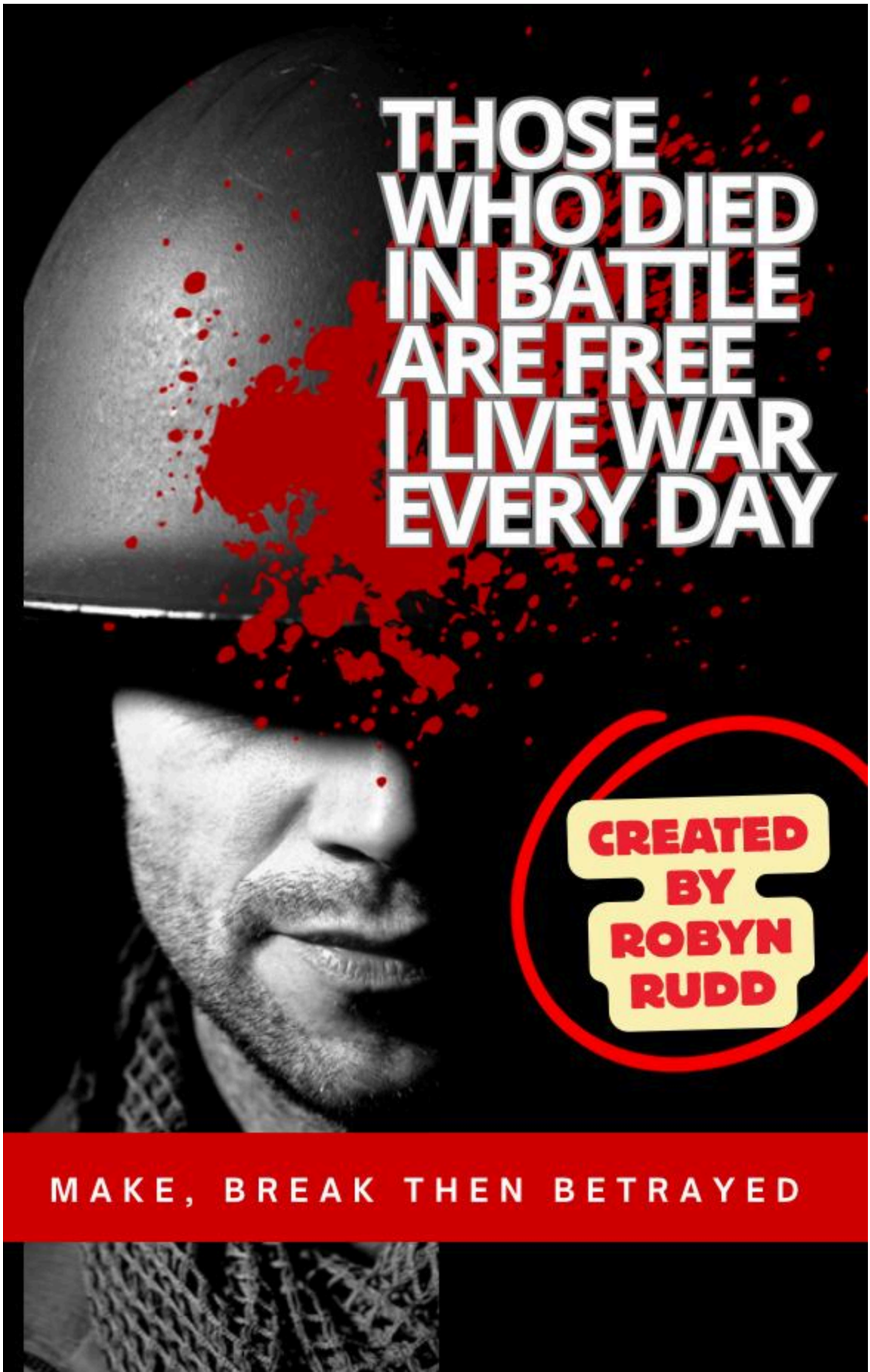
THOSE WHO DIED IN BATTLE ARE FREE I LIVE WAR EVERY DAY
CREATED BY ROBYN RUDD
MAKE, BREAK THEN BETRAYED

The Make, Break & Betrayal

Created by Charlie Rudd in memory of Martin Driscoll

Chapter 1 — Cornish Roots

The sea was Marty's first soundtrack.

In St Ives, Cornwall, the gulls screamed at dawn, the tide smacked rocks with the rhythm of a drum, and the harbour pulsed with tourists in summer and silence in winter. Marty learned early that beauty and emptiness could share the same space.

His father drove coaches. His mother cleaned guesthouses. They worked hard, but the air at home often felt heavy. Marty noticed how his mother's eyes lingered on receipts left in his father's pockets—flowers, perfume, little luxuries she never received. She never asked. She just folded laundry tighter, ironed with more force.

At fifteen, Marty drifted. Pub nights bled into petty trouble: nicked cans from shops, the kind of scuffles that end with blue lights and a warning. He felt restless, like Cornwall was too small for him and yet too wide to escape.

One Saturday, after a fight outside a club, his father shook him by the collar.

"Carry on like this and you'll end up in jail, boy."

Marty spat blood and shrugged. But when he saw the army recruitment stand at the market the next week—polished boots, ironed creases, the promise of becoming something more than another statistic—he stepped inside.

"You sure about this?" the recruiter asked.

"I am," Marty lied.

That afternoon, he signed away his youth.

Chapter 2 — The Making

Plymouth Barracks smelled of sweat and polish. The drill sergeant's voice was thunder. The first weeks tore Marty apart—boots blistered, shoulders rubbed raw, pride stripped.

But piece by piece, they built him again.

He learned to march until his legs felt like lead, to clean a rifle blindfolded, to obey without pause. He learned to shut his mouth and grind through pain.

Letters home were short and careful:

The truth was different. Nights, his muscles screamed. He thought about quitting, but quitting meant going back to Cornwall, back to nothing. So he didn't.

In the barracks he found two mates from back home: Ben, loud and fearless, and Charlie, quiet, always thinking ahead. They anchored him.

"We don't quit," Ben told him one night, over weak tea and smuggled crisps.

Marty nodded. "We stick."

The instructors noticed his stubbornness. He wasn't the best, but he never gave in. "Solid," they called him. A grinder. That word settled in his bones like a medal.

By the time passing-out parade arrived, Marty wasn't the boy from Cornwall anymore. He was a soldier.

Chapter 3 — Jacob

Deployment changed everything. The air overseas was thick with dust and fear. Patrols meant constant eyes on every alley, every rooftop, every shadow.

It was there Marty met Jacob.

Jacob was from Leeds, with a grin that could split stone. He joked through firefights, teased officers, kept morale alive.

"You're the quiet one," Jacob said one night, nudging Marty's shoulder. "Quiet ones always get left alone. Not by me."

They became inseparable.

Jacob carried a photo of his two younger sisters, Sophie and Mae. “Promise me, if anything happens, you’ll tell them I was laughing when I went.”

“You’ll go home yourself,” Marty replied.

But war doesn’t honour promises.

On patrol, under a sun like a nailed coin, Jacob turned back to crack a joke about football. One step later, the world blew apart.

The blast lifted Marty off his feet. Ears ringing, eyes stinging with dust, he scrambled to Jacob’s side. Blood. Bone. A sound like air escaping a balloon.

“Stay with me, Jake! Eyes on me!” Marty shouted.

Jacob’s grip was weak. “Sophie… tell Sophie…”

Then nothing.

Marty held a torn scrap of Jacob’s sleeve long after the medics carried what was left away. He pressed it to his chest like a relic.

From that day, Jacob never left him. Not in dreams. Not in waking. Not in the silence.

Chapter 4 — Return & Quiet Hell

They flew in on a weekday so there’d be fewer cameras.

At Brize Norton the air smelled like wet tarmac and weak coffee. An officer read a statement about “professionalism” and “service,” then dismissed them in tidy lines. Marty kept his head down. Someone clapped. It sounded like rain on a tin roof—there, then gone.

In Plymouth, the flat was a box above a takeaway. The extractor fan below hummed through the night; the window didn’t quite close; the carpet had a pattern that hid old stains but not new ones. He stacked his kit in a corner and sat on the edge of the bed like it might buck him off.

There was a pack from the MOD: Transition Pathways. A leaflet for Veterans UK. A number for NHS Talking Therapies. A website for the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme. He made a list and told himself lists were the start of order:

- Call Veterans UK
- Register with GP
- Ask about AFCS / PIP

- Sleep (try)

The GP surgery took him on after a sigh and a scan of his passport. The receptionist spoke softly, like talk might shatter him. He appreciated the tone even while it made something raw in him prickly.

The doctor asked good questions. Marty dodged the worst of the answers. He said he slept sometimes. He said he had “odd dreams.” He said he jumped at sounds but laughed like it was a quirky party trick.

“The nightmares,” the GP said, not unkindly.

“Just… the usual,” Marty said, and hated how small he sounded.

They queued him for a mental health assessment. “Two to three months,” the nurse said, apologetic. “We’ll prioritise if we can. In the meantime, these might help.” She wrote “breathing exercises” on a scrap of paper like it was morphine.

Veterans UK put him on hold for forty minutes and then told him he needed forms he’d never heard of. AFCS wanted “theatre medical evidence” he didn’t have. The DWP site for Universal Credit asked the same questions twice with slightly different wording, then timed out.

He found a charity coffee morning in a church hall that smelt of polish and hymn books. Men with creased faces and women with straight backs. A kettle that took too long to boil. A young volunteer with a lanyard and restless trainers: Aisha.

“Sit,” she said, nudging a chair with her knee like a friend would. “I’ll help with the forms. You just breathe.”

He showed her the stack. She swore under her breath, a soft blasphemy that felt like loyalty.

“Okay,” she said, pen poised. “We’ll do UC, then AFCS. Then I’ll chase Talking Therapies. I can’t promise miracles.”

“Miracles are banned,” Marty said.

“Good. I’m better at paperwork.”

Nights were loud inside and quiet outside. He left the telly on with subtitles because the words were company. When he did sleep, the blast sat just beyond the first dream. He woke choking and reached for a scrap of sleeve in the dark, fingers closing around nothing that could save him.

He sent a postcard to his mother in Cornwall: I’m back. Settling. Don’t worry. He didn’t go home.

One afternoon he walked to the Hoe and watched a grey skin of water pulse under a grey skin of sky. A boy set off a string of cheap fireworks on the promenade. Marty went to ground hard, concrete burning his palms. He came up grinning like it was a joke. No one laughed. He went home by the lanes and counted breaths until his jaw stopped locking.

He kept a plant on the sill. Something hardy. “If you live, I do,” he said to it once, hating himself for the sentimentality even as he watered the dry soil with a measuring jug.

The letters came in polite fonts: provisional, pending, appeal, regret to inform you. He kept them in a folder and stacked the folder on a shelf he’d reinforced with screws.

He tried a warehouse shift. A pallet dropped. His body hit the deck before his mind caught up. The manager’s face moved from alarm to liability to pity in four seconds.

“Maybe… come back when you’re sorted,” the man said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Marty nodded like he’d been given good advice.

Chapter 5 — Decline

The assessment came on a Tuesday. A windowless room; a clock that ticked loud enough to fight. The clinician had the careful voice of someone taught to step around landmines made of words.

“Tell me about Jacob,” she said.

He did, in pieces, like describing a house from memory after it burned. She wrote neatly. He watched the nib. He felt disloyal: to Jacob, to the silence they’d shared. When he left, she gave him a crisis card and three leaflets. “We’ll book EMDR,” she said. “There’s a wait.”

He walked home by backstreets, because main roads made the noise hit him sideways. He bought eggs and forgot bread. He stood at the light and didn’t cross when it was green.

Aisha called. “I’ve escalated AFCS,” she said. “You should hear soon.”

“How soon?”

“I’m chasing.”

“Chase with teeth,” he said, and she laughed, and for ten seconds he felt almost human in the shared absurdity.

He went to Leeds on impulse: Jacob’s city. The train hummed. The window made a picture of England in streaks: fields, pylons, a horse standing as if reading. He found the street from the

photo by instinct and Google. He didn't knock. He sat on a bench and let the wind slap him awake. A girl with a school bag bounced past and for a second looked exactly like Sophie might. His throat closed. He stood up and then didn't. He waited until streetlights came on and a man pulled his curtains across the view like theatre ending.

Back in Plymouth, he dreamed wide-awake. The blast unspooled in the middle of the day. He tasted grit between his teeth in Sainsbury's and had to leave a basket of milk and apples in the magazine aisle. He started keeping score in a notebook, a soldier's habit turned on himself:

- Slept 3 hours
- Ate once
- Talked to Aisha
- Didn't shout at the postman
- Didn't go to the Hoe
- Didn't cry (unverified)
- Don't think about Jacob

He crossed the last line out until the paper thinned.

The plant yellowed. He moved it closer to the glass as if more light would reverse time. He googled "how to save a dying plant" and felt ridiculous and then did exactly what the internet told him to do, because any instruction felt like a rope in a dark well.

The GP upped his dose, a milligram at a time that made days fuzzy at the edges without dulling the centre. He learned the difference between dizzy and dissociation. He learned to sit with his back to a wall in cafés, counting exits like you'd count reasons to stay.

A letter came that used the phrase "on this occasion" in a way that meant "not this time." He put it in the folder, then took it out again, then put it back, a ritual of defeat. The rent went up by a decimal that was still too much. He stopped the telly to save on the bill and discovered silence had a grain to it, like wood.

Ben called from a number that had changed since the old days. "We're getting the lads together," Ben said. "You should come down. Put faces to names again."

"Can't," Marty said. "Got… an appointment." He didn't. He couldn't bear faces that saw and faces that didn't.

"What about Charlie?" Ben asked. "He's… not great either."

“Tell him to call me,” Marty said, and then didn’t answer when Charlie did.

On a wet morning, his kettle died with a pop and the smell of cooked dust. He stared at it like it had betrayed him personally. He boiled water in a saucepan and hated the indignity of it. He added “kettle” to the list and then didn’t buy one because the week had too many costs already.

The second therapy block finished. “We’ll see you in twelve weeks,” the receptionist said brightly, as if twelve weeks were an afternoon.

He walked home slow, as if walking quickly might break him faster.

Chapter 6 — The Last Days

The world narrowed to small tasks done slowly. Shower. Socks. Toothbrush. Mug. On the fourth day without sleep he stood at the window at 3 a.m., watching a fox patrol the alley with purpose he envied.

He wrote to Sophie and Mae and then didn’t send it. Your brother was brave felt like a counterfeit coin. He wrote to Jacob’s mum and didn’t send that either. I was there shouldn’t have to carry the freight of what “there” means.

Aisha knocked on Thursday with a bag of shopping and a new kettle. “Don’t argue,” she said, shouldering past.

“I’m not arguing,” he said, already arguing in his head with the part of him that kept score of debts.

She put the kettle on like it was a ceremony. “AFCS have you at Stage 2,” she said. “That’s movement. It’s not enough. I’ll keep pushing. Also, Talking Therapies can do a check-in by phone in two weeks.”

“Two weeks,” he repeated, as if learning a phrase in another language.

She watched him. “You’re not safe alone, are you?”

“I am,” he lied. “I’m a soldier. I can do alone.”

“That’s not what safe means,” she said, soft, not letting go. “Do you want me to call Crisis?”

He shook his head. Panic rose like tide. He didn’t want uniforms again, even the kind meant to save. He didn’t want to be catalogued, observed through a glass wall. “I’ll ring you if it’s bad.”

“Ring me if it’s middling,” she said, packing the thought into his day like a ration bar. “Not just if it’s bad.”

After she left, he made tea and drank it standing up, as if sitting would commit him to staying.

He opened the folder and laid everything out on the table like evidence. Discharge papers, decisions, appeals, appointment cards, crisis numbers, the leaflet that had creased exactly where his thumb always pressed. The scrap of Jacob's sleeve in a sandwich bag, folded so many times the fabric had learned to be small.

He wrote a note—short, stupidly polite, thick with apology like fog. I love you. I tried. I'm so tired. He put it under the plant pot because it felt right to pair endings with something that was supposed to be alive.

He walked to the Hoe because habit is a track worn by feet and thought. The water was ugly-pretty. A boy on an e-scooter laughed into the wind. A gull stole chips and got chased for the theatre of it. The world had the audacity to be ordinary.

Back in the flat, dusk wrapped the room before he thought to turn on a light. He sat with his back to the wall and listened to the extractor fan below thrum, and the pipes click, and a neighbour cough. He held the sleeve to his face and breathed dust that once touched a man who had laughed through firefights.

"I tried," he said aloud, to the sleeve, to Jacob, to the room, to the list that had grown longer than any solution.

When the end came, it wasn't cinematic. It was a narrowing, a decision as dull and heavy as a brick. He made the room neat because soldiers do. He checked the door twice because soldiers do. He took himself out of the future because he couldn't find a route through the present that didn't keep detonating under his feet.

Morning found him the way mornings find what nights have decided.

The note stayed under the plant pot, a small square of paper bearing more apology than any man should be asked to write.

Chapter 6 – First Blood

The desert heat was nothing like Cornwall. The air was thick, dry, metallic, and it clawed at Marty's throat with every breath. Sand whipped across his face beneath the helmet. The horizon shimmered, endless, and the hum of the armoured vehicles never stopped.

He was a soldier now. The boy who'd swaggered through pubs and thrown punches was gone—at least, that's what he told himself. Months of training had burned the softness out of

him. Early mornings, shouted orders, endless runs, rifles carried until his arms shook—he'd hated every second, but he'd come through it leaner, harder, sharper.

Yet beneath it all, he was still Marty. Still the lad who needed to prove himself.

"Stay sharp," Corporal Davies barked as the convoy rolled through a village, huts of clay and tin pressed against the road. Kids stood barefoot in the dust, staring. Women pulled them back as the vehicles clattered past.

Marty's hands clenched around his rifle. His pulse hammered. He told himself it was excitement. But when a dog barked sharp and loud, he nearly squeezed the trigger.

Davies caught it. "Easy, Boy Wonder. First tour'll do that to you. You'll learn."

The first firefight came days later.

Patrol through a warren of narrow streets. The sun high, sweat running down his back. Then—crack. The air split. Dust exploded near his boots. Another crack, closer. Shouts.

"CONTACT LEFT!"

It was chaos. Civilians scattering. Soldiers hitting the dirt. The rattle of rifles bouncing off the walls.

Marty froze for half a heartbeat. His training screamed in his head—move, cover, return fire! He dropped to his knee, sighted down the barrel. His heart pounded so loud he could barely hear.

A figure darted between two walls. He didn't think. He fired.

The kick of the rifle jolted his shoulder. The figure stumbled, fell.

It was over as quickly as it started. The insurgents melted away. Silence crept back, broken only by the ringing in Marty's ears.

Davies clapped him on the back. "Good lad. First contact. You held your nerve."

But Marty didn't feel proud. He stared at the crumpled figure across the dust. His stomach knotted. His mouth was dry.

That night, lying on his cot, he saw it again. The dart of movement. The fall. The stillness. He told himself it was just war. He told himself he'd done his job.

But sleep wouldn't come.

Weeks blurred. Patrols, contacts, heat, dust, noise. Marty grew into it, muscles hard, reactions quicker. He earned nods from his mates, respect from Davies. He told jokes, drank from his canteen, acted like he was thriving.

But every night, when his head hit the thin pillow, he saw the first one. The one who'd fallen.

And he knew, deep down, that something inside him had shifted.

There was no going back.

Chapter 7 – The Tours

They counted time in tours, not years. Calendars didn't make sense out there. You measured life by patrol briefs, by the weight of your kit, by the smell of cordite after a contact, by the names they wrote on plaques and pinned to walls when lads didn't come back.

Marty's first tour bled into a second before he'd learned how to sleep without boots on. He went home in between, of course—Cornwall, wet air, kettles boiling, his mum fussing and his dad standing a step too far away, as if afraid to touch what the Army had turned him into. For a few weeks he tried to squeeze himself back into his old life. The bed felt too soft. The quiet too loud. He kept scanning the corners of rooms. The kettle click made him flinch. He smiled, said all the right things. Then he counted down the days until he could go back to the only place where the noise in his head matched the noise outside.

Out there, he knew who he was.

On the second tour he earned his first stripe. Corporal Davies shook his hand and said, "You've got a head for it, Boy Wonder." The nickname stuck—an old joke made new truth. Marty could read a street: where eyes watched from, where rubbish hid wires, where children didn't play anymore because someone had laid something under the dust. He could feel a bad day creeping in his bones before the radio crackled. The lads started looking to him without being told.

He carried more weight now—not just kit, but men. He learned the thin line between hard and cruel. He learned when to shout, when to laugh a panic down, when to put a hand on a shaking shoulder and say, "Breathe. On me." He learned how to write the first sentences of letters to mothers he'd never met and hoped he'd never have to finish them.

They did good work, too. Not just contacts and raids. They cleared roads, guarded clinics, fixed generators for villages the map forgot. A kid in a red shirt started waiting for them, every

Tuesday, at the end of a dusty lane. He'd wave like he was flagging down a ship. Marty always tossed him a biscuit from a smashed ration pack. The kid's grin, a moment of ordinary, cut like sunlight through fog.

Then one Tuesday the lane was empty, and a dog barked and barked from a rooftop, and Davies said, very softly, "No one's outside."

"Dismount," Marty said, because that's what training tells you to say, and because the silence wasn't ordinary. "Eyes open. Five-metre spacing. Watch the verges. Jackson on point."

Jackson nodded, mouth a tight line. They moved. The dust was a taste. The sun pressed down like a hand.

The blast wasn't the biggest he'd ever hear. Just enough to lift the front wheel and twist metal like toffee. Jackson vanished into a cloud that stank of earth and fuel and the copper breath of blood.

"CONTACT—IED!" someone shouted, as if naming a thing could make it smaller.

Marty was already moving, already counting, already calling in the MEDEVAC nine-liner, already doing what you do when the air is full of grit and screams. He folded himself into the work like a prayer, hands steady while everything inside him broke glass.

They got Jackson out. The medic did miracles with bandages and morphine. The helicopter came, a dragonfly in the white sky. They loaded, waved it off, stood in a ring around the dust it left behind and said nothing for a long time.

That night, Marty wrote two versions of a letter that didn't need sending yet. In one, Jackson cracked jokes in rehab and learned to run again on carbon blades. In the other, Jackson didn't wake up. Marty folded both and slid them under his mattress, as if his choosing would matter later.

Promotion brought a different kind of pressure. More briefings, more maps, more names. He started sleeping lighter than light. His laugh got shorter. The lads still followed him; they could smell fear and he didn't show it where it counted. But sometimes he'd wake with his hands already trying to push rubble off a body that wasn't there. Sometimes he'd blink and see dust motes drifting like snow in a shaft of light and his throat would close because for a second he was back in a room after a blast, the air fat with plaster and silence.

On the third tour, they were the old hands. New lads came in with faces still round at the edges. Marty ran them hard but fair. He taught them the quiet rules: never take the same route twice; never ignore a dog; never trust a door that's already open. He taught them to keep biscuits for Tuesdays, just in case.

He told himself he was fine.

They took a compound at dawn. Walls like teeth against a sky already hot. The breach charge coughed; the door bucked; they flowed. The world reduced to shapes and angles, to shouts and the thunk of boots and the human-sized spaces where you expected a man with a rifle. Marty turned a corner and there he was: a man, not much older than Ben, eyes wide, hands flitting between surrender and a grip on something black at his hip.

Time split again, like it always does. One half where everything was a line he'd already rehearsed: challenge, hands, search, clear. The other half where instinct roared.

Marty fired.

The man folded, not like in films, not clean. It was messy and awful and real. Someone shouted "CLEAR." Someone else vomited in the courtyard. Marty stood over the body and watched a fly explore the man's lip.

"Good shoot," said the lieutenant, crisp and precise, already writing it down in his head. "Weapon recovered. Legitimate threat."

Marty nodded. The words slid off him and pooled at his boots.

They lost two that tour. Not on the same day, which is worse. The gaps don't teach you anything except how to count. Marty stood on parade squares and watched flags dip and he wore black tape on his rifle and he told the lads that they'd honour them by doing the job right. He believed it. He also woke some nights with his teeth grinding, jaw aching like a pulled muscle.

From home, letters came less often. His mother told him about the boiler, about a leak in the roof, about Auntie Sue's hip. She asked if he was eating. She wrote around the shape of his father, who was always "busy" or "working away." Sometimes she wrote, "I'm proud of you, Martin," and he'd stare at the words until they blurred.

Ben wrote once, from some dead-end job upcountry, saying he should've stuck in with the Army, that Marty had been right, that there was nothing out here but night buses and kebab shops and trying not to swing at blokes who looked at you sideways. Marty didn't write back straight away. He wasn't sure what truth would help.

Charlie wrote three pages on a library computer about books he reckoned Marty would like. "Not the posh ones," he said. "Ones that feel like a punch." He listed titles. Marty tucked the list under his mattress with Jackson's letters and told himself he'd look for them when he got home.

Home. That word kept slipping. He went back between tours and the pub smelled wrong—too clean, too sweet. The sea felt like a picture, flat and harmless. He ran the cliff path until his lungs burned because pain was the easiest version of peace he could find. He tried a girl for a while, soft voice, clever eyes. She touched his wrist one night and he flinched so hard he knocked a glass over. Spent the rest of the night apologising and pretending he hadn't been imagining a pressure plate under the carpet.

"Do you even like me?" she asked, gentle but tired.

"I don't know," he said, honest and wrecked. "I don't know what I like right now."

He slept with the window open because he couldn't stand quiet rooms. He slept with a torch in arm's reach. He kept a pair of trainers by the bed in case he needed to move fast.

Mum watched him like he was a storm out at sea. You could see it on the horizon, dark and building. Maybe it would blow past. Maybe it would break the windows.

"Eat," she said. "You're thin."

"I'm fine," he lied. She put food in front of him and he ate until the muscles in her face unclenched.

Before the third tour, his father stood in the hall and cleared his throat. "Look after yourself," he said, like he was borrowing the words from someone. "Your mother—she worries."

"Yeah," Marty said.

They didn't hug.

Near the end of the third tour, they rotated to a quieter sector where quiet was its own trap. Routine dulls you. That's when mistakes get made. Marty fought against it, kept the drills sharp, kept the lads wary. Still, one afternoon on a white road with poplars making tall shadows, a man with a bicycle pushed out from behind a wall and grinned and waved and the world went white again, louder than God.

Marty couldn't hear for a while after. Everything was in a tunnel. He lay on his back and watched a leaf drifting in the blast wind and thought, stupidly, poplars don't look like that at home. Someone dragged him. Hands patted him all over. He laughed because he couldn't feel his feet and then he cried because it turned out he could. The man with the bicycle wasn't there anymore. Neither was half the wall.

In the med tent that night, Davies sat next to him, bandaged and doped, and said, "Nearly there. You've done your bit three times over."

Marty stared at the canvas roof and thought how tired he was. Not body-tired. Bone-tired. Brain-tired. Like the part of him that kept the wolves outside the fence had been on watch too long.

He slept. He saw the lane with the red-shirt kid and no kid. He saw Jackson's letters under his mattress. He saw a fly on a dead man's lip. He saw Cornwall like a postcard pinned to a board in a corridor he could never find his way back to.

When he woke, Davies was gone. Transferred. Medevac. Marty didn't ask which. He didn't check. He just stared at the empty chair and felt that old, stupid hope shrink another size.

They handed him travel orders. A flight home. A debrief date. A checklist of kit to clean and return. A sheet about "transition support"—numbers to call, people to see, leaflets with smiling men on the cover, in civilian clothes, carrying toolboxes like happiness could be issued and worn outside the wire.

"Any questions?" the admin sergeant asked.

Marty shook his head. He had loads. None that fit in that room.

He looked down at his hands. They were steady. They always were, when someone else was watching.

He told himself again: I'm fine.

He said it so often he started to believe the shape of the lie.

And then he went home.

Chapter 8 – The Ghosts

The Army had made him strong. Stronger than he'd ever been in Cornwall. Stronger than the skinny kid who swung a cue in a pub and panicked when the police van pulled up. Strong enough to carry mates, to keep calm in gunfights, to drag himself through walls of noise and sand.

But strength doesn't stop dreams.

The first night back in barracks after the last patrol, Marty woke drenched, heart hammering, convinced the ceiling was caving in. He'd been sure he could taste dust in his mouth, hear shouts in the distance, feel grit grinding in his teeth.

The other lads laughed it off. "First week's always like that," one said. "Brain's unwinding."

Marty laughed too, but his hands shook when he lit a cigarette outside.

It didn't stop. Every night was a rerun. Jackson's pale face. The boy in the lane with the biscuit never turning up again. The man with the bicycle grinning just before the white flash. He dreamed in fragments, and woke with his fists clenched, ready to fight.

On patrol he stayed sharp. You had to. But between, when the hours dragged, he started drinking heavier than before. At first with the lads, then alone. Whiskey made the edges fuzz. Beer made the silence less heavy.

Once, in a FOB rec room, he snapped. Some new lad was mouthing off about being bored, about wanting "action." Marty launched across the table before anyone could stop him, fist colliding with jaw, knuckles splitting open. The lad went down, teeth red.

"Control yourself!" the sergeant barked.

Marty stood over the boy, chest heaving, eyes wild. "You want action? Go dig Jackson up. Ask him about action."

The room went silent.

After that, people looked at him different. Respect, maybe. Fear, more likely.

He didn't care. Or he told himself he didn't.

The nightmares followed him everywhere. Even on leave, even in Cornwall, where the sea should've calmed him. He'd walk the cliffs at 3am, cigarette after cigarette, watching the tide slam the rocks. He told his mother he was fine, that he just couldn't sleep in soft beds. She nodded, lips tight, not believing him.

His father avoided him. "You've changed," was all he said, like it was a crime.

By the time discharge loomed, Marty felt hollow. Strong shell, but nothing inside. He was scared to admit it. Scared the lads would laugh. Scared the Army would send him home early, stamp unfit on his file.

He told himself to man up. He told himself the ghosts were his problem alone.

Chapter 9 – Coming Home

The Army didn't end with a bang. It ended with paperwork.

A debrief, a checklist of kit, a handshake, and a pamphlet about "transitioning to civilian life." The officer who signed his forms didn't even look him in the eye.

“Support numbers are on the back,” he said. “If you need anything.”

Marty stuffed the leaflet in his bag. He never called.

Back in Cornwall, the sky looked too big. The air smelled wrong—too wet, too green. He’d walk the old streets and feel like a ghost. The shops hadn’t changed, the sea still roared, but he didn’t fit.

At night he jolted awake, soaked in sweat. His mother came to the door once, frightened. “Martin? You were shouting.”

“Just a dream,” he said, forcing a grin. But his hands shook as he poured water.

He tried work. Labouring on a building site. The foreman barked orders, and Marty froze, breath catching in his chest like he was back on patrol. Someone dropped scaffolding, the clang echoing, and Marty dived to the floor before he could stop himself. The others laughed. By the end of the week, the job was gone.

He tried the pub. At first it was fine—just pints, a game of pool, old friends asking questions he couldn’t answer. But then someone bumped his shoulder. Too hard, too cocky. The old surge rushed back, and in a blink, he had the lad pinned, fist cocked, shouting about enemies and threats.

They threw him out.

He went home, drunk and ashamed. His mother pleaded with him. “Martin, you need help. Call the number. Talk to someone.”

“I don’t need help,” he snapped. “I just need… I just need time.”

But time didn’t help. Days blurred into nights. Nights blurred into bottles. The world felt slow, heavy, pointless. He’d gone from kicking down doors in deserts to staring at damp wallpaper, waiting for nothing.

One morning, he sat on the harbour wall, gulls circling, waves slapping below. He watched the boats bob and thought of his mates scattered across the country, some thriving, some like him. He thought of Davies, gone. He thought of Jackson, broken.

He pulled the leaflet from his pocket. Creased, worn. If you need help, call.

He stared at the number. His thumb hovered over the keypad.

Then he stuffed it back in his pocket.

Because in his head, a soldier’s voice still echoed: Are you man enough?

And Marty, staring at the tide, wasn’t sure anymore.

Chapter 10 – The Spiral

At first, it was little things.

He'd wake up at noon, curtains drawn, head pounding from cheap whiskey. He'd forget to eat until his stomach cramped, then shovel chips down at midnight. He'd miss appointments, ignore letters, let bills pile on the table unopened.

The jobs came and went. A warehouse shift where the clang of metal made him twitch. A mechanic's helper, where a backfiring engine sent him crawling under a workbench, heart hammering. Each time, his bosses shook their heads, muttering "unreliable" and "lazy." They didn't see the nights without sleep, the dreams that left him drenched in sweat, the way daylight itself sometimes felt like a threat.

His mates drifted. Ben moved away, tried to settle. Charlie still wrote, but Marty stopped answering. He couldn't bear to explain. Couldn't bear to see pity in their eyes.

Drinking filled the gaps. Pints in the day, bottles at night. It dulled the edges, for a while. But then came the rages. The smallest thing—spilled pint, wrong word—could light him up. He'd shout, slam doors, punch walls until his knuckles bled. Sometimes he'd forget what set him off at all.

His mother begged him. "Martin, please. You need help. You're not well."

"I'm fine," he'd snap, eyes glassy, voice breaking.

But he wasn't fine. He was sinking.

Chapter 11 – Breaking Point

The fight came out of nowhere. A Friday night in the pub, three pints in, trying to pretend he belonged. A bloke laughed too loud, shoulder-barged him on the way to the bar.

Marty saw red. He swung before thinking, fist cracking against jaw. The bloke went down, glasses smashing, voices shouting.

The police arrived. Not the first time Marty had seen blue lights, but now it was different. They knew him. Knew his past. Knew he was a soldier come apart at the seams.

"Martin Roberts," the officer said, steady but firm. "You're coming with us."

Marty tensed, fists clenching. For a second he thought of fighting, of going down swinging like in the old days. But the look on the officer's face wasn't aggression. It was tired. Sad.

They took him in. Not long—just a night in the cell, release in the morning with a warning. But the shame clung like smoke.

He sat on the harbour wall again after, staring at the tide. His hands shook as he rolled a cigarette.

He thought about the leaflets, the hotlines, the so-called "support." He thought about the lads who never made it home, the ones who'd carried him, trusted him. He thought about the soldier who'd asked him all those years ago: Are you man enough?

The words twisted now. Not a challenge. A curse.

Chapter 12 – Final Silence

It didn't happen in one night. It built, slow as rot.

The sleeplessness. The bottles drained. The fights with his mother, her tears, her helplessness. The endless weight pressing down, heavier each morning. The feeling that he'd fought wars abroad only to be abandoned at home.

One night, alone in his room, Marty sat on the edge of the bed, head in his hands. He thought of Cornwall's cliffs, of the red-shirted boy, of Jackson, of Davies, of Charlie's letters he never read. He thought of being fifteen again, swinging a pool cue, desperate to be seen as a man.

He thought of all the times he told himself he was fine.

And finally, he admitted to himself he wasn't.

The next morning, his mother found the room empty. On the bed was his old Army beret, folded neat, and a single sheet of paper.

"Sorry, Mum."

That was all.

The town would talk, of course. Whispers at the harbour. Such a waste. Such a shame. They'd say he'd been brave. They'd say the Army broke him. They'd say Cornwall had claimed another son.

But the truth was simpler, harsher.

Marty had fought three wars, survived bullets and blasts, earned his stripes. And yet, when he came home, he was left to fight alone.

And in the end, even the strongest soldier can’t win a war fought in silence.