

AN

INTERVIEW
WITH GOD

Novelization by Robert Noland

Based on the Screenplay by Ken Aguado

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Chapter One

Surviving the Fire of Re-Entry

The massive bay of the C-130 military plane holds some very precious cargo heading back to the United States from Afghanistan. Six extremely exhausted, tragically empty, war-ravaged men sit securely strapped into their jump seats. They appear lifeless, spaced away from one another with two to three empty chairs between them. At thirty thousand feet somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean in the middle of the night, the darkness feels strangely denser, deeper than ever before.

Between the jump seats and the rear of the plane stand two rows of three each—six solemn flag-draped coffins. Ornate wooden boxes representing young lives forever silenced, their hopes and dreams for the days beyond service to their country now as vanquished as the breath in their lungs. A peculiar presence is felt in the absence of a life one once knew so well.

Death has always had a daunting supernatural effect on the living.

Despite the droning roar of the turbines driving the four turbo-props of the plane assaulting their ears, every one of the men in the seats is distracted by a much louder noise—the invasive thoughts of how easily it could have been for one of them to

be lying in one of those six coffins. And how any one of those young soldiers could instead be sitting in their spot among the living, headed back home to family and a future.

All silently ask the same questions . . .

Why them?

Why not me?

Why did I survive?

Why am I going home . . . alive?

And they aren't?

The professional term is “survivor’s guilt.” The words are all too accurate, because these people *feel* guilty for *surviving* what others didn’t in the midst of the exact same circumstances. *Was it luck? Random chance? Or part of some cosmic plan? Would I rather be dead instead? Would I really trade places with any of them?* Therein lies the horribly vicious cycle of such a challenging conflict. And then the raging question . . .

Will my life ever be the same again?

So the *whys* just keep coming. Relentless. Repeating. Reliving the brutality of man as the soldiers walked through the Afghani people on an almost daily basis, constantly uncertain who was a friend and who was the enemy. Who was grateful for your presence and who wanted you not just dead, but suffering before your last breath? Far too many questions without answers, or answers that may have worked before but now they no longer want to hear.

To these six men, war is not a sound bite on the evening news or a headline you can choose to ignore. War is a saturating presence of evil, a visible enemy that leaves behind an invisible hell in the heart. One war being left, with another brought home.

And six battles are still raging in the belly of the plane.

One of the men in the jump seats is not a soldier. He's a journalist who accepted the assignment of being embedded with the military, firsthand, on the front lines. A job where the pay makes no sense compared to the incredible risk taken to do the work. Paul Asher, twenty-eight years old, is a seemingly typical middle-class American with a passion for telling the truth through his gift of writing.

While the other men carried assault rifles, his weapon was a laptop, his pistol a pen, his survival kit a notepad. Protected only by a flak jacket and helmet, he had regularly placed his life in the hands of these soldiers and many others just like them. And protect him they did. He is going home safe and sound without a scratch on him. On the outside, at least.

Paul is certainly above average in his looks, with a thick mass of dark hair that he constantly pushes out of his face and deep brown eyes that can look right through a person with an overabundance of intensity. His intellect is far above the crowd, and his curiosity off the charts.

He is a young man of depth, driven by an old soul that searches beneath the surface of the skeptical and questionable cultural standards of the day. His passionate tenacity is the kind that will keep asking someone, "Why?" until all their words are gone and they have nothing left to say.

In the cavernous cargo bay, Paul tries desperately to write out his thoughts. His mind flashes an idea, and he clicks his penlight on, pointing it at his pad. But what he scribbles down doesn't accurately articulate his feelings. Like some indecipherable foreign language, the letters on the page do no justice to what he desires to express.

Paul finally gives in to his frustration, clicks off the light, and surrenders the pen to his pocket. In the darkness, his eyes drift back and forth between the men seated to his left

trying desperately to find sleep, and the young heroes lying to his right under the flag they valiantly defended to the final moment of their lives.

Paul's job back home is to effectively convey the truth that he experienced on the battlefields in Afghanistan to his busy, distracted readers. But with each hour that passes, the realization grows stronger that he's returning with more questions about life, death, faith, and the future than he ever thought possible. His hope was to write an award-winning journalistic masterpiece of a series, a reward for the great risk he took following these men into battle, but this new chaos in his heart and mind are building an impassable roadblock between the life he left and the one he's returning to live.

His thoughts shift toward home in New York. How will he go about attempting to download all the thoughts, feelings, emotions, fears, and doubts to Sarah, his wife of three years? After all, she had graciously and courageously agreed to allow him to risk his life—and her future—to pursue *his* dream and passion.

In the days ahead, she'll deserve to hear the entire story, as well as the details of his own heart. But when you aren't sure what the experience has done to you, created in you, and made you, then how *do* you—how *can* you—share what you can't seem to understand yourself? The expectation creeps up on him and he isn't even home yet. Writing the many difficult stories from the front lines is one battle, but navigating the emotional and spiritual confusion inside his own home will be quite another.

With Paul strapped tightly into the seat of the plane, his imagination scans his memory for an analogy of the dilemma, just as he so often does for his readers, to understand the point of a story. In a synaptic flash, he recalls the vivid picture of astronauts secured in their capsule, plunging into Earth's atmo-

sphere, going through radio silence, as the G-force threatened their transition back to Earth.

Taking a deep breath, he whispers a prayer: “Just help me to not burn up on re-entry . . . please.”



A few months have passed since Paul returned, and while his and Sarah’s lives are back into a routine, an all-too-obvious and unspoken tension shares their apartment with them. Their emotional distance leaves them feeling like the floor is strewn with a maze of eggshells.

Sarah knows her husband has come home a different man, but pushing him to talk is not working. Like trying to grab Jell-O, she comes up empty-handed but messy every time she tries to bring up Afghanistan. Paul has returned to all his familiar circles, but he feels like he left something back on the battlefield that he can’t seem to find again and reconcile inside himself.

And then there’s the one thing Paul had to face that he thought he would never have to deal with. Trying to avoid the overwhelming issue in his marriage gets in his face every moment of every day, nagging him like a jagged rock in the bottom of his shoe on a long, difficult journey.

Today is yet another new normal in the early morning hours in their stylish but quaint Brooklyn apartment. The décor is what you’d expect of two young professionals busy with their

jobs, trying to make a name for themselves in their respective careers while also keeping the bills paid. But they clearly need to commit an entire weekend just to straightening and cleaning every single space in the tiny place.

Since Paul's return, life for this young couple has been messy in any and every direction you look.

Dressed and ready for work, Paul stands in the kitchen, in tune and listening intently. Sarah walks in, wondering who's already on the other end of the phone this early. Finally, she hears him say, "Okay, Matt, I get it. How can I help?"

Paul's new friend from the front lines—Matt—is in his own personal crisis and has called for help. As Sarah watches and listens to her husband's obvious compassion for him, she wonders if she'll ever get to experience that quality of his again, one of the many that caused her to fall in love with Paul.

"Matt . . . Matt, listen . . . Slow down and take a deep breath. We're going to figure this out . . . together. Okay?" Paul assures. "Have you gone to the VA? You know they have people there that can help."

Sarah grabs a coffee mug from the cabinet and reaches for the carafe, but Paul steps in and beats her to it, then pours himself another cup. As she stares at him with an I-can't-believe-you-just-did-that look on her face, he clearly hasn't a clue about what just happened. And she wonders, really, even if he did, would he even care?

"Matt, I'm just a writer," Paul continues. "I'm really not qualified to speak into what you guys went through over there. You work for the NSA. Surely other vets are there who can relate to your struggle. Can you ask around?"

He listens for a few moments, then reassures, “No, I get it. You have to be careful of appearances. Someone might question your judgment on the job.” After setting his coffee on the counter, he leans against the frig and slowly closes his eyes. He’s praying, *Please help me help this guy*. Finally, he says, “Hey, I’m here. I’ll do whatever I can for you, okay?”

Sarah pours the last of the coffee into her mug, sits down at the kitchen table, opens her laptop, and begins to scan her photo album for evidence of their past life. While her eyes look at pictures, her heart searches for hope. *Any* sign of hope.

There’s the picture of Paul at college just after they started dating. The next is of the two of them at their favorite restaurant on their second anniversary. Then there’s a shot from Afghanistan with several soldiers in front of a Humvee. Paul sticks out, the only one not in full military gear. Next are Matt and Paul in the mess tent. The connection they made during their days together out on patrol shows in their expressions.

Sarah clicks the arrow, and her and Paul’s wedding photo pops up. She taps the track pad again to escape, only to land on a more recent photo of them together, just before Paul went overseas. Her husband’s usual smile lights up his face, but her countenance seems dark and sad. Emotions rise up and grab her by the throat as she slaps the laptop shut and stands so quickly the chair almost turns over.

Paul misses the entire scene. He’s still engrossed with Matt’s issues.

She glances at her cell. 8:13 a.m. She needs to be in her office at her desk with her game face firmly affixed at 9:00 a.m. sharp. Working as a paralegal since graduation from college, for eight to ten hours a day, five and sometimes six days a week, her daily existence is immersed in the supposedly black-and-white world of a large law firm.

From her childhood to the first two years of her and Paul's marriage, from family to faith to her future, life was so clear-cut and calculable. But she can't deny that she's grown cynical and increasingly cold to everyone and everything around her over the past year. Sometimes the sea of gray where she now resides seems to be emotionally and spiritually drowning her.

Even her dream of going into the practice of family law has been shelved. The thought of watching a couple battle one another and destroy their family hits way too close to home now. She's seemingly lost every safe place in her life. Home, work, family, friends, everywhere she goes, she has to face her unresolved issues while answers are elusive.

Sarah stares at Paul until she gets his attention. When he finally looks her way, she points at the phone and whispers, "What's wrong?"

He holds up his index finger, mouthing, "One minute," then goes back to listening. Finally, he says, "Hey, Matt. I really have to go. Sarah's waiting on me, but I'll find you some help. Let me ask around. I have a crazy interview this morning, but then when I get back to the office, I'll work on it . . . I was there, man. I saw what you saw. I get it. Hang in there. I'll call you later." Paul taps his phone screen but then gazes off to wherever or whomever he runs these days.

Sarah wonders if she will ever feel normal again—or will the pain just linger on until she learns to live with it? Not a great way to start any day, only to have to leave once again to go act like all is well in the world.

"I'm really sorry, Sarah."

"Well, you were the one who wanted to talk before work. You asked me, remember?"

“Yeah, but it was tough. I mean, Matt broke down on the phone. He’s really been struggling since we got back and isn’t transitioning well at all.”

Sarah considers her response. She doesn’t want to appear uncaring. “I like Matt. Is he okay?”

“No, he’s not. It was just so bad over there.”

As if she needed to be reminded of that. “Yeah, it was. And bad for you too, Paul.”

“But I was only there to write. I didn’t have to shoot anyone. I didn’t have to make the split-second life-or-death calls like those guys did. They protected me, I couldn’t protect them, so this is the least I can do now. And *I* came home safe.”

Surrendering to the obvious that they are once again *not* going to deal with their marriage this morning, Sarah puts the focus on Matt. “So he wants you to find him a therapist or . . . what?”

“Yeah. Just get him help of some kind.”

She clenches her jaw to hide her frustration. “But why *you*, Paul? And why *right now*? Isn’t there someone *he* knows who can help? Like one of his combat buddies?”

“It’s because of his job, Sarah. He’s trying to keep quiet with what’s going on so he doesn’t appear to be unstable. The NSA is a highly secretive government agency. Not exactly a warm and fuzzy place. Matt’s not sure who he can trust there . . . ironically.”

Still, she gives Paul a moment to turn the discussion back to them—which he doesn’t. *Fine. Talk over.* “Okay. I have to get to work.”

“Yeah. Sorry, me too. I have an interview this morning.”

“I overheard you mention that to Matt,” she says with a touch of sarcasm. “I guess you can fill me in about it some other time.”

“Look, Sarah, I’m so sorry about not being available this morning, okay? I want this . . . I want *us* to work. I do.”

“You can stop apologizing . . . Look, you left because you did what you felt you had to do, and . . . well, a lot has just changed. So we are where we are now. How many times do *I* have to re-live it?”

“But I *am* back,” he insists. “I’m here now. I’m trying. Okay?”

“Yeah, Paul. You may be back, but you are not *here!*” she exclaims, desperation having bolstered her bravery. “The distance just keeps growing. I just don’t know if I can . . . if I *even want* to live like this anymore.”

Paul stares, taken aback by her raw emotion and honesty. Sarah has always been the quiet and reserved one. He’s always had to wonder what she’s thinking, but he had no idea how far down the road she had already gone in her decisions. “But I can be better. Do better. I can fix it. We can fix this . . . Can’t we? . . . Sarah?”

She looks out the window as she slowly shakes her head. Familiar tears border the corners of her eyes again. Turning, she stares him down. “I don’t know, Paul. When there’s been an affair and trust is gone in a marriage . . . how do you fix that? And *fix* is such a horrible word anyway. This is not some *thing* that just needs new parts. This is my heart! Your heart! Something has been broken, and I don’t know where to turn anymore. I used to. We used to. But who or what can possibly change *this*? Change *us*?”

“I don’t know either,” he says, “but I don’t want to throw away our life together over one mistake.”

Sarah brushes tears away.

Compassion for her suddenly overwhelms him, and he moves toward her to comfort. She raises her hands, palms out to indicate *not now*, and he backs up. The least he can do is respect her wishes. “Look, this morning . . . well, lately . . . is all my fault,” he says softly. “I know I’ve been in my own world and haven’t let you in. I haven’t been accessible. Pretty far down the rabbit hole. I’ll get help. Let’s get some help. *We* need to talk to someone.”

Sarah hesitates, uncertain if she can trust the offer. “You go on to your interview. Don’t be late.”

“I don’t care about the interview right now!” he exclaims.

“Please don’t raise your voice, Paul.”

He sighs, backing his emotion down. “Okay, sorry. Can we talk more tonight?”

“I’m not sure I’ll be here,” Sarah whispers, almost talking to herself as much as to him. “I need to do some thinking . . . alone. I need some space.”

Frozen by the certainty in her words, Paul looks away.

“Go to work, Paul . . . to your interview. I have to leave now too so I won’t be late.”

Paul walks to the front door, puts on his sport coat, grabs his helmet, and snaps it on. He then takes his prized twenty-one-speed urban road bike down from the rack on the living room wall. When he opens the apartment door and rolls it out, Sarah follows him and secures the three locks. They walk in awkward silence as he guides his bike down the stairs balanced on the back tire.

The couple nears Bobby, the fifty-something building superintendent who can repair, replace, or repaint anything in a New

York building in a New York minute. He's busy patching a hole in the hallway sheetrock, delivered by some unknown force.

The super smiles at them. "Just like clockwork, you two, every morning."

They pass him without responding, but Bobby has been around the block enough times to know the couple's silence isn't about him. He shrugs, watches them walk out the door, and with a big smile calls out, "Okay, well, have a great day!"

As the door latches shut, he whispers, "Lord, I think they need some help. And by the looks of things, soon would be good."

The two descend the brownstone's stairs to the sidewalk. Sarah reaches down to pick up a copy of *The Herald* lying in a bundle on the last step, folds it in two, and places it in her tote bag. Paul gets on his bike, throws the strap of his messenger bag over his head, and looks with intention at his wife. "I'll call you later. Okay?"

She takes a deep breath and exhales with a shrug of her shoulders. Paul rides off to the north and Sarah starts walking south. Something about their opposite-direction routes feels much more telling to both of them this morning.

What
problem
are you facing
in your life
today
that just seems
to have
no answer?



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