



BY

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## CHAPTER 1

“I’ll wake up.”

No, you won’t, an incredulous voice snickered.

“I must.”

Whatever.

“Where am I?”

Dead.

“Why am I talkin’ then?”

You don’t know when to give up!

Bill Evans through a Herculean effort managed to open his eyes. He felt it a bit humorous that he did not remember closing his eyes in the first place. His parched throat ached. He wasn’t sure how he felt because at first thought, he couldn’t feel anything. Bill shifted his eyes to an empty chair to his left. A lime green curtain separated Bill’s space from the rest of existence except for his neighbor to the right. Looking to the right revealed an unfamiliar face staring at him but not looking belonging to a man hooked up to numerous chords and beeping machines. Bill then realized he was in a hospital or at least a building in the guise of one.

The stranger’s eyes were weak, distant, and Bill shuddered as he thought, dead. The stubble on the stranger’s face made him look at least twenty years older than he was.

“Where am I?” Bill half hoped the man wouldn’t answer. He knew if the stranger’s lips parted to speak, a thousand unspeakable evils would spring forth and devour all humanity.

Bill closed his eyes and let the past catch up to him. He couldn’t remember what happened that led him to the building in the guise of a hospital.

This is how old folks feel when their memories betray them Bill concluded. He had always read that folks never could remember the events right before or after a traumatic incident.

“What is today’s date? Hello?”

“Doctor,” Bill heard a female announce a thousand miles away, “Mr. Evans is awake.”

The doctor and nurse combo appeared from behind the lime green curtain. Both appeared to hold a sincere demeanor. The doctor’s nametag revealed his name to be Joseph Abrams. Dr. Abrams’ eyes were bright, blue and full of care. His distinguished face reminded Bill of his Grandpa James.

“I imagine you have questions, Private Evans,” Dr. Abrams started.

Glory be! The incredulous voice started up.

You were a military man! You signed on to protect his country’s freedom by becoming the latest victim to what was it Commander Flag called them, an IED? Right! An IED landed you on the hospital gurney looking at Mr. Drool!

“Am I okay?” Bill could not believe the simplicity of his question.

“You,” Dr. Abrams paused as if considering his words. “Have had better days. But,” his tone turned cheery, “You will be fine in a few more days. You have not suffered any long term debilitating trauma.”

Bill looked to the nurse. He hoped she was close to his age of twenty-six. She had a slender build, tender looking lips and brunette hair that Bill knew had to be as soft as silk. Her eyes were sincere, but he sensed some reservation. Turning to the doctor, Bill struggled to speak.

“It’s okay,” the good doctor comforted. “As a doctor, we aren’t supposed to talk about the military operations, but a liaison will be here shortly to explain what happened.”

“The other guys,” Bill spoke. The words themselves were harmless, but coupled with the fear of the inevitable; Bill hated himself for asking in fear of the answer.

“Bill,” the nurse spoke. “Try to rest,”

Hear that Billy? She wants you to rest! You been restin’ here for years! They are dead! Billy, you killed them all!

Bill closed his eyes in compliance to the nurse’s request. Before drifting off to sleep, he felt of his face. His stubble had grown into a small, beard. That told him he had been in this situation for close to two weeks. Bill Evans would find no rest in his slumber. As Bill dozed, he saw himself walking on patrol in the desert with Zach Himes, Jeffrey Rhodes, his commander named Hall and his childhood friend named Greg.

Bill stood atop a sand dune in the distance watching. He began to think the voice in his head was correct.

“I’m dead. This is my life. I’m going to watch how I caused these men to die before I’m cast into hell.”

Bill watched as he and his fellow military comrades patrolled the hellish desert. If the pain of watching the unfolding events had not been so torturous, Bill would have found it funny that ten year-old Greg Harris was dressed in little kid army gear marching along with the big boys despite the fact he died on July 28, 1993.

Bill began waving and yelling for his friends to turn back, but they were oblivious to him. Bill continued to scream until he found his arms jerked out of the air by two skinny creatures that resembled hairless Chihuahuas burned to a crisp on a microwave’s highest setting. Instead of paws, the miniature beasts clasp Bill’s arms with bloody talons. Hissing sounds protruded from

their mouths. Bill closed his eyes as he thought he saw the Chihuahua like beasts' spit dissolve millions of souls.

As Bill fought off his hellish captors, little Greg Harris ran ahead of the rest of the squad. He pointed his plastic gun at the invisible enemies darting in between the soldiers' wedge formation hollering bang bang every so often. Just as he jetted in front of Private Bill Evans, little Greg Harris's feet triggered the IED. One moment later, the desert was raining little Greg Harris and military body parts.

At the moment of destruction, Bill Evans's captors released him. Bill ran to the scene. He fell to his knees in terror despite that somewhere in his brain he knew this was a dream. He looked, but could not move as the broken, tattered, and ultimately destroyed bodies began to reform. The reanimated body of Greg Harris, noticeably missing a nose, a right leg, ears, and a left eye screamed at Bill.

"You let me die again!"

Greg Harris's accusation of negligence was enough to send Bill out of dreamland and back into reality. He awoke, rubbed his eyes, took a few deep breaths, and looked to the right. The unfamiliar face was gone and the bed empty. Bill jumped out of his skin when his eyes scanned to his left. The empty chair from earlier now had an occupant. A female dressed in a conservative, light blue dress sat reviewing papers in a manila folder. She wore thin frame glasses. Her blonde hair lay braided on her shoulders. When Bill jumped, the woman smiled.

"Don't be afraid."

"Of you?"

"Of the beasts coming to eat you."

"Pardon?"

“I said to show emotions. You have been through an ordeal. My name is Kayla Brewer. I’m,”

“You are the shrink here to adjust me?”

“No. I’m a member of the clergy.”

“Leave.”

“Sir,” Kayla began. “I’m here to help if possible.”

“Am I dead? I know I can walk. I have my body together,” Bill adamantly stated. “I’m not dead, so I don’t need you or that paperweight your kind calls a bible.”

This juvenile outburst did not surprise Kayla. She had studied the file on Bill Evans. He had listed on his personnel file when asked under Religious Affiliation, “I’m not that stupid to worship the invisible man!” What Kayla did not know was why Bill hated God. She was not there on July 28, 1993. She had not seen what little Billy Evans had. She had not witnessed what he did when the evil one took Greg Harris’s life.

“Mr. Evans,”

Bill Evans had never struck a woman in his life. His mom had raised him to treat woman not as his father had. As he reached for anything he could find to assault this imperious woman, he blamed his behavior on the morphine drip. Bill stretched his right arm ready to wail on this Christ loving harlot.

“Bedpan?”

The sheer randomness of the phrase halted Bill from committing aggravated assault. He looked perplexed, but realized the truth after he lowered his arm.

“You were going to hit me with a bedpan?” Kayla’s voice was full of genuine disgust and rage.

Bill sheepishly dropped his weapon. His face blushed. All he could do was say sorry.

“I understand,” Kayla started. She regained her original composure. “That you don’t want to hear about any of this. So,” a smile appeared. “I offer my friendship to you, if you want to talk about anything.”

“I’m sorry. It’s the medicine,” Bill stumbled. He hoped she would buy it. “I’m not even sure what happened. Are you married?”

Kayla and Bill both shortly looked stunned that Bill would be so abrasive to ask such a question.

“Let’s talk about the accident now.”

“Shoot.”

“Do you remember anything?”

“No,” Bill lied as he tried to forget the nightmare.

“Okay,” Kayla took a deep breath before starting. “Your squad was on regular patrol at the Mandali border when you stepped on,”

“An IED.” Bill’s words were slow, deliberate, and painful.

“Right,” Kayla somberly agreed.

“The team is gone aren’t they? Zach, Jeff, Lieutenant Hall are gone.”

“The initial detonation was wired to at least five other IEDs. They all went off. Your team, your friends were caught in the middle.” Kayla stopped so Bill could digest the news.

She was not going to tell him that his friend Jeff had lived in pain for a few hours before succumbing to death. She was afraid that would further push him away from God.

“If I ask you how I lived,” Bill looked himself over. “Without a scratch, as it were, are you going to say, ‘It’s a miracle of Gawd’?”

“Don’t ask me. Tell me how you lived.”

“Luck.”

“Maybe,” Kayla agreed. “Maybe not. I don’t want to offend you at all, but if I mention His name or read from The Bible, are you going to try to hit me again?”

“No.”

“I will tell you what I believe if you will then tell me why you believe what you do.”

“Fine.”

“I believe in God. I believe in the God that died for the sins of the world. His name is,”

“Jesus Christ,” Bill interrupted sardonically. “Sorry.”

Yes, Jesus Christ. I believe that you were spared for a reason. I don’t pretend to know why, but God has a plan for you.”

“Was his plan for my buddies to be blown to bits? Were they born just to die? Die in a place like this?”

“It is hard to understand I know. We aren’t God. How can we know? We trust through faith.”

“We? No, you. I’m not denying that a god might exist, but I don’t believe he is a god of love because look at all the suffering!”

“Who in this life doesn’t suffer? The Bible says we would. Jesus Christ said that we would endure trials.”

“And Santa Claus says, ‘Ho ho ho!’”

Kayla smiled. “I believe the Bible is God’s holy word inspired and true.”

“I once believed,” Bill began. “I believed that the tooth fairy would bring me more money for fillings. I was wrong as you are now.”

“I understand that not everyone opens the door when there is knocking, Bill,” Kayla touched his shoulder. “In time, you will see the truth. It, as He said, will set you free.”

“Thank you for telling me what happened to my friends.”

“God bless you, Bill Evans.” Kayla slipped away leaving a pocket sized bible in the chair.

Bill closed his eyes and settled back to sleep. This time sleep found him unlike the first attempt.

July 28, 1993 was a normal summer day. Little Bill Evans had decided that he and his best friend Greg Harris would spend the day together sneaking into movies, terrorizing girls and anything else that two boys could do to deny that school would soon start back in September.

The two had just finished watching Jurassic Park and were recounting to one another their favorite parts. The theater was only a few blocks from Greg’s house in Suffolk County. Neither thought it was much of a walk since the weather was decent. Both boys wore blue jeans and the same red tee shirt with the slogan “The Masked Weasel Rules!” Neither boy noticed the rusty, 1986 GMC van trailing them from a distance.

“The raptors are coolest,” Greg announced to the world. Throwing his arms up and scratching as a beast, he made a few growling sounds.

“Yeah, but the ‘rex was cool too,” Bill added. He flung his head back and allowed his own growl to burst forth.

“What’s next?”

“I don’t know? It’s getting dark. We might need to go home. It’s close to ten.”

“I guess.” Greg pulled out a cigarette from his pocket. In an attempt to act cool, he lit the cancer stick and placed it between his lips. A few gags and heaves later, Greg blew the death smoke. “I have to stop this.”

“Your mom will kill you.”

Greg laughed at that statement. Looking back, he was right to laugh. It would not be his mother at all. “We all gotta die sometime, Billy.”

The boys stopped in front of Greg’s house. The porch light was on. “I’ll call my mom to come and get me,” Bill grumbled. Their day was coming to an end.

Greg did not answer. Bill turned around to the spot where Greg should have been standing. He would have been standing there too if he had not been at the end of the driveway talking to the occupants of a rusty, 1986 GMC van.

A thousand after school specials assaulted Bill’s mind. He wanted to run to the door, fling it open, and scream for help. He saw himself grabbing that scary looking yard gnome with the purple cap and tossing it like a javelin at the creeps in the van. He saw himself play the hero a thousand times over. Yet, in the end, what he saw was unbelievable.

What the crap are you doing?

Bill couldn’t answer his mind as he ran toward Greg and the van.

“Hey, Bill,” Greg spoke. “These guys have some cool things in here.”

“Greg,” Bill wheezed as he took his asthma inhaler out of his pocket. “Get away,”

Before he could finish, the sliding door violently opened. Bill dropped the inhaler. Both tried to scream. Two large scarred hands prevented their attempts at escape. The boys were quickly hoarded inside the van. The sliding door echoed a strong, deafening finale as the boys’

hope died on the street in front of Greg's home. The van burned proverbial rubber through the tiny suburban dreamland as neighbors and Mrs. Harris ran outside.

Jane Harris did not give the lone inhaler lying alone on the street a second thought until Mrs. Hudson and her five-year-old grandchild named Danny came running across the street. Mrs. Hudson was wearing her Angora pink robe. Danny swung loosely in her arms as his granny sprinted across the street. Mrs. Hudson hugged Jane Harris compassionately.

"My God, Jane did you get the make of the van?"

"No," began Jane Harris. "I heard a noise like the rest," she pointed to the handful of families that were on their lawns investigating the commotion.

"Greg rides in the van," Danny proudly announced.

"What?" Jane looked at Danny then to Mrs. Hudson. She wanted to be comforted that this blundering five-year-old did not know what he talking about.

"No way would my son would get in a stranger's van. I taught him better!"

"Billy too," Danny continued.

"Honey," Mrs. Hudson began. "Danny ran to me saying that a strange van was in front of your house. I looked and saw the van. I didn't see Greg though. I went to grab the phone, but before I could dial, the tires were spinning."

Jane's eyes glared at the spot where the van may have been parked.

Oh God! Is that?

She grabbed the inhaler from the ground. She held it as if it were her child. Her hands were shaking. Her heart ached. "This is Billy's. Call Sadie, his aunt. Call the police!" Jane Hudson broke down on her lawn screaming until her heart beat its last. Later the autopsy would reveal that stress triggered the heart attack which led to the aneurysm. That was probably a

blessing in disguise. Jane Hudson would not have lived long if she found out what happened to her Greg.

*The fool says in his heart, "God does not exist."*

*They are corrupt, and they do vile deeds.*

*There is no one who does good.*

*PSALMS 73:22*