



The End: A Postapocalyptic Novel (The New World Series Book 1)

By G. Michael Hopf

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What would you do to survive?

Young Gordon Van Zandt valued duty and loyalty to country above all, so after 9/11, he dropped out of college and joined the Marine Corps. This idealism vanished one fateful day in a war-torn city in Iraq. Ten years later, he is still struggling with the ghosts of his past when a new reality is thrust upon him and his family: North America, Europe and the Far East have all suffered a devastating Super-EMP attack, which causes catastrophic damage to the nation's power grid and essential infrastructures. Everything from cell phones to cars to computers cease to function, putting society at a standstill.

With civilization in chaos, Gordon must fight for the limited and fast dwindling resources. He knows survival requires action and cooperation with his neighbors, but as the days wear on, so does all sense of civility within his community—and so he must make some of the most difficult decisions of his life in order to ensure his family's safety.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the New World series

“[Hopf] excels in his storytelling. Its authenticity makes it not only compelling but thought provoking as well.”—**David Miller, *The Herald-Dispatch*** (Huntington, West Virginia)

“Incredible.”—**Before It’s News**

About the Author

G. Michael Hopf is the bestselling author of 'The End - A Post Apocalyptic Novel' and its sequel, 'The Long Road'. He spent two decades living a life of adventure before he settled down and became a novelist full time. He is a former U.S. Marine combat veteran and bodyguard. He lives with his family in San Diego, CA Please feel free to contact him at geoff@gmichaelhopf.com with any questions or comments.

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October 15, 2066

Olympia, Washington, Republic of Cascadia

Haley stood, staring through the thin pane of glass that separated the chilly sea air of the Puget Sound and the warmth of her living room. She looked at the capitol building in the distance. Its sandstone dome towered over the other buildings in the city, as it had for the past 138 years. At one time, it was the capitol of a single state; now it was the capitol of her country, a country born out of chaos and destruction.

She tore her gaze away from the distance and looked down at the photo she held in her hand. She touched the faces of the family depicted. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she passed her fingers across the photo. It contained four smiling faces; a portrait of a once-happy family, her family. More tears came as she thought back to the day the picture was taken. She remembered it vividly, as though it was that very morning. Haley closed her eyes and pressed the photo against her chest; the tears ran down her cheeks and hung from her chin. She remembered her father holding her tight as she sat on his knee; he kissed her many times on her head and told her how proud he was that she had tied her own shoes that day. She longed for that innocent time when she had no concerns or cares. She longed for the days when her family was together and happy. Not long after that photo was taken, her innocent world collided with the harsh realities of mass murder and apocalypse. Her family was to be ripped apart by this new reality, and what remained would never be the same.

A knock at her front door jolted her back to present. She quickly wiped the tears from her face and placed the photo in the pocket of her sweater. She walked toward the front door, but before she opened it, she turned to the mirror that hung on the wall in the foyer and looked at herself. She made sure she had wiped all the tears away and fixed her graying hair.

“You can do this, Haley,” she said, attempting to reassure herself of the difficult task she had before her.

She turned and opened the door. On the porch before her were three people. The first was a man in his

thirties, John, the lead reporter for the Cascadian Times. He was accompanied by two photographers, neither of whom could be more than twenty-five years old. They were all postwar babies; none of them knew the horror and brutality of the Great Civil War.

“Mrs. Rutledge?” John asked as he reached his hand out.

“Yes, please call me Haley.” She grasped his hand firmly and shook.

She greeted the other two and invited everyone into her house. They shared small talk as the photographers set up equipment for the photo shoot that would follow the interview.

“Mrs. Rutledge, when you’re ready to begin, let me know,” John said.

“John, please, call me Haley.”

“Yes ma’am,” he answered with a sheepish grin.

Haley sat nervously, her hands rigidly clasped on her lap. She rubbed her fingers in anticipation of the first question.

“Haley, first let me thank you for letting us into your home. It is an honor to be able to speak with you and to get your personal story and perspective.”

“You’re very welcome, John. I have to admit, I’m a bit nervous. As you know, I don’t like the limelight nor have I ever been one for doing interviews. If it weren’t for your family connection you wouldn’t be here. I knew your father; he was a friend and colleague to my own father. It was only when I heard you would be the one conducting this interview that I agreed,” Haley said. She sat very straight and looked at John directly.

“I do know that our families have had some connection in the past and, again, thank you. Let me then get right into this.”

Haley just nodded her approval.

“Next week marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Treaty of Salt Lake. It was that treaty that gave our young republic the formal victory over our opponents and gave birth to our country. Your father was in Salt Lake for that signing. What can you tell me about him?”

Haley chuckled a bit before she answered. “Wow, that is quite the question. What can I tell you about my father? Where do I begin?” She paused for a moment before she continued, “Are you asking me about how he was then?”

“I can see how that can be a vague question, I’m sorry. Let me start again. Your father was very instrumental in the founding of this country; he is one of our founding fathers, as some would say. While many praise him for his sacrifice, there are some now that question some of his actions during the Great Civil War. How would you describe him?”

“I have heard some of those revisionists who now, in the protection of our hard-fought freedom, question the means by which it was gained. To them I say, ‘you didn’t live it, you were not there.’ It is easy to sit in the comfort of liberty handed to you, swaddled in the bloodied cloth of our revolution,” Haley said firmly. “If you are here to question my father’s actions, then I feel we should start with who my father was and where he came from. The man I knew was a loving and protective man. He cared for me and the rest of his family and was willing to do whatever it took to ensure our survival. Many look back on history without looking at

context. You have to have lived it to truly understand why anyone did what they did. My father was a pragmatic man who took direct action when it benefitted those whom he pledged to protect. He was not always a pragmatist, though.” Haley paused; she shifted in her seat and then continued with a softer tone in her voice. “Daddy was very open about his life. He told me stories from his past. Many times, he told me that life will show up and change the way you look at the world; that there would be incidents that would shake you to the core and shift your way of thinking. My daddy had a few of those moments, the first one I can remember him telling me happened back when he was a Marine in Iraq. What happened there changed him as a person and set him on the course that would lead us to this living room today. I hope you planned on being here a while, because I am going to set the record straight.”

November 16, 2004

“Be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everybody you meet.”

—Marine General James Mattis to his Marines in Iraq

Fallujah, Iraq

“Target acquired!” yelled Sergeant Gordon Van Zandt, his face planted firmly on the day sight of the TOW antitank missile system.

Gordon could hear gunfire cracking around him. He focused on the target he had acquired, a small window. Inside, an Iraqi sniper was pinning down a squad of Marines further up the road. The glint of the sniper’s scope and an occasional flash from the muzzle gave away the sniper’s position.

After the pinned-down squad was notified that no air support was available, Gordon’s TOW squad was called up to take out the sniper’s nest. TOWs had been initially designed to destroy armored vehicles; the previous Gulf War had proven their farther-ranging battlefield application, bunker busting.

Gordon steadied his breathing and kept the crosshairs on the target while his driver, Lance Corporal Bivens, crouched outside the vehicle, alongside the rear driver’s side with his SAW machine gun against his shoulder.

Bivens yelled, “Back blast area all secure!” Bivens was not your poster model of a Marine physique. He was small in stature, lean, and only stood around five feet six inches. But his nickname, “Pit Bull,” said more about him than anything else could; he was a staunch fighter and had proven himself a worthy opponent in hand-to-hand combat.

Immediately, Gordon reached up with his right hand, lifted the arming lever, and shouted back, “Gun up!”

He placed his hands gently back on the traversing unit’s control knobs and with his right thumb flipped up the trigger guard.

Just then, he saw the sniper’s rifle barrel emerge from the shadows of the small room he occupied. Not willing to waste another second, Gordon yelled out, “Fire in the hole!”

He pressed down on the trigger.

A loud pop and whiz came from the TOW. Within a couple of seconds the loud blast of the missile leaving the tube on its way to the target rattled Gordon’s ears. He tracked the missile through his sight as it flew to its

target. After only a few moments, he saw a flash of light. The missile had struck its target. All Gordon could see now was dark smoke billowing out of the room.

“Impact, target destroyed!” he yelled out. He reached up, released the bridge clamp unlocking the missile, and tossed the empty tube onto the ground.

Bivens slung his SAW and quickly opened the Hummer’s rear hatch. He grabbed a new missile and handed it to Gordon, who loaded it into the launch tube with precision speed and closed the bridge clamp down. He jumped behind the scope, assessed the damage, and looked for more targets.

After feeling secure, he looked up from the gun and shouted out to Bivens, “We got that fucking Muj, jump back in, and let’s drive up to assist the grunts.”

Bivens jumped back into the driver’s seat and proceeded toward the Marine squad.

“Bivens, radio the Battalion Forward HQ and order a medevac.”

“Roger that,” Bivens replied, grabbing the radio.

Bivens and Gordon pulled up to the Marines.

Grabbing his M-4 rifle, Gordon jumped off the top of the Hummer. He looked back to Bivens. “Stand watch while I attend to these guys.”

“Roger that,” Bivens replied as he crawled up into the hatch.

Gordon saw before him chunks of building, combat gear, and discarded weapons. Amongst the debris he also found eleven Marines, some battered and bloody. Some were sitting up against the wall of a building in an alleyway, but others just lay on the ground motionless. He couldn’t tell if they were dead or not. Gordon could remember the first time he took fire; the sights of destruction and death were surreal then. Now, they had become commonplace.

Gordon approached the first Marine, knelt down, and asked, “What’s your condition?”

“Shot in the gut. This really fucking sucks,” the wounded lance corporal muttered.

“Listen. We’ll get you out of here soon,” Gordon assured him as he lifted up the bandage on the first Marine’s stomach.

“Corpsman? How’s it looking here?” Gordon shouted over to the Navy corpsman attending to another wounded Marine.

“Much easier without that fucking Hajji shooting at us,” the corpsman responded while bandaging another Marine.

“Thanks for blasting that Muj. You were a godsend,” a second Marine told Gordon as he walked over.

Gordon looked up at the second Marine and noticed blood running down his leg and all over his left arm.

“How you holding up?” Gordon asked.

“Shit, Sergeant, I’ve seen better days, but I’ll live.”

“Good, man. Who’s in charge here?”

“Well, it was Corporal Davies, but the sniper took him down first. A shot through the head,” the second Marine explained, gesturing toward his squad leader’s lifeless body lying in the alleyway.

“What’s your unit?” Gordon asked.

“First Squad, third platoon, India Company, three-one, Sergeant, and I’m Lance Corporal Smith. Just call me Smitty.”

“I’m Sergeant Van Zandt, Weapons, three-one, nice to meet you, Devil Dog,” Gordon said, patting Smitty on his good shoulder.

Gordon proceeded to check on each wounded Marine. The Marines of Third Battalion, First Marines had been fighting their way toward their objective for almost ten days now. The fight was tough, but these men were Marines. Even though they had suffered casualties they were determined. The Thundering Third would reach their objective or die trying. However, dying wasn’t an option for any of these Marines; it was their job to ensure it was the enemy who died for his cause.

Gordon came upon a Marine who was severely wounded; he dropped to one knee and examined the man’s wounds. Gordon could tell from the markings on his bloody uniform that the man was a private first class; he couldn’t be any older than twenty. Gordon couldn’t help but make the grim prediction that this young Marine probably wouldn’t see his twenty-first birthday. Gordon grabbed the Marine’s hand and asked, “How you doing, Marine?”

Without opening his eyes, the young PFC whispered, “I’m cold . . . very cold.”

Gordon could see the large pool of blood collecting under the wounded Marine. He bent down to his ear and whispered, “We got the fucker that did this and we’ll get you out of here soon, I promise.”

A Hummer rumbled to a stop in front of the squad. Two Marines sprung from the rear doors, stretcher in hand and ran to the wounded Marines. One by one, they loaded the most critical into the vehicle.

Just as they began backing away from the scene, a black streak from the south soared toward the Hummer and struck its cab. The explosion knocked Gordon to the ground.

Gordon opened his eyes. He wasn’t sure how long he had been unconscious. The yelling, screaming, and gunfire seemed strangely faint and distant. His eyes burned; all he could see was deep black smoke billowing over him. He tried to get up, but intense pain shot up his back.

“Goddamn it!” he screamed. He took a deep breath and forced himself to sit up. His movements were slow, but he knew he needed to get up and start doing something. He looked around and found Bivens behind the TOW, scanning the area. The burning chassis and four smoldering tires of the ambulance were still there, but not much else. All on board were definitely dead; he could make out two burning corpses in the front seats. The charred bodies were slumped over, flames dancing out of their open mouths.

He saw the squad’s remaining Marines taking cover and engaging something down the street. Gordon rose to his feet, balanced himself, and headed toward his Hummer.

“Bivens, if you got a shot, take it!” he commanded.

“Nothing, Sergeant. My visibility is not that great with all the smoke. Wait a minute . . . I see the fucker.

Target acquired!”

Gordon looked to the rear of the TOW. He didn't see anyone and yelled back, “Back blast area all secure!”

“Gun up,” Bivens hollered, and not a second later he bellowed, “Fire in the hole!”

After its familiar pop and whiz, the missile propelled out of the tube. Almost instantly, it reached its target, a minaret of a mosque. The missile struck the minaret squarely, and it crumbled and fell to the ground.

The Marines cheered, but the engagement wasn't over. They had taken out the insurgent in the minaret, but were still taking small arms fire from the mosque.

Gordon and Bivens worked to get the TOW back up while the remnants of First Squad were engaging, slowly eliminating the Iraqi hostiles holed up inside the mosque.

As Gordon and Bivens readied the TOW for more action, the second vehicle in his team pulled up. Gordon looked up to Corporal Nellis, who was manning the “Ma Deuce” .50-caliber machine gun affixed atop the Hummer.

“We have some Muj in the mosque that is located on the left about a block and a half down. Provide support with the fifty to the grunt squad,” he instructed Nellis before running back to his vehicle to grab a radio.

He contacted Battalion Forward Headquarters to request additional support and another medical evacuation team.

Gordon was really starting to feel the toll from the blast. After radioing the headquarters, he noticed blood on the handset. He checked his hands, discovering that they, too, were covered in blood. He glanced down, wiped them off on his trousers, and saw more blood drip from his chin onto his boot. He wiped his face with his hand and looked at it. A thick layer of blood again coated his palm. He examined himself in the side mirror of his Hummer, discovering bloody pockmarks all over his face. He had taken shrapnel from the blast. He used his sleeve to wipe off more blood. Knowing there was no more time to waste on his face, he headed back into action.

The .50 caliber, with the help of a few M203 grenades, did its work on the mosque. The area fell silent, save for some gunfire in the distance.

“What do you see, Bivens?” Gordon asked.

“No movement, but you know those motherfuckers.”

The mosque stood eerily quiet, no movement or gunfire came from it. Looking up the street, Gordon could see what was once a thriving marketplace on the right and a soccer field on the left. Now, debris littered the street, all the buildings were shot up, and a few small fires burned on the vacant sidewalk. Gordon wanted to ensure the mosque was secure, but the only way to do that was to take it.

“Stay in the gun and provide support if we need it. I'm going to take these Marines up the street and take the mosque,” Gordon said to Bivens. He reached into his Hummer and grabbed a few more magazines and as many high-explosive grenades he could carry.

“Roger that,” Bivens confirmed.

“Actually, change that. Turn the gun around and watch our six,” Gordon commanded Bivens. He then turned

to Nellis and ordered, "Nellis, provide overwatch as we move up the street."

"Roger that," Nellis responded.

Gordon ran up to Smitty. "You and these Marines okay enough to go take that Hajji temple down?"

"Yes, we are!" he said with a smile.

Gordon led the Marines through the commercial buildings on the right side of the street, clearing each one. He navigated up-down, down-up, crossing over from one building to the next from the rooftops. The front glass of the last building had been blown out and the entire structure was riddled with holes. He grabbed one of his high-explosive grenades and tossed it through the open window. The explosion was followed by a scream from inside. While the Marines were stacked up along the side of the building, waiting to go, Gordon stood back, kicked the door, and ran inside. The Marines followed, each peeling off into a separate room.

Gordon had gone in and immediately went left into the remnants of a café. Tables and chairs were scattered, along with empty brass casings.

"Sergeant Van Zandt, Sergeant Van Zandt!" Smitty hollered from a room farther inside the building.

Gordon could hear Marines shouting and someone yelling in Arabic. Upon entering the room he met Smitty, another Marine, and two Iraqi insurgents. One was alive, wearing a white, deeply blood-stained thobe. The second insurgent lay motionless on the floor. The room had pockmarks from shrapnel and bullets, there was debris and trash all over the floor, and three AK-47s leaning up against a wall. Smitty and the other Marine shouted to the wounded insurgent, demanding he keep still with his hands in the air.

The insurgent shrieked back in Arabic. Gordon couldn't know for sure, but after already spending a tour in Iraq, he had picked up some of the language and he thought it sounded like "Don't shoot."

All the yelling was becoming distracting; Gordon knew he needed to take charge and process the prisoner ASAP.

"Everyone shut up! Smitty, process the guy and check him out for any intel. The rest of us will head upstairs." The Iraqi kept screaming. Gordon turned and yelled, "Shut the fuck up! That's enough! No one is going to shoot you!"

The Iraqi fell silent, as if he understood Gordon's words perfectly. He quietly sobbed as he rocked back and forth, shaking in fear.

Gordon left the room and started slowly upstairs. His progress was interrupted by Smitty's panicked voice: "The other fucker—"

A loud explosion shook the room.

Gordon whipped back around. Chaos had erupted downstairs; the two Marines who had been following Gordon were now yelling, though he couldn't make out their words.

Gordon headed back downstairs, into what was left of the room. The wounded Iraqi was now blown apart. A Marine had also been torn up by the explosion, but he couldn't tell who it was.

Gordon heard a voice from the hallway. "Sergeant!"

Gordon turned and saw Smitty lying on the ground, covered in the blood of four people including his own.

“What happened?” Gordon asked, kneeling next to him.

“The motherfucker on the ground wasn’t dead. He turned over and had a grenade. He blew up Grebbs.”

“Dirty motherfuckers!” Gordon cursed.

Just then, another squad of Marines emerged from the entrance of the building. They were followed by an imbedded reporter and his camera crew.

A corpsman followed behind and immediately started to look over Smitty.

“Suicide bomber killed a Marine in that room,” Gordon informed the new squad of Marines, pointing to the room. “Upstairs is not clear yet. Let’s go.”

Gordon and the new squad proceeded upstairs and cleared the area. On the roof, they could see the mosque. There was still no apparent movement.

“Let’s go take it,” Gordon said to the Marines. They rushed back downstairs and out across the street. The reporter and his camera crew followed closely.

Smoke flowed from a few windows on the south side of the mosque. The entire south and east sides were riddled with bullet holes. Gordon and the squad approached the front door and stacked up along the east side. Gordon kicked the door, but it did not break down. He kicked it twice more. Nothing.

“Sergeant, I have a shotgun,” a Marine in the squad offered.

“Okay, get up here.”

The Marine shot the door handle twice with his 12-gauge shotgun and backed away. Gordon took a step back and kicked the door; this time it flew open. He tossed a high-explosive grenade through the open door and stepped back, leaning against the wall. The grenade tumbled and rolled down the narrow hall and into the large great room of the mosque. The explosion shook the ground. As was standard operating procedure, he and the Marines proceeded into the mosque after the grenade detonated. The reporter and camera crew followed right behind the last Marine.

The first room on the right side was full of munitions and small arms. The room on the left was vacant except for soiled mattresses. The men proceeded down to the great room, where they found a few Iraqis leaning up against a wall. The Marines loudly demanded they stay still. They all appeared alive, but wounded.

“Do not fucking move, fucking stay put!” Gordon yelled at them. He quickly assessed the situation in the room.

In the background, Gordon could hear the reporter talking to a rolling camera.

“I’m here inside a mosque in Fallujah with the Marines. The battle has been fierce and the Iraqis have put up a tough resistance. In the end, though, they are no match for the superior firepower of the United States Marines. These wounded Iraqis here have managed to survive the heavy onslaught and are requesting aid—”

“Requesting aid? They haven’t said a fucking thing!” a Marine from the squad snapped at the reporter.

Gordon, with his rifle firmly planted in his shoulder, kept scanning over the half-dozen Iraqis. From the corner of his eye, he saw the Iraqi at the end of the line move his arm toward something on the ground.

Without hesitation, Gordon turned and fired off a single shot, hitting the Iraqi in the head. The sound from Gordon's gunshot echoed through the great hall.

"Did you get that? Did you get that?" the reporter asked his cameraman.

"Yes, I did," the cameraman responded, turning the camera on Gordon.

"That Marine there just shot an unarmed and wounded Iraqi," the reporter said to the camera, pointing directly at Gordon.

March 17, 2014

"Other things may change us, but we start and end with the family."

—Anthony Brandt

San Diego, California

"Pink or purple?" Gordon's five-year-old daughter, Haley, asked, showing him two different bottles of nail polish.

"I like purple, but I prefer pink," Gordon said, looking at his daughter as she started to shake the bottles.

"Can I have a snack after we're done Daddy?" Haley asked, slowly applying polish to Gordon's fingernails.

"Yes, of course, what did you have in mind?" Gordon replied in a soft tone.

"Fruit leather, I want a fruit leather and then I want to watch Octonauts!" Haley squealed, looking up. She smiled at Gordon and brushed some hair out of her face.

"Okay, fruit leather it is." Gordon smiled, looking at Haley.

Haley was small for her age, very girly with long, blond curly hair and very fine features. She was definitely all-girl and loved everything princess.

Gordon adored his family and felt blessed to have his two children. Hunter, his seven-year-old son, and Haley were his pride and joy. His entire life revolved around them and Samantha, his wife.

He had met Samantha about a year after his tumultuous departure from the Marines. They were married after a year and had Hunter within the next. He was happy, secure and lived each day in the now. He never thought too much about his time in the Corps and when he did, it seemed like it was a different life entirely; almost as though it wasn't even his life, but someone else's.

Though his time in combat didn't come to mind often, his everyday life was still influenced by his two tours in Iraq. The experience had shifted his priorities and shaped his perspective. He was no longer the idealist who believed in helping all. Instead, he had become more pragmatic and only wished to take care of his family. He was done sacrificing for those he considered "clueless."

“After you’re done in the salon, meet me outside,” Samantha said to Gordon as she passed the doorway on her way to the kitchen.

Gordon looked over his shoulder. “Okay, but are you sure you don’t need a mani-pedi too?”

Samantha shouted from the kitchen down the hall, “Maybe later. Haley needs a little quiet time and you and I need some adult time.”

“Adult time? Like ‘adult time’ or adult time where you have to tell me something and have my full attention?” Gordon yelled back while watching Haley finish applying nail polish to his last finger.

“You’ll find out later,” she hollered from the kitchen

“You’re such a tease,” Gordon shot back.

“What is a tease, Daddy?” asked Haley.

“Well, honey, it’s when—”

“Haley, it’s when we play jokes on one another,” Samantha interrupted, now standing in the doorway of the play room.

Gordon whipped his head back over his shoulder. “Gosh you move so quickly and stealth-like.” He winked and noticed a semi-irritated look on her face.

Samantha stood there, looking at her husband. She loved him so much. She felt so blessed to have such a good man and good father to their two children. She couldn’t think of too many men who would subject themselves to having their nails painted pink. She was so proud that he actually took an interest in his children and loved how important they were to him.

She continued admiring Gordon. He fit her perfect profile of a man. He was tall and ruggedly handsome with a chiseled jaw, light eyes, and broad shoulders. Haley looked so small next to him, dwarfed by his strong, muscular build. She knew from the first time they met that he would always take care of her. She felt safe with him.

“Done, Daddy! Now can I have my snack?” Haley asked sweetly as she closed the nail polish bottle.

“Of course,” Gordon answered. He started to blow his fingers dry, but paused when he noticed Samantha still staring. He looked up to her and asked jokingly, “Does the pink bring out the blue in my eyes?”

Haley jumped up and ran out of the room, down the hall toward the kitchen. Gordon jumped up and followed, of course mindful of the wet nail polish he had on his fingers.

“So what’s up?” he asked Samantha before leaning forward to kiss her on the lips.

“Let me set up Haley for quiet time and I’ll meet you outside on the patio in, say, five minutes,” Samantha responded, then kissed him back.

Gordon sat on the patio and waited for Samantha to come out and join him. He leaned back, kicked his legs up onto the outside coffee table, and let the mid-afternoon sun warm his face. While he had a love/hate relationship with Southern California in general, he definitely loved the weather. He preferred smaller towns, and San Diego definitely wasn’t a small town anymore. All in all, though, life was good. He enjoyed a

comfortable lifestyle, a nice group of friends, and the family he had around him. The one family member he wished was around more often was his little brother, Sebastian, who had joined the Marines four years after Gordon had left the Corps. His brother originally followed in his footsteps and became a TOW gunner, but it proved a bit boring for him. Being a man of adventure, he would now try out to be a Scout Sniper.

Gordon's slumber in the sun was interrupted when he heard Samantha come outside. He opened his eyes to find her hovering over him.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" she asked, looking down on him, her arms crossed.

"Why, yes, I am, thank you for asking," Gordon replied with a grin on his face.

"When were you going to tell that your brother was coming down tonight for dinner?" Samantha asked, taking a seat across from him. "You know I need notice so I can get the house ready."

"I thought I told you. I'm sorry," Gordon said, sitting up more in his chair. "It is okay, right? We don't have anything else going on, do we?"

Gordon looked at Samantha sitting across from him. He fell for her instantly when they met. He loved everything about her, from her small frame and long, wavy blond hair to her light green eyes and full lips. For him she fit the portrait of the perfect woman.

"No, we're fine; I just need to know next time. Had I not checked the voicemail, I never would have known. Just promise me you'll give me some notice next time."

Gordon stood up and walked over to Samantha. He softened his voice. "Absolutely, honey."

He bent down and gave her a big hug and kiss and whispered into her ear, "How about I apologize more upstairs?"

Samantha, a bit stubborn, pulled back and said, "You know I have things to do."

"All things can wait," Gordon said, even softer, knowing his wife too well. He followed up with a proposal. "How about I help you with your stuff later if you help me with my stuff now?"

Samantha raised her eyebrows and smiled mischievously. "Deal!"

She grabbed his hand and they both ran upstairs.

"Someone's at the door!" Hunter yelled excitedly.

"Go ahead and get it; it should be your uncle Sebastian!" Samantha said from the kitchen. She was too busy preparing a salad to go to the door.

"Gordon, I think your brother is here!" she called out to Gordon, who was in his office working. Samantha loved Sebastian but didn't always like his visits. It wasn't Sebastian's fault, but just having him around made Gordon act differently. She knew that Gordon would be very distant in the days after Sebastian's departure.

"Uncle Sebastian!" Hunter screamed as he opened the door. Hunter and Haley loved his visits; they always had the best time when he was around.

"Uncle Sebastian, Uncle Sebastian!" Haley screamed as she bounded down the stairs.

Sebastian stepped inside and picked up Hunter. Haley made it down the stairs and grabbed his leg.

“Hey guys, how are my favorite niece and nephew?” Sebastian asked. He squatted down and picked up Haley with his other arm. He walked into the kitchen where Samantha was still rushing around, preparing dinner.

Sebastian was tall and, as they say in the Corps, “lean and mean.” He and Gordon looked very similar; there was no mistaking they were brothers. The major differences came from their seven-year age gap: Gordon was slowly getting a widow’s peak and a bit of gray on his sides. Sebastian had a full head of thick brown hair and no gray. While he was a hard charger, he didn’t go for the flat tops or high and tight haircuts; he liked his hair and made sure it was just regulation or longer if he could get away with it. Sebastian always had a smile on his face and took life more lightly, as opposed to his brother, who had a more serious and stoic persona.

Sebastian wanted to have kids himself one day, but for now he enjoyed the life of a single Marine. He still had the adventure bug, and with the Corps being tough enough without a family, he thought it not fair to start one. So for now, Sebastian took what family life he could get with his brother’s family.

“Hi, Samantha!”

“Hi, Sebastian, how are you?” Samantha replied, looking flustered trying to get everything finished. Samantha was a perfectionist and needed everything to look perfect for guests. She stopped for a few seconds to give Sebastian a quick hug and peck on the cheek, though. “Gordon is out in his office finishing up a project. Go ahead on back.”

“I think I’ll do that”—he looked down to the kids in his arms and raised his eyebrows—“but first I have a couple of monkeys on me that need to see what Uncle Sebastian got them.”

Both kids squealed, “Presents!”

He let the kids down and squatted so he could look at them eye to eye, “Go out front and you’ll see two bags on the table out there. The green one is Hunter’s and the pink one is—”

“Mine!” Haley cried out, already running to the front door. Hunter did not hesitate either and took off.

Sebastian stood up and approached the kitchen island, “Wow, something smells great! I’m hungry.”

“I hope you are, we have tons of food and Gordon ran out a bit ago and picked up your favorite tri-tip.”

“You guys are great, thank you,” Sebastian said, looking at Samantha, happy his brother had found such a wonderful wife. It made him smile when he thought about how much his brother deserved this life, especially after everything he’d been through.

Samantha had the TV on in the background as she cooked; it was really the only time she could catch up with the news. Her two kids were a full-time job, demanding more than a fair share of her day.

On the TV, Bill O’Reilly was interviewing the Republican speaker of the house, Brad Conner, and Democratic California representative Shelly Gomez.

“The president is clearly failing in ensuring our country is safe. Allowing Iran to manufacture nuclear fuel and only slapping their hands will not keep us safe. The Iranian regime cannot be trusted. We need—”

“—need what, Mr. Speaker, another war?” Representative Gomez shot back.

“We must keep everything on the table and we need to project strength, not telegraph the fact that he will not use force.”

“Speaker Conner, you are a proponent of pre-emptive strikes. Do you favor striking Iranian nuclear facilities if we had solid intelligence that they were making nuclear weapons or selling weapons-grade fuel to terrorists?” asked O’Reilly.

“Bill, Iran is a terrorist state. To answer your question more directly, yes I would.”

“Ms. Gomez, what say you?” O’Reilly asked quickly.

“Mr. O’Reilly, we must always keep every option on the table. However, we cannot sidestep diplomacy and we must ensure that we have exhausted all attempts at a peaceful solution.”

“So you would favor a military strike?” O’Reilly asked her directly.

“What I am saying is that we should never pigeonhole ourselves into one solution.”

“It’s a simple yes-or-no question, Ms. Gomez,” O’Reilly shot back.

“Mr. O’Reilly, diplomacy is more dynamic than a simple yes-or-no answer,” Gomez challenged, looking agitated.

“I understand that, Ms. Gomez. Let me make the question clearer. If you exhausted all diplomacy and the intelligence stated that Iran would develop a weapon or was prepared to sell weapons-grade fuel to a known terrorist group that would use it as a dirty weapon, or even worse, they were to sell a nuclear weapon, would you support a military strike?”

“I think you have to define ‘exhausted all diplomacy,’” Rep. Gomez answered.

“Really? Really? Ms. Gomez, you can’t answer that question?” O’Reilly pushed further, looking a bit disgusted.

Speaker Conner interrupted. “I can answer the question, Bill. Yes, I would strike them and strike them hard. Bill, Ms. Gomez is aware of the threats, the real threats that our country faces. She is in the briefings, she knows. But what do she and her colleagues do? They vote every time to weaken our defenses or to not fund projects that can harden our defenses.”

“Mr. Speaker, what is one threat that faces our nation that most Americans are not aware of?” O’Reilly asked, looking to wrap things up.

“What I fear the most is a rogue nation or terrorist group attacking us with an EMP or an electromagnetic-type weapon. We are not equipped for this; it would destroy our entire power grid. The Iranians, for one, have stated their awareness of this weakness and want to exploit it.”

“There you go again, Mr. Speaker, spreading fear,” Gomez disdainfully accused.

“Fear? Ms. Gomez, you have seen the reports regarding this specific threat. Even some in your own party realize the threat and have courageously put forth bills that never made it out of committee. I am now pressing Congressman Markey to put forth the same bill again. I will work hard to ensure the bill at least gets

the up or down vote it deserves,” Conner spat back, obviously irritated.

“Ms. Gomez, you have the last word, please respond to what the Speaker just said.”

“Mr. O’Reilly, this administration is doing an incredible job at defending our nation. After almost ten years of war, it is time to take care of the homeland by addressing domestic issues. We have everything under control as far as defense. We need to get issues like education and healthcare in the forefront.”

“Well, I have to leave it there. Ms. Gomez, Speaker Conner, I appreciate your time. Next on the lineup we have retired General McCassey here to talk about the recent terrorist attacks in Paris and London.”

Samantha grabbed the remote and turned the TV off. “Sorry, it’s the only time I can listen to what’s happening. It’s scary out there right now with so many attacks happening overseas, I just feel it’s only a matter of time before it comes here.”

“Yeah, maybe so; I wouldn’t focus too much on that; I think we’re pretty safe here. As far as the talking heads on TV, I just don’t listen at all. Sounds like a bunch of hot air to me,” Sebastian said.

“Can I grab you a beer?”

“I’ll get it, I know where they are. Can I grab you one too?” Sebastian asked, opening the fridge.

“Why, yes, thank you.”

“Get one for me too!” Sebastian recognized his brother’s voice. Gordon was grinning ear to ear as he entered the kitchen; he was always thrilled to see his little brother.

“Gordo!” Sebastian boomed, setting the beers down on the counter. He approached his brother and gave him a big hug. “Great to see you, thanks for the invite.”

“Of course, little brother. We just wish we saw you more.”

Gordon turned to Samantha and asked, “Where are the kids?”

“Outside, playing with the toys Sebastian brought for them.”

“Tell me what’s up with you?” Gordon asked Sebastian after taking a swig from his beer.

“I guess I need to ask you that,” Sebastian replied, pointing at Gordon’s fingers. “You know, if it was the ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy that made you leave the Corps, you’re good to go now.”

“What?” Gordon asked, puzzled for a second by Sebastian’s comments before realizing he still had on the pink fingernail polish from earlier.

“Kids,” he explained, shrugging off the comment.

Gordon walked over to the fridge to get the meat for the grill. “Well, Mr. Smartass, how about helping me with this outside?”

“Roger that.”

“Dinner was great. I’m stuffed,” Sebastian said, leaning back against his chair.

"I'm glad you liked it. Why don't I clean up and you boys go enjoy a beer and chat," Samantha said while stacking plates.

"Are you sure?" Gordon asked, looking up at her from his chair. Gordon respected Samantha and looked at his relationship and the responsibility of parenting as a true partnership. He never wanted to take her for granted.

"Yes, I'm sure. You boys go be boys. Drink some beers, talk shit, and solve the world's problems. I can take the kids upstairs to watch a movie." She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I love you, baby."

"I love you too, sweetie."

Sebastian watched their interaction and smiled. When it was time for him to settle down, he wanted exactly what his brother had. Of course that wouldn't happen for a while since he had another year on his enlistment and life was just too much fun.

Samantha grabbed the remaining dishes and walked back into the kitchen. The brothers could hear her talking to the kids. After a minute of squealing and cheers from the kids, the house fell silent.

"Let's grab those beers and go to the back patio." Gordon stood up and Sebastian followed him to the fridge before heading outside.

"Here," Gordon handed his brother a cold beer and sat down.

"Thanks. So what you been doing lately?"

"You know, the usual. Oh, I have been getting to the range more lately."

"Good, any new acquisitions?"

"Yeah, when I was in Idaho I stopped by a gun show and finally bought an M-4 and another Sig."

"You were always more of the collector than me, you and Dad were alike that way," Sebastian commented, then took a drink.

"So, tell me more about Scout Snipers," Gordon asked, kicking his feet up on the table.

"I really want it; I get to try out in a couple of weeks. I've been training, so we'll see."

"As long as you're clear," Gordon said, looking down at his beer in his hand.

"What does that mean?" Sebastian asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Just that."

"Listen, don't project your anger with the Corps onto me," Sebastian said with a bit of attitude.

"I'm not projecting anything. I just want to make sure you're making the right decision. I don't think you made the right decision by signing up for six years initially. All you had to do was sign up for four, and if you liked it, go for another enlistment," Gordon admonished.

Sebastian stared his brother down, frustrated. He loved him so much, but hated when Gordon acted like a

parent. He figured that after two combat tours, one in Iraq and another in Afghanistan, his brother would finally treat him with respect. He knew it stemmed from two things, one being that Gordon and Sebastian's parents had died a few years back. Gordon took it upon himself to fill that role for his much younger brother. The other issue was Gordon's anger toward the Marine Corps. He felt betrayed after the incident in Fallujah ten years before.

"Gordo, I know what I'm doing. Scout Snipers are a tight unit, professional and motivated. I wish you would stop second-guessing me. I know you asked me not to join the Marines, but I did. Then you were against me signing for six, but I did that too. I needed to guarantee the job I wanted. You were against me being a TOW gunner and now you're second-guessing this. I'm a man; I know what I'm doing." Sebastian sat straight up in his chair and looked his brother directly in the eye.

"Okay. Okay," Gordon replied, waving his left hand in the air and rolling his eyes.

"I'm gonna make a head call." Sebastian put down his beer and walked inside.

Gordon rested his head on the back of the chair and looked up at the stars. He thought back to that day in the mosque in Fallujah. In the years immediately after, he'd mentally replayed the incident over and over again. Every time, though, he'd concluded that he'd do it all the same. It frustrated him to no end, the ridicule and hatred he received. The investigation from the NCIS team proved he made the correct decision, but those stories are not interesting and always land on page D9 of the newspaper. Stories of Marines shooting "unarmed and wounded" prisoners, on the other hand, make for headline news and political fodder. He hated the politics most. The entire situation changed how he looked at his country and countrymen. When his time for reenlistment came around, he opted to get out. He could no longer risk his life to defend a country wherein half the citizens either hated him or, only slightly better, thought nothing of him.

Gordon had joined the Marine Corps right after the attacks on September 11. He dropped out of George Mason University in his third year because he felt it was his generation's calling to serve, walking away from a full academic scholarship. At the time it felt like the right thing to do, but now things had changed.

He often questioned why he had sacrificed so much. For what? So people could hate him? So people could take their freedom for granted? For all the lazy asses and all the dumb shits who want to sit around and do nothing? Fuck them, he thought. Never again would he sacrifice himself for anyone but his family and friends. Now his brother was putting himself in harm's way so those same worthless people could sit back and enjoy their freedoms and abuse their rights.

Sebastian knew how he felt, but he was never the idealist Gordon once was. Sebastian loved his country, sure, but he was in it more for the adventure. He loved the action. Sebastian felt lucky that people would pay him to blow things up. He never thought much of politics, thinking it was a waste of time. Gordon would love to share his brother's outlook, but how can our country survive if all we do is look out for ourselves? Ideologically, he was conflicted. Practically, though, until his anger went away, he would not put anyone else before himself or his family.

Sebastian's return interrupted Gordon's train of thought.

"Here, bro," Sebastian said, handing over another beer.

Sitting up and grabbing the beer, Gordon said, "Thank you. Look, I'm sorry if I seemed like I doubted you. I do respect you and I don't look at you any other way than as a man. You know how I feel about the Corps and everything else. I really don't want to get into it again. I just don't want anything to happen to you."

“I know, I know. Listen, I’ll be in good hands. By the way, I forgot to tell you, we just got a new commanding officer,” Sebastian said after drinking some beer. He had a big smile on his face.

“Who is that?” Gordon was interested.

“Barone!”

“Major Barone?” Gordon’s eyes widened.

“Yeah, but he’s a light bird now.”

Again, Gordon’s memory flashed back to the time after the Fallujah incident. Major Barone was one of his staunchest defenders. He stood by him while the other brass were ready to offer him up to appease the politicians and media. The press had a field day with the story and was bloodthirsty in its reporting on the shooting. For all intents and purposes, he had been publicly convicted before any investigation had even been completed.

Comforted by the memory of a loyal friend, Gordon said, “That is great news. He’s a great man. You are definitely in good hands with him.”

“I knew you’d be happy to hear his name again. I haven’t had the chance to actually meet him, but I hear he loves his snipers. I’m pumped. Now, all I have to do is make the cut.”

“It really does make me happy that he’s in charge and will be taking you guys back into the mix on your next tour,” Gordon said. He felt relieved that his brother would be in such trustworthy company.

Gordon was very happy to have that bit of news. Regardless of his brother’s confidence, he would always worry and look after him. Sebastian was his little brother and, as the oldest, he felt a bit responsible for him even if it meant being accused of acting like a parent. Gordon was also concerned because of the increase in terrorist attacks against military installations around the globe. Over the past few months, there had also been an uptick in attacks against civilian targets in Europe. He and Samantha often talked about how strange it was that the terrorists had never attempted those attacks in the United States. With the porous border to the south, he just felt that the U.S. would not always be so lucky. He knew that eventually the terrorists would come back and the next large attack could be so damaging it could bring the country to its knees.

Gordon put aside the thoughts about the harshness of the world and refocused on having a good time with his brother. After a few more beers, some laughs, and a brief trip down memory lane, the brothers said good-bye to one another.

After walking him to the front door, Gordon gave Sebastian a hug and said, “If you ever need anything, you call me; don’t hesitate. We’re here for you.”

“I will, Gordo. I love you, brother,” Sebastian always felt bad when he had to leave. He hated good-byes.

As Sebastian walked down the sidewalk Gordon yelled after him, “Stay frosty, Marine.”

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