



# The Bad Soldier

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MY PARENTS AND SISTER were waiting at the reception campus when our shuttle from the airstrip pulled in. My mom broke from the crowd of families holding flowers and gifts, and hugged me like I'd never been hugged in my life. Even my dad was teary-eyed. As they stood looking at me, my mom still clutching my arm, my sister said, "You're home, Anthony. Aren't you excited?" She was fourteen, and generally found excitement in all directions. Getting back to base felt good, no question, but the jubilation I'd expected to feel wasn't there. "Sure," I said, shrugging and trying to smile. I said "sure" about fifty times that day.

At the welcome reception, guys stood surrounded by family like wildebeest that had been separated from their herd. They were overmatched by moms and wives in brightly colored skirts and lipstick, dads in their best shirt and too much cologne, children and younger siblings star struck at the sight of their personal hero, returned to them at last. The smaller kids had been given balloons and cupcakes, but they looked disoriented. Their mothers were acting strangely, smiling and crying at the same time, holding them up to be kissed and held by men they either barely remembered or didn't know at all.

I scanned for Tolbert but didn't see him. That he'd not wanted to stick around was no surprise.

"Are you all right, *mijo*?" my mom asked.

When I was a kid, my dad, a cop, sometimes came home from work quiet.

He would change out of his uniform and then head out to the porch alone to drink a few beers in silence. My mom would warn us not to bother him. A day or two later, he might tell us about responding to a traffic fatality, or a shooting, but it wasn't until I was a teenager that I started connecting the quiet moods with the stories. Now I understood those quiet moods all too well. I shrugged. "Just weird being back. I'm okay."

"Leave him be," my dad said. "He's all in one piece. That's what's important." He locked eyes with me. I nodded—a kind of thank you—and took another sip of my ginger ale.



I first met James Tolbert when Staff Sergeant Aguilar brought him into the abandoned warehouse that served as our sleeping quarters. He was one of the smallest soldiers I'd ever seen: five-three, five-four at most, maybe a hundred and twenty pounds. He was joining the platoon in mid-deployment, a replacement for Specialist Marcos, who'd timed out. Aguilar introduced him to the dozen or so men playing cards or writing e-mails and then pointed him to his rack—the one next to mine. "Delgado, meet your new fuck buddy." Aguilar had gay on the brain; calling you a *fag* or a *homo* was his way of being friendly.

Up close I saw Tolbert had fair hair, pale skin showing a little sunburn on the nose and cheekbones, and pimples at the corners of his mouth. At nineteen, I was one of the younger guys in the company, but he looked young even to me. Standing there in his ruck and helmet, he looked like a middle-schooler playing dress-up with his father's gear.

"Hey. I'm Anthony," I said.

He had just travelled by personnel carrier from Baghdad to Fallujah, crossing a desert wasteland pocked with bombed-out vehicles and fire-blackened dwellings, but he gave me a smile and shook my hand with force. "Hey, man, how's it going?"

After Aguilar left, I showed him his armoire and footlocker. To get out from under his ruck, he shrugged one strap off and then performed a little maneuver, flexing his knees and then bouncing onto the balls of his feet while turning slightly, the ruck dropping onto the mattress with a squeaking thud. He uttered a soft "Whew!" and started unpacking.

A ruck fully outfitted with standard gear weighed seventy pounds. To this burden Tolbert had added a small library: *The Book of Mormon*; a Bible; an Arabic dictionary; *Guns, Germs and Steel*; *Snowcrash*; *A History of Western Philosophy*; *Of Mice and Men*; *Monologues for Stage and Screen: A Study Guide*. The religious books were fairly common, and there were a couple of mostly unread Arabic dictionaries on the shelf of DVDs and video games over near the flatscreen, but you'd probably have to search the entire rest of the quarters—home to over forty men—to come up with four regular books. A book on acting was probably unique to the entire division.

As he got his personals sorted, we made small talk. We discovered we'd grown up 150 miles from each other, he in Sacramento and me in Watsonville; viewed from planet Iraq, we were basically neighbors. I asked who his DI's had been at Benning—all Infantry soldiers did Basic and MOS training there—and found we'd both had Sergeant Cardell, a man known to all those unlucky enough to train under him as Sergeant Barbell. The stereotype of the angry sergeant filled with poetic insults had been the exception at Benning, but Barbell was doing his part to keep it alive. I still occasionally had nightmares of being on a full-gear 20k hump with the rest of the guys in my training platoon while Barbell's voice, bellowing through a bullhorn, listed the different ways our mothers should be punished for giving birth to such insults to flag and country. I woke from these nightmares to a sweltering, stinking, tin-walled room in the middle of a combat zone, but the waking was still a relief.

Remembering Sergeant Barbell, Tolbert smiled. "That guy was classic."

I'd heard a lot of words used to describe Barbell—*cocksucker*, *motherfucker*, *asshole*—but, to that point, *classic* had not been one of them.

"So what's up with all the books?" I asked.

He looked at the toppled pile and grinned sheepishly. "Yeah. I don't like to be bored."

South of the camp, on a slight rise beyond the perimeter HESCO bastions and concertina wire, lay several acres of wind-blown trash. It was a section of open desert that the Iraqis used as a dump. Dead dogs and sometimes dead people got left out there, bringing in mobs of vultures that hopped around, wings open, fighting each other for scraps. Somebody had named it the Diagona, after the monster that lives in the trash compactor in *Star Wars*. My first

week in camp, I couldn't escape its stench; it was in my food, my clothes, my dreams. As I was walking Tolbert across the camp to show him the honey buckets and the showers, a gust of wind hit us with a strong dose. Tolbert stopped in his tracks and started coughing as though trying to expel poison. "Holy crap!" he said, his eyes watering.

"Don't worry about that," I said. "You'll get used to it."

He spat a few times, shook his head. "Wow," he said. "Okay." He smiled again, but with effort.

We headed to the dining facility for evening chow with the rest of the platoon. As we sat powering through cheeseburgers and mashed potatoes, Specialist Fernquest and Specialist Pignato got into one of their routines:

"Dude, what is the problem with your fucking hair? You cut that yourself?"

"Your mom cut it for me. It was part of the special: *Free Haircut with Hand-job.*"

"You should have let her finish one before she started the other."

"She told me she could multi-task."

They could keep it going for ten minutes at a stretch, never cracking a smile. They were both big, confident dudes, a former high school quarterback from Minnesota (Pignato) and backcountry firefighter from Colorado (Fernquest). Their delivery was so deadpan, you'd sometimes think they were about to fight, but then one of them would wink, and the bubble of tension would burst. A few guys got tired of the schtick, but I enjoyed it. I appreciated the distraction from the heat and the drudgery, the homesickness, and I envied the way they could own a conversation, could take the meanest insult as a joke and sling something back that was just as vicious and funny.

Rising to his role as one of our unofficial leaders, Pignato brought Tolbert into the conversation: "So Tolbert, let me give you a heads up about Iraqi women. When you're out on patrol, you're going to see some serious hotties. Personally, I like the grannies dressed in four layers of shawls, all hunched over in the heat, dragging a goat. But that's just me. When I see a sweet piece of ass like that I want to stop the convoy right there and get busy. But here's the thing: in Muslim culture, it's frowned upon. You can't just bust a move. You have to go through family channels, get the father's permission, all that. Something to keep in mind."

“But it’s worth the trouble,” Fernquest said. “Trust me. For the rest of your life you’ll enjoy those wrinkled, deeply sagging tits, hanging like used jimmy hats. I’m getting a woody just imagining them.”

As guys laughed, Tolbert looked around, red faced.

“It’s a joke,” I said. “They’re just fucking with you.”

Tolbert nodded. “Oh, totally,” he said. “I know.”

Over the next few days, Tolbert’s true personality emerged: he was a chatterbox. He was filled with sports trivia—“What baseball team produced five Rookie of the Year winners in a row?” “Name the six NFL teams that have never been to the Superbowl.”—and had strong opinions about writers and TV shows: Kurt Vonnegut was a “genius” while Chuck Palahniuk was “totally over-rated”; *Battlestar Galactica* was a “million times” better than *The Sopranos*. When he taped up a picture of his family—his father, two older brothers and Tolbert himself in suits, his mother and younger sister in church dresses—he spent half an hour describing them. His father was a successful real estate developer, his mother a teacher, one brother a general contractor, the other an infielder for the Dodger’s double-A club. His sister, still in high school, was an academic standout—Straight A’s, Model United Nations, Mock Trials, Yearbook Editor. I couldn’t help noticing that, unlike Tolbert, his father and brothers were big, broad-shouldered guys with square jaws. When I asked if he’d been adopted, he laughed. “No. Why would you ask that?”

Despite all his reading and command of trivia, Tolbert admitted high school hadn’t really been his thing. He’d graduated with a B average, and had gotten 1100 on the SAT, good enough to get into Cal State Sacramento or one of the other Cal State schools, but he’d chosen the Army—specifically the Infantry—because, in his words, it sounded “awesome.” “I wanted to do something that my dad and brothers would never do.”

Most mornings, there was a regular game of three-on-three at the hoop behind quarters. His first couple days in camp, Tolbert stood on the sidelines watching, but one day, as a new game was starting up, he stepped onto the court and raised his hands for the ball. He tried to dribble between his legs but bounced the ball off his ankle and had to go running after it. He was put on a team with Fernquest, one of the better players in the platoon, and Marker, an overweight kid from Louisiana who liked to camp out under the rim, waiting

for a pass. The games were generally casual, just a way to burn off steam, but Tolbert didn't understand this. He couldn't dribble without looking at the ball, but he started confidently calling plays: "Pick and roll!" "Post up!" "Pass it back!" "I'm open. I'm *open*!" When his teammates ignored him, he yelled louder, his face pulsing with frustration.

"Dude, just shut up and play the game," Fernquest scolded.

Tolbert's eyes widened. He kept quiet for a few minutes, but soon he was yelling again, calling for passes, putting his hand up for high-fives every time his team scored.

His first patrol came up a couple nights later.

By this point in the war—mid-2006—the IED's, mass killings and chaos that had marked the first year after the American invasion had calmed way down, so full-on combat was a rarity. But Fallujah was still a very dangerous place. In the last month, there'd been two sizeable suicide bombings in our sector. Snipers popped up from time to time and mortar attacks were common. Sensors had been installed around the city to pinpoint fire locations, which meant insurgents could get off only a few rounds before the nearest Apache or tank unit was called in to pulverize their position. But we all knew even untrained lunatic shithheads got lucky once in a while. When a patrol was imminent, guys got quiet and focused. Prayers were said.

Once I got myself strapped up, I stepped over to make sure Tolbert was ready. As usual, he'd run himself ragged at basketball that morning, and was moving a little sluggishly. He noticed I was giving him the once-over and, smiling, surrendered to the process. "Yes, mother?" He'd forgotten his thigh-holster and, with it, his side-arm. "Come on, man. You've got to focus," I said. He dug the holster from his armoire and started untangling the buckles. I wanted to run through the full checklist with him but I heard our lieutenant barking for us to get outside. I hustled into formation.

Our lieutenant walked up and down the line, calling out deficiencies—safeties off, dirty ammo clips, no flares. As the new guy, Tolbert got a particularly thorough look. He had an empty CamelBak and a radio with dead batteries. In the Iraqi heat—the sun had been down for two hours but it was still over 90 degrees out—an empty CamelBak was the most immediately dangerous oversight, and the lieutenant let him know it. "Where the fuck do you think we're going, soldier? The mall? There's no Jamba Juice here."

“I know. Yes, sir.”

The lieutenant gave him sixty seconds to correct his deficiencies and be back in line.

After Tolbert returned, the lieutenant started his mission brief. He was a few minutes into it when Tolbert fell forward into the dirt. Guys fainted from time to time, so seeing him collapse was not particularly alarming. Another guy and I stepped out of formation and lifted his legs to get blood back to his head. I unhooked my drinking tube from its shoulder clip and doused his face and neck. When he came to, his face pale, eyes searching, we sat him on a Humvee bumper and helped him down some water. By the time the lieutenant finished the mission brief, he was back on his feet.

We climbed into the vehicles and headed out.

Tolbert rode with Pignato, Marker and me. Moving through the city, the streets were a dark forest; as we turned corners, our Humvee’s powerful headlights caused shot-up cars and toppled utility poles to jump forward and then suddenly retreat. Traveling down a narrow, trash-strewn boulevard, a shape that could have been a large dog or a man running in a crouch crossed into an alley perpendicular to our route. We were enforcing curfew, so any movement was suspicious. Marker radioed back that we were stopping, which brought the short convoy to a halt.

I got out and started hustling down the alley. I’d gone about thirty meters when, from behind me, I heard Tolbert cry out in pain. When I looked back, he and his rifle were splashed across the asphalt. I hadn’t heard the report of any firearm, but I ran to him. “You hit?”

He rolled onto his side, wincing.

Marker, still in the Humvee, swept the area with his spotlight. Pignato took up a position about ten meters from us and scanned the rooftops, rifle at the ready.

“Talk to me, man.” I clicked on my flashlight but I couldn’t see any wounds. I frantically ran my hand over his torso, feeling for blood.

“I’m okay,” he said.

“You sure?”

He opened and closed his right fist, working out some pain. “I just fell.”

I’d joined the Army because I wanted to follow in my dad’s footsteps and become a cop. From my dad’s stories I knew the exciting moments—chasing

guys over backyard fences or breaking up fights—were far outnumbered by days when you wrote tickets and picked up shoplifters at the mall. In twenty years on the force, my dad had never fired his weapon except in training or at the indoor range at Markley’s Gun Shop. But the gang problem in Watsonville was getting worse. I’d attended high school with dozens of Norteños and Mexican Mafia. If I was going to be a cop, I’d be busting these guys, as well as other dudes who were bigger and meaner than I was, and I wanted to have the confidence to take them on. I thought if I could get through a year of military training and a full tour in a war zone, Watsonville would seem pretty tame by comparison. And things had gone well so far: I wasn’t as big or physically strong as many of the guys in my unit, and my fingers still visibly shook when I got nervous or stressed, but I kept my gear squared away, did what I was told, and my weaknesses had escaped comment. With Tolbert around, making his klutzy ruckus, I felt less in the spotlight, felt like a much better soldier.

A couple of days after his first patrol, Tolbert’s wrist was still hurting so he walked to the medical building to have it checked out. The rest of us were at the basketball court, listening to Pignato and Fernquest banter as we waited to get into a game:

“Dude, run over and take a shit for me.”

“You’re on your own, princess. I dropped mine this morning—crisp and clean and no caffeine.”

“I’m serious. The turtle’s head is touching cotton.”

“Buy yourself some fucking Pampers.”

When the exchange ran out of steam, Pignato looked my way. “So, Anthony, what’s the issue with your girlfriend?”

I didn’t have a girlfriend, and was momentarily confused. Then I realized who he was talking about. “He’s not my girlfriend.”

“I thought I heard you guys butt-banging in the corner the other night.”

“Whatever,” I said.

“I’m just saying he is one piss-poor excuse for a soldier. I see you guys talking. Any insights?”

“You talk to him too,” I said, my voice pitched higher than I would have liked. Despite my vehemence, this was barely true. Since the nonsense in the dining facility on Tolbert’s first day, Pignato had basically ignored him.

“Easy, big fella,” Fernquest said. “There’s no crying in baseball.”

“The man doesn’t like having his girlfriend insulted,” Pignato said.

“He’s uncoordinated,” I said. “But he’s trying.”

“He’s a fucking spaz,” Aguilar chimed in, shaking his head. “Army these days would let my mom serve.”

“Come on, Sarge. That’s unfair. Not every soldier can be a frightening stud like Delgado here.”

This had sounded like a kind of compliment, but when I looked at Pignato I saw he was being sarcastic.

After lunch, I told Tolbert to follow me outside. When we reached the shade on the north side of the quarters, I turned to face him. He was smiling. “What’s up, man?”

“Dude, you’re blowing it.”

His eyebrows pinched. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve got to calm down and be more careful. Shit is serious here.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “There’s a war going on.”

I was having trouble making my point because I knew that, despite the lack of focus, the fainting and tripping, Tolbert was not the worst soldier in C Platoon. There were two or three other guys who were just as bad, though in different ways. They were constantly bringing up the rear, treated every blister and abrasion as a medical emergency, and opened their mouths only to whine about the heat or the smell. The real problem was the attention Tolbert drew to himself, the attention he was drawing to me. I struggled for a way to say this without actually saying it.

“Look, you’ve got a job to do. You need to stop talking about your books and *Battlestar Galactica* and who was the fucking MVP in 1978. Fernquest and Pignato and those guys are cutting you some slack because you’re new. But the grace period is over, trust me. You’re making the whole platoon look bad.”

He looked at me skeptically. “Talking about books is making the platoon look bad?”

This brought my frustration to a boil. I punched him in the chest.

He rocked back, nearly falling over before catching his balance. If I’d punched anybody else, it would have meant a fight, but Tolbert just stood there, rubbing his sternum. “What the hell?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I shouldn’t have done that. But I’m not fucking playing with you. You need to figure it out. Do you understand?”

He pulled himself erect, chin trembling. “Whatever, Anthony,” he said, and walked away.

Two weeks later, we got word that an Iraqi in our sector was trafficking weapons out of his home. The lieutenant showed around a photo of the target—a tall, skinny dude with a half-assed beard and dead eyes—and organized a convoy of four Humvees to go pick him up. Based on the mission brief, I thought we’d be back in an hour, ninety minutes tops.

We left camp at midnight, the streets dead quiet. Marker and Pignato were up front and I was on top, manning the SAW. Tolbert was in the back, down below my turret. Though we still racked next to each other and sat at the same table at chow, things had cooled between us. He’d become quieter and more focused, and had managed to get through several patrols without hurting himself or anyone else. But the klutziness remained. When a mortar round landed inside the perimeter one night, he’d twisted his ankle and opened a gash in his forehead trying to dive under a table.

Electricity had been out for a couple days in this part of the city, so people had been cooking on patios and rooftops with barbecues and wood fires, making the neighborhood smell like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July back home. We parked a block away from the house and approached on foot. Everything looked good: no dog barking, no candlelight in the windows. We radioed one of the Humvees forward, attached the chain and ripped down the gate. Going through the door was surreal, like always: flashlights swirled over walls and ceilings as we yelled out our pent-up terror. This was someone’s home, but we attacked it as though it had been taken from us and we had come to reclaim.

The target was on the ground and flex-cuffed before I even got a look at him. Six members of his family were also inside—a middle-aged father and mother, a grandmother, a teenaged sister, and two younger sisters.

After searching the house, we realized the intel we’d received was bullshit. We found only one weapon, an AK-74, and a clip containing three rounds. Affectionately known by insurgents as the Osama, the AK-74 was smaller and therefore more concealable than the more popular AK-47. In the early days of the war, long before my deployment, it had been the weapon of choice among

foreign Al-Qaeda fighters. These days Iraqis bought them on the black market for home protection.

We confiscated the weapon, checked the IDs of the adults, and did a little more poking around. We were about ready to leave when, for no reason except the obvious ones, the teenaged sister started screaming. Flashlight beams swung toward her corner of the room. She cursed us in Arabic mostly, but threw in “pig-fucking American” and “son of whore” here and there to antagonize us. Fernquest and Aguilar stood near her with their hands turned up, trying to get her to calm down. She’d been holding one of the smaller girls, and now she put the girl aside and stood, still shrieking. During pre-deployment training we were taught not to touch Muslim females unless it was absolutely necessary. Whether it was necessary in this instance could be argued forever, but the simple fact is Fernquest grabbed her by the arm. She jerked away and, with a determined, furious look on her face, took a swing. Two rounds went off in rapid succession, one tearing through her shoulder and the other blowing open her forehead. All around me guys dove for cover and clicked over to Automatic. I dropped into a crouch and spun around. Tolbert was standing behind me, rifle still pointed at the girl, eyes pegged open in shock.

When I got home to Watsonville, I spent some time reconnecting with my friends from high school. We drove over to Santa Cruz on the weekends to drink and try to meet girls. It was fun for a while—the freedom, the girls in short skirts and low-cut tops—but I felt far away. I got a girl to come to a motel with me one night, but I went limp about halfway through and had to make excuses about an injury I’d received in combat. The girl called her friend to come get her. I walked down to the beach and sat shivering on the sand, watching the waves in the moonlight.

When I went to the mall with my mom, the crowds stressed me out and I had to go wait in the car. Out on the road, if I hit a stretch of bad traffic I squeezed the wheel and raced the engine. I took a page from my dad’s playbook and spent evenings sitting on the porch, knocking back beers. But instead of enjoying the peace and quiet, I scanned for danger. I couldn’t shake the fear that people were watching the house, waiting for me to leave so they could slam their way in and kill my sister.

My dad had brought home a Watsonville PD employment application, but it had been sitting on my nightstand, untouched, for three weeks.

One night, unable to sleep, I took out a notebook and made a list of all the dead bodies I'd seen. There were fourteen. One was a fellow soldier: a radioman from another company who'd been shot by a sniper. Seven were victims of the suicide bombings we'd responded to the first month of the deployment. Two were men we found dumped at the Dianoga—they were both in dress pants, with burn marks on their faces and necks, and bullet wounds to the temple. Three more were insurgents who'd tested a detonator too close to a leaky propane tank. And of course Tolbert's girl.

She haunted me the most.

She'd been shot six feet from me, so the clarity of the memory was part of it. The suddenness was part of it too; she was alive, yelling, gesturing, and then her head exploded and she dropped. These images were interspersed with memories of her father, writhing on the ground, pulling at his own hair, and her mother, rocking back and forth, sobbing and praying as she clutched her remaining children. I was also haunted by a question: Had my punching Tolbert in the chest played a part in what he'd done? At the time, I hadn't thought so. I'd believed shooting the girl was just another one of his klutzy moves. But now I wasn't sure. After I punched him, he changed, lost his chipper smile and wore a look that suggested he was out to prove something, was watching for a chance at redemption.

I was still trying to come to terms with all of this when I got a call from Pignato. We hadn't talked since the end of our deployment and I was surprised to hear from him. He spoke quietly, all the sarcasm drained from his voice. "You hear about Tolbert?" he asked.

The day after killing the girl, Tolbert was sent to the Green Zone for counseling and a Combat Readiness Evaluation—a psych test. This would be the only official punishment for what he'd done. Though every man in the platoon knew shooting the girl had been stupid and unnecessary, she'd been in a house where an illegal weapon had been found and had defied multiple orders to step back. As far as the Army was concerned, she was a casualty of war.

While Tolbert was gone, guys prayed he wouldn't return, no one harder than me. We asked the lieutenant for updates but were told to stop gossiping, asked

if we didn't have more important things to worry about. In the absence of hard intel, the rumor mill went into overdrive: *Tolbert was assigned to another unit. Tolbert had failed his eval and was at Walter Reed. Tolbert was in a padded room, bawling his eyes out.*

Then, about a week after he was sent away, he came moping into the sleeping quarters just before afternoon chow. Card games paused and conversations hushed as he crossed the room to his rack. He looked sick, wrung out. Skinny as he'd been, it was obvious he'd lost weight. He took off his helmet and blouse and stowed them in his armoire, and then crawled into his rack and curled up. The room stayed quiet for another minute, until the wind outside blew sand against the windows, breaking the spell.

Over the next few days, I heard guys swear they wouldn't patrol with him. Some guys went further, talking about accidents that can happen in tense situations, about how a man's vision can get funny in all the dust, making it hard to tell an insurgent from a fool playing soldier.

Our lieutenant heard the comments, may have actually made a few of his own, and he took the situation up the chain. After our captain had a conversation with Lieutenant Colonel Dixon, the camp commander, a decision was made. Tolbert was relieved of his rifle and sidearm, and forbidden to leave the camp. No more raids, no more patrols. He would clean the showers, sweep quarters, litter patrol the grounds and assist the kitchen crew. He would stay a soldier—an Infantry soldier—and would complete his deployment as scheduled. The lieutenant would even submit paperwork so he could get his Purple Heart for cracking his head against the table. But in reality he would be the camp bitch.

He was moved to the Admin quarters, where the rest of the Food Service guys racked, but we still saw him at chow and out picking up cigarette butts. In addition to *Shithead*, *Douchebag*, *Fuckwad* and other standard insults, he was called *The Cleaning Lady* or just *Headcase*. Some guys went out of their way to fuck with him; they dropped candy wrappers at his feet or told him to take care of the spill on aisle five. His sickly, wrung-out appearance never improved, and the lost expression he'd worn on his first day back became permanent.

He still came into our sleeping quarters, usually running a message for the lieutenant's office, or delivering some ordered ammo or equipment. One night,

near the end of the deployment, he was on one of these errands when he saw me lying in my rack and stepped over. “Hey, Anthony,” he said.

I was listening to 50 Cent on my iPod, getting focused for another night patrol, but I took my ear buds out and waited for him to continue. We hadn’t talked since he’d been reassigned, and I assumed he wanted to tell me something official, that the chow schedule had changed, or the lieutenant wanted to see me.

“Just saying hi,” he said. His voice was soft, pleading.

I looked around the quarters; ten guys were looking back at me. I didn’t have the same contempt for Tolbert that they did, but I didn’t want him thinking we were still friends, if we ever had been. I put my ear buds back in and closed my eyes.