

Boots

By DC Diamondopolous¹

The same sun scorched downtown Los Angeles that had seared the Iraq desert. Army Private First Class Samantha Cummings stood at attention holding a stack of boxes, her unwashed black hair slicked back in a ponytail and knotted military style. She stared out from Roberts Shoe Store onto Broadway, transfixed by a homeless man with hair and scraggly beard the color of ripe tomatoes. She'd only seen that hair color once before, on Staff Sergeant Daniel O'Conner.

The man pushed his life in a shopping cart crammed with rags and stuffed trash bags. He glanced at Sam through the storefront window, his bloated face layered with dirt. His eyes had the meander of drink in them.

Sam hoped hers didn't. Since her return from Bagdad a year ago, her craving for alcohol sneaked up on her like an insurgent. Bathing took effort. She ate to exist. Friends disappeared. Her life started to look like the crusted bottom of her shot glass.

The morning hangover began its retreat to the back of her head.

The homeless man vanished down Broadway. She carried the boxes to the storeroom.

In 2012, Sam passed as an everywoman: white, black, brown, Asian. She was a coffee colored Frappuccino. Frap. That's what the soldiers nicknamed her. Her mother conceived her while on ecstasy during the days of big hair and shoulder pads. On Sam's eighteenth birthday, she enlisted in the Army. She wanted a job and an education. But most of all she wanted to be part of a family.

"Let me help you," Hector said, coming up beside her.

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"It's okay. I got it." Sam flipped the string of beads aside. Rows of shoe boxes lined both walls with ladders every ten feet. She crammed the boxes into their cubbyholes.

"Can I take you to lunch?" Hector asked, standing inside the curtain.

"I told you before. I'm not interested."

"We could be friends." He shrugged. "You could tell me about Iraq."

Sam thrust the last box into its space. The beads jangled. Hector left.

She glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes until her lunch break. The slow work-day gave her too much time to think. She needed a drink. It would keep away the flashbacks.

"C'mon, Sam," Hector said outside the curtain.

"No."

Hector knew she was a vet. He didn't need to know any more about her.

On her way to the front of the store, Sam passed the imported Spanish sandals. Mr. Goldberg carried high-quality shoes. He showcased them on polished wood displays. She loved the smell of new leather, and how Mr. Goldberg played soft rock music in the background, with track lighting, and thick-padded chairs for the customers.

The best part of being a salesperson was taking off the customer's old shoes and putting on the new. The physical contact was honest. And she liked to watch people consider the new shoes – the trial walk, the mirror assessment – and if they made the purchase, everyone was happy.

Sam headed toward the door. Maria and Bob stood at the counter looking at the computer screen.

"Wait up," Maria said. The heavy Mexican woman hurried over. "You're leaving early again."

"No one's here," Sam said, towering over her. "I'll make it up, stay later. Or something."

"You better."

"Totally."

"Or you'll end up like that homeless man you were staring at."

"You think you're funny?"

"No, Sam. That's the point."

"He reminded me of someone."

"In Iraq?"

Sam turned away.

"Try the VA."

Sam looked back at Maria. "I have."

"Try again. You need to talk to someone. My cousin –"

"The VA doesn't do jack shit."

"Rafael sees a counselor. It helps."

"Lucky him."

"So do the meds."

"I don't take pills."

"Oh, Sam."

"I'm okay." She liked Maria and especially Mr. Goldberg, a Vietnam vet who not only hired her but rented her a room above the shoe store. "It's just a few minutes early."

Maria glared at her. "Mr. Goldberg has a soft spot for you, but this is a business. Doesn't mean you won't get fired."

"I'll make it up." Sam shoved the door open into a blast of heat.

"Another thing," Maria said. "Change your top. It has stains on it."

Oh fuck, Sam thought. But it gave her a good reason to go upstairs.

She walked next door, up the narrow stairway and into her studio, the size of an iPhone. Curry reeked through the hundred-year-old walls from the Indian neighbors.

Sam took off her blouse and unstuck the dog tags between her breasts. The Army had no use for her. *Take your meds, get counseling, then you can re-enlist.* But

she wasn't going to end up like her drug-addicted mother.

The unmade Murphy bed screeched and dipped as she sat down in her bra and pants, the tousled sheets still damp from her night sweats.

The Bacardi bottle sat on the kitchenette counter. She glanced sideways at it and looked away.

The United States flag tacked over the peeling wallpaper dominated the room, but it was the image of herself and Marley on the wobbly dresser she carried with her.

Sam had taken the seventeen-year-old private under her wing. She'd been driving the Humvee in Tikrit with Marley beside her when an IED exploded, killing him while she escaped with a gash in her leg. Thoughts of mortar attacks, roadside bombs, and Marley looped over and over again. Her mind became a greater terrorist weapon than anything the enemy had.

Her combat boots sat next to the door, the tongues reversed, laces loose, prepared to slip into, ready for action. Sometimes she slept in them, would wear them to work if she could. Of all her souvenirs, the boots reminded her most of being a soldier. She never cleaned them, wanted to keep the Iraqi sand caked in the wedge between the midsoles and shanks.

The springs shrieked as Sam dug her fists into the mattress and stood. She walked to the counter, unscrewed the top of the Bacardi, poured herself a shot and knocked it back. Liquid guilt ran down her throat.

Sam picked up a blouse off the chair, smelled it and looked for stains. It would do. She dressed, grabbed a Snickers bar, took three strides and dashed out her room.

Heading south on Broadway, Sam longed to be part of the city. Paved sidewalks, gutters, frying tortillas, old movie palaces, jewelry stores, flower stands, square patches of green where trees grew – all of it wondrous – not like the fucking sandbox of Iraq.

The rum kicked in, made her thirsty as she continued down the historic center of town. The sun's heat radiated from her soles to her scalp. A canopy of light si-phoned the city of color.

She watched a tourist slowly fold her map and use it as a fan. Businessmen

slouched along, looking clammy in shirtsleeves. Women, their dresses moist with sweat, form

fitted to their skin. Even the cars seemed to droop.

Waves of heat shimmered off the pavement. They ambushed Sam, planting her back in Tikrit.

She heard the rat-a-tat-tat of a Tabuk sniper rifle. Ducked. Dodged bullets. Scrambled behind a trash bin. Searched around for casualties. She looked at the top of buildings wondering where in the hell the insurgents fired from.

"Hey, honey, whatsa matter?" An elderly black woman stooped over her.

"Get down, ma'am!"

"What for?"

Sam grabbed at the woman, but she moved away. "Get down, ma'am! You'll get killed!"

"Honey, it's just street drillin'. Those men over there, they're makin' holes in the cement."

Covered in sweat, Sam swerved to her left. A Buick and Chevrolet stopped at a red light. She saw the 4th Street sign below the one-way arrow. Her legs felt numb as she held onto the trash bin and lifted herself up.

"You a soldier?"

"Yes, ma'am," Sam said, looking into the face of the concerned woman.

"I can tell. You fella's always say 'ma'am' and 'sir', so polite-like. Take it easy child, you're home now." The woman limped away.

Sam reeled, felt for the flask in her back pocket but it wasn't there. Construction workers whistled and made wolf calls at her. "Douche bags," she moaned. Alcohol had always numbed the flashbacks. Her counselor in Bagdad told her they would fade. Why can't I get better, she asked herself? Shaking, she blinked several times, forcing her eyes to focus as she continued south past McDonald's.

At 6th, she saw the man with tomato-color hair on the other side of the street, jostling his shopping cart. "It's Los Angeles, not Los Angelees!" he shouted. His voice rasped like the sick, but Sam heard something familiar in the tone. He

pushed his cart around the corner.

The light turned green. Sam sprinted in front of the waiting cars to the other side of the road. She had grown up across the 6th Street Bridge that linked Boyle Heights to downtown. From the bedroom window of the apartment she shared with her mother, unless her mother had a boyfriend, Sam would gaze at the Los Angeles skyline.

She followed the man into skid row.

The smell hit her like a body slam. The stink of piss and shit, odors that mashed together like something died, made her eyes water. A block away, it was another world.

She trailed the man with hair color people had an opinion about. The Towering Inferno. That's what they called Staff Sergeant Daniel O'Conner, but not to his face. He knew, though, and took the jibe well. After all, he had a sense of humor, was confident, tall and powerfully built, the last man to end up broken, not the hunched and defeated man she was following. No, Sam thought. It couldn't be him. It couldn't be her hero.

He shoved his gear into the guts of the city with Sam behind him. The last time she'd been to skid row was as a teenager, driving through with friends who taunted the homeless. The smell was one thing, but what she saw rocked her. City blocks of homeless lived under layers of tarp held up by shopping carts. Young and old, most black, and male, gathered on corners, sat on sidewalks, slouched against buildings, drug exchanges going down. Women too stoned or sick to worry about their bodies slumped over, their breasts falling out of their tops. It was hard for Sam to look into their faces, to see their despair. The whole damn place reeked of hopelessness. Refugees in the Middle East and Africa at least had tents and medicine.

Sam put on her ass-kicking face, the one that said, "Leave me the fuck alone, or I'll mess you up." She walked as if she had on her combat boots, spine straight, eyes in the back of her head.

Skid row mushroomed down side streets. Men staggered north toward 5th and the Mission. She stayed close behind the red-headed man. He turned left at San Pedro. And so did Sam.

It was worse than 6th Street. Not even in Iraq had she seen deprivation like this:

cardboard tents, overflowing trash bins used as crude borders, men sleeping on the ground. She watched a man pull up his pant leg and stick a needle in his ankle. Another man, his face distorted by alcohol, drank freely from a bottle. The men looked older than on 6th. Some had cardboard signs. One read, *Veteran, please help me*. Several wore fatigues. One, dressed in a field jacket, was missing his lower leg. Most, Sam thought, were Vietnam or Desert Storm vets. She felt her throat tighten, the familiar invasion of anger afraid to express itself. She'd been told by the Army never to show emotion in a war zone. But Sam brought the war home with her. So did the men slumped against the wall like human garbage.

The red-headed man passed a large metal dumpster heaped with trash bags. It stank of rotten fruit. He disappeared behind the metal container with his cart.

Sam looked at the angle of the sun. She had about ten minutes before thirteen hundred hours.

There was a doorway across the street. She went over and stood in it.

He sat against the brick wall emptying his bag of liquor bottles and beer cans. He shook one after another dry into his mouth. She understood his thirst, one that never reached an end until he passed out. He took a sack off the cart and emptied it: leftover Fritos bags, Oreo cookies, pretzels. He tore the bags apart and ran his tongue over the insides. He ate apple cores, chewed the strings off banana peels.

"What are you –" he growled. "You. Lookin' at?" His eyes roamed Sam's face.

Shards of sadness struck her heart. It was like seeing Marley's strewn body all over again. Staff Sergeant O'Conner's voice, even when drunk, was deep and rich. It identified him, like his hair. How could the man who saved her from being raped by two fellow soldiers and who refused to join in the witch-hunts of Don't Ask Don't Tell, a leader, who had a future of promotions and medals, end up on skid row?

"You remind me of someone," she said.

How could a once strapping man who led with courage and integrity eat scraps like a dog next to a dumpster? What happened that the Army would leave behind one of their own? Like a militia, disillusionment and bitterness trampled over Sam's love of country.

She woke up to another hot morning. Her head throbbed from the shots of Bacardi she tossed back until midnight as she surfed the internet, including the VA, for a Daniel O'Conner. She found nothing.

For breakfast, she ate a donut and washed it down with rum. She pulled on a soiled khaki T-shirt and a pair of old jeans and slipped into her combat boots, the dog tags tucked between her breasts.

Sam knotted her ponytail, grabbed a canvas bag, stuffed it into her backpack and left. She had to be at work at twelve hundred hours.

If O'Conner slept off the booze, he might be lucid and recognize her.

At the liquor store, she filled the canvas bag with candy bars, cookies, trail mix, wrapped sandwiches and soda pop then headed down Broadway.

The morning sun streaked the sky orange and pink. Yellow rays sliced skyscrapers and turned windows into furnaces. Sam hurried south.

When she crossed Broadway at 6th, the same sun exposed skid row into a stunning morning of neglect. Lines of men pissed against walls, women squatted. She heard weeping.

Sweat ran down her armpits, her head pounded. Sam felt shaky, chewed sand, and looked around. Where was Marley? She stumbled backwards into a gate.

"Baby, whatchu doin'? You one fine piece of ass." The man reached over and yanked at her backpack.

"No!" Sam yelled. She didn't want to collect Marley's severed arms and legs to send home to his parents. "No," she whimpered, grabbing the sides of her head with her hands. "I can't do it," she said sliding to the ground.

"Shit, you crazy. This is my spot, bitch. Outa here!" he said and kicked her.

Sam moaned and gripped her side. She saw a plastic water bottle lying on the sidewalk, crawled over and drank from it. A sign with arrows pointing to Little Tokyo and the Fashion District cut through the vapor of her flashback. Iraqi women wore abayas, not shorts and tank tops. Sitting in the middle of the sidewalk, Sam hit her fist against her forehead until it hurt.

She saw the American flag hoisted on a pulley from a cherry picker over the 6th Street Bridge, heard the click clack of a shopping cart, and the music of Lil Wayne. The sounds pulled her away from the memory, away from a place that had no walls to hang onto.

Sam held the bottle as she crawled to the edge of the sidewalk. She took deep breaths, focused and glanced around. What the fuck was she doing sitting on a curb in skid row with a dirty water bottle? *"Or you'll end up like that homeless man you were staring at."* "Oh Jesus." Sam dropped the bottle in the gutter and trudged toward San Pedro Street.

She had thought that when she came home, she'd get better, but living with her mother almost destroyed her. It began slowly, little agitations about housework, arguments that escalated into slammed doors. Then, one day, her mother called George Bush and Dick Cheney monsters who should be in prison. She accused Sam of murder for killing people who did nothing to the United States. Sam lunged at her, when she stumbled over a chair and fell. Her mother ran screaming into the bathroom and locked the door. "Get outa my house and don't ever come back!" "Don't worry! You're a piece of shit for a mother, anyway!" She left and stayed with her friend Jenny until she told her to stop drinking and get her act together.

In her combat boots, Sam scuffled along, hoping to catch O'Conner awake and coherent.

She turned left. The shopping cart poked out from the trash bin. Sam walked to the dumpster and peered around it. O'Conner wasn't there, but his bags and blankets were. She stepped into his corner and was using the toe of her boot to kick away mouse droppings when someone grabbed her hair and yanked back her head, forcing her to her knees. Terrified, she caught a glimpse of orange.

"Private First Class Samantha Cummings, United States Army, Infantry Unit 23. Sergeant!" She raised her arms. Sweat streamed down her face.

His grip remained firm.

"Staff Sergeant O'Conner, I've brought provisions. They're in my backpack. Sandwiches, candy bars, pretzels!"

He let go of her hair. The ponytail fell between her shoulders.

"I'm going to take off my backpack, stand, and face you, Sergeant." Her fingers trembled, searched for the Velcro strap and ripped it aside. The bag slid to the ground. She rose with her back to him and turned around.

She saw the war in his eyes. "It's me. Frap." His skin, filthy and sun-burnt, couldn't hide the yellow hue of infection. He smelled of feces and urine. His jaw was slack, his gaze unsteady. "You want something to eat? I got all kinds of stuff," Sam said. Her emotions buried in sand, began to tunnel, pushing aside lies and deceit.

O'Conner tore open the backpack and emptied out the canvas bag. "Booze."

She knelt beside him and unwrapped a ham and cheese sandwich. "No booze. Here, have this," she said, handing him the food. "Go on." Her arm touched his as she encouraged him to eat.

O'Conner sat back on his heels. "It's all..."

Sam leaned forward. "Go on."

"It's all... stuck!"

"What's stuck?"

He shook his head. "It's all, stuck!" he cried. He grabbed the sandwich and scarfed it down in three bites. Mayonnaise dripped on his scruffy beard. He kept his sights on Sam as he tore open the Fritos bag and took a mouthful. He ripped apart the sack of Oreo cookies and ate those too. "Go away," he said as black-and-white crumbs fell from his mouth.

Sam shook her head.

"Leave. Me. Alone!"

"I don't want to."

He drew his knees up to his chest, shut his eyes and leaned his head against the metal dumpster.

Here was her comrade-in-arms, in an invisible war, where no one knew of his bravery, where ground zero happened to be wherever you stood.

"You saved me from Jackson and Canali when they tried to rape me in the bathroom. I should have been able to protect myself. And when they tried to discharge me. For doing nothing. You stood up for me. Remember?" O'Conner didn't

move. "I never, thanked you. Cause it showed weakness."

O'Conner struggled to his knees. "I don't know you!" His breath smelled rancid.

"Yeah, you do."

"I don't know you!" he cried.

"You know me. You saved me twice, dude!"

O'Conner stumbled to his feet and gripped the rail of his shopping cart, his spirit as razed as the smoking remains of a Humvee. He shoved off on his morning trek. For how long, Sam wondered.

She gathered the bags of food and put them in the canvas bag. She kicked his rags to the side, took his blankets, flung them out, folded them and rearranged the cardboard floor. She put the blankets on top and hid the bag of food under his rags.

Emotions overcame her. Loyalty, compassion, anger, love – feelings so strong tears fell like a long-awaited rain.

Sam couldn't save O'Conner, but she could save herself.

She ripped off her dog tags and threw them in the dumpster. Once home, she'd take down the flag, fold it twelve times and tuck the picture of Marley and herself inside it. She'd throw out her military clothes and combat boots. Pour the rum down the sink. She'd go to the VA, badger them until she got an appointment. Join AA. She'd arrive and leave work on time.

The morning began to cook. It was the same sun, but a new day. Sam walked in the opposite direction of O'Conner.