

BROOKE N. KING

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## Dogtags

**D**ogtags sway as your friend slams on the brake and pulls up to your family's house. Fresh and new, minted and pressed, your dogtags are still warm where your name was printed, your religion pronounced, your blood type engraved, your serial number stamped. Down to their core, dogtags remind you that you've just signed your life away and are now the property of the United States Army. Dogtags slouch as you walk bent over from your friend's car to the house you grew up in, a last farewell with your ex-boyfriend and your best friends before you ship out. A wave and a stumble into the house, dogtags slam up against the wall of the hallway as you trudge to the bathroom. Dogtags slap against the toilet after a late night of downing too many different type of liquor, that last shot of Vodka you swore up and down wouldn't make you puke. Dogtags are silent as you sleep one last time in the house that you labeled on your emergency contact form as your permanent place of residence. Dogtags hide underneath your uniform at the airport the next day as Dad hugs and kisses you goodbye, tells you to be safe over there while Nana sits in the front seat of the car crying, and Grandpa stands by the driver's side door staring at you as he holds back tears. Dogtags swing in unison against one another as you board the plane and leave everything familiar—the orders printed, your names recited, and only a one word response given when you asked where you were going: Iraq. Dogtags hang around your neck as you stand in formation at dawn in a place unfamiliar, waiting for marching orders, the sound of your heart beating against the tin metal. The rubber ring around your dogtags, the only thing that hides the panic you feel in your chest. Dogtags break the silence of the quiet morning, the clanging sound of each soldier coming to attention, the

orderly unison of dogtags ringing out their impending doom. Here in this line is where dogtags find you equal, but here is where they separate you. Here is where they strip your pride and force you out of the line. Here is where dogtags come in handy as you ask the chaplain to sit and pray with you before you leave out the gate on mission. Here is where dogtags fight the urge to leave your body as your convoy takes enemy fire and you are forced out of a burning Humvee. Here is where dogtags bang against your combat vest as you run down a narrow street, shooting the enemy in front of you while you scream at the soldier behind you, hoping he is still there covering your back. Dogtags yank you away from the raging firefight. Here, next to a burned out car in the middle of the street, is where they are guarded and hidden from sight. Here, dogtags equip you for death, prepare you for the inevitability of war, but you won't die today- today it is the soldier behind you, the one that had your back moments ago. Here is where dogtags are ripped off by soldiers. Here is where you take one dogtag from him and put it in your pocket. Here is where the other one is shoved in his mouth and duck taped shut inside. Here is where dogtags give you no solace, as you fireman carry the dead soldier back to a waiting Humvee at the end of the street. Here is where you hand the dogtag over to your commander when you return to the FOB. Dogtags clink in the shower as you try to rinse off the soldier's blood crusted to your hands and buried in your cuticles. Dogtags feel cold against your skin in the morning as you walk to the chow hall, hoping for the quiet and peace of a warm meal. Here in formation is where a set of dogtags once stood. Here is where dogtags still stand silently waiting for the next mission. Dogtags bring you relief when you are not named off the rooster for another day out the gate, but tomorrow it will be your turn again. Here is where dogtags drip with sweat from the searing heat of the midday summer sun. Here is where dogtags cook your flesh if left exposed for too long in 120F heat. Here in the crowded streets of Baghdad is where dogtags have placed you. Here is where the familiar sound of dogtags bumping and clanking are replaced by a local merchant yelling the fresh cuts of meat he's selling at his market stand and loud Arabic music blaring from a beat up silver Mercedes Benz moseying down the street as if it weren't congested with wall to wall people. Here is where dogtags redefine you as a target inside and outside the gate. At the end of the day, when you have fought as hard as you can to do the job they trained you for, dogtags drag you down, their weight unbearable around your neck. Here, after the sun has set and it is black outside, is where male soldiers lay in wait for you to leave the latrine by yourself. Here is where they tackle you and drag you by your legs to an even darker alleyway as your dogtags try to dig into the gravel. Here is where dogtags don't care about your age, rank,

or gender. Here dogtags are useless in lines of defense. Here they are used against you, making you a victim of opportunity. Here is where dogtags are utilized as a way to keep you submissive, cinched around your neck and held taut so you can barely breathe. Here is where they are loosened so you can gasp for air as you are forced against the wall. Dogtags press hard against your chest. They imprint your skin. The men around you stand with theirs dangling behind them, their dogtags rhythmic against their back as they take turns fucking you against the wall, their faces blurred, their rank and name taken off their chest so no I.D. can be made. Their dogtags jingling back and forth to the mismatched sound of yours jangling around your neck. Here is where you are left with only your dogtags to comfort you. Here is where you are found and gathered up by a friend. Here is where you both hope that your dogtags do not make a sound and give away your position. You hold them together as she carries you back to her hooch, opens the door, shuts, and locks it. In here is where dogtags don't mean shit. In here is where silent wars are fought, in the in-between hours when sleeping soldiers wake in fear. Here is where dogtags lay on the night stand next to a green Army watch. Here is where they separate and divide, placing reality in a box where compliancy and devotion to the job do not exist. Here is where they are left while the rims around your eyelids fade slowly down to black. Here is where they watch you from their place next to your bed, hoping that one day the sleep you wish for will finally be called rest. Here is where dogtags don't matter until the next morning when they are lifted up and returned to their rightful place. Here is where they learn the meaning of death. Here is where a girl is made into a woman and then slowly into a man. Here is where dogtags sit and wait, hoping that the humanity in you appears again. Here is where dogtags see the wayward daughters and sons of America fight on the front lines. Here is where they notice the landscape is not what it seems. Here is where dogtags watch you kill an innocent fifteen year old child. Here is where you leave the semblance of the person you once were. Here, dogtags listen to you sob as you lose your will to live. Here is where dogtags are collected in blown out vehicles where no faces or whole bodies remain. Here is where dogtags are the only thing that distinguish one soldier from another. You wear dogtags around your neck until the day you die. But still, dogtags will not leave you. Here, in this metal coffin, is where dogtags identify you. Here is where dogtags sustain a memory, a lasting image of a soldier that once was a woman or a man. Here, on marked graves, among the rows of white headstones, is where dogtags no longer trouble the dead.

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**BROOKE N. KING** served in the United States Army, deploying to Iraq in 2006 as a wheel vehicle mechanic, machine gunner, and recovery specialist. Her work has been published in the *O Dark Thirty*, *Hudson Whitman*, and *Prairie Schooner*, as well as appeared on NPR's *Here and Now*. Currently, Brooke is working on her memoir, *Full Battle Rattle*.