
CHAPTER 2

The echo from the explosion rattled the walls, causing Captain Brandon Shepherd to grimace and open one eye. Each mortar seemed to be getting closer, and with all the military activity, he knew something big was going on. The insurgents had been active in the last two days, and that had kept everyone busy. As a doctor, it didn't matter whether Brandon was back home in the States or stationed near the Syrian border at a small medical outpost in al-Qaim, Iraq—he was used to long shifts and pushing his body to the limits of physical endurance.

Brandon sat up and rubbed his hand over his face, feeling the stubble. When he'd first come to Iraq, the mortar attacks had kept him awake, but now they had become commonplace, and he'd learned to sleep through them—except for today. Something just seemed different. He'd pulled an all-nighter at the hospital and had only grabbed a few hours of needed rest, but for some reason he felt uneasy and had been unable to sleep. He sighed and pulled his six-foot frame from his cot. If the mortars got any closer, they'd all end up in the bunkers anyway. He dressed in his fatigues, then grabbed his miniature Book of Mormon and slipped it in his shirt pocket before heading for the makeshift hospital. It was silly, but he felt better having the book near him.

Stretching his neck as he walked, he pressed his fingers against his freshly shorn head. Brandon closed his eyes against the sun's rays, which bounced off the metallic walls of the hangar-turned-hospital where he worked every day. The old hangar was said to have once housed Saddam's private jets. No one could really confirm the story,

and Brandon found that legends sprang up like wildfire around here, especially if they had to do with Saddam Hussein.

The soldiers had made modifications to the building, of course, by fortifying it and making the operating rooms impenetrable to mortars. Entering the building through a side door, Brandon squirted some disinfectant on his hands and was walking toward the supply closet when Dr. Rachel Fielding walked in, arguing with the doctor beside her. From the volume of their voices, he could tell it was a heated exchange. "Not again," Brandon breathed, heaving a sigh.

"You're wrong," Rachel said loudly, her tone tinged with anger. She barely looked at the doctor beside her as she spoke.

Brandon shook his head. Rachel Fielding was not an easy woman to get to know. She was opinionated and headstrong, but she was also one of the best surgeons he'd ever seen. And one of the most intriguing women he'd ever met. He walked toward the pair, curious as to what the problem was.

"Dr. Winthrop, Dr. Fielding," he greeted them.

Rachel nodded. "Dr. Shepherd. I thought you were off."

"I am, but I could say the same for you. Your shift was over when mine was." He tilted his head toward the two doctors. "Is there a problem? I could hear the two of you from across the room." Brandon looked encouragingly at Tyler Winthrop, who returned his gaze, the frustration evident in his eyes.

"Dr. Fielding and I are having a disagreement on the course of treatment for the little Iraqi boy they brought in this morning. His burns are extensive, and the head trauma caused swelling on the brain. We can't do surgery *until he's stabilized*." He enunciated the last sentence, looking straight at Rachel.

"He's stable enough, and he should be at the larger hospital in Baghdad," Rachel said firmly. "The medical chopper could get him there quickly, and he would be able to get better medical treatment than what we can offer here. If we wait, he will die." She looked at her watch. "The medevac chopper is doing a dust-off right now; when it gets get back, he should be taken to Baghdad."

"You're getting way too attached to these people," Tyler muttered.

Rachel set her jaw, tucking her hair behind her ear in irritation. "Which 'people' are we talking about, Tyler? We're here to help the

sick and wounded, period. And I don't want this little boy to die."

Brandon looked at Rachel, unable to keep the admiration from his glance. Her eyes were on fire with conviction. She was determined to get her way on this.

"Maybe I can help settle this. Who's the doctor on record?" Brandon asked.

"I am," they answered in unison. Brandon smiled. "Who saw him when he first came in?"

"Dr. Fielding did," Tyler admitted. "I came over when I was done with my other patient."

"Rachel, have you looked carefully at all the test results?" Brandon asked. She nodded. "And it's your medical opinion that he can be safely moved?" She nodded again. "Then let's go tell the parents."

Tyler stiffened immediately. "Will you at least hear me out?" he began.

Rachel shook her head and motioned for the interpreter, Nazir, to join them. They started over to the far end of the hangar, Nazir trailing behind as if waiting for Tyler. Brandon looked back and saw that Tyler was still standing where they'd left him, looking a little forlorn. When he saw Brandon watching him, he spun on his heel and walked out. Brandon knew he was angry, but he also knew that Rachel was trusting her gut. He knew that the situation could go either way, but for some reason he trusted Rachel. They reached the bedside of the little boy, and Rachel immediately went to his side and checked his vitals. Removing the stethoscope from her ears, she took a deep breath and turned to his parents.

"Your son is hurt very badly," she said slowly, then waited for Nazir to repeat her words. "We are only a small medical facility here. He needs to be at a hospital in Baghdad where they can treat his burns and help him wake up. We have a helicopter that can take him there." Nazir dutifully repeated her words, and the parents' eyes widened. The father paced slowly in his dishdasha, a soiled, robe-like garment dragging just above the ground. Finally he stepped forward and spoke in his native tongue. "He wants to know if they can go with their son to the hospital," Nazir said to Rachel.

"Only one of you may go," she said regretfully. "The helicopter will take one of you."

The father spoke to his wife, and she nodded. Turning back to Rachel, he said in halting English, "I will go." She nodded, briefly brushing her hand over the boy's brow, looking at the cuts and bruises that covered one side of his little face, where the shrapnel had made sharp, raking patterns.

"How old is he?" she asked, her voice softer now.

Nazir asked Rachel's question for her and waited for the father's reply. "He is nine," Nazir reported. "His name is Yusuf."

"Yusuf," Rachel repeated. Brandon watched her carefully, having never seen this side of her before. She was always calm, cool, and collected—if sometimes pushy—even in the most dire circumstances. He had seen her fight for respect as a doctor and as a woman while tired beyond words and still treating the wounded. She always seemed to be in control. Yet here, as she watched this little Iraqi boy, she seemed tender and vulnerable. Rachel caught Brandon watching her at that moment, a small blush rising in her cheeks. "I'll make the arrangements," she said abruptly and strode away.

Brandon caught up to her easily. "Hey, are you okay?"

She nodded. "Why wouldn't I be okay? He's going to get the treatment he needs."

"Rachel," he touched her arm. "It's been a long day already. I know you've been working for at least as long as I have. Let me buy you lunch."

"Buy me lunch?" She laughed. "What are you going to buy me? An MRE? Entertain me while we stand in a chow line?"

He stepped away from her. "I got a care package from my sister. But hey, if you're not interested . . ." He left his words hanging, but he knew he had her attention.

"What do you have, Shepherd?" she asked.

"Something I know you'll love," he hinted, raising his eyebrows. He could tell she was trying not to smile.

"I'm not interested in going out with you," she said bluntly, not quite meeting his eyes.

"I didn't ask you to go out with me," Brandon said. "We've both had a hard shift, and I thought you could use some cheering up. I'm willing to share my care package with you, Fielding, but only because I'm being nice."

She lowered her chin. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to men being nice to me without having ulterior motives." She rubbed her shoulders. "Let me get the helicopter on its way, and I'll meet you at the mess tent."

He grinned. "Deal. See you there." He watched her walk away, wondering how a woman could look that good in army fatigues. Taking a deep breath, he turned around and noticed a soldier across the room sitting in a chair holding a bandage to his head. Knowing Rachel would be a little while, he went over to him. "Have you been waiting long?" he asked.

"Yeah, they seem pretty busy," the soldier answered, standing up next to Brandon.

"Let's take a look." Brandon removed the bandage. "You'll probably need some stitches, but it missed the eye." He motioned for the soldier to follow him and proceeded to set up a stitching tray. Numbing the affected area, he deftly began stitching the eyebrow closed. "We're almost done," he said to his patient after a few moments. "That shrapnel barely missed your eye. You're a lucky man."

"Yeah, well my roommate doesn't think so," the soldier said, a small smile playing on his lips. "Last week I hit an improvised explosive device while I was driving *and* was involved in a firefight. He'll hardly come near me anymore in case bad luck is following me around."

Brandon smiled. "Well, I would say just the opposite. Your luck must be pretty good if you've survived all that and come out unscathed. I'd be happy to share a bunker with you."

Brandon put a bandage on the wound and began cleaning up his work area. "I'll see you back here in five days to remove the stitches," he instructed.

The soldier nodded. "Thanks, Doc," he said, and started toward the door. Brandon took a look around. All seemed quiet, which was usually a bad sign. Shrugging off his thoughts, he decided to think about sharing his care package with Rachel. This was his chance to see her in a setting other than the hospital.

Rachel rubbed her eyes, her body beyond tired. She should be sleeping, but she knew she couldn't rest until Yusuf was safely on his way. Even thinking about what had happened to him today made tears burn the back of her eyes. From what his parents had said, he had found an undetonated roadside bomb in a field, picked it up, and when it seemed to be a dud, he'd thrown it behind him, causing it to go off. His life had been changed forever. When he should be thinking about school and friends, he would be fighting to stay alive. Shaking her head, she tried to gather her thoughts as she walked toward the side of the hospital to wait for the chopper. She folded her arms and looked out the doorway. The sun was already high in the sky, but there wasn't much to look at. Unless you were near a river, there wasn't anything green here. It was all orange-brown silty dust that got into everything—clothing, hair, and mouth—and made you long for the moment you'd be able to wash it off.

She thought of Brandon's offer to buy her lunch and smiled. His eyes always seemed to have a light in them, and he had a ready laugh. He was a peacemaker among the medical crew, and she liked his calm demeanor. The fact was, she hadn't had time to think much about any man since her early days in medical school, and her complete focus on her goal of being a good doctor generally put most colleagues off. Brandon didn't seem fazed at all by her businesslike attitude, though. He genuinely seemed to be interested in friendship, and she had to admit she was intrigued by him.

She could hear the rumble of the rotor blades and knew the Black Hawk helicopter was approaching. Since this was generally one of the more dangerous times—landing or taking off—she put on her helmet and ran a hand over her forty-pound flak jacket. *Battle rattle* they called it, because of the sound it made when you moved. Rachel had thought she'd never get used to wearing it while she was working, but she had.

Moving toward the landing site, she waited patiently while the helicopter touched down and the blades stopped turning. "Frank, I've got a little Iraqi boy that needs transport," she told the pilot. He smiled and gave her the thumbs-up sign. "I'll have him ready for you in about fifteen minutes," she promised. She walked back into the hospital and quickened her step. She wanted to find Nazir and tell

him the helicopter had arrived so he could tell Yusuf's family. As soon as Yusuf was on his way to Baghdad, she could meet up with Brandon. She liked the thought of getting to know him better.

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Brandon retraced his steps toward his bunk, arriving at a small row of trailers that everyone called *cans*—each one housing two people. He passed by a few tents with soldiers playing cards or writing letters under the flaps. He opened the door to his trailer and looked at his own cot, inviting him to lie down for just a moment, but he knew it would be useless since sleep seemed intent on staying at bay, no matter how badly he needed it. He sighed. A hot shower would feel so good, just to get the sticky sand off his body. The bathrooms and showers were only two hundred feet away, but there was no guarantee he'd get any hot water, and the lines were usually long. He scrapped the idea, not wanting to miss his lunch date with Rachel.

He went to his locker and slid out his care package. His sister Kristen had sent him Kool-Aid, chewing gum, Skittles, and his favorite staples—ramen noodles, Pop Tarts and microwave popcorn. He sent a silent prayer of gratitude, feeling guilty that he hadn't written to Kristen since his transfer to al-Qaim. He just hadn't found the time yet, but he really wanted to tell her how much he appreciated her. Being in Iraq had given him a different perspective on how much his family and friends truly meant to him. Not to mention that the care packages Kristen sent were like a little bit of heaven. The food items—things he had once taken for granted—were a nice change from military food, and Kristen's letters and packages gave him something else to think about besides the broken bodies he was called to fix every day. He grabbed the noodles, popcorn, Skittles, and Kool-Aid before he closed his locker. He'd write that letter tomorrow, he promised himself. Right now, he was going to have lunch with a pretty colleague. Heading back over to the hangar, he decided he'd use the microwave there before meeting Rachel at the mess tent. He smiled at the idea of finally getting to talk to Rachel alone.

He was coming out of the hangar with two steaming cups of noodles when a loud explosion sounded to his right, followed almost

immediately by the ear-splitting whine of the proximity alarm. More scattered explosions came from the left until it sounded like they were surrounded. "It's a massive mortar attack," a soldier in front of him shouted, waving his arm for Brandon to get back. "Head for the bunker!"

The entire camp scrambled for cover. Brandon balanced the cups and ran thirty feet to the bunker. More explosions rocked the camp and smoke filled the air. His eyes began to burn as he sat down. Another soldier came in breathing heavily. He slumped down beside Brandon. "Hey, don't you work with that woman doctor?"

Brandon nodded, a feeling of foreboding building within his stomach. "Why?"

"I just saw her running toward the hangar. The colonel was yelling at her to get to the bunker, but she just kept running."

"Rachel," he said softly, blowing out a breath. Carefully cupping the noodles, he headed for the operating room, where he hoped she'd taken cover. Keeping low and running as quickly as possible, he made it to the door of the hospital and burst in, heading straight for the corner where the operating room was located.

Rachel stood when he came through the door. "Brandon," she gasped. She had a small trickle of blood on her cheek. Brandon set the cups on the table and moved to stand beside her.

"What happened?" he asked. "Are you all right?" He immediately used his shirt sleeve to wipe the blood away, trying to get a better look at the wound.

She waved him off. "It's superficial. I was trying to check on Yusuf; we'll have to wait a little longer before the chopper can get him out of here." They both sat down on the floor. "How did you find me?" she asked.

"Somebody saw the colonel yelling for you to get to the bunker. I figured you'd come here." He continued to look at the cut. "You might need a stitch or two."

"You surgeons are all the same. You want to operate on people whether they like it or not." She gave a wan smile. "I'm fine."

He took a cup of the noodles for himself. "I was on my way to meet you for lunch. Now we can have more privacy," he said, keeping his tone light.

She leaned over and her smile grew wider. "You planned this, didn't you?"

Brandon liked it when she smiled; it relaxed her features. "Yes, I planned this mortar attack so we could have lunch together in the operating room. You got me."

Rachel laughed and slurped one of her noodles. "Oh, this is heaven!" Taking a sip of the broth, she leaned her head back against the wall. "You never know how much you miss the simple stuff until moments like this."

Brandon agreed. "There's popcorn and Skittles for dessert," he told her.

Her eyes widened. "You've got Skittles?"

He nodded. "I thought that might get your attention."

She continued eating her noodles. "So, who's sending you these care packages?" she asked.

"My sister Kristen. She's actually getting married today. I had hoped to be there, but they extended my tour another two months." He felt a little pang of regret. "Kristen wanted to wait for me, but I couldn't let her do it. There's no reason she should postpone her happiness on my account."

"Do you know the man she's marrying?"

"I haven't met him, but from her letters, he sounds really great. His name is Michael Forbes. He works at the same political firm Kristen does."

Rachel raised her eyebrows. "Your sister's in politics? What does she do?"

Before Brandon could answer, the alarm sounded the all-clear signal. Brandon stood up. "I wonder what's going on. With all the military operations going on lately, this can't be a coincidence." He walked into the hallway with Rachel following behind him.

They saw Tyler as they rounded the corner of the hospital. "Frank's looking for you," he said. "And that interpreter, Nazir, is waiting to see if you want him to go with you and the Iraqi boy to Baghdad." He turned away without meeting their eyes, and the three of them walked out to the helicopter together. When they arrived, they saw the colonel talking to Frank.

"Colonel Palmer, is everything all right?" Tyler asked, saluting him.

“They’re getting more creative.” The colonel grimaced. “They put mortar tubes into some buckets of water, froze them, then put them all around the perimeter. When the sun melted the water, the mortars dropped, hit the bottom of the metal buckets, and fired. That’s why it seemed we were surrounded.”

Tyler shook his head. “Who thinks of these sort of things?”

“Something big is going on. And I’m willing to bet it’s about the summit later this week. Having the leaders of Syria, Iran, Iraq, Britain, and the U.S. in the country is just too tempting for the opposition, so they’re trying to distract us with stuff like this.” He looked over at Frank. “We’re tightening security at the Syrian border, but there’s a group of insurgents in al-Qaim that ambushed our guys a block north of the main square. We’ve got an urgent and a priority that need evacuation,” the colonel said.

“We’re headed over there now,” Frank said. “One of you docs want to come with me for the urgent patient?”

They heard several explosions behind them—probably more melting mortars, Brandon thought—but he and Rachel instinctively ducked.

“I’ll go,” Rachel said, coming up behind the men.

“No,” Brandon and Tyler said simultaneously.

“There’s no time to argue.” The colonel took Rachel by the arm. “We need to be up in the air now.” Rachel turned back to talk to Nazir, who was waiting near the entrance to the hospital. “The Iraqi boy will have to wait, Nazir. We’ve got some priority patients near the main square in al-Qaim. Will you wait?”

He nodded and, without saying a word, headed back into the hospital. “Your Cobra escort is waiting,” the colonel told Rachel, propelling her to the door of the helicopter.

“I’m coming with you,” Brandon said, patting his own flak jacket and adjusting his helmet. “If that’s all right with you, Colonel,” he amended. “Dr. Fielding may need my help with two patients. The insurgents are obviously close by, and they don’t seem to care we’re medical.”

Rachel and the colonel nodded, and they all climbed aboard the helicopter with Frank, a soldier, and the crew chief. Rachel briefly looked back at the base, then at Brandon. For a millisecond he thought he saw fear in her eyes, but it flickered and was gone.

"Be careful," Tyler said as the helicopter rotors started turning, then he crouched down and headed back toward the hospital.

The crew chief fingered his M-16, watching the landscape carefully for snipers or rocket-propelled grenades. Brandon kept his own eyes peeled, watching the scenery as it went by, finally turning his attention to the blue-gray sky which was a strange color that looked warped because of the heat waves rising from the earth. They passed over a shepherd with his sheep, and Brandon thought that if he didn't know better, he would never have believed this was a war zone. When the Black Hawk was at treetop level, Frank started darting and zigzagging, trying to be a difficult target. A downed American helicopter, even one with a red cross adorning its bulbous nose, would be a major coup for the Iraqi insurgency. Brandon rubbed his eyes and glanced over at Rachel. She was struggling to open the large medical supply cases that had been stashed at their feet. He helped her, and they looked through them together. Everything seemed to be in order, but Rachel picked up each instrument and bandage, handling it, and mumbling to herself. "What are you doing?" Brandon asked.

She didn't answer right away, and he just watched her, at the same time pulling the Skittles out of his pocket and opening the package. Only then did she glance over at him. "I'm familiarizing myself with the location of everything so that when we're in the middle of an emergency situation, I won't have to go looking for something." She eyed his Skittles. "You know, we never finished our lunch."

He chewed slowly, looking at her. "You're *familiarizing* yourself with the location of everything?" he asked.

She slapped him on the shoulder. "Yes, now can I have some Skittles or not?"

He poured some into her hand. "You're cute when you're impatient." Before he could say more, the helicopter jolted, slowed, and started its descent. "We've only got a few minutes," Frank shouted back at them. "There's a sandstorm coming, and the Cobra team is waving us off. If we go, though, those men will be on their own, and I don't want to leave them behind. Load and go, that's what we want, so let's get a move on."

Rachel and Brandon quickly surveyed the scene. A Humvee, still smoking, lay on its side, blown up by an improvised explosive device—the weapon of choice for the Iraqi insurgency. Some small-arms fire could be heard in the distance. Three U.S. soldiers were trying to form a protective perimeter around the downed Humvee, and the Cobra was providing some assistance, keeping the insurgents at bay. Rachel and Brandon quickly hopped out, each grabbing a medical case, the soldier who'd come with them following closely behind. Brandon looked up as he saw the sky darkening, unable to believe his eyes. A large, menacing black cloud of dust, dirt, and debris was barreling toward them. "Hurry!" Frank shouted. "The sandstorm's almost here!"

As they started moving forward, the Cobra pilot swooped in and picked up Frank's crew chief so the wounded would fit in the helicopter with both doctors. Then the helicopter circled back to pick up the three U.S. soldiers who were providing ground cover. The Cobra pilot shouted, "I'll cover you from the air, but get out of here, Frank, there's nothing more you can do. Go now! That sandstorm's right on top of us, and I don't want to come back here looking for you!"

Frank nodded and waved the Cobra team off. "You go. We're fine—don't worry about us," he called back.

Rachel nodded at Frank's gesture to hurry as she reached the wounded soldier on the far side of the perimeter. Brandon headed for the wounded man nearest the burning Humvee. The man was pinned beneath the vehicle, his legs obviously crushed. "I need some help over here," Brandon called to the soldier they'd come with, but he was already helping Rachel get her patient situated and moving toward the helicopter. "We've got to get the Humvee off him," Brandon yelled to Frank.

Frank started to unbuckle himself from his pilot's seat. "I'm coming," he shouted. Brandon nodded and felt for vitals on his patient. The soldier's pulse was weak. Time was of the essence.

At that moment, Brandon heard a strange whine, and it seemed as if everything went into slow motion. Frank climbed out of the helicopter and took two steps toward Brandon's position just as a rocket-propelled grenade hit the tail rotor of the Black Hawk. The helicopter exploded, throwing everyone backward. Brandon slammed

into the ground just as the dark sandstorm cloud descended on them, making everything coal black. Brandon's ears were ringing, and his shoulder felt like it was on fire. Smoke filled the area, mixing with the sandstorm and making it almost impossible to breathe. Brandon found some semblance of cover from what was left of the Humvee and tried to take deep breaths. The side of Brandon's head was wet and sticky, and he knew he had a head wound. In the force of the blast, his helmet must have come off. He felt around as best he could, searching through the blinding sand until he found the soldier he'd been working on. Reaching for the man's wrist, he tried to find a pulse and realized the soldier was dead.

Brandon felt torn between venturing farther out into the storm to find Rachel and the others and staying put. He began coughing uncontrollably, the sand whirling around him as though the devil himself were stirring it up. He lay still for a moment, trying to assess his injuries and taking shallow breaths. When he was finally able to sit up, he felt disoriented, and a blinding pain in his head caused him to wince. Brandon tried to get his bearings, determining he had to try to find the others. He crawled on his hands and knees, digging through the sand and going in the direction he thought the helicopter had been in, remembering that Rachel had been trying to move the wounded soldier. He moved slowly, reaching out like a blind man with a cane.

"Rachel," he called, his voice scratchy with sand. He thought he heard a faint cry and moved toward it. A few feet ahead, he felt a human hand, and as he scraped through the dirt and sand, he realized it was the soldier who'd been helping Rachel. He was lying at a grotesque angle, obviously dead. Brandon's stomach sank. "Please let Rachel be all right," he murmured to himself. His eyes were watering, and he could barely see the inches in front of him as he frantically searched for her. Within a few minutes, he heard a voice, "Brandon?"

"Rachel, I'm here!" he called. He crawled toward the sound of her voice. Finally reaching her, he grabbed her arms, trying to pull her toward him. She was lying on her back, and he could barely make out a trail of blood slowly seeping from a wound on her forehead. "Are you all right?" he shouted as he gently shook her shoulder. She

squinted, trying to open her eyes, but she didn't answer him, so he leaned closer. "Are you hurt?" he asked again over the roar of the storm.

She sat up slowly, shaking her head. Her voice was raspy. "My head hurts, but I think I'm okay." She rotated her shoulders and turned her head. "We've got to get out of here. I can barely breathe."

They both scrambled backward to where the Humvee was, their only sure source of cover, and ducked under it as best they could. Brandon was grateful that at least the sandstorm had suffocated the fire that had been burning on the vehicle, but he hoped it wouldn't suffocate them as well. Time seemed to stand still, and Brandon couldn't gauge how long they'd been huddled near the vehicle. After what seemed like hours, the sandstorm had finally spent its fury. Rachel and Brandon huddled together, pulling the collars of their uniforms up over their faces and doing their best to breathe as they lay partially buried in the sand next to the Humvee. Brandon tried to shield Rachel as much as he could, but the tiny, scratchy sand particles caked every surface they landed on. He could smell the burnt rubber and hear the crackle and hiss of the fire from the helicopter, but he could only see the sand in front of him. And Rachel. He decided to concentrate on her.

"Are you still all right?" he asked as he began to dig them out of the massive sand pile they were sitting in.

"I think so," she said slowly, helping him dig.

He suddenly held up his hand. "Do you hear that?" Brandon felt the ground shaking beneath him, then he heard the low rumble of trucks. But he wasn't alarmed until he heard guns being shot into the air and men shouting. Brandon's heart began to pound as the blood in his veins seemed to turn to ice. He looked into Rachel's eyes and knew that she had come to the same conclusion he had. They began looking for weapons, trying to stay low while attempting to wrench open the burned-out door to the Humvee. But it was to no avail. Everything was buried in sand and debris. They were trapped.

They crouched lower, watching three trucks approach. When the small convoy reached them, several masked men got out and surrounded the downed helicopter. They located Frank and the soldier Brandon had found, digging out their bodies and turning

them over, talking to each other in loud voices as they worked. Brandon peeked around the body of the Humvee, and, at that moment, a man who appeared to be the commander looked up and met Brandon's eyes. The man stared for a moment, his expression cold. He stroked his short beard, his expression calculating as his eyes bored into Brandon's. He began pointing and speaking to his men, his voice low.

"Make a run for it, Rachel," Brandon urged quietly. "He's seen us!"

"I'm not leaving you," she whispered fiercely. "Besides, there's nowhere to run."

Brandon silently agreed, and they looked at each other for a long moment, knowing these seconds could be their last. He grabbed her hand and squeezed before they both stood, wiping the sand from their faces. They were soon surrounded by men wildly gesturing with their AK-47 machine guns.

They took Brandon first, hustling him away from Rachel and forcing him into the back of one of the trucks. He craned his neck to look back at Rachel and briefly saw her wide, frightened eyes. He felt a flash of pain as the butt of a rifle connected with his head. And everything went dark.