

PROLOGUE

“I have a clean shot,” a voice rings out over the radio.

“Hold, do not fire.” The response in the sniper’s earpiece is calm but calculated and alert.

In the darkness of night, men and women in black suits scramble to get into positions that would provide some cover just in case a firefight were to break out. Their weapons drawn and at the ready. Another group, outfitted with tactical gear and heavy weapons, comes sprinting out of a heavily reinforced door, on the side of a stone building. All of them moving in unison, as though they had rehearsed for this moment hundreds of times.

Everyone settles into their own predesignated, defensive position surrounding the main entrance to the massive structure. Each, taking aim at a dark figure that is casually strolling towards them, along a well-manicured lawn.

“Stop right there!” A voice says sternly over a loudspeaker. “You are trespassing on government property.”

The figure pauses briefly to look back at a decimated steel gate through which it passed. Almost as if to taunt the two dozen or so men and women now taking aim at it.

“Put your hands up and lay down on the ground with your arms extended!” Is the next set of instructions from the loudspeaker. “If you do not comply, we will open fire!”

The figure turns its gaze back to the front entrance of the building and continues to walk calmly, as though there is nothing out of the ordinary. A radio click resounds in the earpiece of a sniper, who is perched on top of the massive building.

“Eagle one, give him a warning,” the voice says firmly.

Instantly, the silence of the night is broken by a sharp, echoing pop. A bullet lodges itself into the ground just in front and to the right of the figure. Sending up a small cloud of dust and debris.

“I said stop! Put your hands up and lie down on the ground!” The voice from the loudspeaker reiterates the instructions.

Unfazed, the figure continues to stroll forward as though nothing happened. The sniper’s earpiece clicks again.

“Eagle One, take out his knee, over,” the voice commands.

“Eagle One, copy, out,” the sniper responds with affirmation.

The crosshair of the sniper scope pans down the torso of his target. Although the men and women on the ground struggle to identify the dark figure's features from a distance, the magnification of the Eagle One's scope allows him to see every detail. The man's white hair is pulled back in a clean ponytail. His blue eyes appear to almost glow in the dark. White stubble covers his face...

He must be in his mid-fifties. A leather duster fits snugly around his chest and waist, held tight with thin straps that run across and around his body. Black riding boots come up almost to his knees, with loose-fitting pants tucked in neatly. He looks like a pirate that should be hijacking a spaceship in a sci-fi adventure film.

Although he does not appear to have any firearms, a long sword handle protrudes from behind his right shoulder. Perhaps a katana or something similar. The sniper's crosshair stops at the man's knee. Exhaling to steady his aim, the sniper pulls the trigger with expertise and another pop shatters the silence, echoing through the cold night.

Although what happens next only takes a fraction of a second, the story of a bullet being fired is quite fascinating – The trigger pull releases the hammer, which hits the firing pin. The pin then impacts the primer, creating a tiny spark, which ignites the gunpowder. The resulting explosion, inside the bullet casing, forces the tip to separate and begin its journey down the barrel.

As the bullet moves along it is compressed and spun up. The bullet then emerges with incredible force, accompanied by flames from the explosion. Now, charged with all that energy and perfect spin, it flies towards its target. Ready to penetrate whatever it hits and expend all its energy instantly upon impact. Without protection, such as armor, a bullet like this is absolutely devastating to the human body... but not this time.

Within an inch or two of the pirate's knee, the bullet simply dissipates into a blue ball. That, in turn, releases a bolt of lightning, which extends from the pirate to where the bullet originated. The bolt's energy travels instantly through the rifle and the sniper. The remainder of the bullets explode in the magazine and the sniper's heart explodes in his chest... All in less than half of a second.

The beauty of the lightning bolt, followed by the sound of a small explosion on the roof, takes even the most seasoned security team members by surprise. However, they quickly shift their gaze back to their target.

"Open fire! Fire at will!" The voice yells over the loudspeaker.

The quiet night instantly explodes with the chatter of assault rifles and pistols firing in near unison. But, from a distance, it sounds like only one or two shots had been fired. In less than two seconds, fifteen of the twenty-seven ground team members, along with every sharpshooter and sniper on the roof, are all dead. Just like Eagle One, the moment their bullets came within an inch or two of the dark figure they dissolved. For every bullet, a bolt of lightning arced back to each and every shooter, simultaneously.

Those still standing either missed or never discharged their weapons. Now paralyzed by the image of smoke slowly rising from the bodies and weapons of their teammates, they stand frozen with shock and

disbelief. The mysterious stranger doesn't stop. His pace remains constant, as though he is oblivious to what transpired just moments ago.

As he nears the main entrance, he stops to take in the carnage and terror that now surrounds him. Looking over the horrified, incredulous expressions of the ones still standing, he begins to speak.

“What a waste...” He says in a tone that is both calm and matter-of-fact. “They did not need to die, and neither do any of you. Do not get in my way and show me to the President.”

CHAPTER I

FRIEND IN THE DARKNESS

Darkness... Total darkness. My eyes struggle to pick up some outline in the emptiness. I need a glimmer of light, something, anything! I begin to wonder if I'm blind, but that's not it. Yet, there is definitely something different about my vision. It's like I'm in a void, enveloped by it. I cannot tell if I am standing on solid ground or floating in mid-air. Nothing makes sense... I must be dreaming.

I blink repeatedly to try to adjust, but it's of no use. Suddenly, two hands lunge at me from the dark. I see them clearly, almost as if they're emitting their own light. In typical dream fashion, time slows to a crawl. The hands move toward me slowly enough to analyze and even observe specific details about them, but I cannot react.

As the hands move closer, I notice dry, cracked skin. I can see blisters and cuts. There is a tint to them as if they had been exposed to the sun for far too long. Perhaps I am in a desert? But I don't feel hot... or cold for that matter.

Short fingernails, with jagged corners, as if the owner has been biting them incessantly. There is dirt under the fingernails, and the knuckles have dried blood, from cuts that weren't properly dressed. These are the hands of a laborer - perhaps a mechanic, a construction worker, or maybe a battle-hardened soldier.

As the hands stretch further toward me, my instincts begin to kick in. I should be jumping backward, sideways, or at least edging away. Yet, I feel no malice or threat. I stand frozen in time, almost as if the hands were moving in so quickly and unexpectedly that my body did not have time to react. Though in my mind, I seem to have all the time in the world.

The hands grab onto my clothes. I feel a tug and my shirt pulls tighter around my shoulders. It seems I am being drawn into the darkness or perhaps being held onto by someone who is being pulled away. I desperately try to focus my vision in an effort to discern what is happening – whose hands are these? Why are they holding onto me?

A part of me feels compelled to reach back and reciprocate, to help this person out there in the darkness... Then, just as the hands first appeared, a face begins to take shape. I know it is someone

familiar but cannot make out who. The vast darkness begins to fill with an air of chaos. Try as I might, I cannot discern the individual's face, not even to determine whether it is a man or a woman.

The grasp tightens and the gap between myself and the familiar stranger closes fast. I do not fight back, not that I could, even if I wanted to. I am being pulled with intent, but still, I feel no fear. The face gets closer, but like a photo with a filter, it is too blurry to make out the person's identity.

Suddenly, the lips become clear, and all my focus shifts to them. Like the hands, the lips show signs of wear from the elements. They are chapped and cracked. They part as if yelling something, but just as the darkness obscures my vision, the deafening silence makes it impossible to hear.

Whatever words escape the stranger's lips, come out muffled and unintelligible. In trying to decipher the words, I lose track of the proximity of the stranger's face. Then, I feel the mysterious lips press against my own.

A kiss? It feels like being kissed for the first time. All the confusion, fear, and concern melt away. Replaced by a mix of longing and desire, excitement and thrill. The kind of emotions you experience when you get something you've been waiting for forever!

Is this someone I've been attracted to for a long time? I try to think - to picture the faces of people I know... but my mind draws a blank. I am too stunned to do anything but return the affection.

For a brief moment, time grinds to a halt. Any second now, the darkness will dissipate, and all will be made clear. Yet, it seems that I have stopped caring about this as well. Passion consumes me and I no longer want this perfect moment to end.

Alas, the kiss ends as abruptly as it began. My friend in the darkness pulls away. The grasp on my shirt is released, and the hands fade back into the gloom from which they emerged. I am once again alone, all alone in the darkness.

As I reel from the kiss, my void fills with a familiar tune. It is distant and soft. A melody that I have heard many times over. It is telling me something, reminding me of something I must do.

The feeling is akin to being carried in by a tide. I gradually float back into consciousness and my world turns from darkness to blackness. The tune gets louder, closer almost... I open my eyes.

This feeling is not new to me. It happens often, several times a week actually. I know exactly what time it is - 5:13AM. Five days a week I awake to this tune. For some reason, I still try to verify this fact with my sleek smartphone. Hoping that perhaps a coworker pulled a prank and changed my alarm to 2AM, and I have another three hours to sleep...

The alarm always starts out softly and gradually becomes louder. I am still amazed at how long it took engineers to implement the ingenious concept of bringing someone out of their sleep with a melody that increases in volume. Rather than startling and snapping people awake with a loud, obnoxious car horn. That beats redundantly against the eardrum, like a baseball bat to the head.

It is Monday. Unlike many, I do not dread Mondays. In fact, I kind of embrace them. They imply that yet another week has begun. I get excited about the potential changes that I can bring to the company where I work. I have always known that I am destined to bring something great to the table. At one time I thought it would be the world, but for now, I will settle for a medium-sized business.

Over the years, people have told me that monumental change takes time. That it may seem difficult, especially if I am the one driving it. Of course, there are the natural disasters, wars, and a few other catalysts that can change the world almost instantly; but otherwise change, real, lasting change, does not come overnight...

At least that's what I remind myself, each and every Monday. I am aware that I am not much of a motivational speaker, but I am an awesome realist. The alarm's melody starts again, as the snooze timer runs out... I don't even remember having pressed 'snooze.'

"Ok, ok, I am awake!" I yell at my phone, as though it will make a difference.

The default snooze setting on my phone allows me a five-minute reprieve. Then, just as I begin falling back into a dream state, it smashes my eardrum at full volume!

"I've got to change that setting," I mumble to myself knowing full well that I will forget. Just like the last hundred times, I told myself to change it. As I prepare to get up, I realize that something isn't right. My body feels as though I was hit by a train. The bed is so comfy and warm... It beckons me to stay.

"No!" I yell out loud. "I am getting up. It's time to get ready for work, get some breakfast, and head out." After all, this is what I wanted, isn't it? Independence, self-reliance, and the ability to make my own way. To be the captain of my own ship and all that other empowerment stuff.

During the winter months, my room is especially dark. Sunlight does not penetrate the windows for another two hours. Yet, somehow today it seems even darker. The sole source of illumination is ambient lighting from the buildings and streets of the city. It permeates and reflects off the cheap, plastic blinds. Other than this, the darkness is almost palpable. There is little I need to see though. Especially, since I don't really have anything to stub my toe on in this place.

Some might call it 'living out of a box,' but I prefer the term 'minimalistic lifestyle.' There's an inflatable mattress, a cardboard box for a nightstand, and a seldom-watched television that sits on the floor. My greatest concern is avoiding stepping on my phone or punting it across the room, as I get out of bed.

The downstairs neighbors are still asleep when I get up. I often wonder if the periodic squeaking of the floor beneath my feet is enough to make them curse the day they rented an apartment that was not on the top floor. Maybe they've become accustomed to it? Perhaps the sounds of my creaking floorboards just blend into the general hum of the city. Along with the horns, sirens, and car alarms that incessantly pierce what would otherwise be calm, quiet nights.

I make my way to the kitchen and visualize myself taking that first sip of coffee. It's made in what may very well be my most prized possession - my Keurig. That little, magical, black and silver appliance has

saved many innocent bystanders from experiencing my wrath. I may not do drugs, but I imagine there is little difference between a heroin addict fiending for his next fix and me without my morning coffee.

That first sip is always so hot! I can imagine it scorching my poor unsuspecting tongue. No matter how many thousands of cups I've consumed over the years, I can never get used to it... However, once the heat dissipates throughout my mouth and gradually makes its way into my stomach, I will awake. For that brief moment, my life will be sheer bliss. Until then, I will just enjoy the aroma that fills my tiny apartment, while I try to make myself look like a person again.