

# THE PRICE OF LIFE

## Prologue

Eight-year-old Jennifer Haller lay motionless on the hospital bed, her head slightly higher than her feet. Her eyelids were closed, hiding what once was a pair of eyes more blue than the deepest sea. Even when open, those eyes had lost their sparkle, and it wouldn't return. A rhythmic monotone filled the room, reporting that the patient was still alive, if only clinically so.

Julie Haller sat in a straight-backed chair next to her daughter's bed, holding Jennifer's hand as she had done for the past two days. She'd rarely left the bedside, refusing food and sleep. She wanted to be there when Jennifer woke up. She needed to be there if she didn't. Julie caressed her daughter's bare scalp with her free hand, taking care not to rub too hard on the skin still healing from radiation burns. Julie's mind still registered the feel of her daughter's hair in her hand. The hair was once silky and thick, but fell out by the handful as radiation and chemotherapy progressed. As she gently moved her hand, she spoke in muted tones to Jennifer, telling her daughter she was loved and trying desperately to pierce the wall the coma had built between them.

"Are you sure you don't want anything to eat, Mrs. Haller?" asked the nurse, poking her head into the doorway.

"No, thank you," Julie replied without turning around. It was close to noon, but Julie honestly didn't know the time, nor did she care.

"Captain Haller is here," the nurse said. "I'm not supposed to let both of you in here at the same time."

Julie shot her a glare and drew a breath, but the nurse raised both hands in surrender.

"I said I'm not supposed to," said the nurse, patting Julie on the shoulder. "We'll be right back."

Julie nodded, turning back to her daughter.

The nurse returned shortly, pushing the wheelchair bearing Ed Haller, his left foot resting on the stirrup and his right pant leg tied at the stump of his right leg.

"Any change?" Haller asked.

"Not yet. I keep talking to her, but not yet."

"Want me to take over?"

"No, Ed, you should get some rest yourself."

"I've had enough rest, and you've been here two days without leaving. Really, honey, let me stay with her." He reached out and massaged the back of Julie's neck with his hand. She didn't seem to notice.

"You can stay if you want," Julie said. "I'm not leaving."

Outside, a soft rain had fallen all morning, and low dark clouds lingered, keeping the sun at bay. Even in the dimly lit room, the pain and exhaustion etched into Julie's face was plain to see. She kept her gaze on Jennifer, ravaged by cancer and by treatment worse than the disease itself. Haller longed to hold his daughter, comfort her, carry her from this horror to a time and place where she was happy and healthy once more. He wanted this more than anything, but he knew it couldn't happen.

Haller maneuvered his wheelchair next to Julie's bedside seat. She inched over to make room, and Haller took his wife's hand, which in turn held his daughter's hand, into his own. They tended Jennifer for nearly three hours, softly stroking her head and her hand, Julie occasionally whispering to her little girl as the constant beep of the monitor kept time like a metronome.

The rhythm grew slower over time and became a continuous tone just before four o'clock in the afternoon.

Julie leaned into the bed and kissed Jennifer's forehead, squeezing her eyes shut in an effort to make it all go away, to wake up from the nightmare that had become her life. When she opened them, the reality struck her again.

Ed Haller still held Jennifer's hand. He waited as his wife hovered over Jennifer, speaking too softly to hear. Finally, Julie turned to her husband. Their eyes met, and she could contain her agony no longer. She fell into his

lap and disintegrated into tears, the sobs amplifying as they rose, racking her body in pain to match the anguish of her soul.

As he quietly held his wife in his arms, Ed Haller didn't cry. His eyes narrowed to slits and his jaw tightened, but otherwise there was no outward sign of the fury within.

## **Chapter 1**

Captain Ed Haller, USMC, arrived with his wife at Grant Mercer's office about fifteen minutes early. He was, after all, a Marine officer, and punctuality was a trait that came naturally. Growing up on a working ranch in south Texas, eldest of three sons, Haller had risen early and worked hard his entire life.

Grant came around the corner and winced ever so slightly at the sight of the thin titanium tube between Haller's sock and pant leg. He recovered his composure quickly, but Haller noticed the momentary change in facial expression. Haller stood and introduced himself, then his wife.

“Nice to meet you both,” Grant said as he stuck out his hand. “Why don’t we sit in the conference room? The view is pretty good, and nobody’s using it today. Would you like something to drink?”

“Your receptionist already offered, thank you.” Haller took Grant in a polite but extraordinarily powerful handshake. Grant cringed, but refused to rub the wounded paw.

They sat at a large oak table in the center of the room, with Grant in an oversized arm chair at the head of the table and the Hallers across the corner. Haller’s steely blue eyes scanned Grant quickly before a friendly smile returned to the Marine’s face.

“I’d like to get right to it, if you don’t mind,” said Haller.

Grant gave a slight nod as he started making notes on a fresh yellow pad.

“I got a call while I was still in Iraq,” Haller began. “It was about eight months ago. Julie called on a Wednesday evening. Right away, I knew something wasn’t right. You have to remember, we don’t get many calls over there. With email available to us, we get to communicate pretty much every day, but the phone is still something they keep for special occasions. My son, Bradley, had his birthday last fall, and my daughter, Jennifer, had turned eight about six months before. Jen had been sick for a little while and was complaining more and more about pain in her head. So like I said, I knew something was up.

“Anyway, Julie said Jen had some tests done, and they found a tumor in her head. She said the only way they could take it out was with a laser procedure, but only two places in the world had the laser. I tried to get her to slow down and explain, but she was crying and the telephone connection was in and out, and I barely heard her say our insurance plan wouldn’t pay for the procedure because it’s experimental. Then she said the doctor told her the tumor would have been visible on a CT scan if they’d taken one a year ago when Jennifer started complaining about the headaches. Doctor said it could have easily been removed back then.

“With all the time gone by and the growth of the tumor, though, they gave Jen only a twenty percent chance to survive. The experimental procedure would have cured her, but all we could get the insurance company to pay for was chemo and radiation.” Haller drew a tortured breath, let it out in a long, painful exhale, and continued.

“Jennifer lost her hair, about fifteen pounds, and all her energy. I marveled every day at my daughter’s fight and her will to live. I don’t think I could be as strong as she was.”

Grant cast a quick glance at the titanium prosthesis where Haller’s right leg should have been. “I’m not sure I can agree,” he said. “That doesn’t look like something too easy to recover from.”

"This is nothing," replied Haller calmly. "I disconnected from that phone call with Julie and went out on patrol about two hours later. Unfortunately for me, I ran into an Iraqi IED about an hour later."

The Improvised Explosive Device is without a doubt the most insidious weapon yet invented by the twisted minds of men at war. Some might argue the relative merit of the cluster bomb, the antipersonnel mine, or the fully automatic assault rifle. But for pure terror of the unknown and unseen, the IED has no rival.

As the name implies, the IED is entirely improvised from whatever happens to be on hand. Pipes, metal containers, plastic boxes, gas tanks, and animal entrails have been used at one time or the other as the housing for the device. Explosives of all kinds, from C-4 to nitrogen fertilizer to TNT, provide the force.

The true evil of these implements of mayhem, however, is the remote detonator. Using a cell phone or walkie talkie, the maker of the bomb sets it out on a road, street, or open field and remains close by, typically within a hundred yards, to ensure adequate visibility of the package. After that, it's simply a matter of waiting.

Around Baghdad and other Iraqi cities in time of urban warfare, rubbish and debris is everywhere. Burned out vehicles, household garbage, dead and dying animals, and the remainder of the flotsam and jetsam of war litters every street, road, and highway. When the patrols of Marines and US

Army soldiers canvass the streets to maintain or restore order, they travel on foot, in Humvees, and in armored personnel carriers. Budget restrictions crimp the supply of APC's and Hummers, and far too often the majority of Marines walk or ride in vehicles with little or no protection. Together with the shortage of protective vests and the inferior quality of the vests available to them, American soldiers become easy targets.

As a patrol approaches the spot occupied by the IED, the guerilla in the nearby apartment or parking structure keeps watch, waiting impatiently for the opportunity to take down the greatest number of infidels in a single attack. Without military training or any education to speak of, most fail to engage the detonator at the optimum moment. Between the horrible force of the explosives and the lack of sufficient protection, these shortcomings are rendered meaningless.

"We were out on patrol in Tikrit," Haller said. "We completed a good sweep about a week before and had cleared out all the insurgents we knew about. The problem is, whenever you kill or take out one, two more come in behind them to claim the territory. At first, we figured that process took about a month. Then it became three weeks. I found out the hard way the transition time was down to about a week, sometimes less.

"As we headed down this one street, we saw a wrecked Toyota pickup truck with a camper shell on the shoulder of the road. The insurgents use these vehicles as half-assed machine gun nests, so we always need to be

sure they're actually empty. Protocol says all the men should be in a reinforced Hummer or an APC, but the truth is the open Humvees with the armor up around the front and sides will be fine if there really is an AK-47 or two in that vehicle.

"It was obvious to all of us there was nobody inside the truck. I jumped down with my lieutenant about twenty-five yards away, and we started walking toward the truck, him a little in front of me. Nobody could tell me to get my ass back in the Hummer, but our driver, a lance corporal from Nebraska, told me he wished I'd do just that.

"As I turned around to tell him we're okay, the IED went off. Lt. Schaeffer had just crossed in front of me, so he took the brunt of the detonation and nearly all of the shrapnel right to the front of him. The Kevlar vest was shredded, but the injuries to his head were too much anyway. I don't think he knew what hit him. I hope not."

Haller blinked several times, and his voice trembled, but he continued.

"The force was just unreal. The two guys on the passenger side had cuts from the glass, and the one in the front seat lost the vision in his right eye. I was thrown into the side of the Hummer, and all the glass was blown out of the vehicle. I remember being foggy for awhile, and the guys told me later I was unconscious for about ten minutes.

When I came to, I tried to get up, but it felt like I was swimming in a pool of Jell-O. My legs wouldn't work. My arms wouldn't work. I could see,

but everything was cloudy and smoky, and I had a hard time recognizing the things around me. Then I noticed there was somebody right in front of me, telling me to be still and messing around with my leg. Except when I looked, I had no leg. It was just gone. I saw blood, and flesh, and bone, but there was nothing from the knee down.

“I remember being in a helicopter, then on an airplane, but the next time I was conscious awhile was in a hospital at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany. They told me my leg was gone, but I’d survive. The vest from Julie’s parents probably saved my life.

“The next day, Julie arrived in Germany. It was great to see her, but when I found out what had been happening back home, the nightmare started for real.”

*The Price of Life* will be released September 16, 2010. Watch for pre-sales to begin July 1.