

## Fresh Wounds

By: Brandon Fries

I looked down and gingerly rubbed the nub where my left ring finger should have been. The barren highlands of the Sierra Nevada's were crisp, as was customary during the late fall. The deserted trail ahead of us was our path towards victory this time.

A dog barked in the distance.

"Damn it," I muttered. "They must have found the truck. We have to move faster. Now's the time to toughen up."

"Yes sir," said my blonde-haired boy. "They won't get us, we are smarter and faster. Aren't we?"

"Yes, we are," I said.

We got up, and as I stood, my calf cramped up revealing my age and the stress from the past five days.

We started up the hill and kept a quick pace despite the aggressive incline. At the summit, we stopped and took a drink from our canteens. The water was warm and tasted like tin, but it was still refreshing. I looked around and saw the resurrection of a forest in the distance.

Once we caught our breath, we were back on our way. "double time" is what my dad would have said. I looked down and Brian wasn't used to this, but he was keeping up. He had the resilience of my dad.

I labored for each breath in a battle against the altitude. A rhythmic beating loudly echoed off the mountain.

I looked around, trying to find the source of the sound. Coming over the mountain from behind, a helicopter appeared. I pushed Brian down behind the nearest granite boulder and took cover myself.

I concentrated my thoughts on finding a way out of this. They passed over us and then jerked to the right, heading back to where they had come.

"I don't think they saw us, son," I said. "We should stay here and catch our breath."

I reached down and picked up a piece of wood and plucked out a large fat grub.

"We aren't going to eat that, are we?" He asked.

"It's all we have to eat right now and we only have two more sunsets left. We need all the fuel we can get." I said.

Brian grabbed the bug from my fingers and took a deep breath as he brought the bug to his mouth.

"Remember what I taught you," I said

"Yep," he said, closing his eyes. "Hold your breath. Bite down. Swallow fast." He placed the bug into his mouth and bit down hard. Puss squirted out of the bug and onto his lip. He gagged but looked up at me as he pushed it down his throat.

"I did it!" He said as he grabbed grass next to him as a palate cleanser like we did last time we were vacationing in Paris and he had escargot.

"Yes you did," I said. "It's only taken you five days to stomach that. This will all be over soon. I promise."

"I think the chopper left," Brian said. "Should we go now?"

"Great idea," I said looking back for any sign of movement. "It looks clear. Those trees are only a couple of hundred yards out. Can you run to them?"

"I can do it, papa." He said.

"We need to run. NOW!"

Adrenaline filled my body and the pains I had felt disappeared. We abandoned the trail and were running on the side of the mountain littered with rocks. A cloud of fine dust that billowed up with each step as we stumbled towards shelter.

A loud crack filled the air and dust spit up from the ground by Brian's right foot as we drew closer to the lush forest.

"Damn it," I shouted. "Hurry, we are almost there." We picked up the pace. We started entering the community of trees. They fired again, but this time they hit me. A sharp pain ran through my left leg.

"Papa, are you all right," He said. "You're bleeding real bad."

"Don't stop now, keep running until we find cover." I rode the wave of adrenaline while avoiding looking down at my leg, afraid of what I'd see.

We entered the darkened forest, and I looked for a spot to stop. Based on the sound from the gun, they were at least a half-mile behind us and I needed to assess the damage.

We were almost at the top of the hill when I felt the warm liquid squishing between my toes.

"We need to stop," I said. "Over there, at the top of the ridge by that patch of snow."

My leg was throbbing as the adrenaline left. I plopped down and finally looked down at my leg.

"What are we going to do?" he asked. "It doesn't look good."

"It looks worse than it is," I said while I ripped off the sleeve of my sweatshirt. "I've lost some blood, but once I slow the bleeding, we can continue. Drink some water and catch your breath."

His teeth chattered as he watched me tie the cloth over my wound. I looked down the hill and saw a large sprawling lake.

"Brian, look down there," I said while my leg pulsed with the beat of my heart. "That's the town we passed on the way up here. If we can make it down this mountain, we can take another car and drive away safe and sound."

"Are you sure you can make it?" He asked.

"I have to." I grabbed a chunk of snow and placed it on my leg, "there isn't

another option. Give me a minute to catch my breath."

I slowed down my breathing and thought about Ginny.

I pictured her on our wedding day.

Her giving birth to Brian.

An embrace at the grave.

Laughter.

Grace.

Hope.

"OK, let's go," I said.

I stood up quickly and felt the world revolve around me. Brian's nine-year-old frame tried to support me. My right hand found the trunk of a tree. I leaned heavily on it as my eyes scanned the bloody earth.

"Papa, I don't think it's working"

"What?"

"Your bandage is leaking badly."

He drifted into the shadows.

"I'm losing you again," I said.

I looked down.

Silence.

Blood pooling.

Spinning.

Darkness.