

Chapter Two

Kuwait

At night, the desert was cold, bitterly cold and the wind blew hard against the skin and by day it scorched the earth under the feet. However, the movement of uniformed people of all shapes and sizes was amazing to see. Everyone seemed to know where they were going through the organised chaos of pre-battle.

Missile alerts were fairly frequent but nothing actually happened. There was almost always a collective 'Thank God' expression that echoed throughout the camp after every false alarm. But all of them knew that one day, one hour, or one minute, one of those attacks would be for real.

Iraq had already attacked Israel with Scud missiles earlier in January. Though somewhat slow and cumbersome, those weapons had the desired effect as they signalled Saddam's pre-publicised threat to launch an attack. The world had waited for Israel's response, knowing their capability would be either conventional or something more. The Israelis', metaphorically and militarily speaking, kept their hands in their pockets, leaving the fighting to someone else.

During the waiting, Richard had become accustomed to the bravado and innuendo of the combatants. He was after all in the Army, not a bowling team. The subjects that permeated most of the conversations were sex, politics and religion, much of which could be summed up in one simple phrase. 'God help us! I hope the fucking President knows what he's doing!'

Letters home was the other main occupation for many of the soldiers. In snatched moments, a few urgent words were scrawled down on pre-prepared cards or paper with just a hint of the emotions that were running through the writer. For those who had eloquence of phrase with more than GCSE English O Level, the sentiment was clear. But for those whose command of the written word was more oblique, then it was left to the reader to form their own opinion of what emotions were being exchanged. Richard found himself somewhere in the middle, as his wife, son, and baby daughter occupied all of his words as he wrote.

Hello Julie, darling,

I wish I could tell you what I am doing here. I didn't sign up for this, but I suppose it's a soldier's lot and duty to go where he is sent. I can tell you this, it's not a very hospitable place and a lot is going on. I find it difficult to put into words exactly what it is I want to say as I have never been faced with anything like this before and it's not easy to think that by the time you receive this I might not be here anymore. I realise this is not what you expect to read but who knows what might happen? Sorry for sounding so bleak. I have made arrangements should

anything happen but I am confident it won't. We are all geared up and ready to go, so hopefully it will be over soon. I am sure you will follow it all on TV. That sounds odd, doesn't it, watching war on the television as it happens. I pray that I get through this. Please cuddle the kids for me and make sure they know that I miss and love them very much, as I miss and love you.

Always, for a day and evermore,

Richard

He folded the letter, put it into an envelope, and left it on the table for collection. The scream of the siren heralded a new attack so he ran for cover as fast as he could.

The next few hours saw the activity rise considerably, the imminent attack grew closer and closer, the pressure point was about to be reached. Richard lay on his canvas bed hidden in the pages of his guidebook. He had already read it almost from cover to cover and probably knew as much about Cyprus and the Aphrodite legend as the local tourist guide, but somehow he wanted to learn more. But now was clearly not the time to do it. If he came through this he would try to get closer to the mystery of Aphrodite's Rock, because he was sure there was a mystery behind it. It simply needed someone to uncover it. Those three rocks in the sand couldn't be all there was to the legend. There had to be something more, but what? Wrapping himself up in history and myth brought him comfort from the fear that lay ahead. Perhaps it was this more than anything else that he asked for when he had prayed to the Goddess in the helicopter. Yes, he wanted safe passage and to get home, but above all, he wanted something to take his mind off the terror that he felt inside. In an odd kind of way she was already providing it.

The morning of the 24th of February started like most mornings, with the desert sun rising early and cutting its rays across the orange coloured sands. As the last remnants of a lazy moon disappeared out of the sky, the sun burnt bright and shadows became long and low as if in their design they painted the ground.

Across the makeshift parade ground, soldiers and combatants of all ranks and denominations made their way from one place to the next. Exercise was in full swing, as discipline or recreation and the buzz of anticipation was all around the camp.

Richard stood by his tent watching then looked across to the approaching figure and seemed to recognise him, but from where he was not sure.

'Good morning,' the stranger spoke with authority in his voice, and across his uniform he displayed several winged badges. He was not as tall as Richard but was broader in shape, if not muscular, well-built, solid, his face well-tanned and his eyes blue. His hair was a dark brown, bordering on black with just the hint of a few strands of grey peeping through. Undoubtedly, among his most redeeming features was his smile, which was broad and wide and genuine.

Richard gauged his age at about thirty to thirty-five.

‘Peter Shaw, I was your pilot, on the bird that brought you over.’

Richard looked somewhat bemused. ‘Bird...’

‘The copter, mate, I brought you out here. Peter Shaw, pilot.’ Peter repeated himself. ‘Good to see you!’

‘Yes, great, thanks. Sorry, the bird,’

‘Oh shit, don't mind me, bird, choppers, copters, all the same. So, how are you getting on, settling in? These drills are a real pain, aren't they?’

Richard starts to remember the journey over and his prayer to the goddess. It brings a wide grin to his face. ‘Richard, Richard Cole.’ He too repeated himself as if to make sure Peter knew whom he was talking to. ‘Good to meet you too!’

Peter carried on with his conversation as if he had not heard Richard's intro. ‘All necessary I guess. Hate to think those Iraqis would use the stuff, but can't be too careful. They have done it before.’

The Siren sounded on cue and the two scattered towards the makeshift shelter.

Peter just has time for one last expression before ducking down into the shelter. ‘FUCK, here we go again!’

‘It seems so!’ Richard's nod confirmed the situation.

The all clear sounded and the anxious soldiers and troops exited from their shelters, another drill it would seem over.

Later that morning, Peter returned to Richard. As both stood outside the tent chatting, Peter puffed on a small cheroot-style cigar with his expression one of melancholy. ‘Bastards killed twenty-eight Yanks today, and over a hundred injured. Some bastard missile it was, in Saudi.’

‘They're bombing cities now, before we ever get near the battlefield. What do you think they're going to do next?’

‘Not sure. Us probably! They have already had a go at Israel, remember, so anything's possible!’

‘Have you heard anything about when it might start?’

‘Just rumours. They say not long now.’ Peter drags on the cigar and a puff of grey smoke exits from his mouth.

‘I will just be glad to go. I hate waiting around, all that adrenalin pumped up and nowhere to go.’ Richard turned towards his new friend. ‘You ever think you might not come back from one of these flights of yours?’

‘Sometimes, yeah, but then I think if it’s going to happen there’s fuck all I can do about it! Besides, I like flying. Might do it when I get out, that’s if someone will have me. Only another year to go, then I am out.’

‘Four for me, just don’t know what I’ll do when I get out though. Got a trade here as an electrician, but I think I’d like to do something else. I might get into computers. That’s the future, so they say. Anyway, I just think I would like to try something different.’

‘Well, I hope it all works out for you. Got any kids?’

‘Two little ones, Matthew and Molly. There’s just a year between them, Matthew’s two and Molly is my baby. You?’

‘Not yet, said we’ll try when I get back. Sheila, my Missus wanted to get the house and stuff sorted first. I said she got it arse backwards but would she listen? NO! Still, she is the one who has to carry the little buggers, not me. I just have to make sure the swimmers get in the pool.’

‘Well, that’s the fun bit, Peter.’

‘You can say that again. Anyway, Rich, I am out of here. Catch up with you later.’

The two smiled and chuckled together and for an instant, the war was forgotten, then, Peter walked away.

Richard turned and went back inside. Sitting on his bunk-bed, he grabbed the book about the rock, sat down and began to read it again. He picked up another book and placed it beside the other one. Greek Myths was the title. He had found this one in the make-shift library set up on the camp.

As day turned to night, large groups of troops moved across the desert supported by a plethora of aircraft, tanks, trucks, missile bombardments, and artillery fire. The night sky lit up for miles around.

Richard, in contrast, regularly sat in his tent almost oblivious to the noise and the movement; but finally, his curiosity kicked in and he got up to look out of the tent-flap to observe all the activity, patiently waiting for his turn to be called. Then he returned to his bed and started re-reading the books.

Private Jones entered the tent kitted out for war. He was younger than Richard and not too smart; some would call him a grunt in certain circles, but that would be a little harsh on him. But there was no doubting the excitement in his face. If anything, you could see Jones’ adrenalin flowing through his veins as he pointed to the action unfolding in front of them. ‘Hey Corp, come and see this, it’s like a fucking armada out there, if that’s what you call it.’ Jones pointed and left just as quickly as he had entered.

Richard looked out of his tent and then skywards. Red flashing lights dotted the black sky and the noise of engines pierced the desert silence. He turned back to his bed and sat down to read, again waiting for the call. Then he spoke aloud, as if to drown out the chaos around him,

looking for a sanctuary, which he always found in the pages of the books. 'I have to go back to Cyprus, I know Julie will love it, and I'm sure she'll feel the same way as I do. I just know it. Just as I know there is something more to this goddess thing, but what?'

The terror they all felt was about to be unleashed, with the President's order to begin the ground war. Under cover of a desert night, the troops began to advance, equipped with night vision and machines that sported technical wizardry, designed to baffle and batter the maligned Iraqi army, most of whom were frightened and undisciplined conscripts skulking in their fox holes.

But in the space of just twenty-four hours since the assault, it was effectively all over, President Bush announced to a grateful nation that the troops had liberated Kuwait City. The force of the coalition had frightened resistance out of the Iraqis. The threatened chemical or gas attacks never came and the whole ground war was over in forty eight hours. Saddam's last desperate act was to set the oil wells on fire, believing that crippling the west's oil reserves would be something of a victory, even if a shallow one.

Peter was in a jubilant mood as he entered Richard's tent. Without thought and unable to contain his excitement, he plopped down hard onto the bed, waking Richard instantly. 'Rich, quick, come see this!'

Richard, still sleepy and bemused followed Peter outside.

A large TV screen had been set up and was broadcasting to the troops who had gathered around it. A ticker news tape displayed at the bottom of the screen proclaimed news of the victory, supported by pictures of Kuwaiti residents waving US flags as they welcomed troops, the images further reinforced by the noise of several hundred cheering voices.

'It's all over mate, and you missed it!'

'What? What do you mean missed it?' Richard rubbed his eyes to clear the night before and to look on a new day.

'THE WAR, it's over, they're in Kuwait, we just have to mop up and then we can fuck off back home.'

'You're joking, aren't you? It can't be over.'

Peter began grinning wildly, slapping Richard on the back. 'Look at the screen, it is over. Well, almost. Just need the Iraqis to surrender officially, then that's it. They just chucked in the towel and they've gone. There's no one left to fight.'

'NO, no, it can't be. And I slept through it?' Richard's realisation finally sunk in.

'SHIT, so what! Just be glad it's over and there's not a scratch on any of us.'

‘Yeah, you’re right!’ Richard watched as the soldiers celebrated and small clusters of men and women rejoiced together. Privates’ Jones, Edwards, Thomas and Banks, and a couple of the other men Richard didn’t know walked over towards Peter and Richard and began shaking hands, smiling brightly, a look that decorated all their faces, as a sense of relief spread through the camp. Richard joked and listened and chatted with the others, and kept thinking how lucky he was. He had prepared himself for battle, had trained himself to battle readiness, and had also made his peace with God. Now, he almost felt cheated, exhilarated that he was alive and unscathed, yet, not tested. It was, as it was described to him later, two mismatched boxers in a ring, one flailing away to get in a punch, whilst the other pummelled the other into submission. The bout was over in just four rounds, or four days in war speak.

The following day, Iraq accepted all UN resolutions and everybody began to pack up to go home.

With the threat of any attack diminished, the camp relaxed and over the next two days, the atmosphere was almost cordial. Just outside the main camp area, Richard and Peter had found a quiet place to have a drink, a kind of farewell drink, as soon, they would be splitting up, going their separate ways, and back to their units. They lay down on the desert sand, between them a second bottle of sparkling vino they had started and was almost gone. It too would soon find a spot next to the empty bottle that already lay beside them.

Peter brushed off the sand with his hands and stood up, a little unsteady at first but quickly corrected himself. ‘Well, I’d better get back to the unit. Maybe we will catch up later.’

‘I hope so. Thanks.’ Richard raised the now just about empty bottle to Peter as a gesture of farewell. Almost as an afterthought he too stood up and took Peter’s hand. ‘Peter, you’ve been a good mate to have around.’

‘No problems. I hope we can stay friends! After all this has passed us by. Anyway, better go, or I will get bollocked, for being AWOL. Good luck.’ Peter said and began to walk away.

Richard called him back with his next statement, just as Peter moved forward and took a final swig from the bottle.

‘Do you feel cheated, Pete?’

‘Cheated, why?’

‘We trained all those years to get ready to fight and to prove ourselves and now we don’t have to. All those exercises, the effort, adrenalin, and fear locked up inside. That’s what I mean by cheated.’

Peter placed his hand on his friend’s shoulder. ‘No, Rich, I don’t feel cheated. I just feel glad to be alive and out of it, and so should you.’

‘I do too, Pete. I feel glad to be alive. But I can’t help thinking that I’ve missed something, something that I should have done or seen, something important.’

‘No you haven’t, you’ve just been lucky. We all have, really! So I’m grateful for that... Good luck and see you around.’ Peter shook Richards’s hand, they hugged once more then both went their separate ways.

CHAPTER THREE

Highway 80

Richard felt content as he slumbered under his single sheet, his rest only interrupted by the face of his Sergeant cowering down upon him.

‘COLE! COLE! Get up! We are needed somewhere.’

Richard responded to the summons immediately and within a minute or two of his waking was up, dressed, and ready for the day. ‘I am packed, Sergeant, all set for the off.’

‘Not today, Cole, you are going with me. We have an observation to carry out. Get your gear and be ready outside, in five.’

‘Yes, Sergeant,’ Richard said as he looked around the tent and shuffled a few items into his kit bag.

Sergeant Hancock was a soldier’s soldier, who had been around some time and had seen action in places that most people would shudder at the thought of, including Northern Ireland and the Falklands. His experience was invaluable in a tight spot and he was as strict as he was compassionate. Kuwait would be his final duty, as he was set to leave the army as soon as they got home.

The blades of the helicopter were already spinning and the dust being thrown up made Cole cover his face immediately. Hancock bundled him into the chopper, and Richard looked towards the front, Peter was not the pilot. The craft ascended slowly at first then faster as the ground moved further away from them. Richard could hear the sound of the rotors and that was about all he could hear as they pulled away from base camp and out into the desert.

‘We are going to pick up a jeep, from there we are going across the desert to these coordinates,’ Hancock pointed down to a map he held in his hand. ‘There is some big party going on with the Yanks and they just want us to observe, ok?’

Richard nodded his understanding of the situation.

The copter began to descend. They couldn’t have been in the air more than fifteen minutes but the scarred landscape below bore testimony to a war that was in its last throes. The crumpled machinery lay burning, as plumes of black smoke rose into the clouds.

Both men jumped from the copter and began running towards the barely visible camouflaged jeep, parked close to a sand dune. Wasting no time, Hancock pulled off the camouflage and jumped in, Richard looked back towards the chopper, which was already in the air, as he stepped into the jeep.

Sergeant Hancock was in the driver’s seat revving the engine, waiting on Cole. Richard clambered in beside him and the jeep sped off, the trail of dust and spinning tires leaving a tale in the sand.

Hancock said nothing as he kept driving and looking down at the map. Richard too said nothing and looked ahead. There was nothing visible, just sand, sand, and more sand heaped into dunes or furrowed out into small holes. But the further they distanced themselves from camp, more remnants of an army in retreat lay scattered across the ground and as they approached the Kuwaiti border, two other jeeps joined them. They acknowledged each other and in a threesome headed towards the border.

For the first time since they left, Hancock turned to Cole and above the roar and thumping of the engine and the road noise below them told him what was happening. ‘The Republican Guard are trying to get out of Kuwait, making a run for it, and taking whatever they can with them. As I said, the Yanks are looking to give them a farewell party, going to bust them open. It’s our job to watch and listen. We only engage them if we have to, understood?’

‘Yes, Sergeant,’ whatever way this turned out it would be Cole’s first action.

The jeep bumped and thumped and trundled from gear to gear over the terrain. Cole and Hancock were more than once bounced and thrown up and down in their seats before reaching their destination, the Jeep slowing down, before stopping on a small incline.

In the distance, was the fast approaching sight of billowing pillars of black smoke edging up towards the sun. Encamped in their observation spot, the two men watched as the bombs and precision rockets homed in on their targets. Sporadic and then more controlled gunfire spurted out across the landscape as faint screams and more gunfire echoed across the dirty road in front of them.

Richard looked up, the scream of jets above and the silence of the smoke rising provided a surreal backdrop to the carnage unfolding below them. He gripped the chinstrap of his helmet and tightened it as he lay down closer to the top of the incline for a better view away from harm’s way, his heavyweight field binoculars already focused on the landscape ahead. He could see the signpost Highway 80 written in Arabic as well as English, the road markings with the figure 80 just visible.

It was 8:00am and already the blazing sun added to the intense discomfort of their surroundings. Slowly, Cole and the Sergeant edged closer to the highway and began to witness the battle as the other two jeeps headed east, away from the highway.

At first it was difficult to make out what was happening, as the highway was littered with a convoy of military and commercial vehicles, tanks, personnel carriers, army lorries, buses, cars, and vans. Everything seemed to be aflame. Among the wreckage of exploding vehicles were scores of bodies. Some were dead soldiers still in their uniforms. Others were civilians, men, women, and children, all clustered together in a vain attempt to escape and all lying on the ground in small huddled groups. Inside one of the buses, some children were still in their seats on the bullet splattered bus, their bloodied faces turned against the remains of the glass windows.

Richard eased his body closer to the road. He was sure he could be seen now, as more waves of airstrikes continued to pound the road. Amongst the weapons used were deadly heat-seeking missiles which snaked their way through the air and the wreckage, before smacking into their targets and spreading more carnage and mayhem as well as dense palls of smoke that rose into tall pillars. Cries of agony accompanied each strike, followed by a silence which seemed to absorb and eat up the impact. Engines raced and throbbed as more vehicles tried to run the gauntlet, only to be hemmed in by constant machine gun and rifle fire.

Some of the firing came from inside the twisted metal of the wrecked cars, as desperate insurgents fired back in retaliation; the occupants trying to shoot at the helicopters, tanks or halftracks closing in on them. For a few brief seconds, it was their guns blazing in retaliation, the familiar rattle of their AK 47's in full voice only to be silenced by a direct hit on their vehicle, which rapidly became engulfed by flames, in the entrapped convoy.

Throughout, Richard watched and listened and now a new sense kicked in, that of smell. The smoke smelt acrid and tasted bitter and he began to cough and choke on the fumes, but it was not just the smoke that drew the bile to Richard's throat and mouth. It was the stench of burning flesh and spilled fuel, mixed with the raw metallic smell of bullets crashing on metal before they ricocheted into innocents, which left the area caked in a phosphorous aroma drifting across them, as more blood spilled into puddles before them. Richard drew his binoculars back from his eyes as the sweat dribbled from his forehead.

Hancock looked at him and began to laugh, enough to crack a dent in the serenade of combat.

'What?' Richard's bemused expression added even more curiosity to the reason he was laughing and such levity in such a desolate situation.

'Cole, I wish I had a mirror, or better still a camera. You should see yourself. You look like a fucking Panda.'

'What?' The same word repeated as Richard stared into the lens of the binoculars reflecting his somewhat unusual look. The rings of the binoculars had mingled with his sweat and two black rings now rimmed his eyes. He reached for a cloth handkerchief and wiped away the rings.

'Here, take this.' Hancock handed Richard a small jar of Vaseline. 'Make sure you put plenty under your nose.'

Richard took the jar, opened it, and promptly placed a large dollop of the gel under his nose and along his face. He handed the jar back to Hancock who repeated the action.

'We need to move in closer. Keep sharp and if you see something that needs killing, kill it.'

Richard breathed deep. The Vaseline was working. It was all he could smell as they both slithered down the hill to another observation point to take up their positions. This one, less than two-hundred yards from the highway.

A small troop of American soldiers led by their Corporal walked gingerly towards the colony. The soldiers were all heavily armed; some with M16's took cover behind some of the smouldering wrecks as they picked their way through the remains to find better targets.

Hancock crept nearer, moving across the ground on his belly, before nodding to Richard to stay close and pointing to a spot even closer to the roadway. Cole edged himself along the ground, he too crawling towards the place. It was a burnt-out lorry, one of the first hit, as it cooked in the sun. Cole lay below the chassis, to watch as the Corporal signalled to his troops to head down the road.

The troops fired into vehicles, looking for anyone with a gun or a bomb. They continued to search and *reckie* in single file and then in twos along the column, moving from one vehicle to the next, mopping up any stragglers, regardless of their look.

A single shot rang out against the metal shell of a truck close to where the Corporal stood. His troops returned fire in a volley of rounds and rallied around the wreckage of a bus.

In the distance, more troops could be seen running towards the group. Hand grenades were tossed into vehicles almost casually, and exploded, as more civilians hiding in the vehicles died mercilessly.

The mopping up operation of the convoy continued without hesitation as the jets screeched high above them and the helicopters hovered and sprayed the road with machine-gun fire from inside, cutting off any possible retreat. Explosions ripped through the highway as pockets of the road opened with great gaping holes, bright orange coloured flames shot out from them, stretching skyward.

Richard watched, not moving a muscle, as the troops continued to clean the area.

From behind a wrecked car, an Arab woman emerged, clutching a bundle in her arms. It looked like a baby wrapped in a single blanket. The woman wore a long black one-piece dress, her face was covered by a black veil, just her eyes showing through a gap in the material, and her dress was ripped and splattered with blood and dirt as she staggered out from her hiding place towards the soldiers. Richard focused his binoculars on her. There was no sound as he watched her stumble forward on her way to the troops who stood with their guns aimed at her.

Once more, she fell to her knees; her arms outstretched, pleading for someone to take the bundle from her. She slipped again and Richard could clearly see that one side of her body was covered in thick blood oozing out of a deep wound, flowing freely, spattering the ground under her.

The Corporal moved closer flanked by his troops but cautious of any possible suicide bomber, he stood two to three feet from her. She stretched out her hands and arms and offered the bundle to him again. Reaching forward, she unclipped the veil from her face. It was an act of total surprise for the Corporal, something he never had seen before—an Arab woman unveiling herself to an infidel. He deemed the gesture an act of honesty as the woman smiled, revealing her young face with its light skin and piercing dark eyes that opened wider as she watched him take the bundle from her.

A smile spread across her face. It was her last emotion, for once she was sure the bundle was in the soldier's safe keeping, she detonated the device concealed in her dress and all within five feet of her, decimated, as shrapnel and metal shards hit the soldiers, tearing away flesh and body armour. Body parts and limbs flew into the air like flesh twigs as bodies crumbled into the ground and what was once a living breathing man, was now just a piece of burnt meat with its insides ripped apart, his flesh and bones arrayed like confetti decorating the ground. The corporal had christened the bones of his victims 'flesh twigs' because when you stood on them they snapped, like twigs. Now, his own flesh twigs lay scattered and discarded from his once proud body.

The shocked, blood-splattered soldiers remaining, emptied their weapons into the cars and lorries where the woman had come from, continuing to shoot until their guns were empty, the hatred for their enemy only appeased by their fingers on the triggers.

Richard, stunned and numb looked on, as tears began to fill his eyes, but he could not or dare not weep. He checked that Hancock was not looking as he quickly wiped the tears away with his cloth handkerchief. Sergeant Hancock put down his binoculars, sat back and took two long swigs from his bottle of water.

Around them, silence broke into the volume of battle. For just a few seconds, the only noise they could hear was the crackling of fire and breaking of glass as the heat expanded, turning it back to liquid.

For an hour or more Richard and Hancock sat in their observation position, few words passing between them.

One of the American soldiers moved towards them, Hancock stood to acknowledge him. 'We are just here to observe, Lieutenant. Is it all clear now?' He saluted firmly, the salute returned.

'Sure is.' Richard was not sure what accent he had but it sounded Southern States. 'If you want to come and take a look-see be our guest, but be careful, there may be a couple of those fuckers still anxious to take someone out. So stay frosty.'

Hancock got up, smoothed his uniform down with his hands, picked up his SA80, and headed down towards the centre of the column. Richard followed closely behind, the safety off on his weapon, ready to fire.

It was late evening before the Jeep rolled back into the base camp, one which had already started to empty out. Richard climbed out of the Jeep and headed back to his tent, his head, hands, jacket, and boots all caked in dirt, blood, and sand. Without ceremony, he tumbled onto the bed, burying his face in the pillow, his body exhausted and drained.

Minutes later, he dragged his body up off the bed, as he heard a noise outside.

Peter walked into the tent, beaming, in his hand a large bottle of red wine, with no label. 'Richard. Richard! Hey, you okay? Listen, I just heard we're shipping out in a couple of days. Hey, what's up? Hey...'

Not looking at Peter, Richard got off his cot, sat on the edge, and stared at his reflection in the shaving mirror opposite him on the makeshift table, made from a crate labelled spare parts. His face was dirty and creased by sweat, looking as if he had aged ten years, his head covered in a thick grey dust.

Peter, lost for words, held up the bottle and waved it at him, then realised the folly of that suggestion. Richard's expression was empty of emotion. 'Oh God, mate, I'm sorry. You were on observation duty today. I forgot. How did it go?' Peter leaned across the crate and picked up a green apple and began to polish it against his uniform.

Richard turned to Peter, his expression somewhat quizzical. 'Peter, do you remember where you were when Chapman shot John Lennon?'

'Yes, I was in London, Shaftesbury Avenue. It was near Christmas so we were doing a bit of shopping when I heard. Why?'

Richard sat still and looked at him. 'I know exactly where I was, I was in the car, in Winchester on my way to meet my mates, I was fourteen and we were going to a gig that night. I remember it came on the radio, and then they kept repeating it. I remember it, because I knew it was a day that I would never forget, never.'

'Why do you ask, Rich?'

'Why, because what I saw today, I will never forget, never forget it. It will stay with me always.'

'Lennon being shot was terrible, I agree, but this is war, war. You know the drill, Rich. It's what we are here for.'

Richard stood up and looked straight at Peter. His eyes were full of sorrow, yet there was deep anger and contempt for his friend at that moment for the way that he had just made that statement. 'You think what I saw today was WAR?' His voice rose in volume. 'You want to call this war, because it's convenient, so tell me where is the glory then, Pete, where are the

medals and the battles? If this is war... where are the heroes? This was no war... this was murder, pure cold-blooded murder, slaughter.'

'I don't know what you saw, nor do I want to know but it's them or us, man. It's the way it has always been; kill or be killed. We didn't write the rules; we just carry out the orders. It's never going to be pretty!'

'You think I am that naïve that I don't know the difference between war and murder? But you weren't there, and I appreciate that. You want me to tell you what it was like, I don't know if I can... How can I even begin to describe it, as I have never seen anything like it. Even now I can still smell the stench of burnt flesh. Still taste the acrid smoke as it choked my lungs. Still see the empty eyes of the dead soldiers, as they lay crumpled in their vehicles, as the road burned...'

Peter sat down; listening to Richards's heartfelt words, holding the apple in his hand, turning it round and round in his fingers.

'I have never seen such destruction, such terror, such horror. I watched it all and I did nothing...' Richard picked up a bottle of water and drank from it.

Peter watched the agony in Richard's eyes, seeing his friend relive every minute of the day.

'You know, a woman killed herself before my eyes. She blew herself up just to kill an American soldier. I think she blew her baby up too... I never thought I would see...' Richard stopped and replayed the scene in his mind, seeing the woman again, as she handed the baby to the US Corporal. He drank again, taking a longer gulp, and swallowed the cold liquid down. 'I actually thought... I thought I'd get through this without a scratch. Fuck! I know I have no divine right to say that. Why should I? It's part of my job, right? Dying! But today, this wasn't a job, it wasn't even part of being a soldier, this was slaughter, cold-blooded murder, disguised as war, and as I sat there watching, and listening, I wondered what it must have been like to be in that column of 2,000 vehicles and thousands of people. TRAPPED, unable to move, unable to go back, or forward. Men, women and children locked together in one line of despair and terror, with nowhere to run, or hide, just one long straight road to oblivion. Practice targets for an unseen enemy, picked off without thought for whom or what was killing them.'

'They chose to fight, mate. They could have surrendered. Most of the others did.'

'Chose surrender... You think so? They had no choice in this, no choice at all.' Richard turned to Peter. His eyes started to itch and he wiped them with the cloth he used to clean his Panda look. 'Ok, possibly they were the Republican Guard or maybe they were just conscripts given guns and forced to shoot at us. But what is our protocol? We shoot back, kill, or be killed you said. Regardless! And for what, most of those people were trying to escape it all! I saw dead mothers, holding and clutching their dead sons to their breasts as if they were children. I saw soldiers in their trucks and in the convoy, burnt alive, their heads etched into the metal of their vehicles moulded together in steel and flesh, twisted wrecks of humanity unrecognisable

as a name or a person...' Richard paused, picked up the bottle of water and held it in his hand. Trying to stop his welling eyes, he wiped the cloth against the sweat and tell-tale tears. 'After the bombing stopped and it was all over we got up from our sanctuary and I walked among them. And it was then I had the weirdest feeling. I felt like I was in a gallery, the pieces all part of a great exhibition, as if each person was an exhibit, displayed and captured in that moment, their death framed for all to see. And among all that wanton carnage, there was one abiding image that will stay with me always. Out of all the horrors I saw, a woman lay dead next to a young soldier; she had her arms clutched around his neck as if she was embracing him, cradling him to her. She was obviously his Mother, the one who had brought him into the world and now she was with him as he left it. In that moment, the two most significant events in that boy's life were captured and framed for all to see, the one who gave him life, the place where it ended, and she was there with him.'

Peter leans across to his friend; seeing the pain in Richard's eyes. 'Richard, whatever happened today, happened for a reason. Be thankful you came through it okay. I am, man! You could easily be lying there, on that road, next to them.'

'Yes, you're right of course.' Richard looked down to the floor and across to his friend. His anger mellowed. 'But... they were running away. From what though? From us, Saddam and his deadly regime, or from life itself? Where were they going, Peter? Sixty miles of highway with only one destination at the end of it, an uncertain future.' Richard paused, opened the bottle, and sipped the last drop of water from the bottle. 'But we saved them that trouble, didn't we? We gave them no future at all. We ended it for them, there on that road.' Richard sat back on the bed and looked to his friend, his eyes glazed with tears. 'I know what you're saying... I am a soldier too, a soldier, not a killer. I value life, but I know that if I had to protect myself, my family, my fellow soldiers, I would kill. But today... today I felt ashamed I was a soldier. I felt ashamed that I was a human being. I felt ashamed I was alive to see this.'

'Richard, you did what you had to do. You are alive, ashamed, or not. There were killers among them, rapists, and murderers. People who would not be thinking like you are now. They wouldn't think twice about putting a bullet between your eyes. You said a woman killed herself. She had no thought for herself or her baby. Her doctrine was to kill a Yankee soldier. Did she show pity for the soldier? Did she show any other thought for him or his family? He too was just doing his job. I can tell you now for nothing, they would not feel ashamed of doing it either! They would gloat over such an act of defiance. It's their culture to do so. Now you must forget it and put it to the back of your mind. We are going home soon. It's over, Richard. It's over.'

Richard sat back on the bed, 'Is it? You think just because I close my eyes it will all go away?'

'No, I do not. I never said it would. But if you don't at least think of something else, it will make you ill. You've got to snap out of it. It's over! Try and get some sleep. You have had a bad day. Let's just keep it to the one day, yeah? Go see the Doc, get some pills, some *tranqs*

sleeping pills, anything to get you out of these thoughts. I don't know, I'm no expert but you need to distance yourself from this. Ok, now, I better get back to the unit, we will open this bottle tomorrow when you are feeling better.'

Richard stretched his hand out to shake Peter's. 'Sure, and thanks.'

'No problems. I'd better go. Just try to rest, mate.' Peter left the tent.

Left to his thoughts, Richard couldn't think of anything else other than what he saw that day, so he picked up the book he had already read from cover to cover and fingered the pages. On the side of the made-up table was a small bottle of sleeping tablets. He took one, swallowed it without water and let it dissolve on his tongue, the after-taste seeming bitter as he continued to read.

Richard looked at the bottle again, opens it and took two more tablets. The after-taste was just the same as before. He dropped the book onto his chest and slowly drifted off. But his sleep was disturbed as he wrestled with the images of the day.

He opened his eyes, outside sirens wailed and voices cried out, explosions rang around the camp.

Private Jones rushed into the tent covered in blood; his stomach open, pulsing thick dark scarlet blood. He staggered towards Richard screaming. 'They're coming, get out!!!'

Richard rose from the bed and hurriedly put on his boots, picked up his rifle, exited the tent, and started running, in no particular direction. As he ran he noticed the camp was strafed with bullets. Richard ran towards the floodlights ahead of him to finally emerge on HIGHWAY 80. He raced past several of the vehicles and the faces of dead soldiers and civilians in a nightmare vision. Richard kept running and found himself standing amidst the devastation and carnage!

A woman dressed in black walked slowly towards him through the smoke, and as she drew nearer, he could tell she wore the scent of death. Beside him, the woman from earlier knelt close to him, gripped a grenade, pulled the pin, lifted the bundle towards him then raised her veil. He saw her face clearly for the first time. She had no eyes. Richard waited, unable to move then he heard a different woman's voice calling to him. 'Come Richard, come to me now.' It was softly spoken almost like a song.

Richard turned to the new voice and began to run towards it through the smoke and dust. He emerged on a shore, the sea rolling in around him, where all was still, except for the noise of the waves as they broke onto the beach. He looked out to sea, as the woman who was calling to him, beckoned to him to go to her. She was naked, perfect and serene as she walked from the waters towards him.

He snapped his eyes wide open and awoke, sweating.