

THE FLAWED ONES

Jay Chirino

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To Samuel, for giving me the inspiration to learn, grow and face my
biggest fears with courage.

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PREFACE

Dear Reader,

Let me begin by saying that it is my absolute privilege to share this story with you. The fact that you will spend some of your precious time reading it means a great deal more to me than you will ever know. This is something very personal to me, something that I deeply connect with, something that in many respects I have lived. Writing this book took me the best part of twelve months, but in actuality, I have been writing it for close to thirty years. I have faced many serious challenges in my life, and several times I have felt defeated enough to want to fly the white flag. I am sure that you have felt like that from time to time, and it is that visceral connection all of us humans have that motivated me to write this story.

You see, our reality is shaped by our thoughts and what we surround ourselves with. When the sadness comes, our thoughts make us feel so alone that we begin to think we are the only ones in the world feeling that way. This is the reason we isolate and stay away from those that don't seem to comprehend, those people who tell us to "get over it" or "snap out of it." That is why we get drunk and high and we hurt ourselves, as a punishment for being so broken--more broken than anyone else. My purpose with this book was not only to show you that we are all connected in some way, but also to prove to you how special every single one of us is, no matter how "broken" we think we are. For a while I had not been able to put into words what my true motive was for writing this book. I knew that I wanted a story that would move people, a story that many could

relate with. But I still couldn't put my finger on it. Then, a few months back, someone asked me what I wanted most when I was going through my depression, and after thinking about it for a while, I figured it out. What I am trying to accomplish with this story is to help you see that you are not alone.

What you are about to read is fictional, but very real as well. It is a collection of events that may or may not have happened in some fashion or another. As it applies to me, yes, I am a recovering alcoholic and drug addict who spent over ten years destroying himself and the ones around him. Yes, I was hospitalized in psychiatric hospitals more than once, and I spent a long time trying to figure out what was wrong with me. My depression crippled me since I was a child, and without the right treatment or understanding, it made my life close to unbearable. My anxiety stopped me from living life, from enjoying the world, from seeing things in full color, and from chasing after my happiness. It was a very hard road to navigate, and one that I hope never to go through again.

The characters that you will meet in this story are a representation of the real struggles that a lot of us have gone through, and many of us still are. They are, sometimes, combinations of several people that I met in my journey. These people have meant a great deal to me, because they are the embodiment of the flawed human condition, the physical and mental glitches that affect us all in one way or the other. My intention by writing this story is not to paint anyone with any condition in a negative way; my purpose is to show you in some way how we are all the same, no matter what illness plagues us every single day. Our humanity supersedes any physical and mental blemish; love seems to flourish inside every one of us, one way or the other. I want you to take this into consideration when you think negative thoughts, or when you don't see the precious light at the end of the tunnel. We all must explore deep within ourselves and find the greatness that we all possess. Then we need to exploit that greatness and learn how to truly love ourselves. This will allow you to have a constant influx of love without the need of external sources. This, in my opinion, is the true way to happiness.

But I know this is easier said than done; heck, it took me over ten

years to begin making progress, and I still have a long way to go. I do, however, want to tell you this, and if you feel the way I once did, I want you to bookmark this page so you can come back to it every time you need: You are not alone; you are not the failure that you think you are. You are not what other people want to convince you that you are. I know that it is hard, and I know that the strength to go on is sometimes fleeting, and it feels like it would be easier to give up. Easier, yes, worth it, no. Believe me. When you learn to see life the way you are supposed to see it, beautiful, with bad things and all, worth living, a privilege even, it will be a remarkable and extremely valuable experience. You are not alone; I cannot stress that enough. You are not the only one who does not see the colors of the world. I know how hard it can be to convince yourself of that. But your love is right there, deep inside you, not with the people who judge you and bully you and ignore you and play with your emotions. They are empty, and because they are empty they cannot share anything with you, because they don't have a thing to give. Don't feel sadness over the blind eyes that don't get to see the real you, or of the fearful hearts that would rather judge you and put you down so they don't have to deal with who they really are. Let your love and acceptance and uniqueness come from within you. Learn, little by little, to enjoy the things you like, for you and only you. Learn to see life through your eyes and no one else's. This, I promise you, will dramatically affect you in a positive way.

Is it just that easy? No, it isn't, unfortunately. Sometimes the chemicals in your brain will not let you progress the way you should. I am still tied to a daily dosage of medication, and let me tell you something, for that I feel really blessed. I feel fortunate that I was able to have an accurate diagnosis and to find something that could alleviate the pain just enough for me to be able to move forward. The medication is not an enemy; it is often necessary and it shouldn't make you feel ashamed. We all need a strong support system to succeed, and the meds are an important part of that equation. If you are one of those people who need them, like me, make sure that you stay on schedule and you take them the right way, and you will eventually see a dramatic impact on the way you feel.

If you are a family member or a caregiver of someone with an

addiction problem or a mental illness, let me say, first and foremost, that you deserve a standing ovation for your strength, courage and everything you do for your loved one. Caregivers do not get the credit they deserve, yet they are there, fighting hard in the trenches every single day. I know that you too feel like giving up some days, and you might even feel guilty about thinking that way. Don't. You are an expression of overwhelming effort and sacrifice. You do what you do for love and responsibility, and the fulfillment of your duty makes you an exemplary human being, one that should be celebrated and acknowledged. You also are not alone. Many caregivers are fighting the battle every day, and managing it to see the good things through all the pain. I have such an admiration for people like you that it brings me to tears, tears of pride and deep respect. Thank you, thank you, and thank you again.

I hope this story touches you in some way and allows you to learn a little more about yourself. I hope that it makes you feel a little more understood, and that it gives you a little more hope for the future. Don't think that everything you are going to read will have a perfect ending. This is life we are talking about, not a fairy tale. But even through the sometimes dark and cruel reality, a beam of light seems to shine through, every time. Look for it, look for it within you and in the pages of this book. I promise you that you will not be disappointed if you do.

So, as I said before, what a privilege it is for me to share these words with you, to be right there, in your home, sharing something that I connect with so deeply, something that you may be able to relate with as well. It is my responsibility, however, to share what took so much time and pain and suffering to create, to make you laugh and make you cry, and give you hope, and for a moment, let you escape and connect with a version of your own self, encouraging you to find acceptance and hope, and love, all within you, as those things are already there.

I sincerely hope that is the case.

I live in constant conflict between my ambition and the awareness of the great futility of life.

CHAPTER 1

I was stained with the color of despair, my face as white as paper and my eyes afraid. I had not been me for a while and I didn't know how much destruction I had caused, but I had the terrible suspicion it had been a lot.

The room had nothing in it but a single-wide bed, right in the center. There were no pulse monitoring devices, blood pressure monitors or any other type of triage care equipment. Behind the bed was a window that brought in enough light to see that it was daytime, but it wouldn't be soon. There was a small television hanging from one of the walls, but it wasn't on. For a minute, the thought of looking for a remote ran through my mind, but just thinking about exerting that type of effort made me feel exhausted.

I sat in the middle of the bed, elbows resting on my knees and hands balled into fists, supporting my head. Mom and Dad stood next to me, pacing nervously in quiet desperation. They had not slept for days and their faces showed it. Their eyes told a story I didn't want to read, so I kept my head down and refused to make eye contact. There was a constant static noise inside my head that got gradually louder as the minutes went by, and by now it was getting to the point of unbearable. I tried squeezing my ears shut with my hands, closing my eyes and blowing out my nose, but nothing worked. It felt like the station inside my head had lost all reception, and only the white noise remained, slowly torturing me, forcing me to surrender the rest of my sanity.

A doctor eventually walked in the room, sporting a fake smile, as if its only purpose was to soothe me. It failed.

“Hello, my name is John, I am the ER doctor today,” he said, still grinning without credible emotion. His whole expression had been programmed for dealing with the people he encountered, maybe in an attempt at making them more comfortable or at ease. He probably spent a long time in front of a mirror, perfecting it, practicing hard at masking his aversion to broken people, the reason he decided to become a doctor in the first place. Then he realized that fixing the broken meant being around them for a while, and he had no choice but to learn how to conceal his true feelings on the matter. I just hoped that his whole act worked better on others than it had on me.

“What brings you in today?”

His question was just part of the protocol; he already had the answer. His left hand had a grip on a chart that told him more than he needed to know, and I didn't have the desire to relive any of the details that had transpired the previous weeks. My blood would do that for me; it would give a thorough recount of the alcohol binge, the sedatives, the stimulants and whatever other substances I had put in my system without recollection. It would be a faithful witness of the events that made me lose total control and landed me in the hospital that day.

I kept it short and sweet to get things moving. “I have been struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts, self-medicating with alcohol and drugs,” I said with embarrassment, not for telling the doctor, but for having to openly admit what I never had in front of my parents.

“I see...” Now the doctor's fake smile dissipated; my answer was the cue that gave him clearance to stop the pleasantries and get down to business. His new face was no better though; it had morphed into somewhat of a concerned frown, eyebrows making a considerable upward tilt where they ended, by his nose. His nostrils opened wider than normal, almost begging for more air. His eyes strained with focus as he made eye contact with nothing but the chart that he was

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writing on, while speaking to no one in particular.

“Let’s go ahead and run some labs and see what medicine we can give you in the meantime, to ease some of the symptoms--deal?” He looked at me momentarily and there was one more artificial grin. Before I could nod in agreement he was walking out of the room, turning this time into his true, uninterested self. As he walked past the glass wall in front of me, I saw the real ER doctor for the first time. It almost made me feel relieved to not have to live with the lie, the clumsy act that he had to put on, just for me.

A needle went in my arm and painted three vials red. There went my story, no detail left behind. Questions were going to be asked, and truthful answers were going to be given. The dark era of lies and deceptions was finally coming to its inevitable end.

Then I waited, waited for help, a knot in my throat as the walls of the room started to close in. Sobriety sank, deep in my gut. I started reminiscing without anything to blur the images, and excruciating pain bubbled up inside me. There were projections on the walls, chopped up scenes of disastrous moments that defined the surrender of my sanity, of my happiness, of my hope. I wanted to scream, but didn’t know how. I wanted to cry, but tears wouldn’t come out. I sat still in the middle of the bed, and the walls were now so close that I could touch them with my hands. Mom and Dad became dark shadows that stood still in the background. The ringing in my ears became louder and it muffled everything else. My head started pounding harder than my heart, and my desolation became intolerable.

The wait continued, the minutes refusing to move on, time becoming relative to my discomfort. Mom and Dad still stood by my side. Their pacing had continued, just a little slower. Heads down, arms crossed, I could only imagine what was going through their heads. I was well aware of their exceptional distress and felt immense guilt knowing it was me who put it there.

Outside the room, movement continued. Nurses and doctors did their dance as stretchers drove by and parked in empty rooms,

delivering their cargo. Green scrubs would rush to hook up monitors, get blood pressure readings and insert IVs. An agonizing patient begged for pain killers. The loudspeaker called out for a code blue in room twenty-six. Nurses sprinted past the room, almost in rehearsed formation.

I waited.

A blonde-haired woman now sat on a recliner on the other side of the glass wall, in front of the nurse's station. It seemed like she couldn't quite understand why she was there. She attempted to helplessly explain to the nurses and the cop standing by her that she had not meant to threaten anyone's life. It had just been a fit of anger, like the ones she had gotten before, during her first tries at sobriety. The nurses, with their empty smiles and careless eyes, nodded and ignored her. It wasn't a story they hadn't heard many times before, or one that could possibly change her outcome in any way.

Seventy-two-hour psychiatric hold. We were going to be staying on the same floor.

At last someone came. They had secured a room for me to stay in. My parents got close and embraced me. Mom gave me her "it's going to be ok" look, but the fear in her eyes said something else, something sadder. Dad walked past me and gave me two soft pats on the shoulder, then continued to walk out of the room, head down, as if my failures were his own.

As they disappeared into a corridor that now seemed five times longer than when we got there, my stomach ached the same way it did that very first day of public school, when they waved their hands in unison, and their blurry silhouettes shrank as I saw them vanish through the tears. I had never felt more alone, more abandoned. The complete weight and heat of my burning world rested entirely on my shoulders now. Would the elevator taking me to the third floor be able to hold that much? I was about to find out.

CHAPTER 2

He never looked at me, not once. At first, I thought that it was because he had repeatedly done the same thing with so many people that he had become numb to the procedure. I was just a package that needed to be safely transported from the first to the third floor, and he was the carrier.

But the more I studied him in an attempt at getting my mind off the indescribable pain, the more I realized that I was misjudging the man with the badge. There was a look in his eyes that told me there was a lot more going on than simple indifference. A lot more.

He was a black man with a bald head, his prime years now just stories that he would tell his grandchildren as they grew up. They would eagerly listen but not understand them at first, much less realize the reason he would tell them. Later, however, when things truly mattered, they would reminisce and find important lessons in each one, helping them navigate some of the unavoidable obstacles in life, metaphorically speaking, on their grandfather's back. By that time, the old man would be long gone, and he knew that, hence his reason for telling them so young.

Years of hardships and challenges had left him wise, but also scarred. Unnecessary wrinkles and bags under the eyes were clear evidence that the man with the badge had prioritized his work for many decades. It wasn't because he wanted to, but because his sense

of responsibility compelled him to.

His eyes spoke in a way that his lips could not; they went back to places he'd rather forget. But those places were now tattooed in his pupils, and, in a sense, he liked it. It made him who he was, it gave him invaluable knowledge. Sometimes, however, he wished he could only be half the man he was if it meant erasing some of the memories. But memories are written in indelible ink, and pupils are crucial in order to see.

He walked past me and pressed the button to call for the elevator. He was a muscular man of six feet plus, with thick skin that shined as the lights bounced off it. His body towered over my thinner, shorter frame, and it made me feel a sense of intimidating respect. You could tell that back in his day, he would have had no problems picking the girl of his liking, as many went after him, his remarkable physique, his mystery, his quiet charm. He, however, only had eyes for one, *THE* one, and he didn't give up until he gave her his entire life. Out of all his regrets, that was never one.

He always looked forward and refused to make eye contact. The rhythm of his steps and the straightness of his back gave evidence of his military background. Maybe after a few tours on the other side of the world, fallen comrades, unspeakable atrocities and too many days away from his loved ones, he decided it was time to put on civilian clothes and ensure that people like me successfully made it to the third floor without hurting themselves or each other. It wasn't the highest paying or the easiest job sometimes, but it was honest and honorable. This man, you could tell, was all about honor.

Some of the habits you acquire in the military only die when you do. He was always very aware of his surroundings, and knew how to use his peripheral vision perfectly. Although he never made eye contact with me, he knew where I stood all the time, and I could tell he studied my body language in order to predict what I was going to do next. He learned this the hard way and promised himself never to get surprised again without being prepared.

The elevator dinged and opened its doors, like a mother opens her

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arms as she welcomes a young child. He extended his left arm and instructed me to jump in. I immediately obliged.

I stood in the back of the elevator as he stood with one hand on top of the other in front of the buttons, protecting them. The ride took less time than I thought, the elevator dinging once more and again opening its doors. The arm extended and prompted me to exit. He followed closely behind.

There was a short hallway that ended in a big double door. I walked until I could walk no more and waited for instructions. He came up and fiercely knocked on the door three times, then proceeded to again stand behind me, back erect, hand over the other, like a bouncer at the door of hell's night club.

A voice came from the other side of the door. "One second!" Steps followed and got louder as they approached. The door began to open.

The arm extended one last time and instructed me to make my way in. As I entered the darkness, I heard a deep yet surprisingly comforting voice.

"Son..."

I looked back and, for the first time, the man with the badge looked straight in my eyes.

"Best of luck to you."

I understood. It wasn't that he saw me as simple cargo; it was that he saw me as so much more, and this, he knew, was weakness, weakness he could not afford. Sometimes bigger hearts become easier targets, and his had been a bullseye too many times already.

The doors swung shut behind me, and a thought made me smile through the pain. The man with the badge will continue to do his work and do it well. How many great stories his grandchildren will be able to tell!

CHAPTER 3

At first glance the environment seemed chaotic, sometimes complete turmoil. For the most part, it was a loosely orchestrated play that featured multiple levels of mental illnesses, addictions, homelessness, crimes, suicide attempts, unspeakable loss and regrets-lots of regrets.

The young nurse who opened the door escorted me through the main corridor, past the lounge area and into a small exam room. As I walked by, I could feel eyes that followed me, some curious, others unaware. They just followed movement; it was the only thing they understood. Those empty stares brought shivers down my spine; they pierced like arrows through my skin, shattering bone and getting lodged deep inside me. Why did it feel like they could see through me better than anyone else?

As we made our way into the exam room, the blonde-haired woman I had seen downstairs made her way out. This time her face showed resignation; she had accepted the fact she couldn't talk her way out of this particular situation. Outside she picked up an obscene amount of Prada luggage, obviously not packed with this stay in mind. Two nurses had to help her carry it. She walked in front of them, head held high, solemnly but with authority. One could tell that she had the knack for making people feel as if she owned them. She walked in her room and slammed the door shut after the nurses were done bringing in the luggage. A few moments later, a few

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desperate cries could be heard coming from the other side. *That's reality setting in*, I thought. *That is the most painful part of the whole procedure.*

The young man brought me in and asked me to sit on the exam table, then checked my vitals and close to every inch of my body, to ensure that I was not carrying any contraband. The room was cold and hard, crowded with medical equipment and the scent of iodoform. It was big enough for an intimate medical examination but too small for anyone with claustrophobia, or, as I have always referred to it, *moving walls syndrome*.

He then told me to remove my shoelaces and belt, proceeded to put them in a bag along with my wallet, and labeled it with my patient ID number. That property would be safely stored in a locker, away from suicidal hands.

After the ritual ended, he brought me out of the constricting little room and directed me to the general lounge area, which I later discovered was also the dining hall. There he told me to sit and wait until someone came for me. The plastic chair had metal armrests that felt crisp, like ice. The walls moved outwards this time, making everything and everyone distant. I found myself in the middle of nowhere, sitting on a frozen chair, in the dark. As the nurse walked away, a fear like the one I felt when my parents left the hospital was digging its claws in the most vulnerable parts of my soul.

The lounge/dining area stood in the middle. On each side were two corridors that spanned the length of the floor. Patient rooms were located on the outside of each hallway. Living quarters were explicitly basic: two single-wide beds, a small, empty shelf and a window with a sad view. The few restrooms that were available to patients had doors that didn't lock and shatterproof mirrors. If someone wanted to shave they would have to ask a nurse, and they would do it for them. Every precaution had been taken to avoid self-harm.

In front of where I sat was the nurse's station, a centralized location where all activity could be carefully monitored and analyzed.

There was always someone on the other side of the counter, pressing buttons on a keyboard. There was a surveillance office behind, where a guard could keep an eye on the entire floor through the security monitors. Behind me, on the wall, hung a clock that at first glance seemed to be broken. I later realized that there was nothing wrong with it; it was time itself that was broken inside these walls.

It didn't take long to notice that a new face brought lots of attention. As I sat there, an array of looks consistently headed my way. They were concerned, confused, threatened and angry looks. For the most part, however, a lot of the patients seemed eager to make new friends. It meant having new ears to tell their story to, the story that no one there wanted to hear again, the record that had been overplayed a long time ago.

Regardless of how they felt about new tenants, most of the patients were lucid enough to understand that not everyone that walked through the doors would be friendly, much less polite. They had to wait and see how the newcomers were going to act, and that would dictate how close they were going to get. After a couple of days, maybe, they could plan a prudent approach.

There were several types of individuals roaming the halls, entering and exiting their rooms, coexisting in the most dysfunctional of ways. Some of them wore hospital gowns that were wrinkled and dirty, barely hanging on as they moved about. They wore them for several days in a row, and the stench of their unbathed bodies was cruel to the senses. They walked at slower than normal speed most of the time; the world did not move as fast for them as it did for others. There was an eerie emptiness in their eyes, most likely a combination of their illness and the strong medication, and they roamed the halls as soulless bodies that had no motivations, intentions or ambitions. They existed on the most desolate plane of reality, right before death. I nicknamed them zombies, although I felt guilty thinking of them that way.

In contrast, others paced as if they were late for the most important meeting of their lives, making unnatural gestures with their hands and talking out loud to themselves. The world they were living

in was simply not the same; it was an alternate dimension that only they had access to, and only their broken minds could understand. Sometimes, out of the blue, they would scream profanities or make bizarre statements that only made sense to them. They yelled about government conspiracies and plots to get them killed, demons and angry gods, vengeful children who would follow them around and secret societies they were a part of. Sometimes I wondered if they knew something that the rest of us didn't. More than once I witnessed nurses having to forcefully hold them down and give them shots, as they had a hard time taking their medications willingly. Big bruises would be left on their arms and legs due to their muscles being so tense at the time of injection. Seconds later, gears downshifted and their world would slow down, maybe a little too much now. The quick pacing and loud talking would stop, the soul left the body and for a few minutes, maybe hours, a zombie was born.

There were those who, like me, were there for other, not-so-obvious reasons, like addictions, run-ins with the law, violent outbursts, death threats, suicide attempts. Family members would sometimes be left without a choice; they would have to call the authorities and put their loved ones under an involuntary psychiatric hold. Those who tried to take their own lives had to be carefully monitored and wore a red bracelet around their wrist. The patients who seemed relatively normal were the ones that scared me most, as I couldn't figure out what they were capable of. I'm sure that for the same reason they were cautious of me as well.

As I sat in front of the broken clock, movement never ceased. Zombies would slowly approach and get a whiff of my scent (as I would unwillingly get one of theirs), then walk away when they perceived that I wasn't a threat. Others would sit on the lounge and draw, or write long essays, or play with cards, table games and puzzles. Some would just sit and explore their worlds, the ones inside their heads, while reality became a distant, unreachable star that they were most likely unaware existed. Some gathered small crowds and preached about the end of the world, the Illuminati and the secret spaceships hovering above Earth, waiting to extract and dispose of the weaker ones. Needless to say, having an audience that mostly

consisted of listeners with severe anxiety and extreme paranoia, these kinds of topics could cause plenty of unrest.

Sometimes, in the distance, loud screams would be heard, and punches to walls so hard that they'd resonate in your chest, followed by more terrified screams. A few trained nurses would sprint to the scene and the situation would be, most of the time, quickly contained. Other times guards had to get involved and restraints had to be used. In order to do that, however, the hospital had to call the patient's family and get prior permission to avoid facing legal repercussions in the future. If they didn't have any family, they would have to involve the state.

The higher functioning individuals, which I later nicknamed *the lucid*, seemed to mostly gather in the TV room on the other side of the hall. It was the safest place, away from the madness and incoherence of the others, but not always tranquil. From time to time one could hear scuffles about whose turn it was to control the remote, or what channel to put on. A nurse or two would always be close by to ensure things didn't turn violent, but they weren't always in time.

As I continued to wait, a disheveled woman with crooked eyes and a very abnormal limp walked past me, crying. As she roamed the floor without purpose, she would look back into the emptiness of the dim-lighted hall and yell with dismay, "Please! I beg you! Stop laughing at me! OH GOD!" I momentarily focused on this woman and peered into her eyes for as long as I could stand it, long enough to see what she saw, and to understand how real it was for her. It was a nightmare that had no end, a horror that could not be escaped. As she walked away in panic, the frigidity of her fears crawled inside me, and for a few seconds I understood the ravenous terror of constant torment.

After a while, a nurse approached me and let me know that I was now able to go into my room and settle in. I would see Dr. Patel in the morning. In the meantime, they would give me a light sedative to help me sleep. *A light sedative is definitely not going to do it*, I thought, as there was no way I would be shutting both of my eyes at the same

time in this place.

The nurse gave me a flimsy toothbrush, a small toothpaste tube and a hairbrush, then told me to go into room 217 and put everything on the shelf closest to the second bed, the one by the window. As I walked in, a short, stubby man of maybe forty was making his way out. He was bald and had a goatee that reminded me of a biker dude from the nineties. He took a meticulous look at me, extended his hand and said, “What’s up, man? I’m Jerry. Looks like we are going to be roommates tonight. I really hope you don’t pee yourself. I slept bathed in the stench of piss last night. Jesus...”

I was at a loss for words for momentarily. “I’m Jay, and no, I don’t pee myself at night--at least I don’t think so,” I finally replied.

Jerry smirked. He must have seen the fear in my face and immediately felt a sense of empathy toward me. “Don’t worry, kid, it could be worse. I leave tomorrow but before I do I’ll make sure to point out a few friends for you.”

“I appreciate that, Jerry,” I said with some relief.

“No worries...” he said, and then a light bulb came on in his head. “Oh, and another thing, and this one is important, trust me... Stay away from the little one...”

CHAPTER 4

I lay on my back with eyes open, staring at the ceiling as Jerry's snores filled the air with vexatious rhythm. He had no problem falling fast asleep, but as I expected, no "light sedative" was going to knock me out tonight.

It wasn't only the fear, the anxiety and the relentless thoughts that were keeping me awake. Every fifteen minutes or so a nurse would barge into the room, momentarily shine a bright light in our faces and walk away as she made a checkmark on a clipboard. I guess they could not give us enough time alone to succeed in killing ourselves or each other, so instead they robbed us of whatever soundness of mind we had left.

The air conditioning unit by the window competed with Jerry's snores as to who could be the loudest, and yet the night seemed eerily quiet, so quiet that my thoughts became more persistent than usual, in a desperate attempt to break the silence. Thoughts that I had been trying to keep out of reach for a while started to appear loud and clear, and I had no access to any substance that would quiet them down. The images formed in high definition and refused to be turned off. I was chained to my subconscious and forced to watch the show.

I saw her face, smiling with that smile that made my knees weak and my heart tremble with a rush of emotion. She connected with my

eyes and got lost in hopes and dreams, in plans of a future with good food, far travels, of kisses under the rain and cuddles on those cold nights, where the air smells of wood fire and the breeze turns your cheeks red. In me she saw her every day; getting home from work to a cup of coffee and destressing conversation, walks under autumn leaves and sunsets in the summer. She saw a confidant who would never let her down, a friend she could always trust, a lover who would always satisfy her. I could tell by the way she looked at me that with me she saw eternity in her finite existence, death not a worthy adversary against the strength of our love.

The scene in my head abruptly changed, and now there I was, sitting in a bed, forcing an exorbitant number of pills down my throat, coming in and out of consciousness, every memory a choppy blur. I heard yelling in the distance but couldn't tell where it was coming from. I could feel the force of someone rocking me back and forth--maybe an effort to make me listen, to pay attention. But it wasn't working; I became nauseous and more belligerent. Another change of scene and there she was, in the corner of a dark room, sitting on the floor with knees bent toward her face, sobbing uncontrollably, shaking in her own sweat. All her face now showed was unmeasurable fear and emptiness, a deep black hole in the middle of her soul that gradually expanded and swallowed every dream it touched, leaving her with nothing but flagrant dismay.

Another abrupt change of scene and she smiled again, hope radiating one more time, eyes shining with revived expectations. I remembered that expression, I yearned for it, as it tugged my insides with more force than anything in existence. For a second it made me happy and brought me a smidgeon of comfort, but the feeling didn't last long, as I was forced to pay attention and figure out the reason for her glow. She took off her clothes, slowly, with that raw sensuality that was as unique to her as her signature. Her top came off and so did her skirt, leaving her in nothing but her pink underwear, the ones from Victoria's Secret that I had bought and surprised her with on our first anniversary. She almost looked shy, as if she was about to reveal a very deep secret, one she never had. Her bra found its way to the floor, and her breasts looked as splendid as ever, gleaming in the soft lights, bathed in her unblemished alabaster skin.

A pair of masculine hands grabbed her firmly by her waist, and she sighted with lust. The tip of the fingers traveled north, barely touching her skin, just enough to drive her crazy. Her eyes rolled back and her mouth stayed open but did not make a sound. She was in so much pleasure she was forgetting to breathe. His mouth found hers and nibbled on her lower lip, as his hands now held both of her breasts tightly. He passionately pushed her onto the bed and climbed on her, without losing contact with her mouth. Two bodies started to tumble and intertwine, two bodies started to become one. The rest of her underwear quickly came off; she wasn't shy about sharing her secret anymore. She closed her eyes and tried to hold her moans but didn't succeed. Sweat gushed from her pores and she glistened. Her neck arched as she let out a loud, extended sigh that signaled her climax. Then she breathed heavily, full of satisfaction, as she looked in the eyes of the man who had brought her inexplicable pleasure, a man who wasn't me.

My body automatically sat up in the bed and a loud scream came out of the deepest parts of my spirit. I screamed for as long as I had air in my lungs, and when I stopped to catch my breath, I realized I had screamed with so much force that my ribs felt bruised and my throat was sore. A horrific panic began to penetrate my skin, making me tingle everywhere. My accelerated breathing was making me wheeze uncontrollably, and my heart rate was dangerously fast.

Jerry did not move a muscle; his snores continued battling the air conditioning for dominance. The door opened and the light hit my face, this time for a few seconds longer, to make sure I was ok. A check mark was made and the quiet darkness showed up again.

I laid back down on the bed, afraid to close my eyes. I did not want to relive another scene like that. But that raw emotion could not be concealed with alcohol or drugs any more. I was tethered to the clarity of my mind, and it wanted to express itself thoroughly now that it had my full attention. I begged, *Please! Don't let me see this again, please!*

No one was listening.

THE FLAWED ONES

Over and over my mind replayed a moment in time that I had not been present for, and with every playback my desperation grew larger. *Please! Make it stop, please!* Tears fell down my face and my body shook ferociously, my heart palpitated and I could not catch my breath. The only answers I got, however, were from Jerry's snores and an air conditioning unit that persisted in making the room much colder than it should have been.

Finally, exhausted and defeated, I allowed myself to sleep for a few minutes, but it wasn't long before another flash of light woke me up, a check mark was made on the clipboard, and torturing thoughts started to plague me again. *Funny*, I thought in my agony. Since I had gotten here I had been afraid of the ones out there, roaming the halls. Little did I know that the real source of horror was inside my head, and it could not be escaped.

That thought made me chuckle at first, and then made me break into maniacal laughter that went on for several minutes. I was losing my mind in the very place that was supposed to save it.

Jerry continued to snore, unscathed and oblivious. How could he sleep amidst all this commotion?

He is leaving tomorrow. He's been bathed in piss and God only knows what else. To Jerry, this is the most peaceful night he's had in this God-forsaken place.

CHAPTER 5

It was probably around four-thirty in the morning when my body, finally exhausted, forced my mind to shut down and allowed me to rest. Not long had passed when the lights in the room abruptly came to life and obnoxiously burned my eyes.

“Checking vitals, fellas,” said the nurse as she walked in with a portable blood pressure monitor and heart rate indicator. She looked as annoyed to be there as I was. I could only imagine how many vile things she’d already heard that morning, waking up highly dysfunctional and medicated individuals so early.

She had acquired thick skin throughout the years though, and the skill of letting things roll off her back with ease. To her, it was a matter of speed. How long would it take her to walk in and out of a room to get the job done? She probably timed herself and worked hard to beat her best time, and her level of exasperation would diminish if she was able to improve it. Everyone needs an anchor to let the grueling hours of the day pass by a little quicker.

Jerry was closest to the door, so he was first up. Incredibly, he didn’t seem at all bothered; his snores never went out of rhythm. An arm lifted from under the sheets and waited for the blood pressure cuff to wrap around it. The machine started breathing air into the cuff and a few seconds later began to exhale. It finalized by making three fast beeps that signaled a reading. The nurse quickly wrote it down and rolled the equipment to my side of the bed.

THE FLAWED ONES

The whole procedure did not take more than five minutes, but it felt like an hour to me. Through the bright lights, I could only see a blurred silhouette in front of me, feeling the pressure of the cuff as it hugged my arm. Once the lights in the room were off again, I felt so exhausted that I was happy at the prospect of closing my bloodshot eyes and getting some sleep. It was now all I wanted, to just sleep for a while, no tormenting thoughts, blinding lights or medical tools, or heavy snores, or freezing temperatures.

Just pure, unadulterated sleep.

This time it felt like I got some decent shut-eye for a bit longer than before. When the door of the room slammed open, a hint of sunlight was already peeking through the window, warming it up significantly. Jerry was no longer in the room, leaving me to fend for myself in the situation that was about to ensue.

I sat up in the bed and rubbed my eyes vigorously to ensure that what I was seeing was real. A young woman had barged in and was now standing against the wall, one hand on her chest, hyperventilating.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh... my God!” she whispered repeatedly at such speed that it sounded like her words were all one. Her chest would inflate and deflate strenuously, trying to keep up with the oxygen demand.

“Are you... ok?” I said, in the most soothing tone I could possibly find in such an unnerving situation.

“A man, a gargantuan man, had a huge anger episode and ripped the entire phone box off the wall,” she said, her chest still bouncing up and down like a basketball.

“Please help me, I’m scared!” Her eyes began to moisten and tears appeared. “I didn’t know what to do. All the nurses ran past me to hold him down and give him a shot. There were five or six of them and they still couldn’t hold him down! It happened next to my room and they were blocking the door. I couldn’t go past them to get

inside, I didn't know what to do..." The tears began to flow like a waterfall. "I'm so scared!" She balled up the hand she had against her chest into a fist and pressed it hard against her, closing her eyes briskly, as if trying to make her fear go away with the power of her mind.

"Just... calm down. You are safe here, nothing to worry about anymore," I said to her, but in reality, I was trying to reassure myself.

She was a young woman, no more than five feet tall. She wore thick glasses that magnified her eyes to twice their normal size, and had pale skin that had not seen the light of day in quite some time. She was a little heavysset, but not overweight, and unlike most patients, she wasn't wearing a hospital gown. Her blouse had quite the colorful flower arrangement on it, and her jeans went too high up her waist. Her fears were honest and pure; you could tell she could not hide her emotions, not like the rest of us could.

I got out of bed, slowly, trying to not frighten her more. I stood by her for a few seconds and with loosely calculated precision wrapped my hands around her shoulders in a risky attempt at comforting her.

She gradually nuzzled her way into my chest and just stood there for a while, in uncomfortable silence. I could now feel her heartbeat ricocheting vigorously against me. After a couple of minutes, I looked down to notice her head tilting up to make eye contact with me. Her heartbeat dissipated and retreated to an almost normal pace.

As soon as her eyes locked into position with mine, the expression of fear that was written on her face instantly vanished, as if a magician had tapped her in the head with a wand, or as if a hacker had deleted all the bad thoughts and fears from her hard drive. I was now in the presence of a completely different person.

Her big eyes squinted and her mouth formed a smile. She now reminded me of a five-year-old girl who was just given a reward for good behavior. "Hi, I'm Tara, nice to meet ya!" She hugged me by the waist and put her ear to my chest as if trying to decipher what

was ticking in there. She then squeezed me hard enough for me to let out an audible gasp, and for my already sore ribs to hurt even more.

Without warning she released me from her grip and began skipping out the door as Jerry was walking in. It was almost like she had experienced some sort of amnesia and could not remember the events that had transpired just a few minutes before.

Jerry looked back, petrified, as she made her way out. He looked at me, then back at her and back at me again, startled and confused. Maybe it was because he knew the rules; male patients could not cohabit with female patients in the rooms. Maybe it was something else.

“What... the hell... was the little one doing in here?” he asked, almost rhetorically.

I chuckled at first, and then, when I saw the look on Jerry’s face, got rather scared.

What the hell indeed.

CHAPTER 6

“I was born an anxious kid, with fear a loyal companion every step I took. Growing up an only child with overprotective parents meant that I was shielded from really learning how to fend for myself out there, in the real world.

“I wore concealer on my face my first day of school, not as a fashion statement, but because I cried so much that morning that Mom had to plaster it on me, in a desperate attempt at hiding my swollen eyes and red cheeks. The thought of being all alone in a place full of strangers, without anyone to hold on to for emotional support and protection, wasn’t just scary; it was downright terrifying.

“I remember that the old fan in the corner of my bedroom had metal blades and an electric motor that looked like it previously belonged to some type of landscaping tool, maybe an edger or a weed whacker. It was connected to a hollow metal tube that ended attached to an old wheel, which served as base. The whole thing had been spray painted gray, adding to its already industrial look. My late grandfather had put it together years before my birth, and it was considered as much a member of the family as any other of his inventions.

“In order to turn on the fan, you had to manually spin the blades clockwise (so they would turn in the right direction) and switch on the motor. When it finally came to life, it made a noise like that of a

small plane, and it probably generated as much thrust. Aside from the loud noise and the risk of losing a limb if you got too close to it, the fan was a great piece of machinery. On those scorching nights filled with humidity, having the metal giant watching over you and cooling your sheets was a luxury. And one would get so used to the noise it made that after a while it would be difficult to sleep without it.

“Mom’s morning routine included making breakfast and coffee, mopping the floor, preparing lunch and eventually shutting the fan off to get me ready for school. It was the slow decline of the blades, the disappearing noise and the dissipation of wind flow that would make me wake up every morning, promptly reminding me that it was time to start the dreadful routine.

“My heart palpitated and sweat would engulf my hands as I got out of bed and headed to the bathroom. My eyes would start swelling with tears, and my stomach would curl more than a yoga instructor as I brushed my teeth with little strength. Mom would eventually have to remind me how everyone noticed the makeup that first day of school. It would be a shame if we had to remind them of that unfortunate occasion again. So I would have to do my best to swallow my fear and suck in the tears, get dressed and ready for another day of hell and just do my best to get through it. Some days it was harder than others. Back then the teachers taught on a fear-based system and had no qualms about punishing children in sometimes extreme and sadistic ways. Many parents even gave them authority to physically hit their kids if they misbehaved. Even though I never got in trouble, witnessing the things they did to others in the classroom mortified me. I still remember the screams of third graders getting hit repeatedly on the back of the legs with plastic rulers, or sitting on the floor for extended periods of time with bottlecaps under their knees. Dealing with other children was no picnic either, and I was repulsed by the anxiety that the whole ordeal gave me. I would have done anything never to feel it again.

“Every morning the fan would die off and the routine would play over. My heart rate would elevate, tears would start to form and Mom had to once again give me the makeup pep talk. Then came the long walk to school that felt as if I was heading to an instant death by

firing squad.

“I would eventually make it to class, and initially things were never as bad as I had seen them in my head. But not being socially adept to handle myself with confidence resulted in eventually becoming an outcast, getting bullied and occasionally tormented. I cringe every time I hear about the purity and innocence of young children, about the light in their eyes and the goodness that must be protected. As far as I remember, it is at a very young age when the human race is truly at its most honest, jealous, ignorant and cruel. I don’t think most parents see that though, and they do absolutely nothing to positively influence their children’s behavior. This leads them to grow up not knowing how to be decent members of society.

“I was greeted with occasional beatings, because everyone knew that the quiet, weird kid was not going to retaliate, and what eight-year-old doesn’t need a live punching bag to practice on? I never got shoved into any lockers, for the mere reason that there weren’t any at my school; otherwise, I’m sure that I would have gotten very familiar with their interior architecture. I did, however, get pushed into concrete walls and kicked to the floor from time to time, which makes me wonder if the locker thing would have been a bad thing after all.

“Alexis always seemed to have a special interest in me; only God knew why. He had a repertoire of *funny skits* he liked to show off to the class, with me as his unwilling assistant. I would usually end up bruised up, written on, half naked and crying, to the amusement of Alexis’ audience. He was by far the shortest kid in the school, and I concluded that he picked on me to take the attention away from his tiny stature. I began to convince myself that I was doing a good deed by helping Alexis not get bullied himself, and for that I should feel proud. But feeling proud of being the school’s buffoon was not the easiest thing to do.

“I was nine years old when I experienced my first depressive episode.

“A lot of people describe depression as a void that swallows you

whole and won't let you feel anything at all. My depression consisted of immeasurable sadness that depleted any positive feeling or outlook for the future. It was a black hole that attracted and swallowed my reasons for being happy, the things that I enjoyed doing, the desire to do anything at all. I didn't feel like dying, but I didn't feel like living either. I was alive only because my lungs still breathed oxygen and my heart pumped blood through my veins. Little did I know at the time that a nine-year-old should not be feeling such an overwhelming emptiness, but I was, in ways that were almost impossible to accurately explain. I also became occasionally paranoid; some nights I would be terrified of closing my eyes, fearing that the darkness would seep through them and when I opened them in the morning I would be blind. I convinced myself that I would eventually die in my sleep, and not being aware of the transition from life to death would make me panic. There were other times where I would notice my parents acting in ways that to me went against their character, so I became suspicious that they weren't really my parents, but imposters who took their place.

"I woke up one morning and the world had turned a shade of gray that lacked life, enthusiasm and most of all, hope. The fan came to a stop that day and I could not find the strength to get out of bed, much less argue my decision of not going anywhere.

"Mom must have noticed the change, as she didn't even argue or attempt the makeup pep talk when I told her I was staying home. She looked at me, concerned and intrigued, nodded and cranked the fan back on, then stood in silence by the door, studying me. She walked away, head down, when she couldn't find the answer she was looking for.

"Three days went by and her concern transformed into worry when she saw that my condition had not improved. Now she and Dad would constantly hover over the bed, asking the same questions over and over again: *Why are you so down? Can you tell us what's wrong? How can we help?*

"The answer was always the same: *I don't know.*

“To me, the world had lost its reason for spinning. Putting one foot in front of the other and getting out of bed was pointless. It was a feeling of constant falling into a bottomless abyss without knowing how to fly or make myself wake up from the nightmare. I lost my sense of self and started questioning my own reality. I spent days bathed in sadness and nothing else. My hygiene became so bad that Mom had to give me sponge baths and brush my teeth in bed, as I lay there, slightly more alive than dead.

“I struggled with the idea of purpose, as I became convinced there wasn’t any.

“My parents were obviously very worried and tried to help in any way they could, but failed miserably. Living under religious and cultural stigma left them with hands tied and an ignorance that was hard to overcome. Taking someone (especially a child) to a psychiatrist or even a psychologist was reserved for the mentally ill and psychotic, not the melancholic. So they resorted to the only thing they knew: prayer, Bible passage readings, visits and pep talks from the congregation leaders and the occasional “*you need to get it together and snap out of it; you are stronger than this*” that made me feel even lonelier, as it was proof that no one really understood what I was going through.

“Several weeks went by and not much changed. I continued lying in a stupor of sadness as the Earth rotated and the days passed, until one fateful morning. The old fan came to a stop and the sun came through the window, and I found myself very interested in the specks of dust that danced in the light right above me. *It’s like they move in certain patterns, almost relative to each other*, I thought. *It’s like they dance with each other and know what the next move should be before they do it. Could dust specks have a gravitational pull? Do they attract each other like galaxies attract each other in space? Do galaxies move like dust specks, or do dust specks move like galaxies?*

“It took me a minute to realize something had changed. It wasn’t only that the sun was shining a little brighter that day; it was also that something caught my attention, something had interested me enough to make me think, to make me wonder. A thought that wasn’t sad or

anxious had crept in without me even noticing, and it was virally creating other interesting thoughts that were, for the first time in a while, not full of gloom.

“I smiled.

“I was feeling slightly better. Things didn’t change overnight, but gradually; it was a slow process. I started getting out of bed more often, hygiene improved and the world got some of its pizzazz back. “Eventually I got tired of being a bum all day and decided it was time to incorporate myself to reality again, as challenging as I knew that would be. But my brain begged for stimulation, it wanted to go out there and learn and be challenged, and I knew that wasn’t going to happen staying at home.

“I was honest with my parents and told them about the challenges I was facing in school. They decided it was time for a fresh start and moved me to another campus, where they made sure to thoroughly explain to the teachers my situation and worked closely with them to monitor me both at home and in class. Things got a little better after that, and for a while I enjoyed my studies and got somewhat closer to some of my classmates.

“I wish I could say that this was my first and last depressive episode, but I would be lying if I did. My life has been deeply affected by these bouts of sadness. Things got truly worse when alcohol entered the picture and I...”

“Let’s stop there for today,” Dr. Patel said, while dotting her I’s and crossing her T’s on the chart.

“Well Jay, it seems like we are dealing with a depressive disorder that could potentially be manic, or bipolar. There is some childhood trauma that we must work through and try to reconcile as well. I don’t have enough data to make an accurate diagnosis yet; we’ve just began the process, but I think we are off to a good start. Let’s put you on the right meds to get you feeling better and we will continue this exploration tomorrow. I am prescribing 75mg of Effexor in the morning and 100 mgs of Seroquel at night. Let’s see how that works

and we shall go from there.”

“How about for the, um, the anxiety?” I asked, hoping to God that I could get some kind of benzo out of her.

“Well...” She sighed and looked down at the chart. “I want to see how you do without benzodiazepines for a while, since you have had problems with them recently. We will keep an eye on you and if you exhibit any withdrawal symptoms we will taper you off, but for now let’s try going this this route.”

Dammit. I nodded in agreement; it was not as if I had a choice in the matter, but it was worth a shot.

As I walked out of the office, for some reason, the thought of the old metal fan remained in my head. We had left our home and country 20 years ago, but the old fan stayed behind. I wondered if it was still cooling the sheets of some kid’s bed, while providing the loud yet soothing noise of the metal blades and the weed whacker motor to break the silence of the night. I wondered if its morning demise was still letting some anxious kid know that it was time to get up and face a scary world, today, hopefully, without any makeup on.

