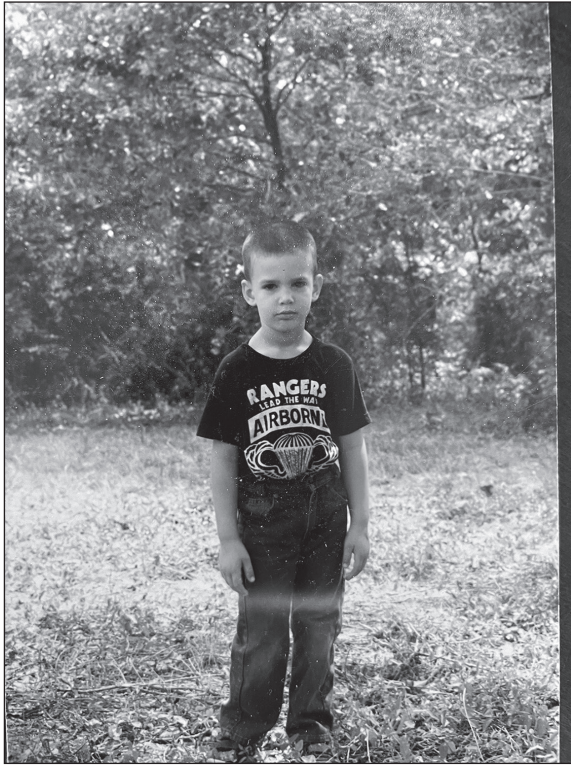


CHAPTER 8

LIFE CONTRACTED



Airborne Ranger aspirations took hold early. Me, around the summer of 1986.

We started in the dark, before sunrise.

Scrambling through bushes and peering through dim moonlight in an attempt to get my bearings, I'd gotten off course somehow. The contours of the terrain looked so much different than the lines on the map. Had I already passed the ridge? I studied the map's depiction of landmarks with a red-lens flashlight, then erased my pencil lines. This wasn't good.

I needed to reset. I needed to reorient myself to the physical reality of my surroundings. After another long glance at the map, my compass, and the shadowy curves of the land, I set off again—hoping I'd recalibrated successfully.

It was no use. When the sun finally came up after 6:00 a.m., I was lost. My mission had been to complete the Land Navigation course within five hours. At 8:30 a.m., the five-hour mark, I knew that I had spent too much time searching for one of my points.

It was a failure.

I'd done Land Navigation courses before, but this was the first time I'd failed one. I was a strong navigator, and even in those rare cases when I got off, I was able to use my speed to catch back up. Physical endurance and speed were my calling cards. In a short sprint, I was easily bested, but over long distances, I was unbeatable. Even with an eighty- or hundred-pound pack on my back, I could move quickly and even run. But this time around, I didn't have that advantage.

Instead, I was nursing a painful knee injury.

That right knee was turning out to be my Achilles' heel: it was the same knee that had been an issue at West Point, but it felt like a different injury—the pain was in a different spot. In the couple of weeks before Ranger School officially started, I'd been doing a group workout with a bunch of other Lieutenants and a Staff Sergeant who had already completed Ranger School. The sergeant was leading it, taking us through high-intensity plyometric exercises. We were jump-

ing up and down off a small, elevated platform when I landed badly. I felt a shooting, burning pain along the outer side of my right knee.

I figured it would be fine. Infantry soldiers don't complain about injuries. You grit your way through. You don't whine, you don't go see a doctor, you don't even bother with ibuprofen. You just trust your body to tough it out and heal on its own.

Except my body didn't seem to be doing much healing. The knee didn't get any better in the remaining three weeks before Ranger School started. If anything, it seemed to get worse.

On the first day of Ranger School, we had a physical fitness test: push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, and a five-mile run which needed to be completed within forty minutes. In my training up to the knee injury, I would complete that run at a 6:10 minute/mile pace with over nine minutes of spare time. But the pain of this injury forced me to slow down. I limped my way through the five-mile run, finishing just under the forty-minute deadline.

Day Two was the Land Navigation test. I had never failed on a course like this, normally finishing in the top five percent. So, despite suffering terrible pain in my knee, I had no concerns until I found myself struggling to find the second point of my map and validate it with the unique stamp tethered to a post at that precise location. I lost almost an hour scouring an area I was convinced it was at. Finally, I realized I didn't have enough time to get my remaining points.

I had failed a Land Nav course for the first time in my life, and now my knee was the worst it had been in weeks.

I got one chance to retest. Just one. If I failed again, I could be kicked out for failing to meet the rigorous Ranger School standards. My only hope would be to appeal to the Battalion Commander directly.

Day Three of Ranger School, like the previous day, started before 4:00 a.m. There were only a few of us that hadn't passed and needed to retest. As we congregated around the Ranger Instructor for a repeat of the same guidelines we received just twenty-four hours ago, I glanced

into the dark night sky and registered the cloud cover. No moonlight this time.

And my knee was killing me.

I was moving too slow to risk getting lost again—there was no chance of catching up if I made any errors. I decided there was only one way I was going to finish the test on time: using my compass, I'd plot a straight line to the point I was trying to get to. I would force my way through whatever terrain was on that straight line. I wouldn't attempt to follow certain terrain features, or use some other technique to get there quickly. I was just going to go *straight*, bush-whacking and stream-fording as needed.

About an hour into the course when it was still dark, I was staring down at the glowing compass, pushing through dense woods. I wasn't looking up or paying attention to the gaps in the trees; I was focused on staying true to the azimuth that would lead me to my next point. Suddenly, I caught a stick in my eye.

Mother fu... I rubbed my eye, trying to get out the grit that I could feel under my eyelid. Why did it hurt *so bad*?

I closed the hurt eye, trying to squint down at my compass with the good one. But that eye, in apparent solidarity with the other one, had started watering profusely.

I hobbled forward, feeling increasing desperation. I couldn't see clearly and I could barely walk. I thrashed through the trees, plunging forward, knowing that I was likely forging ahead in futility.

The sun finally rose, but that made things worse. Both eyes reacted to the light with severe sensitivity. The realization dawned on me as the sun's rays intensified: I was going to fail again. I had no chance of meeting my goal. I was too blind, too hurt, too lost.

The Ranger Instructors confirmed this. "Failure," they said out loud when I finally reached the rendezvous point.

Later that day—after I was informed at the infirmary that my bushwhacking had led to a severe corneal abrasion—I stood before the Battalion Commander. Embarrassingly, my eyes were still watering.

He sized me up and down. "Well, Lieutenant Brown. You failed."

“Yes, Sir.”

“Am I to believe your poor performance over the past three days should be considered an exception?”

“I believe so, Sir. I’m dealing with an injured knee. I was much slower than usual on the course. I’m sure it will heal up if you allow me to recycle, Sir.”

He looked down at his desk. “We have high expectations of all Infantry Officers, Lieutenant Brown. You appear to have performed well in your prior training. And your previous PT test results are exemplary.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Your performance thus far at Ranger School has been very disappointing.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He took a long look at me. I straightened up and pulled my shoulders back, trying to make the most of my height. Before the knee injury, I’d been in the best shape of my life. I had more muscle on my frame than I’d ever had before. I was young, strong, fit, and good-looking. If any part of him was making this decision based on my physicality—surely, I’d get his approval.

He finally nodded. “I’m approving your request to recycle, Lieutenant. You can start again with the next class in three weeks. I don’t want to see you in this office again.”

“Yes, Sir!”

I had failed—but it wasn’t the end.

My military ambitions hadn’t been shut down yet. I still had every opportunity to go on and become the leader that I’d set out to become. It was a *momentary* failure, not a missional failure.

Now, I just had to make sure I never failed again.

* * *



Mother and I during the early days of my recovery.

On October 10—five days before my twenty-fifth birthday—I was discharged from the hospital.

It was a bit anticlimactic. I would be living in the Extended Stay hotel, just across the street. And going to the hospital would still be my full-time job.

But we told ourselves it was a victory. “You did it!” Mother cheered as we exited the hospital lobby. “Five days ahead of schedule!”

We entered our hotel room. There was a kitchen off to one side and a stiff-looking couch in front of a TV. The couch was gray; the paint was gray; the light filtering in through the window was gray. On one wall, there was a generic black-and-white picture of some sort of plant. One door led into the bedroom, which had two queen-sized beds and contained the bathroom. The whole apartment felt dark and sterile.

“Home sweet home,” I remarked.

“Be thankful.” Mother batted me with her hand. “It’s better than the hospital.”

The new routine began. My first appointment was physical therapy in the morning. These PT tests were a far cry from my military training. Mainly, we worked on building back my ability to just... move. My range of motion, due to the contracting scar tissue, needed constant attention. We stretched my scar tissue and tried to keep my joints moving. This was more labor intensive than it sounds: every single joint was at risk of becoming permanently stuck if I didn’t stretch and work it every day. Since my hands had gotten burned, for instance, each finger needed to be stretched, moved, and exercised so that my hands weren’t permanently contracted into immobile claws.

The splints helped with this, which was usually appointment number two. The splints were intended to help during the times I slept or relaxed—those times when the contracting scar tissue would otherwise have a chance to set in and undo whatever progress had been made in PT. By sticking my hands and arms into various splints, my limbs were held in a position that maintained some stretch even while I was relaxing or sleeping. These splints were tailor-made, built by technicians working with the therapists to correct my particular warping.

“This reminds me of that time we went to the tailor to get you a

suit for prom,” Mother said cheerfully one day as the PT assistant measured off a piece of plastic that would be molded for a new arm splint.

I thought about that. “I’m not sure which get-up is less comfortable,” I said.

After getting fit for a new splint, I would usually head to the hospital cafeteria for lunch. The first appointment of the afternoon was the burn clinic, either to do pre-op work or post-op wound care. I needed reconstructive surgeries and skin grafts basically everywhere, so I was always either recovering from surgery or preparing for the next one.

Then came another hour of therapy, this time with the occupational therapist. We did cool things like add padding around the handles of my silverware so I could more easily hold them and not drop food all over myself. (I still dropped food all over myself.) Sometimes, they introduced me to a new tool to help me bathe more effectively. Dwelling on how *easy* it used to be to lift a fork and put food in my mouth, or how *easy* it used to be to get ready in the morning—ten minutes, from waking up to running out the door—only depressed me. So, I just didn’t think about how far removed all this was from my pre-explosion days.

Instead, I focused on the next goal: straightening my fingers. Graduating from a bandaged face to pressure garments. Walking a mile on the treadmill.

Life required accepting small, incremental gains. But it was easy to lose patience with that—I wanted a breakthrough. I wanted something impressive to report to the guys, the next time they called from Afghanistan. Perhaps because of that, once I saw progress in a certain area, my temptation was to push harder for continued progress *there*. But given that I had a very finite amount of energy, when I favored one part of my body, I ended up neglecting other areas. My left elbow, for instance, was the most stubborn of my joints. Even as I was regaining function, mobility, and strength in other areas of my body, that left elbow was a challenge. It just couldn’t get unstuck.

Eventually, I grew impatient with my left elbow. I stopped focus-

ing on improvement there and directed my energy to drive for more range of motion in other joints where I *could* see progress. Years later though, I had many moments to regret that I didn't push harder. I never did regain full function over that left elbow which also meant I never regained full strength in that arm. A failure.

Scattered throughout the day were other appointments: if I wasn't with occupational therapy, I would be in another clinic or appointment for a range of things like evaluating my brain for Traumatic Brain Injury, talking to a psychologist to keep up on my mental health, meeting with my nurse case manager to go over my upcoming week or review past appointment and test results, or waiting for the pharmacy to hand me another bag full of narcotic pain killers and other medications.

Once this new daily grind at the hospital was done, I headed to the hotel. Mother and I ate dinner—usually something we'd bought from the hospital cafeteria. Meal time, for her, must have been a flashback to my baby days. She had to help feed me and clean up my mess afterwards.

We spent an hour or two unwrapping my bandages. Then it was time for the wound debridement shower. We spent several more hours *rewrapping* me.

And then we both passed out: another day gone.

I missed the days defined by a clear mission, with set objectives. I missed having my team around me. What was my mission now? "To heal." It felt non-specific and also kind of impossible.

"You're making *such* good progress," Mother said one night at dinner. "Everyone at the hospital says so."

The bite of penne pasta I was aiming toward the tiny opening of my mouth couldn't fit through. It pressed against my face and fell onto the plate.

"I know it may not feel like you're making a lot of progress." Mother watched me grip the padded fork and go after the noodle again. "But... you really *are*," she repeated.

I nodded, pretending to agree with her.

On the morning of October 13, Mother announced that she had made plans for us to celebrate my birthday.

"What? What do you mean?" I asked.

"We're having a special guest!"

"Who?" I asked.

"His name is Cliff," she answered.

I stared at her, confused. "Who is *Cliff*?"

"Your Battalion Executive Officer put me in touch with him. Major Ruth."

Major Stephen Ruth had been a professor at West Point, and ended up being the Executive Officer of my Battalion as well. Like Austin Wallace, he'd been one of the few people to see me through both my West Points days and my deployment. Hearing his name made me miss him. "But...who is Cliff?" I asked again.

"Cliff is his old friend. They were both at Texas A&M together and he lives right here, in San Antonio. Major Ruth called him up and told him that one of his soldiers and former West Point grads was at Brooke Army Medical Center, and he asked Cliff to come see you since he couldn't be there himself. So, he's coming for your birthday!"

"Oh," I said.

Spending my birthday with a stranger didn't sound like the best time. But I wasn't about to reject someone Major Ruth had sent my way.

That evening at dinner, Mother got a call from Cliff. She pulled the phone away and turned to me. "He wants to know what you want for your birthday," she said.

I stared at her. What did I *want*? There were a lot of things I wanted. Most of them couldn't be brought to a birthday party. "He said he could rent you a video game console?" she asked. "Would that be fun?"

I shook my head. I wasn't interested in a video game console. I stared down at the take-out containers from the hospital cafeteria. "A home-cooked meal," I said.

The night of my birthday, I met Cliff Dugosh. He showed up

with two brown paper grocery bags: one full of ingredients, and the other containing a filled casserole dish and a spatula. He wore a sweater vest, stood with a slight stoop, and had thinning hair. He smiled warmly when Mother opened the door. His eyes found me. I appreciated that he didn't flinch at my appearance. "Happy birthday, Soldier," he said.

"Thank you, Sir."

Mother waved him in. He headed for the kitchen and turned the oven on. "It's not 'Sir.' I'm a civilian. You can just call me Cliff."

"What is it you do, Cliff?" Mother asked.

He beamed at her. "Well, I do my best to serve the Lord and serve people. That's my main mission in life."

"Are you in the ministry?" she asked.

"I certainly hope so!" he said, smiling again. It struck me that I hadn't seen him *not* smiling since he walked in. "But not at a church. Well—not in a paid capacity, anyway. I don't *work* doing full-time ministry, but I tend to think about life as full-time ministry. I'm not married and I don't have children, so I do my best to just give all my time to the Lord. I do a fair bit of volunteering. I spend most of my working hours as a substitute teacher." He beamed again.

"A substitute teacher?" Mother asked. "For...children?"

"I'll go wherever the district needs me, but mostly, I'm at the high school. It is a real privilege to get to interact with young people. I also do a little bit of motivational speaking and leadership training on the side. That helps supplement my income." He looked at me. "But I think I'm talking too much about myself. It's not my party. Sam, I'd love to hear more about you."

I cleared my throat uneasily. I'd never had any trouble answering this question before the accident—I had plenty of things to share about myself. But none of my old distinctions seemed relevant anymore. These days, when people met me for the first time, their immediate question was "What *happened?*" I didn't want to talk about Afghanistan—not tonight, on my birthday. What was there to talk about? Did he want to know my therapy routine?

He looked me right in the eyes and grinned warmly. “Tell me what kind of instructor my buddy Stephen Ruth was at West Point.”

I relaxed. If my mouth could have grinned back, I would have. “He was great,” I said. “He wasn’t even my professor, but he still invested in a relationship with me. I got to know Major Ruth when I’d visit one of my best friends from the crew team in his class. Major Ruth didn’t ignore me, like other professors might have, since I wasn’t his student. He asked me questions and acted genuinely interested in getting to know me. Plus, I thought it was cool that he was a Texas A&M grad, not a West Point grad like a lot of the other profs.”

“That’s right!” Cliff beamed. “An Aggie, like me. That’s where we became close.”

As I shared about West Point and Major Ruth, Cliff continued to prep dinner, putting the casserole he’d brought into the oven and washing lettuce for a salad. He asked me questions periodically, getting me to elaborate. Sometimes he pointed out connections between things I’d said. His questions conveyed genuine interest—like he cared to know more about my experiences and understand more about my thoughts.

In his company, it became somehow possible for minutes at a time to forget I was a burn patient. With Cliff, I was simply a young man.

Mother prayed for our meal when we all sat down at the table. Cliff’s casserole was cheesy and warm—good, classic, comfort food. He didn’t ask me questions about my padded fork. He didn’t seem to notice when I spilled food. Instead, he wanted to know about some of the other soldiers I’d met on the burn unit. “How are they doing?” he asked.

“They’re doing okay... Well, I guess it depends on the soldier,” I said. “Some guys have more minor wounds and others are in much worse condition than me. My injuries are pretty bad. But I’m progressing better than a lot of them.”

“Huh. What do you credit that to?” he asked. He looked at Mother and his eyes twinkled. “Good genes?”

Mother straightened up. “I think it’s because of his faith,” she said.

Cliff looked back at me. “Is that right, Sam?”

I nodded. Suddenly, I wanted to tell him a bit about the accident—at least, about the part that mattered. “When I was on fire in the desert, I thought I was all alone. I couldn’t see through the flames, and I thought I was going to die. I threw up my hands and yelled, ‘Jesus, save me!’” Cliff nodded intently, but didn’t interject. “In the hospital...Mother has been reading a lot of Scripture to me, and it’s been encouraging. I guess...” I hesitated.

“Go on,” he prompted.

“Well, I believe my life was spared for a reason. Like I’m supposed to live for something bigger now. My life isn’t my own anymore—it belongs to God. But I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

He looked at me thoughtfully. “These other soldiers on the burn unit ward,” he said. “You said most of them aren’t seeing your level of progress?”

I nodded. “It’s easy to feel angry or bitter. And I think that can make it hard to engage with the therapies sometimes. It’s hard to work at building your life back when you don’t think your life is going to be worth much anymore.”

“But that’s not your problem?”

“No,” I responded. “I trust my life has a purpose, even if I don’t fully know what that is yet.”

Cliff studied me. “Seems like God might have a mission for you right where you’re at.”

His use of the word *mission* struck me.

A *mission*. Right where I was at.

I watched Cliff clean up our meal after we’d finished—insisting that he do so without any help from Mother or me. As I reflected on our conversation and watched him continue to serve us, it occurred to me that I could serve people around me too, whether I knew them or not. My mission was not simply my own healing—keeping my head down, working on my therapy, seeing the other patients in a competitive light and trying to outpace their progress. If I were to take Cliff as my example, I could be someone who actively sought to engage and serve others, providing them hope, right where I was at.

It didn't require a platoon of soldiers; it didn't require a trip across the world. Cliff hadn't gone far from home at all to find his mission field. He'd found people to serve all around him—and maybe I could too, if I was willing to see them.

Maybe there's an aspect of my mission that's changed, I thought. Maybe it's not just returning to battle. Maybe there's a new temporary mission assignment: leading and encouraging others right here—like Cliff.

Before Cliff left that evening, he hugged me. “By the way,” he said, “if you ever want to share your testimony of how God met you in the desert, I'd love to invite you to speak at one of the groups I work with. I lead a Christian men's retreat for Texas A&M students during the summer, and another one for professional alumni too. I think they'd be inspired by your story.”

Inspired? Yeah, right, I wanted to retort. How could my wrecked body inspire someone?

He hugged Mother goodbye too. “A woman of valor’,” he said to her. “I'll be praying for your strength.” He looked back at me. “And praying for your healing and your mission, Sam. And praying for encouragement for you both.”

Then he left.

I had the sense that I'd just met a great man.

* * *

The next day, on the burn unit ward, I paid closer attention to the people around me.

Every soldier getting wheeled to the showers, or in a therapy context, or walking down the hall had their own story. They had people who loved them, who were checking in via text or calls to see how they were doing. They had families—some of them, spouses and children. Their plans for their future had been altered, like mine. Most of them had a date on the calendar that was *their* Alive Day.

I wasn't the only one going through a life-altering crisis.

I started to see them in rough categories: some patients were

ahead of me on my own path to recovery. They were further along in their surgeries and in their treatment, closer to a finish line, such as it were. Sergeant Adam Clark, for instance—a young Marine Sergeant who'd gotten injured roughly a year before me and had similar injuries. Among the burn unit patients and staffers, Sergeant Clark was considered the model patient. He'd made great progress, engaged with the therapies, and was nearing the end of his treatment. I often saw him on the step-down unit when he came in for therapies, and he inspired me to step up my efforts.

Maybe I can be that kind of example, I thought. *Maybe that's my purpose*. There were plenty of other patients in my same stage of healing, or behind me in their journeys. Maybe I could show them life was worth working toward. I survived. Now I was trying to live. Perhaps I could encourage them to do the same thing.

I didn't have to wait long before trying out my new resolution. That afternoon, I heard yelling from one of the therapy rooms. I couldn't make out exactly what was being said, but a few curse words came through loud and clear, and the interjections seemed to interrupt the voices of the medical staff. The person yelling was obviously being hostile.

One of the nurses hurried out of the room. It was Betsy, who'd become close enough to Mother and me that I called her Auntie Bet. She had tears in her eyes.

"Auntie Bet. You okay?" I asked.

"Sam." She impatiently wiped a tear from her cheek as it spilled out of her eye. "I wonder if you could talk to Captain Ortiz. Maybe you could get through to him. None of us can."

"He's a Captain?" I asked.

"Special Forces Captain, I think." She lowered her voice. "And he's being an *asshole*."

"Special Forces is what I want to do. That's my dream job in the Army."

"Well, I hope this gentleman could aspire to be a little more like *you*, than you aspire to be like *him*." She put a hand on my shoulder. "So. Will you talk to him?"

I nodded.

That afternoon, I knocked on his door and slowly opened it. Captain Paul was lying in his bed, scowling.

"Hey, man," I said. Based on what I could see, his burns were similar to mine—except his face wasn't as bad. "I'm First Lieutenant Sam Brown. First Infantry Division."

He gave me a once over. "Captain Paul Ortiz."

"What unit were you with?"

He sighed, as though the question irritated him. "Tenth Special Forces Group. Alpha Team leader."

"Right on," I said, impressed. "That's my dream job." He stared straight ahead at the blank wall, his face still in a scowl. "Looks like we both got pretty well torched. IED?"

He nodded, silently.

"Except your face is better than mine," I pointed out.

He glanced over at me, then looked back at the wall. "Probably because of my beard," he muttered.

"You had a beard? Ah, because you were Special Forces. Yeah, I was clean shaven. Look at me now," I cracked. I touched my scabby, swollen face. "Not exactly as smooth as a baby's butt."

He didn't answer. I tried again. "So...what was going on this morning? I heard some yelling out of your room."

His scowl deepened. "Yeah, because they're not giving me the pain meds I need. I'm not about to do their fucking therapy when I'm in so much fucking pain and they won't give me any more fucking pain meds."

Now *I* felt irritated. But I tried to remember my new mission—to encourage. "I know it hurts. *Clearly*, I know it hurts. I'm not much further ahead of you. But if you refuse to engage in your therapy, that's a disservice to yourself as well as everyone around you who's trying to help you reach your full potential." I stood up and held out my left elbow. "Look." I bent my arm. "That's as far as it goes. Which means I'm probably never going to regain full strength in that arm. You know why? Because I stopped doing the therapy on that joint. I got tired

of it. Now, I'm kicking myself. That's what happens if you don't take full advantage and push through with your therapy."

He briefly glanced at my elbow, then slid his eyes back to the wall. "None of them have any idea how fucking painful this is."

"I do," I retorted. "I know exactly how painful it is. You think you're avoiding pain right now, but you're actually decreasing your long-term potential for a full recovery. Besides—dude, we can *handle* pain. We made it through Ranger School. You did all the Special Forces training on top of that! We dealt with the pain because people depended on us and we needed to lead them through the mission."

"No one needs me now," he muttered.

"What about your family?" I asked. "Are you married? Do you have kids?"

"Yes, *Lieutenant*," he hissed. "I'm married and my wife stopped coming to visit, thanks for bringing it up." For the first time, he made eye contact with me. "She said all I care about is getting more pain meds. And she doesn't want to 'enable an addiction.' Her words." He shook his head, angrily. "She doesn't get it."

I sat for a moment, sobered by his confession. "Well, I get it," I said. "And *she* needs you. You've got to view healing as your mission. People are depending on you. You can push through this pain to get better. If you don't do the therapy, and you keep sucking down the pain meds, you're just ruining your future. And you're ruining *her* future." I stared at him, feeling admiration, despite his attitude. "You're *Special Forces*, man. Alpha Team Leader!" I urged. "You've got this."

He didn't respond. I wasn't sure if anything I'd said made a difference. I sighed and stood up to leave. "Do me a favor—" I added, before walking out. "Be nicer to the staff. They're just trying to help you."

Weirdly, I felt invigorated by the conversation with Captain Ortiz, even though he hadn't given me any indication I'd been helpful. It still felt good to try to encourage someone. For that window of time, I'd oriented my attention toward someone else. I hadn't been thinking about my own struggles or injuries; I hadn't been indulging in self-pity. I'd used my limited bandwidth to attempt to encourage a fellow

wounded soldier who was struggling to find the internal strength to fight for his own recovery. Ironically, it hadn't sapped me; it had given me a boost.

With a shock, I realized that I'd mainly been healing in isolation. Yes, I'd been surrounded by therapists and medical staff—but my focus had mostly been on myself. I had kept my head down and focused on my own path to healing.

For some reason, the thought brought to mind the memory of plunging through the woods in the dark at Ranger School: head down, eyes focused on the compass—who knew if I was aiming right. I hadn't been looking up at my surroundings, and the experience had ended up temporarily blinding me. I'd piled on more injuries rather than successfully and expediently getting to my destination. *Failure.*

Well—what if I lifted my head up? What if, in the midst of feeling my way toward whatever purpose God might have in store for me, I paid attention to the people around me? I didn't really know where I was going, and everything was taking longer than I wanted it to.

But even so—what if I tried acting like a leader again?

If I can't lead my guys in Afghanistan, I thought, I could still try to lead by example to some of the guys around here.

I began paying closer attention to everyone around me. Every day, it seemed, there were opportunities to check in with someone, share a bit about my recovery, encourage someone else along their own journey. It wasn't just the patients who needed encouragement either, I realized. Plenty of the staff looked discouraged and tired. I started memorizing their names and tried to remember the snippets they shared with me.

"Hey, Sheila! How'd your son do at the track meet?"

"Mateo. How do you think the Aggies will do this weekend against Texas?"

Initiating those interactions took some effort at first, because I was so used to being inside my own pain and recovery. But once I got started, it was easy to continue. It felt *good* seeing others be encouraged. Eventually, it became easy. Checking in with others became

something I looked forward to. They made me feel invigorated with new purpose.

About a week after my interaction with Captain Ortiz, I saw him in the hallway with a Physical Therapist. When Auntie Bet came by my room later, I asked her how he was doing. “Is he still holed up in his room?”

“No!” she said, cheerfully. “He got motivated after you talked to him. He’s doing all his therapy now. He even said ‘Thank you’ to me today. Whatever you said to him must have kicked him in the ass.” She smiled. “Another model patient! Like you!”

I grinned. “Well, that’s awesome. Do you know if his wife is visiting him again?”

“I wasn’t aware that she’d stopped, but she was by this morning.”

I nodded, satisfied. *Good.*

The interactions made me want to work harder at my *own* recovery, so that I had more milestones to report. I wasn’t necessarily aiming for breakthroughs anymore; I was more content to track the small, incremental gains—mostly because I knew that’s what everyone else was tracking also. If I could cheer on Paul’s engagement with therapy—couldn’t I register my own progress too?

The long-term goal was still to get back to Afghanistan: that was the mission. In the meantime, I wasn’t about to waste this moment. I could redeem this time.

* * *

Mother and I started venturing outside of the hospital campus for meals out. The first time was for another celebration: Kevin Jensen, Mike Debolt, and Philip Kopfensteiner had all finished up their treatment at BAMC. In fact, they’d all been a stage ahead of me. While I was still unconscious or on the ketamine, they’d moved to the step-down unit. Once I was on the step-down unit, they’d graduated to outpatient. I hadn’t seen them much around the hospital. But once I was discharged, Mother put together a celebratory dinner at a nearby

Tex-Mex. She'd even invited my grandparents and my childhood pastor.

I felt a little self-conscious, to be honest. I hadn't been off the hospital campus since the accident, and now I was being ushered into a crowded restaurant like a debutante. I had tried dressing up in a collared shirt, but I couldn't button the sleeves because of my bandages. I had bandages around my neck as well, so the shirt wouldn't button as high as I would have normally worn it. My face was completely exposed, in all its red, shiny, scabby glory. Mother had gotten me a ball cap that said "Purple Heart" on it, to satisfy people's unspoken questions; in theory, it was also supposed to offer my face a little extra cover. It didn't. I stuck out.

I tried to remind myself, *Everyone here loves me. They're all here to encourage me. They're celebrating the fact that I graduated to outpatient treatment.*

It helped that the guys from my platoon didn't hold back from ribbing me—that made things feel more normal. Philip grinned as I slowly took a tiny bite. "Last time I saw you, LT, you couldn't eat that Canadian MRE fast enough."

Mike snorted with laughter. "Yeah, you were stuffing your blueberry cobbler down and yelling into the radio with your mouth full." He imitated me. "Wuhn-fix, dis is free-fix. Do you need affittance?"

I laughed. "Now, look at me," I said. "I can't even eat half of my dinner in an hour."

"I'll finish your enchiladas for you, LT," Kevin offered.

"So selfless, Jensen."

"Yes, Sir! Anything for the Lieutenant, Sir!"

Some of the other restaurant patrons glanced over me. Children stared. I decided I wasn't going to let it bother me. Their response was natural. If I had been a kid seeing a burn victim for the first time, I probably would have stared too.

I was just going to focus on the people in front of me.

Kevin filled me in on their recovery. They had all but finished up their treatment and PT. Soon, Kevin explained, they were going to

join the US-based portion of our unit and finish out their enlistment there at Fort Hood—just a few hours north of San Antonio.

“So, none of you are redeploying?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, Sir.”

“Don’t you want to?” I asked.

He grinned. “It’s okay, LT. I don’t think any of us mind staying on US soil.”

That was a surprise to me.

We had to wrap up dinner by 7:00 to ensure I had enough time to do my shower and bandage routine. The guys hugged me goodbye, patting me carefully on the back. I felt sad, watching them take off. It had been good to see them.

After the Tex-Mex dinner, Mother and I decided we were ready to start venturing beyond the hospital more often. One Sunday, we tried out a local church. One week, we went to the grocery store and picked out some food for home-cooked meals. We tried doing “normal life” again.

It didn’t exactly feel normal though. Every time we were out anywhere, there were people: looking. Staring.

There was no mistaking that I’d been through something terrible that had left me horribly wounded. I didn’t have the benefit of being able to hide my scars. But strangely, I began to feel a weird freedom in that. For most of my life, I’d tried to hide any areas of weakness I discovered in myself. But that option wasn’t available to me anymore. Rather than feeling sorry for myself, I found myself feeling sad for people who still felt compelled to cover up their pain.

“Thank you for your service,” a man said to me in church, looking at my “Purple Heart” hat.

“You’re welcome,” I said. “It was an honor to serve. How are you doing?”

“How am I doing? I should ask how *you’re* doing,” he said nervously.

I nodded. “I’m actually feeling a lot of joy right now. It feels like I’m learning what life is supposed to be all about. God spared my life, and things aren’t easy, but I’m taking it one step at a time.”

He looked taken aback. “The fact that you could express joy when you’re...” He trailed off awkwardly. “Well...it’s inspiring. Good reminder for me to push through my own stuff.”

I remembered Cliff saying at the end of my birthday dinner that people might be inspired by my story. I hadn’t believed him at the time. Surely, the sight of my disfigurement would cause people to feel shocked or even disgusted. How could it ever be a source of inspiration?

But, as it turned out, it was that unmistakable evidence of pain that some people seemed drawn to. Especially when I focused on showing up the way Cliff did—interested in others, curious, encouraging, full of joy—the effect was surprising. I didn’t fully understand it, but people said seeing me and talking to me made them feel hope.

Sometimes. Not all the time.

A lot of the time, people responded with pity. At least, that’s how I interpreted it. After yet another stranger anonymously paid for Mother’s and my dinner out, I told her I was going to stop wearing the Purple Heart hat.

“Why? It helps people understand what happened to you. It shows that you were serving your country.”

“It makes people feel *sorry* for me,” I said. “I don’t want to be a charity case. If people want to know what happened to me, they can come talk to me.”

One night, Mother and I got dinner at the Cracker Barrel. The place was packed. We squeezed into a narrow booth on one side of a walkway that had tables closely set on the other side. I could feel Mother staring at my face. Before we’d left the hotel, I’d noticed that several scabs were oozing pus. I hadn’t thought much of it; I knew they’d deal with it the next day in the burn unit. But Mother looked concerned.

“Does it look that bad?” I asked.

She shrugged. “It’s pretty rough. I’m just trying to think of whether or not I should scrub them in your debridement shower or leave them alone.”

A server passed close beside us in the aisle, brushing my sleeve. "Excuse me," I heard him say. He walked farther down the walkway and set waters on a table where a family was seated. "You know, there are arcade games for kids at the front," he said.

"Can we?" one of the children at the table asked. The mom handed them some change, and the kids eagerly jumped up from their seats. "Come on!"

They hurried down the walkway toward my table. The older boy in front glanced at me.

"Woah—" he said. His eyes grew wide.

"What?" his sister behind him asked.

"Shh!" the boy said, and glanced at me again. The girl followed his gaze. When she saw me, she gasped.

"What?" the youngest brother asked, tucked behind his sister. "What are you guys talking about?"

"Joey, be quiet. Hurry up." The three scurried past.

Mother and I exchanged looks. I looked down at my menu.

We forgot about the kids for a bit. Our conversation turned to news from home. Father was finally out of his casts and moving normally again. Daniel was getting ready for deployment. One of my younger brothers seemed to be having a harder time lately. Mother suddenly broke off, mid update.

"Don't look at him," a child's voice hissed behind me.

Reflexively and regrettably, I looked over my shoulder. It was the three children again. Both the older boy and girl dropped their eyes. The youngest boy gaped at me. "Look at that guy!" he said, loudly.

"Come *on* Joey," his sister said and tugged his hand, pulling him past me.

He craned his head over his shoulder. "Did you see that guy?!" he said again. "Mommy, is that Two-Face, from Batman? Is that a bad guy?"

Mother and I locked eyes again. There was an awkward pause. "Samuel." She spoke hesitantly. "Don't think about that. Children are just...they're just little."

"I feel bad. I don't want to scare anybody."

“Don’t feel bad,” she said. “It’s not your fault.”

We didn’t talk much through dinner. I kept my gaze down and focused on eating. Mother attempted to engage me in conversation several times, but I didn’t feel like chatting.

Toward the end of the meal, I heard the kids run by me again—saw their shoes flash past as I stared down at the carpet. “Excuse me,” Mother said. I looked up at her, then realized she wasn’t talking to me. “Excuse me,” she repeated. “Could I talk to you for a moment?”

The kids’ parents paused near our table. “Hello?”

“This is my son, Samuel,” Mother said. “I think your kids were walking by and they saw him. He got wounded over in the war. We just wanted to explain because he does not want them to be scared of him.”

The woman smiled sympathetically at me. “I hope they weren’t rude. We’re so sorry you got hurt.”

“Thank you for your service,” the husband cut in.

Mother continued. “I don’t want to keep you, but could you just explain to your children about what they saw? That he was burned—that’s why he looks like this. We don’t want them to have nightmares.”

“Of course,” the wife said. “We appreciate you explaining. God bless you.” They left.

I stared down at my plate, still piled with food.

Inspiration, pity, and nightmares. Somehow, I generated all three.

* * *

That night, Mother and I went through our regular ordeal. After the unwrapping and the painful debridement shower, she wrapped me in towels and blankets. I was always so cold after the shower—my body temperature still wasn’t regulating the way it should. Holding the blankets and towels around me, I climbed under the covers in the bed for another layer of warmth.

“I feel almost drunk, I’m so tired,” Mother remarked. She went to the CD player to turn on her worship music.

“Me too.”

“We still got all the rewrapping to do.”

“I know.”

Once I was finally warm enough, I uncovered one arm. Mother started the slow, gentle process of wrapping the bandages around my fragile skin. We’d learned that each arm took about five songs. The legs each took seven. The CD played twice through before we were all done.

“Samuel,” Mother sighed, looking tired. “I forget what to do next.”

“You can start on the other leg now, Mother.” I moved it out from under the blankets.

She hummed along in a weary way with the music, murmuring Scripture to herself. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Finally, the bandaging was finished. Both of us were worn out. She pulled a chair up next to my bed and set herself down heavily. “Alright, Son,” she said, opening her Bible. “Let’s read Romans 5 tonight.” She read a few phrases and then her voice shifted. She spoke with more intensity. *“We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.”*

She paused and stared at the words. “Oh, Son, this is a good Word to us,” she said, and read it again. *“Problems and trials...help us develop endurance. And this hope will not lead to disappointment.”*

“That’s all true,” I said quietly.

“It is true. We can be *thankful* for this trial. Because it is making you stronger on the inside. It is helping you develop endurance, and strengthens your character. And leads to deeper hope.”

I believed those words. So then, I simply needed to accept them. *Maybe I don’t need to know what the end point is, I thought. Or even how to get there. Maybe I just...keep moving forward. Hope that one day I see the good things that the scripture promises.*

I swallowed. “Mother, I was remembering... When I was standing there, on fire, I was thinking about everything that I’d done. Everything that had gotten me success. You know, getting into West Point, and being the stroke on Varsity, and moving toward my goal to be a Special Forces Officer... But when I was standing there on fire, I knew everything I’d done in my life so far couldn’t get me out of that situation. It couldn’t save me. And that’s when I threw up my arms and cried out, ‘Jesus, save me.’”

Mother nodded. “I remember you said a little about that when you were talking to Cliff.” She stared at me, her expression soft. “You know, we’ve been teaching you about Jesus since you were a little boy. But I’m not sure I’ve ever heard you talk about God like this before—the way you have since your accident.” She paused. “You surrendered to Him.”

“I guess I did.”

“Do you think it took being on fire for you to be able to give up your will to the Lord?”

I thought about that. Feeling so tired, under those blankets—my thoughts moved slowly. “Maybe. I’m not sure.”

“Well, I admit, I’ve wondered about that.” She looked at me; I could see her eyes evaluating the skin on my face. “Before you got burned, Samuel, you were so handsome.” I rolled my eyes. “You were, you were so handsome. And there were so many sweet, pretty girls at your high school, wanting you to be their boyfriend. You thought you were too good for all of them.”

“No,” I protested. “I just had to stay focused if I wanted to get into West Point.”

“You had your own vision of what you wanted to do,” she paraphrased. “You were competent. And you were self-reliant. And you were very arrogant and prideful.”

I didn’t protest this time. I knew she was right. “Should have gotten myself a girlfriend when I had the chance,” I tried to joke. “Doubt anyone’s going to take me now. I’d give our kids nightmares.”

She didn’t like my joke. Her expression was sad. “I know it must have been hard with those little children tonight at the restaurant. I

suppose there's going to be a lot more of that. Maybe you'll just have to get used to it. But...God can bring good out of this still."

God can bring good. That was another thought I didn't want to wrestle with—I was too tired to wrestle with it. I just wanted to accept that it was true. I wanted to hope that, even if I felt lost, I wasn't failing. I wanted to hope that somehow, this was all part of what God had intended.

"Mother...I think if God didn't have a purpose for me, I would have just died there on the battlefield. If my mission was already complete and I'd done everything He wanted me to do, I would have just died."

"But you lived. He's got a call on your life."

"I think so."

She nodded silently. "Even though it hurts me to my bones to see you hurt the way you are—if getting burned is what it took for the Lord to draw you to Himself...so be it."

"So be it," I repeated.