CHAPTER 1 — THE ALLEY

Section 1 — The Alley Reconnaissance

Fallujah, Iraq — Anbar Province, 2007

1400 Hours

The intersection fifty yards ahead was empty. In Fallujah at two in the afternoon, that was enough to make Staff Sergeant Marcus Vance halt.

Heat seeped through his uniform and body armor. From a narrow alley, Marcus watched the street through a rusted courtyard gate.

Across the boulevard, shuttered shops and battle-scarred houses presented more windows and rooflines than he could cover alone.

A faded advertisement for a soft drink hung crookedly above the entrance to an abandoned grocery store.

Its windows had been smashed.

The shelves inside were empty.

Farther down the street, a yellow sedan sagged against the curb on a flat tire. Its windshield was spiderwebbed with cracks.

Marcus studied the car for several seconds.

Then the windows above it.

Then the rooftops.

Then the alley opening beyond.

Marcus reached for the radio microphone clipped near his shoulder.

"Vance, how's the intersection looking?"

Lieutenant Miller's voice crackled through the headset before Marcus could transmit.

Marcus kept his eyes on the rooftops.

"Quiet, sir."

"Define quiet."

"Market's empty. No civilian movement. No vehicles. No kids. Nothing."

A brief burst of static interrupted the connection.

"Could be everybody's staying inside because of the heat."

Marcus checked the yellow sedan again.

"Negative, sir. I've seen this neighborhood in worse heat than this. Something's off."

"Any confirmed hostile activity?"

"Not yet."

"Then hold your position. Third Squad is still clearing their route two blocks west. I don't want anybody pushing across that intersection until we've established the flank."

"Roger. Holding."

Marcus released the microphone.

Behind him, Specialist Eli Moreno shifted beneath the narrow strip of shade cast by a rusted water tank.

"That's reassuring," Eli muttered.

Marcus didn't turn around.

"What is?"

"The lieutenant telling us not to get shot until everybody else gets into position."

"That's not what he said."

"Close enough."

Marcus shook his head.

Eli had held his ground under fire and helped carry a wounded soldier to cover. Marcus trusted what the young specialist did when fear took hold.

"Hey, Sarge."

"What?"

"You ever think about what you'd be doing right now if you weren't here?"

Marcus continued scanning.

"Sleeping."

"No, seriously."

"Seriously. Sleeping."

Eli chuckled.

"I'm talking about back home."

"You're supposed to be watching that roofline."

"I am watching the roofline."

"Then watch it quietly."

A few seconds passed.

"Probably be fishing," Eli said.

Marcus sighed.

"Moreno."

"Big lake back home. My uncle's got this aluminum bass boat. Thing leaks like a damn screen door, but we used to take it out every summer."

Marcus allowed himself the faintest smile.

"Sounds safe."

"Oh, it's a death trap. Motor only starts when it feels like it. Uncle Ray says that's part of the adventure."

"Your uncle sounds like an idiot."

"He's a certified idiot, Sarge. But he makes the best brisket in East Texas."

Eli paused.

"Man, I'd kill for some brisket right now."

Marcus glanced over his shoulder.

Eli knelt behind the water tank, his M249 resting across his supported arms. An ammunition belt fed from the pouch into the receiver.

Exhaustion lined his face.

"Keep your head in the game," Marcus told him.

Eli's grin faded.

"Roger, Sarge."

Marcus returned his attention to the intersection.

Marcus hated cutting him off.

Sometimes talk of home was all that kept men steady.

But not when an entire neighborhood had gone still.

A warm gust of wind pushed through the alley.

It carried the smell of sewage, diesel exhaust, and burning garbage.

Marcus breathed through his mouth.

Eli suddenly lifted his head.

"Hey, Sarge."

Marcus heard the change in his voice.

No humor this time.

"What?"

"You smell that?"

"Half of Iraq smells like something died in a dumpster."

"No. Underneath it."

Marcus drew a careful breath.

Beneath the stench lay something sweeter, like sugar scorching in a metal pot.

"Same smell as Ramadi."

Marcus remembered the market square in Ramadi:

civilians vanishing before the blast,

the wounded screaming,

the crater left behind,

and his own frantic search for the warning he'd missed.

"Could be nothing," Eli whispered.

Marcus looked at him.

"Could be."

Neither believed it.

The Weight of Command

Combat had not made Marcus fearless.

It had taught him how many things there were to fear.

On his first deployment, he'd mistaken the veterans' calm for an absence of fear. They moved deliberately, spoke evenly, and kept working when everything collapsed.

He'd assumed they felt nothing.

Now he knew better.

They were afraid, too.

They had learned to function anyway.

Fear could be useful.

It warned him when the scene in front of him didn't match what he knew.

When something had changed.

The challenge was to listen without letting it take command.

Marcus checked the windows across the street again.

Second floor.

Third floor.

Rooftop parapet.

Nothing.

He returned to the yellow sedan.

Something about it bothered him.

Parked at an angle, it partly obscured a narrow side street.

Someone could move behind it unseen.

Or hide something inside.

Marcus pressed his radio.

"Miller, Vance."

"Send it."

"Request eyes on a yellow sedan near the intersection. Appears abandoned. Possible tampering; unable to confirm."

"Copy. Don't approach it. We'll have the engineers look at it once the area is secure."

"Roger."

Marcus released the microphone.

Eli watched him.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That depends. Are you thinking about brisket again?"

"No, Sarge."

"Then probably."

Eli adjusted his grip on the M249.

"Whole damn street feels staged."

Marcus glanced at his watch.

1406.

"How's your water?"

"Half full."

"Drink."

"I'm good."

"That wasn't a question."

Eli reached for his hydration tube.

"Yes, Mom."

Marcus ignored the comment.

Marcus drank from his own hydration pack.

The water tasted faintly of warm plastic.

He swallowed anyway.

The Street Goes Silent

At 1411, Marcus noticed the dog.

A skinny brown stray emerged from an alley across the boulevard, patches of fur missing along its flanks.

Its ribs were visible beneath its skin.

The dog moved cautiously, nose close to the ground, sniffing at a discarded cardboard box near the gutter.

Marcus watched it.

Animals were unreliable indicators of enemy activity.

He knew that.

The dog could have reacted to food, another animal, or a person Marcus could not see.

Still, a change was worth noticing.

The dog lifted its head.

Its ears stood upright.

It looked toward the rooftops.

Then it backed away.

Slowly.

Eli noticed it, too.

"Sarge."

"I see it."

The dog gave a sharp bark.

Then another.

Its body stiffened.

Marcus followed its gaze to a three-story building across the intersection.

A dark shape shifted behind the rooftop parapet.

Something metallic caught the sunlight for less than a second.

A barrel.

Maybe.

Marcus raised his rifle.

"Moreno, eyes on the third-floor roof."

"Tracking."

The dog yelped.

A single, frightened sound.

Then it vanished into the alley.

Marcus’s stomach tightened.

"DOWN!"

Marcus shouted the warning.

Eli dropped instantly.

A fraction of a second later, the wall above Marcus's head erupted.

CRACK-CRACK-CRACK-CRACK!

Chunks of stucco burst outward.

Concrete fragments struck Marcus's helmet and shoulders.

A high-velocity round punched through the rusted iron gate, sending a sharp metallic vibration through the frame.

Marcus dropped behind the low masonry base.

"CONTACT FRONT!"

More rounds hammered the building.

The gunfire was close, violent, immediate.

Not the distant, hollow popping of gunfire several streets away.

This was close.

He could hear rounds cracking overhead.

Masonry fragments struck his body armor.

"ROOFLINE! TWELVE O'CLOCK!"

Marcus brought his rifle toward the third-story parapet.

A dark figure appeared briefly behind the concrete.

He fired a controlled burst toward the armed position.

The figure disappeared.

"MORENO! SUPPRESS THAT ROOF!"

"ON IT!"

Eli brought the M249 into action.

The weapon roared.

TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT!

The narrow alley amplified the sound until it seemed to shake the walls.

Spent brass struck the pavement around Eli.

Marcus could smell hot metal and propellant.

He leaned toward the radio.

"Miller! Vance! Contact front! Multiple hostile shooters, elevated positions across the boulevard!"

Static.

Then Miller's voice.

"Vance, say again! You're breaking up!"

"WE'RE TAKING AUTOMATIC FIRE FROM THE THIRD-STORY ROOFLINE! INTERSECTION IS AN AMBUSH!"

Another burst slammed into the wall.

A piece of concrete struck Marcus across the cheek.

He felt the sting.

Ignored it.

"Copy!" Miller shouted. "We're taking fire here, too! Third Squad reports incoming mortars west of your position!"

Marcus looked toward Eli.

The young specialist was firing short bursts toward the rooftop, keeping the enemy's attention away from their exposed position.

His face was tight with concentration.

No grin.

No jokes.

Only the weapon and the task in front of him.

"Vance!" Miller's voice returned. "We're pinned behind the collapsed wall! Hold your position! We're trying to maneuver!"

"How long?"

"Three minutes, minimum!"

Three minutes.

Marcus looked at the crumbling masonry above them.

Three minutes might as well have been three hours.

Their position was already compromised.

The enemy knew where they were.

And if mortar rounds began falling into the alley, the narrow walls would offer little protection from the blast and fragmentation.

Marcus evaluated the doorway several yards away.

A heavy wooden entrance led into the corner building.

The structure offered a possible escape from the exposed alley.

But entering an unfamiliar building under fire carried its own risks.

There could be armed men inside.

There could be civilians.

There could be traps.

He had no way of knowing.

Another burst of enemy fire tore into the gate.

The iron frame shuddered.

Marcus made his decision.

"ELI!"

Moreno glanced toward him.

"YEAH, SARGE?"

"WE CAN'T STAY HERE!"

"NO ARGUMENT!"

Marcus pointed toward the wooden door.

"CORNER BUILDING! WE GET INSIDE AND OFF THIS STREET!"

Eli looked toward the entrance.

Then back at Marcus.

For a moment, Marcus saw something behind the younger man's eyes.

Fear.

Real fear.

The kind no amount of training could eliminate.

But Eli nodded.

"I'm with you, Sarge!"

Marcus checked the doorway one final time.

The distance was short.

The exposure was not.

He took one breath.

Then another.

He remembered the soldiers depending on him.

He remembered Lieutenant Miller pinned two houses back.

He remembered that hesitation could be as deadly as recklessness.

"READY?"

"READY!"

Marcus tightened his grip on the M4.

"MARK!"

He moved.

Across the Killing Ground

The first few steps seemed to happen in slow motion.

Marcus pushed away from the gate, boots striking broken glass and hard-packed dirt as he crossed the exposed section of walkway.

His body armor shifted against his chest.

His rifle remained close to his shoulder.

A burst of incoming fire struck the wall behind him.