

CHAPTER 12

WOUNDED WARRIOR



Preparing to deploy and proudly sporting the "Big Red 1" patch of the First Infantry Division—though this patch was in combat gray. Around April 2008.

I knew where I was going.

Toward the end of my Infantry Officer training, I was assigned to the Second Brigade, First Cavalry Division, headed to Iraq. As soon as I wrapped up my training, I would head to Fort Hood, Texas, to prepare for the deployment. I'd spoken with the personnel there and had a plan to pick up all the gear being issued to me for that specific deployment. I knew I wouldn't have long in Fort Hood before I got on a plane and joined the unit in Iraq.

I knew all of that.

Less than two weeks before I was scheduled to leave Fort Benning, the plan changed. A group of around thirty of us got called out one morning at formation. "Wait for everyone else to clear out," we were ordered. We waited. Everyone else was dismissed.

An officer stepped forward. "The group of y'all thought that you knew what unit you were going to. Well, plans have changed. You've heard the phrase, 'needs of the Army.' The Army has just decided it needs to stand up a new Infantry brigade. They're going to pull one together from scratch, and y'all are gonna be part of that new brigade. So, congratulations on being the first soldiers to join—" He studied the piece of paper he held. "Third Brigade of the First Infantry Division. You will likely have one year to train up before you lead your troops in either Iraq or Afghanistan." He looked back up at us and nodded sharply. "That's your new unit assignment."

As soon as I heard him say "First Infantry Division," I was instantly taken back to a memory from childhood.

It was a family road trip. I was still a young kid, but I already knew I wanted to be in the military when I grew up. I had no plan, thought, or idea about doing anything else. I remember squinting out the window, watching fields go by through dusty clouds. While driving through Kansas, my father decided to have us stop at Fort Riley, home of the First Infantry Division.

We went to the gift shop. It was air-conditioned and cool, a respite

from the hot sun outside. Mother and Father told me I could pick out a souvenir.

I wandered, looking at T-shirts, mugs, keychains. None of them captured my attention.

Then I found a basket of large brass coins. I picked one up. It felt heavy in my palm—a good kind of heft. I studied it. In the middle of the coin was a raised image of the First Infantry Division patch—a green patch with a big, red “1” in the center. Around the outer edge of the coin was inscribed a motto: *No mission too difficult, no sacrifice too great. Duty first.*

The clarity and call of the motto sent a thrill through me, even as a kid.

We bought the coin. I studied it in the car and held it tight in my hand until it became warm and sweaty. Back home in Arkansas, the coin became one of my most prized possessions. I cherished it throughout my childhood, carrying it everywhere. I knew that motto by heart. It became something sacred to me: a kind of commandment to live by.

When I arrived at Fort Hood to join up with the new brigade, I picked up my gear from the Central Issue Facility. Back in my apartment just outside post, I dug through my duffel bag and pulled out one of my uniforms. There it was: the green patch. The “Big Red 1.” The motto flashed through my mind. Later, it was repeated over and over by our officers throughout the deployment preparation.

No mission too difficult, no sacrifice too great. Duty first.

I had been assigned to the First Infantry Division, and the motto I’d memorized as a kid was now *my* unit’s motto. It felt like destiny, somehow. I’d arrived exactly where I was meant to be. I was going exactly where I was meant to go.

Plans had changed—but I still knew that.

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS. SUMMER 2011. AGE TWENTY-SEVEN.



A "Wounded Warrior." Spring 2011.

Way back on the hospital grounds, behind the barracks which housed recovering enlisted soldiers, there were a few small trailers. As I approached them, I thought of the “portables” my middle school used when the student population overwhelmed the main building: little, shabby, one-story structures. I scanned the small nameplates on the doors until I found the one I was looking for: “Wounded Warrior Battalion: Bravo Company.”

I paused before climbing the stairs. I was in a bad mood.

My healing journey was drawing to a close—after three years, I was finally preparing to “graduate” from the endless therapy sessions and surgeries that had defined my life since the accident in September of 2008. I had looked forward to this threshold as the moment when the military would take me back. Once I was healed, I could return to service. I could start up my career as an Infantry Officer again—ideally, contributing all the new knowledge and experiences I’d gained over the past few years to lead with greater wisdom and efficacy. This goal had kept me going.

Instead, the military was kicking me out.

“You don’t have to take it personally,” Amy had urged me. “A medical retirement is honorable. It means you served and sacrificed for your country. They *appreciate* you.”

But that’s not how it felt. I’d dreamed about a career in the military for my entire life. I didn’t *want* to be medically retired—I wanted to serve my country. Without that service to look forward to, I wasn’t sure what was left. I couldn’t even lean on my temporary mission of encouraging the soldiers and staff in the burn unit anymore, since I was moving on from the hospital.

I’d been in such a great place for much of my healing journey, but now the last vestiges of my former identity were being pulled out of my grasp. Empty-handed, I felt anxious, frustrated, and unanchored.

Who was I supposed to be, if not a leader? What was I supposed to do now, if not serve?

The worst part was, the military was trying to make me feel good about it. First, they’d promoted me to Captain—a promotion that I

accepted as a matter of course, one which Amy had also received in due time. And now, they wanted to give me an award.

I sighed as I climbed the creaking steps of the trailer. When I opened the door, I was greeted with a blast of frigid air-conditioning. Inside, there were posters up all over the beige walls, arranged haphazardly. Some were motivational—or at least, that seemed to be the intent. Others were sterile bureaucratic government disclaimers and announcements. Behind a desk, there was a bulletin board covered messily with information about various events, resume workshops, suicide prevention classes, and so on. The desk in front of it was likewise piled with messy stacks of paper.

“Close the door behind you to keep the air in.”

The man sitting behind the desk waved me in without looking up. With his beige shirt, pale skin, and ashy blond hair, he nearly disappeared into the stacks of papers around him.

I shut the door and stepped toward the desk. The structure groaned as I moved.

The man glanced up. “Captain Brown?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He began rifling through some of the papers on his desk. “Hang on. I just saw your paperwork this morning...”

I waited. His fumbling with the papers seemed to exaggerate his large hands and thick fingers. “Looks like they keep you pretty busy in here,” I remarked.

He sighed and shook his head. “Tons of paperwork goes into retiring people out of the military.”

I nodded, trying not to let “retiring out of the military” feel like a personal insult. I looked at the motivational poster on the wall behind him. It was the silhouette of a soldier aiming a machine gun, backed by a yellow sky. A giant word at the bottom said, “BELIEVE.” Underneath, in much smaller letters, I read, “*If we are strong, our strength will speak for itself.*”

Annoyed, I looked back down at the stout man at the desk. He looked like the type of guy who might have played sports in col-

lege—maybe wrestling or D2 football. He looked tired now. Worn out. Another casualty of the machine.

“There we go! Captain Samuel Brown.” With a heavy sigh, he pulled a stapled packet of paper from the pile and looked up at me, seeming to register my face for the first time. He smiled blandly. “Congratulations. The Army intends to issue you a Meritorious Service Medal.”

“No,” I said, feeling a flash of anger.

“No?” His forehead wrinkled. “Why ‘no’?”

“For the last three years, all I’ve done is endure therapy, surgeries, and convert oxygen to carbon dioxide. Meanwhile, there are young men and women literally putting their lives on the line right now, and in some cases dying. And most of the time, they get little or no recognition for that. I do not deserve a ‘Meritorious’ award, so please don’t write me up for one.”

The man blinked and looked down at the paperwork, then back up at me. “Well—but, this is customary. This is about your service as a whole. This is what we *do* for people who are retiring.” He shook the paper. “You served honorably,” he protested.

I bristled at the man’s attempted affirmation. “Yes, I served honorably. But I still feel like accepting this award would be an insult to the people fighting in combat overseas.”

This—whether or not I deserved it—felt like a consolation prize, written all over with pity. “Do not write me up for a Meritorious Service Medal. I will refuse to take it.”

The man seemed on the verge of protesting again, then apparently decided it wasn’t worth the effort. “All right. Well, in that case, your retirement date is September 27. Two months from now. You’ll need to make an appointment to come back next week to fill out some paperwork. There’ll be a lot of paperwork.” He let out a sigh that wasn’t quite a wheeze. “That’s all for today then, Captain Brown.”

It was a relief to get out of there.

As I walked back through the campus, my phone buzzed. I looked at the caller ID: *Anthony Roszko*. I picked it up. “Hey, man.”

“LT!” Anthony’s deep, familiar voice made me smile, despite my mood. I was thankful we’d stayed in touch, even after our awkward first meeting following his return from deployment. The old dynamic had been easy to find again after he got used to the shock of my burns and we’d maintained a strong friendship. “How are you doing?” he asked.

I didn’t want to say much on that. “Doing fine. How about you?”

Anthony sighed. “Well, looks like my military career is over.”

“Wait—what?” I asked. Was it possible Anthony was in the same boat I was in? I knew he’d sustained a number of injuries during his deployments. Was he being medically retired too?

“I mean—not *actually*,” he said. “But I don’t get to do the fun stuff anymore. They’re parking me stateside. I’ve got an assignment at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, as a Staff NCO. No more deployments.”

“A hard-charging guy like you, working a desk job?”

He sighed again. “Yeah, man. It sucks, right?”

I felt myself shifting back into the mode that had become second nature over the past two years—that of encourager. It was a relief to have a reason to shift out of my grim mental state into something more positive. “You’ve served honorably. You’ve been on multiple deployments. This is a good thing. Your body needs a break from the field. Hasn’t your back been all messed up?”

“Yeah. And I’m still having issues with the shrapnel wounds.”

“You should take advantage of this time to start addressing some of your medical stuff. Don’t squander the opportunity to start doing PT on some of your physical injuries. Trust me, I know what I’m talking about.”

He laughed. “I guess you do, LT. You’re right, I know. Everything works out the way it’s supposed to.”

Everything works out the way it’s supposed to. The phrase was characteristic of Anthony’s stoicism. In fact, it was the kind of thing I would say too. I tried to apply the encouragement to the sting of my medical retirement. Is this really how things were supposed to work out?

“Besides,” Anthony continued, “it’s good for me to be there for my

family. Bailey's going to use the GI bill to get her degree, and I'm going to be able to be with the kids more. Be more engaged as a dad."

"That's awesome, Roszko."

"You too right? You and Amy can get more family time, now that you're retiring." I swallowed hard. I didn't answer.

He tried again. "Any idea what you're going to do, LT?" he asked.

I paused, wishing I could answer Anthony with the confidence I used to feel as his platoon leader. "No, man. Not yet. And you've got to stop calling me LT. I won't be in the military much longer. It's just Sam now."

* * *

It was increasingly urgent that I figure out my next step.

For the last three years, my mission had been to heal. Now I had to find a new mission. Specifically, I needed to discover who I wanted to be professionally outside of the military. Amy was pregnant with our first child, and he would arrive before the end of the summer.

The fact that we were on the cusp of parenthood together felt like another miracle. When we'd first dated, Amy had told me she never intended to have children. Despite my own desire to be a dad, I'd accepted that. But a visit to Steven Smith and his family had changed her mind. He and his wife had made us the godparents of their daughter, and I'd watched Amy soften throughout the visit as she cuddled their baby. On the way home, she'd told me, "I've changed my mind about having kids. I *do* want that for us."

During her pregnancy, she'd also made the decision that she'd like to stay home with our children. I wanted to support her desire to be a stay-at-home mom, whether it was temporary or long term. I viewed it as my responsibility and duty to support her—especially given how much she had nurtured and supported me in the midst of my three-year recovery process.

Our relationship so far had been nothing like a traditional marriage where the husband has an identity related to his profession and

takes responsibility for a large part of the financial burden. From the beginning of our relationship, I hadn't been able to do that. I had *no* professional identity. In fact, once I realized that military retirement was soon to be my reality, I confronted an identity crisis. I now felt like a shell of a man. I'd focused so entirely on my external physical recovery, clinging to the dream of returning to military service for so long, that—without it—I wasn't sure who to be at this point, or even who I was.

Amy had shouldered nearly every burden in our marriage: our finances, my care, the professional identity. We had chosen to come together during a time when we each struggled to see how anyone else could ever love us. That bond had forged a trust and commitment that had helped weld us together during our first couple years. But I hadn't been able to offer much to her beyond that.

And I *wanted* to. After all the encouragement and support she'd given me, she deserved it.

A lifeline seemed to present itself through one of the connections I'd made doing volunteer work in veterans communities. A wealthy businessman and military veteran in Dallas had decided to create a service-based startup to help veterans and wanted to hire me.

I told Amy about it one evening as we went for a walk. Once she'd entered her third trimester, we'd had to stop running together, but the dogs still gave us an excuse to go walking. We'd waited to go until dusk to try to beat the heat, but the muggy San Antonio air was still oppressive.

I was excited, telling Amy about the job. "He wants me to come on and help define the mission of the organization," I told her. "It would mean I'm in a position to serve people again—other veterans. If I can't be in the service myself anymore, I like that I could at least help other veterans."

"That sounds amazing!" she said. "When do you start?"

"I can start as soon as I'm ready. But Amy—there's kind of a small thing." I had been dreading telling her this next part. "He wants to base the startup in Dallas. I'm going to have to commute."

She looked at me with a shocked expression. The drone of cicadas filled up the pause before she spoke again. “You’re going to commute to *Dallas*? That’s a plane flight away, Sam.”

I nodded. “Yeah. It will probably mean I’m gone for four days, then three days back. Or maybe five days gone, and I’ll come home on the weekends.”

She stared down at the cracked sidewalk. “We’re about to have a *baby*, Sam.”

“I know,” I said quickly. “That’s why I feel like I have to take this. This can help me provide for us. It’s a great opportunity to do something I love—serving others in need, and I’ll get to know people in a great network of successful professionals.”

She nodded. Her eyes were shiny like she might cry. The dog lunged toward one of the big leafy trees, barking up into the branches at some unseen squirrel. Amy yanked the dog leash back. “Are you upset?” I asked.

She shrugged and shook her head. “I’m excited for you. But a commute to Dallas is not my favorite piece of news at the end of a crappy day.”

“You’ve had a crappy day?” I asked. “What happened?”

Her voice got extra teary. “Work is really bad right now.”

“What? *Why*?” The last I’d heard, Amy was killing it at work. She had recently earned a Certified Nutrition Support Clinician certification and was one of only a few dietitians in the Army to have it. In recognition of her particular expertise, she’d been moved from the burn unit to the medical intensive care unit and had been told to develop new protocols and research for all the other dietitians to follow. In the world of BAMC dietitians, she was a top performer.

“I got moved to patient tray duty today,” she said. She burst into tears.

“*What*?” I demanded. A simple task like patient tray duty made no sense for someone with Amy’s credentials and experience.

“They just pulled me out of the ICU. They gave me no warning—it was just like, ‘You’re leaving. This is no longer your job. You’re going

down to the basement to do patient tray service.’ Sam, *everyone* thinks this is the worst job!”

“But why would they do that? Don’t they know what an asset you are?”

“Because I’m *pregnant*,” she said angrily. “No—not because I’m pregnant. Because I want to stay home with our kids. Because I’m planning to get out of the Army once I finish my term. And now the Army has decided that everything they’ve invested in me becoming a critical care dietitian was wasted. It’s a *punishment*.” She sobbed.

I looked for something to offer her by way of a tissue. There was nothing. I held out the bottom of my T-shirt, feeling useless. She shook her head and gestured ahead. We were coming up on our house.

“The worst thing is *how* they’re going about it,” she vented. “My Commanding Officer has actually been telling people, ‘Oh, that Captain Brown, she thinks she’s so special.’ Like she didn’t think it wouldn’t get around to me. And then today, she calls me in—‘I’m moving you to patient tray service.’” She let out another furious sob as she climbed the steps of our porch and began unleashing the dogs.

I shook my head in disbelief. The woman I loved more than anything was upset. Somehow, I needed to fix it.

“I’m going to go confront her about this,” I said.

She looked over at me, alarmed. “Sam. Don’t do that.”

I felt a surge of righteous anger. “I’m going to.”

The next day, I did. I sat down with Amy’s OIC and lectured her about leadership. I don’t remember exactly what I said or how this Lieutenant Colonel responded. I might have ultimately made things worse. But at least I had gone to battle for my wife. At least I had *tried*.

That seemed to be Amy’s impression too. “I’m kind of scared about what might happen now,” she told me that evening. “But it makes me feel really loved that you went to bat for me.”

I was glad that was her impression. The experience had left me feeling mostly impotent.

We resigned ourselves to my Dallas commute. As Amy and our firstborn son were figuring out their new life and bonding together, I

began regularly getting on flights to Dallas for my new professional life.

I tried to settle into a new groove—one in which the focus was no longer on me and my progress, but on others—one in which I no longer got the attention as a wounded warrior, but sought to *help* other wounded warriors. In many ways, the job was exactly what I'd been hoping for ever since the accident. I'd always wanted to live a life of service. A three-year long mission of healing had felt self-indulgent, regardless of how necessary it had been. Now, I was finally *well* enough to contribute. I was ready to forget the wounded warrior status and provide real value.

But ironically, it was my “wounded warrior” status that everyone seemed most interested in.

At event after event, I got the sense that I was viewed more as a novelty or a symbol of the suffering a generation of veterans endured in the global war on terror. I started getting invited to events for other groups—everything from private parties, to corporate retreats, and even fundraising events for nonprofits. Whoever had invited me seemed to take pride in my very visible war wounds. “Have you met Captain Sam Brown?” they'd say, holding my elbow as they addressed a group of well-dressed attendees. “He was burned alive when his vehicle hit an IED.” This line would be said with a dramatic undertone and always seemed to have its desired effect on the wide-eyed guests: checks would be signed and handed over to the fundraiser with a sympathetic word about my wounds.

Other times, I seemed to give people a vicarious sense of patriotism. I would often hear things like, “Man, I almost joined the military, but I went to college instead. I thought about it though. I sure appreciate what you do so that all of us can be free. Here—let me buy you a beer.” Acknowledging what I or others had been through seemed to satisfy their own sense of patriotic duty.

My hosts were happy. But I didn't feel like I was doing much.

I didn't *always* feel like a prop to be used for someone else's gain. I did forge some friendships with people during this time who genu-

inely appreciated me and never sought to do anything but be a friend. The gentleman who initially hired me for his non-profit was on that list of true friends. He and others like him provided genuine support for me in my own journey of transitioning from a life in the military to life as a civilian. But others seemed to view me simply as a wounded warrior who was useful for helping them achieve their own purposes.

On top of that, Amy was struggling. Roman was born in September of 2011, just before I was officially retired from the Army. We'd named him as a nod to Romans 5:3–5, the Bible verse that had been such an encouragement to me in the wake of the explosion: *"We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love."* His birth felt symbolic of all the good that had come out of the hardest time of my life—especially given that he helped knit Amy and I together even more closely.

But my connection to Roman and Amy was more of a fact and less of an emotional reality. Amy spent most of Roman's infancy by herself, while I was away in Dallas. She handled those long nights of newborn crying alone and had to figure out parenthood by herself during the day. Even when I was home on the weekends, it didn't feel like a joyful reunion. I was clumsy with Roman, and Amy was clearly frustrated with my lack of presence, empathy, and understanding of Roman's needs—and hers.

I sensed things were going badly, but I also felt the need to make this job work. How else could I provide for my family? What other job would make use of my training in leadership and my experience as a veteran, but relative lack of industry experience? Until I gained more experience, knowledge, and connections in the "real world," I didn't think I'd have an easy time finding anything else.

I think we both felt trapped. I forged ahead, in the spirit of the First Infantry Division motto: *No mission too difficult, no sacrifice too great. Duty first.*

Amy wasn't having it though. One Sunday night, we stood on either side of the bed. She was folding laundry while I packed my suitcase for the next day's flight. "Sam," she said, her voice sharp. "This Dallas commute sucks." She folded a onesie and threw it in a pile on the comforter.

Guiltily, I placed a pair of slacks in the suitcase. "I know it's been hard. I'm sorry."

"I just feel like I invested all this time and energy into taking care of you. And then—once you're better, you just *move on*. There's a job for you in Dallas, so you take it, and it's like—'Cool, bye.'" She threw down another onesie. "I need help, Sam! I'm exhausted. I'm supposed to start work again soon to finish out my term, and you're not around."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to fix it. "I'm sorry," I said again.

She looked up from the pile of tiny newborn clothes and stared at me. Her expression was hard with anger and disappointment. "It's just not very much fun being married to you right now."

I nodded.

Somehow—in trying to serve my wife and my son and provide a valuable service to others—I was failing at all of it.

I probably should have never gotten on a plane back to Dallas, but I did. Grimly, I attended meetings with the other two people who worked for my same startup. We were gradually identifying our service niche: to help veterans transition out of the military and try to figure out what they could do professionally. I had been vocal about this being a real need—probably because it was *my* need.

Not long after the conversation with Amy, I found myself at the ranch of a wealthy Dallas businessman. He was considering opening his ranch as a retreat space for veterans, and I'd been invited along with a few others. The guy who'd made the connection was one of my Dallas friends—or, as Amy would have said, one of my Dallas "*friends*," with air quotes. She had pointed out that several of these wealthy guys only seemed to return my calls when they needed something from me, or wanted me to show up to an event with them. "They

never seem to follow up on your requests to be mentored by them in business,” she noted. “You’re such a relational person, Sam. But you’re emotionally connecting with people who don’t care about connecting with you the same way.”

I hadn’t wanted to believe her take on it, but it was hard not to consider her perspective at this ranch. My friend—“*friend*”—stayed close with me as we made the rounds. It was obvious that the company assembled was divided into roughly two groups: veterans with visible wounds, and businessmen who seemed to want to show us off. I was introduced as “Captain Sam Brown, War Hero.” I was asked repeatedly to tell my story of getting wounded. At one point, I made eye contact with another veteran across the room—a fit-looking amputee wearing a prosthetic leg. He motioned his head toward the room of wealthy businessmen in their cowboy duds, then rolled his eyes. I knew exactly what he meant.

That night, I called Amy. “I think I’m going to be done,” I told her.

“What? Really? You’re coming home?”

“I just don’t think I’m ever going to be seen as anything other than a “Wounded Warrior” in this veteran nonprofit space. And I don’t want to just be known as that.”

“Yeah.” Amy sighed.

“Our nonprofit doesn’t produce value—not yet, really, of any kind. We’re still building out the processes and mentorship relationships which means we aren’t providing much of a service yet. I get my salary through the generous donation of our benefactor. But it feels like when people used to buy Mother and me dinner because of my Purple Heart hat. I hate feeling like a charity case. I want to actually *add* value to a business.”

“Come home,” she said decidedly. “Add value by being here with your family.”

I came home. I stayed home. We agreed that I would be a full-time dad while Amy went back to work and finished her term in the Army. This shift didn’t look very impressive on my resume, but it did lead to a big improvement in my marriage. In between changing diapers

and giving Roman bottles, I tried to figure out what might be next. Maybe business?

Amy wrapped up her term of service—six years of honorable service with a deployment to Iraq—and signaled for the exit ramp. For the first time since we'd known each other, neither of us had a reason to stay attached to BAMC. We made the decision to move permanently to Dallas, where I could try to leverage some of the connections I'd made there for a career shift.

But even then, I struggled. The Army had always surrounded me with mentors and provided a clear structure for advancement. In the void of that, I was trying to create new structure on my own—which was challenging. It seemed like every door I knocked on and every avenue I looked down was one more dead end.

With the arrival of our second child—a perfect little girl we named Esther—the matter once again started keeping me up at night. I'd rehearsed my entire life to be just one thing: A soldier. A military leader. A trained warrior for the United States Army.

With that off the table, I was lost. Who was I supposed to be?

In 2013, some acquaintances seemed to present an answer. I'd met these guys through my nonprofit work, and we'd run into each other several times at community events where Amy and I sometimes volunteered as a way to be civically engaged. They called me and asked if I could join them at a coffee shop one afternoon.

"Captain Brown," Aaron began with a large smile. "You knew us as corporate marketers, but we also do political consulting."

"That's right," Marty said. "We know you care about your community and about service. We've seen you doing civic engagement. And we also know you have a really compelling bio."

"West Point graduate, wounded warrior, worked for a veteran nonprofit," Aaron supplied. He lowered his voice. "Burn victim."

"We think you'd make a great political candidate," Marty said.

I was taken aback. "I just like volunteering as a way to contribute to my community. I have no idea how campaigns work or even how to get engaged in the political process," I said.

Aaron waved his hand as though that were inconsequential. “That’s not important. We can help you flesh that out. What people want is a responsible leader. A person of integrity!”

“And that’s *you*,” Marty said. “You know the importance of serving your country. You value service and duty.”

They were speaking my language. Despite the weird vibe I was getting from them, I started to listen to their ideas. Eventually, I agreed to run for a State Assembly office in Texas.

My job, the political consultants explained, was to raise money. *Their* job was to market me and get the word out. They threw around political jargon and told me when to show up to events. They handed me new versions of speeches I’d written, making the original nearly unrecognizable.

It was a terrible campaign. Other than the fundraising—which, surprisingly, I was good at—the campaign was a joke. It didn’t last long, and I didn’t make it past the primary.

Aaron and Marty didn’t seem perturbed by this. They focused on the fundraising haul. “Your story really resonates with people!” they enthused. “You brought in a *ton* of money, especially when considering this was only your first race. And, you came in a close third place—almost made the runoff.” What they *didn’t* say was that the fundraising dollars had more than covered their invoices.

The night after the failed primary, Amy and I slumped on the couch after getting the kids down. I reached for the remote to turn on the TV, but she batted it away. She gave me a nudge. “We should do an After Action Review.”

Amy knew I liked doing these postmortems to analyze how and why a thing had unfolded the way it had. But it didn’t feel good starting this one. “I feel like an idiot,” I told her. “Those guys were using me the whole time.”

She shook her head disapprovingly. “I never liked those guys.” It was true. Amy had felt misgivings about Aaron and Marty from the start. I was starting to learn how reliable her gut instincts were.

“Why didn’t I stop to think about *why* they wanted me to run in

the first place?” I vented. “I actually thought they cared about the community. I thought they genuinely believed I would be good for the state.” I shook my head. “No. They’re political consultants, and the way they get paid is by finding people to run for office and fundraise their consulting fee. I was just their meal ticket. Their token *wounded warrior*.”

Amy nodded. “Aaron and Marty suck. And we were suckers.”

“Big time.”

“But let’s think of the bright side.” She angled her body toward mine and snuggled into me. “You were a good fundraiser, relative to the others. There’s something about your bio that connects with donors and voters.”

“Yeah, but you can’t win with just that. You have to actually have a message that makes voters want to vote for you. I didn’t even know what my message *was*. I don’t even know who *I* am right now, Amy.”

Amy didn’t rush to answer. My words hung there in our living room, like the lingering smell of a stale cigarette. “So...are we ever going to do this again?” she asked.

“Never,” I said adamantly.

* * *

Over the next year, I made myself a political “consultant”—with air quotes. I didn’t take anyone’s money, but I did try to warn other people getting involved in politics about what had happened to me. I was pissed with the whole industry. The political process felt like one more dysfunctional machine—one more societal system that chewed people up, then spit them out, in the spirit of some greater “cause” which, at its root, seemed mainly driven by money. I felt disenfranchised with the whole thing.

When I’d been an outpatient in the burn ward, I had made it my mission to encourage and advise other burn patients along their recovery journey. I took on a similar mission now: I had an experience to share with others that might shed light on their own path ahead.

Occasionally, someone would reach out to me—oftentimes another veteran—who, like me, wanted to serve their community or state or country via a run for political office. If I got a call from them asking me to share my own experience, I downloaded *everything*. I shared all the lessons I'd learned to try to help them avoid the mistakes I'd made, such as blindly trusting the people who were getting paid out of a fundraising haul.

I never made a dollar with my “consulting.” But I was free with my advice to anyone who asked. Ironically, that ended up keeping us more engaged with politics than we had intended to be after the disastrous campaign.

In the meantime, I kept hunting for the right job. I did commission work for a title company. I sometimes did a paid motivational speech. I did some sales work. None of it felt very permanent or fulfilling.

One afternoon in the fall of 2014, Amy and I loaded Esther and Roman into hiking backpacks and set out on a trail. Amy and I were always at our best on a hike, it seemed. Starting with that hike along the Nā Pali Coast on Kauai—which was either a spectacular disaster, or a catastrophic success, depending on your spin—we'd found that the experience of being outside together on a trail seemed to be our natural habitat. On a hiking trail, Amy didn't have to answer any questions about choosing to be a stay-at-home mom who had opted to leave a promising career. I didn't have to navigate anyone's expectations as a wounded warrior. We were just there: together, with our babies, taking in the beauty of nature and the reminder of all the big things we often forgot about.

I started processing my career path. “I'm starting to realize something, I think,” I said to Amy.

“What's that?” she asked. She'd opted to wear Roman, and it made me happy to see his little head bobbing over the rim of the pack.

“Well—I'm good at leadership. I have good instincts and intuition for leading teams. But a big reason for that is because I was *trained* in leadership at West Point and Ranger School. I haven't really been

trained in anything else. I don't have a certain business skill set or experience to fall back on."

"Could you look for a job that would use your leadership skills?"

"That's what I've been doing, but people don't tend to see me as a leader when I show up at an interview. They see me as a wounded—"

"A wounded warrior." Amy's voice synchronized with mine. She knew. "Well, *I* see you as a loving husband. And I believe in who you can become. You have so much to give, Sam."

Roman's chubby hand reached up and brushed a pine branch overhead. I smiled at his tiny ambition. "Thank you for saying that. It's just been hard to find anyone else who believes in me beyond the scars."

"Those people are missing so much."

"Be that as it may...I think I'm realizing I either need to enter business as an individual contributor...or maybe go get a new kind of training."

She turned around to look at me, swinging Roman to the side. I could see her pregnant abdomen just starting to reveal our third child, due in early 2015. Roman shot a smile at me, delighted to discover his daddy and baby sister were so close. I grinned and waved at him. "You mean, like go to grad school?" Amy asked.

"Yeah. Get an MBA. What do you think about that?"

"I think that's an *awesome* idea. Have you looked at any programs?"

I nodded. "A couple. I was just thinking...given how West Point prepared me for leadership, it might make sense to go back to school if I want tools to be successful in business."

Amy swung back around to forge ahead on the trail. "Do it. I'm a fan of this plan."



The whole crew hiking in Texas: me with Amy, Roman, Esther, and Ezra. March 2016.

The new goal was invigorating. It seemed as effective at getting me unstuck as Mother's goals had been in getting me out of the ICU. I got another boost on Christmas day when I got a phone call from Anthony Roszko. I stepped outside to take it, the lights from our tree casting a dim glow into our snowy backyard.

“Merry Christmas, Roszko!” I greeted him. “Man, talking to you is its own Christmas present. I love that you called!”

“I’ve got another present for you, LT,” he said. “Bailey and I welcomed our second child three days ago. A son.”

“*What?* Did you know Amy and I are expecting a son in February too? Aw, congrats man. That *is* a gift.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Anthony said. “He’s your namesake. We named him Samuel, after you.”

I was stunned. “Anthony—that’s better than any military award I could ever get. Of all the soldiers I led, I respect you and Steven the most. Steven asked me to be the godfather of his children, and now you—” I struggled for words. “You’ve named your son ‘Samuel.’”

“After you,” Anthony repeated.

I shook my head, struggling to wrap my head around it. “That’s the greatest reward. The greatest honor. Thank you.”

“You’ve been through so much, Sam.” Anthony’s gravelly voice was earnest. “And you just kept going. You stayed positive and kept working at your healing. It’s been an encouragement to me, with my own healing. And if our son grows up to be anything like you, Bailey and I would be so proud.”

“Thank you,” I said again. The words couldn’t fully express how honored I felt. We talked a bit longer. When we hung up, I looked back through the window at Amy and the kids. I smiled, seeing her big baby bump, seeing Roman and Esther playing with their new toys. I felt overwhelmed by what Anthony had just shared.

You just kept going, Anthony had said. *You stayed positive and kept working*. What a gift—another gift—to have a friend who could remind me of who I was. *And he’s not the only one*, I thought. The same God who had helped me persevere before had never left. He was still with me.

In the summer of 2015, I enrolled in the MBA program at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. I attended classes all day Friday and Saturday, then worked at the title company the rest of the week. Amy held down the fort at home with Roman, now four; Esther, two;

and our newest member of the family—Ezra—now just a couple months old.

Being back in school felt like the ultimate reset. Every class gave me a new mission to get behind—a new skill to learn. I discovered that I had skills in business I'd never realized. My cohort was a bright, talented group of people, but even in their company, I tended to perform at the higher end of the class. That was a surprise to me, frankly. It had been so long since I'd been in a competitive performance environment, I'd almost forgotten what it felt like. For the past seven years, my identity had been “the wounded guy,” and I'd almost gotten used to thinking of myself as damaged goods. But in the MBA environment—I was a serious competitor. I was a shrewd negotiator. I was *smart*.

It was a profound revelation. *I still had something to offer*. I still had ways to contribute real value, apart from my impressive scars. My identity was no longer confined to “Sam the wounded veteran.” Now, I could try out being “Sam the businessman.” That inspired confidence I hadn't felt in years. I wasn't an empty shell any longer; I could market myself with confidence that I had something to offer on Day One.

By the time graduation approached, I had a game plan all locked up. Brad, an executive at a large private equity management company, had taken me under his wing and promised me a job as the Director of Procurement. While many of the other people in my program began a lengthy series of interviews or dove into the startup process for a new company, I gave myself permission to just focus on finishing my classes well. I didn't need to seek out interviews or pursue a startup with some of my classmates. I felt great about my next step.

Three weeks before my scheduled start date, I started feeling concerned when Brad stopped responding to my calls and texts. I finally got a text from him: *Sorry to be MIA. I've been at the hospital. Had a bad pancreatitis attack. Jury is still out on my prognosis. Could be fatal?? Let's hope not. We may have to revisit your start date.*

I was shocked—and worried. I was worried about my friend, but also worried about my future. I'd put *all* my eggs in this basket. I had no back-up plan.

A few days after receiving his text, I went and visited him in the hospital. He had to pull away an oxygen mask to talk to me. “Sam,” he wheezed. “Even if I manage to recover, I’m not sure I’m going to be able to continue working at all. The company is already restructuring to get someone new in my place.”

What does this mean for me? I wanted to ask. I couldn’t say something so insensitive out loud—not to a man who might be dying. But I was grateful when he answered my question anyway.

“The Director of Procurement job was a position I’d created for you. Sam, I’m not sure they’ll be interested in hiring you if I’m not there. You may need to look into a fallback plan.”

I nodded, thinking, *There is no fallback plan.* “I appreciate your honesty, Brad. I’m so sorry this has happened to you.”

A month later—May of 2017—I received my Master of Business Administration diploma. That entire month, Brad had been in and out of the hospital. Amy and I resigned ourselves to the fact that my “perfect plan,” once again, was not going to happen.

So, what did we do?

We headed for the mountains.