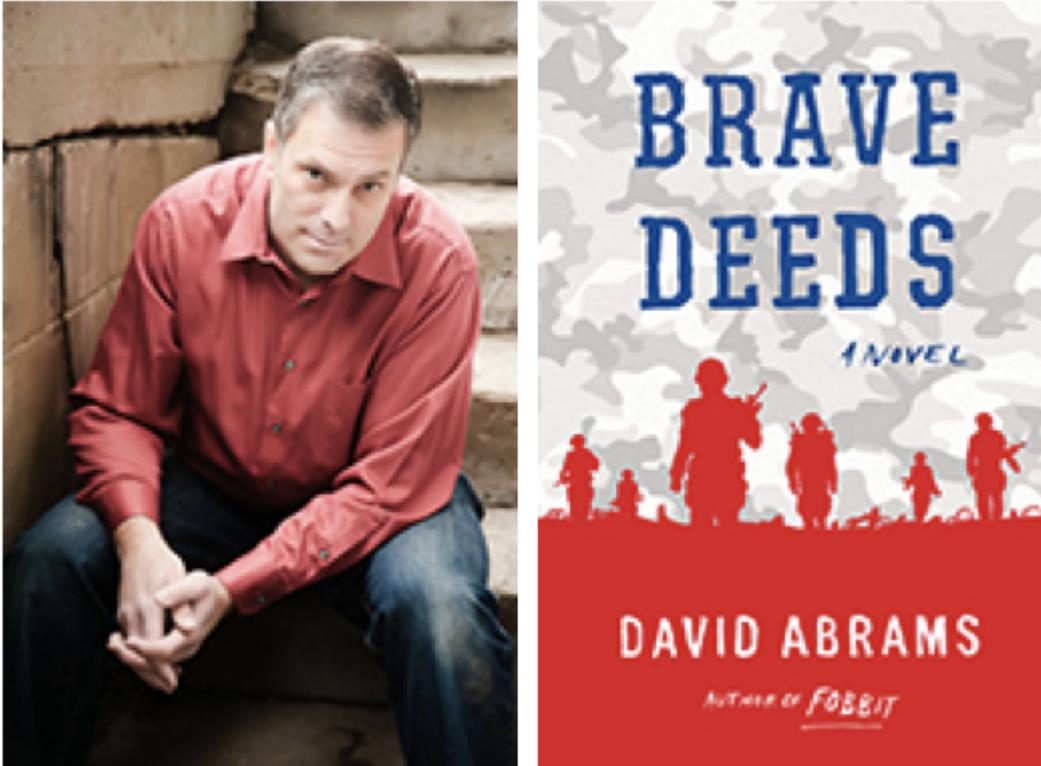


Excerpt from “Brave Deeds” by David Abrams



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We walk, we walk, we walk.

We head into the fireball sun, packed in battle armor, baking from the inside out, throats coated with dust, hearts like parade drums, adrenaline spiking off the charts.

We’re alone, cut off from the rest of the brigade back at Taji, and now thanks to a busted drive shaft weakened in last week’s IED blast along Route Irish, we are without a Humvee. We’ll have to finish this on foot.

We double-time across Baghdad on our twelve feet, a mutant

dozen-legged beetle
dashing from rock to rock, confident in its shell but always
careful of the soft belly
beneath. We are six men moving single file along the alleys,
the edges of roads, the maze
of beige buildings. We keep moving: ducking and dodging and
cursing and sprinting. We
wonder how it could have gone so wrong so fast.

Going on foot was never part of the plan. That damn drive
shaft—nobody saw it
coming. And it's not like we can call for help—dial 911 or
send up a flare—because
we're not supposed to be out here. We're on our own and now we
really have to keep up
the pace if we're gonna make it.

The memorial service starts at 1500 hours. The last time we
checked our watches, it
was 1030. Half the morning gone. We may not make it.

From the back, Cheever calls out, "Hey, wait up."

"Keep moving, Cheeve," Arrow says, not turning his head as he
jogs down the street.
He's on point and he's focused. We wait for no one; we pause
for no Cheeve.

"It's these blisters, man. They're killing me."

"Aw, somebody call the waaambulance," says Drew.

"My boots're filling with blood. I can feel it."

"Squish, squish, squish," Fish says.

"That's enough, guys," says 0, his voice softer than ours:
steel wrapped in velvet.
That's 0. He's never loud, but we always listen.

Everyone loves O. His full name is Olijandro, but we keep it at O—short, simple, sweet. Round as a bullet hole.

We have every right to give Cheever a hard time. He is, after all, the one who left the radio back in the Humvee—forgotten in our mad scramble to get out of what at the time looked like a singularly dangerous situation, an SDS. That's what Rafe would have called it, the kind of thing he was always warning us about—before he himself was the victim of the ultimate SDS.

Two hours ago. *Jesus, was it really only two hours? Feels like a whole week since then.* Two hours ago we were cruising along, taking the streets quick and easy. There was no laughter because we were on a sober mission, but we were feeling good. As good as we could, given the circumstances.

Park said he knew the way and we believed him. Why shouldn't we? Park was quiet, but he was smart. He wasn't one to take risks. And today, of all days, we needed to be risk free.

Everything was going fine. Smooth as a baby's shaved ass. Park at the wheel, Arrow riding shotgun, the rest of us crammed in the back: O sitting on Fish's lap, Cheever digging into his second bag of Doritos for the day, Drew sandwiched somewhere in the middle. Early morning locals in fluttering robes swished past the Humvee's small windows. Burnt shells of cars lined the curb, lingering memories of bombs. Billboards with soccer players saying things we couldn't understand, but

offering us a Coke and a smile. Everything good and fine, then bang! It's like the Humvee decided it had had enough. *Sorry, guys. I'm calling it quits. You're on your own from here.*

You should've seen the look on Park's face when the steering wheel locked up.

This cannot be happening. Not here, not now.

Then came a hard *clunk*, and the Humvee shuddered to a stop. When we realized it wasn't coming back to life, we were out of there. Every which way in crazy panic, no time to stop and think. Even the Doritos got left behind.

By the time we regrouped two blocks away and Drew said maybe we should just turn ourselves in and call back to headquarters, we realized Cheever, our radio guy, was empty-handed and the situation had gone from bad to totally fucked.

A look came into Cheever's eyes and he released a string of curses.

Arrow closed his eyes, ground his molars, then said (over Cheever's *shit shit, damn damns*): "I know you're not gonna tell me you left the assault pack back there. Don't you *dare* let those words come out of your mouth."

"Just kill me now," Cheever moaned. He stared hard at the ground, his eyes boring a hole, digging the dimensions of a grave.

Some of us were all for doubling back and retrieving the PRC-119, but Fish shook

his head and said, "Too late. Hajji's already scavenged the whole damn thing by now.

We'd be lucky to find a single hubcap spinning in the gutter."

Humvees don't have hubcaps, but that's typical Fish—always exaggerating to make things worse than they were.

In this case, though, he had a point.

We blame Cheever. Never leave a PRC-119 in the hands of a guy like him. A

platoon's radio operator is supposed to be the smartest guy on the team—like a Yale Law

School grad slumming in the Army—but we ended up with someone who never quite

mastered the call signs and treated the radios like crossword puzzles he couldn't finish.

Cheever is the self-appointed jokester in our little band of not-so-merry men. He'll

go around saying things like: "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eggs" or "I'm

so broke, I can't even pay attention." Once, when Private Cartwright slipped in the motor

pool and came down hard on a trailer hitch between his legs, Cheever goes, "Ooh, right

in the Balzac!" Lame-ass stuff that no matter what he thinks doesn't earn him any extra

cool points.

Nobody's laughing at anything by this point. All kinds of scenarios unspool through

our heads. We think about Jessica Lynch and all the wrong turns her convoy took in the

labyrinth of streets. We remember hearing about a British journalist kidnapped last

month. His beheading is now trending on YouTube. We think of

those civilian

contractors who were caught, strung up from the girders of a bridge, and then hung there for days after their bodies had been burned. They looked like big slabs of beef jerky swaying in the breeze. None of us wanted to end up like that.

So there we were, a cluster of dumb in the middle of Baghdad.

Oh well, at least we had a map.

We reached into our cargo pockets, unsnapped ammo pouches, probed fingers into pockets behind our flak vests.

Nothing.

We looked at each other, swallowing hard (none of us wanting to admit to the others that we were swallowing hard). We already saw how this would play out—like the surprise twist of a movie you can see coming fifteen minutes before the credits roll. If we were the virgin tiptoeing around the serial killer's lair, we'd be jeering and throwing popcorn at ourselves.

Arrow said we had to go back to the Humvee, take our chances, hajjis or no hajjis.

We didn't argue. We needed the map.

Arrow led us back. We were half a block away—keeping to the shadows, hugging the buildings—and were about to turn down the street where the Humvee was hasty-parked with two tires up on the curb when Arrow held up a fist for us to stop.

We didn't need to be told. We'd seen the men and boys and some women streaming down the street, magnet-pulled toward something unseen. We

knew what that invisible attraction was. We'd been such fools to leave the Humvee like we did.

We slammed ourselves flat against the wall of an electronics store. Arrow inched himself up to the corner, snapped a peek around the side, then pulled back just as fast. He looked at us, shook his head, then twirled his finger for us to reverse.

That's when we smelled the smoke and knew we were no-question-about-it fucked. Mapless in Baghdad.

We threw together a quick plan and made a good guess at our current location. Then we moved out away from the destroyed Humvee and the happy chants of Iraqis celebrating what to them looked like a victory.

Now here we are, slipping from building to building, street by street, trying not to call too much attention to ourselves in this city that already hates us.

"Arrow," Cheever calls again. He's still limping. "I'm not kidding."

Arrow doesn't stop, will not stop until we reach Forward Operating Base Saro safe and sound. That's the mission and he's intense and focused as a shaft whistling through the air until it thunks into the target at the FOB. Arrow's not his real name. He's tall and thin and moves like he's been shot from a bow. His real name is Arogapoulos—the letters squeezed together into tight, muddy stitchery on the Velcro name tag over his heart—but none of us could ever manage that, so we called him Arrow. It started after one of the

company "fun runs" back at Fort Drum. The last half mile, First Sergeant usually let us break ranks and compete our way to the end. That day, Arogapoulos was leading the pack and he pushed hard all the way to the finish line. Slim, intent on purpose (*finish FIRST finish FIRST*), the breeze whistling in his ears. As we came out of the woods, Arogapoulos whipped past the entire company and collapsed to his knees, gagging on the grass in front of the barracks. Later, huffing from his own last kicking sprint, Sergeant Morgan looked at him and shook his head, grinning. "Jesus, you were like an arrow there at the end, Specialist A." So the name stuck. When Rafe christens you, you keep it.

"C'mon, Arrow—"

"Shut up, Cheever," Park snaps.

"Yeah, we're all walking on blisters," Drew says.

"Fine! Fuck all y'all," says Cheever. He lags behind.

Five minutes later, Arrow is forced to slow, then stop. While we pull security, Cheever unties his left boot. We surround him in a ring, M4 barrels pointed out, a bristling pincushion. We scan the rooftops, the windows, the doorways. Somebody could be up there right now with us in his sights, ready to take us out with one RPG. Later, we'll look back on this—at least some of us will—and think, We weren't too smart, were we? Bunching up in a cluster around Cheever, the fat pudge. But since we know Cheever will pay more attention to himself than he will team security, we pull in close. Cheever has his good points, but selflessness is not one of them.

We are six men—Arrow, Park, Drew, O, Cheever, and Fish. And we are moving through the most dangerous sectors of Baghdad—the bubble of the boil—on foot now,

thanks to the goddamn drive shaft and its microscopic cracks. We are on our way to FOB Saro to attend the memorial service for Sergeant Rafe Morgan and we are determined to make it there before sundown, alive, intact, all twelve arms and legs still attached.

We look at Cheever's foot outside the boot. It's moist and raw—straight out of a butcher's glass case. And the smell. It's a sun-ripened leather bag full of vomit sprinkled with sugar. It makes our nostrils cry for mercy.

We all go, "Jesus, Cheever!"

"Moleskin," Arrow says.

Cheever drops his eyes, mumbles, "It's back at Taji."

Camp Taji, our home away from home, is thirty klicks behind us.

"Well, *that's* a good place for it," says Drew. "Better there than on your foot."

"Sure could use Doc right about now," Cheever says.

"Savarola, shit," Fish spits. "What a pussy."

"Hey," O says. "Doc's all right. He made his choice, just like we made a choice."

Savarola could have come with us, *said* he was gonna come with us, but he backed out at the last minute. We waited around the motor pool for fifteen minutes this morning—longer than he deserved—until Arrow called it and said, "Looks like he stood us up."

And so we went out into Baghdad on our own without a medic.

“Wish he were here now,” Cheever is still going on. “At least he could give me some Tylenol to chew on.”

“Suck it up, Cheeve.”

“This whole day is turning out to be nothing but one big suck hole,” he grumbles.

There is a sound halfway down the block, a clang of metal. A baseplate getting set into position, or the metallic mumblings of crated artillery shells knocking together. We snap back into the moment. Our M4 rifles come alert.

We wait. We listen. We watch.

Nothing.

“Stand down,” Arrow says. “Jesus.” He shakes his head. “It’s too early to be this jumpy.”

We relax but don’t lower our rifles.

Then 0 says, “He can have my moleskin.”

“Bullshit!” we cry.

Arrow says, “You are not giving up your moleskin, 0.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

They stare at each other for a long time—*too* long, if you ask the rest of us. This is how it goes—testing a new leader’s boundaries, poking the bear to see if he’ll wake and, if he does, how hard he’ll roar. They’ll send over Sergeant Morgan’s replacement

soon—from Bravo Company or maybe HHC as a last resort—but for now Arrow is in charge of our squad. For today, a week—or, who knows, as long as a month if he's lucky. Besides, before he died, Rafe all but promised Arrow he'd get his stripes.

We're trying to get used to Arrow being the de facto squad leader. This day, this SDS we've gotten ourselves into, has called for one of us to step into Sergeant Morgan's vacuum. Given Arrow's time in grade—he got promoted to specialist long before the rest of us—it looks like he's the man of the hour. He doesn't have Rafe's stripes or his years—this was Sergeant Morgan's third deployment and he knew his shit—but on this day, things like that don't matter as much as they would if we were back on Taji.

We're all in the same boat. Like the rest of us, this is Arrow's first trip to the desert. We're all blind men feeling our way across Baghdad; Arrow just happens to be the one in front with the cane. Like it or not, we trail behind him.

O looks at Arrow, says, "It's just a piece of moleskin, dude."

Arrow looks away, scans his sector of fire, says nothing more. O does the same—after pulling a patch of moleskin out of his ammo pouch and tossing it to Cheever.

We are silent, watching the street. After a minute, Cheever puts his socks back on his feet. As he laces his boots, he grumbles and curses, but that's to be expected. Cheever being Cheever.

We move on. Cheever limps but keeps up.

* * *

Staff Sergeant Raphael Morgan was one of the best men we ever had. Rafe was what they call a born leader. He watched out for us, pushed us when we needed it, backed off when he knew it wasn't the right time to push. We don't want to put him on a pedestal or anything, but he really was everything we could have asked for in an NCO. He knew the field manuals inside and out, chapter and verse. He was prime time in the field. The sloppier, wetter, and colder the conditions the better. He encouraged us to find our inner warrior; he was relentless in his quest for our perfection; he made us hate him in the times we were exhausted, blister sore, and sleep robbed. But then that night, he'd sit down with us at chow, give us the lemon pound cake out of his plastic MRE pouch, and ask nothing in return (and not because he hated lemon pound cake—we knew it was his favorite). He was a used-car salesman when it came to persuading us to do the difficult, the near impossible.

He wasn't a big man, not one to loom over his subordinates with a barrel chest and a Sgt. Rock jaw, using his NCO stripes to bully us. He wasn't like the others—the bitter assholes, the career sergeants who delighted in our torment. Rafe never flaunted what he didn't earn. In fact, now that we think of it, he always seemed to be curled into himself, as if apologetic for his stripes and rocker. Like he was and forever would be one of us, a guy among guys.

He was short, a stump in the infantry forest, and used that height to his advantage,

swimming below the sergeant major's radar when he was prowling for an NCO to blame for his own fuckups. Sergeant Morgan kept his head down—below shoulder level of his fellow platoon sergeants—and went about his work without unnecessary chatter and bluster. But the unwary were fools if they believed that quiet demeanor: Rafe was iron behind that black velvet. And man, he was smooth. We used to call him MC behind his back. Milk Chocolate. Goes down nice and easy.

We remember this one time back in the States, soon after we got a new commanding general. Word came down from on high that a weekend detail was needed for what turned out to be some special landscaping work around Fort Drum. Post beautification they called it.

Names were chosen, put on a roster, but they didn't tell us what it was all about until it was too late. Captain Bangor gathered us in a huddle after formation on Friday.

"Dandelions," he said. And we were all like: *What?*

"Men," he continued, "it seems the new CG's wife hates the color yellow and so we've been ordered to go out and pluck every single dandelion on post." And we were all like: *What the fuck?* But we didn't say that out loud, of course—not in front of Old Man Bang-Her.

It was up to Sergeant Morgan to get us through the weekend without all of us going to Officers Row, armed with knives, breaking into the commanding general's quarters,

and stabbing him and his wife to death. Or maybe just dumping a bucket of yellow paint on their heads.

“Hey guys,” Rafe said that Saturday morning, our garbage bags fluttering in the wind. “This ain’t so bad.”

We looked at the parade field—the largest plot of grass on all of Fort Drum. It was a carpet of yellow.

“Sure looks bad,” Arrow said.

“Naw, this ain’t nothin’,” said Rafe, giving us a milk chocolate smile. “Now 3-5, they got it bad. They been out in the field all week and it only stopped raining yesterday.” (We knew this, but it was good to be reminded of Third Battalion’s misery.)

“You think they ain’t sick of each other’s smell by now? And they still got another three days to go. Sucks to be them. But here we are—warm, dry, doing a little gardening for the CG. Can’t believe they pay us for stuff like this.”

It was still a crap detail, and we bitched and moaned, but we moved forward in a line across the parade field anyway, feeling like we’d somehow one-upped 3-5.

“Besides,” Rafe said as we bobbed and plucked, “ain’t none of you heard of dandelion wine?”

None of us had.

“You never read that book by Ray Bradbury? About the kid?”

We stared at him, our faces not moving. Sergeant Morgan,

despite what you'd think
by looking at him, was well-read. We were not.

"Anyway," Rafe went on, "I figure we got enough to make at least a bottle apiece right here at the parade field alone. Just wait till we get over by the housing area."

We moved across the field, our boots sweeping softly through the tall grass and weeds.

"Golden flowers," Rafe said. "The dazzle and glitter of molten sun."

"Whatever, Sar'nt," we said, turning away to hide our smiles.

"Dandelion wine—like summer on the tongue," he assured us.

"Okay, Sar'nt." Our smiles gave way to laughter.

And so we made it through the day, picking dandelions and looking forward to drinking weed wine—which, as it turned out, we never made.

That was Rafe, always pulling us through the shit the Army shoveled our way.

That's why we took his death hard.

We were there that day, that most horrible day on our calendar of awful. We don't like to think of our Sergeant Morgan like that—the obscene pieces of him flying through the bomb-bloom air.

Yes, we took his death hard and, later, one of us might have gone outside to the solitude of a concrete bunker and cried until the snot ran, and one of us probably dashed for the latrine, vomit splashing the side of the toilet bowl, and one of us most definitely

would press the tip of a revolver—a cold metal kiss good-bye—to his forehead eighteen months after our return. But we're not saying who. That's private stuff we won't share.

And so here we are, out in the bull's-eye center of Baghdad, on foot, moving through hostile neighborhoods with no comms and minimal ammo but with plenty of love for our dead dismembered platoon sergeant. Dismembered but not disremembered. We're doing this for Rafe and there's no turning back.

Photo Credit: Grove Atlantic