

CROOKED LINES

Bent, Not Broken

First 3 Chapters

by Shaun Critzer

PROLOGUE

The first time I got sober—really sober, not just white-knuckling it through a few miserable weeks—I was sitting in a church basement in Austin, Texas, listening to a guy named Rick tell his story. He'd lost everything: his wife, his kids, his business, his house. He'd been homeless, strung out on meth, living under a bridge. And now here he was, ten years sober, laughing about it. Not in a bitter, cynical way. Really laughing. Like he'd found something on the other side of all that pain that made it worth it.

I remember thinking, "I want what he has."

Not the sobriety, necessarily. I mean, yeah, I wanted to stop drinking and using. But what I really wanted was that light in his eyes. That peace. That sense that he'd been through hell and come out the other side not just surviving, but thriving.

I didn't know it then, but that moment—that desire—was the beginning of everything.

This book is the story of how I got from there to here. It's not a pretty story. There's childhood sexual abuse, decades of buried trauma, a descent into alcoholism and prescription pill addiction, multiple DUIs, protective orders, psychiatric hospitalizations, and rock bottoms that seemed impossible to survive. There's also bodybuilding, affairs, porn addiction, and all the other ways I tried to outrun the pain.

But it's also a story of hope. Of getting sober on January 1, 2013, and staying sober. Of EMDR therapy and processing childhood trauma. Of working the 12 steps with rigorous honesty. Of rebuilding relationships with my sons. Of finding love again with Shannon. Of 13 years sober and helping others find hope.

If you're reading this, you're probably looking for hope too. Maybe you're struggling with addiction yourself. Maybe you're supporting someone who is. Maybe you're just trying to understand why people like me do the things we do.

Whatever brought you here, I'm glad you're here. Because this isn't just my story. It's the story of anyone who's ever felt broken beyond repair and wondered if there's a way back.

There is. I promise you, there is.

But first, we have to go back to where it all started. Back to a little boy who didn't know how to process what was happening to him. Back to the moment when the armor started to form.

CHAPTER 1

THE ARMOR BEGINS

I was eight years old the first time it happened.

I don't remember all the details. Trauma has a way of fragmenting memory, of protecting you from the full weight of what happened by breaking it into pieces and scattering them across your brain. What I do remember is the feeling: confusion, fear, shame. And the sense that something fundamental had shifted in my world. That I was no longer safe.

The abuse continued for two years. Two years of my childhood stolen by someone I trusted. Two years of learning to dissociate, to leave my body, to pretend it wasn't happening. Two years of building the armor that would define the next three decades of my life.

I never told anyone. Not my parents, not my friends, not anyone. I buried it deep, locked it away in a vault in my mind, and threw away the key. And then I got busy building a life that would prove I was okay. That I was strong. That nothing could hurt me.

Enter bodybuilding.

I started lifting weights when I was 14. At first, it was just something to do, a way to channel the restless energy that came with being a teenage boy. But it quickly became something more. It became a way to control my body, to make it strong, to make it impenetrable. If I could build enough muscle, if I could get big enough, strong enough, nobody could hurt me again.

By the time I was 18, I was competing in bodybuilding shows. By 20, I was winning them. I was 220 pounds of lean muscle, with abs you could see from across the room and biceps that strained the sleeves of my shirts. I looked like a superhero. I felt invincible.

But underneath all that muscle, I was still that scared eight-year-old boy. Still carrying the shame, the fear, the sense that something was fundamentally wrong with me. The armor I'd built was impressive, but it was hollow. And it was starting to crack.

The first crack came in the form of alcohol. I'd always been a social drinker—a few beers at parties, nothing crazy. But in my early twenties, I started drinking more. Not because I liked the taste or the buzz, but because it quieted the noise in my head. It made the shame less sharp, the fear less overwhelming. It let me forget, just for a little while, that I was carrying this secret.

At first, it worked. A few drinks, and I could relax. I could laugh, joke around, be the life of the party. But then a few drinks turned into a lot of drinks. And a lot of drinks turned into blacking out. And blacking out turned into waking up with no memory of what I'd done the night before, just a gnawing sense of dread and shame.

But I told myself I was fine. I was still working out, still competing, still winning. I had a good job, a nice apartment, a girlfriend. I was living the dream. The fact that I was drinking myself to sleep every night? That was just stress. That was just how you dealt with the pressure of being successful.

The armor was cracking, but I kept polishing it. Kept pretending it was holding.

CHAPTER 2

THE DESCENT

The thing about armor is that it's heavy. And the heavier it gets, the harder it is to carry. Eventually, you start to buckle under the weight.

For me, that started happening in my late twenties. I was married by then, with two young sons. On paper, I had everything I'd ever wanted: a family, a career, a body I'd worked years to build. But inside, I was falling apart.

The drinking had escalated. What started as a way to quiet the noise had become a need. I couldn't get through a day without it. I'd wake up hungover, swear I wouldn't drink that night, and then by 5 p.m., I'd be at the liquor store. I told myself I was just unwinding after a long day. That I deserved it. That everyone drank like this.

But deep down, I knew something was wrong. I knew I was losing control. And that terrified me.

So I did what I always did: I doubled down on the armor. I threw myself into work, into training, into being the perfect husband and father. I coached my sons' sports teams, went to every school event, made sure we had family dinners every night. I was determined to prove that I was fine. That I had it all together.

But the cracks kept spreading.

The first DUI came when I was 32. I'd been out with friends, had too much to drink, and made the stupid decision to drive home. I got pulled over two blocks from my house. Failed the breathalyzer. Spent the night in jail.

I was humiliated. Ashamed. Terrified of what people would think. But I told myself it was a one-time mistake. That I'd learned my lesson. That it would never happen again.

It happened again two years later. And then again a year after that.

By the time I got my third DUI, I'd lost my job, my marriage was hanging by a thread, and I was barely holding it together. But I still couldn't stop drinking. The alcohol had gone from being a solution to being the problem, but I couldn't see a way out.

And then the pills started.

It started innocently enough. I hurt my back lifting weights, and my doctor prescribed Vicodin for the pain. It worked. Not just for the physical pain, but for the emotional pain too. The pills made everything softer, quieter, more manageable. They were like alcohol, but better. Cleaner. More socially acceptable.

Within six months, I was addicted. I was doctor shopping, lying to get prescriptions, taking more and more just to feel normal. And when the prescriptions ran out, I started buying them on the street.

The armor was no longer cracking. It was shattering. And I was too far gone to stop it.

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