

CROSSROADS

By Ben Schafer

The air was full of dust and bullets. This once-quiet town in northern Iraq erupted into chaos the moment my squad of Marines got within a block of the mosque. Though the war had officially been over for years, there was something brewing that threatened to tear the entire country apart. And my squad was right in the middle of it.

Firing down from second story windows and rooftops, the insurgents had clearly been waiting for us. But then again, our ambushers had not planned to fight United States Marines. Our momentary shock was overridden by months of training, and our battle-hardened squad immediately returned fire. Three of the enemy guns went silent less than two seconds after the first enemy bullet had been fired.

There are two keys to surviving an ambush: get out of the killbox as fast as you can, and drive the enemy back with a vicious counterattack. Our squad had been running reaction drills for so long that we were operating on pure reflex. As I tried to get out of the middle of the road, I spotted the barrel of a Dragunov sniper rifle poking out behind a satellite dish on one of the shops across the street. Apparently, the Insurgent Academy didn't teach recruits to avoid giving away their position by extending their weapon beyond cover. I'm sure that whoever owned the satellite dish didn't appreciate the three new holes I had just punched through it, but he would have to get over it.

Sudden movement to the right made me swivel with my rifle at the ready. It was just a handful of civilians, mostly women and children, running for the cover of a nearby house. They cried out as bullets whizzed around them. I waved for them to move quickly, then resumed my scan for threats.

My squadmate shouted out in pain as automatic weapons fire chewed up the low brick wall he had been using for cover. I recognized the chugging sound of a Soviet-era RPK light machine gun. If we didn't take it out, it could devastate the Iraqi infantry that was right behind us. I peeked out from my own firing position in an alley a few yards away. Another burst of fire belched from the gun, and I could see flashes of light coming from inside what looked to be an abandoned cell phone store with its display window completely shattered. I began firing into the window that the muzzle flash illuminated. These were careful, aimed shots, not random panic fire. The gun went silent, but that didn't mean that the threat was over.

It was quiet for another minute. "Hash!" I shouted. "You all right?"

Jacob Brown, or "Hash" as we liked to call him, was our team's Corpsman, sort of like an army medic. He wasn't technically a Marine like the rest of us, but he was as close a brother as you could hope for. I wasn't about to let him die in some backwater hellhole.

I breathed a sigh of relief when Hash stirred and gave me a weak thumbs up. Even from this distance I could see the long gash across one of his ammo pouches. The round must have tumbled when it punched through the brick wall, only grazing Hash instead of continuing straight through him.

This should have been an easy day. American forces no longer patrolled Iraq like they had a decade ago, instead leaving that to the Iraqi army. But lately a new group calling itself al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq wa-al-Sham had been causing a lot of trouble. My unit had been assigned to bolster the normal Marine Security Guard presence at the U.S. Consulate in Erbil. We were sent out to support an Iraqi army column that was setting up defenses in this small town to help ward off attacks from these Daesh guys.

But it looked like we were too late. The town was clearly in unfriendly hands, and we didn't have the manpower to clear it out. Our Iraqi friends were doing the bulk of the fighting, but that would be little comfort if I still got myself killed. There was a fortified position to the southwest. If my men and I could get there, we could find a way out of this mess.

The street had grown deathly silent. Austin Fischer, the rifleman for my fire team, crept toward the blown-out shop window. I kept my eye on him, gun aimed at the shop in case the RPK started up again. Meanwhile, Daniel Lei, our Designated Automatic Rifleman, had his own machine gun ready in case someone tried to take Fischer by surprise. We were still using the M249, which was a heavy gun but could lay down a lot of firepower in a hurry.

Fischer waved us forward. "It's clear," he said. I started to move toward the window and saw Hash following my lead. Lei stayed in place, ready to make any potential ambusher regret his life choices. But no dangers presented themselves. As I got closer to the window, I could see the dead gunner draped over his machine gun. There was a hole in his forehead.

Fischer whistled. "Damn. Good shot, Boss." He glanced back at us and seemed to notice the tear on Hash's ammo pouch. "Uh-oh. Be careful, Hash. I don't know who patches up the Doc."

"I can do it myself," Brown smiled. "One-handed."

"Uh-huh," I said absently. "While juggling grenades in the other hand, right, Doc?" His grin widened.

“Boss, we got incoming,” Lei shouted. The words barely registered when I saw a man in a tan camouflage uniform and helmet sprinting at us, gun in hand. Our own weapons were up in an instant.

“Wait,” I said. “He’s one of ours.” I recognized him as one of the Iraqi soldiers we were here to support.

The man stopped about a yard from me and promptly threw up all over the ground. Hash, Fischer, and I all stepped back reflexively. “Hey,” I said to the man in Arabic. “What is wrong? Are you okay?”

The man looked up at me. There was terror in his eyes. “You need to see this.”

“Boss, what’s he saying?” Hash asked.

“He said there’s something we need to see,” I replied. Switching back to Arabic, I asked, “What is it? What do we need to see?”

The man trembled. I thought he was going to vomit again. But he merely said, in rough English, “Monsters.”

We followed him down the street for three blocks before we came to the center of town. There was a circular platform roughly fifteen feet across that was filled with dirt and dead grass. The road widened here, and the effect was to make the roundabout an effective gathering space for any public announcements made from this spot.

Or public executions.

Lei, who had caught up to us, was the first to speak. “What the hell?”

As I looked, I was tempted to agree. “Hell” was exactly the word I would use. Four men had been strung up on metal pipes that looked like they once held street signs. Black ropes held the men’s arms outstretched, and more ropes around their necks and torsos kept them from escaping. Their feet dangled helplessly. Their faces were marked with numerous cuts and bruises, and blood stained their tunics where their throats had been slit as they hung on display. Each man had a white board tied around their neck with the word “Apostate” written in Arabic.

A wild mob hadn’t done this. The bodies had been carefully arranged so that they could be seen evenly from any point on the circle. It looked like the structures had been brought in from elsewhere and installed on the lawn. This was deliberate, planned murder.

A crowd was gathered around the bodies, a mixture of Iraqi soldiers and civilians from the town. Someone screamed.

“What is this, Kyle?” Lei asked. “This is my third trip to the Sandbox, and I’ve never seen this before.”

I didn't respond. The dead men in front of me were the only thing I could think about. And the only thing I could hear was the screaming.

The screaming didn't stop.

It never stopped.

My eyes snapped open. It took me a moment to remember where I was. The Metallica poster on the wall and the video games scattered across the floor were comforting reminders that I was still in my apartment. I was safe; beyond the dust, beyond the bullets. Beyond the screaming.

A quick glance at the clock beside my bed told me that it was a little after five o'clock in the morning. My sheets were soaked with sweat. There was no way I was going back to sleep. I hopped out of bed. The wooden floor was cold to my bare feet. Through the small window in my room, I could see a blanket of snow covering the city of Boston. There had been a flurry last night, and the heater had been turned off. Again.

I pulled on some jogging clothes and an old pair of shoes and left the apartment to clear my head. I hoped that the brisk run through the snow would get my mind out of the past and focused on the present. I usually run a little over a mile every morning. This morning I didn't even keep track. I just kept running until I stopped hearing the screams in my head. I saw some dedicated businessmen as they started to go to work, and I saw some dedicated partiers as they started to go home. But the mental image of the chaos I had seen half a world away wouldn't be pushed aside that easily.

An hour later I returned to the apartment. I took the key out of my pocket and opened the door. I was careful not to make too much noise. I had roommates, and they would not appreciate being woken up so early.

If you ever came to my apartment, you could be forgiven for not knowing I lived there. The only item that belonged to me that wasn't in my room was the Bronze Star sitting on top of the piano. There's a good reason for that: it wasn't really my apartment. It belonged to my older sister Miriam and her husband Don. Miriam was a doctor who worked in the emergency room at the Boston Medical Center and Don . . . I never really knew what Don did for a living, exactly. I knew he worked for a software firm, but he was incapable of talking about his job in simple terms. He would start using technobabble and I would tune him out. That's not very nice, I know. But the guy was boring with a capital ZZZ.

I shaved the stubble that had grown over the past couple of days, then hopped into the shower. At least the hot water was working this morning. When that was finished, I walked to the kitchen, grabbed a bowl and a box of cereal, and took the milk out of the fridge. I had just finished filling the bowl when Miriam appeared in the short hallway that led to her room. She had long black hair, the same color as mine, but from the frizz I could tell that she had just gotten out of bed. She had wrapped a thick blanket around herself to stay warm.

"Morning," she said, her voice impossibly cheerful for such an early hour. Miriam opened the cupboard and selected a glass. She sat in the chair across from me. "Can you pass me the milk?"

I mumbled something incoherent and slid the gallon jug across the table. I had hoped to finish my breakfast in peace before Miriam woke up. My sister loved to talk, and I was not really in the mood for it.

She noticed. And it only peaked her interest. "Uh oh. I've seen that look before. What's wrong, Kyle?"

Between bites of Honey Nut Cheerios, I managed to get out, "It's nothing. I'm fine."

Miriam's mouth quirked. "You had the nightmare again, didn't you?" I replied by staring intently at my cereal. "Kyle, post-traumatic stress is nothing to be ashamed of. I can't imagine what you saw over there, but you need to speak to someone or these feelings will eat you alive. I remember when Mom-

"I don't have post-traumatic stress," I snapped. She raised an eyebrow, but said nothing in response. I took a deep breath and added, "Look, Sis, I appreciate what you're trying to do here. But I'm fine."

Miriam was quiet for a moment. She put her hand on my shoulder and said, "Okay. But if these nightmares continue, promise me that you will see a therapist and get help." I gave her a half-nod, and she gave me a half-smile.

Just then, Miriam's husband Don walked into the kitchen. In only his boxers. Again. Don used to play basketball at MIT, and he thought that qualified him as a real athlete. He picked up the milk and began to drink it straight from the carton. "Baby, your little brother doesn't need to have his head shrunk. He needs to get himself a real job."

My older sister's eyes shot her husband a *Not now!* look that she thought I wouldn't notice. "It's only been a couple of months," she told him. "And Kyle has been working."

"No, Kyle has been running errands for people in the neighborhood for pocket change. I'm talking about a real job. Something that he can turn into a career. He needs to start living his own life."

The not-so-subtle subtext was that Don wanted me to get a place of my own. More to the point, he wanted me out of his and Miriam's apartment. And so he drank from the carton, turned off the heat in the middle of the night, wore boxers to breakfast, and did a hundred other little things to make me uncomfortable and to pressure me into leaving. Mission accomplished on the uncomfortable part, anyway.

"Miriam, I appreciate that you are trying to stand up for me. But Don's right. I need to get serious about getting some money so I can leave you two lovebirds alone." I stood up and took my dishes to the sink. "I'm gonna head down to Murphy's this afternoon. I heard that he needs a new bartender."

"That's a good Christian boy, spending half your day in a dingy old bar," Miriam teased.

"Hey, this is Boston, remember? If you aren't spending half your day in a dingy old bar, you're just not a proper Catholic."

"Yes, but those are *Irish* Catholics." Then she said with mock seriousness, "We Syrians are above such things." It had been one of our father's favorite expressions. He loved to remind us where we came from, of our culture and heritage. Although he was ethnically Armenian, our father had been a patriot and put the love of his country above everything but his family. The decision to leave had been the hardest of his life, and he never quite recovered from his heartbreak.

"We Syrians are not above a decent paycheck," I responded. "Besides, don't you want me to get out of your hair?"

"Of course I do. But I also worry about you. You seem to spend all your time at the apartment or doing chores for Mr. Perkins. If you move away, I'm afraid that you'll just turn into a hermit. I want you to be happy." She put her hand on my shoulder. "Don't take this the wrong way, little brother, but you need to get a life."

I gave Miriam a skeptical look. "I have a life."

"Playing video games and hanging out at Murphy's isn't a life, Kyle. Who was the last girl that you took out on a real date?" I opened my mouth, but Miriam cut me off. "And taking Kathleen O'Brien to prom doesn't count since she got sick and had to leave early." I closed my mouth.

She had a good point. I enlisted in the Marines only a couple years after high school and spent the next couple of years rotating through warzones. It's hard to meet girls in countries where alcohol is illegal and arranged marriages are the norm. And I learned the hard way that there aren't a whole lot of pick-up lines that work on chicks clad head-to-toe in burqas.

Don turned on the TV. It was set to CNN, and the banner at the bottom of the screen read "Terror in Libya." There was an attractive female reporter in front of a sun-drenched desert landscape. "That's right, Chuck. According to analysts, the video that was released last night showcasing the execution of so-called 'apostates' was filmed only a few miles from here in the town of Sirte. As of right now, sources have placed the death toll at twenty-one, but there is very little in terms of law and order here and the true number may never be known."

Miriam stood from the table. "Don! Turn that off right now." She tilted her head toward me.

Don looked confused, then seemed to get it. He found the remote and turned the TV off. "Oh. Sorry, Kyle. I swear, that wasn't on purpose. I know you went through hell over there."

I sighed. Great. When he wasn't trying to drive me out, Don wanted to "protect" me from what I went through in Iraq. Miriam was at least as guilty. But they didn't get it. Not really.

"It's okay. I appreciate that you're concerned about me." I looked to my sister. "Miriam, I'm just trying to get my feet back under me. I'll be out there before you know it." If I said it enough, maybe even I would start to believe it.

Murphy's Bar was four blocks away from the apartment, so it was within walking distance. Miriam's description of a "dingy old bar" was a bit generous. It had been a hardware store before a fire gutted the place back in 1977. Douglas Murphy bought the place for pennies on the dollar and turned it into a working-class watering hole. With his characteristic no-nonsense attitude, he dubbed the place "Murphy's Bar" and had been providing reasonably priced alcohol to the good people of Boston ever since.

It was moderately busy for a Tuesday afternoon. A couple of regulars were sitting in their usual spots. One of those regulars was a chubby fellow by the name of Isaac. Isaac was the type of guy who gave barflies a bad name. Beyond the rumors, and the smell, I didn't know much about Isaac. He clearly didn't know much about me because he called out, "Hey, Hoy-yek! How you doing, man?"

Not wanting to be rude, I shook his extended hand and immediately regretted it. How could his palms be that sweaty? I smiled and gently corrected him. "Actually, it's pronounced Hoy-yek."

"Whatever," he replied. "Say, would you like to make a couple bucks on tonight's game?" His voice dropped to a whisper and he said, "I have it on good authority that the Celtics are gonna win by twenty points. It's a sure thing."

Yeah, right. Like I was going to hand over what little money I had to a guy like Isaac. "No thanks. I'm good."

"Okay. But this is my deal, so don't go spreading it around."

I gave him an exaggerated wink and asked, "Is Douglas here?" Isaac nodded and pointed a stubby thumb back toward the bar. "Thanks."

Douglas, never Doug, was mixing a drink for a blond woman I didn't recognize. I waved to him, and he gave me a curt nod in return. When he finished pouring the drink I walked up to the bar. "Scotch and soda?" he asked.

"Maybe later. I heard that you needed a new bartender, and I need the money. Sounds like a win for everybody involved."

Douglas shook his head. "Sorry, Kyle. I'd like to help you out, but I just hired a new guy yesterday."

"Well, could I just cover some shifts for somebody? I need some cash."

He frowned. "Look, if you got debts you need to square..."

"No, it's nothing like that. Work's been hard to find lately, and I just want to get some momentum behind me, you know?"

"I understand." Douglas leaned in and quietly added, "Tell ya what. If any of my bartenders need some time off, I'll give you a call. 'Til then, I'll give you the next drink on the house."

Fat lot of good a free drink would do for the job search. But it would be impolite to just turn down his offer. "Okay. Then I'll take that scotch and soda, please."

Douglas gave me my drink and moved on to serve the next customer. As I nursed my drink, I mulled over my options. Unfortunately, there weren't a whole lot of them. I was in a bit of a Catch-22: there were a few job openings in the greater Boston area that caught my eye, but there were no reliable ways of getting there that I could afford. Murphy's was the last place within walking distance from the apartment.

I stayed through the Celtics game. It was a heartbreaker, with a four-point loss to the Knicks in overtime. I was glad that I had decided against betting on Isaac's "sure thing." By the time the game was over, I realized that it was getting late. Miriam was working a double shift at the hospital tonight, but she had asked me to call when I had news about the bartender job. I pulled out my phone to call her and it started ringing. It was Don's work number. He should have been home an hour ago. I answered on the fourth ring.

"Hey, Don."

He sounded relieved. "Oh, Kyle. I'm glad I got you. Have you gone to the bar yet?"

"Yeah, I'm right outside. I stayed for the Celtics game. What do you need?"

Don was talking to someone else in the room, then turned his attention back to the phone. "I got held up at work. Can you do me a favor?"

"Depends on the favor."

"Take the box on the kitchen counter over to Murphy's. I've built up a bit of a tab, so Douglas agreed to a barter to take care of my debt."

Ah. When I asked him about the bartending slot, Douglas thought I owed somebody money. He must have assumed Don and I had similar problems. "Box on the counter. Got it. Anything else?" Don was obviously distracted, so I repeated myself. "Is there anything else?"

"No, just the box. But you need to get it to Douglas by last call. Can you do that for me?"

Murphy's Bar closed at two o'clock in the morning and it was a little after nine. "It's no problem."

"Thanks, Kyle." And with that, he hung up.

When I reached the apartment, I fumbled for the key. It had gotten a lot colder since I left the bar, and little patches of ice were forming on the sidewalk. "I hope Don didn't leave the heater off," I mumbled.

Once inside, I went into the kitchen and found the box. It was small, probably a cigar box. Murphy's didn't close for another couple of hours, but I didn't want to be caught outside in another snowstorm. I picked up the box, slid it into a backpack, and walked out into the night.

I wasn't the only one who wanted to avoid the storm. The streets were virtually deserted. Other than the occasional taxi, there weren't any cars on the road. The few people who had been on the sidewalk only twenty minutes earlier must have found someplace better to be.

About three blocks away from the apartment, I noticed an older man doing his best to stay away from the ice patches on the pavement. I realized that it was Father Tesar, a priest at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross on Washington Street. It took me a while to recognize him without his clerical vestments. But the bushy brown mustache was unmistakable.

I had been going to the Cathedral since I moved to Boston, and Miriam had been going for a year or two before that. I had always tried to keep close to the Church, particularly during my time overseas. It's not like I was best friends with Pope or anything, but my father had impressed upon me the importance of our faith and I took his words seriously.

I waved to him, and he smiled at me as he walked by. And that would have been the full extent of our encounter had I not noticed a group of young men across the street change direction and start following the old man. It looked like they got their outfits off the sale rack at

Hot Topic. One of the kids was wearing sunglasses. It was ten o'clock at night, and this guy wasn't Corey Hart. Despite the ridiculous look, they triggered alarm bells in my head. Everything from the way they kept their hands in their pockets to the way they seemed to be moving as a pack toward Father Tesar made me take notice.

The obvious leader of the group was a tall kid, a little over six feet tall, who couldn't have been old enough to order a beer. He had a shock of artificially red hair and a matching soul patch. I slowed down to keep an eye on things and step in if needed. Red, as I labeled him, quickened his pace so that he would intercept Father Tesar before the next crossroad. The priest, who was paying more attention to the ice on the sidewalk than anything else, didn't see Red coming until it was too late.

Red bumped into Father Tesar and said with exaggerated toughness, "Hey, watch where you're going, old man!"

Father Tesar took a step back and began to apologize when he ran into one of the other thugs approaching from behind. "Where ya headed, geezer?" the thug sneered.

Things were starting to get ugly. I set the backpack down on the sidewalk and turned around so I could tell the punks to take a hike. Then one of them was stupid enough to push Father Tesar to the ground and the others gathered around to kick the old man when he was down.

I don't really remember throwing the first punch. What I do remember is a sudden ache in my knuckles and the sight of one high school dropout on the ground trying his best not to cry in front of his buddies. He failed.

"Hey, who the hell are you?" Red demanded. His friends began to circle around me, and somewhere in the back of my mind I kept track of their positions. Just in case.

"Somebody who wants you to back off." I balled my fists and yelled, "Now!"

Red sneered at me. "Go home, asshole. We've got you outnumbered five to one."

I pointed down to the thug on the pavement. "Four to one." Balancing my weight on my left leg, I struck out with my right leg acting as a piston to drive my foot into another thug's knee. It gave way with a sickening pop, and the poor kid joined his friend on the ground. "Three."

The kid to my right, the one with the sunglasses, came at me with what he must have thought was an impressive round-house kick. It might have worked against someone with no real fighting experience, but to my trained eye it was clumsy and slow. I stepped into the attack and grabbed the leg with my left arm. I yanked the leg up to further disrupt his balance, then swept his other leg out from under him. He went down hard, and one of the lenses popped out of his sunglasses. "Two."

It was down to me, Red, and one other gang member who brought to mind Lou Ferrigno in his early twenties. The big guy took advantage of my fight with the Karate Kid and tried to grab me from behind in bear hug, actually lifting me about an inch from the sidewalk. I swung my elbow at the side of his head. He grunted with pain, but held on tight. I threw my head back, hoping to connect with his nose. I did, and I'm pretty sure I broke it, but he didn't break his grip. I thrashed with my legs and kicked at his shins and knees, but I couldn't get enough power into the strikes to do any real damage. With each blow, his arms tightened around my torso like a steel clamp. His dedication would have been admirable had it not been crushing my rib cage. What's more, he was forcing the air from my lungs, and I was starting to see spots.

It was at that point Father Tesar struck him across the head with my backpack. I had forgotten that I had even set it down. It stunned my opponent for just a moment, but it was long enough for me to get low and swing around the side to break his grip. I took in a gulp of air and my lungs rejoiced in the fresh oxygen. I quickly stepped around the big guy and threw a fast one-two punch at his floating ribs. I might as well have punched a cinder block. I took a quick step back. The brute gave me a snarling grin and took a lumbering step to stay in arm's reach.

For the brief moment that his stance was a bit too wide, I suddenly reversed direction and slammed my foot into his groin. It was a cheap shot, but boy, was it ever effective. The brute's eyes went wide and his snarl turned into a cartoonish squeak. He fell to his knees and his breath came out in wheezing puffs.

I stared into Red's eyes and stated as theatrically as I could, "One."

Red growled and tried to force me to back down, but I think the pained moans of his fellow gang members scattered on the sidewalk ruined the mood. He put his hands up and said, "Hey, I don't want any more trouble. You and the geezer can go."

"Thank you for being so gracious," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. I went over to Father Tesar, who handed me my backpack.

"That was remarkable, Kyle."

I scratched the back of my head. It occurred to me that I had just beat up a bunch of guys in front of a priest. Not exactly turning the other cheek. "Uh. Thanks. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I am," he said wearily. "You saved my life."

"I wouldn't go that far. Do you need me to go along with you?"

Father Tesar shook his head. "That will not be necessary. My house is not far from here, and I should have no further trouble."

"If you say so." I looked around. "Uh. Do you think that we should call the cops?"

Father Tesar considered the question. "I think that these poor boys have learned their lesson for tonight."

I started to turn, but stopped as Father Tesar said, "Come see me after Mass this Sunday."

By doing so, he saved my life.

There was no warning except a subtle footfall behind me. Then I felt a sudden sharp impact on the backpack. I guess Red couldn't take a hint. My back stung from the blow, but if I hadn't had my back turned like that to speak to Father Tesar the knife would have gone into my kidney. As it was, the knife got caught halfway through the canvas and Red couldn't take it out to try again.

He still had his hand on the knife's grip, though, so I reached back to grab his arm and spun him around so that his arm was behind his back. "You just have a hard time letting things go, don't you, Red?"

He tried to say something defiant, but it came out as pained little gasps. I didn't care. Red wasn't going to be hurting anyone for quite a while. I increased the pressure on his arm until I felt it pop out of socket. The pained gasps turned into screams, and I let him go. "Now get to the hospital. They can put the arm back with minimal damage if you hurry." He just stood there staring at his arm as if he could heal it with his mind. "Go!"

Red snapped out of his trance and started to run away. The others were starting to get up and went limping after him the best that they could. I couldn't help but smile at the sight. Then a horrible thought crossed my mind.

I unslung the backpack and opened it. Sure enough, the knife had gotten stuck in the wooden box with the cigars. It wasn't a total loss, but I'd have some work convincing Douglas to accept it as payment.

Father Tesar watched the young men flee and asked, "Will I see you at Mass this Sunday?"

I looked in disbelief at the man who seconds before had feared for his life. He was truly single-minded in his determination. "Yes. I'll be there."

He nodded sagely. "Good. I have something that I think you will want to see."

Despite what he had told me at the scene, I was kind of surprised to discover that Father Tesar never filed a police report about the incident. I didn't mind. For one thing, I didn't have to go down to the station to give my side of the story. I did discover later that Red took my advice

and went to the hospital to get his shoulder fixed. In an ironic twist, Miriam was the ER doc who treated him. Apparently, he told her that he had been attacked by five guys and was lucky to have walked away. But he "didn't see their faces" so it wouldn't do much good to go to the cops. She didn't buy it, but she never pressed the issue.

It turned out that my story impressed Douglas enough that he accepted the damaged box of cigars anyway. Don got upset that I would be so careless with his property and forgot the fact that I had been doing him a favor. So much for the "let's get over our misunderstandings and be best friends" moment. Oh, well.

The next few days went by in a blur. True to his word, Douglas let me cover a shift here and there. But by the time I went to Mass, I had mostly forgotten what Father Tesar had said. I wasn't always able to make it to Mass given my ride situation. Fortunately, Miriam and Don were headed out of town for a few days. The two of them were going to spend some time with Don's parents in Brockton, and my always protective sister was worried about leaving me alone. So she carved out some time to make sure we all went to the service together.

At the beginning of the service, I noticed someone sitting toward the back of the church. He was the last person to enter the room, and something about him just didn't fit with the crowd. There was nothing unusual about his physical appearance. He was an older man with salt-and-pepper hair and an immaculately trimmed beard. I estimated his age at around the late 50s or early 60s. His skin looked rough, probably from years of hard living. He was wearing a crisp black suit that was in keeping with the attire of most of the other people in attendance. But the thing that caught my eye was his general demeanor. His eyes kept moving across the crowd, and he sat in a position that would make it difficult to be caught off guard. The man had the look of a predator, pure and simple. But what was more interesting was that he was trying to hide it.

I tried to push it out of my mind as the service continued. Miriam noticed my discomfort and whispered, "Creepy guy at the back?"

She had noticed him, too. Interesting. "Yeah. I don't know what his deal is. But it's not our problem."

The man didn't move during the service, except to take the Sacrament. Once Mass was over and the crowd cleared out, Father Tesar approached me. He looked at Miriam and Don and said, "I thought you would be coming alone."

I looked at him blankly, then slapped a palm on my forehead. "Right. You wanted to talk to me." I shrugged. "That's my sister. And my ride."

Father Tesar frowned. Miriam took the hint and said, "That's okay, Kyle. We'll see you outside."

The man in black stood and stepped toward us. "Actually, it may be best if you leave. I will make sure Kyle gets home." He spoke English well, but hints of what sounded like a French accent came through.

Miriam scoffed. "I'm sure you will, Mister . . ."

"Bernard is a friend of mine," Father Tesar said. "We've known each other for years. I assure you that he will live up to his word."

"Uh-huh." My sister wasn't buying it. But she didn't want to argue with the old priest in his own cathedral. She looked at me. "You sure you're okay with this?"

Don wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "He's a big boy. He'll be fine. Besides, we have to get on the road now if we want to get to Brockton in time for dinner."

"I'll be fine," I told my sister. "I can always call a cab." It wasn't like I had enough money to throw it away like that, but it wasn't her burden.

She reached into her purse and pulled out a piece of paper. "This is the address and phone number for Don's parents' house in case you need to reach us." As she put it in my hand, I felt her slide a crinkled bill, as well. Miriam was smart enough to know I couldn't spare cab fare and wanted to take care of me. That was so typical.

I fought to keep a smile from my face. "I'm fine. Go."

She did, with obvious reluctance. Which left me alone with Father Tesar and his friend in black. For added privacy, Father Tesar led us to a small side chapel to talk. He looked around to make sure we were alone, then drew a small curtain. Apparently, our conversation was something he wanted to keep secret even from the other priests.

Father Tesar sat and motioned for me to do the same. But his mysterious friend remained standing, arms clasped behind his back. I decided to follow his lead and stayed on my feet.

"Father Tesar tells me that you served in the military. Is that correct?" the stranger asked.

It was an odd question. I nodded. "Yes. I served in the Marines."

The stranger began to walk, encircling me. I was tempted to spin to keep my eyes on him, but I decided for an air of stoic nonchalance. "Early promotion to corporal," he said. "Led a fireteam in combat. Decorated for valorous service. You had a promising career ahead of you." He stopped behind me and whispered, "So why leave it behind?"

"Grunt life wasn't for me," I lied.

"Hmm." He didn't sound convinced. "And it has nothing to do with what you saw in Iraq?" I swallowed but didn't respond. "Yes, I know about that. Your squad were some of the first Americans to see first-hand the barbaric acts that would become the signature of the Islamic

State. It would seem to me that witnessing the brutal execution of men guilty only of the crime of being Christian in a Muslim land would make it hard to stay in that line of work.”

“Yeah, something like that.” Since I couldn’t track the stranger, I kept my eyes on Father Tesar. “Is he going somewhere with this?”

“I’m sure he is,” the priest smiled. Then, I swear, he pulled out a Bible and started reading it like we weren’t in the room.

“And since you came back, things are . . . different.” The stranger stopped in front of me and stared right into my eyes. “People treat you like you’re fragile. Broken. Good, well-meaning people who have no idea what you saw and have no idea how to help you. People like your sister.”

“Wait just a second,” I protested.

He held up his hands. “I mean no offense. She seems like a fine woman. But allow me to make a guess, hmm?” I nodded and he continued. “Sometime in the past couple of days someone mentioned Iraq or opened a newspaper that showed a ghastly picture of atrocities in the Middle East and your sister immediately jumped in to save you from being exposed to something that could trigger your PTSD.”

I grunted. “It was a TV news station, actually.”

He smiled, but did not gloat. “Ah. And you said nothing, because really what is there to say? How can you explain that you are not haunted by the horror of what you saw? How can you tell her that you don’t avoid information about the genocide but grab every scrap of information that you can like pieces to a puzzle you can never start to assemble?”

His voice lowered and he stepped mere inches from me. “How can you tell her you don’t regret going to war? How can you tell her that you *miss* it? That’s what keeps you up at night. Not the feeling that you were exposed to trauma, but the feeling that you need to go back there. That you need to do more.”

Damn.

That . . . that was it, wasn’t it? The reason I hadn’t felt at home here, the reason that I couldn’t find a job. I was wholly preoccupied with the thought that this wasn’t where I belonged.

I regarded the man again. “Who are you?”

“My name is Bernard Cuvier, and I am very much like you. Father Tesar told me what you did to protect him. I feel you have the right stuff to make a real difference. And, if you come with me, I can give you the purpose you seek.”

It was a damned good pitch. He seemed to know everything about me, even things I hadn’t admitted to myself. “Is that what this is? A job offer?”

Father Tesar chuckled. "Consider it a calling, Kyle."

I had so many questions. But something about this felt right. I finally felt like I was in the right place at the right time. Before I committed to anything, I had to know what I was getting myself into.

"And if I go with you, where exactly would I be going?"

Cuvier smiled, showing his teeth. But it was Father Tesar who spoke. He placed his Bible on his lap and asked, "Kyle, have you ever been to Malta?"

Thanks for reading! Feel free to get in touch on TheBenSchafer.com with your thoughts, questions, and comments. You can find out more about Kyle Hoyek and his adventures in Ben Schafer's debut novel, *SON OF SYRIA*, to be released Summer 2017