

Three Unforgettable Days

That Tuesday morning began like any other morning. All around him students were joking and laughing, but Kemp Armstrong, a junior in high school, sat at his desk, his American history book to the left, his spiral notebook open in front of him, and his pen in hand, ready to write down everything the teacher said. The bell rang at 9:05, the teacher began his lecture on the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, and Kemp started writing.

Suddenly, a crackling came over the intercom. “Faculty and students,”—it was the principal’s voice, quavering—“America is under attack. We are patching the CNN report live from New York City into the closed circuit television. Please direct your attention to the monitors.”

It was 9:20, and the first image was flickering onto the screen mounted in the upper right corner of the front of the classroom—a tall tower with a massive hole torn in it near the top, flames raging within, and dark smoke pouring from the hole. Never had Kemp seen anything like it. Was there an explosion inside the tower? For those who had just tuned in, the reporter soon

repeated that at 8:46 a.m. American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. They were now watching footage shot just minutes after.

What a terrible accident, Kemp thought, forgetting for a second the principal's announcement. The reporter continued that at 9:03 United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the South Tower, and new footage aired simultaneously to show it. Upon impact a huge ball of fire rose from the tower, and a mushroom cloud of pitch-black smoke billowed into the air. Once might be an accident, Kemp thought. Twice is an act of war. Just now had the principal's words sunk in. But who could attack America? Kemp sat in a stunned silence resembling a state of suspended animation. For a few moments, he didn't even breathe, as if the shock had literally knocked the breath out of him. He couldn't believe it. Unable to make any sense of the attack, he felt his anxiety rising. His breathing now returned, rapid and shallow; his heart was racing; his head was spinning, his limbs weak.

"Oh, my God!" the girl in front of him cried, bursting into hysterical sobs. "My dad is on that flight." At once students gathered around her. Two of them each held one of her hands. Shy around girls, Kemp hesitated. He wanted to comfort her, to tell her she was not alone, to show her he cared, but he felt unsure of himself. Finally, he rested a hand on her shoulder. That human contact probably comforted him more than it did her.

Up until this point the class had witnessed destruction, fire, and smoke from afar. Now the television screen brought them closer to see people jumping from the towers to their deaths. Some two hundred of them. These were not actors, and this was not a movie. For the first time, Kemp was seeing real people die a real death. He watched in horror, and his blood ran cold, sending chills down his spine and shudders through his body. What if *his* parents had been on

that plane or working in one of the towers? An only child, he would be all alone. His heart broke for the girl in front of him.

The reporter narrated the events over and over, adding fragments of information as they trickled in, and the screen showed the same images time and again, as though the attacks were repeating themselves nonstop. But soon a new report came in: at 9:37 American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the first floor on the western side of the Pentagon. Live footage showed the Pentagon on fire, part of it collapsed. Who could believe that the Department of Defense of the United States of America lay in flames and ruins? The very sight was an outrage. Speechless and immobile, Kemp wanted to scream, jump up, and strike out at someone. He felt pressure in his head, tightness in his chest, the clenching of his fists. Was there no end to the terror?

In real time Kemp and the others watched the collapse of the South Tower at 9:59 and that of the North Tower at 10:28. People ran screaming in panic away from a tidal wave of smoke, ash, and debris that pursued them down the New York City streets and threatened to engulf them. Upon all of lower Manhattan a flood of smoke submerged everything from the ground to the tops of the skyscrapers.

In between came word that United Airlines Flight 93 had crashed into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. It was all too overwhelming. Shock, disbelief, anxiety, grief, horror, indignation, outrage—by the end of the period the overload of intense feelings had left Kemp in a state of emotional numbness.

Throughout the day, story after story emerged of the courage shown by firefighters, police officers, and rescue workers, four hundred eleven of whom died trying to save their fellow New Yorkers. The unprovoked attacks striking at the symbols of American security and prosperity, the loss of innocent life, the destruction of property, the heroic self-sacrifice of so

many—all of it was unspeakably painful to see but not so much as the scenes broadcast later of thousands of Palestinians dancing for joy in the streets and gloating over a wounded America.

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At 8:30 that evening Kemp and his parents gathered in the living room in front of the television for President George W. Bush's address to the nation. His words "disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger" resonated deeply with Kemp. At the same time Kemp drew consolation and hope when the President declared: "Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve." For the first time Kemp felt not like a private individual but like the citizen of a nation and the member of a people. Rescuing survivors, burying the dead, consoling the bereaved, clearing the debris, rebuilding the site, bringing the perpetrators to justice, defending the United States against its enemies—these were the tasks that lay ahead, and Kemp wanted to join his fellow Americans in accomplishing them.

Kemp turned in early that night, but before he got into bed, he did something he had not done in a long time. As the President had asked, he knelt by the side of his bed and prayed for "all those who grieve, for the children whose world has been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened." In a single day the world had changed, and life would never be the same. September 11, 2001 was a day he would never forget.

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The next morning Kemp awoke in a daze and went about his daily activities like a sleepwalker. His body performed the motions—school, sports, family dinner, homework—but his mind was elsewhere, as though in a bad dream but unable to wake up. For the next nine days

he would focus on the task at hand only to have his concentration dissolve into a confused anxiety after a matter of seconds. Who did this to us and why? Will they strike again? When?

Yes, America had been attacked before, at Pearl Harbor. But Kemp knew exactly who did it—the Japanese. And why—to conquer Southeast Asia without American interference. His father, who shared Kemp’s interest in American history, had explained those events to him. Now things were different. Kemp knew nothing of the private individuals who had carried out the attacks or of their motives. Who in the world would want to hurt America and for what possible reason? He craved answers.

On September 20 President Bush addressed a joint session of Congress. Kemp and his parents gathered again in front of the television. Dressed in a blue suit, a white shirt, and a blue tie, with a small American flag pinned to his lapel, Bush mounted the podium slowly and with dignity, to hearty applause. He spoke seriously but calmly, and his demeanor began to quiet Kemp’s anxieties.

“Americans are asking,” the President said, ““Who attacked our country?”” Yes, that was Kemp’s question exactly. He felt as though the president were speaking directly to him. Sitting on the edge of the sofa, Kemp leaned towards the television. A terrorist group named al-Qaeda was the culprit, led by Osama bin Laden and supported by the Taliban. Although Kemp had never heard of any of them and knew nothing about them, he felt relieved to have a certainty firmly in his grasp.

“Americans are asking,” the President continued, ““Why do they hate us?”” Yes, why? It was as though the President were reading Kemp’s mind. Again he peered intently at the television screen and pricked up his ears. They hate us because of our democratic freedom of religion and speech, our freedom to vote and to disagree with one another. Instead, they want to

seize power and impose their radical beliefs on everyone else, as the fascists, the Nazis, and the communists had before them. Yet America had won out over these enemies, and it would defeat the terrorists too. The President himself said so: “The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain.” Finally, things were beginning to make sense to Kemp.

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On October 7 the United States military began its strikes in Afghanistan. Kemp bought a large map of the country, hung it on his bedroom wall, and marked every operation with a pushpin. Each morning at breakfast he read the paper; every evening he watched the news; time and again he looked up geographical locations on the Internet. In a large notebook Kemp kept an almost daily record of the events and his interpretations of them.

Kemp’s was not simply an interest in current events or even in politics. The world was far more complex and dangerous than he had realized, and he felt driven to understand it and his place in it. How could so many of his classmates just want to get back to normal, planning their college careers, following their favorite sports teams, listening to pop music, playing video games, or just hanging out? He couldn’t comprehend it.

By the end of 2001 Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban no longer occupied the limelight. Kemp had learned there was an “axis of evil” consisting of nations with totalitarian aspirations who hated the United States for its democracy and freedom. At the very center of this axis stood Iraq, led by the diabolical dictator Saddam Hussein. Not only had he murdered thousands of his own people, he also possessed stockpiles of biological and chemical weapons. Moreover, he had ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles to unleash them not just on neighbors like Israel but even on the eastern seaboard of the United States. Kemp felt vulnerable. And, as if these weapons of mass destruction were not enough, Saddam Hussein was seeking to

acquire weapons-grade uranium for nuclear bombs. If he did, there would be no limit to the carnage he could wreak.

Kemp firmly believed the United States had to depose and disarm him, destroy his weapons of mass destruction, liberate the Iraqi people, set up a new regime, and preserve the peace and freedom of the world. Who else could do it? This was a war of right against wrong, of justice against tyranny, of good against evil—an apocalyptic battle of biblical proportions. On the night of the September 11 attacks, the President had said: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Even if almost none of the Arab states supported a US invasion, if the UN Security Council refused to provide a mandate, and if our strongest European allies, France and Germany, opposed the war, the United States would have to do what had to be done. Alone, if necessary. In more than a decade since the Gulf War, Iraq had grown weaker and the United States stronger. If the US had beaten Saddam Hussein then, Kemp concluded, we would beat him twice as badly now, and finish what we had only started before.

Kemp was sure that the Arab states would love America after the US soldiers had uprooted this noxious weed from their soil, and history would look favorably upon his country. In fact, he was now thinking of majoring in political science in college next year and entering public service when he graduated. Perhaps his name would go down in history too. He relished the thought.

On October 2, 2002 Congress passed a resolution authorizing the use of military force against Iraq, and on March 20 the invasion, dubbed Operation Iraqi Freedom, began. President Bush delivered his “Mission Accomplished” speech aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* on May 1. In a mere six weeks America achieved what it had set out to do, and Kemp was swelling with pride in his country.

Secretly, though, he was sad. A senior in high school now and just barely eighteen, Kemp had not been able to take part in the operation and had to follow it from afar. He would have given anything to be a part of it.

On Thursday, June 5, 2003, Kemp graduated from high school at a 6:00 p.m. ceremony. Afterwards one of his classmates hosted a cookout to celebrate, but Kemp skipped the party. He had something important to do the next morning, and he wanted to be at his best.

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On Friday morning the Army recruiter took Kemp's height, weight, and medical history and made sure he had no drug use or criminal conviction in his background. Then the recruiter asked, "So, what makes you want to join the Army, son?"

"America is at war, sir, and it needs good soldiers."

"Mmhmm." Looking weary, the middle-aged man in uniform nodded. "After the 9/11 attacks, a lot of kids have wanted to enlist. Most recruiters would just sign you up, but I want to be straight with you."

"Okay." Kemp swallowed, not knowing what to expect.

"Most youngsters these days think of war as high adventure and glory, but it's not a video game."

"Understood, sir."

The recruiter knit his brow in seriousness. "Do you know how many soldiers come home wounded or die on the battlefield?"

"Casualties are a part of war, sir." Besides, something like that wouldn't happen to him.

“Even when soldiers escape physical harm, they often come back with psychological issues. PTSD is serious problem among veterans, and a growing number of them commit suicide.”

“Yes, I’ve read about that, sir.” He, of course, was made of stronger stuff.

Looking down, the recruiter shook his head. “I hate to admit this, son, but the sad truth is that many wounded veterans do not receive adequate care. Because VA hospitals are underfunded, they sometimes deliver substandard health services or do not cover all injuries sustained in war. In my opinion, it’s a national disgrace.”

“Yes, sir,” Kemp said. “America’s veterans deserve the best.” But what need would he have of a VA hospital?

“I couldn’t agree more,” the recruiter said. “So, you understand the risks involved in joining the Army?”

“There’s a high price to be paid for freedom, sir, but it’s worth every penny.” In his mind, Kemp pictured a Distinguished Service Cross, a Purple Heart, or maybe even a Medal of Honor pinned to his chest.

“Then let’s talk about what comes next in the enlistment process.”

After they had done so for another twenty minutes, Kemp left in high spirits.

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Friday evening at dinner his mother asked, “So, Kemp, what are your thoughts about the future?”

“I’m not just thinking about the future,” Kemp said. “I’m doing something about it.”

His mother, about to take a bite, paused midair with a forkful of mashed potatoes.

“This morning when I went out, I spoke to an Army recruiter,” Kemp went on. “I’m going to serve in Iraq.”

His mother’s dropped fork clanged on the plate. “But, honey, the war just ended.”

“Saddam Hussein hasn’t been captured yet, there are still pockets of resistance, and we have to find the weapons of mass destruction. We can’t let them fall into the hands of the insurgents.”

“But that sounds so dangerous, and you’re still so young. Why don’t you go to college, and maybe find a nice girlfriend? You never had one all through high school.”

“The Army will pay for my college education, and there will be time for girls later. Right now I’ve got more important things to do.”

“He’s eighteen,” his father chimed in. “He’s a man now and can make his own decisions.” Turning to Kemp, he continued: “Son, you are joining the long line of Army men in our family who have proudly worn the uniform. I served in the first Gulf War; your grandfather fought in Vietnam; and your great-grandfather in Korea.”

Kemp had no need for a lesson in the family history, which he knew by heart. “And don’t forget Uncle Jack,” he said.

“Uncle Jack joined the Navy,” his father quipped. “That doesn’t count.” He chuckled at his own joke, and Kemp did too—his mother did not.

“But, son, I’m proud of you.”

“I’m still worried,” his mother said.

Kemp’s father cocked his head to the right and raised his left eyebrow, as if to say, “What do you want? She’s a girl.”

Nodding slightly in acknowledgement, Kemp enjoyed the manly understanding between his father and himself.

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Initially Kemp had thought he could just sign the necessary papers and ship out to Iraq. But he could not even take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery until June 16. In the ten days that remained, he immersed himself in the McGraw-Hill study guide and took practice tests for each of the ten areas. The minimum acceptable score was thirty-one. When Kemp sat for the test at the local National Guard Armory and made a ninety-three, his Army recruiter started taking him much more seriously.

“You’ve got a good head on your shoulders there, Kemp,” his recruiter said when he gave him the test results.

“And there’s no way those terrorists are going to take it off my shoulders,” Kemp joked, smiling at his success.

In spite of his fine performance, Kemp had to wait until July 14 to travel to the Military Entrance Processing Station at Fort Lee, Virginia, where he would undergo a physical and be fingerprinted for an FBI background check. He bought a large calendar, hung it on his wall opposite the map of Afghanistan, and circled the fourteenth in red. Every night he marked a black X through that day’s date. During the intervening month he continued to follow the progress of the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. He read up on Iraq’s geography and history and on its people and culture. To everyone’s amazement, he even taught himself the Arabic alphabet so that he could read street signs and store names and learned a few simple phrases in that language.

The day finally came. After Kemp had passed his physical and background check, he spoke with a service liaison counselor.

“Do you know what you would like to do in the Army?” she asked.

“Infantry,” Kemp said without hesitation.

“Well, with your ASVAB scores, there are lots of possibilities open to you.”

“Ma’am, my father was an infantryman, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather too. It’s in my blood.” He didn’t tell her Uncle Jack had joined the Navy.

That answer settled the matter. Once an officer had administered the oath of enlistment, he shook Kemp’s hand and said, “Welcome to the Army, soldier.”

“Thank you, sir,” Kemp said. “I feel as though I’ve just come home.”

When Kemp returned to his family home, he drew a red circle on his calendar around October 18, the date his One Station Unit Training would begin at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia. He would go through ten weeks of Basic Combat Training and four additional weeks of Advanced Individual Training. Although he was already in excellent physical condition from high school basketball and track, Kemp began rising at 4:30 a.m., as he would have to do in basic training, and going for a five-mile run. He would then eat breakfast and an hour later hit the gym to lift weights, working opposite muscle groups on alternate days. After his program of personal study and dinner with his family, he was in bed at 9:00.

The first week of basic training Kemp was the only recruit who could do a hundred pushups nonstop. His drill sergeant said admiringly, “Armstrong, you’re fit as a fiddle.”

“Thank you, sir,” Kemp replied, pleased with the recognition. “Now as soon as you tune me up, I’ll be ready to play.”

When Kemp finished his training on January 26, 2004, he had two weeks' leave. The first thing he did when he got home was to circle February 9 in red on his wall calendar. On that day he was to report to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he was assigned to a unit that would deploy in a month. Kemp took a pocket calendar with him to Fort Bragg and circled the deployment date in red. What if he were the one to capture Saddam Hussein? He imagined the President inviting him to the White House to receive a commendation.

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On March 8 Kemp arrived in Iraq and joined a patrol unit straightaway. The real work had begun, and the job wasn't easy. Day after day the temperature exceeded 100 degrees, and Kemp always had sand in his eyes and mouth, his shoes and socks, and even his underwear. Dressed in his desert camouflage uniform, he often carried sixty pounds of gear and equipment. He ate his ready-to-eat meals out of a brown plastic pouch. Some nights he slept without a tent on a cot in the open. After a fifteen-hour shift, he was tired. A shower came as a rare luxury.

Although Kemp had read about the heat, the sand, the work, the food, and roughing it in the open, actually experiencing it was another thing entirely. Nevertheless, in spite of the physical discomfort, Kemp was happier than he had ever been. He was finally doing what he wanted to do, answering a noble call, making a real difference. Often he thought of how proud of him his father must feel, and his mother would eventually realize she had nothing to worry about.

Kemp's squad went door to door, street by street, checking buildings for insurgents, weapons caches, and explosives. Sometimes they raided a building, when they had intelligence that terrorists or kidnap victims were holed up there. Part of their work lay in having the locals fill out census forms so that they could get a better idea of who was where and of how many

families had been displaced. Whereas some Iraqis welcomed them with mint tea and their diamond-shaped samoon bread, others refused to talk out of fear of retaliation by the insurgents. Still others praised Saddam Hussein as the leader of the resistance against the foreign invaders and cursed Kemp and his comrades as American dogs. Then there was the occasional sniper fire and the sporadic car bombs to contend with. Corpses of murdered Iraqis sometimes lay in the street. Most of the time the locals just stepped over them as they went about their business. Kemp's squad tried to identify the victims and assisted the police in capturing the murderers.

So the work continued month after sweltering month. On Friday, September 24, Kemp set out with his patrol early in the morning as usual. The same relentless sun. The same hot wind. The same gritty sand. Not far away, still within eyeshot, people were shopping at the open-air market, and children were playing with a ball in the street. Around nine in the morning, Kemp suddenly saw a brilliant white flash and heard a deafening thunder.

Everything went black.

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When Kemp came to and opened his eyes, he was lying in bed and observed a woman dressed in white at his bedside.

"Where am I?" he stammered.

"The Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, just ten minutes from Ramstein Air Base," the nurse said.

"In Germany?" Kemp asked, utterly confused.

"You were medevacked in yesterday and underwent surgery immediately."

"Surgery for what?"

"Your left leg."

Kemp reached down, felt with his hand, and found a bandaged stump about four inches above where his knee should have been. Inside him something froze. He turned mute, unable to respond to the nurse.

“There was some sort of explosion,” the nurse explained. “Maybe a landmine, maybe a homemade bomb. The doctors weren’t able to save your leg, but they did save your life.”

Kemp still did not respond, staring blankly in front of him.

“I know it’s a lot to absorb right now,” the nurse said. “But I’m sure you’ll want to talk to someone about it later.”

Kemp just shook his head no.

Nevertheless, an Army chaplain stopped in on him that afternoon. “Hello, Kemp,” I’m Reverend Santos. I just wanted to drop by and see how you’re doing.”

“I’m fine, sir” Kemp said, now that he had had a few hours to think and recover from the initial shock. A soldier first of all, he had to stay strong.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that. You know, Kemp, a lot of people who lose a limb go through a process of grief, depression, or anger. Some of them feel helpless, hopeless, and fearful of the future.”

“Not me, sir. I knew the risks involved when I enlisted. I’m proud to have served my country and sacrificed for it. I may not get a Purple Heart, but this stump is my badge of honor.”

“Well, I must say that is a positive attitude. Still, people who have suffered your type of injury want to be productive. Perhaps I could help you find a vocational retraining program.”

“I’ve discovered I have a knack for languages, sir, and I’m hoping I can retrain as a linguist and learn Arabic to be an Army translator and interpreter.”

“Now that sounds like a good plan,” Rev. Santos said. Then he paused. “For a lot of guys, though, there are other, more sensitive issues. Losing a limb can deal a real blow to your sense of masculinity and your feelings of sexual attractiveness and capability.”

Kemp blushed. “I’ll be fine, sir.”

“Well, okay, then. I just wanted you to know that I’m here and that you can talk to me at any time.”

“I appreciate that, sir.”

Of course, Kemp told the chaplain what he himself wanted to believe but didn’t really, and, without knowing it, the reverend had hit a raw nerve. Kemp didn’t have a girlfriend, and his high school classmates had sometimes teased him about not dating. Not that he had no interest in girls. On the contrary, Kemp wanted to focus on his studies and his career so that, when the time came, he would be in a good position to marry and start a family. He even dreamed of raising his own son to continue the family tradition and become a soldier. But what woman would ever want him now—now, when he most needed a woman to comfort him? Kemp felt like half a man.

In a single day Kemp’s world had changed again, and life would never be the same. September 24, 2004 was the second day he would never forget.

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During his recovery Kemp read the newspaper every morning, in part to distract himself from his misery. It was also a kind of luxury since he couldn’t get a paper very often in Iraq.

On October 1, he read that the day before, September 30, the Iraq Survey Group had released the Duelfer Report. His eyes grew wide as he read its conclusions. The ISG found no evidence that Saddam Hussein was attempting to resurrect the nuclear program that ended in 1991 after the Gulf War. In that same year he had destroyed his stockpile of chemical weapons

and had not renewed it since. Four years later, in 1995, he abandoned his biological weapons program, and nothing indicated to the ISG that he had reactivated it. In short, there were no weapons of mass destruction. Kemp's entire reason for enlisting in the Army, for his call to serve his country, and for his great personal sacrifice did not exist. Just one week later his whole world had changed again, and life would never be the same. September 30, 2004 was the third day he would never forget.

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At that moment Rev. Santos happened to pass by.

"Chaplain," Kemp called out.

"Yes, Kemp," Rev. Santos said, approaching. "How are you doing?"

"Not so good. I think I need to talk to you after all."

Rev. Santos nodded. "Well, I'm here for you. Why don't you come by my office this afternoon, say, at two o'clock?"

At the appointed time an orderly rolled Kemp in a wheelchair down to the chaplain's office, stationed him in front of the chaplain's desk, and left, closing the door behind him.

Rev. Santos came out from behind his desk and sat in an armchair catty-cornered to Kemp.

"I'm glad you came in," he said.

"Have you seen this?" Kemp asked, holding up the newspaper.

Rev. Santos took it and glanced at the headline. "Ah, yes. The Duelfer Report. I imagine it comes as quite a shock to a lot of young men and women in the service."

"What did I lose my leg for?" Kemp said, fighting back tears of indignation.

"You're feeling lied to and betrayed."

Kemp nodded.

“And angry that you were deceived.”

Kemp nodded again.

“And you don’t see how you can go on.”

Kemp nodded one more time.

“Let me ask you a few questions, Kemp. Why did you want to come to Iraq in the first place?”

“To defend our country against terrorists and to liberate the Iraqi people.”

“Did you do that to the best of your ability?”

“Yes.”

“If you were called upon again to defend your country and to come to the aid of an oppressed people, would you do it?”

Kemp paused. “Yes.” He himself had just realized that he would.

“Even after what you know now?”

“Yes.”

“Even if it meant losing your other leg?”

“Yes.”

“Or dying?”

“Yes,” Kemp said and hung his head, shaken to the core by the truth he had just discovered about himself.

“Kemp,” Rev. Santos said, “you have served with honor according to the highest principles of the Armed Forces. The American people owes you its gratitude and respect. In this

case, it seems the intelligence community failed the President and his advisors, and the President failed you. But you did not fail them.”

Kemp shook his head no, staring at the floor.

“You have a long road ahead of you—being fitted with a prosthetic device, going through physical therapy, learning to walk again, retraining for a new job, coming to terms with your loss. How do you do it? With your head held high.”

Kemp lifted his chin and nodded yes. The terrorists had mangled his leg; they would not cripple his spirit.

Glossary of Names

Kemp: champion, athlete, warrior (Middle English)

Armstrong: of the strong arm

Santos: holy, consecrated (Spanish, ultimately from Latin)