



NEVER

FINISHED

UNSHACKLE
YOUR MIND AND
WIN THE WAR
WITHIN

FROM *NY TIMES* BEST SELLING AUTHOR OF *CAN'T HURT ME*

DAVID GOGGINS



LIONCREST

P U B L I S H I N G

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FIRST EDITION

ISBN: 978-1-5445-3681-1

TO MY NORTH STAR THAT HAS ALWAYS SHINED, EVEN ON
THE DARKEST OF NIGHTS.

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WARNING ORDER

TIME ZONE: 24/7

TASK ORGANIZATION: SOLO MISSION

1. **SITUATION:** Your horizons have been limited by societal and self-imposed barriers.
2. **MISSION:** Fight through resistance. Seek unknown territory. Redefine what's possible.
3. **EXECUTION:**
 1. Read this book cover to cover. Absorb the philosophy within. Test all theories to the best of your ability. Repeat. Repetition will sharpen new skills and stimulate growth.
 2. This will not be easy. To succeed, you will be required to face hard truths and challenge yourself like never before. This mission is about embracing and learning the lessons from each and every Evolution so you can discover who you really are and can become.
 3. Self-mastery is an unending process. Your job is NEVER FINISHED!
4. **CLASSIFIED:** The real work is unseen. Your performance matters most when nobody is watching.

BY COMMAND OF: DAVID GOGGINS

SIGNED:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Goggins". The signature is stylized and cursive, with the first name "David" and last name "Goggins" clearly visible.

RANK AND SERVICE: CHIEF, U.S. NAVY SEALS, RETIRED

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS NOT A SELF-HELP BOOK. NOBODY NEEDS ANOTHER SERMON ABOUT THE ten steps or seven stages or sixteen hours a week that will deliver them from their stalled or jacked-up life. Hit the local bookstore or surf Amazon and you will slip into a bottomless pit of self-help hype. Must feel good to consume because it sure does sell.

Too bad most of it won't work. Not for real. Not forever. You might see progress here and there, but if you are broken like I used to be or stuck wandering an endless plateau while your true potential wastes away, books alone can't and won't fix you.

Self-help is a fancy term for self-improvement, and while we should always strive to be better, improvement is often not enough. There are times in life when we become so disconnected from ourselves that we must drill down and rewire those cut connections in our hearts, minds, and souls. Because that is the only way to rediscover and reignite *belief*—that flicker in the darkness with the power to spark your evolution.

Belief is a gritty, potent, primordial force. In the 1950s, a scientist named Dr. Curt Richter proved this when he gathered dozens of rats and dropped them into thirty-inch-deep glass cylinders filled with water. The first rat paddled on the surface for a short time, then swam to the bottom, where it looked for an escape hatch. It died within two minutes. Several others followed that same pattern. Some lasted as long as fifteen minutes, but they all gave up. Richter was surprised because rats are good swimmers, yet in his lab, they drowned without much of a fight. So, he tweaked the test.

After he placed the next batch in their jars, Richter watched them, and right before it looked like they were about to give up, he and his techs scooped up the rats, towed them off, and held them long enough for their

heart and respiratory rates to normalize. Long enough for them to register, on a physiological scale, that they had been saved. They did this a few times before Richter placed a group of them back into those evil cylinders again to see how long they would last on their own. This time, the rats didn't give up. They swam their hearts out...for an average of sixty hours without any food or rest. One swam for eighty-one hours.

In his report, Richter suggested that the first round of subjects gave up because they were hopeless and that the second batch persisted for so long because they knew it was possible someone would come along and save them. The popular analysis these days is that Richter's interventions flipped a switch in the rat brain, which illuminated the power of hope for us all to see.

I love this experiment, but hope isn't what got into those rats. How long does hope really last? It may have triggered something initially, but no creature is going to swim for their life for sixty hours straight, without food, powered by hope alone. They needed something a lot stronger to keep them breathing, kicking, and fighting.

When mountaineers tackle the tallest peaks and steepest faces, they are usually tethered to a rope fixed to anchors in the ice or rock so when they slip, they don't slide off the mountain and tumble to their deaths. They may fall ten or twelve feet, then get up, dust themselves off, and try again. Life is the mountain we are all climbing, but hope is not an anchor point. It's too soft, fluffy, and fleeting. There's no substance behind hope. It's not a muscle you can develop, and it's not rooted down deep. It's an emotion that comes and goes.

Richter touched something in his rats that was nearly unbreakable. He may not have noticed them adapting to their life-or-death trial, but they had to have figured out a more efficient technique to preserve energy. With each passing minute, they became more and more resilient until they started to believe that they would survive. Their confidence didn't fade as the hours piled up; it actually grew. They weren't hoping to be saved. They refused to die! The way I see it, belief is what turned ordinary lab rats into marine mammals.

There are two levels to belief. There's the surface level, which our coaches, teachers, therapists, and parents love to preach. "Believe in yourself," they all say, as if the thought alone can keep us afloat when the odds are against us in the battle of our lives. But once exhaustion sets in,

doubt and insecurity tend to penetrate and dissipate that flimsy brand of belief.

Then there's the belief born in resilience. It comes from working your way through layers of pain, fatigue, and reason, and ignoring the ever-present temptation to quit until you strike a source of fuel you didn't even know existed. One that eliminates all doubt, makes you certain of your strength and the fact that eventually, you will prevail, so long as you keep moving forward. That is the level of belief that can defy the expectations of scientists and change everything. It's not an emotion to be shared or an intellectual concept, and nobody else can give it to you. It must bubble up from within.

When you are lost at sea and no one is coming to save you, there are only two options. You will either swim hard and figure out how to last as long as it takes, or you are bound to drown. I was born with holes in my heart and sickle cell trait, and into a childhood torched by toxic stress and learning disabilities. I had minimal potential, and by the time I turned twenty-four, I knew I was in danger of wasting my life.

Many people get it twisted and think my accomplishments directly correlate to my potential. My accomplishments do not equate to my potential. The little bit I had was buried so deep, most people would never have found it. Not only did I find it, I learned to maximize it.

I knew that there could be so much more to my story than the wreckage I saw around me, and that it was time to decide if I had it in me to go as hard as I could for as long as it took to become a more self-empowered human being. I fought through doubt and insecurity. I wanted to quit every single day, but eventually, belief kicked in. I believed I could evolve, and that same belief has given me the strength and focus to persevere whenever I've been challenged for over two decades. More often than not, I've challenged myself to see how far I can push it and how many more chapters I can add to my story. I'm still seeking new territory, still curious just how high I might rise from the bottom of the barrel.

A lot of folks feel like they are missing something in their lives—something money can't buy—and that makes them miserable. They attempt to fill the void with material things they can see, feel, and touch. But that empty feeling won't go away. It fades some until all gets quiet again. Then that familiar gnawing in their gut returns, reminding them that the life they are living is not the fullest expression of who they are or might become.

Unfortunately, most people are not desperate enough to do anything about it. When you're hogtied in conflicting emotions and other people's opinions, it's impossible to tap into belief and easy to drift away from that urge to evolve. You could be itchy to experience something different, to be somewhere different, or to become someone different, but when the slightest resistance arises to challenge your resolve, you moonwalk right back into the unsatisfied person you were before. Still itchy, still jonesing to be someone new, yet still trapped in your unfulfilling status quo. And you are nowhere near alone.

Social media has compounded and spread this virus of dissatisfaction, which is why the world is now populated by damaged people consuming airy gratification, hunting an immediate dopamine fix with no substance at all behind it. Instead of staying focused on growth, millions of minds have been infected with lack, leaving them feeling even lesser than. Their internal dialogue becomes that much more toxic, as this population of weak, entitled victims of life itself multiplies.

It's funny, we question so many things about the way our lives are going. We wonder what it would be like if we looked different, had more of a head start, or were given a boost at one time or another. Very few people question their own warped minds. Instead, they collect slights, dramas, and problems, hoarding them until they are bloated with stale regret and envy, which form the roadblocks stopping them from becoming their truest, most capable selves.

All over the world, hundreds of millions of people choose to live that way. But there is another way of thinking and another way of being. It helped me regain control of my life. It allowed me to eviscerate all obstacles in my path until my growth factor became near limitless. I'm still haunted, but I've traded in my demons for evil angels, and now, it's a good haunting. I'm haunted by my future goals, not my past failures. I'm haunted by what I may still become. I'm haunted by my own continued thirst for evolution.

The work is often as miserable and thankless as it ever was, and although there are techniques and skills I've developed that can help along the way, there is no certain number of principles, hours, or steps in this process. It's about constant effort, learning, and adaptation, which demands unwavering discipline and belief. The kind that looks a lot like desperation.

See, I am the lab rat who refused to die! And I'm here to show you how to get to the other side of hell.

Most theories on performance and possibility are hatched in the controlled environment of a sterile laboratory and spread in university lecture halls. But I am not a theorist. I am a practitioner. Similar to how the late, great Stephen Hawking explored the dark matter of the universe, I am intensely passionate about exploring the dark matter of the mind—all of our untapped energy, capacity, and power. My philosophy has been tested and proven in my own Mental Lab through all the many trials and tribulations that shaped my life in the real world.

After each chapter, you will find an Evolution. In the military, evolutions are drills, exercises, or practices meant to sharpen your skills. In this book, they are hard truths we should all face, and philosophies and strategies you can use to overcome whatever is in your way—and excel in life.

Like I said, this is definitely not a self-help book. This is boot camp for your brain. It's a what-are-you-doing-with-your-life book. It's the wake-up call you don't want and probably didn't even know you needed.

Rise up!

Time to get to work!

CHAPTER ONE

MAXIMIZE MINIMAL POTENTIAL

I SAT AMONG THOUSANDS OF COMBAT VETERANS IN A PACKED KANSAS CITY Convention Center for the 2018 Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) National Convention. I wasn't just an active member; I was their guest. I'd been flown in to receive the VFW's prestigious Americanism Award—an annual honor for those who demonstrate a commitment to service, patriotism, the betterment of American society, and helping fellow veterans. The most famous past recipient was one of my heroes. Senator John McCain survived five and a half years as a POW during the Vietnam War. I've always admired the courage he exemplified back then, and throughout his very public life, he continued to set the standard for how I believe men should handle hard times. Now my name was going to be alongside his.

I was about to receive the greatest honor of my life so far. I should have been proud as hell. Instead, I was mystified. For over an hour, I sat in the audience between my mother, Jackie, and my uncle, John Gardner. That's a lot of time to contemplate the meaning of the moment, and all I could come up with were the reasons that I shouldn't be there. That nobody should know the name David Goggins, much less put me in the same sentence as Senator McCain. Not because I didn't earn my spot, but because the circumstances that life served me should never have led me here.

Sure, I'm a winner now, but I was born a loser. There are a lot of born losers out there. Every day, babies are born into poverty and broken families, like I was. Some lose their parents in accidents. Others are abused and

neglected. Many of us are born with disabilities, some physical, others mental or emotional.

It's as if every human being is issued their own personal piñata just for making it out of the womb alive. No one gets a sneak preview of what's in their piñata, but whatever it is will set them up one way or another. Some of us smack it open and sweet things rain down. Those are the ones who have it relatively easy—at least at first. Some are empty as a dry well. Others are worse than empty. They're packed with nightmares, and the haunting begins as soon as the baby takes its first breath. That was me. I was born into a terror dome.

As the speakers took their turns on the mic, I was deep in my own dark cave, reliving the countless bloody beatings my father dealt to my mother, my brother, and me. I watched us escape to Brazil, Indiana, only to settle just ten miles from an active chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. And guess where they sent their kids to school? I recalled the steady flow of racist threats from some of my classmates and how I cheated my way through school and learned nothing.

I thought of my mother's fiancé, Wilmoth, a would-be father figure who was murdered before he could become my stepdad. I recalled my repeated attempts at the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), a standardized test required for all military recruits, to fulfill my dream of becoming a Pararescueman. After I finally passed that dreaded test and enlisted, I quit Pararescue training when the water evolutions became too hard. That brilliant decision ultimately led to me becoming a three-hundred-pound graveyard-shift exterminator at Ecolab, raking in \$1,000 a month at twenty-four years old.

I was a shell of a man at that point, with no self-esteem or self-respect. I was still haunted by the same old demons that had tailed me from birth, and the harsh reality was that I lacked everything I needed to become the man I wanted to be.

Mind you, I wasn't thinking about all of that to punish myself. I was sifting through the files, searching for the catalyst, the moment that restarted the fire and ignited something primal inside me. I needed to remember exactly how and when I flipped the script and managed to build a life of honor and service, but I kept coming up empty. I was so deep in my brain cave I didn't even hear them call my name. I wouldn't have reacted at all if my mom hadn't nudged my arm. Even now, I don't remember walking up

the stage steps with her because I was still floating between my past and my disorienting present.

I heard them read my résumé, detailing the money I'd raised for veteran causes and the objectives I'd met over the course of my career. Before I knew it, they put a medal around my neck and the audience was on their feet applauding. That was the surest sign yet that this born loser had been reborn somewhere along the way. That there had been a moment that sparked my metamorphosis.

When it was my turn at the microphone, I gazed out at all the unfamiliar faces. Members of a brotherhood and sisterhood that I will always be a part of. The fact that this recognition came from them was the deepest honor, but I didn't know how to thank them. I was a sought-after public speaker by then, comfortable in front of crowds large and small. Factor in my work as a recruiter for the military, and I'd been a professional public speaker for over a decade. I rarely got butterflies, but that summer day in Kansas City, I was nervous as hell and my mind was still clouded. I tried to shake it off and started by thanking my grandfather, Sergeant Jack.

"He would be the proudest man in the world to see me up here right now," I said. Choked up, I paused, took a deep breath to compose myself, and started again. "I'd like to thank my mom, who..." I turned to my mother, and when our eyes met, the moment that permanently changed my life finally hit me, and the power of that realization was overwhelming. "I'd like to thank my mom, who..."

My voice cracked again. I couldn't hold back the flood any longer. I closed my eyes and sobbed. Like a dream that only lasts seconds yet feels like hours, time stretched out and scenes from the ultimate turning point in my life—the last time I ever saw my father—colonized my mind. If I hadn't taken that trip, you'd never have heard of me.



It finally hit me and I was overwhelmed by the work it took to get here.

* * *

I was twenty-four years old when I realized I was broken inside. Something had gone numb in my soul, and that numbness, that lack of deep feeling, dictated what my life had become. It's why I quit going after my goals, my biggest dreams, whenever things got hard. Quitting was just another detour. It never bothered me much because when you're numb, you can't process what's happening to you or within you. I didn't know the power of the mind yet, and because of that I had ballooned into a fat boy and taken a job as a cockroach sniper in restaurants.

I had my excuses, of course. My numbness was a survival mechanism. It had been beaten into me by my father. By the time I'd turned seven, I'd developed a POW mindset. Going numb was how I took my beatings and maintained some level of self-respect. Even after my mother and I escaped, I continued to be stalked by tragedy and failure, and numbness was how I coped with the fact that losing was all I ever knew.

When you're born a loser, your goal is to survive, not thrive. You learn to lie, to cheat, to do what it takes to fit in. You may become a survivor, but it's

a miserable existence. Just like the cockroaches I was assigned to kill, you find yourself scurrying in from the shadows to claim the bare necessities while hiding your true self from the light at all costs. Born losers are the ultimate cockroaches. We do what we have to, and that attitude often enables some pretty severe character defects.

I certainly had some. I was a quitter, a liar, fat and lazy, and I was deeply depressed. I could feel myself unraveling a little at a time. Fed up and frustrated, bitter and angry, I couldn't take much more of my sorry excuse for a life. If I didn't change, and change soon, I knew I would die a loser, or worse. I might end up like my father, the hustler who was one quick twitch away from violence. I was consumed by misery and groping for some mental foothold to keep me from giving up for good. The only thing I could come up with was to go back to that house on Paradise Road that still haunted me. I had to get to Buffalo, New York, and look my father in the eye. Because when you're living in hell, the only way to find your way out is to confront the Devil himself.

I was hoping to find some answers that would help me change my life. That was what I told myself, anyway, as I crossed into Ohio from Indiana and veered northeast. I hadn't seen my old man in twelve years. It had been my decision to stop seeing him. At that time, the court system allowed children to make those decisions once they turned twelve. I made that choice mostly out of respect for and loyalty to my mom. He'd stopped beating us after we left Buffalo, but the one thing that never went numb was how I felt about what my mother endured at his hands. Still, over the years, I had questioned that decision and began to wonder if my memories, if the stories I told myself, were true.

On the long drive, I didn't listen to music. All I heard were the competing voices in my head. The first voice accepted me as I was.

It's not your fault, David. None of this is your fault. You're doing the best you can with what you've been given.

That was the voice I'd been listening to my entire life. *It's not my fault* was my favorite refrain. It explained and justified my lot in life and the dead-end path in front of me, and it played 24/7. However, for the first time, another voice chimed in. Or maybe it was the first time I stopped listening only to what I wanted to hear.

Roger that. It ain't your fault that you were dealt a bad hand, but...it is your responsibility. How long will you allow your past to hold you back

before you finally take control of your future?

Compared to the first, more nurturing voice in my head, this one was ice cold, and I did my best to tune it out.

The closer I got to Buffalo, the younger and more helpless I felt. When I was 150 miles away, I felt like I was sixteen years old. As I pulled off the highway and wound through the Buffalo city streets, I felt like I was eight, the same age I was when we packed all our belongings into garbage bags and walked out the door. Once I walked into the house, it was August 1983 all over again. The paint on the walls, the floors, the appliances and the furniture, all of it was the same. While it looked a lot smaller and out of date, it was still the haunted house I remembered, filled with years of grisly memories and palpable dark energy.

However, my father was warm and more affectionate than I remembered. Trunnis was always a charmer, and he acted genuinely happy to see me. As we caught up, I found myself laughing at his jokes, slightly confused by the man in front of me. After a while, he checked his watch and grabbed his coat. He held the front door open for his wife, Sue, and me as we headed for the car.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“You remember the schedule,” he said. “It’s time to open up.”

The first thing I noticed about Skateland from the outside was that it needed a paint job. Inside, the floor and walls were chipped and stained, and the whole place smelled funky. The office had deteriorated too. That sofa we slept on as kids, where my mom caught him cheating on more than one occasion, still hadn’t been replaced. It was filthy, and that’s where I sat after the grand tour while my father headed upstairs to spin hip-hop records in the Vermillion Room.

I felt dizzy and disoriented. It was strange how far the old man had let his standards slip. He wasn’t the strong, exacting, demanding figure I’d remembered. He was old, weak, soft in the middle, and lazy. He didn’t even appear to be that mean anymore. He wasn’t the Devil at all. He was human. Had I been feeding myself a false history? As I lingered in that office, steeped in the past, I wondered what else I’d been wrong about?

Then, at around ten o’clock, the bass line dropped upstairs and the ceiling started to shudder and shake. Within seconds, I heard hollering, laughter, and that steady stomping to the beat. In the same way a song can take you back to a distinct time and place, that thumping bass returned me to

my darkest days. I'd been funneled into a relapse of my childhood nightmare.

I closed my eyes and saw myself as a first grader, tossing and turning on that very couch, trying to sleep after working all night and not being able to get more than a wink. My mother was there too, struggling to paper over our pain with "home-cooked" dinners prepared on portable electric burners in the cramped office. I saw the helplessness and fear in her eyes, and it brought back all the stress, pain, frustration, and depression that came with it. Those memories were real! There was no denying it!

I was disgusted to be sitting on that couch. I was sickened to have let my guard down and enjoyed my father's company, even for a few minutes. I felt like I was doing a disservice to my mother, and the longer I sat there and watched the ceiling shake, the more rage rose up inside until I was on my feet and racing up a back stairwell into the Vermillion Room, where my demon was slurping whiskey—the smoky elixir that gave him his power.

As a kid, I rarely saw the space in full bloom, and while it had lost most of its shine, it was still happening. What was once a glitzy nightclub serving funk to a well-dressed crowd had become a packed dive bar flush with hip-hop. Trunnis was in the DJ booth orchestrating the energy, spinning records, and sucking down scotch after scotch until closing time. I watched him work, drink, and flirt, and the more wasted he became, the more my memory synced with reality. After locking up, I drove us all to Denny's for an after-hours breakfast, just like old times. More than fifteen years had passed, yet the ritual remained the same as ever.

Trunnis was sloppy by then, and he could tell it made me uncomfortable, which ticked him off. While we waited for our food, he glared at me as he dissed my grandparents and claimed they were responsible for the breakup of his family. Liquor always brought his ugliness out, and I'd heard that argument so many times before, it didn't have much effect on me. But when he started in on my mom, I wasn't having any of it.

"Don't go there," I said quietly. But he didn't care. He barked about how everyone turned on him and how weak and sorry we all were. His spittle flew. The vein in his temple throbbed.

"Trunnis, please stop," Sue said. There was something in her tone, a mixture of fear and dread, that I recognized. She wasn't standing up and telling him how she felt. She was pleading with him. It reminded me so much of my mother and how powerless she felt when Trunnis would rage on

and on. He was the type of guy who would call a woman over to the house at 3:55 p.m., knowing my mom would be coming home at four o'clock. He wanted her to catch them in the act to show her that he had all the power and would do whatever he wanted at any time of day or night. It's the same reason he beat me in front of her and did the same to her in front of me.

The very same day we left, Sue moved in, yet he often told her, and anyone else who would listen, how beautiful and smart my mother was, as if she were the one who got away. He needed Sue to feel she wasn't good enough for him, and never would be.

For the first time in my life, I felt for Sue and realized that Trunnis' specialty was the weaponization of disrespect. It was a tactic he used to bully women and children into submission. He knew that once he choked someone out mentally, they would lose all their fight and self-respect, which would make it easier to manipulate and dominate them. That's what he was after. Not love. He craved dominance and subservience. It was like oxygen to him. He harvested souls with violence and rage. He wanted the people closest to him to feel wounded and empty. Decades later, my mother still struggles with self-respect, decision-making, and confidence.

Trunnis' face was red from alcohol. His jaw clenched with tension as he kept talking trash. There was no doubt that he was the bully and abuser I remembered, but not because he hated my mom or Sue, or my brother or me, but because he was a sick, twisted old man who didn't believe he was worth anything and could not and would not help himself.

Years later, I would learn that he had suffered abuse when he was a kid. His father made him stand in front of a flaming-hot coal furnace in a dark room, and after a torturous waiting period, his dad would show up with a belt and lash him, buckle-side first. If he moved away from the belt, he'd get burned, so he had to accept his father's lashings and try not to move. He never dealt with his trauma, those memories festered into demons, and before he even knew it had happened, the victim became the abuser.

Whenever he got drunk and the party died down, he self-soothed by picking on people weaker than him. He beat them up. He ran them down. Sometimes, he threatened to kill them. But as soon as an abusive episode was over, he would erase it from history. The beatings we took never happened. He liked to think of himself as a big man but never accepted responsibility for anything he did that went wrong, which didn't make him any kind of a man at all. I suppose I was in that Denny's booth with him

because part of me was hoping Trunnis would apologize, but he didn't think he had anything to be sorry for. He was straight-up delusional, and his delusions demoralized all of us. They were also contagious.

For years, he made me bleed, and he made me doubt myself. He transferred his demons to me through the lashes of his leather belt and the open palm of his hand, and like him, I grew up believing in delusions. I hadn't become an evil sociopath, but like him, I never took responsibility for my own shortcomings or my failures.

Sitting there listening to him rave made my blood run hot. Sweat beaded on my forehead and all I could think about was payback. It was his turn to suffer at my hands. I wanted to make him bleed for my pain. I wanted to beat that man down right there in Denny's. I was hair-trigger close to allowing my father to turn me into a violent maniac just like I remembered him to be!

He recognized the fire in my eyes because it was as if he were looking into a mirror, and it scared him. The weather changed in our booth. He stopped ranting mid-sentence. His eyes went glassy and wide, and in the fluorescent light of the diner, he looked meek and small. I nodded as I recognized, in that very moment, the lie that inspired my trip to Buffalo.

I hadn't driven all the way from Indianapolis as some first step toward self-improvement. No, I was there looking for a free pass. I went to collect more evidence that all my many failures and disappointments stemmed from the same root cause: my father, Trunnis Goggins. I'd been hoping that everything I'd believed all those years was true because if Trunnis was indeed the Devil in disguise, that gave me someone to blame, and I was looking for a cop-out. I needed Trunnis to be the flaw in my existence in order to claim the lifetime warranty on my get-out-of-jail-free card.

Trunnis was flawed alright. He showed me that all over again. But he wasn't my flaw. The second voice was right. Unless I took responsibility for my demons, the ones he put on me, I had no shot at becoming anything other than a perpetual loser or another miserable hustler like him.

When the food arrived, Trunnis stuffed his face while I reflected on how much power I'd given him over the years. It wasn't his fault I experienced racism or barely graduated high school. Yes, he beat me and my brother up and tortured my mother. He was a sadistic man, but I hadn't lived with him since I was eight years old. When was I going to take my soul back from him? When was I going to own my own choices, my failures, my future?

When would I finally accept responsibility for my life, take action, and wipe the slate clean?

Nobody said a word while I drove us back to Paradise Road. Trunnis watched me with a mix of drunken sadness, loss, and anger as I grabbed my car keys from the kitchen counter and walked straight out the door. I'd planned on spending the weekend, but I couldn't stand to be in his presence for one minute longer. While the words were never spoken, I believe we both knew that would be the last time we would ever see each other.

The funny thing was, I didn't even hate Trunnis anymore because I finally understood him. On the drive back home, I turned the volume way down on the nurturing voice in my head and tuned into reality. In place of excuses, it was time for ownership of exactly who I'd become in all of its ugliness, and that meant acknowledging that my thin skin was definitely part of the problem.

All of us are dealt circumstances in life we don't have any power to control. Sometimes, those things are painful; occasionally, they are tragic or inhuman. While the Accountability Mirror—which I tagged with sticky notes filled with real talk, daily tasks, and a few bigger goals—had helped me get to a certain point, those fixes were surface-level. I'd never attempted to dive down and solve the root cause of my problems, so I crumbled whenever life asked me to dig deeper and persevere in order to achieve something that could lead toward sustained success.

I'd spent my entire life in surface waters hoping that my luck would change and everything I'd dreamed of would fall into place for me. That night, on my drive home to Indiana, I accepted the hard truth that hoping and wishing are like gambling on long shots, and if I wanted to be better, I had to start living every day with a sense of urgency. Because that is the only way to turn the odds in your favor.

Reality can be brutal when all of your excuses are stripped away and you are exposed for exactly who and what you have become, but the truth can also be liberating. That night, I accepted the truth about myself. I finally swallowed reality, and now that I had, my future was undetermined. Anything was possible as long as I adopted a new mindset. I needed to become someone who refused to give in, who simply finds a way no matter what. I needed to become bulletproof, a living example of resilience.

Think of a packet of seeds scattered in a garden. Some seeds get more sunlight, more water, and are planted in nourishing topsoil, and because they

are put in the right place at the right time, they can rise from seed to seedling to a thriving tree. Seeds planted in too much shade or that don't get enough water may never become anything at all unless someone transplants them—saves them—before it's too late.

Then there are those seedlings that look for the light on their own. They creep from the shade into the sunshine without being transplanted. They find it without anybody digging them up and placing them in the light. They find strength where there is none.

That is resilience.

Once we're born, our natural instinct is to look for ways to thrive. But not everybody does, and sometimes, there's a damn good reason for it. I was brought up in darkness. My roots were flimsy. I was barely tethered to rock-hard ground. My spirit, soul, and determination weren't nourished in the light, but on that ride home, I realized that only I have the power to determine my future, and I had a choice to make. I could continue living in the Haven of Low Expectations, where it was comfortable and safe to believe that my life was not my fault or my responsibility and that my dreams were just that—fantasies that would never be because time and opportunity were not and would never be on my side. Or I could leave all that behind for a world of possibility, much more pain, unfathomably hard work, and zero guarantees of success. I could choose resilience.

At twenty-four years old, a powerful force was gathering within me, waiting to be unleashed. I would soon call upon it to complete two Hell Weeks, become a member of the Navy Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) Teams, and complete Army Ranger School. I'd compete in ultra races and break the world pull-up record. Thanks to that one night in Buffalo, New York, when I accepted my fate and became determined to tap into my resilience, I found the will to transform myself into the grittiest human being ever to find light where there was none.

I had never been a POW like John McCain and countless others, but I lived like a prisoner in my own mind for the first twenty-four years of my life. Once I'd liberated myself and begun to evolve, I learned that it is the rare warrior who embraces the adversity of being born into hell and then, with their own free will, chooses to add as much suffering as they can find to turn each day into a boot camp of resiliency. Those are the ones who don't stop at good enough. They aren't satisfied with just being better than they used to be. They are forever evolving and striving for the highest level of

self. Eventually, I became one of them, which is why I was honored at the VFW Convention.

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“I’d like to thank my mom, who...” The audience gave me another round of applause as my sobs ebbed, and I returned to the present moment. “Who never picked me up when I fell. She let me pick myself up when I was knocked down.”

By the time I was done speaking, all the emotion had drained clear. Honored and humbled to have received an award that most people would consider the crowning achievement of their career, I walked off that stage into the unknown. They say, “Iron sharpens iron,” but I had left the military behind, and there was no one pushing me on a day-to-day basis any longer. *The hell with it.* I was always destined to be that one warrior. Content to be the one who sharpens his sword alone.