two men standing in front of the vehicle, Rod recognized their Airborne insignias.

"You looking for a missing soldier?" Rod asked.

"Affirmative. And why are you here?" The man who spoke moved closer. "Sarn't Devore. Corporal Emerson, my RTO," he continued, gesturing to the radiotelephone operator who stood beside him.

"The man you're looking for is my brother, Sarn't," Rod said. "We know where he is."

"I asked why you're out here," Devore repeated.

"Looking for him too," Rod admitted.

"Your Sarn't know where you are?"

Murphy broke in. "We're sort of on our own."

"I see," the sergeant said, shaking his head.

Twenty-One Steps of Courage

Murphy pulled the crumpled trip ticket from his sleeve pocket and flashed it quickly in front of Devore's face.

"Damn!" the sergeant said, and then turned to Rod. "You know where he is, huh?"

"Over there," Rod said pointing in the direction of the rock outcropping. "Hajji's got him." Rod glanced quickly at Murphy.

Devore motioned Rod and Murphy into the shadows beside him and told the driver to kill the cyalume. At once the string of vehicles and men seemed to blend into the landscape.

In a hushed tone the sergeant questioned Rod and Murphy, focusing on specific details.

"Let me show you," Rod said, kneeling.

He pulled out his knife and drew a map in the soft dirt. In the moonlight, the rough lines cast shadows in sharp relief against the pale sand.

"Twenty minutes ago, tops," Murphy said.

"Weapons?" Devore asked.

"AK-47s, a few 74s that I could see," Rod said.

"Everyone had a weapon," Murphy added.

"There's probably a watcher keeping tabs on the camp," Devore said. "You see anyone near the trail?"

Murphy shook his head.

The ambient light surrounding the convoy grew brighter and Devore looked up at the moon with its bright halo and frowned.

He turned to the RTO standing by his side waiting for orders. "Radio the 25th MPs at FOB Miracle and let 'em know we've got their two *weekend visitors* here. Tell 'em we're short and we're going to keep them."

"You two stay up here with me," Devore said. "You'll scout." He turned his head and muttered into his radio. Within seconds two soldiers joined their small circle.

"Corporal Ruiz, Corporal LaRussa, team leaders", Devore explained.

Devore turned his binoculars toward the clutch of mountains where the Taliban hid.

"They've likely seen us," he said. "If they haven't scattered, we'll have to move fast."

Devore and the team leaders squatted to look at Rod's crude map.

"Alpha team," Devore said, pointing right, then "Bravo, there," he said, indicating his left.

Ruiz and LaRussa disappeared into the shadows. The whisper of desert boots rose as gunners scuffled to security positions at the trucks. The rest of the two squads, bristling with weapons, vanished in a tumble of activity. SAW Gunners and riflemen along with grenadiers shouldering M-4s with 40mm grenade launchers scattered into position.

"Move out," Devore said, motioning Rod and Murphy forward along with the radioman, like ducks in a row.

The troops advanced along the rocky terrain, crouched, keeping low, blending with the brush and scrub.

Rod's heart raced as he ran, open mouthed, gulping air.

The four men rolled onto their stomachs at the ridgeline where Rod and Murphy first saw Mike's captors.

Rod rested his chin in the soft dirt then pushed his helmet back to get a closer look.

"Some of the men and horses are gone, Sarn't," Rod said. Alarm tinged his voice. He swallowed hard. In the shadows he spotted Mike's crumpled form.

Devore leveled his binoculars and scanned the scene below, then motioned for the men to deploy their night vision goggles. Once again the landscape took on an eerie green glow.

Just then Rod spotted a glint against the rocky cliff above the campground.

"Look!" he pointed.

Twenty-One Steps of Courage

"Guard!" Devore murmured, nodding to the men behind him in the direction where Rod had seen a reflection off the barrel of a weapon in the green luminescence.

"Pull back," Devore whispered, then summoned his team leaders.

Rod scrambled back down the slope to find the two soldiers waiting.

"Okay, here's what we're doin'," Devore said. "Ruiz, put your Alpha SAW gunners beside LaRussa's at the south. LaRussa, you take your medic and one of the grenadiers, secure the rear. Keep your radio open. You're going to control the SAWS. I'll take six of your men with me; we'll sweep the camp from the west and go get our guy."

Ruiz and LaRussa nodded, then melted into the night.

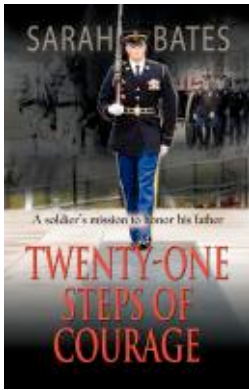
A bullet screamed past them and ricocheted off a boulder behind Devore, followed by a loud crack.

Rod hit the ground, his helmet smacking a rocky outcropping.

"Shit!" he said, dragging his weapon up to his shoulder.

To his right, Murphy flattened against the ground, weapon poised.

"They see us! CONTACT! 100 METERS 12 O'CLOCK!" Devore yelled.



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