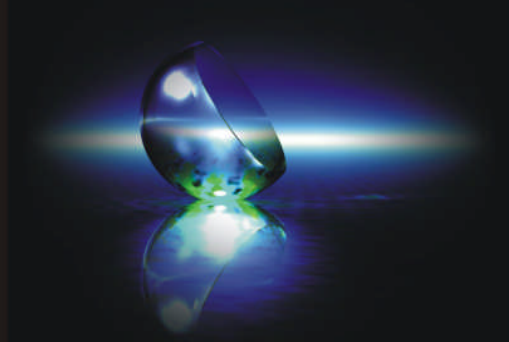


THE
UPPER ROOM



A NOVELLA

JOEY RICCIARDO

The characters, names, and places in this book are entirely fictitious. Any similarity to actual people, or places, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. However, the events in this book could happen if we continue to place the responsibility for our lives in the hands of other people.

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This book I dedicated to you, the reader.

Introduction From the Author

Hi, my name is Joey Ricciardo. Thank you in advance for reading *The Upper Room*. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

When I started writing the book, all I had was a picture in my head of the first scene. I had no idea what would happen or what the book was going to be about, and that made writing it a special experience. It was like I was reading the book for the first time, just as you are about to do.

So enjoy *The Upper Room*. See you upstairs.

- Joey Ricciardo

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CHAPTER FOUR

Two more weeks passed. I no longer needed my make shift crutch but I would need a cane for a long time. I tried my best to tell Eva how grateful I was to her for taking care of me (and letting me live), but the guilt just wouldn't let her go.

The time had finally come. Despite my protests, Eva insisted on going with me. She was probably right. I was probably too beat up to make it on my own.

The nearest town had been burned so we decided to hike 10 miles down river and see if there was still an old man there running a ferry.

Once we crossed the river, we would walk until we found someone that could lead us to my division.

The days and nights were growing shorter and colder. The last of this day's light tucked itself neatly between the branches of the trees ahead. We hadn't said much on our journey. I kept wondering if she really wanted to come or if this was an attempt to ease her guilt. Like most everything in life, the truth was probably somewhere between the two.

Just before the last of the sunlight faded, we spotted a single lantern by the side of the river. On the porch, huddled under a blanket, a little lump of a man slept on an ancient rocking chair. Mosquitoes and gnats buzzed around the lantern and landed on his face. It seemed to me that no mosquito could penetrate that leathery skin.

Eva whispered "hello" several times in a vain attempt to wake him but gave up when she noticed the empty bottle at his feet. We decided to spend the night right there on the porch listening to the old man snore. It would be a long night.

As I lay on the dry rotted porch, my thoughts drifted from one to another in a steady stream of blurred images. I could see my comrades falling in the heat of battle. I could see the sight of my rifle jerking up with every shot. As the smoke cleared I could see the house. I longed to be in that third floor oasis.

I rolled onto my side and out of my dream. She was already fast asleep. How I longed to be back in that little room.

"Hey!!! Yeah you!!! What the hell do you think you're doing? Yah damn freeloaders!!! Get outta here!"

He stood over us. His cane raised in the air. The blanket he had slept under was wrapped around his lower half. When he shouted at us steam shot from his mouth like fire from a dragon.

It took a while for reality to catch up.

"Wake up and get the hell off of my porch! Now!"

Eva spoke first.

"Sir we didn't mean to frighten you we..."

"Frighten me? Hah!" His voice was like an old rusty hinge that had to be forced to move even an inch. "I will beat you with this cane if you don't leave... Get - out!"

"Sir," My throat was soar from breathing cold air all night. "We were only looking for passage across the river."

"Across the river? Son do you see any boat tied to that dock?"

"No sir."

"That's right. Some of your buddies came and took it. My only means of earning a living."

"My bu..."

"Yeah I recognize that jacket. Ask one of your friends to take you across." He fixed his sagging gray eyes right into my gaze. "Think cause you're soldiers with guns that you don't need any conscience for the law? I'm giving you one more chance. Get up and get going!"

It was futile. No boat, no ride. We'd better get

moving. We pressed on into the morning sun. Already, the humid air was clinging to my entire body. We decided just to keep moving. Something was bound to come up.

High above us the sun cast itself without shame through the trees. Some time around mid-day we could see a blurry outline of something spanning the water.

"Oh yeah." Eva's voice was tired. "That must be the river bridge everyone talks about. I've never had any need to come this far so I'd only heard people talk about it."

"And you're just now telling me this?"

"Well I didn't know exactly where it was. Sorry."

"If you happen to remember anything else please feel free to speak up." Sometimes I should just keep my mouth shut. It was going to be another long walk, quiet walk.

We trudged on, one foot in front of the other. The bridge seemed to get further with every step like some mirage in the desert. In our silence, I tried to make sense of what was happening.

Here I was walking yet again to a war that could quite possibly lead to my death with this beautiful stranger who shot me. Whoever said that men choose

their own path has obviously never left the house. That guy should get out more.

My thoughts then shifted to Eva. I guess there wasn't much reason for her to stay back home. Her parents were dead her house almost destroyed. Still the thought kept surfacing. Why? Surely staying back at the house was safer than traipsing through the wilderness with me. Besides that, neither of us knew each other. I could be some lunatic or axe murderer for all she knew. Then again, she could be the same.

Finally it was in plain view. Both halves of it. Our hearts sank as we stood staring at the two halves of the bridge. The ends of it clung to each side of the river as the current swept across the bottom of each section. Whichever side had crossed last decided that no one else should use it.

"Well what now?" Eva asked.

"You a good swimmer?"

"That current's moving pretty good."

"Yeah but if we jump in here we can let the current angle us into the other side." I was trying my best to sound like it would work.

"And if there's an undertow?"

"Well, we'll die."

"Alright. How about this? We just keep on walking. We're bound to find some way of crossing."

"Yeah, the ocean."

"True. You first."

Without another thought I started limping toward the edge of the water. I wondered how my hip would hold out. I also wondered how the rest of me would hold out given how fatigued we were.

As I waded out the current began to pour ice cold water into my boots. This was not going to be fun at all.

The river bottom got deeper and deeper with each step until I was having to yank my feet out of the mud. Finally, with teeth chattering and freezing water up to my chest I could walk no more. I lunged my body forward and the current snatched me up like a little twig. Suddenly I was helpless.

The earth had disappeared from beneath me and my heart was trying to break out of my chest. If I didn't do something I would be swept away.

Kicking and paddling against the current, I realized just how incompetent I was in the water. Arms flailing wildly, I did managed to slow down enough to be able to move closer and closer to the shoreline. Glancing to my right, I could see the bridge. It looked like I might actually make it.

As it got closer I tried to spot something to grab. I decide to simply let the current push me into the bridge itself where I could grab one of the wooden beams.

I hit the bridge with a painful thud. My back scraped against as I struggled to turn myself around.

It was then that I realized that I had nothing but wet wood to grab on to. It would be impossible to pull myself up with no leverage in the heavy current.

Almost at the end of the fallen piece of bridge, my legs slammed into something under the water. I couldn't tell if it was a piling or another section of bridge. Whatever it was, it was high enough that I could stand up and pull myself onto the broken bridge.

For what must have been a full minute I lay panting trying catch my breath. I could hear Eva calling. "Hey are you ready for me yet?"

I had to take a deep, painful breath to project my voice.

"Yeah..." My mouth opened and nothing came out. Another deep inhale and the world began to spin. "Yeah. There's...there's something underwater...off the right corner of the bridge. You can stand on it. I'll catch you."

She waded out into the river and started drifting towards me. When she was almost to the other side, we were both caught off guard by some men yelling. I couldn't understand them. They were speaking another language. I didn't want to yell so I whispered as loud as I could for her to hurry. As she struggled to stay afloat in the current, three men appeared on our side of the river from behind the trees. They had us in their sights.

One of the men shot at Eva first and she immediately went underwater. I wasn't sure if she was hit or if she had submerged herself to avoid the shot. I didn't see any blood but in the rushing water that didn't mean much.

The other men cautiously made their way towards me, guns pointed, fingers ready to fire. Surely I was a dead man.

I don't know what came over me. Maybe instinct, maybe stupidity, but without really thinking about it, I slipped right back into the water and went under. I could hear the bullets slurping through the current as it carried me to who knows where. When my breath finally gave out, I surfaced and noticed that I was drifting towards some tree roots and that the current slowed at this part of the river.

With everything I had, I swam to the shore and made my way to a flat spot on the side of the river. As I lay trying to catch my breath I was sure that Eva had been killed, either by the river or those enemy soldiers.

Before I could open my eyes, I heard feet land with a thud onto the gravel next to me head. A boot applied its full weight to my throat as I grabbed it with both hands. It was no use. One of the soldiers pressed the nose of his gun to my forehead and I was gripped with fear. As I opened my eyes, the other soldier grabbed a handful of my hair and used it to lift the

full weight of my body into a seated position.

“Put your hands behind your back” He spoke almost perfect English except for a pronounced accent. They tied my hands together and lifted me up to my feet. I wobbled on my injured hip but of course that meant nothing to them. I was officially M.I.A. to my side and P.O.W. to theirs.

They led me blindfolded and gagged on yet another hike. As we walked, they chatted in their native language and told jokes as if they were on a nature hike. Maybe they were.

Not too far from the river, I could hear the sound of children laughing. What was going on here? As we continued to walk, more sounds chimed in. We had entered some sort of settlement. Then all the busy commotion stopped. I could feel the gaze of an entire community. Even though I couldn't see them, I knew that there was a lot of people looking on.

We walked a little further and my left foot hit something. The two men leading me grabbed my elbows before I fell and hoisted me on to what I presumed was a porch.

A door opened and they led me down a long hallway and down a flight of stairs. One of the men pushed forward and I fell to the floor. A short time later I heard them ascend the stairs and close the door.

There's no way of knowing how long I lay there. I was on my side, yes my bad side, with my head

pressed against the cold floor. All I could hear was my breath and an occasional rat scurry to and fro. I tried to roll over but it hurt too much. I just had to lay there and wait.

Sometime later, an hour maybe, the door opened. It sounded like several men were coming down the stairs. Through the blindfold I could see that they had turned on a light. Two of the men lifted me to my feet and forced me down onto a chair. My mind was running away with thoughts of what they might do to me. Spending all that time lying on my side wondering what would happen was torture in and of itself.

“So here we are.”

Although this man had no accent, I knew this enemy. I had spent many months fighting them in the hills. Language did not bind them. Borders did not bind them. What bound them was misguided ignorance. What bound them was a crusade to homogenize. To melt our differences together either by force, freewill, or death.

What they failed to realize was that it is those very differences that bound us into a greater whole. It is those differences that keep us viable and vital. Learning from each other, debating and celebrating being different had made us better, made us strong.

That is where all this bloodshed, all this horrible tragedy originated. The new, forward thinking Unitists and the old, simple backward thinking Preservationists set out to kill each other into their way of thinking.

“I’m sure that you realize that this will be very painful for you. I fully expect you to play the hero. Tell me you don’t know anything. Tell me you don’t know where your unit is?” I was looking back and forth and lifting my head trying to see something through the blindfold.

He moved closer. I could feel his stale breath against my ear. “I’ll make a deal with you. The more you know, the faster you will die.”

They removed the gag but left the blindfold.

“So, let’s start small. Where did you come from?”

I could barely talk. “My unit was engaged on the other side of the river east of here. About three days by foot.”

“Ah a lone survivor. So we both know where your unit is don’t we?”

Now I was angry.

“I don’t blame you for being mad. I don’t blame you for being afraid. You’re angry because you’re helpless and afraid because you are ignorant. You have been taught that freedom is a right. That it is the goal of every human being. That my friend is indeed true. However, you will soon learn a lesson that your

brainwashed past did not teach you. Freedom, sir, is letting loose the binds of struggle. Letting loose the chains of preserving your so called identity and embracing a simpler, more stable life. There is so much more to life than what you have been forced to learn my dear friend. From here on out we will care for you. Yes, you need not worry about a thing. Everything is taken care of.”

With that ridiculous rant they tied my hands together and left. The lights were still on but I was once again all alone. Yeah daddy was doing a great job so far.

After a while, the door opened again and someone came down the steps. The sound of the footsteps on the hollow stairs was much lighter than when the other men came down. I smelled something. Food. At this point I really didn't care what it was as long as it was edible. I didn't even care if they had poisoned it.

The plate landed in front of me with a porcelain clang. I could feel the heat rising as I savored its smell with every breath. As I was taking this all in and hoping they would actually let me eat it, I felt a tugging at my wrists. My hands fell to my sides and I shrugged my shoulders trying to get the blood flowing back to my extremities. My captor removed the blindfold but I kept my eyes shut for a moment.

The light penetrating my eyelids seemed uncomfortable after being in the dark for so long.

Slowly I opened my eyes but didn't bother to look around the room. Of course there were no utensils but that didn't matter. Flashbacks of the purple puddle of vomit came and went but the warnings didn't matter. I was starved.

Like an oversized two year old, I dove in with both hands. Potatoes, gravy, green beans, bread, I ate whatever I grabbed first. My stomach tried to reject the onslaught but I kept eating anyway. When I was finished I looked up and noticed that my warden was a woman. She simply looked down at me as if she were waiting for a dog to finish his meal.

When I was finished, she grabbed my plate, turned around and went up the stairs. She returned a few seconds later with a bowl in one hand and a cup filled with water in the other. As Ms. Warden set them down before me, she said in a very flat tone "One for washing and one for drinking." I got the point.

I washed my hands in the bowl then used them to splash some water to my mouth. The cup of water was gone in no time. When I was done she grabbed the two dishes and went back up the stairs.

Shortly after she was gone, I heard music and looked around to find a speaker hanging in one corner of the room. From what I could see, the only way in or out was through the door at the top of the stairs.

My mind quickly shifted back to the music which seemed to draw me in.

The singer had a beautiful voice, “Remember the dark clouds lifted and all that you knew you let go...”. What a beautiful song.

I decided to try and stand but my hip was too sore. It didn't hurt nearly as bad as I thought it would, but I decided I really didn't have any reason to move from my chair. There was simply nothing in this small room for me to explore.

Once again the door creaked open and Ms. Warden came down with some clothes. It was a simple shirt and pants both solid black and made of heavy material. I thought she would leave again but for some reason she didn't.

Without saying a word, she turned away from me and faced the wall. A little embarrassed, I took the cue and changed into the new clothes.

What I wouldn't give for a bath! As she turned around, she pointed towards a box against the wall and told me to put my clothes in the box. I couldn't remember the last time I had been in fresh clothes. It was then that I realized that she didn't have a weapon. Despite this, I had no illusions of trying to escape. Maybe I had sold out for food and shelter. What kind of coward had I become?

She walked up to me and pulled a handkerchief

from her apron. She used it to blindfold me once again. I heard her move around behind me and I went into a panic. She was going to shoot me right there. Then I felt her soft hand on the back of my arm.

“Walk.” She said.

I shuffled forward expecting to hit a wall or trip on something. She pulled me left then right guiding me to the steps. My foot hit the stairs. As I fell forward I reached out and my hand caught a handrail. With both hands on it, I made my way up the stairs. The staircase was very narrow. I could hear her behind me.

I felt like a death row inmate making that final walk. I was convinced that that had been my last meal and I had voluntarily put on my execution clothes. Having no real choice, I very slowly climbed those stairs. This is it.

When I reached the top I stopped. I didn’t want to go any further, I was in a panic. She pushed me slightly to the side then reached around and grabbed the door knob. As the door swung open, I could hear people in the room in front of me.

“Welcome. Welcome home.” It was a man. Other people were in the room. I guessed about four or five. My intense fear couldn’t possibly have gone unnoticed.

As I crossed the threshold into the upper room, two of them, one on each side, grabbed my elbows and

started leading me back the way I had come. At least it felt that way.

I felt a breeze as we left the house. They removed the blindfold but kept me in a tight grip. I expected to see hundreds of staring eyes glaring at the new side-show attraction. To my surprise, it was the complete opposite. Two kids chased each other across the street. A man carried boxes in and out of a building on the corner. For all I could tell I was completely in visible.

We walked to the end of the street where the tree line separated the town from the wilderness beyond it. There was a metal wall that went as far as I could see in both directions except for a gate at the end of the street where we now stood. One of the men reached with one hand, opened it and pulled me along into the woods.

After a short hike, we came to a place where the ground dropped off down a steep hill. After walking for a while, it came into view.

Hundreds of people; men, women, children, old and young all clothed in black. Oh Lord God. What the hell was happening? There were buildings scattered throughout a large clearing. No fences, no gates, and no one looked sick or panicked or like this situation was anything but normal. One guy emerged from the woods as if returning from a leisurely stroll.

My immediate thought was that, as soon as I could,

I was out of here. After all there were no guards, no fences, nothing to keep me from staying. As strange as this place was, there was no way that I was the least bit curious as to what all these people were all doing here.

I'm not sure when, but at some point my captors had let go of my arms. I turned to look at them and they were gone. Just like that.

I glanced down the hill and saw that only a few people had noticed me. A couple of them waved their hands beaconing me to join them. I wasn't about to go down there. After all, I was soldier trained for survival. There were no guards that I could see so I took off running back the way we had come. When the fence came into view, I turned left and kept going. I had no idea where I was going. All I knew was that I wasn't going back to that bizarre place.

Night began to fall and the temperature dropped. I was grateful that these clothes were so thick. Still, it was very cold. All through the night I walked and the fence went on and on. I dared not stop because, if I did I, was sure to be caught again; if I didn't freeze to death first. But how far did it go? Surely it had to end somewhere.

Then it occurred to me that there were prison bars all around me. This fence ended somewhere but I couldn't possibly know where. The wilderness in front of me completed the enclosure. I was in a

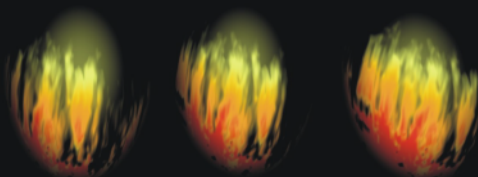
natural prison. The uncertainty, the freezing cold, the fatigue, the very trees in front of me made the perfect prison cell.

I kept on walking. At some point in the night I looked up and saw the full moon shining bright in the sky. If it weren't for the situation I was in it would have been the most beautiful of nights. Something in me kept nagging, kept telling me that the fence didn't end. But that was impossible. It had to end.

Finally I just couldn't go on. Shaking from the bitter cold, I sat down with my back to the fence and crossed my arms as tightly to my chest as I could. It would be a long cold night. I sat and thought about all the ways a person could die. There were quite a few. But as I lay there drifting between asleep and awake, my mind shifted and I thought of only one thing. I thought of Eva.

Coming Soon:

POWER
CIRCLES



Joey Ricciardo

Chapter One

The lights were out. One minute Elmer Haversham was sitting in front of the TV, the next he was sitting in the dark. As he got up, he bumped his knee on the coffee table before closing his eyes and picturing the layout of the living room. It's funny how when you close your eyes, you can see better in the dark, he thought.

He groped his way into the kitchen and opened the top cabinet drawer next to the refrigerator. This was his junk drawer. Inside was an endless array of the most useful items he never used. Scotch tape, duct

tape, packing tape, masking tape, an ice pick (for the next murderer that drops by), a broken candle, twist ties, and - ahha - a flashlight.

He flipped the switch on the side and was surprised that it still worked. The last time this had happened was over ten years ago.

Pointing the flashlight back into the drawer, he continued to search. 9-volt batteries, rubber bands - yeah there it is - a AA battery. Exactly what he was looking for.

Flashlight in hand, Elmer left the house through the back door that led into the kitchen. It was awfully warm outside, especially for this time of the night. The humidity was almost intolerable. Taking a right, he went through the gate to the side of the house where the fuse box was.

He held the flashlight firmly in his armpit and hunted around in his pocket for the key which he pulled out and inserted into the tiny lock on the fuse panel door. Once opened, the door revealed a keypad with a small LCD screen above the buttons. He typed in the code and the screen lit up and asked him his name.

“Elmer Haversham.” He was careful to announce every syllable so the computer would understand.

“Access granted,” said the computer, “Fingerprint verification required.”

Dr. Haversham pressed his thumb against the LCD

display. A small red laser shot out of a tiny hole in the fuse panel and ran across his face.

“Hello Elmer,” the computer voice said.

With that, the entire face of the fuse box slid straight up into the wall above. Behind it, there was a single AA battery. Elmer reached into the front chest pocket of his shirt, retrieved the new battery and used it to replace the old one which he then dropped into his pocket.

“Down,” he said and the panel face slid down back into place. Elmer typed in another code then looked towards the back yard. The floodlights on the back of the house were on so he assumed that the rest of the house was on as well.

Once he was back inside the cool air conditioning of the house, he dropped the flashlight and the old worn out battery into the junk drawer and slid it back into place.

“Well I guess I should get back to work.” Elmer felt silly talking to himself out loud but it was a habit he couldn’t break. One day, he thought, all this seclusion will drive me nuts. I’ll be talking out loud and won’t even know it. But then again, maybe saving the world from a future energy shortage is worth the risk. Besides, going out gallivanting all over town would mean time away from something that I actually find interesting.

So once again he made the choice. Instead of going

out and meeting another person (no one in particular, just another human being), he would work late into the night on his latest project.

Years ago, Elmer had converted his attic into a laboratory. While still at the university, he had come up with a way of multiplying the amount of energy that could be derived from each electron in an energy source. If he could translate his findings into practical applications, the results could be earth shattering.

He soon learned, however, that it was too risky to continue his research at the university. Sure the equipment was better, but once he came up with his Energy Compound Proliferation Theory, he was met with one administrative obstacle after another.

The big oil companies were among the biggest donors the school had. During his tenure he had witnessed one promising discovery after another get de-funded before it ever got off the ground.

No, no, Energy Compound Proliferation would be a home project. This one would see the light of day.

Thank you for reading *The Upper Room*. If you would like to purchase *Power Circles* or other titles by Joey Ricciardo, please visit:

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