

CHAPTER 10

AMY'S CHAPTER

WRITTEN BY AMY BROWN



Lieutenants Larsen and Brown, at the rodeo. February 2009.

The burn unit did not make a great first impression.

When I first toured the burn unit at Brooke Army Medical Center during my Master's program, it was a struggle to hold back my horror and disgust. I heard screams coming from the shower room. There were strange smells. The patients' physical condition was stomach-turning. And on top of that, the ICU rooms were kept between ninety and ninety-five degrees, because burn patients can't thermal-regulate. Keeping the rooms at body temperature meant the metabolically stressed patients burned significantly less calories—but the heat, combined with the sights and smells that hit me as soon as I entered the burn unit, literally caused black circles to start closing in on my vision. I had to sit down until my dizziness passed.

I remember thinking, *I will NEVER work in a burn unit.*

But then, somehow, I did. One of my favorite instructors, a Lieutenant Colonel, called me to her office one day. "Lieutenant Larsen, you might want to consider doing your master's research in the burn unit," she suggested.

I laughed and told her, essentially, *no thanks*. "Besides," I explained, "I'm slated to go to Africa and study the effects of zinc on diarrhea. I'm really excited about that assignment."

She made the tiniest eye roll. "Well, I can understand why you're excited about the prospect of working with kids in Africa. But that diarrhea research is simple and straightforward. Frankly, I think you'd get bored with it. Someone with your level of proficiency in clinical nutrition would be better utilized in more complex work."

I attempted to protest, but she pressed her case. "Amy, the burn unit is *fascinating* for a strong clinical nutritionist. Each burn unit patient is a big puzzle to put back together. You need to understand all the disease processes, all the patient's habits and goals, and everything that's going on in the body to know how to treat them appropriately. You're working with intubated patients, IV-feeding patients—you know how complex that is."

I did—and I also knew how much those puzzles and challenges

excited me. The Lieutenant Colonel continued. “And a burn unit dietitian is an *invaluable* part of the team. We’re able to see things the doctors miss. Like, for instance—why is it a big deal that burns affect bone metabolism?”

I couldn’t help rattling off the answer. “Burns tend to increase bone metabolism, and when calcium and phosphorus are taken out of your bones, they can get into the blood. The blood can transport them all through your body and they may settle in places like your joints, causing heterotopic ossification.”

She nodded, pleased. “Exactly. But do you think the doctors are focused on a lab noting calcium and phosphorus levels? No. They’re focused on healing the wound and getting the patient through therapy. But *we* know that if a patient’s joints freeze up because his bones aren’t getting adequate nutrients, that PT isn’t going to go well. And now the patient is discouraged, and their quality of life is affected, and so on. Strong nutritional care can be a game changer that impacts the patient’s life for the *rest* of their life.”

I was beginning to feel persuaded, in spite of myself. She explained that the burn unit was one of the few areas of clinical care in the hospital where dietitians were considered a crucial part of the recovery team. Even the surgeons agreed that proper patient nutrition was more important than their skin graft surgeries, because a graft won’t heal if a patient’s nutritional needs are not being met. “Good luck finding that level of respect in any other area of the hospital,” she pointed out. “Most of the time, we’re considered helpful, but not essential. In the burn unit, nutrition is anything *but* auxiliary. It’s the foundation for all the other medical and therapeutic interventions. If you work on the burn unit, you’d be part of a team that actually *feels* like a team.”

Hub, I thought. *That might be worth the weird smells and the high temperatures.*

“And,” the Lieutenant Colonel went on, “there’s the research element. You’d be able to teach cutting edge research and also *conduct* research.”

“What about Barry?” I asked, finally getting a word in. “Isn’t he slated for the burn unit? Would I be replacing him?”

The Lieutenant Colonel pursed her lips and touched her fingers together like a tent. “How can I put this tactfully? We’re launching this Master’s Program on the burn unit for the first time this year and it’s going to be monitored. We need to be sure that it represents us well. Hence, why I’m talking to you.” She smiled. “Besides, I think you’d not only excel on the burn unit, I think you’d enjoy it. Once you get over its little idiosyncrasies.”

I paused, hesitating over what answer to give her. She stared at me. “I’m asking you to think of the needs of the Army, Lieutenant. Can I count on you?”

“Okay,” I said, finally beaten by her persuasive arguments and intimidation. “Yes.”

As it turned out, she was right. Over the weeks and months I spent on the floor conducting my research, I ended up falling in love with the place. I surprised myself several weeks in when I realized that I was thinking of the burn unit as a fun—yes, *fun*—environment.

It helped that I eventually got used to the heat and the smells. I also got used to the scars. Some of the other medical workers told me that eventually I would become immune to the patients’ scarring, and they were right. After a few weeks, the patients began to seem as ordinary as someone I might run into at the grocery store, or in the park. The scarring and disfigurement became so familiar that patients distinguished themselves more via their attitudes, and their approach to healing. I began seeing the people behind the burns.

During the final week of my staff rotation, a new patient arrived—one Lieutenant Brown. His rank and age caught my attention. A Lieutenant on the burn unit was a rarity because the majority of patients we saw from the military were enlisted. It was the front line soldiers who most often got hit by enemy fire or an IED, whereas the officers usually kept themselves farther back. But here was this Lieutenant. And not only was he my same rank, we were the same age.

That's interesting, I thought. I remember seeing him through the window of his room. He was covered in gauze, head to foot, still in the ICU. I felt a strange desire to talk to him—which didn't make sense to me. I tried to rationalize the pull toward him. Maybe it was just the weird coincidence of our rank and age?

In any case though, he was intubated. No need to talk to him.

Several days later, I heard he'd been extubated. That meant he needed to speak with a dietitian! My desire to talk to him hadn't gone away. If anything, the pull felt bizarrely stronger. And now, I had an excuse to go see him. I hurried to his room, mentally assembling a few talking points: I could explain the approach to his nutritional care. I could discuss the importance of certain key supplements.

But when I entered, I was taken aback by *all* the people who filled the room. There was a crowd! At least two care providers, a couple physical therapists, his mother, and three or four friends—all of them were gathered around his bed. Apparently I wasn't the only one who'd seen the extubation as a good opportunity to visit Sam Brown.

I smiled and waved. I raised my voice. "I'll come back another day!" No one heard me.

It was only after I left the room that it occurred to me I *wouldn't* be able to come back another day. That day was Friday and it was the final week of my staff rotation. I wouldn't be coming back to the burn unit for another two months—not until I started my duty assignment.

I felt a twinge of disappointment. Someone else would have to discuss nutrition with Lieutenant Brown.

The next two weeks were full of test prep for the Registered Dietitian exam to wrap up the internship. After that came a couple weeks of personal leave, then I returned to the hospital for inprocessing and orientation to my new assignment. I finally returned to the burn unit the first week of November.

One day, I was discussing the various burn patients with a case manager to ensure good clinical care. She began raving about one patient in particular, talking about how exceptionally well he was doing. "His motivation is incredible," she enthused. "And it's beautiful

to see his faith, it's the anchoring force in his life. I wonder if that's one of the reasons he's doing so well."

"Which patient is this?" I asked. I'd missed his name.

"Brown. Sam Brown. Tall and very thin." Her eyes brightened as she registered a connection. "He's a First Lieutenant, like you. Was he here already when you were last on the ward?"

I nodded and—weirdly, embarrassingly—felt my heart pounding.

"Well, watch him," she said. "You'll see. He's not angry. He's full of joy. It's amazing to witness. I'm sure you'll get to know him in our work together."

So, I watched him. I observed him walking around the hospital, moving in and out of the therapy rooms. Sometimes I saw him with his mother as she read to him out of her Bible. I sometimes spotted him waiting for his next appointment or chatting with another patient. And I had to agree with the case manager: this guy was *different*.

He was incredibly motivated, first of all. I found out he had started running nearly three miles within a month of his discharge—before his wounds were even healed. He did that several times a week. That level of discipline amazed me.

And he walked with such confidence. He wasn't slouched over; he wasn't hiding; he didn't try to avoid people's eyes by walking quickly—all patterns of behavior that were common in other burn patients. He walked with his head up, as though he was at ease. He also talked to many of the people he walked past, both patients and medical practitioners. "How are you doing?" he'd ask them in a tone that implied he actually cared to know. "How are you *doing*?"

And when he talked to those other people, you could see joy radiating from him. It was bizarre. Signs of joy on the burn unit floor were few and far between. Many patients were deeply depressed, plenty were angry, and even the ones with good family support who tended to do better had a wry, cynical attitude. From any one of them, I regularly heard them say things like, "This sucks. It's a terrible spot to be in. I want to get out of here as soon as I possibly can."

But not the tall Lieutenant. He was unmistakably, impossibly joyful. It was hard not to notice him and feel impressed.

To be clear, Sam Brown was not looking good at the time—not by any means. He was *so* skinny, even under his covering of bandages. His face was thickly scarred, and dramatically disfigured. His ears were gnarled. Where he'd already received grafts, the skin was shiny, oozy, and dimpled like chicken skin. Anywhere he hadn't received grafts—like his face—was bright red, thick, bumpy, and the texture of plastic.

Most people would have seen Sam Brown as a victim of war whose life had been destroyed by terrorism. That's not how I saw him. *This guy's got it going ON*, I thought. *He's got his life together.*

Not like me.

I was a mess.

On September 12, 2008—eight days after his Humvee was blown up by an IED—Lieutenant Sam Brown was at Brooke Army Medical Center, fighting nightmares in a ketamine-induced hallucination. It was on that day, September 12, 2008, that I blew up my life.

Three days after Sam had first arrived in the ICU, I'd had an abortion. I had grown up in a family that emphasized moral legalism—there were clear rules for right living, and if you broke one of them, watch out. I had been raised to believe that getting an abortion was the *one* thing you must never, ever, ever do. It was also something that, as an adolescent, I assumed I would never, ever, ever do. I was willing to extend understanding to anyone else who made that choice for themselves—but, in my self-righteousness, I believed *I* would never do such a thing.

Then I saw the positive pregnancy test.

I didn't believe it at first—we had been using protection. But the second test was positive too. I called my boyfriend in a panic and told him I was pregnant. I'm not sure what I expected from him—maybe sympathy, maybe assurance that he would help me, somehow.

“Well, you need to get an abortion,” he said. His voice was firm, unequivocal.

“That’s not something I ever, ever thought I would do,” I said through tears.

“You need to get an abortion,” he repeated.

I called up the Army Clinic, hoping that someone there could provide a neutral explanation of what my options might be. Instead, I got another cut-and-dry response. The nurse on the phone said matter-of-factly, “Just so you know, I had an abortion, and now I have three kids and I’m happily married. So, my life is better because of it.”

Was this really the only option available to me? “I feel really confused and scared,” I told her.

“Call Planned Parenthood and make an appointment,” she said. “You’ll feel better once it’s over.”

The woman at Planned Parenthood told me I needed to come in soon—time was running out. I learned later on, that wasn’t true; I could have taken more time to make the decision. But I felt pressure on every side to *do it*, to *get it done*. Every bit of the situation made me feel trapped—the pregnancy, my relationship, my ambitions, the advice I received from all sides, which went against everything I’d been taught. On top of that, I felt bowled over with fear and shame. I felt like my back was against a wall, and the walls were closing in. Everything seemed to communicate that there was just one door out—so, I pursued that door.

I took the medicine on a Friday morning. Then I went to work, feeling like a shred of myself. After work, I went home to my empty house, alone.

I remained alone all weekend, as my body processed the abortion. It felt impossible to process the emotions that went with it.

I thought I had chosen freedom, but I did not feel free. I reeled at the eternal consequences that seemed to be pressing in on me. *I just did an unredeemable sin*, I thought bleakly. *So, I guess I’m going to hell now. That’s what I’ve chosen.*

I had always considered myself to be a good person. I did the right things, I obeyed the laws, I was contributing to society. If God let good people into heaven, I had always assumed I’d be welcomed in.

But on September 12, I realized the truth. I felt utterly wretched. I finally realized what a sinner I was. I had no righteousness of my own—no hope.

My next conclusion was born out of despair. *I may as well live it up here now, because this life is all I've got. If I'm going to hell anyway, I may as well sin big.*

The next Monday, I went back to work. It was the first official day of my master's program on the burn unit. One of the first patients I encountered on my rounds was Lieutenant Sam Brown. He was still intubated and wrapped in gauze, fighting to live.

As Sam began his process of healing, I began actively dying. Sam woke up from the fog of his hallucinations, as I was dulling my consciousness through alcohol and partying. Sam began receiving wound care as I piled new wounds of self-loathing, on top of despair, on top of my boyfriend's harsh treatment. While nurses were scrubbing Sam's dead tissue off in the debriding showers, I was deadening my values and my moral compass.

By the time I returned to the burn unit in November, I was in one of the darkest places of my life.

Yet there was Sam Brown, walking through the hallways. The tall, skinny burn patient who radiated confidence and joy. It took me aback. I'd see him making jokes with other patients, checking in on his care providers—the *patient*, checking on his *providers*—and I just couldn't make sense of him.

The evening after the case manager had told me about Sam's faith, I lay in bed in my dark bedroom. I pressed my eyes shut. What was wrong with me? I was partying like crazy. I was trying to "live my best life" before the hellfire and brimstone caught up with me. So, why did I feel so depressed?

Sam's radiant joy looked and felt *so different* from the darkness that seemed to swarm inside me. My sin felt overwhelming. On top of the abortion which felt unforgivable, I'd piled on so many others that made me feel deeply ashamed.

His scars are all on the outside, I thought with envy. They were

unmistakable: there for everyone to see. And yet his inner spirit emanated from him as something arresting and beautiful.

My scars were all internal. Underneath my polished, professional, pretty exterior, I felt like a monster. How long would it be until my inner darkness emanated from me like a cloud and swallowed me entirely?

I knew I needed help. I doubted God cared about me or would listen to me. I didn't even know if I believed in His existence anymore. But maybe faith was worth a last-ditch attempt to get out of this hole.

God, help me, I prayed.

I waited. Nothing happened. No spiritual force welled up inside me to pull me out of my swamp.

I lay in my bed and cried.

The next day, I went back to work. I saw him again: walking through the hallways. Checking in on his providers. I still had never spoken to Sam. But watching him recover, I became captivated by who he was—by who he seemed to be.

(Yes, this is something most people have a hard time believing at first, but I noticed Sam Brown way before Sam noticed me.)

Who *was* he anyway? I tried to shake myself out of my weird fascination by doing what any twenty-something would have done in 2008: I looked him up on Facebook. Maybe more data would cure my curiosity. Maybe he'd have obnoxious pictures or stupid quotes.

Instead, my research had the opposite effect. I saw pictures of him from before he was burned. I read his bio. I concluded that he was still pretty interesting.

He was very, very interesting.

I'd never spoken to him. He was burnt to a crisp. I had a boyfriend. Yet I was developing a major crush on Sam Brown.

It was embarrassing.

Right before Thanksgiving, I was bantering with James, the Physician's Assistant I shared an office with. We'd become friends, and James had heard me share plenty about my toxic relationship. He'd also heard me make a number of impressed observations about Sam

Brown. That day, I actually had an appointment with Sam—and his mother.

“You’re pretty new here, Amy,” he said, “So I’m going to help you out and give you some advice.”

I spun toward him in my office chair and smiled. “Okay,” I said. “Let’s hear it.”

“Burn unit mamas are next-level protective. And there are two moms in particular you don’t want to mess with.” He named a patient whose name washed past me. The second name didn’t. “...And Sam Brown’s mom. She will *lay the hammer down* on you if you mess up her son’s care in any way.”

I swallowed nervously. “I’m supposed to talk to Sam Brown and his mom this afternoon,” I told him. “To discuss his nutrition while he goes home for the holidays.”

He nodded and raised his eyebrows. “I know. *Be nice*. Don’t mess up.”

When the elevator doors opened, there was Sam and his mother. She was wearing a jacket with a military badge. With a jolt, I realized it said *Colonel*.

My heart began pounding. I was already nervous as a result of my weird crush, which felt awkward and inappropriate; then, my PA had put the fear of Tanya Brown in me; and now, she was wearing the badge of a Colonel? *You’d better nail this, Amy*, I thought. *Otherwise, you could end your career right here.*

I forced a smile. Gave a professional greeting. Started talking about nutritional supplements with Sam. Then we started talking about ensuring the nutritional supplements actually arrived on time—and suddenly, the possibility of them *not* arriving seemed like doomsday. *I will FOR SURE lose my job if they don’t arrive right when they should*, I thought.

“Why don’t I get your phone number so that I can make sure they arrive on time?” I suggested.

“You want my *phone number*?” Sam asked, delighted. “Sure, you can have my phone number.”

He was being flirty. Why was he being flirty?? I forced myself to engage as a consummate professional. Even so, I could feel my heart pounding. I touched my face with one hand and put the other on my hip, which immediately felt awkward, so then I held both hands out in front of me, but what was that?? I tucked them into the pocket of my scrubs. *There.* I smiled brightly again. “So, I’ll call you.” *Professional.*

Over the holidays, I called him twice from my parents’ house in South Dakota. My reason for calling was, again, purely professional: I just needed to confirm that he’d received the supplements he needed. Regardless of the fact that my stomach did somersaults before I dialed each time, and regardless of the fact that he was *so flirty* over the phone, I forced myself to act the way I believed a highly professional dietitian would.

Then we’d hang up.

And I would keep thinking about him.

I came back to work in late January, but didn’t cross paths with Sam. In between appointments and consultations, James and I caught up about the holidays in our shared office. I spent more time than necessary telling him about the conversations with Sam. “I swear, he was flirting with me,” I confided.

James hooted in scandalized delight over this. He was less enthusiastic when I described my interactions with my boyfriend.

“The word ‘trainwreck’ comes to mind,” he remarked.

I looked over at him. “It’s not as bad as I make it sound,” I said. Inwardly, I thought, *It’s actually worse.*

One morning, I showed up to work after having been at a nutrition conference for a few days. When I arrived at my office, James said, “Hey, I kept Lieutenant Brown an extra day for you.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“He had his eyelid release surgery. He expected to go home yesterday, but I kept him an extra day for you.”

I stared at James. “Why?”

He gave me a patronizing look, as though he needed to break things down for my slow comprehension. “So that you can check his

labs and have conversations with him about his medications and do your blah blah blah dietitian work. And also because I know you have a huge crush on him.”

“James!” I protested. “I have a *boyfriend*.”

“Oh yes, I forgot. Incidentally, Sam asked me if you had a boyfriend.”

I was stunned. “He did? What did he say?”

“He just asked me if I happened to know whether or not Lieutenant Larsen was dating anyone.”

My stomach did a jumpy little dance. “And what did you tell him?”

“I told him you weren’t.”

“*James!*” I was aghast. He shrugged, unapologetically, and grinned.

“Well—well, I *do* need to talk to Lieutenant Brown about some medication. As a matter of fact,” I said coolly. “So, thanks.” James nodded crisply and turned back to his computer with a satisfied little smile.

Sam and I talked. We discussed medication and his return to therapy and how it was going with the nutritional supplements. I was firmly boundaried and wholly professional.

But even professionals can laugh at a patient’s jokes, right? And the heart-pounding response was involuntary, so I don’t know how I could have helped that.

Later that afternoon, Sam knocked on my office door. James opened it and gestured to his desk chair. “Come on in, Sam. Sit down!” he said. “I’ve got to go check on a patient!” James flashed a grin at me and then bolted out into the hallway.

Sam looked at me. “Hey, Lieutenant Larsen. What are you working on?”

I glanced at my computer. “I’m calculating the caloric requirements for a patient.”

“Calories or kilocalories?”

I sat up straighter in my chair. “You know about kilocalories?” My heart began pounding again. Was it possible Sam actually knew the difference between a calorie and kilocalorie?

He rattled off the definition of a calorie—like, the *textbook* defi-

niton. Then he grinned, sheepishly. “I learned that in high school Chemistry. I can’t remember anything else I learned that year, but for some reason that stuck with me.”

Hearing a man rattle off the correct definition of a calorie was undeniably attractive. *Wow*, I thought. *This guy gets me!* I gulped. “Well, I am impressed that you know that.”

Apparently assured of his welcome, Sam sat down in James’ chair. “So...Lieutenant Larsen. There aren’t really a lot of other officers around here. And there’s really no one my age I can hang out with.” He was speaking slowly and hesitantly. It was endearing. “So, I was just wondering...would you ever want some Lieutenant time?”

Lieutenant time? I thought. I laughed. “Um...I don’t know if I’m allowed to do that, but I can check into it and see if I can hang out with you.”

He nodded rapidly. “Great. We can just be...friendly Lieutenants.”

I stifled another laugh and nodded. Sam stood up and grinned. Then he nodded awkwardly again and walked out. After a minute, James poked his head back in the office. “*So?*” he demanded.

“Sam asked me if I might want ‘Lieutenant time,’” I said.

James grimaced. “Is that supposed to be soldier lingo for a date?”

“I’m not sure what kind of lingo it is.” I laughed. “But he knew the correct definition of a calorie. So, that was cool.”

James nodded thoughtfully. “Thank God he had something to redeem ‘Lieutenant time.’”

The next morning, I checked in with the ICU Burn Dietitian who ran our team. I explained Sam’s invitation. “Is that appropriate...?” I asked.

She looked at me thoughtfully. “I’m sure it’s fine,” she said. “It’s not uncommon for burn patients to hang out with providers outside of work, given how long we end up working with them. There are lots of friendships that form. I suppose the only reason you’d want to practice caution is if there’s any chance of a romantic interest on either side. In that case, we’d probably want to assign him another dietitian.”

I nodded in understanding. My cheeks burned. “I think...it’s probably a good idea to assign him another dietitian.”

Her eyebrows raised and she smiled. “Really?”

“Better safe than sorry,” I said lamely.

Sam’s suggestion for “Lieutenant time” ended up being the San Antonio rodeo. Apparently, someone had given him tickets. I was game—except the rodeo was on February 14, Valentine’s Day.

I called my boyfriend. “Hey. Did you have any plans for us, for Valentine’s Day?”

“Not really,” he answered.

That’s what I’d guessed. “I got invited to go to the rodeo by one of the burn unit patients, Sam Brown,” I said. “Do you mind?”

He laughed. “One of the crispy critters invited you to the rodeo? Sure. Have fun.”

That took care of that.

The rodeo was a blast. Outside of the hospital, it felt easier to relax and be myself with Sam. I was surprised by how easy it was to fall into conversation. Every so often, I’d see someone look at him with alarm, but he never seemed to register people’s reactions to him—or maybe they just didn’t bother him. The only time he seemed self-conscious was when we were eating. I’d gotten a big, juicy burger. Sam had ordered a hot dog.

“It’s the only thing that will fit in my mouth,” he said sheepishly. He pulled the dog out of the bun and set it in the small cardboard container. Using a plastic knife and fork, he cut the hot dog into very thin slices. Carefully, he placed one thin slice on top of his fork and slid it sideways into the small opening of his mouth.

I looked at him apologetically, then took a massive bite out of my burger. Mayonnaise and ketchup squirted out the side.

He watched me wistfully. Then his eyes took on the glint of a wiseass. “Don’t eat too many of those, they’ll go to your hips.”

That *cracked me up*. “Maybe we should work some of these into *your* diet, Sam,” I teased.

He looked down at his emaciated legs. "Are you implying I'm not at the peak of physical perfection?" I grinned and shrugged.

Toward the end of the rodeo, Sam leaned over toward me. "I'm supposed to go to a wedding next weekend," he said. "It's in Houston. Want to go with me? It would be great to have some company on the drive."

I felt a thrill. Another date? Was *this* a date? "Is it an overnight thing?" I asked.

He nodded. "But it's a family event. My parents will be there. Everything will be fully chaperoned."

I nodded slowly, registering both his flirtatious implications and the fact that his "fully chaperoned" comment was a sign he probably thought I lived with a whole lot more propriety than I actually did. What would this Bible-reading, joy-emanating man think of my wild partying lifestyle? I didn't want to know.

I called up my boyfriend and filled him in on my plans. Once again, he didn't care.

The following weekend, Sam climbed into the passenger seat of my car and we began the long drive to Houston. He shared more about his childhood, and his time at West Point, and stories from his military training. I kept peppering him with questions. I didn't want to talk about myself. Anything to keep him from finding out who I really was behind my professional exterior. Anything to keep him from recognizing the rot inside.

At the wedding, I saw his mother again and warmly greeted her, trying not to let my nervousness show. I also met his father for the first time.

"Colonel Brown? Ah, so *you're* the Colonel. I remember seeing your badge on a coat Mrs. Brown had been wearing. Pleasure to meet you, Sir."

The ceremony was short. Everyone seemed eager to get through the "serious stuff" and start the party. Sitting at one of the reception tables, I remarked to Sam, "I can remember the first wedding I went to, as a little girl. It seemed *magical* to me. I thought it was proof fairy tales were real."

“Happily ever after?” he supplied.

I gave a short laugh. “That was the impression of a very *young* girl. Obviously, I know now that relationships and marriage are a lot more complicated than that. Not sure anyone gets a fairy-tale ending.”

He studied me. “So what do you think marriage is about now?”

I thought about that. “I envision marriage being a lifelong, faithful commitment.”

“Me too.”

He glanced at me sideways. “I always hoped I’d end up being married to my best friend.”

“Same. Like, that we’d do everything together. And I hope that my marriage feels like a partnership,” I said. “I want us to feel like a team.” Even while I was speaking, it occurred to me that my current boyfriend fit none of these descriptions.

“And that we’d have similar values,” Sam suggested.

I nodded again. “I always hoped that my future husband would have a strong love of God.”

“*Really?*” Sam said. He turned to face me directly. “Well, that is *very* interesting. Are you a Christian?”

I nearly spat out my drink. *Actually, I’m going to hell in a handbasket.* “Not exactly. I mean—I was raised religious, but...that hasn’t really been my thing for a while.” I was thankful the lights were low so Sam couldn’t see me turn red. That was one advantage of his scarring, I thought, wryly: he never gave away a blush.

He stared at me thoughtfully, which made me inwardly cringe. Had I given too much away? Would he guess what a sinner I actually was?

“But you want a husband who loves God?” he asked.

I couldn’t explain why I felt that way. But I knew, even as I surprised myself with the words I’d spoken, they were true. Regardless of how I was living, I wanted God to be a fixture in my life. That seemed like too much to ask of God, given how miserably I’d let Him down. But maybe I could have that “God fixture” vicariously if I married a guy who was closer to holiness.

I shrugged. "I've just always felt like God is an important part of a marriage, for some reason."

Our conversation was interrupted by Tanya, who leaned across the table toward us. "Samuel," she said, speaking loudly over the chatter of the other wedding guests. "I've decided I'm going to be moving back to Virginia in a few weeks."

"What? Why?" he asked.

"Well, Samuel, it's been almost six months and your younger siblings need their mother back home. You're stable enough that you can start caring for yourself. Besides—" She gestured to me and smiled. "I think it's best your mother gets herself out of the way so things can develop here."

I dropped my eyes into my lap. *Were* things developing here? I pushed away the thought of my boyfriend, then immediately wondered what Sam would think of me if he knew I had a boyfriend... or if he knew about the partying...or the abortion. *I'm such a mess*, I thought.

A noisy guest sitting near Tanya drunkenly gestured with his drink, then guffawed loudly. "That's what I'm talking 'bout!" he called to a couple grinding on the dance floor. Tanya looked at him distastefully.

"Well, I've had enough of chit-chat," she announced abruptly. "Samuel. Will you please share your testimony with our table? I think it's time for something edifying."

Sam didn't skip a beat. He sat up straight—the posture of a soldier. "I grew up in the church. I was always taught about Jesus and God, but I didn't truly put my trust in Him then, even though I thought I did. My trust was in my own mind and abilities."

The drunken wedding guest had swiveled his head toward Sam and was studying him. "Is this the story of what happened to your face? Because I've been wondering what the hell happened to you all night."

"Hush," Tanya said. "Let him tell it."

Sam nodded. "I experienced a lot of success—West Point, then Ranger School, then I was assigned to the First Infantry Division to lead a platoon on deployment. But then during my deployment in

Afghanistan, my vehicle hit an IED,” he said. “I was sitting right in front of the diesel tank and got covered in the gas and the flammable material from the explosive device. And all of that caught on fire.”

“Holy shit,” the guy breathed out, staring slack-mouthed at Sam. “How’d you get put out?”

I stared at Sam, curious. I’d never heard him tell the story of his accident, although I knew a few of the details from his medical history. I’d wanted to ask, but hadn’t worked up the nerve.

Sam continued. “First off, I somehow found myself standing outside the vehicle, on my feet, without any memory of how I got there. I think that was a miracle. And then, I threw my arms into the air and yelled out, ‘Jesus, save me!’”

“That’s my favorite part,” Tanya breathed. She leaned toward me and tapped my hand. “He was also calling out for his mother.”

The guy shook his head in drunken amazement. “And he saved you.” He snapped. “Just like that?”

“No, not exactly,” Sam smiled. “I tried ‘stop, drop, and roll,’ which didn’t work. So then I got up and ran, which made the flames worse. And then I had three final thoughts: first, ‘How long does it take to burn to death?’”

“Holy shit,” the guy repeated.

“Second: what is the transition between this life and the next going to be? And a follow-up realization, which was...that I had no idea where I was going.”

I felt a weight on my chest. I’d been thinking those same thoughts a lot recently. But I hadn’t called out for Jesus—I’d concluded that I was going to hell.

Sam finished. “And then my last thought was just...giving up the will to live.” Across the table, Tanya nodded soberly. She had tears in her eyes.

I stared at Sam. “So, then what happened?” I prompted.

“I heard the voice of one of my guys, Kevin Jensen, yell out, ‘Sir, I’ve got you!’ And he jumped down next to me, and started putting out the flames.” At the mention of his other soldier’s name, Sam’s voice

got thick and choked up. After a pause, he said, "I believe that God saved me for a purpose, and that the life I live now is not my own."

"Praise God," Tanya said quietly.

The wedding guest sighed. "That's heavy." He tossed the rest of his drink back. "You're a real badass, man. I hope you have a great life now. We're all pulling for you." He got up from the table and went out to the dance floor.

"Thanks," Sam said. He glanced over at me. I didn't make eye contact with him.

How does that happen? I wondered. *How do you get to a place where you're literally burning alive and your response is to call out for JESUS, rather than shout out curse words?*

I don't remember what else we talked about that night. After the wedding, we went back to Sam's relative's house and went to bed in our separate rooms. I lay in bed awake and stared at the ceiling. My thoughts were stuck on one certain conclusion.

Whatever he has, I need.

The next morning, Sam and I got back in my car and began the long drive back to San Antonio. I didn't have an arsenal of questions prepared this time; I had too much on my mind. As a result, Sam managed to ask *me* a question.

"So... You heard me tell my testimony yesterday. My story about why I follow Jesus. What did you think of it?"

I sucked in my breath. "Well..." I hesitated. Then, I decided I may as well be candid. "If *I* was on fire in the desert, that would not have been my response: 'Jesus, save me.'"

"What would have been your response?" he asked.

"Probably a four-letter word." I tried to laugh, although I knew that neither of us found it funny.

Sam looked over at me. "I'm concerned about your salvation."

My jaw dropped. I looked back at him. I couldn't believe the audacity of what he'd said, but I also felt gratified to hear *someone* say aloud the thought that had been haunting me for the past four months. After a stunned silence, I said, "Well—that's great, because I am too!"

The words hung between us for a moment. It was the truest thing I'd said to him. In fact, it was the truest thing I'd said to anyone in months.

After a beat, Sam nodded. "All right. Well, can I tell you about Jesus?"

For the next fifteen minutes, Sam explained who Jesus was. He explained that we were created to live in harmony with God and one another, but humans rebelled against God, leading to all the brokenness and pain in the world. He told me that Jesus was God in human form—that Jesus had come to earth to live a perfect life and show us a way back to wholeness and peace. "Jesus allowed Himself to be killed like a criminal on the cross to atone for all of our sins," Sam said. "He died on the cross for me and you. And then He rose from the dead, which showed His power over sin and death. That's why Jesus is such a big deal—He frees us from our guilt and shame and brokenness and pride. He did all of that because He loves you, Amy."

"Interesting," I said. In my mind I was thinking, *That's cool that you say that. But you don't know what I've done.*

I didn't say that out loud though. I didn't want my scars to scare him off.

Finally, I got as close as possible by saying, "Maybe Jesus isn't enough for everyone's sins. Maybe some sins are just too bad."

Sam didn't manage to convert me during that car ride. But by the time we arrived back in San Antonio, I had agreed to go to church with him.

We had a number of loaded conversations over the next few weeks. Every time God came up, Sam kept emphasizing the same truth: Jesus *was* enough for my sin. He found me scriptures to prove his points. I wasn't convinced. I still believed I was too far gone.

One night, we were finishing up dinner on the patio at the Alamo Heights Panera. Sam was trying to explain the power of God's grace, and that Jesus' death on the cross was enough for whatever sins I'd committed. I interrupted him. "Sam, you don't get it. You don't know what I've *done*."

He stared at me. “I don’t need to know what you’ve done.”

“Yes, you *do*. Christians are good people. Look at you—you’re, like, on this pedestal. I’m not a good person. I thought I was, but I’m not.” I started to cry. I looked around me, self-conscious.

“Do you want to go to the car?” he asked. I nodded.

Sitting in my car, in that Panera parking lot, I confessed everything. I told him about the abortion. I told him about all the partying. I told him about my awful boyfriend. “See?” I said through tears. “That’s why I can’t believe Jesus is enough for me.”

Sam seemed sobered by my confession, but undeterred. He began flipping through his Bible. “Listen to this, from Acts 22,” he said. “This is the Apostle Paul talking—he wrote most of the New Testament and was one of the most important leaders of the early church. But before he became a Christian, he actually hunted down Christians and arrested them. He even helped kill the first martyr, Stephen. In these verses, he’s protesting to God about how sinful he is.”

Like me, I thought.

“*Lord... I took Christians out of every Jewish place of worship. I had them beaten and put in prison,*” Sam read, “*Also when Stephen was killed, I stood there and watched them throw stones at him. Those who threw the stones had me watch their coats.*” He looked up from the Bible. “Amy—*this* is the guy that God inspired to write the New Testament! But before he believed in Jesus, he stood by and clapped while another Christian was being killed. If Jesus is enough for him, don’t you think it’s possible that Jesus is enough for you?”

I stared at Sam through tears. *Could* it be possible?

He moved toward me and took my hand in his bandaged one. “Everything you’ve done, Amy—that’s not who you are. You are loved by God. And you’re forgiven. So... You just don’t need to worry about that anymore.”

I sobbed out a laugh. “That feels really good to hear.”

“It’s true,” he said gently.

My face crumpled again. “I can’t believe you’re not rejecting me right now,” I said. “I thought you’d hear all that and be like, ‘That’s a

bit much for me. Thanks for sharing that, but now we're done.' But you're not." He squeezed my hand. "And it feels really good to not be rejected."

"It sort of blows my mind that you thought that *I* would reject *you*," he said quietly. "Most people look at me and think..." His voice trailed off.

I looked at him. "Sam. You are *such* an exceptional, kind person. You inspire me."

He stared down at our clasped hands and spoke my own words back to me. "That feels really good to hear."

We prayed together. My own words felt clumsy—I still wondered if God even wanted to hear from me. But when Sam prayed, the words were full of grace and love and faith. It felt like I had been suffocating in a small, dark space and then someone threw open the door and filled it with oxygen. By the time we said "Amen," I felt lighter. The experience was draining—both physically and emotionally. But the shame had also drained out too.

A few days later, Sam and I went on a run together. This was something else that astounded me: he could keep pace with me in a 5K, despite all those gnarly burns. "I've been thinking about something," he said, staring ahead at the path.

"What's that?" I panted.

"The other night, you mentioned that you had a boyfriend."

I felt a stab of guilt. *Sort of*. We jogged a few yards before I answered. "It's not a good relationship."

"Can you help me understand... What's going on in *this* relationship?" he asked. "I mean, we've just been hanging out a lot. I was mainly hoping for a friendship to start with. I didn't think I should expect anything more. But... I'm wondering..." *Slap, slap, slap*. The sound of our shoes hitting the pavement collided with the blood pounding in my ears. "Well—*should* I hope for anything more?"

"Yes," I said simply.

He looked sharply at me. "Yes?"

I nodded. "Yes."

It was hard to get out any more than that word—especially at the pace we were going. I knew how different this relationship with Sam was from anything else I'd experienced. This wasn't just a fun dating thing, or a crush based on physical attractiveness. This was something much, much deeper. For the first time in my life, I was profoundly emotionally invested with a man I respected more than anyone I'd ever met—one who also respected *me*.

I looked over at him. "I'm committed."

"Well—me too!" He stopped running and grinned. "So—are we doing this?"

I stopped and laughed. "We're doing this."

He cocked his face. "Hang on though—I don't want to just date for fun," he said. "I only want to date you long enough to figure out if there are any red flags. If we date, I'm thinking it's with the intention of getting married."

"Well, that's a pretty huge paradigm shift for me," I admitted. "I've always dated 'to see where things go,' not to look for red flags. But frankly, I'm kind of over dating for entertainment. It feels like a waste."

He studied me. "You're not freaked out by me bringing up marriage?"

"Surprisingly...no." I shook my head. "I don't want something casual with you."

I broke up with the boyfriend—ex-boyfriend—that afternoon.

Sam and I spent the next month dating with the kind of over-achieving zeal both of us tended to practice in every other area of our lives. Knowing that we were dating with the intention of getting married, we focused our conversations on the big stuff: what we wanted out of life, our hopes and goals, our expectations of a marriage partner, and so on. In conversations with Sam and through my new church attendance, I kept learning about God and Jesus.

In mid-April, Sam and I were nearing a month of being "officially" together. "Hey, Amy," he said to me. "I like round numbers."

I looked over at him and grinned. Where was *this* going? "Cool. I like round numbers too."

“I was discharged from the hospital almost exactly one month after being admitted. My mother was here for almost exactly six months. And now we’ve been dating for almost a month—”

“You want to get engaged by April 19, when we’ve dated exactly a month?” I asked.

He opened his mouth and then closed it. Then he cracked a little smile and didn’t say anything. I didn’t know it then, but he had already bought the ring.

It was fast—it was crazy fast. But we had discussed that no one could ever truly know another person until you were married to them. Until you’re actually living together, doing life side by side, it’s too easy to put your best foot forward. We decided that marriage meant the commitment to work through it, regardless of what challenges came up. With God at the center of our relationship, we’d find a way to navigate our challenges and stay together.

Conveniently, we were going to be traveling to New York together on April 19 because Sam had been invited to speak at a West Point military event. On the 18th, we were walking together in Central Park and found ourselves in a beautiful spot. The sun was shining; we saw blossoming trees perfectly reflected in a nearby pond. Everything was perfect.

This is it, I urged him, mentally. Propose right here.

“Do you have anything on your mind?” I prompted.

He sighed, happily. “Doesn’t the sunshine feel good?”

He moved us forward on the path, and we left the perfect spot. Our conversation turned toward the West Point event from the day before, and I realized he wasn’t going to propose. I felt annoyed.

He didn’t propose that night at dinner, or back in the hotel room that night. The next morning, we had brunch plans. Sam needed to take a shower and get ready.

This was a new realization for me: burn patients take *so long to get ready*. The unwrapping, the wound care, the re-wrapping...I started feeling impatient. “Sam, we’ve got stuff we need to do. Can you please hurry up?”

He had climbed back into bed after getting out of the shower and called me over to him.

I hurried over. “You ready? Let’s go!”

He looked at me and smiled. He didn’t say anything.

“Sam—*what*? What’s going on?”

He pulled a velvet box out from underneath the pillow. “I just wanted to know if you would marry me.”

I laughed—relieved that the wait was over. “Yes!”

So then, we were engaged! It hadn’t happened in the perfect spot. Sam hadn’t been in the perfect kneeling position. And it had all occurred in the midst of delayed plans and wound care.

It wasn’t the proposal of my dreams, but in retrospect, it was perfectly fitting for the years of marriage ahead of us.

We planned for a six-month engagement, but both of our parents had scheduling conflicts. When we went back to the calendar to look at other options, we realized that—between Sam’s surgery schedule and my work—our only other option was Memorial Day weekend: five weeks away.

We threw the wedding together. All we needed was a dress, a photographer, and a place—right? I got a dress. We booked a photographer. And one of Sam’s friends agreed to host us at their beautiful home in Hill Country north of San Antonio, Texas. Our immediate families came—that was the first day my parents met Sam. It was all a little crazy.

Sam asked his friend, Warren Haggray, the hospital chaplain, to marry us. As he boomed out a prayer in his strong voice, he said what both Sam and I were feeling:

“Lord, we praise You for bringing these two beloved souls together. Thank You that Amy is able to see Sam for the amazing person he is. Thank You that Sam is able to see Amy as a beautifully redeemed soul. Thank You for their commitment to each other and their commitment to You as their Lord and Savior. Bless them as they learn to live together and help them to navigate the challenges ahead. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

It was a good prayer. And we needed every bit of that blessing. Those first years of marriage were some of the most beautiful, wonderful, and challenging years of our lives.