

CHAPTER 13

CLIMBING MOUNTAINS



Goofing off at Lake Tahoe, with Kristina. November 2010.

LAKE TAHOE, NEVADA. NOVEMBER 2010.

None of us could believe it had actually worked out. Amy's four-day reprieve from her grueling work schedule was the first big break. The General Officer commanding the hospital had just returned from deployment and felt four-day passes were an important part of keeping morale high. He'd mandated a four-day hospital-wide pass. Amy called me, elated, eager to book a getaway before anyone at the hospital could change their mind.

The flights to Reno were another gift: cheap and direct. Both of us had heard great things about hiking in Lake Tahoe, and this weekend seemed like the perfect opportunity to try it out.

The final blessing was that Kristina, Daniel's wife, was going to be able to fly in from Southern California last minute to meet up with us. Amy and Kristina were close friends, and Kristina had been lonely during Daniel's deployment. A weekend getaway in Tahoe felt like the ideal break for all of us.

No one felt particularly concerned that we were novice hikers. We didn't consider the fact that the paved footpaths of San Antonio might feel different than the snowy mountain trails in Tahoe. Amy and I didn't even bother to discuss the near-death experience on the Nā Pali Coast hike. We wanted to take in natural beauty and fresh air. We had no plan, but who really needed one? This was *happening*.

The change in scenery when we arrived in Nevada was instant. We'd gotten used to living in concrete cities in Texas—full of asphalt, humidity, and hazy skies, but with very little to look at on the horizon. Reno was different. The air was fresh and crisp as soon as we left the airport. Views of the Sierra Nevadas swept along the western horizon. And as we drove to Lake Tahoe in our rental car—with our dog, Leonidas, panting over our seats—the trees got taller and the views got more and more beautiful.

We planned to hike the Spooner Lake trail on Sunday morning, and took Saturday to drive around Lake Tahoe, pausing often to wander through the small mountain towns on its banks. We found

a boutique pet store and got Leonidas some high-end dog treats. “Enjoy these,” Amy told him. “They’re the most bougie snacks you’re ever going to get.”

Sunday morning was bright and sunny. We arrived at the trailhead around nine and hit the bathroom. When Amy came out, she looked a little concerned. “Did the men’s side have *bear* warning signs?”

I nodded. “They had a little calendar posted too, in a plastic sheet. Like, noting when bears are most likely to be active.”

Amy stared at me. “And?”

“We should be fine. November is ‘pre-hibernation,’ apparently. Most bear sightings occur during the summer.”

Kristina walked out of the bathroom, and Amy looked over at her. “Hey Kristina, what should we do if we come across a *bear*?”

Kristina laughed. “Oh. Well—I mean, whatever you do, don’t run.”

Amy gave me an ironic grin and nodded. “Okay. Cool.”

The trail was just visible under the freshly fallen snow, which made everything smooth and sparkling white. I was amazed at how *good* it felt, being outside. In Texas, I’d always struggled with the heat and humidity which limited when and how I could enjoy being outdoors. Here, I didn’t feel limited. The crispness of the cool air felt good to breathe in.

Our conversation on the trail often lapsed into stretches of contented silence. The hike was *quiet*. The snow and our distance from any city seemed to swallow up the sound. “I can smell the pine trees,” Amy said happily.

I breathed in. “I don’t smell pine trees,” I said. “But I do smell *something*. What is that?”

“I smell something too,” Kristina said. “Kind of a bad something. Sam—I think it’s coming from the backpack.”

We stopped and unzipped the pack. The strong odor hit us with force. Amy snatched something out of the backpack, sniffed it, and made a face. “It’s Leonidas’ beef liver dog treats. Gross.”

Leonidas whimpered and pawed at the ground. I pulled out a treat and gave it to him. “He thinks they are extremely delicious,” I said.

Kristina gagged. “That’s not what I think,” she responded. I threw them back in the bag and zipped it up.

Around three miles in, we reached a vista that looked out over the crystalline lake. There was a fallen tree there, and we sat down to take in the view. “It’s *so* pretty,” Kristina remarked.

“Imagine swimming here in the summertime,” Amy mused.

“I like it even in the cold,” I said. “I love the snow.” Something about the place felt spacious and expansive—it felt easier to dream here.

The trail kept going, but we decided to turn around. We weren’t sure how long it went or where it would end up, so we opted to make the vista our end point and begin trekking back. After a few minutes, Kristina stopped abruptly. She faced the trail behind us. “Did you guys just hear something?”

Amy and I stopped and listened. “What did you hear?” Amy asked.

Kristina waited, listening. “I thought I heard a twig or a branch break. Maybe not.”

We kept on, relaxing back into silence. The only sounds were our boots crunching quietly in the snow. But suddenly, a bird began cawing loudly in the background.

That’s weird, I thought. We hadn’t heard anything like that for the entire hike. *I wonder if that’s some kind of warning? Maybe it sees a predator?*

Amy and Kristina both stopped at the bird’s caws and looked at each other nervously. Leonidas began to whine, then let out a few sharp barks.

“This is fun,” I quipped.

Pushing on, we approached a creek crossing with thick vegetation on either side. As we eyed the creek, looking for the best spot to cross, we suddenly heard a loud growl behind us.

It confused me at first—it was so unlike anything else we’d heard. “Is that someone calling for help?” I asked.

The growl came again, louder. “No, that’s a *bear*!” Amy cried.

“RUN!” Kristina yelled.

We leaped across the stream and began sprinting down the trail, trying not to slip in the snow. “Sam—it’s probably after those dog treats!” Amy called. I whipped my backpack around to my front, still running, pulled out the stinky bag of beef livers and dumped it over my shoulder.

We ran the entire two miles back to the parking lot, never stopping until we’d collapsed into the car, slammed the doors shut, and locked it. “We’re so stupid,” Amy panted.

“Pathetic!” I agreed. “We set ourselves up for that. We were totally unprepared, and brought the smelliest dog treats known to man.”

“I bet it was stalking us the whole time,” Kristina said. “That was crazy.”

Over dinner that night, the three of us began laughing as we recapped the ridiculous hike. “We’re two for two, Sam,” Amy pointed out. “Near-death experiences in both Hawaii *and* Lake Tahoe.”

“Yeah, but I still enjoyed the hike,” I said. “I *love* this place. I’d hike it again in a heartbeat. Just without the stupid dog treats.”

“Me too,” Kristina said. “Honestly, if we were better prepared, it would have been a totally different experience. It was *so* beautiful. Kind of makes me want to do more. Go farther. Maybe with a can of bear spray.”

Amy nodded enthusiastically. The two of them began talking about what backpacking would look like—hiking farther in, loaded up with overnight gear. I listened to their planning, amused, and let my mind wander back to that view from the vista point.

I could live here, I thought—the place where limits were lifted, and new dreams rose to the surface. *I could do this every day.*

DALLAS, TEXAS. MAY 2017. AGE THIRTY-THREE.



Amy, Esther, me, Roman, and Ezra. Thanksgiving 2018.

What now? I had my MBA, but my career plans had fallen through. It was tempting to think I was back at square one, but I knew that wasn't the case. I could envision a life beyond the military now and was confident about the value that I could contribute.

I just still needed to figure out *where* to contribute.

Dallas was feeling less and less appealing as a home base. Our season here had been a hard one, particularly for Amy. During the years I'd been completing my MBA program, she had struggled. The explosion at the end of her deployment hadn't left any visible marks on

her, but it had created internal wounds. In the last two years, those had finally manifested. She'd become afraid of leaving our house, but was also afraid to stay home—nowhere felt safe. When ISIS led a series of attacks in 2016, she'd become overwhelmed with fear, convinced that the terrorist group was going to take over the world.

On top of that, our church community hadn't been supportive of her. They'd implied that Amy could be helped and healed if she only had enough faith—which ultimately was a hurtful and shaming message for her. Although she'd been helped significantly with counseling, her PTSD was still part of our daily reality.

The only time she seemed like her old self was when we were hiking. It was the natural beauty that drew her initially, but as she and Kristina began taking backpacking trips, she found that the excursions helped her anxiety. “I *like* being in a vulnerable position when I’m out in the wilderness,” she explained to me one night. I was complaining about the fact that she had chosen a hike that would traverse a high snowpack where the trail would be covered for much of the time. “If I do something that scares me on purpose, it forces me to confront my fears and stretch myself. By the time we’re hiking out, I feel more confident and more skilled. I don’t feel as anxious and scared. And that makes returning to normal life just a tiny bit easier.” Despite my misgivings with some of the risky hikes she and Kristina planned, I couldn’t argue with how they seemed to help Amy.

Luckily, that May we had the chance to get ourselves back into the mountains. My younger brother, Luke, was going to be graduating from his undergrad in Colorado right after my MBA graduation ceremony. Amy and I flew to her parents’ house in South Dakota for a visit, then left the kids with them and headed to Colorado to see Luke. After his graduation ceremonies, we planned to go backpacking in the Lost Creek Wilderness in the Colorado Rocky Mountains.

Amy planned the trip. After all the serious hikes she and Kristina had done together, Amy had turned into an impressive backpacker. They never took it easy, hiking higher and farther than I would ever have considered safe or sane.

I was less enthusiastic about roughing it. Ironically, one of the ways I had comforted myself about not being able to return to duty as an Infantry Officer was considering that I wouldn't have to sleep in the dirt ever again. If I ever slept "outside," I told myself, it would be in a forty-foot RV with access to a bed with a mattress, a kitchen, and a hot shower. There was no need to deprive myself of the comforts of life if a mission didn't require it, I thought.

But Amy had other ideas—and she'd convinced me to do my first backpacking trip "civilian style," post-Army. Because she had become so experienced, she planned the trip, assembled our gear, and led us to the Lost Creek trailhead. "Come on, Captain Brown!" she called over her shoulder.

"Yes, ma'am, Captain Brown!" I called back. I grinned. It was a relief to see Amy like this.

On the trail, Amy exuded confidence and vivacity. She teased me and laughed easily. It was such a stark contrast to the Amy that I'd become used to at home in Dallas.

We paused to drink water beside a creek, and Amy looked up at the clouds, breathing in with deep satisfaction. "Sam, if I could do nothing other than hike through mountains for the rest of my life, I think I could die happy."

I loved seeing her thrive. "Do you remember the hike near Lake Tahoe?" I asked.

She laughed. "The one where we got chased by a bear on the trail to Spooner Lake? *Yes*. Of course I do. But do you remember how *beautiful* Lake Tahoe was, Sam? How clear the water was? I loved Nevada."

"I loved it too," I reminded her. "I remember going back to San Antonio and looking at real estate in Reno, trying to figure out how we could move there. But you were still in the military. We had no idea where life was going to take us at that point."

"True." She twisted the top on her water bottle and pulled her pack back on. "Come on, Soldier. We've got three more miles before camp."

The trail took us through fields of wildflowers and past vistas of snowy peaks. I couldn't get over how happy Amy seemed in this

environment. I considered what she'd said: *If I could do nothing other than hike through mountains for the rest of my life, I think I could die happy.* I thought about the wilderness in Nevada and how much we'd enjoyed that Reno trip.

"You know," I told her that night as we cuddled beside the pot of boiling water for our meals and hot cocoa. "With this job falling through...we could consider moving. There's no reason we need to stay in Dallas."

She furrowed her eyebrows. "Move? You don't think you need to stay and lean on your connections here?"

I shrugged. "I've been 'leaning on my connections' for the past five years in Dallas. It hasn't really gotten me anywhere. I've got a business idea that I think could take off. And it's one I could do from anywhere. I'd need to find some sort of steady work to sustain us while I got the business off the ground, but that doesn't need to be in Dallas."

I pulled back from her so I could look her in the eyes. "I want us to live in a place where you can thrive. Wouldn't you like to live in a place like this? Among the Rockies? Or somewhere in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, where we can do hikes all the time?"

Her eyes grew wide. "The Sierra Nevadas. Oh my gosh, yes please." She snuggled back into me. "You really think we could move?"

"I loved Nevada," I said. "I think that would be a great place to raise a family. We could find a new church. Get ourselves a little house. Go hiking on the weekends. What do you think?"

"I'll plan all the backpacking trips," Amy said.

I laughed. "Deal."

The next morning as we hiked out, I rallied myself behind the new plan. *I just need to find a job to help us move and get us a steady income while I get my own business off the ground,* I thought. Fresh out of business school, I felt confident in my ability to find something that could work for our family. I had more to offer and no shortage of motivation to see this version of Amy on a daily basis.

"What about Amazon?" I asked Amy as we made the drive back to South Dakota. "I like where that company seems to be heading.

And it seems like they're everywhere. Maybe I could get a job with them. Like—manage a warehouse, or something.”

Amy pulled out her phone. “I’m Googling ‘Amazon fulfillment centers...’” Amy looked up from the screen, bright-eyed. “Sam, there are *a couple of* fulfillment centers in northern Nevada.”

“*Really*. Well, that seems promising. And doesn’t Nevada have favorable tax laws for small business owners? I feel like someone told me that.”

Amy was still studying the map on her phone. “SAM. Do you have any idea how many beautiful places to hike there are in Nevada? Great Basin, Ruby Mountains, Lake Tahoe, Red Rock Canyon—plus it’s near Crater Lake, Volcanic National Park, *Yosemite*...”

“Wow.”

“And we could easily get to Sequoia, Kings Canyon, Death Valley, Joshua Tree...” She looked up from her phone. “Oh my gosh. We have to make this move happen.”

By that autumn, moving to Nevada was no longer a pipe dream, but our firm plan. I landed an interview with Amazon, and they made me an offer to be a baseline ops manager at one of the warehouses. It wasn’t an impressive job—it was an entry-level position that any college graduate would have qualified for. But I saw it as a means to an end.

Provided it got us to Reno.

“We’re going to place you at one of our US fulfillment centers,” the HR lady told me over the phone. She rattled off several locations—one in California, one in Washington, and one in Florida. “Those are the places where we currently have positions available...”

“What about Reno?” I asked.

“Nothing’s available in Reno. Take a day or two to think about it and get back to me.”

I dragged my feet on making a decision, hunting for other jobs in Nevada while still hoping the Amazon opportunity might work out. Finally, another HR guy from the company called me.

“Has anything come available in Nevada?” I asked.

"It's very seldom that we see anything opening up in Nevada," he said. "The Reno center is a small worksite. Did you think about Florida? Or, there are now openings in Kentucky and Texas too. You said you live in the Dallas area, right? You wouldn't even have to move for one of the openings we have. You could start in as soon as three weeks."

"Well, what are the odds that something might come up soon?" I asked. "We're really hoping to end up in Nevada."

"Look," the man said impatiently. "Your options haven't changed. If you want to get started with Amazon, you need to pick one of the available sites."

"How often do openings pop up for the Reno fulfillment center? Maybe I can wait until one of those spots opens up."

"You think if I just refresh my screen, I'm going to see a job opening in Nevada when there wasn't one a second ago? Fine, if it will make you happy, I'll refresh."

There was a pause. "What the...?" The man's voice trailed off. "Hold on," he said. "I think this is probably a mistake. Let me refresh again."

I waited. "Anything?"

I heard him blow air out of his lips in disbelief. "Well, you are one lucky SOB. Or else someone up there is looking out for you. I thought this was a mistake because it wasn't here earlier, but they've just posted a job opportunity for your specific managerial role in Reno. You want it?"

"Yes! I want it!"

"The post won't be open until July, though," the man said. "Can you wait that long?"

"I can wait that long," I said. That would give me plenty of time to get my ducks in a row as I laid the groundwork to set up my own business in Nevada. A longer timeline would be better for the kids and Amy, anyway.

In May of 2018, Amy and I once again dropped the kids off with her parents in South Dakota and began driving west on Highway 50 to Nevada, planning to scout out a place to live. My experience of Nevada up to that point had really been confined to the tiny bubble

around Reno we'd explored. I had stereotypical impressions of Las Vegas but had no idea what the rest of the state was like. I expected eastern Nevada to look like a flat, sandy desert.

Instead, we found ourselves driving through mountain range after mountain range. The views were vast and striking. "Sam, Nevada is the most mountainous state in the *country*," Amy informed me, reading an article on her phone. "There are three *hundred* mountain ranges!"

"Unbelievable." The scenery backed up her fact-finding. The highway wound up and through passes, taking us through a seemingly never-ending series of mountain ranges that dropped down into basins, then up into peaks again. Every time we crossed over a pass, we could see the next range stretching in front of us.

"Amy, I feel like something inside of me is actually *singing*. This is so incredibly beautiful."

"I know! Me too! It never gets boring."

We drank it in, mile after mile. After a long, contented silence, Amy spoke up. "I wonder how long it will take us to make friends in Nevada. Or find a new church."

I nodded. "Do you think many of our friends in Dallas will come visit?"

She shrugged. "Not sure. I don't know how many of those relationships will translate to long distance." She named a few of our closest friends. "They might come visit."

The conversation drifted into a lull again. I began thinking of all that we were leaving behind in Dallas: our friends, the campus where I'd gotten my MBA, the house we'd been raising our kids in. But also the unpleasant things: humidity, the concrete cities, the people who viewed me as a payday—like some of the nonprofit fundraisers and political consultants. Then I had a new thought which made me chuckle. "You know—all that heartache that we had with campaigns and politics back in Texas is behind us now. No need for us to worry about that again."

Amy laughed. "You mean you don't think the people who used you are going to pay us a visit?" She shook her head. "I won't miss them *at all*."

The move to Nevada felt like almost a magical reset for Amy and me. For the first time in our history of being together, we both felt excited about where we were at in life: physically, emotionally, professionally, and geographically.

We *laughed* again. The stress we'd experienced in Dallas had taken such a toll on us—I don't think we'd even realized how hard and dark things had been until we broke out of it, finding ourselves laughing while unpacking boxes in Reno. We hadn't laughed in so long—it felt like an abnormal experience. The first time it happened, we looked at each other, shocked.

"Well, *that* was fun!" Amy said.

Everything seemed lighter, and happier, and easier nestled among the Sierra Nevadas—including work, at long last.



At the Balloon Festival in Reno, September 2018.

I enjoyed the job at Amazon. I liked leading a team and working with people to accomplish a clear, tangible outcome every day. In that

way, it wasn't unlike crew at West Point, or working with my platoon in Afghanistan—only, instead of winning a regatta or providing security for a convoy, our goal was to pack and load boxes onto pallets, then move the pallets onto the semi-truck trailers for shipment. It was simple and straightforward: we had a clear goal, distinct roles, and we knew exactly whether or not we'd succeeded.

I also liked being among such a range of employees. The warehouse crew seemed to represent all different facets of the state—there were college-age young people, working Amazon as a part-time job; there were retirees working there to supplement their social security; there were people in their twenties, trying to save up to buy a home, and so on. I liked getting to know them and hearing their stories. It gave me the opportunity to serve people again—like I'd tried to serve my soldiers, and the patients and medical providers in the burn unit. Being able to serve felt like finding my equilibrium: it's when my upbringing, my passions, my skills, and my experiences finally seemed to find congruence.

I tried to organize people according to their skill set and abilities. Amazon's quotas were relentless, so there was no truly "easy" job, but some tasks were more physically grueling than others. I usually assigned the young men and women to load pallets, which was more physically demanding. The boxes we handled might be two pounds, or they might be a hundred pounds—sometimes, two people were required to lift them onto the pallets. Another tough job was the "Tetris master." That person stood at the end of a long conveyor belt that stretched into the actual tractor trailer. As boxes fell off the conveyor belt, the person moved and stacked them to fill the trailer—another task that required a young, strong body.

The actual packing of the boxes was less physically demanding, especially the lighter-weight packages that were under a pound. That's where I tried to slate people who needed a task that would be easier on their bodies. It required speed because of the high-volume quotas, but it wasn't as physically taxing.

At any station though, the work was relentless. I didn't mind the

fast pace—it made the hours go fast. But it concerned me when people struggled to keep up.

Rick, for instance. Rick was an older guy—late sixties, I'd guess—who lived in an RV park along the Truckee River. Rick probably would have preferred to hang out on a golf course somewhere but needed income beyond his social security check. He was always asking me for overtime hours because he needed the money—but then he'd struggle to meet his quotas. His body simply couldn't keep up with his work ethic. I could relate to that.

I kept an eye on Rick. Whenever he started getting behind, he got grumpy—sometimes, I'd learn he was struggling by way of a complaint that made its way to me about something he'd said to a co-worker. I'd go check on him and try to get him into an easier spot. I recognized Rick's stress—it was stress I'd felt in my own life, teetering on the brink of failure. He knew he didn't have any margin for error in his life. He needed the hours, he needed the job, and he needed the income and health benefits. But in trying to do such physical work as an older man, he worked himself so hard that his performance would start to decline.

Despite me trying to get Rick in spots where he could succeed, his pattern of missed quotas got him put on probation. I started taking his seat when he went on his lunch break to try to clear his backlog and bump up his quota a little bit. I did the same thing for other employees on the bubble—packing up stuff that added to their numbers, and trying to ease bottlenecks at their stations while they caught a breather. Even so, it didn't always help.

One day, during Rick's probation, I went by to check on him. I was alarmed at what I saw. He'd fallen asleep.

"Hey, Rick," I said, shaking his shoulder. He jolted awake. "Rick—I've looked it up and I know you've got some PTO available. I've got to insist that you consider taking a half day off so that you don't end up missing your goals again."

He scowled. "I know it." Then his expression became worried. "I'm not sure I'll be able to drive myself home safely. I just can't seem to stay awake."

I went and found my manager and got permission to drive Rick home. We got into my car, and he directed me to his little trailer at the RV park. “Thanks for the ride,” he said. He looked glum.

“You bet. Get some rest. On Monday, you can come in refreshed and hit your numbers.”

“That’s all they care about,” he said gruffly. “You’re the only leader at Amazon who treats me like a human being.” He stared bleakly ahead. We were facing the Truckee River, and I looked out the windshield, following his gaze. The water flowed by, looking steel gray under the cloud cover. Rick looked back at me. “*You* get it.”

I furrowed my brows. “Get what?”

He nodded like he’d made up his mind. “You get it.” He opened the car door and climbed out.

“Get some rest, bud,” I repeated. “Take an extra day if you need it.” He waved and slowly climbed the steps of his trailer, hunched over.

The following week, Rick was back, but missed his quotas again, two days in a row. That Wednesday, Rick walked past me with a bleak expression on his face. He held up a paper in his hands—a summons to the front office. We both knew what it meant.

“I’m sorry, Rick,” I said.

He shook his head. “Can’t say I didn’t try.”

I didn’t see him again after that day.

The initial enjoyment I’d felt in the teamwork and goals-driven environment of the Amazon job started to be tempered with frustration over people like Rick. I was getting to know my team—I was learning about their lives and hopes and dreams. But the giant arm of the company seemed to treat everyone there as expendable—not unlike the military. The employees were doing labor-intensive jobs for a low hourly wage, but Amazon didn’t care. All the company cared about was if they were meeting their quotas.

In many cases, the workers seemed to be trapped. I heard some of the younger employees talk about their dreams of getting married or buying a home, but they were so exhausted at the end of every day, they didn’t have time to learn a new skill that would get them

higher on the pay scale, or send out applications to a better-paying job. They got stuck.

I talked about it with Amy in the evenings, sometimes. “It makes me wonder how many people across the state and even the country are in this same spot,” I said, scrubbing the dishes after dinner. “They’ve done all the right things—they got through high school, pursued college, found a job. But now they’ve got no upward mobility. And the corporation just sees them as expendable. If they can’t keep up, they get fired and replaced with someone else.”

“That’s disappointing,” Amy said. “It’s sad that people like Rick can’t skate by, not even with government help.”

“The government seems like part of the problem. These people could use help, but it seems like the government only offers temporary or insufficient help, which gets people stuck waiting on the government’s aid—even though it’s not enough. And politicians either don’t know about what these people are going through, or don’t care. The solutions they come up with are temporary, rather than doing anything that would change the overarching environment or system.”

“You thinking about politics again, Sam?” Amy looked over at me teasingly from where she was loading the dishwasher.

“No,” I said. “Absolutely not. I’m just saying...the people on my team need freedom to pursue a meaningful life. And their environment isn’t providing them that freedom.”

As my disenchantment with Amazon grew, I put more energy into starting up my business. I’d decided to name it Palisade Strategies, and its function was to help veterans get their medications from local community pharmacies when they were in urgent need of prescriptions and the Veterans Affairs hospitals and clinics couldn’t meet the need that same day. Amy and I had both received medical care through the VA, and there were basically only two ways to get medication from them: either at the hospital’s onsite pharmacy, or via the mail. For any non-urgent medications, the mail order worked fine. But in the case of an emergency, you couldn’t get medication without driving to a VA hospital, and that wasn’t great for people who lived

far away. My company started managing the relationships between the VA pharmacy and other local pharmacies so that veterans had better local emergency options.

I loved being an entrepreneur. My business helped veterans, which felt incredibly gratifying; and as the business started to grow, it was providing my family with a good standard of living. I also felt proud of the fact that it was a legitimate *business*. As opposed to all my work in the nonprofit sector, which had been donor driven, this business was creating its own revenue. For someone with a complex about being a charity case, this was hugely validating.



Hiking in the Ruby Mountains, in Elko Nevada. September 2022

One weekend, shortly after I'd left Amazon and gone full time with my business, Amy remarked on my change in attitude. We were out on a hike, and the kids scampered ahead of us on the trail.

"You seem *happy*," Amy said.

I grinned. "I am happy. I have a beautiful family, and we live in a place we love. I finally have a launchpad that enables us to dream and plan. And I feel like I've discovered a version of Sam Brown that isn't obsessed with the military or pigeonholed as a wounded warrior."

"You seem more confident too."

I nodded. "Back in Dallas, I always felt like a wannabe, trying to find a professional career. But now I feel competent and prepared. When I call up another business and set up relationships, it feels more peer-to-peer. Like—I am of equal standing with these other leaders. And it's exciting. Stressful too, obviously. But it's exciting to see the business succeed and grow."

I looked over at Amy. As usual, she seemed particularly full of life out here, in her happy place. "What about *you*?" I asked. "*You* seem happy."

She grinned. "It's a pretty good life right now. Hiking mountains. School for Roman and Esther. Bonding with Ezra and working out most days. Doing our thing." She glanced over at me and seemed to hesitate over her next thought. "Would you be happy if this is what the next twenty years look like?"

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "I guess I just wondered...if this feels *satisfying* to you. If you feel like you're living into the purpose God saved you for."

I thought about that. Her question took me back to the horrible, blinding moment in the desert—screaming out, "Jesus, save me!" while engulfed in flames. That night had made me certain that my life had been saved for some sort of higher calling—*the life I live is not my own*. Was I living into the mission that God had for me?

"I remember a guy I met who encouraged me right after Mother and I moved into the hotel across the street from the hospital," I said. "Cliff Dugosh. Do you remember him?"

"Of course I do," she said. "You guys were still getting together a lot when we were dating."

I nodded. "He was such...an anomaly. He's one of the greatest people I've ever met, but he wasn't doing impressive work. He was

a full-time substitute teacher. But he just *radiated* God's love. And I remember him telling me that I had a mission right where I was at. That was part of the reason I approached other people in the burn unit with so much intention, trying to encourage them."

"Which got *my* attention." She grinned.

"You know, for so much of my life, I've tried to find something *big* or *impressive* to do. It's like, if it wasn't something huge, it would be a waste of the skills and preparation God gave me. But I'm not sure I feel that anymore. I think I can be used by God in a burn unit, or in an Amazon warehouse, or running my business, or in the context of our family. Mostly, I just want to use the gifts and talents and opportunities in front of me to serve my God. And ideally, be humble and faithful in how I do that."

Amy looked at me thoughtfully, as though she was tempted to say something—then seemed to change her mind.

"Well, I love that," she said. "And I'm so glad."

* * *

Despite my intention to never get involved in politics again, Amy and I picked up volunteer work with the Republican Party in our local community—but *only* as volunteers, and *only* to remain civically engaged. Political engagement had been a big part of our life in Dallas, and—while I didn't want to abandon that form of civic engagement altogether, I also didn't want to be involved the same way I had before. Rather than trying to provide counsel to candidates, I decided to just do grunt work for them.

During campaign seasons, I helped out by knocking on doors, making calls, and delivering campaign literature. I'd made the decision that I didn't have any right to complain about political dysfunction unless I was actually seeking to help create positive change. That meant doing more than just showing up and voting on election day.

During the 2020 election, I started getting to know some of the young people working on the Nevada Republican campaigns. They

weren't paid well, but they were passionate—the exact opposite of Aaron and Marty. I enjoyed being around them, and several of them sought me out as a mentor. They were fascinated when they realized I had some prior experience running in a political campaign.

"Why don't you run again?" one of them asked.

I shook my head. "*Here's* why," I said, then launched into my familiar cautionary tale.

But that didn't dissuade them, and they didn't let go of the idea that I should be a candidate. In the spring of 2021, after the 2020 election drama had started to die down, the guys called me up and asked me to grab breakfast with them.

"Sam. We seriously think you should run for office," Tanner said.

"We know you don't like the idea," Andy continued. "But you're the type of person our country needs. You get what the average person is experiencing. You're smart. You have integrity. You're a veteran, you're a small business owner, you're a man of faith—you *are* the kind of candidate we need!"

I didn't have the heart to tell them that I had zero interest in being a political candidate again—nor did I have the bandwidth for a campaign. "Tell you what," I told them. "Why don't I have you guys over for dinner and we can talk with Amy about it."

THERE, I thought. *Amy will deliver a firm "NO" and save me from being the bad guy.*

I didn't tell Amy about what the guys were planning to talk with us about. I figured her negative reaction would be more dramatic if they sprung their idea on her. I knew she'd have no tolerance for another political campaign and she'd squash the whole thing.

A week later, the guys came over. Amy made us chicken enchiladas and set the kids up with a movie. Right after we prayed over the food, I began serving up the enchiladas. *Now*, I thought. *I'm going to get ahead of this.*

"Hey, Amy," I said. "The guys here have been asking me for a couple of months if I would consider running for office. I've told them that you and I always do everything together. So, I just want

to give you the floor right now to provide your thoughts and feedback on that.” I sat down, feeling confident that Amy would issue an unequivocal “NO.”

She looked at me, startled, then looked at the guys with the same surprised expression. *Here it comes*, I thought. *This is the last time I have to hear this idea and then we can all move on.*

But that’s not what she did.

“I’ve been waiting for you to come to that conclusion, Sam.”

My jaw dropped open. The two guys stared at her, then turned to look at me.

“I’m sorry—what?” I asked.

“I’ve been waiting for you to come to that conclusion,” she repeated. “The Lord told me in prayer that we’ve been wasting our time.” She looked at me, her eyes soft and full. “We’re called to do more than just hike through mountains, Sam.”

I stared at her in disbelief. “I can’t believe you’re saying this.”

“The Lord has given you *gifts*, Sam,” she said. “You’re exceptionally intelligent. You’re a gifted orator and leader. And you have an amazing story. We’ve been out gallivanting around in the mountains, having fun—and obviously, I love that. But I feel like God has been telling me that He didn’t give us these gifts to waste.”

“This is so epic,” one of the guys whispered to the other.

I shook my head, trying to come to terms with Amy’s declaration. “How long have you felt like this?”

“A couple months.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I was waiting for God to make it clear to you.”

I wasn’t sure God *had* made it clear to me—if anything, Amy’s statement seemed to confuse things. *Was* I wasting my gifts?

The rest of the meal passed easily enough. The guys were both elated to have Amy’s vote of support, and Amy seemed lighthearted after unburdening herself of her confession. I was the only one who felt awkward and preoccupied.

That night, as the two of us were getting ready for bed, I brought

it up again. “You know, I was really banking on you breaking those guys’ hearts,” I said, my mouth full of toothpaste.

She smiled sympathetically. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

“You said you’ve been feeling this way for a couple months?”

She cocked her head, thinking. “I remember having that prayer with God...back in the fall.”

“That was like five months ago!” I spat out my toothpaste.

“I just felt like the Lord was telling me that it wasn’t my job to tell you to do this. That was His job. He told me, ‘I’ve prepared your heart. Now I’ve got to prepare his heart.’ I knew it couldn’t be me or anyone else making you want to do this. You had to see the need on your own. And you needed to get to a point where you saw what you could contribute.” She paused and studied me. “*Do* you see the need?”

I grimaced and shrugged. “Of course I see the need for good leaders. That’s the easy part.”

“And do you see that you have incredible talents you could contribute?”

I sighed. “Those two made a pretty good case for it.” She shot me a look, wordlessly rebuking my cop-out answer. “Okay, yes—I know that I would be a good leader. And my experiences have given me a lot of exposure to some of the struggles people are dealing with in this state.”

Amy rubbed cold cream on her face. “And you’re incredibly capable at leading people in teams. You can endure tough circumstances. You’re able to make objectively good decisions on behalf of others. Sam, I feel like those talents are *needed* in the political arena, and...” She looked at me apologetically. “I think those gifts are being underutilized by you right now.”

I didn’t want to admit that I agreed with her. “But I’m not sure I *want* this.”

“Don’t you? If you’re being really honest with yourself? Haven’t you felt frustrated by the people making laws and policies, and considered the fact that you might do a better job?”

I shifted my weight uncomfortably. “No. Well. Maybe.”

She sighed. “I *know* you, Sam Brown. You’ve always wanted to live a life of service. And I totally agree with what you said on our hike last fall, about God being able to use us in whatever context we’re in. But I can’t help thinking He’s calling you to a broader level of service than what you’re doing right now.”

I sat down on the bed and stared at my hands. “What about what happened last time?”

“You’re not the same person you were last time,” she said, sitting down next to me. “You’re so much more sure of yourself and your beliefs. We wouldn’t be entering this as naive, clueless little lambs. We know *exactly* how awful the political machine can be. But that doesn’t mean you’re not still called to enter into the fray.”

I thought about that. “I *do* have pretty thick skin,” I acknowledged. I glanced at Amy with a grin, hoping she’d pick up on the joke.

She smiled and rolled her eyes. “Yes, you literally have very thick skin.” She laughed. “Honestly, that’s part of the draw. Your scars inspire people. Think about the people you worked with at Amazon. They’re not in a position to represent themselves. They would never have the resources or the capacity to run for political office. They have a lot of suffering in their lives, and when they look at *you*, they think, ‘This guy knows what it is to suffer.’ And they see that your suffering hasn’t *broken* you. It hasn’t deterred you from trying to help other people, like them. What if you could help them, Sam? What if you were in a position of leadership that could lead to a noticeable improvement in their lives?”

“Amy. I’m not going to lie and say that doesn’t appeal on some level. But haven’t you thought about what this would mean for our family? For our kids? This would be brutal for all of us.”

She nodded. “I know. I don’t look forward to it. But...this guy I know is always quoting this motto—‘No mission too difficult, no sacrifice too great. Duty first.’”

“Oof! You hit below the belt!”

Amy smiled. “Sorry, not sorry.”

I stood up and began pacing at the foot of the bed. “Amy. I have learned over the years that you have so much wisdom.”

“Aw.” She smiled.

“I think you probably understand me better than I understand myself. So, when you speak on an issue like this...even if I don’t agree with it, I know I have to consider it.”

She took my hand as I walked past and paused my pacing. “Can we pray about it?”

I nodded. I sank back down on the bed next to her.

We held each other and prayed.

I struggled to fall asleep that night. For some reason, I kept thinking of Rick staring out at the Truckee River, remembering what he’d said to me just before he got out of the car. “You get it.”

What did he mean by that? I wondered. *What did he think I “got”?*

Was it true what Amy had said about my scars? *People see that you know what it means to suffer.* I thought about what Rick had tried to endure every day at Amazon. *He* suffered. And maybe he related to me, because he saw evidence of my own suffering.

My road had looked vastly different than his, but in the end—suffering was suffering. By now, I’d heard plenty of stories of desperation, and broken dreams, and missed opportunities. I’d seen the deflation of hope and optimism in people’s faces. Maybe my scars’ visibility caused people to recognize their own pain in me. Maybe it even caused them to feel hope when they saw me fighting to keep going and striving and working to make things better, because that was a sign they could achieve the same thing.

Spreading hope, I thought. *Now THAT would be a mission worth sacrificing for.*

God. Do you want me to do this? I prayed. *I’d really be okay living a quiet life at home with Amy and the kids, running my business and keeping things chill. But I want to live my life for You. Is this something You’re calling me into?*

While waiting for His answer, I fell asleep.

The next morning, I got up early, let the dogs out, poured myself some coffee, and went into the living room. I flipped my Bible open to the story of “the talents.” It was a familiar story to me. Jesus tells

a parable of a master leaving on a trip, and giving the care of his money—gold talents—to three different servants. When the master returns, two of the servants have invested the money and stewarded it well, so they're rewarded. But the third servant buried his gold talent in the ground. The master gets angry with him for wasting the talent and he's disciplined.

I shut my Bible and took my coffee out onto the back porch. The dogs ran up to me, eager for a walk. I patted their heads and threw a ball as a compromise. I'd take them on a walk later.

Lord, I prayed, am I burying my talent in the ground?

The sky was pink as the sun started to rise. I could see thick dew on the grass, and registered that the season had already moved beyond the spring frosts.

Lord, I could work toward solving problems that help people, but that could only ever be part of the answer. The thing that actually brings peace in the midst of it all is You.

I thought about the journey He'd taken me on. How strange and bizarre that the terrible explosion that had upended my life and left me permanently scarred might now be a reason for people to feel hope.

What if I get too caught up in it all? I wondered. What if a political campaign becomes one more version of me wanting to feel important? What if my ego gets in the way and causes me to lose sight of what matters?

I remembered Mother's remark during our long stretch together about how I'd been so prideful in high school. She'd said, "If getting burned is what it took for the Lord to draw you to Himself, so be it." That was the gift she could see in the accident: a humbling in the desert.

But I didn't just need a humbling in the desert, I thought. I needed a thorn in my side.

That was the gift of the scars: they were my grounding rod. Every time I looked in the mirror, I saw both the miracle and the reminder of who I was. I was not invincible. I was a fallible man, and I'd been hurt, and I *had* suffered. But I had also survived. And in that moment after surviving, even as I stood there on the battlefield before getting to the helicopter, I knew that *all of it* was for a reason.

The scars were a literal physical reminder that God saved my life for a purpose. Was a political campaign supposed to be part of that purpose?

The sun pushed its bright light over the horizon, spilling into our backyard. I could hear stirrings in the house—cupboards opening. Amy's voice calling for the kids to get up.

Lord, I'll explore this political thing, I prayed. And if You don't want me to move forward, just send me a "No." Shut doors, so it can't happen. Either way, God, I want to hold up my end of the bargain: the life I live is not my own. It's Yours. Whether or not I do a political campaign, whether I win or lose—I just want to serve You. I want to show people the hope that You've given me.

"Sam?" I heard Amy call.

I turned toward the deck and lifted my mug so she would spot me. She gave me an impatient smile and motioned me inside. I grinned.

Another day was beginning. It was another day I'd never been entitled to. Another day that may never have been. And there was my bride, and my three children who lit up when they saw my face, and there was hope and dreams and purpose that joined hands with eternity.

I headed inside.

It was time to keep living.