

A man with dark hair and light eyes, wearing a light blue button-down shirt under a dark blue tactical vest. He is holding a black helmet in his left hand. A tan tactical bag with a patch that says 'RISC' is attached to his vest. He has a visible injury on his left hand. The background is a plain, light grey.

SAVED

A War Reporter's
Mission to Make It Home

BENJAMIN HALL

SAVED

A War Reporter's Mission
to Make It Home

BENJAMIN HALL



HARPER

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

To my wife, Alicia, and my daughters, Honor, Iris, and Hero. You are the reasons I am here today, and I love you more than I can hope to convey.

And to the casualties of wars everywhere—the people who have given so much and shown such extraordinary courage, all in the fight to make this world a better place. Your losses and sacrifices will never be forgotten.

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue

One: Something's Happened

Two: Whatever It Takes

Three: Misrata

Four: Tell the World

Five: Bombs and Bullets

Six: Tooth for Tooth

Seven: The Bloodlands

Eight: Horenka

Nine: Emergency Posture

Ten: Seaspray

Eleven: The Two Anyas

Twelve: The Only Viable Option

Thirteen: The Prime Minister's Train

Fourteen: The Extraction Platform

Fifteen: Landstuhl

Sixteen: C-17

Seventeen: Mogadishu

Eighteen: Robot Leg

Nineteen: Strength at the Core

Twenty: You Are the Miracles Here

Twenty-One: Yellow Jumpsuit

Acknowledgments

Photo Section

About the Author

Copyright

About the Publisher

Prologue

**KYIV OBLAST, UKRAINE
MARCH 14, 2022**

The first explosion tore through a stand of pine-birch trees twenty feet in front of us, and we'd barely turned to look before the second bomb whistled overhead and landed right next to us and everything went dark.

Not just dark—black. Deep, infinite blackness. A void in which no thought or awareness seemed possible. If I had the slightest hint of consciousness, it was a distant sense of shock waves, and the feeling that every part of my body—bones, organs, sinew, my soul—had been knocked out of me, leaving behind a useless husk.

I was all but dead.

But then—

—improbably, out of this crippling nothingness, a figure came through and I heard a familiar voice, as real as anything I'd ever known:

Daddy, you've got to get out of the car.

* * *

Twenty days before these bombs exploded in the abandoned ruins of a village near Kyiv, I buried my father who died at the age of eighty-nine, in a lovely cemetery at the foot of San Francisco's San Bruno Mountains.

His six children gathered in a chapel of carved white granite, stood in front of a coffin draped in the Stars and Stripes, and took turns telling stories about him. There were many stories to tell. After all, my father had,

as one obituary put it, “stayed with tribes in Venezuela, fished in the Amazon, climbed volcanoes in Ethiopia, went birding in the Galapagos and rode a hot-air balloon through Burma.”

He had lived a big, long life.

The story that best defined my father, however, was the story of the Battle of Manila—perhaps the bloodiest, deadliest, most savage engagement in all of World War II. The battle that fulfilled General Douglas MacArthur’s historic promise to return to the Philippines. The battle that ended a hellish three-year Japanese occupation during which at least one hundred thousand Filipinos were killed in godless acts of mass murder. The battle that left more than six thousand U.S. soldiers dead or wounded.

My father, Roderick Hall, was there for all of it. He was twelve.

Rod was born in Manila to a Scottish father and a Filipino mother and lived there happily until December 1941, when Japan’s Fourteenth Army landed on Batan Island and opened its merciless campaign to conquer the country.

The Japanese held his father—my grandfather—as a noncombatant prisoner at the harsh Santo Tomas Internment Camp for three years. Rod’s mother, grandmother, aunt, and uncle were rounded up and, it was presumed, eventually killed—he never saw or heard from them again.

Left in charge of his three younger siblings, my father managed to survive and keep his siblings safe for nearly four years, long enough for American forces, under the command of General MacArthur, to storm the shores and liberate Manila in early 1945 (my great-uncle Colonel Joseph McMicking was on MacArthur’s staff, walked ashore with him on a Leyte beach, and stood with him as he gave his “I have returned” speech). In the chaos of the American offensive my father led his young siblings into the still-besieged streets in search of American GIs—the only ones who could save him. “There were Japanese snipers everywhere as we carried a few belongings and walked in single file among the ruined houses,” he later wrote. “Suddenly a sniper shot rang out and a little boy about fifteen feet ahead of me fell.”

Desperate, my father and his siblings ran for their lives toward the American lines, bullets whizzing past their ears. When they got close, GIs from the 37th infantry, the Buckeye division, reached out for them and pulled them to safety. From that day forward, to the end of his life seventy-seven years later, my father felt a profound sense of gratitude to the U.S. (he

and his family moved to America) and the U.S. military, and he never forgot how the GIs had reached out and saved him and given his life to him.

I never forgot that story, either—nor did I realize how it would reverberate through the years and finally be replayed, in a way, in my own life.

My father felt so indebted to the American military that after graduating from Stanford in 1954 he enlisted to serve for two years in Korea as a private during the Korean War. He wanted to earn his U.S. citizenship and pay back what he'd been given. He shared his pride in the United States and its military with his children, and I grew up feeling that pride (I am a dual citizen of the U.S. and the U.K.). My fate, however, would not be to fight in wars but to be a war correspondent, traveling to the world's most dangerous places and reporting on its most violent conflicts. I went wherever civilization was collapsing under the assault of factions and ideologies—to Aleppo in Syria, Mosul in Iraq, Kabul in Afghanistan, Mogadishu in Somalia—always maneuvering as close to the front lines as I could. I felt the earth shudder beneath me with the force of Hamas missiles, huddled with Syrian snipers on hilltops, interviewed bloodied jihadists, and sat with mothers weeping for their murdered children. I filed urgent satellite dispatches to the *Times*, the *Guardian*, the BBC, and many others, breaking news and painting portraits of humans under extreme duress. I saw a lot of death, had guns pressed against my head, dreamed horrific dreams—all of it an echo of what my father endured in Manila.

Still, back then, from 2007 to 2015, when I was a war-hopping freelance journalist, I did not dwell on, or even think too much about, what might happen to me in those dangerous places. I knew the risks, and I understood what I needed to do to stay alive. I never acted rashly or thoughtlessly, but I must admit that there were likely times when I sought out the danger, drawn ever closer to the fighting by a relentless desire to go where no one else had gone. I suppose that, like many younger people, I felt a sense of invincibility. And anyway, my unambiguous mission as a battlefield correspondent did not allow for much wiggle room: it was my job to give voice to the voiceless, and to show the world the brutal reality of war, up close and at whatever cost.

I was, to say the least, extremely lucky to survive it all.

Then things changed. In 2011 I met a smart, beautiful, caring woman named Alicia, and we got married, and we had three angelically lovely

girls: Honor, Iris, and Hero. No longer was there an entity known as Benjamin Hall, journalist, existing independently of any place or anyone. Now I was part of something much bigger than myself—my family—and there was no separating me from them or them from me. We were the same thing. We were one single entity.

I understood that, or at least I believed I did.

After the birth of our first child, Alicia and I discussed plans for me to move away from the front lines and keep a safer distance from the worst of the fighting. Still, there were always conflicts I wanted to cover and stories I wanted to tell, and they inevitably drew me back into combat zones. In 2015 I took a full-time job with Fox News, serving first in their London bureau and continuing my coverage of wars. It was only in 2021, when I became Fox's U.S. State Department correspondent and moved to Washington, DC, that I made that final decision to pull back from the front lines.

It was much harder than I imagined it would be to make this professional change in my life; the pull of distant wars never weakened or went away. But I understood new paths were opening for me, and as I began to fill in as a TV anchor I understood this was the right decision to make, and in this way I slowly brought my risky wanderings to a close.

Then, at the break of dawn on February 24, 2022, Russian T-90 tanks streamed across the border from Crimea's Chongar region into southern Ukraine. Columns of Russian troops moved in across the northern border with Belarus. Kh-55 cruise missiles and ground-launched Iskander missiles rained down from the sky.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine had begun.

That morning, while I was in the Fox media booth at the State Department in DC, I got an urgent call from a Fox News executive: I was being assigned to go to Ukraine to report on the war from the western city of Lviv, more than three hundred miles away from what promised to be the heaviest fighting in the east. Technically, it was not an especially risky assignment: Lviv was not the front line. Of course, there would prove to be no such thing as a stationary front line in Ukraine—Russian troops and tanks could turn any city into a battle zone at any time. Hundreds of Ukrainian citizens had already been killed in just the first twenty-four hours of fighting.

Are you ready to go overseas and cover the war? the executive asked.

This would be the single biggest military invasion of a sovereign country since World War II. A conflict with historical, global consequences, perhaps even the beginning of a third world war. It was going to be the biggest news story of the year, if not the decade. *Of course* I wanted to go to Ukraine and do what I'd always done—*tell the story*.

But there was also a part of me that did *not* want to go. I had made a promise to my wife and children, who had all agreed to move across an ocean and live in Washington, DC. And I had agreed I'd begin to steer clear of combat zones. How could I now just pick up, pack a bag, and fly across the world straight into a war? Didn't I already know the right thing to do?

There wasn't much time to decide: an Air France plane was leaving from Reagan National Airport in just a few hours on the way to Warsaw, Poland, near the border with Ukraine. Would I be on that plane?

* * *

The reason I wanted to write this book is because the decision I made that day, February 24, 2022, and the events that followed, tell what I think is a universal story about self-discovery, and about how we learn what matters most in our lives.

Nothing about self-discovery is simple or obvious—the journeys we take to truly understand ourselves are long and complex and often wrenching. We are products of what we inherit: in my case, my father's strict moral code and his reverence for soldiers and nations battling against aggression, and my mother's beautiful curiosity about the world and her restless desire to experience it all. We are also shaped by how and where we are raised (watching John Wayne and Gary Cooper war movies as a youngster and wrestling with the meaning of my very Catholic upbringing). Our decisions are born of countless influences, yet also the simple calculus of our identities—this is who we are, and this is what we do.

Somewhere along the journey, if you are immensely fortunate, as I have been, you might discover that the true blessings of life are even deeper and richer and more astounding—as well as more *available* to us—than we ever imagined they could be. Because, as I have learned in the past year of my life, even amid the very worst displays of human nature, the extremes of depravity and brutality, the harshest sorrows and suffering and turns of fate,

there exists something impossibly beautiful and indefatigably good, some spark of light and joy that cannot be extinguished.

Believe me, I have seen it, and I would not be here without it.

And so, my wish for this book is that as you read it you recognize something of your own journeys and setbacks and hard decisions, and take heart in an appreciation of your own strength and resiliency and goodness.

Back in my Washington, DC, office, down in the bowels of the State Department, I got off the phone with the executive and called my wife, Alicia, in London. She is a brilliant partner and entrepreneur with talents far beyond mine, as well as a deeply loving and caring person, and I wanted to run the decision by her, as I had so many times in our years together. In some of those phone calls, I had soft-pedaled the risks of my assignment, and even exaggerated how far I would be from the front line. Back then I believed I was sparing her a lot of unnecessary anxiety by not sharing every detail of the assignment with her. In all that time, Alicia never once told me not to go to a danger zone, and I knew that she wouldn't tell me that now. She understood that the invasion was important, and that it was important for me to cover it, and that covering wars was what I loved to do.

But I also knew, and have always known, that she would have preferred it if I did not go.

The day the invasion of Ukraine began, Alicia and I spoke on the phone for just a few minutes. Time was short, and there really wasn't all that much to say.

By nightfall I was on that plane, bound for Ukraine.

* * *

Daddy, you've got to get out of the car.

Immediately, I knew who the voice belonged to and who the figure was. It was my daughter Honor, come to see me. Six years old, a tangle of brown hair and skinny limbs, my endlessly happy and silly and chatty daughter, my world, my heart, coming through the blackness in this abandoned far-off corner of nowhere, just to tell me these important words.

Daddy, you've got to get out of the car!

I heard my child's voice, truly I did, and I saw her face and felt her presence, and the blackness began to lift, and I realized that my daughter

was right and I *was* in a car, or what remained of a car, a fire raging around me, the acrid smell of smoke, a pounding in my ears, the feeling of being pinned down, and an awareness—no, a certainty—that I *had to get out of that car* or else I would die. The decision was mine. I had to find some way to move.

Seconds later, the third bomb hit.

One

Something's Happened

**THE PENTAGON
ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA
MARCH 14, 2022**

Jennifer Griffin looked down Corridor 9 on the second floor of the Pentagon's D ring and saw a woman running straight at her. Jen knew the woman—Sylvie Lanteaume, longtime national correspondent for the global news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP)—but didn't know why she seemed in such a rush. Not that it was all that unusual; Jen had hurried down more than her share of Pentagon corridors, driven by tight deadlines and breaking news.

“Is your team okay?” Lanteaume asked when she finally reached her.

Jen Griffin, the chief national security correspondent for Fox News Channel, was in the middle of preparing a report about the war in Ukraine, based on pointed questions she had just finished putting to John Kirby, the Pentagon spokesperson. It had been a stressful morning, as all the mornings and afternoons and nights had been since Russia invaded Ukraine eighteen days earlier. Fox News had several employees on the ground in Ukraine, and there was a constant swirl of concern and activity around them, but Jen had heard nothing about anything happening to anyone. The look on Lanteaume's face, however, told her that something was wrong.

“Ben and Pierre may have been hit,” Lanteaume said.

Pierre Zakrzewski was one of the cameramen working for Fox News in Ukraine. Ben, of course, was me.

Immediately, Jen slipped into an operational mindset. “My brain goes a mile a minute and I’m spinning up all these moves, who do I know, who do I call, what can I do,” she explains. “I’d handled traumatic situations before.”

Since joining Fox News in 1999, Jen had been fired on in Gaza while covering the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War, reported on the killing of Osama bin Laden and the attack on the Benghazi consulate in Libya, and questioned senior military leaders in hazardous war zones around the world. She was known to be as effective a leader and crisis manager as there is in journalism. “Jennifer is the kind of person who walks into a room,” says someone who has worked with her, “and within five minutes everyone is asking her, ‘What should we do?’”

Outside the Fox News media booth at the Pentagon, Jen was on her cell phone within two or three seconds of Lanteaume’s question about her team. She had to find out what had happened, how bad it was, and what she could do to fix it. The first person she called was Jay Wallace.

Shortly before noon that day, Nicole Knee, executive assistant to Fox News Media’s president Jay Wallace, picked up the phone in her office in the News Corp Building, Fox News’ skyscraper headquarters in midtown Manhattan. It was Greg Headen calling. Greg, head of the Fox News International desk and vice president of News Coverage, asked to speak to Jay.

Nicole told him Jay was in a meeting and would be out in about ten minutes.

Two minutes later, Greg called again.

“I need you to get Jay, it’s urgent,” he said. “I believe our team has been hit in Ukraine.”

Nicole wrote a message on a Post-it and hustled to the second floor conference room, where Jay and Suzanne Scott, the CEO of Fox News, were in a talent meeting. In the conference room she handed Jay the note.

Headen called—it’s urgent, it read.

Jay excused himself and hurried to his office. He was a hardened veteran journalist—he ran Fox News’ New York bureau when the planes hit the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001—and he steeled himself to handle this new crisis. He called Greg Headen to his office, and

Greg passed along the little he knew at that point—a Fox News Team in Ukraine may have been hit.

Greg left to work the phones and get confirmation of the attack. By then the talent meeting had let out and Suzanne Scott had just returned to her office, not far from Jay's. He asked her to come by and told her about the possible hit on a Fox team in Ukraine. While they waited to hear more, they went to the third floor for a previously scheduled noon lunch with Steve Harrigan, the seasoned Fox News correspondent who had covered stories in more countries than any other Fox reporter, and who had just returned from Ukraine.

During the lunch, Nicole Knee came in with another note for Jay.

Greg Headen has confirmed it was the Fox News team that was hit.

Not much later, Jay took the call from Jennifer Griffin, who had just spoken with Sylvie Lanteaume at the Pentagon. Jen and Jay were close; they'd known each other since working together during the 2006 war in Israel, and they shared a deep mutual trust and admiration. They weren't just colleagues; they were friends.

"Jay, what's going on? Has Ben been hit?" Jen asked.

Jay responded in a hushed tone with his own question.

"Do you know who Ben was with today?"

Jen knew what that meant. It was confirmation that something bad had happened. And she knew who I had gone out on assignment with that day—my usual cameraman, Pierre Zakrzewski. She knew Pierre as well as I did; they had been on many dangerous assignments together over the years, and, like anyone who has ever spent a day around Pierre, she was incredibly fond of him. Jay's question made her feel physically ill.

"Pierre was with Ben," she answered.

"Ben and Pierre are both missing," Jay said. "We don't know where they are."

* * *

Suzanne Scott had known Jay Wallace for twenty-six years and had never seen him as somber as he was in the moment he told her about the attack in Ukraine. They'd both steered the company through the difficult days of the pandemic, and that experience had brought everyone at Fox News closer

together. But now, Suzanne quickly understood, “we would have to face the worst thing we had ever experienced by far.”

Suzanne spent the next thirty minutes with Jay, digging up whatever news there was about the attack. Before long they learned that I’d been located and was in a Ukrainian hospital in bad shape. As the company’s CEO, Suzanne knew what she had to do next—let my family know that something had happened.

Across the Atlantic, in a town house in West London, Alicia was upstairs in our bedroom, getting ready for dinner with the girls. It was late on a Monday afternoon and the children had just returned from school. The day had been a strange one for Alicia. It was ordinary in most ways—she saw the girls off in the morning; walked our brown Lab, Bosco, down to the river; handled her many calls and tasks; prepped spaghetti and meatballs for dinner—but something felt different.

“The whole day I just had this unusual sense of calm,” she remembers. “Plenty of days I’d just throw on some leggings and sweats, but that morning I thought, *You know what, I’m going to get properly dressed today.* I don’t even know why.”

She was used to not hearing from me most mornings I was in Ukraine. I tried to call her at least once a day, usually twice, and certainly around the middle of the day if it was at all possible. But that day, she still hadn’t heard from me by 5 p.m. “I tried him a few times and he didn’t pick up, but I wasn’t worried,” she says. “I remember I left him an email about Easter. I told him I needed to know if he was going to be home for the Easter holidays, which were a week away.”

Alicia was sitting on the edge of the bed and about to go downstairs and round up the girls for dinner when her cell phone sounded. She looked down at the screen and saw the number 1 ahead of the full phone number—a call from the United States.

Instantly, she knew.

“It was chilling,” Alicia says of that moment. “I thought, *Oh my God, oh no.* I was shocked and my heart just fell, but I also realized why the day had felt so calm—it was because I had a sense that *change is coming.* Like I already knew that something was about to change.”

“My name is Suzanne Scott,” the woman on the phone told Alicia, identifying herself as the CEO of Fox News. “Ben has been in an accident.”

“What kind of accident?” Alicia asked.

“His car was hit.”

“How is he?”

“He is critical.”

“How critical?” Alicia asked.

“Just pray. Keep praying.”

Alicia glanced to her right and saw her reflection in the bedroom mirror. She was still on the phone with Suzanne, still in the middle of this terrible moment of learning, and she froze the moment in her mind. It was, she knew, the before-and-after moment.

“I will call you as soon as I know anything,” Suzanne promised. Then the call was over.

Alicia sifted through the thoughts racing in her head. “I said to myself, ‘I knew it, I just knew it. Ben had been there too long,’” she remembers. “There was no way he wasn’t going to go to Ukraine, and I gave him my blessing to go. But he had stayed there too long. We talked a lot about the balance he tried to achieve between his work and his life. And my thought was *He had lost that balance.*”

Alicia knew she had to go downstairs and have dinner with the girls, betraying nothing, keeping it in. There was no need for them to know anything, especially since she knew so little herself. But before she could go, she had to make a call. She had to find out *more*.

So she called Rick Findler. He picked up in half a ring.

“Something’s happened,” Alicia said.

Rick had already heard.

* * *

The cabin lights in the Boeing cut off and the airplane’s nose dropped suddenly, and it seemed we were plummeting out of the night sky over northern Iraq. Some passengers wept; others prayed aloud from the Koran as we plunged. We had not lost control—the pilot knew what he was doing. We’d gone dark and cut speed and were gliding sharply earthward to make ourselves less of a target for any surface-to-air missiles fired at us by insurgents. Down below, the lights of a runway came into view and at the last moment the pilot pulled up the nose and the plane rattled to a landing on an airstrip in the Kurdistan Region city of Erbil.

Finally, I thought—a war zone.

This was the fall of 2007, and I'd booked my seat on the Air Arabia flight just three weeks earlier. I was twenty-five years old, and I wasn't quite a journalist yet. I wasn't much of anything, really. I was class of 2004 at Duke University in North Carolina, where I spent far too much time at parties and meandered around obscure interests like the films of Stanley Kubrick, Russian revolutionary cinema, history, and writing. At twenty-two, I took an internship at Columbia Pictures in Los Angeles, and after sitting around in meeting after meeting about demographic scores I realized I didn't want to earn my living in Hollywood. I moved back to London, where I was born, took a look around the world, and decided that what I really wanted to do was experience, and record, extreme events in far-flung places—life at its very edges. More specifically, I wanted to know what it was like to live in a place of war. I'd read about some young Iraqi rappers who were embracing U.S. culture and whose concerts were being attacked, and I decided to start with them. I would make a documentary about the rappers.

Of course I had no idea how to make a documentary, or even what step to take first, but just the idea of *trying* to do it excited me like nothing else ever had before.

The choice of Iraq as a destination in 2007 was, for an inexperienced nonjournalist, either audacious or dumb. That year, Iraq remained firmly in the grasp of war following the U.S.'s shock-and-awe invasion in 2003 and the surge of twenty thousand American troops in January 2007. Roadside bombs and other improvised explosive devices (IEDs) routinely killed U.S. troops across Iraq, while insurgents waged fierce battles in Mosul and Kirkuk, Al Anbar and Fallujah, in the capital of Baghdad and smaller cities like Latifiya and Hilla. In fact, 2007 would turn out to be the single deadliest year of the war for American soldiers, with 904 lives lost.

None of this frightened me from going, and I got to work planning out the trip. The problem was I didn't know where to go or who to meet. As luck would have it, I went to a party one night at the School of Oriental and African Studies in an old Edwardian home in London, on the same street as the Russian Federation Embassy. I mentioned my Iraqi plans to someone at the party, and they told me the Iraqi president's nephew was at the party, too.

My reaction was something like panic. What was I supposed to say to the nephew of Jalal Talabani, the first non-Arab president of Iraq and head of the joint Sunni-Shiite-Kurdish administration? Who was I to seek assistance from such a high-level source? In my mind the nephew was a swashbuckling figure and likely a war hero, while I was just some random Brit with oversized ambitions. But never mind that. Three or four drinks into the evening, I took a deep breath and set out to find this exalted nephew.

When I found him, he was, it turned out, just about the complete opposite of what I'd pictured. He was a fully Westernized young man of twenty or so, skinny and polished, in tight white pants and crisp blue blazer, a pocket square perfectly in place and a flute of pricy champagne in hand. He was *not* the unapproachably dashing rogue I'd imagined. He was a lovely guy and he graciously spoke with me about the situation in Iraq, and he even promised me a letter of introduction from his aunt, Hero Ibrahim Ahmed, the wife of President Talabani and one of the most powerful Kurdish women in Iraq. With that letter in hand, my passage to Iraq was off to a great start. I would draw an important lesson from that party and that encounter—you never know who might be the one to open a crucial door for you or give you a key lead. So go ahead and ask everyone, talk to everyone. This is the very basis of journalism—if you don't know, go find out.

Two weeks before my departure to Iraq, I went for a drink at the Champion, my local Notting Hill pub. I ordered a pint and sat at a table and began reading a book about the history of Iraq, savoring the anticipation of the trip and, I suppose, enjoying my little Ernest Hemingway moment—the studious young reporter on his way to the front. A few minutes in, the barkeep, a cheerful ginger-haired fellow about my age, wandered over.

“I see you're reading a book about Iraq,” he said. “I might be working here but what I really want is to be a war photographer.”

“That's funny,” I replied. “Me, too. I'm off to Iraq in two weeks. Want to come?”

Rick Findler paused for perhaps a second and said, “Absolutely.”

Two weeks later we were both on that plummeting plane.

* * *

We landed near midnight in the run-down international airport in Erbil, an ancient city in the northern Kurdistan region of Iraq. Rick and I had flown out of the intensely lavish Dubai Airport, home to Louis Vuitton shops and a Ferrari showroom and countless emporiums of glitz, the exact opposite of the dismally unkempt terminal in Erbil. But that was okay—we were not there to shop. In fact, the grimness of it all excited me. This *was* what I imagined a war zone would look like.

But something was wrong. Rick and I grabbed our bags and walked to the parking lot expecting to see a driver with our names on a sign and our Iraqi visas in his hand. But there were no private drivers there, just sputtering taxis buzzing around and shouting people picking up relatives, and after about an hour Rick and I were the only travelers left in the lot. We sat on a curb and waited for our prearranged car to show up. Another hour passed. Finally, I called the number of our nameless Iraqi connection and luckily got through to him and asked him where he was.

“Where am I?” he responded. “Where are *you*?”

“We’re at the airport,” I said.

“*I* am at the airport,” he said. “Wait, which airport are you in?”

I told him we were in Erbil. He asked me what the hell I was doing in Erbil, except he used an expletive for emphasis. Then he hung up. Rick and I were in the wrong place. Our proper destination, Sulaymaniyah International Airport, was *six hours away*. We had no choice but to wait for a ride, so we lay atop our duffel bags and tried to doze off on the sidewalk, in an empty airport in the middle of the night, with two Kurdish soldiers standing nearby and smoking and watching us the whole time and likely wondering, *What is up with these two guys?*

Our trip only got worse from there.

The next day someone did finally pick us up and drive us to Sulaymaniyah. But we soon learned that northern Iraq was not the scene of rampant fighting at that time, and thus was a relatively safe place to be—good news, I suppose, but not for someone seeking the authentic experience of war. In Sulaymaniyah we managed to track down the Iraqi rappers, but it turned out they were just a bunch of kids in a music class with, to put it politely, rudimentary rapping skills (to put it honestly, they were *terrible*). The reporter who wrote them up had obviously embellished reality in order to have a story to file. As for Rick and me, our would-be documentary suddenly had no subject.

“Mate, we’ve got nothing,” Rick said a few days into the trip. “We’ve got to find a story somewhere.”

We decided to walk around the city and look for leads. One morning two Kurdish soldiers stopped us and screamed questions at us, none of which we understood. Fortunately, I had the letter the president’s dapper nephew had arranged for us from his aunt, and that defused the situation. Another time Rick and I saw a plume of dark smoke some ten blocks away and, excited by the prospect of a skirmish or any incident at all, ran madly toward it, only to find a pile of burning rubbish.

On one of our last evenings we took to the streets again and happened upon a fancy Kurdish wedding—women in gowns, men in formalwear, a line of Mercedes parked in front. Rick and I looked at each other, shrugged, and crashed the wedding. It was fairly easy, even for a couple of Westerners who didn’t exactly blend in. We sampled the *tepsi baytinijan* casserole and hung out with the band and even danced a few dances, until someone clocked Rick taking pictures and several men grabbed us by the arms and escorted us roughly out the front door. We had crashed a wedding that featured a member of Iraq’s ruling party.

In truth Rick and I were thrilled to be so unceremoniously booted from the house. Not only was it an actual bit of excitement after so many uneventful days, but what mattered most was that we’d got in at all. Here was a lesson I could draw from a decidedly clumsy attempt at journalism: *find a way through the door*. Get yourself on the inside of whatever is happening. Don’t wait for an invitation: just go on in and act as if you’ve got a right to be there. *Tell* people you belong there. You might get tossed, but you might also get a hell of a story.

Not that Rick and I got anything that night, or on any night of our trip, and we flew back to London with nothing to show for our troubles.

By all rights I should have been discouraged, but I wasn’t. The most impactful part of this first war zone journey for me, the event that changed everything and sealed my fate, happened before I ever set foot in Iraq.

It happened in the dark cabin of that Air Arabia plane as it swooped nearly vertically down to earth. Those long moments of descent, of perceived danger and possible catastrophe, all the way to the lurching, last-second nose-up maneuver that landed us safely, were the first time in my life I felt the special, powerful, adrenalized thrill of *taking a risk*. Even

during the descent, I wasn't praying or crying or paralyzed with fear. Instead, strange as it may sound, I felt *alive*—more alive than ever before.

It was a monumental, life-changing feeling, and I was instantly addicted to it. My future began to unfurl before me—I would travel the world witnessing history and telling meaningful stories. I would be a journalist—a war journalist. I would go where no one else wanted to go, I would push through my natural instincts to avoid great risk, and I'd learn to adapt to being in situations over which I had no control.

Of all the lessons I learned from my many early missteps, this was by far the most consequential—to tell the true story of war, I had to be able to run toward danger, not away from it.

And I learned that I had it in me to do it.