PART 3

LEARNING TO LIVE

CHAPTER 7

PAINFULLY AWAKE

First time at an Army–Navy game as a member of Corps of Cadets. December 2002.

"Bone graft? I'm going to need a *bone* graft?"

The doctor perched on his swivel chair in front of the computer. He looked at me patiently, as though he were used to explaining the frailty of a human body to West Point cadets who—like me—largely believed in their own invincibility.

"That's right. You sustained a hairline fracture at the base of where your femur meets the tibia." He pointed to an anatomical poster on the wall. "That fracture cut off your blood supply to an area of the knee…here. And part of your bone tissue has died." He moved over to his computer screen, where there was an X-ray of my knee. "See this dark hollow space?" He tapped the screen with his pen. "That's supposed to be dense white. That's how we can see the bone has died."

"But…I don't even remember getting *injured.* How could I have gotten a fracture?"

The doctor shrugged. "It's not uncommon for high school athletes to sustain an injury that they push through. My guess is you got the fracture at some point during high school and the unhealed fracture ended up cutting off the blood supply, which over time, led to the bone dying. That's likely why it's been hurting you for so long."

I was still skeptical. "I've never heard of anyone else having this."

The doctor smiled. "Yes, you're very special. ACL injuries are much more common. Your knee injury is rare. It's called osteochondritis dissecans, OCD for short."

"OCD? I thought that was obsessive-compulsive disorder."

"You know, the psychiatrists and the orthopedic surgeons are always fighting over who gets that particular three-letter combo." He smiled, attempting a joke. I scowled.

"Well, how long until I'm healed?"

"First, let's talk through *how* you'll be healed. In surgery, we'll need to scoop out that dead tissue. Then we'll take a bone graft off the front top end of your tibia—that's your shin bone—where the bone is

extra thick. We'll pack the crater where the dead tissue was with the live bone tissue, and use screws to hold that little bone cap in place."

"I'll have screws in my knee?"

"Not forever, no. It will take about three months for the bone graft to integrate into the rest of the bone around it. Once it has, we can take out the screws in another surgery—"

"*Another* surgery?"

"…That's right, and then you'll need additional time for that to heal."

I stared at the doctor bleakly. I was thinking of all the training exercises, my long runs, playing pickup basketball games with my friends on the weekends. Most of all, I was thinking about crew. "So… how long until I'm better?"

"You need to stay off of it for three months, until the graft heals. And when I say stay off of it, I mean absolutely *no* weight on it. You'll have to get around with crutches."

I hesitated before asking my next question. I didn't want to know the answer, but I suspected I needed to. "What about crew? I'm a rower. When I row, I'm not standing on my legs, but I use them to push back when I pull the oar. Can I still do that?"

He stared at me as though the answer were obvious. "If you put *any* strain whatsoever on your knee while it's healing, the graft is likely to die, and we'll have to start the whole process over again."

My face returned to its scowl. "I'm going to miss the entire spring season."

He nodded, matter-of-factly. "Looks like it." He stood up cheerfully. "We've scheduled your surgery one week from today. Lots of ice and ibuprofen until then. And *no weight* on the knee."

That was a depressing spring. As West Point woke up from winter, daffodils bloomed and the cherry trees were covered with pink blossoms. All the other West Point cadets seemed high on life. On good days, I sat in the sunshine on a bench and watched my friends throw the football around. On bad days, I stared out my window as the members of the crew ran together in front of the barracks toward the boathouse.

Being injured sucked.

After three months, the doctor confirmed the bone graft had "taken," and I could start doing gentle activity. I was allowed to walk, but *no* running, *no* lifting, and *no* rowing.

"Can I row in our indoor rowing tanks, at least?" I asked, desperate for some way to maintain my spot on the crew team.

The doctor didn't know what I was talking about. I explained that the West Point boathouse had a couple of huge water tanks with sliding seats in the middle, simulating rowing in a single shell. "I wouldn't be hauling hard on the oars, like I'd be doing if I was in the boat with all the guys," I pleaded. "I could go easy and just work on my technique?"

He agreed—but warned me to stop if I felt pain.

The tanks became my saving grace. When the JV team left for practice, I went with them. They all climbed in the shell; I climbed onto the sliding seat between the tanks. They cruised down the Hudson; I rowed in place. But being back in the boathouse meant I was part of the team again—now, I just had to get good enough to earn a spot back on one of the shells. I'd lost nearly all my strength, but I still could work on form. In that solitary tank, I drilled technique without force: over and over and over again, all by myself.

Occasionally a coach or a coxswain would come in and watch me for a few minutes. They'd provide a few tips or suggest an adjustment. Then, I'd drill that new adjustment, isolating technique away from everything else. Focusing on form while still babying my bad knee made me realize the importance of controlling my slide forward—and that ended up being the big game changer.

I was still weak from the muscle atrophy that had occurred over the past six months when the fall season started, at the beginning of junior year. Following the doctor's instructions, I hadn't put real weight on my right leg or exercised it. But my technique had gotten so good, the coaches still put me in the stroke seat in the JV boat. We rowed to victory that fall, even beating the Varsity team. The next spring, I won the Varsity Stroke seat and we had one of the best seasons West Point crew had ever seen.

The lesson became internalized: *Temporary setbacks are opportuni-*

ties to create even bigger wins. When I push through adversity, I come out stronger. I've got more to contribute. I'm an even better leader.

Years later, in another hospital room, I circled back to that lesson. I repeated it to myself, again and again, with the same repetitive force of rowing on a sliding seat in a stationary water tank. The repetition got me nowhere: there was no discernible progress.

But there was still that hope: *Maybe I'm changing. Maybe I'm getting stronger. Maybe soon, I'll be back on the team.*

BROOKE ARMY MEDICAL CENTER, MID-SEPTEMBER 2008.

Mother had printed off a number of pictures for me, and taped them up where I could see them from my hospital bed.

She'd chosen happy pictures, meant to cheer me up: a picture of our family at Christmas time. A picture of me at graduation. There were several pictures that she'd found on my digital camera from Afghanistan: me, reading *Lone Survivor* by my stretcher-cot at the FOB. Me, with a group of smiling kids in one of the villages. She'd also taped up pictures of me with the West Point crew team: holding up the shell. Pulling the oars in unison just after the starting pistol.

The guy in the pictures was good looking. Tall. Strong. It was me—at least, the "me" I'd always been.

He didn't look much like whoever I was now.

I lay in my hospital bed, wrapped in bandages from the crown of my head, down to my lower extremities. The parts of my body that hadn't sustained burns, like my back and thighs, had all been used as donor sites for skin grafts. It felt like there wasn't a single part of my body that hadn't been either burned or harvested.

I had escaped the ketamine-inspired war zone and was finally, painfully awake. But reality was brutal.

Time moved with agonizing slowness. Hour after hour, I lay in that hospital bed.

Stuck.

At one point, I'd been the fittest soldier in my Infantry company. Now, I was so weak it was difficult to stand. The initial period when I'd been intubated and on a ventilator had resulted in a significant decrease in my caloric intake. I'd never had a ton of body fat to begin with, but during those early days in the hospital, I became emaciated. I lost body fat, and I also lost muscle. That, plus the pain of the burns, grafts, and contracting scar tissue, made me feel trapped inside my own wrecked frame.

Even if I *had* been capable of getting out of my bed, I couldn't have. I was literally tied down. Because my arms had been so badly burned, they were in danger of becoming immobilized by the contracting scar tissue. In order to stretch the skin and try to keep it flexible, the nurses had attached my arms to a wing-like structure, stretching off each side of the bed. Whenever I woke up, I was lashed in a crucified position. They quickly detached my arms once I was conscious, but the sense of freedom was short-lived. We had more painful healing to get to.

Wrapped head to toe in the ICU. September 2008.

The day's activity began with the long process of wound debridement. I'd had my first experience of wound debridement at the KAF airfield, when medics and military nurses had worked to clean the dust, dirt, pieces of melted uniform, and dead tissue off of me, to create a clean environment for the skin to heal. In the hospital, wound debridement was Priority Number One for burn victims. Only in this stretch, it wasn't dust or charred uniform fabrics the nurses were scrubbing off. It was dying tissue—the parts of my body that had shown themselves to be past the point of ever being able to heal. If that dead tissue remained, it could rapidly lead to infection and bring down the other healthy tissue surrounding it.

It started off gently enough. Every morning, two nurses would come in and very, very carefully begin to take all my bandages off. It took hours: they were basically unwrapping a mummy. Once I had been stripped of all the bandages and was mostly naked, they lifted me onto a metal gurney. Just before leaving the ICU room, the nurses gave me two milligrams of a strong painkiller, Dilaudid.

The first time they gave me this painkiller when I was lucid and *not* high on ketamine, I asked about it. "Why do I need a painkiller when I'm just taking a shower?"

"You're going to need it," one responded grimly.

The nurses wheeled me into the shower room: a big, tiled room with multiple shower heads and handheld spray nozzles. As we approached it, the screams of pain which were ubiquitous on the burn unit floor grew louder.

"Is someone being murdered in there?" I joked, nervously. The nurses looked down at me, then made eye contact with each other. One of them clenched her jaw. Neither responded to my joke. It occurred to me that they seemed more apprehensive about the whole thing than I did.

Standing in the shower room, one of the nurses reminded me of the drill. "You're only allowed two more milligrams of Dilaudid. Last as long as you can, then tell us when you need the second hit."

Bracing themselves, one of them reached for the spigot. There was no point in asking if I was ready.

With a rush, the shower heads were turned on. Water sprayed down with force. The nurses began scrubbing.

And I began screaming.

Using debridement scrub brushes with thick, stiff bristles, the nurses scrubbed my burns to remove dead necrotic tissue. My skin had been burned severely enough that all my nerves on the burn sites were exposed—and those raw nerves were being forcefully scoured. It was necessary, but it felt like torture.

I lasted as long as I could until it was impossible to endure any longer. Finally, I cried out, "I need more pain medication!"

The nurse nodded, gave me the second hit. "That's all you get now!" she called over the noise of the water. "You just have to deal with the pain until it ends!" Each second was a minute. Each minute was an eternity.

Finally, the shower spigots were turned off. I was wheeled back to my room, still reeling from the pain. The long process of being rewrapped began.

Visiting hours usually began around the time the nurses were finishing up my rewrapping process, which meant Mother joined me after I was back in my mummy get-up. Once I was rewrapped, the next "healing" task was to sit. Literally, my first Physical Therapy exercise was sitting in a chair for four hours. I'd been burned on the backs of my legs, burned on my butt, and wherever I hadn't been burned, doctors had taken large slices of donor skin grafts. On top of those raw nerves and exposed flesh—that's where I rested all my weight. Sitting was agony.

Similar to the wound debridement, sitting was *necessary*: I was rebuilding core strength and the ability to sit up. But no one explained that to me at the time.

Maybe because I'd acted so insane at first, none of the medical practitioners ever bothered explaining *why* I had to sit in the damn chair. No one walked out the process for me, to spell out the duration or purpose or goal. I was just told, "Do this. It's part of your therapy."

The first day in the chair, I sat there for about thirty minutes—which, to me, felt herculean. After a half hour, I said through my gauze, "Okay, I'm ready to be put back in my bed now."

"No, no, no. You need to stay sitting. This isn't voluntary."

For four hours, I had to sit—although "four hours" were words they never said. I had no idea how long this sitting needed to go on; I only knew that every time I asked to go back to bed, I was shut down. There was no way for me to count down the minutes or measure how much longer. After another eternity, I was finally carried back to my hospital bed and immediately passed out.

The next day—after the shower and the debridement and the rewrapping—they said it again: "All right, time to go sit."

"No, no, no," I begged. "I did that yesterday."

"No, no, no," a nurse mimicked me, feigning cheerfulness. "You've got to do it today too."

"*Why?*" I demanded. "How long?"

"We're keeping track" was the chipper answer.

Mother tried to make things easier. On the second day, she turned on a football game and wheeled me in front of the TV. I was angry about everything—angry about the stupid showers, and the stupid gauze, and the stupid pain, and the stupid chair. Angry that I wasn't with my guys, angry that my body wasn't healing. I was angry at the nurses, and the doctors, and Mother.

I stared at the TV, miserable.

"I love you, Son," Mother said to me quietly.

I glared at her. "If you loved me, you wouldn't let them make me sit like this."

She looked shocked. "Samuel," she said, clearly hurt. "You have to do that."

"No, Mother," I said. "You could change it if you wanted to."

It wasn't fair of me to say that. But from my perspective inside that mummy shroud—stuck in my own skin, incapable of an activity as basic as *sitting*, overwhelmed with the stabbing pain of sitting on my burns—no one seemed to understand how hard it was to do the

things they were asking of me. I felt like I was giving everything I had and it wasn't enough.

Mother set about proving her love to me. After I'd fallen asleep, she went to find the medical staff and do battle.

"I don't know how other families deal with the recovery of a loved one, but I can't just passively watch when I think there are things that need to be done better. You're having him sit on a *wooden* chair. His butt is burned! You need to give him a cushion to sit on. He can still do his PT and get whatever benefits you're after if he's sitting on something soft instead of a rough wooden platform, can't he?"

They started to answer. She cut them off.

"Of course he can. Tomorrow, things are going to look a little different."

The following day, during my chair sitting time—which had improved accordingly, thanks to the provision of a cushion—Mother explained her new outlook to me.

"Well, Samuel, after I realized they'd had you on ketamine that whole time, I just said to myself, 'Tanya, you've got to be your son's advocate. They're not going to do anything beyond what's necessary to make him comfortable. They're not taking care of the details. They're just going for the easy approach, not the best approach. And the only way they're going to take care of the little things is if I complain about it.' So, I complained. And they changed it."

"Thank you, Mother," I said, chastened to think of my meanness the day before.

Even still, after days of this routine—the unwrapping, the shower, the debridement, the rewrapping, the chair—I was tempted to despair. *I hate this,* I thought. *I don't see any progress. How long is this going to go on?* It took several days for me to wake up to the fact that this WAS my recovery reality. This was what I had to go through.

Even through the layers of gauze, Mother could recognize my discouragement. Once again, she took matters into her own hands.

"Samuel," she told me one day. "Look. I know you don't like to be in this situation, but they've got their requirements of what they expect. And we've just got to do it. So, I think we should set a goal."

I perked up my ears. I've always been goal-driven. *Was* there a goal?

"Let's make a backwards plan, Samuel. When would you like to be out of the hospital?"

I thought about that. Could I *ever* get out of the hospital?

She spoke up, having already decided. "Your birthday's coming up pretty soon. Would you like to shoot to get out of the hospital by your birthday?"

"Yes." I felt incredulous that such a thing might be possible. "October 15?"

She nodded, firmly. "Let's shoot for that. We're going to have that as our goal."

"What do I have to do?" I asked, muffled by gauze.

Mother got a list from the medical staff. Before I could be discharged to the outpatient clinic, I first had to graduate from the ICU to the step-down unit, in another wing of the hospital. My graduation was dependent on three things: one, I had to drink from a straw. Two, I had to feed myself. And three, I had to walk.

Goals! Having something to work toward was a light at the end of the tunnel. The shift was so energizing I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it sooner. Mother knew me—she knew I had always been goal-driven. But, as I considered the cards I'd been dealt, I decided I needed to think even bigger.

October 15 was a step on the ladder. The *real* goal was to get back to Afghanistan. We had been early into our deployment. If I could recover fast enough, I could go back there—lead my guys again. Complete our mission and finish the deployment. That became my singular focus for pushing through every bit of pain. The harder I pushed myself, the sooner I could go back.

The *real* goal was to step back into leadership with my guys.

I didn't say my new goal out loud. I suspected, if I did, I'd get hit with negativity. The doctors and nurses would tell me it was unrealistic. But they didn't *know* me. They didn't know I'd come back from a crippling knee injury at West Point and had gone on to win the stroke seat. They didn't know what I'd overcome at Ranger School. They

didn't know what kind of fitness I'd had before the accident—what fitness, I was sure, I could achieve again.

What had I learned after the knee injury at West Point? I'd learned that adversity could be a blessing in disguise. So long as I pushed through it, looked for the lessons to be gained, and applied them diligently, I could come back *even stronger.* I could be a better leader! If I just focused on healing and hit every goal they put in front of me—forget that, if I *blew past* every goal they put in front of me—then they'd see that I deserved to get back with the team. I could be given the leadership spot again. I could lead my guys to victory.

When I woke up now, I had a purpose. I had something to prove!

We worked on the straw first. Because my entire face had been burned, the contracting scar tissue around my mouth had closed it to a tiny opening. But it was big enough for a straw. Mother held up the cup for me. I managed to close my lips around it—at least, what was left of my lips. After a few messy attempts, I was able to suck liquid down.

BOOM. *One step closer to drinking from a CamelBak in the desert.*

"Now he's got to feed himself," the ICU nurses reminded her.

"How is he supposed to manage that?" Mother asked. "His hands got burned. They're covered in bandages. He can't hold anything."

"He's got to learn if he wants to go to the step-down unit," they said. I agreed with that. If I expected to tear open MREs and pass them out to my team at the FOB, I needed to learn how to use my hands.

Feeding myself took much longer than the straw. It wasn't just the bandaged paws that posed an obstacle—it was also my tiny mouth. But we worked at it, and worked at it, and worked at it. Every time I got frustrated, Mother would remind me of the goal. "October 15," she said. "We're going to get out of this hospital for your birthday." I nodded, thinking even further into the future: *I'm going to share a meal with my soldiers.* Finally, by using a padded fork and taking very small bites, I was able to use my left hand to get food inside my mouth.

Walking: the final goal. My ability to run great distances had always

been one of my strengths. Walking sounded painful, but it was also the goal I felt most excited about. Plus, they told me that if I could walk, I could do shorter stints in the chair. Anything, to get out of that chair!

The first day I tried to walk, I managed three or four steps away from the bed. At that point, I started to collapse. I had to be half-carried back.

The next day, I was determined to beat my record. My goal was to double it, but I did better than that—I took around ten or twelve steps. I went far enough to escape my ICU room! For once, the screams from the shower room that reached me as I ventured into the hallway felt like a celebration, rather than a reminder of the next morning's torture. Ten steps was a far cry from the distance I used to be able to run, but it was a heck of a lot better than sitting in that chair.

Finally, I could see *progress.* It was addictive.

Each step brought me closer to the step-down unit, and getting discharged by October 15.

Each step brought me closer to redeployment: getting back to Afghanistan with my soldiers.

At the end of the day, I would study the crew pictures from West Point that Mother had taped next to my bed and remind myself: *This is the slog in the rowing tanks. This is working on technique, without force. It doesn't feel like you're getting stronger, but you are. This is going to make you a better leader. This is the work that gets you back with the team.*

I measured my days according to how much further I had gone than the day before. I made it my personal challenge—a competition with myself. Moving my limbs in any capacity meant moving and stretching melted skin, subjecting my nerves to new agonies. Every inch was painful, but the progress kept me motivated.

On the third day, I managed to walk partway down the hallway *and then back.* My nurses looked at me dubiously, as though expecting me to collapse. "I'm exploring!" I said through the bandages. "I want to see something different!" How far could I get?

I loved seeing the surprise on the faces of the medical staff. All

the therapists and nurses seemed incredulous by how far I was going, which egged me on. *If they were impressed by that yesterday, how much farther can I go tomorrow*?!

It was the first moment I had felt anything positive. Painful—but positive.

"You keep at it, you'll walk yourself right out of this ICU," one of the therapists quipped.

Walk out of the ICU. Why *shouldn't* I walk out of the ICU? The next day, that's what I set my sights on. With each painful step, I stared at the double doors leading into the main hospital corridor, eager to see what was beyond them. For the vast majority of my life, I had *explored.* I'd explored the wilderness around our property in Arkansas. I'd explored new wildernesses as a soldier. Since the accident, I'd been an object lesson in immobility—but not anymore.

"Let's keep going," I said to the physical therapists walking beside me. They pushed open the doors. It was a hallway. A hallway! Something new! Mother—following behind me—let out a little cheer.

I walked farther. This was not territory that would have excited Lewis and Clark: the corridor was long and bland. I passed storage closets and offices. But it felt thrilling to have taken myself beyond the confinement of the ICU; each new discovery felt exhilarating.

The corridor opened to a large, central, open area. "Sam, you're doing great!" one of the therapists said. "You ready to turn back?"

I was exhausted, but the thought of returning to the ICU was terrible. Suddenly, I had an idea. "Where's the step-down unit?" I asked, muffled by the gauze.

The two therapists locked eyes. "Is that a good idea?" one of them asked the other.

"It's a good idea!" Mother answered. "Come on, Samuel. He can do it," she told the therapists.

They led me down another long corridor, stretching into a different hospital wing. I began to wonder if I'd overestimated my ability to keep going—I nearly felt ready to collapse. But walking this far had resurrected a shred of my old self: the guy who could control his own

outcomes. *Keep going,* I thought. *You're one step closer to doing village work again. One step closer to running with your pack on.*

"There it is," one of the therapists said, pointing to another set of double doors. "That's the step-down unit."

"That's where we're going!" Mother crowed behind me. "Today is ICU graduation day!"

They held open the doors, and I managed to step over the threshold. My legs wavered. The therapists quickly moved to support me on either side.

"It's Patient Samuel Brown!" Mother called to the medical staff on the step-down unit. "You've got a new patient, it's Lieutenant Samuel Brown! Please point the way to his room!"

The nurses opened a door halfway down the hall. By the time I finally made it to the room, I needed to collapse. Mother propped me up. "He needs to lie down!" she called urgently.

Two nurses rushed in behind us. "His bed isn't made up yet," one protested.

"No one expected him to just *walk over here,*" the other nurse said.

"Here, put him in the chair. He can do his chair time now," they concluded. "Three hours of chair time."

I let out a muffled groan. *To hell with chair time!* I thought. The walking was supposed to earn me a break from chair time! I looked at Mother in distress.

"He can't do his chair time!" Mother protested. "He's just given everything he has to get here. He needs to rest!"

"Well, we don't have his bed made up yet," a nurse repeated.

"You need to *get* his bed made up, and he needs to lie down!"

The medical staff had identified a course of action and did not intend to deviate. "No," they responded to Mother. "He needs to do his three hours of sit-up time in the chair and eat."

Fuming, but seeing no alternative given that the bed wasn't made, Mother guided me to the chair. I could barely hold my head up. *Wasn't that enough?* I wondered. *Didn't I show them what I was capable of? Do I still have to do more? What do they need to see?*

One of the nurses brought me lunch. I wasn't able to pick up the fork to eat. "Mother, I can't do this," I muttered.

"You have to, Son," she said apologetically. Then she seemed to change her mind. She addressed the nurse again. "He can't even eat."

The nurse was unsympathetic. "Well, he's got to eat before he lies down."

"I want to talk to the head nurse!" Mother spoke loudly and authoritatively, her lilting Arkansas drawl firm as steel. For the first time, I realized how *I* must have sounded giving orders to my troops.

It was Mother versus the Head Nurse. One smiled brightly and cheerfully, offering platitudes of hospitality and polite refusals. One was a bulldozer, refusing to take no for an answer, ready to throw open every hallway door until she found bed linens herself and had managed to tuck in her grown-up son.

Mother won. A hospital worker dragged in a mattress. In short order, a bed was made up and I was finally allowed to lie down.

"I don't believe that being a Christian means I'm supposed to lie down and let people walk all over me or my son," Mother reflected after they'd cleared out of the room, considering the moral implications of her victory. "That's not the kind of Christian I am." She looked down at me. "But it's probably a good idea to get back to the Christian aspect of it, anyway." She pulled her Bible out of her purse and flipped to a passage.

"Second Corinthians 4. *'We never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!'*"

I was asleep before she finished.

On the step-down unit, everything kicked up a notch.

All the therapies increased. I had to move my joints more to keep the scar tissue from contracting. Walking was supplemented with doing stairs. Each joint had to be moved and stretched. Sometimes, I had the rare experience to interact with other burn patients in the physical therapy room. It was difficult to talk through my mask of

gauze—but we were there. Together. Working side by side toward the common mission of healing.

The medical staff was paying particularly close attention to my respiratory system. The inhalation injuries I'd sustained had produced scarring all down my trachea, so there was an aggressive lineup of medications to try to calm down the scarring in that affected area.

Another point of concern was my left index finger. "I don't like the look of it," one doctor told me.

I hadn't seen it. Usually, when the nurses wrapped or unwrapped me, I shut my eyes and tried to go to that quiet place in my mind to block out the pain.

"Obviously, both of your hands were badly burned," he said. *No kidding,* I thought, remembering the agony of when my soldiers pulled off my gloves, tugging off a layer of skin with them. "But this particular finger doesn't appear to be getting good blood flow. I'm concerned it may never regain function. We'll need to keep an eye on it."

This struck me as funny, given that I'd never actually looked at it beneath the thick layers of bandages. "Okay," I agreed, nodding. "I'll keep a close eye on it."

The wound debridement showers still punctuated every morning, but—on the spectrum of pain and bodily trauma—the showers had moved to the lower end of the scale. I wouldn't have believed it if someone had told me those showers would *ever* take on "minor" significance, or that I would have to endure anything much worse.

But: they did, and I did.

The surgeries to harvest donor skin for grafts effectively replaced the showers on the upper end of that spectrum. I'd had skin grafts already, but the grafts had either been taken when I was in the medically induced coma or, later, when I was on ketamine. In the ketamine nightmare, I'd interpreted the skin grafts as taking place in a torture chamber.

Now, lucid—I still sort of felt like the skin grafts belonged in a torture chamber.

Here is how skin grafts work. (Feel free to skip this paragraph

if you have a weak stomach.) Picture a cheese slicer with an electric blade. Using a tool like that, a medical professional runs that slicer over the burn victim's healthy skin to harvest a thin strip about three to four inches wide, and anywhere from six to fifteen inches long, at about half the depth of the epidermis. In my case, they collected that skin from my sides, my back, and the unburned parts of my legs. That thin strip is called a partial thickness skin graft. In order to maximize the healing potential of that strip of skin, it's perforated, using a device that punches holes in it like a meat tenderizer. Then, the graft is able to be stretched out onto a larger surface of the affected burn area. Ideally—provided the graft site has proper blood flow and the patient is getting the proper nutrition—the graft eventually reintegrates into the body and grows back over the wound.

The only trouble was that my body's epidermis wasn't healing *or* scarring the way it was supposed to. The trauma of getting burns on most of my body had kicked my scarring response into hyperdrive.

"It's called hypertrophic scarring," the doctor explained to me. "It means your scarring response doesn't know how to turn itself off, so it keeps adding layers of new scar tissue. Sort of like your skin doesn't know when to quit." He smirked. "Have you always been this much of an overachiever?"

His comment caught me off guard. "Yes," I said, with a chuckle.

"Well, I think we can expect your burn areas to continue piling on tissue until we can get grafts to effectively 'take.' That's why these areas are getting thicker and more red—" He pointed to an area of my face. Instantly, I felt self-conscious. *IS my face getting thicker and more red?* I wondered.

"Do you have a mirror I could use?" I asked. It was a rare moment when my face was unwrapped. I hadn't seen myself outside of my mummy-wrap in weeks.

"Let's go look in the bathroom," he prompted.

In the bathroom, under the bright fluorescent lights, I stared at my reflection. I was leaner than I'd ever seen myself—my cheekbones jutted out and I noticed sharpness around my collarbone. I could also

see my shoulders had narrowed. Much of the muscle I used to have was gone. My face, as he'd pointed out, was red in parts, and the skin seemed slightly thicker than before.

But I still recognized myself. Beneath it all, I still looked like *me.*

That's not SO *bad,* I thought. I remembered my goal and felt a thrill wash through me. *A few more months of therapy and I could be ready to put on a uniform again.*

The next day, I decided to inform my doctors and the medical staff about my goal. They should understand how motivated I was. "I'm planning to discharge by or before my birthday, October 15," I told them.

"It's ambitious, but you're doing well," they agreed. "It's worth shooting for."

"Then, I'm planning to redeploy," I continued. "I'm going to get back to my platoon in Afghanistan. Step into my leadership role again."

This statement was met by an awkward silence. Two of the nurses looked at each other uneasily, then looked at the doctor.

"I think you should plan on a lengthy healing process," this doctor said. "It's highly unlikely that you will ever be able to return to your duties as an Infantry Officer. And it's impossible to think you would be able to return to your current deployment. Most burn victims are looking at a healing timeline of *years*, not months."

I didn't say it out loud, but my thoughts shot back at this. *I'M not most burn victims.* This doctor didn't know me. He didn't know what I was capable of.

"I'm hitting every goal you give me," I pointed out. "I'm beating everyone's expectations."

"Yes, but… Well." The doctor smiled patiently. "I just think it would be wise to temper your expectations."

I made up my mind to do the opposite. I had done it at West Point. I had overcome injury in Ranger School. This was the exact same, only bigger: bigger injury, bigger adversity, steeper learning curve, greater potential for coming back even stronger.

That evening, Mother brought a rented DVD for us to watch: *Ratatouille*. I'd never seen it before. The antics of the animated mouse and the hapless human chef he controlled made me laugh out loud.

"You just laughed," Mother said. I looked over at her. She had tears in her eyes. "That's the first time I've heard you laugh since the accident."

"It's funny," I said. Inside, I felt energized. I was blowing past healing milestones. I had a goal. I still recognized myself—my old self. I *could* laugh.

"Hearing you laugh makes me feel like things are going to be okay," Mother said warmly. She reached over and patted my bandaged paw. Then we turned our attention back to the movie.

The next day produced a dimmer outlook.

They'd asked Mother to come in earlier than usual. "If Sam hopes to check out by October 15, we'll need to train you to be his non-medical attendant," they'd informed her. "You'll need to take over the wound debridement and the bandage wrapping and unwrapping." She agreed to come the next morning after they'd unwrapped me, to practice the debridement process.

I don't think it occurred to anyone that Mother hadn't ever seen me without my bandages on. I'd gotten so used to being unwrapped and wrapped up again every day that I forgot she'd never seen it. Apparently, none of the medical staff thought to warn her either.

As soon as she entered the room and saw me mostly naked, she began crying. I heard her sobs even before I saw her. When I turned around, she had sunk into a chair and was covering her mouth with her hands, staring at my body in horror.

I felt terrible. "I'm sorry, Mother," I said. Inwardly, I felt a stab of disappointment. *It's not SO bad, is it? Can't you still recognize me?*

"Your back, Samuel…"

I hadn't seen my back, but that's where they'd taken large grafts from. Did it look terrible? A voice inside reassured me: *That won't be visible under your uniform. No one needs to see that part.* "I'm sorry, Mother," I repeated.

"You shouldn't be sorry," she sobbed. "I'm just…I'm just so sad to think of the pain you're in." She covered her eyes with her hands, folded into the chair, and wept.

Finally, seeming to steady herself, she rose up and walked over to me. Her eyes were still wet, but she seemed determined to face reality. She rested her fingertips gently on my shoulders. "Right here, where they put the grafts… They kinda look like my mother's ten-minute steaks," she said, gulping out something between a laugh and a sob. She gently touched my back. "I can see where your normal skin is, between your shoulder blades…and under your arms."

She smiled at me, her eyes shiny. "I'm just… It's hard for me to not think of my baby boy. Your perfect, smooth little baby skin." Her voice caught with another sob.

"I'm sorry, Mother," I repeated.

She made herself firm. "I guess this is the clearest visual so far of the fact that you were on fire. Now I see how much damage it did to your body."

Her words were sobering. I didn't *want* people to see me as this damaged. I wanted them to see how I was getting stronger.

"Mrs. Brown?" I heard a tentative voice from a nurse behind us. "Do you feel ready to try the wound debridement? It's time for Sam's shower."

Mother looked at me again, her voice wavering. "Back up in the ICU, Samuel explained about the showers to me," she said, apparently speaking to the nurse. "He said it made him feel like a slab of meat on a meat counter. He cried just thinking about going in there, getting sprayed and scrubbed to get the dead skin off." She stopped and shut her eyes tight. "It's just hard to think of what my son has endured."

The nurse looked from Mother, to me, then back to Mother again. "We can try this a different day."

"NO," Mother said loudly. "No. I've got to do this if Samuel's going to be discharged by his birthday. Isn't that right? It's on me." She turned to the nurse and nodded her head. "Show me what to do."

They gave Mother a water suit to wear and a scrubbing brush. Just

before exiting the room, they gave me the two milligrams of Dilaudid. On the way to the shower room, we could hear the screams from other patients.

"Samuel, we can do this," Mother said, raising her voice to be heard over the screams. "I'm just going to turn off being your mother for the next little while and be your medical attendant."

In the shower room, the nurse beside Mother called out instructions. "You've got to scrub his skin, like this," the nurse said. Mother scrubbed. I knew it was too gentle. "You've got to scrub harder than that!" the nurse called.

She pressed down and dug the brush into me. I began crying. "Please, Mother—please don't," I begged.

"Samuel," she said firmly, "This must be done, and we have to do it." She moved the brush in great, hard circles. "Am I doing it right?" she called to the nurse.

"Yes, that's right!"

Mother managed to endure my screams and pleas that she stop. And I managed to endure her scrubbing.

Back in the room, they taught her how to rewrap me. As usual, the process took several hours. "You'll need to do this every day," they reminded her.

She nodded, her mouth tight.

At last we were through both the shower and the wrapping. As the medical staff filed out, Mother turned off the lights.

Much later, we were awakened by a cell phone ring. Afternoon light shone laterally into the darkened room—we must have been asleep for several hours. Mother squinted at the phone. "It says 'Unavailable,'" she said. "Hello?" Her eyes brightened and she smiled at me. "It's Steven Smith. Here." She held the phone up to my ear.

"Steven?! Buddy!"

"How are you doing, LT?" he asked. "Man, it's good to hear your voice!"

I tried to sit up. "I'm doing great! I'm healing fast. I'm beating everyone's expectations."

"Aw, man, that's awesome, Lieutenant! We're thinking of you every day. It's great to hear you're healing fast."

I felt a rush of adrenaline. "That's right. I'm working to get back with you guys. You need your old Platoon Leader!"

Steven's voice changed. "Well…actually, LT…we were assigned a new Platoon Leader."

The words felt like a punch in the gut. *Assigned a new Platoon Leader.*

I couldn't speak. Mother continued holding the phone to my ear, but I just sat there, dumbfounded. My thoughts boiled. *How could they do that? Those were MY guys. Has the military given up on me already? Doesn't anyone believe I'm coming back?*

After a long pause, Steven spoke again. "Don't worry, LT, we like you better," he said awkwardly.

"Well…" I tried to unscramble my thoughts. "Well—tell him not to get too comfortable. It's just a temporary assignment. I'm going to get my old job back."

Who can I call? I wondered. *What high brass do I phone to say, "HEY, here I am! I'm recovering fast. I'm sorry I had to be gone for a little while, but I'm coming back just as fast as I can. Don't give up on me yet!"*

Steven changed the subject. He talked more about the guys, how everyone was doing. He filled me in on how the rest of the night of the explosion had unfolded. "Once your Humvee exploded, all the Taliban left First Platoon alone and headed to attack you guys. That's how Lieutenant Wallace was freed up to send you all his vehicles. The Taliban put up a pretty good fight, even though Anthony and the others were giving it to 'em good too. The Air Force ended up taking care of business with a couple of 2,000-pounders. That took out the rest of them."

I only half heard his words. I hadn't thought of the mission once since that night. How was that possible? Even stranger, I found I didn't care. All I cared about was the fact that I'd been replaced. *Assigned a new Platoon Leader.*

Mother seemed to notice my distraction. She pulled the phone

away. "I think we'd better say goodbye," she said to Steven. "Samuel's looking a little tired."

That frustrated me. "Let me say goodbye," I said. She brought the phone over again. "Tell the guys I say hello. And tell them I'll see them soon. I'm healing fast and I'm coming back."

"Sounds good, LT. We're rooting for you."

The call went dead. A long silence filled the room. Mother finally broke it. "You doin' okay, Son?"

"Fine."

Another long pause. *Assigned a new Platoon Leader.* I couldn't believe it. Was I that easy to replace?

"Do you want to pray togeth—"

Mother was interrupted by a doctor's entrance. He pushed open the door and flipped on the lights. I blinked in the harsh brightness.

"Sam Brown. I'm Dr. White, one of the staff surgeons. I think we need to make a decision about that finger." He grabbed the room's second chair and pulled it to the bed. "I'm recommending amputation."

I stared at him, in disbelief. "Amputation?"

"We could leave it alone and hope for the best, but it's starting to show signs of infection. And there's no sign of its increased blood flow, which means it's unlikely to ever regain its function. If it gets infected, the infection could spread quickly. Then we might be discussing amputating much more than just your finger."

"Such as?" Mother asked.

He looked at her. "Several fingers, possibly. Or the entire hand."

I stared down at my left hand, feeling something like betrayal. *You giving up on me too?* I wanted to demand of my finger. *What's the matter with you?*

I looked back at the doctor. "Do you know if an amputated finger would disqualify me from military service?"

He stared at me for a moment, unblinking. After a pause, he said, "No. Soldiers can still fight even if they're missing a finger. But Lieutenant, I think your expectation to return to military service is highly unrealis—"

I cut him off. "Do I need to make this decision right now?"

He paused again. "No. You can take the evening to think it over. I'll come by again in the morning. We should make a decision by tomorrow." He stood up to leave, then paused. "Keep in mind, Lieutenant, you can choose to try to keep the finger and it might be okay… But it also might get a lot worse." He made eye contact with me. "Trying to deny the gravity of what your body is experiencing could end up leading to much more serious long-term consequences."

I was sick of the negativity. "Okay. Let's make the decision tomorrow."

He nodded and left. The door closed slowly.

There was a long pause. I stared down at my left hand. In the corner of the room, I heard Mother digging into her purse. She cleared her throat and began to read.

"We never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever."

"Samuel…" she said, and hesitated. "Even though parts of your body are dying, your spirit is being renewed."

I didn't answer.

"The real battle is on the inside," she continued. "It's the battle in the mind. Scripture says the physical injuries are just a *'small trouble that won't last long. But they produce a glory that will last forever.'* So—we've got to lift our eyes past the physical. There's an eternal purpose for this. God's preparing you for something that has greater value than what we're going through right here and now. So, we've got to take care of your soul, first and foremost."

I remained silent. I found comfort in her words—but I also struggled with them. This affliction didn't feel light or momentary. In my opinion, it had already gone on far too long. They'd found a new Platoon Leader. My finger needed amputating.

But, I supposed, when compared with eternity—these things felt smaller. I sighed.

Mother seemed to take that as permission to continue. "Samuel, we need to pray and forgive the Taliban for what they did."

I looked over at Mother. "What?"

"The battle's for your mind, Samuel. I want us to make sure we've done everything expected of us to be right with the Lord. Because, Samuel, if you're carrying around anger and bitterness, that can affect your body."

"My body is already affected," I pointed out. "I've had skin cut off—both good and bad. And, they want to cut off my finger."

"I mean it can make it harder for your body to heal. A clean conscience will help you move on. It will help you walk this road." She paused and looked down at her Bible.

I waited. "Do you have another scripture you want to read?"

"Yes. This is from the Sermon on the Mount." She began reading to me out of the book of Matthew. *"Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us… If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.*"

Forgiveness. That was a hard word. It was easy to feel angry at any number of people—the nurses assigned to my wound debridement showers. Whatever military higher-ups had assigned the new Platoon Leader. The new Platoon Leader, for that matter. The Route Clearance Commander, who hadn't agreed to clear the road.

The Taliban.

I thought of him—the bombmaker. I remembered his face, his angry expression. The black turban. The missing fingers.

It goes back earlier than that, I mused. I thought of the terrorists who had planned 9/11, how many of them had been harbored and hidden among the Taliban in Afghanistan. Memories from the ketamine nightmare swam back: how the war in Afghanistan had seemed to follow me from Kandahar to Mexico—my nightmare of being held as a prisoner of war inside a mosque run by the Taliban.

I guess I am harboring anger, I thought. Anger felt so easy. Maybe it *was* making it harder for my body to heal. "Maybe anger's the thing infecting my finger," I said aloud, trying to joke.

Neither of us laughed. I shut my eyes and leaned my head back against a pillow.

"Look, this is a terrible thing that happened to you—" Her voice caught and trembled. I waited.

"But if there's any spiritual warfare that's going on, based on what happened over there," she continued, "I want to cut those dark powers off right now, in the mighty name of Jesus."

I opened my eyes and looked at her. The sunlight through the window had gotten lower, more golden. It made the bed and chair cast dark shadows on the walls. "Samuel, it may be hard, but would you be willing to forgive them? Maybe they're led by evil to do the things they do. If it's evil that's controlling them, we can forgive the people. Scripture says to 'overcome evil with good.'" She waited. "Will you pray to forgive them, Samuel?"

I felt too tired and too disappointed to resist. "Yes," I said.

We prayed together. When we opened our eyes again, the sun had set. Visiting hours were over.

After she left, I struggled through dinner, the nurses prompting me to grip the fork—"Use your thumb—try again." I tried to remember my goal: redeployment. *I need to grip my fork if I expect to hold a gun.* Somehow, the goal didn't feel as energizing as it usually did, even when I reminded myself that I didn't need my *left* index finger to pull a trigger, just my right.

Mother's Bible readings circled in my head. *Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day.* Was that really the case?

After the medical staff had cleared out of my room, they turned off my lights, but I didn't feel ready to sleep yet. I turned to look at the pictures which Mother had printed out—she'd taken care to remove them all from the ICU room and tape them up again in the step-down unit. My eyes rested at first on the pictures of me rowing at West Point.

You could come back stronger, like you did before, a voice said inside.

Tonight, the pep talk felt like an empty boast.

My eyes landed on the picture of me with a group of Afghan children. It was a picture of me squatting next to a passel of Afghan kids—maybe ten of them. They had huge grins, especially the boy standing right next to me. Even the oldest boy on the end of the line, wearing a turban as though he was already a man, had a small smile, as though he couldn't help himself.

I remembered that day. After every picture, the kids had demanded to see their faces on the digital screen of my camera, and then they laughed like crazy. Few of them had ever seen their reflection in a mirror. They were excited to get their picture taken—they wanted to see their digital images, again and again.

With Afghan children in a small village. We were using my digital camera to take pictures so they could see themselves on the screen. August 2008.

I studied the picture, noticing the two older men in the background. They were smiling too. One wore a black turban.

The night before the picture had been taken, we'd received rocket fire at our FOB. We knew what direction it had come from and roughly how far the rocket would have been able to travel. When we'd driven out to the area the next morning to investigate, a little family compound was the only thing we'd found.

We'd called out a greeting, entered the compound, hoping to determine if they were friendly or if we'd need to worry about them shooting rockets at us again.

They'd waved us in as though we were friends. Showed me into a small house. Offered me tea and some candies. Through an interpreter, they explained the Taliban had driven up next to their compound in the middle of the night and launched the rocket. It had nothing to do with them, they insisted.

I didn't know if they were telling the truth or not. But I drank the tea and ate the candies. We made small talk. I remember wondering, *Am I talking to someone who genuinely appreciates the help we're trying to provide? Or is this someone who wants to destroy me?*

Maybe they were only being polite because they weren't in a position to fight us at that moment and survive another day. It occurred to me that when we rolled up thirty-strong, wearing body armor and carrying machine guns, they might have the same questions about us: *Are these soldiers here to help us? Or destroy us?*

We gave them information about how to contact us if the Taliban showed up again, then finished the tea and headed back outside. That's when the kids surrounded us. That's when the laughter began.

They were just like any other kids in the world. They were running around, some were playing make believe, some of the other ones were playing hide and seek. When they got too rambunctious, one of the adults checked them with a stern remark—just like my mother had with my brothers and me when we were growing up.

Now, in the step-down unit room—nearly two months after that photo—I stared at the kids' faces in the picture. A six-year-old with

gaps in his smile from a newly lost tooth. A serious-looking toddler in her big brother's arms, her head bent under his protective hold. A taller boy with a fresh, open, eager smile. A shorter child with curious, probing eyes. The boy standing next to me, mid-laugh.

What's going to become of you? I wondered. *Are you going to grow up and try to support the Afghan government? Are you going to become members of the Taliban? Are some of you going to die young? Will some of you try to escape Afghanistan and live somewhere else, less plagued by war?*

Somehow, thinking of the kids I'd met took me to an emotional place that went further back than anger, that was deeper down than grief. It took me to something resembling basic humanity. I thought of Mother's comment earlier—"I just remember my baby boy." All of us started off playing make believe, playing hide and seek. We all were susceptible to doing the wrong thing, on both an individual and collective level. Each person was responsible for their own actions, yes—but also, each person made mistakes. None of us were perfectly objective about what was right.

The lines of scripture came back to me. *If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you.*

I thought of the bombmaker: the man who'd likely planted the explosives that had killed Winston, wounded three of my other soldiers, and changed my life forever.

He'd been a kid once. Maybe he'd been brought up to fight foreigners, to defend his country.

Now he was missing fingers.

And tomorrow, I was likely to lose one too.

A part of me pushed back against any inclination to humanize him. *He is a murderer. Even if we're all human, there should still be consequences,* I considered, lying there in the dark. *People still need to be held accountable if they commit evil acts.*

But the philosophizing exhausted me. I felt too tired to be angry anymore, too discouraged to hang on to bitterness. *Maybe I can just trust that God will bring the justice that he deserves.*

Wrapped in gauze in that hospital bed, my job wasn't to hold

anyone accountable at that moment. My job was simply to heal—internally and externally. *I* wanted God's grace and forgiveness and love. The Bible said He'd given it to me. In return, He asked me to give grace, forgiveness, and love to others.

It seemed like a fair request.

I prayed for God's help to forgive the people who'd been responsible for my pain. And I prayed for the kids in the picture—that they would be safe and blessed.

As I fell asleep, I was still thinking of their faces.

The next morning, the surgeon came back.

"Well?" he asked.

Saying yes to the amputation meant choosing to permanently remove a part of myself, to acknowledge that part of me had become so damaged—so beyond repair—that it now posed a threat to other, healthier parts of me. It meant recognizing that a full recovery would never actually occur. It meant my physical body would be permanently altered, permanently changed, permanently disfigured.

Mother looked at me. I could guess at her thoughts. *Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day.*

I looked at the surgeon and gave a quick nod.

"Cut it off."