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*Preface*

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I first met Marine Corporal Aaron Martin in Fallujah in early 2008, just before he lost most of his face in the Iraq War. The State Department had assigned me the prior summer to be the political adviser to the three-star Marine commanding general based there and to oversee the U.S. government's strategy in the city and Anbar province. Aaron, a native of Rogers, Arkansas (home to the first Wal-Mart Discount City store, which opened in 1962), professional in bearing, with cobalt eyes, square jaw, high and tight haircut, showed maturity and possessed an eloquence that belied his youthful age.

A few months later, Aaron and a unit of Marines were traveling in a convoy when one of the largest roadside bombs to date detonated—an explosion killing four, wounding eleven, and disfiguring Aaron in an instant. His bones cracked and skin scorched. Ears, nose, and mouth ravaged. Only Aaron's eyes were left unchanged, shielded by protective goggles as fire roared through his vehicle's cramped rear compartment.