
Battle Rattle

By Brandon Davis Jennings

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To huddle over the coals of flickering hope? Not I.

Honor in life, or honor in death; there is no other thing.

—Sophocles' *Ajax*

CHAPTER 1

Rake broke his back when he tried to sit on a chair that wasn't there. He was drinking off our last deployment and had stomped upstairs to his office when Taylor came over to pick up some Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) of the things she'd left behind after she'd bailed in the middle of Rake's most recent bender. He'd shoved his roller chair out of the way so he could duck under his desk to unplug and reseal the mouse cable. After he plugged it in, he stood and stepped back to where he thought the chair would be and sat down hard enough to break his back; before this happened to Rake, I never thought breaking your back was Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) so easy. Taylor found him up there: passed out, pants soaked in his piss. She called an ambulance, and as far as I know, that was the last kind thing she did for him.

I met Taylor that day at the base hospital outside Rake's room. The tips of her brown hair tickled her freckled shoulders, hid the mangled ear some Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) pill-head boyfriend had given her a couple years before she and Rake were married. "He's all yours," she said.

“It’s fucked you’re leaving him when he’s like this.”

“You could’ve told him the truth about the baby.”

“You could’ve handled it and pretended there was never anything to say about a baby.”

“The Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) baby’s been *handled*.” Taylor bit her bottom lip and then shook her head. “I’m not going to wait around the rest of my life wondering if my husband’s coming home. I’m too old for this. We all are. But you both choose to Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) not grow up.” She folded her arms beneath her breasts so her shirt molded around them; it reminded me of how much I’d liked having them in my mouth, how much I loved pressing my face between them, how much I hated myself for having slept with her behind Rake’s back. But we’d both been drunk every time, and I’m sure she wanted to hurt Rake more than she wanted to fuck me. To avoid looking at her chest, I stared at the room number: 314. Silver numbers. Fingerprints made the 4 look gold when light hit it right.

She grabbed my left hand and squeezed. “I love him.” Her fingers were rough and bony. “You know that.”

“You don’t leave people like this when you love them.”

“Take care of him.” She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek, then let go of my hand and walked away. The tips of her hair swayed about the small of her back, and I followed the curls down to her jean skirt and felt sick as soon as I realized I was staring at her ass.

I wrapped my fingers around the cool doorknob for a while. Metal pressed deep into my palm. Taylor’s heels clicked and echoed down the hallway. People passed, coming and going. They probably thought I was crazy: some big dumb vet who went to war and came home wondering why doors needed knobs when you could bash them down so easily. No one offered to help me turn the knob; if someone had offered to help or had asked what I was doing, I might’ve actually Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) seen Rake that day. I’m not sure how long I stood there before I let go.

I WENT HOME TO Kaylynn and Ariel; they were reading a book together: *Oh No! Don’t Let Me Go*. Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) I leaned against the doorframe while Kaylynn read Ariel some of the rhymes: “If I fall asleep and the water’s too deep? No, baby. I will not let you go. If I’m always picked last? Wrapped in a full-body cast? No, baby. I will not let you go.” They didn’t notice me, so I went to the garage and pounded my canvas heavy bag with unwrapped hands Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) until my knuckles seeped blood and my shoulders struggled to hold my arms onto my body. Then I grabbed a bottle of Jameson from the liquor cabinet and headed out Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) back to watch the sunset through the trees in the woods behind my house. I dragged a lawn chair from the porch out onto the wet grass and then sat there drinking until long after the sun was gone.

I woke shirtless the next morning Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) stretched out in the grass. The uncapped Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) and half-empty bottle lay on its side near my feet. The label was peeled off and the liquid sparkled green-gold in the sunlight. My head was on the teeter-totter seat, and it would've been easy for anyone to break my neck while I slept that way: a little pressure in the right spot, and *snap!* Ariel found me, though. She tugged at a fistful of my hair and sang, "Silly Daddy lost his shirt. Silly Daddy's in the dirt."

I smiled and tried not to exhale while she was close enough to smell my breath. "Silly Daddy was a jerk."

"Wanna teeter?" she asked and then skipped to the other side. Her yellow dress billowed in the light breeze. She was barefoot, and I didn't like that she was out there shoeless. We had a chestnut tree, and there were probably burrs I'd missed when I raked the yard before I deployed last; it was impossible to get them all. I wasn't in any position to question Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) Kaylynn's mothering without bringing a lot of hell on myself, though; that song Ariel had sung was probably Kaylynn's invention. She knew it pissed me off when Ariel saw me hungover, so I figured this was her way of making me endure the non-physical repercussions of my stupidity.

I mounted the seat that had been wedged into the back of Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) my neck all night and lifted my end so Ariel could climb onto her side. My head didn't hurt, but each descent wrenched my guts. I thought Ariel would be more excited to spend time with me, but she only smiled when I smiled at her first. Before long, Kaylynn came outside to get Ariel ready for ballet. Kaylynn didn't ask what had happened, and I didn't offer to talk Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) about it. When they were gone, I leaned over the fence and vomited onto my neighbor's too-green grass.

HEAVY DRINKING WASN'T A new thing for Rake and me, but after Manchin drowned in a training exercise off the California coast a few months before our last deployment, Rake and I made drinking an Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) essential post-PT ritual. I'd drink with Rake until he passed out, and then I'd drive home to sleep it off and show Kaylynn that I was still alive and still stupid enough to think the biggest danger with driving drunk was that I might get a Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) DUI. The next day when I'd roll back to Rake's place, he'd be at it again: filthy and silent. Living like that was hard on our bodies, and being with someone who was living that way wasn't easy. Lucky for me Kaylynn had the endurance to deal with it for as long as it went on. Rake wasn't as fortunate. Taylor ditched him after we deployed, and the next time Rake heard from her was the day before we Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) were set to call an air strike in on some desert village. She emailed to tell him that she'd had an abortion; she didn't want the baby because she wouldn't waste her life raising a kid for a man who was never home. Kaylynn never said ugly shit like that to me. Rake emailed back and called Taylor a cold bitch. She filed divorce papers Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) before we made it home.

ARIEL WAS TWO THE first time we went to the desert. I didn't like leaving her and Kaylynn, but Ariel was too young to really understand where I had gone back then. Kaylynn seemed to have adjusted to living life in segments; six months home and six months away wasn't uncommon. But there were a lot of shorter deployments that popped up; those she hated most because there was rarely any warning before I was packing my bags and heading out the door. I always told her there was nothing I could do about it. Whenever it was time to re-up, she'd tell me that I didn't have to sign the paper, that I Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) could do something else. Each time, I said, "I don't know how to do anything else." Then I signed the paper, committed us to another four years of bulletproof excuses for why I had to leave whenever I was ordered to.

On our first desert deployment, we demoed a Soviet-era anti-air cannon. The wreckage smoldered on a hill a hundred yards or so from where we'd parked the Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) Humvee to watch the results of our handiwork. I'd learned to admire explosions, the way the dirt and dust rippled, surfing the blast's shockwave. I felt most alive when something was exploding and I was the reason it had gone up.

Rake leaned against the Humvee. Firelight flickered and illuminated the scar that traced his jawline, the stubble that had sprouted on his face and throat over the last two days. "When me and Taylor have a son, I'm gonna tell him not to do any of this dumb shit."

Sergeant Harris said, "It's just another thing you're going to miss while you're out here. Women. Kids. Trucks. I dreamt about clean socks last night."

"No Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) one cares about your dreams," Rake said. "At least it'll give me something to miss. And when my son grows up, I'll tell him all the things my dad never told me." Rake tossed his helmet onto the Humvee's hood and a small dust cloud punctuated the thud and the clacking chinstrap. He pulled his Leatherman out of its holster. Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) "I know what a boy needs to know to keep safe in this world." He clipped his fingernails as we talked.

"What's that?"

"Don't join the military." Rake smiled. "Somebody's gotta do this. But not my kid."

"I hear you," I said. "I never thought I'd be so glad to have a daughter."

"Fuck that," Rake said. "You know what you want to do to women."

"Ariel doesn't have to let some asshole like us take advantage of her."

Harris had climbed into the Humvee by then. He set his helmet on the dashboard and scratched his shaved head. "You guys think your kids are going to be special? My wife caught my son in his closet getting a blowjob from the neighbor's daughter a few weeks back."

"So?" Rake said. "Like you didn't get terrible blowjobs when you were a teenager."

“My son’s five,” he said. “The girl is six.”

Rake bit at a nail he’d misclipped and then spat. “Does that make them both pedophiles?”

“Shut up,” I said.

“It’s going to be my fault too. *You’re never home. You’re a bad father.* Because I’m over here hunting bastards that want to take away my five-year-old son’s right to get head before he learns the alphabet. That’s the shit we’re fighting for.” Harris said. “That’s what Cammack died trying to protect.”

“Cammack’s boots.” Rake whistled slow and quiet. “Could you believe those boots?” He closed his Leatherman, slid it back in its holster.

“Not the boots again,” I said.

RAKE HAD CRACKED A couple vertebrae, and the doctors said it was possible he’d never walk again. It’s corny, but I knew that if anyone had a 100 percent chance of recovery, it was him. And Rake did recover, but he never jumped from a C-130 again, and he never carried the same weight he once had. He was thirty-two years old, and the only job he’d ever wanted to do was taken from him: all because he was too drunk to look before he sat.

Rake had something with Manchin that I never had with any of the guys. Both Rake Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) and I are the bastard sons of military fathers who died fighting wars that few people have ever heard about. Dad died somewhere near Alaska, and Rake never learned where his father died. Both our fathers had serious medals, not just Purple Hearts Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) but Bronze Stars. Neither me or Rake ever earned medals like that. Or maybe we earned them. We weren’t awarded them, though; so what difference does it make? But Manchin and Rake were like shields for one Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) another. Somehow I never walked into a situation where I had a close call Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) that someone could’ve saved me from. Rake: he shot guys that might’ve killed Manchin, and Manchin shot guys that might’ve killed Rake.

Once we raided a house in a desert village, and a dark-colored blanket nailed above a doorway rippled in the breeze whipped up by each man thumping past. The first man who got to that door should’ve cleared the room, but I won’t lie and try to fool anyone into thinking anybody’s infallible; Rake wouldn’t want me glamorizing any of this because kids might read it. Rake was point man and never even tilted his weapon in the direction of that blanket-covered doorway; maybe he was tired because we hadn’t slept in two days; maybe he was lazy because we’d done the same thing so many times without incident; maybe he was thinking about how Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) Taylor was back home and surely fucking around on him. No matter what the reason was, as he peered around the Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) corner at the end of the hall, doing exactly what he should have done at the door he missed, a man with a pistol stepped through the blanket-covered doorway and aimed at Rake. Before the man could squeeze the

trigger, Manchin capped him in the head. Rake didn't turn around, didn't acknowledge what had happened. Manchin never said anything either. We all just stepped over the corpse and cleared the rest of the house. We found the ordnance that had been stashed there, in a hole that was hidden beneath a box spring in one of the bedrooms, and then we blew the place into shards. The night breeze smelled like coriander as that house burned. I remember the coriander because that house was one of the rare ones that actually had what Battle Rattle (Kindle Single) we were searching for inside.

Battle Rattle Kindle Single

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