

The background of the entire image is a monochromatic red and white abstract pattern. It features a central horizontal band of bright white, which fades into a deep red at the top and bottom. The texture is grainy and resembles a close-up of a rough surface or perhaps a microscopic view of a material. The overall effect is dramatic and high-contrast.

DUSTIN BEUTIN

**INVISIBLE
WOUNDS**

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Prologue

Washington D.C.

February, 2010

Special Agent Morgan Huntley passed through the security desk at the Pentagon, headed for the inner ring of the maze-like structure that housed the top commanders of the U.S. military. This was neither the first time that Morgan Huntley had been to the Pentagon, nor was it the first time he had met with Pentagon officials to brief them on a high-profile case. In Morgan's line of work as an investigator for the Army's Criminal Investigation Command, or CID as it was known, every case was high-profile at some level.

It was, however, the first time that Morgan had been summoned for a personal briefing by Colonel Jeremy Franklin, the second most powerful man in the Army's Military Police structure. It was also the first time that an official Department of Defense private jet had been dispatched to fly him direct to Washington D.C. on short notice. These were highly irregular arrangements and they served only to enhance his ever-growing wariness as to why he had been ordered to come here today.

Still, Morgan tried to remind himself that interest in his current inquiry should be expected. After three years investigating major crimes for CID, he had learned that there were two types of cases that always drew immediate attention from the top brass. One was anything involving an officer with the right connections. The other was a violent assault on a woman.

This case had both.

Morgan had never met the Deputy Provost Marshal before and as he entered the large suite that comprised his office, he immediately disliked the man. Colonel Franklin had the look of a career officer, his smile and his uniform custom-tailored to a fine fit. As they traded salutes, Morgan could sense Franklin's dissatisfaction with Morgan's civilian clothes: appropriate for a Special Agent, but unusual here at the Pentagon.

"Have a seat, Huntley," said Franklin, his eyes glued to Morgan.

"Thank you, Colonel."

As Morgan grabbed a chair, he acknowledged the other officer in the room: Chief Warrant Officer Thompson, Morgan's direct commander within CID. Thompson, who had already arrived at the Pentagon ahead of Morgan, looked tired and pensive.

Franklin gave his best imitation of a human smile, then said, "Huntley, why don't you give me the basic details of your current assignment so I can be sure we're all on the same page."

Morgan knew that Franklin and Thompson were both likely well-informed on all of the relevant details of his case. This being the Army, however, long-standing protocol mattered more than convenience.

"A little over forty-eight hours ago, MPs at Fort Stewart responded to a request for assistance within the base hospital's emergency room. When the MPs arrived, they found 2nd Lt. Kathryn Dover, age twenty-two, undergoing treatment for a broken nose, lacerations to her face, and numerous bruises. Her clothing – civilian – was torn and some articles of jewelry were missing. Lt. Dover was conscious and asserted to the MPs that she had been sexually assaulted by her commander, Captain Isaac Wooster. She claimed that the assault occurred in Wooster's car after he had offered her a ride home from a nightclub just off-base. Following documentation of Lt. Dover's complaint, the MPs on the scene took photos and collected evidence, including her clothing, her smart phone, and samples of semen via a rape kit issued by the hospital."

"I assume you've spoken with people who knew her. What can you tell me about Lt. Dover?"

"Everyone speaks highly of her. Less than a year out of West Point, she graduated tenth overall in her class, first among female cadets. From what I gather, she's a natural leader, razor-sharp and everything else you would want in an Army officer."

"Any indications that she's been wrapped up in any sort of trouble with fellow officers in the past?"

Morgan looked at Col. Franklin for a moment before answering, weighing where the Colonel wanted to take this. Finally, he said, "Nothing I've heard would indicate that she's been involved in anything worth reporting before."

Franklin made another note. "Her alleged attacker?"

"Captain Isaac Wooster, twenty-five years old, on the fast-track since leaving West Point. Graduated middle of his class. Capt. Wooster has been Lt. Dover's commander for a little less than three months. He's well-liked, though several women I've spoken with only went so far as

describing him as ‘charmingly brash.’ He’s also the son of the Lt. Governor of Idaho and the grandson of a former U.S. Congressman.”

Franklin nodded. “Congressman Wooster sat on the Armed Services Committee for over a decade.”

Morgan winced. He now knew exactly where the Colonel wanted to take this meeting. He looked towards Chief Thompson, who only met his eyes with a blank stare.

Franklin gave another one of his half-human smiles and asked, “Do you think you’ve got a case?”

“Yes, Colonel, I do. We found blood and one of Lt. Dover’s earrings in Capt. Wooster’s car. We’ve swabbed Wooster for DNA and I have a feeling that it will match with the semen collected from Dover at the hospital. Seven different witnesses saw Dover and Wooster leave the nightclub together two hours before she was admitted to the hospital. There are phone records ...”

Franklin held up a hand. “Yes. That is the evidence. But, have you got a case that the Army JAG will prosecute?”

“Yes, Colonel.”

“No, Huntley, you don’t,” said Franklin, his eyes stabbing at Morgan. “You’ve got ten pounds of shit and a five-pound bag to put it in. Isaac Wooster may be guilty. And he may be an asshole. But, his parents and his grandparents have more friends in the highest reaches of the Army, the Air Force and even the fucking Coast Guard Yacht Safety Club than you or I can count. That adds up to a mess. We aren’t going to put Captain Isaac Wooster in front of a Court-Martial and have CNN give wall-to-wall coverage of an officer-on-officer sexual assault. It’s bad for the Army, to say nothing of the wrath of a thousand officers who all owe favors to the Wooster clan. Like it or not, this case can only serve to discredit the Army and tarnish everyone who touches it. Given all these issues, from my perspective, we would be best served by leaving this case to rot on the vine.”

Franklin looked at Morgan to see if he comprehended. Morgan instead looked at Thompson, who was still giving Morgan that blank stare. “Is this really why I’m here, Chief?” Morgan asked. Franklin interjected. “I invited Chief Thompson ahead of time to ask if I could trust you to do what was right for the Army.”

For the first time, Thompson spoke up. “I told Colonel Franklin that you can be trusted with anything I give you.”

“Morgan,” said Franklin, leaning back in his chair. “Before you start having pangs of guilt over this, I want to make clear that we aren’t just going to leave Lt. Dover hanging in the wind. She was attacked by a fellow officer. We’re going to fast-track her career. Anything she wants, she gets. She’s just got to play ball.”

“What about Wooster? What does he get?”

“Wooster will be dealt with.”

“What does that mean?”

Franklin dropped the phony smile. “It means that how we choose to handle Wooster is above your pay grade, Huntley.”

Morgan said nothing. He just looked straight ahead at Colonel Franklin.

Franklin took the silence to be an opening, so he continued. “As for you, Chief Thompson has told me that you’d like to be admitted to Warrant Officer School. I have a feeling we can make that happen.”

Morgan continued to stare silently at Franklin.

Franklin picked at something on the arm of his chair. “I can tell you’re mad. Thompson said you had a pretty good sense of right and wrong. That’s alright. Makes you a smart detective. I want you to believe that what we’re doing is right for you, for Lt. Dover, for CID and, most importantly, for the Army. Everyone is going to come out of this thing okay on the other side. I assure you that we won’t leave Lt. Dover behind.”

Franklin and Morgan stared at each other for a long, awkward moment. Franklin cracked first.

“Any concerns, Huntley?”

“Do I fly back on the plane? Or do I pay a taxi and then get reimbursed by DOD?”

For a moment, Franklin looked pissed. Then he chuckled. He looked at Thompson. “You’re right. Bit of a smart ass.” He turned back to Morgan. “You’re free to go, Huntley. You and Thompson will be flown back to Fort Stewart.”

Morgan and Thompson stood, then turned for the door.

Franklin cleared his throat and both men stopped. “Just so we’re crystal clear, Huntley, you are not to make another move on this case without first running it by me. That’s a direct order. You do nothing. We’ll take it from here. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Several silent hours later, Morgan and Thompson disembarked from the DOD private jet on the tarmac at Fort Stewart, Georgia.

As Morgan set an immediate course for his nearby car, Thompson stepped in front of Morgan.

“Look, Morgan, I know you’re upset. I’m sorry...”

“For what?”

“For what happened back there.”

“What happened back there?” asked Morgan, looking bewildered.

Thompson squinted and got close to Morgan’s face. “What are you doing, Morgan?”

“I’m not sure what you mean, Chief. I’m going to my personal vehicle.”

Morgan stepped around Thompson and headed towards his car. As he got inside and closed the door, he heard Thompson yell from behind, “Don’t go doing anything stupid, Morgan. You got that?”

Morgan parked his sedan in front of the Ft. Stewart Officer’s Club just after nine at night. He stepped out of the car into the cool evening air and strolled towards the building. It was a Friday, so the place was busy and filled with a wide spectrum of officers.

As Morgan approached, the guard on post at the door said, “Sir, officers only.”

Morgan flashed his CID badge. “I’m here on business.”

Morgan shouldered past the guard and into the heart of the Officer’s Club.

It didn’t take long to spot Isaac Wooster. He was in the back of the main hall, playing pool with several friends.

As Isaac Wooster was about to approach the pool table to take his turn, he found that his cue was gripped by a strong hand. He turned to see that the person on the other end of the stick was Morgan Huntley.

Wooster’s face turned white and he loosened his grip on the pool cue.

The other men around the pool table stopped chatting and turned towards their friend. Within moments, it seemed the whole Officer’s Club had gone quiet. All eyes were on Morgan, who was holding the cue as if he were about to turn the long, wooden staff into a weapon.

“Captain Isaac Wooster. I’m placing you under arrest on the charge of sexually assaulting a fellow officer and recommending you to the Army’s Judge Advocate for General Court-Martial. Please come with me.”

I

Chapter One

Kabul, Afghanistan

May, 2010

Special Agent Jason Milner arrived at the small, subterranean bar known as The Brydon a little before 10:00 p.m. local time. As one of the rare businesses in Kabul with a genuine, government-issued liquor license, The Brydon was possibly the most dependable place to find any one of the foreign contractors that lived and worked in the city. Considering that Jason was looking for a man known to be a functional alcoholic, it didn't take a detective to guess that The Brydon would be the best place to start hunting for him.

The subject of Jason's search was a British contractor named Martin Lansley, a man whom most would describe as affable and well-spoken. Yet, despite his excellent reputation as a companion for a night on the town, Jason was not here this evening for the pleasure of Martin's company. That was because Jason had a different description for Martin Lansley: prime suspect in a double-murder investigation.

The bar was nearing full capacity at this hour and no one paid any attention to Jason as he continued to stand just inside the entrance. In fact, The Brydon was one of the few places within this city in which a Westerner didn't attract immediate attention. Afghans were barred by state law from being served alcohol and The Brydon was thus exclusively patronized by foreigners. Tight security in the form of armed guards stood outside to keep any locals from entering and putting the valuable liquor license at risk.

The oddity of being in a bar that existed purely for the benefit of foreigners aside, Jason had to admit that this was the most relaxed he had felt since leaving the United States three months ago. Jason was on a one-year rotation through Afghanistan, responsible for investigating major crimes for Army CID in the Afghan Area of Operations. Jason's experience with Afghanistan had to this point been an endless cross-country journey, highlighted by obscure Forward Operating Bases, hot nights in field tents and unforgiving cold showers. And while his current investigation into the murder of two American soldiers was a tragedy for those involved, the Army's excellent facilities in Kabul had at least offered him a small respite. In fact, if it weren't for the growing complexities of this case, he might have even found himself liking Kabul.

After a few moments of searching, he was relieved to see his time tonight would not be wasted. Martin Lansley was seated on a corner stool of the bar, holding a friendly conversation with the bartender and waving an empty glass. Martin Lansley was hard to miss with a classically handsome face and dark, well-groomed hair that was somehow perfectly manicured at all hours of the day.

Approaching from behind, Jason waited for Martin to finish ordering his next drink, then said to the bartender, “Just a beer for me.”

Martin looked up with an easy smile. “Special Agent Milner? I thought American police officers were more partial to whiskey than beer.”

Jason sat down next to Martin. “Depends on who we’re drinking with.”

“Oh?” asked Martin Lansley, turning in his stool.

“Have you got a few minutes? I want to ask you about a rumor.”

“Lots of rumors in this country. The place is practically propped up on them five deep.”

“I promise it’s worth your time.”

The bartender brought Jason’s beer and Martin’s drink. Martin was quick to cover the tab for both, then toasted Jason with his outstretched glass. “A good gin and tonic deserves a moment of silence.”

Jason waited as Martin stirred the drink methodically. The men had met several weeks prior as part of Jason’s investigation into the execution-style murder of two Kentucky National Guard MPs. The Guardsmen’s bodies had been found in a secure cargo area at Kabul International Airport, or KAIA as it was known among the American military. Initially it was presumed that the killer was one of the other soldiers assigned to the jointly shared NATO base at KAIA. Yet, after weeks of interviews with base personnel turned up no links to either the murdered men or the duffel bags of money found in their barrack dorm rooms, Jason’s suspicions had fallen on the community of contractors who worked within the confines of the base.

Among the pool of contractors with unfettered access to KAIA, Jason had initially dismissed Martin Lansley. On the surface, Martin was just a well-groomed and harmless socialite who – like most of the contractors working on government contracts – was in and out of the airfield on a regular basis. Yet, as Jason dug deeper into the backgrounds of the civilians who worked at KAIA, the more his attention had turned to Martin and his work for a company called FDC.

FDC was making millions helping the government deal with one of the largest obstacles that faced the U.S. military after a near decade of war in Afghanistan: how to repatriate the mountains of surplus, damaged and oversized equipment the military had shipped into the country since 2002. From inoperable HUMVEEs to excess building materials and everything in-between, many of these items could be repurposed if brought back to the United States. Yet, exporting these materials meant dealing with the country's limited infrastructure and a tangled web of civilian powerbrokers whom the military was ill-equipped to handle. The immense costs of paying a private company to deal with these problems on behalf of the military was thus deemed by the Pentagon to be more cost-effective than simply abandoning the materials to the Afghan desert.

Martin Lansley's role in all of this was as a sort of ombudsman for FDC. After several years in his early career spent working for the British Foreign Office, Martin was fluent in both Punjabi and Pashto. He married these talents with a seemingly never-ending array of connections to local officials in both countries. Most important to his success, Martin had that rare ability needed to keep material moving in a part of the world where even mundane shipments were known to bog down into never-ending and indecipherable power-struggles.

Martin finished his drink and waved for another. "Now that I'm properly established, tell me about your rumor."

"It's a good one. You remember our conversation a few weeks back?"

"How could I forget? Not very often a British citizen gets to experience a real, live interrogation from an American detective."

"Well, after we talked, I heard a rumor that maybe those two Guardsmen died due to a connection with someone running drugs out of KAIA."

"Do tell?"

"Then I heard another rumor from some contractors there that you're making some money on the side these days."

Martin received another cocktail and worked it once again with a short straw. Jason realized that Martin wasn't going to provide a response, so he asked, "Just a rumor?"

"Everyone here is making a little something on the side. I'm no different."

"Maybe. Maybe not. A few days after I hear this rumor, I get a call from my friends at the DEA back in the U.S. You know who the DEA is, right? They made a drug bust at the Port of Miami a

week ago. Two pallets of heroin packed into the back of surplus U.S. Army HUMVEES. Your company, FDC, is listed on the bill of lading. And the whole thing is signed by you, no less. It doesn't take a genius. I've got two dead bodies. Two pallets of heroin. Two duffels of money. And you. I'm wondering if you want to fill in the details for me?"

Martin wiped the corner of his mouth with a napkin. "I'm not sure what you're getting at here."

"I'll cut to the chase. I've got evidence linking you to some pretty damn illegal stuff going on at KAIA and I've also got you on base at the time of the murder of two American soldiers. But, I also figure that the people who pay you to ship their drugs are vastly more important to me.

That's what has me interested now. I couldn't give a shit about throwing some low-level operator like yourself into jail, murders or not. I want to talk to the people with the balls to run drugs into the States using the Army's own logistics network. So, I've got two choices. One is to get you to tell me where to find the men who run this little operation. If you do, maybe I'll look the other way on your own indiscretions. Or I can just call it a day, pin these murders on you and walk away from the whole mess."

Martin sipped his drink. "Are we making deals? Is that what's going on here?"

"Depends what you have to offer."

Martin looked across the room and, without turning back towards Jason, said, "I can offer quite a bit, actually. The question is whether you're willing to make it worth my time."

"I don't see what choice you have."

"I don't see what jurisdiction you have."

Jason smiled. "What does your future look like with your face and name splashed all over the front of *The Times*?"

Martin Lansley took a long drink from his cocktail, draining it to the ice. He rattled his empty glass, then set it down on the bar. "I'd be willing to make a business arrangement."

Something about the pompous way that Martin bit off the sentence made Jason want to punch the guy. Instead, Jason took a moment to keep himself calm, then said, "Arrangements, as you put it, are reserved for people with the right information."

"If you assure me that my cooperation will buy me a way out of this, I will give you what you want."

"It will. Tell me what you know."

Martin snorted. “God, you really are quite blunt. Not here. Let’s make an appointment for tomorrow.”

“No. Now. My office. I’ve got a bottle of Kentucky bourbon there to keep you topped off.”

Martin raised an eyebrow in thought. “Not my usual libation, but if you pay for the cab, I’m willing to give it a nip.”

Jason nodded and stood, waiting for Martin to do the same.

The darkened streets of Kabul were quiet. A cab queued near the curb lurched slowly towards Jason and Martin as they exited the bar.

Nothing about the cab’s presence was out of the ordinary. A steady line of taxis were always waiting at The Brydon to take home the crowd of patrons. What did strike Jason as unusual, however, was that the two security men who had greeted him on his way into The Brydon just thirty minutes before were now gone. In their place stood two new guards, their eyes alert and automatic rifles at the ready.

As the cab approached, a sense of uneasiness led Jason to crowd Martin towards the curb, hoping to make a speedy departure. Before they could reach for the door of the cab, however, one of the security men called out behind them, in English.

“Wait.”

Jason turned towards the man. Martin immediately put his hands into the air, as if he was expecting trouble.

“What’s the problem?” asked Jason.

Rather than provide an answer, the guard just smiled.

Then, in one quick motion, the guard nearest Martin Lansley pulled out a silenced pistol. An instant later, Martin’s head exploded in a spray of blood that showered Jason and the taxi in a blur of crimson.

Jason reacted on instinct, pulling his own 9mm Beretta from its holster, but the guard closest to him was already bringing down the butt of a pistol onto Jason’s temple. It hit Jason hard on the side of the head. A blinding flash of pain shot through him and he fell to his knees.

Jason shook his head to clear his clouded vision and reached once more for his gun, but the men were on him, pinning his hands. As he opened his mouth to yell for help, he was met with an immediate knee to the gut, knocking the wind from him.

Lungs burning for air, Jason felt the men lift him off his feet and shove him into the cab, face-down in the rear seat. One of the men pinned his knee into Jason's back and shoved the barrel of his gun against Jason's head.

The other assailant wrenched the cab driver from the front seat and took the wheel.

As the taxi started to race away, Jason continued to struggle against the man holding him down.

Then a cloth was pressed against Jason's nose, accompanied by the harsh scent of chloroform.

Jason tried to hold his breath against the inhalant, then inevitably succumbed.

As Jason faded into darkness, his last thought was that he hoped someone would realize he was gone before it was too late.

Chapter Two

Quantico, Virginia

Morgan Huntley sat in the waiting room reserved for defendants at the offices of the Army's JAG lawyers based at Quantico, eager for an 11:00 a.m. appointment with the capable Lt. Col. Varetzky, his acting defense attorney. Varetzky had phoned last night to say that he would be meeting today with the Army's prosecution attorneys to see if a plea-bargain could be struck on Morgan's behalf prior to the start of his pending Court-Martial.

For his arrest of Captain Isaac Wooster several months prior, Morgan now stood charged with violating Article 92 and Article 80 of the Military Code of Justice. In layman's terms, these were, respectively, the crimes of disobeying a direct order and – Morgan's favorite – *attempting* to disobey a direct order. The max penalty for each of these crimes was exactly the same: six months in jail, a fine and a Dishonorable Discharge. In the Army, even thinking of disobeying an order carried the same punishments as actually disobeying the order itself.

Despite these possibilities, Morgan tried to remind himself that it was unlikely that his case would end in jail time or discharge from the Army. The charges against Morgan were not so much about violating the direct orders of the Deputy Provost Marshal as they were a tool the Army had used to keep Morgan quiet. A dirty move to be sure, but one that Morgan recognized after six years as an Army MP and another three as a CID Agent.

Not that Morgan hadn't tried to insulate himself from this scenario following the arrest of Isaac Wooster. Morgan had personally driven the young officer to Washington D.C and had delivered Wooster in cuffs to the Army's JAG offices at the Pentagon. Of course, Morgan had also made the choice to parade Wooster through the media entrance at the Pentagon just as the journalists were preparing to file their weekend reports in the hopes that some press coverage would strengthen his position.

The media took the bait and used the next week to savor the case with breathless interviews of the entire clan of Wooster politicians. With the Army and Wooster on defense publically, Morgan was certain that the attention would force the Army's hand into supporting his case against Capt. Wooster.

In one sense, the ploy worked: the public spotlight indeed pressured the Army to put Wooster on trial. What Morgan had not foreseen, however, was the depths to which Wooster's connections ran.

Within hours of delivering Wooster to the JAG offices at the Pentagon, Morgan had been remanded to administrative leave by Chief Thompson. Soon after that, he was formally charged with disobeying Franklin's direct orders to leave Wooster alone, as well as the contemplation of the act. The charges were thin, to be sure, but they were enough to get Morgan out of the way. With Morgan thus incapacitated, Wooster's allies set to getting the young officer out of the mess he had created for himself. Just before the Court-Martial against Wooster was scheduled to begin, the Army's Forensics Lab somehow lost the physical evidence of Dover's clothing and other items collected by Morgan's investigation. Worse, the DNA samples related to the case were found in the open at the Forensics Lab, where they had rotted quickly in non-refrigerated conditions; thus rendering them inadmissible at the Court-Martial. Within a blink of an eye, all that had stood to materially convict Wooster of his crimes had been destroyed.

The Court-Martial against Captain Wooster summarily devolved into a matter of one officer's word against another. Lt. Dover maintained that she had been assaulted and raped, unable to defend herself against a man who weighed eighty pounds more than her. Capt. Wooster admitted that they had engaged in sexual intercourse, but insisted that the act had been consensual. His lawyer argued the well-worn path of how the young officers' state of inebriation had made any interpretation of their choices that night nearly impossible.

By the end, the Generals who composed the Court-Martial all too gladly found Capt. Wooster innocent of the charges brought against him. The Generals even went out of their way during their final comments to make it seem as if the physical abuse sustained by Dover had been overstated, if not completely fabricated by the young woman.

The Generals did see fit, however, to reprimand both officers for their conduct and judgment on the evening in question. In a letter appended to both Dover and Wooster's files, both officers were admonished for an excess of drinking and fraternization on the evening in question; and for the embarrassment that both officers had brought on the Army.

During the weeks of the Wooster Court-Martial, Morgan had remained on administrative leave at CID headquarters at Quantico, awaiting his own fate. With his own, pending Court-Martial

hanging over his head, the last few months had been a loyalty test. Now, with the Wooster trial over and the young officer safely back in the folds of the Army, Morgan was about to learn his own fate.

Morgan entered the offices of Lt. Col. Varetzky, gave a brief salute and then took a seat in the single chair that sat on the other side of the desk....

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