

Justice Gone

N. Lombardi Jr.



Winchester, UK Washington, USA

First published by Roundfire Books, 2019
Roundfire Books is an imprint of John Hunt Publishing Ltd., No. 3 East St., Alresford,
Hampshire SO24 9EE, UK office1@jhpbooks.net
www.johnhuntpublishing.com www.roundfire-books.com

For distributor details and how to order please visit the 'Ordering' section on our website.

Text copyright: N. Lombardi Jr. 2018 ISBN: 978 1 78535 876 0
978 1 78535 877-7 (ebook)
Library of Congress Control Number: 2017961038

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publishers.

The rights of N. Lombardi Jr. as author have been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design: Stuart Davies

UK: Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
US: Printed and bound by Thomson-Shore, 7300 West Joy Road, Dexter, MI 48130

We operate a distinctive and ethical publishing philosophy in all areas of our business, from our global network of authors to production and worldwide distribution.

In memory of Kelly Thomas, who was beaten to death by members of the Fullerton Police Department on July 5, 2011.

Part I: The Incident

Chapter 1

Bruntfield, New Jersey, just another banal town in a part of the country that nobody thinks about, was about to become famous; or rather, more aptly put, infamous. People sauntered past lackluster shops unaware that in a few days, the lackadaisical streets would bear the rabid frustrations that divided the nation; a pus-like bitterness that was held in check by the demands of everyday survival and the distractions offered by obsessive consumerism and brazen media.

Some would inevitably blame the cascade of events on the weather, since the origins could be found on a hot summer day in 2006. Sure, just about all summer days are hot, but this one was close to the record, and humid to boot. By the end of July, the Northeast coast was suffering under a sweltering heat wave. Despite the humidity, no one could remember the last time it had rained. A hundred-year drought was predicted, they'd said.

Bruntfield, among the many places under this curse, had its water supply so severely depressed that the city authorities were forced to impose water rationing. As if that wasn't enough, the excessive load on air conditioners led to incessant brownouts. With the weather nothing less than insufferable, suffocating, oppressive, even provoking, tempers flared along with the temperature. But the local situation, as bad as it was, was about to get worse.

In the heart of this small town, just a block up from the bus depot, sat Sliders, a rather successful drinking establishment catering to young adults, and noted for its ecstasy-fueled rave parties. At four in the afternoon, the owner, Joe Poppet, a burly man with a thick red beard and a well-developed beer belly, was staring out the large glass facade of his bar.

"Screw this heat, man."

Joe was sweating because he didn't want to turn on the air-conditioning; as a rule, he didn't put it on until a half hour before opening. He possessed a rather cynical personality, considering himself continually persecuted by life's little aggravations. Now it was the heat ramping up his electricity bill; soon it would be the freezing temperatures inflating his heating bill...always something. His worries constantly exceeded his hopes. He was sort of a "glass-half-empty" man.

Rudy Glum, the shaven-headed bartender, was an easygoing optimist, a "glass-half-full" kind of guy. He was whistling as he washed the glasses in the sink behind the bar. "Tell me about it," he chuckled. "I hear ya, buddy."

But Rudy's sanguinity did not rub off on Joe. "There's that guy again."

"What guy?"

"That fucking guy we saw yesterday."

"Oh, yeah, he's probably from the bus depot. Lotta homeless hang out there."

Joe continued to stare out the glass facade, feeling helpless. "For Chrissakes, why can't the city do something and get rid of those bastards. They're a fucking eyesore...it's bad for business. Probably got diseases too."

Rudy finished drying the glass in his hand and hung it up on the beer mug rack. "Yeah, it's a goddamn shame," he said noncommittally, trying to get these glasses done before the evening crowd surged in.

"He doesn't have a shirt on."

"Yeah, well it's hot, ain't it? Wish I could take mine off."

"And we're opening in an hour. Ladies Night tonight."

Rudy said nothing while reaching for another glass from the sink behind the bar.

"Call the cops."

The bartender froze with the glass still in his hand. "And tell them what?"

"I don't know, tell 'em there's someone suspicious hangin out on the corner...trying to break into cars or something. That way

they'll come fast."

Reluctantly, Rudy put down his dishrag, picked up the phone, and dialed 911, not feeling good about it at all.

Patrolman Rafael Puente might well be considered an unattractive man. A pencil-thin mustache above diminutive lips made insignificant by his large inflated face, gave his head the appearance of a balloon with a cartoon countenance. His acne-scarred skin oozed sweat as he studied the thin disheveled man, shirtless with unkempt hair and a scraggly beard, standing three feet in front of him. "You were trying door handles on cars, eh?" The man's body wavered, but his gaze was focused hard on Puente's eyes. Then his own eyes darted left and right, revealing his vacillation on how to handle this situation. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Puente began playing with his baton, twirling it down, and then back up smack into his palm. Rotating it down, rotating it up, like a long yo-yo...like the tail of an agitated cat ready to pounce. "Give me a language...tell me a language you speak in."

"Like what?"

Puente's tone rose in hostility. "Tell me a language you speak in."

"I don't know. What do you want to know?"

The humidity was so dense it felt like a sponge rubbing against their skins; so thick you could almost take a bite out of it and chew it.

"I want to know what kinda language you speak."

"I don't know."

"Yeah, well, what *do* you know?"

"I don't know."

"My partner, he speaks ten languages. Right, Foxy?"

Patrolman John Fox, a clean shaven, waspish-looking man standing to his right, smiled a mouthful of nice bright teeth. "Yeah, that's right. I can speak Mongolian, Cambodian..." Fox came closer, boxing in the man they were questioning.

"He don't speak English," Puente told his partner. "You

don't?" Fox asked the homeless man.

The figure in front of them became fidgety. "What do you think I speak?"

Fox put his hands on his hips. "I don't know, you tell us. You're speaking English right now, aren't ya?"

Puente interrupted. "You know, it seems I see you all the time, and all the time I gotta say something to you. Do you enjoy that?"

"Oh yeah, I love bumping into you all the time."

"Really?"

The bearded man looked to his left and right, looking for an escape route while at the same time desperately trying to tell himself that these guys were just American cops and not the enemy in Iraq. He was trembling with the effort. "So, what do you guys wanna know?"

Puente's baton was still twirling with a pent-up belligerence. "I asked you already."

"I don't know what..."

"You trying to open car doors?"

"Well, I don't know what you're talking about."

"What does that mean, is that a yes or a no?"

"I don't know, don't know what you're hassling me for, man."

"You got any ID on you?"

"No. I don't need any."

"You don't need any?" Fox voiced with a rising tone of contempt.

"No, I don't drive, I don't vote, no credit card, and I don't use my passport anymore."

"So what's your name?" Puente asked.

"Felson. Jay Felson."

"What's your first name?"

"I just fucking told you, man. Jay."

"J' is an initial. Tell me your full name."

"Jay, J-A-Y, Felson."

Puente, his question answered, went off on a new tack. "You

know, I can take you to jail right now...loitering, suspicion of burglary."

"You don't have anything better to do?"

"What's in your knapsack?" Fox interjected.

"Why? You wanna search it?"

"If you don't mind."

The bearded man swung his bag off his shoulders and handed it over. "Knock yourself out."

"Sit down," Puente abruptly ordered. "Sit down where?"

"On the ground."

This was getting hard. *Just cops*, he reminded himself, but he suspected something worse.

"I said sit down."

"Where man?"

"Where you're standing, on the ground."

Felson plopped down on the concrete pavement. "Put your legs out in front of you. Stretch them out."

Just do it. He did so, his arms at his sides supporting him. "Put your hands on your knees."

No, this is a mind fuck, man. He ignored the command. "I said put your hands on your knees."

Realizing he didn't have much choice, Jay drew his legs up first, then put his hands on his knees.

"Stretch your legs out."

He removed his hands from his knees and stretched out his legs.

"Put your fucking hands on your knees."

"What the fuck you want me to do. I can't do both."

"Give it a try, lean forward and put your hands on your knees."

Fox was going through the items found in the knapsack. "Got some letters here. They ain't addressed to Jay Felson...let's see, Casey Hull, Donald Darfield... You stealing other people's letters, boy."

"I'm gonna mail them."

"They already got stamps on them," Fox noted. "How come

you haven't mailed them yet? You know, just slip them into a mailbox. There's one right over there on the corner."

Puente was still toying with his baton. "Let's take him in on a 4-96." Four-ninety-six was police code for handling stolen property.

Jay Felson, feeling an ache in his lower back, removed his hands from his knees, once again placing his arms in back of him to support himself.

"Hey, what the fuck I tell ya! Hands on knees!"

This time Felson was not eager to comply. He remained motionless in silent defiance.

Puente then reached into his back pocket and slowly, deliberately, put on a pair of latex gloves. He thrust one glove-laden fist in front of Felson's face. "See these fists?"

"Yeah, what about 'em?"

"They're getting ready to fuck you up."

"That just sucks."

"Put your legs out, put your hands on your knees"

"Hey, I'm sick of playing games, which one is it!"

Puente slapped him in the head.

"Hey, wouldya just fucking..."

"Put your hands on your knees!" he yelled, giving Felson another slap.

"Wouldya just fucking..."

Fox got on his handheld radio. "Code three, four-fifteen, bus depot corner Fifth and Clemston." (Code three, urgent, proceed with lights and siren; four-fifteen, disturbance.)

Puente slapped Felson's head a third time. Felson stood up, tired of being hit while on the ground.

Puente raised his baton.

Felson put his hands in front of him to display supplication.

"Hey, hey all right!"

"Get on the ground, get on the ground now!" Fox screamed.

Both officers began to hit Felson on his legs and side with their batons, and he did what came instinctively—he ran.

"Take him down, take him down!" Puente yelled.

They grabbed him, got him down on the pavement, pressing his face against the concrete, and the real beating began.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry, sorry, man."

"Put your hands behind your back," the two cops shouted, twisting his arms.

"Okay, I'm sorry...I can't breathe..."

The two cops were on top, Puente with a knee in Felson's back and Fox kicking him. "Stop resisting," they both yelled in turns.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

A second patrol car pulled up with sirens blaring and flashers blazing. Two more officers sprang from the car and piled on. One of the new guys, Victor Fratollini, tasered Felson, zzzzt, and Fox began walloping him over the head with his stun gun. Another unit pulled up. Two more cops, two more assailants, and seeing Fratollini smashing the homeless man's cheekbones with his elbow, joined in the fracas.

Zzzzt, zzzzt, zzzzt they tasered him again and again.

"Dad, Dad, help me!"

More tasering, six times now.

"Help me, Dad! I can't breathe, I can't...Dad..."

Someone pounded Felson's head into the pavement. "Dad help me!"

A pool of blood formed beneath him. The six police officers relentlessly pummeled him, the scene resembling a feeding frenzy of enraged carnivores...until Felson was no longer able to call for his father.

Chapter 2

The New Hope Trauma Recovery Clinic occupied an entire brownstone near Canal Street in the Bowery section of Lower Manhattan. Founded by a group of altruistic therapists, it had three different sections: treatment for victims of child abuse, female ex-convict counseling, and a veteran's center for post-traumatic stress disorder. Federal funding had been approved for two of the units, and funding for the third was pending.

Dr. Tessa Thorpe's second-floor office, a warm, imitation-oak-paneled room with deep-pile green carpeting, beckoned visitors with a subtle scent of gourmet coffee. Its tenant, a one-time criminal psychiatrist, was now an avid advocate for the downtrodden and the senior therapist of the clinic. At this moment, she was tending to one of her downtrodden.

"So Caroline, last time we met you told me you were going to try to stop drinking."

The skinny girl, with flaxen air that hung as straight as sheets on a clothesline, squirmed in the vinyl armchair. "Yeah, well..." The tank top and short shorts exposed long limbs that only affirmed her scrawniness. She stopped chewing her gum and looked at the woman behind the desk, the only person she trusted, the person who knew more about her than anyone else, but who had never once judged her. Caroline didn't want to deceive her, but she didn't want to disappoint her either. "I'm cuttin' down some."

"Well, that's a start, a positive one. Stopping all at once doesn't work for some people."

Caroline gazed earnestly at Dr. Thorpe...at Tessa. An older woman, she could have easily been her mom. A mountain of wavy black hair flowing down to her shoulders framed a sculptured face characterized by wide, oval, dark brown eyes and a long soft mouth, and high cheekbones that Caroline found herself envying. Tessa wore an earnest expression that radiated trust.

Even her attire gave Caroline a sense of warmth; the billowing brown blouse and the black slacks made her feel secure and safe. At this moment, Tessa was adopting that pose again, with her chin cupped in her palm and her fingers spread out over her cheek, her listening pose, a posture that only accepted the truth. Caroline was thus compelled to adjust her answer. "Well, I'm not sure how much less I drink now...it's sorta hard to tell..."

Tessa Thorpe surreptitiously pressed a button underneath her desktop, starting the cassette recorder hidden in her top drawer. She would use the tapes later for analysis and reference. She was a strong believer in the Hawthorne effect, the phenomenon of influencing the subject's behavior when they know they are being observed, and so she felt no qualms about this clandestine deception. "Caroline, do you want to stop drinking?"

"Hell, yeah! I get crazy...next thing you know I'm taking them other drugs, well, you know all about that, and then I do things..."

"Things?"

Squeak...squeak...

Damn, I've got to fix that tape recorder. Hope she can't hear it.

"You know what I mean, Tessa, those things that get me in trouble."

"You don't want to end up in Carswell again, do you? I sure as hell don't. I was there, and I never want to go back."

"You were there?"

"Almost one year."

"You're shittin' me!"

Of course, the direction of conversation now became directed toward Tessa's experiences, and so, being the good therapist that she was, she had to herd the words back to Caroline's situation, namely, the friends she was hanging out with, her current beau, her finances...

"Anyway, we're here to talk about you. So how's Ricky, still seeing him?"

"No, he split. I don't miss him."

"Why don't you miss him?"

"He's mean to me sometimes."

"Mean? How?"

"Roughs me up, but not so bad...he don't do it often."

"But now you're not seeing him?"

"Nope. Been three weeks already."

"And your buddies, Kelsey, Chrissie?"

"Nah, these days I keep pretty much to myself."

They continued on this line for nearly an hour, Tessa mainly asking Caroline about her efforts at trying to secure a job and the manner in which she spent her recreational time.

"Our time is up now...we'll meet again next Wednesday. Is that good for you?"

"That's fine with me, Doc. I mean, Tessa."

Dr. Thorpe flashed a smile. "Okay. But remember, any problems that come up before then, just call me."

Caroline stood up. "I will, no worries." She turned and opened the door, leaving just as Penny was about to enter.

Hair cut short in a pixie style, glasses threatening to slip off her nose, Penny Melrose rushed in, a body in perpetual motion, as if she were wired for ceaseless movement. "Tessa, you got that orientation for the new guys in five minutes."

"Righto!"

Penny ducked out as abruptly as she had ducked in.

Tessa grabbed her notebook and exited in her wake. The room to be used for introductory sessions was just down the hall. On the way, she opened the door to the Team Admin room. "Casey, need you to go point for me, we're on in five minutes."

The man behind the corner desk looked up at his boss, his eyes unwillingly distracted by her besom of raven tresses rippling down to her chest and reminding him of a lion's mane. "Yeah, right, new guys. Give me a sec."

Casey Hull, in his mid-fifties, looked much younger than his age. His boyish haircut, evoking the early Beatles "pudding bowl" style, went well with the silvery-gray straight hair that formed an orderly mop on his head. Twinkling blue eyes and an

affable mouth fixed in an impish smile contradicted the subtle lines on his face. He possessed an equally youthful enthusiasm for his job. Over the past few years, Tessa had grown to admire his sanguine personality, an invaluable asset when reaching out to others. He gathered a folder on his desk, along with his diary, and headed out the door that Tessa had left ajar.

Inside the meeting room, five men and two women were milling around the coffee and tea table, holding paper cups and chatting.

"Hello, everybody!" Casey announced in an upbeat tone characteristic of an emcee. "Have a seat, take your cups with you, of course."

The chairs were arranged in a circle, the usual setup, with Tessa sitting on Casey's right as the others took their seats. There was a deliberate moment of silence—it was part of the ritual they had set up—an opportunity for the vets to realize their own presence in a clinic, their effort to seek help, and to size up the two people who claimed they could offer it. Their casual clothes and relaxed manner could not hide the fact of who they were: emotionally shattered but still defiant men and women who'd seen what no human being should ever have to see, the latent pain subtly imprinted on their masked expressions.

"First of all, welcome to New Hope. I'm Casey Hull, the program coordinator for the Veterans Trauma Unit. And this is Dr. Tessa Thorpe. By the way, she prefers Tessa to Doc, so keep that in mind if you want to stay on her good side."

Subdued chuckling naturally followed.

"I also want to tell you right off that Tessa and myself, as members of the Admin Team, are not your bosses, leaders, certainly not commanding officers, or any other such thing. We consider ourselves to be signposts, signposts along the path to recovery, and we're here to steer you on that course. Recovery is a self-healing process, so you all have a bit of work ahead of you, but I'm sure I don't need to tell you that. However, that doesn't mean we don't have rules, we do, community rules, but we're depending on you guys, along with the other comrades

you'll meet, to enforce them. You'll find out as we go along." Hull cleared his throat. "This program is conducted in three phases. In phase one, we're all going to concentrate on the three S's: sobriety, self-care, and safety. And I emphasize the word *concentrate*. Nobody here at New Hope regards that as an easy thing, weaning off alcohol and drugs, keeping healthy and hygienic, and we depend on your support for each other so that you can all make it to phase two. Phase two entails the kind of stuff you've probably been expecting to go through, you know, facing your demons and constructing your own narrative about the things you went through, and to grieve for the fallen comrades you left behind, but most importantly, to grieve for yourselves. Until you do that, you can't heal. There are two methodologies for this, we call A and B. Step A is one-on-one with either Tessa or myself, traditional psychotherapy with a therapist. I don't know if you've seen that movie, *Home of the Brave*, with Bobby Darin as the army therapist..."

"Yeah, I've seen that," one of the group said.

"Good flick," Casey noted. "Not realistic, but it jerked a tear or two."

Once again, restrained laughter.

"Step B is recounting your experiences within a group environment. But remember when you're in the group, and here again is one of our rules, there are no pissing contests here. No competition on whose suffering was the most or anything like that. We'll remind you of that as we go along. The final phase, phase three, is making the effort to reconnect, first to your loved ones, then your immediate community, and finally to society at large. Okay, I've blabbed enough, and more info is contained in the papers I'll give you later, so it's time for introductions. We'll start with myself. My name you know already, or did I talk so long you forgot it?"

"Casey!" someone shouted out.

"That's right, like the old manager of the NY Mets..."

"Or the guy that got hit with a barrel of shit!" Uproarious

guffaws.

Casey made a note of this guy. He was going to be a hard case for sure. "Yeah right, smartass... And the band played on," Hull added, to show he was a good sport, which was awarded with approving laughter. "As you can guess from my age, I was in Nam. Drafted and sent over when I was eighteen. A grunt in the 101st Airborne. Suffice it to say, I experienced a lot of grisly shit and when I came back I was pretty fucked up. In the course of my treatment of PTSD, I became interested in psychology, and after a long haul, got my master's and became a certified therapist. A wonderful wife, two kids: daughter at university, boy, a senior in high school, a fairy tale come true. And I wish the same for all of you." Hull looked over to Tessa.

Tessa, not being a vet, always kept her introductory bio short and sweet, knowing that the details of her life contributed little in terms of inspiration. "Tessa Thorpe, only child, thus an overachiever, attended medical school after a secondary degree in psychology, worked in criminal psychology for thirty years, got into some legal difficulties which turned my life around, and ended up at New Hope working with female ex-convicts and vets. Currently single and very fulfilled with my work."

As she sat down, the man next to Tessa spoke up. "Charles Conroy, 323rd Maintenance Company, and was assigned to the 1st Infantry Division, Operation Iraqi Freedom. Twenty-eight years old, discharged eighteen months ago..."

So it went around the circle of people, each taking a turn. Of the women, one had been a supply sergeant in Bagdad, the other an army nurse in Kabul.

When the introductions were finished, Tessa stood up. "I just want to add a little something before Casey starts handing out your orientation kit." She paused, making sure of what she wanted to say. "I'm not a vet. I'm one of *them*. That's right, *them*. When we eventually meet, don't expect me to understand what you went through because I won't. Despite thirty years as a mental health professional, at least half of my work dealing with

psychological trauma, and three years as a veteran's counselor, I still can't imagine it... So, don't expect anyone else to...not your wife, husband...not your siblings or friends...not your mother and father. And I don't need to mention strangers. Therefore, the challenge is to understand *them*, and more specifically understand how they are reacting to you and your behavior. While you may be the experts in battle, they are the experts in civilian life, so learn from them. The other point I need to mention is that all of you combat vets have possessed courage on the battlefield. I don't mean the heroic romantic version, just the plain vanilla courage of trying to stay alive. Don't leave that courage behind because you're going to need it to truly come back home."

But her words of inspiration were brusquely punctuated when the door swung open, and Ed Dresnik's balding head appeared with an expression of urgency. "Tessa, it's bad, really bad, you gotta come, rec room, you gotta come now!"

She swiveled around and, leaving the group with their mouths agape in curiosity, hurried toward the door with fitting immediacy, hastily following Dresnik down the hall and up the wooden staircase to the third floor. Casey was just behind the thumping of Tessa's high heels, catching up to her only when they entered the rec room. The wall-mounted television was blaring and everyone in the room, nine men and two women, was standing, gazing at the screen. On display were the before and after pictures of Jason Felson: one a handsome young man in a military uniform that displayed his medals, and the other a photo of a face that was hardly recognizable as human, the features reduced to a bloody pulp.

"Oh, man!"

"Fuck!"

"The sons of bitches beat him to death!"

"Kill those motherfuckers!"

Tessa stared incredulously at the television.

"The suspect was identified as twenty-seven-year-old Jason Felson..."

"Fuck! Hear that? Suspect...more like victim!"

Other shouts, mingled with whines and groans.

Tessa knew this, as Ed had said, was bad, really bad. For her it was a crushing blow, so how would it feel to a vet? The suicide of a comrade they could handle—it was an all too frequent occurrence. But this! Something like this utterly destroyed a veteran's fragile sense of validation, the affirmation that what he or she went through had meaning and was worthy of honor. To come home through all the risks and horrors, only to be beaten to death after returning to the country that you fought for, was an irony that pierced the heart.

She had to redirect their feelings. *Take their grief*, she instinctively thought to herself. Swept up in a rising tide of emotions: shock, sadness, anger, she placed her fingers in her mouth, biting down on them with her teeth and wailing through them, "Oh God, no!"

Everyone looked back at her with surprised eyes as she backed up a few wobbling steps and sobbed. *Take their grief*, she continued prompting herself. "Oh God, no!"

When she appeared she would stumble and fall, all of them rushed forward to attend to her. She sobbed in their arms for a minute or so, then struggled to arrest herself.

"Okay, Tessa, take it easy."

Must show strength now.

They helped her to her feet and she put her hands on the shoulders of the two adjacent men, Casey and Ed, at first ostensibly for support, then tightened her grip to indicate solidarity, which, in a ripple effect, spread throughout the close-knit circle that had spontaneously formed, each of them placing their hands on their comrade's shoulders as Tessa announced, "This is only the beginning, it's not going to go away just like that. This is something that's going to continue to burn our hearts until we shout at the American public to take care of us. We have to be strong for each other now."

They all hung their heads down in silence, but it wasn't long before Tessa jerked hers up. Jay Felson's words, disclosed during one of Donald Darfield's therapy sessions, flashed through her mind like a neon-lit warning.

You saved my life, you fucking watermelon eater. You know what that means... Now, you're responsible for it.

She looked around anxiously. "Oh shit, where's Donald, where's Shortstop?" She broke from the circle, causing it to dissolve immediately as everyone ran out in single file following her out the door, down the corridor, down the three flights of steps, their shouts reverberating throughout the building.

"Donald!"

"Shortstop!"

Tessa urgently yanked open the glass doors that led out to the sidewalk. Outside the front entrance of the brownstone, she frantically looked left and right, up and down the street, searching among the crowd of pedestrians, and let out a cry, "Donald!"

Chapter 3

Jay Felson and Donald Darfield, aka Shortstop, had met on the battlefields of Iraq. They had known each other for fourteen months, and during that time had developed a bond, watching each other's backs, cheering each other up, and seeing each other break down and cry or just generally losing it until one calmed the other down. But on one particular day, that bond became even stronger, essentially irrevocable.

Dawn came, and with it, the pathetic assurance of another blinding, white-hot day full of punishing heat and windblown dust. Having a sky of searing blue with streaks of flimsy clouds, the morning was starting out the same as yesterday. Even though it was only 0600, the temperature had already risen to 91 degrees Fahrenheit, 33 degrees Celsius. The task they had to perform, securing the northwest part of the town after an airstrike, would only make the day even more oppressive.

The patrol consisted of three vehicles, with Sergeant Felson's Humvee in the lead.

"Okay, Maffrey, let's slow to a halt. Let everybody in back of us know we're stopping before we go in."

"Roger that, Sarge."

Felson got on the radio. "This is Echo Delta Zero-One. We're gonna stop just short of the settlement. Dismount and take ten." Sergeant Felson craned his neck to address the man sitting in the back. "Hey Shortstop, I got an idea."

"What idea? Fuck you man, you're not gonna get us in trouble again, are you?"

"Just listen. Remember the comment I made when we were looking at the mockup? About a combined arms ambush, just as we hit that straight section where there are buildings on both sides of the street, remember?"

Private Darfield nodded his shaved chocolate-skinned head, slowly and reluctantly. He was a huge man. At six feet, four

inches and two hundred and forty pounds, he was someone to be reckoned with. In contrast to such an impressive physique, his face was soft, congenial. "Yeah?" he said, devoid of enthusiasm.

"There's no way in hell we're going through there."

"Yeah, but the Six said..."

"Fuck him!" Sergeant Felson sneezed out. "Do you wanna die, Shortstop?"

"Fuck you, saying —"

"Neither do I. This is what we're going to do." But instead of elaborating, Felson turned toward the driver. "Maffrey, still got that binding wire?"

"Yeah, Sarge, still under my seat since the last time you asked me."

"Now, we're going to need it. We're going to put this thing in first gear, and just before we reach that straight stretch, tie the fucking accelerator down, fix the steering wheel into position, then we're gonna jump out and slip behind the truck. Zero-Two is going to pick us up and, at the last minute, veer right and into the street just behind the frontage road on the right, and Zero-Three is going to do a similar maneuver to cover the backstreet on the left. So if there's any hostiles in position, we'll be coming in on their derrières, understand?" Felson raised his eyebrows for emphasis. "We'll have the guys in the turrets spray the back of the buildings with the .50 caliber guns, and then we make a house-to-house assault to make sure it's clear. If there's no IEDs on the road, and our zombie truck makes it through rambling on ahead, we can try to recover it, otherwise we'll pack six into the remaining vehicles, fuck the Hummer. Got that?"

"Think they got an IED ahead?" Maffrey asked.

"Look Maffrey, does a bear shit in the woods?"

Darfield leaned forward to give the answer instead, "Indubitably."

"Okay, I'm gonna have to go over this with everybody, so let's get out, cop a smoke and a piss and discuss this with the others."

The twelve men of the patrol stood around the vehicles,

smoking cigarettes, chewing tobacco, and picking the sand out of their noses.

"Okay, listen up. Ever see that movie, what's it called, *Fantastic Voyage*, about some important guy. He's got this small blood clot in his brain and they gotta save him cause he's got some important information...so they make a plan, they decide to shrink this ship and the crewmembers to the size of a microbe and then inject the ship into his bloodstream..."

"Oh, yeah, I saw that," Putmeister said. "Good flick."

"Well, we're like those guys that get shrunk in their tiny little ship. Once these guys are navigating the arteries and veins, the guys who sent them in there, they can't help them, they're on their own. That's us. We gotta clear that blood clot, but we're on our own. The ones that sent us can't help us."

Darfield was amused. No matter how well he got to know this guy, he was always full of surprises.

It was then that Sergeant Felson presented the proposed plan of action. There ensued a few moments when all of them stood in a stunned circle, followed by a tense question and answer period that ended with consensus: *yeah let's do it!*

"Lucky for us," Private Pentarelli commented afterward, "that we got such a cagey Sarge. I'm tired of playing the sitting duck."

"I don't know about this," Private Haney grumbled. "They ain't gonna like losing a Hummer."

Felson wasn't going to let that little detail derail his plan. "Look, we can probably recover it if it doesn't get blown up... all right then?"

Everyone gave a perfunctory nod. "Now, before we go..."

"Oh shit!" Shortstop moaned. "Not that psyche-up bullshit about being the anus of the world..."

"Bowels of humanity, shithead. How many times do I gotta explain it?"

"Too many," Darfield said with a smile and a series of throaty chuckles.

"You see, guys, we're like fucking pioneers, the people who go into the deepest part of the oceans, cross fucking barren deserts, climb the highest fucking mountains, and hell, yeah, even go into space and land on the moon."

"What shit you been smoking?" said Sanchez, one of the guys who rode in Felson's Humvee, causing everyone to belly-laugh.

"No shit!" Felson argued. "It's a fucking frontier, man. I mean not exactly like *Star Trek*, where *no* man has gone before.

But, and I think we can all agree, it's where *few* men have gone before, into the bowels of humanity."

They all stared at him, slightly bug-eyed, afraid that their leader had finally gone over the edge. All except Darfield, who was smoking a cigarette and looking in the other direction, appearing bored. He had been through this before, the evocation of the adrenaline rush, a tactic that had saved countless soldiers. But he had become numbed by now, in spite of Felson's gift for it.

"So, it ain't no injection then," Darfield said to the wind in his face, encouraging Felson's analogy, "more like an enema, going up the man's ass, not into his brain."

This caused some laughter, but Felson was determined to rile them up. He screamed at them. "What the fuck is wrong with you! There's gonna be a lot of shit coming down on us through that giant colon, a tidal wave of shit, and we got to fight to get out of the other side! We're gonna try our best to rip apart people, before they rip us apart, and we don't even know them, except as the enemy. We're gonna be fighting our way through the bowels of humanity, and we have to get out alive and help our brothers get out alive. NOW, DO YOU ALL GET THAT?"

They all nodded their heads, again the exception being Darfield, who still looked away as he flicked his butt into the desert wind.

Felson lowered his voice, and in creepy contrast to his impassioned rant, said in a cold, monotonic voice, "Okay then, let's give it a go."

Dispersing to get into their vehicles, Private Haney touched

Felson on the shoulder. "Wait up, Sarge."

"Yeah, Haney, what?"

"Sorry 'bout what I said...about losing the Humvee. Since I've been with you, we've gotten out of two fixes that I thought were going to be the end of the road for me. You're my lucky charm."

Felson grinned. "Let's hope I'm still lucky."

The small convoy followed a bend in the road on its approach to the settlement, a scattering of box-shaped dwellings shimmering in the heat, daubed in pallid shades of beige and tan, the highest buildings along the road front, three to six stories high, with the lower structures nestled behind them. Maffrey and Felson worked with the binding wire as the vehicles proceeded at a plodding pace in first gear at the start of the straight section of road. The accelerator pedal was secured as Maffrey pressed on it with a light touch, the steering wheel fixed on both sides to the undercarriage of the driver's seat while Maffrey got his legs clear. Once this was done to their satisfaction, the four men discreetly opened their doors, slipped down into the ground and closed the doors lightly, leaving the abandoned vehicle to lumber on. They sprinted toward Zero-Two, and deftly got in. Zero-Two made an abrupt right and entered the backstreet; Zero-Three went left to enter the backstreet south of the main road. Zero-Two had hardly reached the backside of the nearest building when they heard a thunderous explosion that released a flood of adrenaline through all of them, triggering them into combat mode. It now seemed there was no need to recover the Zero-One Humvee.

"Fuckers!" Pentarelli screamed from the turret, letting loose a barrage from his cannon that riddled the walls of the first two buildings with holes the size of golf balls. "Camel fucking sons of bitches!" *Bam, bam, bam.*

The others had their rifles to the ready, prepared to pick off anyone foolish enough to flee out of the back entrances.

But the enemy was as not as unprepared for this contingency

as Felson had hoped. When they saw only one vehicle on the road, they knew something was up and shifted to cover their backsides. Shots rang out from the back windows, from both the building behind and the one in front, the shooters aiming at the most obvious target: Pentarelli. His body flailed wildly, legs kicking convulsively inside the cab, as his torso was torn to shreds. Blood was dripping everywhere.

"Fuck man!" Sanchez, in the back, yelled out, appalled.

Felson took charge. "Haney, Sanchez, Putmeister, the building in back, me and Shortstop we'll take the front! Reilly, stop the truck, take cover with your rifle, Maffrey, you too. The rest of us, on my mark. Go, go, go!"

They poured out of the vehicle with a haste that their lives depended on, running hard until the five of them slammed themselves into the walls of their respective buildings, glued to the dusty surfaces like flies on flypaper. The two teams both kicked the doors in and hurled grenades inside before rushing in.

"Shortstop, check your nine!"

Someone was running down the hallway in front of them, aiming his Kalashnikov.

Darfield whirled to his right and let off half his clip and the man went down, half his body shredded meat.

An explosion of sounds merged into a cacophony of frenzied shouting, maniacal screaming, and ear-piercing gunshots. Combatants had descended from the floor above them, converging on Felson and Darfield with piercing battle cries, but were immediately cut down by the two Marines.

"Fuck man, there's another!" Felson cried as he fired his weapon.

Darfield heard a crying sound in the room to his right, causing him to spin and spontaneously let out a burst of fire. It took him a second or two to see what he had just hit, now a huddled mass of little bloody corpses. "Oh my God! Jesus, Jesus, forgive me. They were just kids!"

"GET DOWN!"

Darfield felt the wind rush violently out of him as he crashed on the floor with Felson on top of him. Felson rolled over and loosened twenty rounds into a combatant who had been ready to pull the trigger, his body bouncing off the hallway wall and onto the floor in a gory mess.

"STAY FOCUSED!" Felson screamed in Darfield's face. "There's hostiles upstairs. We gotta get 'em. Otherwise, we're never gonna get outta here. We'll die facedown in the sand."

"I ripped up those kids!" Darfield was still wailing.

Felson took hold of his comrade's shirt and shook him. "I SAID STAY FOCUSED!" He helped Darfield to his feet, and in a flash both of them proceeded into the shadowy depths of the house, Darfield behind Felson's point, until they found the concrete staircase. Up, one careful step at a time... Felson reached the doorway that opened to the middle of the second floor, whereupon he gave a quick strategic survey of the corridor they had entered.

"You go right. I'll go left," Felson whispered.

At each end of the hall were rooms that faced each other from both sides—four rooms total. As shots rang out in the adjacent building, both men slithered against the wall in opposite directions, creeping up on their own pair of doors. Here was a betting game where the stakes you played for were your life: right door or left?

Felson popped in the doorway on his left and discharged his weapon before quickly retreating back into the hallway.

Darfield hesitated. *What if it's kids again?*

Out of the door to his right, an enemy combatant appeared, drawn out by Felson's fire. Darfield pulled the trigger and the man's head shattered like a ripe pumpkin, shocking Darfield for a fleeting instant.

"You okay, Shortstop?" Felson yelled from down the hall. "I'm cool, man," he said between frantic breaths.

"We have to get to the roof. One of these rooms must have access. Are your rooms clear?"

"No, man."

"Never mind, back up into my position. We'll check this room first for stairs, and you're gonna cover my ass. We'll repeat that until we can find a way to the roof."

"Roger that, Sarge; backing up."

Darfield walked slowly backward down the hall but his eyes were fixed ahead, ready for anyone to come dashing out. Once he was in position covering the doorway where Felson was standing, Felson entered the room with combat stealth. "Stairs," he whispered across to his companion standing guard at the threshold.

Darfield, still walking backward, recoiled circumspectly into the room.

Felson went up the wooden stairs to the roof in a manner that was slower than slow motion, as the treads were thin boards and the slightest creak could mean the end of his life. Darfield looked back just as his companion disappeared into the ceiling. A few minutes later, his hushed voice called down. "Clear up here."

Felson walked back down the stairs as if getting down from a ladder. Once down, he turned to Darfield and said, "Let's haul our ass outta here."

But as they reached the first floor, shots rang out. They were coming from outside. Both Darfield and Felson ran down the main corridor and flanked the exit doorway, glancing furtively at their vehicle parked outside, just in front at a distance that might as well have been miles away.

"Haney!" Felson yelled out. "Sanchez, Putmeister!"

"We're in!" came a voice from the Humvee. "But there're hostiles on the roof in front!"

"How many?"

"More than one."

"Listen up. On my signal, you'll open up both the front and rear doors of the vehicle. We're gonna make a dash for it."

"Roger, Sarge," Haney replied.

Felson looked at Darfield. "Think we can make it, Shortstop?"

Twenty-five yards I reckon."

"Fuck!" was all Darfield could say.

"It's like stealing second." Felson was referring to second base in baseball, the position protected by the shortstop, and the most common base stolen in the game. Darfield had played shortstop for the Yankees farm team, the Florida Gators, hence his nickname.

Shortstop laughed a big hearty, nearly uncontrollable series of guffaws that belied the dread that threatened to overwhelm him. "This is more like fucking Butch Cassidy and the Sunshine Kid!"

"Sundance Kid, asshole!"

This seemingly cheerful banter was absurdly contradictory of what they were truly feeling—they were scared shitless, scared shitless because they knew that death was waiting for them outside.

"There's just one difference," Felson said. "Both Newman and Redford were skinny guys and they ran out the door together. But you're such a big lug, we'll never fit through this narrow doorway at the same time. Someone has to go first."

"And who's that gonna be?"

"You."

"Why me?"

"The first guy has the element of surprise in his favor. Chances are the first shot they make will be hurried."

"Then you go first. I can run faster than you."

"Look, I'm not telling you as my buddy, I'm ordering you as your sergeant."

"Fuck you, sergeant!"

"Okay, you have a choice. If you disobey my order, I'll send the Humvee out of here, 'cause my men are in harm's way. We both stay behind to die. Which is it going to be?"

"Fuck!"

"Is that a yes?"

"Okay, Sarge. Let's go for it!"

"NOW!" Felson yelled at the Humvee.

As the vehicle's doors popped open, Darfield charged full steam toward them. Felson was a step behind as they received enemy fire.

"UUUGH!"

Felson was down. His left foot was blown off. "UUUGH! FUCK!"

Darfield turned around, grabbed his sergeant from under his shoulders and hauled him into the vehicle, but not before he caught it in the thigh. "Fuck!" Inside, wounded, Darfield slammed the door shut. "Go, go, go!"

Underneath a hail of bullets the Humvee stormed out of there. Darfield examined his own wound. It stung like hell but luckily it just went through flesh. Then he looked at Felson's foot, except there was a bloody mess of bone and flesh instead of a foot. Putmeister already had his belt off and was tying it around Felson's ankle, hoping it was good enough to serve as a tourniquet.

Felson, gripping Darfield's waist, struggling with pain, managed to groan out, "You...you okay, Shortstop?"

"Yeah, just a flesh wound. But I have to tell you, better not think 'bout taking up soccer, your left foot's fucking gone, man."

"Fuck soccer," Felson gasped out. He was breathing hard, trying to contain the throbbing stabs of agony emanating from his ankle. "Now...I'll have to...cancel my ballet lessons." Darfield gave out a forced laugh, as he was supposed to.

Felson struggled to raise himself up, his hands in a vicelike grip on Darfield's upper arm, his eyes in a fierce, manic gaze. "You saved my life you fucking watermelon eater. You know what that means, huh? What the Native Americans believe?"

Darfield shrugged, almost afraid of the explanation. "Now, you're responsible for it."

Chapter 4

The city council had no choice but to call an emergency meeting with the mayor. All but one of the council members, despite the late notice, were able to make it. The police chief was summoned, and the head of the Bruntfield Police Union also insisted on being present. They didn't meet in the public hall, but rather in the private chambers in the back where they sat around an oval walnut table, nearly all of them dressed in white buttoned-down short-sleeve shirts, except for the chief who was dressed in uniform, and one councilman dressed in a suit and tie.

"So now we're national news," the mayor announced despondently. He was a short man with a very round body, his features reminding one of a genial uncle in a TV sitcom. He had a buzz cut hairstyle and distended cheeks. Despite his almost comical looks, he was well liked by the people, and now deep in his second term. "Care to tell us how that happened, John?"

John Garson, Chief of Police, Bruntfield Township, squirmed uneasily in his chair. His embarrassment looked incongruous when compared to his reputation and his mien, a well-built man, his chiseled features bearing the epitome of moral integrity, his hair cut in an austere style that radiated a combination of duty and pride; a dedicated officer of the law. "Officers Puente and Fox responded to a call of vandalism and approached a man who fitted the description that was consistent with the 911 call. From what I know at this point, and that may change, is that the suspect resisted arrest."

"Was he armed?"

"As far as I know he was not, mayor."

"Were there other officers involved?"

"Yes, backup was requested and two units responded."

"Is it safe to say"—and now the mayor's voice took on a mordant tone—"that allegations are going to be made that these men, six officers in total, used excessive force on an unarmed

man, considering he's dead as a result of this confrontation?"

"More than likely, Your Honor."

"An unarmed homeless man, who just happens to be a goddamned war hero!" exclaimed the mayor, slapping his hand on the table. "Purple Heart, Bronze Star!"

The silence that followed was not surprising.

"A man dies while being apprehended, and we aren't even sure if he committed this petty act of vandalism. This looks bad. Like hooliganism. A goddamned war hero for Chrissakes! Thank God it wasn't a black man!"

A chuckling snort was heard from the far side of the table.

"You got something to say, Ray?"

Ray Miffler was the leading property developer in Bruntfield, and his inputs into town planning were significant. But he typically contributed next to nothing on any other issue. And he was a smartass too. His angular face opened into a wily smile. "It could have been worse...could have been a woman. Imagine, six burly cops?"

The mayor instantly regretted giving this man any attention and didn't wait for the idiot to finish before he shouted, "He had a prosthetic foot for God's sake! No more flippant comments, Ray, or we'll throw you out of here!"

The mayor then redirected his attention back to Garson. "Do you know these men, John?"

"Of course I'm familiar with them, it's a small force."

"Chief Garson," injected a middle-aged balding man with a bushy red mustache, wearing wire-rimmed spectacles; Brad Wilkinson, also the Superintendent of Bruntfield School District, "have any of these men been implicated in any similar situations, where, I mean, excessive force was suspected?"

"Of course, we checked that first thing, and there had been some complaints against three of the officers. It was quite a while ago, before I came."

"And what is the status of these men, are they still on the job?"

"As of this moment, yes, but I am considering full suspension pending the outcome of this meeting."

The police union boss fidgeted in his chair. Bushy salt-and-pepper hair, puffed up in a style dating back to the fifties, jowls that hung like slabs of beef, his tremendous paunch half-hidden beneath the table, he made clear his position. "That wouldn't be acceptable to us. Paid administrative leave is more what we have in mind. It's not the first time this has been done pending an investigation...almost standard...remember, innocent until proven guilty."

"So how else are we going to respond to this!" the mayor demanded.

Abe Norson, small-headed but handsome, with a fashionably trimmed van-dyke, the owner of Bruntfield's Ford dealership, spoke up. "I think at the very least we should hold an inquiry."

Wilkinson couldn't suppress himself. "Inquiry?" he blurted. "A man is dead, I would think a grand jury would be more appropriate."

The mayor looked directly across from him. "Burns?"

Alexander Burns was the sixty-four-year-old city attorney.

The only councilman wearing a full suit despite the heat wave. His black, thick-framed glasses sat perched upon a hairless rectangular-shaped granite face, his wide mouth horizontal, his little eyes revealing nothing. "I'm afraid I concur with Councilman Wilkinson. We need to demonstrate that we're on top of this and that we take the matter seriously...a grand jury would serve that purpose."

The beefy police union rep immediately responded. "We would be vigorously opposed to that."

"I advise grand jury proceedings," Burns countered. "But no indictment."

"Excuse me," Wilkinson blurted. "How can you say 'no indictment'? We have to hear the evidence first, or am I off-course here?"

"It's the DA's ballgame. Isn't that right, Louis?"

Louis Pimply, a deputy DA, a wiry man in his early thirties,

responded. "Most of the time, yes."

"Any witnesses, John?" the city attorney asked.

Garson put his head down, signaling an unpleasant reply.

"Four. And then there's a videotape...from the bus depot."

"Is it in police possession?"

Garson nodded his head affirmatively.

Burns looked at the deputy DA. "Louis?"

"The DA's office does have the final say as to what evidence can be admitted."

Miffler spoke up. "What about this homeless guy? Any history of violence? Prior arrests? Minor infractions?"

Garson answered. "He was cited for loitering, sometime last year."

"Is he of right mind?" Miffler continued, "I mean, you know, these vets sometimes come home a bit looney...was he involved in any treatment for that matter?"

"Ah now, Ray has an excellent point there," Burns said.

"Let's look at the supposed victim's background and see if we can find anything to show he wasn't just a complacent citizen, but someone whose actions were, say, unbalanced, and therefore threatened the well-being of the responding officers."

"There were two letters," Garson disclosed, "that we believe he intended to mail. Stamps were on them, but I guess he forgot to mail them. They were both addressed to the New Hope Trauma Recovery Clinic in Manhattan."

"That's a start," Burns said.

"So, we are aiming at no indictment, precluding a trial?"

Wilkinson asked in disbelief, causing a fit of murmuring among the council members.

Burns held both his hands out to grab everyone's attention. "A trial can last months, even a year or more, do you really want that constant publicity?"

Norson, the car dealer, raised an important point. "Don't you think that when it's announced that there'll be no trial, the public outcry, which no doubt there will be, will cause harm to

our standing in the eyes of the people?"

"Of course, there will be a hell of a hullabaloo," Burns admitted. "But you'll see, it won't last long. The public will just get tired of the whole thing and the dust will settle, in less than a year I imagine. But a trial...we'll be in the headlines continually."

"Let's put it to a vote," the mayor suggested. "Inquiry, or grand jury with no indictment."

After fifteen minutes of discussion, votes were cast. Grand jury, no indictment, was the final decision. It seemed a sensible decision. But then again, none of them could be expected to have predicted the future.

Buy links for Justice Gone

Amazon

US

https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1785358766/ref=x_gr_w_bb?ie=UTF8&tag=x_gr_w_bb-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1785358766&SubscriptionId=1MGPYB6YW3HWK55XCGG2

Barnes&Noble

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/justice-gone-n-lombardi-jr/1128875661?ean=9781785358760>

<https://bit.ly/2SoiKwc>

Book_Depository

<https://www.bookdepository.com/Justice-Gone-N-Lombardi-Jr/9781785358760?ref=grid-view&qid=1544400889897&sr=1-1>

<https://www.bookdepository.com/Justice-Gone-N-Lombardi-Jr/9781785358760?ref=grid-view&qid=1549051281975&sr=1-1>

Kobo

<https://www.kobo.com/ww/en/ebook/justice-gone>