

## Chapter 1

The nightmares were getting worse. Each night, their tendrils slithered into Galen's mind as he laid in bed, unable to do anything except see what *they* forced him to see, feel what *they* forced him to feel. It always started in Sanaa, in the Old City, on the roof of the casbah overlooking a familiar wasteland of dirt and dead bodies. Galen's left leg was painted crimson red with clusters of thin cuts and slashes scattered everywhere from his ankle to his groin. Every inch of his body shrieked in pain, and as he sat on the rooftop awaiting an extraction, the pain took on a life of its own. It possessed him with a singular focus that drowned out all else: he was going to find the people who did this to him, and he was going to kill them. He was going to make it *hurt*.

Galen gripped his Mk 12 rifle with fingertips left cracked and bleeding from the arid desert air. Sweat stung his eyes as he peered through his scope, rotated his head, and desperately searched for a target somewhere in the clutter of sand and wind and fire and corpses. A figure in a balaclava emerged in the distance. Without thinking, Galen fired a round. It struck the figure in the head. Another emerged, and he shot again. It didn't alleviate his pain. It didn't make him feel any safer. But it did, for a brief moment, scratch the never-ending itch to strike back at the harsh, unforgiving world that wished him dead.

Three, four, five more came within his sights. Each one was dead seconds later. Galen wondered what had brought them here. What were each of them thinking in those last moments they spent bleeding out in the sand? Were they sons or fathers? Mothers? Were they daughters, like the face he saw in his crosshairs, pale and dirty and covered in the blood that leaked from the bullet hole above its nose, a face he recognized but told himself wasn't there because it was a face that *couldn't* be there...

"Mia?" Galen whispered.

He dropped his rifle and in an instant his daughter had traveled from hundreds of feet away to directly in front of him. "Daddy," she moaned. "Why, Daddy?"

Galen tried to speak but couldn't, as if some cold, disembodied hand had grabbed him by the throat.

"Don't you love me?" her voice echoed.

Blood continued to pour down Mia's face as Galen reached out for her. He screamed but no words came out. There was nowhere for them to come from, no mind nor body nor spirit. Only a desiccated husk, powerless to stop the nightmares from peeling off his eyelids and forcing him to watch in horror as a voice whispered in his ear: *YOU were the one who put the bullet in her.*

And then, the nightmares decided that Galen had had enough. Piece by piece the desert faded away. Wood and plaster replaced the endless horizon, and the concrete ground on which he sat became soft. The rusted springs beneath his mattress screeched as Galen sat up. Sanaa had disappeared in front of him, yet Mia remained, still only inches away from him, haunting him as she wailed and the blood continued to pour out of her. He called her name and reached out to grab her, to hold her as she died and tell her he was there and it would all be okay. But when his hand touched her face, she was gone.

Galen remained still at the edge of his mattress and felt the cold sweat drip down his neck. He was drenched in it, yet his skin felt as dry as it had been in Yemen. But he was *not* in Yemen. With every passing second, he became more certain of that fact. He was in Barkersville, New York, in a small bedroom crammed with half-unpacked boxes and furnished with only a mattress and a nightstand.

Galen reached for the bottle of bourbon that sat beside him, but accidentally knocked it onto the ground. *Empty.* He slumped over and retrieved his cigarettes from the drawer. As he held the cigarette between his lips and struck a match, his hands froze. The cigarette dropped and he waved out the flame, then he stood up and walked to the hallway outside.

The light from the television felt bright enough to blind Galen as he approached the living room. He shielded his eyes and, from his periphery, saw Mia lying on the couch with her head half-buried in a pillow. Still trembling, he crept toward her and put his hand on her shoulder. She was *there.*

*Real. Not dreaming*, Galen insisted to himself, cognizant of how desperate he was to trust his own senses. *Because it always FEELS real. Doesn't it?* He still remembered all the *real* conversations he'd had with dead men and women back when he was recovering in the hospital. Several hundred prescriptions later, his waking mind was well enough to know what was there and what wasn't. And yet when he closed his eyes each night, Sanaa became as *real* as it had been five years ago.

Galen took a deep breath and grabbed the remote to turn the TV off. When he did, he heard a slight, barely audible grunt come from somewhere nearby. He froze and looked at Mia, studied her, then said, "You can stop pretending now."

Silence followed for a few moments before Mia rolled over. "How'd you know?" she groaned.

Galen smirked. "When you're asleep, you don't breathe like you do when you're awake. It's more like long, gentle breathes."

She sat up. "Is that why you were yelling before? To see if I was asleep?"

Galen looked at her but didn't answer immediately. He bit his lip and rubbed the back of his neck. "No... don't worry about that. It was..."

"Another bad dream?"

Galen sat down next to her. "I'm sorry, Peanut."

She shrugged. "Was it *bad* bad? What'd you dream about?"

Paralysis gripped him as he blinked and, for a brief moment, saw himself holding Mia in his arms, his clothes soaked in all the blood she'd lost when she...

"Don't remember," he said. They sat still in silence with one another before Galen cleared his throat and said, "Anyway. Time to take those long, gentle breathes. Your mom would kill me if she knew I'd let you stay up all night watching TV. Even if it *is* your birthday."

"Aw. Please?" she begged. "Just a little more?"

Galen looked in her eyes. Even through the darkness he saw her pouting and, for a moment, he was overcome with an awareness that someday his nightmares would seep into reality. Someday Mia

would be in immeasurable pain, just as she was in that image so recently burned into his mind. Someday she would die. And as unfathomable as it seemed, he couldn't stop the voice in the shadowy recesses of his mind from whispering to him, *it will be your own doing*. He was still the man from that rooftop, the man who'd gunned down so many other peoples' sons and daughters. It seemed almost inevitable that all the violence would one day come to claim him, as though through some vessel of cosmic justice. And when the day came, would it claim Mia, too?

Galen's watch beeped at the turn of midnight. It was now June 22, and Mia was ten years old. He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "No more TV," he said. "But, if you promise to go to bed after, I've got something for you."

Mia's face lit up and she nodded. "A present!?"

"Sort of. But you have to *swear* to go to bed after I show you. Got that?"

She held up her hand to pinky swear, and Galen's finger wrapped around hers. Then he handed her his phone, where she saw a picture of a black and brown striped tabby cat on the screen. Her mouth opened wide and she squealed with joy.

"It's *mine*?" Mia gasped.

"That's right," Galen said, hugging her and kissing her forehead. "We'll have to keep him here, of course. But he's yours. We'll pick him up first thing in the morning."

Exclamation after exclamation raced out of Mia's mouth, and it pained Galen to remind her that she'd promised to go to bed after this. He knew it was unreasonable to ask of her, and he imagined Sonja, the ever-so-experienced mother, lecturing him on getting Mia all riled up before telling her to fall asleep. "This is something you need to really grasp," she'd say. "Especially once the joint custody appeal goes through and she's there with you regularly."

Galen shrugged it off. They could always sleep in. It wouldn't be the first time that week. In fact, it was becoming something of a habit for Galen, who'd slept through a scheduled job interview the morning prior. And despite Sonja's stipulation that he needed a steady income if he wanted joint

custody, he couldn't bring himself to care about some vapid, transitory job that would never really matter to him. He was only ever good at *one* job, and it was precisely because of that one job that he was awake at that moment, still drenched in the sweat its memory had induced in him.

All that mattered was *this*, seeing Mia so happy, so excited about something *he* had accomplished. It was the only proof he ever needed to know he was more than the sum total of 137 confirmed kills, more than what his nightmares would reduce him to. And he was *capable* of so much more, of simply putting a smile on the face of this little girl, this creature he'd created who had the inexplicable power to make those nightmares disappear and shrink the universe down to the space only the two of them occupied.

"I love you, Daddy," Mia said as he put the blanket over her and stood up. "Don't let the monsters scare you."

Galen blinked. "Monsters?"

"From your dream," she said. "I have bad dreams too sometimes, but they don't scare me."

"Oh?"

"Mhm." she said. "Like, there's a monster in the room. And it's *this* room, but also my room at home. And I keep calling you, and I call Mom and Hamilton too, but none of you come. And the monster keeps growling louder and louder. But then I wake up and realize it was just a dream."

Galen gazed at her and smiled. "You..." he said, his voice cracking. "You know I *would*..."

"I know, Daddy," she said. "They're not real, just dreams."

"Right," he nodded. "Of course. Just dreams."

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Galen didn't sleep for long. He faded in and out but was twice awoken by the sound of his phone ringing. Each time he ignored the call and struggled to get back to sleep. When he fully awoke, he saw that the calls had come from a blocked, unidentifiable number. Whoever it was, they could wait. By the time he was dressed, he'd already put it out of his mind.

Mia's excitement had only grown throughout the night, and by the time they picked up her new cat she could hardly contain it. She settled on the name Gizmo after pressing the cat's ears down and noting a resemblance to the creature from *Gremlins*, which she and Galen had watched several weeks prior.

Galen basked in the vicarious happiness he got from Mia playing with Gizmo all morning, but there was also a perverse and, admittedly, indulgent satisfaction he derived from it, as well. She had wanted a cat for at least a year, but Sonja was severely allergic. Now that she had Gizmo, she would be even more ecstatic to spend the night with Galen, who relished the idea that he could finally offer Mia something that Sonja and Hamilton couldn't. *They* had the money and house and surround-sound television, but *he* had Gizmo.

It was 12:18 P.M. when Galen arrived to drop Mia off, eighteen minutes later than he'd agreed to. He didn't care if he was a little late, and Mia – the birthday girl herself – wasn't complaining. So it was with mild irritation that he muttered "Piss off" when he saw that, beside two more missed calls from an unknown number, Hamilton had sent him a message. *Hi Galen. Please call. We said 12 noon, yes?* He looked at Mia and at once realized he'd said something he wasn't supposed to in front of her, so he held his finger to his lips and whispered "Shh, don't tell Mom. I'm not supposed to use foul language in front of our little girl."

"I'm not little," she insisted as he walked around to let her out.

"Oh yeah? Then how come I can do *this*?" He picked her up and carried her up to the door while she playfully screamed to be let go. Galen couldn't help but notice how the utter silence of this neighborhood exacerbated the volume of Mia's hollering, and thought he could even see some of the neighbors glaring at him in disapproval as they mowed their lawns and washed their porches.

He put Mia down and rang the doorbell. As they settled and caught their breath, Galen looked around. Sonja and Hamilton's house was adorned in creamy white stucco painted over two stories and surrounded by rows of flowers that Sonja had planted. *This was what they call a "quiet neighborhood."*

The kind of neighborhood with gravel driveways and Sycamore trees that reached as high as a hundred feet. His old, dented pickup truck sat in stark contrast to the polished and well-kept sedans he saw in the driveways around him, as did his dark brown unkempt hair and scruffy beard to the clean cut white collar workers who occupied these houses.

The sound of an ice cream truck came into focus and Galen watched a group of children chase after it. Parents followed them, all smiling and holding lively, upbeat conversations. He wondered if Mia knew the children, if Sonja and Hamilton knew the parents. He imagined that they swam in each other's pools and grilled steaks together on holidays. What an idyllic life these people afforded Mia, a life that he could *never* hope to give her, himself.

Hamilton came to the door with a baby boy in his arms, who Galen recognized as Hamilton and Sonja's son, David. "Hello, Galen," he said.

"Hamilton," Galen nodded, opening his hand and waving to the baby. "Sorry we're a bit late," he added before Hamilton could say anything. "Lost track of time..."

"Well the movie starts in thirty minutes. I hope we can still get good seats." Hamilton looked down at Mia. "Why don't you go and get dressed quickly and then we'll leave, okay?"

After Mia dashed into the house, only the two men remained there, with only a few feet separating them as they looked at one another like predators searching for a weak point to tear at. Galen couldn't help but wonder which of them could best the other in a feat of strength. Hamilton was lean and taller by about three inches, but Galen still retained some of the physique he'd built throughout the ten years he'd spent as a Navy SEAL, not to mention his three as a private contractor. Given his injuries, as well as the toll his drinking and smoking had taken, the two men seemed more or less evenly matched.

"She smells like an ashtray," Hamilton said.

Galen rolled his eyes. "So it's a movie then?" He smirked with the confidence of a man who knew with certainty that he'd won. A new pet kitten outclassed *any* movie, *any* day of the week.

“Yes. And then dinner and a sleepover. I presume you won’t be joining us?”

Galen remembered that, weeks ago, Sonja had invited him to Mia’s birthday party in a gesture so obviously lacking in sincerity that he hadn’t bothered to decline. “Afraid not,” he said.

“Ah. Better things to do, then?”

Galen glared at him. “That’s right.” He felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, but ignored it as he asked, “Sonny home?”

Hamilton looked at him and with a curled lip said, “No.”

Galen nodded. “Well, tell her I say hello.” Internally, he breathed a sigh of relief. Sonja didn’t know about the interview, and as long as she wasn’t around, she wouldn’t have the opportunity to ask how it had gone.

Mia came bounding back into view. “Okay, I’m ready!”

Galen knelt down and hugged her. “I love you, Peanut,” he whispered as he stared at her face and smiled. She was looking more and more like Sonja each day, with caramel blonde hair and dimples that popped out every time she smiled. But her eyes were Galen’s, a prismatic array of shifting colors bathed in hazel and bouncing off the light.

“Alright sweetie,” Hamilton said. “Time to go.”

*Sweetie.* Galen gritted his teeth and walked away. He started the car and turned the radio volume to its maximum, hoping it was loud enough to spite all these uptight WASPs who lived in blissful ignorance of how much he’d sacrificed to give them the privilege to sit there and scoff at him.

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Home was a thirty minute drive away in a cheap rental that seemed just large enough to qualify as a house and not a shed. Yet, every time he returned from dropping Mia off, Galen found himself thinking that it seemed disproportionately empty for such a small size. His closest neighbors were an older couple named Gary and Helen who lived down the street. He had interacted with them only a



handful of times, and they seemed friendly enough, but apart from them his only visitors were the mailman and the landscaper who came twice a month to mow his lawn.

Now, with Gizmo, Galen supposed he was no longer living alone. The thought made him smile, but only momentarily before that pervasive feeling of emptiness returned. It seemed impossible to feel anything else in a place as dull and placid and lifeless as this. He ached for the city, for that deafening racket of cars and yelling and jackhammers that could so effortlessly drown out the sound of his own thoughts.

As he pulled into his driveway, Galen received yet *another* call from an unknown number. Before he could answer it and tell whoever it was to leave him alone, he received a message. *It's Dryver. Call this number ASAP. EXTREMELY IMPORTANT!!!*

Galen decided that, whatever it was, it wasn't important. Still, he couldn't help but wonder what Dryver could possibly want from him. How long had it been since they spoke? Was it Sanaa? Was it *really* five years ago? As he dwelt on the name, Galen felt the tension build up, first in his fists and then in his face. *Dryver*. There were no hard feelings toward the man himself. Only what Galen associated with him, inextricably tied as he was to the memory of Galen alone, scaling the Bab al-Yaman with his Mk 12, sweat dripping from his brow as he wondered which one of these seemingly infinite bullets was going to puncture his skull and...

Galen gripped his chest and fell down to the floor as he walked inside. *It's happening again*. His heart felt like it was beating at breakneck speed, and his face was glazed in sweat. He struggled to reach into his pocket, pop a blister pack and force the Valium down his dry throat. *So pathetic*, he thought. *So impotent*, held hostage by his own mind and memories. He turned and saw Gizmo hiding under the coffee table, staring at him. *Even the cat knows you're a mess*.

Galen propped himself against a stack of boxes that were still unpacked. It was almost one o'clock now, and Mia was probably sitting beside Sonja and Hamilton, *ooo-ing* and *ahh-ing* at the movie previews. Next they'd be off to dinner, then ice cream, and finally Mia would go back to her

nice little bedroom in that nice little neighborhood. All the while, Galen would be in this house, wishing she was still there with him.

His thoughts returned to the missed interview and his hollow search for a gainful employment. Would a job accelerate the passage of all this time Galen spent alone, treading water? He sighed. It wouldn't. Because it wasn't a passion, wasn't a career. It was just a job, and this was just an interview. There would be others. But he suspected he'd probably miss those, as well, despite knowing the consequences of him doing so. What were a few more rash, self-destructive decisions in a long line of other rash, self-destructive decisions?

At a certain point he'd become numb to it all. With all his training and history and experience, there were *hundreds* of well-paying jobs that could be his if he wanted them. But he didn't. He didn't *want* or *care* about any of it, or about anything at all except those few days each week he spent with Mia. The rest of the time, all he could do was sit and ask himself what he was really good for, other than putting a bullet in an enemy combatant?

A lifetime ago, *that* was a career, a purpose, something Galen truly believed in right up until the moment he didn't, and all the time he'd spent in pursuit of that purpose was time he would never get back. Ever since, it seemed he couldn't stop hemorrhaging time. He looked back at all the yesterdays and tomorrows that had passed by without him noticing. All that time spent – time *wasted* – waiting for something to change, waiting for moments that would never come... where had it all gone? What had it added up to?

As Galen sat in silence, he stared at the small plastic compass that hung from his key ring. Unaccustomed to the sparsity of landmarks in upstate New York, he'd gotten lost several times simply trying to make his way to the supermarket when he moved there. Mia found it so hilarious that she gave him the compass, which she'd won at an arcade, and Galen decorated the inside of its case with a picture of him hugging her tightly as her face shouted, "Ohmygosh stop it! You're embarrassing me!"

“I’ll be thinking of you whenever I’m lost,” he’d said, and every day since then Galen found himself looking at the compass, repeating those words to himself.

It was five o’clock when the phone rang again. Galen was cooking chicken on a skillet with a cigarette between his lips. To his left was a half-drunk glass of whiskey on the rocks, and to his right was a pile of dishes that stretched from the sink to right below the faucet. When he heard the vibration on the table, Galen groaned in annoyance. Then he remembered that he’d put it on “Do Not Disturb” mode, a mode that only Sonja’s cell and house phones overrode.

“Hello?” he answered.

“Hey,” Sonja said.

“Hey Sonny.” They both paused, letting the silence linger. “How did everything go tonight?”

“Good,” she said. Galen switched off the stove and poured himself another glass. “The movie was... well, silly. But Mia loved it. We just got home a few minutes ago.”

“That’s great.” Galen said, unsure of what else to say. He looked over and saw Gizmo creeping toward the kitchen with his eye on the skillet. Galen shook his head and hissed, “Shoo!”

“That must be your new roommate,” Sonja said. “Mia told me. She’s *very* excited about it.”

“Yes she is,” Galen said. *Damn right she is.*

“I... well, it’s none of my business, but I hope you know what you’re doing. No matter what Mia thinks, it’s *yours* to take care of, you know.”

Galen rolled his eyes. “I’ve got it handled.”

“Okay. Well, anyway, something I wanted to talk to you about...” Sonja cleared her throat. “Our daughter used a new phrase tonight.”

“Oh?”

“Yep. Her friend Carly asked if she could share her popcorn, and Mia told her to ‘piss off’.”

Galen chuckled softly, but stopped himself while Sonja remained silent, as if waiting for an admission of guilt.

“Any idea where she heard that phrase?” Sonja asked.

“Nope,” he said, almost sarcastically.

“Galen...”

“Alright, alright. I’m sorry.” He sighed and wondered if she’d actually called to talk about something this trivial. “It’s in my Irish blood. I can’t help it. But having her around more is gonna break the habit. Once we get this custody thing settled. So... patience. Please.”

“Yeah,” Sonja said with palpable doubt in her voice. “On that note, how’d the interview go yesterday?”

Galen froze. He’d expected the question to come at some point, and yet it still managed to catch him off guard. As soon as she asked, he knew he couldn’t lie to Sonja, and found himself wishing Hamilton had asked him instead. *That* prick, Galen had no problem lying to.

“I, uh... I didn’t make it actually.”

Sonja paused, then said, “I know.”

“You *know*?”

“I called the agency. They told me you didn’t show.”

Galen sipped the whiskey through his gritted teeth. “I see. So... you’re checking in on me, then?” The words stumbled out of his mouth as he tried to hold back the anger that was quickly building up inside of him.

Sonja didn’t say anything. The only sound on the other end of the line was a subtle hum.

“Okay,” he said. “Well, yea. Not your concern, really, but thanks I guess.”

“It *is* my concern, Galen. We’ve talked about this. You need to be working.”

“I’ve got money, Sonny.” It was true. His annuity wasn’t much, but it paid the bills.

“You know what, Galen? Not everything’s about money.” She spoke louder now. “It’s about setting an example for our daughter, who *you* want to have an equal part in raising. Have you stopped to consider what she’ll think of you, moping around the house with no job, no direction...”

“Sorry things don’t work as perfectly for me as they do for you, Sonny. It’s a bit harder...”

Galen stopped when he realized he could hear someone else on the other line. He couldn’t make out what they were saying, but he recognized it as a man’s voice. “Tell Hamilton to get out,” he said coldly.

Galen heard a muffled sound, followed by Hamilton saying something unintelligible before he spoke through the phone.

“Galen.”

“Give the phone back to Sonny, Hamilton. This is none of your fucking business.” Galen stood up and listened to himself slur the words slightly. He felt lightheaded as his legs struggled to lock themselves in a standing position.

“No Galen, it is,” he said. “Sonja and I are concerned about the example you’re setting for Mia.”

“*The example you’re setting.*” Hamilton’s words mimicked Sonja’s. They were following the *same* script, reciting the lines *they* fed to each other.

“Hamilton!” Galen was almost yelling. “Fuck off and give the phone back to Sonny.” He felt dizzy, and the words stuck together as they left his lips.

“I can smell the liquor from here, Galen.”

“Fuck you, you cunt,” Galen sneered.

“That’s nice,” Hamilton replied. “That sounds like something a mature adult, and a *father* no less, would say.”

The rage reached a critical mass and Galen bellowed, “SHUT. THE FUCK. UP! Give the phone to Sonny, you piece of – ”

“Good night, Galen,” Hamilton interjected before he handed the phone back to Sonja.

“Look,” she said. “I’m sorry, but there’s no discussion to be had here. I want what’s best for Mia. And you and I *both* need to agree to the terms of joint custody. But until we feel you can provide a stable, healthy environment for her, we’re not comfortable...”

*We.* Sonja and Hamilton were *we.* And Galen? He was just an afterthought that existed somewhere within the gaps of their busy schedules.

“I know moving up here wasn’t easy, and I still think it was the right decision. She *loves* going over there, and I want you to be a big part of her life.”

“How magnanimous,” he jeered. “Thank you so much for your generosity.”

“Stop it,” she said. “You know I didn’t mean it like...”

“What a fucking philanthropist you are,” he continued. “What tremendous self-awareness, to think that after you take a job upstate without talking to me – and you take Mia with you – you meet someone else and go on to live your perfect little life without me, and yet you somehow have the *gall* to act like you’re doing me a fucking *favor*.”

“Galen! You *don’t* talk to me like that, got it?” she said. Her voice became more forceful, but it cracked just enough to let Galen know she was upset. This would not be a good night for her. She wasn’t going to sleep restfully after this. *Good.*

“Look,” she began, but Galen hung up before she could utter another word. Then he sat back down and poured another glass while he replayed the conversation on a loop in his head. His mind conjured a dozen things he *could* have said, things he *wished* he’d said if he had only thought of them in the moment. But it was too late now. His breath still heavy and his heart still racing, Galen swallowed what remained of the whiskey. He sat still for a moment, waiting for the drink to do its job. But minute after minute passed and he was still thinking thoughts he didn’t want to think, so he picked up the glass, threw it against the refrigerator, and watched it shatter into a myriad of little pieces.

*What’s one more rash, self-destructive decision in a long line of other rash, self-destructive decisions?*

Eventually Galen stood up and retrieved the broom to clean up his mess. Lost in his thoughts, he didn’t see the headlights pull into his driveway. But he heard the knock that followed soon afterward. When he opened the door, he saw Dryver in the threshold with two other men behind him.

“Fucking hell, Brelings,” Dryver said. “Don’t you answer your phone these days?”

Galen blinked and stepped back, dumbfounded and still halfway drunk.

Dryver made his way inside and said, “Sorry. Can’t wait around for you to invite us in.” The other two followed closely behind him. “We’re here on a matter of national security, so you might want to sit down.”