

A MUDBRICK TOWER stands in ancient Samarra, a city known to Alexander the Great. Wrapped around this tower a staircase hugs the wall—concealed behind its own separate mud shell—spiralling up from the courtyard to the sky. Such is the closeness of heaven for those with permission to go there. Right nearby, in the middle of the American military compound, a surprise explosion leaves two men dead and one, an Australian, critically injured.

The Mesopotamian dust settles, a flat street rising through it, as the city collects wits enough to struggle from moment to brutal moment of a war of occupation. The wounded man, Adam Griffiths, clings to life. His instinct is tenacious. Having left death too late, he cannot let go even when he decides to. He wakes in a hospital tent to find there's a lone desperate army surgeon already at work on his body. He'd like the poor fellow to worry less. And being young, buoyed by good humour and helpfully ignorant of how dreadful his burns are, he survives the treatment.

'Nineteen,' he croaks in reply to the doctor's question.
'Nineteen not. Ar. Out.'

Next of kin?

Ever the joker, he rolls his eyes heroically and gasps, 'Married.'

Without warning the canvas hospital unfolds, its dark wing peels back on livid sunlight and dissolves around him, whisked away, complete with operating tables, blood-stained bandages and embedded cries of pain. The last overworked attendant on death is sucked into the black hole of a heartbeat.

Good luck.

Here we go again. He's flat on his back in another surgical ward, this one comfortable as concrete and equipped with glittering steel weapons. It doesn't get more scientifically up-to-date than here. Further investigations would appear to be underway. A team assembles. Artists with steady eyes are probing newly budded growths more or less the shape of elbow and knee while tweaking re-routed nerves. Their cowed silhouettes hunch in a cone of light. Dazzled necromancers, they dare to model what remains of his face in the likeness of guesswork based on photographs provided by the battalion—stitch by threaded stitch. Delayed by two comas the whole job seems to be taking a lifetime. And, sure enough, here they come again, indomitably hopeful. Men with needles and blades.

'Did. We get,' he coughs up three separate syllables before attempting four more. 'What we came for?'

'You betcha.'

After more experimenting and another skin graft—the latest stage in a comeback that seems to be happening to somebody else—he battles through . . . with the help

A STOLEN SEASON

of some top-quality bottled blood. A witness to his own drama, inert in the embrace of drugs, he overhears the knife-wielders exchange encouragements. This time their confidence seems justified. His resurrection assumes enough momentum to rumble into motion, wonky as a juggernaut. Is he the passenger or the vehicle? This is not clear. Way beyond his control the bumpy ride betrays poor planning, wooden wheels and lots of wear. At least he knows the wagging heads belong to rostered staff who peer down from swaying galleries. From windows and portals they stare, masquerading as doubtful stretcher-bearers, rooky nurses, obsessive specialists, psychiatrists, rooky nurses and yet more doubtful stretcher-bearers. Not to disappoint them he concentrates on holding the bits and pieces together.

At best it feels like he's only camped out in his injuries anyway.

Next thing, the world flips inside out. He is the helpless witness to this event. His spirit hovers free. He fully feels he has been skinned alive and tacked back together. Pain on such a scale will take decades to settle. When they are ready to put him on view (he hears the news, yet doesn't hear) the army's entrepreneurs are called in to make the event an event. He is to be a paragon and an example. What luck. A military celebrity in a civilian age. One of a kind. An endangered species.

They load him aboard a commercial aircraft and fly him halfway round the world for ceremonial release into the wild.