

Chapter One

The Beginning of The End

0700 hours, Monday, 10 June 1991

“All I had to do was let it go. Just say, ‘Yes Sir’, bring the body home, and today I’d be dressing for my change of command. I’d be commanding a battalion, leading soldiers, being a soldier. Instead, I’m project manager for closing out Fort Sheridan. My God Sam, what have you done?”

Sam stood in front of the mirror gazing at his own reflection with a blank stare. Then he pressed closer to the mirror, inspecting his perfectly shaved face and military haircut. He stared into his own eyes and for an instant wished it would all go away, that he’d have another chance to respond “Yes Sir;” and all of this never would have happened.

“What the hell Sam! Feeling sorry for yourself? Bullshit!” Sam admonished his own reflection. “Given the chance you do the exact same thing and you know it. That’s your problem! You’re a stubborn, kick-ass, ‘I don’t give a shit’ soldier, Major Sam Call, no respect for authority and it ruined your career.” He looked deeper into the mirror and a little more quietly said, “And you wouldn’t have it any other way.”

His moment of self-doubt disappeared. “Better be careful Sam, or you’ll start talking to yourself.” Smiling, he returned to the bedroom picking up his wallet and change from the dresser. Moments before he’d been filled with self pity, but now he felt a surge of excitement. He still wore the uniform he loved, he was still a soldier, and that was all he’d ever wanted.

His wife Mary was in the kitchen making breakfast for him. She had been up for the last two hours unable to sleep, worried how Sam would make it through this day, and now she was worried how

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she was going to get him out of the house on time. She gave a sigh of relief as she saw Sam come into the kitchen.

Sam kissed Mary, said ‘Good Morning’ and then went straight to the coffee pot.

“The girls still all asleep I take it.”

“Yep. With school out I’m just letting them sleep in and I can tell you it’s a pleasure not listening to four daughters fighting for the bathroom in the morning.”

Sam just touched her shoulder in acknowledgement and sat down and started watching the local news on a small screen TV that she had set up in the corner of the kitchen counter which Mary usually had on in the morning to watch the news. Sam listened as the TV reporter droned on about a patient who wanted to die, but wasn’t allowed that privilege by the courts; Sam quietly sat at the table with his coffee and listened to the reporter until the end of the report.

“Death with dignity; is that too much to ask? I swear to Christ!”

“What did you say, Sam?”

“I said this poor slob is suffering. All he wants to do is to die, to end it, and they won’t let him. Between the God damn bureaucrats and the lawyers this guy will just suffer until he dies—and go broke in the process.”

“What are you babbling about? And hurry up. If you don’t get a move on you’ll be late for your first day on the job.”

“Sorry Mary. I was watching the news, and they’re talking about some poor bastard who’s terminally ill with cancer and tried to kill himself. As if his life wasn’t bad enough, they found him and brought him back. He’s been in restraints for the last ten days. The hospital won’t untie him from his bed because they say he’s is a threat to himself. He’s in intense pain and refusing nourishment and medication, because he doesn’t want to end up comatose in the hospital.”

“Well, that’s too bad, but it isn’t like it’s never happened before,” Mary said as she attended to the stove.

“Bastard lawyers,” Sam started.

“Not with the lawyers again Sam. What is it now? I know you despise lawyers, but not every problem in the world is their fault.”

“This man is dying of cancer and all he wants is for it to end. But the city has an army of lawyers making motions in court so he can’t be released from the hospital, because they say he has diminished capacity and his decision to stop medical care will cause his death.”

“Will he?”

“Will he, what?”

“Die if he leaves the hospital,”

“Of course he will, Mary. That’s the whole idea.”

“So they’re right,” Mary said, as she put the eggs on the plate. “It’s a shame he’s sick, but ...” her voice trailed off.

“This poor slob is paying thousands a day in hospital costs for services he doesn’t want and lawyer’s fees he can’t afford, his wife is dead, and now after sixty-two years he will have nothing to leave to his three daughters. Bastards!”

“Lawyers *and* daughters; now I see Sam,” Mary said as she sat down at the table.

Sam glanced back at Mary. “What did you say?” then returned to watching the news report.

She looked over at him, seeing the gentle loving husband and father not the tough soldier the outside world saw. She stopped what she was doing and smiled sweetly at him; then started to move towards her husband to give him a reassuring hug. Instead she caught herself and returned to the task at hand which was getting him out the door. “Get your ass in gear, Sam. Don’t be late on your first day. It will reflect badly on me you know.”

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“On you?” Sam looked turned away from watching the TV and found her staring at him. “A bit old school, don’t you think? This is the modern army; the wife as the ‘quiet strength behind the successful officer’ doesn’t exist any more. They gave up their Donna Reed skirt and string of pearls, put on BDUs and came on active duty. Or have you forgotten?” Sam said sarcastically.

“I’m just an old-fashioned girl. So if that bothers your sensitive male ego, you can just bite me,” she retorted with a tone that was just this side of ‘take me to the bedroom right now.’ Sam put the cup in the sink, kissed Mary and left.

Sam was a major with over eighteen years of active duty, and this would be his terminal assignment. He always wondered why they called it that. Did they expect him to die during this tour? Either way, this wasn’t Sam’s idea. He’d failed to make the list for lieutenant colonel, and with that he couldn’t stay beyond twenty years. So this would be the first day of his last assignment.

It was 0715 hours as Sam began his drive to Fort Sheridan, his new duty station, and he was thinking of what would come. His new assignment was to close the fort. After over a hundred years of supporting soldiers during peace and war, surviving years of political debate and backroom deals over the issue of closure, Sheridan had finally succumbed to the base closing initiative and was scheduled to shut down in 1995.

“After eighteen years of busting my ass it’s come to this; project officer for closing Ft. Sheridan,” Sam said out loud, then his mind drifted into deeper thoughts. I was going to be the next John Wayne or Errol Flynn, leading the valiant charge, saving lives, leading men in combat, making a difference. Now I’m facing the end of my service just like this old fort. What has this place done in the last hundred years besides sit on some of the most expensive real estate in the country? It didn’t serve as an Indian fort protecting the settlers. It wasn’t a major command center, not even a major training base. As he drove up the gravel lane and approached the fort’s entrance, Sam glanced at himself in the rear view mirror. “And what about me? Oh, God!”

At 0735 hours he turned into Fort Sheridan, drove past the

MP gate, turned right onto Leonard Wood Avenue, then followed it to Lester Avenue and the Post Headquarters building. He parked his car in the visitor's spot, then walked up the steps and into the Post Headquarters building at exactly 0745 hours.

A secretary guarded the colonel's door and Sam quickly sized her up. She was well dressed, very professional, in a skirt and matching jacket. It looked like it was an expensive outfit like the ones he had seen in Nieman Marcus the other day while shopping for Mary and the girls, but he knew it had to be a knock off for her to afford it on GS pay. She had a classic string of pearls around her neck with matching earrings that added a touch of elegance, and her hair was light brown and carefully pulled back into a small bun that fully exposed her beautiful complexion. She was a lady of around fifty-five, Sam guessed, but she looked a lot younger. A real class act, Sam thought to himself.

"Good morning. I'm Major Call, here to see Colonel Evans. I have a zero eight hundred hours appointment."

"Good morning Major Call. The colonel had an early morning appointment outside of the office, but I am sure he'll be here shortly. Please go on in and have a seat." She pointed to the open door.

Sam looked towards the door and glanced at her nameplate that sat on the edge of her desk. "Thank you Ms. Kasten," Sam said as he gently nodded his head to her and then walked into the office. He took a quick look around while he waited. This room went way beyond the usual army office: expensive wood paneling on the walls, a massive oak desk with a plush leather chair, and real art hanging on the walls. While the rest of the building was standard government issue, this office was obviously specially maintained. Of course, it was the post commander's office, and controlled by the post engineers, which in turn the post commander controlled, so whatever the commander wanted, the commander got. Behind the massive desk a full-sized American flag and army flag stood in matched brass holders on the floor. The large flags had required the commander to move his desk toward the middle of the room, which in turn made the desk the most dominant and imposing feature of the

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room. The other three walls were all ‘love me’ walls, so named for their contents of pictures and awards, all of which included either the commander’s image or his name. Evan’s commission hung prominently behind his desk, between the flags. There were photographs of him sitting in or on combat equipment with at least six of the most important military generals of the era. As Sam studied the memorabilia, he noticed that in all the photos Evans was perfectly dressed; it was all photo op stuff and not real-life in the field stuff. Sam’s quick analysis told him the combat equipment photos were staged motor pool shots, and the photos with the generals were most likely taken at Pentagon functions where the generals and five hundred of their closest Pentagon associates gathered for some army dinner or other official affair. Most of Evans’ assignments were at the Pentagon, and so were the resulting awards.

Twenty-five years and almost his entire career in D.C.; this is a real ‘Pentagon Puppy’, Sam thought. But then he remembered what Mary always said about jumping to conclusions, so maybe he’d give Evans the benefit of the doubt. The colonel finally strolled in at 0825 hours. He stood six feet tall in a well-tailored uniform that did a good job disguising he was overweight. His hair was a little beyond regulation in length and Sam suspected that it was an attempt to hide his receding hairline. His cheeks were puffy and he looked soft, like he hadn’t done physical exercise in years, and Sam wondered how he could have possibly passed the yearly physical fitness tests, unless of course they were paper drills only.

He took his seat behind his massive desk and instructed Sam to have a seat in one of the two chairs in front of his desk. He lectured Sam for twenty minutes on the importance of the project and how there were no small tasks, only small officers. It was obvious Colonel Evans fully expected to make general and the successful execution of this mission would get him back to Washington where he wanted to be. And, definitely where he belonged, Sam thought.

Sam listened intently, and after guaranteeing the success of the operation, stood, saluted smartly, and left the office thinking his visits with Colonel Evans would be infrequent and brief. Sam

thanked Ms. Kasten for her courtesy and asked for directions to his office. She kindly handed him a packet containing a complete list of post facilities, his office location, a list of his current staff, and a copy of the mission statement on the base-closing along with a separate write-up on the project officer's duties. The packet contained everything Sam needed to get going, and he was sure the colonel had delegated it all to Ms. Kasten. Grinning he said, "Thank the colonel for this outstanding packet. Obviously he has his hands in the daily operations of this command."

She smiled back, and they both silently acknowledged that she'd done the entire job, and the colonel hadn't done shit.

Sam left through the massive double wooden doors of this solid stone building. He went down the ten marble steps that must have serviced a million footsteps in their hundred years of service, then onto the street. Sam had time before he needed to meet with anyone, so he decided to take a short walk around the area. He reached into the folder that the colonel's secretary had developed for him and pulled out a small pamphlet on Fort Sheridan. It contained a brief history of the installation and old photos of the buildings, most of which were still standing.

The pamphlet also contained a map of the post and Sam located the Post Headquarters building in order to get his bearings. Sam surmised that the pamphlet was not professionally made. The text was all one font, the captions on the photos were not always centered, the map of the main area was obviously hand drawn and not to scale, and the pages themselves were more photocopied than printed. The pamphlet was an Officer's Wives Club project that had probably been started as some fundraiser, and despite the obvious lack of professional printing they had done a good job. It was easy to use and read, and contained some very interesting facts.

The main buildings on the fort were centered around a large fifty-four-acre parade ground. Leonard Wood Avenue was a backward 'D' shaped road that ran around the entire parade ground. The headquarters building was located off the south end of the loop on Lyster Road, so named for Major William Lyster who served as the first post commander of Fort Sheridan from 1887 to 1890. Sam

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looked around as he read the map to orient himself to his new surroundings.

On the east side of the loop, the only straight part of the road, was the massive three-story stone building that served as headquarters for The Fourth Army and Recruiting Commands. This huge building had fourteen entrances on the front side of the building alone, seven on each side of a massive tower that divided the building in half. According to the pamphlet, the tower was 167 feet tall and had a tunnel built through its base to allow a platoon of soldiers to march through the tower on what was then Sheridan Road. Sam stopped for a moment and looked the massive building over, then he finished reading the notes about the building. The tower was originally 227 feet tall, Sam read, but a flaw was found in the structure in 1940, so sixty feet of the tower had been removed. Sam looked at the tower. “You are one impressive big-ass building! I’m Sam Call and I’ll be staying here a while.”

With that Sam looked at his watch and knew it was time to meet the team. He put the pamphlet into his briefcase, walked to the nearest of the fourteen entrances and entered the building. He climbed a double staircase to the second floor, then down the bright white corridor to the left, stopping in front of a door near the end of the hallway that simply had ‘216’ stenciled on the door. Inside, Sam found a twenty by ten-foot room with two desks facing each other from opposite sides of the room. Like mirror images, each desk had a chair for the owner and a smaller chair on the left side for a visitor to use. Each had a phone as well as a desk pad and a small lamp. They were cheap, standard-issue metal desks and Sam knew this furniture most certainly didn’t come from the same supplier as the colonel’s furniture. The off-white walls were completely bare and the room was as sterile and plain as an old operating room. The office did have some pluses: the ten-foot ceilings and a huge window that were typical of older stone buildings, provided a great view and made the room feel very airy despite its lack of size and its austere contents. Sam placed his briefcase on a chair, went to the window, and looked outside. From his office he had a view of the parade field, the senior officer’s quarters, and the field grade quarters. He looked to the left and he could see the road he just walked down

from the Post Headquarters.

The door opened behind him and he turned around to see who'd entered. A soldier stood just inside the door. Sam quickly scanned the man; he had the rank of first sergeant on his shoulder and the name 'Kent' above his right pocket. He was a large man, not overly muscular, just big and strong looking; six feet two inches, the same height as Sam, but he looked taller. Maybe it was because his fatigues were so starched and straight that he just looked taller, or maybe it was because he stood very erect. His hair was a GI cut, shaved close to his head, and his boots were spit polished so well Sam saw his own reflection in the man's boots from ten feet away.

"First Sergeant Kent, may I help you, Sir?" Kent stood at attention.

"I'm Major Call, the new project manager for the post closure operation. I believe this is my new duty station."

As Sam turned and fully faced Kent, the sergeant looked at his nametag and responded. "Yes Sir, Major Call. Welcome aboard, Sir. I took the liberty of preparing your desk with the basics. Please let me know if there's anything else you require. If you like, Sir, I can give you an overview of the mission and the unit thus far."

Kent went on for twenty minutes, describing the mission and providing a list of the buildings to be closed, plus the timeline. He provided details on what they were supposed to do with the equipment in the buildings, the papers, and everything else down to the junk level. He also provided a list of all the personnel in the 'unit' and their position and responsibility. He was thorough, Sam concluded.

Kent was obviously a man who didn't like to offer personal opinions; he seemed to be military down the line. However, when describing his part of the unit, Kent mentioned he was 'First Sergeant', not just 'Master Sergeant'—a distinction that obviously concerned him. He seemed uncomfortable with being called 'First Sergeant' in this admin role, even though the group had twenty enlisted soldiers. Although first sergeant and master sergeant were both Enlisted level 8 ranks, the first sergeant position was normally

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reserved for the senior sergeant in a line unit—a company-sized unit much larger than this twenty-person detachment. The orders were clear however: Kent’s position was officially listed as first sergeant, and he was playing the role.

Listening to Kent speak, Sam thought the term ‘Old School Top Sergeant’ perfectly described the man. If first impressions were any indication, he’d been partnered with one of the few remaining real top sergeants.

Sam worked at his desk for the next few hours, reviewing the plans and documents Kent and the colonel’s secretary had prepared for him.

By 1300 hours, the room was hot, and getting hotter. Kent had been on site for two weeks, the last of the enlisted troops had arrived the previous Monday, and Sam was the last member of the team to arrive. Over the last week Kent made sure the troops were ready for work having ensured the enlisted soldiers had stowed their gear, gotten the proper insignias sewn on, and settled into the barracks. Today was to be their first workday in support of the mission and he had scheduled a meeting with the troops to both meet Sam and to get the mission underway.

Sam was not ready to start. He was not mentally engaged and wanted to be elsewhere. He knew he’d eventually get his head together enough to be effective and to present the proper image to the troops; but he wasn’t prepared for it today. Besides that, since he had to report to the post commander he’d worn his Class A uniform, and everyone else would be in the fatigue work uniform, making him feel even more out of place. Down the hall there was a classroom that serviced the entire building. Kent being old school was never late, and therefore nor were any of his soldiers. The meeting was set for 1300 hours but already everyone knew how Kent was about being on time and they were in their seats by 1245 hours.

Sam was equally sensitive to time, having learned the lesson the army way as a second lieutenant. ‘On-time’ was ten minutes before the scheduled start of any meeting; if you got there at the scheduled time and the door was already closed you did not enter. If you did, and the senior officer was present then there was only one

acceptable excuse: you had just been shot; and you better be bleeding. Sam learned the appropriate protocol as a second lieutenant when he was five minutes late for a battalion staff meeting. The battalion commander stopped the meeting, welcomed Sam, and thanked him for joining them and then waited for Sam to have a seat before continuing. During the remainder of the meeting, every time there was point needing to be clarified the colonel asked Sam to explain it, which, to the amusement of the rest of the battalion staff officers, he could not. To further compound his embarrassment, every administrative tasking the staff had during the meeting was given to Sam. At the conclusion of the meeting, and as they were beginning to adjourn, the colonel asked Sam if there was anything in particular he learned in the day's meeting; Sam replied instantly and without thinking, "I'll never underestimate what can happen in five minutes Sir."

Just before 1300 hours Sam left his office and walked the few feet down the hall to the classroom. It was exactly 1300 hours when he entered the room. Kent called "Atten hut" and the room occupants all stood at attention. Sam took a few steps towards the front of the room with an "As you were" and the troops sat back down. Despite his lack of enthusiasm, Sam began. "I'm sure this isn't the most exciting assignment you've had, but it's what they're paying us for, so let's do the best job possible. Our mission is to empty every building, turn in all serviceable equipment, ship any and all useful files to the army archives, make sure the buildings are totally emptied, clean them from top to bottom, and then seal them up. We have thirty-five buildings and 120 days to do it. This will not be a ball-buster, but we do have a schedule. We'll start with Building 44. Any questions?"

"Sir, what are they going to do with the buildings when we finish?" asked Specialist Carrington.

"They will be sold to the civilian community, who will most likely tear them down and turn this land into million dollar homes, or a mall, or some other money making real-estate deal."

"If they're just going to tear them down, why do we have to clean them and make them ready for inspection? Why?"

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"Why *Sir?*" corrected First Sergeant Kent.

"Yes, I mean. Why clean them up? *Sir!*"

"How long have you been in the army, Carrington?" Sam focused on the young sergeant.

"Four and half years."

"Four and a half years, *Sir!*" corrected Kent.

"Yeah, four and half years, *Sir,*" Carrington said half-embarrassed and half-pissed off.

"In all that time, Carrington, has the army ever made any sense to you?"

Carrington didn't reply. He liked the response. So did the rest of the group.

"First Sergeant Kent, would you please cover the work assignments."

"Yes, *Sir!*" Sergeant Kent roared.

"Specialist Carrington, your group will handle the packing of all salvageable files," Kent began. He continued with a complete briefing to the work detail. Although Sam was mentally there in the beginning, his mind rapidly drifted to memories of other assignments and dreams not realized. He flashed on his last command, the action and excitement. It was a real command, Sam thought. It wasn't a few years ago—it was a *lifetime* ago.

"Anything else, *Sir?*" There was no response from Sam.

"*Sir,* do you have anything to add?" Kent finally got Sam's attention.

Without thinking, and in an attempt to show Kent he was with the program, Sam jumped to his feet with false enthusiasm and said, "Okay First Sergeant, let's get everybody out the door and get this mission rolling." Sam paused to be sure they all heard his next statement. "And let's make sure we all know our first milestone."

Kent looked at him coolly, and Sam glanced at the

chalkboard. There listed was the schedule for the week, and in big letters, underlined and circled was, Today, 1600 hours Building 44 Walk through inspection - Major Call. Sam felt like an idiot and wanted to go home for the rest of the day and not see the unit.

Shit! Sam said to himself as he left the briefing room and returned to his office.

He sat at his desk, thumbing a pencil against the cheap volar surface, unable to concentrate. They had two years to close the post, but his task would take considerably less time. The first phase was to empty all the old warehouses and return all salvageable equipment into the inventory. He had to complete the schedule for the closeout and give a presentation to the post commander in ten days. He had more than enough time to put together a good plan and Kent had already gathered a ton of data for him, so he could certainly get the job done. But he just couldn't get it rolling. He decided to take a walk.

Not going anywhere in particular, Sam strolled down the tree-lined street. It was 1430 hours and sunlight streamed through the trees, warming his face and shoulders. Instantly his mood improved. He loved the outdoors, he always had. As much as he wanted to stay in a shitty mood, the walk through the beautiful streets and the fresh air filling his lungs gave him a fresh outlook.

Sam strolled past the chapel and the main gate, then walked by the reserve center toward the west end of the installation. At the end of the road, past a green open area, he came upon an army cemetery. Sam loved these old military cemeteries, as they were rich with history. Every grave had a story and he often thought of the 'people' he met during his visits. The oldest cemeteries were especially intriguing, and he could spend hours walking through and reading the tombstones. The graveyards held more than soldiers—often families, civilians, and other 'guests' occupied the graves.

Sam scanned the area, looking for the oldest stones. At the southern end of the cemetery he spotted a group of small limestone headstones that were turning black at the corners. The years of sun and pollution had taken their toll on the stones. Sam strolled through the markers, occasionally stopping to read one of the more legible

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markings, Wilber Jones, Private, 1871 was inscribed on one stone. The letters were still legible after more than one hundred years. Sam wondered, as he often did, who mourned the death of this man? How did he die? Did he die a soldier's death? Was it in battle perhaps? "1871!" Sam said out loud.

The date suddenly struck him as odd, because he'd just read that Fort Sheridan actually opened in 1887. He pulled out the pamphlet and checked the dates again. There it was. "The catastrophe of the Chicago fire of 1871 formed the first link in the founding of Fort Sheridan. There was looting and wild confusion as a result of the fire. Chicago's Major Mason declared the city under martial law and placed the government under the command of General Sheridan. Six companies of infantry were sent to Chicago from the frontier under his command to help restore order."

There you have it, Sam thought, the grave was from a casualty serving on the frontier.

Sam continued to walk and read. *Fred Taylor, Sergeant, 1882. John Calloway, Corporal, 1876, 7th Cavalry.*

Now that's interesting, he thought. Corporal Calloway was a member of the famed 7th Cavalry. Maybe this man had served with General Custer. But if so, why wasn't Corporal Calloway buried in the fields of South Dakota with the other 277 sorry bastards who followed Custer to his death? He walked further and examined a few more stones; more soldiers, a few wives, some children, typical old stones. But Fort Sheridan's cemetery was obviously anything but typical; it had a cavalryman from the 7th Cavalry who died the same year as Custer. He found that fascinating.

Sam strolled on still puzzled over the mystery of Corporal Calloway. A row of stones at the back of the cemetery caught his attention because they stood separate from the others in the last row possible before the cemetery fence. He approached these lonely stones, stopped at the first one, and read.

Heinz Braune
German
16 November 1944

Wow! What was a German soldier from World War II doing in Fort Sheridan?

“Bigger than Stuttgart,” Sam said as if someone was there to hear him. A German cross was engraved on the stone. Every stone down the line was a German name and from the World War II era. Now this is a story, Sam thought. He looked at each grave in turn.

Rudolf Loehr, German, 25 Nov 1944
Kurt Myer, German, 25 Nov 1944
Willy Paap, German, 25 Nov 1944
Egon Krauz, German, 13 July 1945
Emil Krause, German, 4 Aug 1945
Richard Barthal, German, 18 Aug 1945
Heinreich Bauer, German, 7 Sep 1945
Kurt Roessger, German, 12 Oct 1945

Sam slapped at a mosquito on his arm and in doing so glanced at his watch, it was 1545 hours, and realized he'd spent over an hour in the cemetery.

“Christ, I'm going to be late!” Corporal Calloway, his story, and the Germans would have to wait until another time. Sam hurried back down the road to his office and the urgent inspection.

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As he approached Building 44, he saw Sergeant Kent standing outside with a clipboard, looking all the part of a senior army sergeant. It was hot, muggy, and Kent had been working outside with the men all day—yet he looked like he'd just stepped into a new uniform and spent the day sitting in a cool, air conditioned office. "Afternoon, Sir!" Kent came to attention and saluted.

Sam returned the salute. "Good afternoon, First Sergeant. How's it going?"

"Well, Sir. Building 44 should be one of the easiest to do. It's small and hasn't been used much. The building was almost full of old, useless file cabinets, so all we had to do was move the stuff and prepare it for turn-in. Didn't have to do any research to determine what the equipment was or if it was still serviceable. Mostly just old desks, chairs, lockers, and those file cabinets. We have all the installation property separated and ready for transport to the warehouse."

Sam looked around the area as Kent spoke; the team had removed most of the furniture from the building and had it neatly arranged it on the side of the road ready to load onto the trucks. File cabinets, desks, and other useless, obsolete junk; stuff so old it wasn't even worth doing the old 'midnight requisition,' Sam thought.

"The file cabinets are another story," Kent continued. "Most of them were empty, but the ones in the back had files. The drawers weren't labeled, and the men didn't even know that they had anything in them until they tried to carry them out. I looked at some of the stuff and most of it was just old, unused forms. The only interesting thing was a folder Carrington found. It had photos of the building, some of soldiers, and some old finance stuff. I had them put the papers into boxes for your review."

Sam nodded. "Very good. According to what I've read, this building was constructed in 1942 as an office for a finance group during the war. Apparently it became a warehouse in 1947, and it's been that way ever since."

Kent and Sam went into the building, which was empty except for the dust of fifty years and four boxes in the middle of the room. The building was in remarkable shape. Nearly every older fort has these one and two-story white board, open-bay buildings constructed as temporary facilities during World War II. They were temporary then but still standing and in use today—a tribute to the builders, who took the extra care to build them right, and the thousands of GIs who scrubbed and maintained them over the years.

In every place Sam ever served there was a shortage of desks, chairs, and other office furniture, and every base had some warehouse with equipment nobody could get because of the archaic supply system. It was easier to slip in there at lunchtime when everyone was out, or during a field exercise, and liberate what you needed. If you got caught, it wasn't really considered stealing, just 'relocation for the good of the service'. It was expected, but not officially condoned. This stuff wasn't even worth that.

Sam reached into one of the boxes and pulled out the photographs, a picture of Building 44 taken during the war years. The sign on the door read, 21st Finance and there was a photo of what must have been the finance crew. He examined five other photos; one looked to be of a picnic, one of soldiers playing baseball, two were just soldiers walking, and the fifth one was of a beautiful vintage Packard. None of the pictures, except the one of the finance crew, appeared to be staged. There were also finance papers and reports on earnings and labor, nothing too exciting.

"First Sergeant, I don't see any historical significance in any of these papers. Have all the forms and other papers put into the recycling bins. Oh, and where did Carrington find this stuff?" Sam asked Kent.

"I believe it fell out of one of the cabinets."

Kent and Sam exited the building and went outside where the men were loading equipment onto the trucks. Sam watched them working and had to work equally hard to restrain himself from joining in. The brass was never too keen on officers working with the troops in routine manual labor, and more importantly he had a bad back. If he aggravated his back he'd be in pain for two weeks,

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and worse than the pain, Mary would have his ass for not taking care of himself.

As Sam stood watching, Specialist Carrington and Private Eggers came out carrying an old desk. They put it down beside the other desks, and as Carrington turned to go back into the building, he saw Sam had the old envelope.

"I see you got the photos," said Carrington. "What are you going to do with them?"

Before Sam could even open his mouth, Kent was on Carrington like a fly on stink.

"Carrington," Kent shouted. Carrington stopped dead and waited for what he obviously knew would be an ass-chewing on his unprofessional attitude. "How many times do I have to talk to you, son? The major is an officer, and you will learn how and when to address him, or you and I are going to have a serious problem. Am I getting through to you?"

"Yes, First Sergeant," Carrington said.

Sam pretended he hadn't heard the exchange, so as to not interfere with First Sergeant Kent's authority. He'd learned a long time ago there were three people you never got on the wrong side of, the mess sergeant, the supply sergeant, and the top sergeant. Without them you didn't eat, couldn't get your requisitions filled, and you didn't survive, in that order.

After a suitable period of time had passed, Sam asked First Sergeant Kent to send Carrington over.

"I'm curious," said Sam, "was the envelope in a separate file folder or mixed in with other records?"

"Neither," Carrington kind of shrugged his shoulders. "It was the only thing in the drawer. Well, I guess it was. I mean, Harris said there wasn't anything in it when she checked it before bringing it out of the building." Carrington continued, "Well, Harris was dragging one out on the hand truck and having a tough time. It was one of the really old, heavy ones, so I went over and tried to help her. I didn't

want her to hurt herself. I was holding the bottom, and I guess it must have slipped and the cabinet fell off the hand truck when we were going down the steps. The drawer fell out and so did the envelope.

Sam looked around and saw a striking young female private loading one of the trucks. The army BDU uniform does nothing for a woman's figure, but it was a hot day and the soldiers were working in their T-shirts; Private Harris's T-shirt was working harder than most. Sam looked at Specialist Carrington. "Hot day. It's nice you let your team ground their gear." His tone was lightly sarcastic and Carrington knew what he meant. "Yes, Sir. Got to think of what's best for the troops, Sir."

"Thanks, Carrington. Carry on." Best for the troops, my ass, Sam thought. Best for Carrington to see Harris's boobs.

Carrington saluted, turned but hesitated. "What are you going to do with the photos?" he asked in a low voice, just loud enough for Sam to hear, but not so loud that Kent could hear.

"I guess I'll turn them over to the archive crew. Why?"

"Do you think I could have the one with the '39 Packard? Man, I just love classic cars and that one is cherry."

Sam thought, Why not? The photos would probably just get trashed. "Sure, no problem." He opened the envelope, quickly scanned the photos, and handed the Packard photo to Carrington. "Enjoy!"

In one quick motion Carrington grabbed the photo, and he was on his way back to work.

Sam announced, "First Sergeant, I'm going back to the office. If I don't get with you tonight, I'll see you first thing in the morning."

"Yes, Sir!" Kent snapped.

The specialist standing next to Carrington whispered to him, "That's such bullshit, Kent and this 'by the book' hard-ass routine."

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“Yea. I hadn’t seen one like him since basic training and jump school. Those guys struck fear in your heart. You know, in four years since jump school, I hadn’t seen one like them.” Carrington looked at Kent for a moment as he surveyed the work the team was doing. “And as I think about it I haven’t respected one since then either.” They paused, looked again at Kent and went back to work.

As Sam left he wasn't sure what time 'first thing' was for Kent. He was probably out doing PT at 0500 hours. He tucked the envelope under his arm and walked back toward the office. As he neared the parade grounds, which was across the way from the office, the loud speaker piped the first note of Retreat. It was exactly 1700 hours. Sam stopped and came to Parade Rest. The first movement ended, and on the first note of the second movement Sam came to attention and saluted smartly. No matter where Sam was or what his mood, the sound of Retreat and other military movements inspired him. Hell, Taps practically brought him to tears. These traditions never became routine; he truly loved them.

Once the music ended, Sam continued walking back to the office. It was 1720 hours when he got there and the door was already locked and he hadn’t been issued his set of building keys.

"Damn!" he cursed. It was only twenty minutes past quitting time and the place was already locked up tighter than a drum. Chicken shit outfit, he thought. He could get the staff duty officer, or SDO, to open the building, but he had his car keys in his pocket so it could all wait until tomorrow. Inside the car, he tossed the envelope onto the passenger’s seat and started down the tree-lined road toward home. Twenty-five minutes later he was there.

Sam entered the house and closed the door behind him. From where he was standing, Sam could see through the living room and dining room to the door that led to the back yard. Just then Mary entered the dining room from their little eight by ten kitchen. “Hi, Hon, I'm home," Sam shouted as she entered the room. He had always called Mary ‘Hon.’ It was short for honey, and it was about as close to a pet name as Sam could get.

“Hi babe,” Mary called back to him as they walked towards each other. She gave him a kiss. “How was your day?” She added

without waiting for his answer, "Mine was interesting. You'll never guess who I bumped into today."

"Who?" asked Sam, as he threw his keys in the basket by the door and dropped the envelope onto the table.

"Go ahead, guess," Mary said, anxious to play the game.

Sam hated guessing games, probably because he was so bad at them. "Sigorney Weaver?" He knew that comment would end the game right there. He loved Sigorney Wearer, and for some reason Mary hated that.

"You ass!" she said. "Sometimes you're a real shit."

He did a quick step and attempted to recover. "Who did you meet, Hon?"

"Never mind."

"Come on, tell me."

Mary smiled a little. "Well, I was walking around the block this afternoon just taking in the weather, and I literally bumped into Barbara Seim. They live just down the street.

"How long have they been here?"

"Almost three years. Rick is a Full Bull now and getting ready to command a Brigade.

"That's fantastic. Good for him. He loves command, I'm glad he's getting the brigade. He'll make general, no doubt. How's Barb? It must be six years since I've seen them."

Mary told Sam all the news about Rick's last three assignments, Barb's schooling, and six years of their lives up to now. Sam turned Mary off fifteen minutes into the debriefing, making an occasional "No kidding" or "That's great" just to stay in the game. Mary was a champion talker, and Sam had learned a long time ago to appreciate this ability. He was a bottom-line person. He sometimes lost his patience when Mary talked at length, but mostly he was awed by her ability to talk. Often she and her good friends could talk for literally hours on just about any topic. It was a talent that had

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served her well these last forty-odd years. In an effort to break out, Sam thought he'd distract Mary with the old photos Carrington had found. "Speaking of surprises," Sam interjected, "we had a surprise at work today. While cleaning out an old warehouse one of the men found some old documents and photos. Do you want to see them?"

Without waiting for her response, he got up from the couch and retrieved the envelope. He didn't find the photos all that interesting, but it might distract Mary from telling him about Rick and Barb's life, and then maybe he could get some dinner. He was starved.

Mary opened the envelope and glanced through the photos and the documents. "Sam, where did you get these?"

"What's for dinner, Hon?" Sam asked.

"These are interesting. What do you think they are?"

"Hot dogs on the grill?"

"Were these all together?"

"I'll start the grill, okay?" Sam stepped out of the back screen door and lit the gas grill that was standing to the right of the door on a small concrete pad.

"Sam! Would you stop thinking of your stomach and come here a minute," Mary said from the dining room.

"What is it, Hon? I'm hungry."

"Sam, did you look at these? If you didn't think they were important, why did you bring them home?"

Sam re-entered the house and was getting the hot dogs from the refrigerator.

"Well, I really didn't get a chance to study them," he said, trying to recover. "Apparently they were in a file cabinet for forty-five years. When we moved it, they fell out. What do you think?"

"They *fell* out," Mary repeated doubtfully. She was quiet for

a moment then said, "How did they fall out of a cabinet?"

"Well actually, I'm not too sure of all the particulars. But I'm fairly sure they wouldn't have been found at all if a young sergeant hadn't had the hots for a well-endowed private. He was 'helping' her," Sam did the quote thing with his fingers. "And I guess he was watching her and not the steps. Down he went, the drawer came out, along with the envelope, and the rest is history as they say. Let's eat."

Sam again went out the back door and put the hot dogs on the grill.

"It was the only thing in the drawer?" Mary asked.

"Yeah. Why don't you get the beans and set the table? Let's eat." Sam turned dogs on the grill.

"Sam, there's tape on the envelope." She came to the screen door, opened it and pointed to a length of tape that ran the entire length of the top of the envelope. "Like it had been taped to something. Someone must have put it there. Why would you tape an envelope to the inside of a drawer? And if someone did, how did it just lay there for fifty years? You'd think that someone would have noticed this fat envelope taped to the inside of the file drawer. Don't you think?"

Sam paused from his urgent task of helping the dogs cook faster, left the dogs cooking on the grill, came back inside, took the envelope from Mary, and examined it. For the first time he began to think that there might be something to the envelope besides a collection of old photos and old papers. Mary was right—it was unlikely an envelope taped to the inside of a drawer would just be left unopened for nearly fifty years. For some reason the envelope must have been hidden. But why?

Sam gently took the photos and studied each one in silence. Mary did the same.

Each of the five photos was black and white, seven by nine inches, and each had a stamp on the back with the words 'Government photo 1945' hand written within the stamp.

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Photo number one was the picture of Building T44 as it was in 1945. The one-story temporary building was a standard wooden structure painted white. A door on the right side had a standard awning above it and a two-step entrance. A sign to the left of the door read 21st Finance Company, Ft. Sheridan. Outside, six men stood together in a friendly pose. On the back of the photo a hand written note said, 'My office. June 1945'.

The second photo was of three soldiers and a small white building. The third showed soldiers playing baseball. Photo number four showed a group of soldiers leaving what must have been the front gate. The last photo was another shot of troops walking.

"The remarkable thing about all five photos is that they are totally unremarkable. I don't see a thing. You?" asked Sam.

Mary turned her attention to the documents. They were one-page financial reports on POW labor revenue. "POW revenue!" Mary said. "In January of 1945, the government was making money off of POW labor? Can that be right?"

"I don't know. I have no idea. Let's eat." Sam grabbed a plate from the kitchen and went to get the dogs from the grill.

"You're right. We need to get going. Vicki and Dana will be here around 8:30, so get rolling. You know they won't be late."

Being able to spend time with Dana and Vicki might even make this suck-ass assignment bearable, Sam thought as he tended to his hot dog cooking duties.