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## Chapter 1 - Welcome Home

Jack prayed silently for the people in the city as the dark silhouette of Mahraj loomed in the distance. The only noises filling the air was the far-off howling of a few dogs and the quiet chatter from the coms as the captain got the orders. A moment later the coms went quiet as the captain stood and looked to his squad.

“Colonel Barret says move in. The target’s a small airport on the North edge of the city. We move in, secure it, and wait for the birds. I want two teams. Insert from the East and West via the main highway using the Technicals. The Guns are firing on the complexes South of us to cut off the T-Man reinforcements. Weapons check and move out in 5.”

Jack nodded along with the rest of the detachment as everyone began to make their way towards the two, old, sand-blasted trucks they’d “acquired” from a few hostiles.

Jack was in his mid-thirties with soft brown hair highlighted with rogue strands of gray that stuck out here and there from his somewhat shaggy and unkempt haircut that he kept parted to the right and, hung down about his ears after months of being behind enemy lines. His beard too was slightly unkempt; fairly thick now with streaks of grey coming down along the either side of his lips through the coarse brown hair. Jack was fairly tall, a little over six feet by a couple of inches. His rough skin was darkened to a deep-tan, and his face was creased with a few light wrinkles across the forehead, and small crow’s feet around the eyes; along with the dust, sand and dirt caking his toughened hide. The price of the life a soldier led; that and the risk of death and injury, but Jack was okay with that. Soldier’s life. He wasn’t bad looking though. The life kept him fit, and his broad shoulders, square jaw, and intense, bright blue eyes gave him a rugged sort of attractiveness.

“This is one of the most kinetic targets we’ve hit, and these bastards like using civis as shields gentlemen. So, check yer targets and y’all watch your six. De Oppresso Liber,” Jack said in his light Texan drawl as he climbed into the back of the truck and began checking over the ma-deuce mounted on it.

“You too Master Sergeant,” and “Copy that,” filled the air from the rest of the men.

“Hey Master Sergeant.”

Jack looked over to see Cpt. Gibson approaching. He was fairly young, under 30 by a few years and he was new to the position, but he’d earned his stripes over the deployment. Gibson had sandy blonde hair and a scraggly beard that never seemed to fill out properly but his thick sideburns, mustache, and chin hair gave him the appearance of a Civil War soldier. He wasn’t as tall as Jack, just under six foot from his guess. He had keen, grey eyes and always seemed to be smiling.

When Jack got assigned to this detachment, he was a First Sergeant around Gibson’s age, and it was under the command of his long-time friend, Captain Barret; the same Colonel Barret

now giving the squad orders. He'd been promoted two years or so ago, and since then Jack's detachment had changed from one Captain to the next.

"It'll be a shame to see you go," said Gibson. "I'm going to hate having to replace you, but it's been an honor serving with you Master Sergeant. I just wanted to wish you good luck with retirement," he said as he held out his hand.

Jack smiled and took it, giving him a firm handshake and a pat on the shoulder.

"You too Captain. Don't let these goobs push ya around. They do, and ya tell 'em I'll be back to kick their asses," Jack said with a light laugh.

He turned to go before hesitating.

"Oh, the Colonel said for you to watch your ass. He said he's counting on you to keep his little girl out of trouble while she's at college. I don't envy you there Serge. I'd rather stay here and fight the T-Man than deal with a moody, Colonel's daughter going off to college. You sure you don't want to stay and fight? Might be easier." added the captain with a chuckle.

Jack laughed. "Yeah, well just trading one war zone for another right? Besides she's my god-daughter. Somebody's gotta keep that girl on the straight and narrow, and beat those boys off with a stick."

Gibson moved to the lead vehicle, and the rest of the squad loaded up into the sand-blasted old pick-up trucks repurposed into assault vehicles. The two trucks set out, kicking up moon dust as they drove across the sandy, scrub-lined roads that led to Mahraj. Jack watched as the lead vehicle broke off to the East and disappeared steadily into the darkness before looking towards the city.

In the darkness it was hard to see anything. Sharp whistling suddenly broke the night, followed by an explosion then a thunderous boom in the distance. The siege began, and chaos broke out as Jack's covert unit sped towards the city along the deserted road. Dressed as Taliban soldiers and driving in one of their trucks made it easy to get inside. The city looked post-apocalyptic, especially bathed in the light of explosions, flares and fires; like something from Mad Max or Escape from LA. The truck turned a corner towards the LZ, and suddenly Jack was flying through the air as nearby pile of debris exploded.

The truck was on its side smoking, and Jack's ears were ringing so loud he couldn't hear a thing. The front of the truck had been nearly ripped off and flames were shooting up through the cab, engulfing two of his brothers.

Jack could see two other men laying on the ground about ten feet from the truck. One had blood pooling around his head, and his neck was at an odd angle from where he was laying against the dull khaki colored stone wall he'd obviously hit; smeared with blood and gore like the time he'd accidentally hit a deer with his truck on the interstate. The other soldier was rolling from side to side, blood covering his face. Jack tried to stand but his leg gave out, and he crumpled to the ground as a red-hot pain shot through his body from his right hip. He clawed at the loose dirt, dragging himself towards the wreck of the truck to try and help his brothers as his vision tunneled and everything went black.

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Jack took heavy breaths, struggling with each step as the muscles in his hip refused to react and support his weight forcing him to lean on the cold, collapsible cane he gripped tightly in his right hand. The groceries tucked into the plastic bag held tightly in his left hand shifted from side to side throwing off each step just a bit further and making him struggle a bit more. His legs and thighs ached, even after traveling such a short distance from his apartment to the corner store just to grab a few things.

Six months ago, he was healthy and strong, and even though he was in hell he had his brothers; he had respect. He was so close to retirement too. Now, he didn't even respect himself, and here he was back at home, the place he'd fought to get to, and he felt more alone now than at any point over in the Sandbox. Hell, he could barely make it out the front door and down to the Dollar General for smokes and beers.

Of course, everyone said how "very brave" he was, and that a "medical discharge was nothing to be ashamed of." Still, he was ashamed. His hip hurt all the time, as did most of his right leg. He could still feel people staring at him with a look of "What's wrong with him?", "What happened to him?", or even worse "That poor guy." But at least he was home, he guessed.

*I can't believe how shitty this neighborhood's become since I got deployed last time.*

His mind drifted back to his arrival home from the military hospital four days ago.

He'd stepped off the plane and had to be assisted up the ramp by a flight attendant up. Waiting for him was one of those airport shuttle carts. So, he made short-talk with the driver and thanked him for welcoming him home from Afghanistan as they whizzed through the airport, passing by other soldiers lugging their bags while he sat on an electrical cart. He'd been dreading his return home. He figured nobody would be waiting for him since his father had passed away just before he got deployed. He knew it was coming because his mother had passed only a few years before. It was sweet in a way, but he missed his folks. Thankfully, waiting for him at the end of the terminal was Cassandra, his god-daughter. She was 18 now and a Freshman in college at A&M.

She was taller than he remembered; damn near six feet now. She was slender but had an athletic build and a golden tan from her years in various sports including volleyball, soccer, softball, karate, tae-kwon-do, and competitive cheerleading. Kassie was dressed in a black, leather jacket, a pink t-shirt, jeans, and old combat boots. Her short, dark bob bounced and her steel-grey eyes sparkled brightly as she charged Jack and nearly took him off my feet with a tackle as she took him into a hug.

"Hey Uncle Jack! Welcome home! I brought you a present," she said as he held out a large cigar wrapped in cellophane that had bold, Cyrillic writing emblazoned across it.

"The doctor wouldn't let me give it to ya in the hospital. Oh, and I brought ya your Jeep too so you can drive it home!" she said as she reached into her right jacket pocket and produced a ring of keys with a Hard Rock Berlin keychain dangling from it and, handed them to him.

Jack began to limp his way towards the baggage claim area with Cassandra moving beside him while keeping a careful eye on him and, their surroundings as he pocketed the keys.

"Ya sure you don't need some help?" asked Kassie with a concerned look on her face as she reached out to take his arm.

Jack pulled away and shot her a disapproving look mixed with a smug smile.

“You do and I’ll deck ya.” He said with a laugh and a smile.

Kassie grinned and chuckled. “Yeah right. I’d lay your ass out in three seconds flat old man. Oh! Let me tell ya about this guy!”

Jack went wide eyed a bit at the sudden segway in the conversation, and what it had to do with her kicking his ass. Classic Kassie, but she was right; she probably could have laid him out in seconds in his pitiful condition. He sighed and listened as they walked, limping along beside her as she spoke.

“So, I was trying to join this sorority right; the Delta Kappa’s. Anyways, so they had this big Greek mixer for all the frats and sororities to get together at this bar.”

Jack shot her another disapproving look.

“Relax, they still carded and I didn’t drink anything, though I could have. I mean the security was pitiful and a couple of the bartenders and the security guards were total creepers.”

Jack sighed but grinned and continued to listen as the baggage claim came into view, sadly it wasn’t the one for his plane. That was further away.

“But I decided to go out on the dance floor and start dancing with some of my girlfriends and stuff when this guy came up and started trying to grind on me. I mean he wasn’t that bad looking, but just no. So, I tried to ignore him and ghost him, hoping he’d take the message. But, he didn’t! The jerk kept grinding up on me and stuff and it was totally gross!”

Jack smiled, still the innocent Kassie, thank God, but how long could that last, he wondered.

“He just wouldn’t stop though! So, finally I just turned around and full on decked his ass. Surprised him and landed it square in his jaw on the sweet-spot just like you told me! Haha, you should have seen it! I swear, his head and shoulders hit the ground before his feet did!”

Jack went wide-eyed again, but this time cracked a thin, approving grin which he tried his best to conceal. He’d first shown her a few moves in some of the CQC training he’d picked up back when she was in middle school and a few girls had begun picking on her for not having a mom. She’d taken to it like a fish to water. After that, he’d trained her for several years through high school and, she’d even competed in tae-kwon-do and won first every year she competed in the local Austin tournament they held in the fall. But a hit that hard surprised even him. He’d seen only a few hits that hard from the sounds of it, even in his life, but for a teenage girl to level a guy near her age like that was pretty impressive.

“Yeah, right!” she said, steel-eyes shining and full lips stretched into a wide smile. “He was spitting out teeth and I guess I ended up breaking his jaw. Dumbass has to have it wired shut now.”

“Kassie!” Jack shot her a disapproving glare.

“What!? He deserved it!”

“I mean, maybe. May-be. That sounds a lil’ over kill. What did I teach you about self-control and appropriate escalation of force?”

Kassie sighed and rolled her eyes as she stuck her hands in her back pockets, jutting out her chest slightly and making his gaze shift on instinct to straight ahead.

“I know... I know.” She said with a sigh and a frown before crossing her arms over her chest. “I honestly didn’t mean to do all that... I dunno I just kinda let him have it and didn’t hold back. It’s not my fault he had a glass jaw,” she said.

Jack nodded. “Still, proud of ya for sticking up for yourself. But what is it with you and knocking out the teeth of boys that like you huh? What was the poor kid’s name? You kissed him and...”

“Okay, shut up! That was when I was six and I didn’t know what anything was about alright. And, he’d already lost one of his front teeth okay, and it came back when he got his adult teeth!” Kassie fell silent for a moment as Jack grinned sideways at her while she blushed; she always hated it when he teased her about that.

“And his name was Jeremy.” She added matter of factly.

“Right. I remember having to come get you from after-school care because your dad was on deployment, and the lady there having to explain to me that you’d punched out a boy’s teeth for liking you, after you kissed him.” Jack said with a smile and a laugh.

“It was only one tooth! And, like I said I was six okay. Let it die,” she said with a sigh.

Jack smiled. “Nope, never. I’ll be giving ya shit about that on your wedding day. That is assuming you can find yourself a husband since ya keep knocking out boys’ teeth every time one tries to make a pass at you.”

“I do not! Not every time, just a couple, and yeah, I may have punched a few others for moving too fast or whatever, or for cheating on me but they deserved it. And, none of those other ones lost any teeth so drop it.”

Kassie was beginning to get a bit heated and Jack could see it but, it was still fun to tease her. In actuality he was really her god-father but, she was always much more like a niece or daughter to him. Back when he first met Steve, he’d been assigned under him and was surprised to learn that the captain was a single dad and an officer in the military. Back then Steve’s grandparents had helped with Kassie but, after working with him for a few deployments and getting to know the family when they were watching football, cooking out, shooting at the range, hunting or whatever they’d all grown close. Kassie’s grandparents had passed a few years after that, and clung to him for comfort. Since then, they’d been close.

What surprised him was that Kassie was so little and had no mom. Steve hardly ever mentioned her mother, just that they’d met while he was on deployment as a lieutenant, had a brief thing, and nine months later he had a daughter. In the more than a decade he’d known Steve he’d only mentioned her in passing a handful of times, but Jack could tell the look of a guy that lost a woman he loved; hell, he knew that feeling. It was just something ya didn’t talk about generally.

They neared the baggage claim conveyor belt for his plane but it wasn’t so much as moving yet. Jack sighed and groaned but stood patiently as he waited, hip throbbing and screaming the

entire time. He reached into his pocket, producing a small pill bottle of 200mg pain killers before downing two of them. He pocketed the bottle and sighed.

Kassie looked over. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Jack as he rubbed at his hip gently with his hand. "But, you can drive," he added as he reached into his pocket, produced the key's she'd given him, and tossed them to her.

She caught them deftly and nodded before pocketing the keys once more as she gave him a concerned look. He hated it.

After several moments in silence the conveyor belt began to turn and, bags began to pop out one by one; thankfully Jack's was one of the first out.

"I got it," said Kassie as she moved over to the side, cutting him off before waiting as the large, green, canvas bag slowly grew closer. As it neared her, she reached down, grasping it firmly by one of the straps and lifting it up before shouldering it.

Damn, she was strong. Looks like all those sports really had paid off.

Kassie waddled along next to him carrying the bag as he limped beside her, and they made their way out of the baggage claim area and onto the wet street as rain trickled down steadily from overhead. Jack and Kassie waited in mostly silence until a shuttle van arrived to take them to the parking garage where Kassie had parked. They made their way to his old, orange, rag-top Jeep and Kassie loaded his bag into the back as he climbed into the side with a bit of a struggle before Kassie climbed in and cranked the older model vehicle up before backing out and beginning to make their way back towards his apartment.

As they drove Kassie began to talk his ear off, telling Jack all about her dorm room, what classes she was taking, and everything else going on in her life while Jack puffed on one of his favorite Russian cigars. Most of what she said was a blur. It kept his mind off his troubles, but even with her there Jack felt alone. She'd always been the closest thing he had to a daughter, but he felt disconnected from everything now.

They finished up the night with pizza and wings from Craig O's Pizza and watched Jack's favorite movie, Enter the Dragon, before he wished Kassie a good night as he hobbled along with her to her car before watching her drive off. Then he headed back to his apartment to take a shower, and be alone.

He stepped back inside his home and looked about the apartment. It was decently enough sized for what he paid. Two bedrooms, a kitchen and bar top directly adjacent to a small area where his dining room table was, a small living room are directly across from that. A short hallway leading down to the two bedrooms across from one another and, the bathroom at the end of the hallway between the two bedrooms. The apartment was moderately furnished. A 42-inch flat-screen TV, small sound system, a coffee table he got at a yard sale, the couch he'd inherited from his parents, a few shadow boxes containing various medals, sports memorabilia he'd collected, a few framed posters of John Wayne, Bruce Lee, and Clint Eastwood, his collection of DVD's containing the several key titles of the aforementioned movie stars along with the complete works of the Mash, the Dukes of Hazard, and several of his other favorite titles among film and television.

“Is this what I fought for?” he thought before his mind was pulled back to reality.

Two people were arguing outside. It was probably just the couple across the alley, and he’d seen them at it before the times he’d been back from deployment. So, he tried to ignore it. Jack turned the shower on just as he heard a scream. Immediately he rushed to the window and wrestled it open.

On the other side of the window a brunette, somewhere in her 30’s, dressed in a smart, blue coat, white blouse, and jeans tugged frantically at her purse.

“Let go of my purse asshole!” she screamed.

A man dressed in a black hoodie with a small skull imprinted on the front, and “Zero” written over it, along with a pair of tattered jeans grasped the strap of her purse tightly and struggled to snatch it away.

She reached up and clawed at his face, leaving deep, oozing gashes across his right cheek; forcing him to cry out in anguish.

“Ahhh! No mames puta!” he shouted before grasping one of her wrists with a hand as his other wrenched at the strap on the purse. “Ayudame cabrone.” He shouted frantically to someone out of view.

It was then Jack noticed another guy running up on her from behind. He must have been hiding somewhere because Jack couldn’t see him before from his narrow view through the window. He was wearing a green and white leather jacket and blue jeans with a matching green ballcap pulled low so he couldn’t make out anything else.

“Let go of the purse crazy bitch!” he shouted as he came up behind her.

Jack was already scrambling for his phone, which he’d left on the coffee table in his tiny, apartment living room along with something else he had stashed away. In his haste he fell and swore as he hit the stained, light-beige, carpeted floor before pushing himself up, snatching his phone from the table-top, and pulling his .45 pistol from its magnetic holster under the table. In an instant he was dialing 9-1-1 and hobbling his way back into the bathroom.

“9-1-1. What’s your emergency?” Came a female voice from the other end of the line.

The woman’s frantic cries for help continued from outside along with a mix of swearing from the two men.

“Yes. I’d like to report a crime in progress. There’s two guys robbing a girl outside my apartment. I’m at La Hacienda Estates. I’ve got my gun, and I’m gonna stop them. My name is Master Sergeant Jackson Sinclair Majors. Ya’ll better hurry the fuck up.” Jack said flatly before hanging up the phone.

“Hey shitheads! Leave her alone!” he shouted as he rounded the corner.

The barrel of his gun came up as he leveled it towards Hoodie and squeezed the trigger. The report of gunfire filled the bathroom, echoing off the teal tiled floor, partially deafening Jack as the stink of cordite filled the air. Jack’s round caught him high and to the right, clipping his shoulder and spinning him to the ground out of view.

Jacket already had his gun out, a sleek, black 9mm, and he was quickly raising it and leveling it towards the window. All hell broke loose as he pulled the trigger over and over peppering the brick wall around the window, and the bathroom; filling the air with dust as he let loose the chaotic barrage. Jack dropped to the floor a split-second before the bathroom mirror behind him shattered, and as he did a short, animal-like yelp filled the air outside as he emptied the magazine.

Everything went quiet again except for a few muffled voices outside the window. Jack stood and looked out, leaning awkwardly over the toilet. He could see both men retreating down the alley. Hoodie was leaving a trail of crimson droplets on the ground as he gripped his right shoulder tightly with his left hand while Jacket held him around the waist and helped him run. Both men rounded the corner and disappeared out of view quickly. Jack looked about and called out for the woman to see if she was alright.

“Hey, lady! Lady! You okay?” Jack shouted, but there was no response.

He leaned out a bit further, nearly slipping on the toilet and making his hip scream at him. There she was. Laid out beside the long line of dumpsters that butted up against the wall. Blood pooling around her on the ground as she stared blankly at the opposing wall of the alley.

Jack was used to death. He’d seen plenty of his men die in the I.E.D that got him medically discharged, and even before that. But this was different. She was home, she should have been safe, this shouldn’t have happened. She didn’t sign up to give her life.

Of course, Jack had to go through the whole rigmarole when the police arrived. Hours of questions and a night down at the local precinct, along with many follow-up questions over the next several days. He’d seen her obituary in the paper a day or two later, along with an article about it on page two. Her name was Jenny Tillinghast, she was an elementary school teacher, had a fiancée, and was only four months from getting married; she was only 28. Her parents and fiancée had called to talk to Jack, but the police had told him to wait to speak with anyone, and with as broken up as he was over it, he didn’t wanna hear their teary-eyed thank you’s; he didn’t deserve it. He’d failed them, he’d failed her, he’d failed himself, and he failed to uphold the oath he took; just like he’d failed to save his brothers that died.

*Now, I gotta appear in court to testify Monday. I hope that piece of shit gets the chair, and I hope they catch that guy in the jacket and do the same to him.* Jack thought as he neared his apartment building. The police tape had been taken down and the street scrubbed, but he could still hear that girl’s cries for help echoing out from his subconscious.

*Damn it, that poor girl. I still can’t believe they shot her over a purse and a few stupid bucks. This ain’t the Austin I knew growing up. This ain’t the Austin I love. What the fuck is wrong with this world?*

The screech of tires on the pavement behind him broke his train of thought and snapped Jack from his moment of self-loathing and reflection long enough for him to look back. A dark-green SUV fishtailed slightly as it completed the quick turn, making the rear-shocks groan.

“Slow down man. Kids live around here. You ain’t drag racing or four-wheelin’!” Jack shouted angrily.

*Don’t I know that guy?* Jack wondered as he looked at the driver of the vehicle.



A second later he realized who it was. It was Jacket. That was when he noticed both windows on the passenger side roll down and two men leaned out. Jacket had his hat pulled low like before, and the other two had hats on with their hoodies pulled up over them, and each had a pair of sunglasses on. He'd never seen the other two before, but he knew the driver by that ugly, green and white leather jacket, and his matching hat.

Cold metal flashed in the sun as they raised their guns. Jack knew just how screwed he was right away. The one in the passenger seat leveled a MAC-10 out the window as the one in the back hoisted up a sawed-off Mossberg 500 with a pistol grip in one hand. Jack just prayed both of them had Jacket's aim, that the one with the SMG chewed through his ammo before he hit him, and that the idiot with the shotgun broke his damn wrist when he pulled the trigger. That was a last-ditch prayer though. With them coming up on him fast, and such a short distance between himself and them Jack barely had time to react at all.

His atrophied hip and right leg were useless, reducing his reaction time so all he could get out before all hell broke loose was a short two words as a he dropped the groceries and turned to the side to pushing a few nearby pedestrians out of the line of fire.

"Get down!" was what he said, but all that went through his mind as he found himself starring down those three barrels was, *Oh shit!*

"Bienvenidos culo!" cried the one with the MAC 10 as both men opened fire.

Jack felt hot, searing pain as his ears rang, his vision went white around the edges, making it difficult to see. The ringing \*Crack\* of gunfire filled the air.

Suddenly, he was on the ground. He could hear screaming and smelled hot grease and metal, along with the smell of smoke and rotten eggs. There was something hot and wet on the ground around him. He couldn't move, couldn't think. He just wanted to go home.