



One brother home from war.
The other desperate to save him.
A river that will change them forever.

GREAT FALLS

STEVE
WATKINS



Jeremy and I are stopped at that really long light on Route 3, stuck in a long line of cars waiting to turn and go into the mall. He's jumpy, agitated, checking all the mirrors constantly, even though we're sitting stone-still. A blue Chevy tries to nudge in front of us and Jeremy cusses and throws the truck in gear and cuts the guy off.

The guy, just somebody's dad in a white shirt and tie, glares at Jeremy and says something, but his window's rolled up—lucky for him. Jeremy smiles back, but it's not a real smile. It's the thin, almost painful-looking smile he gets when he's in the basement, cleaning his gun.

Please, asshole, I pray to the guy. Just shut up. Just let it go. I've already seen a couple of things like this escalate in the six weeks Jeremy's been back.

The light turns green and Jeremy lurches forward, nearly rear-ending the minivan in front of us, wanting to make sure the man in the blue Chevy doesn't get any more bright ideas about cutting in. As the minivan reaches the intersection, the light turns yellow and the driver brakes.

"Go, bitch!" Jeremy barks. "Just go already!"

But the minivan stops. The light turns red. And Jeremy fumes. His face is red and he's sweating and looking around even more anxiously than before. Mirrors. Windows. Mirrors again. He looks like a trapped animal, which, from the way we're boxed in by all these other cars and at this slow turn light, he sort of is. The blue Chevy is behind us now, the driver still glaring and running his mouth.

Jeremy fumbles with something under his seat.

"What's that?" I ask. "Did you drop something?"

He doesn't say, but I figure it out anyway: He's brought the damn gun with him. It's a 9mm, the same as his service pistol. He can't go a day without breaking it down, cleaning it—every last piece—then reassembling it. Now he's got it with him in the car. I shouldn't be surprised, but somehow I still am.

"You don't need that," I say, trying not to sound nervous.

"Need what?" he says, pretending.

"*That*," I say, pointing.

Jeremy turns away. "You never know," he mutters, his

fingers playing over the steering wheel like it's a piano. There's no music on, though. He won't listen to music when he drives. But who knows? He could have a tune in his head he's playing along with. He's never still, I know that much.

The light seems stuck on red forever. A homeless guy who's been sitting against a concrete barrier in the median, not five feet from our car, pulls himself up off the curb. His hair is matted, a long nasty rope of dreads down his back. He's got a ragged beard and a deeply weathered face with obvious dirt in deep lines that are more like crevasses gouged into his cheeks and neck. His sign says VETERAN. SUPPORT THE TROOPS. NEED \$ FOR MEDICINE. SEMPER FI.

I look and then look away, the way you're supposed to, but not Jeremy. He rolls down the window and calls the guy over. He pulls a ten out of his pocket and holds it out to the guy but doesn't let go when the guy reaches for it.

"Who were you with?" Jeremy asks.

The guy stares at him for a minute. I'm sure he can't help but notice Jeremy's buzz cut, what they call a high and tight, and knows Jeremy's active military.

"Marines," the guy rasps. "The Two-Five."

Jeremy grins for real. I haven't seen that look since I can't remember when. When I was a little kid, that's the face he wore all the time. But that was a long time ago.

"That's my unit," Jeremy says.

"No shit," the guy says. I don't think his hard, weathered face will let him grin back. He seems to be trying, though.

"Yeah, no shit," Jeremy says. "Retreat Hell." It's the

Two-Five's motto. Jeremy taught me that when he first got assigned. The whole line, from back in World War I, is, "Retreat? Hell, we just got here."

The sun breaks out of the clouds and Jeremy has to squint. The homeless guy just nods. He's a lot older than Jeremy. He would have been in Vietnam probably.

The driver of the blue Chevy starts honking. The light has changed and the minivan in front of us is gone. Jeremy checks his rearview mirror but we don't move. Other horns are blaring behind us, too.

Jeremy lets go of the money.

"God bless you, brother," the homeless guy says.

Jeremy shrugs. "Semper fi."

The homeless guy nods and shuffles away toward the other cars. Everybody is honking like crazy now, the blue Chevy guy going at it nonstop, wanting to go through the intersection and not have to wait through yet another long red light.

Weirdly, Jeremy seems relaxed now. I don't know why. At least he's no longer reaching under the seat for his 9mm.

He lifts his arm out the window instead, gives the finger to the driver of the blue Chevy and to everybody else, puts the truck in gear, and drives slowly into the intersection as the light turns from yellow to red. Nobody else makes it through.

I wish he'd let me drive. I've had my license for nearly a year. I wish he'd talk to me about whatever's going on with him. I wish a lot of things.

We don't last long at the mall. We're there maybe ten minutes when Jeremy gets panicky or claustrophobic or whatever. Mom calls it hypervigilance and says he can't help it. She says he just needs time to adjust to being home.

All I know is Jeremy's eyes get really wide, and he keeps looking over his shoulder and all around us, checking the exits, making sure his back is to any wall he can find, which is hard to do in a mall. And then, before we even get to where we're going, he says we have to leave. *Now!*

So we do a forced march back to the car and haul ass as if somebody is chasing us.

We were just there to buy shoes.



2

I don't tell the Colonel what happened at the mall. He'd probably just shrug it off. "Cut him some slack, boy. He only just got home."

It wasn't always like this. He was always on Jeremy's ass before, from when Jeremy was a kid to all the way through high school. Only after Jeremy enlisted and got deployed did the Colonel start giving a shit. And once Jeremy got his medals — a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star after his third deployment — it was like he could do no wrong.

Sometimes, when he thinks no one is home, I can hear the Colonel in his study watching this YouTube video that

a guy from Jeremy's unit posted. Jeremy was pissed at the guy for posting it, but it ended up going viral, so there wasn't much anybody could do about it.

The video is shot from Jeremy's helmet cam, so you don't see much of Jeremy except for his hands or legs or feet. It's like a real-life Call of Duty, the way you see what Jeremy sees as he's scrambling over rocks in this barren moonscape, panting and muttering "Shit, shit, shit, this is bad." The guy with him, Private First Class Tyler Atwell, Jeremy's radio-man, is whimpering. They got separated from their unit and they're exposed on the side of a hill. Jeremy tells Atwell to shut it.

Then you hear *pock, pock, pock*—bullets hitting near them. The video goes blurry as Jeremy and Atwell dive for cover behind a rock that doesn't look big enough to hide a small dog.

Jeremy's turning this way and that so much, it's hard to follow. You do see an M16, and Jeremy's hands, and his shadow, firing back at the Taliban—not that you ever see any Taliban. Jeremy looks down, and Atwell is sprawled on the dirt, not moving at all.

The first time I saw the video I thought he was dead. Turns out he'd been hit in the face, bad. But he wasn't dead.

Jeremy keeps firing, and the rain of bullets keeps pouring down around him and Atwell, kicking up puffs of dirt on every side of them.

At some point Jeremy drags Atwell close to him behind their little rock. He pulls something out from inside his body

armor, gauze or something, and presses it onto Atwell's face. You never actually see the wound, or the half of Atwell's face that got blown off—most of his cheek and eye socket and jaw on one side. The gauze quickly turns dark, but the helmet cam doesn't stay there. Jeremy is back kneeling behind the rock and shoulder-firing short bursts with his M16. And he's calling in for help on Atwell's radio, shouting his position over and over, and the coordinates for an air strike.

What's weird is how calm Jeremy is, though, even when he's shouting. The worse things get around him, the calmer he sounds. Telling them that Private First Class Atwell has been shot. Telling them where he thinks the Taliban are shooting from.

Something explodes just in front of their rock—it's an RPG—showering the helmet cam and Jeremy and Atwell with dirt and debris. The M16 goes flying and Jeremy goes down, too, but just for a second. Then he's scrambling on the ground, going after the weapon.

Once he retrieves it he scrambles back to Atwell and the meager protection of the rock. The dust clears away, and the helmet cam is fixed on Jeremy's hand, which is dripping blood. Jeremy seems to be counting the fingers on his left hand. One is missing. Out comes the gauze again, which he hastily wraps around his whole hand, stuffing a big wad tightly onto the bloody stump which is all that's left of his index finger.

Then he's back on the radio, and back shooting at the Taliban. He shakes Atwell. "Hold on, ass wipe!" he yells.

The helmet cam looks up at the sky, so blue that it hurts.
And that's where the video stops.

Text appears over a dark screen on the YouTube version, filling in some of the blanks: how the batteries died on Jeremy's helmet cam, which is why the video ends where it does; how it took more than an hour for Jeremy and Atwell to be rescued by their unit; that Atwell survived his head wound, and Jeremy returned to active duty three days later; that he and Atwell both were awarded Purple Hearts. It says Jeremy also received a Bronze Star, which for some reason gets the Colonel worked up. He thinks Jeremy should have gotten the Silver Star. Or the Navy Cross.

"Maybe the Medal of Honor if he hadn't got separated from his unit," the Colonel once said, though from what I've read, you have to do a whole lot more than what Jeremy did to win the Medal of Honor. Or the Navy Cross, for that matter. Silver Star, maybe.

Not that there's anything to be ashamed of, winning the Bronze Star. All I know is Jeremy won't talk about it, and he won't show the medal to anybody. Not even me.

But the YouTube video leaves out a lot, things Jeremy told me one night when he was drunk: that Atwell was in a medically induced coma at Walter Reed for about a month, that he's lost all the sight in one eye and most of it in the other, and that they've already done half a dozen surgeries to repair what's left of his face, with more surgeries still to come.

The video also doesn't tell you that Jeremy's been staying

in our basement pretty much since coming back from his last deployment, and drinking a twelve-pack every evening to help him sleep. He spent all of two weeks at his and Annie's house across town, with their little girl, Nelly, and the new baby.

Nelly made too much noise, Jeremy said, and the baby, Greer, wouldn't stop crying, deep into the night. So Jeremy came over here, though he didn't want to be in his old bedroom with all his sports trophies and stuff. He wanted to be in the basement. Just temporarily, he said. Just until he could adjust.

The Colonel didn't ask how long, and Mom didn't say anything. Maybe she was glad to have Jeremy back under her roof, despite everything. Or maybe she just knows there's no use questioning the Colonel.

Jeremy disappears into his cave, not saying anything, when we get back from the mall. I grab my football gear from the laundry room and take off for practice.

We have a game tomorrow night. Coach has asked Jeremy to give a pregame talk in the locker room. I'm wondering if he'll actually show, especially after what just happened.

Jeremy went to my same high school, graduated eight years ago. They were state champions his senior year, with him playing wide receiver and cornerback. He probably could have played college ball. He got offers. They might not have been top schools or anything, but still.

He got in trouble instead. Blowing up mailboxes, of all things — on graduation night. With pot in the car when the police caught them.

And then he joined the Marines. It was the Colonel's orders.

Still, everybody in town loves Jeremy, or loves a certain idea they have about him, anyway. He can hardly walk down the street without someone stopping him and wanting to talk about the good old days or thanking him for his service and telling him what a hero he is.



3

It's Friday night and I'm in the locker room getting suited up for the game, pulling my shoulder pads on over a gray Marine T-shirt of Jeremy's, when my phone buzzes. It's him.

"Hey," I say. "You're late. Coach just asked when you're getting here. We're out on the field in half an hour."

Jeremy's still supposed to do that pregame pep talk or whatever.

"Yeah," he says. "I'm on my way."

The way he says it, I'm not so sure.

"So what's up?"

There's a long pause. Guys all around me are lacing up cleats, banging lockers, yelling at one another — already

fired up. We're undefeated so far this season, so I don't know why Coach thinks we need Jeremy or anybody.

"Goddamn GPS isn't working," he says in a low voice. "Not sure where I am right now."

"You're lost?" I ask. This doesn't seem possible. We've lived here practically our whole lives.

"No," he says, clearly pissed off. "Yes. Sort of."

I don't get it. "Well just ask somebody for directions."

He ignores what I said. "There's a Walmart," he says. "A bunch of big-box stores."

I ask if he's been drinking.

"What are you, my fucking mother?" he shoots back.

"Sorry," I say, though I'm not. "So are you on a highway?" I ask.

"Yeah. Pulled over on the side. There's a RaceTrac gas station across the road. There's a Starbucks on this side. The Walmart's on this side, too."

"OK. Is there one of those big American Family Fitness places there, near the Walmart?"

He hesitates, and then says, "Yeah. Right over there."

I figure out where he is—south of town, where there's been a lot of retail development, though it's been there a lot longer than his latest deployment, so that can't explain why he doesn't know where he is, or why he's lost.

"Just turn around," I say. "Stay on Route One. You can probably make it here in ten minutes. You remember Coach asked you to talk to the team, right? You're supposed to be here?"

“Of course I remember,” Jeremy snaps. Is he defensive because I’m questioning him, or because he’s feeling guilty for forgetting?

“OK. See you in a while,” I say, and hang up.

One of the few things I know about Jeremy’s time in Iraq and Afghanistan — besides what I’ve learned from the YouTube video — is that he got blown up a couple of times during his first two deployments. He never gave any details, and since I couldn’t see any scars and he wasn’t ever in the hospital or anything, I figured that just meant stuff exploded near him or whatever but didn’t hurt him.

Now I’m wondering if *blown up* doesn’t mean something else: not being able to remember where you’re going, or recognize where you are, even if you’ve been there a thousand times before.

Fifteen minutes later, Jeremy is standing in the locker room with us, everybody taped and ready for the game. I already got my shot of Toradol, so I’m feeling no pain, though I plan to inflict some on certain members of Courtland, who we’re playing tonight and who kicked our ass last year.

Jeremy looks smaller in here than he does in real life, leaning against an empty locker, hands in his jeans pockets. Maybe it’s because we’re all in uniform, with helmets and pads and cleats. Maybe it’s because he lost weight in the wars. Or maybe because he hardly eats now that he’s back home.

Coach tells us to take a knee and then introduces him: Jeremy Dupree, All-District, All-State, captain of the state

championship team his senior year, *Captain* Jeremy Dupree, United States Marine Corps. He leaves out that Jeremy was always smart as shit, too — valedictorian, took so many dual-credit courses his senior year of high school that when the Marines sent him to college before officer training, it took him only a year to get his degree.

Coach is a stout, red-faced man, a former offensive guard at Virginia Tech back in the 1980s who played about ten minutes for the Philadelphia Eagles and never lets you forget it. He only cares about two things: football and model trains. Get him going on either subject and pretty soon his head explodes.

Jeremy pushes himself away from the locker and steps to the middle of the room.

“Coach asked me to talk to you gentlemen today,” he says. “About winning.”

You’d never know he was so lost just minutes before that he had to call his younger brother for help getting here.

“Well,” he says. “There isn’t any secret to it except one thing.” He pauses and winks at me, as if I’m the only one in the room who’s in on the big secret. Half the guys turn to look at me. Half just look bored.

“Forget what anybody says,” Jeremy continues, “because it isn’t heart, or willpower, or team chemistry, or any of that bullshit they tell you. It’s superior firepower.”

Guys look at one another with quizzical expressions. A couple look at me again. I don’t give them anything back.

“We had the M1-A1 Abrams tank in the invasion,”

Jeremy says. “They had these ancient Russian pieces of shit. Had to come to a full stop before they could even fire.”

Coach taps his watch. Jeremy nods but doesn't change the pace of his delivery. “We see their muzzle flashes about as soon as we cross over what they call the Line of Departure into the desert. Everybody's nervous, but then when their little turd bombs bounce off the Abramses, which are about the most heavily armored tanks in the history of modern warfare, we start laughing. And we keep on laughing when our guys unload a bunch of Sabot rounds on the Iraqis before they can throw their tanks back in gear and haul ass.”

He pauses, looking casually around the room, pulling rank on everybody just through his eyes. Guys sit up straighter, though most probably don't know what the hell he's talking about.

“Sabot rounds carry depleted uranium rods,” he says. “They're armor-piercing shells. So they punch right through those piece-of-shit Russian tanks. Through and through shots. Suck out everything and everybody as they exit—from the kinetic force or whatever. Rip their tank operators apart. Literally. At the molecular level.”

Jeremy sticks his hands back in his jeans pockets and shakes his head, remembering. “That was some sick shit,” he says. Then he nods at Coach again, and leaves.

Nobody moves for about a minute, until Darryl Shook, a linebacker, like me, whistles. “The hell was that all about?”

Everybody laughs. Somebody else says, “Hey, Coach,

can we get some of those Sabot rounds and unleash hell on Courtland?”

Coach's face is twice as dark as its usual red. He doesn't acknowledge the comments, just barks out a quick pregame prayer—"God grant us this victory, we humbly beseech Thee"—then we go charging out of the locker room, down the tunnel, and onto the field.

Darryl runs up beside me and says, "Your brother high or what?"

I throw an elbow that catches him on his chin strap and sends him staggering to the turf. I keep running. Somebody else stops to help him up. A few minutes later during warm-ups I see him. He's on the bench with the trainer, holding an ice pack to his jaw, with a big butterfly bandage on his chin. I jog over. He flinches. "Jesus, Shane. What'd you do that for?"

I tap his shoulder pads. "You OK?"

He spits out blood. "Asshole."

Jeremy is sitting near the end zone in a deserted section of bleachers, drinking something out of a paper bag. I wave when we line up for the opening kickoff, but he's not watching the game. The Colonel and Mom are in their usual seats near the fifty-yard line with the other parents and boosters. I wave to them, too—or to Mom anyway. She waves back.

The ref blows his whistle and we kick off. Courtland's speedy little return man finds the corner and sprints hard down the sideline, thinking he's going somewhere, until I demolish him.



4

I go over to Annie and Jeremy's house after the game. It's late but I know she'll be up. She always is. The baby, Greer, doesn't sleep much, so Annie is chronically sleep deprived, but she still has to get up early most days for her morning shifts at the hospital. Nelly has preschool, and Mom watches Greer some.

The porch light is on when I get there, and the door is unlocked, which I wish Annie wouldn't do. She's always happy to see me, and I've been coming over after my games the past couple of weeks, since Jeremy moved out.

"Hey, Annie," I say, pushing the door open and stepping into the front room.

“Hey, Shane,” she whispers. She’s lying on the sofa with Greer conked out on top of her. “I just finished nursing her. She’s asleep.” Annie sounds excited. Eleven is early for Greer. She’ll probably wake up in a couple of hours, but Annie will take what she can get.

“Should I go?” I ask, not that I want to. I’m just being polite, offering to let Annie get some sleep, too.

“No,” she says. “I want to hear all about the game. Let me see if I can get her in her crib first.”

I help her ease up off the sofa, trying hard not to jostle Greer.

“Be right back,” Annie says, all puffy cheeks and tired smile.

I sit on the couch after she disappears into Greer’s bedroom. It’s still warm and I let myself sink in. The Toradol has mostly worn off and I’m starting to feel all the hits I took—and gave—during the game. I had two sacks, six solo tackles, and half credit for that many more, though Courtland quit running to my side of the defense in the second half. Coach also had me in at fullback, which on our team is strictly a blocking position. He told me there was a college scout in the stands, but I never saw him, and he didn’t come down to the locker room afterward. Probably because of the limited way Coach uses me on offense. Colleges want a fullback who can run the ball on short yardage situations and catch passes over the middle and catch screens in the backfield and run the option. Not just some asshole who can block.

And big as I am — six feet and two ten — I’m probably too small for anybody to recruit me at linebacker.

Annie comes back by way of the kitchen, holding a beer and an empty glass. She fills the glass halfway and hands it to me. “That’s all you’re getting,” she says.

“I’m almost eighteen,” I say, pretending to take the bottle.

She doesn’t let go. “Drinking age is still twenty-one. Take it or leave it.”

I take the glass. I don’t even like beer. I just like the ritual.

“You and Jeremy weren’t exactly twenty-one when you started,” I say. Annie was two years behind Jeremy in school; they started dating during his senior year. She was with him and his friends that graduation night when he got in trouble, and she actually set off a couple of cherry bombs herself, though Jeremy lied to cover for her and she never got in trouble for it. I guess she was pretty wild back then, too — not that she’ll admit to anything now.

“So how about a postmortem,” Annie says, settling in beside me.

“What’s that?”

She laughs. “It’s an autopsy,” she says. “But of the game.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling stupid, until she pats me on the arm. And then I start talking. I tell her we won, of course. Still undefeated. And then I tell her about running down Courtland’s return man on the opening kickoff. She seems impressed, which makes me happy. Really, just about everything Annie says and does makes me happy. It’s why I spend every Saturday over here doing chores, helping out around

the house, watching the kids so she can take a nap, going with them out to lunch.

Annie turns serious when I get to the part about the Courtland trainer coming out on the field to check on the return man after the hard tackle. “He wasn’t hurt, was he?” she asks. I love that about her, too — that she worries about everybody, even people she doesn’t know.

I shake my head. “Just shook up. But he didn’t want to have anything to do with me the rest of the game. Any side of the field I was on, he went the other way.”

I go on for a while about other highlights of the game: a block I made that sprang our running back for a long touchdown run; a fumble recovery. Annie finishes her beer quickly and then has another, and then another after that. It’s not long before she’s yawning and slurring her words. Not that she’s drunk. Drunk is how Jeremy gets: angry, cursing, blacking out, falling down, sleeping it off, waking up disoriented.

She finally gets around to asking about him.

“Was he there?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah. For a while. Sitting by himself. But he left before halftime.” I don’t tell her about his “superior firepower” speech before the game, or about me taking out Darryl Shook for asking if Jeremy was high. I don’t tell her about the gun under the car seat the day before either. I’m not sure why. It’s not as if Annie hasn’t seen and heard those sorts of things before, and worse.

“Was he drinking?”

I shrug. Of course he was, so why ask? She wants me to reassure her, so I do.

“He’s just still adjusting to being home,” I say, parroting the Colonel. “He’ll come around.”

She stands up suddenly, unsteady on her feet, and announces that she needs to go to bed, as if she just remembered. I help her to her bedroom. When we get there, she turns and puts her arms around me. She’s so much smaller than I am. I’m always surprised by this, when she hugs me. I kiss the top of her head and smell the sweet scent of shampoo in her long brown hair.

She’s crying softly now. I know the tears are for Jeremy. I just don’t know what to do about them. One thing I do know is if I was Jeremy, I don’t care what happened to me in the war, I wouldn’t ever do anything to make Annie cry.

I go into Nelly’s bedroom to check on her before I let myself out. She’s kicked all the covers off, so I tuck her back in, even though she’s wearing these little Marine footie pajamas, so probably isn’t too cold. She’s also hugging a giant Spiderman doll. Nelly’s a total tomboy.

I check on Greer, too. She’s still asleep in her crib. I make sure the front door is locked when I leave. I wonder where Jeremy is tonight — if he’s home in the basement or out somewhere. He goes away sometimes, and I don’t know where. None of us do. He might not even know himself.

Great Falls

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