

CHAPTER 6

VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH



Mother and me, during West Point's graduation weekend. May 2006.

SUFFOLK, VIRGINIA. SEPTEMBER 4, 2008. MORNING.

As dusk turned to darkness over the Kandahar desert, my mother was on the other side of the world, driving down green Virginia roads. She had just dropped my father off at work.

Mother had just gotten a new worship CD and put it in the player. The lyrics were about God's presence, His sovereignty, His love. The country roads of Southern Virginia swept by as she drove. Tall, old trees stretched out their green canopy over the road. She felt her body relax.

It relieved her that my father, Scott, was finally well enough to be back at work. When she'd first heard the news of his accident, she was afraid he might not make it.

She'd gotten the call from the hospital—*Tanya Brown? Your husband had a motorcycle accident. He's in the ICU.* She'd rushed there, her heart in her throat, terrified with the thoughts of how bad it might be. X-rays showed a broken hip, broken hand, and broken foot—but no head trauma or internal bleeding. Not life-threatening, they assured her. Still, rehabilitation could take months.

That wasn't even the worst part. The worst part came when he nearly died on his hospital bed from a pulmonary embolism, caused by complications from the accident. She could recall the madness in the hospital room, people rushing around, yelling orders. The horrible beeping from the machines, the alarm in their voices. All she could do was silently pray: *Please God, please God, please God, no.*

He'd pulled through—she thanked God for that. And now, two months after she'd first rushed to the ICU, he was home. She was starting to get used to the new routine. In her opinion, she'd become a halfway decent at-home nurse. "In sickness and in health," they'd vowed, and she supposed sickness included injury; so, now was the time for that kind of love.

He couldn't drive himself anywhere yet—not with those casts on. But he was starting to work again. That was a relief.

Driving down those country roads in the late summer sunshine,

with peaceful music playing, it felt possible to think of the traumatic events of the past several months as receding into the past. Mother relaxed. It was going to be okay. All would be well.

Suddenly, a bizarre picture appeared in front of her—slightly to the left, seemingly obscuring the oncoming traffic. The image was oval-shaped, like a mirror or an old-fashioned window.

It's Samuel, she realized, shocked. *He's in a hospital room. Wrapped in bandages.* She watched herself enter into the frame and walk through a glass door toward me—her oldest son.

After a moment, the image disappeared. The plain stretch of asphalt returned.

Uh oh, she thought, her sense of calm giving way to unease. *What was THAT?*

I'd better pray for Samuel, she resolved. That's what she did for the rest of the drive: she prayed, letting the words of her worship music CD guide her meditations.

When she arrived home, she registered the time: 9:30 a.m. Afghanistan was 9.5 hours ahead of her. She did the math: it would be evening there—around 6:00 p.m. *Hope Samuel's doing well,* she thought. *Wonder what he ate for dinner. Maybe he's doing something fun with his buddies.*

The light blinked on the answering machine. She made up her mind to listen to the messages in a few hours. There were too many things on her to-do list needing her attention right now.

It was only later—after she'd gotten the frantic call from my grandmother—that Mother finally pressed play on the answering machine. The voice she heard coming through sounded weak and tired—even raw. The words arrived slowly, as though each one required a great effort. Despite the message's attempt to reassure, she knew instantly that something was wrong:

"Mother and Father, this is Samuel. My truck was hit. I'm okay... They're flying me back through Germany. I think they'll be in touch with you. I love you."

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, AFGHANISTAN. SEPTEMBER 4, 2008. NIGHT.

I wasn't awake for much of what followed, but I do remember a few things.

First: the hellish return of consciousness when they began the debridement process of cleaning my wounds at the Kandahar Role 3 hospital—the combat equivalent of a Level One Trauma facility. I have no visual memories of this because I'd shut my eyes tight to deal with the pain. All I remember is the agonizing sensations of my raw flesh being scraped, cut, rubbed, irrigated, peeled, and scrubbed. It was a frightening preview of the months and years of “healing” still ahead of me.

Finally, I was left alone, doing my best to breathe and block out the pain. A Sergeant Major from the Battalion came to check on me. I remembered that I'd seen him use a satellite phone before and asked him to call my parents.

He hesitated. “I'm really not supposed to do that...”

“Come on, Sergeant Major. I want to let them know I'm alive.”

He called.

They didn't answer. I left a voicemail and tried not to alarm them.

The only other number I had memorized was Meemaw's. The Sergeant Major held the phone up next to my head. “Meemaw?” I said when I heard her answer. “It's Samuel.”

“Oh *hey*, Samuel! It's so good to hear from you!” Meemaw's drawl was full of delight. “How're things goin', honey?”

“Well, Meemaw—I've had an accident, but I'm okay. They're sending me home early. I need you to get in touch with my parents and let them know that I'm coming home.”

“Oh my gosh, Samuel! You've gotten hurt? What happened? How bad is it?”

“It's not too bad, Meemaw,” I lied. “I can't really talk right now. Can you let Mother and Father know?”

She said she would—I think. I don't remember how the conversation ended or what happened next. That's about when my memories just cease.

Roughly eight hours after the explosion, I stopped breathing. My body succumbed to the trauma-induced exhaustion. Because I had breathed flames down into my respiratory system, I had scarring up and down my trachea—something called “inhalation injuries.” My oxygen levels plummeted and my system crashed. I had an emergency intubation, was put into a medically induced coma, and given strong dissociative painkillers.

Soon thereafter, I was flown out to a ship to keep me stabilized for the journey back to the United States. My mother, seemingly answering the summons I’d shouted out while being burned alive, was flown out and joined me onboard. I was so relieved to see her. Mother had always managed a nurturing duality in how she cared for me: she was both a comforter in my pain and a challenger, prompting me to toughen up and endure hard things. She sat with me in the ship’s common area and told me that she was proud of me. “We’re going to get through this, Son,” she repeated quietly. At times, she read scripture: “... *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...*”

I didn’t have a room on the ship, so there was never a secure place to go. I got the sense, in fact, that I wasn’t welcome there at all. The crew seemed to treat me with hostility, as a wounded deadweight who couldn’t even manage to move his own wheelchair. I overheard their mutterings: “We had to be taken off our mission for *this* guy?”

“Can’t believe our new mission is escorting this wounded soldier back home.”

“Isn’t there someone else who could take care of him? Why are we stuck with it?”

It was painful to feel like such a burden, especially when I had been used to leading soldiers like this. I didn’t want to be the one that had to be supported or taken care of. I had no control: not over others’ perception of me, not over my movement, not over my own destination. I was wholly dependent on other people moving me around, a loss of self-determination that seemed exacerbated by the fact that I was on a ship in the middle of an ocean. And the servicemembers

in uniform—men and women I'd always thought I could trust and lean on like family—had turned against me.

A few days into the journey I ended up in a sailor's cabin, deep inside the recesses of the ship. As I looked on, shocked and horrified, several sailors tangled themselves in a drug-fueled orgy. One looked up, saw me there, and shouted at me, "You're going to tell on us!"

My shock switched to alarm—how was I supposed to defend myself? For a minute I was speechless, but my thoughts violently protested. *I'm just here to get better! All I'm focused on is healing. I don't care what other people are doing around me.*

Finally, I managed to say something out loud. "I can't do anything," I said. "I'm stuck in this wheelchair."

One of them walked up menacingly. He held up an aerosol can of hairspray in one hand and a lighter in the other. He flicked the flame and began spraying through it, creating a flame thrower. I writhed as he came closer, but couldn't escape. Then he was spraying it on me, burning me, re-burning me, I was on fire again. I cried out but couldn't move, once again powerless against the flames.

The torture was interrupted by the Commanding Officer. He burst into the room, demanding to know what was happening. The sailors lied, making up a story about something I had done. Once again, my thoughts protested but I couldn't make a verbal defense.

"We didn't hurt him *that* bad, Captain."

The Captain looked at me. Even in the belly of the ship, he wore dark sunglasses. He smiled, revealing teeth that were perfect and gleaming white.

I felt panic. Couldn't he see I was incapable of doing anything to anybody? Yet, as he smiled down at me, I sensed there would be no fair evaluation of the facts. Even though the evidence was clearly on my side, I was still deemed to be in the wrong. Were the officers of the ship just there to protect their own? Were they afraid I'd expose their bad leadership culture? Better to accuse the outsider who couldn't muster a defense, and then get rid of me as soon as they could.

The senior officers took me down to the very bottom level of the

ship, the keel. There was a makeshift torture room down there with a metal table. I was strapped onto it, naked and face down. Along the wall were cut sections of fire hose, each about four to six feet long. All the officers of the ship came down and gathered around the metal table where I was trapped. One by one, they took strips of the fire hose and beat my back with it, whipping me, lashing the only part of my body that hadn't been covered in burns.

Through the pain, I felt fury. I was being tortured for someone else's failure. I'd lost a soldier, saw three of my men badly wounded, and had experienced life-threatening burns because of someone else's decision. Now, I was bearing the entire cost of that? And what were their consequences? They stood, whole-bodied, and jeered.

I passed out. In my unconsciousness, I dreamed of falling into a dark, deep, cube-shaped pit. The darkness was so encompassing, no light could penetrate. There was no bottom or sides—I was suspended deep inside it, unable to move. On scaffolding above the pit, demonic figures moved and prowled. Surely this was hell—I was in hell. *I'm in hell.*

When I regained consciousness, I found myself in another Forward Operating Base, similar to the one where my unit had been stationed in Afghanistan—only this FOB was in Mexico. This was confusing to me. Hadn't we been trying to make it back to the US? I'd nearly made it there, but wasn't yet safe. Even more confusing was the fact that Afghan terrorists were roaming the streets of Mexico, almost as if the war in Afghanistan had moved to the US's southern border.

My Battalion was with me though—that was a relief. I observed small teams of my guys going out on patrol. I felt a mixture of resignation and disappointment watching them leave. I knew I wasn't in a position to join them, but my inability to engage was depressing.

Despite not going into the field, I was captured anyway. The Taliban broke through all the security that had surrounded me—my guys, our armored vehicles, our weapons—and I was taken hostage. For several days I was held as a prisoner of war inside a mosque, guarded by Congolese mercenaries. The mixture of characters and places was

bewildering: Where was I? Was I alone? Who could I trust? Would rescue ever come?

At one point, a conflict occurred in the mercenaries' camp outside the mosque—some sort of big firefight. I pulled myself out of my wheelchair and escaped, doing my best to maneuver through the streets, moving with the grace of a zombie. But I stepped in the wrong spot. An explosion erupted underneath me. When the smoke cleared, I saw with horror that my lower half had been entirely blown off.

I was now half a man, impotent and emasculated: cut down to only a badly damaged torso, battered face, and tortured mind. Soldiers nearby—Americans, though not my soldiers—picked me up and threw me into a dumpster. Inside the dumpster, I found myself surrounded by other mutilated body parts.

Was this where I belonged now? I was a horror, a grotesque—fit to be thrown away, discarded, and left for dead.

But *I* wasn't ready to be left for dead. A frantic need to survive took hold of me. How could I escape? I tried looking for a way to climb out, but instead began sliding down toward the bottom of the slanted dumpster. There was nothing to grasp onto—nothing but other mutilated body parts. As I slid past bloody arms and wounded torsos, I spotted someone else's lower extremities near the bottom. Before I could stop myself, my exposed lower torso had merged on top of the foreign legs.

The sensation was mortifying. I felt contaminated on the deepest level. But I also realized I was able to animate the foreign legs beneath me. Disgusted and appalled, I accepted that this severed corpse was my way out.

Pieced together like Frankenstein's monster, I climbed out of the dumpster and found my way to a field hospital. The hospital was in Mexico—I was still beyond the safety of the US—but at least the hospital bay felt secure and spacious.

Here though, the isolation was profound. Despite the multiple beds in the ward, there were no other warriors—there weren't even nurses or doctors. No one came. I felt increasingly uncomfortable,

yet there was no one to provide relief, or answers, or help. I also was once again immobilized: I was back in a wheelchair, my brief mobility terminated.

Days passed. Eventually, a nurse showed up, then left almost as quickly. My mother occasionally looked in, then disappeared.

The fear and frustration were consuming. When would I ever start healing? When would I be taken to the security of American soil? When would there be safety and help?

One day, I was taken somewhere, then almost immediately brought back. From my wheelchair, I stared at my bed in shock. The corpses of two young Marines had been set in my cot. Somehow, I understood the nature of their demise: they were from a Battalion of Marines that had redeployed from overseas and landed in San Diego. On their first night back, several of them had crossed the border into Mexico to party. These two had ended up drunk and lost, stumbling down a dirt road in the middle of the night. They'd gotten hit by a car and brutally killed—their carnage, if possible, even worse than mine.

Horried, I tried calling for help. “Can someone move these Marines? There are other beds around me!” I called. “I’m the only living guy here!”

The nursing staff entered the room and assessed the situation. They picked me up out of my wheelchair and tossed me into the same bed with the dead Marines. Then they left.

There was no word about who the young men were, no mention of their deeds, no mourning, no celebration of their courage. They were simply discarded, a casualty of war, no longer any use to the war machine.

“I don’t *belong* here!” I called. “Why are you putting me in the bed with these guys? I’m not dead! I’m still alive!”

I could smell the dirt and dust on their bodies. It seemed to coat the inside of my nostrils and mouth, like the sand and ash I’d inhaled in Afghanistan. They still smelled of exhaust fumes and spilled diesel gas. I felt sickened by their company and grief-stricken by our collective loss.

Perhaps I lost consciousness again—I must have started dreaming. I imagined myself floating above the earth, almost as though I *had* died. My viewpoint started at ground level, then zoomed high through the lower atmosphere with a view of Earth like a satellite. Far below on the surface of the earth, I could see a series of coordinated explosions—a choreographed global attack on major cities around the world. Mushroom clouds and the echoes of massive detonations bloomed in succession, first across the Middle East, then into Europe, and then in the United States. Sleeper cells all over the world—undetected and unseen—had waited until that certain day, that certain time, to detonate bombs in major cities.

With a sickening realization, I watched the dream tell a story of utter failure. Terrorism was widespread. Winston's death, my injuries, all the other casualties of war—it had all been in support of a higher mission, a noble cause. Yet, even so, the world seemed to be going up in flames all around us.

When I woke up, I found myself in a madrasa, an Islamic school for children—though, strangely, we were still in Mexico. The teacher was a man with a black turban who was missing several fingers. His eyes glowered like a storm while he instructed the students on how to be suicide bombers. This was alarming enough, but even more unsettling was what I noticed hanging in the back of the classroom: an American flag.

The door burst open. The President of the United States came in, along with the Secretary of Defense. “We are proud of you!” the President spoke. “You’ve completed your training to become undercover terrorists for the United States. Your reward is US citizenship.” The instructor began to guide the students through a citizenship ceremony, the President personally shaking each child’s hand, congratulating them.

“You will each be sent to infiltrate a known terrorist cell somewhere in the world,” the Secretary of Defense explained. “Using your training, you will assess the optimal moment to do maximum damage to the terrorist group. Then, you will detonate yourselves. Hopefully, you will

kill as many other people as you possibly can. In doing so, you will be supporting the ideals and values of this country—a noble cause.”

Stunned, I watched the President as he left the madrasa and boarded Air Force One. As the plane lifted off into the low evening light from the remote airstrip near this desert oasis village, I suddenly heard sharp shots. The enormous 747 was being shot down. Flames shot up from the plane’s engines. The nose dipped toward the ground and the whole plane crashed into the earth, flames erupting from its center.

The flames grew bigger and all-consuming. They filled my view.

Then, out of the fire, I heard a familiar voice.

“No wonder he hasn’t been able to sleep! All this time I thought he’d lost his mind, in addition to being nearly burned alive!”

Mother? I opened my eyes. Fluorescent lights glared harshly above me, reflecting against sterile, white walls. I smelled disinfectant.

“I could have *told* you to take him off the ketamine if anyone had bothered to tell me he’d been on it! He thought he was in danger. He thought we both were in danger!”

Why was Mother so angry?

“I’ve been trying to calm him down to get him to sleep, and meanwhile, y’all have been giving him hallucinatory drugs that have kept him trapped in a war zone!”

Someone was arguing with her—“Dissociative drugs...help a patient disassociate from their pain—”

“Maybe that works when the patient isn’t dealing with PTSD! I’ve been trying to reason with him, telling him that we’re in San Antonio at the hospital, and meanwhile he’s telling me that we’re surrounded by enemies and we’ve got to get on the helicopter, and yelling for his Sergeant. No one thought to tell me that he was *hallucinating*? No one thought to mention to his mother that he wasn’t *actually insane*, that he was just on hallucinogens?”

The other voice was protesting again. Mother wasn’t having it.

“He’s been running in his bed, trying to climb up into the helicopter! It broke my heart! You think moving like that is good for his healing? And y’all told me he had to stay intubated until he calms

down and sleeps—so, I’ve been reading him stories and showing him pictures from his West Point crew days, and counting sheep backwards... Meanwhile, he thinks he’s in a life-or-death situation because of your dissociative drugs! That’s why he’s on superdrive!”

“Mother?” I spoke. My throat hurt.

She didn’t hear me—the other person had interrupted. “He’s off it now, so—”

“Even after y’all took the tube out, he’s been acting crazy. If I had *known* that he was on hallucinogens, I could have told you to take him off a long time ago. Do you have any idea how sad it’s been, to watch Samuel go through all that trauma while he’s been in the safety of a hospital room? And all from the freaking ketamine?! I tell you, I am pissed off. I am seriously pissed off.”

“Mother,” I croaked again, louder.

Both Mother and the medical professional looked down at me.

“Is the President still alive?” I asked. “Were there a series of explosions and bombs going off?”

She sat down next to me and took my hand. It was thickly wrapped with gauze—like a paw.

“No, Samuel,” she said, in a steely and much quieter voice. Her eyes flickered up angrily to the medical professional. “None of that happened.”

“Did the Taliban attack? Where are the dead Marines?”

“You’re safe, Son. You’re in a hospital in San Antonio. You’ve been... living in an alternative reality for days now. All those horrible things you’re describing—that was all just in your mind.”

This was inconceivable to me. I had *lived* it. Those experiences had been far more real than any dream I’d ever had. So real, in fact, that I had dreamed *inside* of what she was describing as hallucinations.

I pushed back, reminding her of our journey on the ship, the torture room, the hospital in Mexico, the dead Marines.

“None of those things were real,” she insisted. She began explaining a different version of reality—but it wasn’t my reality. It was *their* reality.

In anyone else's reality, I had spent thirty-six hours in Kandahar at the airfield. Then I was transported with other wounded veterans—including Philip Kopfensteiner, Kevin Jensen, and Michael Debolt—to Bagram Airfield in Northeast Afghanistan. After another thirty-six hours passed, we flew with a larger collection of wounded soldiers to a major hospital in Landstuhl, Germany.

At that point, many of the wounded were checked in for treatment and rehab at Landstuhl. The location was close enough to the combat zone theater that soldiers with more minor wounds could be quickly treated, quickly healed, and quickly returned to battle.



Recovering in US military burn unit at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. October 2008.

I did not meet that criteria. They determined the burned First Lieutenant was ineligible for a quick return to combat, and I was put on another flight, this time to San Antonio, Texas, with a final stop at Brooke Army Medical Center. BAMC, with its formalized

burn unit, was the final stop for the most badly burned soldiers in the Department of Defense. Apparently, that was my new category.

At BAMC, I was kept in a medically induced coma while initial treatment began, including preliminary skin graft harvesting from the healthy skin off my back—an experience which, in *my* reality, took place in a torture room in the belly of a ship.

In *their* reality, there was no ship. There was no torture room. There was no dumpster, no madrasa, no series of worldwide explosions.

It was all in my mind, Mother reassured me. A result of the ketamine. “You’re safe now,” she kept insisting. “It’s all right. Healing can begin.” She opened her Bible and flipped it to the center.

“The Lord is my Shepherd. I will have everything I need. He lets me rest in fields of green grass. He leads me beside the quiet waters. He makes me strong again. He leads me in the way of living right with Himself which brings honor to His name. Yes, even if I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not be afraid of anything, because You are with me...”

I didn’t hear the rest. The phrase circled in my head—*valley of the shadow of death. Shadow of death. Death.*

Healing can begin, she’d said.

I hoped she was right.