“Hey, hey, hey! Easy, buddy! You gotta turn around!” he shouted up. Dizzy and confused, Joe turned and backed down feet first.

I ran over to the bottom of the ladder and waited with Jim. We eased Joe down and propped him up in the dirt. Jim started to examine Joe’s head, parting his short hair with his fingers. Meanwhile, Aaron continued returning fire overhead.

There was no wound to be found. Joe—somehow—was okay. The round had skidded through the top of his helmet without hitting his head at all.

The first attack didn’t last long—less than a half hour—but it felt like forever. One minute hell’s breaking loose around you, the next minute it gets quiet. You realize you’re soaked in sweat, you’re wearing all this heavy armor and a helmet in one-hundred-degree heat, and your mouth is an oven. But you’re alive.

Within an hour, the next attack came. It was similar to the first. The Taliban liked to start with something dynamic—using a big, powerful weapon, hoping to inflict casualties. Sometimes that meant an RPG or mortar fire; sometimes it was heavy fire from a large-caliber rifle at close range, like a DShK (pronounced “dishka”). It could also be a recoilless rifle, a type of lightweight tube artillery, fired from a truck or from the ground. They always launched attacks from at least two locations, followed by mortars and gunfire. Then they’d recover and reposition, launching the next attack about an hour later. It would continue like this until sundown.

We had days on end of this. The guys took shifts on the roofs. The rounds came in. The temperature rose. We took fire; we returned it. For a short span of time in the afternoons, when the sun rose high in the sky and it got to be 115 degrees Fahrenheit, the desert fell quiet. It was unbearable to do anything, and for a couple of hours, the Taliban stopped their assault.

We spent the time cleaning our guns and eating our MREs (“meals ready to eat,” aka vacuum-sealed military-issue space food). We played cards and took naps. We tried to make jokes, cool down, clean off. We were already filthy, covered in dirt freckles—little specks of dust on our skin no baby wipe could get off. Our “bathroom” was a chicken coop where we did our business in little silver bags with deodorizing powder, then tossed them in a burn pit. In less time than you might think, all of it kind of becomes a new normal.

It was between Taliban attacks that I spotted him.

I was hot and exhausted, trying to stay cool in sandals and the thin green running shorts we called “silkies.” I stood refilling my water bottle and heating some water for Ali, who, despite the heat, insisted on a cup of tea with his lunch. As I put the cap on my water bottle, I watched a goofy-looking dog trot across the compound. With his short legs and puppylike pep, he looked nothing like other stray dogs I’d seen in Afghanistan. Most were tall and bulky, and they moved around in packs, aggressive over territory and scavenged food.

I could tell this dog was different. He didn’t have a pack; he was alone. He pranced nonchalantly in the dust, tail bobbing and snout held high, as if he was particularly proud of the morsel of food he was carrying. There was something innocent about him; he seemed unaffected by life in a combat zone.

I’d noticed his routine before in the day or so since we’d been
in the compound. The dog would go over to the burn pit to rummage for something to eat, then carry little scraps back to his makeshift den, which was a shady spot under a few bushes. *Furry little hoarder,* I thought.

When we first arrived at the compound, I asked the old man about a couple of dogs that were hanging around. “Are they yours?” I asked. If so, we’d help transport them to the family’s new compound, along with the livestock.

“No, no, no,” he told us. It would have been unusual for a farmer in Sangin to have a pet dog. The villagers loved animals and took great care of their livestock, but they were focused on surviving and on feeding their families; they couldn’t afford to feed and care for a pet. Occasionally, when we did come across “pet” dogs, they were actually used for fighting.

After the family left and we moved in, the little dog stayed. It was almost as if this were his compound. I stood and watched him flop down in his spot under the bushes. Beside him I could see other food scraps he’d accumulated: little MRE wrappers, sticks, bones.

I put down my water bottle, picked up a piece of beef jerky, and started walking over to him, my sandaled feet kicking up dust. When the dog realized I was coming his way, he stopped eating and looked at me. He watched as I approached, squinting to shield his eyes from the dust and sun.

A few steps away from him, I paused.

“Hey, buddy,” I said. “How’s it going?”

He seemed to be studying me. There was something expresssive about his big, light brown eyes—almost humanlike. For a moment, we just looked at each other. Then I heard a quiet *thwap thwap thwap.* A little cloud of dust kicked up into the air behind him. I couldn’t believe it: he was wagging his tail.

I took it as an invitation to move closer and crouched down to get a better look at him. The dog’s fur was mostly white, with large spots of light orange-brown. He had a long snout with a big black nose and floppy ears. As he looked at me, his eyebrows twitched from side to side, curious. He continued to wag his tail, and his expression was soft and easy, as if he was smiling.

The dog seemed happy as a clam, but I could see he was covered in black bugs the size of dimes. They were buzzing around him, then burrowing into the fur on his face and neck.

I extended my arm, holding out the piece of beef jerky. “Here you go, buddy,” I said.

The dog stood up and shook, as if to rid himself of as many bugs as possible before getting near me. He took a few steps forward, his nose leading the way, and inspected my offering before carefully pulling it from my hand with his front teeth. I laughed watching him chew the jerky. Most dogs I knew didn’t bother chewing treats before sending them down the hatch.

“Well, you’ve got better manners than most, don’t you?” I said, and extended my other hand so he could give it a few sniffs. With his permission, I massaged my fingers into the fur around his neck and under his ears. It was coarse and matted in dust; it felt unnaturally stiff, almost like a dirty pair of jeans. But the dog happily leaned into me, pleased with the neck rub. I wondered if it was the first time he’d ever been petted.

I’d always wanted a dog as a kid. I even went so far as to buy a leash with my own money, then went around knocking on our neighbors’ doors after school, volunteering to walk their
dogs for free. Some of them actually let me. My favorite dog was an old basset hound named Irene. She had these big paws and enormous floppy ears. When I walked her, she'd trot ahead of me, out at the end of the leash, with her snout high in the air, taking in all the smells she could. This dusty pup with his long body and short legs made me think of her.

Before I got carried away with him, though, I stopped myself. Cozying up to dogs was off-limits in Afghanistan. When I first arrived in-country, back at the main base, I'd sat through two full days of orientation where they laid out all the rules, big and small. No alcohol. No porn. No saluting superiors, for tactical reasons. One of the memorable ones came from a veterinarian from the military police K-9 unit. "No dogs," she said plainly, then proceeded to tell us horror stories about guys contracting rabies. Get caught with a stray dog, she said, and that dog will be euthanized, no questions asked. On top of that, I was still hyperfocused on proving myself to the RECON guys. I had to show my worth on this mission, not sit around in the dust with a dog.

With that in mind, I reluctantly got up. The dog just stood there, gazing up at me. "Okay, buddy," I said. I turned and headed back toward my corner of the compound.

But after taking just a few steps, I felt a little nudge at the back of my ankle. I looked down to see the dog staring up at me with a toothy grin, tail wagging again. From across the compound, Matt, one of the EOD guys, had been watching our exchange. "Looks like you made a friend!" he shouted. But what I heard was, "Looks like a Fred!" The name stuck.

Fred trotted along behind me back to the makeshift campsite.

where I had my sleeping mat. I didn't try to stop him. Maybe there wasn't that much harm in giving him another piece of jerky and some water, I thought.

I grabbed a large tin bowl that was lying around—it had probably been for the cows—and filled it with water from my canteen. Placing it down in front of Fred, I watched as he licked the thing dry. I stood over him and smiled. Just as he'd taken the jerky from me with a gentle tug, he drank water the same way, with polite little laps.

Jim, the corpsman, had been watching, too. You got the feeling Jim had been an Eagle Scout as a kid. He was super bright and always had any tools he needed close by. He got up from his spot in the shade and came over, taking a closer look at the bugs on Fred's neck. He pulled out a set of tweezers from his fancy pack and, pointing to the bugs, said, "Why don't you hold him steady, and we'll see if I can get some of these bloodsuckers off?"

The two of us crouched down in the dirt. I sat cross-legged and pulled Fred toward me, holding him by the shoulders. The bugs, like flying ticks, were digging into Fred's fur and attaching to his hide. Getting them out meant Jim was going to have to pull them from his skin.

"Careful, dude," I said, as Jim narrowed in on one, closing down on it with the tweezers. I didn't know how Fred was going to react. In one quick motion, Jim yanked hard and, between the prongs of the tweezers, pulled away the first bug, along with a clump of Fred's fur. I braced myself for a yowl or nip from Fred, but he just sat there, unbothered. Jim and I exchanged looks. Carefully, he kept going, pulling out one bug at a time. Patiently, Fred just sat there, letting us do our work.