

PROLOGUE

The trouble started with the mask.

Soon after the surge died down, the commanders, in their infinite wisdom, decided that the handful of ballsy Iraqis who'd agreed to risk their lives interpreting for American military forces would no longer be allowed to cover their faces.

Word got passed to Second Lieutenant Natty Dread, a.k.a. Nathaniel Dresden, while he was in Mortaritaville. He was involved in a house-to-house search for a high-value target known as Ahmar the Red Beard, who had a reputation for personally executing suspected collaborators.

"That's a *negative*," Captain Paultz, the main fobbit at the base, told Natty when he questioned the order. "We're a professional army and professionals don't conceal their identities. If your terp is that scared, tell him to seek other employment."

Which meant Natty, a butter bar intelligence officer attached to the First Brigade Combat Team of the Tenth Mountain Division, had the stone privilege of walking down a crater-pocked street and breaking the news directly to the terp known as "Borat," because his long face, droopy mustache, and occasionally unseemly enthusiasm reminded some American soldiers of the only foreigner they'd encountered before deploying overseas.

"Please, no, Natty Dread." Jittery brown eyes stared out from behind a Polartec ski mask, watching Iraqi police officers help themselves to freebies from a fruit stall across the street. "It's not safe here. People are not how they seem."

"It's the army, B. Love it or leave it."

Knowing damn well that Borat couldn't afford to leave it because he needed cash to repair a family home badly damaged by Coalition bombs early in the war. A tiny mudbrick house near Balad with rebar sticking out of the walls, which Natty visited three days after the unmasking order came down. Now a group of individuals who needed no permission to wear balaclavas had just broken into the house, dragged Borat out of bed, and beheaded him in front of his wife and four young children.

"This cannot stand," said Captain Paultz. "This man was an important asset. It's like one of our dogs getting killed."

Resisting the urge to assault a superior, Natty channeled his aggressions into putting together leads instead, digging up information that led to Special Ops picking up a bunch of low-level insurgents for questioning. One of whom, nicknamed Crazy Eddie, literally coughed up a tip after a long adventure in what was euphemistically called Waterworld. An enhanced interrogation that Natty, the son of a civil rights attorney, observed with increasing discomfort bordering on physical symptoms over several hours. He'd just started to lodge a protest when Eddie suddenly recalled that *pendejo* Ahmar was laying up with a relative's family near the old cigarette factory in Sadr City. He was posting jihad messages by day and banging a twelve-year-old niece by night with selectively edited passages from the Koran as justification.

Hyped on bottles of Ripped Fuel 5X, Natty's unit scaled the front wall just after twenty-two hundred hours the next night. The sapper set a donut-shaped charge on the steel front door, while Natty, hanging back by the concrete shutter in the yard, noticed that even with night-vision goggles turning everything aquatic-green, the villa they were about to break into vaguely resembled the brownstone where he was raised in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

The charge blew the door off its hinges and put white noise between his ears. He hoisted his M4 and joined his staff sergeant, J. R. Cuddy, and four other joes in the stack, breaching the entrance and entering the front hall. Army cowhide and rubber soles stomped past a fading Persian rug with two pairs of sparkling silver women's slippers, a pair of men's Adidas shower shoes, and child-sized soccer cleats. He stepped over them gingerly, knowing they could have been rigged with explosives, his gun-sights finding a black plate with Arab calligraphy over the doorway.

“Enter here in peace and security.”

He lowered his gun sights, his hearing fading back in, realizing his parents had the same plate over their entrance. Along with the mezuzah by the front door, the “No Blood for Oil” bumper sticker, and the Bob Marley posters in the living room.

One fire team went off to a room on the left that had a running fountain while Natty followed Cuddy to the right, finding himself in a small den where the air was heavy with lavender and flavored tobacco.

A man his father’s age in a white Oxford shirt, dark pleated slacks, and a Stalinesque mustache was already facedown on the rug, hands laced behind his head. A stocky woman in a lumpy red pullover and a black headscarf was waving her arms and shrieking in Arabic.

“Fayn Ahmar,” Natty yelled at her, trying to fill in for his dead translator with the pidgin Arabic he’d retained from his army language program.

“Fayn Ahmar?” The lady looked confused, shifting her glare from Natty to the beleaguered husband on the floor.

“Fuckin’ listen to him.” Cuddy tugged on one of his big mudflap ears to illustrate, while driving the heel of his boot into the prone man’s back. *“Samee-ya. Okay?”*

“Ahmar,” Natty rubbed his own chin. “Fuckface Red Beard. Where is he?”

“Bit Amal.” The woman screamed, the smell of cumin on her breath. *“Da gozee! Da baiti . . .”*

She pointed at the man on the floor, at the soccer game on the television, the water pipe on the end table, at the family photos around the room. Then she began patting her chest frantically as if to say, “You see? You see? We’re the same. Our hearts beat just like yours.”

“Sir, whoever you’re looking for is not here.” The man facedown on the floor was speaking in lightly accented English, calm as Obi-Wan telling the stormtroopers *“These are not the droids you’re looking for.”*

“Ahmar.” Cuddy kicked him in the ribs. “Don’t fucking tell me you don’t know.”

The rest of the team was casing the room. Nothing in the closets. Bunch of books on the shelves but, suspiciously, no pictures of any of the local “Death to America” fire-breathers, which were as common here as

photos of the Pope in Carroll Gardens. Anyone who didn't have one had to be hiding something.

Cuddy grabbed a gold trophy on a white pedestal off the mantelpiece and exchanged a knowing look with Natty. Fucking A. The last house where they found a high-value target had a solid-gold table with a personal thank-you from the local Al Qaeda chapter inscribed on the bottom.

"Da ibn! Da ibn!" the wife was shrieking again.

"Shut the fuck up already," Natty raised his carbine, trying to silence her and figure out what was going on.

He was aware of the differing rates of respiration in the vicinity. At least a half dozen people breathing hard in a limited space, like they were all recovering from a marathon. But someone was conspicuously panting more than the others. Natty looked around until his eyes found a door at the back of the room. A pair of shadows were visible in the gap at the bottom, indicating human presence. He nodded at Cuddy, making sure he'd seen as well. Two days before, a joe from another fire team searching for Ahmar got fried to a living crisp at a similar house in Ramadi.

The shadows under the door moved and footsteps pounded up an unseen staircase, then tramped across the ceiling.

The husband on the floor tried to lift his head. "Sir, this is a misunderstanding—"

Natty was fast through the door, Cuddy at his heels. A short hall led to a stairway with a lime-green carpet. A wall to the right was shiny with a fresh patch of plaster, probably covering a hiding place for a weapons cache. Shattered glass in a back door looked out on a rear yard, where another fire team was coming over a wall. Natty's heart pummeled at thrash-metal speed as he took the lead up the steps, forgetting for the moment that his job was supposed to be intel, Cuddy close behind, joes in the other room still shouting at the couple not to fucking move.

He crept three-quarters of the way up the stairs and then stopped, hearing frenzy on the second floor. Ali Baba up to no good, preparations for counterattack underway. Cuddy joined him on the step, listening and then detaching a stun grenade from his belt. He carefully extracted the pin and rolled the charge across the landing. The dimpled avocado shell made a muted treading sound on the rug before it stopped a yard short of a doorway: maybe a dud. But then the concussive force of the flash-bang

turned Natty's eardrums inside out again, leaving just a high, mournful keen above a low hiss.

Cuddy's round face floated beside him, mouth opening and closing without aural effect. Natty rested his hand on the banister, noticing that it was still vibrating. Someone continuing to move above them. Jihadi Terminator shit. Normal people would have surrendered by now. He tried to say as much to Cuddy but couldn't hear his own voice. He looked back and saw the shadows moving within a scalene triangle of light coming through the door which was now half open on the landing.

His right shoulder tightened as he raised his carbine and set it to burst, ignoring the voice in the back of his head second-guessing. Shut up, old man. I'm here. You're not.

The door creaked, the shadow lengthening, the scalene turning into an isosceles and then a trapezoid. He pulled the trigger and let go a three-round burst just as Cuddy mouthed the words "Oh shit."

Natty shut his eyes, deliberately counting to five. The stillness of the house had the submissive character of city streets after a blizzard. He opened them again and saw an empty child-sized sneaker sideways on the landing. A Nike knock-off with gold Lakers trim. And velcro straps. Just for style, he tried to tell himself. Because the alternative explanation was that the little boy in the white soccer jersey, who'd just been blown out of his shoe, was not quite old enough to tie his own laces.

Natty knew before he turned that the parents would be at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at him. The mother was hollow-eyed. She'd just seen to the end of her days and knew nothing she cared about was standing between now and then. The father had gotten a life sentence as well. His face was like a study in time-lapse photography, thirty years passing in ten seconds. He opened his mouth to speak, but all Natty could hear was the keen rising into an unbearable shriek inside his own skull.

He looked down, trudged past them dutifully, and went out into the cold desert night.

1

A helicopter with a searchlight is hovering low over Prospect Park, its juddering hum reminding Lourdes of a man deciding how to respond to an insult.

As she approaches the Fifth Street entrance, she sees ambulance guys smoking cigarettes, in no big hurry to do anything. Yellow tape cordons off the bike lanes, a big crowd behind it already, bathed in flashes of blue, white, and red from the squad car lights. An exclusive nightspot for people you wouldn't want to party with: white-shirted supervisors, regular uniform cops, and detectives in off-the-rack suits.

On first glance, it looks like the unusual event they've shown up for is a vacant parking space in No-Park Slope. But then she sees the fleecy white and red clumps, which turn out to be feathers, trailing back toward the sidewalk. They lead past inside-out latex gloves, snipped rubber tubing, and a bent syringe to a body facedown near an elm tree, stuffing coming out through the ruptured stitching of a Canada Goose parka.

Lourdes flips tin at the cop standing guard and ducks under the tape, not liking the way her trousers crackle with the bend. A month without carbs and she still can't get under 165. But fuck it, she's bootylicious and proud. Always been a big girl, with lots of bounce to the ounce. All creamy café con leche abundance busting from a halter top when she was waitressing undercover at the Golden Lady Gentlemen's Lounge, substantial and serious when she's wearing her Lane Bryant business suit in the squadroom. Either way, whoever couldn't appreciate that rearview had no class and could just move it along, nothing to see here, fellas.

"Detective Robles, welcome back." Captain Bowman, the CO from

her patrol days, is just inside the tape, shivering in the spring chill. "I'll cue the balloons."

She smiles and bunches her cheeks up like brioche tops. Three months back in the detective squad and still catching grief from the trolls downstairs. What else could she expect? Even before she got in trouble, she'd been dangerously low on allies at the seven-eight. Pretty much everyone she used to work with had been pissed about her getting to jump the line before she'd even completed her eighteen-month rotation in Narcotics.

But none of them happened to be getting highlights at the Sophisticated Lady Hair Salon on Flatbush Avenue when a five-time loser named Tyrell Humphries tried to hold the place up with a .22, which he dry-clicked twice upside Lourdes's head after she ID'd herself as a cop. Somehow even with a smock on, she'd managed to wrestle the gat away before shooting him in the ball sack. Which, in turn, led to her getting promoted at a special ceremony attended by the mayor and the PC.

Her photo appeared in the *Daily News*, effectively ending her career as an undercover. And leaving her unprotected six months later when her fuckwit partner, Erik Heinz, got caught on a cell-phone camera verbally abusing an Arab cab driver for cutting them off on Ocean Parkway, with Lourdes standing behind him, silent and embarrassed. The clip became an instant YouTube sensation, seventy-five thousand clicks in the first three hours, earning Heinz a new assignment moving Staten Island barricades and Lourdes six weeks in a VIPER room, watching security monitors in a housing project basement. When she got out, she was no longer known as the "Heroine of the Hair Salon," but as "that fat girl who got in trouble."

"What do we got, Captain?"

"Deep breath, LRo. Taxpayer down."

"White guy?"

"Amazing. You're getting called in six hours after your tour ends and you figure that out on your own. No wonder they let you hang on to that little gold shield."

Four detectives from her squad are already at the scene, joining a couple of medical-legal investigators from the ME's office in Tyvek suits and booties. Two CSU techs take photos and make notes. The ghouls are parking the morgue van over by the parks administration building. She notices that every time she catches someone's eye, it darts away.

“The 9-1-1 operator patched the call through a few minutes past eleven,” Bowman says. “Residents across the street reported hearing shots.”

Lourdes looks over at the limestones and brownstones on the other side of Prospect Park West, lined up like nineteenth-century novels you needed perfect ACT scores to read. Each worth four million *easy* these days—more, if you could get a dentist or a shrink paying office rent on the garden floor.

It must be twenty years since the last murder in the park that white people cared about. A drama teacher got shot for his mountain bike near Swan Lake, back when she was in fifth grade and Brooklyn was still fierce.

Nowadays, the whole damn park is an ad for healthy urban living. At least when the sun is up. Private foundations and citizen volunteers had poured dollars and hours into protecting the trees, saving the ducks, bringing in the Metropolitan Opera, and chasing junkies from the band shell. Any Saturday or Sunday, the six hundred acres are fields of well-tended flesh: world-class runners, Tour de France wannabes, Audubon Society bird freaks, Olympian volleyball players, and Ivy Leaguers dragging their \$500 congas to the African drum circle in the grove.

At night, though, the ghosts still come out. The Picnic House gets shrouded in mist like a castle from some old Shakespeare play. Homeless people still hide out in encampments in the woods, where they can lie down quietly with their sorrows in the moonlight. The occasional wolf pack still roams over from Parkside Avenue or Empire Boulevard. Every few years, a ninja with a sword shows up in the Vale of Cashmere, a vengeful spirit from the eighties slashing at gay men in the bushes. And every season or two, a lonely life still ends dangling from a low branch on Suicide Hill.

“See all the fluff that came out of the coat?” Bowman points out the wisps blowing away. “Must have been a big gun.”

“Or defects in the nylon.” Lourdes aims her chin at a flagrant rip in the stitching. “Eyewits?”

“The good news is, we found some screwball with a sleeping bag and a view of the crime scene just on the other side of the wall.”

“The bad news?”

“He’s not talking.” The captain jerks a thumb over his shoulder.

Detective Robert “Beautiful Bobby” Borrelli from her squad is a few

yards away, gesturing haplessly at a man wearing a hat with furry ears and a plastic shower curtain over his shoulders.

"It's not clear he speaks English," the captain says. "Or any other earth language."

"Like that matters." Lourdes unbuttons her coat as she strolls over. "What up, B.B.?"

Beautiful Bobby, Romeo-eyed with a Guido Elvis pompadour and a small pink baby butt of a bald spot, shrugs at his subject.

"Mork from Ork here. Ten minutes, no ID, *no hablo*. He's either deaf and dumb or thinks we're from the intergalactic border patrol."

"I'll talk to her," the homeless man says matter of factly.

"See that, B.B.?" She throws her shoulders back. "It's all about the attitude."

"I know you." The homeless guy adjusts the shower curtain like an aristocrat's cape.

"You know *me*?"

She studies the homeless dude more closely. He has the face of an Aztec warrior debauched by years of hard city living: high, bruised cheekbones and slanting almond eyes with tiny globs of mascara sticking to the lashes.

"I met you in the park," he says, with a hint of a Mexican accent. "Long time ago."

"Yeah?" She wrinkles her nose, hoping this isn't someone she once dated.

"I was living down under the bridge, by the ravine." He doffs the furry ears in tribute. "You were in uniform but I knew you were an angel."

"Yeah, I get that a lot." She rolls her eyes at B.B., knowing she'll pay for this later at the squad.

"It was ten below zero in the park." Little yellow whales crinkle on the shower curtain cape. "You gave me a twenty-dollar bill and told me to get the fuck out."

"*De nada*." Lourdes nods. "Was I nice about it?"

"Nice enough."

"Anyway, tonight . . ."

"Tonight I'm sleeping by the wall, when I hear these people talking."

The homeless man pops his eyes open, to recreate the moment. “Old white dude says, ‘Hey, guys, what’s doing?’”

“‘Hey guys?’ Like it’s someone he knows?”

“Dunno.” The homeless man shrugs. “Then I hear, ‘Whoa, whoa, whoa,’ and *bap bap bap*. I drop back down behind the wall and I hear this other dude go, ‘Kizz, kizz.’”

“‘Kizz, kizz?’ You sure?”

“More likely, ‘Keys, keys,’” a deep, tired voice says behind her. “Like the victim dropped his car keys and one of them was saying pick it up.”

A tall, red-faced man with 1977 sideburns and bloodhound eyes has lumbered over in a black raincoat, uniformed cops getting out of his way like meerkats fleeing an elephant.

“Kevin Sullivan, Brooklyn South Homicide,” he introduces himself in the diffident grumble of a country priest with a Marlboro habit.

So this is Him: the Last of the Mohicans. His reputation precedes him, but he’s actually more imposing than Lourdes expected. Maybe six-five, six-six, two fifty—the kind of big that makes everyone else have to adjust their seats when he gets in a car. Said to be peaceful of disposition until provoked—then potentially terrifying. Up close, he looks to be in his early sixties but his ruddy complexion is still so pockmarked from adolescent acne that it appears small animals have been gnawing on his face. He smells of Old Spice and patchouli. His mop of black hair has no shading or nuance. More Grecian Formula Apache than Sitting Bull Natural.

“Yeah, that must have been what they were saying.” The homeless guy nods. “When I looked over the wall, they were getting in a Benz and driving away.”

“Mercedes-Benz?” Lourdes makes a note.

“Yeah, I’d say an old 450.” The homeless man registers Lourdes’s questioning look. “I used to be a mechanic out at one of those garages by Shea Stadium.” He glances away wistfully. “Anyhow, I look out and see the white dude’s crawling along the sidewalk going, ‘Help me, help me.’ But by the time I got to him, he was gone.”

“Can you describe the guys who jacked the car?” Lourdes asks, a little self-conscious about keeping her voice steady with Sullivan clocking her.

“No. It was too far from the streetlight.”

“Excuse me, *how many* shots did you say?” Sullivan looms over the homeless man, more solicitous than threatening.

“Three.”

“Sure about that?” Sullivan gives Lourdes a sidelong glance.

“I’ve seen better days, but I can still count to three,” the homeless man says, a brief history of shame passing across his face.

“All right.” Sullivan nods at Borrelli. “You got this?”

“Oh yeah, we’re BFFs now.” Beautiful Bobby helps the homeless guy keep his cape on. “I’ll get him a hot chocolate and take his statement.”

Lourdes watches them trundle off, then looks back toward the body as the CSU techs slip paper bags over the dead man’s hands. Sullivan drops into a surprisingly agile squat and starts to count the evidence placards.

“I see five shell casings; he says three shots.” He sucks his lips. “You find that odd?”

“I wouldn’t take his word for anything.” She shrugs. “He’s out of his fucking mind.”

“Watch the language, please.” He doesn’t meet her eyes.

God, another one of those lace-curtain Irish hypocrites, who swears like Lil Wayne around other men but blushes every time a woman lets a four-letter word drop.

“Good you got him talking though.” Sullivan bounces on his haunches.

“What we do.”

“White man dead by the park, in an \$800 coat, with a Benz driving away afterward.” Sullivan stands, wipes his hands on his coat. “There’s going to be a lot of eyes on this.”

“You telling me to back off?”

“Just saying. You have options.”

So he’s heard about Erik Heinz.

“You want me off, do whatever you have to do,” she says. “But I’m not going willingly.”

He looks her up and down. Other girls may have wanted to be ballerinas or princesses, but Lourdes never thought about being anything other than a cop. Spent her nights watching *Kojak* reruns and reading

Dorothy Uhnak novels while Papi was starting his bid upstate and Mami was out getting high. And now that she's finally made it to a detective squad, she's not looking back. Other people got into the job for the benefits or because they couldn't think of anything else to do. But Lourdes always knew she had the calling. While other girls she grew up with at the projects were getting pregnant too young and soft-minded with reality shows and self-pity, she was sharpening up like a Westinghouse scholar. Getting all sagacious and streetwise about human behavior. Even Erik Heinz couldn't quite kill her feeling for the work. After eleven years on the job, the girl loves having her own desk and coffee mug with the NYPD emblem, loves the dark science forensics and data-bank searches, loves the interrogation head games, and yes, even sometimes loves working with men instead of women—appreciating the simplicity of dealing with a bunch of coarse, hairy-knuckled guys who don't talk shit all day about their weight and how no one really appreciates them.

"Hey, detectives." Bowman is waving them over, a tech from Crime Scene with him holding up a wallet. "Know who this is?"

The vic has been rolled. An older guy, maybe mid-sixties, with a halo of wizard-white hair spilling out around his head and a kind of exhausted middle-class nobility to his leonine features. He wears a scruffy beard and the slightly perplexed expression of a man interrupted while making his morning coffee.

"That's David Dresden." Sullivan goes still.

"The lawyer?" Lourdes asks.

"Try the lawyer every cop in the city hates," the captain says.

Big mouth on the evening news, press conferences on courthouse steps, always carrying on about police brutality and racial injustice. Lourdes heard him referred to as "the white Al Sharpton" and worse long before she even became a cop. Despised not only for keeping criminals out of prison but for causing epic traffic jams with his protest marches.

"Scumbag." The captain breathes out a cold vapor. "I don't want to say 'what goes around comes around,' but . . ."

"Then *don't*." Sullivan turns away, broad shoulders hunched.

"Wasn't he just in the news, defending some raghead who wanted to blow up a bridge?" the captain asks, not taking the hint.

"*Suing* the FBI." Sullivan looks back over his shoulder, setting his

teeth. “For a client who claims he was tortured. Slight difference.” He eyes Lourdes. “Sure you still want in?”

“I come a long way to get back to the dance, daddy.” She sticks her chest out. “Don’t send me home early.”

“Suit yourself.” Sullivan takes out his notepad and ambles back to the body. “Just don’t count on meeting any princes at the ball.”

2

An old man with long gray hair is in a corner of the cell. Sweat stains form a harrowed *Scream* face on the front of his t-shirt as he hunches over, talking to himself. At least he *appears* to be talking to himself. Except every once in a while, he tilts up his scabby chin, fixes on Natty, and announces, “Well, you done it now, son . . .”

Natty averts his eyes, the back of his buzz-cut head sore and cold from the cinder block wall as he tried to sleep sitting up on the bolted bench.

The ghouls and goblins of recrimination were at him until dawn, much louder than the perps in and out of the pens. The system is overloaded. Last night, Ecstasy-addled fans pouring out of a Skrillex concert ran straight into hordes of angry Yankees fans tumbling from the bars after a brutal loss to the Tigers, resulting in dozens of arrests for fighting and public indecency.

“The fuck are you looking at?” The man with the long gray hair is staring again, some old wet brain in the late stages of dementia. “You want something to cry about?”

Natty bangs the back of his head against the wall again. Stop tripping, yo. Come on, be a man. You’re thirty-three years old. You can take care of yourself. Still in good health, physically, with a thick neck and oversized shoulders from weight-lifting and mixed martial arts. “The kind of muscles that make it look like you’re about to attack someone when all you’re doing is getting in the shower,” his father once said. No one’s going to hurt you in here, except yourself. And you’re *definitely* not going to do that. It’s just normal procedure that the court officers took the belt from your khakis and the laces from your Timberlands. Right?

“Long way down, son.” The wet brain is laughing. “Enjoy the ride.”

The air smells of two-day-old urine, Vanilla Mist air freshener, and man ass. An old Chinese dude sits on the steel toilet in the corner crying. A skinny black androgyne with braided hair and an “I Luv Haiti” t-shirt knotted above the navel leans against the bars, talking quietly to a young Pakistani-looking dude with a hennaed beard and a ponytail, who keeps drawing back and falsettoing, “Nigga say wha?”

Natty crunches his eyes, trying to shut out the noise. Most of his cellmates are what his father would have called *the disenfranchised*. Subway slashers, pocketbook grabbers, credit card snatchers, nickel bag dealers, bus stop boxers, dis cons, DVs, DUIs, and ACDs, with the occasional Ecstasy seller and child abuser thrown in. Men born mostly without privilege, who have tried and failed to reach accommodation with friends, family, women, the powers-that-be, and their own defeated expectations. Waiting to be shipped off to Rikers, the island of no hope, where they might wait years for their cases to be called while the rest of the world goes about its business and forgets them.

How you like me now, Dad? I'm finally one of your people.

He rubs his face in the crook of his elbow, right below the tattoo that says “Everywhere Is War.” His little revenge joke on the old man. Who used to play that fucking Bob Marley song all the time in the old Peugeot with the “Coexist” bumper sticker and the skunky back seats.

Natty reacted by listening to nothing but death metal and gangster rap for years afterward. Until he got in the army and wrote the hated reggae nickname Dad had given him on his helmet, making “Natty Dread” his nom de guerre. Then he had the lyrics from “War” inked permanently into his flesh. Because by then he had learned a truth not often spoken about in Park Slope: That war was a natural universal state. War between nations, war between religions, war between races, war between men and women, and, yes, war between fathers and sons. *Iyaman*, Bob Marley. Everywhere is war.

He stops knocking his head and wrinkles his nose, disgusted by the smell of his own BO. The clock on the wall says it's almost nine in the morning, but it could be hours before he sees a judge. His hands flex as he tries to get his circulation going. There are red rims on his wrists from handcuffs being on too tight and something is stuck in the webbing

between the fingers of his right hand. A fragment of a tooth lodged in the knuckles, with dried blood around it. His tongue feels around inside his mouth and finds all his own teeth present and accounted for.

“Hey, what are you?”

A large black man stands over him, with the pot-roast arms of a bouncer who works at a nightclub where they even have to check the purses for weapons. He wears an untucked striped polo shirt that makes him look like a member of the Peanuts gang turned ill thug by life on the streets. You a bad man, Charlie Brown.

“I don’t know,” Natty keeps his head down. “What do you think I am?”

In the P.S. 51 schoolyard, he was never really anything. A shade or two darker than most white kids, but too pale to be considered black or brown. Just lost in the middle when they sang “The Rainbow Connection” at the year-end assembly. By the time he hit his teens, his features had settled and become more conventionally Caucasoid, with Dad’s nose prevailing over Mom’s mouth, but inside he still didn’t quite ID as anything. Not really majority or minority. Not really Jewish or Christian. Not really cool or a nerd. Not really rich or poor. Right or left. Probably half the reason he joined the army was just so he could be *something*.

“No, I mean what are you here for?” Thug-life Charlie Brown asks. “You a domestic? Arson? Drugs? What’d you do?”

“Why’s that anyone’s business?”

“Okay, don’t tell me.” Charlie Brown puts his hands up. “All I know is those dudes over there saying they’re gonna fuck you up, first chance they get.”

He moves aside so Natty can see there are two men across the cell glaring. Both white and brawlic, wearing navy-blue t-shirts with FDNY emblems.

“So you must have done *something*.” Charlie Brown peels off as the older of the two comes over.

A Brooklyn redwood in Levi’s and work boots, with salt-and-pepper commas of hair and the confident stride of a battalion captain who believes that the free swinging of his dong could wake the whole neighborhood like the tolling of the Liberty Bell.

“Hey,” the captain says.

“Hey.”

“You know what you did, don’t you?”

He looms over Natty as his buckethead friend joins them, the two of them starting to do that chicken-wing limber-up that men do when they circle each other before a bar fight, raising their elbows to shoulder level and bending them back.

“Depends.” Natty turns and gives him side-eye. “What do *you* think I did?”

“I think you fucked yourself,” the captain says.

“Yeah? How’d I do that?”

“You jumped one of our brothers.”

“He need jumping?”

“He’s in the ICU now.”

“Because of what *I* did?”

Unlikely this is a coincidence, being placed in a holding cell with people he’d had a conflict with earlier. Protocol should have separated them. Maybe it’s just the overcrowding tonight. Or maybe someone is fucking with him, playing fast-and-loose with the rules because they figured out just who his father was.

“Here’s the thing.” The captain lowers his voice. “Our crew, we’re a family. We eat together, we sleep in the same room, we put our lives on the line for each other. You hurt one of us, you hurt all of us.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.” Natty shrugs.

But little pinpricks of concern are giving way to a massive bubble of panic forming. He has literally no memory of anything after ten o’clock last night.

“When we get out of this place”—the captain lays a heavy hand on Natty’s shoulder—“there’s going to be a conversation.”

“Whatever.” Natty brushes it off.

“Not ‘whatever.’ This is going to happen.”

All the other men in the cell are staring. This is a test, a proving ground, to see what he’ll do. Backing down or offering a feeble apology would be a fatal choice for someone about to go in the system. Even his father, champion of the oppressed and defender of the underdog, would admit, after a few scotches, that no one loves a pussy who can’t stand up for himself.

“You’re crowding me,” Natty says.

He stands up to his full five foot ten inches. The captain is at least a head taller, but Natty holds the bigger man’s gaze for a full ten count before he allows himself to blink.

“There are fifteen thousand people in our department,” the captain says. “You’ll be safer in Rikers than you will be out on the street.”

“You know what?” Natty pulls up on his belt loops. “If what you say about me is true, I must have issues. And you’re triggering them.”

A buzzer sounds and a heavy door opens down the hall. A couple of court officers walk up to the cell, having probably seen enough on their CCTV monitors.

“All right,” says one of them, a municipal Medici with a clipboard and a Staten Island accent. “Gentlemen, some of your attorneys are here to speak to you before your arraignments. I have Alvarez, Pablo; Carter, Marcus; Dresden, Nathaniel . . .”

“Peace.” Natty nods at the firemen.

The door opens and he joins the line of defendants being led to a series of booths in the hall between the pens and the courtroom.

His father’s best friend and law partner, Benjamin Grimaldi, a.k.a. Ben Grimm, a.k.a. Benny G., is at a small table in one of the cubicles, a steel mesh partition separating him from the client side and making only a few fleshy sections visible at a time.

“Goddamn, kid,” he says in his Brooklyn grand opera baritone. “Didn’t anybody tell you the war is over?”

Tears of relief pump up behind Natty’s eyes. Hallefuckinglylujah. The cavalry is here. If the mesh wasn’t in the way, he’d throw his arms around Ben.

As usual, Ben is dressed with the kind of pimpish, bad-ass Jim Dandy flamboyance that can only be pulled off with a Marine Corp bearing, a heavyweight boxer’s physique, and a head shaved clean and round as a cannonball. On a lesser man, a purple Hermès tie and matching pocket square might seem—well, a little swishy, even when worn with double-breasted Hugo Boss pinstripes. But on Ben, with his iron jaw and his deviated septum, they looked like the heraldry of a warrior-king.

By contrast, Natty’s own father, David Dresden, was a bit of hippie

shlub in his old corduroy jacket with the patched elbows and his gasoline-rainbow ties. A decent man. An admirable man. An *estimable* man even. He took on unpopular causes, challenged the authorities, got innocent men out of life sentences and at least one off Death Row, and argued successfully twice before the Supreme Court. While usually getting home in time to have dinner with his family. He took his only child to pediatrician appointments, helped him with his math homework, pitched in on art projects, and tried to teach his boy how to play the guitar.

But Ben was the man Natty truly wanted to be.

The first call you'd make when you were in trouble. Natty's earliest memories are of his own sticky-stubby fingers tracing the smooth dome of Ben's scalp, instead of getting caught in Dad's stringy locks. And with only daughters at home, Ben was always happy to take Natty camping in the Catskills, where he taught the boy how to split wood and build a fire.

While Dad was off at protest marches with Pete Seeger and Harry Belafonte, Ben, a former Golden Gloves fighter, taught Natty how to box. Enrolling him at Landau's gym, getting him his first pair of Everlast gloves, and signing him up for his first junior tournament when Natty was twelve. While Ben wrapped his hands in the locker-room, Dad showed up in his Grateful Dead *American Beauty* t-shirt and said, "You don't have to do this." Trying to give his son an easy out. Not realizing it was the worst possible advice to give a boy trying to psych himself up for his first physical combat experience.

So once Natty was between the ropes, facing a beast built like middle school Mike Tyson, it was Ben's voice that he listened for calling out "stick and move . . . keep your guard up . . . stay off the ropes . . . pick your spots." He waited until he saw the opening, landed a solid shot through the headgear, and dropped the larger boy to the canvas. Then beamed as Ben got in the ring to hold his bony trembling arm aloft.

While Dad talked about "the importance of the struggle," Ben was just about winning. His wall had framed headlines about the Mafia cases he won as a state prosecutor and the acquittals he'd collected later as a defense lawyer. He kept a pair of old brass knuckles in a desk drawer and sometimes sported a .38 caliber service revolver in an ankle holster, which his own father had worn as a New York City police officer. He had

a collection of watches that included a gold Rolex Chronometer he'd been given by Tupac Shakur as a thank-you for representing him in a traffic dispute years before. After Natty made it through basic training at Fort Benning, it was Ben, who'd served in Vietnam, taking him out for a steak dinner at Peter Luger's to celebrate.

But thinking back now on how the constant comparisons must have weighed on Dad, Natty feels a sting and contraction in the middle of his chest, as if someone had stuck a syringe into his heart and slowly pulled back on the plunger.

"Thanks for coming, Ben."

"What am I gonna do? Rack up billable hours while my best friend's son is in the can?"

"What do you hear from the DA's office?" Natty sits down.

"I won't lie. It's serious. They're going for the top count."

"Assault one?" Natty shows his palms. "These look like deadly instruments?"

"We'll get you bailed out," Ben says.

"What's the max I could get?"

"Twenty-five. But it's not going to come to that."

"Oh my God." Natty shakes his head. "Ben, I fucked up."

"We're not going to argue that now. The fact is, there's a probationary firefighter in intensive care at Bellevue, with a severe concussion and a broken jaw. And he's got an uncle who died on 9/11."

"Jesus . . ."

"Hey." Ben puts his palm flat on the mesh. "We are going to fix this. Okay? You're not some jerk-off who's already on parole. You did two tours in Iraq. You've got a half dozen commendations, a law degree from Duke, and—what?—two years as a prosecutor with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. And if that wasn't enough . . ." He raises his finger, pausing for dramatic effect as he rehearses his pitch for the judge. "You've just suffered a tragic loss in your own family."

"Do we really have to bring that up?"

"Why wouldn't we? Your father's dead less than a week."

Natty crosses his arms, starting to feel sick to his stomach, remembering how he handled himself at the funeral over the weekend, getting up in his army uniform to read Rudyard Kipling's "If—" at Riverside

Memorial Chapel. A not-so-subtle fuck-you to the overflow crowd of lefty lawyers, media geeks, Occupy Wall Street types, and common criminals trying to pass themselves off as “activists.” The so-called progressives who always acted like they had more of a claim on Dad than he did.

“*Nathaniel*,” his mother said afterward. “*I’m a let you be you.*”

“All right, what can you tell me about last night?” Ben rolls his neck.

“Nothing.”

“I don’t need to go into a lot of detail at this point.” Ben opens his legal pad. “Just enough to start the negotiation.”

“I don’t remember anything.” Natty drops his voice. “I think I blacked out.”

“Seriously?”

“There’s nothing past a certain point.”

“What’s the last thing you got?”

“Arguing with my ex-girlfriend on the phone, and then stressing about money with Mom afterward.” Natty shakes his head again, sick to his stomach from remembering. “So I was like, ‘fuck this, I’ve gotta get out of here. I’m bugging.’”

“Where did you go?”

“A bar called Rescue One on Fifth Avenue.”

“I know it. A retired firefighter owns it.” Ben’s tone of voice is not approving.

“I was just gonna have a couple and watch a few innings of the Mets in LA. But that’s where my highlight reel ends.”

Ben taps a silver Cross pen on the pad in a steady metronome rhythm. “So let me ask: has that ever happened to you before?”

Natty clasps his hands on top of the table, the right trying to take custody of the left, before he nods.

“When?”

“Just a few times. Mostly in Florida.”

“Have you been treated for post-traumatic stress disorder?”

“We really have to go there?”

“Yeah, we really do.” Ben tucks his chin down and looks up from the tops of his eyes. “It’s not clear if this firefighter is even going to make a full recovery.”

Natty takes a deep breath, as if preparing to go underwater for a while.

“I went to a few group sessions at the VA in Orlando. But I got sick of the long wait to get an individual appointment and didn’t think it was helping anyway. So I stopped. And never applied for disability.”

“Uh-huh. You want to tell me why you had to start going in the first place?”

Natty looks down, watching his own knees bang together. “I was starting to have some trouble at work, spacing out, fighting with my supervisor. And a couple of times on the highway I hit the brakes when I thought someone was tailgating me.”

“Oh, boy.” Ben stops taking notes. “Anything else?”

“In the parking lot of a Publix supermarket, when I was with my girlfriend and her daughter, I had to deck someone. But it was for good reason. He’d knocked the kid over with a shopping cart and wouldn’t apologize.”

An unwelcome flash puts him back in the sunshine. With Tanya screaming, her daughter, Ariel, cowering behind her tawny leg, as a dude in a Marlins jersey cups his bloody mouth and screams “lawsuit.”

“Let’s just cut to the chase,” Ben says. “Were you arrested for any of these incidents?”

“The police took a report after one of the tailgating things. And they showed up after I punched the guy in the parking lot. I got a deferred adjudication because I agreed to counseling.”

“So charges were dismissed?”

“I didn’t lose my army benefits, but it was strongly suggested I take a leave of absence from my job.” Natty sniffs, his tongue touching a sore spot where he’d been chewing the inside of his cheek. “Not giving you much to work with, am I?”

Ben spread-eagles his right hand up against the screen again. “Let me ask you something else, Natty. Do you trust me?”

“You know I do.”

“Do you believe I have your best interests at heart?”

Natty puts his palm up against Ben’s, the mesh in between. “I do.”

“Then I need you to listen to me. The answer is drug court.”

“Ben, I’m not an addict.” Natty slides his hand down. “I went out to have a few drinks because I haven’t been able to sleep since the funeral . . .”

“Don’t get hung up on the technicalities.” Ben barrels over the ob-

jection. "It's a diversionary program. Treatment is better for everybody than prison. The judge who handles it was in Vietnam around the same time as me. He's taken over other cases where the defendant was a vet. If the other side is willing to deal, I might be able to get you counseling for PTSD instead of jail time."

"What about keeping my law license? Who's going to hire me if that's on my record?"

"*I am trying to save your neck, son,*" Ben says. "If convicted, you will lose not just your license, but all your military benefits. And you will destroy your mother. Who just lost a husband. You want her to have to drive six hours and get felt up by some inbred redneck prison guard every time she wants to see her kid?"

Natty shakes his head and picks at the dried blood on his knuckles.

"Then let's get to it." Ben stands up, does the pocket mambo to make sure he's got everything, and then grabs the pad. "Oh, and Natty? One other thing."

"What?"

"I'm aware you and your father had your differences. But you should know David was always very proud."

"If you say so." Natty looks over his shoulder again, to see the court officers escorting out the firefighters and the wet brain who'd been pestering him in the cell.

"Enough." Ben gets up. "I'm gonna talk to the judge. See you out there."

Natty nods and watches him go, tongue touching the inside of his cheek again and then pulling back, the sore spot still too tender to probe.