

Cliffhanger
From "Between Two Rivers, A Novel of Faith, Transformation, and Healing"
Clement Hanson DO, MPH

Lieutenant Anthony Kile and Doctor Caleb Harrison returned from a day of field inspections on a warm desert evening. They headed for their tent to clean up.

The Lieutenant settled down on his cot and found a letter on his pillow. "Mail clerk was here. It's from Mom and Dad!" He ripped open the envelope and riveted his attention on neatly penned script.

Caleb ripped open a "hot dogs and beans" Meals Ready To Eat packet.

Kile lowered the letter.

"How's things with your folks?" Caleb asked.

"Mom and Dad are busy settling my grandmothers' estates and setting up probate hearings. I'm not even home to help them with that." He lay down and turned over on his side.

"Anthony, I'm sorry. But healing takes time."

Kile didn't reply.

Caleb pulled out his Bible and flipped to Isaiah 41. "Here's something to think about. 'So do not fear, for I am with you ... I will strengthen you ... and uphold you in my righteous right hand.' We're never alone, Anthony. God is always with us. Even in the Saudi desert."

Cliffhanger
From "Between Two Rivers, A Novel of Faith, Transformation, and Healing"
Clement Hanson DO, MPH

Kile turned over onto his back and stared up at tent canvas. "You're right, Sir. We're gonna need a lotta strength."

"How?"

"I heard Major Black say that Operation Desert Storm will launch any day. Some of us'll come home in body bags."

Caleb closed his Bible. "I'm going outside for a while to let you rest." He crawled out and spent the next two hours in the five-ton truck reviewing his well-worn Arabic phrase book.

The sun had set before he returned to the tent. Kile lay asleep.

Caleb settled down on his cot. An expectant breath expanded his chest. "Please, God, keep us in your right hand; watch over us." His mind and body hung between uncertain slumber and wakeful foreboding.

Tent canvas shook as a communications specialist crawled inside. "Colonel Harrison, a call for you on the field phone from Major Roth at Battalion. He says it's important."

Caleb wondered why he would call so late. He and Kile had spent most of the afternoon with Roth at Battalion Headquarters and Roth said little at that meeting.

Cliffhanger
From "Between Two Rivers, A Novel of Faith, Transformation, and Healing"
Clement Hanson DO, MPH

"Thanks. On my way."

He pulled on boots, reached for his Colt 45 and gas mask and hurried to F Company Headquarters tent. His right hand clenched the phone receiver. "Colonel Harrison."

"Major Roth here. What took you so long? You need to get over here right away to inspect a box of MREs. Some soldiers from Bravo Company said they got sick and they just brought me the case."

"Okay, Major Roth," he sighed. "Lieutenant Kile and one of our techs will get over there tomorrow morning and take a look. Check the lot numbers on the box and make sure no more of the same batch are distributed till we inspect them."

"No!" he growled. "I need someone from your team to inspect these before tomorrow morning. Git over here now!"

"Major Roth, we do need to take a look at those spoiled MREs. I don't see why it needs to be done tonight. You do have access to a different batch, don't you?"

A fist crashed against a hard table. "Get someone over here tonight, or I'll call the Colonel at Division Support Command!"

"Major, the Battalion Commander says our troops need to rest before we move out to the forward assembly area."

Cliffhanger
From "Between Two Rivers, A Novel of Faith, Transformation, and Healing"
Clement Hanson DO, MPH

My soldiers had a long day. I don't see how this is a medical emergency."

He exploded. "I'm calling the Colonel right now to have him order you here tonight! If you disobey him, I'll have him court-martial you!"

Caleb cleared this throat. "I'll get someone over there tonight, Major."

When Caleb put down the phone, he recalled that when he walked past Major Roth's Humvee that afternoon at battalion headquarters, the words "Kickin' Butt and Takin' Names" emblazoned his front windshield. That was Major Roth. The worst the Army had to offer.

He returned to the tent. Kile awoke with a start when Caleb's hand met his shoulder. "Anthony, we need to inspect an MRE box tonight at battalion. It was Major Roth."

He groaned. "He's nuts!" Kile switched on his flashlight and squinted at his watch. "It can wait till morning. Tell him go shove the box up his ... "

"Lieutenant, I don't think that's an option. This might be a food-borne illness outbreak."

Kile sat up and stretched his back. "Well, if we gotta, we gotta. Better now than later."

Cliffhanger
From "Between Two Rivers, A Novel of Faith, Transformation, and Healing"
Clement Hanson DO, MPH

"How long will it take to get there, do the inspection, and come back?"

He thought for a moment. "No more than an hour or two. There's enough light from the stars and moon for us to follow the green supply route barrel markers."

Kile reached for his boots. "I'll get Sergeant Vicky Vernardo to go with me. She's done a lot of food inspections." He began to dress.

"Lieutenant, I'm coming along with you both. I hear that Roth is a terror with junior officers and enlisted people. If I come along, he won't mess with you or Sergeant Vernardo."

They hurried to the Humvee. Caleb climbed into the right front seat as Kile strode toward Sergeant Vernardo's tent.

Five minutes later, Vernardo advanced in front of Kile clutching her clipboard and rifle. "Hey, glad to come along. I could teach that jerk Major things about field hygiene and sanitation. Officers aren't too bright."

Caleb wondered if that was a jab against him and Kile as well as Roth.

Kile looked at her droopy eyelids and smirked. "Sergeant Vernardo, you forgot to put on your mascara."

Cliffhanger
From "Between Two Rivers, A Novel of Faith, Transformation, and Healing"
Clement Hanson DO, MPH

Forearm muscles swelled as she gripped her M16. "And you forgot to put on your after-shave!"

The trio Humveed through the front gate. The night desert sky looked partly cloudy without wind or rain. With Kile driving and Vernardo sitting in the back, Caleb guided Kile with his compass.

They bounced over rocky desert with dim blackout lights providing meager illumination to the ground in front. The drive to Battalion Headquarters took twenty minutes.

Major Roth sat gnawing on an MRE cookie when they entered the Tactical Operations Center. Yellow, decayed teeth shone from behind tobacco-stained lips. A framed photo of a diminutive white poodle stood on a table behind him. "'Bout time!" he grimaced. "I've been waiting half an hour!"

"We got here as quick as we could," Caleb said. "I'd like to take the MREs back with me to our compound tonight to inspect them in daylight tomorrow. Right now, I'll get the lot numbers and call the unit when we get back to Foxtrot to see if they have any more of the same boxes. Might need to inspect them all. Which box did you get that cookie from?"

Cliffhanger
From "Between Two Rivers, A Novel of Faith, Transformation, and Healing"
Clement Hanson DO, MPH

He studied the half-eaten cookie and put it down.
"I guess that will have to do, Colonel," he sneered. "I was about to call the Colonel when you walked in."

Sergeant Vernardo's fingers tightened on her clipboard. Kile coughed.

They departed Battalion Headquarters with the MRE box.
Kile hummed a tune as he drove northwest into the black nothingness over barren ground along Supply Route Green.

As the minutes stretched to a half hour, sky clouded over, and stars and moon disappeared. Wind began to pick up, and visibility became more limited. Soon, there were no more green barrels to mark the Supply Route.

Caleb switched on his red-lens flashlight and pointed it to his field compass. "Turn a little more to the north, Lieutenant."

Kile rotated the steering wheel thirty degrees counterclockwise. Three pairs of eyes strained to spot a barrel or anything that would stand out from the empty terrain.

Nothing.

A knot twisted Caleb's stomach. They were lost in the vast desert night!

Cliffhanger
From "Between Two Rivers, A Novel of Faith, Transformation, and Healing"
Clement Hanson DO, MPH

Kile slowed the Humvee to about five miles per hour. Terrain became rougher and clouds gathered lower. An endless expanse of blackness stretched in front. Caleb's eyelids grew heavy as chin slumped to chest.

Kile slammed on the brakes.

Caleb bolted upright. "What's wrong?"

"Sir, you yelled at me to stop the Humvee!"

Stiff fingers rubbed sleepless eyes. "No, I didn't."

"Sir, I distinctly heard you yell at me to stop!"

Sergeant Vernardo awoke. "What's going on?"

They strained to look through the windshield. Beyond the Humvee front bumper, ground disappeared.

"Anthony, take a deep breath, shift into reverse and then ease your foot off the brake."

Kile shifted into reverse then backed the Humvee ten feet.

The three climbed out. They stepped forward a few yards. There was no ground in front of them. They switched on red-lens field flashlights and shined them forward and down into darkness.

They stood on the edge of a cliff at a ridge of sand dunes. Ground dropped over a hundred feet, opening unto a black velvet abyss.

Cliffhanger
From "Between Two Rivers, A Novel of Faith, Transformation, and Healing"
Clement Hanson DO, MPH

Caleb broke into a cold sweat. Another few feet forward and they would have disappeared over the edge. There were no seatbelts in the Humvee to keep them from ejecting through the front windshield. They didn't even know where they were, and they had no radio to call for help!

Goose bumps formed on Caleb's arms and neck. "Anthony, I wonder who yelled at you to stop the Humvee? It wasn't Sergeant Vernardo or me. We were both sleeping."

Vernardo huffed. "We almost died 'cause of that crazy Major. All over a box of MREs. I told you Officers aren't too smart." She snorted. "You both look beat. I'll drive this leg of trip."

She pulled herself into the driver's seat as Kile and Harrison climbed in.

She backed the Humvee further away and then drove west and south. After fifteen minutes, they made out the shape of a lone barrel, and then another. The Supply Route!

After midnight, the Humvee rumbled toward the perimeter gate. A tired guard let them through after they shouted the password. They pulled up to their hex tents and climbed out.

Cliffhanger
From "Between Two Rivers, A Novel of Faith, Transformation, and Healing"
Clement Hanson DO, MPH

Sergeant Vernardo shouldered her rifle. "I'll take this box to my tent and 'spect it before I hit the sack. See you in the mornin'."

Kile sighed. "Thanks, Vicky. Can't wait to get some snooze, too."

Kile and Harrison plodded away as Sergeant Vernardo toted the box to her tent.

Caleb crawled into his bag and fell into a fitful sleep.

The next morning, Caleb called Major Lisa Black on the field phone. "That's right. He wanted us to inspect them right away. And we were within ten feet of that cliff edge."

She let out her breath. "Doctor Harrison, Roth is full of it. And he even ignored my advice against setting up camp at the wadi." She paused. "Sir, did you hear about the Marine Captain?"

"No. What are you talking about?"

"A few months ago, before the Third Armored deployed to Saudi, a Marine Captain driving alone at night ran his Humvee over that same cliff. They found his body the next day. He was the first casualty of Operation Desert Storm."

Cliffhanger
From "Between Two Rivers, A Novel of Faith, Transformation, and Healing"
Clement Hanson DO, MPH

"You mean Roth knew about the cliff but didn't tell us?"

She hesitated. "And the Major violated General Raymond's policy."

"How?"

"The General issued an order yesterday that no night driving is authorized unless vehicles travel in pairs and have radios."

"Why didn't Roth ..."

"I don't know, Sir. Though you made the same mistake as the Marine Captain, you, Kile and Vernardo survived."

The doctor's heart fluttered. "Thanks."

Caleb returned to the tent and collapsed on his cot. He couldn't help suspecting that God's hand was at the wheel of their Humvee that night.

He thanked God for keeping them in His right hand.