

WARRIOR

A WAR CORRESPONDENT'S MEMOIR

POSE



HOW YOGA (LITERALLY) SAVED MY LIFE

BRAD WILLIS AKA BHAVA RAM



PRAISE FOR
Warrior Pose

“Brad Willis’ life is the background for this extraordinary tale that provides compelling and essential lessons for anyone wanting a more fulfilled life. *Warrior Pose* is more than just one man’s journey of healing and transformation. This book is a bright beacon of practical wisdom and guidance, inspiring us to reach for greatness and reminding us that we each possess an amazing capacity to achieve a more healthy and joyful life as well as our most heartfelt dreams. Read it and you too will be emboldened to soar.”

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WARRIOR POSE

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BenBella Books, Inc.

10300 N. Central Expressway, Suite 530

Dallas, TX 75231

www.benbellabooks.com

Send feedback to feedback@benbellabooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this title.

978-1-9378-566-94

Editing by Debbie Harmsen

Copy Editing by Eric Wechter

Proofreading by Rachelle Sparks and Cape Cod Compositors, Inc.

Composition by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd

Printed by Bang Printing

Photo on page 118 courtesy of Tara Eby, In-Sight Photography, www.tfortara.com

Distributed by Perseus Distribution

To place orders through Perseus Distribution:

Tel: (800) 343-4499

Fax: (800) 351-5073

E-mail: orderentry@perseusbooks.com

www.perseusdistribution.com

Significant discounts for bulk sales are available. Please contact Glenn Yeffeth at glenn@benbellabooks.com or (214) 750-3628.

Introduction

Life's greatest lessons usually sneak up on us when we least expect them. Some hit like hurricanes, turning our worlds upside down and wreaking havoc. It's always confusing, chaotic, and challenging to understand why we've been chosen for such a fate, and in the midst of the maelstrom, it's impossible to view our suffering as a blessing. But it almost always is.

This is my personal story. But it's about you, too. It's about all of us. I say this because I've come to learn that there's a power deep within every human being that can help us overcome great obstacles, deal with crisis and calamity, and turn our suffering into a catalyst for positive change and personal transformation. I know this is true because I am alive today even though all the experts said I should have passed away long ago.

I was in the prime of my life, traveling the world as a foreign correspondent for NBC News, when my storm hit and everything came crashing down around me. In what seemed like an instant, I was declared permanently disabled with a broken back. Then came a diagnosis of terminal cancer, with only two years to live. I was once capable of covering wars, crossing deserts, climbing mountains, and slipping in and out of battle zones with ease. Now I couldn't sit up to eat a meal, walk without a cane, or speak without a voice box strapped around my neck. The career that had been my greatest joy and defined my life for more than two decades was gone forever. My identity was shattered. I no longer knew who I was or why I was alive.

I became completely dependent on a medical system that didn't help me heal. Chronic pain and heavy medications warped my mind and stole my Soul. I was angry, confused, frightened, and deeply depressed. As I approached death's door, addicted to painkillers and alcohol, I fell into an abyss. Not a person on Earth could have told me that somewhere in this darkness was a glimmer of light.

It was an overwhelming love for my two-year-old son that finally motivated me to transform my life. This realization was triggered one morning when he tearfully implored me to "Get up, Daddy." *Getting up* required recreating myself in body, mind, and Soul. I had to move past my rational mind and journalistic cynicism, and find the courage to venture into a realm of self-healing and inner awareness I once dismissed as absurd. There, in the deepest reaches of my being, I discovered my own battlefield, with wounds to treat, conflicts to resolve, and peace to be made.

It was the greatest challenge I have ever faced, but ultimately I overcame cancer and a broken back, forged a new life, and was able to be the father my son deserved. My healing journey taught me that there is an inherent power and natural intelligence within all of us. By tapping into these forces, we can move far beyond our perceived limitations and often achieve miraculous results. We see this in the mother who performs an astonishing feat of strength to protect her child, in the passerby who rushes into a natural disaster to save a life, and in the small children who flee war-torn villages and somehow manage to survive against staggering odds.

These might seem like isolated incidents that have little to do with us, but they illustrate a great truth: *The capacity to rise up and overcome great obstacles is our birthright as members of humankind.* The more fully we reclaim this right from a system that has all too often disempowered and disenfranchised us, the more we are able to experience profound healing, liberate ourselves, and chart new courses in our lives.

Although years of physical pain and emotional anguish were nothing I ever would have wished for, I now realize that a broken back, failed surgery, cancer, and a lost career were my greatest teachers and biggest blessings. They taught me more about the world than all my

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previous travels and experiences combined, compelled me to face myself, and made me a better human being.

This book details my personal journey from a career as a war correspondent to life as a permanently disabled person with terminal cancer. It shares my descent into years of darkness; the battle against depression, painkillers, and alcohol; and the story of how I ultimately clawed my way back into the world. My intention is that *Warrior Pose* will inspire all who face physical and emotional crises to dig down deep, connect with their power, and unfold their fullest potential.

Bhava Ram
(Brad Willis)

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Some names in this book have been changed for reasons of confidentiality. My healing program as outlined in this book is not a formula for anyone other than myself. The practices I undertook should never be done by persons with certain health disorders, and an experienced doctor, teacher, or healing practitioner should always be consulted by those facing serious medical challenges.



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CHAPTER 1

Afghanistan

MAHMOUD'S EYES mesmerize me. They are deep ebony. Plump as a newborn fawn's. He holds my gaze with such blazing clarity that I feel frozen in time. He's a small, slender boy. Ten, maybe eleven years old. His thick, black hair is beginning to show again on his shaved head. His perfect white teeth glisten as he softly smiles.

His quivering body is bright red, covered with third-degree burns. Large patches of skin have peeled away from his torso, which is now covered with open sores. He is lying on his side in partial fetal position on top of a thin mattress on a rusty metal bed. Bloodstained gauze is wrapped around his ribs, both arms, and his left thigh. It hurts just to look at him, and I can't begin to imagine his pain.

The rest of Mahmoud's burned body, too tender and wounded to touch, is exposed to the dank air of the refugee hospital. It's close to 100 degrees outside, as the midday sun bakes the arid ground on the desolate border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The hospital has no ventilation or cooling system, so the heat is stifling, the air almost too thick to breathe, and it smells like a butcher shop filled with spoiling meat.

"How did this happen to you?" I ask Mahmoud through my interpreter. He can barely whisper his response, and his body seems to quiver even more as he recalls what happened.

“I was just playing outdoors, all by myself,” he says as his eyes close tightly, fighting back tears. “Then the jets came and everything exploded, and I was on fire.”

As I stare into Mahmoud’s gentle face, I can hear my deep breath and feel the pounding of my heart. Every cell in my body is trembling with compassion, disbelief, and a sense of outrage that such a thing could happen. What I feel is not a new emotion, but a reignited one. A righteous anger at the injustices in the world has smoldered within me since I was a child, like Mahmoud. It began as I became aware of the violence and discrimination in my own country during the Civil Rights Movement. Then, as I became a teenager, the Vietnam War turned me into an advocate for peace and justice. This indignation continued with me into adulthood, motivating me. This is why I’m a journalist. Making the public aware of suffering and inequity in the world is my passion. It defines what I do, and who I am.

Mahmoud was simply being a little boy, playing in his remote village high in the mountains of Afghanistan, when Soviet MiGs suddenly roared overhead and began dropping bombs. His horrific wounds are from napalm, a jellied gasoline designed to stick to its victims and burn them to death. As he was running down the rocky clay street trying to escape the attack, the gooey fire stuck to his body and consumed him. Dozens of people in his village were killed, including Mahmoud’s parents. Despite his scorched flesh and terrible pain, he managed to walk through the mountain wilderness for three weeks, cross the border into neighboring Pakistan, and find this refugee hospital just in time, before his wounds became so infected that any chance of survival would have been lost.

On a bed next to Mahmoud is a boy of similar age from a different village. His right leg has been blown off by a land mine. In the far corner, behind a cloth curtain for privacy, is a teenage girl from a region farther north. Her swollen, lacerated face is peppered with tiny, razor-sharp pieces of metal from the shrapnel bomb that killed most of her family. She’s been blinded in one eye. She stares at the floor with the good eye, an empty gaze of hopelessness.

This is happening throughout Afghanistan as the Soviets attack villages and drive the people out so that the local freedom fighters

have no basis of support. Every bed in the refugee hospital is filled with victims of all ages. Some are infants. Others are more than eighty years old. All have ghastly wounds. Many barely cling to life. The medical staff is in a perpetual state of overwhelm, and more victims are carried in every day.

I know we have done things like this to one another throughout all time. Knowing it is one thing. Witnessing it is something else. It touches you in places you never knew existed. Gazing at Mahmoud, I can't help but believe that if I devote my life to telling the world about such atrocities we might wake up one day and stop the killing. I realize this is utterly naïve, but Mahmoud's eyes argue otherwise. "You must tell the world," he seems to be saying with his gaze. "You must."

"Yes, I'll do it," I say aloud as my cameraman finishes filming. It's impossible for me to consider otherwise. I feel this at the very core of who I am. And even though Mahmoud speaks no English, his soft smile tells me he understands that I've heard his message.

One Month Earlier

WBZ-TV is the NBC affiliate in Boston. I'm the new reporter here, hired just two months ago and bent on making my mark. This morning, as I sit at my desk in the newsroom leafing through *The Boston Globe*, a photo jumps out at me. It shows a young girl with a white cloth wrapped over her thick black hair. Her dark, haunting eyes are staring straight into my Soul. There is no story, just a caption below the picture saying, "Free Afghanistan Alliance." That's it. No details, no phone number, no way to contact the organization.

It's 1986, and the war in Afghanistan has been major news ever since the Soviets invaded seven years earlier, and I think this might be a "local hook," a Boston connection to an international event.

Nobody in the newsroom has ever heard of the Free Afghanistan Alliance. The phone company doesn't have a listing. It makes me all the

more determined to contact them. I finally get hold of someone in *The Globe* advertising department and I beg, cajole, and schmooze them for all I'm worth. It works. They break the rules and give me the name of the person who bought the ad. His name is Charles Brockunier. He owns a Persian rug store just across the Charles River in Cambridge. I ring him immediately, telling him I'm a reporter and that his ad caught my eye. He gives me an overview of his mission to help the Afghan people by smuggling badly needed medical supplies into the country. As we speak, it's clear that he's brilliant but also eccentric, totally locked into his mission. I'm completely intrigued now and know I must meet him. I get his address, jump up, and tell the assignment editor I'm off to investigate a lead on a possible story.

Brockunier's shop is hard to find, tucked away on a side street near Harvard Square. The air inside smells ancient, and with so many dusty, antique carpets piled everywhere there's barely room to pass through. The place is empty, and I have to call out several times before Brockunier appears from behind a stack of rugs. The founder of the Free Afghanistan Alliance is tall and lanky, clad in worn, wrinkled khaki trousers, a drab, collarless Nehru shirt, and a rugged vest that looks and smells like it was made from the wool of a wild goat. He is sporting a matching brimless, woolen hat like the ones I've seen Afghan freedom fighters wearing in network news reports. He has a heavy, poorly trimmed reddish beard, ruddy complexion, and glasses so thick his eyes look like they might jump out of their sockets.

Brockunier insists that we sit down, cross-legged, on a stack of elaborately patterned burgundy, gold, and earthy brown Persian rugs to sip Afghan tea. I've always been stiff. Sitting like this is a pain. It makes me impatient. It's not even that cold outside, so I don't feel like drinking hot tea. I just want to pepper Brockunier with questions and get a full understanding of what he's up to. But this is his world and he's clearly not going to be rushed.

As he settles in with his tea, Brockunier tells me he is a native of Cambridge, went to Harvard but never finished a degree, and has spent years traveling to Afghanistan to buy rugs for his shop. He's in love with the Afghan people, a self-taught expert on their culture and

history, and fluent in their languages of Pashto and Dari, along with being conversant in several other languages of the region. When I ask for an example of a few dialects, he rattles off sentences with ease. I can't understand a word, but I can tell he isn't faking it.

"I had to flee Kabul in 1979 when the Soviet tanks rolled in," he explains in a deep, scratchy voice. "Otherwise, I'm sure they would have arrested me, tortured me, accused me of being a spy, and locked me away in prison." Back home in Cambridge, Brockunier founded the Free Afghanistan Alliance and dedicated himself to raising money to support the Afghan freedom fighters, called mujahideen. These are the men, and often boys, who are fighting the Soviet occupation of their country. Most are rugged, rural villagers—farmers and tradesmen—who stage daring attacks on Soviet positions, then slip back into hidden camps in the mountains. They are outnumbered and vastly outgunned but are holding their own against all odds.

"I smuggle the medical supplies across the border of Pakistan and into mujahideen camps," he tells me, his voice monotone. Matter of fact. "I have to go through the tribal territories. It's lawless. Everyone is armed. You have to be careful."

I always try to follow my instincts, and they tell me that I can trust this man. He's experienced, compassionate, and dedicated to his cause. And I really want this story. When he tells me he's about to leave on another trip to a mujahideen hideaway in the Afghan mountains, I know that somehow, some way, I'm going with him.

"Can you get me and my cameraman in with you?" I ask him point blank. "We can tell your story. More people will know about your work. You'll probably get more donations." Brockunier's bulging eyes get even wider and, for the first time since I arrived, I see the hint of a smile on his face.

"Yes, I can do that," he answers without hesitation. I get as many details from him as I can persuade him to share without compromising his need for secrecy and protection of his contacts, then head back to the station for online research on the war through our station's new computer system, one of the first in the country.

I check in with my favorite cameraman, Dennis, to see if he's willing to risk the trip. He's beyond willing; he's ecstatic about the idea.

Within a few hours, I've drafted a detailed proposal and mounted it in a glossy report folder. Navigating the expansive and ever hectic newsroom, I reach the office of our news director, Stan Hopkins.

"Stan," I say, as I poke my head inside his door, "can I have a few minutes?"

"Sure, come on in and have a seat." Stan is one of the best news directors in the country. He hired me to stir things up and I've done some of that already with a few investigative reports, including exposing corrupt cops who shook down nightclub owners in downtown Boston for thousands of dollars in bribes. I'm still the new kid, but I've earned Stan's trust and support. Now I'm about to stretch him to the limit.

"Take a look at this," I say as I hand him the proposal. The station has never sent a reporter to cover a foreign war, so I've included story summaries, itineraries, budget breakdowns, and backup plans. Most importantly, I've made a detailed argument on the relevance of the story for our audience. The Free Afghanistan Alliance is right next to Harvard and receives donations from throughout New England. The war between Russia and Afghanistan is front page news almost every day. This international coverage will set us apart from the other news stations, with whom, of course, we're always in competition. Stan takes his time and pores through every detail. I can practically hear his mind spinning, weighing the risk against the payoff. After several minutes, I can see he's hooked.

"How do you know this guy is for real and can get you inside Afghanistan?" Stan asks, still looking at the proposal.

"He's been doing it for six years, at least two times a year," I answer. "But there are no guarantees. We'll be taking a gamble."

"Do you realize how dangerous this is?" Stan is looking me straight in the eye this time.

"Yes," I say, knowing this would come up. "There are no Western journalists inside Afghanistan that we know of, and the Soviets say they'll execute any they capture."

"And you and Dennis are willing to take that chance?" Stan knows the answer.

"Yes, we are."

This is what journalists do. Take chances. Go places only soldiers would go. Even risk their lives to report the news. Especially idealistic journalists with a burning desire to be wherever the action is, to expose injustice and the causes of human suffering.

“Give me a few minutes,” Stan says. As I return to my desk, I see him heading upstairs toward the general manager’s office. *He’s going to take a huge chance and pitch the story*, I say excitedly to myself. I can’t think of much else the rest of the day and am relieved when the assignment desk doesn’t need me for any breaking news. Just as I’m getting ready to go home for the night, Stan calls me back into his office and stares straight into my eyes for a minute before saying a word.

“It’s a go,” he finally says with a firm smile. “I know you’ll do it right. If you don’t, we’ll both be looking for work somewhere else.”

“I won’t let you down,” I say, amazed at his courage, and touched by his confidence in me.



A few weeks later, Dennis and I land in Peshawar, Pakistan, an ancient city near the Khyber Pass, close to the southern border of Afghanistan. We’d be lost without Brockunier at our side. The narrow, jumbled streets are thronged with mule carts weaving their way through lines of huge trucks covered with colorful paintings, wood carvings, calligraphy, and mirrors. Small, open-sided mini-taxis with high-pitched engines scurry between the trucks and carts belching black smoke into the air. Men with thick, long beards and piercing gazes are gathered at every corner, thronging the walkways, and huddled in dark shops sipping chai tea while gravely discussing the war next door. Most wear loose, pajama-style outfits called *shalwar kamiz*, with tan vests and cloth turbans or woolen hats called *pakols*. Large ceremonial knives, curved like crescents, dangle from their waists. The sharp steel blades could slice off the head of a goat with ease. The women of Peshawar are almost invisible in the background, covered from head to toe in heavy cloth gowns called burkas. It’s like wearing a prison cell, with only a small slit at the eye level so they can navigate the outdoor markets.

Tall, conical minarets with onion domes tower over the city; from these, the faithful are called to prayer at the mosques five times a day. Traditionally, a devotee called a *muzim* climbed the winding staircase to a narrow ledge atop the minaret to call to the village at the top of his lungs. No one would hear him today. So great bullhorns have been attached to the minarets, wired to tape players down in the mosques. It's a sign of progress, Pakistan style.

Brockunier has somehow managed to get us into Mahabat Khan, Peshawar's largest mosque, to film the prayers. He blends in easily, wearing his own travel-worn *shalwar kamiz* and *pakol* while speaking the local dialect with fluency. Dennis and I stick out like sore thumbs, standing behind our TV camera and tripod in our blue jeans and khaki shirts. We look like aliens, or at least two futuristic men who hijacked a time machine and landed in a past century.

The mosque dates back to the 1600s and is stunning with its high, arched gateways, richly carved parapets, and fluted domes crowning a massive prayer hall. There must be more than a thousand people here. Rows of men with heavy beards sit on their heels chanting prayers in Pashto as they reach their arms to the sky in unison and then bow forward, touching their foreheads to their prayer rugs. More than a few of them gaze up at us as they lift their heads, their thick eyebrows knitted in frowns of disapproval. Even though America is an ally of Pakistan, and the country is happy to take billions of dollars in U.S. foreign aid, nobody said they have to like us. And most don't. They don't like our politics, our lifestyles, our culture, or the power we wield in the world. The only thing worse than an American right now is a Russian. It's an open secret that the CIA is funneling aid to the Afghans to fight the Russians, so we are tolerated. As the old saying here goes, *the enemy of my enemy is my friend*.

Brockunier is good at getting us around the streets of Peshawar, moving by foot from mosques to marketplaces so we can shoot the necessary background color for our reports. But we have to be careful. Everywhere we go someone becomes resentful of our presence, raising his voice at us. A crowd gathers. Tempers start to flare. We quickly commandeered some mini-taxis and get the hell out of there before the crowds become anti-American mobs.

At almost every location we film, Brockunier stops to buy Afghan rugs from street vendors. I can't understand it. He has thousands of rugs back in his shop that will take him years to sell. He's even begun pressing me for funds to buy more. Worse, he's having trouble making contact with the Afghan mujahideen, which is, of course, the reason why we're here. It's been five days now and I'm starting to wonder if my judgment was flawed and all I've done is sponsor a maniacal rug-buying spree for a complete crackpot. I have a sickening vision of walking back into the WBZ newsroom, tail between my legs, everyone staring at the failure I have proven myself to be as I break the news to Stan, and then start looking for another job.

Every night, Dennis and I sit in one of the two decrepit and mostly empty "foreigners' hotels" as Brockunier disappears into the dark streets to seek out his Afghan contacts. These are the people he has worked with for years, he tells me, and the only ones who can get us into Afghanistan. They always have to stay in hiding, and the dangers of meeting with us get greater every day. The longer we're here, the more people are aware of us, the more visible we become.

Peshawar is filled with intrigue. Soviet agents, secret police, spies, and snitches. Everyone on the lookout for an enemy or a chance to sell some information. A Soviet spy would kill an Afghan freedom fighter in a heartbeat, and vice versa. A bomb went off two nights ago at the other foreigners' hotel, destroying several rooms and injuring some European businessmen. Yesterday, there was an explosion at the Afghan restaurant we've eaten at every day.

Tonight, after a sixth day of waiting for contact with the mujahideen, I can't sleep. I'm furious with myself for trusting Brockunier and am contemplating storming into his room, confronting him, and tossing all his lousy rugs into the street while I'm at it. It's almost dawn when I doze off. Then I'm startled awake by a soft but firm knock at the door. I crack it open to see Brockunier standing there with two rugged men in Afghan dress. One is brandishing a Soviet AK-47 automatic rifle. The other looks like he could kill someone with his bare hands. It's the most comforting sight I've seen since we landed in this country and I feel embarrassed for losing faith in my friend who buys all those fabulous carpets.

“They have to blindfold us,” Brockunier says as I rouse Dennis from his bed. “They don’t want us to know where the safe houses are in case we’re captured and interrogated.”

One of the mujahideen pulls strips of dirty cloth from his baggy pajama pants pockets and wraps them around our heads to cover our eyes. Then we’re stuffed into the back of a Jeep and driven to a safe house somewhere in the maze of the oldest sector of the city. When the blindfolds are removed, we’re in a dark cement room, surrounded by a half-dozen or so mujahideen sitting cross-legged on an ornate rug. They look tough as grizzly bears but welcome us with warm smiles as they gesture for us to sit and drink chai with them. As I’ll soon learn, nothing happens in Pakistan without this ritual of sitting on the floor and sipping tea as we are subtly scrutinized and deemed to be trustworthy...or not.

After several meetings, each time at a different safe house, we finally win their trust. One morning before dawn, the mujahideen arrive at our room again without any notice. They give us a few minutes to



With Charles Brockunier inside Afghanistan in 1986.

gather our gear, then load us into the back of their Jeep, this time for the dangerous journey through the wild, tribal territories along the border and into the snow-covered mountains of Afghanistan. There's no need for blindfolds now, but we need to lay low and do our best to blend in. Along the way, we stop at a tailor's shop and quickly get outfitted with Afghan clothing. All we need now are beards down to our waists and AK-47s slung over our shoulders.

The tribal territories line the amorphous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. They begin on the sloping plains that skirt the Himalayas and soon rise into jagged mountains. The main crop in this region is poppy flowers, grown to produce opium and heroin. Warlords hold sway here. In the few remote towns we have to sneak through, weapons are openly sold on the streets and frequently fired into the air—sort of a test drive of your AK-47 or Kalashnikov before you take ownership of it. Dennis and I stay curled up in the back of the Jeep on top of our gear. There are informants everywhere, and we would be a prize catch.

“Are you doing okay?” I ask Dennis.

“Fine,” he says with an impish smile. Dennis looks like a shorter, tougher version of Brockunier, with his ruddy Irish face, short-cut reddish beard, and broad shoulders. He's strong as an ox, funny and charismatic, and utterly fearless. He's also the best photographer I've ever known. He never misses a shot and always manages to step squarely into the action without ever getting in the way.

“I'm just thinking about the gear,” he says. “I hope the solar battery recharging kits work right. I tested them before we left the States, but you never know.”

I don't have any doubts. Dennis keeps everything meticulously organized and I've seen him instantly repair his gear in the midst of a big story. He's unstoppable.

Brockunier is seated right in front of us, on the backseat of the Jeep with our guide and interpreter, Rasoul. The mujahideen with the AK-47 rides shotgun while his partner speeds across the rocky dirt roads. Every five minutes we hit a huge bump and our heads slam into the roof. We're choking on dust. It's hot as hell. And I love every second of it.

It's pitch black when we finally get through the territories and into the mountains of Afghanistan. We're driving without headlights, still going so fast that I can't believe the driver can stay on the winding road guided by starlight alone. But at least with the cover of darkness Dennis and I can finally poke our heads up and breathe more deeply, relieved that we've made it without having to get through any checkpoints.

"The border guards come and go," Rasoul says in perfect English as we head higher into the mountains. "None can be trusted. We must still be very careful."

Rasoul, which is surely a pseudonym, has thin, fine features, like a nobleman. In talking with him, I can see he is highly educated and cultured. He is fluent in English, French, German, and Russian in addition to all the major Afghan dialects. He loves conversation, but he is cryptic about his past, except for sharing that he is from Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan. My guess is that he's a member of the Afghan elite, deeply connected to the government and business community, maybe even a former head of some intelligence operation. I imagine he would have been imprisoned or executed had he not escaped Kabul during the Soviet invasion. Rasoul is vehemently patriotic and devoted to the resistance, moving like a shadow behind the scenes. He has to be the contact Brockunier was waiting for all along. The one person making all of this happen.

It must be close to midnight when I nod off to sleep. Suddenly, our driver slams on the brakes and my forehead smacks into the metal bar framing the backseat. "Get down!" Rasoul hisses with urgency. "Say nothing! No one speak! I'll do the talking. Do not leave the Jeep!" He speaks like a general and we immediately fall in line. Brockunier freezes like a statue. The mujahideen who is riding shotgun grips his automatic weapon and holds it at his chest. Dennis and I curl up again, trying to disappear.

As Rasoul jumps out of the Jeep and slams the door, Brockunier whispers, "We're surrounded by armed men in military uniforms. They're speaking Urdu, so they're Pakistanis. This isn't good."

I can hear Rasoul arguing loudly. I don't understand a word, but it doesn't sound like he's getting anywhere. Suddenly, the Jeep is flooded

with flashlights, the doors are thrown open, and we're ordered out. Brockunier seems to pass for one of the mujahideen despite his reddish beard. But Dennis and I, even in our new pajama-like garb, still look very much like foreigners.

Rasoul is ordered back to the Jeep and whispers, "Don't say a word. These are tribal people. They don't speak English, but they know it when they hear it. They hate Americans almost as much as Russians. I've told them you are French doctors, volunteering to treat the wounded. Right now, they are threatening to arrest us all. Whatever you do, do not show your passport."

Three guards walk up and yell at us to get out of the Jeep, then quickly rummage through everything, finding our camera gear beneath the duffel bags filled with Brockunier's medical supplies. This stops the show. The yelling gets louder. Rasoul is incredibly courageous, alternately confronting the armed men with verbal assaults then switching to gentle persuasion. But he's getting nowhere. Finally, he somehow manages to get the guards to wait in a group as he comes back to where I'm standing at the rear of the Jeep.

"This is trouble," he says with a sigh of resignation. "They want to know what doctors are doing with camera equipment. They want documents."

My mind starts racing for some sort of solution. It's too dangerous to change our story and tell them we're journalists. There's no way we can show them our American passports. Then it hits me in a flash. "Tell them I'm getting documents from my bag," I whisper to Rasoul.

He looks shocked and is about to protest when I say, "Don't worry. No passports. Trust me." Rasoul calls out to the leader of the guards and gets his permission as I slowly reach into the Jeep for my shoulder bag and open the zippered pouch I keep my passport in. Right next to it is the equipment manifest we had to obtain from the Pakistan Embassy granting permission to bring our gear into the country. It's covered with official government stamps.

"Tell them this is our permission document from Pakistan customs," I whisper to Rasoul. The first two words beneath the government stamps are Sony Betacam. That's our digital camera. "I'm Dr. Sony," I whisper to Rasoul, pointing at the words. "Dennis is

Dr. Betacam. We're treating wounded fighters and filming it to raise more money back in France for more medical supplies. We're on the side of their Afghan brothers."

Rasoul's eyes widen. "This is good," he says as he takes the paper and walks toward the guards. There are a few tense minutes. The document changes hands several times. Suddenly, everyone is patting Rasoul on the back. Our gear is returned to us and we cram back into the Jeep, start the engine, and roll past the guards, waving and smiling like one big family.

"I have to remember this trick," Rasoul says as he hands the manifest back to me with a huge sigh of relief.

"I thought we were dead," Dennis says. It's the first time I've ever heard him sound frightened.

"Or at least going to jail and having everything confiscated," Brockunier chimes in.

"It's a good sign," Rasoul says, calming everyone down. "We still have a long way to go. Let's get some rest."

I'm exhausted and try to close my eyes and doze off again, but it's impossible to sleep as we wind higher into the mountains and the road becomes narrower and more difficult to navigate, especially with our headlights still off. Finally, we stop in the middle of nowhere. No more road. Nothing but mud and snow.

"We must unload everything here," Rasoul says, still whispering and gesturing for quiet. "No flashlights. No talking."

Once we have our things, our mujahideen driver and guard hug Rasoul, jump back in the Jeep, start the engine, and somehow find a way to turn around and drive off. The woods around us are pitch black. While it was hot in the valleys below, it's freezing cold here. Deep banks of springtime snow are illuminated by the brilliant starlight. We just stand still and shiver, our gear held in our arms, as the drone of the Jeep's engine disappears down the mountainside.

"What the hell is happening?" Dennis whispers to me, risking a rebuke from Rasoul. "We might just freeze to death!"

I look at him and shake my head. Shrug my shoulders. Then I pat the sleeping bag roped onto my backpack and wonder how warm it will keep me in the wet snow. Suddenly I remember we only have one

or two days' worth of food with us. As I start to think it might have been better had the tribal Pakistanis arrested us, we hear a faint, sloshing sound at the tree line. Now we can make out the silhouette of two figures under the starlight. A man with a rifle over his shoulder and a mule. They approach silently. He is mujahideen. His first glance is toward Rasoul, who then gestures for us to pile our gear on the mule.

We walk behind the mujahideen, who leads us into the cover of the woods and up the mountainside. It's slow going. Grueling, in fact. The snow is up to our knees and the temperature beyond freezing. We touch one another's backs to keep from getting lost. An hour later, we arrive at a bombed-out farmhouse. More mujahideen appear in the darkness. There are no lights. Not even a candle. Nothing to give the Soviets a chance to discover their position. We stumble into a dark, frigid hallway of the home, finally making it to a room with a wooden floor covered in straw. About to collapse, we unroll our sleeping bags and slip in. Curling up, I roll over and whisper to Dennis, "We made it."



We're beyond exhausted, but we get only two, maybe three, hours of sleep before we are told to roll up our bags and quietly depart before sunrise. There are three mules now, the one with our gear, the other two laden with rounds of ammunition, artillery shells, and grenades. It takes a full day of vertical hiking through heavier snow to find the hidden camp of a group of some two hundred mujahideen. The fighters line up in the glistening snow to meet us, surrounded by towering pines. They shoulder their weapons, from old rifles to AK-47s to rocket launchers, as a show of pride and dedication. Most are rustic farmers from small mountain villages. They range in age from fourteen to eighty-four. Several have lost a leg or an arm to land mines. It hasn't slowed them down a bit. Instead, it has strengthened their resolve. I will soon realize the oldest among them could out-hike me on my best day.

Rasoul introduces us as American journalists who have come to document their struggle. Like the Pakistanis, most Afghans dislike

America but again, the enemy of their enemy is their friend. At least for now. Brockunier delivers his medical supplies to the chief of the fighters and all the men chant “*Allāhu Akbar*,” meaning “God is great.” Dennis films them thrusting their weapons into the air, symbolizing that this is a holy war. *When our viewers see this back home they’ll be blown away*, I think, as Dennis deftly puts his lens a few inches away from a boy’s hand clutching the trigger of his weapon and then pans to his innocent face.

We live with the mujahideen for the next week, sleeping in small huts while burning frozen wood soaked in kerosene to avoid freezing to death. There’s only enough food for one meal a day. It’s always goat fat boiled into a filmy yellowish grease and served in large, communal bowls, with broken goat bones at the bottom. We sit in circles on the ground and scoop up each bite with a traditional flatbread called naan that the mujahideen bake in makeshift clay ovens. The grease is rancid. The gristle on the bones is black with rot. We’re so hungry that it tastes delicious, especially the steaming hot naan.

Dennis and I hold each piece of naan in our fingertips, carefully dipping it into the bowl and slipping it into our mouths. It’s challenging to do so without having grease run down our arms. I have to be especially careful since I’m left-handed. The left hand is the one used throughout the region for self-cleaning after defecation. Reaching my left hand into the food bowl would be the ultimate gaffe. For me it’s almost impossible to remember. I come close to muffing it every day.

The mujahideen have well-camouflaged anti-aircraft guns posted high above the camp. Just before sunset, they fire at any Soviet MiGs seen flying at altitudes well beyond the range of their artillery. After shooting a few rounds, they circle the guns and chant “*Allāhu Akbar*,” then almost sing, repeatedly, in Pashto, “We vow to purge the satanic invaders from our homeland!”

The real fighting starts long before dawn. The mujahideen slip down dark trails into the valley below to launch guerrilla attacks against Soviet outposts on major roads that connect the few major cities of Afghanistan, all of which are under Soviet control. When helicopter gunships counterattack, they scurry back into the mountains, hiding under huge boulders along the way, carefully moving



With mujahideen inside Afghanistan in 1986.

toward the cover of the thick forest. Back in camp, the fighters treat the wounded with Brockunier's medical supplies. They bury their dead before sundown. We film everything we can. Their war against the mighty Soviet Army is like a small shepherd boy against a towering, battle-trained giant. But these are the toughest people I have ever met and they fight boldly, like David going after Goliath with just a stone and a slingshot.



After leaving the mujahideen and saying good-bye to Rasoul and Brockunier, Dennis and I make our way into the sprawling camps along the Pakistani border. There are 5 million refugees—one-third of the Afghan population—living in horrid conditions, many without so much as a ragged tent over their heads. This is the unseen horror of the Cold War as it's played out around the world. The Soviets invade Afghanistan as a pushback to American influence in Pakistan.

The Americans then push back against communist expansionism. Innocent people get hurt. Lots of them. I am thirty-seven years old and have been in some rough places, but this is human suffering beyond anything I have ever witnessed or even imagined. It sickens me. Angers me. Makes me want to cry. And it strengthens my resolve to tell this story.

We film improvised burial grounds, where bodies are stacked atop one another and covered with dirt and large stones. They surround the edges of the camps like anthills. Those who survive cling to life with incredible determination, refusing to succumb to the diseases that spread like fire. More victims pour into the overwhelmed treatment centers every day. This is where we find Mahmoud and the other wounded Afghan children. We are here for three days, rushing to complete our filming in the camps and main refugee hospital before we fly home. In all, we have been gone less than a month, but it feels like a lifetime.



Mahmoud in Refugee Hospital, Pakistan, 1986.



Back in Boston, we air a series of reports entitled “Afghanistan, the Untold Story.” I knew this was powerful stuff, but I never dreamed the response would be so overwhelming. Viewers throughout New England rally to the cause. Schoolchildren launch class projects, draw pictures for the children in the camps, and mail them with bags of coins from their piggy banks. Viewers form groups to collect donations of food, clothing, and medical supplies, which Brockunier ships directly to the refugee hospital where we found Mahmoud. New England hospitals offer their facilities, time, and services. Airlines agree to fly in dozens of war-wounded children for world-class medical treatment. Our viewers open their homes to family members accompanying the Afghan children as they arrive in Boston for eye surgery, prosthetic devices, and burn treatments. Mahmoud is on the very first flight and will soon be cared for at the Shriner’s Burn Institute. I cover it all, with a new story almost every night. More than ever before, it makes me feel like what I do for a living is making a difference in the world.

Over the next few months, I’m periodically sent on the road to other major stations of Group W, which owns WBZ, and I broadcast the reports from Philadelphia to San Francisco, appearing on talk shows and giving public speeches. One morning, shortly after I return to Boston, Stan calls me into his office to tell me our work has been given a Columbia-DuPont Award. I don’t even know what the award is until he explains it’s the broadcast equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize.

This is big news for my career. That’s not lost on me. But as I say when I accept the award at a ceremony in New York, it’s hard to accept such a prestigious honor for documenting such tremendous suffering. As I sit in a suit and tie with Stan and Dennis for a sumptuous awards dinner complete with champagne, I feel humbled as well as a little embarrassed and out of place. I’d rather be back in the field, unwashed, hungry, and exhausted, pushing forward to bring another story of human suffering and injustice into the light of day.

In fact, all I can think about is where to go next.





CHAPTER 2

Beginnings

I WAS BORN IN LOS ANGELES IN 1949. The city was already well on its way to becoming a madhouse. When I turned five, we moved to the nearby countryside. A bucolic place called West Covina. It was paradise: rolling hills, creeks, pastures, farms, orchards, and walnut groves perfect for all-day hide-and-seek and the building of secret forts. But soon the developers arrived, and the landscape was leveled, scraped, and sterilized for suburban housing tracts and strip malls. As I watched all my favorite haunts being destroyed, it felt like they were bulldozing my childhood into oblivion.

Like so many other Americans of their era, my parents and their friends were prejudiced. From my earliest years I heard countless pejorative terms for people who weren't white and conservative. Even as a little boy, something deep inside me recoiled every time they spoke like this. It was incredibly painful and made me feel like I had been born into a family to which I didn't belong. Then came the sixties. The Civil Rights Movement. Vietnam War. The assassinations of John Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. It felt like someone had hijacked my country. Like so many others of my generation, I was consumed with youthful outrage. I marched in protests. I got roughed up by the cops at peace rallies. I became completely disillusioned with the idea of ever joining a society that behaved that way.

I can't remember finishing high school in 1967. All I wanted was out. At the first chance, with the ink barely dry on my diploma,

I fled to the woods of Humboldt County in Northern California. It was a place where I could sink my fingers into the fertile soil, plant seeds, tend the earth, and grow my own food. I could spend days on remote, rocky beaches and never see another soul. I could canoe down wild rivers or hike into forests of virgin redwoods and just sit, listening as the quiet whispers of nature enveloped me. Being in this isolated area with nature's beauty was like finding my true home. I was away from the racist remarks, the anger, the frustration of marching and protesting, and a world that seemed upside down and inside out.

I loved the outdoors, working with my hands, and being self-sufficient. I bought an old truck and chainsaw, scavenged dead oak and pine trees from the forest, cut and chopped like a madman, and sold firewood. The smell of the wood splitting open mesmerized me. Oak had a light fragrance of vanilla and cinnamon. The pine resin had a minty aroma that flooded my senses. I also built a business restoring some of the region's cherished Victorian homes, figuring out how to do the needed carpentry and painting as I went. This nourished and sustained me, but when I turned nineteen it felt like it was time to get serious about an education and I enrolled at a small college in the redwoods named Humboldt State University.

I became fixated as I threw myself at my studies even harder than I had chopped firewood. I loved language and literature—from the classics of Shakespeare, Whitman, and Thoreau to the radical poets of the beat generation. I ate it all up like I was starving, finishing a degree in English Literature and earning a high school teaching credential in less than four years. It wasn't from any inherent brilliance, and I had no career ambitions. I don't even know why I got a credential. I never wanted to be a teacher. I just needed to prove something to myself and to the mainstream world I had left behind even though I still wanted nothing to do with society, the system, or the rules. I'd checked out of that scene long ago and, with my degree finished and the small savings left over from my firewood and restoration business, I was ready to head off for the unknown.

I decided to leave my remote cabin on the edge of a village called Freshwater for a few months and see more of the world. I thought

about South America, New Zealand, or Africa. Or maybe I'd travel around Europe again on a shoestring budget like my trip there the previous summer. The destination wasn't of utmost importance. Expanding my boundaries was. I longed to feel part of something bigger, explore what was unknown to me, and be a global citizen.

In the end, I chose Canada. I could drive my old van there, explore Vancouver, then head farther north into the Yukon Territory and camp out in the wilderness, avoiding the costs of air travel and lodging. In preparation for my trip, I drove into the nearby town of Eureka to buy some supplies. As I was heading home to pack for my trip, the local television station caught my eye. The large cinder-block building had a neon sign facing the main road that flashed the time and current temperature right beside the station's call letters: KVIQ-TV, Channel 6.

I don't know why I pulled into the parking lot and walked inside. I didn't own a TV and didn't care a thing about local news. I was hooked on *The New York Times* and enthralled by the major events shaking the world, always fantasizing I was the one on the scene of a great war or revolution. I never saw myself as a reporter. I just wanted to be a witness to that which was momentous and meaningful. Yet suddenly, there I was, strolling through the lobby of a small-town TV station, when a portly, gregarious man wearing strong cologne and a loud tie walked up and introduced himself.

"Hi, I'm Alan Jones, the general manager. You must be the one looking for a job." Jones reached out with his meaty fingers and shook my hand with surprising strength.

"Yes, sir," I answered impulsively, trying to match his grip while wondering what I was getting myself into. I'd never taken a course in journalism and had no idea what duties people performed at TV stations.

"Where are you from?" Jones asked with a gentle grin.

"Right here, Freshwater," I answered. "I just graduated from Humboldt State."

"Oh, I thought you were from out of town!" he said with a laugh.

Jones must have been confusing me with someone who really did have a job interview and was somehow blind to my outfit of work

boots, blue jeans, and a flannel shirt. I glanced at the station entrance expecting to see a well-scrubbed journalism grad in a dark suit and button-down collar come running in for his interview and angrily declare me an impostor.

“Come with me,” Jones said. “As I’m sure you know, we just fired a reporter and plenty of people want this job. I’ll introduce you to our news director. We’ll see how you do.”

“Yes, sir!” I said again with a smile, thinking I might as well have a good time while it lasted and I’d still be able to leave for Canada in the morning.

News Director Don Michaels fit the role of a seasoned journalist to a T. He was sitting behind a desk piled with papers in what could only be called organized chaos. He wore thick glasses framing a face pockmarked from childhood acne. His thinning reddish hair was in a comb-over to hide a balding pate. He was coatless, in a wrinkled white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled above his elbows, thick suspenders, and a narrow black tie tossed over one shoulder. Michaels was so absorbed in his work he didn’t bother looking up when Jones said, “Here’s a local guy who wants a job,” and sat me down in a creaky wooden chair facing his desk. “I’m a local guy, too,” Jones said as he turned and headed out. “I like local guys.”

Two metal boxes, each about four feet high, stood beside Michaels’ desk loudly clacking away, spewing rolls of tan, pulpy paper all over the floor. Suddenly, a sharp bell sounded. Michaels leaned over and ripped the paper off one machine. “Another so-called *urgent*,” he said disdainfully, giving it a quick glance then crumpling it up and tossing it into the trash. “Worthless, old news; nothing urgent at all.”

“What are those?” I asked, risking sounding like a fool.

“News wires. Associated Press and United Press International. Didn’t you learn about these in your journalism classes?”

“No,” I said as straightforward as possible. “My degree is in English Lit. I’ve never taken a class in journalism.”

“Humph,” Michaels grunted. “Go take a look.” Michaels used words sparingly, getting right to the point. His brusque expression never changed.

I walked over and watched the automatic printers firing off one story after the next. World news, national news, statewide news, local news: reports literally pouring in from around the globe before anyone ever saw them in a newspaper. As they cascaded onto the floor like a waterfall, it seemed like the whole world was unfolding right there at my feet. It sent chills down my spine.

Michaels ripped three stories off the wire, handed them to me and said in a curt tone, "Write these up. Make them concise and conversational. One page only. Here's some script paper. You can use that empty desk and typewriter over there. You have ten minutes." He looked me in the eye with a fatherly but piercing gaze as I realized he hadn't bothered to even ask me my name.

I had never typed a word in my life. I hand-wrote most of my college papers and had to pay someone to type them when a professor required it. I sat down at the news desk and flashed through the wire reports, then picked up a sheet of the thick script paper with shaky hands. It was really three sheets; white on the top, pink in the middle, and yellow on the bottom, with sheets of carbon paper in between. It was so thick I could barely get it into the typewriter without destroying it, already losing too much of my precious ten minutes. Once I finally got the sheet threaded, I began to hunt and peck with my index fingers, furtively glancing at Michaels in hopes he wasn't watching and relieved to see he was crumpling up more wire copy and tossing it on the floor. Despite my slow fingers, my studies in English Literature paid off. I knew how to write. I finished just in time, making my first deadline.

I handed the stories to Michaels. He gave them a rapid glance, tossed them onto one of the growing piles on his desk, and said in a challenging tone, "Can you shoot and edit film?" I was in luck again. Art was part of my minor studies, and as an elective I had taken a film class working with 16 millimeter film cameras, cutting the film strips and splicing them together with special glue. Michaels took me into the film room and I gave a quiet sigh of relief. It was the same editing equipment I knew so well. I cut and spliced some leftover film strips for him then noticed the cameras on a wall rack. "Those are Bolex and Auricon cameras," I said. "I know how to use them.

The Bolex is for silent footage and the Auricon records sound on the film strip. You always need to white balance and set the f-stop before you shoot. By the way, I also know how to process the film.”

“Okay, I’m a homicide detective,” Michaels said, seeming unimpressed as he strode back into the newsroom. “You’ve rushed to the scene of the crime after hearing on the police scanners that a body has been found in the woods.” He pointed to a shelf with a few black boxes that had dials and flashing red lights. I could hear the squawking of a police dispatcher and the responses from units in the field. Scanners. This must be how it really happened.

“I’m busy on this case. I only have three minutes to speak with you. Here’s a notepad. Go.” Michaels was pushing me. Seeing what I was like under pressure.

I decided to be terse, just like him, stick to the basics and ask the obvious.

“Male or female? Age? Name? Cause of death? Where did the victim live? Any suspects?” I took furious notes as he fired off his answers.

“OK, follow me,” Michaels said. “Grab the wire stories you wrote from my desk. You’re on the air in two minutes.”

We walked briskly into the large news studio. There were racks of lights on the ceiling; massive floor cameras on thick, black wheels; and a colorful news set in the middle, painted in hues of blue with *KVIQ Eyewitness News* prominently displayed in the background. There was an adjoining room behind the cameras with a plate-glass window labeled “Control Room,” filled with projectors and other large machines that mystified me. Michaels opened the door and found the engineer. “Fire up the cameras and turn on the lights for a screen test.”

As the hot lights flooded the studio, he sat me down in the news chair, wrapped a lavalier microphone around my neck, walked over to a floor camera, and pointed at me, then barked, “You’re on the air in thirty seconds. Just back from the murder scene. Forget your notes. Ad-lib what you know. Then read the stories you wrote... right into the camera. Make eye contact. Here we go, 3, 2, 1... You’re on.”

I took a deep breath and, doing my best to remember how network news reporters sounded, began my story. “I’m Brad Willis. Here’s the breaking news. I’m just back from a crime scene in the woods north of town. Homicide Detective Don Michaels tells me the body of a young woman, stabbed to death, has been discovered in a shallow grave. College coed Jane Doe, missing for several days, has been identified as the victim. The police say they have no suspects at this time. We’ll stay on the story and keep you informed as more information becomes available.”

Then I read the stories I had typed up. *Be sure to pause, I told myself, relax into it, be confident.* I glanced up at the camera as often as I could, keeping my right index finger on the script line so I could find my place when I glanced back down. The whole thing was still a lark, but I was already on fire. This was a way to make a difference. To be somebody. All my life I thought I never wanted a career. But now this was all I wanted. Every cell of my body was screaming that I had to have this job.

Back in the newsroom, Michaels asked a final question. “I’ve interviewed ten people for this job. They are all journalism graduates. Some of them even have reporting experience. You don’t. Why should I hire you?”

I stared straight into his eyes, hoping to make my gaze as piercing as his. “Because I’m relentless. I’ll work harder and longer than anyone you’ve ever met. I’ll make you proud and I’ll never let you down.” I meant every word of it. I belonged there. I just knew it.

“Thank you very much, young man.” Michaels suddenly turned formal and even more distant. “Give me your phone number. I’ll be in touch.”

And that was it. I drove home to my cabin, wondering if he and the general manager were chuckling at the rube in work boots who typed with two fingers and had no idea what newswires or police scanners were. I doubted I would ever hear from Michaels. I stuffed my travel gear into a backpack and went to bed, prepared to head for Canada first thing in the morning.

I was tired and groggy when the phone rang before sunrise. “Get in here now and grab a camera! There’s a guest at a hunting lodge

ninety miles north of here who's gone berserk. He's holed up in a room with his rifle and has already shot someone in the parking lot. I'm sending you to the scene." Michaels threw all this at me so fast I barely understood a word. He hung up before I could ask a question.

I pulled on my blue jeans and the only dress shirt I owned, laced up my boots, jumped into my van, and drove faster than lightning into town. Michaels was at the back door of the studio waiting for me with a handful of wire reports, a Bolex camera, extra film, and a notepad with directions scribbled on the first page.

"Thanks for the job," I said as I grabbed all the stuff and threw it on the seat next to me.

"My number is on the pad," he barked, all business. "Find a phone and call me once you're on the scene. And make me proud."

I sped north on Highway 101 as fast as my old van could go, furiously glancing in every mirror for any sign of the highway patrol. When I arrived at the scene, the lodge was surrounded by more than a dozen law enforcement vehicles. There were police officers, sheriff deputies, and highway patrolmen swarming everywhere with walkie-talkies, guns, and rifles. Cops manning a blockade at the lodge entrance ordered me to keep going. It immediately brought up all my memories of being manhandled at protest rallies. But this was different. I was here this time to report the news, not make it. I needed to be bold, show them I had the authority of the news station behind me. I sucked in a deep breath and slammed on my brakes right in front of them, rolled the window down, stuck the camera out, and shouted, "I'm a reporter from KVIQ-TV!"

It was unbelievable. In an instant, I was an accepted part of the scene. I was allowed to park right there and move as close to the lodge as possible, ducking behind police cars and periodically poking my head up to film the action. The County Sheriff agreed to an interview, giving me about the same three minutes Don Michaels allowed me when I played reporter with him. Within a few hours, the sniper surrendered. I was the only TV journalist there, filming as he walked from the hotel into the parking lot, hands held high, and followed orders to lie facedown on the asphalt as officers swarmed in to make the arrest.

I jumped into my van and blasted back down the highway. I rolled into the parking lot with my gas tank on empty, ran into the station, loaded the film in the processor, and grabbed some script paper. I furiously pecked away at my story and then, with Michaels' help, recorded my report on a bulky eight-track cartridge, editing the film to go with my words. I finished less than two minutes before we went on the air and ran everything into the Control Room just in time. It was an initiation by fire, but I made my first real deadline. I was transfixed, and in that moment the news business became my whole life.

I soon turned myself into an investigative reporter, using pictures and words to peel back the veneer of society and expose corrupt business and political practices. I caught drug detectives falsifying evidence, local council members taking bribes, timber companies illegally cutting down virgin timber in Redwood National Park. Covering the news was what I was born to do. I lived it, breathed it, ate it, and made it my way of crusading against the society from which I had felt so alienated in my earlier years. I was relentless, just as I'd promised Don Michaels I would be.

Within two years, Michaels retired and soon I was named news director, running the small news department, filming and reporting stories throughout the day, anchoring the six and eleven o'clock nightly newscasts, and even cleaning up and taking out the trash before the long drive home to my cabin. It was around-the-clock, usually seven days a week. I made a whopping \$600 per month. Far less than I took home from a weekend job painting a house, but I wouldn't have traded it for the world.



CHAPTER 3

Moving Up

AT THE END of my third year at KVIQ, I was beginning to understand something about the business of being a broadcast journalist. The market size of a television station was based on its audience size. I was working in one of the smallest markets in the country, something like number 198 out of 206. If I wanted broader horizons, bigger stories, and more opportunities, I'd need to land a job in a bigger city. But I had no idea how to go about it. Then one morning I received a call from a man introducing himself as Pete Langlois, the news director of KCRA-TV in Sacramento, the twenty-first market, and the state capital to boot.

"We want you to fly down and discuss taking a job with us," Langlois said in soft monotone of a voice.

"Sure, yes," I said with surprise. "But how did you hear about me?" I couldn't imagine anyone outside of Humboldt County even knowing about our little news operation.

"Your competitors," Langlois droned. "They want you out."

There was only one other station in town and they had always been number one in the news. My commitment to investigative reporting had helped turn that around, and after I became news director and anchor, we captured the number-one spot in the ratings and kept it. As Langlois would later explain, the general manager of our competitor station knew the owner of KCRA and had asked him for a favor—to get me out of town.

The job that KCRA offered me wasn't what I expected. I'd be in management as the executive producer of the station's prime-time magazine show, *Weeknight*. It was a light, fluffy show that mixed feature stories from the news department with entertainment and show business reports. They wanted me, they said, because the show needed someone who had been a news director to provide more organization, focus, and leadership than the previous producer. But it meant, they added, that I would no longer be a reporter. I told myself I didn't care. It was a huge jump up in market size, incredible pay, and the only offer on the table. What a mistake it turned out to be.

I gave the show everything I had, always trying to minimize the fluff and inject the investigative journalism I loved. But I was trying to turn a lamb into a lion. The longtime cohosts wanted to keep it soft and light. The reporters only wanted to make the hosts happy. For me, it was like overdosing on candy and I could barely bring myself to even watch *Weeknight*. I argued, sweet-talked, and bullied the staff, trying to make the tone more substantial and journalistic. It was all to no avail. After less than a year it was clear to me, and everyone else, that this job was not for me. When Pete Langlois called me into his office one afternoon, I figured I was about to be fired.

"I don't think you belong with *Weeknight*," he said when I'd barely sat down.

"I know I don't," I answered with a huge sigh, feeling equal jolts of abject fear and complete relief. "I'm not happy. The staff isn't happy. This isn't what I was meant to do."

I confessed to Langlois that it was painfully obvious to me that I was wired to do hard-hitting, investigative news reporting. That's what had come so naturally to me in my first TV job. My passion for the news is what had made me so successful in Eureka.

"I agree with you," Langlois said, sounding as detached as ever. *Here it comes*, I thought, *the end of my career*. Instead, he said, "I want you take over our Call Three. Bring your intense focus and energy to that and there will be no stopping you."

I was stunned, elated, and profoundly relieved. Call Three was an institution at KCRA's Eyewitness News, dedicated to seeking justice for consumers who'd been wronged. Staffed by a group of highly

skilled community volunteers, it handled thousands of consumer complaints every month that poured in by phone and mail. Call Three would document their cases, determine the validity of their complaints, and then become their advocate with the merchants or businesses in question. KCRA's designated Call Three reporter would then comb through the resolved cases and pick the best success stories to report on twice a week. The reporter who had handled Call Three for several years had just been hired as a news anchor in another city, and now the segment would be mine.

"I'll take it, Pete," I said so loudly I thought the whole newsroom might hear me. The producer under me at *Weeknight* took over my duties as executive producer, and soon I was off and running with my new gig.

Once I became familiar with the Call Three staff and procedures, I immediately conspired to make it something unique and more substantive. Call Three helped consumers with things like getting shoddy repairs fixed or a refund for a faulty product. The reports would focus on how happy the consumers were that Call Three helped them resolve their complaints. I chose to focus instead on exposing the consumer fraud and went after the perpetrators with my cameras. Once I began peeling back the veils, what seemed like small cases at first often became big stories.

One viewer contacted Call Three to complain that he had been denied medical coverage for his one-year-old daughter who was dying of cancer. Digging into it, we uncovered a billion-dollar construction firm falsifying its payroll records on government-funded housing projects across the country, paying the workers less than half of what it billed the Department of Housing and Urban Development for their labor. This way, the corporation, whose president had close ties with the Republican Party, could skim millions of tax dollars.

The worker highlighted in our story was told that his government-backed health insurance was invalid because he failed to report his full income, which, of course, he never received. I discovered hundreds of other workers in the same boat and, as a result of our reports, the government ultimately forced the corporation to fully

compensate them. The health coverage for the little girl whose father first contacted Call Three was validated and she received her cancer treatments.

Viewers soon began calling us with tips. Whistle-blowers came forward. We exposed the local Air Force base polluting the groundwater of its surrounding communities with highly toxic solvents, heroin rings with ties to law enforcement, and even the highest ranking Nazi War criminal ever located in the United States—Otto Von Bolschwing. We found him living in a rest home not ten miles from KCRA.

Although I loved my work and went at it with everything I had, every night I was watching Tom Brokaw on the *NBC Nightly News*, dreaming of being one of his reporters in the field. Not a correspondent at the White House or on Capitol Hill, not based at the New York or Los Angeles bureaus, but a foreign correspondent reporting from the front lines anywhere in the world where there was conflict and turmoil. I didn't know how to make it happen, but I thought continually about getting to network news. It was an obsession.

One day, as if on cue, a stranger named Ken Lindner walked into the newsroom. Tall and lean, with an expensive Italian suit, flashy tie, and a paisley silk muffler scarf tossed casually over his shoulders, Lindner caught the attention of everyone in the newsroom as he shook hands with Langlois and ducked into his office for a meeting. When Lindner emerged a half-hour later he headed straight for my desk and, with a million-dollar smile, said, "Hi, I'm with the William Morris Agency and we want to represent you. Can I take you to lunch?" I glanced toward Langlois's office to see him leaning against the doorway with his arms folded, quietly nodding his approval.

"Sure, let's go," I said, having never heard of William Morris Agency and not having a clue what *representing* me meant.

Lindner took me to the most expensive restaurant in Sacramento, where all the lobbyists at the state capital dined, and soon explained how it worked. Top market and network reporters had well-connected agents who negotiated their contracts and supported them throughout their careers—for a percentage of their salaries, of course. Lindner said he had been watching me for more than a year

and met with Langlois to seek permission to represent me. “I think I can get you into a top ten market right away,” he said with a gleam in his eye.

It felt suspicious to me. He seemed a little too slick, and being an investigative reporter, I was cynical about anyone and everyone’s motives, never taking anything at face value. “Give me one day, okay?” I responded.

“Sure,” Lindner answered as he handed me his business card with his private number handwritten on the back. “Take all the time you need.”

Back in the newsroom I rushed into Langlois’s office. He immediately read my mind. “It’s the real deal,” he said. “William Morris is a major agency and Lindner is a pro. You’re in good hands. We’d like to keep you here, but it’s easy to see your ambition and I’m not going to hold you down.”

“Thanks, Pete,” I said, shaking his hand hard then heading back to my desk to call Lindner immediately and say, “When do I sign?”



A few months later, as promised, Lindner negotiated a new job for me in a top ten market, at WFAA-TV in Dallas, an ABC affiliate and one of the most respected news organizations in the country. It had a consumer unit similar to Call Three, but it was flagging. I was the perfect person, Lindner convinced them, to re-energize it. Before I knew it, I was off to Texas.

I quickly turned the consumer unit into an investigative one. We exposed racial discrimination at several of Dallas’s posh nightclubs, where the city’s rich and famous gathered. The clubs had secret policies of requiring a second photo identification from African Americans, then denying them entrance even if they managed to comply. We used hidden cameras and microphones to expose them turning away a black woman who happened to be a lawyer in the attorney general’s office. Subsequent lawsuits shut down several clubs.

Just as it had been in Eureka and Sacramento, corruption and white-collar crime were plentiful, and I was more aggressive than

ever. Only in Texas, the conservative establishment pushed back hard. Business and political leaders began complaining to WFAA management, and the station started trying to tone down my work. I pushed back even harder, refusing to dilute a story and standing my ground. Marty Haig, the news director, was a legend and a man of incredible integrity. But he was on the spot and did his best to walk a fine line between management and news.

When I began working on the plight of a Dallas oilman locked away in a Caracas prison after being framed for a major oil scandal involving the Venezuelan government, the station declined my proposal to cover it. Bullheaded as ever, I took two weeks' vacation, hired a freelance cameraman, flew to Caracas, and shot the story anyway. I even managed to smuggle a camera into the prison on visitors' day and recorded a secret interview with the Texas oilman.

Returning to Dallas, I pitched the story to ABC's primetime network news magazine show *20/20*; the show agreed to buy it. When I shared this with Marty Haig, he was upset and quickly decided WFAA wanted the story. He grudgingly agreed to pay me for all my expenses plus a hefty freelance bonus. The reports, which I titled *Petrospies*, created a sensation in Texas, got the attention of diplomats in Washington, D.C., and ultimately the oilman was freed. But my relationship with Marty Haig and WFAA would never be the same. I distrusted and resented them, and vice versa. My next story proved to be my last.

It was 1984 and the Republican National Convention was about to be held in Dallas, where the delegates would nominate President Ronald Reagan to run for a second term. As it turned out, the construction company I had exposed in Sacramento was based in Dallas and played a major role in Republican politics. The federal government was still investigating them, so I updated the story and produced a five-part series. The night before it was scheduled to run, Haig called me into his office to say the station's legal department was killing my stories. "They say the reports don't pass legal review," he said matter of factly. "They're libelous and will get us sued."

Furious, I demanded to meet with the legal department and challenge its position. To his credit, Haig supported me on this.

That afternoon, as I rifled through all my files to defend my work, I discovered something I had never noticed: WFAA's law firm also represented the construction company my reports had exposed! The next morning, I tore into the legal team, defended my work, pointed out its obvious conflict of interest, and promised that if the reports were killed I'd take it to the Dallas newspapers and expose the whole thing. When it was over, Haig said, "We'll air one report tonight, and one only. You'll have to cut the series down to something less than three minutes. That's it."

Haig didn't have to say anything more. I knew this would be my last report for WFAA. I went back to the station and worked right up to the five o'clock evening news deadline, then walked onto the set to give the lead-in live and answer a few softball questions from the anchors when it was over. The next morning when I arrived at the station, Haig called me straight into his office.

"It's time to cut the sheets," he said, looking down at some papers in his hands.

"You mean not working here any longer?" I said, as if clarification was necessary.

"Yes," Haig said, finally glancing up. "We're letting you go."

"No need," I shot back, "I quit."

I stood up and shook his hand, and thanked him for everything. He was a good man in a tough spot. "See you around," I said and walked back to my desk.

In less than a minute, a security guard tapped me on the shoulder and stated with authority, "Please give me your station identity card. WFAA has the legal rights to all of your files. I'm here to escort you to your car. A settlement on your contract will be negotiated with your agent."

I opened my wallet, handed over my identity card, and walked away, saying politely but firmly, "I can show myself out."



It was the first time I'd ever been fired from anything. I had occasionally wondered if something like this might happen one day,

and the thought had always made me shudder with fear. Now, I was surprised at how great it felt.

“Don’t worry,” Lindner comforted me when I called him from my high-rise apartment overlooking the Dallas skyline. “We’ll find a better spot for you. Just give me some time.”

“Okay,” I answered. “I’m going back to California as soon as I can book a flight. I’ll be in touch from there.”

It took a few days to arrange for the packing and shipping of my things, then I was off to a small island in San Diego Bay called Coronado, where I had relatives. I rented a condo overlooking the bay and began catching up with family and friends. The settlement on my contract paid my salary for another year. Surely, I thought, Lindner would come through in a flash. I could just relax, sun myself at the beach, and have a good time. But before two weeks was up, I was going stir-crazy. I had no idea what to do with myself without reporting. It was like having no identity. No reason for being. I was completely lost.

The weeks turned into one month, then two, then three. After half a year, I thought I might explode. That’s when Lindner finally called. WBZ-TV in Boston, an NBC affiliate in an even bigger news market, liked the reel of my reports that William Morris sent them. I soon had a new contract and an even higher salary. I could breathe again; I was back in the game.

I leased a grand old apartment in the historic Back Bay overlooking the Charles River and the verdigris dome of MIT. It was thrilling to be in this sophisticated city with its rich history, but I knew, even at this prestigious station, local news would never be enough. Going to Afghanistan was just a start. I had to pitch more global stories, stretch the limits, make a mark. I was thirty-six years old. By the end of my three-year contract at WBZ, I’d be close to forty. After that, I told myself, I had to be at the network or I’d be past my prime. Ambition was consuming me again.



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