The day the killers came for my friend

Hannah Allam, a young American reporter, relied on her trusted translator, Ban Sarhan, to help her navigate the dangers of Iraq. But when insurgents brutally murdered Ban's husband and daughter, Hannah knew it was up to her to save her friend. Here, for the first time, their story of death, loss and daring rescue. By Hannah Allam

The bird flew past us suddenly, a flurry of gray feathers that swept across the balcony of the Cairo apartment where I sat with a group of friends on a tranquil afternoon in March 2004.

Looking out over the ancient cityscape, I felt a joyous calm. It was the third day of a much-needed vacation in Egypt after months of reporting for American newspapers on the war in Iraq. As the bird grazed the curtains and landed in the living room, I laughed. So did my translator and friend, 28-year-old Ban Sarhan.

The other guests on the balcony didn't find our visitor amusing. "That is bad," said Xavier, a French art dealer. "A bird flying into the house is a sign. It means death is coming."

Ban and I exchanged smiles. Working together in Baghdad, we'd become so close we could almost read each other's minds. We'd been strangers when we'd met the previous summer, and although we were very different in some ways—she was a native Iraqi and the mother of two young children, and I was a single American—we'd been drawn together by the adventures we'd shared. We'd been shot at, nearly trampled by angry mobs and chased with sticks. A wayward pigeon was nothing by comparison.

"Sounds like an old wives' tale," I said to the group.

But our peaceful getaway was shattered at 8:00 the next morning, with the shrill ring of the telephone next to

A long way from Baghdad: Ban Sarhan, holding her son, Fadi, and Hannah Allam outside Oklahoma City

my bed. While Ban slept in the next room, I listened as a colleague calling from Iraq sputtered out the horrible news: Ban's husband, Selwan, 28, their four-year-old daughter, Nadia, and Selwan's mother, Mahdiya, had been driving in Baghdad the previous night when a carload of gunmen pulled alongside and sprayed bullets into their small black Daewoo sedan. Neighbors found the family's bodies, slumped and bloodied, in their seats.

"They're dead," came the voice on the staticky line. "They're all dead."

Sobbing, I crept into Ban's bedroom and touched her shoulder. "Good morning, *habibti*," she said, using an Arabic word that means "my darling." Then she saw my tears and her smile disappeared. Trembling, I told her about Selwan and his mother and said that her infant son, Fadi, who'd been left with a babysitter that night, was unharmed. But I couldn't bring myself to say more. "What about Nadia?" she screamed. "Tell me now!" My silence, and tears, were answer enough.


Selwan at the Tigris River


Nadia's fourth birthday

Gunmen sprayed bullets into the family's small car. Neighbors found their bodies, slumped and bloodied.

As we huddled together on the first flight back to Baghdad later that day, a heavily sedated Ban seemed to forget her English; she let loose long strings of Arabic that I couldn't understand. Then midflight, she suddenly turned to me and wiped away her tears. "Hannah," she said. "Do you remember the bird?"

The most dangerous place on earth

I thought the worst was over, that on our return to Baghdad we'd find consolation for Ban among her friends and relatives. But instead of relief, the next six days would bring even more danger—for me and for this woman I'd grown to cherish.

When people ask me how I first found Ban, I always tell them that *she* found me. It was my first day in Iraq, a sweltering afternoon in July 2003, and I was jet-lagged and feeling overwhelmed by my first overseas assignment, at age 25, as a foreign correspondent for Knight Ridder, one of the largest newspaper companies in the U.S.

I awoke from a nap and walked into my new living room in the Baghdad hotel where I'd taken up residence to find a pretty young woman on my couch. She wore a Muslim head scarf, and her belly bulged in pregnancy. "I'm Ban," she said. "I'll be your translator."

She was bold, to say the least. After persuading a janitor to let her into my room, she'd parked herself there for hours, waiting for me to wake up. She assumed I'd be so impressed by her personality and credentials—she'd worked for other Knight Ridder correspondents—that I'd hire her before even interviewing other candidates. She had a master's degree in English literature and the guts to work, even seven months pregnant, in the most dangerous place on earth.

I said "yes" on the spot.

Ban was my lifeline during those first turbulent months in Iraq. My father is Egyptian, and my mother, a native Oklahoman, converted to Islam decades ago. Yet even as a Muslim who speaks some Arabic, I was just a bumbling American in Baghdad.

Ban instructed me in Iraqi slang, and she took me to the banks of the Tigris River and taught me how to split a fish, spear it on a stake and roast it over a fire. We listened to the latest in Arabic pop music, and, when no one was looking, we took off our head scarves and tied them around our hips, shimmying like belly dancers to the drum-heavy rhythms.

Ban quickly became my closest friend in Iraq. I loved spending time with her husband, Selwan, who also worked as a translator for Americans, and her daughter, Nadia, whose hair always smelled so clean and sweet when she snuggled on my lap.

I knew Ban was special, but she really proved her mettle on our biggest story of that summer. I'd told her I wanted to track down members of Iraq's then-fledgling insurgency, and so she started working her contacts with powerful Iraqi tribes until she found a group willing to talk.

On the morning of the interview with the rebels, three of us sat nervously in my room, trying to figure where we'd fall on a one-to-10 scale of stupidity. It was Ban, me and Mandi Wright, a free-spirited photographer from the *Detroit Free Press*. We were all so close that my mother used to e-mail us to check on her "three crazy daughters: Han, Ban and Man."

Dressed in black from head to toe, we set off in our car toward a secret meeting place. As we headed for the perilous Sunni Triangle, Mandi leaned over and whispered, "You know, I've made better decisions."

Mandi's fears seemed justified when we arrived at the rebels' hideout, an overgrown orchard, where insurgent soldiers confiscated our satellite phones—our only link to the outside world. As we waited for their leader to arrive, terrifying thoughts ran through my head. Would we be killed? Taken hostage? Ban, however, seemed relaxed and nonchalant.

Soon a tall man with a checkered scarf obscuring his face emerged. "Peace be upon you," he said. This was the rebel chief, a Jordanian named Abu Mohammed, who looked surprised to see three young women sitting before him. We probably didn't match his image of war correspondents.

I asked questions, Ban translated into rapid-fire Arabic and we left the camp with one of the first inside looks at the forces that would eventually kill more than 2,200 U.S. troops. Our

COURTESY OF BAN SABIHA

drop-everything read

Out in the nick of time: Ban, Fadi and Hannah in the air minutes after escaping, far left. Photographer Mandi Wright at work on her laptop in Iraq, left. In Oklahoma, Fadi gets a look at his new president, below.

story ran on the front page of dozens of newspapers. Ban told me later, with pride, "I wanted to prove I had what it takes to do this job."

The next week, my first stint in Iraq was up, so Ban threw me a going-away party at my hotel. That night, we sat by the sparkling blue swimming pool, folding grilled meat into soft Iraqi bread and chatting happily until the dawn call to prayer drifted across Baghdad.

Ban stayed even longer so she could be the last person to tell me goodbye in the morning.

A desperate race against the clock

Three months later, in December 2003, I returned to Iraq with a new title: Baghdad bureau chief for Knight Ridder. Since I'd been gone, Ban had given birth to her son, Fadi, but that didn't stop her from working with me. Things were even more dangerous now, though. Iraqi translators were being killed by insurgents, who deemed them "collaborators" for helping the people they considered enemies. I begged Ban and Selwan not to tell their neighbors or even relatives what they did for a living.

Our days and nights were consumed with mayhem. After covering five suicide bombings in a three-week span, I decided in March that we deserved a break. I invited Ban to come with me to Egypt. To her surprise, Selwan encouraged her to go.

It was Ban's first trip outside the country, and she was bursting with excitement. Even before we boarded the flight, she took off the head scarf she felt compelled to wear in conservative Iraq. Once in Cairo, we fulfilled her lifelong dream to visit the pyramids. She spent hours on the phone talking to Selwan and told Nadia about all the pretty dresses Mommy would have for her when she returned.

Our vacation ended with that devastating early-morning phone call. Ban was in no state to pack for our hastily arranged return trip to Iraq, and I wasn't much better. I mechanically stuffed our clothes and souvenirs into suitcases—until I opened a shopping bag and found the "princess dress" Ban had promised Nadia. It was a pale-green frock with a delicate, scalloped collar and a matching straw hat.

For countless minutes I stood there with that dress in my hand, paralyzed by indecision. Should I throw it away? Leave it? Hand it to the first little girl I saw on the street? In the end, I carefully folded it and hid it among my personal belongings.

As soon as our plane taxied to a stop in Baghdad, American security officials came on board and escorted us to armored cars waiting on the runway. Ban, they told us, had been one of the targets on the night of the murders; in the dark, the men had mistaken Selwan's elderly, veil-draped mother for his wife and pumped them both full of bullets. Nadia had been killed with two point-blank shots to her head. With the murderers still at large, Ban's life was in great peril.

While Ban went to her parents' home to begin the traditional three days of mourning, I returned to my hotel room. It was filled with reminders of Nadia and Selwan. Photo after photo showed Nadia's skinny arms slung around my shoulder or playing in the folds of my skirt.

As I stood crying in the shower, the phone rang. Ban's voice trembled, and it was hard to understand her words.

"I got a threat," she said, sobbing. "They want to kill Fadi and me."

A letter had been left for Ban on her family's doorstep that said, "You and your son are next." There were other hints of menace: A relative's home where Ban and Selwan kept some personal effects had been ransacked; among the missing items were Ban's pay stubs and phone lists from Knight Ridder.

At my hotel, I sought advice from Keith, a British security consultant who was staying there as well. He looked me straight in the eye. "You've all been compromised, love," he said. "You've got to leave. Now."

Exhausted and terrified, I was in no shape to formulate an escape plan. But I had to. Ban and baby Fadi were cloistered inside her parents' home, which was likely under surveillance by the killers; it was only a matter of

MANDI WRIGHT/DETROIT FREE PRESS

time before they'd shoot their way into the house. I was on the other side of town, safe in a heavily guarded hotel. Somehow, we had to reunite, procure visas for Ban and her son, and catch the first plane leaving Baghdad.

But how would we even get out? The one road to the airport was treacherous—lined with gunmen and homemade bombs. I figured we'd have just a few hours to make our getaway before the killers caught up with us.

There was another complication: Ban and Fadi weren't the only ones who needed to flee. Security consultants recommended that anyone who'd worked with Ban and Selwan should leave the country. That meant our photographer pal Mandi as well as Laurie Kassman, another dear friend and radio reporter who'd employed Selwan.

While other journalists went about their usual routines that day, Mandi, Laurie and I drank strong coffee, swapped phone lists and dialed every contact we'd made in the past year. None of us were regular smokers, but we nervously lit cigarette after cigarette as we tried American military colonels in the Green Zone, attachés at the U.S. embassy, friends from the CIA station in Baghdad, even militant Muslim clerics who might be able to assist.

They all offered sympathy, but little help. "I'm so sorry to hear this, but it sounds like a matter for Iraqi authorities," a brigadier general from the U.S. Army told me.

Growing desperate, I punched in the number of Basel, an Arab-American whose full name I can't disclose because he holds a sensitive U.S. government job in Baghdad. He's the classic tough guy with a heart of gold. When I arrived in Iraq knowing no one, Basel adopted me as a kid sister. His access had opened up hidden worlds—we dined with Iraq's elite, strolled through one of Saddam Hussein's palaces and zipped through narrow streets in a van filled with cash and guns. The only condition for these wild rides was that I could never take his photo or use his name in published reports.

Basel had met Ban on several occasions, and he was furious when he learned of the killings. Thirty minutes after I told him about our predicament, his huge white SUV roared up to the hotel and he turned my room into a de facto command center.

Basel soon was on the phone nonstop to his U.S. and Iraqi buddies, barking orders in English and Arabic. He got an Iraqi official to come to the hotel to pick up Fadi's ID cards in order to rush through travel documents. His biggest coup was recruiting a team of private Iraqi commandos who owed him a favor to help rescue Ban and Fadi.

Ban proved her mettle; I had to prove mine.

Keith looked me straight in the eye. 'You've all been compromised, love,' he said. 'You've got to leave. Now.'

As the clock ticked, we concocted a complicated plan that we thought just might work. That evening the Iraqi commandos would storm Ban's parents' house before nosy neighbors and the waiting gunmen could react, hustle her and the baby into an unmarked car and then drive them at breakneck speed to my hotel. We'd all spend the night together under the watch of British security guards recruited by Laurie, the radio reporter, and next morning we'd leave for the plane in an armored car, taking the dangerous airport road.

Thankfully, Ban already had a valid passport from our trip to Egypt. The interior ministry official who'd been contacted by Basel promised to hand-deliver Fadi's emergency travel documents to the airport the next day, minutes before our flight.

There was one more critical element to our plot: Basel said the only way to protect us all was to tell no one except our immediate group what we were planning. That meant I couldn't confide in my work colleagues; I couldn't even tell Ban. Basel was worried that the details might leak to someone outside the family. So the next time I phoned Ban, I simply told her to have two suitcases ready "in case something happened." If it all worked, by 9 P.M. that night she'd be with me at the hotel, safe and sound.

The countdown began at 7 P.M., when Basel received word that the commandos were en route to Ban's house in three unmarked cars, including one disguised as a taxi. Mandi, Laurie and I waited in my room, physically ill from the anxiety. We clutched our cell phones, hoping for the call that meant everything was proceeding OK.

For security, an armed British guard was posted at my door, turning away even my confused coworkers. We tried not to look at our watches and urged ourselves to believe we could get out of this alive.

At 8 P.M., six Iraqi commandos burst through the doors of Ban's parents' house and fanned out through the rooms. They grabbed the suitcases, bundled up the baby, whispered to Ban that Basel had sent them and rushed her out the front before her shocked parents could even react.

Hurtling through Baghdad's rutted streets, the three-car group used the classic anti-insurgent driving technique: Ban and Fadi sat in the middle car, while the front and back cars weaved left and right to prevent an outsider's vehicle from getting close. The convoy looked like a snake, with head and *(continued on page 329)*

CORAL VON ZUMWALT

Killers *continued from page 234*

tail thrashing—moving at very high speed. Suddenly a white truck filled with men appeared in the rear-view mirrors. "We're being followed," said one of the commandos.

With Ban and Fadi crouching in the back of their car, the driver floored the gas pedal and flew even faster. For almost two hours, the convoy zigged and zagged, taking roundabout routes, until the commandos called in another unit in hopes of ambushing their pursuers. Spotting the setup, the white truck made a sudden turn and peeled away into the night.

Back at the hotel, Mandi, Laurie and I were frantic. It was 10 P.M., and there was still no word. Then we heard the crackle of a radio outside my room, and the British guard sprang into action. There was the sound of boots, like a small army coming up the stairs, and my door flew open.

Six big, burly Iraqi men stormed into my room, scouting out the balcony, my bedroom, even the bathroom. Then a commando ran in carrying something in his arms: It was Fadi, fast asleep in a blanket. Next came Ban, sandwiched between two guards and looking pale. Ban, Mandi and I hugged and wept with joy.

Ban called her parents and told them that she was with me, and that tomorrow we'd make a run for the airport. She might never see her family again, but once she'd left the country, their lives would no longer be in danger.

"My mother was crying," Ban recalls. "'She said, 'We've already lost three people. I would rather have you far away than find you killed because you stayed.'"

I was happy to see Ban curl her body around Fadi as she fell asleep in the bedroom—she hadn't really slept in days. Mandi and Laurie nodded off too, but my brain kept racing, and I awoke every few minutes throughout the night.

Finally, the sun rose, spreading its pink light over the sand-colored city. We got up, gulped tepid instant coffee and nervously pulled on our clothes. Baghdad was still quiet when the signal came for us to leave.

Ban, Mandi, Laurie and I ran down to the ground floor, where two British guards with radios and guns helped us into a pair of armored cars and drove us in silence to the airport. It was a pins-and-needles trip all the way; my eyes darted constantly from the serene image of Fadi nestled in Ban's lap to the cars driving near us on the highway—each one looked suspicious to me. I thought about how ironic it would be if we'd survived all this just to die in cross fire from an unrelated ambush.

Just as we pulled up to the airport, my cell rang. It was one of our British guards. "The bits of paper are ready," he said, using our code for the arrival of the ministry official with Fadi's travel documents.

Only when we were in the Royal Jordanian airline waiting lounge did we relax. Baghdad International Airport is a desolate, cavernous place, its walls and ceilings still painted in the Saddam era's clashing shades of green, but on that day it looked beautiful. Fadi was a big hit with the airport guards, who rarely saw children. We have a photo of him from that day in the arms of a Nepalese soldier who's cooing at him with a machine gun slung at his side.

It was hard to believe that only seven days earlier, Ban and I had gleefully departed Baghdad for our Cairo vacation. This time, as our plane rose from the tarmac and banked west toward Amman, Jordan, Ban was silent. We watched Iraq become a distant brown-and-blue map of deserts and rivers. "I was thinking I never even had time to go to the cemetery to see Selwan and Nadia," she told me later. "I didn't know where I was going or what I would do."

How do you say "y'all" in Arabic?

Ban and I spent a month in Jordan, waiting for her asylum petition to the U.S. to be approved. But there was really no question about where she would live—from the moment I'd told my mother about the killings, she'd given me an order: "Bring Ban and that baby to me."

The sun was shining in a blue southwestern sky on April 16, 2004, when we arrived in Oklahoma City. My mom, devoted solely to her five offspring since my parents' divorce several years ago, had arranged a hero's welcome by stringing yellow ribbons on the fence surrounding her five acres of farmland. My grandfather, one of my three brothers, my sister and dozens of friends carried signs that read, "Welcome to your new home, Ban and Fadi!"

Ban has been in the U.S. for almost two years now, adapting to Oklahoma while still monitoring the news from Baghdad. She calls Iraq often, and each time she makes her mother put every single member of her family on the line, to make sure they've survived that country's ongoing turmoil.

In some ways, her new life has been a shock. "It was a culture clash from the time I got off the plane," she said. "The only America I had seen was through movies—Saddam didn't allow us to study it in school—and now here it was in front of my eyes. People can say anything they want, wear what they want, do anything they want."

Over time, she shed her black mourning clothes, and along with them the fears she brought from Iraq. "For the first time, I was walking in the street without worrying about a car bomb," she says. After being granted political asylum, she gained benefits including a rent-free furnished apartment. It was a modest one-bedroom on an upper floor, but to Ban it felt like a palace: "I was on my own. I had never experienced that before. I was walking around the apartment thinking, this is mine. Mine and my son's."

With American can-do spirit, she learned to drive, enrolled in computer classes and got a job as a hostess at the local Bennigan's. Now she works with an agency that helps other immigrants, mostly Asians and Mexicans, settle into the public schools. I almost fell over the first time I heard her say "y'all" in a perfect Oklahoma twang.

Two months after our escape, Knight Ridder let me return to Baghdad; the insurgents, I was told, had turned their attention to other targets. I went back to work, but the place seemed lonelier without my trusted sidekick and sister.

I travel to Oklahoma as often as I can to visit Ban and the baby. They've been absorbed into my big, noisy family—a recent photo shows Ban standing next to my grandfather, who holds Fadi on his lap.

She hasn't talked much about her ordeal. Typical Ban, she just plugs along with a steely determination. "Tears come before words," she told me when I suggested that she write about her experiences.

On my last trip home, Ban picked me up in her new black Honda, and we sped through the empty streets of Oklahoma City to find tacos at midnight. For the first time, we talked at length about our dangerous last days together in Baghdad. "Did you ever think this would happen?" she asked. "Did you ever imagine we'd be in Oklahoma together one day?"

We ate our tacos in the car and split a soda, then rolled down the windows. Ban popped in a cassette of an Egyptian singer we both like. If not for the neon lights of diners and the flat expanse of Oklahoma plains, we easily could have pretended we were back in Baghdad, cruising the timeless streets along the Tigris River.

She reached for my hand and we smiled. I thought of something she'd told me during those harrowing hours when we were still trying to escape from Iraq. "When you lose someone, you want to be with your loved ones, your own family," she'd said. "Now my family is you." ©

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