

## Homeless

A homeless man sat on a bench and stared out at the Mississippi river. He knew that the cold weather would be coming soon. He would have to find a place to stay, or he would die.

The wind blew a torn piece of newspaper to his feet. He reached down and picked it up. His arm hurt. In fact, there was no part of his body that didn't. He was sore all over. And hungry. He knew a lot of things, but he hadn't figured out how he was going to get enough to eat. He would have to work on that, give it more thought.

Soon.

Very soon.

He held the strip of newspaper in his hand for a couple of minutes, and then he unfolded it and looked at it. There was an expired coupon for cake frosting on one side, and part of an Associated Press article on the other:

### **INDUSTRIAL ACCIDENT LEAVES FIVE DEAD**

*Portions of this article were attained from sources who wish to remain anonymous.*

*Early Thursday morning a massive explosion destroyed nearly two-thirds of a government research facility located thirty miles east of Memphis, Tennessee. Seconds before the blast,*

And that was it. That was where it cut off.

But the homeless man didn't need to read the rest of the article to find out what had happened seconds before the blast.

He already knew.

*40 hours and 12 minutes before the blast...*

From the moment he opened his eyes at zero four hundred, Petty Officer Third Class Nathan Brennan knew this was going to be the hardest day of his life. Now, three hours and sixteen minutes later, he stood at the aircraft's open bay door and stared out at the 13,000 feet of nothingness between him and the ground.

*The only easy day was yesterday.*

It was the motto of the United States Navy SEALs, the best-trained military force in the world, and Brennan had adopted it as his own a long time ago. He'd been dreaming of becoming a SEAL since he was eight years old. It was all he ever wanted to be.

Three of his fellow SEAL candidates had taken the plunge from the treaded hatch deck already, and five more were waiting in line behind him. Brennan wanted to take a step forward and join his teammates in the dive, but he could not. Paralyzed with fear, he stood there and watched as their parachutes opened in the distance.

Three or four seconds ticked by. An eternity.

Chief Watson, the jump coordinator, shouted, "Do it, Brennan! Go! Go! Go!"

But Brennan didn't go. He couldn't.

"I can't," he shouted back at the chief.

Brennan was in excellent physical condition. He had passed the initial SEAL assessment with a time of 8:29 in the 460 meter swim, and 9:09 in the 2.4 kilometer run. He'd done one hundred and three pushups in two minutes, best in his class.

After the initial assessment, he'd been sent to Great Lakes, Illinois for the eight-week Navy Special Warfare Preparatory School, where over half of the aspiring candidates were weeded out in an incremental series of timed physical screening tests, challenges that culminated with a 1000-meter swim and a four-mile run. From there it was on to BUD/S—Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL Training—a twenty-four week physical and mental trial that broke nearly eighty percent of those who attempted it.

It was incredibly tough, but Brennan made it, knowing Parachute Jump School was next, thinking that if he could make it through BUD/S, he could make it through anything.

Thinking that when the time came to jump, he would just do it.

Chief Watson grabbed him by the parachute harness, yanked him back to the interior part of the bay, shoved him down on the wooden staging bench.

“What do you mean you can't?” Watson said, waving the next man in line toward the jump platform.

Brennan hung his head in shame. “I want to,” he said. “But I can't. When I get up there, my body just won't move.”

“I don't understand. You did fine on the static line jumps.”

“That was different. I didn't have to think. I just closed my eyes and bailed. Freefalling is different. I thought I was going to be able to do it, but—”

“Oh, you're going to do it, even if I have to pick you up and throw you out of the airplane. You know what's going to happen if you don't make the jump today? You're out,

Brennan. You're out of the program. Forever. You'll be sent out to the fleet to swab decks and scrub toilets. Is that what you want?"

Brennan glanced up as the last man in line dove from the platform.

"I'm going to try again," he said. "I can do this, Chief."

Watson looked at his watch. "You have thirty seconds."

Brennan stood and walked to the leading edge of the platform. Three more steps and he would be airborne. If he could manage this first freefall jump, maybe the others would be easier. That's what he kept telling himself, but his body still wasn't cooperating.

He knew the chief was right. If he didn't jump today, that would be it for him. Since his initial Navy training was in avionics, he would most likely be sent to an aircraft carrier, and his first year at sea would probably be spent on the flight line, launching and recovering aircraft. It was grueling, thankless work, and Brennan had heard quite a few horror stories from guys who'd been there: legs being amputated at the knees when an arrest cable snapped; sailors being sucked into the intakes of jet engines and coming out pureed on the other side; boatswain's mates being blown overboard when an F-18 pivoted unexpectedly on the runway.

Brennan wasn't afraid of hard work, and he wasn't afraid of danger, but the flight line of an aircraft carrier just wasn't where he was meant to be. He was meant to be among the most elite fighting men on the planet. He was meant to be a United States Navy SEAL.

He took a step forward, thought about all the people who were going to be disappointed with him if he failed to make it through the training. His parents, his friends, his former coaches and teachers.

And, perhaps most of all, his little sister, Rebecca. She was almost twelve now, and before Nathan had left for Great Lakes, she'd told him that—because of him—she was going to

try to become the first female SEAL someday. *The only easy day was tomorrow*, she would say sometimes, nonsensically, laughing so hard she cried.

It broke his heart to think about letting her down after coming this far, all because of his stupid fear of heights.

I can do this, he thought. I'll do it for Rebecca.

But then he took a step back.

He couldn't do it, not even for her.

### ***38 hours and 8 minutes before the blast...***

Somewhere east of Memphis, Tennessee, on a piece of land that had once been a soybean farm, inside a research facility the size of a discount superstore, Dr. Clive Aggerson, MD, PhD, sat at his desk and sipped his morning coffee with a deep sense of satisfaction. Satisfaction with what he'd achieved here at CereCirc Solutions over the past seven years, satisfaction with the remarkable achievements soon to come.

Aggerson affectionately referred to his mammoth steel and concrete structure as *The Lab*, and he had constructed it with a single purpose in mind: to develop the smartest, strongest, fastest, most deadly and precise Special Forces soldier in the world.

iSEAL.

Why spend years training a man to be a helicopter pilot when you can do it with a few clicks of a mouse? Martial arts, sniper training, explosive ordinance disposal. With the MK-2,

the revolutionary brain-computer interface Aggerson had developed, a person could become an expert in practically any discipline in a matter of seconds. Need someone to disarm a nuclear warhead? No problem. Just a few keystrokes, and you're all set. Once the MK-2 and its initial software was installed, there was no limit to the skill and knowledge that could be downloaded directly to the human brain.

As with any new technology, there had been some setbacks along the way. Rabbits losing their eyesight, cats going insane. It had been a long hard road, but nothing could stop Dr. Aggerson now. Nothing.

His phone buzzed. He looked at his watch, lifted the receiver from its cradle.

“Yes?”

“One of the naval officers is here to see you, sir.”

“Send him in.”

Rear Admiral William B. Lacy, the man with the power to put the next phase of Aggerson's project in motion and on the fast track to a billion-dollar government contract, was right on time. He stepped into the office carrying a briefcase in one hand and his hat in the other. Gold buttons, shoulder boards, dozens of meritorious ribbons. At around six-three and two-forty, he was an imposing figure in his dress white uniform.

Aggerson stood, intending to walk toward the door to greet him.

“Don't get up,” Lacy said. He walked over and set his things on the desk. He seemed to be in a hurry. He always seemed to be in a hurry.

“Good morning,” Aggerson said.

“I have a meeting in an hour. What was it you needed to talk to me about?”

“Won't you have a seat, Admiral? Can I get you a cup of coffee?”

“Are you deaf? I need to get out of here. Just tell me—”

“We’re ready to start the human trials,” Aggerson said.

The expression on Admiral Lacy’s face softened a bit. He took a seat in the leather wingback on the other side of the desk.

“Are you sure?” he said.

“Positive.” Aggerson lowered himself back into his chair. “The latest experiments with the Rhesus monkeys went off without a hitch. I have some stunning video to show you—when you have more time, of course. What we need now is the go-ahead from the Pentagon, and a volunteer for the human prototype, preferably a man in his early twenties, someone highly motivated, someone who can tolerate the extreme rigors of all the physical tests, someone with top secret security clearance. We’ll need him for about a month.”

“And you’re certain this man won’t be harmed in any way?”

“The risks are minimal. Only one of the monkeys showed any residual effects from the procedure once the device was removed. One out of a hundred. And even with that one, the effects weren’t severe. She has intermittent tremors in her left hand, and her left eye is hypersensitive to bright light.”

“I’ll need all of your latest reports for the bean counters,” Lacy said. “And before I can deploy a volunteer, I’ll need to send an inspector in here to double-check your security measures. And of course it might take a while to find the right man. We’re talking about brain surgery, right?”

Aggerson turned and dialed in the combination to the wall safe behind his desk, reached in and pulled out a Lucite cube the size of a ring box. Inside the cube, secured by a hollowed-out section of medical-grade silicone rubber, was a shiny gold cylinder no larger than a pencil eraser.

“We’re talking about this,” he said, handing the cube to Lacy. “Quite an improvement over the bulky contraptions we started with, wouldn’t you say?”

“It’s even smaller than the last one you showed me.”

Lacy started to pry open the lid, but Aggerson stopped him in time, letting him know that the interior of the cube was sterile.

“Eventually the interface will be microscopic,” Aggerson said. “We’ll be able to insert it with a needle. But even with this size, the surgery itself is relatively minor. Given a healthy subject, I can implant the device in less than an hour. Then it’s off to the races. There’s virtually no recovery time involved.”

“Amazing.”

“It is amazing, Admiral. It’s going to be the most amazing thing you’ve ever seen. I can promise you that. This is the only brain-computer interface of its kind, and it took me seven years to build it. But Thomas Edison wasn’t the only guy trying to invent the electric light bulb, you know? And I’m not the only guy working on military applications for BCIs. There are several competing companies out there that would love to get their hands on my technology.”

“And of course you’re going to do whatever it takes to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Of course. So send your inspectors back in here if you want, but I can assure you that our security is top-notch. All I need is a healthy young man willing to give up a month of his time.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Lacy said.

*26 hours and 18 minutes before the blast...*

It had been a long day. An ego-crushing, humiliating, life-altering day. It was like striking out in the bottom of the ninth with two outs and bases loaded. It was the kind of day you wished you could do over.

The Navy hadn't wasted any time in issuing Nathan Brennan a new set of orders. Tomorrow, no later than 0700, he was to report to the USS Gridley, right here in San Diego.

The Gridley. A destroyer.

They weren't even going to put him on an aircraft carrier, where he could eventually work in his chosen field of avionics. For the next three years of his life he would sleep in a room the size of a walk-in closet, sharing the cramped space with five stinking, snoring, cussing squids who didn't want to be there any more than he did. He was screwed. All because he couldn't take three steps forward and jump out of an airplane. It was embarrassing, and depressing.

He dreaded making the call to his folks, dreaded telling them that he was not going to be a SEAL after all, that he was a total failure. Nobody made it through BUD/S and then rocked out of jump school. Nobody.

Yet here he was, alone on the second floor of an open-bay transit barracks, packing his sea bag, entertaining the notion of finding a bridge and making a different kind of jump.

He'd just stuffed his last pair of skivvies into the bag when an E-2 named Berryman walked in and said, "Kemp wants to see you in his office."

Petty Officer Second Class Jeffrey Kemp was in charge of the transit barracks, and for the time being, he was Brennan's immediate supervisor.

"What's he want?" Brennan said.

“How should I know?”

Brennan stowed his bag in the locker by his bunk, walked out of the room and descended the stairs to the first floor. There was an E-3 in dress whites standing at parade rest outside Kemp’s office door.

Odd.

Brennan wondered what was going on, but he didn’t say anything to the seaman. He knocked, and a voice from within said, “Enter.”

Brennan opened the door and walked into the office. Kemp was sitting behind his desk, and there was an officer in the padded steel chair beside him. It took Brennan a second to realize that it wasn’t just any officer. Golden embroidered oak leaves that sailors commonly called *scrambled eggs* embellished the visor of his cover—his hat—and there was an anchor and a single star on each of his golden shoulder boards.

Brennan popped to attention.

Kemp rose from his chair. “Petty Officer Brennan, this is Admiral William B. Lacy. He would like to have a word with you.”

Brennan nodded. “Of course.”

The admiral got up and walked to where Brennan was standing. Looked him straight in the eye, smiled and said, “At ease.”

Brennan relaxed his posture, but only slightly.

Solemnly and silently, Kemp walked around to the front of the desk, exited the office and closed the door.

Brennan swallowed hard. “You wanted to talk to me, sir?”

“Yes. Let’s sit down, shall we?”

They sat, Admiral Lacy behind the desk and Brennan in the padded steel chair.

“Sir, if this is about the jump this morning—”

“We’ll get to that. First, I have a proposition for you.”

“A proposition, sir?”

“First of all, let me just say that everything we talk about in this room stays in this room.

What I’m going to discuss with you is classified. Top secret. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I studied your record on the flight over from Memphis. Very impressive. Do you still want to be a Navy SEAL, Petty Officer Brennan?”

“More than anything, sir.”

“I can’t make that happen. Only you can make it happen. But I can arrange for you to have another chance at jump school. There’s a class starting at Fort Benning in a little over four weeks. Interested?”

“Absolutely, sir, but—”

“But what are you going to do in the meantime? I want to send you TAD to a research facility near Memphis. It’s called CereCirc Solutions. We’re testing a new BCI, and we need a volunteer for the study.”

“BCI?”

“Brain-computer interface. Are you familiar with that terminology at all?”

“I saw something about it on television a while back,” Brennan said. “Handicapped people moving computer cursors and robotic arms. Doing it with their minds. Almost like telekinesis or something. On the show I saw, there were cables coming out of a woman’s head, and they had her hooked up to—”

“We’ve come a long way since then,” Admiral Lacy said. “The device we’re testing is about the size of a pea. It will be surgically inserted and turned on for the duration of the study, and then it will be permanently deactivated.”

“Surgically inserted where? In my brain?”

“Of course. But it’s a minor procedure. Local anesthesia. You’ll be awake the whole time. I know it sounds scary, but it’s actually very safe.”

“And what conclusions are the researchers trying to draw from this study?”

“We want to see if the device is suitable for military applications. If so, we’ll see about funding a second study, and a third. Eventually, we would like for at least one operator in each SEAL team to be outfitted with the device. We’re calling the program iSEAL, and if everything works out, it’s going to revolutionize covert warfare. Of course we’re a long way from our ultimate goal, but we have to start somewhere.”

“And that somewhere is me,” Brennan said.

He didn’t like the idea of being a lab rat, but the USS Gridley didn’t sound so great either. Apparently, volunteering for this iSEAL thing was the only way back to where he wanted to be. But at what cost? And even if he did manage to get reassigned to the jump school at Fort Benning, would he be able to make the freefall there?

Or, would he freeze up again, and maybe draw an even worse duty assignment than the Gridley?

“I know it’s a big decision,” Admiral Lacy said, looking at his wristwatch. “So I’ll give you some time to think about it. You have sixty seconds.”

Brennan felt his pulse in his eyeballs. If he wanted another chance to become a United States Navy SEAL, then this was the price. A hole drilled in his skull, and a foreign object

implanted into his brain. Four weeks of being poked and prodded and examined like some sort of specimen in a Petri dish.

“Can I sleep on it, sir?” Brennan said.

Admiral Lacy’s eyes were still on the watch. “Twenty seconds, sailor. There’s a duty driver standing outside the door at parade rest, and there’s a van at the curb with the motor running. My plane back to Memphis is refueling as we speak. If you’re coming with me, I need to know now.”

Brennan took a deep breath. “All right,” he said. “I’ll do it.”