This Place is Perfect

Chapter 2

We found ourselves in the back of an old, dusty cab going to Elat, Israel for a three-day pass. Staff Sergeant Jake Walter and myself are headed for a well-deserved break. Two hours from nowhere in the middle of BFE (bum fuck Egypt) the taxi suddenly stops without warning. There isn’t another city for a hundred miles in any direction. The dark, Muslim driver doesn’t speak to us as he pulls over to the side of the sandy shoulder and proceeds to exit the vehicle without speaking. He makes his way towards the back of the cab. Jake and I look at each other and quickly undue our seat belts and prepare to leap out, not knowing what to expect.

Craning our necks to try and see what the hell this guy is doing, He is obscured when he opens the trunk of the vehicle and leaves it up! What the hell is he getting from the trunk? We think to ourselves. A gun! We both look at each other wide-eyed in bewilderment. We reach the same conclusion simultaneously. We are about to be murdered and put on Al Jazeera television! We check our 5s and 25s. Jake gives the hand signal to count down and we will each exit our own door at the same time. Three. Two. One! We open our doors and peel outward scanning for the threat. Ready to catch a bullet if it means the other has a chance to subdue the terrorist and survive. We quickly merge towards the rear of the vehicle. I was very proud of myself for not faltering in the face of unknown danger. I faced fear and I was ready for anything.

And much to our chagrin, we find ourselves facing the back of our driver. He is kneeling on the ground, on a prayer rug, which he obviously pulled from the trunk, and he has his head on the ground and we can hear him quietly praying in Arabic. It is prayer time. We look at each other with surprise on our faces. SSG Walter is standing in a ready to fight stance looking like an MMA fighter. I had taken a more traditional kung fu looking stance.

As soon as we realized we had misjudged the driver, we looked at each other and stood normally, shrugging our shoulders at each other, big grins on our faces. Man, did we feel stupid. We did not speak as we did not want to disturb his prayer. Instead, we made our way to the front of the vehicle to talk quietly. Foreheads sweaty, hands trembling slightly, pulse beginning to slow down. I think I can talk now without my voice going into a high-pitched stressed squeal. I laugh at myself for overreacting.

Looking around, we noticed that one side of the road had flat desert for as far as the eye can see. The side of the desolate desert road our taxi was parked on had about twenty meters of low, wavy sand and then some very nice looking 25 meter tall cliffs, the beginning of some small hills. A perfect place to practice our rappelling skills!

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking”? We both say at the same time. As we gaze upon the perfect rappelling cliff face.

I start to make my way to the base of the cliff, looking for a way up to the top. Walking across the hot, dusty sand, I kept my eye on the top of the short cliffs. They were thirty to forty feet high. Perfect. Now if I could just find a way to the top…

“Freeze”! I immediately froze at the sound of SSG Walter’s scream. I froze in place. He hadn’t yelled stop, he yelled freeze! There was a difference. There was a huge difference. I was a statue. Immoveable. I trusted Jake with my life. If he yelled freeze, he meant it. So, I froze. I waited. My eyes were the only things moving. Scanning, up. Down. Scanning left and right. Scanning near. Scanning far. Then I saw it.

“Don’t move, Doc! Don’t move”! Jake continued in his best command voice. “I’ll get you out. Let me think for a moment”.

I could just barely make out the sign. It was at the edge of my periphery. A red and white warning sign! Oh Shit. My heart dropped. Sweat was now dripping down my face and into my eyes. The sign had been low and angled away from us, probably due to the heavy sandstorms common in the area. I had missed it because I was looking up at the top of the cliff and not minding my 25’s as Jake had done. The sign had huge, red and white lettering with the classic skull and crossbones prominently displayed. The sign was in Arabic at the top, English at the bottom. The message was quite clear. Minefield! Do Not Enter!

Luckily, both my feet were still in contact with the ground, so I had an edge on balance. But I stood frozen, trusting that my Battle Buddy would save the day. I waited impatiently for him to make a decision and guide me back to safety. I trusted Jake with my life. This wasn’t the only time he had come through and saved the day. So, I waited. After what seemed an eternity, Jake spoke in his best NCO voice.

“Ok, Doc, I checked up and down the road”. He began. “It looks like the heavy winds have blown the sand around and there’s just no telling where those mines are”.

“No, shit”! I countered.

“You got this. Just walk backwards and retrace your steps”. He spoke matter-of-factly. “Just be careful to only step in your own footprints and nowhere else”.

Now I was looking down carefully making sure I could easily see my own footprints. The Lord was on my side today. My footprints were easy to see. I gently rocked my weight back onto my back foot and then smoothly brought my front foot back into the nearest footprint and settled my weight down. My heart was racing. My heart was thudding in my chest. I was battle focused on Jake’s voice and my balance. One step at a time.

“Tack! You are about 10 meters into the field”. Jake kept speaking to me. Keeping me from overthinking my situation. Keeping me grounded so I don’t panic. “You got this. Don’t stop for too long, just get your balance then take the next step”! My hero.

“Fuck”! I spoke quickly, I was mad at myself for getting out into this mess so quickly without looking. “I better not get blown up”!

Our driver must have approached Jake. He began yelling and gesturing very animatedly. I paused and slowly looked behind me at the two onlookers. Jake was gesturing the driver to slow down and be a little quieter.

“Mafeesh muskela, sedeekie, mafeesh muskela”! Jake was gesturing with both hands.

The driver looked incredulous. Finally throwing up his hands and stating loud enough for me to hear, “Inshallah”! I knew what that means! It means God’s will shall be done. Translated loosely to: If God wants it to happen it will. Oh great!

I continued my slow and deliberate steps, feeling and listening for that dreaded click of the pressure switch activating. I would only have 1, maybe 2 seconds if the click came. Remembering my In-Country briefing from a few months back, Egypt is one of the most heavily mined countries with about 20 million landmines. Most of these mines are in the western part and date back to World War II. There was no telling the type of field I was in. It could be the T/79 or TS-50, anti-personnel mines. Maybe it was the MF 45 bounding fragmentation mine or the MF 270 bounding frag mine. Either way, my Battle Buddy and our driver would be in serious danger. Anyone within 150 feet could be seriously damaged, while anyone within 15 feet would probably not survive.

“Hey”! I yelled over my shoulder. “You guys better get back a ways. I don’t want you getting hurt too”!

“Don’t you worry about us”. Jake was calm and in control. “You just worry about not falling over, I ain’t gonna go to your funeral and tell your family what happened”!

“Yea, make up something cool”! I joked.

“I’m tell people you had a heat stroke in the shitter”! Was his reply. We both laughed out loud a bit. Inside I wasn’t laughing.

I methodically kept walking backwards, slowly, slowly, ever so slowly. Rest my weight on my backfoot. Ease up on my forward foot and smoothly step it back into the next footprint. Repeat. Over and over and over.

A sudden jolt to my back! “Hey”! Jake suddenly screamed. “You made it”! I about shit my pants!

Jake pulled me back onto the road and was smiling and laughing. Asshole! I laughed too. Jake pushed me towards the car. Our driver was already in and ready to get out of here. I knew exactly how he felt.

Once we were back in the car and heading towards our vacation in Israel, Jake turns to me, with a serious look on his face.

“Doc, you really gotta stop walking on the razor’s edge, Brother… seriously”. We both turned to look out our own windows facing away from each other. A hint of a tear at the corner of my eye as I realize how close I was to not making it home from this easy-peasy peacekeeping mission called the MFO. He was right, as usual. I still do not know how many times I have been at death’s doorstep, too many to count. I call these times being On the Razor’s Edge.

“ I’m tryin’, Jake”. I mutter under my breath, as I think of my children back home waiting for me. Anthony, Stephanie and little Robert Jr. were over 7,500 miles away playing at home and I almost never got to see them again. Hug them again. Hold them again. “I’m trying, I’m trying”.