

Second Chance (Excerpt)

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SECOND CHANCE (EXCERPT)

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Written by Dave Cenker.

If you are still breathing, you have a second chance.

~ Oprah Winfrey ~



Prologue

The tour guide spoke with an informal tone that put me at ease. The bamboo cage strapped around the elephant's torso provided a surprising level of comfort. It was only the stink of fresh dung below my ten-foot tall method of transportation that signaled we were in the wild.

I regarded the wildlife I saw functioning in its natural habitat with a respectful fear. I didn't think to adopt the same awareness toward the trained animals carrying us on their backs.

The array of species on display was vast. Zebras. Gazelles. Lions. Cheetahs. That word still makes me cringe when I hear it. *Cheetah*. I replay the scenario in my mind. Was she being protective of her cubs nestled in a nearby pocket of waist-high grass? Was she sensing my adventurous spirit and doing her best to impress me? Or challenge me? Whatever the reason, she darted for the elephant that dwarfed her in stature with unprecedented tenacity.

Surprised by the imminent attack, the domesticated mammal let out a howl and lurched in a sudden act of self-defense. Everything blurred. I heard the tour guide shouting commands. I couldn't tell whether his directives were for me or the animal carrying me on its back. The thick accent he fought to curtail returned, rife with panic.

I'm an adrenaline-seeking junkie. It's in my DNA. I have launched myself from an airworthy plane as a skydiver. Soaring above the ground on a motorbike, smatterings of mud never obscured my view, or confidence levels. I have skied ahead of an avalanche while the advancing columns of snow pulled me toward a powdery grave.

Scoffing at each of these unsuccessful attempts to ruin me, I turned each one to the side with casual arrogance. Instead, I met my match atop a docile elephant on a grassy savanna somewhere in the middle of Africa.

Destiny has an ironic way of manifesting itself. Christine, my unofficial fiancée, was on the elephant I was riding before she switched with me, offering to let me ride in front for a closer view of the action. Her scream from behind me reached my ears, a warning signal arriving too late. Based on the outcome of those few frantic moments, I knew her fate was shifting in a different direction from mine.

I was flying once again. There was no time to prepare, no bicycle wheels to land upon, and no parachute to deploy. The last thing I remembered was the mixed taste of clay and soil in my mouth.



1

With so much time at my disposal, I can't help but snicker at the irony of my unfortunate circumstances. Nick McKenna is a name synonymous with strength and indestructibility. It used to be, at least. I'm the impetuous and reckless one. I stare danger in its tempting eyes, taunt it, and turn away its perilous consequences with ease. Touché, my friend. Or fiend.

Who is winning the battle raging inside my head? It depends on the mood of the prescription medication coursing through my bloodstream. Its numbing effects relieve more than my physical pain.

The paradox that continues to provoke me is more crippling than it should be. As impulsive and unfettered as I was, I had a plan, a well-laid strategy for my future. Every single part of it. Career. Financial. Relationship.

Akin to gamma rays bombarding matter, my intentions vaporized into a state of entropy.

Disorder.

Chaos.

Laws of the universe were violated on that ominous day. I never imagined it was possible for things to change so dramatically, and quickly.

It was ideal timing, or so I thought. Between semesters in pursuit of our degrees, the next term for Christine and me in-

cluded a light class load mixed with internships. While she worked at the pediatrician's office, I'd be at the university hospital. Our choice of specialties diverged, but we came together in every other facet of our lives.

We are a pair of oxygen atoms, establishing a covalent bond and sharing everything. We're planning to marry once we complete school. There's no ring or date, only an unspoken promise between two twenty-something medical students in love.

The impromptu African vacation was perfect middle ground.

Christine is a lover of the outdoors. She pines to immerse herself in the cloak of a forest canopy. She invites the unbounded wonderment of the open sea. This expedition furthered her quest to better commune with Mother Nature.

Watching the hunter pursue the prey. That was my attraction to our trip. The circle of life unfurling before my eyes provided a welcome adrenaline rush.

There were few documented dangers. The maladies we risked contracting from disease-carrying insects posed the most severe threat. The suite of precautionary immunizations had us more prepared than we needed to be. Christine covered our bases before we'd dive into something with reckless abandon as I was prone to do.

Despite the foresight and preparations for a safe adventure, fate intervened to remind me, in no uncertain terms, that we are at its mercy.



2

I got your favorite. Ham and Swiss. Extra mayo and tomatoes, no onions.” Christine’s actions are slow and deliberate as if I’m a fragile piece of glass, waiting to shatter into a million pieces. After kissing the top of my head, she spreads a napkin across my lap. Instead of transporting me from one location to another, my legs now serve a different and less meaningful purpose.

As she leans in, the proximity of her body is intoxicating, but frustrating. Getting my lunch, making a trip to the bathroom, and climbing in and out of bed. Simple tasks have become unmanageable, a spider spinning a web poised to entrap me with cunning skill.

A peck on the cheek, a forced smile, a lock of hair that tickles my neck while she works to position the pillow behind me. These are the shards of sensuality remaining in my relationship with Christine. Her perfume’s scent lingers longer than the memory of our last intimate moment together.

“Here you go, honey.” She hands me an envelope before brushing her fingertips along my lap. Her touch isn’t felt, but the thought of that lost sensation brings a tingling awareness to my other senses.

The international postage catches my attention. I wonder how Tom, my former roommate, and his girlfriend, Amy, are far-

ing on the other side of the Atlantic. Tom's voice echoes in my head as I read the opening words in his letter. *Hey, Fin! How's it hanging, bro?*

Fin. It's a nickname I earned several years ago. I jumped off a boat into shark-infested waters. On a dare. It was one of those challenges in my former life branded as courageous. Hindsight is twenty-twenty. That supposed act of fearlessness was more foolish than brave.

I peruse the contents of the letter while working to keep the sandwich and chips balanced on my lap. Tom tries to downplay his excitement, but I can detect the happiness oozing between his words. The two of them deserve their good fortune even if jealousy has become an uncomfortable new word in my vocabulary.

Christine is gliding around the house. She navigates through the doors I can't fit through and moves with an ease I'm sure she takes for granted. It's not her fault. I did the same thing. As she ambles back into the room with drinks, I exhale an audible sigh before setting Tom's letter to the side.

"What's wrong? Is the sandwich okay?" There's a hollow desperation growing inside me. I bite my bottom lip and stare at my lunch as if it has a convenient solution to my problem.

"No, it's fine. I guess I'm not as hungry as I thought." A different appetite replaces my physical hunger. I yearn for something that will return my life to what it used to be. *Normal.*

My friendship with Tom has morphed since his departure. Still, he's treated me the same after my accident while Christine has donned kid gloves. Is it because she shares a closer emotional bond with me? Our relationship has become so much more complicated. She coddles me, pities me, and jumps through

hoops so everything is easy for me. Too easy, as if I'm an invalid, incapable of doing things for myself.

There may be more truth in that self-fulfilling psychobabble than I thought. Someone treats a person in a certain way and the mind accepts the new reality without question. How do I make sense of the two most significant relationships and how they're affecting me? Do I prefer the status quo impartiality of Tom's friendship? Do I need the pampered attention Christine provides? Is it because I never had that relationship with my mother?

An acidic bile rises in my throat as I voice the word. *Mother*. It triggers an unwelcome and painful reminder of my biological parents. Despite the events that unfurled over the past month, they are absent from my life. Given our history, it doesn't surprise me. But still, I am their child.

Most considered me a reckless kid in my teenage days. I didn't go looking for trouble, but it sure had a way of finding me at my most vulnerable moments. My mom and dad spent most of their time at the office. They left me to fend for myself in the empty shell meant to be our family's home. Could I have bypassed the opportunity to partake in any mischievous wrongdoing? I suppose, yes, but boredom's influence prevailed.

There were boisterous parties on evenings when my parents were otherwise engaged. I covered my tracks at first, afraid of getting caught in the act. I became more brazen over time, seeing how much I could get away with in their absence. It was a game, and I continued to be victorious no matter how far I pushed beyond the acceptable limits. I needed a bigger challenge.

My mom hid her spare set of keys inside the liquor cabinet disguised as a nightstand. I'd pick up my girlfriend at the library.

Stacy's parents thought she was meeting a group of friends to study.

Stacy and I navigated to our secret spot on the far edge of town. We parked the car and disappeared into the woods with a bottle of bourbon and a box of condoms. We could've done the same in my house, but there was more pleasure in undertaking a larger risk. I suppose those wild and reckless days helped nurture my adrenaline-seeking personality.

My parents toiled away at the office, oblivious to my needs and rebellious shenanigans. The long hours and continual absence were for me. That's what they told me. I wanted to believe them, but I wasn't naïve. They devoted more of their time to fraternizing with colleagues than they did catering to their clients. When I exposed their lie, a wide chasm formed between us. They called me immature and selfish. They refused to continue supporting someone who was so ungrateful even if I was their son.

Cut from the family payroll on my eighteenth birthday, I relied on stubborn determination to fund my college education.

Now, I'm doing the same in pursuit of a medical degree.

Christine picks the tomato from between the two slices of bread and sets it to the side. "I set up an appointment for you. Her name is Leah. She'll be here tomorrow morning at eight o'clock."

Four weeks of physical therapy will strengthen my core. It'll help regain the confidence I've lost along with the feeling below my waist. Everyone tells me it's an opportunity to reclaim my independent nature. I shouldn't need training in that discipline.

Insurance covers my planned expenses under a disability clause.

I can opt for self-directed rehabilitation. The doctor suggested it might be more efficient. Christine could be the cornerstone of a strong support team.

Instead, she did the research and set up this first appointment, siphoning off responsibility for my well-being to someone else.

I need to keep my emotions in check. She has enough pressure with her classwork and the responsibilities of her internship. I shouldn't expect her to reschedule her entire life to do something that's better handled by a professional at no cost.

"Thanks for helping." I wrap the sandwich and place it beside Tom's letter on the side table. "I think a nap is in my future."

"Do you need me?" As much as I want to read into her question, I know what she means. It takes longer than it should to transfer myself from the wheelchair to the couch. I could use Christine's help, but I decline her offer.

"No, I'll be fine." Truth is, I'm less *fine* with each passing minute.

"Okay. I have to run to the bookstore to pick up a book for my new class." Our conversation has never required so much effort. Every single syllable is an exercise in forced communication.

She continues as if walking atop a bed of pins and needles. "I also need to stop by the pediatrician's office to take care of some logistics. I won't be able to make it for dinner tonight."

"No problem. I understand." I offer her an unconvincing smile. She kisses me on the cheek and disappears out the front door.

The silent screams shattering my fragile shell upon her departure are deafening. They're an unspoken plea for help that I don't want, but desperately need.



3

The space surrounding me remains the same, but it feels different as I view it from a new perspective. I treasure the bittersweet memories in this house I've rented with Tom for the past two years. Frosty brews. Action flicks filled with gratuitous fight scenes. Casual conversation wandering along no definitive path. The world was our stage, and we were ready to take it by storm. So much has changed since those carefree days. My roommate is the smallest of those changes in the grand scheme of things.

Tom Tomkins. I get a chuckle when I reminisce on his parents' choice for a birth name and their interesting sense of humor. I met him in the same biochemistry class we shared with Christine. Without his not-so-subtle prodding, I'd never have asked her on a date. He inherited a wry disposition through his upbringing, but he's the sincerest guy I know and my best friend.

With his girlfriend, Amy, deployed overseas, Tom secured a medical internship in the town next to her base.

Serendipity has treated him well.

Still, their *opportunity* couldn't have been more out of sync with my *misfortune*. He offered to help locate a new roommate. He tried to give me money, to tide me over until I found someone to pick up his share of the rent. I didn't accept either proposal. He had enough to plan for with his imminent departure.

I could handle this minor inconvenience without a problem, I thought. I never imagined it could be so difficult. Christine being the caring soul she is, moved in with me. Sort of, at least.

Her parents don't approve of our relationship. In their eyes, I'm a negative influence and pose a threat to Christine's future as a pediatrician.

A plea to help cover unexpected expenses was the casual inquiry she made to them. She knew she'd never need to pay the money back. She risked violating a sacred trust with her mother and father for my sake.

Christine has kept her old apartment. It's meant to keep her parents unaware of where their added financial support is going. She spends as much time with me as possible. Here, in the house I can afford once again, thanks to her family's money.

Unable to navigate stairs, the top floor is useless. My effective living space is half of its former size. The gathering room downstairs is my new bedroom. The couch, once used only for watching television, is my bed. My bathroom is right around the corner and the kitchen is next to it. My wheelchair won't fit through the narrow passageway, so I wheel through the foyer to get to it. The architects of this house didn't consider my plight when they planned the layout. I suppose no one plans for my circumstances. Everything poses a challenge now.

I'm unable to move any part of my body below the waist. The second-hand wheelchair is temporary until insurance processes my claim. I wish my medical diagnosis was temporary. The odds for a complete recovery are slim to none.

I remember the doctor uttering those caustic words. He used such a mundane tone as if he were reciting the items on a shopping list. *A carton of milk, a half dozen eggs, and a loaf of rye*

bread. And, oh yeah, you're paralyzed for the rest of your life. Enjoy your day. The way this nightmare has played out pushes me toward the far end of the cynical spectrum.

So many thoughts race through my mind. What am I supposed to do now? How am I to become the surgeon I wanted to be when I'll never walk again? The medical professionals keep telling me to prepare for this new reality. At first, I denied their prognostications for my future. The more their words echo in my subconscious, the more I accept them with the begrudging truth. I have a permanent disability.

What will happen between Christine and me? We haven't discussed children. Should I even consider that as a sensible choice? Could I be an adequate father? How am I to toss a baseball with my son in the backyard? The first dance with my daughter at her wedding won't be the way I imagined it. These are the wandering thoughts and worries that haunt me when I can't do much else other than think.

I lose my focus at the worst times. The remnants of my sandwich have fallen on the floor thanks to absentminded clumsiness. A mere foot beyond my reach, it may as well be on the other side of campus. Determination is a cornerstone of my personality, but the foundation is crumbling. It reminds of a trip to the Florida Keys before my accident.

I pulled into a gas station, forgetting the boat trailer visible in my rear-view mirror. I boxed myself into a tight spot and spent twenty minutes doing my best to navigate in reverse. Pumps, parked vehicles, and the car wash next to the convenience store were obstructions that posed no threat a few moments earlier. Despite the ogling and honking from aggravated travelers surrounding me, I prevailed. With an ample reserve of determina-

tion, I could overcome any obstacle in my path. Stubbornness served me well. *Determination* and *stubbornness*. Two words providing the same means to an end. On opposite ends of the spectrum, one is positive. The other, not so much.

That scene reminded me to stay aware of my surroundings. That's the case now. Not because there's a boat trailer towed behind me. Instead, it's because the pair of legs beneath me no longer obeys the commands sent from my brain. I need to be careful with each piece of every mundane task even if it only means paying attention to a sandwich.

My Rottweiler hears the ruckus and interprets it as an invitation. His tags jingle in excitement as he enters the room.

"Shelby, no!" The command carries little emphasis as he chomps up the crust on the floor. My lunch has become his afternoon snack. I exhale and allow my shoulders to sag with resignation. I am more demoralized with every subtle nuance that moves me further from a *normal* life. The nurses and doctor share their encouragement at each of my weekly visits. As if they have a clue what I'm asked to endure. I don't want to depend on others for my well-being. It causes my mental health to suffer as much as its physical counterpart.

A nap may be a good idea. It might help ease the pounding inside my head. Sleep is more enjoyable than ever, for the wrong reasons. I wheel into the bathroom to relieve a different pressure. It's an awkward routine, not as simple as flinging myself on the toilet seat. A mundane necessity that every other person undertakes without thinking, I'm nothing but a blundering toddler in my attempts. This shouldn't be so difficult. Even though no one can see me, embarrassment consumes me. I *am* an invalid.

The bottle of pills stays firm in my grasp as I return to the living room. I won't drop them. They're too important to my quality of life right now. With little grace, I shuffle out of the wheelchair and flop on to the couch. Shelby scampers in, expecting another handout. When he realizes I have nothing to offer, he jumps up and nestles in a ball at my feet.

I smell the fragrance of Christine's shampoo on my pillow. I remember how she used to curl up beside me. There wasn't much extra room, but the emotional value outweighed any physical inconvenience. Her scent is fading now. She spends more time in the bedroom upstairs. With her responsibilities and obligation, I know she needs her sleep. Still, I crave that attachment. It's a crutch that keeps me from tipping over a precipice into the black void of depression.

I pop two pain pills, take a swig of water, close my eyes, and succumb to the movie playing on the back of my eyelids. A hundred yards from the sandy shores of the pristine beach, I paddle on my surfboard, keeping an eye peeled toward the horizon in search of a utopian wave. As the ocean swells, I rise to my feet while maintaining balance. I maneuver with precision at each crest. Nothing will break me as I continue to glide along the shoreline. I am invincible. In the safety of my dreams, at least.



4

The ocean crests continue to wash over the tips of my surfboard. I slip closer to the foamy tendrils that kiss the glittering grains of sand along the shoreline. A surreal experience, I'm the only soul on the beach. There's an endless supply of idyllic waves at my disposal. The sound of knuckles rapping on wood doesn't fit with the ambiance surrounding me.

I coax myself from the drunken slumber imposed by the pain medication. The daylight streaming through the front window hints I've slept through the night. Christine left for class this morning without bothering to wake me. There's silence in the house except for the knocking sound and Shelby's deep breathing. He's still curled up at my feet. Watchdog he is not.

Clearing sleep from my eyes and focusing on my watch, I realize it's eight o'clock.

"Hold on a second. Be right there." I bark my words louder than Shelby, who raises his head in recognition. I wrench myself from the couch with an abrupt maneuver that leaves me feeling pain in yet another part of my body.

"Hi." I fail to hide the embarrassment in my tone as I swing open the door. I smooth my tousled hair and try to suppress the twinge of painful discomfort in my back. The irony of the circumstances doesn't elude me. My physical therapist is standing before me and I've tweaked something before I know who she is.

“Hi, I’m Leah Hewitt, from *Able Bodies*.” She extends her hand in greeting with a polite and professional smile on her face.

“Nick McKenna. Come on in. Sorry about not answering sooner. My meds must have socked me out for the entire night.”

Christine chose *Leah* for a reason. She was a stout girl from the psychology class we took a couple years back. This rendition of Leah in my living room isn’t pudgy, but neither is she striking in presentation. She has a well-toned body, but shouldn’t every physical therapist be fit and trim?

Wire-rimmed glasses frame her hazel eyes. Wavy brunette hair comes to rests on her shoulders. Her unassuming outfit draws no sideways glances from passersby on the street.

“Please, sit down.” I shove the blanket to the side as a pile of Shelby’s fur floats suspended in the air. Being unprepared is embarrassing, but she doesn’t notice. Neither does she waste any time, getting right to business.

“So, Nick, there’s a four-week program set up for you. It will help strengthen your core and establish a sustainable strategy for your future. Tomorrow, we’ll begin an exercise plan I’ll refine based on our discussion today.”

“What can I expect from this process?” It’s an open-ended question full of potential answers.

“It all depends upon how much work you’re willing to put into it.” Her canned reply irritates me. “Let me rephrase. Has anyone you’ve worked with in this situation ever walked again?” There’s that thought, the one I fear vocalizing. After suggesting such an ambitious idea, I’ll be committing myself to making it a reality since failure is a four-letter word in my vocabulary.

“If I am being honest with you, I wouldn’t know. You’re my first client.”

Leah's comment summons a different four-letter word, but I bite my bottom lip to keep it silenced. I'm stuck with a complete rookie to help set up a workable future for myself.

"So, where do we start?" My question is a manner of accepting her answer. She may not get me where I want to be, but I have little choice. I'll commit to doing whatever is necessary. This undertaking *will be* a success. Even if I don't yet understand the exact meaning of that word, *success*.

Leah withdraws a shiny laptop from her backpack. As she removes her glasses and sets them on the table, my pessimistic thoughts evaporate. I glimpse at Leah's hazel eyes, intrigued and captivated. There's something familiar hidden behind them.

"Nick, what do you think?" Her voice registers in my head.

I'm confounded by the filtering effect of her eyeglasses. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"What are your grandest ambitions? Where would you like to get to?"

"I guess wanting to surf again would be a stretch goal, huh?" My recent dream is still fresh. I sail straight past the medical impossibility of walking. I leap to the unthinkable, balancing on a surfboard while riding an ocean swell.

"No, not at all. You need to think big. The mind has a way of limiting what's possible when you give it permission. The world is your stage. Use it all."

I recall my ruminations from last night. Christine and Tom have treated me in different ways. How they act in my presence affects how I regard myself. It's a bouncing seesaw. On one end is Christine with her kid gloves. On the other is Tom, speaking free and easy with no reservations. Leah's demeanor is causing my mental fulcrum to shift away from the side hiding the truth.

We spend the rest of the first session covering logistics of our routine. The space in the living room is large enough for the exercises scheduled to become my daily regimen.

Leah makes a note of my medications, insuring they won't interfere with my therapy while proposing that I wean myself off them. She warns they can be an addictive crutch.

"Do you want to push our meeting to a later time slot?" There's a chastising tone in Leah's proposal meant to point out my unpreparedness for our first session.

"No, eight is fine. I'll be ready."

"Good. Now, I have homework for you. I need you to think of an outside activity, to help you get fresh air and exercise. This is important. It should be something you enjoy, okay?"

"Yeah. So, bright and early tomorrow?"

"Not a minute later. It was nice to meet you, Nick." She replaces her glasses, slips the laptop into her backpack, and makes her way toward the front door. "See you in the morning, then. Have a good day."

"You too, thanks." I exhale. The first meeting wasn't that dreadful. Leah has a contagious air of confidence, but that same conviction, once easy to summon, is now difficult to find inside me.

How do I come up with something enjoyable outside these four walls? I only dwell on things I'm no longer able to do. Whether it's biking, volleyball, or hanging ten, everything interesting is out of bounds. I'll complete her homework... later.

Three hours pass before Christine arrives back at the house. She does her best to put on a face of compassionate understanding, but I can tell she's exhausted.

"Hey, babe. How were your classes today?"

“Okay. How did your first session go? How was, what’s her name, Leah?” She tiptoes around pronouncing those four letters as if there’s a hint of worry or anxiety in her voice. I know Christine’s intonation and body language. Her subtle jealousy is endearing.

“She’s not attractive. If that’s what you mean.” I smile and see the tension subside in her shoulders as if it’s been building up throughout the day.

“So, what happens next?” A casual tone returns to her conversation.

“A bunch of strength exercises. Something about weaning me off meds, and I’m supposed to think of some outside activity, from my wheelchair. I don’t have a clue.”

My statement is a question to Christine even if it’s not posed as one. I could use help to navigate this latest road block in my recovery. She slips through the doorway amid our back-and-forth conversation.

“You’ll figure it out.” Her response is disappointing.

That’s as helpful as my legs are for walking. Left grasping for an idea in the deep recesses of my mind, she emerges from the bathroom with a bundled-up tissue in her hands. “I can’t stay long. I’m meeting my parents for dinner.”

“What about *our* plans?” I don’t hide the disappointment in my voice. There aren’t many times I look forward to leaving the house.

“Sorry, didn’t I tell you?” It’s a rhetorical question. We both know the answer.

“No.” My response is curt. *Why wasn’t I invited?*

“I told them you weren’t available. The whole evening would turn into a giant argument. It wouldn’t be worth it.”

What isn't worth it? Annoyance is seeping through my pores. Not because I'm not going, but because Christine feels compelled to make that decision for me. Does she believe this course of action is the best thing for me, for us? We need to come clean with her parents and move forward, but I see it won't be tonight.

"You understand, don't you?" She speaks with little conviction.

"Sure." The lies become easier to fake as they grow in number.

"How about dinner together at home tomorrow night?" Her pleading grin works every time. "It's a plan then."

The guilt of leaving me alone subsides as a relieved smile spreads across her face. She runs her long fingers through my hair, still tousled, and plants a kiss on the top of my head. "See you later, Nick. Love you."

We don't use those two words much, so when I hear them they catch me by surprise. The door latches as Christine departs. "Love you, too." I whisper it to myself, alone once again.



5

I set an alarm to make sure I won't oversleep again. It's not needed because I'm up the entire night. It'd be easy to blame my insomnia on the dripping faucet in the bathroom. The periodic settling of the house is a shotgun going off in the moments of silence between each drip. Instead, I lay awake contemplating everything wrong in my life.

Christine has been there beside me through this whole wretched debacle. She says the right things. Still, something is amiss. She always has a convenient excuse for leaving me to fend for myself. I guess it's difficult to blame her. It'd pain me to see someone I love trapped inside their own skin.

I can't sleep a wink. My propensity to over-think everything is a part of it. The other contributing influence is my decision to cut back on medication. I forwent taking any pills last night, but I shouldn't have done that. At least, not yet. I depend on their desensitizing effects. Yes, they ease my physical pain. But, I rely on them to placate the emotional upheaval I face every time my thoughts wander toward how things *should* be.

A minute before eight o'clock, her announcement at the front door surprises me even though I'm expecting it. My sense of movement and ability to walk has disappeared. But, my hearing has become sharper to compensate for those shortcomings. Each knock is a signature for the person waiting to enter.

This one occurred only once before, but I know it's her. A steady, yet firm rap, balanced between direct and compassionate is a comforting mix. It feels odd taking a moment to appreciate the simple pleasure associated with a greeting at my front door.

Leah has her hair tied back in a tight ponytail. She means business but is sharing a pleasant smile at the same time. Her grin is contagious. How long has it been since my lips curled upward as they are now?

She's holding two cups. I smell the caffeine. I watch for a moment as the steam vents through the hole in the plastic lid. The trail of visible heat escaping from the inside of each container curls into the small space between us. Each vapor stream dances with perfect choreography. It's a short-lived dance, but a delightful one.

"Good morning, Nick. Ready to get started?" She hands me a cup.

"You know I drink coffee? And how I like it?" I don't remember sharing my daily ritual with her. My underestimation of Leah's deductive abilities escapes through her furtive grin.

"I listen to what people say." Leah sets her steaming dose of caffeine on the table and retrieves her laptop. She opens the spreadsheet from yesterday and reviews our plan for the day's session.

"Let's begin today with a few simple exercises. Basic seated crunch, stomach pumps, and a move called twist the night away. They're easier moves aimed at improving your flexibility and should ease us into a daily routine we'll work on ramping up."

"How did you know?" Still hung up on how she knows of my affinity for coffee, my streak of stubbornness can't let it go, even though it's something so insignificant. I need to understand

things. It allows me to stay in control even if it borders on obsessive-compulsive behavior.

“What?” Leah looks at me with genuine confusion on her face.

“The coffee?” I press the question, backing her into a corner, requiring her to give me an acceptable answer. I’m sure I offered nothing to her that hinted at my caffeine tendencies. If she thinks my words are too aggressive, she doesn’t show it.

“Is it that important?” Good point. Why can’t I accept an act of kindness at face value without having to analyze its origin?

Our eyes stay locked for a few seconds. She waits for a response that isn’t forthcoming. When she realizes I won’t move forward until I get an answer from her, she offers, “It was Christine.”

“Huh?”

“Christine, your girlfriend. She called me yesterday to see how our first meeting was. After apologizing, she said your oversleeping was likely due to a lack of coffee.”

She pecks at her keyboard while continuing, “I took a guess on how you take it. Two sugars and one cream for me. I figured I couldn’t mix them up if I made them the same way.”

Leah waits for my response, but my mind is wandering elsewhere. *Christine* called *Leah*. Was it a genuine concern for my well-being that prompted her call? Or, were there other reasons? I recall our brief time together at the house yesterday. Why did Christine ask how my first session went when she knew? Trying to unravel the confusion in Leah’s actions only creates more of it on another front.

“So, I guess I’m not the mind reader you presumed I was, huh? I use all my resources though, you must give me that.” Leah

finishes taking notes, her sarcastic tone complemented by deliberate key presses. I emerge from my contemplative daze and level my eyes back on her. Leah's facial expression is laser-focused. "Can we get to the exercises now?"

She leads me through the introductory movements, showing them herself as I watch. I should pay attention to her directions. Instead, my mind ponders how her limbs move and stretch with a seductive charm. Guilt consumes me for entertaining these involuntary thoughts. It takes several attempts before I'm able to focus and execute the moves with limited agility.

It is painful, more so than I imagined it'd be. From the look on Leah's face, she doesn't expect the exercises to be this difficult for me either. She pushes me beyond the unwelcome discomfort with conviction. Still, the full arsenal of required repetitions eludes me. I'm behind schedule and I've only begun.

"Nick, focus on my eyes. Twist to the right, slow." I do my best to follow her. I want to, in ways I shouldn't want to, but I can't do it.

"Okay, let's take a break." The message encoded in her response is demoralizing. I have failed and fallen short of her expectations. It's been the biggest worry at the forefront of my mind, the fear of failure. It was so easy to overcome before the accident. My determined resolve is wilting away, a flower that isn't provided enough water or sunlight.

"So, did you come up with your outdoor exercise, like I asked?" I don't have an answer for her pointed question.

"I'm not sure. There's nothing I enjoy doing outside that wouldn't be impossible for me now."

Leah furrows her brows, a sign she's tangled in a delicate internal dilemma.

"I have an idea." She pauses, cautious in continuing with her proposal. "How about tennis?"

"Tennis?" I spit the word out with absurd surprise.

"It would allow you to work on some of these core exercises without dwelling on completing them." She knows what I need, exercise with a purpose.

"I've never played before. Racquetball, yes, but not tennis."

"If you've played racquetball, you'll have no problems. I have an extra racket. I'll teach you the basics. Let's give that a try tomorrow, instead of these exercises."

"Okay." It's obvious Leah senses the apprehension in my voice.

"I drive a minivan. I can pick you up in the morning, eight o'clock as usual. We'll head over to the courts on campus together. Does that work for you?"

"Sure, but aren't they packed? The courts?" I'm doing everything in my power to back out of this recipe for failure. But, with every comment, Leah is pulling me into her corner.

"Don't worry, I have connections. Trust me, there'll be at least an hour to cover some introductory stuff. I bet you'll enjoy it."

It occurs to me that my reluctance to complete Leah's homework on my own is for a different reason than I first thought. It isn't what I'm unable to do outside, but what other people will see I can't. I don't need the perceptions of others deflating my damaged ego any further.

There's an uneasiness in my acceptance of our plans for tomorrow, but Leah makes it more palatable, despite the risks it poses to my self-esteem.

She leaves the house a few minutes later. The thought of struggling with simple maneuvers everyone else can do is agonizing.

Still, hope shines through my adversity. It's an intangible feeling that provides a spark of energy from an unknown source. For once, I need not know why that sentiment graces my presence. I accept it without question.

As the sun slips toward the horizon, a message arrives from Christine. She'll be late for our dinner date but promises to be there. Dr. Bloom has asked her to stay longer to help do the intake on a few new patients. He wants her to witness the psychological tactics for earning a child's trust. First impressions are everything, she says in her text. I couldn't agree more, even if my thoughts stray beyond a child, a pediatrician, or my unofficial fiancée.



If you'd like to read Nick's story in its entirety, I invite you to visit www.davecenker.com/second-chance, where you can order your copy from all major retailers in both e-book and paperback. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share a cup of caffeine for the soul with you!



About the Author



DAVE CENKER is a romantic fiction author, writing stories infused with a kaleidoscope of emotions that nurture the heart while exploring elements of the human condition. He appreciates the opportunity to connect with readers through a shared emotional chord and the enchanted sentiments of a timeless love story.

Like coffee provides caffeine for the physical body, Dave's stories supply caffeine for the soul. He lives in the Sunshine State with his beautiful wife, amazing son, and three cats.

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