

## Prologue

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . . .”

Time is not a constant tick. Some minutes fall to the ground unnoticed, while others like windswept leaves turn and linger. The car was speeding on, and the world was spinning away beside it.

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. . . .”

My eyes closed and opened, pressed so close to my folded arms in the confines of my space that I saw only the blurry dirt of the backseat carpet.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me. . . .”

My stomach lurched as the car turned sharply and hurtled forward. Forward and away. Forward to a place I dared not yet think of.

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.”

I could not tell if I were speaking the words aloud, or if they were merely rattling inside me. I could not tell until the butt of the gun crashed down on my head and stirred the sense of the nightmare fast unfolding.

“Quiet!” the man above me barked, his voice ringing out through the deafening noise of the spinning wheels, the roaring engine, and the gravelly road beneath them.

“Quiet or by God right here I’ll scatter your head!” he ordered, pressing the weight of his gun on the base of my skull in warning.

“The Lord is my shepherd. . . .” My voice fell. I closed my eyes once more and yet my lips continued moving. For fifteen minutes, I read and reread the psalm of David from my memory. In the whisper of a murmur, I wrapped myself in the lines and held onto the words like a man clinging to a torch as he plummets through the darkness.

Time is not a constant tick. I thought it had been traveling fast back then, too fast to hold on to and to decipher, but how could it have been? When to this day I close my eyes and still see every moment.

## CHAPTER I

# The Sign and the Soccer Field

August 12, 2006. I awoke at the bang outside. In all likelihood, it was not the first that night, only the latest in a series. Each a hand knocking at the door of my dreams until my eyes opened to let it enter.

Standing a little to the side, I peered out cautiously from the window, searching for the source of the commotion. A day would come when stray bullets would break the glass and all but destroy the room in which I was then standing, piercing through the pages of the books I kept on the shelves beside me. A holy book ripped by the bullets of men firing through the darkness. I remember staring at the bent and broken pages and seeing a kind of artistry in them. An artistic statement, perhaps too obvious for the galleries of the European cities I had visited, and yet not one made within the space of a studio, not made with precision but through the absence of it. That was much of Iraq in those days, change without precision. A knocking down of the walls that both held back and birthed the flood that then came raging.

There would be no bullets in my room that night. I listened for the next crack of gunfire, knowing I would not have long to

wait, and when I heard it I, was reassured enough to return to my bed, to close my eyes and drift back to sleep.

There were two checkpoints near the Dora seminary that was my home, one closer than the other, and the attacks on them were nothing if not regular. A secular war was burning through the country, and the district of Dora, situated in southern Baghdad, had been described by the American soldiers serving at this time as “the most dangerous place in Iraq.” The police officers occupying the checkpoints were not Americans but Iraqis. Shiite Muslims, who for long had been on the wrong side of power, were now forced to thwart the continuous attacks of the Sunni Muslims they had come to replace.

Three years earlier, in 2003, was the first time I heard gunfire in the night. I was not so casual about it then, but much of life is learning through experience, and some of the skills a man acquires are stranger than others. I would move to a place beside a window and listen to the pop and whizz of bullets. I would listen and ascertain which checkpoint was being hit and estimate the distance of the danger. Often I would call the young men who were our guards through the Walkie Talkies I had brought them, and they would tell me what they thought was happening. When the fighting was close, I would go to a room with no windows. There I would sit and again listen, hoping that the noise would not grow louder, waiting like someone cooking popcorn in the microwave, listening for the beats to become farther apart, to grow sparse and fade into silence.

That night, and the one that followed, the seminary was unusually empty. Father Zaid, the vice rector, had departed for his holidays, and Father Basil would not be arriving until the fourteenth. Solitude is a part of life for a priest, and yet it never ceases to offer its own hardships. When looking back at those two days spent alone in the midst of the turbulence of that time, I remember a nagging sense of uneasiness that rose up quietly within me, like the faint scratching of a forgotten thought, very close but out of reach. I look back upon those two simple days, and they seem a fitting prelude for what soon was coming.

When I was just a boy, there was a kind of book I liked. On each of its pages were fragments of a picture—a hand, a cloud, a feather, the door of a house—and all around these pieces was a jumble of numbered dots, some bunched together and some scattered, with no discernible pattern or reason for their order. But once you drew a line from dot one to dot two, from dot two to dot three, and so on, slowly, bit by bit, each stroke played its part to form a picture.

I had thought of it, at certain times more than others, had even had the question asked of me on occasion, and I suppose there would be a comfort in it, a lifting of the burden. Some might think that the religious are more likely to believe in fate. I, however, have never given myself over to the idea that life is preordained. Our lives are made up of choices intertwined with purpose. That freedom of choice is a trust and a burden passed from God to humankind, to place no fence along the path, to let us choose, and often choose wrong, to place no bounds on good or evil. Still, if there was ever an argument for fate, it would surely be made in hindsight, after the seemingly random dots have played their parts to form a picture. The truth is, I still think of it, and when I do, I think of two days in particular. I think of the sign in the store, and I remember a hot and seemingly ordinary afternoon, when God found me on a soccer field.

It is often through the inevitability of aging, of the way the world is, of what it may demand of us, and what we in turn grow to demand of ourselves, that the word *simple* becomes attached to the period of our youth. And yet simple is what that time was for me. I was raised in a simple home by a family of simple means, my days governed by simple youthful priorities.

Whenever I find myself transported back to the days of growing up in the home my father built, as I often do, and often did when my arms were bound and my eyes had no place to look but inward, I see a time that was as simple as it was beautiful.

Having six siblings, three older sisters, two older brothers, and one younger sister, I had a childhood filled with companionship.

Love, I am thankful to say, was not a concept I had to learn, but had always surrounded me.

We lived in an area called “Ghadeer” in the center of Baghdad. Tightly packed with flat-roofed houses, on the roofs of which the families often slept throughout the summer nights, it was neither a poor nor an affluent neighborhood. A place like much of the Baghdad of the time, where Christians and Muslims lived side by side without that fact ever earning them a sense of pride or achievement. It was just the local community.

My school was a twenty-minute walk from our house, and once class was over, I would race home to finish any work I had as quickly as possible, so I could join my friends, who at most times were already out. When people drove through our streets, they almost always did so at a creep, not only because the narrowness of the road barely allowed for two cars to pass one another, but because around every turn there might be a game of soccer in full swing.

The world moves quickly. There were no computers or phones for us to play with, and the endless choice of television channels we now enjoy was then far more limited. However, there were two shows that I would not miss that together tell a lot about the boy I was. The first, named *Science for All*, was a weekly report on the advancements the world was making. The wide array of subjects ranged from space voyages to complex surgery, and every Tuesday evening, I sat and watched in wonder, fascinated by the horizon of possibility. For as long as I can remember, I never found studies to be bothersome. Homework was not a chore that I did to appease my teachers or my parents, though they had instilled in me the necessity of education, and I did take much pride in showing them the results of my labors. More than that, though, I had a thirst for learning, for solving problems, for collecting the tools necessary for tackling whatever questions happened to be etched on the exam papers that were turned facedown, waiting to be turned in. Much of me has changed throughout the years, but the young boy eager to know more remains unaltered.

The second program, *Sport of the Week*, was shown on Friday evenings. It covered a wide array of sports, but my interests leaned toward one. Soccer. The Iraqi national team was a relatively strong force at the time. We had won the Arab Nations Cup twice, and I watched them lift it twice again in 1985 and 1988. In 1986, however, when I was fourteen years old, something quite remarkable happened. Even though the war with Iran was ongoing, forcing Iraq to play their home games at neutral venues, the team still managed to qualify for the World Cup in Mexico.

There is something different about these kinds of sporting occasions. Even as a boy I could feel it. It wasn't about who followed the sport and who didn't. That summer, everyone was a soccer fan. Iraq would go on to score the country's first, and to this day only, goal at a World Cup finals tournament, before falling in the group stage.

On the wall above the television set, where I would sit to watch my favorite shows on those Tuesday and Friday evenings, was a cross that my mother had proudly hung in our home. Our family was Chaldean Catholic, and religion was an important part of our everyday lives and our identity. My mother went to church on every Sunday and I, like my brothers and sisters before me, received my first Holy Communion at the age of eleven. Yet if you had asked that boy about the life he imagined his future would hold, his answer, among the many and varied possibilities, would certainly not have involved the priesthood.

Up to my late teens, my time continued to be divided, in the same way as my two favorite television shows, between soccer and learning. By that time I had grown to six feet in height, with a lean muscular physique, and had developed a reputation as both an able and a fierce competitor.

Those who know me now would be surprised to learn that it was not overly unusual for me to find myself in the middle of a fight, though I must say that most times it was because of my protective nature rather than malice. If I felt a friend of mine had been harshly tackled or kicked during a game, I was not shy

about immediately intervening to even up the score. Meditation and calmness were yet to be my allies. More than that though, I was known to be one of the better soccer players in the neighborhood. For this reason, one afternoon, when I was seventeen, two boys who had been playing on the opposing team strolled over to speak to me after a game.

I knew their names, as I did most people in the local area. What they knew of me was that I was a good player and a Christian. As they jogged along beside me, one of them quickly asked if I had thought of playing for the church team. In truth I was out of breath, the Iraqi sun was scorching down, and I didn't feel much like breaking my step as I walked toward some shade, so I was barely listening. "What?" I asked.

"The church," the other boy repeated. "We have a very good team. We both play on it, why don't you come and play with us?"

Why not? I casually thought, and I was about to agree when I was struck with a reservation.

"I would," I said, "but do I then have to go to the church?"

"No!" the boy assured me, "you just have to come the once."

"Come on Friday," the other boy said. "Just register your name, one time and that's it, you'll be on the team."

I promised that I would and thought little of it. On the following Friday evening, after I had returned from school and finished whatever work I had, I made my way to the church to sign my name and join the team.

Though I knew it, to any others the church at the time was a difficult building to distinguish. There was no courtyard, no statues, no heavy stone walls, and no large cross on the rooftop. Instead it was a house, seemingly much like any other. This was for no real reason other than the scarcity of funding. In fact, on that Friday afternoon, at a different site from the one where I was headed, an actual church for the parish was midway through construction.

To my surprise, when I got there I found the place quite full of people close to my age. Young men and young women were busily taking their seats in the large room where mass was daily

given, except there was no mass that day. Instead a catechism class was about to begin.

Curious, I wandered in and listened, and what I heard that day would change my life in the only way that lasting change can happen. The kind of change that we carry with us no matter where we go, the kind that may come from a lesson, an encounter, or an experience, but wherever it may come from, it brings with it more than a thought or a feeling, but a glimpse into a new way of seeing.

In Hebrew, the name Jesus means “God saves.” I thought I had known much of my religion, but after no more than a few words and a few minutes, it seemed that I knew little. The priest spoke of the life of Christ, and how its message was less of commandments and far more of sacrifice and love. Jesus, the son of God made man to save his people.

When the class was over, I signed my name to the football team and left awash with an unfamiliar inspiration. Perhaps there are moments in our lives when we are searching for the answers without ever knowing we had asked the questions. It was not as people often imagine when thinking about how a man might first give himself to religion. It was not in the flash of an epiphany but in the slow and gradual possession of a purpose found. I submerged myself within it, dedicating time both to prayer and to learning, and the more I read of Christ, the more I grew to admire him. This quickly became my new routine. At home I would read and pray and then read some more. Stopping not at simply reading the words but delving deeper, always searching for the meaning, for the message and the teachings, for that all-encompassing reason, the truth.

Father Jameel Nissan was the priest at the time, and he allowed us to indulge in many initiatives. I began to attend prayer meetings, spiritual meetings, and prayer encounters. Soon enough I had developed many friendships, as my trips to the church continued to grow in frequency.

I watched Father Jameel, I watched the way he preached, taught, counseled, and helped his people, and I was moved by his

example. For me it was not a case of simply becoming more religious or finding a greater belief in Christ. It was becoming increasingly apparent that the spiritual life was the life I wanted, and it was at this point that I began to feel a calling.

Three years from the day I went to the church to join their soccer team, I had decided to become a priest. What I had not done was tell anyone of my intention, and so one evening, while I was helping my father in his store, I felt the time had come to inform him of my decision and to seek his approval.

My father prized education. Though he worked long tiring hours in the local convenience store he owned and ran, he remained a voracious reader and instilled in me, and my brothers and sisters, the essential importance of knowledge.

After achieving high grades, I initially left Baghdad in 1990 to study medicine at the University of Dora. That change would however be a fleeting one as the Gulf War rendered the area too dangerous at the time, and I had to return to Baghdad after a mere two months. I was forced to change my degree to engineering in order to continue my studies there.

I can say with truth that, even if I had continued on the path of medicine, the priesthood would still have remained my final destination. In that respect, fate had no hand to play. It was only a small irony that I would leave Dora to escape from one danger, only to return a few years later to another.

On the day when I at last decided to tell my father of my decision to join the seminary, I was in my second year of university, studying aeronautical engineering. We had been working in the store for a few hours as I toyed with how to order my words, moving at times to speak, only to be interrupted by the entrance of a customer or by my own trepidation. The afternoon gave way to evening, and when a spell of prolonged silence had finally settled around us and we were both sitting behind the counter, having no shelves to stack or customers to serve, I simply came out and spoke two short sentences. "I want to leave college," I said. "I want to go to the seminary."

"Become a priest?" he asked for confirmation.

“Yes.”

“No,” he shook his head in short sharp movements, “no, no,” his eyes circling the room for something to do as a way of signaling the end of the conversation. But it wasn’t going to end there, and neither of us thought it would.

“This is not coming from now,” I assured him. “From before I knew. I knew that this is what I want to do and now I want to do it.”

“Become a priest!” he said again, dismissively.

“Yes.”

“Look,” he began, his voice at once less erratic, falling into that fatherly tone that merges thought-out advice and non-negotiable instruction seamlessly together, “finish your studies, get married, start a family and you can be the best priest for your own children.”

“I have thought about it all, and that is not what I want to do!” I replied forcefully. “I don’t want to finish these studies, I want to join the seminary. That is what I want to do.”

“You have been studying for two years, and you want to stop now?”

Before I could answer, the door squeaked open and in walked Albert, a man who had grown up in the same village as my father. A long-time friend and a local priest.

Utterly undeterred by what might have been construed by some as a less-than-subtle sign, my father immediately turned to Father Albert for help in dissuading me.

“Come Father, come. My son,” he said, pointing at me in exasperation, “he is telling me he wants to be a priest!”

Father Albert turned and looked at me, and with a faint smile and a slight nod, he said, “Why not?”

“Why not?” my Father repeated. “What why not? He is in the second year of his studies . . .”

His hands were gesturing in front of him, asking to be understood, and he paused to steady himself to continue the stream of reason. “He is young, let him get married, start a family, have some children, and then look after *them*.”

It was not an unreasonable request. What father does not want his son to start a family? I knew it then, just as I know it now, the sacrifices of priesthood would not be mine alone.

“I am an only child,” said Father Albert. “I have no brothers and no sisters. I am all my parents had, and they allowed me to become a priest. God gave you seven children. Three sons. Will you not give one to God?”

My father fell silent. He neither agreed nor made a gesture in that direction, but I could see that the argument of his friend had moved him.

Father Albert purchased what he had come to buy before leaving, and after a few minutes, of the two of us, it was my father who was the first to speak.

“We won’t talk of this anymore,” he said, “*but* you go on and finish your studies, and if you still want to, then we will talk again.”

And that was that. We had made a deal, my father and I, one that we would both stick to. From the soccer field, to the priest in the store, I look back on the dots of my life and see myself sleeping in the seminary on that twelfth of August, three days before the Assumption feast and my abduction.