

SCARS AND STRIPES

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AN UNAPOLOGETICALLY
AMERICAN STORY OF FIGHTING THE
TALIBAN, UFC WARRIORS, AND MYSELF

TIM KENNEDY
AND NICK PALMISCIANO

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This book is dedicated to the men and women we have lost in the Twenty Years War.

In particular, I would like to dedicate it to the 660 Special Operations personnel we lost, and the last thirteen U.S. military personnel we lost at Hamid Karzai International Airport on 26 August 2021.

I will spend the rest of my days trying to be worthy of your sacrifice.

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INTRODUCTION

My name is Tim Kennedy, and I have a problem: I only feel alive when I'm about to die.

I've killed evil men on multiple continents, fought in main-event bouts in the UFC, served as a Green Beret, an EMT, a firefighter, and a cop. I've hunted Nazis, drug runners, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, human traffickers, rhino poachers, Al Qaeda, the Taliban, wildebeests, elk, bears, and have the recipe for the perfect soufflé. I fly helicopters, jump out of airplanes, dive mixed gas to the ocean depths, wrestle bulls with my bare hands, lift heavy weights, blow things up, and am proficient in just about every weapon under the sun. I train warriors, own companies, serve my country—and I'm just getting warmed up.

But life hasn't been easy, and it sure as shit hasn't been perfect. On the surface, I make a pretty good Rambo, but the truth is for everything I've accomplished, I've screwed up a whole lot more. I don't mean that in the self-serving "my biggest fault is I work too hard" style. When I say I've hit rock bottom, I need you to understand I went for it *so hard* that if I were a car, I'd have no windows, doors, or fenders, and I'd be on fire . . . at the bottom of a ravine.

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But as bad as it got (and it got really bad), *I've never quit*. I've been called a lot of things: the most dangerous man in the world, an elite fighter, a businessman, a dad, a husband, a hero, a villain, an SOB, and an arrogant asshole. There's probably truth to all of those things. But at the heart of it all, *I am a survivor*.

And that's what this book is about. It's about learning how to weather the storms, no matter how bad they are, and start making decisions to improve the situation and get yourself to a better place. And when I say "weather the storm," I don't mean that in a passive way. Sure, there's something to be said for enduring pain, but enduring that pain and not making any changes in your life until the pain subsides is pretty dumb.

You don't want to be dumb.

Your life only gets better when you do a few things:

1. Take accountability for it. It's your fault.
2. Failure is going to happen. When it does, see number 1. If you want to fail less, see numbers 3–7.
3. An ounce of prevention prevents a pound of cure. The best time to start preparing is right now.
4. You cannot mass-produce elite people. They need to be forged from hard experiences. If you want to be one of them, you need to seek these challenges consistently.
5. Take care of yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. For some people that means therapy. For some people that means yoga and a cup of tea or fishing with the family. For me that means embracing a constant struggle. Rejecting comfort makes me . . . well . . . comfortable.
6. Surround yourself with good people striving to also improve themselves.
7. Build goals and pursue them to the end of the earth.

No matter where you are in life, putting yourself on this path will change everything.

There are enough "guru" books out there already. I want to take you on a wild ride that literally zero other human beings have ever experienced.

I just turned forty-two. I've been selfish. I've been an asshole. I've made mistakes and I've been all too human. Twelve years ago this book would have been about how spectacular I am. That book would have sucked ass. Yeah it would have had its moments, but the last dozen years have been marred with failure and loss and gifted with growth, reflection, and hopefully, a little wisdom.

So why am I writing this book?

1. First and foremost, to tell you a hell of a story. And I won't sugarcoat it. I'm not out to make myself a hero, because I'm not one. I want to write nothing but the unvarnished truth. You'll get the good, the bad, and the ugly, and if you've ever seen my face, there's a lot of ugly.
2. To elevate all the people who have made a meaningful impact on my life. My rise to celebrity has a lot to do with being a fighter, which I don't rank very high on my list of accomplishments. Tim Kennedy the UFC star doesn't exist without all the men and women who have invested time in me along the way. And this isn't about giving shout-outs to my bros. Some of these people hate me because of the way I was when I knew them, but they made a profound impact.
3. To let you know there is always a path forward. There were many times in my life that if you just took a snapshot and read the bullet points of who I was and what was happening to me, you would have said, "What a loser!" And I was. But everyone is straight trash on their worst days. Life is about digging yourself out of those holes and doing something worthwhile, and serving something bigger than yourself. I wasn't born getting that. I had to suffer, and have it beat into my head over and over again, and even then, I had to almost die to finally understand. And I want people who are reading this thing, who feel like total losers with no way out, to see a path forward and get the fuck after it. I want them to start LIVING.

In these pages, I've gone out of my way to tell you the unfiltered truth. A lot of it was embarrassing to write. A lot of it doesn't paint me in the best light. Sometimes, I'm simply not the good guy. And as pain-

ful as it was to put on paper, it needed to happen this way. My public life tells a story of great, inspiring success. No one's public life is real. Life's messy. It's hard. And sometimes, even the best of us are total pieces of shit. I need to show it all to you in order for you to value any of it. I want you to know, to understand, to feel it in your bones, that no matter where you are in life right now, there is a pathway to get better. You can be more than you ever thought possible, but it will not be easy, and the pathway to success is not a straight line.

As I tell this story, please understand I have done so to the best of my recollection. Many of these stories happened a long time ago, under significant circumstances, and I have suffered a lot of head trauma. I did my absolute best to corroborate every single story in here, but the "fog of war" is a real phenomenon. As those of you who have been in combat or other traumatic situations know, four guys can be on the same ground at the same moment in time fighting the same enemy and remember very different things. Throughout the whole research process, I am thankful to report that all the important pieces of the story have been corroborated. Nevertheless, I'm certain my telling isn't perfect, and if there are people I have forgotten to include, or details I have omitted or changed, I apologize.

There are some names and details that I have changed. These do not affect the meat of any of the stories in this book, but they do protect critical aspects of national security and the lives of several people still doing good work.

Finally, I'm going to tell the story a little differently than most memoirs. I decided to write the whole thing in the first-person present tense. I don't want to tell you what *happened* to me. I want to immerse you in the crazy journey I have lived so you can *feel* each moment and each decision as I felt them. I want you to feel all the fear, failure, sadness, happiness, and success right along with me. That's the only way you can truly understand my journey and apply it to your own

I hope my story inspires you. I hope it changes your life.

It's been one wild ride thus far.

Hop in and let me show what I've seen.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CREEK GANG

I move quietly through the woods in standard fire team wedge formation. It's a balmy day, to say the least. The trees above us nearly block out the sun, save for a few streaks of light that illuminate tiny pockets of the forest floor, but the heat is relentless anyway, rolling in underneath the leaves and hanging in the air like a thick blanket. It feels like I am sitting in a sauna. The only things missing are the old naked dudes and the ability to leave. My skin feels dry, even though I can feel myself sweating through my clothes. Nature is baking us and there is nothing I can do about it. I push my discomfort to the back of my mind.

I have to stay focused.

People are counting on me.

I am the point man, meaning I am at the front of the movement. Nick is behind me to my near left. Andrew Hackleman is behind me to my near right. Both are set about five to ten meters away, depending on how the terrain spreads us out. To my far left some twenty meters away is Chad Koenig. David Gaddis is behind me in the team leader position, controlling our movement as we parallel the creek that will bring us to our objective.

This mission came down the pipe only twenty-four hours ago. This was the big one. High-value target. Dangerous man. Every unit, team, and agency in the region was looking for him, thus far to no avail. Now it was on us. We scoured the maps of the region as well as his last known location and, as we had been taught, developed several courses of action. All the other units were looking for him in the city or in the nearby towns.

That's not where we now hunted. We determined that he most likely would have moved from the city into the woodline at its outskirts, which was almost a jungle this time of year, and hidden himself in the deep bramble, walking the creek bed until he could disappear entirely or link up with someone who could help him escape.

We had spent the early morning making our last-minute preparations. We choked down our food, checked our packs, and readied our weapons. When we were satisfied with our pre-combat checks, we stepped off into the unknown as we had hundreds of times before. This was different, though—he was our biggest prey yet. There was a tinge of excitement (and yes a little fear), but as I looked to my right and left, there was no group I'd rather have with me as we once again crossed the Rubicon.

It was the second or third hour of our painstakingly quiet movement along the creek bed when I felt an uncanny change. The foliage transformed dramatically. Something wasn't right. It looked . . . planned. The natural brush had broken up and our walk was easier. The plants were now tall, lush, and green, and shaped like . . . marijuana.

Holy shit, we are walking through someone's secret pot field.

As I scan the horizon there is pot as far as the eye can see. Our crew seemed to register this all at the same time as we exchanged glances. Where there are drugs, there are drug dealers, and drug dealers tend to not like their product being messed with.

Now don't get me wrong. It isn't that I am necessarily worried. After all, I am with a badass group of pipe hitters who can handle anything that comes our way. The issue is that this giant field of weed added another problem. We don't care about the weed. We just don't want to have to deal with drug dealers *thinking* we care about their weed at the same time we're chasing our dangerous high-value target.

That thought leaves me as I hear a twig break in front of me. The hair on the back of my neck stands up. I give the hand signal to the team to freeze. My hands are clammy as I double-check the grip on my weapon. I hear another snap. Then another. Now I can see some movement twenty meters away in the field of weed. I can feel my adrenaline spiking. That fight-or-flight response is starting to set in. It washes over me as it has so many times before.

I motion to the team to follow me to the target and begin to cover the last twenty meters as quietly as possible. My heart is beating so hard I can see it moving through my shirt. I worry he will hear it and it will give away our position.

The boys are right behind me. They've moved into a tight wedge and we're almost shoulder to shoulder.

Suddenly a man seems to explode out of the weed field. He's unshaven, wearing a weird T-shirt, and is about two feet taller than I am. Honest to God, he's like if André the Giant and Charles Manson had a kid. He's the scariest goddamn thing I have ever seen in my entire life.

I scream out loud and drop my weapon. Before it hits the ground, I am already ten feet away from him at a full sprint. My team is right alongside me, also weaponless and scared shitless.

This is a good time to mention I am eleven years old. My brother Nick is thirteen. And the rest of our elite team, that my dad affectionately called the "Creek Gang," were also tweeners. The "weapon" I dropped ten feet back was a stick I had sharpened into a point. The giant dude who had just scared the ever-loving shit out of us was a guy who had just escaped a mental institution a few days ago and was considered dangerous. He was all over the news. The police had been looking for him nonstop. We found him.

We just weren't ready to find him.

We thought we were. Our CONOP (concept of operations) to find him had been perfect. Our analysis of the operational environment was spot on. Our tracking tactics were solid and our movement disciplined. We had even practiced how we would fight him when we found him.

But when the rubber hit the road, we learned the threat of real vio-

lence is a whole lot different than our imagined violence. The plan had been to subdue him with our spears. We practiced hitting each other's arms and legs and parrying potential fist or knife attacks. Then once we got him down, we were going to tie his hands up and march him back through the woods where we would deliver him to the police, winning acclaim for our heroics. To my eleven-year-old brain, that plan seemed not only reasonable but foolproof. But as Mike Tyson says, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

But now, as I was seeing a green blur whizzing past my head on either side and getting hit with the occasional tree branch, the reality was that there was a little piss dribbling down my leg, and I was running faster than I had ever run in my entire life.

I learned right then and there that I had no mastery over violence or fear. I was pissed (no pun intended) and a little ashamed. I didn't want that kind of weakness in me.

In case you haven't figured this out yet, I'm an atypical dude, with atypical parents, and an atypical childhood. I don't exactly know how I ended up like this, but here's my closest guess as to the recipe that made me: To start, add three cups of "I grew up in the '80s." So, like many of you Gen X types, every day was an adventure. There were no cell phones. No helicopter parents. We left in the morning and came home when the streetlights came on. Then add two teaspoons of my mom, a highly educated, classically liberal woman who valued books, art, and dance. She'd probably fit best teaching at an elite East or West Coast college than anywhere else on the planet. Now, add three heaping tablespoons of my dad, an elite counternarcotics officer who literally was going up against Pablo Escobar on the daily at the peak of the War on Drugs. He had seen the worst in life and wanted his children to be tough, quick-thinking, and able to survive in any condition. He valued martial arts, gun work, and more risk taking than most parents would feel comfortable allowing. Finally, add one bucket of my insurmountable drive to prove I can do anything and you now have an idea of what makes me "me."

Where did that drive come from? My parents have a theory.

I was born with a bad heart. Specifically, I had a ventricular septal defect. Just in case everyone reading this book isn't a cardiologist, a ventricular septal defect is when you have a giant hole in the middle of your heart between the chamber that pumps out the good oxygenated blood and the chamber that pumps in the crappy unoxygenated blood that just ran through your entire body. So my good blood and my bad blood were always mixing, leaving my newborn body without enough oxygen. Basically, from zero to three I always had a bluish hue and did not look healthy. I had low energy. None of it was good. My mom and dad were faced with every parent's worst nightmare as the doctors floated the idea that I might not make it. The doctors expected to have to perform open-heart surgery to keep me alive, which is still dangerous now but in the '80s was a total crapshoot.

My parents had a choice. They could do the surgery now, and if all went well I'd live, albeit in a weaker state than the average person, or they could wait to see if I would heal on my own, knowing I might grow too weak to survive the delayed surgery and die.

My parents have tremendous faith. They wanted me to have a chance at a normal life. They postponed the surgery and asked their friends to take part in a prayer circle. Simultaneously, I was given a steroid that was meant to strengthen my heart (which I stayed on for years).

While Little Timmy remained blue and had 25 percent of the aerobic capacity of other kids his age, he apparently did not give a shit. I remember none of this, but I am told I was a force to be reckoned with. I started to walk at eight months. I began climbing out of my crib, unfazed by the fall to the floor after getting my stubby legs over the top. At eighteen months, when I saw my older brother swimming in our pool, I just jumped in, also wanting to swim. When I sank and was pulled out by my father, I grew angry and jumped in again. In fact, my first memory is of being underwater, sinking, looking up at my father through the blurry lens of the pool water. He let me stay in the drink . . . for a bit.

For most people that memory alone is probably something to be unpacked in therapy, but it's gonna have to get in line. I've got a lifetime

of near-death, traumatic, and generally absurd experiences that have shaped me into who I am today . . . but it all started with that bad ticker.

An airplane needs air resistance to gain lift. A sword needs to be beaten and shaped to be made sharp and hard. I needed to be held back in order to move forward.

And, since then, I've never stopped moving forward.

Recess. Thank God. My favorite part of the day.

I have mixed feelings about kindergarten. I love being around all the kids. I love learning new things. I really like my teachers. But I absolutely despise having to sit down all day. I can handle a few minutes at a time, but hour after hour of just sitting and listening to people is painful. The last ten minutes before recess are the worst. I just stare at the clock and it seems like that glorious moment will never come.

Now I'm here. Thirty minutes of freedom. The air is fresh. The sun is shining. And I'm going to run around on my little stubby legs and have a blast!

Then I see her.

Laura LaCuri walks across the playground, and I can't stop looking at her. She has the prettiest eyes, the cutest nose, and she is just so sweet. It doesn't matter if you're an athlete, a nerd, smart, or slow, she is sweet to you every time. I never get nervous around girls, but there is something about her that always gives me butterflies.

She looks different today, though. Her mom just cut her hair, and as much as I like Laura, her mom kind of did her dirty. She looks like someone put a bowl around her head and just cut in a circle. It doesn't matter to me, though. She's still adorable.

As I run around playing tag, red rover, and anything else we dream up, I see a group of boys walk up to her. I know bad when I see it, and these guys look like they have bad intentions. I start walking toward them.

As I get close, I hear their ringleader. "You've got boy's hair! Are you a boy now?" he mocked. "Boys don't wear dresses!" another buffoon chimed in.

Laura starts to cry. I am filled with rage. As the bullies take off laughing, I follow them. They climb onto the giant wooden jungle gym everyone alive in the '80s knows and loves. I walk right up to the ringleader, and I punch him in the face. And then, to add injury to injury, while he's crying and holding his face, I push him off the jungle gym.

Moments later, I find myself in the principal's office. My parents are on their way and they are not happy. They arrive and we are told that I will not be invited back for the first grade.

This doesn't bother me: It was worth it.

I hate bullies.

The wind whips through my hair as the horizontal rain bites through my shirt. My cheeks are red with cold, and my white T-shirt is stuck to my body like a second skin. There's so much water coming at me that I find myself having to clear my nose and throat every few minutes by hocking a lugey. Store signs have blown down and tree branches are everywhere; the roads are littered with them, and there is not a car to be seen. I squint through the rain at the crew moving quietly with me: my brother Nick, Chad, David, and the brothers Cunningham, Jared and Jordan.

While most people are hunkered down in their homes during this El Niño tropical storm, the Creek Gang is busy thinking up ways to take advantage of this exciting opportunity. As soon as we saw the creek start to swell, we drew up our plan. The Salinas River, in my native San Luis Obispo, California, is usually a long and lazy river until it leaves my neighborhood. Then shortly thereafter, it turns into a Class IV rapids, meaning it gets faster, steeper, and meaner pretty quickly. Today, with the gift of this tropical storm, the river is trucking! And, those Class IV rapids are now Class V or VI, meaning they are pretty much a guarantee of sudden death to anyone who falls in the water.

For the Creek Gang it was mission impossible, and it was too good to pass up.

Our plan, should we choose to accept it, and we all did, was to steal some inner tubes, go a few miles away from my house to a bridge that

crossed the river, jump off the bridge with the inner tubes, and ride this water highway all the way to the mouth of the rapids. That morning, we had slung a rope with handholds across the river. The plan was simple. As we hit the mouth of the rapids, we were going to grab the rope, bail on the tubes, and pull ourselves to shore. Was it a perfect plan? We thought so.

I feel exhilaration as we descend on the tire store in a sprint from the woods. We each grab an inner tube and sprint back even harder, disappearing back into the tree line. Adrenaline tickles my skin and pushes energy out of my eyeballs as we run as fast as we can away from the scene of the crime and toward the bridge. (To be super honest, it was easy. No one was really manning the store because of the storm, the inner tubes were outside unwatched because they had little value, and even if someone did see a group of kids grabbing inner tubes, it's doubtful they would have thought much of it. But in our minds, we were on the verge of capture.)

When we finally arrive, a little out of breath from our imagined race from authorities who didn't exist, hunting for inner tubes that no one cared about, we are shocked at the water levels rushing past the bridge. Typically, the drop from the road to the water is about twenty feet. Today it is ten feet, and it is absolutely roaring! That of course makes this mission all the more exciting.

We find the largest truss under the bridge and line up, one by one, inspired by the Army commercials where paratroopers run out of the plane in a perfectly disciplined line as they plunge into the abyss. Once lined up, one of us, I think my brother Nick, yells "Go!" and we all drop into the river.

My feet hit harder than I expected, and because of the size of the tube, I fly through the hole slapping my face on the surface as the water shoots up my nose. My hands, attached to arms that are now in a "V" above my head, clamor to find something to hold on to so that I don't get separated from the tube. They find a home on the inner edge, and I manage to pull my head up a little more. My ears ring with the rush of the water around me, echoing through the tube. I feel like I'm in a tun-

nel. I pop my hands up a little more and finally feel I have a solid grip. I pull myself up and get my feet onto the tube so that the only thing still in the water is my butt.

I start counting. *One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . plus me makes six!* We're all here.

Looking around, it seems like all of us had some version of the same struggle I just had, but our young minds quickly forget our previous peril, and we are all grinning ear to ear. If anyone was hot on our tails, they'll never be able to get to us now. Even though we've been in this river a hundred times, right now it feels like I'm a Navy SEAL on some secret mission in South America or Africa evading capture after getting the bad guys. The Creek Gang has completed phase two!

The river seems to flow faster and faster and the bumpiness of the ride increases as we get closer to our extraction point. Earlier we discussed the best way to make sure we hit the rope. There's no room for missing it by trying to grab it with our wet and cold hands, so the plan is to hook our elbow over it and then lock hands on the other side; that way, even if we slip we're still on.

I start to see trees I recognize, then the last bend before the river opens up to my backyard. Finally, the rope. My heart is racing. This is the moment of truth. I keep my eyes focused on it as it approaches . . . hook! The rope bites into my elbow, and I grip my hand on the other side, letting the inner tube go. I throw my leg over and pull myself to shore. My brother is already there, and by the time I shake the water off my body, the other guys are out and Jared and Jordan are on the rope. We watch the last of the inner tubes crash into rapids. The last of the evidence is gone.

Mission complete.

I hear the phone ringing through the closet door. I look at my dad, and he tells me to say, "Dad is out running errands and he should be back at the house by 6:00."

I open the closet door, and there is the red phone, ringing. I pick it up and answer using our family pseudonym for these occasions. A man

with a Colombian accent who I have spoken to many times answers on the other end. "Hey buddy, is your dad home?" "Sorry, he isn't. Dad is out running errands and he should be back at the house by 6:00. Do you want to leave a message?" "No, that's okay. I'll call back then," he responds.

I hang up, grab some Kool-Aid, and run outside to play with the Creek Gang. Today, we're running missions out of our tree fort. By the end of the day, the fort will be on fire because I will try to build a bonfire in it for us to sit around. It will work for a little while, until it doesn't.

That phone call is everyday life for the kid of a narcotics officer. It is probably a lot of responsibility for a thirteen-year-old but it's just what we have always known so I never really think much about it. In order to keep my dad's cover safe, we have to be available all the time, just like a real family. If my dad or my dad's family only answered the phone between 9:00 to 5:00, then they'd know he's a cop, and they'd kill him. So the police installed a special untraceable phone in our closet, and our family joined in on the cover identity to add depth to his story. It is our mission to keep my dad safe so he can keep the country safe. We take this mission very seriously.

And dad has an enormous mission right now. He just stole a plane full of cocaine from Pablo Escobar. More precisely, he just stole the largest cache of cocaine that, up to this point, had ever been stolen.

Dad's part of an interagency counternarcotics task force. It's extremely dangerous because if the Colombians figure out who he is, he's dead. In addition, the local police are not allowed to know about it, so there's always the added danger of unwanted police interaction as he's running around town with drugs. U.S. Customs, the FBI, and the San Luis Obispo (SLO) and Santa Barbara Counternarcotics Task Forces are in the know; every other agency has to be in the dark.

The drugs fly from Colombia to Puerto Rico or Guantánamo Bay. There, they get packed onto another plane and fly to Port Hueneme, outside of Ventura. Once there, my dad and his fellow officers, dressed in '80s suits or Hawaiian shirts and carrying Uzis, load the coke into

vans, trucks, and Cadillacs with secret compartments and bring them to their office to prepare for distribution.

Dad's "consulting firm" has two offices. One is in Marina del Rey. It's a pimped-out '80s-style office building that is completely bugged. There is a big conference room and a bunch of actual employees that make real wages for just sitting around. When a client comes in, they all pretend to work. Thinking back, it was probably a good gig. Dad goes there for meetings and deals with new clients but doesn't spend a lot of his time there.

The other office is in downtown SLO, and it's the one I frequent. It's situated in a building that would now be described as flex-space, in a classic '80s strip mall. There is a tire store two doors down, a great café-style restaurant, and a coffee shop. I don't drink coffee, but they make decent hot chocolate. Those are the mainstays here. The other stores change a lot, as strip mall stores tend to.

And that's where I am visiting my dad today. My mom is delivering a bunch of apple pies from the world-famous Madonna Inn to the team. (My dad was part of the hostage rescue team that saved the owner of the Madonna Inn's daughter when she was kidnapped, but that's a story for another time.) We do this once a week to show our appreciation and to break the monotony for the guys. For me, as a newly minted teenager, it is super exciting because I get to be part of the op. I'm around all these larger-than-life badasses, leaning against pallets of cocaine, sporting MP5s, and fighting bad guys. I sit down, grab a slice of apple pie, and listen to story after story of these men dancing the fine line between life and death. *I'm gonna be like them when I grow up.*

My dad is gearing up to move the 980 kilos. The quantity is way too big for even the largest of local dealers, so they are going to sell the drugs to multiple organizations. They've arranged secondary transportation unaffiliated with their office for the delivery to these dealers. Then once the drugs arrive at the dealers and are paid for, they will all get hit by completely different police officers with no knowledge of my dad's crew. It is critical that there is no way to tie my dad's team to the takedowns, so everyone had to be in the dark.

In his entire career my dad never lost a gram.

Sitting there, watching my dad gear up for this massive sting operation across the entire West Coast, I am so proud of how chill he is. *My dad fights with drug dealers the way most dads deal with paperwork. It doesn't even seem like a big deal. Danger and the possibility of violence are just . . . natural.*

When dad was on his crazy missions, mom brought us to my grandparents' house.

Grandma and Grandpa Sumpter's place in Cambria, sitting off the coast of Morro Bay, is my favorite place on earth. Their house sits on top of a cliff overlooking the bay and the clean salt air washes over you the second you step foot on the property, filling your lungs, heightening your senses, and making you feel alive. You can carefully climb down the side of the cliff and hit the ocean shoreline. At low tide, there are pools of saltwater left behind full of small fish, crabs, and jellyfish. At high tide, you can take a few steps and cast into the abyss, catching rockfish, lingcod, halibut, and mackerel. The sunsets and sunrises here are an incredible mix of oranges, and reds, and purples. The only way to describe the view is "majestic." I always felt it's right out of a *Lord of the Rings* book. If you were approaching from a distance, and you saw the little cottage on top of the cliff, with billowing white smoke coming out of the fireplace, you would absolutely think this is the place the old wizard or the retired knight lives. It is beautiful, but also a little foreboding, like the grounds themselves have some deep, secret knowledge the rest of the world isn't privy to. It is absolutely perfect.

In the mornings, the sun would rise, sending sunbeams shooting through the windows letting us know it was time to get up. As my brother Nick, my little sister Katie, and I stirred, our nostrils would immediately get hit with the smells of breakfast: sausages roasting, bacon sizzling, and eggs scrambling. They'd get up right away, but I'd lie there a little longer than my brother and sister, trying to sink into the mattress and get just a few more minutes of rest. I'd be tired from a night

of staying up with my grandpa and my grandma watching old movies. Grandpa always made me watch movies where the hero had to make hard decisions, sometimes the wrong decisions, and then we'd talk about them when the movie was over.

The Big Country, starring Gregory Peck is his favorite. Peck plays a sailor who travels west to marry his fiancée, Patricia, at her father's ranch. Her father, "the Major," is in a rivalry with another ranch. Those rivals set upon Peck, and even though he has the opportunity to best or kill them several times, he always makes the honorable decision, even if it means losing the support of his future father-in-law and eventually his fiancée as well. *Do the right thing, even when there's negative consequences for your actions.*

There are many others: *The Searchers*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Patton*, *Friendly Persuasion*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Long, Hot Summer*, just to name a few. Each one comes with lessons and discussions deep into the night. By today's standards, it is probably a lot for a little kid to ponder, but I revel in it. Grandpa treats me like an adult. He treats me like a man and trusts me to look at examples of good and flawed men and decide for myself what right looks like. He's giving me the road map to success, one movie at a time. *I can be like these men.*

The remnants of those thoughts are still floating around in my brain as the smells of cooking food overpower me, and my feet finally find their way to the floor. I throw some clothes on, brush my teeth, and head into the kitchen. My mom is laughing at something Grandma Sumpter just said and her amazing laugh rocks the room. Katie is half-way through her first and only plate, and Nick is filling up his second. I grab a plate and fill it with bacon, sausages, eggs, and pancakes. I'm going to need the energy because we're heading to the breakers!

If Cambria is my favorite place on earth, and Morro Bay is my favorite part of Cambria, then the breakers are my favorite part of Morro Bay. Morro Bay is one of the most dangerous bays in America because it has a massive tidal shift of over six feet, which occurs in only a few hours. The effects of that fast-rising tide on boats, property, and swim-

mer safety, especially during inclement weather, are significant, so to lessen the threat of property damage and loss of life, they built a massive jetty of boulders, rocks, and concrete stretching out across the bay.

To the average person, that jetty was an unapproachable, insurmountable wall of rock. To me it was an adventure. As you enter the base of the jetty there is a huge sign painted yellow that says “Do Not Climb Inside Caves.” The reason for that sign is pretty obvious: The tides change so fast that you can get lost exploring the catacombs during low tide, and before you know it, the entrance is underwater and you die. Well, if you leave cavities and caves full of creatures and lost treasures in a super tidal shifting quagmire of death, then post a sign specifically prohibiting its exploration, there you shall find Tim Kennedy.

On this particular day, as I leap from boulder to boulder like a tween parkour athlete, feeling the spray of the ocean against my face, I catch something out of the corner of my left eye. *What is this? Is that a cave I have yet to explore?*

Nestled between two rocks I have climbed hundreds of times, I notice a small opening. Normally, the opening is completely filled with sand, but the waves have opened up a little pocket. I crouch down, feeling the bite of the rock on my left knee as I peer into the hole. *It's a cave! And it's big. I just have to get in.*

I immediately start to dig the sand away with my hands, throwing it behind me until the opening looks large enough for me to fit. Then I crawl in. My shoulders won't quite fit. I wiggle myself and break more of the sand loose while I work my way deeper and deeper into the crevice. Finally, I break through and drop into the cave.

The temperature inside is at least 10 degrees cooler, and even though I am only a few feet from the surface of the rocks, that added an aura of foreboding that I enjoy. Seaweed drips from the walls and ceiling. Barnacles and mollusks are everywhere. I cut my finger on one as I climb down and suck the blood off of my finger so it would stop. A large pool of water inside is full of crabs. I go deeper into the cave to explore the pool and see if there are any big ones worth keeping for dinner.

The crabs aren't great, but I am not anxious to return to the surface yet. After all, I am probably the first kid ever to discover this place. So I take a handful of pebbles and throw them at the crabs to annoy them and make them move while I just enjoy the quiet. Then I hear something. Or rather a lack of something. The sound of the wind is suddenly far less prevalent. I turn around to look back at the way that I had come.

The cave is filling up with water!

My stomach drops. My mouth goes dry. My heart races. *Holy shit. I have no way out.* I sprint up toward where the water is coming in. *Maybe I can hold my breath and squeeze back in there?* But I know I cannot. I had barely fit on the way in. There was no way to do it against the current.

I am going to die.

"Hey, Tim," a familiar voice shouts.

I look up. There, above me, is the nonplussed face of my grandfather. He has been watching me the entire time from a distance, and the second I crawled into this damn cave, he made sure there was another way out and that I was safe. "Time to get out of here now," he continues with no visible emotion. All of my fear slips away in an instant. I almost want to cry in relief. I'm safe.

He reaches down and helps me out.

"If you want to eat, you're going to have to catch and kill one of those chickens," the tall, wiry man in front of me states plainly. His name is Woody Shoemaker. He is my pastor.

It had been a very long day, and I am starving. There is no way I am not going to eat. I stand up and start walking down the chickens, eyes fixated on one plump one with a patch of black against her brown body. I walk it down into a corner and then lunge for it. Miss.

I repeat this process, honing my technique. On the fourth attempt, I catch it. As they had shown us, I twist its neck, breaking it and killing it instantly. Then I set up on a rock and begin gutting and de-feathering my dinner.

The other fourteen-year-old kids are now following my example, trying to catch and kill their own chickens.

I am a Royal Ranger undergoing survival camp. The Royal Rangers, if you've never heard of them, are a lot like the Boy Scouts used to be in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, in that they teach you pretty hardcore survival skills and don't really worry about the emotional impact of that training. So they take the old Boy Scout recipe for men-making and add a few heaping tablespoons of Jesus to the mix.

The chicken killing is quite an emotional event for a lot of these kids. Some of them are crying. Others have a thousand-yard stare going. Some seem to feel like they have accomplished something adult and manly and are showing signs of pride. For me, it's a Friday. The Creek Gang has hunted for years, either with the supervision of my dad, or on our own using snares and traps we made ourselves. I had never done it with my bare hands before, so that added a certain primal element to it, but this made the experience nuanced, not new.

While the other kids were wrestling with their emotions, I was gearing up for the final phase of this survival school so I could go home, get away from these neophyte tough guys, and get back to my friends.

Our final mission is a thirty-six-hour, self-correcting land navigation course. You start with a full canteen, a map, and two partners. Every time you find a point, you can refill your canteen, but the only food you have is what you can forage on the way, which is scarce to say the least.

We begin at dawn, full of piss and vinegar. This is our final test, and everyone is anxious to prove their worth.

We quickly expel all the piss onto random trees as we take breaks that we don't need to disassociate our minds from this miserable long walk through the blaring California heat. And while there is no actual vinegar, we quickly start to smell like we're doused in it as the ammonia from our sweat settles into our clothing and evaporates into the air.

Twenty-eight hours into this thing, my two partners have become worthless. To be honest, they were worthless the entire time, but for the first twelve hours or so, they kept the whining, moaning, and constant fear of dying to a minimum. Now, they were quite comfortable letting

the complaints fly. I was fucking sick of it. After over a day of walking through the woods, doing all the map work, all the navigating, and walking point while cutting through all the bramble, my patience is shot. I briefly consider eating them, as it would make me less hungry and the journey more pleasant, but instead I let them know that if they can just push on a little longer, I think we are getting close to the final point.

There were seven points thus far, labeled A through G. As promised, each one had a jug for us to refill our canteens, and each one had a little clue to help us find the next point. For a kid that lived in the woods and along rivers, the navigation is easy. The hard part is putting one foot in front of the other for this long. I'd done a lot of walking at this point in my life, but never this long without food or rest. This definitely sucks. But by far, the hardest part is dealing with these two guys that didn't have my level of training. I don't know it yet, but my intolerance of weakness will be an Achilles' heel for years to come.

Nevertheless, I catch my second wind. I am 99 percent sure we're approaching the final point. The last clue basically said as much, and while all the other points had us running around out in the middle of nowhere, we're now heading back toward the camp. "Not another damn hill," one of my partners in crime complains, but now I know where we are and I think I know exactly where we are going. I can't help myself. I pick up the pace.

By the time I see the hill with the large tree on it, I'm 100–150 meters ahead of my team. I look back and make sure they can at least see me because the last thing I want to do is lose them and have to go find them after all this walking, but I don't want to slow down. That tree has to be the final point. As I move forward, something unnatural catches my eye. Something is on the tree. I squint.

It's a bag of oranges.

I pick up the pace even more and find myself running by the time I get to the top of the hill. I arrive at the tree. *I did it. I made it.* I was at the final point.

"This is it, guys!" I yell back to my partners as I'm already ripping the giant bag of oranges apart. My fingernails cut through the orange mesh and pull out the plumpest, juiciest California orange I can find. I

barely remember peeling it as I bite right into the entire orange. There's no time to break it into slices.

I have never tasted anything sweeter. No food, not at any fancy restaurant, not on any hunt, not even in mom's or grandma's kitchen, has ever tasted as good as that bite of orange did. It is impossible to describe. If you've ever cut weight for wrestling or boxing and then finally had that first bite of watermelon or first drink of Pedialyte, that comes close, but not quite to the level of satisfaction that orange brought me.

My two compatriots caught up and ripped open their oranges. The three of us sat there, eating all we could, sticky juices running down our face, coating our hands, and seeping into our shirts in puddles where it was dripping from our chins. We didn't care. The moment was absolute bliss.

My pager starts beeping. I am still getting used to this new technology my parents had invested in to try to keep track of fifteen-year-old me. Then it beeps again. And again. The messages come fast and furious from lots of different people.

"Where are you?"

"Are you home?"

"Call home, right now."

Something is going on.

I reluctantly find my way to a pay phone and call my parents. I assume I am in trouble for something. My mom answers the phone. "I'm so sorry, Tim," she starts. Her voice is quivering. It's clear she's in real pain. That throws me instantly. I'm not used to my parents being hurt. Upset, sure. Angry. Happy. Disappointed. Proud. These are common parental emotions. But not pain. I had only heard real pain in my mom's voice once before, when she lost her best friend CariLee in a diving accident in Morro Bay Harbor, less than a quarter mile from the breakers I explored. I had only heard it in my dad's voice when he lost his mom right in front of all of us to a heart attack, after he performed CPR until the ambulance arrived. I braced for the worst. Then she told me—and my world ended.

I don't remember much of what she said after that. I found myself sitting on the floor of the pay phone with tears streaming down my face. Then I was on a knee. Then the tears were dry and my senses had disappeared, leaving only a vast emptiness. At some point, I got up and started walking the long way home.

Jared and Jordan Cunningham, two members of the Creek Gang, and two of my best friends on planet earth, were heading to a party driven by teenagers in two separate cars. When I say "heading to a party" I mean that in the lamest, most wholesome way possible. They weren't going to some Hollywood-style teenage kegger. They were going to hang out at someone's house and play games. Maybe if things got wild, they'd wrestle in the grass. Just good wholesome fun. It was a church kid hangout.

But church kids are still kids, and as you've seen from me, and know from your own childhood, kids do dumb things. The two teenage drivers, finding themselves alone on a long country road, started racing each other, taking turns passing each other in the oncoming traffic lane.

It was Jared's car's turn to speed by, and they slid out from behind Jordan's car and started to pass. The brothers were right next to each other, their respective drivers in mid-acceleration, in that horrible moment. I know what the moment was like, as do you: boys yelling at each other through windows, laughing, swearing, feeling the invincible rush of adrenaline-filled youth.

Then the oncoming car came around the corner. They were doing nothing wrong. Just minding their own business, doing some last-minute shopping before Christmas.

Neither driver saw the other in time to hit the brakes or swerve.

Jared died.

Aged 13.

December 20, 1994.

Five days before Christmas, in front of his sixteen-year-old brother Jordan.

My parents did what they always did in a crisis. They helped. People always told us that the Kennedys were good at death. And I guess they were right. When everyone else was mourning, or didn't know what to

do, we took action. It's not that we didn't hurt. It was just better to be useful. So I learned from my mom and dad to always be useful.

And there we were, in front of the Cunningham house, a place I had visited a thousand times, ready to be useful. My parents knock on the door and a lady I don't recognize answers. I know who she is, mind you, but I have never seen her before, at least not like this. Debra Cunningham, Jared and Jordan's mom, is an excellent mother and person. She is always upbeat, always put together with flawless makeup and dress, and always ready with a kind expression and a smile on her face. She's genuinely kind, friendly, compassionate, and amazing. She isn't here today. The woman in front of me wears a face that is gaunt and expressionless. Her eyes are puffy, red, and empty, and behind them sits only blankness. Her mascara has run to the base of her nose, and she doesn't seem to notice in the slightest.

She cannot look at me, but I understand. I can't look at her either.

As my parents usher her to the couch, I go down the stairs to head to Jared's room as I have so many times. I get to the doorway and look in, unable to cross the threshold. I've played in this room, slept in this room, plotted and planned in this room, talked about girls in this room. I cannot walk in.

I turn around and sit at the base of the stairs and wait a few hours for my parents to be ready to leave.

Jordan isn't here today because he is with family members.

I won't see him again in any meaningful way for five years. I simply cannot bear to be around him, and I would find out many years later that he couldn't bear to be around me.

The Creek Gang is no more.

My childhood is over.

CHAPTER TWO

DEVIANCE

The vibrations run through my sixteen-year-old spine, up my neck, and out my ears as my best friend Auggie Gaw, in the driver's seat, revs the engine of my brother Nick's burgundy 1993 V8 Camaro. I'm sitting shotgun. In the car next to us, revving his brother's "borrowed" 1969 midnight blue Mach 1 Fastback Mustang, sits my other best friend, Joe Silva.

The roars of both engines and the smells of the sweet, smoky fuel and exhaust permeates the country air at the entrance to Scalari Ranch, a beautiful little property in the heart of central California wine country.

The anticipation fills me to the brink as I wrestle with the fight between the tightness in my stomach and the fuzzies running through my face and ears. I revel in the fact we're sitting on atomic bombs of pure unadulterated American muscle!

It was time to answer the age-old question that has plagued philosophers and poets throughout the ages: Ford or Chevy?

This is the first time my brother has let me borrow his Camaro. It's only a year old and a real beauty. He worked hard to buy it (all with his own money), and to say he was proud of it would be a terrible under-

statement. He emphasized to me that he was trusting me with his most prized possession.

That was stupid.

But as dumb as my brother is for lending me his vehicle, stealing the Mustang from Joe Silva's dangerous drug-dealing brother Paul is a dumber move still. For clarity, this is the drug dealer that my narcotics officer dad had told me to avoid. He said Paul was "unhinged and homicidal." And yet here we are.

To get Paul's keys, we had to go into his room. No one was allowed in there, because that's where Paul kept the money, drugs, and God knows what else. To be caught in his room meant catching a beating. Paul is a mountain of a man—wide-chested with forearms like Popeye—with several years of testosterone and puberty on us. We did not want that smoke.

But you know . . . we *had* to know which car would win.

Scalari Ranch opens up onto Old Creek Road off of Highway 46. It's a super-curvy street that races back and forth between rolling hills and acts as a connector between the highway and the coast. It looks exactly like the kind of road they use for one of those commercials with a British lady voiceover and some generic European model dude with a five-o'clock shadow and racing gloves. He's careening through time and space as the drone shot hovers overhead and you can see the sprawling countryside. "Drive a JAG-UUUUUUU-AR and experience what it really means to be a predator of the road." Or whatever bullshit they say in those commercials.

The race is going to be a fifteen-minute sprint to the coast. Sure, most kids would knock out a straight-line quarter mile like they do in the movies, but we want to really test ourselves as well as the cars. To drive this course right means you need to be a highly technical driver. Although our licenses are still warm from being laminated, we have something other drivers don't have: the desire to flick death right on the forehead and dare him to do something about it.

As the only guy not driving (I still don't know how that happened), it's my job to start the race. I raise my arm out the car window. Auggie and Joe both stare at me as the engines swell in front of me and next to me.

“Go!” I scream as I drop my hand.

Gravel flies everywhere, fire leaves the exhaust, and rubber is burned into the ground as we lurch and fishtail forward. The guys race through the gears, living between second and fourth as we hit turn after turn.

Holy shit.

My back is pressed against the seat. Every time we hit a straightaway, the line blurs as we punch over 100 mph. Auggie found his groove and I start to anticipate his slowdowns and speed-ups. The Ford is a little faster on the straights, but we are owning the turns. It’s gonna be close.

As we come up to the fifteenth turn, Auggie gets a little more aggressive. He doesn’t quite slow down all the way and accelerates a little early. We fishtail and lose control.

My senses are shot as we spin around and then BAM! We fly off the road and get stopped abruptly by the creek bed. As the car comes up briefly on two wheels and then settles back down again, I hear the whole vehicle creak and groan, kind of like someone just twisted a rusted-out bolt.

Auggie and I look at each other. We’re okay.

It is not lost on me that what just happened is eerily similar to what happened to Jared not that long ago.

That thought is quickly replaced by:

Fuck. My brother’s gonna kill me!

I take a deep breath.

Maybe it’s not that bad.

I open my car door.

It falls off.

Double fuck.

To be fair, it doesn’t fall all the way off, but the hinges are damaged badly enough that it hits the ground. To close it, I need to lift it up and then push it shut. It makes a groaning, popping noise when I do that but I get it so it stays shut.

We try to push the car out. We try to pull it out. The Camaro is not moving. We call a couple of our friends who own trucks with winches and tow ropes and ask them to come help us out.

They arrive, and thankfully, our group of teenagers manage to yank this thing out and place it back on the pavement. As it leaves the creek bed, water, dirt, and moss pour out of the exhaust, tires, and every crevice I never knew existed on a vehicle.

On the road, it doesn't quite look right. I mean . . . sure the entire right side of the vehicle is scraped and bent, but something else seems off. I can't quite place it.

As I jump behind the wheel, it finally comes to me. The car is sitting at a 20 degree angle. Something deep inside of it is broken. Maybe the suspension. Maybe the frame. Maybe the whole shit.

To drive it, I have to keep the wheel angled hard to the right. As we crawl back to my house, there is a distinct wobble in the ride, and when I try to accelerate, it gets even more aggressive. But somehow, some way, Auggie and I get it home with Joe in the Mustang behind me.

I take a deep breath. There's only one sensible thing to do.

I park the car. I walk inside. I place the keys back in the bowl where my brother puts them. Then I leave and pretend like nothing happened.

Maybe my brother won't notice.

We jump in Joe's Mustang and head back to the ranch. Somehow I've convinced myself everything is fine and we got away with it. We park the car back where Paul had left it but when we close the doors, we realize for the first time that someone is there.

Not just someone. Paul.

"You fucking assholes! Who the fuck do you think you are?" he shouts.

He punches Auggie right in the face. Not once. Not twice. But over and over again. This was a man beating up a child. Paul could have been a professional athlete if he wasn't a dealer. He was that kind of specimen. We were still spindly teenagers.

The thuds as his fists carve Auggie's face and body up are sickening. Joe and I are frozen in fear and we keep begging him to stop, screaming that we are sorry. When he is done with him, he rag-dolls his brother, punching and throwing him around. By the time he gets to me, whether it is exhaustion from beating the other two, realization that he may have gone too far, or the fact that I wasn't one of the drivers, he took it easy

on me. He slammed me into the wall and slapped me around, but he didn't do any real damage.

"Get the fuck out of here," Paul commands as he stares through Auggie and me.

We head home. Auggie's face is now swollen. He can't see through his eyes. His face is as bad as any professional fighter's I would see in my career. "Fuck, man," I say. "Yep," he replies. We bump fists and I head into my house.

My brother is there waiting.

Apparently, he noticed.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," I tell him. "It was fine when I dropped it off. Don't try to blame me for your shit. I bet you crashed it and are trying to pin it on me!"

After dropping that gem, I indignantly marched off to my room, leaving my confused brother in the background. He's pretty sure I crashed his car, but now he doesn't *know* I did.

The next morning he is hovering over my bed when I wake up. Auggie couldn't sleep. He showed up early that morning to apologize to my brother for crashing his car.

Fucking amateur.

I stretch the water balloon launcher as far as it can go, as the blue bands grow translucent the further back I pull. Now that it is fully stretched, I aim the potato sitting within it at the optimal angle for maximum distance.

Release!

I watch it fly through the air at blistering speed, rapidly turning into a speck on the horizon as it clears the 101 freeway and heads toward the Kmart parking lot on the other side of the highway.

Score!

This potato hit its mark. I hear the impact on the car and see the tiny people in the distance trying to figure out where it came from and who did it. Absolutely hilarious.

I've launched about a dozen of these today, and it's been funnier every time. I look down at my watch. My break is over. I throw my apron and hat back on and head back inside In-N-Out Burger. *This job is the best.*

In-N-Out is my home away from home. I'm sixteen, and I have no idea why adults complain about work. This place is great. We get lots of freedom as to how we do our jobs. After being here for only a few weeks, I've moved some things around and now I am by far the fastest fry guy.

Better yet, my boss, Joe, is super cool. We hang potato sacks from the ceiling in the back and when it's slow, we practice throwing knives. I'm getting pretty good and can pretty much hit the mark nine out of ten times. Recently, to further spice up our slow periods, I've also introduced my teammates to the idea that mop and broom handles, unscrewed from their implement, make Bo staffs, which are big, long wooden fighting sticks like the one Donatello carries on the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

Last week we had our first Bo staff tournament, which I won. Brianna Sadothway, a beautiful, super nice girl that I have a crush on, did not partake, but pretty much everyone else did. The final came down to me and Tim Sobraske, a high school wrestler and football player. I bested him solidly, which hurt his ego, probably because Brianna was watching. This led to him talking a lot of shit about me—specifically my wrestling.

I am a very good wrestler, but because I am homeschooled, I cannot join or compete on the regular school teams. So I do all the club tournaments and freestyle tournaments. Although I win most of them, I don't get to compete at regionals and states, the tournaments that really matter to high school kids.

When he tells me, "You're not really a wrestler," Sobrowski sees that he struck a nerve and, like any good teenager, keeps poking it. Fast-forward about ten minutes and the homeschooled chip on my shoulder has prevailed and we are in a full-out wrestling match in front of God, customers, and everybody. I put him in a standing cradle, a position where I am standing up with one arm around his head and the other

around his legs with my hands locked. I walk over to the dirty clothes laundry bin where we stick all of our clothes at the end of shift and stick him in it, butt down. He cannot get out and has to scream for help from the other associates.

My boss frowned upon my physical assault of another associate, and I was counseled by him as a result.

But that was last week. Sobrowski and I are cool again, as men of action always are after a scuffle. Brianna is looking adorable. I'm dropping fries like the elite chef that I am, and I just got to launch some quality potatoes. Life is good.

And that's when I hear it. The sound of creepiness.

"I didn't realize In-N-Out had girls that looked like you, or I'd be here all the time," says some dude in his late twenties to the sixteen-year-old Brianna. He has four buddies with him who are giggling along to his shitty pickup lines. I now have one eye on them as I work my fries.

I can tell Brianna is visibly uncomfortable as their conversation continues. She is desperately trying to just take his order and get him to move on, and he keeps trying to put his hands on her arm and lean in close to talk. She backs up. He reaches out to pull her in.

"What the hell!" Brianna screams.

This fucking asshole just grabbed her breast.

It is my time to be noble. Some people would say I am partially motivated by the fact that I really like Brianna, but I am 99 percent sure it is pure nobility that leads my cloth-apron-clad body to sprint from the fry area to the counter. Four feet before I get to the counter I launch myself in midair, perfectly sliding over it like a movie cop slides across the hood of a car.

I transition from counter slide to double leg takedown and dump him onto the hard floor, reveling in hearing him wheeze as his body loses air as it gets folded up. For good measure, I punch him in the face five times, then grab him by the leg and drag him into the parking lot like he's a sack of potatoes.

He screams like a little girl for his friends to help him. I look at them. They look at me. They decide they want nothing to do with the crazy

teenager that just attacked their buddy like Macho Man Randy Savage coming off the top rope.

The police arrive. Sexual assaulter douche pretends he did nothing wrong and that I just attacked him out of the blue. A few of the people that didn't know how it started corroborate his story, as all they saw was the counter slide to beatdown transition. Luckily, Brianna, Sobrowski, and my boss Joe were all privy to the actual events and they back me up.

After the police have a brief discussion with the groper, everyone involved kind of decides that it is in everyone's best interest not to press charges.

I'm home free!

Brianna thanks me for looking out for her and I turn a little red. Lancelot has nothing on Tim Kennedy.

Hours later, Steve Cronk, who is Joe's boss, is at the store and asks me to come to the back office with him. Proud as can be, I walk in expecting to get a pat on the back and a thank-you for defending the store.

Wrong.

Steve hands me a termination letter and asks me to read it aloud. I begin, "Employee is being terminated for the following reasons: throwing knives, Bo staffing with employees to include minor injuries to those employees, launching potatoes from company property and doing significant property damage as a result, thereby placing the company at risk of lawsuit, assaulting a co-worker, and finally, for assaulting a customer."

Steve speaks after a long pause. "Tim, I like you as a person, but not only do I have to let you go, I have to warn you that you're lucky you're not in prison."

I look him right in the eyes and say, "You're losing your best fry guy, Steve."

Then I walk out.

My teenage brain meant every word.

I'm holding on to the ropes I stole from my youth pastor, John Bartle, as Auggie cuts through the skylight seal with a knife and a crowbar.

The night is pitch-black, which is the perfect condition for these two sixteen-year-olds to knock out our first felony operation, but there is a mugginess hanging in the air that isn't normal to SLO. It's making us both sweat, and Auggie's hands are slipping on the knife. We both have droplets running down our foreheads and noses.

We see headlights in the distance on this long and winding road. We throw ourselves onto the roof and lie perfectly still, neither of us making a sound. In my head, we've set off some alarm and that car is driving right to us. I can feel the blood pumping through my head and neck as my blood pressure shoots up.

The car arrives quietly. I can hear its tires grinding into the road. It's paved, but the gravel from the hardware store parking lot has spilled into it, causing the tires to kick up some of the tiny rocks. For a second of abject fear, I thought it was turning into our lot, but then it continued down the path, and we were once again left alone.

I glance at my watch. It's 3:12. Auggie and I have been watching this hardware store for a month, and we have reasoned that the optimal time to break in is 3:00 a.m. It's the time with the least traffic and the best chance of darkness. We chose tonight because it is a new moon, with low visibility, limiting our chances of being spotted by some random car.

We knew the store didn't have cameras. It did have an alarm on the doors and windows (as well as metal bars on both), so normal entry was a no-go. But the skylights looked old as shit. They were giant bubbles, yellowed from the sun and caked with a mixture of pollen, dirt, and bug carcasses. We figured the owner probably hadn't planned on a couple of crazy kids climbing through the ceiling to get to his tools, so we hoped there weren't any alarms up there.

Auggie is done cutting. We both slip our fingers underneath and gently lift up the skylight, half expecting an alarm. Nothing happens. We gently and quietly lay it down.

While Auggie was cutting, I had secured the rappelling ropes to the roof in a couple of places. I feel confident it will hold. I secure the line to my, or I should say Pastor Bartle's, harness and with one last look at Auggie, descend into the darkness.