BENJAMIN HALL

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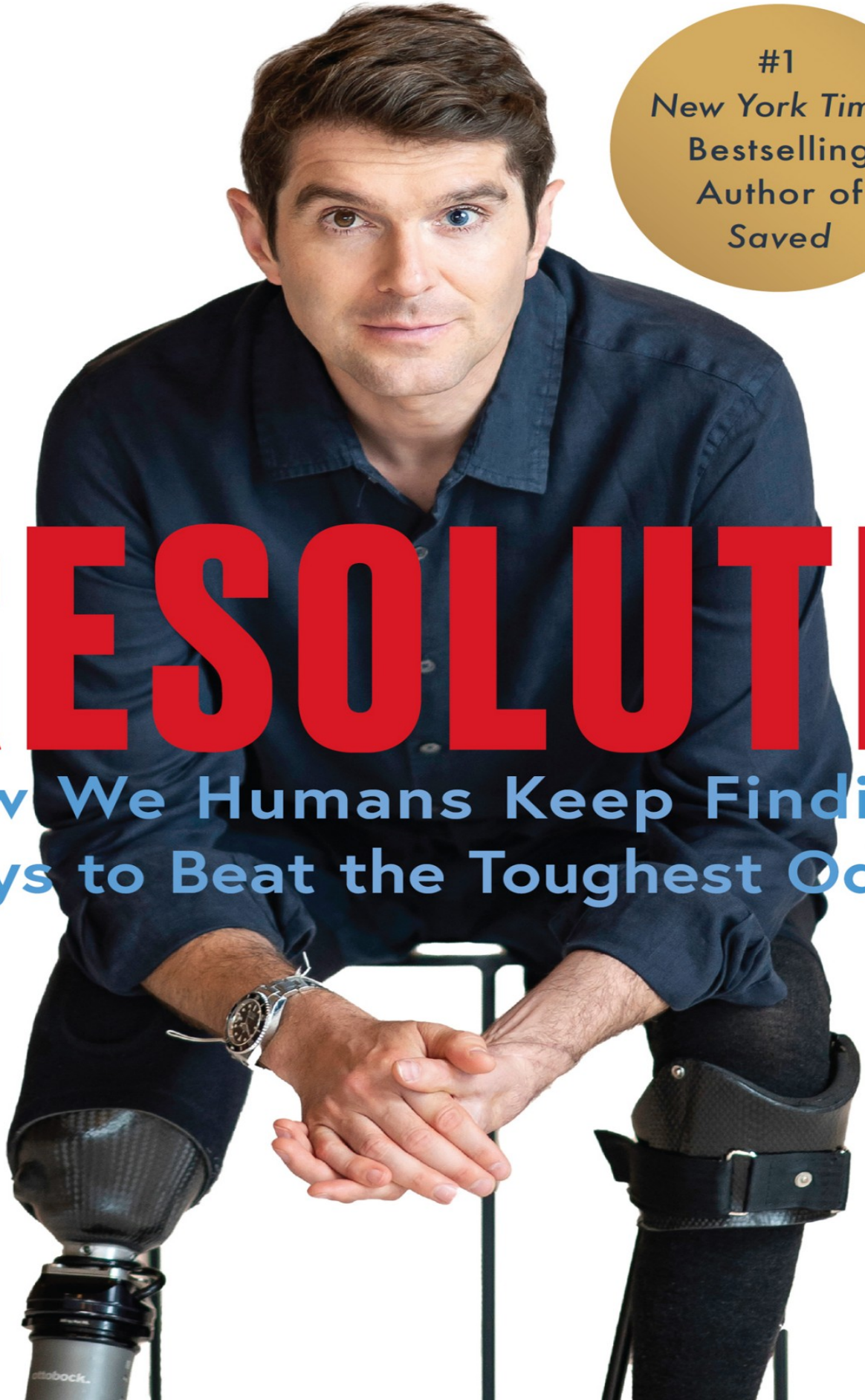

RESOLUTE

How We Humans Keep Finding Ways to Beat the Toughest Odds

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to Beat the Toughest Odds

BENJAMIN
HALL

HARPER
INFLUENCE

Dedication

For all of you who've been knocked down—know you have the strength to get back up. And that you will be stronger every time you do.

And for all of you who help to lift up others—know that you make us all stronger. Never stop doing so.

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Introduction

November 2023
PRZEMYŚL GŁÓWNY TRAIN STATION
Przemyśl, Poland, near the Poland-Ukraine Border

Almost from the day they carried me out of the country, missing a leg, most of a foot, and part of a hand, I wanted to go back. Few people thought it was a good idea. Some tried to talk me out of it. The country was still at war. The capital was still the target of Russian cruise missiles. The village where I'd been injured no longer existed as a village but only as the ruins of a thousand cratered homes. And yet, in my mind, it was never a question of if, but when.

I had to go back.

And so, 614 days after a missile attack outside Kyiv nearly killed me, I did.

A few months earlier, I received an invitation to travel to Kyiv and interview Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Mariinskyi Palace, from where he'd been conducting the battle to save his country from the militarily superior Russian forces that invaded on February 24, 2022. There was great news value to the interview, but for me there was something else.

The war in Ukraine has been one of the deadliest for journalists to cover: more than one hundred journalists or media workers have been the victims of violence in Ukraine since the 2022 invasion, and at least eighteen have been killed—an astonishing number that includes my great friend and colleague Pierre Zakrzewski, a veteran Fox News cameraman, and Oleksandra Kuvshynova, a twenty-four-year-old Ukrainian journalist who served as our fixer, both killed in the same attack that crippled me.

President Zelenskyy knew my story, and one of the reasons he invited me to return, I believe, was to demonstrate the resilience of journalists, who—like his country's courageous warriors and civilians—refused to be cowed by Russian aggression. In fact, journalists from all over the globe continue to pour into Ukraine, seeking the front lines, finding the story, doing their jobs.

For me, there was a personal element as well. My escape from Ukraine after the bombing had been improbable, all but doomed to fail, yet I'd somehow made it out alive and all the way back to my home in London, to my family. Returning to Ukraine was a chance to retake this most unlikely escape in reverse. To relive the many impossible events that had to happen for me to survive, only this time with a clearer head and a more functional body. A chance to appreciate and be thankful for all the twists of fate and acts of heroism that brought me home. It was important for me to confront anew everything that had happened, rather than look away and leave it in the past. Like I said, I am a journalist, and a journalist can't look away.

There was more to my story that needed to be told.

So it was that I arranged a meeting with a doctor from the Military Clinical Hospital in Kyiv, Ukraine's capital—the brave Ukrainian doctor who, in between shifts as an armed sentry for the national army, saved my life after the bombing.

It was in that hospital in March 2022 that my team of rescuers dispatched from abroad by Save Our Allies found me in a bed, metal rods sticking out of my left thigh, a drain tube attached to my skull, a cigarette lighter–sized piece of shrapnel lodged in my throat, parts of my left eye missing, my right leg amputated at the knee, and deep burns across much of my body. The Ukrainian doctor was dead set against moving me, afraid that any passage on the country's gutted, bomb-shelled streets might dislodge the shrapnel in my throat and kill me—one of several ways that leaving the hospital might have cost me my life.

Finally, he did agree to let me leave, patched up and hammered together just enough to make the trip feasible. And now, on my unlikely return to see him almost two years later, there he was again, waiting to greet me along with a handful of nurses who'd helped keep me alive.

I did not recognize the doctor—I had been close to death when we first met.

But he recognized me.

When he saw me, his eyes widened and his face went white, and he began to cry. He walked up to me and looked hard at my face, as if I weren't real.

As if he were looking at a ghost.

"You were gone," he said. "My God, you were *gone*. You shouldn't be here. It is a miracle you are here."

I hugged him and I told him I agreed with him. I *was* gone, a bloody mess, clinging to a heartbeat, and yet there I was, 614 days later, walking upright on a prosthetic leg, my facial scars nearly invisible, looking from the outside like the healthiest person alive. I'd been at the very brink of extinction, but something had pulled me back.

This book is about that something.

* * *

For most of my adult life I've been a journalist—specifically, a war correspondent. I've covered bombings and battles, witnessed heroism and atrocities, seen brutal death and unbearable injury up close, and along the way I have often wondered one thing:

How would I react if I was the guy on the stretcher?

Now I know.

I told the story of the bomb attack and the start of my recovery in my first book, *Saved: A War Reporter's Mission to Make It Home*. Yet as soon as I finished that book, I knew there was more to my experience I wanted to share. As a journalist, I'd begun reporting my own story in the minutes after I awakened on that asphalt slope in Horenka. The first thing I tried to do after regaining consciousness was take out my cell phone and snap pictures of my missing leg and mangled foot. My impulse, even before any primal survival instinct kicked in, was to document what was happening to me. *To get the story*. I never stopped doing that all through my recovery and the process of writing my first book. And I'm not quite done yet.

In a way, it's the same story I've been chasing throughout my fifteen years as a war correspondent. I've searched for it in the hills of Aleppo and the rubble of Mosul, the valleys of Kabul and the carnage in Mogadishu—places where civilization had all but collapsed and human beings were at their most vulnerable. I understood it was a thing that existed in the

extremes of life and often on the edges of death. I'd caught glimpses of it, and I'd wondered if it was possible to understand it without experiencing it.

What I was chasing, the story I wanted to tell, was the story of humanity's profound and powerful will to survive.

The way we humans keep finding ways to beat the toughest odds.

Before the bombing, I believed it was something I could write about after just having witnessed it from a distance.

But it was only after I was nearly killed in Horenka, when I found myself in a fierce struggle to live and recover, that I truly understood what it was that had so intrigued me.

You see, most of us will never be challenged in the way that people caught up in wars are challenged.

But every one of us *will* be challenged in some significant way, or in many ways. We will all face long odds at some point, and we will all confront some obstacle that at first seems insurmountable. Life, in a way, is a series of such tests—of character, of will, of resolve.

What intrigues me is how we keep managing to pass these tests, sometimes after believing we are doomed to fail.

Humans are, I have learned, incredibly resilient creatures. We are capable of summoning a mysterious extra gear from deep within that can rescue us from terrible predicaments and propel us to wondrous new heights.

We are, in a word, *resolute*.

In fact, resilience is one of our most primal imperatives as human beings. "The human instinct to survive is our most powerful drive," a recent study in *Psychology Today* declared. "Since animals climbed out of the primordial muck and as our ancestors rose from all fours to walk upright, evolution has been guided by its ability to help us survive and reproduce. Just about everything humans have become serves that purpose."

Or to borrow a phrase from the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, the human animal is "a survival machine."

This book is a result of the hardest journalistic mission I've ever undertaken—an inquisition into why I'm still alive.

It's both a continuation of my physical, mental, and spiritual ordeal and an exploration of how that ordeal, though unique to me in its details, is, at its essence, universal. Because the challenges I have faced are the same kinds of challenges we are *all* capable of overcoming—challenges most of

us confront many times in our lives. So instead of looking at geopolitics and war strategies, I'll be tunneling into the human psyche in search of its secrets and truths.

In *Resolute*, I share my own experiences—on battlefields, in war-torn Kyiv, in hospitals, and at home with my wife and daughters—as well as the experiences and insight of several remarkable people I've met in the course of my continuing recovery, including other people who have confronted their own mortality, or helped someone who has.

What these people share with me is the experience of dealing with a truly dire situation—and the knowledge that these situations can push us to tap into new levels of tenacity, potency, and resolve. The message all these people conveyed is simple and direct: the capacity to not only survive adversity but to use it to become better, more evolved, and more compassionate human beings is something *that resides in us all*.

I will also take a closer look at certain events that happened between the bombing and my return to London six months later. As a journalist, I wanted to drill down deeper on these moments and, with the benefit of time and distance, mine them for more meaning and insight and, hopefully, a little extra wisdom along the way.

You should know that I've always been an optimist. Even after the bombing, a doctor told me I was suffering from post-traumatic optimism. When I talk to people about everything I went through, they sometimes marvel at how I've maintained such a positive attitude.

"Whatever it is that you have," they say, "can you bottle it and give it to me?"

This book is the best I can do.

I'm certainly not an expert in anything. I don't have advanced degrees. I cannot write a guidebook or handbook filled with lessons and exercises. All I can do is what I do for a living—tell a story. Yet I hope that what I have gone through in the last two years will resonate in some way with you, and with whatever challenges you face in your own lives—physical, financial, emotional, aspirational.

I also hope that the things I discovered about myself will inspire you to believe in your own remarkable power to take on any challenge and beat the toughest odds.

1

Reckoning

March 2022
BROOKE ARMY MEDICAL CENTER
Fort Sam Houston, Texas

Twenty-four sleepless, hallucinatory hours in the frigid belly of a C-17 military freight plane were, mercifully, over. Now I was in a Type 3 MICU ambulance speeding down Interstate 35 South in San Antonio. It was 2 a.m. and the traffic was light; I was alert, exhausted, and in pain. We took Exit 162 and pulled through the George C. Beach Avenue entrance and into the sprawling Brooke Army Medical Center complex.

This was the place where people like me—the lucky ones—came to face our fates.

I was wheeled through the Trauma Center straight to the Surgical Research Burn Center. Of all my multiple injuries, the burns across my back and legs were deemed the most urgent. Nurses and techs gave me a Trauma Care Primary Survey—a quick check of my airway, breathing, circulation, and neurological status—before surveying my burns. Then I was rushed to an operating room and swung onto a table beneath two eerily bright, tire-sized LED surgical lights. At least ten medical professionals swarmed me and got straight to it. All that time at high elevation on the cavernous C-17 Globemaster had worsened my condition, as expected—decreased blood pressure, high fevers, delirium. That pointed to dangerous bacteria in my system. A serious hidden infection, the doctors knew, could be fatal.

Which meant I would have to be taken apart.

Bit by bit, the unraveling proceeded. First the gown, then the dirtied bandages. I lay naked on the table as doctors probed every open wound—the stump of my right knee, the hole through my left foot, deep gashes in my left hand—looking for signs of infection. Even wounds that were stitched up and sealed were unstitched and pulled apart. All was laid bare. Different doctors peered into my tattered body—ophthalmological surgeons, brain surgeons, burn specialists, neurological experts—as is common with polytrauma stemming from blast injuries. The damage is extensive. The blasts affect multiple systems. They ravage your resources. My doctors needed to quickly determine:

This is what it looks like. This is the lay of the land. This is where we are right now with the patient, Benjamin Hall.

They needed to know just what was left of me.

* * *

By then I fully understood that my life as I knew it ended on March 14, 2022, in the deserted village of Horenka, Ukraine, on the outskirts of Kyiv.

I was there with a crew from Fox News, where I worked as the U.S. State Department correspondent. The crew included my friend Pierre Zakrzewski, fifty-five, and Oleksandra "Sasha" Kuvshynova, our gutsy twenty-four-year-old fixer and translator. We were there to cover Russia's invasion of the country, which began eighteen days earlier. On March 14, two Ukrainian soldiers escorted our crew to Horenka, where we filmed the total devastation of the village and spoke with a troop of defiant Ukrainian soldiers.

We were done reporting for the day and were driving out of the village and back to Kyiv when it happened.

An unknown Russian craft fired three missiles at us and blew up our small red car just before we steered out of the town. I was in the back seat, sandwiched between Pierre and Sasha, while the two Ukrainian soldiers were in front. The first missile struck thirty feet in front of us. The second landed next to the car, plunging me into a darkness that felt like death. That is when a true miracle happened. Out of the blackness came a vision and a voice, thin but distinct, imploring me to get out of the car. It was my beautiful six-year-old daughter, Honor, whom I'd left back home in London with her two young sisters, Iris and Hero, and her mother, my wife, Alicia.

Over and over Honor was saying, *Daddy, you've got to get out of the car*. I listened and I *did* get out of the burning car, and took one or two steps before a third missile exploded next to us and threw me back into blackness. When I awakened, I was flat on the asphalt ground, not far from the smoldering skeleton of what used to be our car. I was bleeding badly and missing the bottom half of my right leg, and much of my left foot. I was also on fire.

The miracle continued. A series of improbable events unfolded that allowed me to survive the blasts that killed both Pierre and Sasha, as well as the two brave Ukraine soldiers who were driving us, Mykola Kravchenko and Serhiy Mashovets. I had been in the death seat, the only spot in the red car with no quick exit, yet I was the only one of the five of us to make it out alive. Surviving the blast, however, was just the beginning of my ordeal. After I was rescued, I needed to get out of Ukraine and to the safety of an American military base, which meant traveling hundreds of miles west to Poland without jarring the hunk of shrapnel lodged in my throat, or worsening any of my other severe injuries to the point where I would bleed out, all while a countrywide shoot-to-kill curfew had just been imposed.

Somehow, all these unlikely pieces fell into place and I was delivered to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, near the United States' Ramstein Air Base in Germany, and from there to the brilliant surgeons and nurses at Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) at Fort Sam Houston in Texas—the beginning of my long journey back to recovery.

Now I was in an operating room at BAMC, being dissected like a specimen, and I understood I'd entered a new phase of my journey. First, I had survived the blasts. Then I'd made it out of Ukraine. For ten days at Landstuhl I was treated as an emergency case, monitored and restored to a functional baseline of health. Now, at BAMC, it was time for the accounting. The reckoning. Judgment Day. I had survived, and that was a blessing. But what next? What came now? What, exactly, would the rest of my life look like?

Eventually a doctor came into my room in the intensive care unit and read me the laundry list of the injuries I'd sustained. I already knew the basics: one leg was gone from the knee down, the other foot was a mess, and my left hand and eye were in bad shape. What I still needed to know was, what would I get to keep? Would I need another amputation, maybe two? Would I lose my eye? What other potentially devastating internal

injuries did I not know about? I've never been afraid to receive bad news, and I wasn't afraid when the doctor came into my room, his face at best serious, at worst grim. But I did feel my muscles tense and my nerves fire warning signals to the rest of me. The verdict was in, and I was about to hear it.

"Let's go from top to bottom," the doctor said, before reciting a litany of bodily destruction. A depressed skull fracture, or a hole in my skull, that caused a traumatic brain injury but did not necessitate immediate neurosurgery; a retinal detachment in my left eye, as well as the loss of my iris, lens, and cornea—the result of shrapnel spattering my face; a shattered metacarpal bone in my left thumb and extensive damage to my left hand, the skin torn away and the tendons on the back of my thumb exposed; my right leg amputated just below the knee; my left leg missing a fair amount of calf muscle and all the tendons that powered the foot, which, due to its condition, might have to be amputated as well. And, of course, significant burns from the top of my left leg to the bottom, and on my left hand, back, and buttocks, all requiring multiple delicate and painful skin grafts over the course of the next several months.

What's more, at every step I would be at risk of potentially fatal infections.

In those first few days at BAMC, I was told I could expect to remain at the medical center in Texas for at least the next two years.

There it was—the reckoning. The moment when my journey changed from a battle of survival to a battle of will.

No matter what, I would need enormous amounts of help from literally dozens of people, and without them I had no chance of any meaningful recovery. There were also a million variables, meaning luck and grace would surely play a huge part in my rehabilitation.

But the most critical work, the day-to-day dogfight for incremental progress, the mental and physical overhaul needed to confront the challenge, would be mine and mine alone.

The first question I had to ask myself, then, once I fully accepted my situation, was whether I believed I had it in me to not only face this challenge but to fight my way through it, and *keep* fighting through it, no matter how hard or impossible things got.

In other words—*was I made of strong enough stuff?*

Here I was able to apply a lesson I'd learned in covering the many wars and conflicts and disasters during the last fifteen years—a lesson I would keep learning and relearning over the long course of my recovery and rehab.

What I learned is that the trait that most shapes the destinies of people and nations and movements, more critical even than bravery and cunning and all the other human traits, is *the capacity to withstand and recover from adversity*.

Or, in a word, *resilience*.

"Campaigns and battles are nothing but a long series of difficulties to be overcome," U.S. five-star general George C. Marshall, commander of Allied operations in the Pacific and Europe in World War II, memorably said. "The lack of equipment, the lack of food, the lack of this or that are only excuses; the real leader displays his quality in his triumphs over adversity, however great it may be."

It is a thought echoed by any number of war historians and participants. "Resiliency does not guarantee victory," Regents professor James L. Regens once said. "But history is littered with examples where the absence of resiliency ended in defeat."

Resilience is our genetic inheritance; it's what we're wired to exhibit. It is not something we even have to think about; it is just there, built in, ready to go. The human animal is not born to quit or surrender; we are born to endure, to keep going, to push further, to explore deeper, to be strong and determined—to be resolute. This is simply how we are designed. We are built to rise to the moment.

Resilience is our default setting.

So when my primary surgeon, Colonel Joe Alderete, told me I would likely be stuck in the hospital in Texas for two years before I could properly walk out on my own and be with my beloved family in London, I knew instantly that this would not be my fate.

"To be honest," I told Dr. Alderete, "I was hoping it might be less time than that."

In fact, my goal was to make it home in time for my fortieth birthday on July 23, which would mean my stay at BAMC was not two years but rather closer to just *six months*.

This was not false bravado or wishful thinking. This was my natural, inherent resilience immediately kicking into gear. I believed what I said,

and I believed, without even thinking about it, that I could do it.

How could I be so confident?

I was sure because I've witnessed resilience all over the world, and I've seen what people facing colossal adversity are capable of. Adversity much greater than what I was facing. Knowing this, all I had to do was learn how to *trust* that I had it in me to fight back and fight hard, because that's just what we humans do.

We fight back, and we fight hard.

To anyone facing a fearsome challenge they aren't sure they can overcome, I would say: *Trust that you have what it takes to battle against any adversity. Trust that the power of resilience is already inside you, waiting to be deployed.*