

SAYING GOODBYE to Toxic Boys

by
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EUREKA, CALIFORNIA



Our Street Publishing
Eureka, CA 95501

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2019915419

eBook ISBN-13: 978-0-578-58538-3

Paperback ISBN-13: 978-0-578-58255-9

1st Edition, 2019

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Printed in the United States of America

*For Eric,
Thanks for teaching me to always read the intro
and preface, among other things.*

Acknowledgments

Many people read this book for me about eight years ago. Without their notes, this book would not be what it is today. I can't remember everyone's names. I will include them in future editions if they reach out to me. I am so grateful for the notes from my sisters Casey and Darla, as well as my friends Emily and Cynthia. A special thanks to Matthew Cinnirella, whose notes were so valuable that I do not think this book would have ever even been published without them. He introduced me to what became my creed as a writer, which is the reminder, "Show, don't tell." My editor, Darcy Werkman, also known as The Bearded Book Editor, helped me turn my dream and vision into a professional manuscript. Clarice Tudor, I'm so grateful for you and the beautiful cover you made me. I'm so happy I found your sticker. Kim Schmidt you are a rockstar graphic artist and put this whole thing together beautifully.

I would like to thank my parents, Kristine and Greg. My recovery from mental illness and drug addiction was very much rooted in their support, and despite some of my poor behaviors, they never gave up on me. They had so little as young, struggling parents, but they managed to give more than I could ever ask for. The love I have for my parents and my siblings, Bobby, Casey and Darla, is unbreakable, as well as for everyone in my extended family, including my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

My mentors Eric, Frank and Stefanie changed my life profoundly. I use the lessons they taught me every day of my life. I am an adult human as a result of their love and patient hard work. Rest in Love, Eric.

Each day my life is enhanced by the support and love of my friends Baila, Megan, Jackie, Mo, Melissa, Tyler, Jacob, Cynthia, Lucas, Rob, Holly, Lindsay, Christopher, Brandi, and Michael. The community I found in Eureka has helped me grow into myself. This includes my family at Arcata Ecstatic Dance and Humboldt Yoga, and especially everyone at Word Humboldt, with special thanks to my poetry mentors Wil Gibson, Susanna Gibson and Dylan Collins. Without all of these people, nothing I do would be possible.

Trigger Warning

This book has many triggers, including sexual assault, drug addiction and suicide to name a few. Writing this is how I overcame all of the trauma in my life. It is impossible to avoid your triggers. The world often will not warn you about them. The magic trick is learning what to do when it happens. If you're not stable right now, maybe this isn't the right time to read this book, or maybe it's exactly the right time. You decide. You have the power.



Chapter 1

My girlfriend loves me, but she loves fucking other guys more. I've had a lot of girls cheat on me over the years. I always thought it was because I was unlucky. But that doesn't really make sense or explain it because I'm actually a pretty lucky guy in reality. I was born with above-average intellect, even though I did a lot of work killing my brain cells in high school. I have a loving family and have made friends that have become family. I was fortunate enough to be born into a suburban middle-class existence, with all the privileges white men have in America.

When people in New Jersey ask you where you're from, it's pretty common to tell them the exit number of where you live. My town is exit 9 off the Turnpike. New Brunswick is home to Rutgers University and is affectionately nicknamed the Hub City. I've lived here my whole life, and as much as I talk about how shitty it is, I've never put in any effort in trying to leave. New Brunswick isn't as big or as well-known as Newark or Trenton, but sometimes I think it makes the people here a little tougher, like we have something to prove. The only thing I'm trying to prove is that my girlfriend is cheating on me again. I have a gut feeling but need to find out for sure.

Sarah wears sweatpants and a t-shirt, and her long black hair is messy. I say, "Hey, they canceled my shift. What are you doing today?"

She says, "Good for you, Devin. I wish I could take the night off too. I'm closing tonight and don't have to go in until six. We have time to fool around a little bit if you want."

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She grabs me and drags me over to the couch. We have sex for a little less than five minutes because I prematurely ejaculate. People act like it's a disorder, but I think it's an evolutionary advantage. When it comes to natural selection, I think a species that can procreate in a matter of seconds will definitely win out over ones that can't.

She says, "Really? That's all that you've got?"

"I'm sorry."

"Well, at least I won't be late for work. I'm going to take a shower."

While she's in the shower, I start looking at her phone. It confirms my suspicion. I shouldn't be invading her privacy like this but she left her phone unlocked and some guy named Jay texted her. I decide to reply to the text. "Hey, babe, I just found out that I have herpes, so you might want to get yourself checked out. Talk to you later!" I add a wink emoji and press send.

I hear her getting out of the shower, so I quickly put her phone back just before she walks back in. She comes up from behind me and locks her hands together around me, pulling on my stomach. She starts kissing my neck and says, "Do you think you have it in you to go again?"

I wonder if I should have sex with her one more time before I break it off with her. No, I can't do that. I'm too hurt. "No, I can't go again. I haven't given you an orgasm since the Obama administration. To be honest, it doesn't seem like I really have anything to offer you. Why don't you go fuck Jay like you want to?"

"How do you know about Jay?"

"Because you're the only idiot walking around with an unlocked phone in 2017."

"You went in my phone? God damn it, Devin, you're such a fucking child."

"I might be a fucking child, but at least I'm not fucking every

guy in New Brunswick.”

“Well, I’m sorry, but if you weren’t so bad in bed, I wouldn’t have to go out and do things like this.”

“Whatever,” I say bitterly.

She laughs at her ability to emasculate me. “So what now? Is this the part where you finally stand up for yourself and walk out of my life forever?”

“Yeah, it is, actually.”

I turn around, walk straight out the door, and get in my car. I almost broke up with her the last time this happened. That was the time she had asked me to grab her cigarettes and I found condoms in her purse. We had stopped using condoms when she went on the pill. Unprotected sex still isn’t smart, but I often tend to do what makes me feel good without thinking about the potential consequences. And let’s be honest, sex with condoms is like decaf coffee, fat-free cheese and light cigarettes. When I had found them, the pack was already open and there were only two left, so I confronted her. “What the fuck are these?”

“Um, condoms.”

“Yeah, no shit, but why do you have them?”

“I was fucking this European tourist a couple weeks ago and I didn’t want you to get AIDS or something, baby.”

That’s what I love about Sarah; she’s always thinking about other people. She manipulated me into staying every time this happened. She was always able to turn it around and make me feel like it was my fault. I needed her so bad that the idea of leaving was terrifying. I expected her to satisfy all my needs, and even though she always fell short, she would tell me things that made me believe that someday she would. And to be honest, all my fears are coming true in this moment.

The drive home is a nightmare. I am in tears and it is distracting me from driving. I thought this relationship was going to be different. I thought that we had a lot in common. I thought I was

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actually with the right person. I thought she loved me. Every committed relationship I have ever been in has ended with the girl cheating on me. She would always tell me how much she loved me, and for some crazy reason, I believed it, even though she didn't do a very good job of showing it. When a girl tells me that she loves me, it immediately gives them a tremendous amount of power over me. When I hear that phrase, I always believe it. I always believe it and it is never real. People say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. People used to credit Einstein with saying it, but he never did because it's cliché nonsense and not the actual definition of the word. I'm going to use this pain as an opportunity to grow. I'm going to push aside my emotions and do something good for myself. I am going to end it. For real. I'm not going to just break it off with her and then go crawling back in a few weeks. I am loving, caring and compassionate, and I deserve better than this. I pull into my driveway and call her. When she answers, I blurt out, "I'm tired of your shit, Sarah. This is the last time you are going to hurt me. We are never going to be together, and we are never going to be friends. Goodbye."

I listen for a response and hear quiet crying for a brief moment before she hangs up. I can't believe it. I feel amazing because I finally stood up for myself, and not just to her but, in some weird way, to every girl that has ever hurt me. I feel really good.

Some time passes, and my mind starts doing what my mind does. I start thinking, and the reality of what I just did hits me, and the little boy inside me realizes that she is really gone. Who is going to love me? Who is going to take care of me? The emotional pain is back, and ten times worse.

I'm bipolar and have general anxiety disorder. Right now, I am having what professionals call a panic attack. I become terrified and my body goes into fight-or-flight survival mode. My senses become heightened and my pulse and blood pressure go up noticeably. It

feels like I can't breathe, like I'm drowning. My life is spinning out of control and I am going insane. The only things I am capable of are crying and feeling sad. The acids swoosh around in my stomach and cause me to throw up. I *feel* like I'm dying even though everything is fine in reality. Cigarettes always help me with my anxiety. They are what professionals refer to as an unhealthy coping skill, but they work.

After my cigarette, the only thing I want to do is get under my covers and curl up in a little ball and hide there, which is exactly what I do for what feels like hours but couldn't be more than ten minutes. I finally find the courage to get out from under the covers. Conscious breathing and mindfulness have played a huge part in my recovery from mental illness, and whenever things start to get out of control, I slow things down and meditate. I calm my body and just sit. Crazy thoughts pass through my head but I make a conscious effort to let go of them as soon as I have one. I imagine that the thought is on a cloud and I just watch it float away. I think about Sarah and get sad. But I do not hide from the pain. I recognize it and then let the emotion leave on one of my clouds. The relief I get from this practice is more powerful than any pill I have ever taken. Doing this is what professionals refer to as a positive coping skill. I pay attention to my body. I try to feel my feet in my shoes. I am conscious that there is a sock around my foot, and I feel it, and I am conscious that my foot is in my shoe, and I can feel that too. I continue on like this, breathing in and out, fully and deeply, for about a half an hour. My anxiety has passed. I know that whatever happens, I will be okay. I am okay.

I inhale.

I exhale.

I am alive and I am at peace.

Chapter 2

Sometimes, when I am feeling sad, I smoke instead of cry. Cigarettes suppress my feelings. When I light up, it distracts me from the pain. I started smoking when I was twelve. I desperately wanted to be cool. Most of my life I have been obsessed with what I imagine other people are thinking about me. I just want to be cool. *Maybe if I get the lead in the play, people will think I am cool. Maybe if I learn how to play guitar and start a band, people will think I am cool. Maybe if I go on tour and have sex with random girls and get shitfaced all the time, people will think I am cool.* The reality is that I am often quite insecure and tend to need validation from other people.

I remember the first time I smoked a cigarette. I was so excited. I really wanted one. It just seemed so cool. I took a huge breath and coughed harder than I had ever before. I immediately fell in love. I had always been attracted to cigarettes. I remember hearing a Sublime song on the radio that had a line about lighting up a cigarette and I thought about how cool it would be. When I was a kid, I would watch people smoke and was curious as to why they did it. My mom smoked. But now it's kind of different. It has become more than an act of vanity—less about looking cool and more about soothing myself. People don't really understand that, though. Smoking helps me cope. When the pain is great and I want to die, I just smoke.

At the same time, I have always been taught that when I am going through tough times, I don't ever have to face them alone. If I ask for help, I can make it through anything. As I drive around

smoking cigarettes and listening to music, I decide to head over to Pepper's to see my friend Eric. I've been working at this Tex-Mex restaurant for three years now. Unfortunately, it's also where I met Sarah. But, it's still the only stable thing in my life.

I walk through the door and towards the bar. Eric is wearing a backwards Yankees cap and has a goatee. I sit down right next to the tap and garnishes. Eric sees me out of the corner of his eye and pulls a pint glass off the shelf, scoops some ice into it, and pours me a cold Red Bull. He throws a coaster down and places the glass in front of me. I take the straw out of it because you can't look cool drinking from a straw. He says, "Hey, man, what's going on?"

"Not much, I just got back from Sarah's. She's been fucking other guys again."

"I'm sorry to hear that, man, but what did you expect? She always treats you like this, and you just keep going back for more. You need to find a nice girl and stop associating with trash like her."

"I know. I've decided that I'm not going to take it anymore. I told her I never wanted to see her again. I actually stood up for myself."

He grabs four bottles at once and pours them to make a Long Island Iced Tea. "How are you going to do that? You see her here every day."

"You know what I mean. We are done."

"You've said that before. I really hope you're serious this time."

He pours sour mix into the glass and then a splash of coke. He serves it to the guy sitting a few stools away from me. He made it perfectly—it was foaming at the top and the lemon was elegantly hanging off the glass. He could make drinks with his eyes closed. I love watching him work because he is so good at what he does.

I look him dead in the eye and say, "I'm serious. I know it's going to be hard. Even though she treats me like shit, I still love her for some reason."

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"I never understood what you saw in her. She is a waste. You need to get all this love bullshit out of your head. She's a train wreck, and the more time you spend with her, the more she is going to drag you down to her level."

"You're right."

"I should be getting out of here soon. You want to come over for a little bit?"

"Yeah, that sounds good."

As we are talking, Olivia walks through the door. She has dirty blonde hair and always wears high-waisted acid-washed jeans. She wears cooler clothes than Sarah, and I always remember thinking that Olivia and I would make a cuter couple. She's a bar fly but always tips good and everyone likes her. She sees me and walks over. "Devin! How are you, fucker?"

I make one of my stupid-sounding laughs. "Not too bad, I guess. What about you?"

She looks happy and she looks hot. Did I mention that she has a full C cup? She has a full C cup. She told me so one time.

"I'm doing great, just got back from the city. Went to a cool art museum with my friend up there."

Her smile puts a smile on my face. "That sounds like fun."

"Yeah, it was. What's up with you? I haven't seen you in a while."

"Not much. I just broke up with Sarah."

This makes her smile even more. "Did you?" She wants me so bad. The whole time I've known her, I've been dating Sarah, but I knew the day would come when I would be able to hook up with her.

I make eyes at her and say, "Yes, I did."

"That's probably a good thing. She was no good for you." Then there is a pause and she says, "So when do we get to hook up?"

We both laugh, and I say, "I don't know, you tell me."

"Let me see your phone."

I give it to her and she puts her number in it and texts herself. She says, “Now I have your number and you have mine. I’ll probably call you in the middle of the night when I get lonely. You better answer when I do.”

She walks away and Eric comes over. “You’re not wasting any time, are you?”

“Are you kidding, man? That girl is a tease. She’s not going to call me.”

“You’re probably right.”

The door opens and Elissa comes in for her shift. She sees me and says, “Hey, Devy.” She works the mid-shift, which is the end-of-lunch to the end-of-dinner rush. She is like my work sister, and her boyfriend, Chris, is like my work brother. We small talk for a little bit as Eric cleans up.

When Eric is done counting his tips, he says, “Let’s get out of here before Sarah comes in. She’s closing on the floor tonight. Wanna restart our *Family Guy* binge?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

As I’m driving over to his house, I listen to some upbeat music and I suddenly realize that I’m in a really good mood. I still feel hurt and sad about Sarah, but I know that I am never going back to her and that things are going to get better. Eric lives on Powers Street. There used to be a house on this street that we always partied at when we were kids, so it’s pretty funny that Eric lives here now. We walk up the stairs to his apartment and he unlocks the door.

We walk in and I sit on the couch. It reeks of cigarettes and it is comfortable and I love it. Eric goes into his bedroom to change, then we put on *Family Guy*. We watch it for a while. We are watching the older episodes, the ones that came out before FOX canceled it the first time. We are laughing hysterically to this one episode even though we have watched it a hundred times. I was crying like a baby back at my house and now I’m laughing. It feels

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good. Hanging out with Eric is helping to distract me and make me feel less lonely. It's good to have support when things aren't going good.

After the episode ends, we decide to play some cards. Eric and I both had pretty bad gambling problems a few years back. We blew thousands playing Hold 'em in Atlantic City, people's basements and illegal card clubs. We watched that movie *Rounders* too many times and got hooked. Now we just play each other every once in a while for fun. I'm thinking about whether to call his bet when he says, "What are you going to do when she calls you tomorrow and apologizes, then tells you that she will never do it again and how much she loves you?"

"I am not going to answer the phone when she calls me tomorrow."

"What are you going to do in a few weeks when she sexts you and tells you that she wants to fuck you?"

"After a couple weeks of no sex, I'll probably use said pictures to jerk off, but I still won't call her."

"No! You are not allowed to jerk off to her anymore, do you hear me?"

I laugh. "I'll try, man, but it will be hard. She takes up a huge portion of my Rolodex."

He laughs and then I laugh at him laughing and then we laugh together. He says, "I am really proud of you. This is a big deal for you, Devin. You have never broken up with a girl before. Just be strong. I don't want her to trick you into taking her back."

As I drive home, a serene calm comes despite the intense pain. I light a cigarette and, as I crank my car's stereo, I start paying attention to my breathing again. One of the most common symptoms of depression is negative thinking. Right now, I can't think. I used to drink Jameson neat and read Bukowski until I fell asleep; now I meditate. I get home and jump on my bed. I bought a new journal at the drugstore yesterday. I wrote on the first page as

soon as I got to my car. I'm going to write in it again now. It's big and floppy and has a multicolored canvas patch running across the middle of it. I only write private things in my journal. I sit with it for about an hour.

Chapter 3

It really sucks when you fuck your girlfriend right before you break up with them, and it's even worse when you still smell like a mixture of her muck and cheap perfume in the afternoon. I need to make this Facebook-official. I need to completely delete her off all social media, and maybe I need a shower after that. I go to her page and look at her profile picture. It's black and white and she is smoking a cigarette. I jump through all the necessary Facebook hoops to completely block her.

It says, "Are you sure you want to block Sarah Jean?"

I scroll over the button and, after a brief moment of hesitation, I click on it.

I feel good. Relationship status goes back to single. I start deleting and untagging all the pictures of us together. I have to look at each one of them as I remove them. I see how happy I looked in the pictures and it makes me feel stupid. It was clear to everyone in the world that she was using me, but I just stood there in these pictures, smiling obliviously. I delete the last one and I feel a sense of accomplishment.

With drug addiction, they say that the user constantly chases the feeling that they got from their first high. The more they use, the further they get from the feeling of the first time, and they can never recapture the intensity of its initial euphoria. That's why they keep using, but the feeling they are chasing is always out of reach. It's kind of the same thing with her. She never made me as happy as she did when I first met her, but for some reason, I always thought that she would somehow.

Facebook asks, “What’s on your mind?”

“I am surgically removing a malignant tumor.”

I get a phone call from Eric and he asks me what I’m doing. I tell him I’m just sitting around my house, half-naked, eating chocolate-chip-mint ice cream out of the container, and feeling sorry for myself.

“Dude, lame.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“There’s a show at *Canada* tonight, and we’re going.”

Eric and I love music. We have seen more bands together that I can even remember. The way he said this reminded me of one of the first shows he told me I was going to, many years ago. Our whole friendship dates back to high school. And if it wasn’t for one of the worst days of my life, we would have never become friends. It’s funny how you can look back at all the fucked-up shit in your life and be grateful it set you on your current path.

On my thirteenth birthday, I invited all my friends to sleep over at my house. My mom went out and bought all kinds of food for the party. I was so excited. I had been hanging out with these five guys for about a year and we were really tight. I had been over for all their birthdays. The night of the party, my buddy Charlie called me up and said he couldn’t make it because he was sick. Then Mike called. One by one, everyone else called. I was so upset. My party was ruined. My mom decided that to cheer me up, she was going to take me to the mall and get me some new clothes. At thirteen, you can still go to the mall with your mom and not be too embarrassed. I went into one of the trendy stores with over-priced clothes that sent the message to people that you were cool. When we left the store, my mom asked me if I wanted to go to the food court to get pretzels. When we got there, we saw all my friends hanging out in front of the cookie store. Fuck them. I didn’t even confront them. I don’t think they even saw me, but I’m pretty sure they know why I stopped hanging out with them.

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For a long time, I just stayed to myself. I didn't have any friends and did a lot of stuff with my mom. I was really into trendy rap stuff at that time. That is until I saw Blink 182 on MTV's Sports Music Festival. I loved them. I bought their CD and listened to it constantly. I would stand in front of my stereo and pretend like I was in the band, singing along to all the songs and playing air guitar, making sure to jump at all the right times. I found out that they were going to be playing at Warped Tour that summer so I got my mom to buy me tickets and eagerly awaited the concert. When the day finally came, the experience changed my life. I had never seen so many different-looking people in my life, and I was captivated by it. People had spiked hair and Mohawks, they had piercings and tattoos, and everyone was dressed in clothes different than the trendy stuff I wore. Even though I didn't look like them, no one made fun of me or judged me.

Less Than Jake went on and everyone started dancing and jumping around. I just watched how everyone else was dancing and I mimicked them. Pennywise also played that year. I went deep into the crowd and found out what a circle pit was. I didn't know what to do in a circle pit so I just ran around in it. At that point in my life, I had never experienced something that exciting before. When I left there, I had stickers, patches, free sampler CDs and, most importantly, I had fliers for upcoming shows in my area. I went there to see Blink 182 but I left a fan of so many other punk, ska and hardcore bands. That night it took me two hours to fall asleep because the ringing in my ears was so loud. I was never the same again.

I started going to local shows every weekend. I made friends with people who really cared about me and never treated me like my so-called friends from school. The kids at shows didn't care what you looked like, what you wore or if your parents had money. They just accepted you for who you were. For the first time in my life, I felt like I truly belonged. I was finally part of something.

Something that was important. I learned how to be happy with who I was and stopped caring about what people thought of me. I met Eric. He lived in the town next to mine, and we started hanging out with each other all the time. That was almost twenty years ago, and we have been friends ever since.

Eric continues. "You remember where *Canada* is, right?"

"Yeah, I do. When does it start?"

"Soon. Let's head over now."

Chapter 4

I walk to the house on Louis Street to meet Eric for the show. There is a vibrant music scene in New Brunswick. Sometimes you can see good bands at the Court Tavern, but most of the time the good shows are in people's basements. All of the houses that throw shows have names. That way, you can make fliers for the show and pass them all over town without having to worry about the cops showing up and shutting them down before they even start. This house is named *Canada*. The house across the street is named *America*. Some of the best shows I have ever seen have been in basements like these.

There are people outside when I walk up to the house, and I find Eric in the crowd. We have a cigarette and he asks me how I am doing. This causes me to think about Sarah and triggers some anxiety.

"I miss her, man."

"That's okay, that's why we're here. When have you ever left a show feeling depressed?"

"Well, there was that one time when we saw Bright Eyes."

"Yeah, that was pretty emotional, but other than that?"

"No, that was the only time."

We both laugh and then go into the basement through the side door of the house. We walk down this crappy wooden staircase and I start to feel some relief. My stomach doesn't hurt as bad and I don't feel as lost. I have been in hundreds of basements like this one over the years, and in every single one, I have felt completely at home. I am around people and I'm gaining strength. We are

watching this band and I'm really enjoying them. The singer is angry and red and sweaty. He's talking about the government and what's going on in the world, about the gap between the haves and have nots and the oppression of the working class. I start to realize that in the grand scheme of things, my broken heart is not that important. We live on a tiny blue marble in the middle of an ever-expanding universe and our entire existence will be over in the blink of an eye. I've been trying to hide from the pain and I have become obsessed with distractions. I need to experience what I am feeling and stay in the moment. If I can't live in the moment, then she has won. I'm listening to the music. I can hear each instrument. I can even hear each note and vocal melody. I am paying close attention to my breathing.

I inhale.

I exhale.

I am not alone.

There are paintings covering the walls of the basement. On one wall is Edward Scissorhands. On the other is a giant worm. There is graffiti everywhere else. Behind the band is a mural of a Mountie and a grizzly bear arm wrestling in front of a ripped up Canadian flag. The rule in the house is that bands can't cover the mural with a banner. Kind of like the same way you can't cover up the pony at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park.

I notice this girl who is dancing. She's the only one dancing and she doesn't seem bothered by it. She's singing along to all the songs and is having a great time. I see her smiling and it makes me smile. There is a lot of positive energy in this basement and I can feel a connection to something bigger than myself. The band stops playing and people go outside and start talking. I see my friend Darren and go over to him. We usually discuss politics whenever we see each other. I always pretend to know what I'm talking about even though I don't pay attention anymore.

Darren says, "Do you realize he wants 8.6 billion to build this

fucking wall? It is preposterous. They say we don't have enough money for single-payer healthcare or a universal income. They won't even invest in a Green New Deal, which is our only chance at saving the planet. But they can spend 8.6 billion on this. It's absurd!"

I respond, "The world's pretty fucked. Lately, I haven't really been paying much attention. I'm just trying to live my life to the fullest because I know it will all be over soon."

"Dude, I can't believe you're saying that. I've never known you to be apathetic."

"It's not apathy, man, I just care about different things now."

"You're going to vote in the midterms though, right?"

"Of course. I'll vote blue down the line every time, no matter what. But I really don't think it will matter whether I do or not."

"Okay, man, you can play all the philosophical games you want, just as long as you vote."

Darren introduces me to some of his friends. He knows the dancing girl. "Maggie, this is Devin. Devin, this is Maggie."

She's kind of cute. I start talking to her and am enjoying getting attention from another girl. I feel calm and comfortable. She says, "So you're voting blue down the line? You'll just vote for anyone?"

"Yeah, I mean, what choice do we have?"

"You can just stay home and not vote at all."

"Yeah, but that's how we got into this mess."

"I don't vote."

"Why not?"

"I don't believe in the ballot. I don't believe in reform. Baby, I'm an anarchist."

"I love that song, but you really think things could work with no government?"

"I think if people started treating each other and themselves with respect, government would become obsolete."

"I don't know. I always agreed with Hobbes' belief about human

nature. People are mean and stupid and would kill each other if there was no authority to tell them they couldn't."

"Well, I believe Darwin when he says that species can evolve. Don't you think we could evolve to the point where people did what they were supposed to, not by force, but by choice?"

"That makes sense. I guess it *could* be possible."

"I *know* it's possible."

I like this conversation. The next band starts to play but we stay outside. We just keep on talking. She takes notice of the fact that I'm not holding a beer like everyone else. "So, what's with the energy drink? You straight-edge or something?"

I say, "No, not really," as I light up a cigarette. "I just don't like the way I am when I drink. It makes me act like an idiot and I tend to compromise my ideals. I was kind of an out-of-control teenager and got into a lot of trouble with drinking, so I just abstain now. It doesn't bother me when other people drink, but it's just not for me."

"You've got to be careful with those energy drinks, though. I hear they're pretty addictive."

I take notice of the fact that she isn't holding a beer like everyone else. She has a paper cup full of tea. The tag for the tea bag says *Chamomile*. I say, "Well, what about you?"

"Alcoholism runs in my family. So I've always just avoided it. One time I had a beer and I didn't like the way it tasted."

"I never liked the way it tasted either."

I light up a cigarette right off the last one, but it's a little too much and I start coughing uncontrollably. My face turns red.

"Holy shit, dude, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, just have a little bronchitis. I'm on an antibiotic though."

"Those antibiotics can be bad news, man. Doctors have been overprescribing them for years. Over time, all the common infections have been slowly becoming resistant to them. They're

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actually becoming super infections and it's happening faster than we can make new antibiotics. Have you thought about any natural remedies instead?"

I laugh a little. "Yeah, I have, but natural remedies never seem to work. I'll stick with real medicine."

She winks at me. "Or maybe just quit smoking."

She has a little green bag. On it is a "Food Not Bombs" pin, some studs and two patches. One says, "Goodnight, white pride," with a picture of a guy swinging a bat at a Klansmen. The other one says, "Catch 22."

"You like Catch?"

"Yeah, so much. I love them. They're my favorite band. How did you know that?"

I point at her bag.

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that."

I tell her, "They're one of my favorites too. The first time I saw them, they played with Bigwig in a church basement in front of about twenty kids."

"Wow, I'm jealous. By the time I got into them, they had gotten pretty big. How long ago was that?"

"Oh, shit, I don't know. I was a sophomore in high school."

"That's so cool. I love them because whenever I'm in a bad mood, they always lift me up."

"Me too. Me too. So, how old are you?"

"I'm thirty, flirty and thriving." She giggles. "What about you?"

"Thirty-two. There's no cool rhyming line for that. I'm just old."

"Oh, come on, you're not that old."

"Yeah, I know, but at this age, people have real jobs and kids and houses and shit. I feel a little bit left behind."

"Well, don't. Everyone has their own path. You're right where you're supposed to be."

We go back inside and there is a guy playing an acoustic guitar. The flier said it was post-punk-folk. His voice is raspy and a little

nasally. Maggie sits down on the floor, so I sit down next to her. She is pretty. Her hair is brownish-red. It's not dyed. She is wearing a t-shirt, and it looks soft and worn. Her jeans are tight. She has a nose ring. It is a hoop. I usually think nose rings look stupid on girls, but for some reason I like hers. Her skin is fair. I like her shoes. "I like your shoes."

She makes a funny face at me and I like the way her nose scrunches up when she does. I can hear the pain in the singer's voice. He sounds like he might have depression. He looks like he has anxiety about performing, but it isn't stopping him. I feel like this moment is precious. Like singing those songs is the only thing in the world that is important to him, and listening to them is the only thing important to us. After his song, she says, "He looks like a street-kid version of the guy from *Garden State*."

"I've never seen it."

"Really? You live in New Jersey and you've never seen *Garden State*?"

"Nope."

"I'm going to make you watch it sometime."

I guess this might actually be going somewhere. I think she likes me. A lot of times I think girls like me when they really don't, but this time is different. I can tell by the way she keeps looking at me.

The folky punk guy finishes up and she says, "Let's go back outside." She takes both my hands and pulls me up the stairs and outside. She does like me. She leans up against the wall and takes out a piece of gum.

I say, "Where's my piece?"

"I don't have another one. Here." She bites her piece in half and puts it in my mouth.

I blush and say, "Thanks."

"No problem. Do I get a kiss now?"

I feel a little uncomfortable, so I try to think of something funny to say. "I don't know, do you?"

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She smiles with wide eyes at me, glowing. I reach over and give her a kiss. She's a really good kisser. It's probably one of the best kisses I have had in a long time. As soon as I pull my lips from hers, I immediately want to kiss her again, so I do. We are standing outside in front of a huge group of people, but for some reason, I don't care that they can see us. I am totally involved in this moment.

She pulls away from the kiss and says, "I don't usually do this, but do you want to get out of here and go watch that movie?"

We are millennials. Our generation is defined by participation trophies and Netflix and chill. We're going to fuck, and we both know it.

"Where do you live?" I ask.

"I live over on Guilden. We can just walk."

I'm feeling impulsive so I just go. I don't bother saying bye to anyone. I just go.

Chapter 5

The entrance to her apartment looks like a tacky Mexican restaurant. The walls are screaming with bright pastels. There is a yellow banister running up the stairs. There are cowboy hats and sombreros hanging on the walls. Apparently she is an artist because in the hallway of her apartment are paintings of naked women—very tasteful, very impressive, almost reminds me of Van Gough. The women look sad but at the same time hopeful. And they are very naked. There are no doors, only beaded curtains in their place. There are some funny throw rugs, posters of bands, bumper stickers, and a laptop on a corner desk has sharpie marker drawings all over it. Everything is thrown together in no particular way—very random as if no decoration had ever been planned or thought out, but at the same time, it is perfect in its discord. It's just the way she wants it to be. It looks like the way an eight-year-old girl would decorate her room if she didn't have parents to tell her she couldn't.

I follow her in and she leads me to her desk. “Put some music on. I have to go to the bathroom real quick.”

I start going through her Spotify playlists and see that she basically listens to all the same bands I do, even the obscure ones you wouldn't expect. She comes out of the bathroom, and I say, “You know Humble Beginnings? I haven't listened to them in years.”

She says, “Put it on.”

I play my favorite song by them and we both sing along. She looks really happy. I say, “I'm surprised. I don't know anybody else who knows them.”

Greg Bee

She smirks. “They were one of my favorites. Really cool guys, too. They would bring me and my friends to shows in their van and buy us beer and stuff.”

“You were friends with them? That is so fucking cool. I was in love with them in high school.”

I go and sit on the couch while she starts scrolling through Netflix. She says, “I don’t know if it’s on here. I think I have the DVD somewhere.” She starts looking around for it.

Her couch is huge and it’s purple. I sit on it awkwardly. Even though I am very comfortable with Maggie, I become slightly anxious because I remember that doing things like this is technically out of my comfort zone. Sometimes I get what is called *anticipatory anxiety*. It’s like being anxious about something you think you should be anxious about. Kind of the same as when you get anxious for someone else, thinking about how anxious you would be if you were them. The anxiety isn’t that bad. It’s just bad enough to make me awkward, though. Sometimes my anxiety gets so bad that I avoid social situations altogether, but for the most part, I find that when I’m actually in the present moment, everything turns out fine.

She says, “You’re going to love this movie. If only I could find it. Oh no way, I thought I lost this.” Her DVDs are strewn all over the place. I don’t know how she is going to find it.

I say, “What is it?”

“It’s *The Notebook*. It’s so sad. I haven’t seen it in forever.”

“Let’s watch that. I love sad movies.”

“No, sorry, all it does is make me cry and I don’t know you well enough to cry in front you. Oh, here it is.”

She puts the *Garden State* DVD in and sits down next to me. She starts cuddling up next to me. Out of the blue, I think about Sarah. I’m with this awesome girl who wants to have sex with me, but all I can think about is how much I miss Sarah and how I wish it was her that was next to me right now. I feel like I want to cry,

but I don't because that would be embarrassing. After a little while, she starts to kiss my neck and it reminds me of the way Sarah used to. She bites my lip and it reminds me of the way Sarah used to. I think, "I miss you. I miss you so much and I'm hurting and I know that you're sleeping with someone else right now and that makes it hurt even more." The anxiety has crept back in and my stomach is in a knot again. I have to stop this. I tell Maggie, "I can't do this. I just broke up with my girlfriend, and I'm not over her yet. I'm not ready for this."

She tells me, "Just relax, and breathe, it's going to be okay. Everything happens for a reason."

I feel better. We start watching the movie again. She starts kissing my neck again and I don't care. She bites my lip and I don't care. I feel nothing. I am numb. I am as close as you can physically be to another person, but I am the loneliest guy in the world. The phone's buzzing on the table, but we just ignore it. The movie's still playing, and after a while, the DVD's splash screen comes back on. I'm hot and there's no air-conditioning, and I'm all sweaty and I feel alone.

When it ends, she falls asleep quickly, but I'm awake. I can never sleep in a bed with a woman. I can barely sleep in a bed alone. Her phone keeps buzzing on the table. Every time I almost fall asleep, it wakes me. I light up a cigarette. I look over at her. She looks happy and at ease. Maybe I should leave right now. No, that would be fucked up. I feel awful. I don't like having meaningless sex. It makes me feel bad about myself. I'm constantly seeking authentic connections with other people, and I don't like the idea of using someone for sex, especially using another person as a distraction from the pain I'm feeling.

I walk over to the refrigerator looking for something to drink. I am dehydrated. Whenever I wake up in the middle of the night, my mouth and throat are so dry it feels like someone filled it with dirt. I see some green tea and I take a huge gulp straight out of

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the container. It's kind of fucked up that I would just drink out of the container, but I keep doing it anyway. I finish my cigarette and sit down at her laptop. I think it's really cool that she drew stuff all over it. I've never seen anyone do that before. I log onto Facebook and start doing what it is that people do on Facebook. I go out and smoke another cigarette before I lie back down. I cling onto Maggie, and even though she is asleep, she responds to my presence and curls up into me. I pretend like she is someone who loves me, and cares about me, even though she is a stranger. I know this is wrong but I don't care. I'll leave tomorrow and that will be that.

Chapter 6

I wake up suddenly and it takes me a moment to get oriented. Maggie is not in bed and I'm happy about it. Maybe she went to work or something. No, she's here. I can hear her crying. She's not crying the way I've been crying. She is hysterical. I have to leave before I get all wrapped up in her drama. I walk into the kitchen. She is on the phone, day-old makeup running down her face and snot coming out of her nose. I can almost feel her pain and despair. I look at her and don't know what to say. She looks at me desperately and grabs my hand. "I need you to bring me to my mother's. I can't drive right now."

"My car isn't even here. What's happening?"

"I need you to bring me right now. Drive mine."

I'm driving her car. I just woke up and I'm just trying to figure out what could possibly be happening. She's talking to me but I can't understand anything she is saying. I've known her for twelve hours. I don't know her birthday or her last name and I have no reason to care about her or why she is so upset. I don't even think she really knows my name because I think I heard her call me Kevin last night. I didn't correct her. It didn't really bother me. I mean Devin and Kevin sound alike, and that would have been awkward so I let it slide. Regardless, she is another human being and I love all people. I know she is in real pain and I'm starting to put it together that someone she loves is in trouble. I can sympathize. We drive for ten minutes to the next town over. It feels like an hour, but somehow, at the same time, it feels like the blink of an eye.

“Park right here.”

I park.

“Come inside with me. Please!”

I turn the car off and we walk up to a white house. There are potted plants hanging along the walkway and a rocking chair on the front porch. It looks like one of those cookie-cutter suburban houses built in the sixties, but it’s maintained well. The house has character. It looks like the people who live here are happy—like they have barbecues and yard sales and are living the dream.

As we walk through the door, I am overcome with gut-wrenching anxiety. I don’t exactly know what kind of anxiety it is, but I am confused and don’t think I am going to be able to handle what is about to happen. Maggie’s mother is crying. There is a bottle of Maker’s Mark on the table and she is holding a large Collins glass with barely any ice in it. Maggie grabs her and doesn’t let go. They cry out bullets. Maggie looks like she saw a ghost. “I got all her messages this morning, Mom. I’m going to read them to you.”

She is sobbing. “Why? Why are you going to read them to me?”

“Because this is important, Mom, this is real. This is what is happening.”

“There you go again, Maggie, looking for meaning in everything. Well, go ahead, I’m not going to be able to stop you. Let’s hear it. I’m sure your friend here wants to hear it too.”

“Thank you, Mom. This is what she texted me: ‘Maggie, I can’t take it anymore. I feel like I want to die. I need help. Please call me back when you get this! I don’t know what I’m going to do. I’m scared of myself. I need my big sister right now.’”

“Jesus Christ, Maggie.” Her mother sighs. “What the hell were you doing?”

We were fucking.

“My phone was off.”

She’s lying. I heard it buzzing last night.

“There’s more, Mom. ‘I just want you to know that I love you, and I am sorry for anything I might have ever done to hurt you. Tell Mom that I said she is the best mother I could have ever asked for. Tell people my story so that others might learn from it. I love you. I love you so much. Goodbye, Maggie.’”

I don’t think I ever knew what a panic attack was until this moment, right now. Why am I here? What should I even be doing? I don’t know these people.

Maggie sits at the table and her mother screams, “How could you let this happen to me, Maggie?” She breaks down and makes angry sounds and angry movements, the sight of which causes Maggie to weep.

Maggie shouts back, “I did not let this happen. And nothing happened *to* you! It just happened!”

I inhale.

I exhale.

I don’t know what pain is.

Chapter 7

Today is too beautiful of a day. It should be dark. It should be raining. When we get back in the car, her face is red and her eyes are like glass. She asks me in a broken voice, “Do you have a cigarette for me?”

“I didn’t think you smoked.”

Her tears are visibly running down her face. “I don’t usually, but I desperately need one right now.”

“Okay, I can understand. Here you go.” I take one out of my pack and light it for her.

“Thanks, Devin. Not just for the cigarette, but for everything.” She wipes her nose and face. “There’s only one place I want to go right now.”

She directs me to Rutgers’s Gardens off of Ryder’s lane. The parking lot is hidden in the shadows cast by huge, beautiful oak trees. We walk past one of those super-safe plastic playgrounds. When I was a kid, everything in the playground was metal and rusty. I remember falling off the monkey bars one time and cracking my head against a steel pole. We walk further away from the playground and head deep into the woods along a dirt trail. The trail is shady and I accidentally step into some mud. I don’t really care, though. I try wiping some of it off on some leaves but the leaves just end up sticking to the soles of my shoes. I give up.

As we walk, Maggie says, “Jenny and I used to take walks down these trails.”

“This place is beautiful, I’ve driven by a million times but I never thought to stop and see it.”

“Jenny liked it here because you can’t turn around nowadays without seeing a new McDonald’s or Walmart, and the only way to get away from it is to return to nature. So she would come here with me. We always did. Jenny had bipolar disorder. She would have these manic highs that she was addicted to, but she would always crash quickly into deep depression. It made her do things she normally wouldn’t do. She would say things she normally wouldn’t say. The disease had her tightly in its grip. She made very heartfelt apologies to me for things that she had done, and she would do good for a while, but then she would stop taking her meds and it wouldn’t take long for the illness to take control of her life again.”

I can relate, but I don’t know if I want to tell her that. “That sounds miserable.”

“It was. She wasn’t, though. She would struggle with these things, but she never chose misery. She could always find the silver lining. When she was eighteen, she got pregnant. She didn’t even know who the father was. She did the logical thing and got an abortion. It depressed her, so she went and got a job at a daycare. She even got me a job there too. We like it so much we both still will volunteer there. Or, I mean *I* still volunteer there.”

“That must be fun.”

“Yeah, for the most part. The only part that I don’t like is when I have to clean up vomit or change diapers, but other than that, it’s the best job I have ever had. It is really rewarding, and at the end of the day, I feel like I have accomplished something.”

“I wish I did more things like that. All I care about is making money when I go to work.”

“Where do you work?”

I sigh. “I work at Pepper’s. I’m a server.”

“Oh, I used to wait tables. I hated it.”

“So do I, but it pays the bills.”

“If you hate it so much, why don’t you do something different?”

Greg Bee

"I don't know, I guess I'm just comfortable there. I also love the people I work with. We're like family."

"Well, that's good then."

We walk up to a concrete slab positioned in between a fork in the trails. "Jenny and I would always sit right here. Do you want to sit with me?"

"Yeah, of course."

I put my arm around her because that's what you do, and I know it was the right thing because she sinks into me. Neither of us say anything. We just breathe the fresh air and exist together. We get up and go down the trail to the left and walk for a few minutes. She stops at a huge tree. The roots are tangled along the ground and the bark looks like it is peeling off. There are big holes and weird markings all over it. "This is our tree. It still looks exactly the same as when we were little. The world, our lives, they are constantly changing. That's why it's nice to come here, because this tree is still the same. It remains a constant in our lives."

"This is really nice. Thank you for bringing me here."

"Thanks for coming with me. Are you okay? You seem a little bit off, like something is on your mind."

I look over at her. I need to open up a little bit. I need to trust her. She sits down very close to me. "I'll be honest, I'm not really over my ex-girlfriend. She just cheated on me, like two days ago. I'm still processing it. I just think that you should know that."

"I understand. That must have been really tough for you. Let's just take it slow, okay?" She smiles and it makes me smile.

"That sounds good. Spending time with you has been incredible even though the circumstances are a little unbelievable. But I'm happy I didn't leave your house last night."

"Why? Were you thinking about it?"

I can't hide the fear on my face. "Um, I don't—"

She interrupts. "It doesn't matter what you think. The only important thing is what you do. And you didn't leave. You stayed

with me, and I'm so happy you did."

"I never thought about it like that. It might sound nuts, but I kind of feel guilty for the things I think sometimes."

"You don't need to. Sometimes you can't control what you think."

Saying that makes Sarah pop into my head. I imagine her wearing the lingerie I bought her for Christmas. This is fucked up. I feel so bad. But I know I'm thinking this just because she told me it doesn't matter what I think. I need to start paying attention—this is so much more important.

She has changed topics in the time I haven't been paying attention, so I try to catch up and listen. "Gandhi said that you have to be the change you want to see in the world. I hope that someday there will be peace on this planet, but the only thing I can do is spread peace and comfort to the people I meet. It's not hard. Anyone can do it, including you. All you have to do is try. The more you work on it, the easier it gets."

She takes my hand and we walk out of the woods and back to the little park near the parking lot. We walk up to the plastic playground and sit down on the swings. We start swinging. We start competing to see who can get the highest. I start feeling sick and slow down, then jump off.

She says, "What's the matter?"

I give a nervous laugh and say, "I feel like I'm going to throw up."

"Aw, poor baby."

She gets off her swing and walks up to me. She puts her arms around me, locks her hands together and we kiss. I kissed her a lot last night, but this kiss feels different. This kiss means something. I like it.

Chapter 8

When we left Rutger's Gardens, I told Maggie I had a doctor's appointment to get to. When I dropped her off, she asked me if I wanted to hang out again tomorrow. I'm actually really looking forward to it.

I drive to my therapist's house. Her name is Kim and she sees patients in the basement of her house. I walk in the side entrance and go down the stairs. I'm early, and as I sit in the waiting area, I can hear a woman softly crying. I walk into my therapist's laundry room, which also serves as a bathroom for her patients. I have Irritable Bowel Syndrome, so going to the bathroom can be an ordeal. I typically spend more time on the toilet than I would like to. As I sit on the pot, I notice a shelf filled with old records. They belong to Kim's husband. I love my therapist, but I sure as hell hope all my records never end up in a basement laundry room.

When I go back out, the crying woman is gone and Kim invites me in. She is more cheerful than usual, and I sit down into my big reclining chair. She asks, "How are you?"

"I'm okay, I guess. How are you?"

"I'm well. So, what's new? You were feeling pretty good last time I saw you."

"I'm still feeling alright. Lately, I have been thinking a lot about my childhood."

She makes a sympathetic face. "You mean with your mom?"

"Well, I haven't been thinking that much about her in particular. I have resented her for a long time, but I think I'm over it. She did the best she could. But when I was a kid, I didn't know that. I was

never sure if she was going to be there. She was hospitalized with depression several times, and she would always be lying around the house. I would be alone and terrified, too scared to cry. I was neglected often, but that hasn't been what has been bothering me as of late."

"Then what has been bothering you?"

"I don't think I have ever told you about this."

"What is it?"

"I don't usually like talking about it, and not that many people know, but at this point, I think it is important to tell you, especially since it has been affecting me lately."

I sigh.

"When I was six, I was sexually abused by a teenage girl in my neighborhood. All of it happened outside by the swing set in my apartment complex. She gave me oral sex so that I would get an erection. Sometimes she would do things to me that would hurt too. She told me I was dirty and bad, and she did it a bunch of times. I was confused because I liked the way the oral sex felt but I didn't like the way I felt. And then one day, a little girl that I was friends with in the neighborhood was there too. The older girl made us have intercourse. I was young, but this girl was even younger. I'll never forget the look in her eyes for as long as I live. It was sheer terror and fear, with an underlying hatred for me. It was the kind of look that makes your heart stop. She wanted to cry but couldn't. She had to have been four or five. The older girl made it seem like we were playing a game and convinced me that I wanted to play. A neighbor walked by, saw what we were doing and called the police. When they came, I thought they were going to arrest me for what I did. I told myself I was bad and was going to Hell for what I did. No one ever explained to me that what happened wasn't my fault. They just acted like it didn't happen. I wasn't allowed to play with the little girl anymore and soon her parents moved away. I never saw her again."

Greg Bee

I feel like I was holding my breath the whole time I was talking and now I can finally exhale.

“Devin, I’m so sorry to hear that. It must have been very confusing and hard to deal with. This really explains a lot of the issues you have with trusting women. They have been hurting you ever since you were little.”

“I always knew that, but most of the time I have just downplayed my past. I act like none of it was that big of a deal.”

“It’s not good to avoid your issues like that.”

“I know. My childhood was really weird after that. All I wanted was attention. One time I took everything out of the refrigerator and threw it on the floor. Then I rolled around in it and threw stuff around. My mom was passed out. I got attention when my dad came home from work, though. He yelled at me, but at least he gave a shit. One time I thought it would be funny to go to the bathroom behind the couch. It made the whole living room smell awful. I told myself that I was a bad kid because of everything I did, and for some reason, I didn’t care. I honestly don’t know why I did this stuff. I can’t even imagine what I was thinking while I was doing it. Maybe I thought it would be fun or something, but it was almost like things weren’t real, like someone else was doing them.”

Sometimes I feel like things aren’t real. Almost like I am standing as a silent observer, watching myself do things. This is what professionals call de-realization. It is very scary and confusing and can last for a long period of time if nothing is done.

She says, “As you know, depression and anxiety can make people do strange things. It changes your whole way of thinking. Do you think that you might have been bipolar, even as a child?”

“Yeah, probably. It would make a lot of sense. Growing up, I would always have long periods of feeling extremely sad and then long periods of feeling elated. At age ten, I started getting angry. I would hit my mom. I pulled a knife out on my dad. I hit the dog in the head with a bat.”

“That is awful, but in your defense, you were only a child and you had a lot of things to be angry about.”

“I know, you’re right, but it doesn’t change those feelings. Something else happened then that has really been getting to me. It’s hard to actually tell you.”

“You can tell me anything you want, I’m not here to judge you.”

“This is actually harder to say out loud than the first thing I told you. I still feel extremely ashamed about it.”

I sigh.

“I was on the playground and I saw a boy I knew. He was smaller than me. I pushed the boy. He didn’t do anything to me. I just pushed him. He fell into the sandbox and started to cry. I took sand and threw it in his face. His face was red, and his eyes squinted and teared up. His mouth opened to cry even more, and I threw a handful of sand in his mouth. The teachers all ran out and stopped me. I have no explanation to offer for my actions, other than I was a child. But how could I have been so brutal? Where did I learn that behavior? I was never the victim of violence prior to this. I showed this child such cruelty, and at that age, I taught him that that the world is not a safe place, that you can be attacked for no reason, at any time. I mean, this is a truth in life—horrible things happen at random all the time—but at this stage in his development, I fear my actions could have impacted his life in a profound way. Why did I do it? And why so brutally? How could I be so emotionless? Why didn’t I treat this child with love? That’s all I had ever been taught.”

“Devin, I have to remind you, again, that you were only eight years old. You need to forgive yourself for this. You are feeling just as guilty as you would if you had done all of this yesterday. You were only a child, a child who was having a very difficult time living his life. And you felt remorse. You are not a narcissist!”

“Kim, are you really sure I’m not? I did not feel bad after I did it. It took me until way later to start feeling bad.”

Greg Bee

“But you said yourself, it didn’t feel real. I think you were starting to dissociate from reality, even way back then. You didn’t feel bad until you realized that you had actually done it.”

“Rationally, I know that, but what if I did something like that again now? I feel sick to my stomach when I think about it. My past haunts me. What’s so weird is that as each year went by, I slowly suppressed all of these memories. If I was consciously aware of these things, I don’t think I would be able to function. I hid them away deep inside. I walked around as a teenager with only happy memories of childhood. With my past neatly hidden away, I couldn’t understand why I didn’t feel like everyone else. I felt like a square peg in a round hole. I was constantly in discomfort. Since my childhood memories were suppressed, I had no idea why I was feeling that way. That’s why I got in so much trouble with drugs and alcohol. They helped kill that pain. They helped get rid of my anxiety.”

“You have a lot of insight. Most people don’t understand themselves like you do. Have you had any thoughts about drinking lately?”

“No, not really. It’s been so long now. I don’t really want to go back to it. I just think about how awful it was and it always deters me. And there was this guy in AA named Brian who always told me I was going to drink again. Sometimes when I want to, I think of him and simply don’t drink to spite him.” I laugh. “I don’t want to give the bastard the satisfaction.”

She laughs along nervously. “Well, that’s good. Whatever works.”

“I mean, sometimes I wish I could drink like other people, but I have been able to accept that it’s just not an option for me anymore. If I wasn’t bipolar, I would have no problem with it, but I don’t want to end up psychotic in the hospital again. I remember the last time I was delusional. I thought both my parents were dead. When they came to visit me, I thought they were imposters and I

told them that they weren't my parents. My mother cried. I also thought that the government was after me and that I was the leader of a terrorist organization. I don't ever want to be like that again. I have no chance of recovering from my mental illness if I don't stay sober."

"Well, it's good that you can remember that. How long has it been now?"

"Four years. I remember the last time like it was yesterday. I just got off a ten-hour shift, and I was tired. I only had slept three hours the night before. I was hurting so bad the entire shift. Every muscle in my body was sore and my head was pounding. I was taking Excedrin the whole day for the pain, and the caffeine in it kept me somewhat awake. I just kept telling myself I was going to go home and sleep after work. Once the shift was over, everyone convinced me to come out with them. Kelly's Korner Pub had half-off drinks for people who work in restaurants. They called it *Server Sundays*. We always referred to it as Sunday Funday, though. I walked up to the bar and ordered a pint of Killian's. That was the last drink I ever remember taking.

"I came to at the police station. Apparently, I wandered over to Knight Club at some point, and after last call, I refused to leave. They don't put up with shit like that at Knight Club, and they threw me out. I proceeded to take a piss on the front door and then threw a rock through their window. They kicked my ass before they called the cops. I'll never forget the look in my dad's eyes when he came to bail me out. Growing up, my dad worked two jobs to support me. He never missed a day of work, and even with his crazy schedule, he still made time for me. He taught me how to play ice hockey. He gave me an appreciation for classic rock. He even took me and my mom to see the Grateful Dead three times before Jerry died. He worked hard and long so that I could have a chance at a better life, but after all that, I had become a disappointment. I was a fucking failure, and every time something like this happened, it was like a

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little piece of his hope died—like everything he had done for me was for nothing. I hated the person I had become.”

“Well, that is a really good reason not to drink, and I’m sure your dad doesn’t think you are a failure now. You have come so far, and I’m sure he is really proud of you.”

There is a moment of silence.

“I have also been getting those strange thoughts again.”

“Really? I know it’s been a while since you have had them.”

“Sometimes I am nauseated by the sick, twisted thoughts I have. I walk around all day and think about doing horrible things to the people I come in contact with. A couple days ago, I saw a really big bodybuilder and I kept thinking about what it would be like to bitch slap him in the face. I think about having sex with every girl I see, even girls who are too young for me. I hate the way I objectify women, but I can’t help it. I would never in a million years act out on these thoughts, but they really bother me and I wish they would just go away.”

“We have talked about this before. These thoughts are just manifestations of your fears. They are things you are scared might happen. Now knowing about your sexual abuse, I think that for some reason you are afraid of becoming an abuser yourself. This would explain your strange thoughts about women. It would also explain why you have so much trouble with your sexual relationships. There is a part of you somewhere that is afraid of sex in general. Whenever you get these thoughts, I want you to tell yourself that you are thinking this thought because you don’t want it to happen. Imagine the thought sitting on a cloud and let it just drift away.”

“Okay.” I pause for a moment. “I have had a very peculiar couple of days. It’s almost surreal, and the intensity of it is kind of freaking me out a little.”

“What happened?”

“I met a new girl.”

“What about Sarah?”

“She cheated on me again so I finally decided to break up with her.”

“How do you feel about that decision?”

“Really good. She has been a very toxic person in my life. I feel like nobody knows that as well as you.”

“It’s true your relationship was toxic.”

“I don’t deserve to be treated like that. I’m not going to go back to her, or anyone else like her again.”

“What are you going to do to achieve that goal?”

“I’m not going to let toxic people into my life anymore. I’m going to surround myself with good people.”

“And you said you met someone else already?”

“Yeah, Eric brought me to a show, and I met her there. Her name is Maggie.”

“What can you do to prevent this new relationship from becoming toxic?”

“I don’t have to do anything. She’s amazing! There is nothing toxic about her.”

“That’s interesting, I asked you what *you* could do, and you started talking about her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when there’s conflict in relationships, both people play a part, Devin. Even in toxic relationships, when one person is abusive, it’s still possible for both people to play a part in the conflict. Even if your part in the conflict with Sarah is that you didn’t leave. So what are you going to do different with Maggie?”

“I don’t have to do anything, really. Maggie is amazing. She’s almost *too* amazing. She is really positive and emotionally stable. I’m not usually attracted to girls like that. I feel good about myself when I am with her, but she terrifies me.”

“Why are you scared of her?”

“Because I think she could be the one, and the idea of falling in

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love and committing to another person scares the crap out of me. I've never been able to be legitimately close to a girl before, and I kind of like it that way."

"That is understandable. You've been hurt by girls your whole life, so it would make sense to be scared. Intimacy is not what you're used to. It's hard to do things that you aren't used to, even if it's something good, something that you want. On the other side of the coin, it's hard to move out of your comfort zone and stop doing things that are bad for you, even if they make you feel horrible. It doesn't matter because you are *used* to feeling horrible. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah."

"So, are you still doing your meditation?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Do you want to do some right now?"

"Yeah, that would be good."

For the rest of the session, she guides me through meditation. I just sit and breathe. I feel really good right now. When the hour comes to an end, I schedule another appointment and ask her if it is okay if I pay next time I see her. I almost never have money to pay her but she is always willing to work out a payment plan with me. She is more concerned with me coming to therapy than paying, and I really appreciate that. Working with her for the past two years has been the best experience of my life, and I will be forever grateful to her. I say goodbye and leave. I feel good. I always feel good when I leave Kim's.

Chapter 9

Maggie calls me the next day because she wants to bring me somewhere. She won't tell me where. I often take my messenger bag with me when I go out for a long day. I keep extra meds in it, whatever book I'm reading, pen and paper in case I get inspired, band-aids and foodstuff. Girls can carry bags, so why can't I? Plus, messenger bags look cool, or at least I think they do. I put my new journal in it and head over to her house. She greets me on the porch, and we start walking downtown. Then we start walking a little bit further, past all of the restaurants and bars. This is the part of town that college kids avoid.

I don't really know why we are heading in this direction. There is no reason for us to be here. I see a pair of sneakers tied together and thrown over telephone wires. There's a homeless guy talking to himself. I feel bad and give him a dollar and a cigarette. What else can I do? Kids are running down the street, and they have no shirts and probably no toys to play with. These people are poor. They work hard every day, but they are still poor. Most people would be scared in this neighborhood, but I'm not, and neither is Maggie. I can relate to the guy talking to himself because I could easily be doing the same thing he is. All it would take is about a month of drinking and not taking my meds and I *would* be talking to myself. I still don't know why we are here.

We walk up to a big brick building. I've driven by here before but was never sure what this place was. We open a red door and enter a big open room filled with blue plastic chairs and fold-out tables. In the back of the room is a kitchen. I notice a crucifix on the

wall. Many negative emotions get stirred up when I see religious symbols, but the one I can best identify is anger. I don't like Christianity. I don't like any religion. Religion stands in the way of progress. I don't like anything that stands in the way of progress. In my head, I am thinking, *what the fuck are we doing here?*

Recently, I started using a seven-second delay before I say things. Kind of like the system they developed for radio, and then live TV. I regroup my thoughts and say out loud, "Umm, what are we doing here?"

"This is Elijah's Promise Kitchen, and we are volunteering here today. It's dangerous to sit in your head for too long when you are feeling depressed. I have to do something for someone else."

We meet some people when we walk into the kitchen. A hippie girl introduces herself to me and I immediately forget her name. That happens a lot, and people really take that personally for some reason. This girl is wearing a green bandana and has long, bleached-blond dreads. Under her plastic apron is a dingy white shirt with some band's name on it. Probably a hippie band. The other lady is older and talks with an Irish accent. Maggie already knows both of them, and just seeing them puts a smile on her face. I see her smiling and it makes me smile. The older woman asks, "How are you, dear? I know you are going through a lot right now."

"I am doing my best, Beth. No matter what happens, I will be okay. I am okay."

"Just remember that Jenny is in a better place now. When Carl died, I didn't know what to do with myself. I would stay at home alone, crying by myself. That's when I started to get more involved in the church. After spending time with the other women in the parish, I started to realize that Carl was still alive, in the hearts of everyone who loved him. God watches over us all, Maggie. You have to have faith."

"I know my sister is still with me. I can feel her here with me sometimes. I know that she is at peace."

“Who is your friend?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, how rude of me. Beth, this is Devin.”

I’m anxious. I get anxious when I have to talk to new people. I’m always afraid I will say the wrong thing or embarrass myself. “Hello, it’s very nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, Devin.”

I forgot her name already. “I forgot your name already. I’m really sorry. I’m bad with names.”

“It’s Beth. God has a purpose for everyone, Devin. Right now, yours is to be here with Maggie.”

I get really uncomfortable in situations like this. I know that for me, and my life, there doesn’t need to be an imaginary character in the sky that takes care of me. But for her, her belief in god has given her so much. It has helped her through a very difficult loss and has brought her closer to other people, and even though I think god is fictitious, he is very real to her, and I think the power of people is real. It is a power that can never be beaten. I swallow my pride. “You’re right, god wants us to take care of each other, to be there for one another. He has a plan.”

I don’t know why I pretend to believe in god around certain people. Call me a fair-weather atheist if you like, it’s just that this woman is so nice and sweet, I wanted to say something that would make her happy. She holds my hand and smiles.

Beth then turns to Maggie and asks, “How are your classes this semester, Maggie?”

“They’re going quite well. I really like my child psychology class. It makes me think I might want to work with children when I graduate. Children who experience trauma are so vulnerable. When problems arise at that age, it can dramatically affect someone’s life. I think I would get a great deal of satisfaction from helping people deal with their issues at a young age, before they start to create major problems in their lives. I would really be able to make a difference.”

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“That sounds lovely, dear. I hope you keep up the good work.”

The dreadlocked girl comes up to me and asks, “Can you help me shuck this corn?”

Volunteering is different from work. People don’t tell you what to do, they don’t boss you around. They always *ask* you to do things. You get so much more than a job could ever pay you. You get a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of self-worth that is indescribable. I start shucking the corn. There is something really therapeutic about it. I remember my dad teaching me how to do it when I was a kid. I used to like helping him cook. After we finish, I use an old, dull chef’s knife to cut the corn off the cob. The corn is put into the vegetable soup we are making.

As more and more volunteers show up, I start to feel the same way I felt at the basement show the night I met Maggie. These people don’t look like me or talk like me, and they have different views on the world and politics, but I still feel like I belong. All I ever wanted was to feel like I belonged. For some reason, I never had the ability to see that I always did. I crave meaningful connections with other people and I’m getting my fix. I’m high on life and doing what’s right.

The doors open and slowly the room fills up. Beth says grace with the clients before we start serving the food. On the menu is the vegetable soup the hippie girl and I made, the salad Maggie and Beth prepared, bread that a local deli donates every day, and meatloaf. I hate meatloaf. It always makes me want to vomit. Beth insists that I try it and I cautiously take a bite. It’s the best thing I have ever had. It tastes like it was made with love, with the spirit of giving, and with the responsibility of taking care of people in need.

All of the volunteers start moving quickly, preparing the plates and then bringing them out to all of the clients. It reminds me of what I do at work, only I’m not thinking about making money or working my tables for a better tip. I am helping right now and it feels great. One of the clients comes up to me after we finish

serving. “Hey man, the food was good tonight. Thank you.”

“Yeah, man, no problem.”

“The last couple days before my paycheck are always hard, you know? If it wasn’t for this place, we would be eating Ramen noodles and mac and cheese every night this week. God bless you, man, God bless.”

When people hear “soup kitchen,” the first thing they think about is a homeless guy drinking a cup of soup before he goes back out to panhandle and get drunk. At this kitchen, the homeless make up a small percentage of the clientele. The majority of the people who come are just hardworking people who are struggling to get by. They bring their families and make the best of the situation. Elijah’s Promise is not a depressing place by any means. It is a place of hope, hope that things can get better—filled with the joy of people working together. It is a happy place.

As we clean up the kitchen, I am bombarded with a sense of serenity. I am consumed by it. I have never enjoyed mopping a floor more than I do right now in this moment. Back and forth. My hips sway. I’m still preoccupied with Sarah, but spending time here is really putting things in perspective for me. Relationships end all the time. It is nothing special. It is nothing unique. The people I met today would gladly trade their problems for mine. Everything I am feeling is completely normal. The world is exactly the way it should be.

Maggie’s heart may be throbbing worse than mine, but she helped me more than I think I could have helped her. She was being useful to other people, she was doing her part and she was doing it gracefully. She is in so much pain but she intuitively knows how to handle it, she knows how to cope with her feelings, and she has the ability to accept the situation for what it is. I admire her resolve. Maggie pointed something out to me earlier when she said, “Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional.” I had never made that distinction before, but I immediately embraced the concept. I know I might

be putting her up on a pedestal, but if anyone ever deserved to be put on one, it would be her. This is what professionals call extreme idealization of a person. I don't care, though.

We decide to go to the coffee shop on the corner of George and Albany. On the walk over, she starts to cry. "I barely know who you are but you have really been there for me, and I am so grateful that you came into my life." When we walk inside, Maggie orders her Chamomile tea and I get a black cup of coffee. We go outside and sit next to each other on the bench in front of the store.

"Thank you for bringing me with you to Elijah's Promise."

"No problem. Thank you for coming with me. I didn't want to be alone today."

"I really enjoyed volunteering there. I think I would like to do it again sometime."

"We can go whenever you want."

"Cool."

There is a little moment of silence but it isn't awkward for some reason. I see something weird on her arm. "What's on your arm?"

"Oh, that? It's a scar. I was camping with some friends and we were sitting around a bonfire. Then someone had the bright idea to burn a plastic bottle in it. I was sitting right next to them and the melted plastic got on my arm. My initial reaction was to bend my arm. I don't know, I guess to try to get it off. That's why there are two scars. Look, when I bend my arm, the scars line up."

That is the coolest scar I've ever seen. "That's the coolest scar I've ever seen. It's badass."

She laughs. "I'm glad you like it. So, Devin, how did you get to this point in your life? What's your story?"

I think about it for a second. "Well, in high school, I had a really hard time fitting in. I smoked a lot of pot and got in a lot of trouble. My school had four lunch periods and I would cut class and go to all four of them. I would stand outside the lunch line and ask people for their spare change. It was to the point that I didn't even have to

ask. People would just see me standing there and would know to give me their change. At the end of each period, I would go to the cashier and get bills for my change. It would usually be around five dollars per period. Four periods a day and five days a week meant that I was pulling in around a hundred a week. That's how I paid for my habits."

"Dude, that is fucking crazy. A hundred a week?"

"Yeah, I know. That's also how I failed my sophomore year."

"What did you do?"

"Well, I didn't feel like going back to that school, and I heard that you were allowed to smoke cigarettes at the vocational high school, so I convinced my parents that's where I should go. I actually did pretty good there and had a lot of fun. I still cut classes but I still managed to pass everything. The next year I got sick, and since I missed so much time, I just dropped out and got my GED."

"You were sick? What was wrong?"

She has to find out eventually, I guess. I trust her somewhat. There is no better time than now. "Well, when I say *sick*, I don't mean physically. I told you that I smoked a lot of pot. Most people smoke pot every once in a while and have a good time, but with me, it was really bad."

"Did you have to go to rehab?"

"No, not exactly. I had a psychotic break from reality and needed psychiatric hospitalization. I had untreated anxiety and depression for most of my life, and it was becoming gradually worse. On 9/11, I was in high school, and just like everyone else, I was scared and confused. Only, I started to believe that the attack was my fault. Like most suburban punk-rock kids, my friends and I always used to talk about how we hated the government. I thought that my friends were responsible for the attack and that the whole thing was my fault for not stopping it. I thought that the CIA was after me. I also believed that my parents died in the attack and that it had become my responsibility to take care of my brother and two

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sisters. I thought that the CIA was broadcasting personal messages to me over the television, and I started hearing voices.”

Usually, as I tell this story to people, they look at me like I am an absolute nut job, but Maggie isn’t looking at me like I’m crazy. She is looking at me with compassion. She says, “Oh, Devin. You must have been so scared.”

“I was. I was terrified. After a couple months of being on medication, I slowly started to realize that everything was in my head. From then on, it has been a constant struggle to take care of my mental health. At this point, all I have to do is take my meds and see my therapist. That and stay away from drugs and alcohol. That’s the real reason I don’t drink. I’ve been clean four years now, and it’s been three since I’ve needed to be hospitalized. I take my recovery seriously. I don’t ever want to go back to where I have been.”

“But wait, you weren’t in high school four years ago.”

“I know. I had some really hard years learning to accept my illness and how to cope with it. I needed to be hospitalized a handful of times before I was ready to make a real change in my life. I’m not sure when exactly it happened, but at some point, things just started making sense. My life is good today.”

“You are so amazing. You have overcome so much, you should really be proud of yourself.”

“Thank you. Well, what about you? What’s your story?”

She looks a little sad out of nowhere. “Well, since you told me some really intimate things about yourself, I feel comfortable telling you this.”

She takes a deep breath and says, “My dad died when I was sixteen. I had an amazing relationship with both my parents. I never hated them like most adolescents do. We always did things together. When he died, it changed everything. My mother turned to the bottle. It’s like she gave up on everything, even me and Jenny. I began to despise her for it. I took over most of the responsibilities

in the house. I made sure that Jenny got to school every morning. When I turned seventeen, I got a part-time job to help contribute to the family. When I graduated high school, I went to work full-time. I could have gone to school, but I felt like I needed to stay home until Jenny was old enough to take care of herself. My mother never really recuperated from my father's death. I didn't think she could ever possibly get any worse but she has. I don't know what to do about her. I just hope someday she stops drinking, but for now, I just need to accept her for who she is. I need to love her for who she is. She is the only family I have left."

I don't know what to say. Usually, after I tell people I was psychotic, they feel pretty bad for me. I am used to the focus always being on me. I have become a master of making myself the center of attention. What Maggie just told me makes me feel like my life and problems aren't really that important. "You're amazing. You have overcome far more than I have. I don't know if I would have been strong enough to do what you did."

"You would be surprised at what you are capable of doing when you really need to. I just do the next right thing in my life. At that point, being there for my family was the most important thing to me, so I just did what I did. I didn't feel burdened or sad. At this point, though, I have started focusing more on myself and what I want to accomplish with my life. I love the person I am, and I treat myself accordingly."

"I do my best to love myself and treat myself the right way, but I have so many doubts and insecurities, sometimes it's hard for me to do."

"It takes practice. Just keep trying."

"I will."

She rubs the sleeves of her hoodie. "It's getting chilly. Do you want to go back to my place?"

I wasn't even thinking about sex. I swear. For the first time in a while, I was actually thinking about something else. "Yeah, let's go."

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We stand up. Maggie takes my hand and we start walking up Albany Street.

Chapter 10

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Before we get back to Maggie's, she says, "I want cookies now. Let's go to the store." We walk to the new supermarket by the train station. I walk to the aisle where the cookies are and ask her which ones we should get. She says, "Are you crazy? We're not getting those. We're going to bake my famous Heath Bar cookies." We buy all the ingredients and head home.

Everything I have been through doesn't matter right now. I am happy and content and genuinely enjoying this moment. When we get back to her house, we put everything on the table. I wouldn't know how to make cookies without a mix or something, but she knows exactly what to do. She doesn't even need a recipe. "My grandmother taught me how to make these cookies when I was a little girl. I remember her every time I make them. Here, mix this while I go turn on the oven."

I start mixing them but after a little while, my arm starts to get tired. She can tell that I'm having a hard time. "You okay over there?"

"Yeah, only I think my arm is going to fall off." I am so out of shape, it is pathetic.

"Aw, poor baby."

She looks in the bowl and says, "I think they're ready." She scoops a spoon into the bowl and eats some of the cookie dough. "These are delicious. You did a good job. Here, try some." She scoops me out a spoonful and feeds it to me. Then I take the spoon and feed her some. We keep eating until the bowl is half empty. She says, "We better put these in the oven before they're all gone."

"Yeah, good idea."

While they bake, we kiss in the kitchen. I like kissing while standing up. It's more fun that way. She is shorter than me, and I have to lean over to kiss her. I have my arms around her waist, and she has her arms on my shoulders. I get chills down my back. I feel so good. After a little while, the timer goes off and we take the cookies out of the oven. We put them on a plate and sit down

in front of the TV. The cookies are warm and are basically falling apart while we eat them. She gets up and comes back with two glasses of milk. She says, "Let's watch some old South Park. All the episodes are on Hulu." She makes a cute little face and scrunches her nose the way I like.

I say, "I haven't watched this in a long time. The old episodes are so much better than the ones they're putting out now."

We start cuddling while watching the episode, and for some reason, I'm still not thinking about having sex. Well, I mean, I am thinking about how I would be content and happy with her even if we didn't have sex. The show makes Maggie laugh. I love the sound of her laugh. She has such a cute voice. We let the show play all the way through and just cuddle on her couch all night. I tell her that I'm tired and should probably go home. She doesn't want me to leave. She doesn't want to be alone. "Just stay here tonight."

I don't want to leave, and I don't want to be alone either, so I decide to stay. Maggie has her arm over my stomach and her head on my chest. We start talking again. A lot of times when I talk to girls, I just zone out and can't pay attention, but for once, I am actually listening. I think I'm able to listen right now because I actually care about what she is saying. I feel safe with her. I think she feels safe with me. She looks up at me. "What do you want to do with your life?"

"I'm not really sure. I just know I don't want to work for someone else. Someday I'm going to open my own business."

"That's really nice. I'm sure you'll be good at whatever you choose to do."

"Thanks. What about you? I know you were telling Beth about your psychology classes."

"Well, I always was trying to help Jenny with her problems. I even read some books on psychology and tried using what I learned to help her. I know now that I want to be a counselor. That way, maybe I could keep what happened to my sister from happening to

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someone else. My whole life, all I have cared about is helping other people. When I do it, it makes me feel good about myself. I had a really good counselor in high school that helped me tremendously. She taught me techniques to fight through the depression, and I have used them my whole life. I'm a psych major at school. I just don't have enough money to go full-time but I'm getting there."

"I know you're going to be a good counselor. You're really easy to talk to."

"It's weird. I have been having a rush of memories about my sister. I remember when our parents used to make us take ballet and how much we hated it. We hated it so much, we would hide behind the couch when it was time to go. The day of our big recital, we hid in the backyard and we missed it. Our whole family went to the recital and watched all the other kids dance. It was so funny. I also remember how scared Jenny was on her first day of school and how she held my hand while we walked to the bus stop. I helped her out that day, but by the next year, she was guiding me. I used to be really shy as a kid, but Jenny was always outgoing and helped me become more confident."

Maggie starts to sob, harder than when she got the phone call that morning. "This just isn't fair, Devin. How could I let this happen? If I had answered her texts, she would still be alive and could get the second chance she deserved. She was sick and I couldn't help her. I tried so hard but I couldn't help her!"

"Maggie, this isn't about you. This isn't about what you could have done. This is about what did happen and accepting life for what it is. Jenny died from depression. You can't blame yourself for it. That isn't fair."

She is still crying and says, "I know."

"This did not happen to you. It just happened. It just happened and you can't be selfish and blame yourself."

She cries out, "Devin, what the fuck is the point of living life? From age four until now, I have had a continuous string of

traumatic events. Once everything gets better, I just get fucking shit on again. Sometimes, I wish I were dead. Sometimes I just wish I could end it, too. You ever feel that way?"

This is not about me. I have to get out of myself right now. I have to be here. "Of course I have thought about it before, but I'm grateful I never tried and you should be too."

Maggie has a tattoo on her wrist. I noticed it before but never mentioned it to her until now. It says, *Just Breathe*. I push the hair out of her face and wipe her tears.

"Just breathe, Maggie. Just breathe." I take her hand and firmly grip it. "This is my hand. Can you feel it? This is my hand and it is real." She squeezes my hand to let me know she does. Her face relaxes. I say, "Feel the pain you are in, and do not hide from it. Experience it and realize that you can feel this way and be okay, too. Maggie, take breaths with me. Take one huge, deep breath and hold it as long as you can."

We both do it.

We inhale.

We exhale.

"Become aware of the fact that you are breathing faster now so that you can recover from holding your breath that long. You don't have to make a conscious decision to do this. Your brain does it automatically. Most of the time, people are in the *doing* mode and are completely unaware of their own body and all of its sensory perceptions. We are trying to enter the *being* mode. We need to be conscious of our breathing, and our heartbeat, and everything we are feeling, from the overwhelming pain in our hearts to the sensation of the couch under our bodies. Just take peaceful breaths, in and out through your nose, and let any thoughts that come into your head float away. Recognize them for what they are, and then just send them away."

She takes a deep breath and lays her head on my chest. We slowly lie down together, and after a while, we start breathing

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in unison. Calm, easy, peaceful breaths. I remind myself to stay mindful of the present moment. I'm so comfortable with her. It's almost like we've done this before. My thinking is clear, and all I can think about is her body on mine and the breaths that we are sharing. We are like one little breathing machine.

We inhale.

We exhale.

I feel closer to her than I have ever been with anyone else.

She presses her lips to mine and then says, "I love you."

I look into her eyes and say, "I love you too," and I mean it. We fall asleep quickly.

I wake up in the middle of the night. I always wake up in the middle of the night. I go through my messenger bag and find my medication. I forgot to take my medication. I hope I haven't been forgetting other days. I find my new journal, the big floppy one with the color canvas patch running across the middle of it. I only write private things in my journal. I sit with it for about fifteen minutes. I take Melatonin to help me fall back asleep. I dream for a little bit, but like all insomniacs, I inevitably wake up several more times throughout the night. Somehow I find it easier to sleep once the sun comes up, and I manage to get some good sleep from 7 am until 11 am. The sleep was so good and I felt so comfortable with Maggie, that I forgot I was supposed to open today. I kiss Maggie on the cheek and say, "I'm late for work."

"Don't go."

"I wish I didn't have to."

I actually don't want to leave, which is weird, because I always want to leave. I walk down the staircase and run my hand along the yellow banister. I head home to start getting ready for work.

Chapter 11

I'm in the shower. I can feel the water hit my body. The pressure is just right. The temperature is just right. Everything is just right. I can smell the body gel I'm using and the texture of the lather it creates. My feet are splashing in the water that is accumulating in the bathtub because the water drains slowly down the pipes. All the houses in New Brunswick are old and poorly maintained, so it's common to have problems like this. Usually, I'm in a hurry when I'm in the shower and don't get to fully experience it, but today is different. As I get out of the shower and dry off, I am completely conscious of what I'm doing. Each stroke of the razor on my face is real. The hot water I am using heats up the blade. I am not thinking about having to brush my teeth when I am done shaving. The cream is tingling on my neck. I start paying close attention to my breathing. It is great to be alive.

I inhale.

I exhale.

I am right where I'm supposed to be.

Most people spend their entire lives waiting to do the next thing, waiting for the next activity they are going to engage in and their next action. They completely miss out on the joy of living in the present. I am aware of this shortcoming but still do it a lot of the time. Not today, though. After I brush my teeth, I put on my uniform. That is the only thing important to me right now. That is the only thing I am doing, and I am happy and I am content. I want to live like this forever. When bad things happen, they tell you, "This too shall pass." Fucked up part is that when you feel good,

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it will inevitably pass as well. They don't really ever tell you that part, though. I feel so good, it's unbelievable.

I get in my car and put on some music. *Is This Love* by Bob Marley comes on. I feel good. Really good. I am elated. I wish I was this happy all of the time. I wish this would never end. I am on top of the world and nothing is ever going to get me down. Then *First Day of My Life* by Bright Eyes comes on and reminds me of Sarah. It amazes me how one song has the ability to cause a sudden mood swing. I turn up the volume really loud and start screaming the lyrics. When it is over, I feel like shit. I had an amazing time with Maggie last night, but for some reason, it doesn't matter to me anymore. I still love Sarah. I am not over her. I wish I was, but I'm not. Why do I love her? After everything she put me through, I still feel this way. What is wrong with me? I like being treated like crap. I like pain. I am a sick, sad puppy dog. But what if she does love me in her own fucked up way? Maybe I could help her with her problems and she would stop treating me the way she does. She is so wrong for me, though. I think I like missing her more than I actually like her. I love Maggie. She is amazing and really likes me for who I am. I don't need to get over Sarah. I *am* over Sarah.

I am hyperventilating. I am going to feel like this forever. I want to die. Life has no meaning. I have no purpose. I am never going to amount to anything. I'll be waiting tables until the day I die. I am a disappointment to my family and everyone who cares about me. Every report card I ever had in school said, "Not performing to full potential." I am wasting my potential. I am a waste of life. I want to curl up in my bed and hide away from the world forever. I want to quit my job and be a hermit in the woods. I wish I could just make everything go away. I am so sad and I miss her so bad. I wish I was just well-adjusted. I wish I was okay.

I stop and breathe again. I slow down. Wait a minute, I *am* okay. I am calm again. This painful moment has passed. I remember how much fun I had last night, and I am hopeful for the relationship

I am starting with Maggie. I just experienced what professionals refer to as rapid cycling. When you are bipolar, you go through cycles. My cycle is typically depressed in the winter and manic in the summer. When you have rapid cycling, you go back and forth between these two extremes in a matter of hours, sometimes even minutes. But like always, it has passed.

I pull into the parking lot. It's going to be a busy night. I forgot that it's Cinco de Mayo, and I work in a Mexican restaurant. Well, Tex-Mex, but still, we have margarita specials, and that's the only part of Cinco de Mayo that Americans care about. When I pull into the parking lot, I see Chris and Elissa outside. When Elissa sees me, she gets excited and gives me a hug. Then I give Chris a hug too.

Chris says, "What's going on?"

"Not much. I finally broke up with Sarah."

Elissa says, "Good for you, that's great news!"

"Yeah, it is. I met someone new too."

Elissa says, "Really? You know that Chris and I met right after he broke up with his girlfriend, right?"

I laugh. "Yeah, I do. You guys tell the story all the time. You met at the underwear party. Chris didn't know it was an underwear party and wasn't wearing clean underwear. He noticed you because you were wearing boy underwear—tightie-whities, I believe? And he thought that was a lot cooler than if you were wearing sexy lingerie like everyone else."

Elissa says, "Exactly!"

Then they kiss.

Chris says, "Devin, are you coming to our show next week? It's at the *Laundromat*."

"Yeah, I want to go. Which house is that?"

"It used to be called the *Missile Silo*. It's the house on Livingston."

"Oh yeah, I'm gonna try to come."

Elissa says, "Hey, maybe you can bring this new girl to the

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show. Oh, what's her name?"

"Her name is Maggie. I think you guys will like her."

At work, we have a lot of time to talk to each other. I think they call it waiting tables because when business is slow all you do is wait around. You wait to get sat, you wait for the kitchen to make the food, and you wait for your tables to leave. Every job I have ever had has involved doing what other people want me to do. This is true for most people, I suppose. People who go to school and get degrees often get to do something they enjoy, but I would wager that the majority of people have jobs they hate. I know I hate mine. I could get so much cool stuff accomplished if I didn't have to go to work all the time. Not many kids say that when they grow up they want to spend all their time waiting tables at a corporate restaurant making the federal minimum wage for tipped employees, which is still two-thirteen an hour for some reason. I didn't say this is what I wanted to do when I was a kid, but it is what I do, and just like me, the majority of people will work some menial job until they die. The boss gives you breaks, a day or two off and vacations if you're lucky, but it's not because they like you or care about you. They just give you enough so that you don't quit. This is what the socialists call wage slavery, and there is very little chance of escape.

However, the one good thing about my job is the people I work with. A few weeks ago, someone stole our busser's bicycle. This guy busts his ass six days a week. He is the best busser I have ever worked with. He makes decent money in tips but he definitely makes less than the servers, and he is not a college kid. He is a man who has a family to feed. He is a sweet, kind-hearted, hardworking man, and finding out that his bike was stolen really hurt everyone. It was painful to see. He did not deserve something like this. At the end of the shift, Eric went around and started a collection for him. Everyone threw in ten to twenty bucks, and at the end of the night, we were able to give him a hundred and fifty dollars to buy

a new bike. I work in the best restaurant in the world. The people I work with are my family and they are the only thing that makes this shitty job bearable.

When I walk into the kitchen, I see Eric and he gives me a big hug. I am really happy he is working the expo line tonight.

“Dude, what happened to you the other night? Did you go home with that girl?”

“Yeah, but you don’t even know the half of it.”

Eric pulls a medium-rare ribeye out of the window. “Can you grab that Chick Caesar for me?”

I throw some parm on it and hand to him.

“Well, I’m happy to see that you’re keeping your mind off Sarah.”

He yells, “Can I get a runner to sixty-three, please?”

No one answers him.

“What’s this girl’s name?”

“Her name is Maggie. She’s pretty cool. She is completely different from the type of girls I usually date. She’s, like, normal. It’s kind of freaking me out. I’m not sure how well it’s going to work out with her.”

He yells even louder, “Run, please!”

Then he turns to me. “This is fucking bullshit, dude. What, you don’t think it’s going to work out with this girl because she doesn’t treat you like shit? Please give this Maggie chick a chance.”

He screams this time. “I said I need a run, please!”

The new girl that everyone wants to fuck walks up and takes the food, and Eric looks at her ass as she walks out of the kitchen. So do I. Then we give each other a look acknowledging that we both know what the other one was thinking.

“I know, dude, I’m crazy, but I love Sarah. I don’t know why I do. There’s absolutely no reason to, but I do.”

“You don’t *love* her. You love the *idea* of her. You love being able to point at her and tell people that she’s your girlfriend. You

think having a sexy, punk-rock girlfriend that doesn't take shit from anyone will make you cool. Well, it doesn't. People see the way she treats you and feel bad for you. They think you are pathetic." He yells, "Can I get a run to twenty-six?"

Sarah walks in, shoots me a dirty look and walks behind the bar. I feel like someone punched me in the stomach. My body feels really hot; just seeing her hurts. I feel exposed and vulnerable. I feel like if I have to talk to her, I might start crying in front of everyone. I walk out onto the floor to avoid her. There are five tables sat in the restaurant and one of them is in my section. I walk up to the computer and clock in. Hopefully no one orders any drinks tonight. There is a middle-aged man dressed in work clothes accompanied by someone whom I assume is his wife. They have money. I can tell.

"Hello, my name is Devin. I'll be taking care of you tonight. Today our soups are broccoli cheese and cream of potato. Don't forget to look at our promotional menu right here." I take the promo menu and present it to them. "My favorite is our new Brown Sugar Bourbon Ribs. They are char-grilled and cooked to perfection. Can I get you started with some boneless buffalo wings while you look over the menu?"

The man says, "No, thanks, we don't want an appetizer. We don't want to ruin our appetite."

"Okay, no problem. Would you like a Very Berry Margarita?"

He says, "No, thank you."

The woman is looking into her compact and orders a chardonnay very casually. She doesn't even acknowledge me as a person.

The man says, "Do you have Beefeater?"

"Yes, we do."

"Then I'll have a dirty Beefeater martini, straight up."

"Sounds good. Do you need a few minutes to look at the menus?"

"Yes, please."

Terrified, I walk up to the computer to put in their drink order. Usually selling alcohol is a good thing, but when your ex-girlfriend is the bartender, it kind of sucks. I head back toward the kitchen and I can see her looking at the ticket I rung in, laughing. I wait for her to finish making the drinks, and after what felt like forever, I walk over to garnish them. She is standing right there but I can barely look at her. I am silent.

“So that’s how it’s going be? You’re just not going to talk to me?”

I put the drinks on a tray and walk back to my table. Today is really going to be bad. I am so uncomfortable with her here. I take my table’s order, ring it in and then linger by the computer. The girl that everyone wants to fuck comes up to me. I trained her but still can’t remember her name.

“Aw, what’s wrong, Devin?”

“See the bartender over there?”

“Yeah.”

“She was my girlfriend but then she started fucking other guys. Now she makes my life hell at work. I hate her face.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. If I was going out with a guy like you, I would never cheat on him. I’m sure you’ll find someone way better than her. You’re so sweet and cute. You won’t have trouble finding someone nice.” I notice she is smiling at me and is possibly flirting with me but I don’t really care. “Don’t worry, it’s going to be okay.” She puts her arms around me and starts rubbing my back. Her body is so soft and her hands are little. I notice that Sarah is watching us so I pick her up and she giggles. Sarah looks mad and that makes me smile. The girl who everyone wants to fuck says, “I just got sat.” She walks away and I take yet another look at her butt.

I see my table’s salads come out, and I go check on them. “How is everything?”

“Oh, everything is just fine.”

“Would you like another round of drinks?”

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“That sounds good. It’s not very often that we go out.”

These people are too classy to be eating in a shitty restaurant like this. I go back to the computer. The computer is the equivalent to the water cooler in an office building.

Megan isn’t the closest friend I have, but she’s always friendly and quick with a joke. She walks up to me and smiles. “Hey, Devy, how are you doing? I just heard about you and Sarah.”

“I’m doing okay, I guess. It really sucks that she’s working tonight.”

“So what exactly happened?”

“I found a text on her phone. Basically, she was telling some dude named Jay how much she loved sucking his dick and that if he was lucky she would let him fuck her ass. It was more graphic than that, but I’ll leave out the details.”

She quiets her voice and asks very seriously, “Wait, did she let *you* fuck her in the ass?”

“No.”

She laughs and gives me a big hug. “Aw, you deserve so much better than that.”

“Fucking her ass was not the issue here. She cheated on me, repeatedly.”

“I know. I know. You will find someone who deserves you, Devin.”

“I actually met someone already.”

“That’s great, Devin. Maybe this is going to be the one that will let you.” She laughs at her own joke.

I decide to go back into the kitchen. Eric asks me to go get guac out of the walk-in. As I start toward the back, Sarah passes me going in the other direction. She’s holding four six-packs and looks pissed off and makes a mean yet sad face at me. I look away. I take the last pan of guac, and when I give it to Eric, I tell him that they need to make more. I realize that the food he just sent out was for my table so I walk out and go check on them.

“How was your steak cooked, sir?”

“It’s perfect.”

“And your fish?”

“It is delightful.”

These people really are too classy to be eating here. I notice that Eric is yelling louder and people are moving faster. It’s getting busy. I walk back into my section and notice two new tables. Also, the table I already have needs something. When the dinner rush hits, you have so much to do that the only thing you are capable of thinking about is work. You are moving fast and thinking fast. You have to learn how to do a million things at the same time. There is no time for hesitation. You have to work deliberately and confidently. When you talk to your tables, you have to act happy even when you’re not. It’s kind of like being an actor. The front of the house is the stage and the back of the house is your dressing room. You are not selling the guests food. You are selling them an experience. You are selling yourself.

Tonight, the customers are being ruder and more obnoxious than usual due to the kitchen being short-staffed and it taking half an hour to get people their food. Some people go out to eat just because they like the idea of being able to boss somebody else around. They spend their entire work week being abused by their employer, ordered around, demeaned and humiliated. They feel like that entitles them to go out and do the same thing to someone else. It makes them feel important, but they’re not. They are just too lazy to go home and cook their own food. It doesn’t dawn on them that the only reason I take the abuse and pretend to be nice is because I want their money so I can buy a pack of cigarettes and a tank of gas. It seems like every table is ordering booze now, but it’s okay because I have this whole thing down to a science. I just quickly grab my drinks when Sarah isn’t looking.

After I cash out, I sit at table two and wait for Eric to finish cleaning. Sarah comes up to me. “So you’re just going to sit there

and pretend I don't exist?"

I say nothing.

"Well, you can't. I am here and I'm not going away. Say something to me, you little fuck."

I say nothing.

"I love you, baby. I miss you. Why are you doing this?"

I explode. "You don't love me. You never fucking loved me. You've just been using me this whole time."

She has tears in her eyes. I think in some weird way I hurt her. And I am happy I did. "If you really believe that, then you must be crazier than I thought."

I immediately say, "I must be crazier than you thought because I really believe that."

Eric rescues me and brings me back behind the line. We eat for free because we are friends with all the cooks. Sebastian and Jose made some authentic tacos, not the bullshit tacos that are the menu. Everyone was sharing them and they offered some to us. The guys in the kitchen are always making jokes, calling each other vulgar nicknames and throwing things at each other. Jonathan calls Eric a *pendaho*, so Eric shows him his butt. Then Jonathan decides to throw a boiling hot fry at his butt and everyone laughs. Bino brought in some homemade salsa and we put it on the tacos. This food is *so* good. I love this place. Well, the people at this place.

Chapter 12

After work, Eric and I go back to his apartment and sit at the kitchen table. He grabs two Red Bulls out of the fridge and says, “I’m really proud of you and the way you handled yourself tonight with Sarah. I won’t lie. I thought you were going to have gone back to her by now.”

“Dude, you have no idea how hard it was for me tonight. I felt like my insides were being ripped out.”

“You did good. So what’s the deal with this girl, Maggie? Are you actually going to give her a chance like I told you?”

“Eric, a lot has happened in the past couple of days. I didn’t really have time to tell you about everything at work.”

“Are you getting married?”

“Dude, I’m trying to be serious right now, so you have to listen to me.”

“Because I’m not going to the wedding.”

“Really, dude, come on.”

“Okay. Okay.”

“After the show that night, we went back to her house and watched a movie. By the time it was over, we were having sex on her couch. I was honest and upfront with her, and I thought that it was going to be a one-night thing. We were just having fun.”

“Okay, so what happened? Why are you still talking to her if it was just a one-night thing?”

“It’s really fucked up, man. When we woke up in the morning, she found out that her sister died the night before.”

“Holy shit, dude. This kind of stuff only happens to you.”

“Yeah, I know. I drove her to her mother’s house and we found out her sister killed herself. Fucked up part is that when we were having sex, her sister was trying to call her for help. She ignored the call and all of the texts because of me. If it wasn’t for me, this girl would still be alive.”

“I’m so confused. Why is she is still talking to you? Doesn’t seeing you remind her of the horrible mistake that she made? She should want to have nothing to do with you.”

“Dude, I’ve asked myself the same question. She isn’t blaming this on me, or herself for that matter. She is an amazing person, just doing her best to deal with all of this, and right now I’m kind of the only person she has.”

“Why do you always have the need to fix damaged girls? You say that you are the ‘only person she has’ about every girl you date. This whole situation sounds fucked. I think you should get out before it’s too late.”

“This is different, though. Over the past few days, I have watched this girl do amazing things. Yesterday, she brought me to Elijah’s Promise and we volunteered there. She said that she had to do something for someone else in order to make herself feel better. Do you think Sarah would ever take the time to volunteer in a soup kitchen?”

“Not unless she was court-ordered to.”

We both laugh.

“The point is that I think Maggie is special, and something is telling me that I should get to know her. Did I tell you that she doesn’t drink?”

“Oh, she must be the one.”

“Listen, I know that I get excited about girls all the time and I always think I’ve met the perfect girl, and then inevitably I get my heart broken, but I think this time might be different. I really like her.”

“Good, just remember what I told you: take it slow and be

careful.”

“I think I love her.”

He puts his arms up in the air. “Of course you do. You didn’t tell her this, did you?”

“Yeah, but she said it first.”

He sighs. “Why does it always have to be one extreme or the other with you?”

This is what professionals call all-or-nothing thinking.

He goes on. “I feel like this is going to end badly. Why can’t you just date a person and get to know them without falling head over heels in love with them immediately?”

“I don’t know. That doesn’t really seem like much fun.”

“That’s the only way to avoid getting hurt constantly. I’m just trying to look out for you.”

“Don’t worry, I’m a big boy.”

He eases up a bit. “I am happy for you. I just want you to be careful.”

“I will.”

After our talk, I head home. I’m feeling better and I think I’m going to finally get a good night’s sleep in my own bed tonight.

Chapter 13

I wake up suddenly to the early morning sun and the loudest noise I've ever heard in my life. It takes me a moment to get oriented. I'm at home. I'm in my bed. The sunlight makes everything look hazy, and I can't really see too well. I probably need to change my contacts. Maybe I'll just go back to sleep and worry about it later. I turn over and cover my head with the blanket. What is that loud sound, though? I have to get out of bed to figure it out. I am lazy and just lie there with my eyes open for a little while. My eyes feel fine, though. There is nothing wrong with my contacts. I smell burning plastic. It reminds me of when we used to make little bongs out of soda bottles. It looks cloudy in here because my room is filled with a thin layer of smoke. I am not having trouble breathing, so I'm not too scared. I imagine there is a small fire somewhere and I should probably go out into the hall to try to put it out.

I open the door without testing the handle to see if it's hot. They teach you that in grade school, but when it actually happens, you easily forget it. The handle feels just like a cookie sheet out of the oven but I don't realize it until the door is already open and my hand screams at me. All the smoke pours in. It is thick and gray. I take a huge breath of carbon monoxide and I fall to the ground. I feel like I'm high and all I want to do is close my eyes. For a moment, I actually do close my eyes, but then I open them in sheer terror, the way you open your eyes when you are falling asleep at the wheel. The thin layer of smoke turned into a dark inferno when I opened my door. Is this how I'm going to die, alone, naked, on

my bedroom floor? I am never going to see her again. Why do bad things keep on happening? Adrenaline shoots through my body and my heart starts pounding.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

I can't think okay. I need to get standing up. I do standing. I am dizziness. I need to put on clothes. I can't stop coughing. There's no time to put on clothes. I can't go out the door. Fire is out there and too smoky. My dresser is tall and I climb up onto dresser. I have to jump out window. Window will not open no matter how hard I try. Open! Please open! I have to unlock window. I hold my breath. I don't want to keep breathing smoke. I unlock window and jump out. The bushes in front of my window break my fall, and I stagger around my street completely naked and fully disoriented. If it wasn't for the burning building in the background, I would look pretty crazy right now. I am crazy, though. An older man who lives across the street is outside and he has enough sense to cover me with a blanket. I can hear him saying, "I called the fire department, and they're on their way."

His voice sounds so far away.

I breathe in oxygen.

I breathe out carbon dioxide.

I am sitting.

Oxygen.

I sit there and watch my house burn down, along with all my favorite shirts, CDs, photographs and high school poetry. I sit idly by while they are all destroyed. I watch and there is nothing I can do about it, like I'm watching it on TV, like it really isn't happening. Fire trucks come and start putting out the fire. The firefighters make fun of me for being naked. One of them looks at me and says, "Don't let them bother you. At least you get to live to see another day."

The water from their hoses destroys most of the stuff that hadn't been burnt. They ask me if I want to go to the hospital but I decline.

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I do like trips to the hospital, and I probably should get checked out, but I have shit to do and don't feel like getting stuck there for hours. The same nice firefighter comes over and says, "We found these." It's my keys. I usually keep an extra pack of cigarettes in my glove compartment. I walk over to my car, hoping they are there. I start frantically looking through the glove compartment for them but they are nowhere to be found. How could this get any worse?

I hear my phone ringing. I must have left it in here last night. For once, forgetting my phone in my car is actually a good thing. It's Eric calling. I tell him what happened, and in about five minutes, he's standing in front of me with a clean set of clothes. He gives me a hug and asks, "What are you going to do now?" "I have an appointment with Kim. I think I'm going to go." "Oh, that's probably a good idea."

Chapter 14

My senses are heightened as I drive towards Kim's in an adrenaline-fueled mania. I speed into a gas station parking lot and stop short in front of the gas attendant. He yells, "Hey, watch it, buddy!"

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry, man."

"It's okay, it's okay, what do you want, kid?"

"A pack of cigarettes. Please."

I pay him with the change in my center console. I drive away and light one up. Cigarettes kill the pain. I smoke a cigarette, and when I am done with it, I smoke another cigarette. When I finish that one, I smoke another. As I drive, all I can think about is getting to her house. I don't have the music on because I really need quiet. I pull into the driveway and walk down the stairs into her basement. I sit in my reclining chair again. She smiles at me and asks, "How are you feeling?"

"I feel awful, probably as bad as is humanly possible. My life is as bad as it could be right now. I actually don't think things have ever been worse. But at the exact same time, I feel better than ever. I have nothing to lose. I have nothing to fear. I was so close to death, and now I've been given a second chance. This is like an extra life in a video game, so I might as well give it all I got."

"What do you mean by 'close to death'? Like, figuratively speaking? With everything you've been through?"

"No, I literally almost died this morning. My house caught on fire and I had to jump out of my window to escape. When I left to come here, they still hadn't put the fire out. My anxiety is through

the roof. I feel so scared. I should be dead. I could have very easily stayed asleep and we wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

As I talk, Kim is sitting there with a shocked expression on her face. Nothing I have ever said has really shocked her before. After a moment, she says, "Devin, I can't believe what you are telling me. This is horrible. Did you go to the hospital to get yourself checked out?"

"No, I feel fine. I thought it was more important to keep our appointment."

"Devin, you have just gone through serious trauma. How are you dealing with this?"

"I am pretending like it didn't really happen." This is what professionals refer to as avoidance. "I can't deal with the reality of it. I have nothing now. I had no insurance. I don't even know where my wallet is. I am completely fucked. I have been chain-smoking because I don't know what else to do."

"You really need to use some of your positive coping skills right now. This is why we work on them, so when things like this happen, we can get through it. The important thing right now is that you are okay. You made it out. You are here with me right now, and you are safe. You know that, right?"

"Yes, I know I'm safe."

"Good, that is the only thing that is important. All of the other stuff will work itself out over time. Right now you need to stay focused on the present moment. I don't want you to avoid dealing with this."

"I agree, but I feel like I need to avoid it for just a little bit longer. I'll start dealing with it tomorrow. The rest of the day, I am going to chain smoke and pretend like it didn't happen."

"That's all right. Just for today, though."

"Yes, just for the rest of today, not any longer. I was feeling pretty good before this happened."

“It’s important that you feel good, right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“What if I told you that it’s not? That you are inevitably going to feel everything from excruciating pain to pure bliss? That some days you will be paralyzed with fear and others you’ll be a champion to everyone around you? And no matter what, how you feel isn’t as important as what you do?”

“I’d say I already know that, but I keep forgetting.”

“Have you been meditating? Have you been practicing mindfulness? I’m asking you this because accepting how you feel is easy when you feel good, but accepting it when you’re in pain is how you grow.”

I inhale.

I exhale.

“Yeah, I’ve been trying to stay mindful, but...”

“But your emotional mind keeps taking over?”

“Exactly. That’s exactly what I was going to say.”

“I’m going to tell you a secret, Devin. Your emotional mind isn’t taking over. It’s always in control. You might think you’re rational, but you’re not. No one is. Stay in the moment to see the truth, but don’t be disillusioned. It’s not a superpower. You will always go back to your emotions. It’s important to remember this because you almost died in a fire today, and for some reason, you didn’t. Devin, the good news is you’re alive, and now you’re free to do all the things you’ve always wanted to do. You can follow every dream. There are no more limitations. This is your extra life. Play it as best as you can!”

Chapter 15

After my appointment, I drive over to Eric's house. Before I go in, I look in the back seat and see my messenger bag. "Thank, god," I say out loud to no one. It has my journal and meds.

Eric gives me a big hug when I walk in, the kind only he can give, and asks, "Are you okay, man? I know this has been a rough day."

"I feel like shit, but I am going to be okay. Can I wear your uniform, or are you working tonight?"

"You're going to work? You're fucking crazy, bro."

"What am I supposed to do? I can't miss out on Saturday-night money."

"You're supposed to take a few days off and clear your head a little bit. You almost died today!"

"Well, I don't want to. I need money, especially after all of this, and working helps me cope—it's a great distraction."

"Okay, you're probably right. Take my uniform. I'm off tonight."

I put on Eric's uniform in the bathroom. As I'm walking out the door, Eric says, "I love you, bro."

"I love you too."

I inhale.

I exhale.

I am loved.

I show up to work and pretend like nothing happened. Work always helps me forget about my problems, and I really need to do that tonight. Taking orders, running food, wiping down tables—like

a drone. A drone with no feelings. Acting happy and smiling and joking around, like my house didn't burn down. Elissa comes up to the computer and says, "Hey, what's going on?"

"Oh, not much. Kind of had a shitty day."

"Why, what happened?"

"My house burned down."

"Oh my God, Devin! Why are you here? Why are you at work? That is horrible!"

"I'm here because I need to get my mind off stuff and work is always a good distraction. Plus, I want to be with my friends. The people here are like my family. I knew I would get a lot of support here."

"Devin, you're acting like this isn't that big of a deal. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think I will be."

"Do you need anything? Clothes or money or I don't even know what, anything?"

"Eric is letting me stay with him, so I should be good. It's enough to just know that you care."

"Well, if you need anything at all, just tell me. I know Chris has some clothes he doesn't wear anymore. Maybe you could take some of those."

"Thanks, Elissa."

We get busy out of nowhere. I get triple sat and I am running around frantically trying to get drinks for all my tables. The last table ordered a coffee and a hot tea which is a major pain in the ass. I have to pour it, then get a side plate with a napkin, creamers, lemon and spoon. Getting coffee and tea sucks when you are busy. When I go to grab mugs, they all have little dried coffee spots on them. It's not a big deal when you're serving coffee, since you just pour it anyway because no one will ever see the spots. But with hot tea, the mug has to be immaculate because you can see the inside

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of the mug through the hot water. I take a spotted mug and clean it with a towel. All the while, my tables are out there waiting for me. I bring everything out and start taking orders.

When working in this kind of restaurant, it is important to get your tables in and out as quickly as possible. You're most likely not going to make very big tips off your tables because the menu is so cheap, so you have to turn your tables over if you want to make any money. I have it down to a science. I get the orders as fast as possible and ring everything as fast as I can. If they order appetizers, I only give them a couple minutes to eat them before I bring out their entrees, and I do my best to get people to skip dessert. I'll say something like, "You guys don't want dessert, do you?" I am supposed to suggest dessert, but I don't do it because it takes too long and is a pain in the ass for me to make. Since all my tables sat down at the same time, they all get up at the same time. Five bucks on a twenty-dollar check. Ten on a forty. Fifteen on fifty. I'm a fucking rock star.

They triple seat me again but I don't care. I didn't come into work to stand around. All I can think about is getting drinks or bringing that guy a ranch or that lady her chips. I just keep moving.

I inhale.

I exhale.

I don't have a care in the world.

It starts to slow down. I only have two tables and there isn't anyone waiting at the front door anymore. I am in the kitchen leaning against the chip machine and Megan comes up to me, makes a sad face and gives me the biggest hug in the world. She tells me, "You're going to be okay."

"Thanks, I know I will."

We share a really nice moment.

Then Steph walks in the back with dishes piled up in her arms and says, "God damn, I have the hugest wedgie right now."

I laugh. "You always get wedgies. Try wearing some different underwear or something."

"It happens with all my underwear."

"Maybe you should try wearing a thong."

"Yeah, you would like that, wouldn't you?"

After the dinner rush, we start cleaning up and getting ready to leave. I'm closing but I hope I don't get stuck here too long tonight. Sammy comes into the kitchen and tells me, "I'm seating you with a party of ten."

"Fuck, dude, really?"

"I'm sorry."

I can tell that he is. I go out to greet them. They're a normal-looking group, a big family with who I assume is a mom, dad, grandparents and kids. I'm pleasantly surprised. This might end up being a great way to end my night. I take their drink orders and most of them order margaritas and other cocktails. Then they put in some appetizers. Their check is seventy bucks and I haven't even rang in their entrees yet. I get the drinks and appetizers out, and then they start to give me their order. They all order steaks and ribs, and every one of them has a special order, even the kids. I don't really mind, though. I am good at listening and putting everything into the computer the way they want it.

While they are waiting for their food, I get sat again with two girls. They are a little bit younger than me, and I know that if I flirt with them, they'll give me a good tip. I walk over and get their orders. The first girl orders a salad and asks, "Can I get the dressing on the side?"

I say, "No," with a serious face.

She seems surprised. "Really?"

"No, not really, I can put it on the side. I was just fucking with you." They both start laughing. I'm in. The food for the big party comes out and I check on everyone. "How is everything?"

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The father says, “Oh, it’s terrific. You did a great job.”

“Thank you. I’ll be right back with some refills for you.”

I go back in the kitchen, and Megan asks, “How is the party going?”

I say, “Good. Their check is up to two-fifty and they love me. This table is going to make my night.”

“Awesome.”

I go back out to flirt with the girls some more. “Hey ladies, how is everything going?”

“Really good, thanks.”

“No problem. If you need anything, and I mean *anything*, just let me know.”

They giggle.

The party is done so I start clearing their plates. The father asks for the check so I bring it out to them. The final total is \$275.18. I am very excited. Twenty percent of \$275.18 is like fifty-five bucks. The father hands me the check and tells me to keep the change.

I say, “Thank you so much, guys, enjoy the rest of your night,” and walk back into the kitchen. I start counting the money but there is only two-ninety in the check presenter.

I look at Elissa and say, “What the fuck is this shit?”

“Oh, Devin, how bad is it?”

“They left me fifteen on a two-hundred-and-seventy-five-dollar check! Fucking assholes.”

My whole career as a server I have had to take verbal abuse from customers and bite my tongue. People are rude and bossy and I just put on the same smile as always. And when people stiff me on the tip, I just give them a sincere “Thank you, hope to see you again soon.” But not tonight, not after this day. I don’t need this job that bad. I go back onto the floor to tell them off. I’m going to unleash every single thing on them, but to my disappointment, they are all gone. They fled like cowards.

The two girls are still sitting there. I walk over and put on my happy face. “Hey, we’re closing up. You don’t want dessert, do you?”

“I think we’re good. We have a question, though. How come everyone else who works here looks miserable and can’t wait to leave, but you’re so happy?”

I laugh out loud. “It’s because I am a really good actor. I am the most miserable person in the building. I hate my job. I have an ex-girlfriend who works here and drives me crazy, that table just left me fifteen dollars on a two-hundred-and-seventy-five-dollar check, and, to top it off, my house burned down today and I almost died.”

Their jaws drop.

“But don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine.” This is what professionals call minimizing. I smile really big. “Can I get you anything else tonight?”

“Um, no, we’ll take the check.”

After they pay, I go back into the kitchen and my manager, John, calls everyone to the back for a post-shift meeting. These things are so lame and all we do is hear them talk about the same things every day.

John starts it off. “Okay, guys, it was a good shift for the most part. I saw a lot of teamwork. That’s really important. The more we help each other, the better the shift goes. Steph won the margarita contest tonight. She sold sixteen.” He hands her an envelope and everyone claps. “As everybody knows already, one of our team members had a very tragic thing happen to him. Devin’s house burned down, so Elissa decided to start a collection for him. Devin, here you go.”

He hands me an envelope. He’s talking so fast that I don’t even realize what’s inside right away. He continues. “When one of us is down, it is our responsibility to help that person back up again. That’s what we do here.”

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Everyone comes up to me and hugs me. My eyes water up and I start crying tears of joy. These people would do anything for me. It is a beautiful thing, and I am so grateful I have people like this in my life. I just keep crying and crying and people keep hugging and hugging. I love this place. Well, the people at this place.

Chapter 16

I get out of work and I want to call Maggie. I really want to hear her voice. I want to hear about her day. I want to make sure she is okay. I want to tell her about everything that has happened to me, but I realize it's probably too late to call her. But, I could easily text her. If she's asleep, she'll see it tomorrow. I should just text her but I don't. I'm too scared. I don't know what I'm afraid of, but I meet up with Eric at the diner instead.

Everyone in New Jersey loyally goes to the same diner, and the diner they choose to go to inevitably becomes known as "the diner." Our diner is the Edison Diner on Rt 1 South. We sit at our regular booth by the window, and Eric looks uneasy. He says, "This has been some day, dude. Did they ever tell you how the fire started?"

"Apparently I hadn't been cleaning the dryer's lint guard, and when the motor seized, it set all the clothes in it on fire. Then all the dirty clothes and random crap in the basement lit up. After a few hours, it made its way upstairs."

"I don't know what I would have done if something had happened to you."

"I lost everything I have, but none of that is really important because I am alive and have so many people who care about me. I don't know where I'd be without a friend like you."

As we're talking, our waitress, Debby, walks up to our table. Debby is in her late forties and is cool as shit. She just started working here but it didn't take her long to befriend us. She comes by and asks us if we want dessert. Since we're here almost every

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night, we know all the servers by name. They love us, partly because we rock, and partly because we are really good tippers. We say no to dessert, but she says, "His meal comes with one." She's a harder worker than me.

Eric tells me, "You can have it if you want."

I ask her, "Can I get the chocolate cheesecake?"

"Chocolate cheesecake isn't one of the desserts that come with it but I can get it for you anyway."

I tell her, "You can charge me extra if you need to."

"Don't worry about it, honey. I'll take it when he's not looking."

She points at the manager with her eyes. The manager's name is Harry, and he has worked here since Eric and I were teenagers.

He used to hate us and would kick us out all the time because we would come in with big groups of people and cause trouble. As we got older and started paying our checks in full, as well as tipping the servers, he started warming up to us a little.

Debby says, "I'll be right back, guys." She walks off into the kitchen and returns with my cheesecake. Before I take a bite, she says, "Do I look alright to you guys?"

"Yeah, sure, you look like you always do."

"Okay, good. People have been giving me shitty tips and I was worried it was because I look like crap from partying last night."

"No, that's not it. You look great."

She smiles. "Thanks, Devin. Last night was crazy. I remember going out and I remember going home but everything in between was a blur. My girlfriend told me that I got up and started dancing on the bar. Then I was all over some dude, and at one point, I was lying on the dance floor with my legs spread open."

"Holy shit, Debby."

"Don't worry, I was wearing jeans, but still, crazy night."

I chuckle. "You rock."

"Oh, boys, you have a good night, okay?"

"We will. You do the same."

She walks away and Eric says, “That chick is crazy.”

I say, “I know, I love her.”

Eric asks, “Do you want to just split the bill?”

“Fuck no, your entrée was way more expensive than mine.”

He says, “Well, you should pay for that dessert. I didn’t want it.”

I say, “What? I thought that cheesecake was a gift. Now it turns out you were just trying to get me to pay for you? That’s beat.”

He laughs. “That was like a five-dollar piece of cheesecake, dude.”

“That cheesecake was already calculated into the price of your entrée. It didn’t cost you anything.”

“Okay, but I’m not paying for those buffalo wings, though. I only ate one.”

I can’t even keep a straight face I’m laughing so hard. “It doesn’t matter how many you ate. You entered into a verbal contract with me that we would split the cost of the wings. You deciding you only wanted one wing does not nullify your commitment to me.”

“I’ll pay for my half of the wings if you pay for half of the cheesecake.”

“Okay, you got a deal.”

We carefully figure out how much we owe, and then Eric says, “You need to put in another two dollars.”

I look at the check and tell him that he needs to put in another two dollars and then we realize that we forgot tax and that we both needed to put in one dollar. He puts the tip down on the table and says, “We should have just split it. We both ended up putting in the same amount.”

We laugh, and then we laugh at how our laughs are the same.

“Devin, I just want you to know you can stay at my house as long as you need to.”

“Really? Are you sure? No one has ever done anything like that for me.”

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“Well, you’ve done plenty of things like that for me. No reason to be all emo about it, and to be honest, it will be nice to have you over.”

“You’re right. It will be nice.”

We start heading home in Eric’s car. By now it’s four o’clock, which is a relatively early time for us to go to bed. We work at night, we hang out at night, we literally live at night. Most nights I go to bed with the birds chirping and the sun just coming up. Eric says, “I don’t feel like going home yet.”

“Me either.”

He says, “Well, what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know, what’s there to do really?”

He pauses. “We could drive down to AC.”

“That would be a terrible idea. I barely make enough to get by. I don’t need to start losing all my money again.”

“Yeah, but what if we win?”

The diner is on Route 1 and Eric just took the ramp for Route 18 south. If we were going to Atlantic City, that’s the road we would take. I am starting to get a little nervous. He has a mischievous tone to his voice. “Eric, where are you going?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not bringing your degenerate ass down to AC. It would be awful.”

“Then where are we going?”

He says, “It’s a surprise.”

We take the exit for Washington Road and start driving through South River and Sayreville. Sayreville has a shitload of strip clubs and this is the way we go to get there. I also had a pretty bad problem with strip clubs for a while. I would go there and blow hundreds of dollars every night. Besides the money, I started feeling like I was compromising some of my ideals by spending so much time in there. It’s been about two and a half years since I’ve been in one of those places. We turn onto Route 35. “Were not going to the strip club, are we? I’m pretty sure they’re closed by

now.”

“Don’t worry, dude. I’m bringing you somewhere you’ve never been before.”

We turn around and pull into a parking lot. Right off Route 35 is Raritan Bay Waterfront Park. It has little piers you can walk out onto. We get out of our car. There is an old man sitting in a parked car. I notice him but think nothing of it. The sun is rising over the water. I see sunrises all the time, but for some reason, I am able to fully appreciate the beauty of this one. We start walking down the pier and Eric says, “This is where she told me that she was married.”

Eric loved his ex-girlfriend deeply. Unfortunately, she was married with two children. He had to break it off with her because he couldn’t take it anymore. He loved her with all his heart, but she was never going to make him happy. I don’t know if I would have been able to break it off with Sarah if it wasn’t for the example that Eric set for me. “Shit, dude, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I don’t think about her as much as I used to, and when I do, I don’t think about her the same way. I have learned from my mistakes, and I just hope that she finds whatever it is that she is looking for out there. All I know is that it’s not me.”

“I’m happy to hear you say that.”

He asks, “You ever wonder what it is that we should be doing with our lives?”

“Yeah, all the time.”

Eric’s face is serious and troubled. “All we do is work these shitty jobs and stay up all night long. We are always in bars and restaurants. We live in them. We do the same thing week after week and we never get ahead. We are both in the same amount of debt that we were in five years ago when we were playing poker all the time. We just spend our money on bullshit. Most people don’t go out every night like we do. What are we going to do?”

I say, “We have to start setting and achieving measurable goals.

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That's what I was always taught to do when I was in the hospital. For me, my goal is to work as much as I can and save money to start a business. It might take a long time, but I am making progress. You need to figure out what you want to do with your life and start setting goals to get to where you want to be."

"I know. At least you know what you want to do. I have no idea. I don't want to be forty and still bartending."

"Then do something about it. What if every night after work, we stopped going out and just went to bed when we got home? We would be able to wake up before work and start being productive during the day. We could figure out ways to better ourselves. What if we started tomorrow? Why not?"

He shrugs. "I like to go out after work, though. I work so hard, I feel like I deserve to have fun when the day is over."

"We are never going to go anywhere if we just hang out in bars every night of the week. There are so many things we could be doing. Remember our coffee shop, dude?"

"Yeah, Devin, you still want to do it after all these years?"

I say, "Of course I do, man."

"You can host your open mics on Fridays."

"And you can do DJ sets on Saturdays."

He adds, "We'll have comfy couches on the back porch where people can smoke cigarettes."

"Yup, and they can make out back there too."

"You're making a lot of sense right now. This is actually the only thing that makes sense to me. You're right. It's time to start making changes."

I say, "I'm in, man, we can do it."

An older black woman in a windbreaker is power walking down the pier. When she reaches us, she says, "Good morning!"

We say it back and she turns away and continues her walk. I

say, "Look at that woman. She wakes up at dawn and does some exercise before she starts her day. We could learn a lot from her. We

could live like that if we wanted to.”

“We could, couldn’t we?”

“Look at the sunrise. It is beautiful. It makes me feel like I am part of something.”

“Me too, Devin, me too.”

We start walking back to the parking lot. Eric points at the man sitting in his car next to ours. “Look at that old dude. He’s been here the whole time we have been. What do you think he is doing?”

I say, “I saw him when we pulled up. I have no idea what he could possibly be doing. You want to ask him?”

“No man, that’s crazy. People from Jersey don’t talk to strangers.”

“Well, I’m going to ask him.”

I walk over to his car. The window is open, and I say, “Hello, sir, good morning. How are you?”

He is somewhat startled but quickly snaps out of his trance and says, “I’m good, son. How are you?”

“Good. I have a question for you.”

“What would that be?”

“You have been sitting in your car the whole time I have been here. What are you doing?”

“Oh, it’s silly, I guess. This is where my wife first told me she loved me. It is also the place where I asked her to marry me. We were married for fifty-two years before she died. I come here once a month and think about her. Spending my life with her was the best thing I could have ever done.”

“That is amazing. I don’t know many people who could say that. I have had a lot of trouble with girls.”

“When you meet the right one, you’ll just know, son. You’ll just know.”

“Thank you, sir. Have a great day.”

“You too.”

As I walk away, I remember Maggie. I love her so much. I think

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she might be the one. I just kind of have a feeling, like the way he said. I get back in the car. “Let’s go back to your apartment. I think I need to sleep.”

“You mean *our* apartment.”

I love Eric.

Chapter 17

I sit up on Eric's couch after a relatively peaceful sleep. He let me use one of his old, worn blankets. It was soft, big and fluffy, and as I pulled it over my head, I sunk into the couch. I only woke up once and it was just to go use the bathroom. I was able to go right back to sleep after I was done. Eric's apartment is always dimly lit and smoky. All the windows are covered by dark curtains that do not let in much sunlight. This is a really great thing when you are trying to sleep during the day.

The first thing I do is light up a cigarette and throw the pack back into my messenger bag. Everything I own is in this bag now. I always start the day off with a cigarette. It is the first thing I do when I wake up and the last thing I do before I fall asleep. Sometimes I miss candy cigarettes, when the smoke was just your breath in the winter air. I call Maggie. I can't believe that I didn't call her after the fire, especially because of how terrified I was that I would never see her again.

"Hi, Devin."

Hearing her voice is music to my ears. I miss her so much. It's only been a couple days since I've seen her, but I still miss her. I really love the sound of her voice. It's so cute and awkward and I love everything about it. I love everything about her.

She sounds concerned. "Are you okay? You sound a little out of it."

"Well, I almost died yesterday."

"Oh my God, what do you mean you almost died?"

"It was a fire. I'll tell you more about it later. I just want you to

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know I love you.”

In her awkward, trembling voice, I hear my favorite phrase. “I love you, too.”

The drive to her house is a moving meditation. I hold the steering wheel and push my foot on the gas and then brakes, all with a soft smile on my face. My gaze is on the road, and my breathing is slow but steady. It only takes five minutes to get there, but it wouldn’t have mattered if it had been five hours or five seconds, because I am at peace, and I am in love.

I text her that I’m outside. I’m hoping I’ll sleep here tonight, so I bring my bag in with me. I’m not sure where home is anymore. I never really knew, but maybe this is where I’ll finally find it. Maggie has a really big porch. It is blue and has a couch and a rocking chair on it. There are pots filled with flowers and her bicycle is chained up next to the door.

I see her coming down the stairs through the top window in the door. Her hair is tied back and she is wearing a white t-shirt with paint on it. She opens the door. “Oh my God, come here.” She hugs me and says, “The reality of what you told me over the phone didn’t really set in until right now. Are you okay, Devin?”

“Yeah, I’ll be okay. It’s so good to see you.”

Even with no makeup and gym shorts, she is still the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen. Our hug turns into a passionate kiss, one that I don’t want to end. Usually, when I make out with girls, I always want the kissing to end so we can have sex, but with Maggie, with this kiss, I wish it would last forever. I say, “I am so grateful that we can still be together, that we will have many more days together. I am so grateful to be here with you right now. I thought I’d never see you again.”

“This is your second chance to do all the things you’ve always wanted. Let’s go inside. I have something to show you.”

We walk up the stairs and I run my fingers across the yellow banister. Maggie’s painting supplies are all over the living room.

Drop cloths cover the floor and there is a giant easel in the middle of the room. Painted on the canvas is a dove, flying out of its cage. The entire piece is painted in different shades and tones of blue, everything besides the dove, which is white, and the cage, which is red. I stare at it for a moment in complete amazement. I don't understand how one person, using only paint and a brush, could make something so beautiful, so breathtaking. I look at Maggie, and she has paint on her fingertips and smears on her clothes. She is so talented. I ask, "How did you do this?"

"I just had an idea and then visualized it on the canvas. After that, it was easy. I just produced what I saw. Kind of like a coloring book."

"It's so pretty. The details are amazing. What is the painting about?"

"What do you think it's about?"

"I think it's about breaking free. Being trapped in our jobs and our routines. At some point, you need to liberate yourself from them. Is that right?"

"Well, you're right about the freedom part. The dove represents peace, obviously—they always do."

"Yeah, that makes sense. I missed that."

"What I am trying to get across in the painting is that if you are at peace, spiritually and physically, then you are already free. No matter what kind of constraints are put upon you, you can never be trapped."

"Wow. I really like that. It's a wonderful way to look at things."

"Yeah, I think so too."

"I wish I could paint like that."

"Why can't you?"

"I don't remember how to. When I was a kid, I would paint pictures with my grandmother, but that was so long ago, I don't think I would be able to make something that looked good."

"Why not?"

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"I don't know why. I just couldn't, that's all."

"Don't worry about what you actually produce. Painting is not about the end result, it is about the process, what you are feeling while you are in the moment. Do you want to know something funny?"

"What is it?"

"Sometimes I want to create something beautiful and never show it to anyone."

"I like that."

"Okay, c'mon. Can you try? All you have to do is try."

"Yeah, I can."

"Good. Let me set up an easel for you."

Maggie goes into the other room and comes out with a roll of canvas and a wooden frame. She takes a staple gun off the table and starts stapling the canvas into place. "I like stretching these myself. I could go to the craft store and spend all sorts of money on fancy ones, but I enjoy making them. I like knowing that I created the entire painting from scratch." She starts brushing on some primer and puts the frame on her easel. "Alright, now we just have to wait for this to dry."

I think about what would happen if I punched a hole in the canvas she just made. It would be so mean and it would hurt her feelings. She would probably cry and kick me out. The idea of this makes me sad. The idea frightens me. I could lose her if I did something that stupid. We sit down on the couch. She says, "What are you thinking about?"

That's really weird. I don't know what to say. I should tell her how much I love her or tell her how talented an artist she is, but that's not what I am thinking about. I have never lied to Maggie, and for some reason, I don't ever want to. She is too good for that. I say, "It's really funny that you asked me that question at this very moment." I am anxious. My stomach growls a little bit.

"Why is it funny to ask you that? It's just a simple question that

girls love asking guys for some reason.”

With a nervous tone in my voice, I ask, “Do you really want to know?”

“Oh, wow, I do now. This has got to be good. What is it? What’s going on up in that head of yours?”

I inhale.

I exhale.

I am not afraid.

“Well, it’s really weird. Sometimes I get random thoughts about doing bad stuff.”

“Like killing people?”

“No. God, no, I don’t want to kill anyone.”

“Good, I don’t want you to kill anyone either.” She laughs.

“I get random thoughts about socially unacceptable things. Stuff that would piss someone off or hurt someone’s feelings. I can’t control the thoughts. They just pop into my head and bother me. My therapist thinks it’s my anxiety playing out things I don’t want to happen.”

“So what were you thinking?”

I hesitate and take a breath. “I was thinking about punching a hole in the frame you just made.”

“That’s all?”

“What do you mean? I feel horrible for thinking it.”

“That’s pretty silly. I get weird thoughts like that all the time. I think everybody does. Kind of like when someone walks in front of your car and you think about running them over.”

I smile from ear to ear in complete disbelief. I thought she was going to be mad at me, and here she is telling me that she does the same thing. That other people do, too. That I am not the only one who gets fucked-up thoughts. I give out a joyous laugh. “Yeah, exactly.”

“You are so cute.” She gives me a quick little kiss. “I have another canvas ready. Let’s go over there and see what you can do.”

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We walk over to the middle of the living room and she takes some tubes of paint off the table. "What colors do you think you want to use?"

"Hmm, yellow is my favorite color. I want to use that, and I like the way light blue goes along with it."

She takes a piece of cardboard and puts a yellow blob on it and then a blob of blue. "This is exciting. What are you going to make?"

"I don't know yet." I stare at the canvas for a while. I am trying to think of something to paint but I can't come up with any ideas.

"Stop trying to come up with an idea and just let your mind wander."

"Okay."

I start thinking about Maggie, about how happy I am that Sarah cheated on me and I was able to start this new relationship. Then I think about our first night together and how I was only using her as a distraction from the pain I was in. Then I think about how if Jenny hadn't died, I wouldn't be standing here right now. I quickly remember how much pain Maggie is in right now. Even though she appears to be holding it together quite well, she is still going through the grieving process. I don't want my painting to be about the fire or any of the problems I am having. I want it to be about Maggie and how proud I am of her. How much I admire her strength. I pick up my brush and dab it into the yellow paint. The canvas is about a foot by a foot-and-a-half. I start painting a star right in the center. Then I take the blue and make clouds and rain. I tell her, "I'm going to use some black too."

"Okay, here it is."

I mix the black and blue together on the canvas to make the rain and clouds dark. Everything on the canvas is dark and depressing except for the bright star in the middle.

"I also need some red."

She gives me some and I outline the star in red. It makes the star

brighter and almost gives it a glow. It needs something else, though. I see a tube of brown on the table and I pick it up. I fill in all the white spots on the canvas with it. I stand back and look at what I just made. I impressed myself. I just had a creative burst and I'm getting a natural high from it.

"What do you mean you don't know how to paint? That's awesome."

"Yeah, I really surprised myself."

"What were you thinking about when you were making it?"

"I was thinking about you and how much I admire your strength."

"Really? What does all this mean?"

"You are the star. You continue to shine in the face of tragedy and pain. In fact, you shine brighter when trouble comes. You can do anything. You can conquer any obstacle."

"Wow, thank you. That is the nicest thing anyone has ever told me." We sit back down on the couch. She says, "I miss her, more than anything in the world."

"I can only imagine."

"You never think that the person you are closest to in the world would just not be there anymore. I knew she had her problems and put herself in risky situations, but I never actually thought that she would die. I had this feeling like she was going to get it eventually. I guess I was in a little bit of denial. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, I think about calling her or going to her house, but then I remember that she's gone. It doesn't feel real. I went to my mother's house yesterday. She told me that she quit drinking. She said that she did it for Jenny. I stayed there for hours and we just told each other stories about her. Then we looked at some of our old photo albums. There was one picture of us together that made me weep. I was moved by it because I could remember the day it was taken. We were swimming all day in the pool at my grandmother's house. Our fingers were all wrinkled because we had been in there

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so long. When we were getting out of the pool, my mom took a picture of us. I remember how happy both of us were, how innocent and carefree we were. We had no idea how harsh the world could be. I took the picture out of the album and I keep it with me now. Do you want to see it?"

"Yeah, of course."

Most of the time when someone asks me if I want to look at their picture, I say that I do but don't really want to, but I genuinely want to see this one. She pulls it out of her bag and hands it to me. I look down at it and see two adorable toddlers smiling with crooked teeth. It's amazing how one photograph can display true happiness and inner peace like this one does. Happiness isn't something you are all the time. It's like a photograph, a captured moment in time. I say, "This is truly beautiful. And you are so right that happiness is not the destination of our journey in life. It's a place we stop off along the way to take breaks." She looks at it again and her eyes well up a little bit. I put my arms around her and let her cry. I say, "It's okay to cry. And it's okay to not be okay."

I hold her on the couch for an amount of time that I cannot measure. I hold her for exactly as long as she needs.

We inhale.

We exhale.

That is all we need to do.

Chapter 18

We stand up off the couch and walk down the staircase. Maggie runs her hands across the yellow banister. When we open the door, we see a little boy chasing a little girl down the street. We can see the big smiles on their faces just before they pass the porch and disappear into the distance. There is no happiness quite comparable to that of a child. The street in front of us is bustling with sounds of cars and people scurrying through their days. Maggie takes a seat in the rocking chair and I lean against the porch's railing. She says, "I like living in New Brunswick. It has character."

"Really? I kind of hate living here."

"Look at the people walking down these streets. Everyone here is part of a community, friends and families, living together in one place. There are so many amazing things to do here. There is music, art and theater. We met in this city. We fell in love in this city. You really hate it?"

"I shouldn't say I hate it, but this isn't exactly the safest place in the world. You never know if your stuff is still going to be there when you come home. Someone broke into Chris and Elissa's house and took everyone's laptops. I heard that someone got shot at one of the pizza places on Easton Avenue a couple weeks ago. Then you have to deal with all the loud, obnoxious college drunks. The city is noisy all day long and then it is amplified at night. It is never quiet. It is always in a constant state of chaos. There is never one moment of peace."

"You ever think that the city is just fine the way it is and that it's you who isn't at peace?"

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Her answer pisses me off. It pisses me off because I know how right she is. I am not at peace and she has called me out on it. “Maggie, I am trying really hard to get there. I read books on meditation and mindfulness. I try to live in the moment and find beauty in the small things around me. I try to be more and more patient and tolerant throughout my day. I am honest with myself and with others. I treat people the way I want to be treated. I do all these things, but for some reason, I’m just not there.”

She immediately responds. “It’s because you’re still holding onto something.”

I know exactly what it is, too.

“You need to let go. Until you do, it is going to torment you.”

“You are right, but it’s hard because I have been holding on to it for so long, it’s become comfortable.”

“Well, if you ever want to grow, you are going to have to deal with being a little uncomfortable. You need to let go, Devin! Whatever it is, just let go!”

“I’ll try.” I am lying.

She stands up to face me. “Devin, please be truthful and think before you answer this. Why don’t you believe in God?”

I automatically respond with my standard spiel. “I don’t believe in god because I am incapable of it. People who believe in god have a good thing going. They can rely on him for anything, and he gives them strength, hope and purpose. Throughout my life, I have attempted to believe. I thought that if I pretended like god was there, it would get me through whatever hardship I was facing, but it never worked. My prayers always went unanswered. I have seen god work for other people—belief in him has lifted so many people up. The only problem is that believing in god only works when you think it’s going to work.”

“You’ve seen it work for other people, but it won’t work for you? Do you think you are different than everyone else? What makes you think you’re so special?”

“That’s not what I’m saying, and I don’t want to disrespect you or what you believe, but I think it’s like the placebo effect. It never worked for me because I could never really believe that it would. I believe that the real power is people working together and helping each other. So, I guess you could say that I don’t believe in god simply because I don’t believe in him.”

“I can understand what you are saying, but I think it is the other way around. I believe that God works through other people. He uses us as instruments to work wonders in each other’s lives. To me, God is unconditional love, a power greater than anything else in the world, more powerful than an earthquake or tornado, even more powerful than gravity.”

“I believe in the power of love.”

“Then why is it so hard for you to believe that God loves you? Unconditionally, even if you don’t believe in him?”

“If he loved me so much, why would he let all these terrible things happen to me?”

She gets mad. “Are you serious? Do you really think you have it that bad? You need to grow the fuck up. Bad things happen to everyone—there are no exceptions—but he always offers us ways to get through them. Blaming God for your problems is so childish, like a kid who cries when his parents don’t let him eat candy before dinner.”

I feel stupid and don’t know what to say.

“You are spiritually sick; you can do all the meditation and mindfulness you want, but you aren’t ever going to be happy until you open your mind up a little bit. God is love. God is other people. God is you and me on this porch. You’re just complicating it.”

The sun is setting behind the houses across the street. It looks like the sky exploded and then froze in place. I can see purple, yellow, red, pink and blue. The street becomes relatively quiet, almost like everyone in town stopped to stare into the sky. Maggie points up. “That is supposed to be like that. The sky looks like that

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for a reason. Not a single soul on this planet could create what is up in that sky right now. No artist could ever dream up such a thing. No scientist could ever produce this in his lab. This is bigger than anything you could possibly imagine. God has literally opened up the heavens for you, to show you that he exists, to show you that I know what I am talking about. Call it a coincidence if you want, but I know pure divinity when I see it.”

I am speechless. Maggie moves towards me. My back is still against the railing and she presses me all the way into it. She closes her eyes as we kiss.

“He is love, unconditional love.”

She pauses.

“Come on, let’s go in now.”

Chapter 19

Maggie and I have had sex before. Our one-night stand started this relationship. But we haven't hooked up at all since that night. Neither one of us said it out loud, but it's like we were waiting for the right time—waiting for the right time to make love. I usually don't have problems performing in bed when I don't care about the other person. When it's meaningless, when it doesn't count, I'm okay. But it's different when I care about someone. I am terrified of intimate moments. I immediately regress back to my childhood, regress back to being a scared little boy. I get performance anxiety. I get off almost immediately after intercourse. Sometimes I get off before my clothes even come off. My body remembers the abuse, it remembers how awful and painful it was, and as a defense mechanism, my body makes it end as quickly as possible. This is why girls always cheat on me. I am unable to pleasure a girl that I care about. Maggie has only had meaningless sex with me. She doesn't know this about me, and I am terrified of her finding out because she will inevitably want to leave me. I have to do something.

She comes out of the bathroom. I assume she just finished doing whatever it is that girls do before they have sex. I abruptly say, "I have something I need to tell you. I don't know how to but I need to. It's really important."

"Oh my God, what is it? I didn't do anything, did I?"

"No. But before we do this, there is something you need to know." I pause and take an anxious breath, but then I look at her and remember I'm safe. "I was molested as a child. I was six years

old. I lived in a shitty little apartment complex. An older girl in the neighborhood would make me play weird games with her. She would pour water over my penis. She would play with it and kiss it sometimes. She convinced me that the games were all my idea. She would tell me how bad I was for playing the games and that if anyone ever found out what we were doing that I would go to jail.”

“Devin, it’s okay, I’ve had something sim—”

I continue without listening to her. “The last time this happened, the time that we got caught, she made me have sex with a four-year-old. It was a girl in the neighborhood that she had been abusing for a long time before this too. She would hurt her, and beat her up, and put things inside of her.”

“Wait, Devin, stop.”

“No, it’s okay, I have to finish. When we got caught, the police came, and I thought it was all my fault. Until I got into therapy, I had always thought that I raped her. The girl was crying and I just kept on doing it, but I was six years old, I was just doing what the older girl told me to do. “

“Devin, really—”

I continue without listening. “After that, the girl’s parents moved away because they didn’t want her to have to see us anymore. I have thought about her my entire life and always wondered if she turned out okay. I am telling you this because I have never been able to be intimate with anyone before. My body doesn’t let me have sex with someone when I care about them. I don’t want you to think that I don’t love you. I’m just scared.”

She stands up, turns away, and closes the bathroom door behind her. I don’t understand what she is doing. She didn’t say a word. I finished my story and she just left. From behind the bathroom door, she says, “You need to leave.”

I plea, “What?”

“I said you need to leave.”

I start crying. I have never cried this hard in my entire life. Why

would she do this to me? I approach the locked door and scream, “I love you. I share my deepest, darkest secret with you and you tell me to leave? What the fuck is wrong with you? How could you do this to me?”

“I fucking hate you. I wish you were dead!”

What is happening? I beg for an answer. “Why?”

She opens the door and looks at me in a way she never has before. But at the same time, she *has* looked at me like this before. It looks like sheer terror and fear, with an underlying hatred for me. It’s the kind of look that makes your heart stop. As the realization hits me, she spits out the words, “Because it was me.”

I hear the most unsettling silence in between the pause in her words.

“You fucked me. And the way I remember it, you seemed to be having a pretty good fucking time. You were laughing. I have hated you my entire life. Now fucking leave!”

This isn’t real.

This can’t be real.

Chapter 20

She told me to fucking leave, so I do. I take my messenger bag and walk right down that staircase again, out onto the porch, then the street. I keep walking. I don't know where my car is. I don't know where I'm going or where I should be. I see the neon sign for Kelly's Korner Pub and I sit down at the bar. I haven't been in this bar since I quit drinking. It's fitting that I would come back on Sunday Funday. And they still have specials for service industry people. I see Mark for the first time in four years. He was always our bartender on Sunday nights. He's a tall, handsome man who always has a funny story and a lovable smile. He looks surprised and asks, "Where have you been, man?"

"I've been around."

"Well, it's good to see you."

He pours a pint of Killian's and a shot of Jameson. After all these years, he still remembers what I drink. The beer and shot sit in front of me. I look at them with contempt. I hate alcohol. I don't want to drink them but I don't want to feel this way. I am terrified of what might happen if I go through with this. For a brief moment, I think about what my old AA sponsor used to tell me, back when I was going to meetings. He would say, "Think the drink through." I should think about all the awful things that will happen if I take this drink in front of me. If I play the tape through in my head, it would be clear that this is a bad idea. I should get up right now. I am scared but I feel like I can't leave. I think about that guy Brian from AA who always said I was going to drink again. "Mark, I can't drink these. I'll totally pay for them, but I can't drink them. Can I

please get a Red Bull?”

“We only have Bash.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s the same shit, just cheap and comes out of the gun. Wanna give it a try?”

“Sure.”

I miss Jameson. I take my Bash and start looking at the other people in the bar. There is a couple who look about my age. They are both well dressed and most likely attend Rutgers. They are just two normal kids who are enjoying a night out together. He is teaching her how to play darts. He explains the rules of baseball, and on the girl’s first throw, she puts a hole in the wall to the side of the board. They both laugh. I wonder what it would have been like if I had a normal childhood. Maybe I would be laughing, playing darts with a girl like her. I try to think if there is anything I could do to ruin their date. Maybe I could throw something on her dress, causing him to hit me. Then I could pick up a barstool and hit him in the head with it. Well, those intrusive thoughts are back. What did Kim say? Just acknowledge these thoughts and send them away on a cloud.

I see two guys standing at the jukebox putting money into it. They return to their group of friends and they all sing along to the songs. I wish that I could go out and have drinks with friends and enjoy myself like them. When I drink, I do it with only one purpose, and it’s to escape. There is nothing *fun* about it. I think about walking up to the jukebox and breaking it, turning their shitty emo music off and ending their sing-a-long. No, then I’ll get kicked out.

The other bartender is hot. She’s been flirting with me, and I could probably go home with her if I stay here until close. But that’s a lot of time to keep nursing a Bash. When she comes back and tries making conversation, I just give monosyllabic answers until she leaves me alone. I like being alone, but I hate being alone.

Then I notice a fifty-something man drinking a Seven and Seven. He drinks it quickly, all the while staring straight through the bottles on the shelf to the mirror behind them. He looks so far away. He holds the glass in his fist. He is making love to it in front of everyone. Even though he is in a crowded bar, he looks as alone inside as I do. He reminds me of Harry Haller from *Steppenwolf*, desperately seeking someone to rescue him from his solitary and suicidal hell. As I look down at my Bash, I realize that I am no different from him. Will this be my fate? Am I destined to become a lonely old man who will die alone? I want to go up to him and call him a pathetic piece of shit. I want to tell him that I hate him and that no one will ever love him. I want to do it because I am a pathetic piece of shit and I hate myself and I know no one will ever love me. Maggie is really no different than Sarah. In fact, she is no different than any of the girls I have ever been with. Every girl was crazy, didn't know how to love me, and, in the end, did something to fuck me over.

I get a text. It's Olivia, the girl from Pepper's. I always thought that we would make a cute couple because she dressed cool. The last time I saw her was at the bar after I broke up with Sarah and she said, "I'll probably call you in the middle of the night when I get lonely. You better answer when I do."

It says, "Where are you?"

I shouldn't text her back. I know if I text her I am going to regret it, but I am lonely. I'm sure sleeping with her would kill the pain. I text her back. "I'm at Kelly's."

"Well, you should get out of there and come over."

I start making my way over to her house on Louis Street. I smoke two cigarettes on the walk because I have ten minutes to think, and I don't want to. I text her when I get there: "Outside." I hope she doesn't open the door. A minute goes by. Maybe she passed out. I take out my journal, the big floppy one with the color canvas patch running across the middle of it. I only write private

things in my journal. I really hope she doesn't open the door. She opens the front door. "What are you writing?"

I put it back in my bag and say, "Don't worry about it, it's nothing."

She pulls me inside and we start making out on the staircase. After a few minutes, she puts her hands down my pants. She has full C cups too. She looks so hot right now.

"Want to go upstairs?"

She leads me to her bedroom and starts to kiss my neck. It reminds me of the way Maggie did. She bites my lip and it reminds me of the way Maggie did. I miss you, Maggie. I miss you so much, and I'm hurting, and I know you hate me, and that makes it hurt even more. My stomach is in a knot again. "I can't do this. I still love her. This is so fucked up."

Olivia smiles the way someone does when they know they are about to get you to do something you don't want to do. "If you love her so much, then why are you here?"

I don't answer.

"Just relax."

Olivia starts kissing my neck again and I don't care. She bites my lip and I don't care. I feel nothing. I am numb. I am as close as you can physically be to another person, but I am the loneliest guy in the world. I'm all sweaty, and I fall asleep completely alone.

Chapter 21

When I wake up, I see her lying there. I wonder if I should say bye. I can't do it. I stumble back to my car and start driving. Then reality hits me, hard, the way it always does. Did this really happen? It did, and I feel like shit. Maggie still hates me. And now Olivia will too. I used her. I used her the same way I always have used girls. I have to stop treating women this way!

I start thinking about Maggie. Everything about her is beautiful. She is an amazing person and deserves to have so much. She is selfless and compassionate and loving and pure. I wish we could be together, but I understand why she can't. I hope she's okay right now. I stop and get a Red Bull. I sit down and smoke a cigarette. Then I smoke another. I take my journal out of my messenger bag and start reading it from the beginning. I've only had it for about a week, but I've written a lot. The first page is the poem I wrote the day I bought it.

I'm a Bee - May 1st, 2017

I'm gonna do everything I want to do, and I'm gonna say everything I want to say. Going to be the person I want to be and stop paying attention to what you think of me. I won't let people change the way I feel, and there's nothing you can say that can ruin my day. You just don't have that kind of power over me, because I'm buzzing around happy like a bumblebee. I'm not saying that I'm happy all of the time, but I like to think that I always try. Keep facing the problems right in front of me, and there's nothing I can't get through with my family.

I take a deep breath and I close my eyes and appreciate it when the birds chirp and sun shines.

It is so positive. I remember how good I felt when I wrote it, and it makes me feel worse now. I will never *really* be happy with my life. I have short periods of optimism where I believe that I have recovered from my emotional disorders and relapse seems impossible. The thing is, something always happens to completely destroy the idea that life will someday be fulfilling. Every time, I am reminded that I have no purpose and things will never get better for me. I'm starting to think that I am never really happy, but rather, I have short periods of being delusional. The idea of happiness is just a figment of my imagination, and love is not real. Love is *not* real. The first page of my journal has thoroughly discouraged me, but I like the idea that someday I will think that I am happy again, like when I wrote this poem. That is the coating on the pill of reality that makes it somewhat easier to swallow. I hate reality. The world is a cruel, cold joke. I read what I wrote on the following page. It was the day I broke up with Sarah:

She Couldn't Have Done This - May 2, 2017

Today I discovered that Sarah was cheating on me. I was deeply hurt by it, but not so much because I loved her, but more prevalently, I was not going to be receiving the attention and affection that I had become accustomed to. This was also a huge blow to my ego. She left me because I couldn't fuck her adequately. I never really loved her, but I enjoyed keeping company with her because she was a hot chick who wanted to have sex almost every day. You can't really beat that. I thought I loved her at one point, but towards the end, I grew to hate her. She was so fucking needy, and helping her deal with her problems let me forget about mine. I will miss her. Despite all of this, I am still deeply saddened by the situation. But I

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cannot even begin to describe the sense of relief I felt when I broke it off with her. I felt so empowered.

I get a text from Eric. “Where are you? You didn’t come home last night.”

I text him back. “I’ll be over in a little bit.”

I look at the next page. It’s what I wrote after my walk in the park with Maggie:

The Swing Set – May 3rd, 2017

We were having such a nice time walking in the park. We were getting to know each other better, but then out of nowhere, I became uncomfortable. I felt like everything about what we were doing was fake. Like I was watching it on TV or in a movie or something. Like it was so nice that I began hating the idea of doing something so common, so corny, so bourgeois, so suburban middle-class. There was nothing real or meaningful about what we were doing. I wanted to be somewhere else. I started disliking little things about her, like her mannerisms or the way she pronounced words. When we were sitting on the swing set, she said, “I hope that someday there will be peace on this planet, but the only thing I can do is spread peace and comfort to the people I meet. It’s not hard. Anyone can do it, including you. All you have to do is try. The more you work on it, the easier it gets.” I remember initially admiring her words, but immediately after that, I started to despise all her idealistic rhetoric. The entire situation made me feel like I was going to throw up.”

I really wish I hadn’t read that. How could I have written something so mean about such an amazing person? I can’t believe I actually spent so much time trying to think of things I didn’t like about her. Why was I doing that? I love her so much and miss her

terribly. Why couldn't I just fucking enjoy the time I spent with her?

I put out my cigarette and get back into my car. I go to Eric's. When I walk in, he is sitting on his couch, and he stands up when he sees me. "Where were you, man? I was worried."

"Shit, dude, I fucked up. Maggie and I had a fight and I went over to that chick Olivia's house and I fucked her. I thought Maggie was done with me."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I don't know. I wasn't thinking straight. I was so sad after our fight. She told me that she hated me. After that, I felt crazy."

"Dude, you need to go find her. You need to make this right."

"I need to get her back."

"That's not what I said. I said make this right. Stop thinking about yourself."

I get back in my car. I look at my journal again. The night I told her I loved her for the first time, I woke up in the middle of the night. I just scribbled the following in my journal:

Can't Sleep Again - May 4, 2017

All I want is to go to sleep. I just want to go home and leave her here. This is the last place in the world that I want to be. I want out.

I remember when I wrote that. I was so scared that I had shared so much with her. I felt like the walls of her apartment were closing in on me. It was the first time I think I ever felt true love. I found true love and I couldn't fucking handle it. I sabotaged myself. I would give anything to go back and lie on that couch with her again. The very next page, I wrote last night, on Olivia's porch, before I fucked her:

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Why? - May 7th, 2017

I'm just repeating the same behavior over and over again. I know I am doing it but I don't care. I was relieved when Maggie told me she hated me and kicked me out. I was relieved because I was getting too close to her. It's exactly the same way I felt when I found Sarah cheating on me. I was becoming trapped and it was an easy way out. If Olivia opens this door, it will be the final nail in the coffin of my relationship with Maggie. She will become nothing but a distant memory, part of an elite group of girls that I never even gave a chance to love me. I hope Olivia doesn't open this door. I'm scared no one will ever...

This is awful, what was I thinking last night? I need to fix this. Maybe this time can be different. Maybe I can end the vicious cycle. There was never anything wrong with any of those girls. They weren't all crazy like I thought. I was the crazy one. I treated Sarah like shit. I was distant and passive-aggressive, I was overly jealous, I was clingy. I pushed her away and got mad at her when it worked. I can't keep doing this. I need to go to Maggie. I don't want to lose her.

The Final Chapter

I drive to Maggie's house, and she is sitting on her porch smoking a cigarette. She's wearing a black dress with black stockings. I notice her subtle makeup—simple eyes and bright lip. She sees me approaching her and gives me a hard stare. I can see pain in her eyes. I can tell that she is distraught, like she can't take it anymore. I awoke something inside her. I made her remember an ugly part of her past that she doesn't care to think about anymore. She hates me. She loves me too, but she hates me and what I represent. I have never been this anxious—ever. I need to do something but I'm not quite sure what it is. I don't know what I could possibly say to comfort her at this point.

I am at the foot of the steps, and she says, "I'm sorry. Oh my God, you have no idea. I made a huge mistake last night." Her eyes look tired and dark. She takes a long pull off her cigarette. "What I did wasn't fair to you. I was just taken off guard, and when you told me, I almost regressed back to childhood. I shouldn't have said that to you. I mean, I love you and don't want to hurt you."

How is she the one apologizing right now?

She continues. "What that girl did to us was horrible. She had abused me for a long time before we got caught that day. I was never the same after it. When everyone found out, my parents brought me to therapy, and over time I learned how to cope with the pain and grew into a person that I love. And, of course, it still hurts sometimes, but it's okay to hurt. I've done amazing things with my life. I've traveled all across this country. I learned over time how to have healthy relationships. That girl really messed me up for a long time, and finding out who you are brought back all of those

feelings. But I am a better person now because all of it, and I hope you can forgive me for my behavior last night.”

I am speechless. I really fucked up bad. There is a moment of silence. I can’t think of anything to say. What have I done? Her face is long, and I can tell she has been crying. I look at her with remorseful eyes. “Of course I can.” I feel like I am dying inside. “But I don’t think you will be able to forgive me.”

She interrupts me. “I already have. Don’t worry.”

“No, I don’t think you understand. I did something awful last night, something that I will probably regret for the rest of my life.”

Her quiet, scared voice makes me start to cry. “What did you do?”

“When I left your house last night, I went to the bar. I sat there thinking about drinking, and it was the closest I’ve come to picking one up in a long time. I didn’t drink, but I did something so much worse. I went and hooked up with a girl from work instead. I didn’t want to, but I was trying to find any possible way to escape. Is there any way you can forgive me?”

I have never seen someone look at me like she is right now. She puts her head in her hands and starts crying. I instinctively put my hand on her shoulder. I wish I could do something to make it all better but I can’t. She asks, in a broken and crushed voice, a question that she already knows the answer to. “We can’t be together, can we?”

Tears start flowing down my face. “No, we *can* be together. We can get past all of this. I love you too much to lose you.”

“You had sex with another girl. We spent the entire day together yesterday. I felt so close to you. You told me you loved me, and you go out and fuck some strange in the same night? I love you too, Devin, but how can I get past this?”

She approaches me cautiously. I instinctively hold onto her, and she holds on to me even harder. Her voice cracks. “Goodbye, Devin.”

“Remember the sky last night? You told me it was like that for a reason. You told me that God opened up the heavens for me to see—to show me he was real. If everything happens for a reason, then why did we even meet? So that we could get a glimpse at a better life, only to have it ripped away from us? I couldn’t admit it last night, but it is impossible to deny now. God put us together, two broken pieces that fit perfectly together. Call it a coincidence if you want, but I know pure divinity when I see it. He is love. Unconditional love. Why should we keep suffering? Please don’t make me pay for this the rest of my life. I beg you.”

“Devin, there’s no reason to beg. I’m not making you pay for this the rest of your life. I’m trying to do what is best for both of us.”

“Being together is best for us. God put us together, you know it’s true. You showed me it’s true.”

“I’m so happy that you’ve come to believe in a power greater than yourself, but I don’t think that’s why God put us together.”

“Maggie, I know this hurts, but why should we keep suffering?

“I’m not suffering; suffering is a choice, and it’s one you still choose to make through your actions, Devin. This relationship has been codependent almost since day one, and you seem to think I’m the broken one because my sister died. I’m crying all the time, but I’m not the broken one, Devin, you are. I’m going through real life right now, but I’m thriving. I appreciate your friendship and support that you’ve been giving me, but I don’t need to be fixed. And here’s the thing: I do love you, but I can’t fix you. Only you can do that. I love you so much, and that’s why I’m saying goodbye. Maybe not forever. But right now, I am, and I hope you take this time to take care of yourself. You’re so close to your goal—you’re so close—but you still have some work to do. Promise me you’ll do it.”

I inhale.

I exhale.

I promise.

The Chapter After

Some weeks passed, and I kept replaying everything in my mind. I couldn't comprehend the events of just one week of my life. I kept saying to myself, "How could so many fucked-up things happen?" It took time to put it into perspective, and I realized that things just happen, and there's no reason they shouldn't happen. Life is beautiful and cruel, random and intentional, all at once, and never again. So we all tell stories. Stories about the world and our little place in it. We all like to believe ourselves to be the hero of our own story. And I couldn't help but think that the only difference between life and fiction is where I decide to start telling the story and where I decide to end. And this story goes on for just one more chapter after. I wrote this in the last pages of my journal. The big floppy one, with the color canvas patch running across it:

A reflection of events - June 2, 2017

Maggie taught me something about love that I never understood before. Love is not about PornHub-style sex. It's not about attachment, or being possessive, or even being faithful. It is not the expectation that someone can complete you and be everything you could ever need or want. And it's definitely not about anyone fixing anyone else. Maggie taught me through actions that love is pouring someone a glass of milk while they're eating Heath Bar cookies. It's hugging your best friend when your house burns down, and not being afraid to cry when they take you in. Love is unconditional, done on purpose, and never with expectation for anything in return.

Love is an action, not just a feeling. It's what you do, not just what you say. It's the most important thing Maggie taught me. And she is the hero of my story.

As the years went by, I finally started doing some really serious work with Kim. I even had a few of my meds adjusted. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, all the mindfulness and my new belief in a higher power that I call Love, changed me profoundly. Eric and I opened our coffee shop. We still work crazy hours and stay up all night, but it's our coffee, and we write the schedule. We're working for ourselves, but we're also working on ourselves.

Maggie became my friend over time. We always shared a deep connection. Once the romantic aspect of our relationship was removed, our friendship flourished. She adds things to my life, and I add things to hers. And I used our friendship as a template on how to treat women. I'm still single, but I've had some really healthy relationships since I started writing that journal. People always ask me about my history with Maggie. I tell them that I think we're both pretty happy people, and I think all the fucked-up things we've seen haven't just made us stronger, but I think they made us more interesting too. They gave us character. And people ask, "Do you think you guys will ever end up together?" And I tell them there's no answer to that question because that story hasn't been written yet.



Codependency is a term professionals use to describe a certain kind of toxic relationship. It's characterized by the need for one partner to fix the other in an attempt to avoid their own problems. It's often accompanied by possessiveness, jealousy and manipulation. It's an addictive kind of love with extreme emotion, and it guarantees the pain both people crave. *Saying Goodbye to Toxic Boys* is that very love story. Maggie is a free-spirited optimist and Devin is a self-obsessed womanizer. They find comfort in one another as trauma unfolds in both their lives. Going through coping skills from meditation and mindfulness to chain smoking cigarettes, they learn if unconditional love can be enough to save them and break their cycle.



Greg Bee is a traveling poet, storyteller and performer. He is currently based in Eureka, California. He is a registered nurse and mental health advocate who has overcome bipolar disorder and substance abuse.

This is his first book.

