

**Heart-Beat**

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**First free chapter**

For my dad and sister

# **Day One**

My best friend is the one who brings out the best in me.

Henry Ford

# One Jasper

On the last evening of life as I knew it, my meticulously created world came crashing down hard. Darkness dragged me into a downward spiral and I hadn't even seen it coming, even though I probably should have.

I'm not Superman, whose relentless strength saves him all the time, conquering everything, except perhaps Kryptonite. I'm just a regular guy, clad in jeans and T-shirt instead of spandex tights, dealing with a big, fat chunk of mental and emotional issues, piling up at the speed of an unstoppable train.

At the age of eighteen, I was so convinced I was in control of every single detail in my life that I ignored the simple fact that I was actually running myself to the ground. Thinking back on it now, I suppose it was just a matter of time before the shades fell off and my true colors were revealed to the world. Nobody can live life at the speed I was and think they can keep up.

In the end, when push comes to shove, I *am* just an average guy, who was about to cave in under the pressure of self-inflicted pressure. Like I said, Superman, I'm not. I'm just a regular guy and my failing heart became my Kryptonite.

Friday morning started like always, except that it was the last day before the Christmas holidays. It began the same as most of my days, with the sense I was dead tired before seven a.m. and still had a long day looming ahead of me.

As happened so often lately, I had spent too much time overnight preparing and studying for class in my private room on

the second floor of a small dorm, right off Boulder University campus.

At three a.m., my brain finally shut down and forced me to rest, even though I still had too much work to go through. I fell asleep over my books, waking up with a strained neck and a gigantic headache that turned into a throbbing migraine almost immediately.

Less than four hours of restless sleep was all I managed before I dragged myself down the stairs of the recently renovated building that I shared with twenty-odd students. I ignored any sense of breakfast, swallowed pain meds on an empty stomach, packed up my books, waved to a few friends and rode to college on the bicycle Dad gave me for my eighteenth birthday, four weeks ago. I hate that bike wholeheartedly, with its ridiculous sports seat that hurts like hell and its sports pedals that are way too small for winter shoes. But at least it gets me around campus. Students are asked to leave their cars in dedicated parking lots, so I leave my car parked in front of my dorm, using it only for grocery shopping or to visit my parents back in Longmont.

The first hint of snow painted the morning skies, threatening to lock down all roads and the large campus by nightfall. I looked up at the skies and the mountains, realizing we were up for some pretty bad weather. Great. Winter and I don't get along. Sliding over the campus grounds' slick concrete, it took me longer than usual to get to the College of Architecture building, where I'm a freshman. I ignored the familiar ache in my chest that didn't seem willing to go away anymore and left the bike in its usual spot.

Six long classes and a hint of lunch with a few friends later, I was too tired to care much about the humongous backlog I would have to struggle through during the Christmas holidays in order to catch up with my fellow students. The next few weeks would be spent studying in my dorm room in an otherwise empty building, apart from two other students I knew were staying too.

No holidays around the Christmas tree for me, just stacks of books and the prospect of two weeks of loneliness and nobody to talk to, apart from those two other lonely souls who were doomed to stay as well. Why did I ever agree to sign up for this road to hell?

Tired, I waved goodbye to my college friends, wished them all a wonderful holiday, and headed to Sam's building, The College of Medicine, on the other side of campus. I was determined to walk my best friend home to the house she lives in, about a half-hour walk off campus.

Even though I was beyond exhaustion, I planned to accompany her as usual, even though my whole body screamed for rest. These days, this was the only time I got to see her and I missed our old chats.

My sixteen-year-old, brilliant best friend shares a small, old house with two other girls, three years older and a lot less smart than she is. Sam lives off a full scholarship that she won when she was only fifteen years old. She finished high school in record time and started at Boulder on the same day as I did. She could have had any choice of college that she wanted, but she chose Boulder, to stay close to me and her old town.

Instead of picking a dorm, Sam chose to stay off campus, because she hates clubs and fraternities and feared being sucked into partying every day. She managed to find an attic room in a house that her scholarship also pays for, threatening to move to Stanford if they refused her choice. Sam always gets what she wants, and this was no exception.

She could have stayed at her foster parents' home in Longmont, our hometown, about half an hour away by car in good weather conditions, but she chose not to. Her foster mother Sarah had reluctantly agreed to let her move out, knowing there was no way anyone could stop fireball Sam. Besides, I was nearby, so she wouldn't be that alone.

My best friend waited for me at the gates, her eyes shining happily as she spotted me. Without a single word, she gave me her backpack and we started walking in the direction of her home. I held onto my bike, bumping my ankle zillion times against the pedal, cursing under my breath as I did, causing Sam to snort audibly without further commenting on it.

“When will you confess how crappy you’re feeling today?” she asked me, causing me to shut down completely in a flash. I’ve been good at meticulously avoiding every single remark she tried to make about my health in the past few weeks, knowing that she wouldn’t stop once she touched that sensitive subject.

“I’m fine,” I retorted. “When will *you* tell me how much effort and extra hours you are putting into that case file you are planning to send to that professor you’re drooling over so badly?”

Sam snorted, knowing exactly what I was doing.

“I don’t drool; that’s for kids,” she pointed out. “Stop changing the subject, Jasper; you know you’re overdoing it. You should go home and be with your parents for the holidays. And then tell them the truth about how much you hate these courses and how badly you want to do something that doesn’t have anything to do with your brilliant dad.”

I turned a scarlet red as she touched the most sensitive topic of all. My dad is my god and I would do anything for him, even study something that I absolutely detest and totally suck at.

“Come on, Jasper,” Sam persisted, more gently this time, something I’m not used to, coming from her. “You know I’m right.”

Hot tears prickled my eyes. I didn’t want to talk about it, not even with the one person who knew me better than anyone. I had my pride, you know.

I shrugged. “It doesn’t matter, Sam.”

“Yes, it does. You are going to lead a life that you didn’t choose. How can that not matter?”

“I’ll do what *I* want to do in my spare time,” I replied weakly, stopping at the house with the battered front door she lived in.

“Are you coming in?” she asked, fishing out her keys.

“Not now, I have basketball tonight and I need to get some work done before that.”

She stared at me as if I had gone crazy. “You are going out for basketball tonight? In this weather? Feeling as sick as you are right now?”

“Who says I’m sick?” I replied stubbornly.

“Your face, your eyes, even your voice, Jasper.”

“Stop treating me like a kid, Sam,” I retorted fiercely, knowing my best friend wouldn’t relent otherwise. “This is my life and I’m living by the choices I’ve made. I’ll see you later, all right? Unless you change your mind and decide to go home to Sarah after all.”

“No.” Sam reacted with hurt, making me feel ashamed immediately.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I quickly said, grabbing her by the arm before she could walk in. “Everything’s fine, all right? I’m okay. I’ll rest up a bit more now that classes are over for the winter holidays and I promise to take it easy. This is the last game before the break. I can manage it, I promise.”

Sam softened immediately and smiled weakly. She was never a person to stay angry for long, not with me at least. To others, she could be pretty vicious if she wanted to be. I hugged her gently and we promised to catch up tomorrow, as we would both stay in the city for the entire break. We had made half-hearted plans to spend Christmas Eve together next week, but nothing major had been set in stone.

Knowing my parents, they would persuade me to come home anyhow and spend some time with them. Knowing *me*, I would relent and wave off my determined plans to catch up during the

break, so I could start the new semester with the same knowledge as my peers.

I had told Dad there was a huge stack of work I had to go through and would be better off working on that here. It was the only way to get them off my back without having to confess to the truth that I wasn't good enough and couldn't cope with these intense studies.

Sam *wanted* to stay here; that was the difference between her and me. Even though she was legally still a minor, in her mind, she already was completely independent and in no need of adults watching her every move. She was granted permission to live on her own during her first/second year of med school, combining two years at the same time. Because yes, the challenge of doing one year at a time was lost on Sam too. I seriously wonder sometimes how she could stand to be friends with me. Then again, there aren't that many people out there in her league.

Sam's peers were at least two years older than she was and had no respect for her brilliant mind. She was a loner by nature, but back home, she at least had a few friends whom she could rely on if she needed anything. Here, she only had me because she chose to break up with the people who took her in during the last five years.

My best friend had it in her head that she didn't want to stay a burden for Sarah and Mark. Because of that, she told them to free up her old bedroom, so they could take in another foster child who needed them more than she did. Sarah had been too stunned to react at first, and then she blurted out that she wanted to do right by Sam.

My friend never noticed that Sarah still longed to see her, that she had grown very fond of the awkward girl she had taken in five years ago, but I knew. I saw it in Sarah's features and her nice eyes.

Whenever she looked at Sam it was as if she was her own child; when she spoke to her, you could tell her care and adoration for my best friend. I just wished that Sam would notice it too.

“See you tomorrow,” my friend waved me off, shutting the creaking door to her dorm decisively before I could react.

It was her sign to tell me to get lost, so she could focus on her work. I smiled, not fazed by this at all. That’s my Sam.

I biked back to my dorm, becoming more out of breath by the minute. I was concerned about the unexpected snowfall painting the world white at a rapid pace, making it dangerous to be outside right now. Good thing Sam was inside before it really became slippery on the roads. She’s the clumsiest person I know.

By the time I parked my bike, I felt as if I was being choked from the inside out. Exhaustion took over and I had to grip the door handle for a moment, while catching my breath. When I finally walked in, a number of students passed me by, heading for the train station, so they could get home.

“Have a good one,” was all I heard before they left hurriedly, leaving only a couple of students inside the large building.

With a long exhale and a growing sense of self-pity and sadness about the upcoming weeks, I ignored the piano in the main hall and headed upstairs to my room, closing the door decidedly. I chose to be here for a reason and I would stick to my guns. My voluntary isolation would be for the greater good, to make my dad proud.

Fighting against sadness, I started working immediately, hoping to gain on the gigantic workload I never seemed to get through. Part of this was my own damned fault, I wholeheartedly admit. My inability to actually enjoy these damned architectural studies caused me to suck at time management and inspiration to work on the assignments we were given every day. Every excuse to do something other than this was happily welcomed. Now there were no excuses left. I had to do this, even if it killed me.

I actually managed to get something decent done in the next hour or so, before my alarm went off, warning me I had to get a move on.

Even though my instincts screamed at me to forego on tonight's planned basketball game, I still pulled myself together to head out in the snow once more.

I wasn't going to let my basketball playing friends down this time. Last game, I totally messed up and this one would have to make up for it.

Reluctantly, I promised myself I would grab something to eat on the way back. Even though the bout of migraine that had been nagging me all day finally left my system, my stomach was still in knots. Food was the last thing on my mind right now. I left my dorm for the last time, not even realizing that I would never see it again.

So here I am, sitting on the old wooden bench, facing the playing area. Sweat is pouring down my face. I'm wondering how the hell I'm supposed to survive the next two quarters, after the disaster I have already made of the first two. The small crowd of college students and parents is talking about me, wondering whatever happened to the promising young player (their words, not mine) who started out five months ago on our prestigious college team. To be honest, I can't answer that question myself and I'm too tired to care much at this moment anyway.

Their voices fade in and out, the field dances before my eyes and I'm too scared to move again, knowing I'll fall if I do. Why the hell didn't I just forfeit the game? Because I'm too scared to let my father down, that's why. My dad was perfect in everything he did, from being college alumnus to the top scorer of this very same basketball team many years ago. I would give anything right now to be more like him, to be able to pull off this killer pace, without blinking my eyes. I'm just letting everyone down again.

“Jasper?”

Coach suddenly crouches down in front of me, his face wrinkled with concern, one hand placed on my shoulder, the other one leaning protectively against my knee.

Voices and sounds around us mingle in one cacophony, making it hard for me to focus on him. I attempt to look at him.

When I'm hardly able to do so, I realize that damned migraine is pushing its way up to the surface again.

"I've been calling your name for a long time, son," he asks, troubled. "Are you okay?"

He's going to tell me off, I'm sure and I can't blame him. Tonight, every single thing I did so far was absolute crap. I could tell by the audience's reactions they had expected so much more of me. Whistles, foot stomping and impatient shouts throughout the game have made their reactions pretty clear.

My fellow players are angry, I can tell. They aren't able to salvage the damage I caused, either. By the end of the second quarter, I just stood there on the sideline, the game unfolding before my eyes while I became a useless bystander. What the hell am I doing here? I miss my parents. I just want to go home. Maybe I should just swallow my pride and do as Sam says. I should tell Dad the truth.

Exhausted, I close my eyes for a second, feeling darkness taking over. For one brief moment, the world falls away and I'm surrounded by quiet. Then Coach shakes me, distressed, pulling me back to reality.

"Jasper, are you okay there, kiddo?" his troubled voice asks. "You look terrible, pale as a ghost. That's it, I'm pulling you out of the game."

I'm surprised, knowing he must be truly concerned to offer this. Due to the awful weather, and the fact that a lot of students are already heading home, we have no extra player who can replace me, meaning that my team will have one less member. No, I can't do that to them. I need to get a grip.

“I’m okay,” I hear myself say, as if a stranger’s voice has taken over my throat and vocal cords and decides for me what to do. ‘I’m just tired, Coach. I’ve been going through a rough patch, that’s all.”

Coach looks surprised that I’m confessing I’m totally off.

I never show my true feelings to anyone, that annoying character trait of mine that Sam hates about me. She claims that nobody ever sees what’s on my mind, that my face stays stoic, even when I lie.

“You don’t have to play, Jasper, okay?” Coach tells me in a fatherly tone. He’s an old friend of my dad’s and I just know that he’s going to tell him about this. Oh God, another issue to add to the mess I’ve made. “I’ll understand, and so will the others, kiddo. If you’re sick, you’d better go home. You can hit the showers and I’ll drive you home when the game is over, okay? Did you come on foot?”

I nod. The weather had become too bad to ride my bike and I hadn’t risked taking my snowed-in car either, making me hurry to reach the Boulder venue on time. I arrived here out of breath, with that returning pounding underneath my skull and that old ache in my chest that I just can’t seem to get rid of. Oh God, I know how my dad will react when he finds out about this. He’ll be so upset, so worried. I can’t do that to him.

“I’m cool, Coach. I won’t let you down again,” I blurt out, pulling myself together.

He seems flabbergasted by my words.

“But Jasper, you never do,” he retorts, openly shocked. “Whatever makes you believe that?”

I gaze up at him, seeing a grim smile on his face. He knows what I’m all about, I can tell. He senses what is going through my mind right now.

“The only one punishing you is you, son,” he tells me gently. “You don’t have to be here for me, you hear? You have to be here for *yourself*.”

*I'm here for my dad*, I want to tell him, but there's no need. Coach already knows.

We share a genuine fondness for my dad, a man who became a father at an older age, after accepting for years that he would never have kids. I'm his only son and he adores every single move I make. But he also automatically assumes that I want to do the same things that he did, a long time ago.

"Jasper, tell me what you want to do," Coach prods.

I look up at him, ready to tell him that I just want to go home, when a sharp whistle signals the beginning of the third quarter, ending our conversation abruptly. My teammate Tom pulls me up before Coach can say anything else, unaware of our conversation.

"We need you, man," Tom says, patting me on my back. "You'll be fine. We're a team and we stick together, remember?"

I look at my other teammates who are gathering around me, telling me quietly this way that I haven't screwed up everything just yet, that there is still a chance to make things right. Ignoring the man who made our team great, I stretch my shoulders determinedly, reprimanding myself while trying to ignore the tremors in my hands. If I focus on what I'm supposed to do, I'll be fine, I'm sure. It's only two times fifteen minutes I have to play. I can do that.

At the beginning of the third quarter, things improve visibly. I actually manage to score twice and I'm able to throw some damned good passes at my friends. The team is back on track and my teammates give me happy grins. Everything is forgiven when the crowd starts to whistle in a positive way, encouraging me to continue this way.

"Go, Jasper!" I hear a woman shout audibly. I perk up and pull myself together.

Our competitors seem to realize I'm back in my old shape and aim their attacks at me. A hard kick against my lower back throws me roughly to the ground, right in the center of the court.

The referee whistles, the attacker mumbles a lame apology and turns his back toward me with a filthy smile on his face. He stops grinning when, a few moments later, my free throw heads straight for the basket. The crowd goes wild.

The second time a rival throws himself against me, I only catch a glimpse of the bulky student before he literally runs into me. This one actually pushes both hands against my ribcage, sending me flying backwards. I cry out in protest as I slam down hard on my back. I stay down for the count, heaving for air when that choking, suffocating feeling returns. Lying on my side, I struggle against the pain taking over my body for a moment, wheezing hard as panic strikes. The other guy looks very shocked and helps me up with a genuine, heartfelt apology.

“Sorry, I honestly didn’t mean to hit you that hard. Are you okay?” he apologizes sincerely, pulling me up. I manage to nod, barely able to stand on my own two feet.

Immediately Coach runs to his colleague, telling the other man off about his team’s lack of respect for their competition.

In a flash, they start a shouting fest. The other coach calls me a drama queen, causing Coach to ball his hands and step forward. The referee steps in and holds back both angry men, while my team members surround me, troubled, seeing how difficult it is for me to regain my posture.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you people tonight, but if this continues, I’m shutting down the game. Got it?” the referee snaps at all of us. He then turns toward me. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I squeeze out, but I’m lying through my teeth.

The coaches return to their seats, still arguing. A whistle announces the continuation of the game. My team members immediately take their places and the game goes on. Another two minutes before this quarter is finished and I’m vowing not to go back out there for the fourth. I need to get home.

As the adrenaline wears off, cold sweat pours down my face again. Every single hair on my body is raised and I see the world in double. The noise, whistling and shouting of the crowd hurts my ears and my head pounds like crazy. This isn't going well. I panic when my sight starts to fade. I stay frozen where I am, terrified at what's happening to me.

Frantically, I rub both hands over my face, completely freaking out when a startling, sharp pain stabs through my left shoulder. The ache rushes through my entire upper body and I know I'm in trouble, realizing I've crossed my physical boundaries. This game was one step too far.

I see shadows again, then shapes, followed by colors and people's faces, which swim in and out of sight. Stunned, I stand there frozen, my hand pushed against my chest, trying to fight off the excruciating pain in my upper body. I fold into myself when another sharp pain snaps the very life out of me. I heave forward, going to my knees, gasping for air when the sharpest pain of all claims me.

Coach yells my name.

My legs falter; the next second I'm lying on the ground, staring at the blotted ceiling of our hall.

People rush toward me and Coach drops to his knees while he reaches for my hand, squeezes my fingers and tells me everything will be all right. I panic. It feels as if I'm dying. Maybe I am.

Sick, dizzy.

Darkness.