

Kill The Messenger

by

Sarah Bullion

Based on In The Hot Zone: One Man, One Year, Twenty Wars  
By Kevin Sites

A principled but shell-shocked war correspondent, embedded for the Battle of Fallujah, video tapes a Marine executing a wounded, unarmed insurgent in a mosque. He then has to deal with the consequences of reporting a truth no one wants to hear.

me@sarahbullion.com  
(310) 420-8670

FADE IN:

EXT. MUD HUT - VILLAGE OF CHAMCHAMAL, N/E IRAQ - MORNING

Third-rate shithole. It's dusty, desiccated. Heat ripples off the packed earth. Chickens amble around. A scraggly donkey lethargically nibbles at some nothing on the ground.

Sitting in the dirt, leaning against the hut is KEVIN SITES, early 40's, goatee, dirty, shoulder length hair (restrained by an equally dirty bandana). He is intense and focused. A cigarette dangles from his lips.

On the wall behind him are a series of over 20 hash marks a la a prison wall day count.

Kevin plucks intently at the computer on his lap. Cigarette butts and miscellaneous computer gear, including a portable modem, surround him.

MITCH (O.S.)  
(thick Kiwi accent)  
Oy, mate, any news?

Kevin snorts like, "Yeah, right."

Beyond Kevin, "MITCH" MITCHELSON, 30s, unshaven and burly, half-heartedly scuffles a pathetic soccer ball around with BILL MOROTTI, 40s, American camera man, similarly unkempt.

MOROTTI  
Then whatcha doin'? You couldn't possibly be blogging. Shit all has happened for weeks!

KEVIN  
Answering love letters. This one's from your mom, actually.

MOROTTI  
Ah, great! Give her my love!

KEVIN  
I always do.

Morotti kicks the ball in Kevin's general direction but because it's so flat it rolls way off the mark.

From the hut emerges TOFIQ, the Kurdish translator and "fixer" and the fourth of their motley little team. He's holding a satellite phone out to Kevin.

TOFIQ

Kevin, they ask for you.

They all exchange looks and watch Kevin expectantly.

KEVIN

(into phone)

Kevin Sites. You're shitting me. How long ago?

Kevin gives his team a curt nod. They spring into action, grabbing gear and diving into the two filthy SUVs with makeshift "NBC News" placards in their windows.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

Dammit! Okay. We're on the move! Be there ASAP.

INT./EXT. MITCH AND MOROTTI'S SUV - CONTINUOUS

They slam into the car and fire it up.

MITCH

So much for getting a head start.

MOROTTI

Let's pray someone gets a flat tire.

MITCH

I hope it's that pissant, Forbes.

MOROTTI

Hate that guy.

EXT. TOWN CENTER - KIRKUK, IRAQ - DAY

A huge convoy of trucks slams into the dry plaza surrounding a statue of Saddam Hussein.

TOWNSPEOPLE swarm from out of the dusty and pockmarked buildings as people come tumbling out of the trucks: U.S. SPECIAL FORCES, KURDISH PESHMERGA FIGHTERS, JOURNALISTS from a dozen countries.

TITLE: "KIRKUK, IRAQ. 2004"

The Iraqi forces have withdrawn. The city has fallen.

At the back of the convoy, like stragglings younger brothers, screech our two crappy SUVs.

In security mode now, Mitch hops out of the rear vehicle and assesses the situation and their position in it.

Kevin jumps out of the driver's side of the lead vehicle with the sat phone pressed firmly to one ear. His opposing index finger is jammed into his other ear.

KEVIN

(loudly, into phone)

Right. We just pulled in. We can be live in... No, I don't see him.

Morotti approaches Kevin, taps him on the shoulder and points.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

Dammit!

Off in the direction Morotti is pointing is a large truck emblazoned with an enormous and shiny NBC logo.

Next to it, a reporter, ERIC FORBES, short, professional looking and clean cut, with just the appropriate amount of self-importantly tousled hair, is already well into preparations for a live report.

He is cinematically setting up in front of the towering bronze statue of Saddam Hussein dressed in an Arabic keffiyeh headdress and dish dash robe. Behind him people scurry in preparation for toppling the statue.

Morotti pats Kevin on the shoulder reassuringly and trots off with woefully inferior camera gear to some nearby LOCAL BOYS who are smacking a mural of Saddam with the soles of their shoes.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

(into the phone)

Yeah, I see him now. Okay.

(regrouping)

So, Morotti is getting some footage then we can...

Kevin looks up as another large news truck pulls in, also emblazoned with the NBC logo. An impressive, intelligent looking woman, CATHERINE ARSHAD, 40s, hops out and starts directing the traffic of her crew.

She spots Forbes and crosses to him. They exchange a few words and then notice Kevin watching them. They smirk and nod at him dismissively.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

(furious)

We'll get what we can. Right. Call you  
back when I know more. Right.

Kevin hangs up. Tofiq approaches.

TOFIQ

Looks like we were a little late again.  
They really have nice trucks. Why do we  
not have such nice trucks?

Tofiq laughs and wanders off to chat with some of the  
Kurdish soldiers.

KEVIN

FUCK!

MITCH

(returning)

So, Goliath wins again, ay, Mate? Back to  
the hut? I'm startin' to miss that  
donkey.

Kevin, pissed and petulant, watches the swarms of people  
running around with purpose.

Morotti finishes showing the boys the pictures he took of  
them and rejoins the group.

MOROTTI

(to Kevin)

Whaddaya think?

KEVIN

Tikrit.

MITCH

Don't think it's fallen yet, Mate.

KEVIN

Just to the outskirts. Follow the  
retreat. This may be our last chance to  
file anything worth a damn.

MOROTTI

And what's 30 Rock gonna say?

KEVIN

No.

Morotti shrugs. They share a small smile. Agreed.

MOROTTI

We gotta beat ass.

Tofiq enters the huddle.

TOFIQ

Where?

MITCH

(winking)

How 'bout we just take a little recky to the South? You know, check out the perimeter?

TOFIQ

Tikrit?

They nod.

TOFIQ (CONT'D)

It is fallen?

MITCH

Don't think so.

Tofiq looks worried but the others are full of adrenaline--the thrill of the chase.

They load up. Kevin flashes Tofiq his most charming smile and fires up the engine while dialing his satellite phone.

KEVIN

(loudly, into phone)

Janice, Kevin again. We're gonna head out of town and have a look around.

They pull out.

EXT. IRAQI HIGHWAY - ABANDONED CHECKPOINT - LATER

The two SUVs are stopped at a hastily abandoned check point.

The ground is littered with piles of Iraqi uniforms: helmets, books, olive drab trousers. The detritus of deserters.

Morotti, his lip filled with chewing tobacco, and Tofiq lean against one of the vehicles. Tofiq is smoking.

Morotti spits. Tofiq flinches, disgusted. Morotti smiles.

Kevin and Mitch stand at the edge of the road looking into the distance through binoculars.

THROUGH BINOCULARS: THE VAST BEIGE FLATNESS IS DISRUPTED BY A HUGE, QUICKLY MOVING, SOUTHWARD BOUND DUST CLOUD.

Mitch lowers his binoculars.

It's eerily quiet.

MITCH

Looks like we're keeping pace with the good guys.

KEVIN

Cool, let's move on.

From around the back of the building emerge a group of YOUNG IRAQI MEN. They are all surprised to see each other. The young Iraqis nervously search for a quick exit.

Kevin nods to Tofiq who approaches the young men, offers them cigarettes and begins to talk to them. The young men all exchange wary looks of puzzlement and point haltingly in one direction and then another.

TOFIQ

(returning)

They do not seem to know which direction Tikrit lies in.

No one believes that but they let them go. The relieved young men hurry on their way.

Morotti shakes his head and spits again, missing a scorpion under a bush. They all turn to the cars.

KEVIN

Seriously, that's disgusting. Can you fucking stop?

MOROTTI

Sorry. No dice. It's my nature.

MITCH

Spitting is your nature?

MOROTTI

Fuck yeah. You want I should swallow it?

KEVIN

It would show me you really love me.

EXT. IRAQI HIGHWAY - LATER

The two SUVs cut a dusty path through the deserted highway.

Up on the road ahead appears another checkpoint.

EXT. TIKRIT GUARD POST - SAME

There is a lot of activity as HEAVILY-ARMED MEN hastily move boxes and supplies between the building and waiting trucks.

INT./EXT. LEAD SUV - SAME

Kevin slows up a little and keys the walkie-talkie.

KEVIN  
(into walkie)  
Mitch, you see that checkpoint?

MITCH (O.S.)  
Yeah, Mate.

KEVIN  
Probably the Kurds looting. Okay if we move ahead?

MITCH (O.S.)  
Yeah, alright, Mate. Just take it slow and keep your radio on.

EXT. TIKRIT GUARD POST - SAME

ONE OF THE GUARDS notices the SUVs approaching, sorts his AK-47 and moves to intercept them. He calls to the man closest to him.

The second man, also armed, a FEDAYEEN OFFICER, fat, unshaven, wearing a filthy trench coat and red keffiyeh, rises and waves Kevin forward.

INT./EXT. LEAD SUV - SAME

Kevin and Tofiq start to get a bad feeling.

KEVIN  
They don't look like Peshmerga.



TOFIQ

They look like Fedayeen.

KEVIN

(into walkie)

Guys, this doesn't look so good.

EXT. TIKRIT GUARD POST - SAME

It's too late, the guards have leveled their AKs and are beckoning them to stop. There is no way to slip away.

The rest of the looters, in reality retreating Fedayeen soldiers, Saddam Hussein's personal militia, have been alerted to the arrival of the SUVs. They are all clearly in a hurry, suspicious and trigger happy.

The SUVs come to a halt as the soldiers descend on them.

KEVIN

Shit, Tofiq. What do we do? What are you gonna say?

TOFIQ

I will handle this. Let me behave. Let me behave!

The Fedayeen Officer charges up to Kevin in the driver's side window. Tofiq jumps in.

TOFIQ (CONT'D)

(in Arabic)

Hello, my friend, how are you? We are journalists. Journalists. We are with... Al Jazeera.

Kevin hears the words "Al Jazeera" and flinches.

FEDAYEEN OFFICER

(in Arabic)

Really, "my friend"? Al Jazeera? If you are with Al Jazeera why does this say NBC?

He tears the NBC placard out of the window.

FEDAYEEN OFFICER (CONT'D)

(in Arabic)

Get out.

TOFIQ

(to Kevin)

Get out of the car.

Kevin moves to speak into the walkie, but the Officer smacks it out of his hands and rips him out of the vehicle.

The Officer yells to the rear SUV and motions for them to get out of their vehicle.

Several other armed men advance yelling and level their AKs on the group. They are young. And scared.

One FEDAYEEN SOLDIER returns from one of the SUV's with a couple of cameras. The sight of the cameras infuriates the Officer.

MOROTTI

Hey!

MITCH

Bill!

KEVIN

Tofiq, what's going on?

TOFIQ

They think we are spies.

Fucked.

Tofiq is talking almost non-stop in Arabic. Kevin and Mitch implore any Iraqi who will catch their eyes.

KEVIN/MITCH

Journalist. We are journalists. Sahafi.  
Journalists. Sahafi.

The soldier and the Officer argue about the cameras. Tofiq interjects where he can. Morotti leans against the car, sullen and defiant. The Officer points his AK at Kevin.

FEDAYEEN OFFICER

(incensed)

This one is certainly an American spy!

He shoots off a round between Kevin's feet. The noise rips through the desert air and they all freeze.

The Fedayeen swarm around them. The Officer fires an additional round into the grill of the lead SUV, killing it. Men rip apart the SUVs.

Kevin, Tofiq and Mitch are forced to their knees. They are frisked and robbed.

One Fedayeen finds bundles of cash Kevin has stashed all over his body. It's thousands of American dollars.

Morotti resists and is thrown down on his face. The soldiers kick him in the head and pound him with the butts of their AKs.

Kevin and Mitch are pushed over on their faces. These look like the last moments of their lives.

Tofiq, still on his knees, is constantly talking. The Officer presses the muzzle of his AK into Tofiq's cheekbone.

Men bind Kevin's arms behind his back. He sees a glint in the sand to his side. Something metal. He twists around and is able to grab it and slip it into his pocket without being found out.

Past the sandaled feet of their captors, Kevin can only watch as Mitch is kicked and beaten. Blood burns rivulets in the dust on his face.

KEVIN

Mitch!

The butt of a AK smashes into Kevin's face. Blackness.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. MICHELLE'S BEACH HOUSE - BEDROOM - MORNING

Kevin jerks awake.

KEVIN

Mitch!

He's sweating and panting. He looks around frantically. He is still wearing his clothes from the previous night's partying.

The bedroom is placid. Compared to his dream, it's beyond dissonant. He sits up on the edge of the bed and rubs the healing scar on his forehead.

He reaches into his shirt and pulls out an oval piece of metal. It's the Iraqi dog tag he pulled out of the sand, now strung on a piece of parachute cord.

He removes it, studies it for a moment and tosses it into his nearby backpack.