PART I

BLOOD AND TEARS

1

Medic Down

My last minutes in Iraq—my final seconds as a two-legged man—were spent helping a wounded soldier I had never met before and would never meet again. I was a combat medic. And this was my job. But on that morning, two weeks before I was scheduled to come home, I just happened to be working twenty feet from a huge, hidden bomb.

I was crouching in the dirt beside a four-lane Baghdad highway, bandaging the man. As I inserted an IV drip into his arm, jabbed a morphine pin into his thigh, and checked the deep gashes on his left leg, somebody was watching me from the window of a nearby building. He also had a job—to flash a signal light to another insurgent who stood ready to trigger the bomb with a simple call from his cell phone.

"Everything is going to be all right, man," I told the injured soldier, a military police officer from Minnesota. He was my age,

twenty-four. "The chopper is coming to get you. Everything is going to be fine."

I also was saying those words for myself. For eleven and three-quarter months, I had survived numerous street patrols, raids on suspected insurgent houses, and middle-of-the-night mortar attacks on our base. I had seen an innocent Iraqi man shot to pieces, and I had been deeply shaken by the bombing death of a good friend. In about fourteen days, though, I expected to be safely back on American soil, wrapping my arms around my family, my friends, and my daughter. Everything was going to be fine.

"I've made it through this," I had told my mom, Lois, early that same morning, February 21, 2005, speaking on an army satellite phone. I was so excited for my upcoming trip home that I'd bolted awake at three in the morning, long before anyone else in the barracks. I'd strolled alone in the darkness across the base to use the phone. Then, for better reception, I had walked up and out to the roof of the command building at Camp Falcon—our walled-in foothold in southwestern Baghdad. On some nights, insurgents would launch mortar shells into the compound from surrounding neighborhoods. A few had exploded in the rocky ground next to our barracks, shaking the walls, breaking windows, and jarring us awake. During those blitzes, I worried that I'd have to rush out into the darkness to patch up wounded friends. Getting back to sleep was always tough. Those attacks would leave me on edge for years. But up on the roof early that Monday morning, the skies were quiet. I knew that anything could still happen to me, but I couldn't help counting down the days.

"I can't wait to see you all," I'd told my mom.

"Well, the Lord brought you this far," she had replied. Back in Mississippi, Mom and Dad had just finished their Sunday dinner. "Just be careful. . . . Two more weeks."

Soon after my call home, at about four o'clock, I began my workday—a routine patrol of the streets near Camp Falcon. Our

task was to break in a fresh group of soldiers who were preparing to take our place. We needed to teach them how to maneuver through the neighborhoods, how to quickly and safely raid a house, how to best navigate Baghdad. My job classification was a 91-Whiskey or 91W, army shorthand for combat medic. I was attached to a platoon in the Bravo Company of 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment—a heavy-armored regiment based at Ford Hood, Texas, yet with historic roots that coil back to the days of horse-mounted soldiers fighting in the Indian Wars of the Old West. A little ironic, since I'm part Native American.

Although I had been specially trained to treat wounds, I was a soldier first. Along with my medical kit, I carried an M-16—an air-cooled, magazine-fed rifle capable of firing up to thirty rounds per clip. I carried seven clips. During our occasional raids on insurgent houses, I often used that rifle to guard rooms full of Iraqi civilians while other U.S. soldiers scoured the rest of the dwellings for the bad guys.

Our convoy—eventually headed toward that wounded MP—consisted of three armored Humvees. Inside the rear truck, I rode in the backseat just behind my platoon sergeant, John Shatto, a bass-fishing fanatic with a slight Southern twang who had become a friend while in Iraq. I was wearing my usual field gear: desert combat boots, sand-colored fatigues, Kevlar helmet, and a green outer vest lined with bulletproof ceramic plates covering my chest and back—twenty-five pounds of body armor. Also on board was my aid bag that held intravenous needles, tubing and fluid, a tool for opening airways, two morphine pins, antibacterial cream, aspirin tablets, and lots of gauze. In a few hours, I would count on some of those items to save not only another soldier but also myself.

As we turned off an asphalt highway and bounced onto the streets of a residential neighborhood in south Baghdad, I felt the small notebook pressing against the back right pocket of my pants. This was the only noncombat item I carried, but it was

as important to me as all the body armor I wore. The durable *All-Weather Field Book* was used by soldiers to jot down critical information about their daily missions—routes through the city, seat assignments inside the convoy vehicles, who had the job of blocking traffic during raids, any bad guys we thought to be in the area. Mine contained tactical notations like "Stay behind equipment/vehicle," "no wandering around," and "Kevlar on if engine on." But in addition to all those battlefield reminders, my little book was packed with personal writings. During my eleven-plus months in Iraq, I had used quiet moments before bed or spare minutes during the trips to other bases to sit and record my spiritual journey in a time of war. I would write down my thoughts about, say, the previous Sunday's Scripture reading, how the base chaplain had interpreted it, and how that message applied to my life in Baghdad.

"'I know what I am planning for you,' says the Lord. 'I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future,'" I wrote in one passage. Then I gave my interpretation. "God reveals that there is no reason to worry about tomorrow because He plans to bless us with an expected end, not a disaster."

"In the Bible, the words 'servant' and 'minister' have the same meaning just as well as 'service' and 'ministry.' My life is my ministry," I wrote on another page. "God intentionally allows me to go through things so that I can comfort the next person."

When I encountered a rough situation in camp or in the civilian areas, I described how those same biblical lessons had applied to those real-world moments. I felt the Lord was showing me important things about life and people during my time in Iraq. On the light brown cover of the notebook, even my doodles spoke to my time at war: "Perfect love cast out fear!!!" I scrawled one day. He was showing me my purpose. Sometimes, I pulled out my spiritual journal and just skimmed old passages to reflect on how

my faith was holding up—or maybe growing—during the most brutal year I had ever faced.

Back in Mississippi, I had attended a Baptist church every Sunday morning, so I was intrigued that a bloody, modern war was being waged against a timeworn backdrop common to the Bible, in places I had often read about in the Scriptures. I was patrolling roads, raiding houses, and treating wounded people in an area once called Mesopotamia, the land between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Less than fifty miles to the south of my bunk at Camp Falcon sat the ancient ruins of Babylon and the tomb of the prophet Ezekiel. This was a sacred place. Thinking about that kept me grounded. I didn't feel like the little book in my back pocket offered me any protection against the bombs and bullets. It was just tangible proof to me that I was trying to live my life properly in Iraq, making the right choices, and hopefully becoming a better person. But soon my iron-clad faith would be invaded by anger and confusion. In time, I'd be asking God some hard questions.

One of my final entries, written hastily, seemed to foreshadow what was looming.

"Spirit of God led Jesus into wilderness to be tempted," I wrote. "God will take you to the fight."

In the neighborhood south of Baghdad, we rolled past clusters of palm trees—a tropical looking scene but far from laidback. To emphasize that point, many of the houses sat behind concrete walls and thick metal gates. I always felt most vulnerable while riding through Baghdad in a vehicle. I much preferred being on foot with my guys around me. Roadside bombs were a common and cowardly weapon of choice among the insurgents. I saw whole streets dented with craters from past IEDs—improvised explosive devices—which were nothing more than old battlefield munitions

like mortars, commercial explosives, or homemade bombs buried next to highways and often triggered remotely, timed for big body counts. As of March 24, 2008, 47 percent of the four thousand U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq were the victims of roadside bombs.

Death by car is an unofficial theme of this war: our Humvees hitting their IEDs; their truck bombs wiping out entire Sunni markets or ripping through Shia shrines. The first death I ever witnessed—the first body I ever saw at home or at war—involved a car. One week after I was deployed to Iraq in March 2004, our unit was ordered to guard an Iraqi police station to ward off a threatened Al Qaeda attack. In the middle of the night, a civilian vehicle rolled quietly down the road and stopped dead near the police station entrance. From the oil refinery just next door to us, Iraqi civilian security guards—also poised for the rumored Al Qaeda assault—suddenly opened fire on the car. Then our soldiers started shooting at the car. In the shower of bullets, the Iraqi man behind the wheel was killed, but he hadn't come to do any damage. As it turned out, his car had just stalled and he had the awful luck of coming to rest in the wrong place at the wrong time. I understood that in the bizarre commotion of war, mistakes happen. Still, while I was shaking off the moment, my mind raced: *That was crazy! Oh my God, is this what it's going to be like the whole time I'm here?* The worst was yet to come.

At about six o'clock that morning, our Humvee driver abruptly hit the brakes and stopped outside a small Iraqi house protected by a six-foot metal gate and a concrete wall. It was time to show the rookies how to do a raid. The idea was to quickly burst through the gate and the front door, gaining entry and launching a search before anyone inside even realized what was happening. I showed the new guys how and where to kick the gate down, ignoring the loud, metallic crash as it fell. From there, without breaking stride, our platoon sprinted up to and through the front door, then into the house. The people inside all were asleep and the raid turned

out to be a quiet one. We found no evidence of insurgent activity and left the house as quickly as we had come.

Our final task before returning to Camp Falcon was to show the replacements the best route to the Green Zone—a six-square-mile fortification of government, military, and diplomatic compounds in central Baghdad, all protected by blast walls, barbed-wire checkpoints, and Abrams tanks. (Today, that sector has been designated as the International Zone.) The Green Zone also was home to one trauma center, the 86th Combat Support Hospital or CSH. Making a word out of that army acronym as we always did, we just called it the "cash." Formerly Ibn Sina Hospital and once favored by Saddam Hussein's supporters, the bustling facility had gained some fame in a powerful TV documentary called "Baghdad ER." With its elite medical staff, the CSH helped boost the survival rate for wounded U.S. troops to 90 percent, the highest war survival rate in history.

Any soldier who is new to Baghdad needs to know how to get to the CSH, and get there fast. I had learned that lesson firsthand. One night early in my tour, not long after I watched the innocent Iraqi man get shot dead, we were back at that same Iraqi police station, guarding against another possible attack. On the horizon, we could see a battle raging. Amber-colored bullet tracers cut back and forth across the dark skyline. Not long after that, we spotted a lone Humvee rolling up to our front door. In Baghdad, U.S. Army trucks always travel in convoys for better protection. When we saw that single Hummer approach, we thought insurgents had possibly hijacked one of our vehicles during the firefight and now were trying to escape. But then I heard one of the soldiers in the truck screaming in English. They were in trouble.

I raced from the police station to the back of the Humvee, in the process leaving my weapon behind. Not a smart move, but I figured these guys had to get to the hospital fast, and I could show them the way. Inside the Humvee, one soldier was cradling

the bloody thigh of another. I instantly recognized the soldier holding the leg as Specialist Taylor Burk, a fellow medic and a guy I had served with at Fort Hood. As I helped navigate their driver through the dark streets and toward the CSH, Burk told me that their convoy had been strafed by gunfire during a night patrol. Their Humvee, not yet fitted with protective armor, had been pierced several times. Two bullets had struck their gunner, Specialist Joseph Bridges, as he stood in the turret, one hitting him in the jaw and the other in the thigh, which was now hemorrhaging from an artery that Burk had wrapped with a tourniquet. Every minute mattered. As we barreled toward the Green Zone, Bridges was screaming in pain. About that time, Burk confided to me that he also had taken a bullet in the heel. They had been trying to reach the CSH when they got lost and found us.

Minutes later, we pulled into the Green Zone and arrived at the hospital. Someone had radioed ahead that were we en route. Several doctors met us at the door and took Bridges and Burk inside for treatment. Burk later received the Bronze Star and a Purple Heart for his actions that night. But in war, there is often a sad ending to these heroic stories. After six months of physical therapy back in the States, Burk convinced his superiors to let him return to Iraq and, later, to replace another combat medic who had been hurt in action. In January 2005—about one month to the day before my morning mission—a chunk of shrapnel from a roadside bomb sliced into Burk's neck and killed him. He was twenty-one. Among the people at his funeral was Joseph Bridges. Burk will always remain an inspiration to me, a prime example of the dangerous work performed by combat medics in Iraq and a reminder that we came there to serve, to help one an other and the people we encountered. Burk's life was truly about service. I was trying to live that way, too.

As we rolled past the armed checkpoints of the Green Zone, en route to the CSH, it was approaching eight o'clock. Our sector

had seemed calm but it was a small relief to be inside the blast walls. When we stopped and piled out of our trucks at the three-story hospital, I peeled away from the guys to jog across the street to the Tactical Operations Center, a communications hub. My first cousin, Sgt. Debbie Poe, worked at the TOC and also in the emergency room at the hospital next door. When she wasn't compiling paperwork for the Pentagon on casualties who came through the ER doors, Debbie had several other duties, including finding additional bed space at other hospitals in Baghdad. The CSH accepted anyone wounded in battle—Americans, Brits, Iraqis who fought side-by-side with coalition troops, even insurgents. There were days when an injured U.S. soldier lay in one ER bed while an insurgent who had just tried to kill him rested in a bed across the aisle. After a "mass-cal"—army talk for a massive casualty event like a hotel bombing—the hospital would be flooded with fresh wounded. It was Debbie's job to call her medical contact at an Iraqi hospital in the unsecured neighborhood nearby and arrange for some Iraqi patients to be moved to that facility. During other medical scrambles, Debbie was pulled into the fray and asked by the ER docs to clean patient wounds, take vital signs, or tag bodies.

At the TOC, I gave Debbie a hug and a smile. She is fifteen years older than me. My mom and her dad were sister and brother. We each had been raised amid the same thick pine groves, had ridden our bikes on the same dirt road that cuts through our remote little pocket of family homes in rural east Mississippi. I still have a fuzzy photo of a teenage Debbie; my brother, Maurice; a few other cousins; and me, all wearing fancy Sunday clothes and glum faces, all gathered for the funeral of my dog, Blackie. Seeing her at the TOC stoked my excitement about my pending trip home.

"So this is where you work?" I asked.

"Yeah, this is where I work at," Debbie answered.

"This is really nice. Y'all got it made here," I said.

"So I've been thinking about what I'm going to do when my tour is over," Debbie said. "What are *you* going to do?"

"I don't know," I replied. Really, my only plans for the moment were to laugh with my loved ones, to taste some good Southern cooking, and hopefully to get back into college and play some football again. I still had this burning dream of playing in the NFL someday.

"Well, think about it: maybe we should come back over here after our tours and work as contractors because they get paid a lot of money," Debbie said.

That was true. Compared to what we earned, civilian contractors were raking in thousands of dollars. Maybe, if college didn't work out, I could come back and work as a Baghdad firefighter for big bucks. Maybe.

"Well, I am going home next," I said. "I'll be there for a bit and then I report back to Fort Hood."

"Okay, well I'll be home in September," Debbie said. "We're definitely going to have to get together and do something."

It was time for me to rejoin my unit and make our way back to Camp Falcon. We hugged good-bye. I would indeed be seeing Debbie again, but our reunion would come much sooner than I thought.

I climbed back into the Humvee, and our convoy began its trip out of the Green Zone, moving southwest through the city. I was hungry and ready for a meal. About fifteen minutes after we left the hospital, we entered the increasingly lawless Dora neighborhood. Staff Sgt. Bryce Rigby, a twenty-two-year-old outdoorsman from Utah, made a decision. Riding shotgun—the command seat—in the lead Humvee, Rigby told his driver to steer the convoy onto 60th Street, a notorious stretch of murder and mayhem.

"Let's take these new guys down there and show them what it is," Rigby said.

Six weeks earlier, on that same road, Baghdad's deputy police chief and his son had been ambushed as they drove to work. Gunmen had raked their car with bullets, killing both. It was a political assassination with a cold purpose. In areas populated by the Sunni Muslim minority, insurgents had stepped up attacks in early 2005. They intended to scare people from registering to vote for the January 30, 2005, elections that would create the new 275-member National Assembly. Then again, the sound of gunfire was nothing new on 60th Street and in the surrounding Dora neighborhood. Once a high-energy swath of mom-and-pop shops and white villas filled with a mix of Sunnis, Christians, and Shiite Muslims, Dora had steadily degenerated into chaos. During my time in Iraq, Dora's police stations and public infrastructure had been routinely bombed. Kidnappings were rampant, and its bustling market and legendary nightlife had been choked off. As a civil war brewed in late 2004, two Christian churches in Dora were bombed, driving out the small cluster of Christian residents. As 2005 began, Sunni militants increased their assaults on Shiite pilgrims who passed through Dora on their way to shrines in Najaf and Karbala. In late February, it was still a lethal place, and the new guys needed to get a look.

As we drove west on a frontage road that paralleled a major four-lane highway, we noticed that traffic on the highway had backed up, starting below an approaching overpass. Rigby was the first to spot the wreck, just ahead of us on the left. A sand-colored U.S. Army Humvee had rolled off the highway and flipped upside down onto a dirt shoulder that edged the frontage road, coming to rest against a utility pole. Its doors all hung open, and we saw a couple of American soldiers huddled over a man on the ground. More soldiers had cordoned off the immediate area, parking their remaining three Humvees in a pattern to create a 360-degree protective perimeter. This was Dora, after all. The frontage road and the far side of the highway were each bordered by rows of

residential buildings, some with balconies. A crowd of Iraqis was standing and watching. Some were taking photos. The situation seemed tense. We skidded to a stop and jumped out to help.

I snatched my aid bag and sprinted to the injured soldier, Tijtong Vang, who lay face up, ten feet from his flipped Humvee. He was bleeding from a deep gash on the inside of his right leg, and he appeared to have a broken back.

Vang's platoon—there were about twelve on the ground that day—was a tight band of military policemen from the Minnesota National Guard, and many hailed from the small towns that dot western Minnesota's pine woods. Three were natives of Appleton, which has only about 2,800 people. Two of them were childhood friends. Their unit, part of the 151st Field Artillery, had been in Iraq for less than two months. That morning, their convoy had been bound for another army base where the MPs planned to do some target practice with their new rifles. Shortly after eight, just as we were leaving the Green Zone, their four trucks zoomed westbound toward this spot. When they neared a bridge that stretched atop the four-lane highway, the Humvees each began a zigzag maneuver—standard practice when approaching an overpass and a possible sniper's nest.

Inside Humvee No. 3, Vang had the wheel, gunner Corey Fennell stood in the turret with his head exposed, and team leader Sgt. Jesse Lhotka rode in the passenger seat. In mid-zag, their top-heavy truck suddenly lost traction on a patch of loose gravel, spun sideways, tipped, and began to roll onto its side, crumpling a metal guardrail along the dirt shoulder. A split second before the vehicle crashed onto its top, Lhotka yanked Fennell inside, saving him from possible decapitation. But in the tumble, Vang had been ejected. When the truck came to rest, Lhotka—"Lottie" to his friends—guided Fennell through the Humvee's rear hatch. Fennell had a bruised shoulder and could stand. Lhotka then darted over to the downed Vang and began applying hand pressure on his leg

lacerations to control the bleeding. Our convoy had arrived about ten minutes later. The drama was just beginning.

Kneeling next to Vang, I bandaged the leg wound, inserted an IV drip into his arm, and injected him with one of my two morphine pins to ease the pain. I placed the other pin in one of my vest pockets.

"Hang in there," I said, trying to reassure him as I worked.

The other guys in my platoon parked our three Humvees in positions to help shore up the 360-degree perimeter. Our gunners stood in their turrets, rifles in hand, watching the crowd. Other soldiers from both units were in kneeling positions, rifles aimed, taking cover behind the guardrail—some crouching atop the buried bomb.

When I think about that IED now, tucked under the asphalt and armed for remote detonation maybe weeks or months before we got there, I can't help but shake my head. What are the odds that the MP's Humvee would crash there, so close to that deadly device? What are the chances that we would all be working next to it? During the seven minutes I spent stabilizing Vang, several soldiers stepped back and forth over the center guardrail, exactly above the bomb. And we would soon be carrying Vang's stretcher in a straight line to that IED. When I roll it all around in my head, I come up with the basic thought that it simply wasn't my time to die, and that I had more to do in this life.

No one had spotted the bomb, of course. After the truck accident, the Minnesota MPs had conducted an IED sweep, carefully inspecting the roadway, its gravel shoulders and center guardrail for any signs of man-made danger. The device—probably a 61-millimeter or 81-millimeter mortar shell—was in a covered hole next to the center guardrail between the two eastbound and westbound lanes. If it was typical of other IEDs, the insurgents who planted it would have dug a shallow trench in the soft soil next to the guardrail and then tunneled six to twelve

inches under the asphalt edge of the westbound lanes, the side where the Humvee crashed. They would have positioned the base of the shell in the tunnel below the hardened tar because these rounds are "base-ejecting," meaning the tail explodes and forces hot chunks of asphalt—along with a spray of razor-sharp shrapnel—up and out of the hole. This makes the blast even more lethal: bystanders a hundred feet away can be knocked down and struck by flying shards of metal and rock. The insurgents would have placed the front end of the shell in the open part of the trench, packing the nose with a plastic explosive like C-4. They would have then attached a wire to the C-4 and pushed dirt and gravel back over the trench, leaving only part of the wire above ground—ready to be triggered later with a simple cell phone call. This end of the wire would have been carefully concealed as well, maybe with an empty soda can, plastic water bottle, or crumpled sandwich wrapper, or maybe just placed directly against a guardrail post. However the insurgents did the deed, their bomb had been expertly camouflaged. And in a nearby building, someone watched and waited for the perfect moment to set it off.

Sure, it was implausibly bad luck to wind up next to an undetected IED that morning. But I soon would benefit from an incredible stroke of good fortune. Shatto—my platoon sergeant with the Southern drawl—asked one of the Minnesota MPs if they had already radioed for a Medivac helicopter to come and pick up Vang for transport to the CSH. In fact, the Minnesota soldiers already had called for a chopper, but the MP who spoke to Shatto told him he wasn't positive that a Blackhawk was on the way. So Shatto walked to his Humvee and radioed the Tactical Operations Center (where Debbie was working) and asked them to dispatch a Medivac to the crash site. Now, two were in the air, essentially to rescue one badly injured soldier. On a day when numerous battlefield heroes would emerge, that tiny miscommunication would help save the lives of Shatto and me.

We heard the first Blackhawk's thumping blades just a minute later. One of the Minnesota MPs, Staff Sgt. Chad Turner, laid down a one-by-three-foot marker on the highway as a suggested landing spot and then popped a red-smoke canister to help the pilot gauge the wind. With the chopper on the asphalt—sitting in the far eastbound lanes, maybe ten to twenty feet from the guardrail—Minnesota Staff Sgt. Dan Perseke walked Fennell to the Blackhawk and helped him through the side door where an air medic waited. Shatto also grabbed a backboard and a stretcher from the helicopter and carried them across the highway to me.

We carefully maneuvered Vang onto the backboard to make sure we didn't worsen his back injury during our eventual walk to the chopper. Then we eased him up onto the stretcher. I momentarily stepped away to pack up my aid bag because I planned to fly with Vang to the CSH. But when I returned to the stretcher, four guys were already standing at the corners, ready to hoist Vang and tote him across the highway. According to army protocol, litters are to be carried in a feet-first direction and the combat medic is supposed to hold the back right corner, next to the soldier's head, where he can give commands. Because one of the Minnesota MPs was already positioned at the back right corner, I stepped to the other side, intending to grab the back left corner. That's where my staff sergeant, Rigby, stood. Rigby, the young outdoorsman from Utah, figured he could just take that spot.

"No," I told him, "this is my job. I got it, Sergeant."

Rigby backed away. For years, this decision would haunt him. A number of soldiers would carry scars from that day—deep physical defects and invisible mental demons. Both are real, I would come to learn. Among many of the soldiers present that morning, many have been dogged ever since by a single, awful feeling: guilt. Like Rigby, they question decisions they made or didn't make, actions they took or didn't take, each blaming themselves. Of course, they were not responsible for what happened. And in

this case, I had demanded to be on that stretcher because that was my job. Still, I also understand that Rigby, a leader and a good friend, wishes to this day that he had kept that corner. This is how professional soldiers are wired—to jump on the grenade and save our pals. Survivor's guilt is misplaced, quietly destructive, and, unfortunately, common in war.

"One, two, three, lift," I instructed.

Carrying the front left corner, about seven feet ahead of me, was Shatto, an army veteran of sixteen years who had attended church with me at Camp Falcon. The right side of the stretcher was all Minnesota National Guard guys. On the back right corner, across from me, was Lhotka. The twenty-four-year-old financial adviser had grown up in Appleton, a place that honors its war dead by naming streets after them. According to his sister, Lhotka had a "comforting smile that could warm the freezing rain." Walking three feet ahead of Lhotka was Staff Sgt. Dave Day, twenty-five, who had joined the National Guard to pay for his training to become a police officer. Prior to his deployment, Day had worked at the St. Louis Park police department in the Minneapolis suburbs. He had also married his high school sweetheart just five days before leaving home. In front of Day, on the right foot corner, was 1st Lt. Jason Timmerman, who had worked as a high school math and computer teacher in Lake Benton, a town of 703 people in southwestern Minnesota. Timmerman was known to write jokes at the top of every exam to help his students relax.

Up on our protective 360-degree perimeter, two more Appleton natives—Turner and Perseke—watched me and the other stretcher-bearers approach the guardrail. Turner, the staff sergeant who had laid down the ground marker for the chopper, had known Lhotka since childhood when Lhotka's grandmother was his babysitter. On the opposite side of the guardrail, the air medic from the Blackhawk stood and waited for our handoff.

Just behind him, the chopper's rotors spun and kicked up a breeze. It was ready for takeoff.

We reached the median and rested the foot-end of the stretcher on the top rail. That's when the man who had been watching me all along went to work. One of the Minnesota soldiers manning the perimeter noticed a bright flash in the window of a roadside building: the signal. Another insurgent in a nearby location saw the light, dialed a predetermined cell phone number, and triggered the bomb. At that moment, it was literally right beneath us. Here's the odd thing: I never heard the bang. But my father did.

Asleep in his bed back in Mississippi, Dad bolted awake and flung off his covers at the sound of a sharp explosion in his head. He shook it off as a nightmare but remained uneasy.

I hope Kortney is okay, he thought before fading back to sleep.

When I opened my eyes, the world looked blurry. I saw the blue, late morning sky on the horizon over Baghdad. I saw the brown dust and black smoke from the bomb, swirling around me. And I smelled something I will never forget—burnt flesh. I didn't know where that was coming from, but the air seemed filled with it.

The blast had knocked me on to my stomach with my face turned to my side. I knew I'd been hit although, strangely, I felt no pain. Instinctively, I began to pull myself across the pavement in an arm crawl, working back toward our Humvee on the frontage road, away from that guardrail. Shatto, also lying on the highway about fifteen feet from me, watched me wriggle about two body lengths, leaving a red trail in my wake. Shatto later would describe to me his ghastly list of injuries: he had shrapnel in his face, right arm, right upper chest cavity, and left leg; one sliver of metal had penetrated through one eye and into his brain; his left hand looked like hamburger; his right leg was laced with twenty-nine separate entry

wounds and two exit wounds; and the bone in that same leg was so badly shattered, part of it was poking through the skin. In that state, he managed to make one and a half full-body rolls away from the guardrail because he expected a second IED to blow. When he looked up and saw me, he knew I was in far worse shape.

Both of my femoral arteries—the main blood supply for each leg—had been torn by shards of flying hot metal. I was gushing blood. My life was draining away in the asphalt. I also had chunks of shrapnel imbedded in my left heel, in my left big toe, and in my groin. But because I hadn't had a chance to examine myself, I didn't know the worst of it: my right leg was nearly amputated, hanging only by a few strands of tissue below my knee. My dangling right foot also had lost several toes. It was about then that I decided to try and stand up.

I owe my survival that day to a lot of heroic people, a couple of lucky breaks, and my state of mind. I was calm. Had I known the full scope of the human devastation nearby, had I understood the severity of my own wounds, I probably would have given up, lapsed into shock, and died. The scene around me was tragic. The horrific results showed that the stretcher had been directly over the bomb, although Shatto and I—carrying on the left side—were actually three to six inches closer to it than the guys on the right. I was the closest of all, standing basically on top of the unseen hole in the highway's edge. But the tail of the base-ejecting device had apparently been tilted to the right, releasing most of its deadly energy in that direction.

Turner—Lhotka's buddy since childhood—had been on the perimeter, watching our progress toward the guardrail and also keeping a sharp eye on the crowd of Iraqis that gathered after the accident. When the bomb detonated, his back was turned to the fireball, but he instantly whirled to see the carnage. The three Minnesota soldiers on the right side were blown into the air. From the foot of the stretcher to the head, Timmerman was hurled eight

feet away, Day was thrown fifteen feet back, and Lhotka was sent skidding twenty feet across the pavement, landing in the middle of the inside, westbound lane. But Turner wouldn't know their exact identities until he reached the three men.

The second Minnesota staff sergeant, Perseke, had started walking toward the overturned Humvee when the blast erupted. Standing forty feet away, he took some small pieces of shrapnel in his triceps—something he never reported. From their respective positions, Perseke and Turner each bolted toward the badly injured MPs. Turner, a star high school running back, beat Perseke to the spot. First, he reached Timmerman, whose legs had been blown off, one at the thigh, the other at the knee. Turner saw that Timmerman's skin tone was already gray. He knew the math teacher was dead. Turner next checked on Day, the cop. Day had tumbled into a half-seated position with one of Timmerman's legs jammed beneath him. Turner could see that Day's right leg was attached only by fleshy fibers and that the back of his left thigh was gone. Worse, Day also had that grayish color of death. Finally, Turner raced to the third soldier who lay motionless face down but was otherwise intact. Turner couldn't find a pulse. Then he noticed the tape on the soldier's helmet. It read "Lhotka." A tiny piece of shrapnel had ripped into his friend's head, near the temple. Later, doctors would also find a fist-size hole in Lhotka's shoulder.

Perseke, who had been Lhotka's sergeant for five years, was now approaching, having just checked for any signs of a pulse in Timmerman and Day. Turner stood to deliver the news.

"Our three guys are gone," Turner said. "Lottie's dead."

Perseke started to lean down toward Lhotka. Turner tried to grab his arm to stop him.

"Dan, just don't," Turner said.

Perseke ignored him and knelt over his friend, crouching to avoid further explosions and possible bullets, not knowing if the attack would continue. He began trying to revive Lhotka with

mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and chest compressions. When dark red blood oozed from Lhotka's mouth, Perseke stopped.

One week after Lhotka died, Perseke's pregnant wife, Lori, was helping decorate the church back in Appleton where Lhotka's funeral was about to be held. As she prepared for the event, Lori's water broke and hours later she gave birth to a daughter, Whitney. That single bomb sent emotional shock waves rumbling through many small towns in Minnesota. It marked the deadliest day for Minnesota soldiers since May 5, 1968, when nine died in Vietnam. At Timmerman's funeral in Marshall, the thousand-seat church couldn't accommodate the arriving crowd. Dozens had to be turned away at the door. At Day's funeral, a two-by-two procession of 110 squad cars with lights flashing drove silently through the town of Morris as a Blackhawk hovered overhead. In the streets, people laid down a carpet of pink, red, and peach roses.

Perseke couldn't linger over Lhotka for long. He scrambled to Vang, who was lying on his side, still strapped to the backboard. Perseke cut the webbing and eased Vang onto his back. Already dealing with deep leg lacerations and a broken back from the Humvee crash, Vang's body now was full of shrapnel. He would survive but, I'm told, he still has nightmares about that day. A lot of us do.

At the center guardrail, the air medic who had been waiting for the handoff now leaned limply over the top rail. He had a large chunk of shrapnel lodged in his bulletproof vest and a laceration on his right calf. Later, doctors would find that his stomach also had been hit with shrapnel. The air medic pushed himself upright and hobbled back toward the Blackhawk. He could see that the chopper's windshield had been blown out in the blast.

On the highway, about a hundred feet from me, my staff sergeant, Rigby, had been knocked on his backside. Some small bits of shrapnel had sailed into his face and arm, and his left eardrum had been blown out. From my stomach, I looked at him and we

made eye contact. Still not knowing how badly I was injured, I used my arms to do a half push-up. Beneath me, I could see blood on the highway. The air around me was filled with the odor of burned hair, skin, and flesh. Later, I would find out this scent was coming from me. I also would learn that those burns to the massive wounds in my legs had helped save my life. I had been so close to the bomb, the fireball had partially cauterized my bleeding legs and slowed the flow, buying me a few extra minutes—precious time to get from the battlefield to the hospital before I bled out. But Rigby soon would play an even bigger role in my survival.

Before wobbling to his feet, Rigby saw me push myself up and then stand on my left foot. I began hopping in place. But in a matter of three or four seconds, Rigby had sprinted over and ordered me back to the ground.

"Sit down! Sit down! Sit down!" he yelled.

I did.

"You're going to be all right. You're going to be all right," Rigby said, trying to keep me calm as I had done for Vang minutes before. "Just relax."

As Rigby stuck his right hand into my badly damaged right leg in an attempt to fully control the bleeding, we heard the Blackhawk's engine roar to life. The banged-up chopper slowly began to lift into the air and evacuate—proper protocol when there has been an attack, but still hard to take when you're left lying on the ground.

Nearby, Perseke covered Vang's eyes to shield them from the dust and pebbles that were kicked up by the helicopter's blades. And from his back, Shatto watched the Blackhawk elevate into the blue sky and then disappear, leaving three severely injured soldiers behind.

"That sucks," Shatto said to himself.

We didn't know that a second Blackhawk was only a couple of minutes away, thanks our inadvertent earlier request. But in the

sudden silence, Shatto wondered how much time we had before he and I bled to death.

As I lay on the pavement, blood continued to pool beneath me from my two ruptured arteries. Some of that blood slowly began seeping into my uniform pants, soaking my back pocket. Eventually, it reached the little book that held all my writings on faith, staining those pages red.