

THESIS

AT THE WATERS OF DIYALA

Submitted by

William Hutchinson

Department of English

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Master's Committee:

Advisor: Nina McConigley

Andrew Altschul

Usama Alshaibi

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ABSTRACT

AT THE WATERS OF DIYALA

Much of my upbringing took place during the aftermath of 9/11, and the subsequent “War on Terror” that resulted from it, which cascaded into nearly a decade of conflict and birthed the largest American war since Vietnam. These were inescapable aspects of my childhood, and how I came to understand myself as an American, and my country’s place in the world, is bound to these geopolitical conflicts. This novella examines personal relationships, as well as psychological effects, regarding participation in and reflection on the Iraq War from the perspective of a United States Army soldier, both during and after deployment. Written in first-person POV, this novella attempts to engage with the combined feelings of uncertainty, camaraderie, vulnerability, and alienation that emerge for the narrator through a specific friendship formed with an Iraqi interpreter in a high pressure combat environment. His experience of this friendship, as well as his experience of combat, is also placed in the larger context of both his relationship with his grandfather, along with his understanding of his life choices made up to that point. For the narrator, as with all fictional characters, he exists at any given time at the intersection of a multitude of internal and external forces, feelings, ideas, and beliefs including, but not limited to: his family situation, his socioeconomic background, his status as an American in contrast to his Iraqi surroundings, larger political forces such as America in the aftermath of 9/11 and, crucially, the late-adolescent and early adulthood age at which he is enduring all of this.

This novella seeks to explore how the age at which we experience something affects us both during and after the fact, how arbitrary identity markers such as race, religion, and nationality shape the formation of human relations and connections, and how those connections emerge, change, and are molded by the experience of the largest arena of war, and the defining American conflict, of the 21st century thus far.

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DEDICATION

To my mother, always the rock, always the foundation on which my entire life has been built, though I try to consider myself a writer, there is no proper way to describe all that you have made possible for me. All of this is yours, everything that follows is yours, and always will be.

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Prologue

Lexington, Kentucky

2014

I have often thought that I've lived two lives. The first one began, of course, when I was born decades ago, on a bright morning in December, back in Lexington, Kentucky. There was a soft icing of snow beneath a blue-domed sun and ended in a quiet hospital room, sitting by a rainwashed window, watching my grandfather die. The second began years later, when I'd awoken in my beaten up chair at 5 AM, hungover and exhausted, by a phone call from Iraq.

I had been in one of my usual post-work funks, trying to forget how I found myself working the night shift at a shipping warehouse. I could've sworn I had potential once. The sun was casting a hazy orange glow into my living room when the phone rang. I propped myself up out of my recliner, which had become my de-facto bed, brushing empty beer cans aside. When I answered there was no voice, only an inaudible scratching beyond the line.

"Hello?"

The scratching ceased, replaced by a voice I had not heard in nearly 8 years.

"*Salamalaykum*, Baker," the man on the other end said.

"Karim?" I said, "Your voice has changed."

"*Naeam*," the man said, "Hasn't everything?"

His voice was deeper, more haunted than I remembered, "*Hal yumkinuk fahmi?* Can you understand me?" he said in Arabic.

"Salam, Karim. *Naema*, 'ana 'afhamukeh. Yes, I understand you," I replied.

"Good, you have not forgotten all we have taught you," he said.

"Why are you calling me, Karim? Are you in danger?"

"Of course, we all are," said the man with the gravelly voice on the other end of the line, his breath laboring as he spoke, "But that is not why I call. I call for my brother Sami."

"Sami?"

"Yes, Baker, I call because Sami has gone missing."

"He's still alive?"

"I tell myself he is, but I do not know. He has slipped from us, Baker, *Allah yusaeiduna*." God help us.

"I'm not sure I can help you, Karim," I said, my voice trying not to betray a sudden, almost violent urge to slam the phone down and forget this call ever happened, forget that my past life had just reared its head like a snake.

"My contacts in Iraq have faded, everything's scattered now," I said, "Whoever is left there can't be trusted. I'm sure money has changed hands by now, anyway. Whoever worked for us then now works for someone else, I'm sure of it."

"You are right, Baker. It is not how it was, truly", Karim said, sounding almost as though he were reminiscing, "The ISIS dogs have grabbed the weak ones by the balls. If you listen at night you can practically hear them squealing in the alleyways. No, it is not how it was. But trust is all we have now. Trust is why I now speak to you."

"I tell you now, Karim, whoever helped you find me can be of more assistance to you than I can. You must ask them for help."

The labored breathing continued, "They are all older, Baker. I am older. My strength is not what it was when you were here, when I could swim straight across the river, and walk up the other bank with a fish in my mouth. This task is not for us. After all, we must give bread to the

baker, even if he eats half of it,” he said, “I found you because there are those in Baghdad who still trust the Americans. Sami was one of them. I wish I was calling with better news, Baker, I wish I had spoken to you sooner, I wish the years held more of our conversations, but I must remind you of your promise. Just talk and peace...and live with the pigeons, Baker. Do not let Sami die thinking you were a liar. I will call Thursday! It is not safe here! Thursday, Baker!”

With that, the line clicked and the haunted voice left me in the silence of my own dingy apartment. I think we all have moments where, going from day to day, nothing really seems to change, then time asserts itself and we feel the page of our life turning, and all of a sudden we know everything is different, and what we took for granted becomes precious. This was that moment for me. This was when my second life began.

When I think of Iraq now, I think of Sami. I tried to bury and forget that part of the war, and for years I did, before Karim’s phone call, before the dreams began. They came slowly and filmy, like a heat shimmer on blacktop. There was a bus stop in the orange haze of evening. A huddled mass of people standing shoulder to shoulder, each face a blur, just shape and color gnarled by sleep. Then I would see Sami, motionless, the soft mat of hair reaching down above the green eyes that were searching. His face was the same as I remembered it, but not quite. The smile. I’d wait for the faithful smile, but it never came. The bus would hiss up to the curb, and the mass would step through the doors. All would depart except Sami, who remained. The same dream would play itself out in parks, airports and stores, with the same blur of departing faces swirling around, while Sami remained. Everyone was going somewhere but him.

It had been nearly seven years since I left Iraq when Karim called. I hadn't spoken to anyone since, not from the streets we patrolled, the shops we passed each day, not even from my own company. Occasionally I would browse someone's Facebook page. The faces in their profile pictures would be older and less recognizable, some bearded, some with thinning hair, everyone rounder in the stomach and fatter in the cheeks. But if I stared for a second, it was still them. I'm no different. Just without the happy family photos, without a proud wife wrapping her arm around my waist, a child in the crook of her arm. For me, it felt like everything that happened since Iraq had almost been happening to someone else, and I had just been watching. In the back of my mind I would tell myself I'd get the time back, the time to do fun things, to go to school, or even just to leave the house during the day. I once read a short story, in the days when I read short stories, crouched in a foxhole or just passing the time on base, about a barber who lived in a small town. Everyone loved him, and all day people would come in to share stories of their lives while he cut their hair. When they asked about him, he would only speak of plans, I'll do this sometime, I'll go there sometime. He spent every day like this until, one morning, he went into work, looked in the mirror, and no longer recognized the people sitting in his chair. He was someone who spent his days waiting for the rest of his life to happen.

I felt I needed to watch this shitshow called my life for some reason. I felt like the longer I watched, the more likely something was to happen, and that something, whatever it was, would give me permission to start again, permission to believe that the war was really over, and that it had meant something. But I soon came to realize that waiting was only time passing, and that the only person I wanted my days in Iraq to mean something to was Sami.

When I first met Sami, he'd felt a complete mystery. At eighteen, I hadn't understood myself, much less anyone else. The truth is that you never really understand yourself at a certain

age until you stop being that age, and if you're lucky, you remember a thing or two that was worth learning. And so it wasn't until years later, when I'd lay awake in the cool blue hours before sunrise, that I finally learned what Sami had meant to me, and what he seemed to teach me in his steady way. In the army, I learned to find targets and execute them. I learned to read surroundings by entry points and exit points. What the quickest way to get in and get out was. I learned to spot an enemy in a crowd, to tell if a street was safe or not by the presence of stray cats. But nothing about being a soldier had taught me anything of courage. What I learned about that came entirely from Sami.

I remember the day Sami got his uniform. It was in those early days in 2006, in Baghdad. We had taken a picture, well, I had taken a picture. Sami stood by the Humvee with his rifle in his hands, trying to look serious but his faint smile always gave him away. The smile that was always ready to unleash itself. He showed it most in those early days together, when the promise of the war felt purposeful. I would tease him that he was already an American, with his cheerful gaze and fearless sense of humor. Sami would simply say "One day.", which was both a dream and a mantra. One day was both everything outside the war, everything we thought could still happen for us, and the only unit of time we knew for getting through it. Nothing existed but that day, and everything existed but that day, so you woke up years later and wondered why you felt so incomplete. Something was missing. It was the future you dreamed for yourself—the one you thought of when you stood in the Euphrates and looked up at a cold ribbon of stars and felt the immense stretching of possibility—but never got to live, in more ways than one.

Every war is full of lives never lived, both in those who survived, and those who never returned. I was under no pretenses that our's was different in that way. But each war has its own DNA. Just like history is warped by the age at which you experience it, each war keeps its own

meaning for its own era, and for those who are too young to remember what it was before. None of us understand the world before ourselves, not in any truly felt sense, and the world is always changing, so each war is, in a distinctive way, the first one like it ever fought. For Sami and I, our war would not be the last.

Chapter 1

Diyala Province, Iraq

2006

Bravo Company, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division

There's a river in Diyala, the Diyala River, conveniently named, that bends its way past rows of brick houses and groves of dusky palm trees. Along this curving, undulating path of the river rests a low, fertile plain that lies open and green in the sun. As the Diyala river flows south to the Tigris, everywhere the terrain is crossed with lush irrigation canals, banks grown high with reeds, where crickets sing out the morning and the night, and wide orchards that stretch themselves full with plump pomegranate and grapefruit trees. Along the river, Sacred Ibis birds slip their long beaks into the shining water, and lights from the little fishing boats, or mashoofs, glow softly in the cool, sunless hours, while the soft, watery call of the muezzin brings the faithful to their prayers. If I'm making it sound a little too poetic, it's because in a lot of ways it really was. My first impression of the place was that this war thing wasn't going to be so bad. Some pretty scenery, talk to the locals, patrol around a bit, and that'll be it.

Beyond the river plain, the Zagros Mountains rise above the desert, and at night, the high cool air blows down the slopes and out over the desert, bringing the smell of high oaks and mountain dust. In the hot afternoons, wide dust devils surge into the sky and whip the dry desert powder through the palm groves where it scrapes against the skin like warm sandpaper. It is here, among these palm groves by the reedy banks of the river, that FOB Goodwill sat, our glorious base, small and reluctant beneath the pounding sun. The base was little more than a dirt courtyard, a loading dock for a business in a former time before the war. It was rimmed by a

brick wall that at various points slouched, crumbling and defeated. Waves of shimmering nut grass met the wall like a slow, green wave. All day long, stray cats rested on the cracked ramparts, sunning themselves and licking bits of food and campfire grease from their paws. Inside the wall, a row of smoke black rifles rested against the green metal cans of ammunition. A gunner sat in a sentry tower overlooking the baking camp. I thought about that job but it seemed too boring. A creaking iron gate led out to the dirt road into Algaara, a little spit of a town where the markets and shops of the town bustled with activity, trucks nearly overflowing with people going to and from Baghdad, which was some twenty miles away. Other trucks nearly overflowing with propane cans, goats and sheep, plastic fuel tanks for scooters and rickshaws that all passed by in the dozens.

In the late afternoon, every day, our column of tan Humvees and M2 Bradley vehicles would thunder through the iron gates and into the camp. There were six vehicles in total, and we moved them in single file around the edge of the courtyard like a big metal caterpillar, before stopping and shutting off their thrumming diesel engines. The doors would open, and a sad, tired mess of soldiers, our backs aching beneath ninety pounds of gear, would step from the confines and begin slowly scattering about the courtyard. We wore fatigues the tan color of the desert, and carried M4 carbine rifles and grenade launchers. Some of us had ribbons of bullets cross over our shoulders and across our chests. Our faces were always hidden behind thin face scarves which we pulled over our mouths to keep out the suffocating dust. Radios clicked intermittently, and when we reached the little shade of the courtyard, beneath the arcade, we pulled down our gear and slipped off our helmets, revealing mops of matted hair, beaten down by sweat. Every day in Diyala was like this, but the morning I met Sami was a little different.

It was on a random Tuesday. I felt the last remnants of the cool night wind of the desert whipping my face as I stood in the fly-specked courtyard. A muted sun was just rising over the far horizon and the dusty palms that ramparted the dirt roads running out to the east. Everything here was muted by the dust. Everything had a sepia shade. It seemed like half a place that could never come into focus, like living in an old photograph. Still, it was always nice to have a few moments of quiet to myself, even if I had nothing to look at. The previous morning I'd been startled in the early morning by a scratching feeling, like rough plastic on my leg, and rolled over in my sleeping bag. I reached down and felt whatever it was curl around my whole hand. I launched myself out of my sleeping bag and came face to face with a camel spider the size of a dinner plate. I tried flinging it into the glowing coals, only to overshoot it and drop it on Sean Sakritter's head. Now Sakritter was awake and screaming and soon everyone was out of their bags and shaking them over the fire. I knew about those crawly menaces before I got to Iraq, but tried not to think about them most of the time. Even if they were there, they blended in with the beige desert ground and you'd miss them if you weren't paying too much attention. If you got too close they'd charge you, they weren't afraid of anything, and they could move, so if one did charge you, it'd be up your leg before you got your bayonet out. You couldn't shoot them, any gunfire would turn the whole compound into a shitshow. If they bit, it wasn't the worst thing. They carried no venom, but their fangs were like a knife, and just looking at them made us shiver. But soon we learned they were just like spiders and popped when you squeezed them. From time to time we'd drop one in an empty ammo can with a trapped mouse, close the lid, and listen to the shuffling and squealing, one of our dark little war games.

Our dusky shapes were moving now, readying the breakfast. We moved slow, having fallen asleep only a few hours before. Sakritter took a shirt and brushed the dust from his shaved

head. As we crouched along the courtyard, taking our spoonfuls of rice, a thin gray cat slunk among the guns and came right up to our boots, sniffing the air and rolling over for a bite. Occasionally, someone would toss it a chicken bone, a piece of bread, and it would snatch it and slip back over the wall towards the river. As the sun began to light up the sky, the watery song of the Fajr, the morning adhan poured out through the haze, calling the faithful to their prayers. Private Vázquez, one of our Humvee drivers, never liked to listen to such things. Whenever the minarets starting droning he'd get so uneasy that he'd reach for his Spanish bible and sit down to read a chapter or two to drown it out. But the prayers came every morning, so every morning Vázquez reached for the good book and sat along the wall of the courtyard where we slept and ate.

"There goes the Padre," Sakritter would say, amused at watching this daily ritual play out, "You better hurry and read before those Hajji's get to you. You're already a brown boy with a gun, so it probably wouldn't take much. Then I'll have to put a bullet in your ass."

But Vázquez always ignored him. He liked to take his time, and he wouldn't begin his soldiering duties until he'd read every word of whatever verse he was on. The Lieutenant would be pressed on some mornings to pull him out of his routine, which Vázquez understood, and so got to starting his routine earlier and earlier. Even Jesus couldn't get him to forgive the man who came between him and his reading. Sakritter would always pester him about how a man of faith could sign up for war, but Vázquez just ignored him.

"A shepherd can't keep his flock unless he fights off the wolves, *ensacador*," he would sometimes say.

But this morning Sakritter let him be for a change, “Let me know what happens to the Prodigal Son will you, Padre? It’s been a while since I checked in with the Lord.” he said, rummaging through his rucksack.

“You should check in more often.” Vázquez said without turning his head.

“I prefer to start my mornings with the sins of the flesh.” Sakritter said, taking his dip can out of his pocket, the contents of which he packed into his lip three times a day.

It was true that Sakritter spent little time on prayers. His time in Iraq had made him wary of their effectiveness. On his first tour of duty he’d seen men pray to crucifixes and Bibles, only to return home with a missing limb, or not come home at all, while others prayed to a Playboy magazine every morning and got home without a scratch. The only things he cared to put trust in were himself and the violent engineering of his M4 rifle. He figured anything else just took the edge off, and made a man feel as though he knew he was going to make it home, and in Sakritter’s view you had to half-believe you were going to die in that place to have the proper focus anyway. He wasn’t one to tempt fate.

The other men called him “Sackrider” on account of his last name. He said it was Norwegian.

“It means Sour Knight, which is about as good of a description of me as you’ll ever get,” he said.

Everyone else said it was bullshit. I was the only one who called him Sakritter, besides the Lieutenant, which I think is why he took me under his wing. He had joined the Army after dropping out of college, a story he’d told me at least three separate times, with a slightly different reason for each one: *mom’s an addict, watched Saving Private Ryan my senior year of high*

school and thought it'd be fun, told the recruiter I couldn't afford weed or rent and he said he could solve both of those problems.

His reasons for being there may have changed with the day, but he'd often tell me his fears had not. As much as Sakritter didn't like to admit it, he was half-afraid of what life would be like once he left. By the end of his first tour, the civilian world seemed alien to him, and he'd heard of men who got home and ended up worse than they'd been before. Being close to danger somehow made the other problems seem further away, so he decided he'd stay in Iraq until war felt more terrifying than home.

At times, though, he'd tell me the war made him wish he'd done something with his life at an earlier age, maybe gone to college and at least become an officer. Then he wouldn't have to take orders from one of the pink-faced dickskins they pumped out of OCS who'd only been in the country a month. Everything they knew about Iraqis was something they'd read in a book, or seen on tv. But Sakritter had actually spent years of his life here. He'd been 20 when he left home for basic training, and he was now approaching 24. This decade of his life was nearly half over, and he was still in the desert.

At about the time Vázquez had finished his share of the Book of Luke, we saw Lieutenant Williams come wobbling through the door of the ramshackle office where he slept and into the yard. He had his rifle slung over his shoulder and so many maps clutched in his hand that the men could barely see his face. Sergeant Marcus was behind him, reaching down to stop the maps from slipping into the dirt. Lt. Williams was a tower of a man, square jawed with a block of brown hair and easy eyes. To us he looked more like a movie star playing a soldier, and acted like it, too.

It wasn't that the Lt. was incompetent, exactly. Rather, he over-prepared to the point of near paralysis. Any man who spent more than an afternoon with him could tell he was smart as a whip, but the burden of his station weighed heavily on him, and he was wound so tight we often worried he'd jump out of his skin if we dropped something next to him. We could understand it, even appreciate it, but it still didn't convince us we could take our eyes off the man, something wouldn't quite let us relax when the Lt. was nearby. He outranked us, but a few, like Sakritter and Vásquez, had been in the country longer.

Once, Sakritter told me a story about their previous Lieutenant, a man named Tate, who had lacked good judgement to the point that he'd gone and gotten himself crippled trying to carve a path through one of the narrow Baghdad streets when none was there. They'd been patrolling a neighborhood on the southside of the city, when a rickshaw accident had separated them from the rest of their convoy, and they had to take a detour down a narrow side street. The street was too narrow for the Humvee, so Lt. Tate took Sakritter with him on foot to try and find a way out. While they were walking, the Lieutenant had tripped an IED planted behind a scooter he was trying to push out of the way. They'd left their first aid equipment in the humvee, so Sakritter had to make a tourniquet with belt and his pants and call up the medic with the Lt. screaming in his ear. When the medic finally arrived he found a passed out Tate with half a leg, and a dumbstruck Sakritter standing there in his bloody underwear while half a dozen Iraqi women shouted at them for blowing up their alleyway.

So, for all his neuroticisms, Sakritter told me Lt. Williams was preferable to Tate. He'd just never be satisfied until he'd read through what their orders were ten times over, and whatever doubt seemed to eat at him had been quelled for the day. As much as the men liked to

pass jokes about him, they respected the Lt. and avoided making him look foolish to the chain of command.

“I went to Lt. with a complaint once,” Sakritter had said after a patrol, “And it felt like handing the Pope a dildo.”

Now we watched him and the Sgt. for a moment, cleaning what little chow was left over on their paper plates. I moved under the arcade, fooling with my gear. I still hadn’t quite gotten the hang of getting it on in a timely manner, and needed to get a few extra minutes on the men if I was to leave for patrol in time. Sakritter watched me a moment, amusing himself before going to help.

“You cinch your sling up against your tricep,” he said, pointing to my slacking rifle sling and bursting ammo pouches, “Keeps you stable, and keep your mags in your pouch with the flaps tucked behind.”

When he’d finished he gave me a playful slap on the shoulder. I wasn’t an original member, I was a replacement. I was pulled in from Kuwait to replace a guy who shot himself in the foot- no really, that’s what he did. Everybody liked the guy so there was the double problem of losing him and also dealing with me. I was eighteen at the time, straight out of high school. Hadn’t even had a job yet, like an ordinary job that is, and found myself on the other side of the world. I can’t count the number of times the other guys had to straighten me out of some mess I either had, or was about to make. I guess I should be grateful they didn’t want me to end up like Bradford, that was the guy that shot himself in the foot.

The sun was coming full over the wall and a breeze went through the palm trees. The gray cat sat on one of the little blown out ramparts of the wall, licking the grease from its paws. We kept the cat as a kind of lookout. It seemed to know the country better than we did, and when

mortar strikes came in the cat seemed to sniff it out moments before, which gave us just enough time to leave the courtyard and crouch along the wall. It sat up there, turning over in the sun, and whenever we looked up to see it gone, we took extra care to ready ourselves, just in case.

“I’m gonna take that cat with me before I get out of here,” Sakritter had said, “It’s smarter than most of you. Hell, smarter than me.”

““That’s not saying much,” said Private Brauner, who was, despite his name, thin and wiry as a young tree in winter, “I’ve seen rabbit turds that are smarter than you.”

“Well at least I’m smart enough to smoke my cigarettes in the shitter,” Sakritter said, “Instead of wasting em out here in the open air. I’m tired of sitting down for a moment’s peace in there and getting carpet-bombed by whatever you ate for lunch.”

“I thought we were all supposed to get to know each other? I thought that was the secret to a cohesive unit. What’s more intimate than smelling another man’s shit?” Brauner said.

“I’d rather watch what you do when you take that titty magazine behind the Humvee than smell some Hajji casserole you ate on patrol yesterday,” Sakritter said.

By this time Lt. Williams and Sgt. Marcus had finished boring holes in their maps and came over to stand in front of us, most of the men still in their underwear.

“All right, listen up. Patrol’s starting an hour earlier today, Company called and changed the route, we’ve got another checkpoint,” said Lt. Williams.

“Does this one have any feather beds we can take a nap on?” said Sakritter, “Another night on this spider-bed you call a courtyard and I might get a Purple Heart from my back being broke.”

“Recon struck an IED yesterday over in Al’Jamaa or some fucking place. Two marines were killed,” said the Sgt., “Thanks, as always, for being a Jackass, Sackrider.”

“You’ll miss me one day, Sgt.,” said Sakritter.

“I’ll miss you like a fucking hemorrhoid. Alright drivers, just know where your people are. Baker you and Sackrider have the rear, so you need to start holding that rifle like you fucking mean it.”

I’d joined the Army two months after my grandfather died, thinking since I hadn’t gone to college, I might as well do something he’d be proud of. But my war wasn’t a war in the typical sense, at least not like his. My grandfather had fought the Japanese in the Philippines during WWII. His was a long, brutal slog through the South Pacific jungle filled with booby traps and Japanese machine gun nests, mostly shooting at an enemy he couldn’t see. He dealt with torrential rains, floods, typhoons, and all manner of mysterious jungle diseases. One morning, a buddy of his got up to begin brushing his teeth, and they all fell out one by one.

He managed to survive the war, but then, two weeks before he was scheduled to leave for home, he contracted malaria and suddenly found himself in a hospital bed in Manila. But he wasn’t alone. He’d met someone there, my grandmother. In the early days after the Japanese surrender, when the fighting had died down and Manila was filled with bored American G.I’s stirring with restlessness and anxious for something to do, my grandfather began strolling along the market streets that lined the outskirts of the American camp. It was here, among the nooks and crannies of various wares, animals and fruits unidentifiable to himself, that he met an Army nurse named Virginia. He found her sitting on a nearby bench, reading a book, *Middlemarch*, by George Eliot, her long, cream-colored legs sticking out from her white uniform that came down just below her knees, while she turned the pages and swept back thin strands of strawberry-blonde hair from her sweating forehead. Before the war, he had never taken much to reading what you would call serious literature, preferring Flash Gordon comic books whenever

he did read something, but the long months spent beneath a barely-together canvas during the torrential South Pacific rains had forced him to occupy his mind, and whenever a fellow soldier of his produced a book, he devoured it hungrily.

But he had a knack for making himself out like he knew more than he did, and started chatting her up about her favorite books, and she was more than happy to have someone to talk about them with. Soon he was visiting the market nearly every day, often showing up with a copy of something that he'd bought from one of the nearby street markets, or talipapas, to give to her. Many of these, she told me as a child, she'd already read, but wanted to bask in the happiness he showed upon thinking he'd done a sweet thing, and later she would give away her own copies to keep just the ones he'd bought for her. But the visits to the market, and the conversations about books, were cut short when my grandfather found himself laid out in a ramshackle bed with scratchy sheets on the second floor of a Manila hospital wing, packed wall to wall with other invalids, some sick, some with war wounds, others carried in with shattered limbs from still unexploded mines the Japanese had laid through the countryside. While he languished there, shivering and sweating and delirious, she came to him every day-having switched assignments with another nurse to work his part of the hospital- and read to him aloud from his gifted books, along with Filipino children's stories and books on recipes.

Whenever he seemed to be taking a turn for the worse, she left and came back with the Bible. This went on for three excruciating weeks, at the end of which, on the first day he reclaimed his strength, the first day he ceased his shivering, he stopped her reading and rose from bed and, kneeling on the cold and cracked tile floor of the hospital wing, proposed to her. Two weeks later they were married on a sweltering August morning in a nearby church in Manila, with a few men from his company, and a few nurses from her hospital floor in attendance. To his

own parents he sent a letter and a photograph of the two of them on the white steps of the church, he in his Army uniform, his cheeks and jawline still slightly emaciated, and she in her white bridal dress, which she'd bought from a local dressmaker, and which was made for a Filipina woman about five inches shorter than her, holding a bouquet of Sampaguita flowers, with her strawberry-blonde curls pulled back in a tight bun. The letter simply said:

Dear Mother and Father,

As you know by now, the Japanese have surrendered. I have recently come through a tough bout of malaria, am regaining my strength, and will be returning home in around a month. I will be bringing my wife, Virginia, who is eager to meet you. We were married on August 29, here in Manila. Her family is Methodist (My grandfather's parents were severe Roman Catholics) and I hope you will be kind to her, as she is the reason your son is still alive.

Love,

Your son, John

I tell you about my grandfather because, whether I realized it or not, my decision to go to Iraq was done to prove myself to him. To prove myself worthy of his memory, and to prove that I wasn't a disappointment as a grandson.

By the time we had finished gathering our gear, and the Lt. had taken one last look at his maps, we all began climbing into our Humvees. They were a dull beige, and at various spots around the door thresholds the metal was starting to look worn and flimsy.

“Take a look here,” said Brauner to me, running his hand along the outside of one of the doors, “This is the wonderful protection our \$2 trillion dollar war budget provides. We’ve got some secondary armor along the outside, which was made in China, and will, at the very least, make sure any IED shrapnel only gets stuck in your balls, instead of going all the way through.”

He cracked a thin smile and then climbed the passenger seat, while Vásquez took his place behind the wheel.

“Care to partake?” Sakritter said, holding out his dip can for me.

I shook my head while he placed the wad of tobacco between his cheek without taking his eyes off me.

“Don’t cite me or any of that shit. The Adderall makes me crave it.” he said, placing the can back in his pocket.

Once inside there was an incessant clicking of radios as comms came in and out from the Lt.

“When we get into sector, I want eyes on buildings. Sgt. will help you keep up with commo check-ins. You see anything, you call it.” Lt. Williams said, his voice breaking up every now and then.

Our daily operations involved patrolling the eastern roads that surrounded Diyala on the outskirts of Baghdad. These small roads, while seemingly insignificant, kept us tied like an umbilical cord to the VBC, or Victory Base Complex, that surrounded the airport. Patrols came twice, even three times a day. If there were no threats, we came and went in no time. If there was

a car bomb, or a mine in the road, we stood in the baking heat all day to sweep and detonate. While EOD, Explosive Ordinance Disposal, swept, we were lucky if no one took the chance to shoot at us. Then we packed into the grimy courtyard for three hours of sleep and did it all again. Me, being the youngest and least experienced, always tried to remember my training over my nerves, but it was a daily battle. Hindsight would tell me that I never had to worry as much as I thought I did. Patrols like these were mostly security exercises, Sakritter would tell me. I could see the better part of two weeks without action, and if I tallied up my gun fights after a full deployment, I'd surprise myself with how little I fired my weapon. But hindsight never worked in the moment. We never knew going in what the cost would be. It was a roulette gun, an empty chamber for most, but a fear in each one that ours was the bullet. We walked the battered roads with the wind stripping our skin and the day passed and nothing happened and when we arrived back at camp we nearly collapsed with the tension our bodies held.

The convoy consisted of Humvees and MRAPS, or Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles. In the crowded Humvee, I settled beside Sakritter, whose face mine was nearly touching. His swampy tobacco breath warmed the air and it was all I could do not to wretch. We rolled out of the compound in a line of vehicles heading West, the sun at our backs, into the gray morning, into the ancient city. Radios continued their clicking and the engine revved as the humvees picked up speed through the sparse outskirts, where high waving grasses and date palms lined each side of the road. Dotted along the gravel bars were small homes, with their own dilapidated walls and faded paint. Many lay in ruins. The ones that didn't struggled beneath their own weight, nearly crumbling from the sporadic impact of mortar shells and IED detonations.

With the combination of Sakritter's hot breath and the roar of the humvee and the lack of sleep, I felt myself coming in and out of a daze. I was vaguely aware of Sakritter saying

something in my ear, and when I turned my head I could just make out his blotched and sun-worn face.

“I’m talking about seizing the fucking day. Carpe damn or whatever the fuck. You ever feel that way? Like you screwed up your one chance to get something right?” he said to me.

“Not really.” I said, barely able to hear the question.

Our convoy was now entering the dense traffic of Baghdad, and behind me, through the window, flames and ruins rose in periodic bursts, with plumes of smoke and the sad mounds of mangled buildings. The sight of them, and the people walking stiffly among them, pulled me out of Sakritter’s words and then back again.

He pulled me closer to him, nearly shouting over the roar of the Humvee engine as we flung past the tattered neighborhoods.

“If I’d known I would end up here, that the world would be this fucked up by the time I hit 24, I would’ve made the most of things first. I mean I would’ve gotten hammered every night, drunk outta my head, you know? I would’ve enjoyed that college shit somehow. What little I did of it. And like, shit I didn’t have the courage to do otherwise. I would’ve asked out that blonde, you know, the one with the great tits I was telling you about? Maybe I would’ve fucked her a few times, maybe we’d be married now and I’d like fucking her too much to want to leave. Then maybe I wouldn’t even be here.”, he said, shaking his head with a sly grin, “Man.”

I nodded, the remark only making half-sense. I clutched my rifle to my chest and tried to focus my thoughts on what we were getting into. While the convoy hummed onward through the city, I let my mind drift back to my training and the preparation I’d done. It was clear to me the Army wanted cool under pressure, to be able to deliver lethal force in an instant, and at the right person. That was what had surprised me the most about the little combat I had experienced, how

dispassionate it was, and how disconnected I'd felt from whoever I'd been shooting at. The suffering of war had been all around me since I stepped off the plane, but until I fired my weapon I felt distanced from it, somehow. Not quite a participant. Maybe it had to do with my grandfather again, even if I didn't realize it. Until I'd done what he'd done, I wouldn't feel like a soldier.

We turned the humvees west along a busy corridor. Stores sat crammed with people beneath the gray tangles of wires and fans. A bored youth leaned his elbows on the counter of an electronics stall, while in the next one over, a thin man beat the dough of samoon bread in the glow of an oven. Along the street, a group of boys picked trash from the smoldering rags of sheet metal. With the streets now bursting with city traffic, their progress slowed, and it wasn't long before we stopped, the column of Humvees sitting pressed between scooters, small trucks and buses of exasperated passengers. Even in the Humvee, I could smell the air thick with exhaust and woodsmoke and frying food. The air conditioned interior was cool and pleasant but soon I was sweating beneath my uniform. Close to ten minutes passed and we went nowhere. Sakritter spit his dip juice into an empty water bottle. I thought I might vomit from the heat and the smell and the waiting.

"0-3, we need eyes on the street," came the Lt.'s voice over the radios. Vázquez and Brauner got out and stepped into the road to get a better look. Sakritter and I followed, staying beside the vehicle. A mass of traffic walled us in, the street was now like a clotted artery. Vázquez returned after a few minutes.

"Sit tight, street's hot." Vazquez said.

"Is it Lt.'s truck?" Sakritter said.

"Nah, it's ahead of us. Wires in the road, we can't tell where they're coming from."

“Well shot, we came up here last night.”

“Well, they must have been busy this morning, Ken Fucking Jennings. Get out, we gotta keep people from passing.”

Sakritter and I stepped away from the Humvees and into the maze of traffic. He quickly pulled me out from a man in a scooter, riding with a child on his knee, who had come to a screeching stop. Walking among the scooters, cars and buses with their sputtering engines, it seemed to me that each face flashed a subtle hostility. There was an undercurrent of anger in everything that happened. Horns blared, people shouted from stalls and sidewalks. Brauner and Vázquez knocked against each window and conversed with every driver about the situation, using what meager Arabic they’d learned.

“*Abq huna*, stay here,” they shouted.

Me and Sakritter followed closely behind, trying to repeat the words to those who had already heard it. The traffic which had swarmed around us seconds ago had stopped. I tried to massage the ache from my shoulders under my gear. People on the sidewalks began gesturing excitedly and shouting at unseen bystanders ahead of us. Interested crowds of ten grew into twenty and thirty. Some tried to go around the jam on sidewalks and down alleys. Horns blared endlessly. I tried to focus my breathing, but each breath drew in a searing combination of exhaust and heat and dust. More than anything, I tried not to find myself alone. There was no worse fear than being alone when facing any kind of danger. Then Brauner came running up to us.

“Meet up with Sgt. just ahead, I gotta head back and radio Lt. No one’s seen him.”

I shuffled in my gear to the head of the vehicle column, where Sgt. Marcus, Vázquez, and a few others were staring at a few faint lines of wires extending out from under the asphalt like some great, crushed insect. The road ahead was clear for some fifty yards, while the sidewalks

on either side were empty. At the fringes the crowds resumed, with their eyes darting from the wires back to us. Staring at the wires, I felt a coldness come over my limbs to go with the endless sweating. I looked to Vázquez, who was occupied with the ordinance crew. Something caught his eye and he turned his head to shout a storekeeper away. Then, to my left, just behind the animated storekeeper, a rigid faced man came close with his hand up, holding a cellphone. His smooth, glaring brown eyes met mine. This was the pressure point I'd been waiting for.

The next few seconds played out in a strangely slow way. I elbowed Vázquez, and without looking, he seemed to instantly realize who it was I was staring at. He began shouting, but my mind heard only noise. Keeping my target in my sights, I lifted my rifle without a word. A quick squeeze of the trigger and this man would be dead. But when I looked through my scope, the eyes that stared back were green, and the subtle glare of the face I'd seen had relaxed into a soft, unwavering calm. A young man, no older than I was, stood before the pointed barrel of my rifle, holding up two hands as though in prayer, and he was smiling.

"No, sir. This is a good man you see here. I pray you hold your fire. Please, sir," he was saying, "His father runs this store you see here. The wires are from his store."

He gestured into the road. The words began jarring me out of my tunnel-vision, and I tried to maintain focus on my original target, the man with the phone, who seemed to blend back into the crowd. The green-eyed man's voice asserted itself without an ounce of hostility or urgency, but in an instant I felt I had to obey him, somehow, that he was another in my chain of command. My heart was violent in my chest, my vision blurred.

"Please, sir, my name is Sami," he said, "tell me what is your name?"

Chapter 2

Diyala Province, Iraq

2006

One thing I had always remembered about that day with Sami was the fearlessness he carried himself with. It had disarmed me more than any militant, or any mine threat could. It was true my familiarity with the Iraqi people was limited, being a white kid from the American suburbs, but even once I'd arrived in that hazy, desert country, there'd always been a careful distance between me and them. It was intentional, in many ways. Not fraternizing with the enemy, keeping my emotional distance from the people I may have to kill, it was all part of it, which was why the reflex to point and shoot had felt so automatic. When situations like that had reared their head, the locals typically spread like dust blown from the palm of one's hand. Nobody stuck around to see what would happen. If someone had kept too close to the Americans, that was their business. They'd find out later what the damage was, or if someone they knew had been killed.

But I had never expected one of them to boldly stand in front of my rifle barrel, smiling like the two of us were discussing the weather. It had been a point of entry, a thread connecting my world and theirs that Sami had given me. So when I stood by the humvee, in the swirling chaos of the busy street, with this fresh-faced Iraqi asking me a simple question, I still somehow managed to find that thread, and slowly start following it. It was as though Sami was showing me the way to something, and already the path he'd started me on felt more secure than any that had come before, even if I didn't yet realize it. My name, what was my name?

“Thank you, Sami,” I said, digging my name out of the recesses of my mind, trying to come back to the present.

“Ah, very good,” said Sami, “it is very nice to help an American like you, Mr. Stephen.”

I still didn’t know what to say, then I remembered where I was.

“The hell were you thinking back there? You had no business-”

“Oh, please Stephen, it is like I said. That man was innocent. You’d be making a very nasty problem for yourself if you shot him. I was only trying to help, you see. Only trying to help.”

“You’d risk your own life for that guy?” I said.

“Oh, sir, I wasn’t risking anything. Only you were taking the risk.” Sami said, with a subtle warning in his voice that unsettled me, “Upsetting the good people of this neighborhood is not a good idea.”

“Yea, I understand,” I said, but not really understanding.

I stood looking him over for a moment. Sami was a wiry, unassuming man. He held an easy looseness in his body that stood in sharp contrast to my stiffness. He seemed as if he’d been pulled straight from a lounge, or woken from a calming nap, without a care in the world.

“If you like, I can introduce you to these people. I ‘ve known this street for many years. These are good people here. Everybody helps everybody, even the Americans, you’ll see.” Sami said.

“We don’t have time for that shit,” I said, “Now stay here a moment while I figure some things out.”

My awareness was slowly coming back to me in layer after layer. First the heat in my throat, then the sting of the exhaust and the weight of my gear. I sat Sami down against one of

the humvee tires and made my way back over to Sergeant Marcus, who was overseeing the ordinance team. The activity of the street had quieted, with passersby finding other routes away from the roadblock. A few bored locals clung to the street corners to watch, leaning against the cement walls, passing cigarettes. The tense mood from before had deflated and some were even bold enough to walk straight past the ordinance team, like their presence was beside the point of whatever more important business they were on.

"Riflemen! Keep the fucking perimeter!" Marcus yelled to the other men.

"Sir, this man, Sami he said his name is, says these are just utility wires for the shop here," I told Marcus.

Sgt. Marcus looked over my shoulder at Sami, then at me, like he was turning the information over in his mind, deciding what to do with it, "We'll check anyways. He sure about that"

"Yes, sir, he does."

"Bring him up, I wanna talk to him."

When I got back to the humvee, Sami had stood up and was inspecting the underside of the vehicle.

"Hey! The fuck are you doing?" I said.

"Oh, I was only curious," Sami said, standing and slapping the dust from his hands, "My father is a mechanic. I've always been interested in cars."

"Yea, I know. But now's not the time."

"I've always been interested in cars, Stephen," said Sami, "What do you drive?"

"Don't worry about that, Sergeant wants to talk to you."

“Oh, very good. I bet you drive a Chevelle, white wall tires. Or maybe a Mustang, like Steve McQueen. You know Bullitt?”

It amused me slightly that he seemed to know so much about cars, and movies. But I tried not to let it distract me, “I said don’t worry about that right now.”

When I brought Sami to the Sergeant, Marcus took his time looking him over. He seemed to regard him with a similar level of fascination as me, just minus the impatience.

“You got some fucking nerve.” Sgt. Marcus said.

Sami smiled and nodded like it was the plainest fact in the world.

“I like that in a Hajji.”

“Sir?” Sami said.

“You like that humvee back there? I saw you looking at it.”

Sami peered over his shoulder, then back at Marcus, “Yes, very impressive. V8? Turbo-charged diesel it looks like.”

“You fucking got that right.”

“Like the Mustang,” said Sami, looking at me.

Marcus smiled at this, “Well fuck me, Baker, how’d we find this guy?”

I didn’t know what to say. He asked me like I’d meant to, like I had orchestrated the whole ordeal.

There are two important things to understand about Sami. The first is his love of cars. His father, upon returning alive, but defeated from the war, had moved out of the center of Baghdad

and opened a mechanic shop in Diyala, and there he retreated into his depression over the war's horrors that clung to him. Sami, being the youngest, was spared Bilal's labor for another few years, but he observed, he took in as much as he could. One day, an order of car parts his father had purchased came with a small poster of a Corvette, with a salacious blonde relaxing on the hood. His mother had thrown out the poster at once, but Sami swiped it from the trash and kept it tucked away beneath his mattress. Cars, to Sami, meant a way out. A way to transcend one's place, a sense of agency.

During the ride back to the compound, Sami grinned with delight at the trappings of the humvee. Everything seemed bursting with fascination to him, like the whole world was a discovery and he didn't want to miss any of it. I bristled against this, though it was more discomfort with my own lack of curiosity. In those early days with Sami, I secretly resented how much easier it was for him to enjoy life, despite his less prosperous circumstances. Later, I realized I was just uncomfortably aware of my own inability to find the same level of gratitude in my own life, my own circumstances. What places I was able to go, and what places I was able to leave. It seemed like the world was a place of possibility for Sami, but not for me. "Where'd you learn to speak English so well?" Sakritter said, as the Humvees began stampeding ahead once again.

"Al-Mustansiriya University, but I only did two years." Sami said.

"Why'd you leave?"

"The Baathists. If I had done three, they would've wanted me to go into the Army afterwards. They were always looking for English speakers to translate. I would've had no choice. If I refused, they would've come to my father's mechanic shop and questioned him. They may have imprisoned him to get me to join, and I would've been sent to fight you. Then you'd

really have a reason for pointing your weapon at me.” he said with a wink, “University was where I learned to speak English, but movies are where I learned to love it. There were only two things on the television in my house growing up: Baath propaganda, and American movies.”

“What did your parents think about you watching these things?” I said.

“My mother hated it, but my father didn’t care. He was too depressed from losing the war with Iran, so he retreated into his repair shop. My mother worried about him, so she let me watch movies as long as I promised to help my father. That’s where I learned everything I know about cars.”

“You’re a funny guy, Sami,” I said.

“Like Joe Pesci in *Goodfellas*.” he said, flashing another grin.

“Yeah. Exactly.”

The second important thing to know about Sami was his love of movies. Sami and his brother Bilal, two rebellious children roaming the streets of Baghdad in the aftermath of the terrible war with Iran, had needed an outlet for their angst, and a distraction for their worries about their distant father, who still carried the war with him. Sami would talk of going to one of Baghdad’s hundreds of theaters to watch government movies like Tewfik Saleh’s *Al-ayyam al-tawila*, the six hour epic about the life of Saddam Hussein. When King Faisal II’s reign was overthrown, the government had taken control of the nation’s film industry, and all that followed were propaganda pieces, but Sami would never be content with these. The vendors in the street markets sold the more transgressive Western creations, so he and Bilal took their meager chore money to buy *Jaws*, *Indiana Jones*, and Christopher Reeve’s *Superman*. He especially liked the

super-hero movies. At one point he even told me I reminded him of Batman, quiet, moody, always afraid to open up. Movies are where Sami's interest in America began, he would tell me later. Their mother had resisted this at first, but came to appreciate the extra help in directing the attention of two restless boys.

When we rode back into the compound later that day, the sun was unloading a burden of heat onto the courtyard, while the grove of palms beyond the wall swayed in and out of focus through the gathering haze. Each man took his rest in different ways. LT sat on the phone with battalion headquarters. Sakritter sat in his underwear staring at a two year old issue of Maxim, while Sami spoke to Sergeant Marcus. I laid against the wall a short distance away, trying to make out the conversation.

"So how are you?" Sami said, standing over me, barely even breaking a sweat.

"Alright, I guess," I said.

"Don't think too much about it, but just know there are more friends here than enemies. I know this place, I know these people. You don't need to be as afraid of us as you think," Sami said.

At the time, I wished I had really internalized what Sami was saying. The Iraqi people had been interesting to me since I arrived, but I could never bring myself to undo the training I'd received about how to behave in war. I never got over viewing everyone as a potential enemy. Sami was trying to get me to see things another way, to see the benefit to understanding them as they were, just people trying to make their lives in the middle of a war, like me, in a way.

I considered Sami's statement for a moment, then spoke up, "If you say so."

I just wanted to forget the day's events.

“That’s ok, just remember what I said.”

“I’ll try,” I said, rolling over to take a nap.

“Very good.” said Sami, extending his hand.

I looked at him a moment, then shook it.

Later that evening, as the hazy sky turned pink, Sami and I sat on the wall of the compound drinking bottles of Coke, our legs dangling, and stared out through the palm grove to the river. Through their shady trunks, an egret stood in the current with white feathers that seemed to glow, its beak pointed like a knife, ready to strike.

“I never said thank you, Sami,” I said, “For stopping me today. Almost blew that guy away.”

“Ah, Stephen, it is nothing. I know you were only doing your duty,” he said.

“Yeah. Guess so.”

“It is a matter of seeing people, Baker, of looking through who you’re told they are,” he said.

A quiet minute passed between us. Soft lights from the mashoofs, the little fishing boats, moved over the river.

“So what brought you to this place?” Sami asked me.

I hesitated in answering this. I didn't want to let on that I hadn't really considered the answers to these questions, at least not as much as I felt I should. In my mind, people went into the Army for straightforward, even rational reasons, to serve their country, to get out of a bad living situation, to see the world. Whatever anyone thought of those reasons, they seemed better

than the ones I had. Whenever my thoughts took me back to joining the Army, it wasn't so much a carefully considered process, where everything I'd be getting myself into had been understood ahead of time. It was more a haphazard collection of images, of my grandfather sick in the hospital, of my family watching me slowly drift away from them, along with feelings of guilt and shame that knifed me and made such thoughts unbearable. I felt I had to do something, go somewhere that would make up for what I saw as my shortcomings as a grandson, but that didn't seem like an answer that would impress anyone, or make any sense to people who didn't know my grandfather, who weren't there. I knew Sakritter's reasons for being in Iraq were more humorous, the kind you could tell around a fire at night to laughs, but Sakritter was someone who was comfortable playing the part of the fool, while I couldn't bear the idea that I wasn't someone who made careful decisions, and didn't want to think about how much of my life to that point hadn't really been thought out.

"I'm here because of my family," I simply told him, leaving it at that. This was where I came to sit to forget about everything else, and now here was this strange man asking all these questions. I just wanted to sit and listen to the crickets, to feel the cool evening air, but that was the beginning of my realization that Sami's curiosity had no bounds, and that hiding things from him was an impossibility. He always knew your story even before you did.

"How do your parents feel about you spending time with us?" I said, trying to change the subject, or at least redirect it to him.

"For now, they don't worry. If I join, if I start going with you all each day, they'll know I'm doing it for them. The pay is greater than anything my father earns," he said.

I hadn't considered this. Pay had felt like the most important thing, but of course Sami was aware of danger that I wasn't. The mortality rate for interpreters was frighteningly high, with

many jeopardizing not only their own lives, but their family's as well. He seemed completely aware of the danger he was putting himself in, and yet totally at ease. I began to feel embarrassed for my lack of awareness. I nearly killed an innocent man that morning, and now here I was thinking that a flat rate for wartime translation was the only concern.

"Won't your father miss your help in his shop?" I said.

"Certainly, but he has my brother, and the money I'll bring will make up for it. It's for them that I'm doing this, really. So they can see their son go someplace, so they can be proud of me. Your family is all you really have, Mr. Stephen..."

"Stephen."

"...and you should do all you can to make them proud. Without the pride of your family, you have nothing, for they are the ones you rely on when you need them most," Sami said.

"Do you think you'll try to come to America after this is over?" I said, trying to shift the conversation away from talk of family.

Sami took a swig from the bottle, "One day, maybe. Now, I must get home before it's too late. People suspect a man walking the streets in the late hours at night."

I watched him head to the gates of the compound, then looked back to the fishermen on the river. The sun rested on the desert, and the call of the muezzin spread over the shrouds of the palm trees.

In the early 1990s, when I was just a boy, my grandfather decided to build a curragh, which is a kind of wooden kayak, common in Ireland, which is where his family ancestry is

from. He asked me to help him, and the joy I felt at being included in this was overwhelming. He had never built something like this before, but had frequently carved small wooden sculptures and made little crafts. He said he wanted this to be something we both could be proud of. Gloria, my grandmother, had urged him to stop this foolishness and keep tending to the family shop. Of course, my grandfather refused.

He took me along with him to the lumber yard, where we picked out the right pieces that would be used, hazel, to be specific. Once we brought the wood back, my mother would take me to his house nearly every day after school to help him. My grandfather had bought all the tools necessary, and each day we began taking the saw and sanding paper to start building the frame, putting the ribs, laths, and gunwales together. Once the frame was built, we surrounded it with a waterproof exterior, and tarred over it to keep the water out. The whole process took around a month, and we finished it just before school let out, so we could enjoy it all summer.

The first place we took it was a nearby lake, known for its bass fishing. I remember the day before we took it out, hitching it to the trailer attached to his station wagon. He asked me to fetch my dad, too, and gathered all of our fishing gear in the back. The three of us camped out in the backyard in a tent, while my mother and grandmother made rice with grilled chicken and brought it out to us to eat.

When we got to the lake the next day, it was perfectly sunny and warm. Other people were taking boats out, fishing along the rocks, and swimming while the fish nibbled their toes. The water was blinding in the sunlight that flashed off its surface. We backed the station wagon onto the launch for boats, and carefully pushed the curragh in, where it floated gently, while my father kept it from drifting away. Then, my grandfather plopped himself inside of it, and showed me the basics of paddling. He bought long-bladed oars with green tips, and spoke about the

importance of working in unison with each other, both arms dipping the oars into the water, and pulling with your back.

"You want the oar to slice through the water, like a fish darting across the surface, chasing a dragonfly," he said.

But I was too afraid at first, water frightened me and I particularly hated going under and having the sound of the world go quiet. So I spent a while sitting at the shore, watching him take it out and back, smiling at me the whole time. My father fished, and let me hold up his catch for my grandfather so he'd think I caught it, but I hadn't.

As the afternoon dragged on, my fear of the water, unfortunately, did as well, and I could tell I was in danger of disappointing my grandfather by not trying out his new boat with him. It was that look that finally convinced me. Nothing in the world was scarier to me than disappointing him. He had me get in before him, sitting towards the middle so I could use the oars, and he would sit behind me and show me how it was done. The boat rocked at first, and I nearly decided to back out, thinking I was going to go overboard and fall into the mouth of a snapping turtle waiting for me down there in the dark water. Once he got in, it stabilized and he took my hands in his over the handles of the oars. We started slowly, and moved out steadily towards the deeper parts of the lake. The rhythms of the water made me uneasy, but I got the hang of it soon enough. The whole time, he whispered to me, "Together, Will, together," while keeping the oars working in unison. I was proud of myself for going out, but was even more proud of getting to experience it with him.

Chapter 3

Diyala Province, Iraq

2006

It took three weeks to get Sami onboarded into the squad. The Army did a background check, well, what background check they could, that discovered the same information I've just told you, about this father, his mother, the mechanic shop, everything. He had no visible ties to insurgent groups, and no one in his family, that they were aware of, did either. The first thing Sami would have to get used to, though, was the anonymity of it. Whenever we patrolled, whenever we were in a busy area, he would have to keep his face covered for fear someone would recognize him. He couldn't go by Sami either, and whenever we were on mission, he went by the name Paul, for Paul Newman, he said enthusiastically. His face lit up whenever we called him that, and I half expected him to try and change it permanently. Sami's enthusiasm was for more than just the name, though, he arrived into our squad like it was something he had set out to do, like he knew exactly what he was moving towards, and being with us was just a natural part of the progression, whereas for me it was a place I'd arrived accidentally. He seemed to sense some purpose behind it all, that I had yet to see.

Our next patrol with Sami started later than usual. After our meager breakfast we gathered by the iron gate that led out to the road. The Lt. was standing in front of one of the Humvees, trying to keep his map from blowing back into his face. Finally, he just threw it inside the vehicle and turned back to us.

"Let's get shit done, let's do it quick, let's do it with discipline and intensity!," he said.

He said it in the way someone does when they're trying to project a confidence that isn't really there, a little more forceful than necessary, like a high school football coach before his first game. Just a tad too dramatic to be convincing, but what he was saying seemed reasonable enough so we nodded and let him do what he had to do to psych himself up. Patrol the neighborhoods, sweep the houses, mark civilians, be back by dinnertime.

We piled into the Humvees. I took my spot beside Sakritter, who had his usual brown slosh of tobacco juice at the bottom of a plastic water bottle. When he sat down he swirled it around and watched it. The engine hummed like the guttural sound of a hibernating beast being shaken awake, a deep vibration that felt like sitting on top of a dryer. I imagined the engine, and the pistons and spark plugs inside the hulking apparatus, what kind of force it took to move such a thing. The gate opened and we drove out in a line and headed to the small town of Algaara that sat just east of the river. Sometimes, if there were bombs in the road, the detonations would leave a two foot deep crater and we'd have to turn the Humvees into the nearby grasses and trample them and the small palm trees. They learned to plant IEDs there, too, so we turned deeper and deeper into the fields until there was a groove cut into them like a herd of moose had passed through. There weren't any IEDs that morning, and we kept right on towards Algaara. The sun was rising and the closer we came to town the more people we saw.

Part of our mission was regularly moving from house to house and getting a haphazard census of who lived nearby, where they were from, who was coming and going, all that. The first house on our stop was a slab of brick that was barely held together by a few pieces of sheet metal. There was a small courtyard to the side of the house beneath a fig tree. A dog barked twice when we knocked on the door, then an insistent voice hushed it, and it stopped. The door

rattled open to reveal a man and his wife. Both short, with dark brown eyes that moved over us one by one in a look of apprehension. Sami told them we were U.S. Army, and the man nodded and backed away to welcome us into the sunny square of the yard. I thought it would've been a little obvious who we were, but I understood why Sami said it.

Sami went first, followed by Sgt. Marcus, and then Sakritter, and then me. A frizzled mutt was chained to a stake in the dirt, and it circled nervously and scratched at the air before laying down with its nose between its dry paws. Sakritter knelt down and held out his hand and spoke to it gently, and it shook its tail but didn't move. The man and woman sat down on a small metal bench in a patch of shade, and the woman rose momentarily to offer us tea, which Sgt. Marcus declined. The Sgt. took off his helmet before speaking to them.

"Has anyone new moved into the neighborhood recently?" Marcus asked. He looked at Sami after he said it and nodded. Sami spoke to them in Arabic, speaking clearly and forcefully, but without anger. They leaned in when he spoke to them, carefully trying to hear his words exactly. The man nervously rubbed the back of his left hand as he took in the question, and seemed to chew them over in his mind as he crafted an answer, keeping his eyes low to the ground, his mind seeming move in and out of the present moment. He looked up at Sami and pointed with a fat finger as he spoke.

"He says he thinks someone moved into the house on the corner, up ahead," said Sami to the Sgt.

The Sgt. nodded and leaned in with interest, fidgeting with his helmet in his hands.

"He says there was a family that used to live there, but he thinks they've left," Sami said.

They looked at Sgt. Marcus and back to Sami, growing more and more worried the longer we stayed. I stood there while they conversed, feeling a mixture of occasional alertness,

but mostly boredom. I rubbed the back of my pistol grip with my right thumb, looking around the small yard. The wife seemed to notice my nervousness, and tightened her posture even more. Sakritter kept up his attempts to commune with the dog, which had perked up and was sniffing the air around him. There was a creaking at the door to the house, and the shadowy shape of a child peered through the crack they allowed, the whiteness of their eyes, a foot sticking out from the shadow of the room behind them. I stared back and said nothing. The parents kept on their conversation with Sami and the Sergeant, paying no attention. After a moment had passed, the child closed the door.

The next day, there was an explosion in the early morning hours while we sat around camp eating our sad breakfast. It was distant, maybe two miles- two miles counts as distant in combat. We immediately grabbed our gear and took our stations inside the perimeter of camp, waiting for Lieutenant Williams to give us an update on whether we should mobilize or stay put- Was another squad under attack? Did they need reinforcements? While we waited, Sakritter picked tossed pebbles at one of the stray cats. I thought about the family we'd seen the day before. A smoke column rose slowly, like a billowing cloud, black against the green of the palms and blue of the sky. After about an hour and a half of crouching in the sun while our half eaten food sat around being picked at by flies and cats and other small creatures, the Lieutenant informed us that a car bomb had gone off in the market in Algaara, the same market we patrolled every week. He said it was all civilians that died. He wasn't sure how many, maybe six, or ten, could be twenty. He said we could relax, nobody we knew was under attack. We'd sweep the area tomorrow, do another search, mark more civilians so we knew who we'd seen before. I couldn't tell if we were marking them for life or death. I thought about the family we had visited on the patrol weeks earlier. The dog in the yard, the child in the doorway. Their home was at the edge of

the market. I wondered if they were safe. I wondered if the dead were those they knew, friends or family. The other men sat around and talked about girlfriends or letters from home. I thought about the suffering that played out around us while we sat and talked about loved ones, loved ones who we didn't have to worry about dying in a car bomb. I didn't bother bringing it up to anyone.

When we patrolled the market the next day, all was as before, except for the black sooty blotch that stained the sidewalk and rose up the side of the nearby buildings. It happened outside of a clothing shop, one of the many places whose walls were packed with with abayas and jalabiyas, dresses for women. I remember the shopkeeper had sat by the street, smoking a cigarette and playing games on a cellphone. There was a crater in the road outside the shop, some tangled metal, faint bloodstains that had dried dotted the street, where the dead and wounded had been carried by distraught passersby. The shop was closed, a metal grate pulled down over the entrance. But outside, no one was distraught. There were people on scooters and rickshaws who slipped past our convoy. A man loaded propane canisters onto a truck. The explosion, the crater, the greasy black stain were now as part of the market as the electric wires and the smell of baking bread, and people just refused to let them get in the way.

After the explosion, I noticed a difference in how I interacted with the locals. It became more difficult for me to look them in the eye. When we patrolled, when we swept from house to house, I could not meet their gaze. I stared at their hands or their feet. I thought that if I looked them in the eye, they would embed themselves in my memory, and if something happened to

them, they would seek me out, they would find me and cry for me to bring them back. I lay awake at night, not wanting to close my eyes, fearing I would only see theirs.

Chapter 4

Lexington, Kentucky

2014

I work in a distribution center now. It's funny how you can go halfway around the world just to end up back where you started. The distribution center is a cavernous arena of cardboard and fluorescent light located off the highway. It's in an industrial park and when I'm there it feels like I'm in some other universe where there are only semi-trucks and lukewarm coffee and distant faces beneath the light of the parking lot lights. Like everything here is about delivering cheap goods to the normal world where people work normal jobs at normal hours and don't sit in their cars at 0200. When I was a kid I always expected that life for myself, and sometimes on my lunch break, which I spend in my car, or in a moment of self-awareness while cutting ribbons of packing tape, I'll try to go over the decisions I made and try to figure out how I ended up in a loading dock, filling a box of Japanese toys to be sent to a kid in some other part of the country. Despite countless hours of doing this, I still haven't come up with a clear answer.

Fluorescent lights buzz in the warehouse like a hive of insects, casting everything in a pale light that make it impossible to tell morning from evening. Boxes pass over the conveyor belt. I go over each of them with a scanner, the red laser shooting out with a beep that seems to echo in the loading bay. The warehouse I work in has the smell of moldy cardboard and burning rubber. The building is always too cold, even in the heat of summer, but maybe that is part of what drew me to it. After getting back from Iraq the luxury of perpetual air conditioning seemed like a good idea. I talked to almost no one on shift. Nobody else really did either. Third shift was

for people who weren't interested much in getting lost in conversation. Since getting back from Iraq, I wasn't much for conversation anyway.

The warehouse is quiet in a busy, industrial way, everyone focused on their little jobs, the steady routines of their day to day lives. Seal boxes, load them onto hand trucks, load them again onto actual trucks. Record serial numbers. Take lunch, a sandwich and a can of Coke. Talk about the game last night. Back to work. I work the line near the dock, where incoming shipments are broken down before being repackaged. My hands move without thinking. I could lose myself in the routine of it. The box cutter I use is rusty and dull, but I can still get it through the tape. Then I scan, then sort, then repeat. One of the things I've noticed is that time moves in a strange way in that place. In Iraq, it had moved in a clear, linear way. Each day we did a specific job at a specific hour, and I always knew what time of day it was. Since working at the warehouse, though, I had lost track of the clear way that time used to move. I'd start work at 8:00 P.M., go until 4:00, and then get home and sleep into the afternoon. Many days I'd wake up and not know what time it was. The blackout curtains in my bedroom, combined with the windowless warehouse, made the hour a perpetual mystery to me. Slowly, I began to lose all track of what time it was, or what day it was.

My boots stick to the floor constantly. No matter how many times it is cleaned, there seems to be a constant layer of packing tape, soda and grease everywhere I walk. The guy who works next to me is new, or at least I thought he was new, I can never keep track of who is coming in and out. The man is no more than twenty, with a shaved head, no tattoos. He wears headphones while he works, bobbing his head up and down to the music. I don't ask about him, who he is or where he came from.

During my breaks, I mostly sit in my car, which is a nearly broken down Kia with a crack in the windshield I had, at times, tried to patch up with duct tape. The radio hardly works. The heater barely does, but I don't mind the cold anymore. I sip gas station coffee and rarely eat. I watch the parking lot through the windshield, shimmering under the faint halogen streetlights. A couple other coworkers sit in their cars, too. I don't wave at them. It seems the unspoken rule of third shift is the understanding that everyone is there for a reason, but nobody is allowed to ask each other why.

The sky above the warehouse is black with night, the whole world around me asleep. I finish my coffee and head back in. The second half of my shift would always drag. Either my scanner would act up, or one of the forklifts wouldn't work. I'd have to bang it a few times with his foot to get it going again. The guy from maintenance would walk by as I did so, but never said anything. The boxes would come in endless droves. They came from Amazon. From Overstock and Ebay. Mostly they were cheap foreign goods, electronics, clothes, in regular boxes with broken English written on them. Children's toys came through, plastic animals, roughly painted. Made in Taiwan. Not for children under 5 years.

After my shift ends, I drive home just as the rim of pink is coming over the horizon. Early morning traffic is already beginning to clog the roadways. People with what I've been told are real jobs. Lawyers, doctors, teachers, people with briefcases and clean shirts who could expect to come home at a reasonable hour of the day. I sometimes watch them behind the wheel, imagining the daily goings on of their lives, where they went and who they saw, before arriving back at my apartment.

My apartment is a seedy looking building at the end of a run-down street, next to a neighborhood where the police practically lived. The building smells like unwashed carpet

mixed with peppermint air freshener. Nobody there speaks to anyone. My next door neighbor, whose name I had never bothered to learn, leaves his door cracked open and a little dog barks at me when I walk past. When I walk into my apartment, it's dim, with the blackout curtains keeping out the coming sunrise. The only real light comes whenever I open the fridge to grab one of the three beers and no food I keep in it.

After grabbing a beer, I sit in my recliner and stare at the ceiling. I always keep the fan on, and when sleep comes it comes like a knockout punch. I barely dream, and when I wake up it is already late afternoon, the open beer can still in my hand. Occasionally I will leave the tv on, and awake to the latest story from the Middle East, more violence, more people taken prisoner in whatever country fighting whatever war. The talking heads with perfect teeth will recite the same lines with the same pretend outrage. I can't tell who was fighting who anymore. This is how things are when Karim calls that morning.

Chapter 5

Diyala Province, Iraq

2006

After the explosion in the market, Sami began sitting down with me in the evenings. I think he could tell something was up with me. None of the other men noticed. Sakritter mostly talked about himself, and everyone else listened, or tried not to listen, depending on what mood they were in. One evening, I was sitting on the edge of the wall, looking out at the grasses and the palms and the barely visible wink of the river beneath the moon. The crickets were singing so loudly I didn't hear Sami come up. He said it was a beautiful night, he said he liked nights by the river more than nights in the city. I didn't say anything at first. I guess I figured he was right, and that I'd just let the crickets keep singing. After a minute Sami produced a photograph from his pocket and propped it up inside his helmet. I gave a side glance, but didn't want to seem like I was prying. Sami ran his hand over the photo, seeming to cherish it, the same way I'd seen some of the men look over the photo of their wives or girlfriends. But it wasn't a woman in the photo, it was a boy. I didn't remember Sami ever showing it to me before. He seemed to want me to ask about it. He dangled his legs over the wall and swished the tops of the grass that separated us from the river bank. A soft wind came over us. The pink of the sun had dipped below the horizon and the blue sliver of moonlight made the grass seem to glow.

"Is that you as a boy?" I said.

"Yes, my father took it, before he left for war," he said, "He said he kept it in his helmet."

I didn't know what to say. "You can pretend it's your own son," I said, thinking it would amuse him.

LT's radio continued to click and chirp behind us. The voices of the men popped in and out over Sami and mine's voices. Something about the drunkest they'd ever been.

"He is my son, in a way" Sami said.

"You think so?" I said.

"Yes, he's still there in a lot of ways, that boy who has dreams. I guess I keep going so I can make it out of here, maybe start to feel like those dreams can mean something again."

"Makes sense, I guess"

"Sure it does. You probably feel the same about yourself, if you think about it long enough, Baker."

Sami set the photo into the lining of his helmet, then took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it, the smoke passing over my face and being carried off by the wind. I knew if a sniper was nearby, he'd see the soft glow of Sami's cigarette, that we would be easily picked off, sitting up there on the wall. But I didn't care. I didn't think there were any insurgents around, but also I didn't care. I just liked to hear the crickets and feel the wind and smell the river. Sami's words instantly made me think of my grandfather, and I didn't want to think about that for too long, so I just asked him, "What's the city like?"

He took a drag on his cigarette and was quiet for a moment. I thought maybe he didn't hear me.

"Noisy," was all he said finally, and kept on smoking.

"It's noisy out here. You can't hear anything with these crickets," I said.

"No, you can't, but it's not noisy," he said, smiling a little.

I was too shy to ask him what he meant, but I think I understood it.

"You're from Baghdad?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said, "Baghdad is very noisy. You can't hear any crickets, only people. But people are not the only ones living in Iraq. You can't know a country by only knowing its people."

I waited in silence a moment, thinking about what he said. I thought of Kentucky, remembering the cicadas in summer, singing in the trees that surrounded the horse farms. I thought about the cat fish that swam in the dark pools of water in the shade. I thought about the wide green fields that stretched out behind the farmhouses. It would be close to sunrise there. I could never quite make sense of time in Iraq. I couldn't really think about life there going on while I was here, and everyone else, everyone I knew from school, carried on with their lives. I half-thought that when I got back, time would begin again, that it would pick up where I left off, and that I could return to the way things were when this was all over. I looked out over the Tigris. I imagined horses walking among the river banks and munching the grasses, their tails swooping around them to swat the insects, their neck muscles quivering as they ate.

"Well, I've been here nearly a month and I still don't know anything about the people," I said to Sami finally.

"Yes, but every night you hear the crickets. Every night you feel the wind and every morning you see the birds flying to the river. You know more about the country than you think," he said, "You know more about the country than many people I know."

"And what about the people you know?" I said, "Do they know you're here?"

"I hope not," he said, "You cannot trust many people these days. There are many people I know who would not like it that I'm helping the Americans."

"Why are you helping us?"

"That is a very good question," he said, "I think I want to make my father proud. I want him to be able to say his children went farther than he did. I think he would want me to get far from this place, from this conflict. He would want to know I am safe."

"Is he still alive?" I asked.

"Yes, but he's not himself any more. My brother Karim had to take over his shop," Sami said.

"So you want to get to America?"

"Is America far away from here?"

"Yes."

"Then yes."

A moment of silence passed.

"What about you, Baker?" Sami said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Are you trying to make anyone proud?"

"Maybe."

With that, Sami popped down from the wall and walked over to the fire.

I watched Sami a little differently after this conversation. Before, I had paid little attention to what drove him, hadn't really thought about it much. We began talking at night more often, sitting there on the wall. He told me of his family, of his love of movies and of cars, of working with his father in his garage. He told me how he had never imagined being where he is now, but that the war had presented him with an opportunity. He said it would be stupid not to take advantage of it. He did not seem at all worried about the danger. He said that the danger of doing nothing was greater.

In the morning we woke to the distant sound of mortar fire as they hammered down somewhere to the west. Distant columns of black smoke rose over the city, followed by the pattering of helicopter fire. Everyone was still for a moment, listening, then preparations for the morning's patrol began as usual. The sun came over the horizon and the sky was soon blue as topaz. What happened then took me by surprise, a feeling I didn't expect, but that happened more and more after the market explosion. A heaviness came into my legs, and it was as if my body was pulling me not to keep doing what I was doing, like it just wanted to sit down and stay put. I fought against it, clumsily putting on my gear so poorly that even Sami had to come and help me.

The distant mortars and helicopter fire still echoed out from the city. On more than one occasion we all jumped from the suddenness of the impact. Dust shook from our uniforms when we did. Smoke columns continued to rise in the west. We piled into the Humvees and rode out into the morning.x

When we were shortly out of the FOB, heading east, LT's car signaled a halt, something in the road. It hadn't been there the previous evening when we rode back to FOB. There was a mass extending out from the side of the road into a stand of shrubs. Past the shrubs was a field of orange trees. The branches of the trees shook with a rising wind and a flock of birds circled above in the bright blue sky, where they formed a soft, swirling murmur, like a shade of charcoal pressed onto a canvas. I was nervous. I smelled burnt almonds and vinegar, the smells that were usually associated with IEDs. The sun was climbing, and an orange haze was coming through the fields and over the small buildings that dotted the province.

We were lined along the Humvees, sticking close to the vehicles, and up to our necks in a cloud of dust that the Humvees had kicked up. Suddenly it seemed obvious what was going to happen, like something we should've anticipated as easily as a parent anticipates a mischievous

child. Everything was where it needed to be to happen, the proper stillness had been established, and the feeling of the patrol began, subtly, to shift from its usual sense of routine, to one of feeling trapped. The air felt thin and the quiet around us loud. And the world was the road, and the mass in the road, and the field and the orange trees around us. My legs began to feel heavy again. The road was still, the field was quiet. Sgt. Marcus waved for EOD to come up.

Almost as soon as he did, with his hand still in the air, the mass ahead of us in the road expanded, and a burst of dust the size of an ocean wave came up and over the road. We dropped among the Humvees. The only sound was the eruption of the blast. I assumed people were shouting orders, that Sgt. Marcus or somebody was yelling into a radio, but when I lifted my head to scan my surroundings, nobody said anything, and nobody moved. Out of the dozen or so of us huddled among the vehicles, only Sakritter had the nerve to look out over the hood of the Humvee and see what was out there. He began pointing to the north, to the field of orange trees that bordered the road. It took me another ten seconds or so to realize that someone was shooting at us. Then he turned and shouted at me to lay some fire out over the trees. I stood and fired. I kept firing because Sakritter kept yelling and Vazquez and Sgt. Marcus and the LT joined in and I was terrified of being the only one who wasn't doing what he was supposed to be doing. A few grenades flung out from behind one of the Humvees behind us. When they dropped among the orange trees, a shower of tree branches and dust flew out. More birds scattered and I kept firing. The trees that were hit stood there like pencils that had been broken in half. Their shrapnel was flung over the ground in scattered shreds: torn branches and leaves and the rinds of battered oranges. The sun heated the air that separated us from the invisible enemy shooting at us; now

and again there was a quick glint of metal in the sunlight as whoever it was shifted and moved to avoid our increasing fire.

We slowly began moving out in a line towards the shrubs that wrapped around the edges of the field, and after we'd established a line of fire across the field, we each squatted on one knee to rest our rifles on the other. We aimed carefully, looking for movement or any sign of where the enemy was hidden. Sakritter was the first one who saw where the gunfire came from. For a quick second, it seemed to come from less than fifty yards away, and I strangely found myself staring around me in a kind of amusement at how absurdly this patrol had turned dangerous. It was a perfectly fine day, in many ways. The sun shone out over the river and the palm trees, a soft wind had begun to rise. Birds flapped their wings in the palm branches. I tried to snap out of my stupor. Where was Sami? I looked left and right and didn't find him there. The angle of my vision was constrained by the fear of lifting my head too high and getting hit. It was only after another couple of minutes of trading gunfire that I realized Sami hadn't stepped out of the Humvee to begin with. A second later, there was Vazquez and Sgt. Marcus calling out, "Five o'clock, fifty yards out, five o'clock, fifty yards out!"

The more I fired the more I became entranced with the feeling of my rifle. The small burst of light that came from my muzzle seemed like a kind of controlled power that I'd never had at my disposal before. Sakritter caught sight of the insurgents, who were now retreating across the far side of the field, where we could lose them in the palm groves. The men began to move forward, trying to pursue them as best they could. I joined, with Sakritter to my right and open field to my left. Further off to my right, I could see Sgt. Marcus and LT. They moved ahead in quick steps, then dropped to fire, then stood up and moved again.

The sting that followed hit me so fast and so lightly that I thought I'd just been stung by a bee during a firefight. I looked down at the back of my left calf muscle to see a slight tear in my uniform and, through the tear, a flash of blood shining in the sun. If the enemy was in front of us, I failed to see how I could've been shot in the back of my leg. My sense of direction by now had been so disoriented that I couldn't even remember which direction the Humvees were in. The sound of fire had become less steady, and was now periodic bursts followed by shouting, followed by more quick bursts. Then the sound of a bullet whizzed behind my left ear.

I scanned the line of trees to my left, calling out "Nine o'clock, left!" hoping the men would hear it in time. Before I could drop, I caught sight of movement through one of the orange trees and the sound of another bullet came by my ear. Before I could register the danger I was in, more gunfire came from my left, back from where the Humvees were stalled. The shape that huddled among the orange trees dropped, and then the field was quiet. It was only when Sami came running up with a rifle in his hands, that I understood what he had done.

I looked away from the fallen insurgent, exhausted and slightly woozy. I started to wretch, but grabbed my canteen in time and took a long drink.

"Come on, look at me, Baker," said Sakritter, who had come up to me. I couldn't think of anything to say, and just spit water into the dirt, wanting to rinse my mouth of dust more than drink.

"Don't worry, Baker, Sami got him for ya," Sakritter said.

"I feel like shit," I said.

"You'll be fine in a minute, let's get back to the Humvees."

As I stood, I saw Sgt. Marcus and LT walked over to the dead man, while Vazquez and the other men kept their rifles trained to the far side of the field. While Sakritter walked me over

to the Humvees, I caught sight of Sami going past, nodding at me. I thought I detected a smile as he went.

The bullet that hit me had only scraped the outside of my leg. The adrenaline was keeping some of the pain down, but I remember the heat of it more than anything. I patched it with a bandage from my first aid kit, and the patrol resumed once everybody was back to the Humvees. When Sami got back in he looked at me as though what had just happened had been part of a fun afternoon excursion. I was the soldier and I was the one shaken by actual combat.

“Looking better, Baker,” Sami said.

“Yeah I guess you’re here to keep this dipshit out of trouble,” said Sakritter, playfully slapping me on the shoulder.

When the patrol got moving again I stared at Sami sitting next to me. He sensed my eyes on him, and turned his head.

“Sami,” he started to smile, “thank you,” I said.

Around early afternoon, the sun was just past its high point, stretching light across cracked mud brick walls and casting harsh shadows into the crooks of buildings, down alleyways between the small buildings of Algaara where children kicked a dilapidated soccer ball. Vendors watched with disinterested expressions from their stalls as the convoy moved through the street. The air smelled like a mixture of woodsmoke and exhaust, mixed with the lingering scent of stagnant water from the irrigation ditches nearby. I was already getting hot, and the smell only made things worse. We formed a stack along the sidewalk, the buildings on our right and the

Humvees flanking us to the left. Our boots scraped over broken bits of pavement, little shards of glass. I followed close behind Sakritter, who followed behind Sgt. Marcus, Lieutenant Williams Vasquez, and Sami.

By now, we knew where we were going, and what houses contained who. This was our bi-weekly routine. Our faces were lined with a mixture of tiredness and agitation. Sami on the other hand was calm and relaxed. His eyes were all that could be seen, his face being covered by a head scarf. As we went up to the first building, Vasquez and the Lieutenant took point, while Sakritter and I provided support. Sami just tried not to get in the way, or too far out of the way. The first building we approached had a small iron gate at the side of the house. The front door was boarded up, with only a small slit to see through. Lt. Williams pounded at the gate with his fist. There was a response on the other side.

“Please open your gate,” Sami said in Arabic.

A woman’s voice came from the other side, “*Lahzatan wahida*,”- Just a moment. There was the rattle of a lock and the gate squeaked open. A small, pock-faced woman met us with little interest. She was followed by a large-bellied man who carried a small child in the crook of his arm. The man also looked at us without interest, having seen us once before.

Sami stepped forward to speak, “My name is Paul, I’m with the U.S. Army, we are here to establish whereabouts for the residents of this street. If you’ll please wait with us inside, we need to ask you a few questions.”

The man and the woman nodded, keeping their eyes cast downward. We followed them into a small hallway with tile floors. The sound of cooking came from the kitchen, and the man escorted us into a small room, with a wooden table and three chairs. As we went in, me and Sakritter scanned the rooftop, the back corners of the hall. The kitchen was empty.

When we sat the man and woman down, we asked them if anyone new had moved into the neighborhood in the last week. The man said they hadn't, but we weren't entirely convinced. Sakritter in particular was suspicious, considering, in his experience, whenever a question like that was asked, it was usually followed up with an excuse of some kind. After questioning him a bit more, we marked each of their necks with a purple marker so we'd know who we'd seen and who we hadn't. After we instructed them not to wash it off, we walked to the next house.

At the next house, we were greeted by a teenage boy, who wore a long white shirt that came down over his knees, and carried a bucket for washing. We instructed him to place the bucket down, which he did, and ran into the house.

"Baker, Sackrider, take point, move in," said the Lieutenant.

Me and Sakritter opened the door, our rifles trained upward, and walked into the house. Inside it was cool and smelled of damp concrete. We could hear the boy speaking in another room.

"Come out, keep your hands where we can see them!" we shouted.

A woman of at least sixty came out of the threshold of one of the rooms, her voice trembling with fear. We couldn't understand her.

"Get Sami up here," Sakritter said.

When Sami came in and quieted the situation, the woman asked us if we wanted tea, which we politely declined. As with the previous house, we asked them if they'd seen anyone new move into the neighborhood in the last week. She said that yes, someone had moved into the corner house at the end of the street. While we questioned her, the boy stood in the corner, his

eyes calmly beheld us and our guns. We marked the two of them as we'd done at the last house, and told them to remain here for three days.

If you were starting to think that the daily routines of patrol were somewhat boring, and that it was different from your expectations of war, you'd be correct. On most days patrol went off without a hitch, maybe the occasional IED in the road, or someone who looked suspicious who we'd apprehend, but it was always long hours of walking and waiting, and little else to do. I had begun, naively, to think this was how my entire deployment would play out. That whatever real danger there had been in Iraq had already been dealt with, and we would simply walk from place to place, sunning ourselves and sleeping when we could, until it was over. I think we all started to think this after a while, which is why it was so easy to let our guard down.

When we got to the third house, the one on the corner, our knock at the door was not answered. We waited in the silence of the street. The Humvees churned their engines nearby. People moved about the sidewalk on the far side of the road. A cab drove by in a hurry and the driver watched us intently as he passed. We knocked again. A man's voice was heard from deep inside the house.

"Open your door, this is U.S. Army conducting a headcount," shouted Sami in Arabic. Again, no one came to the door. The Lieutenant motioned for Sakritter to come forward. He pointed at the door. Sakritter took a lunging step with the battering ram, and pounded at the door. It gave a little, and he pounded again. The door slumped over and we stepped through, our rifles trained up, and began scanning the room. The house appeared empty. A living room with a couch and a cabinet of dishes was to their right. Through the hall sat the kitchen. Before the kitchen, a small stairway led up to the second floor of the house. Sakritter crouched at the bottom of the stairs, and looked up. I did the same. In a quick flash of movement, I saw the faintest movement

at the top of the steps, someone moving back out of sight. He leapt up the stairs, coming back a second later with a thin man of about forty, who immediately began stammering with apprehension.

“Lieutenant, found a squatter,” Sakritter said with a little smile. He pulled the man into the living room and forced him down onto the couch.

The Lieutenant asked him questions, where he was from, how long he’d been in the area. He said this was his house, he lived here with his son. He said he had left to visit his brother in Kirkuk, and that’s why he was away. We did not see a child in the house. We did find an AK-47. We marked his neck and told him not to leave the house for three days and took the gun with us.

It was decided that we’d return to that same house on the corner the following night. The Lieutenant had shared our visit with his chain of command, and they decided the possibility for insurgent activity was high enough to conduct a raid. We’d move in at about 0300 hours, which was the usual time when IEDs were planted, and few patrols were taking place to catch them. We slept for a few hours after the sun went down, then at 0100 we woke and readied our gear.

Although we were only just across the river from Baghdad, I felt that the nights in Iraq were darker and more difficult to travel by than Kentucky nights. We had driven down the banks of the Diyala River and immediately struck east, driving by what little moonlight cast itself over the palm groves and the low grasses of the open river plain. I stayed in the rear of the Humvee with Sakritter, who was still sloshing around his usual bottle of tobacco juice, but the smell had gotten more tolerable, and Sami. I felt responsible for Sami, to some degree, and tried to keep an awareness of our location in case we got separated from the others, or in case we found ourselves in a firefight with insurgents and had to make a quick escape. I knew the river was to our rear, but that was about all. Although I had been in the country for over a month by then, I still hadn’t

figured out the layout of the Diyala river plain. I didn't know the terrain that well, much less how we would get back to our FOB from where we were headed, and could only go along for the ride and trust we'd get where we needed to before long, but after an hour had passed with no word from anybody, I had begun to realize this was a more involved job than I supposed. The daily patrols had bled together, and the drive we took seemed longer some days and shorter others. The Lieutenant kept the Humvees at a quicker pace than usual, and it was more difficult to get my bearings by. The Lieutenant and Sgt. Marcus had the country memorized and drove the dirt road to Algaara with the same familiarity as if they were only strolling to the mess hall or headed for the outhouse. I felt like asking someone where we were. I felt it necessary I should know something of the surroundings in case I got separated from the others.

Just when it became impossible for me to keep going in silence, we topped a small bluff and the column of vehicles came to a stop under the starry blanket of sky. Ahead of us was a row of small buildings. I could just make out their box-like shadows sitting among the trees and the electrical wires that stretched out overhead in every direction. Even though we were stopped, no one said anything. A call came over the radio that we were to stay put until an area of the road could be checked.

"Well I was just beginning to enjoy our little road trip. Made a nice change from the gear humping I'm used to," Sakritter said, breaking the silence.

Gear humping was his way of describing our foot patrols. We each carried about ninety pounds of gear.

"Why don't worry, Sakritter. We won't work you and that sore back too hard, since you're so sensitive to it. We'll get out and walk the rest of the way, and you can catch up to us.

Maybe one of these houses has a donkey in the back yard you can ride. You ought to be back at camp by breakfast.” Sgt. Marcus said, chuckling.

“We ought to move in on foot, though,” said Sakritter, “Must be a path through this grass we can take.”

“Ought to?” said Sgt. Marcus, “We’ve got a potential IED. How comfortable are you walking around mine infested land on foot?”

“Well suppose we hit an IED in one of these Humvees and it loses a tire or something. What’re we supposed to do, climb into the others like a packing crate?” said Sakritter.

“Well I wouldn’t mind it so much if I didn’t have to listen to your mouth running on top of it,” said Marcus.

“Y’all wouldn’t have anything to talk about if it wasn’t for me,” said Sakritter, smiling widely, “Baker here hasn’t said hardly a word since he got here from Kuwait.”

We sat a while listening to the humming of the engine, to Sakritter’s loud breathing. The moon was near full, just like the Lieutenant said, and once my eyes adjusted I found I could see quite well across the grassy plain. About five miles south of the bluff he saw the flickering light of a vehicle. Sgt. Marcus had seen it, too.

“Well if those road IEDs are disabled soon, we can look forward to a mobile one,” Sakritter said.

“I see it,” said Marcus, “It’s probably just a cab driver or something. There’s usually a few driving around at this hour. We’ll check it out if we have to. That road check will take a while anyway.”

“I admire your optimism, Sergeant. I wish I could look at this positively and see us taking on a car bomber. Or maybe you’re just more willing than I am to waste an expensive, taxpayer funded vehicle like this one,” said Sakritter.

Marcus had a laugh. “I ain’t ever seen someone so worried about the taxpayer’s money as you,” he said, grinning at Sakritter in the dark.

Just then a radio call came in, “Bravo One, Bravo One to all vehicles, possible IED in road, approximately 050 meters ahead of checkpoint Alpha. Visible package ahead. Hold position, dismount and establish 360 security. EOD requested. Over.”

“Bravo Two copies, holding position, establishing 360 security. Engines off. No movement forward until EOD clears. Bravo Two out,” said Sgt. Marcus, “Well, you’ll get your wish, Sakritter. Looks like we’re on foot for a while.”

“That’s one thing I like about this place. It’s always letting me get my exercise. Makes the risk of getting blown up a little worth it if I can get home in better shape,” Sakritter said.

“I don’t know about exercise, but it makes it easier to shoot you in the dark,” Marcus said, “Why don’t you talk a little louder, Sakritter, maybe the guy in the mosque will start singing and the two of you can harmonize.”

We exited the Humvee, with Sakritter taking the point, followed by me, Sami, Vasquez and the Sergeant.

“I guess we’re up for it,” Sakritter said, “As long as that car out there turns out to be a cab driver.”

With that, we split up in a circle around the vehicle. I joined the Sergeant and Sakritter into the brush a little ways with Vasquez. Sami came close behind. The men in the other vehicles exited, too, and soon there were about a dozen men standing around in the dark. Soon, the

thought of displeasing the Sergeant in some way began to occupy my mind more than the insurgents and their IEDs and car bombs.

After the road was determined to be safe, we stopped the Humvees about half a mile from the house. When we approached the house, the sun was still down. We put on our night-vision goggles. Our footsteps were light on the sand and broken pavement, our breath smoking slightly in the early dawn cold. We moved silently, using only hand signals. The occasional click of a radio, or a shuffling of gear was heard. The street was empty. Before us, the house sat in the dark, the painted facade peeling slowly away. On the roof, a plastic tarp moved gently in the little wind that came. I was second behind Sakritter in the stack we moved in. My rifle was tucked close under my armpit, barrel pointed down. My heart pounded and the steady drum of it pulsed in my ears, in my fingers. Ahead of me, Sakritter was steady, eager. Sami was farther back, farther from the action. I scanned the street, and the little houses and buildings for any sign of movement, a hand, a face in a window.

At the door, Sakritter looked back at the dark column of men. When we were ready, he stepped into the now doorless threshold, and we followed one by one. A dog barked in another yard. One by one we slipped into the house. The only sound was the shuffling of our boots on the tile floor of the house. The living room sat as before, a single bulb hung from the ceiling.

"Clear right," said Sakritter.

We swept into the hallway, our rifles up. Each room was empty. The kitchen was empty, the hallways were empty. Upstairs, in the bedroom, was a single bed with a brown stain in the middle. A mat of clothes lay on the floor. A cellphone sat on a night table next to the bed. In the courtyard in the back of the house, the gate swung loosely. We went back into the house.

"Bravo One to TOC, house clear on initial entry. Negative personnel present, Negative weapons observed." said Sgt. Marcus over the radio.

"Bravo One, this is TOC. Roger your last. Standby for maneuver. Maintain position and hold perimeter. Notify immediately if status changes. Over." said the Lieutenant.

"Like hell that guy was his brother," said Sakritter as they stood in the living room where they'd questioned the man the day before.

"I knew as soon as we found that AK that something wasn't right," said Marcus.

The radio clicked again, "TOC to Bravo One, establish 360 security and maintain positive ID on all approach routes. EOD is in route, ETA 08 minutes. If situation changes, evacuate to 300 meters and call for CASEVAC. Acknowledge. Over," said the Lieutenant.

"Bravo One to TOC, copy. Establishing 360 security. EOD ETA noted. Will report any change of status. Out," said Marcus.

Everyone waited in the silence that followed. Marcus watched us, then watched the street through the broken doorway of the house. A dog barked again. It didn't cease.

"Someone out there?" said Marcus.

Sakritter went to the back door that opened into the courtyard. He scanned the perimeter, but saw no one. The dog continued barking.

"Negative, no personnel," said Sakritter.

Marcus stared at the street outside. Habit had made him check and re-check. The pale light of morning was just beginning to come over the horizon. Every second that passed increased the feeling among us that things could go wrong. A metallic smell came into the room. Sakritter felt it on his tongue and spat into the floor. I felt the same. The air shifted. It came not

as a sound, but the small movement of air from above. I felt it the way a fisherman feels the slight tug against the line. My head flicked up.

"Upstairs," he said.

We didn't have time to answer. When the explosion came, it cut through the roof above us in a concentrated detonation that seemed to push the house downward. The room above us gave way like a weight had been dropped on it. The force that followed seemed to turn into itself, bouncing off the walls and striking against our knees and chests like a fist. A slam of wind blew out of the open doorway, scattering a mechanical howl and shower of splintered concrete and plaster. The joists of the second floor of the house folded as if sliced, and it seemed the sky had come into me. The air became dust, our tongues powdered and gagging. There was no visibility in the plaster murk, and the ringing in my ear seemed the only sound I would ever hear again. I felt my way along the ground, my hand running over shards of wood and tile. I felt for my gun. My hand found another of the men. I couldn't tell who it was. I wrapped my fingers around the fabric of his uniform, and I tried pulling us both up and the pain in my legs felt as though it would break me. I tried shouting, but couldn't hear the sound of my own voice. The man I grabbed wasn't moving, and I instinctively tried pulling him toward what I thought was the direction of the doorway. The moments I spent reaching the doorway felt like an hour. I dragged the man through the threshold and into the street.

In the pale light of the street, I could tell the man I was dragging was Sami, who was unconscious. His helmet hung askew on his head, and a rivulet of blood came from one of his ears. Just then, I felt a hand on my shoulder. The Lieutenant had come up with the other men. I could see his mouth moving and tried to make out his words. Sound came in short bursts. I became painfully aware of the hot scent of burning debris and the choking of the plaster in my

mouth. The Lieutenant helped me carry Sami back to one of the Humvees. I didn't think, only acted, and when we reached the vehicle, I collapsed against the tire in a fit of coughing while the medic attended to Sami.

Chapter 6
Baghdad, Iraq

2006

I felt around me. A soft bed, the smell of antiseptic instead of smoke and cordite. I could feel the slight drunkenness that comes with being shot through with pain medication. There was a sound of plastic rustling, something pressing against my face, cold and soft. There were murmurs on all sides of me, beeping in the distance. The sound seemed as though at the end of a long tunnel. Brightness over my eyelids. I blinked hard twice and came-to in a beam of fluorescent light. Someone was to my right, inside of a pale blue curtain. Voices came from behind the curtain, metal clanking followed by quick footsteps. The voices were soft, steady, unlike the cutting voice of the Lieutenant I could now only vaguely recall. I tried swallowing and a sharp pain went down my throat, but my tongue was no longer choked in powder. My breath smelled as though it had been fermenting and a wave of nausea came over me. Nausea mixed with the smell of isopropyl alcohol. I tried sitting up. The figure next to me shifted, a woman in blue scrubs, holding a clipboard with her hair tucked beneath a surgical cap. Her brown eyes scanned me as if I were a biological specimen under surveillance.

"Private Lake," she said. Her voice danced and echoed in my ears before I could settle on her words.

"Private Lake, can you hear me?"

I nodded, "Yes," I said, and I was nearly startled by my own voice.

"Good, my name's Stephanie and I'm your station nurse. You're in the Combat Support Hospital at the Victory Base Complex. We have you in stable condition and we want to keep it that way, ok?"

I didn't answer. The immense weight of my head strained my sore neck, and I let it drop back onto the pillow before I fell asleep. When I woke a while later, the nurse was gone. For some reason I felt it was night outside, though I could see no windows. I could see quick moving figures darting past the slit in the curtain. I tested my strength by opening and closing my hands. I felt all ten fingers. I shifted my legs to make sure they were still there, I wiggled my toes. It was only after I'd done this and sat up in bed that I realized my left eye was swollen shut. I tried swallowing again, and again the pain surged through me. Footsteps on the other side of the curtain. A hand reaching up and sliding it open.

"You're awake again," Stephanie said. She had a pack of saline which she began changing out. She turned over my forearm and checked my IV.

"Sleep is probably the best thing for you right now," she said. The loudness of her voice slammed against me. The light above was nearly too bright to look at. A well of pain concentrated itself in my forehead.

"When did I get here?" I said.

"Yesterday," she said, "You were airlifted in from Diyala."

"And where is here, exactly?"

"The field hospital at the Victory Base Complex. You're in Baghdad."

"Am I the only one from my squad here?"

"No, Interpreter Abboud is in the other room."

"He's alive?"

"Yes, but he's going to have a longer recovery than you. His wounds were heavier. Do you remember what happened?"

Each time I attempted to run over in my mind the events of the previous day, I found myself grasping for memories I could only hold onto for a moment. Then I remembered them again, only to forget them a moment later. It was like I was reliving the same two minutes over and over again, and all time outside of them were hidden away in murk. I remembered the ceiling collapsing, the cloud of dust and the hammering sound of my heartbeat in my ear. I remembered pulling Sami from the wreckage, and there the two minutes ended.

"Vaguely," I said.

"You were wounded in an IED blast, ok? Can you straighten your arm out for me?" she said, and I felt a rushing coolness as she sent medicine into my forearm.

I looked down at my hands, which were both wrapped in gauze, on which a dark stain bloomed. I shut my eyes and tried to piece the moment together again. One second we were waiting for EOD, the next came the metallic smell and the blast. I remembered my lungs burning when I tried to breathe. I remembered reaching for my gun and finding Sami. The curtain opened again, and a man came through wearing camouflage fatigues and a stethoscope came in. His head was shaved and his eyes were polite without inviting intimacy. He looked both competent and exhausted.

"Captain Lagway," he said, putting a hand on my shoulder, "How are you doing pain wise, Private?"

I could hardly feel my body enough to know. Besides the pain of swallowing and the headache, the sensations of my body were largely alien to me.

"Just my head and my throat," I said.

"Just your head and your throat hurt," said Captain Lagway.

I nodded.

"All things considered, I'd say that's a good place to be. You have a concussion, so lights are going to be a problem for about a week or so. Stephanie, can we dim these lights in here a bit? Thank you." He vigorously rubbed his hands with hand sanitizer and sat down on a swivel chair beside me.

"So you have no internal bleeding, which is the crucial thing, and besides your concussion you're ok, neurologically speaking. We ran a CT scan and found no serious damage. There are some second degree burns on your hands, but everything's stable. We're gonna keep everything light for a while. Don't worry about getting back to your unit just yet," he said, "You're the one that got Interpreter Abboud to safety, aren't you?"

I shrugged. I realized this was the first time I'd heard Sami's last name.

The Captain nodded.

"Well done," he said, standing up. He said something to the nurse that I couldn't make out, then walked to the end of his bed and looked at me again.

"We're going to monitor you for 48 hours before we make any decisions about next steps for treatment, ok? We'll decide if Medevac should happen. Your burns don't look good at the moment but there's no reason to suspect they won't heal. Rest, and I'll be back to check on you in a couple of hours."

With that, he disappeared behind the curtain.

"Ok, that's all set up," the nurse said to herself, "How's that IV feel, not too uncomfortable?"

I shook my head.

"Ok, I'll be right on the other side of this curtain if you need me."

"Nurse?"

"Yes?"

"What about my mother?"

"She's been notified. She knows you're wounded but that you're recovering. You can call her in a while, after you feel better."

With that, she walked out and closed the curtain behind her.

Chapter 7

Lexington, Kentucky

2014

After the phone call with Karim, I immediately called in sick to work that day, and sat down at my laptop to begin combing through contacts I still had inside the Army, anyone I knew who could get me in touch with people who knew about the translator programs during our time in Iraq. I tried one of Sakritter's old friends, a guy we had run into shortly before heading back to the states, and someone he'd served with in an earlier deployment. His name was Frank, Peter Frank, and he was stationed in D.C. working for the Department of Army Records. My email was basic, since I'd had no contact with Sami for years, and knew almost nothing about his current whereabouts. I just knew his name and rank from when he worked for us, and hoped that would be enough to generate a lead.

After I sent the email, I sat staring at my laptop, expecting an immediate response, for some strange reason, when the thought occurred to me to call Sakritter directly. Even if he couldn't provide me with a lead, maybe he could get me in touch with someone else who could. I tried dialing his cell number, no answer, likely at work. I was always forgetting that other people operated on a more normal schedule than me. Being available at 8:00 in the morning wasn't something most people were.

While I waited for Sakritter to call me back, having left a voicemail on his cell, I went back into my laptop, and looked up the Freedom of Information Act website to file an FOIA, Freedom of Information Act, request, which would help me get in touch with someone who could potentially look up where Sami was at the end of his time with the Army. He kept working

as an interpreter after I left, and so his journey with the Army didn't end with me. I had to include my unit designation, dates deployed, location of my Forward Operating Base, which was our crummy little compound by the river in Diyala. I had to include Sami's call sign, Jason, which was a name given so that any insurgents who recorded our comms would assume an American rather than an Iraqi civilian working for us. Once the request was in, the waiting began. FOIA requests can typically take weeks, if not months, to respond to, and I felt like Sami didn't have that kind of time by the way Karim spoke about him over the phone. Suddenly my energy returned, suddenly I had something I could put my efforts towards each day. I walked around my apartment and cleaned up every empty beer can and junk food wrapper I could find.

Chapter 8

Baghdad, Iraq

2006

For the next several hours after meeting the doctor, time seemed to pass in vague loops that played a familiar track over and over again. I drifted into sleep, woke more exhausted than before, opened my eyes to the bright light, fought to remember the rest of the blast, listened to voices beyond the curtain, then slept again. When I awoke the third time, Captain Lagway was standing at the end of my bed again.

"Just wanted to give you an update on Interpreter Abboud," he said, "He's awake, he's out of critical condition and you'll get to talk to him as soon as you both recover a little more."

I nodded again, it was all I knew how to do, "What exactly happened to him? I mean how fucked up is he?" I said.

"He has a concussion like you, and his ribs are broken in three places. We needed to keep him monitored to make sure he didn't puncture a lung," said Captain Lagway, "You dragged him nearly one hundred feet to get him out of there. You should feel awfully proud about that. I know it might not feel like much of a win now, but I'm sure he'll thank you when you get to talk to him."

I nodded again. Feeling proud of myself was unfamiliar, to say the least. Mostly I was just glad he was alive. It was only after this that I remembered the other members of my squad who were in the house. Sakritter, Sgt. Marcus, Vasquez.

"How are the other men doing? Are me and Sami the only ones hurt? I said.

"Amazingly, yes," said Captain Lagway, "Apparently it was a pressure plate hidden in the upstairs floor of the house you were in. The concrete took most of the impact, so the only real blast damage came from the roof collapsing. You and Interpreter Abboud were the closest to the plate."

I groaned as I sat up in bed.

"Well, I'll check on you in a bit," he said, "Drink that," he said pointing to a bottle of some purple looking substance on the tray table next to me, "The last thing we want for you to be right now is dehydrated."

He handed me the bottle and then walked out through the curtain. I took a drink. It was room temperature and tasted of medicine. It hurt to swallow. I dropped it down on the bed next to me, and some of it leaked onto my hospital gown. I fell back to sleep.

This time, I didn't sleep for very long. The loud crash of a plate being set on the tray table woke me. Every sound hammered me. The plate was filled with a pasty looking eggs, potatoes that looked like little chicken turds. I brushed it aside and reached for the purple substance instead, which had been placed back on the tray table. The curtains were open now, and I could see out into the medical facility. Cabinets with boxes of medical supplies piled on top of them. Nurses moving quickly from place to place. A wounded soldier walked with a cane down the row between beds.

The only thing I wanted, besides the drink, was to speak to Sami, and my mother. I didn't really care to speak to anyone from my unit. The doctor had said that no one else was seriously injured, but I couldn't fully believe that until I spoke to them. But there was no way to speak to them from the confines of a hospital. If it was morning, which it seemed to be from the eggs on

my plate, then they would already be on patrol. I thought about Sakritter and Sgt. Marcus being on patrol immediately after surviving such a blast. I wondered if they would get a new interpreter, and if Sami's time in this war was already over. I was half grateful for the shoddy nature with which the insurgents had planted the IED. If they'd chosen the bottom floor of the house to put it in, we may not have survived. How many soldiers can say they lucked out of a terrorist attack?

After another several hours of lying in bed, tired of only getting up to piss, I walked out of the curtain that surrounded my bed and walked over to one of the nurses desks. When I approached, one of the nurses looked up.

"May I have a phone, I'd like to speak to my mother."

"Sure," she said, and led me over to a land line that looked out of the 1970s, "Type 011, then the number."

"I dialed, and for a strange moment, some part of me wished she wouldn't answer. Something about having to confront the reality of the blast all over again, to recount it and tell her about it, irritated me. The dial rang a few times before a a slightly raspy Southern accent came over the other end of the line.

"Hey, Mom," I said weakly.

"Jesus, Stephen," she said.

"Yea, I know."

"How are you? My God, how are you?"

"Better than yesterday, but not as good as the day before."

"They told me you were in a blast?"

“Yea, house was booby trapped.”

“Whose house?”

“A house, Mom. Just a house around here.”

“Well I’ve had the worst night of sleep of my life, you know that?”

“That’s comforting,” I said.

“Don’t be a smart ass,” she said, “I ain’t eaten anything, either. Just been drinkin’ and pissin’ and worryin’ bout you, boy.”

“Well you’re talkin’ to me now, aren’t you?”

“Stephen, why don’t you call more often?”

“I can’t, Mom. I’m out in the desert all day. It ain’t like we’ve got a phone booth out there,” I said.

“Well write me a dang letter or somethin’,” she said, “How do you think it feels for a mother to be sitting around wondering what her son’s life is like? It’s like it’s all goin’ by and I don’t even know about any of it.”

“Well that’s nothing new.”

“Don’t give me that. You bein’ off at war ain’t the same as summer camp.”

“Well how do you think it feels for a little boy to always be sitting around wondering what his mother’s life is like? I don’t hardly know about half of your story, either. It was grandpa that got me through school, anyway.”

“That why you joined up?” she said?

“What?”

“So you could make him proud? That’s why you got it in your head to go off and be a soldier?”

“Gotta make someone proud, don’t I?” I said.

“You don’t think I’m proud of you?”

“You wasn’t proud enough to come to my high school graduation. I had to bum a ride back home and eat a steak by myself as a celebration.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“I’m glad you’re ok. Write me a letter or somethin’, but don’t fill it with all your gripes,” she said, and hung up the phone.

I slammed the phone down and stomped painfully back to my bed.

I began to hate the field hospital, with its endless noise and constant smell of antiseptic that I began to feel would lodge itself in my nostrils forever. The nurses stopped being so polite, and I began to think my presence was a burden to them, that I was beginning to stretch their patience, and the regular meals of rubbery eggs and meat and instant mashed potatoes was beginning to make the process of eating feel more like a chore than like something to look forward to.

"How are you feeling?" the nurses would ask.

"Fine. Ok. What about Sami?" were the only answers I could muster, "Can I see Sami?"

"No, Interpreter Abboud..."- I hated it when they referred to him as Interpreter Abboud. There was something overly formal about it that stripped away who he was, turned him into a name on a clipboard. I didn't like the feeling that all we were in this place were names on a clipboard- "...is still recovering," is what they would say.

I didn't think I could do this for too much longer. I wasn't eager to get back to the squad, but I was tired of this bed.

After nearly a week in the hospital they let me walk around the grounds. The doctor warned me against bright light, but I went anyway. I wore sunglasses. The hospital was in the middle of a compound the size of five football fields, with a white concrete wall surrounding it. It was flat gravel all the way to the wall, and a few small trees stood out bright green against the sandy colored ground and the clear blue sky. I walked for a little while around the compound. Nurses helped wounded soldiers walk on crutches, vehicles brought in supplies. The doctor was right about the light. After only ten minutes my head started throbbing again. I went back to my bed and slept for nearly nine hours without waking up. I was still more tired than I realized, and I awoke more grateful for the bed.

The next day, my fourth in the hospital, they let me see Sami. The nurse came in and told me in a voice so peppy you would've thought she was telling me I was headed home. She took me to a more secluded wing of the field hospital. There was less noise, and fewer people. It gave it a seriousness that chilled me a little. We went inside a pair of doors to a dimly lit wing with rows of beds, just like mine, but in each bed was a soldier who could barely be seen beneath the layers of bandages and casts they wore. Sami was near the end of one of the rows. His face was purple and swollen and there were bandages going up the length of his arms. There was a bandage on his face and a yellow ooze slowly dripped out from underneath it. The nurse walked over and gently shook his hand. Sami looked at me, and I could make out the attempt at a smile beneath his bandages, which were bloody.

"Baker" he said, his voice sounded like a small bird. The nurse left us.

I tried to stifle how horrified I was by what the blast had done to him. He appeared as though he'd been pulled from an oven, or gone over with a blowtorch. So did I, probably, but at least I could get around. Sami was the opposite, thin and stringy, with ropy arms and long fingers that were now lost beneath fat layers of bandages. He had always been thin, but was so energetic and moved so easy it never made him seem weak or feeble, but now he looked like some tattered thing, some droopy puppet tossed into a corner. Sweat streamed down from my forehead in the hot room, and I wiped at it with my sleeve. They could never keep things cool enough in here. Sami tried moving, as if to sit up and talk, and I could tell he was in a near crippling amount of pain. He was oddly unbothered about it. He made a small effort, then collapsed back onto the bed like a feather dropped. His body appeared to weigh nothing. Sami pulled his hospital gown up a bit, trying to show me where some shrapnel had been lodged in his side, and he attempted the smile again, as if trying to earn my approval with his wound. It wasn't so much a ribcage as a purple balloon, and I had a vivid flashback of the explosion at the market some weeks earlier, and the dreams that had followed as I imagined the shopkeepers and their customers standing in front of the building, haggling over the price of a shirt, before being consumed by an inferno. Seeing what these blasts did to a body up close brought back my nausea, and I had to fight back a climbing urge to turn out of the room, shuffle back to my bed, and pretend what I'd seen of Sami just now had been another one of those dreams. I'd wake up and he'd be back with the company and it would just be me lying here in this searingly antiseptic smelling box. But I simply looked at the floor for a moment, then lifted my head again and just focused on Sami's face, not letting my eyes drift over his body.

Sami looked at me again with a look of eagerness that almost made me forget our current misfortune. I sucked in a quick whiff of pus-smeared bandages and exhaled sharply from my

nose. I felt light-headed and the fluorescent lighting was now stabbing my eyes and sending a focused pain through my forehead.

“You ok., Sami?” I said, suddenly feeling like the stupidest man in the world for asking it.

“Baker,” he said, “You look worse than I do. You ok?” he simply said back, and his voice seemed small and distant, as if he was far out in a field. I felt weirdly uneasy about answering, not wanting to let him put my wellbeing first when he'd clearly taken more of the blast than I had.

“It’s hot in here,” was all I said. A nurse sped by and I had a sudden bout of dizziness and thought I'd fall off my plastic chair.

“Oh, this is not hot,” Sami said playfully, “We'll keep you here a little longer, Baker, and you'll get used to our heat.” As he said this his eyes suddenly seemed too heavy for him to control, and they just sort of rolled around in his head, and by the time he'd finished talking he was looking off somewhere else.

I sputtered, trying to keep up our meager attempt to focus on anything but the state of our bodies, “Lot of people in here,” I said, but had nowhere to go with it. Sami just lied there, having used all his energy for our brief exchange. I sat there in the silence between us for another few minutes, then could no longer fight the urge to get up.

"Well, they tell me you'll get better," I said, "Just gotta wait a while, but I guess waiting here is better than waiting back at FOB."

Sami turned his head back to me, and tried to smile again, "Go find a cute nurse to talk to, Baker," he said.

I laughed, loudly, awkwardly. A few others in the room glanced over at me.

"Yea, well, I'll be back tomorrow," I said, and turned to head back to my bed. Before I walked away Sami spoke up again.

"Baker," he said.

I turned around.

"Think this will get me a ticket to America?" he said.

"I hope so," I said.

I visited Sami two more times over the next few days. We sat and spoke for only a few minutes each time. If I'm being honest, I couldn't look at him for too long. Afterwards, I took walks around the compound, slowly stretching them out for longer and longer, testing my headaches against the sun. In the evening it became cloudy and I walked for nearly an hour. I was strangely cold the entire time. I remember that. I remember feeling hot inside the field hospital and strangely cold outside. I started to think the blast had done something to me, inverted my internal sense of temperature or something. I think that's where it started, wanting to be cold all the time. I think it reminded me of Sami. I think it made me feel like I did in the hospital, like he was nearby.

Sami and I had now been in the hospital for nearly a week. My headaches had become less severe and I could tolerate bright light for a little longer. My mouth seemed to regain some of its taste and I didn't avoid meals or pretend to be asleep when they brought the food in. The doctor told me I would be able to return to my squad within a few days. I didn't really think

about that too much. Being with the squad seemed like something that happened to someone else, something that I'd only observed from a distance.

Near the end of that week I visited Sami again. At the hospital, the air-conditioning was going full blast inside the room but I was still hot, and the sweat slipped down my legs and a wet, curdling smell began to rise from my socks. People with all kinds of wounds came and went, soldiers, Iraqi civilians, and I thought about each of them and where they came from and where they were going back to after all this. I did this to distract myself from what was coming next for me. I didn't want to think about going back. I felt like getting a concussion from a blast should mark the end of my time here somehow, rather than being a short intermission.

"I'm always worried someone will come in who I know," Sami said in bed next to me, "Once the war began, I remember going up and down the street, making sure no one I knew was gone. Occasionally there'd be someone who I'd known for years who would be gone, their house empty, and I'd worry and worry until someone told me they'd fled to another part of town, or another city. I worried about you until you came to see me the first time," he said, now recovered enough to sit up and playfully slap my leg with his bandaged hand.

"Have you spoken to your parents?" I said.

He said he had.

"What did they say?"

"Very little," he said.

"Shit."

Another minute of silence followed. I didn't know how much Sami had told his parents about what he was doing with us, but I figured they had to know most of it by now. He was gone too long, spending all day with us on patrol. When he did go back home, I always worried we'd

hear from someone that he'd gone missing, or that he'd just never turn up again. I'd heard stories about interpreters going on leave and never being heard from again. To the locals we interacted with, operated under a false name, since he was nervous about being discovered even outside his own neighborhood. He had no driver's license, no bank account that I knew of, and just carried a phone with him everywhere he went. Every so often he would take a phone call from someone, and at times I'd see him standing on the opposite end of the courtyard having an animated discussion with someone, and he'd come back and sit with us and act as if nothing had happened. But sitting there in the hospital after the blast, I had the creeping sense that he was more uncomfortable than usual, and not just because of the wounds. His eyes would shift around the room more often, and whenever a wounded Iraqi civilian was brought in he'd hide his face behind his bloodied hand, or just roll over in bed and lay still until they had gone.

"Don't you think they're going to start wondering why you're here?" I asked, and an even more uncomfortable silence followed for a moment.

He didn't like this. "You shouldn't worry about such things," he said, "You should go speak to your own parents. Why don't you go speak to your mother? You're always coming to see me, but you should be taking care of your own family, worrying about your own people," he said with a biting tone. I'd never heard him speak like that before.

I just sat there, not knowing what to say. He turned over in bed. I left.

In another few days it got chilly outside, meaning the temperature dropped from a high of one-hundred ten to ninety. It was a nice relief, but then it kept dropping and dropping, until it

was soon in the seventies during the day. I spent more time outside, walking around the gravel plain outside the field hospital, my headaches slowly dissipating. I visited Sami, but less and less, feeling like he'd get mad at me if I kept showing up too frequently. As soon as I got back to my bed a nurse came up and said there was a call for me. When she brought me to the phone behind one of their desks, it was Sakritter on the other end of the line. I asked where he was calling from, he said one of the satellite phones the Lieutenant had in his makeshift office in the loading bay of the camp. He asked how I was. I just said I was tired. He asked about Sami. I said he was in better shape than I was. To tell you the truth, I think he was, mentally at least. Sakritter said the house where the blast took place was gone. I figured that was the case. He said it like he thought I would be amused by it or something, like Sami and I survived but the house didn't. He seemed to be amused by it. I asked about the other men, he said they were waiting for me and Sami to get back. He said they could hardly speak to any of the locals without him. He said they couldn't wait to see us again. I ended the conversation shortly after that. I didn't want to think about going back to the squad.

I found a rec room in one of the neighboring buildings to the hospital. It was bright, but that didn't bother me as much anymore. There was a row of pool tables, a tv mounted on the wall and a basketball goal propped against a far wall. I pulled up a chair near one of the pool tables and watched a group of men play. They didn't ask much about me. The clicking sound of the balls smacking into each other rang in my ears. I winced every time. They talked to each other about everything but the war. They talked about where they came from, their wives back home, what they did before the war, or what they wanted to do after the war. I wanted to stay there for as long as I could. I felt that if I just sat there by the pool tables, and listened to somebody else

talk about home, that I wouldn't have to go back to things. The war would be over if I just waited there long enough.

But I waited another few days and it was still there. The burns on my hands weren't yet fully healed, but they needed the hospital space and sent me off with medicated lotion and told me to apply it three times a day and to keep my hands clean. I thought about the courtyard of the base in Diyala, the flies, the cat shit, and realized that would be next to impossible. I snuck another pack of gauze with me before I left.

I went to see Sami on my way out. He wasn't in his bed. I asked a nurse behind one of the desks where he was and she said he was probably in a rehab session. He needed to exercise his shoulder again to get full use of it back. He'd been in bed every time we spoke and I hadn't realized his shoulder wasn't working. I wanted to know if he was going to return to the FOB the same as I was. If he wasn't, I wanted to at least tell him to look after himself. I stood there thinking about what I would say, and the nurse spoke up and told me if there wasn't anything she could do for me, then I needed to get back to my part of the hospital. I told her I wasn't in the hospital any longer. I held up my still burned hands and said, "I hope you people know what you're doing."

When I came out of the hospital, I was placed in a van and escorted to a helipad, where they would take me to one of the larger FOB's outside Algaara. From there, I would rendezvous with my squad when they passed through on patrol. It was another sunny day. The sky was perfectly clear. It was then I started to notice I couldn't really remember how long I had been in the country. There weren't seasons in the sense I was used to. No trees to change color in the fall. I noticed how much the passage of time depends on these things. I felt myself lost in the

dreamlike monotony of it all, like I had passed outside of time somehow. But I knew that wasn't true because I had been in the hospital, and now I wasn't, and soon I would be back where I started, where I'd nearly been killed in the first place.

Chapter 9

Baghdad, Iraq

2006

The helicopter sat on a makeshift airstrip about a mile from the hospital. I realized how massive the base I had been staying at was. The pilot was a guy named Norris, who seemed positively thrilled to see me. He shook my hand and I nearly fell to my knees from the pain. He didn't notice. He said he'd have me back with my squad in no time. He said it like it was something I should be excited about. The blades started turning and soon we were above the ground, the hospital beneath me. I tried to pick out where in that brown mass Sami was. It was only after we were well away from the hospital that I wished I had called my mother again, or at least tried.

While we were in the air, I thought about her. I had spoken to her once when I was in Kuwait, waiting to be moved wherever I was needed. That was the first time I'd spoken to her since before basic training. What had it been? Over six weeks then at least. After I got to Iraq, it'd been even longer. She divorced my dad when I was young, and he moved on to Texas or somewhere else, and she spent the next ten years or so moving from place to place around the country. My grandfather took custody over me for a while, then mom would come back for a year or so, and I'd live with her, then she'd head out again and I'd move back with my grandfather. I don't think it was because she didn't want me, necessarily, but because she just knew she was incapable of staying in the same place for any length of time. She lived in Virginia for a couple years, working as a waitress at a restaurant in Charlottesville while I was fourth grade. She had only gotten through high school, so those were some of the only jobs she could

get. I heard she got a boyfriend there, in Charlottesville. She told me later she left because he wanted to marry her, and once a guy got to where he wanted to marry her, she knew it was time to leave. She went west to the plains for a while, bouncing around Nebraska when I was in sixth grade. She worked at a ranch for a while. She'd send me pictures of her on a horse, and told me I should come see her soon. I had no way to get out to Nebraska, so I think she just said that so she could say she reached out.

When I was fifteen she came back and I lived with her for two more years. That was the longest period of time she had me since I was a child. We'd stay up late, watching old movies. When a storm came by we'd go out onto the porch of her little trailer and watch it together. She'd sip a glass of sweet tea and smoke a cigarette. Then one day, when I was seventeen, I woke up in the morning and she was gone again. She left a note saying I could have the trailer.

When I graduated high school, she was living in Florida, near Jacksonville. I called and told her I was going into the army. She didn't say much at first. But, on my last day of basic training, when we all march in columns in a little football stadium before all of our parents, I looked up and saw her sitting by herself, waving at me. We went out to lunch after that, and talked about everything but each other. She asked how my dad was. I told her I didn't really know. She nodded. Then she started crying. I should've called her.

About an hour after the helicopter took off from Baghdad, we landed in FOB New York, north of our little camp. It was much nicer than ours. It had a sheltered mess hall, with electricity and air conditioning. They had vending machines and a tv, couches, fans. They had a small

medical clinic with cabinets full of supplies. Their wall wasn't a crumbling mess of stone, but tall Hesco barriers that could survive direct mortar fire.

The helicopter sent up a cloud of dust when we landed. A couple of guys were playing basketball when it did, and they had to stop. They seemed a little pissed off about it. When I stepped off the helicopter I was greeted by a Lieutenant named Sellers, who was about twice the age of Williams. He had a mustache and his dark brown eyes met mine with a look of apology, like he was sorry he had to welcome me back to Diyala. He said my squad would be through tomorrow morning. He did not say it like it was something to look forward to.

My bunk at FOB New York was an actual cot, with a nylon bedding, an actual pillow, and a poncho liner for a blanket. It wasn't as nice as the hospital bed, but it was nicer than the sleeping bag I'd be in at FOB Goodwill. It felt like my daily level of comfort was going down and down. It felt like being a soldier was about retreating back to some primitive state the world seemed to want us to be in.

I threw my pack on the ground next to it and laid down. I fell asleep before I could speak to anyone else. When I woke up it was 0400. The other men were asleep around me. I sat up in the dark and thought about what the day would hold. I tried to feel the cot beneath me, thinking it might be the last time for a while I would have a decent night's sleep. I put the medicated lotion on my hands.

For breakfast at FOB New York, we had cereal and orange juice. The orange juice was actually cold. The milk was powdered milk. The other men asked me questions, who I was, where I was from, how long I'd been in the country. I told them I'd been in the country a year, which wasn't true but it felt true, and that's all I cared about at that point. When I finished

breakfast I went outside. The sky was gray, overcast. There was a little wind and the palm trees swayed gently and I walked around the compound. Just before noon, the familiar column of Humvees rolled into the gate, and I saw Sakritter sitting in the passenger seat of one of the vehicles.

For the next couple weeks, after getting back to the company, I didn't hear from Sami. I woke up to our usual routine of patrolling Diyala, checking in on locals, which became more intense and hostile in the aftermath of the explosion, the Lt. didn't trust anyone, and the good graces the locals had benefited from were gone. Patrols took longer now, with each one involving a larger number of people to interrogate, mark, and include in our newly expanded route. Most of the men hadn't really spoken to me that much about the explosion itself, which I welcomed, not wanting to talk about it myself. They asked how I was, and as soon as I showed even a modicum of normalcy, they mostly left me alone. Sakritter kept up his usual jokes at first, but even he was more subdued compared to what I'd come to expect from him.

I slowly started to take less care of myself, though, in small but accumulating ways. I didn't clean my uniform for days at a time. My maintenance of my rifle got sloppy, and as long as I wasn't asked about it, I didn't really do it, thinking it just another of the tedious chores we did that didn't seem all that necessary now. Interrogating the locals without Sami was a chore, and mostly we relied on simplistic gestures towards possible violence if someone didn't immediately comply with what we wanted. We couldn't get a new translator right away, something about

militant offensives going on in Baghdad where the most resources were needed. We wasted no time trying to be calm and relatable. If someone didn't stand where we showed them to, or let us mark their neck, we just shoved them into place and got on with it. There was tension in each interaction that wasn't there before, even with people we didn't have any serious reason to suspect were up to something. Everyone became a suspect now.

What I hadn't really expected was the extent to which I'd miss Sami's presence. Even though I was still getting to know him, even though I wouldn't say I was close to him yet, his absence was felt more easily than I'd anticipated. Even if it was something small, like a quick conversation at the end of the day, getting to know him and listen to him talk about his family, his life before the war, I missed those small moments of connection. Mostly I just sat around and listened to whatever nonsense the other men talked about, usually women they'd fucked back home, or women they were planning to fuck when they got back home. Nothing that carried any particular interest with me.

One morning, just before patrol, I found myself readying my gear, and when I felt a hand tap at my shoulder, I turned and said "Sami!" in an enthusiastic voice, when it was only Vazquez making sure I didn't forget an extra ammo pouch. My excitement at thinking it was Sami, which I had no reason to, had embarrassed me in front of some of the other men, and that night, around the fire, I could hear them talking about him, wondering where he was, and when they'd get to see him again. I ate my dinner on the compound wall that night, listening to the crickets. Later, after most people had gone to sleep, I heard footsteps approaching me. It was Sakritter, coming over to have a quick word.

"Haven't heard from Sami have we?" he said, taking his place on the wall next to me. He pulled a cigarette out and lit it, the smoke blowing into my face.

At first, I hadn't thought anything of it, since the hospital staff had told me he'd recover, but that it would just take a while longer, but at Sakritter's comment, I suddenly ran through a list of horrible scenarios. What if he had a complication? What if there was some infection he ended up getting, something that would prevent him from making it back? What if my conversations with him at his bedside were the last times I'd see him? I tried not to give away my worry in front of Sakritter, but a worried look came over me anyway, and I think he noticed.

"Not trying to get you upset or anything," he said, "Just seems like you haven't been yourself lately. Noticed you not taking as much care of your gear as you should be."

I wasn't really in the mood for a lecture, if that's where this was going, but the subtle chastisement in his voice reminded me of where I was and what I was doing, and most importantly, why I needed to get my mind back in a healthier place.

"You know, Baker, it's not just you and Sami out here. We were in that building, too. We almost got hit with that blast as much as you did, and we're still out here. But if you're not going to take proper care of yourself, you're going to make things more dangerous for each of us."

He didn't stick around to get an answer from me, but just threw his cigarette over the wall and went back to where his sleeping bag was.

I stayed there for a while longer, both trying to ignore what he said, thinking it didn't matter as much anymore, but unable to, especially when thoughts of my grandfather came back to me. I had to remember why I was here. I had to remember why I put myself in this position in the first place. I wasn't doing anyone any favors, least of all myself, by checking out.

Chapter 10

Lexington, Kentucky

2014

It took two days for Peter Frank, the man at the Department of Army Records to respond to my request. He'd written:

Mr. Baker,

I received your inquiry about the translator program, and unfortunately, there is no master record of all interpreters working with deployments during Operation Iraqi Freedom, but what I can try to do is get in contact with someone at CENTCOM (Central Command) who can put you in touch with interpreter records at the Defense Intelligence Agency. It's possible the original documentation of the man you're looking for is there. At the moment, much of our documentation on interpreters is classified for security purposes, but I'll see what I can do.

Sincerely,

Lt. Peter Frank

It hadn't brought me any immediate details, and considering I was hanging on the edge of my seat all day, waiting for someone to give me something to work with, any tangible piece of progress felt meaningful, especially since Karim hadn't called like he said he would. I kept my cellphone in my pocket during my work shifts, which we weren't supposed to do, and tried to call Karim back at the number he'd reached me with, but had no luck. The only thing I could do

was wait, which was only made worse by the awful footage on every news outlet about what ISIS was doing as they tore through western Iraq, looting cities, pillaging historical sites, throwing women into what was little more than slavery. I couldn't fall asleep without picturing Sami among all that wreckage, hoping for someone to pull him out of there, to give him hope that things could get better for him. I imagined him thinking of me, specifically, and how I'd promised him all those years ago that he would one day come to America.

When I got into my teenage years, I slowly stopped spending as much time with my grandfather. I fell into the usual teenage habits of melodrama and angst, thinking myself to be unique for thinking that the world was out to get me, and that nobody else understood. Mostly, though, I was just anxious about what I was going to do after graduation. My grades had been slipping my freshman and sophomore years, and despite my family's attempts to get me back on track, I just retreated further and further into a kind of withdrawal from social life. My friendships slowly faded away, replaced by video games and hours wasted in front of a television. I knew that this isn't who my grandfather wanted me to grow up to be, but instead of thinking I could figure things out so long as I got myself on some kind of a path towards something, I just acted like everyone but me had no clue what they were talking about. I didn't realize it at the time, but this was the start of the road that would leave me feeling as if I'd let my grandfather down at the end, that I hadn't done a good enough job of giving him something to be proud of about me.

Chapter 11

Diyala Province, Iraq

2006

About a week later, we got word that Sami wouldn't be returning to the company. LT had said we didn't have time to wait for him to recover, that we needed an interpreter for patrols immediately, and they'd flown in a new one from another part of Baghdad. His name was Bandar. We'd picked him up at FOB New York, where I'd been dropped off at. When we pulled into the base, and one of the sergeants there pointed him out to us, he looked nothing like Sami. He was short, and round in the middle. His hair was matted and greasy, and he had an unkempt mustache that grew wildly down over his mouth.

There was a scar going down one side of his face, and he had a grimy looking stain over his uniform. When he saw me, there was a look of slight hostility across his face, like he was a substitute teacher sent in to deal with an unruly class of students. There was nothing like Sami's smile. When the LT came up he quickly pulled it away to be replaced by a timid look of almost subservience, like he was one of our lackeys and we were here to take him back to whatever life of drudgery he was used to. I didn't really know what to make of this at first, it being so different from who I'd known Sami to be when we first met him, smiling, bursting with excitement at every little detail about us. It wasn't for any particular concern for myself or even attitudes about the war. But something else seemed to have hardened into place within me now that Sami was gone.

"How we feeling, Jason?" said Sgt. Tate to him. Jason was Bandar's call sign.

"Fine, sir," he said.

“Almost thought they wouldn’t give us another interpreter, but I told them how badly we needed one, our last guy got hit in a blast,” LT said, “I even got hit a little.”

LT pointed to a small piece of grimy gauze over his hand. He said it with enthusiasm, like he should be proud of his little wound, but I was irritated with how quickly he’d dismissed Sami. Bandar’s look I’d seen only a moment earlier made me think twice about any displays of obedience from him. I’d seen something in that look that I couldn’t get out of my head.

We climbed back into the Humvee to carry on with the patrol, Bandar not even getting a day of rest to adjust to his new company. To the other men, there was nothing about him that seemed out of the ordinary. It was just a new interpreter to come along with the usual routine. He didn’t laugh at Sakritter’s jokes, he didn’t really say much of anything. Sakritter tried to make fun of the blast, figuring that since I made it back, it was alright to joke about it, maybe he thought it would cheer me up, help me see it differently. He asked me if there were any cute nurses in the hospital. But my patience had worn thin. Something about the blast, and what I’d seen it do to Sami in the hospital, had shifted something. I couldn’t summon the usual enthusiasm for Sakritter’s sense of humor I could before. My outward appearance was hiding a more serious, more frightened man.

Later that night, while the men were taking their dinner around the fire, and I was sitting in my usual pot on the wall, LT came up to talk to me about how I was. He seemed more concerned for me than the other men. I didn’t really have the courage to tell him how I really felt, that something about me was different, to get at my real feelings about what had happened. I think he noticed this, too, for he kept our conversation to a minimum, and soon he was back among the men, trading laughs about something. If this was how things were going to be, then I

felt at some point I wasn't going to speak to Sami again, and at that thought I quickly turned my attention back to the crickets, which only made me think of him even more.

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Chapter 12

Lexington, Kentucky

2014

That night, I was lying in bed, watching the news about some new terrible thing happening in Iraq with ISIS, when the broadcast shifted into a story about Iraqi interpreters. There was a man, a Marine who was stationed elsewhere in Baghdad at around the same time I was. He was talking about the interpreter he worked with, and how he was trying to get him out of the country. Then there was a man, silhouetted in black, who was given a fake name and had his voice distorted, speaking for fear of his identity being known. As I sat there and watched, the black silhouette was slowly filled with the image of Sami. I imagined him, sitting there being interviewed, having been rescued from the country by me, having gotten out and now able to enjoy his life, the life he always wanted. When the story was over, I laid there and fought off sleep for as long as I could. I flipped back and forth between news channels. The channels all plastered the same stories, the kinds images of fear and terror, the same smoke columns rising from buildings with ribbons of asphalt filled with trucks and taxis fleeing before them.

“It's just all so much” a newscaster would say, “these images are something else.”

In the morning, my car struggled to start and I had to take the bus to work. It was cold and rainy. The sun was wrapped in low, gray spring clouds, and the wind blew furiously, whipping the rain into my eyes. Cars drove past and sent ropes of water into the air around us.

When I got onto the bus I froze. Sitting in the back, looking out the window, was Sami. He was clean shaven, his skin was unblemished, and his hair was cut neat and straight. I felt numb. My nose was snotty from the cold wind. Then he turned to look at me and it wasn't him,

and the man who it was was now staring at me, a look of suspicion on his face. All day at work I was inattentive, repeatedly marking wrong figures on the shipping forms, putting items in the wrong boxes, writing the same address over and over again and having to print new labels.

When I got home that night, I stared at my phone where it lay on my coffee table. I began to suspect that Karim was about to call at any moment, or that the phone would ring and it would be Sami, telling me he'd gotten out of Iraq. I drank beer and had to piss, but didn't get up. I went to my laptop and opened my email. I thought about reaching out to someone from the company, but realized I didn't know any of their addresses. I opened Facebook and sent a message to Sakritter. Then, on a whim, I typed in Sami's name. Dozens of profiles came up, some with teenage boys in soccer jerseys standing in front of a beach somewhere, some with men in suits and ties, their faces furrowed with an over-serious professionalism, some with flags of Middle-Eastern countries for profile pictures. None of them looked like Sami. Then it occurred to me that he would never use his real name, wouldn't give someone a way to track him down that easily. Then I remembered his fake name, the name he chose for himself, Paul, Paul Newman. I typed it into the search bar. This time hundreds of names came up. Kids on baseball teams, fat guys sitting on their decks, fan pages for the actual Paul Newman.

After about five minutes of scrolling, ten pages deep, I found a profile with a slim, smiling man sitting on a river bank, holding up a peace sign. The photo was older, slightly out of focus, but it was him, it was Sami. I immediately clicked on it. There was little to find. Few photos, just a few street level images of Baghdad, some shops, the occasional landmark, nothing of him or anyone else. He had his occupation down as working at a small hotel in downtown Baghdad. It wasn't much, but it was a line of inquiry, something for me to follow. It seemed strange that Karim couldn't figure out that much. I looked up the hotel, grabbed my phone, and

dialed the number, using the 011 exit code for international calls. A terse sounding man answered.

“Is there a Sami there?” I said.

“*Mrhaban?* (Hello)” he said.

“*Hal yumkinuni aleuthur ealaa sami* (Can I find Sami?)” I said, switching to what little Arabic I still retained.

The man already sounded irritated that I called, and grew more irritated when I began asking about Sami.

“*La 'aerif*, I don’t know,” he said, and I could imagine him waving his hand in irritation.

“*Ahtaj 'iilaa shakhs yatahadath al'iinjiliziatu* (I need someone who speaks English)” I said.

A shuffling sound came from the other end. I waited for what felt like eternity, listening to every small sound that came through. After a moment, another man’s voice came through the line. He spoke English in a clear, slightly posh tone that reminded me of a British politician.

“Sir, how may I help you today?” he said.

“Yes, I’m calling about someone who works there, or who maybe used to work there. His name is Sami, Sami Abboud,” I said.

“Mr. Abboud no longer works here, sir.”

“Well can you tell me where he went?”

“He left us close to a year ago, sir. Can I direct you to the police? Would you like to make an inquiry?”

“Can you put your manager on?”

“I am the manager, sir. Would you like me to direct you to the police?”

Feeling defeated, I listened as he gave me the number of a local police station, before hanging up. I sat there staring at the number for a while. I didn't want to go through the police, mostly because I felt nothing would come of it, especially now. How many others were calling to ask where missing loved ones were? How would they be able to find a hotel worker who hadn't been there in almost a year? The sun was beginning to rise. I'd have to leave for work soon. I decided to call the police later that day, but first decided to send Paul Newman a message on Facebook:

Paul, it's Stephen Baker. Karim asked me to reach out to you. He tells me he can't find you. He's probably already sent you a message on here. I don't know what good mine will do, but if you see it, let me know where you are. Let me know if you're safe with everything going on. Are you still in Baghdad? How can I get in touch with you? I want to get you out if I can. Just let me know if you get this.

I pressed send, not expecting much, and began dressing for work.

Once, when I was in high school, I woke early one Saturday morning to hear my grandfather come into the house. It was early spring, and the trees were beginning to stretch their little green fingers and shake off the last few cold stabs of winter. I could hear him in the living room, talking with my mother. He told her he wanted to take me fishing. My mother said she thought it was probably too early, that I'd been out late the night before and would still be asleep, but he could check if he wanted. Then, my bedroom door opened a crack, and I closed my eyes,

pretending to be asleep. I could feel my grandfather standing there in the door. He said my name in a low voice, but I kept my eyes closed and laid there motionless. I kept pretending to be asleep. Then the bedroom door closed and I heard him walk out of the house. I laid there with my eyes open, listening. It was only after the house had gone quiet that I got up, dressed, and rushed out the door, but by then his car was gone way up the street.