LEAVING
DRUG AND ALCOHOL ADDICTIONS
FOR GOOD

HOW BIOCHEMICAL RESTORATION RADICALLY IMPROVES YOUR CHANCES OF RECOVERY

JOSEPH EISELE, CACIII

IN CONVERSATION WITH SHARON R. MONTGOMERY

More praise for *Leaving Drug and Alcohol Addictions for Good*

"I know a lot of us with years of recovery who are still struggling with sleep, mood, diet, etc., and I think biochemical restoration is this missing link. I'm thrilled to have this resource to direct people to."

Jordan Fouts, 15 years in recovery,
Senior Consultant at Philanthropy Expert LLC

"This book is important. It tells how a person or family struggling with addictions can find success working with a combination of biochemical repair and a standard mental/emotional program for addictions. And it gives them a message to not give up in looking for help."

William Billica, MD, FAAFP,
Practitioner at Tri-Life Health PC

Leaving Drug and Alcohol Addictions for Good: How Biochemical Restoration Radically Improves Your Chances of Recovery

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SELF-HELP / Addiction

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To my wife, Donna, and my children, Lindsey, Andrew, and Lauren, who have been my biggest support.
To Bill Corbett, my very first sponsor, and dear friend.

To all in the 12-step and other recovery communities, sisters and brothers who have walked this path together throughout the years, and to all those who are still struggling to find recovery. Don't give up!

"I know I will both witness and tangle with the deepest part of the night, until the night is done and the sky turns platinum with the dawn."

—Amy Dickinson

CONTENTS

PREFACE....1

INTRODUCTION....3

PART ONE
USE AND ABUSE

CHAPTER 1
REACHING OUT....7

CHAPTER 2
GAINING KNOWLEDGE....21

CHAPTER 3
REALITY STRIKES....43

CHAPTER 4
THE ADDICTION TRAIN....58

CHAPTER 5
FINDING RELIEF....72

CHAPTER 6
FEELS SO GOOD....101

CHAPTER 7
'SO I'M USING–NO BIG DEAL'....115

CHAPTER 8
AVOIDING ACCOUNTABILITY....134

PART TWO
ADDICTION

CHAPTER 9
NO LONGER IN CONTROL....155

CHAPTER 10
DARK TIMES 175

CHAPTER 11
DESPERATE ISOLATION 186

CHAPTER 12
HITTING BOTTOM AND SURRENDERING 201

CHAPTER 13
A LOVED ONE SAYS 'NO MORE' 215

PART THREE
RECOVERY

CHAPTER 14
THE MISSING LINK: BIOCHEMICAL RESTORATION 233

CHAPTER 15
TRANSITIONING INTO RECOVERY 260

CHAPTER 16
TAKING THE OPPORTUNITY TO HEAL 281

CHAPTER 17
RELAPSE CAN HAPPEN 301

CHAPTER 18
THE PROGRESSION OF RECOVERY 320

CHAPTER 19
THE GIFTS OF FULL RECOVERY 339

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 349

ENDNOTES 350

ABOUT THE STORYTELLERS 359

PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS THE RESULT of many conversations I had with Sharon, as I explained to her my approach for treating addiction and the importance of biochemical restoration.

I was also telling her my own story of addiction—total, severe, desperate, sinking so low that suicide seemed the only option.

In the process of telling her my story, Sharon revealed her own—of the battle she was currently engaged in with her son, and his serious addiction.

We realized that we could share with readers not only experience but empathy on three levels: the addicted person, their loved ones, and the healthcare professionals who support them through their journey. My role as a professional in addiction recovery and my personal experience as an addicted person, together with Sharon's pain and struggles as a family member searching for answers, offer you, our reader, a more complete perspective on what it takes to get to recovery.

We literally do feel your pain—as the person struggling with addiction, or the person fighting to keep a loved one from total destruction, or the professional whose life work and passion is to help others recover. Through this conversation-style book, we hope you gain the answers and direction you're looking for. Have hope. With help, you can get through this and thrive!

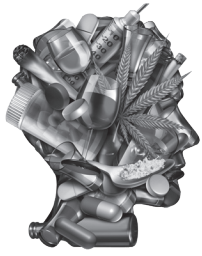
INTRODUCTION

AFTER BECOMING AN ACCREDITED addiction specialist, I eventually opened up InnerBalance Health Center as a place to bring both addicted individuals and their loved ones to where they needed to be—physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually—in order to reach and maintain full recovery.

In my experience, what was missing from many addiction-treatment programs was the critical component of biochemical restoration. Bringing the metabolic system into balance is absolutely essential to full recovery, and various metabolic tests can also play a role in keeping individuals off the addiction train in the first place.

If you or a loved one are dealing with addiction, you should, of course, always seek the advice of professionals. This book is not intended as a substitute for doing so. Rather, it is another resource for you and your team to consider as you make your way on your journey to full recovery.

PART ONE



Use and Abuse

CHAPTER 1

Reaching Out

"It wasn't until I came across the term 'biochemical restoration' that I realized it could bridge the gap between addiction and full recovery."

— JOE

– SHARON –

I MET JOE AT THE END of my frayed and unraveling rope.

I had just realized that my twenty-two-year-old son, Lorin, was probably an addict. I didn't know how deeply, or for how long, this…*thing* had been burrowing into his life, but whatever it was, it left me reeling and on high alert. His selfish, withdrawn, bizarre behavior attested to it. Even allowing for the possibility of depression, I knew there was something more.

This was chemically driven. I felt it in my gut.

I was bitter, tired, resentful, and downright heartsick when I opened up to Laura, our family therapist. My husband, Micah, was as worried as I was, although he felt we should just leave Lorin alone and maybe he would grow up. Grow out of it, with any luck. But I needed answers and hoped Laura knew where I could turn.

"I just need to know what's wrong," I said.

"There's someone I know who runs some pretty in-depth tests," Laura said. "Really accurate biochemical tests like ones on the thyroid and genetics. You could see if he would do an assessment for Lorin, just as a one-off visit. Maybe he can help."

She said I would be contacting a wellness center in Loveland, about an hour away from my home in Denver. The person to talk to was the clinical director, Joe Eisele. "He's the only man I'd send a loved one to, Sharon. He has a big heart. And Lorin deserves a big heart."

It was evident Laura knew Joe's work and respected him immensely, and I had learned to trust her judgment. I would do anything to find a way to get my son realistic, practical help.

I promptly researched Joe Eisele and his clinic, reading reviews. What I discovered made me tear up at the possibility of finally finding a solution. It also intimidated the hell out of me.

WHY JOE WAS DIFFERENT

Joe Eisele was a founder of InnerBalance Health Center and had been its clinical director since 1998. He was considered an expert in treating drug and alcohol addictions. He was well-respected in the medical community and had been the focus of numerous interviews throughout the country for his innovative approach to healing and educating those in the addiction community. His center acknowledged how addiction can affect an entire community. It impacts the addicted individual, their loved ones, and the legal and medical professions as well.

The wellness center reported an 86 percent satisfaction rate among clients who successfully completed the program. The center's life coaches, who stay connected to the clients, measure the satisfaction rate a year after clients complete the program.[1]

What struck me as I read about Joe was something he called "the missing link," a factor that is unaccounted for in most treatment facilities. These facilities miss the focus on a body's biochemical imbalances, which are a critical link in solving the dilemma of a person's addiction. Joe took a scientific, medically-based, holistic approach that enhanced the success rate significantly.

But the second I read the word "holistic," my guard went up. I was firmly in the traditional camp of healthcare. I went to doctors, not mystical shamans, for heaven's sake. I had my kids immunized, took medicine from a prescription bottle when needed, and pooh-poohed the "woo-woo" people who were *out there* in their alternative medicine and lifestyle. I was still on the fence about things like essential oils, for crying out loud. A holistic, biochemical approach? How could there be such a blend?

Yet when I dug deeper into Joe's approach to holistic medicine, it aligned with the meaning. Holistic medicine, in its simplest form, is the understanding that all the parts of us are interconnected and need to be in balance for our whole system to work. That didn't seem woo-woo at all. It made sense. Being interconnected meant that each system or process affected other systems. Just like the interaction of a community.

Joe's center was treating the whole person, and as a series of integrated systems, assessing any deficiencies that pulled a body out of whack. It was addressing more of what the mainstream professional community thought people needed.

Overall, what I gleaned from my research was *exactly* what my gut said Lorin needed. What my strained family needed. Okay,

what I needed. I felt compelled to talk with Joe because the truth was, Lorin had broken us in oh-so-many ways. It was a good thing there were heartstrings attached to my charismatic son because I felt wrecked—emotionally, spiritually, and financially.

MY DESPERATE MANTRA AS A LOVED ONE

I couldn't seem to stop helping my son out of increasingly bad spots. A series of bailouts for him, hoping he'd keep his word and pay us back. Doctor bills, therapy bills, rent, phone, insurance, food—everything we paid for felt blackmailed through love. I was secretly ashamed to "just take care of it," but I did nonetheless. It was just easier on all of us.

"If we don't take care of him, he'll end up on the street. He could die out there!" I spewed this fear to my husband when nothing changed. I spewed it to my close friends when I felt hopeless, and to myself constantly. It had been my desperate mantra for years. We paid for travel tickets when he needed to get out of town to clear his head, and then needed to come back and try life close to family again. We bought into him making a fresh start, over and over again. We paid because we hoped "this" would be the solution. Whatever "this" currently was.

Years of compensation for what we thought was a "Boomerang Kid," then a "Depressed Guy," then a "Selfish Millennial," and finally our "Failure as Parents." All those secret labels had left us broke and broken. Of course I'd check out any avenue to help my son. And myself. I looked at Joe's philosophy as my Hail Mary pass.

GAINING SKILLS FOR A LIFETIME

Joe's approach addressed all the ways a person needs to heal, not merely stopping the unruly, addictive behavior by "talking it out." Not shaming or guilting an addicted person into temporarily stopping, as that can just drive the behavior

underground. And unlike some traditional methods, Joe's approach certainly did not just accept that a recovering person would fall off the wagon in an endless addiction cycle. His approach seemed to provide real-life, practical steps for the addicted individual and those dealing with their consequences. He seemed to know what to do short-term and long-term. That's what I was interested in.

Up until this point, I had assumed that once a person became addicted, he or she was pretty much a lost cause. Friends, family, and co-workers all had stories that added to that belief. So did articles in social media and the news. It was the normal outcome of what I had observed. It's what terrified me about my son "being" an addict. I didn't want to push him into the "lost cause" bin and walk away. I wasn't ready for that.

Joe's approach showed that another option was not only possible but achievable. His center took into consideration the biochemical aspect, the habits, the triggers, the "why" that drive a person's addiction in the first place, and then provided a path through it and tools to use throughout a lifetime. Joe's method also showed kindness and compassion to the person suffering from the addiction. In fact, his philosophy seemed to show respect and dignity to all parties involved.

Many other programs I came across took an almost shame-centered approach.

Joe didn't seem to look at people as "being an addict" at all. He simply treated people who "had an addiction."

That was a big difference because I already knew my son was suffering. He showed more self-loathing and low self-esteem than anyone I knew, despite our words of love. So this philosophy rang true to me.

Plus, Joe had a specific program for the loved ones of the

person struggling with an addiction. *How kind*, I thought, *to take into consideration a loved one's broken heart*. I worried about how much my resentment had grown, but mostly I worried about my stumbling ignorance, and how to function as a secondhand survivor, knowing I was doing everything wrong but still having to do it. Joe's program seemed to consider it all.

AN UNEXPECTED QUESTION

So, with Laura's advice fresh in my mind, and not knowing how to frame my questions, I sent a tentatively worded email to Joe's program manager, Keri. I asked about testing possibilities, pricing, insurance, availability. I told her I had a loved one who might be—I couldn't voice the reality to myself yet that he almost certainly *was*—struggling with drug or alcohol abuse and was looking at options.

The hardest part was mentioning I was a professional writer, as our therapist advised. "When you call the center to get some information, mention that you do some writing," Laura had said. "You never know if they may need your services." Who knew—maybe she was right and I could help them with a blog.

Keri let me know that the center did more than testing, and asked if I would like some more details. I did, but the challenge was that there was no way Lorin would even talk to me about going to another therapist or getting a job, let alone going into a center.

Keri reached back out a short time later, after I had frantically, chaotically moved on to other possible solutions, including drinking a shot of something strong every once in a while. I had just toured a homeless shelter for Lorin, knowing he could end up there soon. I couldn't keep going on this way. It was either that, or scheduling that mystical shaman.

"Mr. Eisele would like to schedule a phone call with you if you could make time." *Ahhh, so that's how you pronounce his name:*

Eyes-Lee. "And would you please send over some writing samples?"

I'd already decided that there was no chance I could put my son in a rehab place. He'd never pay me back, *if* he went, and I knew he'd never go in the frame of mind that he was in. But writing for InnerBalance might just give me a chance to learn more about this biochemical restoration. I'd glean information from their methods. It was a long shot, but it was better than a homeless camp or a shaman session.

I stuttered that yes, I would speak with him, and would send some writing samples. We scheduled a time for Joe's call and I hung up. I didn't care if I had to blog or update their website content for decades if it meant my son had a shot at some help.

A CAUSE TO GET BEHIND

The appointed day came, and I darted into my bedroom for the phone call with Joe.

"Hi, Sharon. This is Joe. Joe Eisele, from InnerBalance Health Center."

I remembered Laura's endorsement, and what I'd read about Joe. I also remembered the sea of other possibilities I'd researched for how to help Lorin. Vague suggestions or tangled solutions that made my eyes gloss over. I did a quick swallow. I had reached out to Joe and his center for information, and what I got seemed to be an interview for…who knew what? I swallowed again. Joe said that he'd looked over my writing samples. "Do you ever write things for yourself?" he asked.

For myself? Of course I did. Blogs, stories, and journal entries were part of the everyday routine that had kept me sane.

"Yes, I do, Joe. Would you like me to send something over to you?" I was mentally shuffling through the more appropriate entries to email him right then and there.

His next words floored me. "Have you ever written a book, Sharon?"

A book. *A book!* My throat closed up just a bit. *I thought he was interested in the simple stuff!* I took a deep breath and took a risk. "In fact, Joe, I haven't written a book to completion, but I did end up with a lot of interviews, and the content for a book."

It had been my best/worst experience to date. I'd learned a lot, like what happens when there is no contract in place. But I also learned to fall in love with a cause, how to form meaningful relationships after the interview was over, and how to write for something bigger than my paycheck.

As Joe and I continued talking, I realized that this man had found something bigger than himself as well. He wasn't a clinical director so much as a person dedicated to bringing more effective information to those in need. That was a cause I could get behind.

That day on the phone, we started a project of our own. Joe asked me to help him write a book he'd yearned to write for fifteen years but never felt he could put into words. I needed answers, information, and resources for my situation with Lorin. I agreed to the project, and we became hopeful partners.

A JOURNEY FOR HOPE

Lorin was at a sullen, inward-focused point in his life, committed to his destructive course. But I knew I needed answers and experience to survive my own daily life. If writing a book would lead me to my answers, then that was what I needed to keep going.

I know now there is hope. I don't have to throw away my son, or anyone else who's suffering from addiction, just to survive the fallout. The best surprise is that I've come to enrich my life by learning of Joe's extraordinary tale and bringing an idea whose time has come out into the world. The story is here for anyone who is at the end of their rope, just like I was. Keep hanging on. Keep reading. There is hope.

His door is open to you, too.

– JOE –

Sharon came to me the same way a lot of people do, as a last-ditch effort to find hope through the toughest time they've ever had. She discovered she's part of the addiction community, whether she wants to be or not. She'll be okay because she reached out…but I'm getting ahead of the story.

I didn't know to what extent Sharon was reeling in the chaos of addiction, but I didn't need to.

> I see it often with our clients' loved ones who don't know where to turn. The hesitant, tired, desperate need to discover something–*anything!*–that will calm the storm that made landfall.

Maybe you feel that way, too. Maybe you are staggering as the awareness kicks in that *there is something wrong with my loved one*. Or maybe it's you struggling with addiction and your loved ones are caught up in the chaos. Either way, it's time to explain a bit about the perfect storm that made landfall in your life.

THE PERFECT STORM

Perfect storms don't simply happen. These fierce phenomena don't just "appear" from nowhere. A multitude of factors must line up, just so, for the elements to intensify the result. It's the difference between severe weather and a catastrophic situation. And because perfect storms in nature are so destructive, causing fallout to so many communities around the world, an entire recovery-and-rebuilding industry has risen up to address them.

Perfect storms cause damage in the medical field as well. Scientists, surgeons, and researchers in the medical community have struggled to predict what goes into causing so much pain and suffering. They've studied the plagues that killed countless

people, wiping out generations of families and loved ones. They've considered bacterial diseases like leprosy, which terrified the public and shunned those very people who were most in pain and vulnerable to the devastation. The perfect storms throughout our medical past birthed research, direction, and lifesaving techniques we now use every day.

It's astounding, then, that the addiction community has such a hard time finding the right information on how to effectively treat a person who has turned to drugs or alcohol. What I've found is that trauma, loneliness, peer pressure, DNA, and other indicators that bring about a perfect storm of elements in that person's life are rarely taken into consideration right off the bat. Instead, fear, misinformation, and the uneasy hope (by both the addicted person and the loved ones) that "it will all just go away" abound in those initial stages.

The aftermath is a culture of shame, blame, and disgrace. Loneliness and isolation fester while families are torn apart. Loved ones are traumatized right along with the addicted person. Prisons are full of individuals convicted of crimes resulting directly from the consequences of addiction. It's more than a tragedy. It's our community's ongoing catastrophe. These results are just as dangerous as any other perfect storm in the medical or atmospheric realm.

MY OWN STORM

My own storm brewed for decades, gaining in strength and momentum. And although it started out with fun and freedom and experimentation, my storm ended in a rage. A category 5 hurricane of years that wreaked havoc on all those who came into contact with me. Dark years feeling alone, confused, and afraid, until finally I surrendered and accepted help. I learned through sad experience that the number-one thing all addictions do is keep people from living up to their potential.

It took a long time, though, before I hit rock bottom and surrendered. In fact, I repeatedly hear, "Why do we have to fall so far down before hitting bottom?" It's one of the first questions a person with an addiction asks when coming into our center. Their loved ones ask the same thing. That question is followed quickly by, "Is there *really* help?"

I had to go so far down before hitting bottom because by the time it became apparent, I was well into my use. There are stages in the progression of addiction, as well as recovery, and I knew nothing about them.

Use, abuse, addiction, and recovery are a complex combination of many factors.

We are dealing with issues that were there before the introduction of drugs and alcohol, and now we are dealing with additional issues that actually come from the addiction itself.

Another reason I had to go so far down the path of addiction was to avoid the guilt and shame of others finding out I might have a problem. It's taboo to have a problem, right? The stigma of being less than self-sufficient. But talking about the taboo is the first step in healing ourselves. It made all the difference in my life.

The second question—is there really help?—plagued me throughout my own addiction journey when I saw so many people, including myself, get sober…only to fall into relapse after relapse. That question became my constant companion, the quiet voice in my head. It wasn't until I came across the term "biochemical restoration" that I realized it could bridge the gap between addiction and full recovery. In my work with physicians and other professionals, I heard the term often.

I realized that if biochemical restoration was the key for me, it could be the key to healing for so many of us whom traditional treatment alone does not heal, long-term.

Now I understand that biochemical restoration, when combined with a traditional foundation, a holistic approach, and a continued healthy support system, is the optimal way to restore all systems to a healthy state. It enables a much higher percentage of people to go from sobriety to long-term recovery.

And it's important that the support system be a healthy one, where we surround ourselves with people who are not still living the chemically driven lifestyle. A positive support system might be a cause that engages us, or a spiritual connection—whether through nature, meditation, or a higher power.

FACING DOWN YOUR OWN STORM

This book gives you one of many possible directions to take in order to get your answers. It's based on decades of research. Along with the research, this book brings decades of experience, fact-based explanations, and practical results to the equation. It's wrapped in a true story that lets you know you are not alone. And if you're like so many other members of the addiction community, that's more than enough reason to keep reading.

Let's state the obvious right up front: If you've picked up this book, it's not for a little light reading.

- If you've picked up this book as the loved one of an addicted person, you're most likely exhausted, out of ideas and excuses, and feeling battered with betrayal after painful betrayal. You already know how it feels to juggle your *actions* with a possibly addicted person's *reactions*. Add to that chaos the outside world's judgments and broad advice. *Exhausting!* This story may bring you some answers.

- If you've picked up this book for yourself, you may want to stop using that drink or drug, but just can't make your

resolve stick. You may have tried other programs, other options, and are out of ideas. You've racked your brain for solutions and nothing seems to help. This book may give you some insight.

- Or maybe you work with addicted individuals as a member of the medical, mental health, or legal profession, and are looking for more complete options to help educate, diagnose, or treat your clients. You're looking for a solid resource to assist people with addictions and their consequences. This book may be an option for you, as well.

It is usually in this chaotic state of mind that perhaps the hardest question of all is asked: "*Is this really happening?*" The answer is yes, it really is. Without help, this is not something that will go away easily or soon. Having an addiction is insidious by nature, and it is almost impossible for you to recover from it on your own.

Hard to hear? Absolutely.

But addiction is a challenging thing to face. The good news is, you do not have to face it alone. Nor should you. There is a better way.

DEALING WITH YOUR STORY

Whether you are the one teetering on the ledge of addiction or the one who cares about someone who has fallen off that ledge, only when we face—and face down—that ledge can we shine a light into the dark corners. After all, how can we conquer something if we can't talk about it? We must speak plainly to heal ourselves, our circle, and our community. Plain speaking is the only way through to healing.

I met with Sharon, first and foremost, so she could help me

write a book. But what I discovered was how important it was for her to get some answers. She was heartsick and dazed. All I could do was share what I knew from my life, my experience, and what I've come to rely on through research and time-tested results. From there, I hoped she would be able to move forward in whatever direction she needed to.

You're reading this book because Sharon and I partnered to write it. After that initial phone call, we knew we could tell this story. It is the story of the path of my perfect storm, as well as Sharon's journey with her son. And although this is our story, there are elements in it that could be anyone's journey. In fact, as you read our story, you may recognize similarities in your own life, as either an individual who is addicted or the loved one of an addicted person.

My hope is that in reading about my storm, you'll connect with some of my story and find insight into what can help you in your particular circumstances. I hope my journey brings you some of the answers you need, or helps put you on a path to your next set of answers.

Keep reading. There *is* hope.

CHAPTER 2

Gaining Knowledge

"The alarming part is how utterly ordinary the many factors were that set me up for my first experience with addiction."

— JOE

– SHARON –

"HI THERE. I'M JOE." He held out his hand, smiling. A strong handshake. I relaxed, smiling back into warm and friendly blue-gray eyes framed with stylish yet understated glasses. He was wearing dark slacks and a checkered button-down, long-sleeved shirt with the top button open, no tie. *Nothing stuffy about him*, I thought. Salt-and-pepper hair and a healthy, slender physique gave him a quiet air of authority.

We were in Joe's office within the InnerBalance building, a

welcoming space with large windows framing poplars and elms. Cozy furniture sprinkled the center area. Books filled shelves that lined one entire wall, and a large desk anchored the opposite wall.

"It's nice to meet you in person, Joe." I smiled back, seeing how at ease he was in the room. He ushered me inside and showed me to a comfortable-looking chair. After offering me some water, he sat down across from me.

My nerves got the best of me despite Joe's friendly demeanor, and I fell back on my interviewing voice. "As I was familiarizing myself with your wellness center, I checked out aspects of addiction and recovery, too. There seem to be roughly two different ways to go about tackling addiction: traditional and holistic."

To my relief, Joe had no problem sidestepping the small talk. He spoke with the confidence that comes from being in one's element. "Pretty much. In my experience, there are several different approaches on the journey to helping a person heal from addiction, but they tend to be framed through traditional or holistic methods. A traditional philosophy, for instance, would be, 'If we just stop the person from drinking or using drugs, their body will recover.' Adding talk therapy and detoxification to the treatment seem to be the extent of the care. But just stopping the source of addiction—the chemicals—and using talk therapy is not healing, in most instances. The damage done to the internal workings of the body's systems needs to be addressed, as well."

"Is that what holistic treatment does?" This was new territory for me.

"I'll go into it a little deeper," Joe said, and shifted in his chair. "Traditional methods are the foundation of chemical treatment. For a long time, the assumption was that alcohol or drug addiction was a mental problem, in which drugs were prescribed to 'fix' the issue.

"As you might imagine, the prescription drugs being given to treat the addiction added to the problem. The methodology

didn't address the reality that an addiction behaves exactly like other diseases and needs to be treated with the same focus as you would cancer or heart disease. The Betty Ford Centers and twelve-step programs paved the way for progress when they discovered this distinction. So they became the new norm for treatment. Holistic approaches—working to maintain a good working balance between mind, body, and soul—came about as a result of having them as a foundation to build from."

"Well that sounds great," I said. "But then why do so many people get sober and then fall off the wagon?"

LINKS IN A CHAIN

"Addiction is a complicated journey," Joe said. "Each person's addiction journey is different, which is what makes treating addiction such a complicated process. But professionals did notice things across the board: surface symptoms, like a preoccupation with the chemicals, continued loss of control, or an inability to cut down or stop using, as well as unkept promises regarding chemical use. Using traditional remedies, professionals got really great at treating the obvious issues that are created as a direct result of a person's use of drugs or alcohol.

"And those issues can cause painful financial, relationship, or legal problems," Joe continued. "So a traditional, logical belief became that by stopping the person from taking the chemicals, the client would achieve temporary recovery, and therefore the problems would be resolved. And those results happened, to an extent. The symptoms of drinking or using drugs do disappear for a short time. This is considered 'sobriety.'"

Joe must have registered my quizzical look. *This was all it took to get sober? Really?*

"But there is a difference between sobriety and long-term recovery," he said. Ah—that made more sense.

Most people might think that sobriety is the end goal. It's not. It's more of a pause in the addiction cycle.

Full, lifelong recovery is really our goal as healthcare professionals: We want the primary causes addressed and corrected, so that relapse is far less likely. Traditional professionals have wanted that, from the beginning. But it's only lately that we are seeing how stopping only at sobriety shows something fundamentally flawed in the logic."

"How so?" I asked.

"It doesn't go far enough or deep enough," Joe replied. "A holistic approach does. It integrates both conventional and alternative therapies to promote recovery. Taking a holistic approach to addiction treatment simply means treating the disease by addressing the mind, body, emotions, and spirit as a whole."

I leaned back and listened as Joe spoke about his take on the holistic mindset. The main belief behind holistic medicine seemed to be that the four components—mind/body/emotions/spirit—are all interconnected, like links in a chain. When one is not treated, it is as if a link has broken, and it causes problems in the other links.

Joe then told me how the American Holistic Health Association, or AHHA, had once described it. "They said, 'Optimal health is much more than the absence of sickness. It is the conscious pursuit of the highest qualities of the physical, environmental, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social aspects of the human experience.' I tend to agree," Joe said. "And including 'environmental' as a fifth component to the wellness of the mind, body, emotions, and spirit recognizes the need to heal the relationships and the consequences that come with addiction, as well."

The accountability aspect, I thought. *Thank goodness.*

"So it sounds like you definitely align yourself with

holistic-style philosophies because they tend to deal with the entire illness, not just the immediate symptoms, right?" I asked.

"I do," Joe replied. "But we opened InnerBalance Health Center because we discovered that we need an additional aspect of treating the body. It goes beyond the traditional method of detoxing, pharmaceutical drugs, and exercise. The holistic mindset is essential to a person's long-term recovery. I like to think of this additional aspect as the 'missing link.'" He paused for a moment to let me register what he had said.

"Think of those components of holistic medicine as being a chain: mind, body, spirit, emotions, and environment. The strength of that holistically based chain is dependent on each link working properly. The missing link—the one that makes it even stronger, an even more effective chain—is biochemical restoration.

"Our wellness center addresses this missing link," Joe added.

We've discovered that the percentage of our clients experiencing long-term recovery and satisfaction is substantially higher as a result.

THE MISSING LINK, DEFINED

I took that in for a moment, recalling what I'd learned about biochemistry in high school. "Your process brings in the scientific aspect, then? Like the chemistry of the body? Is that what you mean by biochemical restoration?"

Joe nodded. "Right. Biochemical restoration is the process of restoring the entire body's systems to a healthy state. The process re-creates a healthy balance. But we work with other imbalances within the body that may have been there even before the use of drugs or alcohol that may have caused an individual to self-medicate.

"We use a series of scientific tests and natural treatments to identify the important causes that perpetuate cravings for more of

the addictive substances. This biochemical link makes the holistic process of healing exceptionally stronger and more effective."

"It makes a lot of sense," I said, "so thank you. It also makes me even more curious about how you got here as a clinical director, though. I mean, what issues did you go through, and overcome personally, to get this perspective? In other words," I said, smiling, "tell me about yourself, will you?"

Such a cliché of a question. *Tell me about yourself.* I mentally rolled my eyes. But I needed to know Joe's own story.

Joe dove right in. "Well, I'm a seventy-two-year-old man with an addiction journey that started when I was fourteen."

I blinked. Nothing could have shocked me more than hearing that Joe had started off at such an early age.

"Sound alarming?" Joe asked, as if he had read my thoughts. "Like maybe someone bad had exposed me to peer pressure at too young of an age? Or possibly, that I had a terrible, broken home life?"

I nodded. It was evident Joe had seen my look of disbelief before.

"Nope. It wasn't like that at all." Joe shook his head slightly and continued. "The alarming part is how utterly ordinary the many factors were that set me up for my first experience with addiction. Those circumstances, incidentally, started showing up for me even earlier than my teenage years."

No way, I thought. *No way did Joe's circumstances start out like any other fourteen-year-old kid. If they had, then anyone could have been a Joe. Even me*. And yet, I knew I was naïve about the addiction world, so anything could be true.

I mean, all I *really* knew about my current life, for sure, was: first, I was terrified I could be the parent of an addicted child; second, Joe was the only person I'd met to mention pre-chemical stage elements and the effect they could have on a person's addiction journey; and third, I was living in a panicked, unsure world with a son who had become sullen, resentful, and probably depressed. I constantly asked myself, *How in the world did my own son slip under the radar?*

The little I'd known about addiction before meeting Joe zeroed in on how to get a person to stop using the drug or drink of choice. Then the only real hope was that they had enough self-discipline to stay off the chemicals, but fearing that they'd relapse. In that case, the addicted person would go back either to rehab or to their chemical of choice. It didn't go deeper than that. I'd seen it simply as a hopeless cycle for all involved.

Then I thought of what Joe had just explained to me about biochemical restoration. Could the missing link really be part of breaking the addiction chain?

A TYPICAL '50S FAMILY

"I came from what I thought of as a typical U.S. family living in California in the 1950s," Joe began. "I remember my parents as being loving, but not very affectionate. No touchy-feely stuff, you know. Parents back then didn't seem to communicate emotions very well. Especially dads.

"Both of my parents drank a lot, socially," Joe continued. "It was just how things were. The daily life of my parents was such that there were plenty of parties at home with drinking, and then my mother would occasionally use prescription medications to cope with stress. Cigarette smoking was also the norm. Our eating, our activities, and our sleep schedule ran around a social calendar on the weekends.

"We were a reasonably well-off family that always had

relatives and loyal friends in the mix," Joe said. "Grandpa was the patriarch of our family, and he commanded respect. Especially from his own kids. Horace, my dad, was initially a military man, but Grandpa could be persuasive and usually got what he wanted. So when he wanted Dad to work in the family business, a car dealership, Dad eventually did. I worked for him, too, when I got older, and I worked there mostly because my grandpa loved and indulged me. I was his firstborn grandson, you see. My brother, Richard, was two years younger. We were very close when we were younger. Sally, our sister, was older than me by three years."

Theola, the family's housekeeper, as well as Rigell, Joe's maternal grandfather, made frequent contributions to the family dynamic as well.

"My mom and dad were around, but not always aware of what us boys were up to," Joe explained. "Although they were responsible parents as far as providing a roof over our heads and buying nice things for us, they were focused on other areas of their lives. And alcohol definitely wasn't frowned on, especially when they were entertaining."

Although my conservative childhood home life was different from Joe's, I knew family dynamics just like his. I figured that what I thought was normal as a kid might be just as odd to Joe.

"Tell me more about your mom and dad," I prompted.

"My childhood friend, Herbie, called my mom, Dorothy, 'a love,'" Joe said with a smile. "She was very social. She got along well with just about anyone. She was always happy and drawing people into her circle."

"And your dad?"

"My dad seemed like a good complement to my mom," Joe said thoughtfully. "From my child's point of view, Dad was quiet and imposing. He wasn't as outgoing as my mom, but she brought him out of his shell. He adored her." Joe paused for a moment. "You just never wanted him angry.

"Dad's temper was extreme at times, except when speaking to my mom, a dedicated peacemaker. He was never angry at her, but she couldn't stand seeing him mad."

"How so?" I asked.

"Well," Joe said, "I remember once when my brother and I were playing in the yard with our little toy soldiers, digging in the dirt. We did everything together, but sometimes we quarreled. This particular time, we argued, and I threw a digging shovel at Richard. It missed him, but the tip hit a window, cracking it. It was an accident, and we didn't get into trouble—with Mom. But Mom went into a tizzy, covering up the window with a curtain in the desperate hope that the repairman would show up before Dad noticed it. Of course, it didn't work, and Dad hit the roof." Joe paused. "Mom was a fanatic about keeping Dad from knowing the mischief we caused."

"That sounds like a lot of stress for your mom," I said.

"He never got mad at Mom," Joe said. "But with us boys, it was different. He made a point of not getting involved in the raising of us boys—said it would be interfering with Mom's role. So when he did have to interfere, he got loud. That made it a simple decision for my mom to hush things up from Dad when he got home."

"So your mom was usually home?" I asked.

Joe nodded. "Yeah. Mom was in charge of the house and the kids, and my dad worked and made sure we had nice, comfortable things. There was a pretty clear line about that, and it included everything but the discipline."

It sounded pretty typical of the time. I remembered my own mom using the threat, "Just wait until your dad gets home!" when I'd get in trouble, even though I was more intimidated by her than I was by him.

"Dad doted on my sister," Joe continued. "I didn't hang around her much, except during family vacations. Sally was a

bit privileged, and as the eldest and a daddy's girl, she got to drink with my parents and their friends on the weekend. Of course, that was when she got older. Sally loved to be with my parents when they entertained. But it became a stark difference in approval, love, and acceptance, right from the beginning, for both Richard and me. I think I became a bit shy when I realized there was a favorite and I wasn't it."

I nodded. My childhood memories weren't quite so stark, but I kind of related to this. As a middle child myself, I was aware of the hierarchy that siblings and parents instilled in a family. And when one brother or sister got preferential treatment, I felt a bit left out.

"You seem pretty matter-of-fact about the inequality, Joe," I said. "Did you just get used to it?"

"Us boys were just a lot harder to wrangle than my sister, I guess," Joe said, shrugging. "Sally was easier for my mom, and especially my dad, to get along with. She liked to hang around my parents more than us boys did, anyway. We were busy playing outside and getting into mischief. Richard and I were 'partners in crime.' We'd be out tearing around the yard while Sally and my mom stayed inside, most days."

The more I heard about his family dynamic, the more apparent it was to me that Joe's parents did what other grown-ups at that time did to raise their kids; the best they knew how.

Just a typical, complicated, regular ol' family, I thought.

TOYS BY DAY, TERRORS AT NIGHT

"Dad probably had some of the same issues I did," Joe continued, "maybe with shyness or anxiety. He was very hands-off with emotion or positive feedback. He never came into our room to just talk with us or anything. Mom did, but mainly it was to see how we were doing. Not so much of a 'How's your day?' thing, but more of checking to see that we were going to bed, or

taking a bath, or staying out of trouble. Mom was the caretaker, but neither were very nurturing."

"Would you say their lack of nurturing added to you being anxious or shy?" I asked.

Joe shifted in his chair. "I'm not sure. That's a tricky question. My earliest memory of shyness goes back to when my mom took me to a birthday party. I was about five or six years old. I already had a lot of allergies, which caused a kind of foggy head all the time. As if I constantly had the flu. Concentrating was almost impossible, and it was hard to get my thoughts into words.

"All I knew back then was that I felt awkward and different from other kids, so although going to a party should sound fun to a little kid, I just felt anxious. In a house full of people, I felt like I didn't fit in. I only found comfort when I wandered alone into the garage, playing with some toy soldiers I'd brought in my pocket."

Joe smiled then, his eyes crinkling at the edges. I picked up on his smile and asked what he was thinking.

"Oh, just thoughts of those molded-plastic green soldiers," Joe said. "I toted them around everywhere and loved playing with them to pass the time. They were wonderful companions. When I was about seven, my family moved into a new house in Arcadia, California, and I loved the yard. I'd go out under the big tree near the house to set up my toy soldiers among the roots and the branches. I'd wage battles for hours under that tree, all by myself. I loved those soldiers!"

I smiled back at Joe. I had my own outdoor memories of toys and trees.

"But the biggest thing about the place in Arcadia," Joe said, his smile fading, "was that the house creaked. It was fine in the daylight, but at night, the house just felt creepy to me. It was a large property out in the country, and it was strange and new. Nobody had explained why we moved there in the first place,

so it didn't feel like home. Now I know the reason was so us kids would have more room to run around, but I didn't know it at the time."

I could hear an edge creeping into Joe's voice. "The scratching noises from the tree branches outside…those were the worst. They were right outside my bedroom window at night, and when the wind blew, it was eerie. Odd sounds came from the rooftop, too. It truly was a different feeling when the sun went down."

Within a week of staying in his new room, Joe started having night terrors, even though Richard was sleeping in the same room.

"Lying awake at night, my eyes would be locked on the dark space that marked the open door and hallway beyond," said Joe. "I waited for sleep, but the moments stretched on and on, timed to the creaking of the house. Each night I'd wonder if the noises were *really* just the wind, or if it was, in fact, a stranger's footsteps inching slowly down the hall, each step bringing him closer to my bedroom door."

Looking back, Joe said, he didn't know if it was the sugary desserts and caffeinated soda he'd consume at night, or if his thyroid, MTHFR gene, or elevated histamine levels in his brain were already out of balance. Many nights, he would lie awake in bed until dawn.

"That's when I knew I could finally fall asleep," said Joe. "When the light started to enter the room, I knew I was safe."

How is that even sustainable? I thought. *And what the hell is an MTHFR gene?*

"I'm not sure how those conditions could relate to you being unable to sleep," I said, "but it sounds like that was a lot of time for a child to think."

"Well," said Joe, "most people don't understand the relationship of histadelia, diet, and thyroid problems to sleep." Histadelia, he explained, meant there was too much histamine in the blood. "They are all conditions that mess with the body, mainly

the mind. The symptoms of the conditions I just mentioned were the result of my neurons firing too quickly, caused by those elevated histamine levels in the brain, and not getting enough serotonin, GABA, and dopamine."

I asked Joe to translate. Serotonin, he explained, creates happiness and joy. GABA modulates anxiety levels; the lower the GABA, the higher the anxiety. Dopamine creates pleasure.

"But all it meant to me as a child was that I felt tired most of the time but couldn't sleep."

"Ah," I said, "one of those biochemical things, then?"

"Right," Joe said.

It wasn't long before Joe's thoughts turned inward. "Those random noises triggered in me a sense of dread, and it was made more real by TV scenes I'd watch. Just a glimpse of something scary or dramatic was all it took for me to think about those scenes over and over at night."

It didn't help that Joe's older cousin would tell all the kids ghost stories around the firepit when her family came to visit. "Those stories would scare the daylights out of anyone!" Joe exclaimed. "I would lie in bed with vivid scenarios racing through my mind, feeling helpless terror, neither in fight or flight, but instead, totally freezing up. My ongoing thoughts were variations of, 'Any moment now, he's going to get in the house.'"

"*Who* would get in the house?" I pressed.

Joe held up his hand. "It was just a general bad guy. Nobody I knew of, and now that I think of it, I didn't know what he looked like. I just knew that he had a big knife, that he would get me, and I was scared. I knew he would be lurking somewhere outside or inside our home, waiting to get me."

"Joe, I know that feeling," I said quietly, goosebumps breaking the surface of my arms. I remembered being on high alert, and the heart-thumping seconds that stretched out forever as I

strained to hear something ... anything ... just a little bit clearer so I'd have time to hide.

"I had never classified them as night terrors, though," I continued, "because I didn't have those feelings of terror while I was actually asleep. I didn't know that's what they were, but it makes perfect sense now. It wasn't like I was having a bad dream and then woke up. Like you, I would be terrified at night and couldn't go to sleep. For me, the 'he' was not a general bad guy, but a very specific-looking vampire guy. Like Count von Count on Sesame Street, you know?"

Joe nodded.

"Except that this one wasn't counting anything." I shivered as the memory crystallized. "This guy was waiting for me to get up in the night. He knew I'd have to get up to go to the bathroom. Every night, he was waiting for me at the end of the hallway, right before the bathroom door." I wondered if my voice sounded as upset as I felt.

"I couldn't see to the end of the hallway because the night light only went so far, so I'd have to walk toward the door knowing that he could see me, even though I couldn't see him. It terrified me every single night during the summer that I was nine years old."

Joe nodded again. "Sometimes at night," he said, "I'd get the courage to move out of my bedroom and very quietly go down the hall. I knew the places to step to avoid the creaks in the floorboards and would crouch down to make myself as small as possible.

"Like you, I was terrified, but I had to make sure the front door was locked, you see? I just knew the guy was going to come into my bedroom with a knife." Joe looked shaken, even now, as he relayed his story more than sixty years later. I saw that he could still feel the vivid memories haunting him, despite the decades that had passed.

Anticipation of the bad guy was a never-ending part of his

memories, I realized. *His constant fear—no, the full-blown terror—was just his normal childhood*. I knew I'd dealt with nightmares and night terrors for a little while, but Joe's reaction was different. It looked like he still could be having them. But even if he wasn't, the impact it had on him even now was unsettling.

Much like the trauma of a soldier living through the heat of battle after battle, or a spouse living in ongoing fear of an attack by an abusive partner, Joe spent his childhood living in a cycle of terror then relief, terror then relief, every night for years, as he waited to be attacked–or killed–every single night.

"It's still with me," Joe said. "The feeling that even now, something bad could happen. Is going to happen. I sometimes overreact to difficult things because of the night terrors I had as a child, even to this day."

But daylight would bring safety and security. "My fear would just…evaporate," Joe said. "It didn't occur to me that I'd have to go through it again that next night because I was safe the moment the sun came up. I felt thankful and relieved, so I'd get up and walk down that same hall, noticing that when the sunlight shone through the windows, it didn't look or feel the same way at all.

"I'd move on, not really thinking about it anymore. I'd play and do my day, and it was only when I was back in my bed for the night that I'd remember, picking up the silent standoff with the bad guy."

He slept in his parents room for a few weeks in the beginning, but when that was too much for them, they'd shut their door, and Joe would camp outside their doorway, afraid to move or make a sound, until he eventually fell asleep.

Sometimes he would sneak into Sally's room and sleep in the other twin bed. "Then she'd kick me out after a few days," Joe said.

"It was frustrating for all of us, but for me, the nighttime isolation was crippling. I yearned for safety, the comfort that comes from knowing that it's safe to sleep. I experienced early on that the loneliness and isolation were hard to bear alone. And I was constantly exhausted because my adrenal glands were depleted."

He shrugged slightly. "That's just how it was."

THE COMPENSATING GAME

At first, I wondered what night terrors had to do with Joe's basis for his addiction journey, but he'd just answered that. His adrenal glands were exhausted from night terrors as a child. *How could the adrenal glands throw a body out of whack so dramatically?* I wondered. I'd bring that up later. For now, it was a missing piece I hadn't known to consider. In combination with too much sugar and caffeine as part of his nightly ritual, Joe seemed like a perfect candidate for the ongoing pain and discomfort that a drink or drug could alleviate.

I also saw Joe's perpetual cycle of dread being downplayed as "Joe's nightmare." Not understanding the differences between a true nightmare and night terrors, his family's reaction reflected the social customs of their time: they downplayed the alarm and chalked up Joe's behavior to probably being a normal stage of growth. Like many adults did back then. *Like so many parents do now*, I thought. The usual advice given in the adult world, then, would be for his mom and dad not to worry at all.

As a child, I once overheard my mom on the phone talking about my nighttime troubles. "Kids just have nightmares sometimes," her friend said confidently. Her friend's tinny telephone voice was loud enough for me to hear from the other side of the room. "They all grow out of it eventually." I didn't believe it then, and I still don't today. I asked Joe if it was indeed just a phase.

"This wasn't a phase or a stage for me," Joe emphatically replied. "I simply adapted, as kids do. Kids adapt to a whole

lot, right? For instance, in my new home, I had pets around me constantly. Cats, dogs, horses, and whatever else lived in the countryside. My dog slept with me every night. Animals were just a part of country life.

"The perpetual state of me living with a foggy head, which I now know was allergies from all the animals, was just one of many essential elements that contributed to my insecurity. I didn't realize it at the time, and neither did my parents. But it kept me compensating for feeling like I was different from the other kids. A little off. Which is the last thing a kid wants."

Joe's words hit me hard. I had also spent much of my childhood adapting my behavior around persistent issues. Then, as a parent of five, I watched my kids go through their "awkward" phases and didn't do much about them because, after all, that's just how kids are, right?

I was keenly aware at that moment that I had missed many clues from my kids' survival behaviors. All of that never-enoughness in Lorin. The hyperactive mind. It started with him climbing up the back of the chairs when he was a toddler and progressed from there. Instead of just bouncing on our trampoline, he started jumping, then flipping from the roof of our house. Always pushing beyond the boundaries. We'd admonish, then ground him to keep him safe, but he'd just find a way to keep doing more.

I said to Joe, "Now that you're talking about this stuff, I can relate to just…finding other ways to make up for what didn't work. How else did you cope?"

"Oh, I compensated in lots of ways," Joe replied. "I just balanced it out by finding pleasure in small things while I was alone. I looked forward to baths every morning to alleviate my constant chill. In fact, feeling chilled was an ongoing thing in the mornings before school. I'd stay in the bathtub, waiting until the bath water was almost cold. Mom would yell at me to get going, but I just wanted to stay warm. It turns out, that was a

thyroid thing. My T3 and T4 hormones were off, and I couldn't get warm. I was always exhausted as well. So I loved to relax in the warmth of the steam and the water. The quiet surrounded me with a moment of peace."

Joe sipped his water, then continued. "Oh, and I always swallowed the toothpaste after brushing my teeth."

I could feel my gag reflex kicking in.

"As early as, oh, the age of ten, I loved the taste of that sweet mint toothpaste and wasn't clear why I shouldn't consume it. Nobody had time, or maybe the answers, as to why I should spit it out and not swallow. Of course, I knew nothing of the detriment of absorbing fluoride,[1] or the chaos as it built up in my system. It did quite a number on my thyroid gland, as it turns out. And nobody back then knew about the complexities of the MTHFR mutations, like the one identified as A1298C.[2]

"I had a mutation of the A1298C gene, as many people do, but it wasn't discovered until much later." Joe then explained to me how an A1298C gene mutation can result in a less likely chance of absorbing the important brain chemicals needed to prevent, reduce, or eliminate depression. Most of it went over my head, but it rolled off his tongue with ease.

As Joe got more comfortable recollecting, he continued speaking of complicated things I knew nothing about. I wrote it all down, along with notes to myself like *Another MTHFR Mutation thingy*? And *Back to the thyroid stuff? Wasn't that for weight issues*? And *I need to remember to ask about the adrenal glands thing*. I had opened a Pandora's Box in the knowledge that Joe was tossing out so effortlessly.

"I also found a lot of pleasure in table sugar," Joe continued. "Even though Mom only gave me one tablespoon of sugar with my cereal, I'd want more. I didn't want her to see, so I'd sneak in extra when her back was turned. I'd put so much in that when the cereal was gone, and I drank the milk, there would be a

thick layer of the stuff on the bottom of the bowl. That was the best part. I consumed sugar wherever I could get it, including caffeinated drinks like Dr. Pepper and Coca-Cola."

Ha! I did the same thing! I smiled at my own memory at the breakfast table. A lot of sugar on the bottom of many bowls of cereal had jump-started my mornings in elementary school. *Sneaky kids that just wanted more of something that tasted good. That's all there was to it, right?*

As if reading my mind, Joe said, "My poor diet, high sugar, and caffeine intake brought about intense cravings and worsened the medical elements like allergies and adrenal glands malfunctioning.[3] Adding environmental elements like being in a new home, night terrors, and non-communicative parents just complicated things."[4] He seemed to be consulting a checklist in his head. "Oh, and social inadequacies like shyness and difficulty communicating.[5] This whole concoction just continued to simmer in the background of my childhood."

Joe paused and leaned back in his chair. I took a sip from the water I'd brought, watching him and thinking of how, here again, my own childhood had some of those same elements.

"But I went on this way," Joe spoke again as if he'd never paused, "compensating throughout my childhood. I didn't make many friends while I lived in that house, simply because no neighbors were around. I felt lonely. The house was on a large parcel of land, and Sally would bring her friends over to ride the horses. I could hear them laughing and joking as they played together. I sometimes wondered why she had friends and I didn't. Why was it so easy for her but so hard for me?"

CHILDHOOD WARNING SIGNS

At school, Joe's insecurities isolated him even further. "I didn't make friends there, either. It was just," Joe shrugged, "hard to talk. Anytime I felt anxious, I'd freeze up. Any pressure,

any public performance would freeze my brain, and I just couldn't speak." He was quiet for a moment. "Looking back, I now believe that the feeling of my brain freezing up was more due to brain allergies and high histamine levels."[6]

Brain allergies? Is that really the right term? More anxious notes to myself. Aloud, I said, "That's a lot of medical terminologies that I'm going to read up on, Joe."

Joe leaned forward a bit. "I know it can be a lot, and we can get deeper into the technical part in a bit, but an important detail to note here, Sharon, is that I *looked* just fine. Thinking about this now, I realize that all these issues were warning signs for a youngster who is prone to addiction. In fact, most of the people I treat have several of the symptoms we've talked about. And the interesting thing to me is that you could have one or two of them, and it might not matter in and of itself.

But the more signs a young kid has, the more likely it is that the youngster will be prone to addiction."

My heart jumped into my throat. I swallowed and it went right to the pit of my stomach and stayed there. I had missed so many of these signs with Lorin.

"Some of the most common signs are," Joe held up his fingers, one at a time, "depression, mood swings, or anxiety." One. "Right behind that would be sugar and caffeine cravings." Two. "Next, shyness or not fitting in, or thinking less of themselves." Three. "And of course, trouble sleeping or night terrors." Four. "Last but not least is a big one: hyperactivity, or a close cousin to it in the form of an increased likelihood of taking risks."

They sounded like Lorin's childhood to a tee.

"And this is an odd one," Joe added, "but another warning sign is about caretakers. Having parents who aren't nosy enough. They need to get involved."

Joe shook his head sadly, dropping his fingers back into his lap.

I couldn't get it out of my head how much of his list I could relate back to my son, or myself. I could never keep up with Lorin, which made it hard to be nosy enough. I had four other kids and got sick of fighting with him to slow down, straighten up, pick up, go to sleep, put that fire out, don't draw on the walls, leave your sister/brother/the cat alone ... sometimes *something* had to give.

I asked Joe, "What would you say to your parents about all this if you had had the knowledge you do today?"

"I'd say get even more involved with us kids," Joe replied simply. "We were taken care of physically. But more time spent with my parents would have given rise to a slew of red flags if they had been a bit nosier about our mental and social habits. And a lot may have been different if our family's education around addiction came more from educators and less from social and work gatherings." He sighed—a mixture of wistfulness and impatience. "The education opportunities for my parents weren't that good back then. There wasn't a lot available to adults, let alone their kids. But even now, it would be so great if parents didn't wait until their son or daughter's behavior was a crisis before dealing with stuff.

Early warning signs are there if we look, but we don't really do anything about them until it is a crisis."

I nodded, mentally going over the last week to see how involved I'd been with my kids. I realized guiltily that I could have done better. *But I know now, moving forward*.

"Looking back," Joe said, "I realize that all the childhood issues I was dealing with were warning signs of a youngster who is prone to addiction. I functioned 'properly' and well, for

a shy kid, and unconsciously adjusted. So my support system of family, educators, and loved ones kept doing the best they knew how, which was to just keep going. It's what adults do today, to various degrees, because we can only observe from outside another person's experiences. We can only react to what we notice."

There was a knock at the door, and Keri, Joe's program manager, peeked in. "Joe, sorry to interrupt, but you're needed." Joe leaned back. I could see he wanted to keep talking.

"Let's meet again in a couple days, on Thursday, to keep going, okay?" I asked.

"Sure thing, Sharon. How's 2 p.m.?"

-JOE-

I watched Sharon leave my office, pulling the door shut. My thoughts circled back to the night terrors I felt throughout my childhood. Sixty-six years later, the memories still make me cringe. I still have difficulty sleeping, and talking about them today brought the fear right back to the surface. *And this was just the first meeting.*

I knew there was a lot to share, and it wasn't going to be an easy journey. But it felt surprisingly good to get it out. Sharon's car left the parking lot, and I turned away from the window.

Two days seemed like a long time.

CHAPTER 3

Reality Strikes

"People don't change directions unless there is a powerful, long-lasting motivation to do so."

—JOE

– JOE –

I WALKED DOWN THE HALL, excited and hopeful to finally tell my story. I couldn't help but notice what Sharon wasn't saying. Underneath her calm, professional demeanor, I sensed that she was trying to hold it together. That outward calm, barely covering a frightened energy. I had a feeling that this was more than just a project to her. It was personal.

I sent her home with a list of websites and terms so she could do some research and start to wrap her head around the

information that was new to her. I gave her some of my reference books, too. They were well-worn into my life and into the philosophy that ran InnerBalance, so I wouldn't miss them from the collection in my office. Well, not too much. They were like old friends, those books, full of memories and answers to a troubling, yet hopeful, time in my life.

I thought of her loved one, whoever that may be, struggling on their journey. I tried not to jump to conclusions about their troubles. If there was one thing I'd learned, it was not to lead by assumptions. Let the facts and the path they are on come from an honest space, and trust that those who needed my input could reach out for help if and when they were ready.

It was hard, though, not to offer a lot of answers and information at once. Hard to sort out the answers to questions Sharon asked, instead of opening the floodgate with everything I wanted to share, right up front. I knew, though, that if I did that, it might scare her into shutting down.

She'd tried hard to hide that deer-in-the-headlights look. I knew she was making her way through the process of learning. She needed time to process what was needed. Her loved one would need processing time, too, if they ever got to a point where they wanted help with their problems. I decided I would focus on my side of things with Sharon and let her open up if she wanted to.

– SHARON –

I made it a full three minutes down the road from Joe's office before I burst into tears. *What's the matter with you, Sharon?* I came to Joe's office with my "professional and put-together" hat on, prepared to sit quietly and just listen. After all, it was Joe's story. But then I was taken completely by surprise. I had somehow

stumbled onto a story that I related to in oh-so-many ways.

Here in my car, with nobody around but me, I could say it: This was *my* story. My life. Everything else could just go hang for a bit. I let the tears flow, as messy and raw as they wanted to be. Maybe the tears were of relief, of knowing that I wasn't alone in my hell. Or possibly in fear of the road ahead, now that I had a taste for the complexities of addiction.

Emotions and thoughts tangled together in my head. This guy seemed to know his stuff; I could safely put my trust in someone other than myself. I knew I was woefully ignorant about what was wrong in my son's life. I had so many questions. And honestly, I didn't know enough to ask the right questions, let alone understand the answers. I just knew I wanted them all answered *now*. Two days until we would meet again seemed like a long time. Then again, with all the research material he'd given me, maybe not.

Eventually, the tears dried up. I drove along Highway 287, wondering about some of the things Joe said. *What was so important about the mutation of the A-129…something ... gene, again?* Could it be that both childhood experiences and genes had had a hand in Joe's addiction? In my son's addiction? I'd heard phrases for years, such as, "Alcoholism runs in their family," but I hadn't really thought much about them. My own family was pretty strait-laced. Drugs and alcohol didn't even come up when I was growing up.

I had my own childhood trauma, though, and I know now that the experiences plainly contributed to the habits and personality I have today. So, was it such a stretch to think that Joe's childhood could shape his tendency for…whatever he had chosen to use? *Probably not*, I guessed. But genetics was something I hadn't studied at all. It would be interesting to hear Joe explain how genes influenced him to feel or do things differently from other kids his age.

I thought about the consequences Joe seemed to tie to things like sugar and the lack of sleep. It was hard for me not to discount them. *I had some similar experiences in the night, and I turned out just fine*. I still remember creeping past an open doorway, and then the stairs, each time feeling my heart race, as I was certain a vampire would snatch me from the dark. But I got over it. Or at least, I got through it. *Probably because it had only lasted a relatively short while*, I reasoned.

My parents had scolded me for being scared and wanting to sleep in their doorway. "Go back to bed, Sharon," they would say wearily. "It's just a nightmare. There's nobody here but us, and it's not real. You're way too old for this. Now go back to bed." And off I'd go, avoiding sleep until I could no longer keep my eyes open. I'd jolt awake when daylight came, relieved it was morning. I'd totally forget the fear as a new day began. I told myself that by playing outside in the sunshine, I was safe.

Joe was telling his story and my story, too. If he'd had that same heart-thumping fear I faced every single night for weeks, it was horrifying to think that he had lived with it for years. That's what he said. *Years*. I shuddered.

Yet he appeared so assured and in control, and he ran such an impressive center. It seemed unbelievable that someone like Joe could have started out where my son was now, emotionally. The story was likely to get more complicated when Joe revealed his addiction. And although he seemed committed to sharing his story, I could see him tense up while he talked.

My audio recorder was sitting on the seat next to me. I started it up as I drove, dictating notes on my own emotions and any questions I had. *Start researching the terminology Joe sent home. Then ask Joe to go deeper into the explanations about gene mutation and thyroid stuff. And allergies. Did he mean just regular allergies or actual "brain" allergies? Is there such a thing? And adrenal glands. Oh, and speak more about anxiety and fogginess.* I knew that whatever I

researched, hearing from Joe would solidify the meanings even more. I kept making follow-up notes and listing my questions, the recorder capturing my words, knowing I'd have to plan on more time with Joe in future sessions. I'd send off an email to Keri when I got home.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAID

The first sound that greeted me when I walked into the house was silence. Lately, I preferred it that way. It meant that I had a rare moment when nobody was home but me. Addie's note said she had stayed late at school for a project, and then was going to a friend's home to study and would be home after dinner. I knew that she was taking a break from the tension in the air. Always responsible and caring, Addie made an effort to ease my worry.

There was no note from Lorin.

I sat down at the kitchen table, opened up my laptop, and started typing in notes as I listened to the recorder overflowing with my thoughts. Then I started googling, setting up a new tab for each symptom I researched. What I found made my head spin.

Adrenal glands that functioned below the normal level—adrenal fatigue, in other words—could contribute to the complications of alcoholism and other addictions.[7] Immediately, I got why Joe spoke about the depletion of the adrenal glands and why it helped to shape his addiction journey.

On to MTHFR genes—the term I'd been dreading, simply because I was so wary of the complexity of genetics. And yet, to have something scientifically backed up and explained seemed also…freeing. All of these terms were new to me, but not new to science, and that was also comforting.

As I looked through the sites and articles, the nearest I could get was that the mysterious MTHFR 1298 gene helps keep alcohol consumption in check—provided it's working correctly. Otherwise, the opposite occurs.[8] What was staggering was how

often it came up when in conjunction with addiction. In one study, nine out of ten of the subjects tested positive for one of the MTHFR variants.

I'd never heard of this gene before meeting Joe. And I never would have known to link it to addiction if Joe hadn't talked about it so confidently.

On to the thyroid.

Everything I read emphasized what Joe had said—of the various thyroid disorders, children (even babies) can develop hypothyroidism, meaning an underactive thyroid. If undetected and untreated, it can play havoc with how children's brains develop as well as with their physical development.[9]

I wanted to find out how the thyroid could relate to addiction. Joe's list included a study from the "Indian Journal of Clinical Biochemistry" on how alcohol cravings related to thyroid issues. Complicated, unfamiliar words crowded the screen, and I moved on, but not before gleaning a major takeaway:

> links between the thyroid and addiction existed in ways I had never heard of, nor thought to consider. A lengthy dependence on alcohol doesn't just damage the thyroid, it alters it.[10]

My mind was filled with possible circumstances where young people and adults could be trapped in the world of drug and alcohol addiction. Situations that had nothing to do with them being bad or weak, and more to do with biochemical reactions. I stopped searching for a moment and let that sink in.

But I still needed to look into Joe's allergies. He had used the words "allergies" and "brain fog" and "brain allergy." What was the difference? I dove in.

I looked at Joe's list: Amino acid therapy. Another phrase that was never needed in my life until now. I couldn't help glossing over some words and phrases, but the gist of what I read was

that amino acids were linked to addiction, and there were tests and processes that could improve the problem.

> No one test or treatment seemed to be the magic pill of wellness, but it was encouraging to see how much effort was put into the scientific solutions.[11]

Allergy symptoms were the usual suspects—watery eyes, runny nose, sneezing, post-nasal drip. But there were other symptoms that were not so typical—headache, sluggishness, depression, a tendency to withdraw, irritability. They change the chemical makeup of our brain to the point where they change our behavior—hence the term brain allergy.[12] So "allergy" and "brain allergy" were not the same.

I almost didn't want to look into a link with unhealthy diet and addiction, but there it was, a double-blind study with a placebo control on seventy-six hyperactive children. Almost eight out of ten of them had an adverse reaction to artificial food colorings and preservatives.[13]

But Joe had talked the most about excess sugar and caffeine. I'd known, like most people, probably, that too much of anything is bad, but I rationalized that there was a time for celebrating or concentrating. That's when I justified using a little pick-me-up. The next resource made me question that belief.

I'd heard vaguely about how sugar is more addictive than cocaine but never stopped to think about it. Who wants to? But in looking through Joe's resources, I had to face the fact that sugar and alcohol can be inextricably linked, joined by their addictive qualities. The same dopamine receptors were activated when sugar was in a person's system as when alcohol was.[14] Ouch.

Caffeine use was no better. Caffeine prevented blood sugar from stabilizing, which is what keeps cravings (and addictions)

in check. There's even a correlation between caffeine and a greater risk for substance abuse.

Then the truly chilling news: for adolescents, caffeine could serve as a gateway to illicit drugs.[15]

Gulp. *That puts things in perspective.*

I checked Joe's list again: pyroluria was next. Huh? I tried it phonetically: pie-ro-lurria. I was positive we hadn't discussed that. I flipped through my notes just to make sure—no, nothing on…whatever this was. Joe may have figured that my already-overloaded brain would explode if he added one more strange term to our discussion. But here it was, so I gamely waded through the references.

It was more like sinking to the bottom of the pool when I tried to make sense of the technical discussions. I came up gasping for air, and decided I would settle on what pyroluria does: It blocks key nutrients from absorbing into the body. The deficiencies show up as mood disorders. No good.

One sentence stuck out: "...depression, anxiety, OCD, ADHD, schizophrenia and suicidal tendencies."[16] That last one was the fear I tried to keep at bay when it came to my son.

My last research tab was on Joe's sleep patterns, or lack thereof: the night terrors. What I found on night terrors basically confirmed what Joe had said—fear during the night, with no recollection of nightmares despite the terror the person felt.[17] But nothing I found captured the instinctive reaction that Joe still had to the memory of them years later.

And nothing pointed to the emotions that were there for Joe, always running in the background, the way computer programs do when we're online. In fact, Joe had told me that he didn't experience terror from the time he fell asleep. Instead, he felt…dread. That flip-flop your stomach does as if ropes were constantly

knotting it. This is what kept him from getting to sleep in the first place. I felt the same way about my experience. Yet nothing I read came from a child's point of view, only from a parent or physician's experience of the child. I left the topic, unsatisfied.

What my research pointed to was this: In order to have the best chance to fully recover from a serious drug or alcohol addiction and minimize relapses, there needed to be a comprehensive approach for treating the biochemical imbalances that can occur in the body. Education about a healthy diet, nutritional therapy, and a holistic, biochemical approach seemed to be the best answer. I was on the right path.

When Addie walked in the door, I was more than a little troubled and knew I'd have to focus even harder to get to sleep when bedtime came. Micah walked in the door shortly after Addie, and I put the laptop away. It was family time.

LETTING JOE IN ON THE FAMILY SECRET

The next day, I brought up Joe's center with Lorin.

"Mom, there's nothing to fix," he said. "I just need a little time to get it together. Don't worry about it. I'm going to start looking for a job today."

My conversation with Micah about it was even shorter.

"Mmpphh ..."

And that was that.

A few days later, I decided to speak with Joe about my family. It was time to talk honestly about Lorin, as daunting as that seemed. On the other hand, while Joe was in the addiction and recovery field, he was also my client. Did I really need to blur the lines on my first major project with him? I was about to find out.

Joe and I were using the video conferencing program on our computers; I was in my home office and he was in his.

"Joe, something happened at home the other night. Can I

tell you about some of it? I think I just have to vent," I added, almost apologetically.

"Sure," Joe said.

"The other day, I shared a little of our conversation with my son, Lorin, and my husband, Micah," I said. "I hope you don't mind. I was just so amazed about what you and I talked about with childhood warning signs. Then I shared that I had some concern for Lorin being susceptible, as well. And I started talking about your center. Just in general terms. I basically hinted that they might want to check it out."

"And how'd that go?" Joe asked.

"Not very well. They both dismissed what I had to say, real quick. And I felt terrible, accusing Lorin of having a problem with possible addiction, so I let it go."

"It can be scary bringing up this topic for the first time. I can imagine that might not have gone over great," Joe agreed.

"But Joe," I said, "I just ... I couldn't believe that they weren't interested *at all*. They thought it was me worrying needlessly. They didn't see the urgency."

Joe caught something in my voice, even through the screen. "Your son is possibly caught up in drugs? How old is he?"

"Twenty-two."

Joe nodded. "That's hard. I'm sorry to hear that. Even harder when our spouse isn't on the same page as us."

I nodded miserably.

"Sharon," said Joe, "a lot of parents approach it the same way you did. Let me share with you a better way to have them understand your concerns and where you are coming from."

"Please," I said.

"What I would do the next time this comes up is ask your family for help for you, personally. Tell them you need help because you are struggling with anxiety and sleepless nights, worrying over what's wrong. You believe there's a problem in

your family that everyone in your family is involved with."

"That sounds much better," I agreed.

Joe continued. "Then say this to them: 'I believe we have all fallen into the grips of an addiction. I believe that you, Lorin, have possibly developed an addiction to drugs or alcohol. Dad and I have fallen into the same pattern that you have, thinking we can control this situation, and you, and that's causing our lives to be out of control. We can't just sit back when we believe there could be a serious problem here. Can you please join with us, Lorin, to find out, to help our family?'"

"So make it about helping our family, rather than telling Lorin he needs help," I said.

"Yes," said Joe.

"But remember this: until they do whatever it takes to get help, neither family nor addicted person has hit bottom yet."

"Why do we all have to hit bottom before we can get help?" I pleaded.

"Because people don't change directions unless there is a powerful, long-lasting motivation to do so," he said patiently. "There are two ways to do that, and either way, it takes committed action. You either hit bottom through becoming educated enough to stop the addictive behavior and get help, or you hit bottom through enough of the pain of consequences, and ask for help. "

"Micah and Lorin don't seem to want to get an education right now," I said. "They are hiding their heads in the sand."

Joe nodded sympathetically. "It's sad, but usually outside consequences are what end up turning the tide. A legal, financial, or medical event becomes a big enough reason to go in a different direction. At my clinic, we provide the opportunity to learn, and rebalance a lot of biochemical damage done from

those consequences, but in the end, it is the individual and the loved one's choice to accept help."

"I just want to hurry them along," I said with a sigh.

"You can't," said Joe simply. "A bottom has to happen. From an intervention, a DUI, or some other event that gets through to them. It has to be their choice to get help."

I nodded. *That's the reality of it,* I told myself sternly. There was nothing left to say about it.

A few days later, Joe and I met in his office. I had decided I was not going to bring up our conversation about Lorin and instead would focus on Joe's story. I set my audio recorder on the side table next to my spot on his sofa and opened my notebook.

"Since our last meeting, I started reading some of the research that you pointed me to," I said briskly, all business. "There's so much information out there. I would have had no idea if I was researching credible sites or even where to find the best places for my answers. So thank you. I'm not even sure I know the right questions to ask after what I read," I added, "but I have a few questions I'd like your take on, in order to clarify a little bit more."

"Sure," Joe said easily. "What would you like me to cover?"

WHY GENE MUTATION MATTERS

"Let's start with the problems you displayed in childhood," I said. "I'm interested in how those things play into addiction. I mean, take the gene mutation thingy. MTHFR—it's something I've never considered."

"Right," Joe said. "And it may sound complicated. But it's basically a part of our body's warning system."

Other factors are part of this warning system, too. Joe ticked them off with his fingers: too much sugar, too much caffeine, high cortisol levels, adrenal exhaustion, histadelia. That chemical imbalance known as pyroluria, and neurotransmitter imbalances coming from low amino acids; both can complicate things even further. He wasn't finished. "Genetic factors, underactive thyroid, and what I call '7-11 syndrome'—where a lot of kids are getting their meals from these days—make it even worse," he said.

"Any combination of these or other, secondary problems that come later on from becoming addicted pile on.

It's like the lights going on and the bells going off when a train is about to barrel through an intersection.

The big train crossing barrier comes down, warning us: 'Watch out! Something's coming! Alter your course!' It's critically important to address all the factors when someone like me is providing assistance with addiction," Joe said, his tone emphatic, "or you'll end up with a low success rate, a lot of people relapsing, and mistrust for the process of recovery."

I was still stuck on that MTHFR gene. I knew enough at this point to understand that it had something to do with folate or folic acid. I just hadn't figured out why folate mattered to an addicted person's body. I'd taken folic acid when I was pregnant because that's what the doctor told me to do to help prevent miscarriages, but I had a sense that folate was different. Joe explained that folate is important for a healthy immune system and works with vitamin B12 to form healthy blood cells. But also, it's vital for mental well-being.

"If a normal MTHFR gene is crucial for mental well-being, then a mutated MTHFR gene changes how folate is utilized," Joe continued.

"When you have one or more of the MTHFR gene mutations, your antidepressant neurotransmitters don't work properly. This leads to the symptoms associated with depression.

Nutritional imbalances contribute to those neurotransmitters misfiring."

I knew how Lorin ate—multiple caffeine and sugar-loaded energy drinks, entire meals made from gas station food.

Depression, stress, irritability, feelings of guilt and frustration, lack of confidence, and even thoughts of suicide can all come from this imbalance, Joe told me. For him, the mutation manifested itself in several ways—anxiety, depression, insomnia, and poor concentration.

"They created a backdrop of discomfort that I couldn't shake," he said. "And nobody could diagnose it correctly, so I moved in the direction of self-medication to find relief—alcohol and prescription pills.

This self-medicating solution started working on a basic level, and that contributed to my using more and more of them for relief."

Joe noted that about 80 percent of the clients he worked with had at least one of the mutations.

"If we detect one of these mutated genes," Joe continued, "we can compensate for them by giving the person a methylated form of folic acid called L-methylfolate." He caught my confused, please-explain look. "It's an active form of folate that helps prevent the mutation from hijacking a person's system. Some people tend to reach out to self-medicate with drugs or alcohol, like I did. We can bypass the genetic defect by giving the person the active form of folic acid—L-methylfolate."

Joe held up a cautionary finger. "Of course, that's just one of many factors that contribute to a person going down the path of

addiction. Habits and circumstances can compound those basic elements. The point is that there was a combination of things that kept me awake and uncomfortable. And it's important that we talk about the different aspects.

Because as parents, or siblings, or just our community in general, we need to understand that many paths lead to the single event where a person becomes addicted to something."

Some chemicals, Joe explained, accelerate the path to addiction—methamphetamine (often called speed), opioids, cocaine, and some others that are injected or smoked. The timeline involving alcohol or pills is more gradual, generally. "But at some point," he warned, "the paths converge."

I nodded. I was starting to accept the fact that some of this stuff was not going to make 100 percent sense to me the first time Joe explained it. Even so, simply knowing now that these things were part of what kept people addicted gave me a certain feeling of empowerment. And I needed that.

As if sensing that I was starting to put the pieces together, Joe wagged his finger emphatically at me.

"But always remember this, Sharon," he said.

"Alcohol and drug addictions are primary illnesses. Other things make it hard to recover, but nothing positive will happen until you treat the primary illness."

"The addiction," I said, nodding.

"Right. The addiction."

CHAPTER 4

The Addiction Train

"It doesn't care about the chaos it generates or who gets hurt.
Its job is to move forward."

—JOE

– SHARON –

JOE STOOD UP AND STARTED TO PACE, although his voice was calm. "If those warning signs are like the railroad crossing signals, with those flashing lights and bells, addiction is like the train ride itself. For those of us with a tendency for drug and alcohol addictions, the train usually starts slowly, innocently, building over time."

"Usually?" I asked.

"With certain drugs," Joe said, "including opioids and heroin,

the ride can shoot forward very rapidly, right from the beginning. Usually, though, the momentum for addiction builds slowly.

Use and abuse are gradual, seemingly harmless stages that gently move a person forward, ever onward toward that ride on the addiction train.

"As it gains momentum, the addiction train keeps that person and even their loved ones occupied, through chaos and drama. It's a destructive, chaotic journey for everyone. The train builds up speed and eventually careens out of control. The only way off is by leaping to safety, being pushed to safety by powerful forces …," Joe paused, "or ultimately, in a coffin."

He stopped and stared out the window. "As an addicted person, we don't know where it will take us, or how to get off it. That's why I'm so passionate about what I do. I was searching for a way off the train, and I finally found it, which is why we started InnerBalance Health Center in the first place."

As glad as I was to hear that InnerBalance was there for those on the addiction train, Joe's words about a coffin chilled me to the bone. I thought of Lorin's journey. Even though I didn't ask to board that damn train, I was on his ride. I saw that clearly now.

I said to Joe, "That's been my family's experience, for sure. Lorin fits this bill. The addiction train is a chaotic ride for all of us."

"Do you want to talk about it some more now?" The gentle tone in Joe's voice was tempting. But I shook my head.

"That's fine," Joe said. "We can talk more when you're ready." I nodded, grateful to put the spotlight back on him.

"That train's chaotic, all right," Joe said. "It's fueled by chemicals, providing that 'what-can-make-me-feel-better' feeling to the addicted person. It doesn't care about the chaos it generates or who gets hurt. Its job is to move forward …" His voice trailed off. "Ever forward."

The brutal consequences of addiction start to surface as the

train speeds up, he explained, bringing eventual desperation and loneliness—churning the chaos that is part of the ride. "Then," Joe added, "comes the resigned feeling that the ride may never end."

I thought of the many early warning signals for Joe that nobody caught, driving his need for a solution, and the chemicals he discovered as his initial quick fix. It was that drive that led him, eventually, onto his addiction train.

As if reading my thoughts, Joe stopped pacing for a moment. "Sharon, for the first time in my life, I felt peace! That feeling, I knew even then, came from the drug. It was inevitable that I would be swept onto the train, without even realizing I'd boarded it. How could I help but do anything else?"

My eyes narrowed when I heard Joe's last few words. "You just got swept up?" I asked, anger tinged in my voice. "As if you had no choice? You *did* have a choice, though." There it was, I thought, the get-out-of-jail-free card that I heard so much: *I had no idea what I was doing because I had too much to drink,* or *I was too high at the time.* As if that mattered to those of us who had to deal with the chaos of their actions.

"Sharon," Joe said, turning around and smiling kindly, "people don't just jump into addiction.

Nobody *decides* to become addicted. Their pathway onto the train is an extended series of events that makes finding relief the most urgent mission.

It just makes sense to continue feeling good. That's what loved ones may not get.

"By the time they realize that their loved one is dependent on chemicals, the addicted person is already far down that track. The speed of their train ride has increased, and life is unraveling. *Wham!"* Joe stopped abruptly, punching his right fist into the

palm of his other hand. "That's when the shock happens for the unsuspecting loved ones. Instantly and painfully."

Yes. I felt the anger welling up. I didn't want it to be true, but it was. The shock, and then the aftershock: the resentment, the inconvenience, the need to be hyper-aware. *Maddening.* My cheeks flushed and I realized that what I really felt was traumatized. I folded my arms, defensively, but kept listening.

Many components of an addicted person's life turn the choices into use, then abuse, and then an addiction, Joe said.

"And like I've said, some of those pieces start even before the introduction of addictive chemicals."

CHASING PLEASURE TO EXCESS

"Take, for instance, chasing pleasure to excess," he continued. "The relentless need to re-create the first high from a drink or drug is a warning sign in an addicted person's journey.

But there is a big difference between *finding* pleasure in what life brings and *chasing* pleasure, or trying to re-create pleasure at any cost.

"Kids chase pleasure to excess all the time, right?" Joe sat down and leaned back. "But most people find a balance as maturity kicks in. They learn to appreciate working for things in the future, and having delayed gratification, as well as finding satisfaction in helping others. Maturity is why many people who have alcohol or prescription drugs in their homes just use them every once in a while. They have found pleasure in many parts of life and are satisfied to use chemicals in moderation. These people are the ones that also turn in early at night when some others head off to the bar and keep partying."

Joe's voice took on a slight edge as he continued. "But for

kids in their impulsive stage, and for those with more of those warning signs, they push and push with no regard for the future consequences. Eating all the cookies in the cookie jar, heedless of a stomachache, and no matter that others might like a cookie, too. They chase pleasure until negative things happen. To themselves. To others. Their chase for pleasure is relentless. This mindset seems to be an M.O. of any individual who is addicted to a chemical substance." Joe paused a moment, looking away, perhaps thinking of his own habits.

I realized that I was seething inside. It was a sensation that had become far too familiar over the last four years—anger and resentment toward my son for the choices he'd made. The relentless chase for his own pleasure at the cost of honesty and dignity. Those consequences led to incredible amounts of sorrow in my family.

"Wait, Joe," I said abruptly, interrupting whatever thoughts he may have been having. "Are you saying that it's *not* all about a person's choice to take the first drink or drug? That the selfishness and chaos and terrible consequences that a person and their loved ones have to deal with are *not* the fault, or the responsibility, of the addicted person? My son is struggling and causing chaos, and it certainly seems to be on him. His choices. His drama. Lorin is twenty-two and acts out like a fourteen-year-old!"

I could see the logic in Joe's explanation of how many aspects led to him becoming addicted. But it didn't account for the heartache that came from the fallout that Joe and his loved ones dealt with. Or the bitter resentment I felt, despite the explanation, for Lorin's situation. I felt helpless and out of control. I was on that damned train because of Lorin. And that somehow felt worse. *Deeply unfair.*

Joe could see how angry I was getting. "I understand any feelings of frustration you might have, Sharon," he said, gently again. "If I thought that just choosing to drink or drug were the

only steps to addiction, I'd be upset, too, because the logical thing would be to choose to stop. I see your resentment because it sounds like you've been caught up in Lorin's chase for pleasure at all costs. Sure you don't want to talk about it now?"

How unprofessional, Sharon. I felt like an idiot, inserting my personal problems into my time with Joe again, and I felt my face redden. "No, not right now, Joe. I'm sorry. I did it again. This is your time, and I don't really know what I'm dealing with, anyway." Joe nodded thoughtfully, respecting my silence.

"Alright, we can talk about it another time, maybe. Whenever you're ready, Sharon. But some of those components, those warning signs I mentioned, do start out simply. Innocently, right from the beginning. Like in my own childhood. Bear with me and I'll explain."

JOE'S CHASE

When Joe was twelve and in the last year of elementary school, his family moved again. His grandfather wanted Joe's dad to work with him. They moved to a neighborhood with lots of families and kids.

"All of a sudden I had more opportunity for social interaction, and I took that opportunity, as much as I could," said Joe. With his new friend Woody, the two of them would go-kart through the neighborhood, causing the kind of havoc only young boys can, like cutting through a neighbor's property.

My anger cooled as I listened to his story. "You go-karted through a neighbor's yard?" I said teasingly. "It sounds like quite a breach of etiquette for such a thoughtful boy as you."

Joe laughed. "I wasn't always thoughtful, Sharon. I was a kid! Woody and I got up to all sorts of trouble. We had these gas-powered go-karts, and we'd race around, destroying his mom's front garden, and then tear on up and down Amalfi Drive, a street in our neighborhood.

Gesturing with his hands, Joe gripped an imaginary steering wheel, jerking back and forth as he reminisced. "It was kind of a"—Joe drew a U in the air—"horseshoe-shaped street, and our neighbors had a driveway that cut through at the curve from one side of the street to the other. It was a perfect shortcut!"

I smiled at his glee, deep in the memory.

"Woody and I would go racing around Amalfi and tear right around the horseshoe. The street went up, up, up, and then made a sharp turn. And there on the curve was Ronald and his wife's perfect yard and driveway. There was no way I was going to let Woody beat me! So I took the shortcut."

It was the first time I'd seen Joe passionate and happy about his childhood.

"This one time we were racing," Joe kept on, "and I cut through the driveway, and Ronald was having breakfast in his kitchen. He kind of smiled and waved as I went on over his driveway. I thought that was kind of cool. So I decided to go around again, and again I cut through. He waved again, and I waved back. But the third time I cut through, it was Ronald's wife in the kitchen, and she wagged her finger at me, like 'NoNoNo! No more cutting through our driveway ...' kind of thing, you know?" He chuckled again at the memory. "Yeah, those were good times."

I laughed right alongside Joe, remembering how I had done the same *NoNoNo* gesture a million times at my own kids and their friends for various shenanigans. I had just gotten a glimpse of the sense of joy Joe had occasionally had as a child, despite the obstacles that kept him awake and tired. It was as if the outdoors were his safe place, and he thrived in it.

"Those were good times for me," Joe repeated, more serious now, "and when I found something that gave me pleasure, I'd try hard not to let anything get in the way of that joy. I pushed for it and pushed for it during the day with my newfound friends.

Even at the expense of getting scolded, because it was worth it for the freedom and fun. I chased to excess any bit of pleasure I could get my hands on because even back then, I knew there was something I needed to fix. That something about me was…off."

"Joe, that's just a normal thing kids do!" I countered. "If something works for them, they want more of it. It's a kid thing. You wanted more of a rush from go-karting, or attention, right? What's off about that?"

"The warning signs weren't in the activities and attention," Joe said, unfazed. "Those were just little bits of life.

The true early warning signs were in the parts of my life that were going unnoticed.

The parts that had faded into the background because I was having some fun. They went unnoticed by everyone, including me."

I thought of the background that whizzed by when I went on a train or car trip. Sure, the landscape started out in focus, but as the pace picked up and the scenery started to blur, my attention found other things. Interaction with others, music, or dealing with the mechanics of traveling would turn my head away. The forms of trees, buildings, grass, and people faded, and only the objects in the vehicle were clear and sharp. The background became ... not quite real to me. It was only when I slowed down and noticed them that each detail snapped back into focus.

I knew then how easy it could be for Joe's warning signs to fade into the background of the carefree moments while growing up. I unfolded my arms.

"Underneath the everyday activities, Sharon," Joe continued, somber now, "something was screwing up my dopamine receptors. There was too much dopamine and not enough serotonin."[18]

"But what exactly does all that mean, Joe? That the dopamine and serotonin stuff are also part of the warning signs?" I needed some clarity.

"Yes, that. But more so, it means that I already had an ongoing situation, as well as a genetic predisposition for dopamine and serotonin receptors not regulating properly," Joe said. "Those predispositions cause emotional and mood disorders and a predisposition to addictions. But do you think I knew or cared about that as a kid? No way! I was finally having some fun! In fact, the desire for friends pushed me out of my comfort zone when we lived in that neighborhood. I pushed aside those warning signs, even more. I was going to lean into that pleasure as much as I possibly could. It was a distraction from the hard stuff. I wanted more and more of it. That's what I wanted to focus on.

"It was an odd, dual life I lived," Joe added thoughtfully. "I was fine and would forget my problems when I was with my friends, but then normal life, like going to school or hanging around the house alone and dealing with family, would intrude and bring me back to reality. I'd remember I needed to play by a different set of rules. A separate yet equally familiar reality."

Joe looked at me intently. "I used to go to middle school and just walk around, wondering what was wrong with me, Sharon. *Knowing* that something was wrong with me, but not knowing what it was. Other people seemed normal, but I was scared that everybody would find out I was different and I wouldn't be accepted.

"Especially at school and around adults," he added. "I was terrified whenever I was in a classroom because the teacher might ask me for an answer I didn't have. I felt dumb because I couldn't keep anything I read in my head for more than a few minutes at a time. That foggy-headed feeling stayed with me. I mean, I was distressed and pretty nervous most of the time."

Once, Joe recounted, a teacher told his class that they would have to take a verbal test the next day in front of the whole class. "I went home and drank an entire bottle of pickle juice that night just to make myself sick, so I didn't have to go to school. Talk about taking things to excess!"

But it didn't make him sick enough. "Mom still made me go, and I was so humiliated that next day, standing up in front of everyone. Red-faced, stuttering and bumbling my way through it. I sensed that everyone was laughing at me and my mistakes. That test took forever."

He smiled. "But you know what? I still love pickle juice."

I smiled with him. *That makes two of us*, I thought.

A MOTHER'S RIDE ON THE ADDICTION TRAIN

I spent the drive home on the phone soothing Micah, my husband of more than twenty years. He reacted to Lorin's disruptions with anger and self-righteous indignation. He railed at me about how Lorin needed to grow up and take responsibility for his attitude. I knew that underneath his anger was a deep-seated hurt, but venting was just easier for him. It sapped my energy, though, and I found myself—somewhat improbably—defending my son, even as I agreed with much of what Micah said.

"I don't want addicts to have an easy way out, Sharon," Micah told me, after I'd given him some insight during our phone call as to what the addiction train could mean for our family. "I want Lorin to be responsible for his addiction and not play the victim. *We* are the victims, if anyone is!"

I didn't reply. As battered and bruised as I felt, it was different hearing those words from someone other than myself. I resented Micah right back for needing me to validate his anger, as wrung out as I felt.

Micah continued, oblivious to my silence. "I blame Lorin for bad choices and for getting addicted in the first place. And now

it could be my fault because of genetics and faulty brain wiring? No. He doesn't get to do this and blame it on bad genes. What I get mad at Lorin for is using some stuff behind my back, stealing, and lying right to my face."

I couldn't blame my husband for feeling this way, but our relationship had been strained for so long that I was hardened to his tirades. I let him rant, feeling like I was battered on both ends. One side came from Lorin, who lied and stole and did whatever ended up hurting me, over and over again. On the other side, the rest of the family and the outside world were making snap judgments, just as I had been doing initially. I felt it was solely up to me to somehow fix Lorin's brain synapses, correct his behavior, and soothe the family while burying my resentment. I could do none of those. I could only learn more for myself.

At home that evening, I kept to myself, making notes and reflecting on what Joe had shared about his childhood. The anger I had felt in Joe's office stemmed from the many questions I had when thinking about how my own children grew up. I also thought some more about the addiction train. Joe's experience with it was clear, and I could understand his thought process, but I had a different opinion about the ride.

My impression was of me getting yanked aboard without any of the good feelings, relief from stress, or the highs that Joe—and Lorin—got when they zoned out. There was no reprieve for me: no time when a drug or drink calmed me or gave me energy or made me the life of the party. I did the ride sober.

In other ways, my ride *was* very similar to Joe's.

> **I felt there was no control over where my life ended up, as long as Lorin's addiction was in control.**

I felt constantly lonely and desperate. I was out of ideas, which was what led me to Joe in the first place, but on a daily

basis I consistently came up short. I couldn't figure out the best way to navigate the landmines that came up. And if I didn't find the strength and determination soon to dig deep, I felt the only way off the train would be either with outside help…or by burying my son.

Lorin and I were a couple of pros at avoiding hard conversations. We danced around what was wrong. Now I thought he might push back, avoiding the consequences that would come from getting help. It would mean accountability and hard work. No more highs or ten-hour sleeps for him. That's all I saw, anyway. He'd also need to be honest about his dealings and whereabouts if he were to get help. He'd have to include others again. I couldn't imagine that world anymore. I still didn't even know what, where, or when he was using. *If he was using*, I amended. Even now, I still held out hope that I was imagining things. At this point, I was just plain tired, scared, and too stubborn to bend, let alone implement Joe's tactic right then.

The truth was, I avoided dealing with his temper and holding him accountable for his consequences. I had fixed and covered for him up until now, telling myself it would be better next week or month. If I wanted things to change, I'd have to tackle my fear head-on and learn how to let go. *I'll have to become vulnerable again*. The thought made me shudder.

Now I could see our avoidance for what it was: denial. Lorin seemed to be chasing pleasure to excess, but I was chasing control to excess.

Micah's words warred with any feelings of compassion I'd had earlier in the day for my son's journey. I looked down at the notepad in my lap. I had been doodling, thinking about our addiction ride. Lorin's and mine were separate from one another. Micah would have his own version of it, as well. When I looked down, I saw just one word scribbled at the bottom of the paper: GRIM. I felt it was pretty accurate for all aspects of those

who ride the addiction train. It described mine, anyway. I took a breath and turned on my recorder, allowing myself to feel the emotions fully as a mom.

"I'll tell you, Joe," I said into the recorder, "the train ride is grim. It is effing horrible. Horrible! For a loved one. For an addicted person. For all of us, dammit! It is horrendous and lonely and we are all on high alert at all times, knowing deep down that this train will never slow down and let us off. I hate it!"

That was as close as I would come to yelling at Joe, as he'd been nothing but respectful to me. Tears formed in my eyes. I spoke again into the recorder.

"And Joe, we *never* get a break." That was the worst part. I wiped the tears away, put the device aside and put my head in my hands. I wanted it all to go away so badly. To stop the interviews, the insight, the knowledge that there was more to come. I wanted to scream, "NO MORE!" And have it stick.

But why was I so mad at *Joe*? I already knew. Because he saw the things I was trying to keep contained in my little box of control. Did Joe see all the stuff that was leaking out in my life? Ugggh, that was not a part of the professional boundaries I should have had with him as a client. But here he was: an opportunity for direct help.

I continued my imaginary conversation with Joe, talking into a machine.

"The windows of my addiction train feel boarded over. Hot and stuffy as hell. Hard to breathe or see, and no clue as to what direction I'm heading." *That is the crappy ride I'm on,* I thought as I got ready for bed. *Thanks, Lorin.* The sleepless nights. The heartache. The hell of knowing that my son could die because of his actions, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do. *Not one damn thing*. Even though all I want is to support and love him.

But I had the opportunity to get help from Joe. So did Lorin. I just had to ask.

I couldn't speak for every parent or loved one, because every person's ride is different. But in my experience with Lorin, I knew that the feelings I had about my journey on the train and my denial of Lorin's addiction were connected. Like a mother-and-son tie. *We're both addicted*. I finally admitted it—*Lorin to chemicals, and me to having control of my loved one.* Both of us, addicted to control in our own way. We needed help. We were at that point, and there was no denying it anymore. I resolved to approach the subject with both Lorin and Micah again tomorrow, the way Joe had suggested.

But for now, Micah was reading in another room. He stayed awake longer than I did, or vice versa. That way we avoided confrontations over Lorin and the fallout that came with them. I felt lonely and yet relieved about dodging a fight before sleep. *Yes*, I thought, turning off the light. *If there is one aspect of the addiction train I feel is true, it's that the ride is grim.*

– JOE –

All through our session, I watched Sharon making notes. Little lines, circles, and arrows would appear on her notepad. I knew by now that she wrote, not to reference those notes later on, but as part of her process to retain the information from the moment. It was obviously information she would relate to her situation with her son.

I hope she's ready for the long haul.

CHAPTER 5

Finding Relief

"A single spoonful of red liquid, and yet it was the moment that defined my direction in life."

—JOE

– SHARON –

TWO DAYS LATER, I MADE A VIDEO CALL TO JOE. It was a relief to be in my own office. I left the immediacy of my home life on the other side of my office door and slipped into Joe's story. My anger and resentment from our last session had subsided. It was time to get on with his work; there would be time to talk about my stuff later. Especially since my family wasn't ready to take a look at anything as drastic as getting help. Yet.

"Joe," I asked, "how did your mom feel, once she found out

how far you'd go to avoid homework and speaking in class?"

"After Mom found out about the pickle juice stunt, that's when she first started to worry," Joe said. "It was something tangible that the outside world could see was wrong. And when she noticed, she did what she thought made sense. That's how I ended up in a school program for kids with learning disabilities on the UCLA campus when I was in eighth grade.

"I wanted to be smart like the other kids," Joe said, "but I just didn't have the answers. Neither did my mom. It was very embarrassing to me. The embarrassment and awkwardness drove me like I'm sure it drives many kids that age. Those feelings, and my underlying biochemical imbalance, took their toll." He paused for a long, pensive moment.

"I remember sitting in front of the assistant teacher. She focused just on me. Very embarrassing for a shy kid, you know?"

I nodded. I could easily understand the desire to stay in the background and not be noticed.

"That lady was there to help me do better, but she was focusing on all my imperfections. She was trying to fix me. It was agony." I winced when Joe said "fix"—just what I'd said about Lorin. Joe sighed and then continued.

MISDIAGNOSES AND MISSED SIGNS

"They gave very individualized attention. I would sit down in a classroom, and the designated person would help me. She would ask me to read something, and a few minutes later, I couldn't remember what I'd read. I just knew something was wrong but counted on the grown-ups, the professionals, to figure it out. And when they couldn't figure me out, I realized that grown-ups weren't my solution. I mean, I thought adults were supposed to know everything!"

Joe shook his head. "Because they couldn't find anything

wrong with me, they decided that nothing *was* wrong. It was disheartening, Sharon. I didn't know what a misdiagnosis looked like back then, but hearing that there was nothing wrong with me was confusing and frustrating. My self-confidence eroded even further. It was another element that established itself in the background and made me feel even more conflicted. That was when I started gravitating toward things that made me feel good, and shied away from things that felt bad. Unbeknownst to me, I was finding a solution when grown-ups didn't have my answers."

Joe looked up at the ceiling, then back at me. "I wasn't the only one struggling this way, Sharon. I know that now. But back then, I thought I *was* the only one because everyone else looked normal to me."

I saw Joe's frustration and wondered, *How many kids functioned like this through difficult times?* Learning how to compensate, but still knowing that their level of "normal" wasn't normal at all? I recognized it in my own memories to a degree, but what was so alarming was how easily I had probably missed the early warning signs in my own kids. In Lorin. I had to ask the questions that had started burning inside me.

"But what could have been done differently, Joe? How do we solve the problem now?"

PERFORMING THE RIGHT TESTS IN THE RIGHT WAY

Joe looked at me kindly—his eyes were the giveaway, even through the screen, on video. He knew exactly why I had asked with such urgency. "When we talked before, we spoke about early warning signs of the possibility of addiction. Let's look now at how to test and track down what's going on, once there is a concern."

I nodded emphatically. I wanted answers.

"Back when I was a kid," Joe said, "the medical community didn't know a lot about addictions, or the effects of excess sugar

and caffeine, and there was little consideration for healthy brain function. It impeded a lot of the process of recognizing warning signs. But today, so much more can be done. Is being done, on a daily basis. Like testing for things like histadelia—those elevated histamine levels in the blood.[19] We didn't know about histadelia back then, but those elevated levels can cause night terrors, difficulty sleeping or falling asleep, obsessive-compulsive thinking, trouble concentrating, and difficulty in school."

Even so, he added, many doctors might go right to an initial diagnosis of ADD or ADHD, writing a prescription instead of getting to the root cause of the symptoms. "Which in most cases might just be elevated histamine levels," Joe said. "And that can be remedied without prescribing dangerous, addictive drugs. But this has been the traditional training procedure, and most doctors are as frustrated as you are. They may not have all the pieces in the puzzle, so they don't know what's missing.

But here's what we know now: running specific tests can get to the bottom of the warning signs we may notice as a parent or loved one.

I glanced at the family picture on my desk. I realized I'd been attributing Lorin's difficulty sleeping to what I called the Montgomery Curse. All of my boys, my husband, and even Addie had a terrible time getting to sleep, staying asleep, and waking up. *This is worth looking into*, I thought, listening harder to what Joe was saying.

Joe looked energized now. He was in his element. "Going back to the terms and warning signs we talked about, testing for underactive thyroid is good for those who have difficulty sleeping. Or for those with consistently cold hands and feet. Or depression. A doctor could test for hormones to check those levels, too."[20]

"Then there's adrenal exhaustion." He was still checking off

the list in his head. "It shows up mainly through being run-down and exhausted. Also, not being able to deal with stress, and feeling overwhelmed. Doctors can run an adrenal profile plus cortisol level test to check the health of adrenal glands."[21] Joe leaned in toward the screen, his fingers ticking off the answers to things that could be done. Things that were clearly his solutions to the lifelong frustration he experienced.

"And you can watch for nutritional deficiencies, too. This is prevalent in young people. Things like kids having excess sugar, excess carbohydrates, excess caffeine, or not eating three healthy meals a day. These can cause fluctuations in weight, difficulty concentrating, depression, and anxiety. Which can all cause neurotransmitter difficulties. There is a test called the amino acid profile for neurotransmitter function, and there are many other tests, depending on the cases and need …" Joe peppered me with information, rapid-fire style.

I held up my hand, my brain on overload.

"So," I said, smiling, as I caught his enthusiasm, "lots of tests are available now that can pinpoint a lot of those biochemical imbalances. I can't wait to talk with my doctor about them to see what fits for Lorin."

Joe smiled back and took a breath.

"Yep. Along with broader knowledge and a desire for awareness in our kids and ourselves, great strides are being made. And of course, it helps for the parent to be nosier, Sharon. Being more involved is what parents can do right now. Being involved in their kids' snacks, their food, where they hang out, their moods, and stress. Knowing how much screen time and how many healthy activities they do daily is all part of being a detective. Looking for things that can cause problems in their child, and then knowing where to get help when red-flag situations pop up.

"It's a new sort of education that brings hope and answers. We don't have to be in the dark anymore," he added, "thanks

to the recovery community and the missing link."

The missing link. Biochemical restoration, which brings in more scientific options to correct so many of the warning signs. That was an exciting confirmation.

Joe and I ended our video call with plans to talk a week later. That would give me time to mull over everything we'd discussed. I opened my office door feeling hope for my family. That feeling crept up on me a little more each day.

THE START OF SOME ANSWERS?

The next morning, I made an appointment for Lorin, Micah, and me to see a counselor. I didn't feel I could take up more of Joe's time, and besides, I knew my family wouldn't agree to see a bigwig like him anyway. But a local counselor was within the realm of possibility, apparently.

Brian described himself as a "teen whisperer." He had a lot of good reviews and was a go-getter, according to the social media groups I perused. Most important, he could get us in that afternoon. I pounced on it, not even bothering to check with Laura, our family therapist. Lorin wanted to see a guy, and that was enough for me. It was my compromise. Neither Micah nor Lorin was happy about it, but I was determined to get to the bottom of things. This time, I held firm when they declined.

"This is just about getting some information. Not about judgment, Lorin. I need to put my mind at ease so I don't worry needlessly. Our appointment is at 2 p.m." And that was that.

The sun shone bright in Fort Collins when I pulled into the driveway of Joe's home two weeks later. I could see why he loved to

be here. His sanctuary was a beautiful, relaxing property. The pond, the landscaping, the home itself welcomed me.

Joe led the way through his kitchen and hallway and up the stairs to his office. It was cluttered with books, papers, and boxes. I felt right at home.

"I had a good conversation with Lorin and Micah after our last meeting," I said, as I switched on the audio recorder. "We even went to see a counselor. He's an ex-cop named Brian who used to work in a drug-busting agency. Lorin agreed to see him a few times to see if he needed some guidance in his life. Not for drugs, but for his life. He's only gone twice, but it's something, at least."

Joe nodded, offering words of encouragement. But I heard how empty my words sounded. I was hanging onto this option, knowing it was just a small step on a long journey, more along the lines of "maybe something will stick." Not unlike Joe's parents trying different tactics.

My son still hadn't opened up to me about the truth of what was going on. Maybe he really didn't know, and this guy Brian would ferret it out.

I was coming to realize that I was not the major player in his life. I felt bitterness and sorrow for that chapter closing. It closed quietly while I was busy putting out fires. Nagging him just shut him down. It was up to Lorin to become a major player in his life now. Even more than…whatever it was that he was using.

I turned my focus back on Joe.

"Joe, did your anxiety at school ever let up?"

Joe settled into his chair and weighed the question for a moment before he began. "By the time I was in my last year of junior high," he said, "I was still withdrawn at school. I had a hard time interacting with other kids and a hard time concentrating. I seldom felt comfortable, whether in my mind, or my clothes, or my abilities in school and sports." Nothing, he said, seemed quite right.

"I just wanted things to feel okay. More than that," Joe said, leaning forward slightly in his chair, "I wanted to be the star of the game. The popular kid. I wanted to be important and fit in, but I didn't. Communicating with kids was impossible because I just wasn't able to put thoughts into words.

"I didn't know it at the time, but I was trying to cope in my own way and doing a poor job, at best," Joe continued. "I still felt more relaxed with Herb and Woody, my two friends outside of school, but that's where my interaction with other kids ended."

THE RED LIQUID WAS THE BEGINNING

One day in the spring, Joe developed a fever and a cough. It didn't seem severe enough to warrant a trip to the doctor, but he stayed home from school nonetheless. When he kept coughing, Joe's mother knew just what to do.

"Mom showed up with some red liquid and a spoon and said, 'Here, this will make you feel better,'" Joe said. "It was sweet and bitter at the same time. Then, about half an hour later, a wonderful feeling came over me, strange and new. Something I'd never experienced in my life before," he added, almost dreamily. "I spent the next four hours staring at the TV screen, barely moving, comfortable in the moment."

"Didn't your mother notice the change?" I asked.

Joe thought for a moment before he replied. "There was nothing *to* notice. The dramatic change I was feeling was all inside. Mom left on some errands as soon as she saw the cough syrup was working. Probably thought I'd sleep and get some rest. I was still staring at the TV when she left, but I was in a different world." Joe tapped his finger to his head. "But Sharon, the most significant thing I felt was the pleasure. It slowed my brain down enough that the racing thoughts, the anxiety, and the worries were all absent. It was that absence, the relief from the anxiety and worry, that I latched onto."

"It sounds like you felt numb," I said. "Hazy."

"Some people do equate the feeling of pleasure with relief or even with numbness," Joe said, nodding. "And in some ways, they can be synonymous.

> **The first function of the human brain is thinking, and up until that point, I could not shut off my thoughts. The anxiety. The shyness. The racing mind. That red liquid was a sedative. It put all that thinking to sleep.**

But my feeling wasn't haziness. It was definitely pleasure."

I pondered Joe's words for a long moment. "So the thinking part goes to sleep. That's why people do inappropriate or dumb things when they are drunk or high, right?"

"Absolutely," Joe said. "It's why drunk people choose to get behind the wheel of a car when they would never consider doing it sober. It's why people do a lot of things they'd never do sober. The thinking part of their brain is being put to sleep. It becomes an altered state of mind."

A simple explanation, I thought, *with such devastating consequences*.

"Such an innocent moment," Joe sighed, as if reading my thoughts, his voice tinged with sadness. "A single spoonful of red liquid, and yet it was the moment that defined my direction in life. That was the beginning." He fell silent and gazed out his window. Then he leaned forward again, looking me straight in the eye. "I identified that moment with what I was sure other people felt."

"And what was that?" I asked him.

"Peace."

FINDING RELIEF

"As a kid," Joe continued, his voice quieter now, "there was a good chance I wouldn't have become addicted to the peace that

being high afforded me if the warning signs—those biochemical and social elements—had been addressed early on.

"But they weren't." Joe stared at my notebook as I wrote. "Instead," he said, "what took all my problems away was that cough syrup. With one simple solution, I had gone from being shy, with hardly any friends, unsure and awkward, to feeling fine. It was incredible! After the codeine went into my body—because that was the addictive substance the cough syrup contained—for the first time ever, Sharon, I felt like I was normal. Just like what I thought the other kids were."

"So the feeling of 'fine' was new to you, and then you wanted that feeling to be the new normal?" I asked. Joe shook his head, not at me, but to himself, as if trying to reframe his thoughts.

"Well, it's not as simple as that. The feeling that had stayed with me for as long as I could remember, day in and day out, when I was feeling pressure to perform, somehow was more of…constant annoyance."

I sipped some water I'd brought and thought about what Joe was describing. *Annoyance.* What an odd choice of word for this feeling. *Is that really what he felt*? But I could see how the constant onslaught of a hopped-up mind, combined with performance anxiety, peer pressure, and lack of sleep, would be annoying to a kid, or anyone else for that matter. And exhausting. And then I realized that I could relate to it in my own universe.

"I can count several times in my years as a mother and wife," I said slowly, "where I was pushed out of my sanity due to lack of sleep, daily stress, and ongoing anxiety. There were many times those stressful conditions would stretch on, night after night, week after week, month after month.

"In fact, I've been worrying for years on end about my kids. Lorin, most recently," I added. "Just wondering what is wrong and how to reach him …" I paused, mentally factoring in what Joe had said about allergies and something like the MTHFR

gene, then overlaying those issues with a fog of exhaustion and a constant buzz in the background, like a fluorescent lightbulb on the fritz, and having to plow through daily life. "Annoying" was suddenly a very accurate term.

"You felt ... relieved, right?" I asked.

His eyes crinkled at the corners and he squinted slightly, moving forward to look me in the eye. "Yes, exactly. The relief I felt!" Joe exclaimed. "There was no chatter! No squirrel cage of non-stop chatter that wouldn't let up. I didn't have to compensate for anything at that moment, and I didn't feel exhausted from it. I could *rest*. That was the peace, the pleasure, and the experience I knew I wanted to replicate."

Joe relaxed back into his chair, as if once again, he was feeling that exquisite relief from exhaustion.

THE CONSTANT BATTLE INSIDE THE MIND

We took a quick break, and when I was settled in again, Joe said, "You know, Sharon, looking back, I'd say histadelia was my number-one condition, in that it caused the most difficulty. It would make my mind race constantly. Slowing my mind down was almost impossible, so I had trouble sleeping. The less sleep I got, the more it contributed to the addiction. Sleep deprivation negatively affects the hormonal system and neurotransmitter systems. It's more difficult for them to rebuild and replenish productively."

Joe saw my look of confusion at the apparent change of topic. "Remember, the mind is constantly searching to grab hold of things," he explained. "It looks to solve things. Histadelia, and the inability of my mind to stop grasping for things to solve is probably what caused the majority of my shyness as a kid. My mind was just too busy to slow down enough to listen, concentrate, focus, and communicate.

So if an addicted person has histadelia, and their mind is constantly trying to grab hold of things, mainly what it grabs hold of is the need for drugs and alcohol.

Their mind is constantly going back to the drugs or alcohol because it sees those substances as a solution to its problems. The need to grab hold of chemicals to soothe the brain ... that becomes all-consuming.

"That's what my mind latched onto with the red liquid," Joe said. "My mind saw the cough syrup as solving the problems that came from dealing with histadelia, unbeknownst to me or anyone else at the time."

Ah. There's the connection. "Would you say that this is the most common condition you see in your clients as well?" I asked.

"Absolutely," Joe said.

"Histadelia is just so common, yet misdiagnosed or undiagnosed. Clients are as surprised to learn about it as I was.

Toward the end of my drinking and drug use, I would wake up in the morning, thinking, 'I shouldn't pick this stuff up today. I know what it did to me last night.' But as the day went on, it became a battle. Eventually, around five o'clock or so, the thought that I shouldn't use would be replaced with, 'One would be okay. I can handle one drink. I can get away with it. One drink will make me feel better.'

"That's the insanity of it. Time and time again, the loss of control, the damage to relationships, the regret and remorse battle with the absurdity of thinking, 'What the hell! I can have a drink. I can get away with it. This time it will be different and I can handle it.' That's plain insanity.

"It's that obsessive, constant battle that goes on inside an addicted person's mind. One part is thinking clearly about not

wanting to use, but another part of the brain still gives permission, saying, 'Go ahead. It's okay!' That part of the mind gives total, dedicated permission because it grabs onto something that solves the problem."

I looked at Joe with something close to wonder. I had just heard the best analysis of why addicts don't just quit, why they go back when it's not logical, and why so many people want relief. *Finally, it makes sense.* Addicted people don't want to hurt their loved ones or themselves. That's not their intention when they pick up a drink or a drug. But that's what happens. That's the price they pay for relief. *That's the price we all pay.*

ESCALATING AND DIVERSIFYING THE HIGH

After the second day of taking the cough syrup, Joe went back to school. He had shaken the cough, but he couldn't forget that wonderful feeling the codeine had given him.

"I had an idea that the bottle was still in my mom's medicine cabinet," Joe said. "So when she went out on an errand, I checked to see if it was there." Sure enough, it was. Joe took a sip and let the now-familiar feeling of being high course over him.

He looked at me intently.

> **"Everyone is different as far as when and how they board their addiction train."**

I realize today that it was *at that moment when I took that sip*, that I had boarded mine." He shifted his gaze to some unseen object far away. "I was a little scared and apprehensive when I went to look for the bottle. I had a nervous feeling that maybe I shouldn't be doing this, but the drive to find the feeling that I'd had a few days earlier overpowered the apprehension.

"In fact," Joe said, "I felt like…you know when you were a kid, and it was Christmas night? That feeling of anticipation? That's

what it was like. As if it were Christmas Eve and I was all excited to open a present, hoping it was what I had asked for. Then, once I took the next swig, it was finding out it was *exactly* what I was hoping for. I desperately wanted exactly what was in that bottle.

"After that experience, I'd go back into Mom's bathroom when nobody was home, maybe every three or four days, and take a swallow of the red liquid," Joe continued, "but I realized pretty quickly that Mom would know something was happening if the codeine kept going down.

"Then one day, I noticed a bottle of pills next to the cough syrup. The label said, 'Take 1 every 4 hours for pain.' I reasoned that because my uncle, a doctor, had prescribed the pills to my mom, they must be safe for me as well. I opened the bottle and poured a few out into my hand." Joe held up his hand and cupped it as if the imagined pills were there. "They were big, by the way. Holy cow! Like horse pills!"

As I listened to Joe's story, part of me wanted to know how it could be this simple, this innocent. *Did Lorin's story look like this as he boarded his own addiction train?* I needed my answers but pulled back a bit, so Joe could finish his explanation.

Joe said he put all the pills back except one. He was nervous as he held the pill in his hand, but he took it anyway. "Within thirty minutes or so, it worked!" Joe said, with a hint of the relief he must have felt at the time. "That magical feeling was back."

The pill, a large red and gray capsule, was Darvon, an opioid that was commonly prescribed in the 1950s and '60s.

"It brought me the same escape from my problems as the red liquid," said Joe. "I found the answer to all that had been consciously or unconsciously wrong in my life for so long. I was hooked on the peace. The perceived 'normal.' What I became addicted to," he was speaking softly now, and emphatically, "was the quiet in my mind."

Joe rubbed his jaw for a long moment. "I reasoned it this way:

'If that good feeling came out of that capsule and liquid, what else was out there for me?'

> My journey over the next twenty years was simply a quest to seek out the feeling of peace and pleasure I first had with those chemicals when I was fourteen.

I let his words sink in. "Your mom had used the codeine innocently enough," I said softly, "as an effective way to quiet your cough and let you have some relief. You found that relief, but not in a way she intended, and then you chased that pleasure to excess." I felt slightly sick, knowing how innocently Joe's ticket onto the addiction train had been slipped into his pocket.

THE CHAOS OF CONFRONTATION

Realization hit me like a ton of bricks. "For the first time in my life," I said, the words catching in my throat, "I'm able to understand an inkling of the pain Lorin must be fighting. He's trying to find that peace, even for a moment." Tears formed in my eyes but I kept on. "I realize that the more I've tried to save my son from the murky waters he's falling into, the more he must see it as me ... drowning him. I've been trying to scrub him clean with judgment and guilt and 'you-should-just.' All while he struggles desperately to make it to the surface and find peace. To find his answers—"

Joe interrupted sternly, "Sharon, you aren't drowning your son, you are trying to save him. You are doing everything you can to save his life."

I dabbed at my eyes with a tissue and reached for the water I'd brought, taking two large gulps. "Nevertheless, he's struggling, Joe, and I'm not helping. At all."

Joe sat quietly while I gathered my emotions. After I wiped my eyes again, he continued in his gentle voice, softer than before.

"You haven't possessed the knowledge and skills to be able to help him effectively," Joe continued. "It was the same for my mom, too. She tried to control everything I was doing, and who I was going around with. She was desperately trying to keep me safe. But it was that control that drove me further and further away. I resented her for it, but she didn't know any other way to protect me.

"So no, Sharon," Joe said again, "you aren't drowning Lorin. You're doing everything you can to save him."

"I thought that butting in was what I had to do," I said to Joe, looking him in the eye. "Isn't that what parents should be doing—getting nosy? Getting to know their kids' friends, and where they're going, and what they're up to? That's what we talked about last week. What you're saying now sounds like conflicting advice."

"That's true," Joe said. "But what was missing in my situation, and made the nosiness backfire, was my mom's lack of knowledge about how to conduct an effective head-on confrontation. It's true for a lot of loved ones. They, just like you, are on the addiction train, remember?"

I had forgotten, actually. I nodded and Joe continued.

"Even when my use got to be a problem, my mom still avoided confrontation. She was as sneaky about it with me, in her own way, as I was with her. There wasn't a sit-down or a plan of action. Not even saying, 'Wait a minute, Joe, you're drinking too much and doing drugs.' She avoided addressing the problem head-on.

Family and loved ones do the same thing as the addicted person. They become just as addicted to the search for peace.

Joe's words startled me, again challenging my beliefs. I'd never once consciously thought about the lengths I went to in order to find peace, right along with Lorin.

Joe continued. "Addicted people come into the center with the same problem—they keep thinking they can control the alcohol and drugs. Their family believes the same thing. 'If I could just get my loved one to stop using, my life would be wonderful. Life would go back to normal.' The loved ones become obsessed with getting the addicted person to stop. And they go to all sorts of lengths, just like the addicted individual, to gain their peace through control."

I thought of how many times I looked for subtle ways to show Lorin what his actions were doing to us, and how many times I avoided a face-to-face sit-down. I swallowed, feeling the truth of Joe's words.

"I think that's me, Joe," I said slowly. "I'd say to myself, 'What do I know about this stuff? He wants to handle it on his own, and I respect his space. I should believe him.' I've had many conversations inside my head, rationalizing why I was avoiding a serious talk. I make it all about Lorin and his temper, or his depressed state of mind, but it's me who is trying to keep the peace and avoid confrontation."

I looked at my feet, focusing on my words. "I've been just plain scared, Joe. I think I've just rationalized my fear. I told myself I was 'helping him to realize his actions on his own.' That's even how I handled it when I brought up getting some help through your center or another one. And even when I pushed him to go see Brian for counseling. It was done with resentment, on my part."

I looked at Joe, half-accusingly and half-ashamedly. "It didn't go over well at all. Lorin has stopped going. And I've gone back to thinking that he's never going to change."

"Your thinking isn't helpful," Joe said evenly, "but it's a common parenting tactic. 'Pick your battles,' and 'it's their choice and consequences,' and all that. This tactic has to go out the window when a child is in over his head with alcohol and drug use."

I nodded. "Lorin hasn't fixed himself, and in spite of him going to see Brian, things don't seem to get better. I got desperate the other night, and suggested he come to your center for some tests or to talk to you, and he shut me down. I've tried many other tactics besides straightforward conversation. Dropping hints. Giving short pep talks. That way I could still say I was leaving him alone, even though I was trying to plant ideas in his head."

"Not working, huh?" Joe asked, even though we both knew the answer.

"Not working," I confirmed. "I see it now. And asking him to help me understand and feel better, like you suggested, just flies out the window when I'm angry and resentful. But he shuts down my suggestions when I'm calm and rational, so I don't want to take the chance of getting rejected again, especially when I'm the one asking him for help!"

I took a breath, realizing I was getting angry. "Somewhere along the line, Joe, I've forgotten his needs and pain and confusion, and all those feelings have become about me. *I'm* exhausted. *I'm* in pain. *I'm* confused. *I* need to avoid, even for just a little bit, so I don't have to keep on him about going back to Brian." I let out a long sigh and then continued.

"My priority is to get Lorin to stop so *my* life will get back to normal. Not for his benefit, but for mine. And worse is the greedy need I have to control *how* he reacts. I have become as desperate and obsessed as Lorin must feel." I took a deep breath, then released it and looked at Joe. I was relieved there was no look of disapproval on his face. He was nodding sympathetically.

"My family was just like that," Joe said. "They turned inward for great lengths of time, made passive/aggressive comments, but never tackled the problem head-on. Most people who struggle with addictions do the same things. Whatever the situation, it's about the need to be in control, in order to make things okay."

He was looking at me intently. "But Sharon, the situation *can* work out and get better, with help."

"How?"

"The situation between a loved one and an addicted person almost never gets better without guidance. There's been too much damage. You did the right thing by going to see Brian and getting help from a third party. Loved ones and those who may possibly have a problem with chemical abuse need a therapist or counselor. Someone with specific training in substance abuse and recovery.

The situation doesn't get better with a hands-off, non-confrontational, approach," Joe explained.

"It usually gets worse. The more that loved ones get in between the addicted person and their solution, alcohol and drugs, the more conflict is created, and the more everyone feels out of control."

Something else stuck out in my mind. I spoke up, trying not to sound impatient. "I know things were hard for you, Joe, but you said things could get better. Just from learning how to communicate?"

"Yes and no," said Joe. "Every person's journey is different, Sharon. But with love, connection, education, the right medical help, testing, and support, things can get better. I've seen it happen."

The more I heard about connection, the more I felt resentful of the time it would take. More time away from my life dealing with Lorin's problems. I didn't know if I had it in me.

"Connection how, specifically?" I asked hesitantly, my guard going right back up. "I already feel connected to Lorin, for good or bad. I can get an appointment for an intervention with Lorin through our therapist, but really, what more can I do?"

"By connection, I mean not only providing support, but allowing the relationship to heal," Joe replied.

"On the other side of healing is strength, love, and understanding. That's connection."

Joe paused, letting the words sink in. Then he said gently, "You want to know why it takes so darn long to get off the addiction train, Sharon?"

I nodded my head wearily.

"Because relief is a basic need," Joe said. "We all need relief. You. Me. Lorin, and your family. If we've reached out for help and not found anything effective, we'll keep looking."

"Yep," I said. "I doubt anyone would give up the only thing that makes them feel normal."

Joe nodded. "Also, when there is depression, pain, anxiety, or fear, that's when you get desperate in finding the solution.

And for chemically addicted people, the solution is drugs and alcohol, even though after a while the drugs and alcohol cause a lot of new problems.

"This is why recognizing the early warning signs is so critical," Joe said. "Had my mother known how susceptible to addiction I was, she never would have given me codeine. Nor would she have left painkillers in the medicine cabinet. She would have sought out an alternative treatment, I'm sure. At the time, though, she didn't know there were such options. For that matter, doctors and dentists didn't, either. Otherwise, they may have been a lot more cautious about what prescriptions they handed out." He tapped his finger on his thigh to punctuate his next words. "But today, they can be."

"Later on, when I was twenty-three or so, I even used a PDR from a friend." He saw the baffled look on my face. "Physicians' Desk Reference," Joe explained, "a big book that doctors use to identify the side effects of drugs. It had pictures and

descriptions, and everything about all the manufactured drugs available back then."

Joe leaned back in his chair. "I remember going through the PDR and finding the names of the drugs I'd get from friends or wherever to see if they were safe. It became an obsession to find the right combination to replicate that first experience.

"'How can I make myself feel better?' That was the core question I'd focus on because I was struggling.

> "Then the effects of the pills would wear off and the struggles would return. And that led to the next questions: 'How do I get more?' and 'What other resources do I have access to?' It was time to search for options again.

ABUSING, AND SOON TO BE ADDICTED

"So that's what you ended up being addicted to, Joe?" I asked. "Pills?"

"I abused everything, Sharon," Joe said wearily. "Down the road, I was attracted to whatever let me escape from pain and anxiety, feeling peace and pleasure in my life. I tried combinations of almost everything that had to do with alcohol, pain medicine, and amphetamines. It was my first real love affair."

He smiled wryly.

> I courted whatever masked my symptoms, or gave me clarity, depending on the pill or drink.

But please understand, I wasn't physically addicted to any of it in high school. Experimenting? Yes. Abusing? Yes. But addicted? No. Not yet. As far as the addiction train, Sharon, I now know I was aboard because the addictive thinking had already started. I was mentally and emotionally hooked, but not physically addicted.

"I got high to fit in, feel important, and have friends," Joe said, "but I could go three, four, five days without drugs or alcohol. And even when I started high school, I never went there high or drunk. I was too afraid I'd get caught. I didn't go into hard-core addiction until after high school. But my course was already set. It was just a matter of time as long as I was doing what I was doing. And I wanted to keep doing it, and more. It was creating such pleasure and peace!"

"I can see why you call it a love affair, Joe," I said. "It sounds like this was the first time you felt any sort of freedom."

Joe nodded vigorously. "Yep. There was no way I was going to go back to the reality of life if I could help it. I felt like I was living a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde reality. I'd go to school sober, white-knuckling it to get through the classes. I'd be foggy-headed and anxious, just fearing that a teacher would call on me, or that I'd stand out somehow. I'd hug the walls of the hallway or avoid the halls altogether and walk around the outside of the school building to avoid contact with anyone my age.

"But after school, I'd get to hang out with some new friends I'd made, thanks to the pills and alcohol. The chemicals did what I needed them to do, and those friends had the same connection to a high as I did. I felt confident and free. Free to become what I thought was normal to every other kid."

I nodded sympathetically. "In looking back over the last several years, there have been signs for Lorin, too," I said. "Signs that I haven't understood. Now I recognize the first indications that he may have been boarding his addiction train back then."

Like when his group of friends changed. "Even with those more mature friends, though, Lorin was at home so much. We didn't use alcohol or drugs at all; even the smell of weed was a cause for contention."

How, I wondered, had my son gotten access to them…or to something else?

NEW FRIENDS AND MORE SUBSTANCES

I looked at Joe. How had *he* done it, knowing that his access to cough syrup wouldn't last forever?

"How did you move from pills to alcohol?"

"I moved on to alcohol out of natural curiosity," Joe replied. "We had it at home, so it was really easy to get. I saw the effects it had on my parents and their friends. My parents would have people over for a party. They'd start out as calm, adult gatherings. But the more everyone drank, the looser and happier they got. As the night went on, a few would go home, but most would stay and just get sillier.

"In fact, the louder the laughter and joking became, and the more frequent the gatherings happened, the more all this became pretty normal in my life. It wasn't any different in many other households in the neighborhood, either. Several of my friends' parents had liquor cabinets, just like at our house. Alcohol was just a natural progression, both for me and for the friends I made."

From there, Joe branched out into other substances.

"Marijuana?" I said. "That sounds much harder to hide than cough syrup or vodka. It stinks like a skunk! And what happened when you would hang out with your new friends? Were you all at your house, or at theirs, or hanging around a park or something?" I asked, knowing full well that I was curious about both Joe's setup and Lorin's. The skunk smell had wafted up from my basement a few times.

"Well, I'd found a new friend, Dillan. We hung around together for a little while when he started smoking pot. I started right along with him. The big deal was the smell, hiding the smell. We'd try opening his bedroom window and using fans. And then it did become a lot of sneaking around and cleaning up so that my parents didn't find traces of the stuff."

Joe took a sip of water. "I didn't enjoy pot as much as pills or alcohol because it didn't give me the clarity in my mind, or

the feeling that I liked so much. It was more of a spacey feeling."

"Why did you keep doing weed if you didn't like the effects?" My question was one I had wondered about for years, whenever I listened to someone who didn't like the taste or feel or the aftereffects, but kept smoking it anyway.

Joe shrugged. "I guess because it was a social thing. My friends did it. I remember I'd always want to steer us in the direction of pills and alcohol, but they wanted pot, so we mixed it up."

I wondered if Joe had dropped his old friends the way Lorin had, gradually yet steadily.

"I lost track of Woody when I went to Palisades High. He went to another school," Joe replied, as if reading my mind. "I just didn't think much about my other friends from my life before. I was focused on this new life."

For the next four years, alcohol was Joe's mainstay. He liked pills, he explained, but they were harder to obtain. His drinking started to increase when he was sixteen and got his driver's license.

"Once I could drive," Joe said, his expression mischievous as he remembered his high school antics, "I remember one time getting some hard alcohol—vodka, I think it was—and driving up to the top of a hill, and we were all drinking so much we threw up, and then we kept drinking some more. We'd head over to girls' houses when their parents were gone. And over to a friend's house to play cards and party. I came to understand that 'party' meant 'getting drunk or high.'

"There were a lot of parties when parents were not home. It became kind of a game. It didn't seem like I had a problem, either, because all my new friends were doing the same thing. And remember, Sharon, this was just the norm for high school-age kids. Whether it was the era or the neighborhood, our group was just one of many groups in high school who were experimenting. It wasn't until later, after high school, that I

even noticed I was getting out of control. I was getting more reckless with my experimenting, while some of my friends just grew out of it."

I'm jumping around a bit here because I didn't get into the more serious stuff until a bit later, but I'll tell you this:

> the alcohol and Darvon gave me peace, but speed gave me clarity."

Joe saw the confusion on my face—a generational divide. "Speed means amphetamines, which are stimulants. Eskatrol was one of the brand names. My mind would race a lot, but the Eskatrol got my head clear so I could function normally. Or what I thought was normal. The pill looked like a cold pill and was really addictive. The FDA finally took it off the market."

WHY SOME ARE ADDICTED AND OTHERS ARE NOT

It dawned on me that once again, so many of my beliefs about addiction were wrong. I had assumed that a person could have only one chosen substance to be addicted to, or maybe just stuck to that one thing. But Joe's experience showed otherwise.

"Going back to that first set of experiences in my mother's bathroom, I didn't feel guilt or shame—why should I, when I was doing something that made me feel so much better? But at the same time, I knew it was important not to get caught. I knew that would cause stress for my mother and consequences for me." Codeine-laced cough syrup and Darvon were both in his mother's medicine cabinet. Speed was not.

I knew I had been comparing Joe's story with my story, and with Lorin's. It was unsettling to feel that it could have been me on an addiction journey, except for a few minor differences. And really, it easily could be many people I knew. But thinking through the description of Joe's ride, I remembered what distinguished his story from those who don't experience a drug or

alcohol addiction: his childhood pain and discomfort collided with a moment in time that caused an incredibly powerful memory of pleasure.

Both Joe and Lorin suffered from bouts of emotional pain, discomfort, anxiety, and depression. The only relief they found was from chemicals, which gave them a euphoric sense of peace, never before experienced. An amplified spike of pleasure. So to them, they had no choice, basically. If they wanted to experience pleasure and peace, or what Joe called a "normal life," they had to use more chemicals. Addiction naturally followed.

The pain of unresolved shyness and anxiety, when combined with the use of chemicals like pills and alcohol, resulted in a magnified release from the pain. For Joe, that high equaled peace, which he chased after incessantly, leading him to become addicted.

"That was when you boarded the train, right, Joe?" I said. "When the chemicals erased the pain and created that peace? I guess this is what distinguishes my story from yours. Something like cough medicine didn't cause me pleasure or peace back then because I wasn't missing them in the first place."

I was more than a little pleased when Joe nodded his head in agreement.

"Yes, that's pretty much it, Sharon. At the time an opportunity might have presented itself in *your* life, you weren't missing what would have put you on the addiction train. But for me," Joe continued, his voice taking on an edge, "the opportunity filled a void perfectly in that moment. It created the solution, starting a love affair with the chemicals. And that left me craving more peace, more pleasure, more connection: whatever made me feel whole in that moment.

I chased that feeling of pleasure for years, even though my high was never exactly the same feeling as it was that first time.

I remember when—" Joe stopped. His office phone was ringing. Keri informed him he was needed at the center.

It was time for me to leave.

REFLECTIONS AND REVELATIONS

I got into my car and looked in the rearview mirror to see how I had held up. Not as stunned as last time. That was progress. *Could I be getting a handle on this*? Even though it definitely wasn't going according to my original, business outline. This was way beyond business.

Traffic was light but the roads were slick, so I resigned myself to going below the speed limit and decided to sum up my thoughts on my recorder.

"How have I missed that someone struggling through their addiction journey could still have morals and a conscience?" I asked into the machine. "Of course Joe had them while he was on this discovery. He had boundaries.

"They all just didn't go out the window like I assume happens when people choose drugs or alcohol. And if it didn't happen for Joe, then it probably doesn't happen for other people, either." *Even Lorin*, I thought. "What other judgments am I putting out there?" I paused, thinking through the meeting. "He didn't latch onto the *codeine*, either. Not at all! He latched onto the *solution*. It was his own formula to get the incessant, negative self-talk to pipe down.

"Of course he would have gone back time and time again. He'd already been battling his pain for over a decade. Joe's newfound peace changed the outlook of his very being."

I thought about what I was like in my middle and high school years. Insecure, and under pressure from teachers and

parents. Peer pressure building its own layer of uncertainty. But every once in a while, something pleasant would pop up, out of the blue. Like in school, when someone I'd been yearning after started to flirt with me. Shock and joy! I could relate to the elated feeling of discovery.

"For Joe, that feeling was the validation," I said out loud, "and the beginning of that courtship, just like Joe said. It transferred confidence quickly and effectively. Like tapping into a secret well. Who could blame him for that?"

I turned off the recorder. There was a lot of information in that little contraption, and I would need to upload it to my computer as soon as I got home. My thoughts turned from Joe to home, and what would be waiting for me.

The truth was, I had no idea what would be waiting for me today. Each day was a different version of worry, heartache, and anxiety. It had gotten to a point where I no longer tried to anticipate what could go wrong with my son, or how I could juggle cleaning up his messes with somehow hoping he would stop and wake up on his own. I had grown tired of looking for inspiring words, lessons, and moments that would halt the lies and half-truths I dissected daily.

Maybe the next meeting with Joe would give me a better solution. I knew I'd run out of my own ideas.

- JOE -

When Keri told me I was needed at the center, I cut short my time with Sharon. As I started the twenty-minute drive into Loveland, my thoughts bounced back through the interview, competing for attention with the client who needed my help. Sharon had given me an audio recorder of my own to capture thoughts as they came to me, a twin of the one she owned. At the

red light, I positioned the little recorder on the passenger seat and turned it on. I wasn't looking forward to talking to the air in front of me, but I gave it a shot.

"Uh, okay, this is Joe thinking about stuff," I started, then put it on pause. *Man, that sounded dumb,* I thought. But I decided that it was more important to get it out than to get it right the first time. That's what Sharon had said, anyway. I gave it another try.

"Okay. So…thoughts about today." I cleared my throat and stared out the windshield at the now drizzly day, wipers going back and forth. Sharon had asked whether any of my old neighborhood groups of friends knew what I had gotten into. This seemed like a good place to start.

I didn't turn the machine off until I was parked in InnerBalance Health Center's lot. Then I turned my thoughts to the events at hand and hurried inside.

CHAPTER 6

Feels So Good

"All I felt was relief, pleasure, and freedom. It was fun and exciting. The consequences that came with addiction weren't there. It was wonderful."

—JOE

– SHARON –

JOE SMILED AND LEANED FORWARD in his chair. "Where were we?"

It was a week later and we were staring through our home office screens, picking up where we'd left off when Joe had been called into the office.

"Junior high and high school," I prompted.

"I loved that time!" Joe said. "Lots of drinking, friends, and drugs."

He must have seen the startled look on my face.

"As an adult," Joe explained, "I look back and see how my chemical use was damaging. But as a teen, I couldn't see that. All I felt was relief, pleasure, and freedom. We were finding ways to sneak out at night with the car, party and get high. It was fun and exciting. The consequences that came with addiction weren't there. It was wonderful."

I nodded. It was the experimentation time, when there weren't major consequences—yet.

"The worst parts were going to school, and whenever else I wasn't drinking," Joe said. "I was still pretty innocent because I wasn't craving alcohol yet. I wanted companionship, friendship, and connections. It's what most kids want, I find."

"No wonder you think of it as a love affair with drugs and alcohol," I said.

THE BRIGHT SHINY TICKET TO THE TRAIN

Joe nodded. "That infatuation was truly the easiest way onto the addiction train. It was the alluring, bright shiny ticket that swept me aboard, with promises to come. The thing is, for the rest of my addiction, I spent my time chasing the feelings I had throughout the beginning stage with the chemicals. But as addiction tends to do, my preoccupation progressed past that seemingly harmless phase."

By the time Joe was about twenty, his addiction transitioned, moving into something more serious. "As my tolerance to the chemicals increased, I was forced to consume more to create the same feeling," Joe explained. "The train sped up, so to speak, and it started barreling around tight corners, jolting and jostling me. I may have boarded the train with the pleasure and relief ramping up, but once that stage progressed from use through abuse, my needs got more intense.

"The period for me that most clearly represented the chaotic

ride on the addiction train was the lonely desperation I felt for all of my twenties and through the beginning of my thirties—thirteen years. I'd transitioned. I went from using drugs and alcohol for the fun and relief of it to the mental chaos and confusion that come with being out of control." Being depressed and anxious slowly replaced the fun and innocence.

"As a teen, I thought I'd found the solution with drugs and drinking," Joe continued.

> "I never talked about it with family because I didn't want it to go away.

It just felt too good. But it became apparent to them that I was becoming a problem because of issues in high school. Even so, my parents didn't connect my problems with my drug and alcohol use. Of course," he added, "they didn't know how much I was using, either.

"And remember," Joe said, "once people try to interrupt the chemical use, the addicted person sees them as interfering with their life. Their loved ones are taking away the most important thing. They just want to be left alone because they have found a solution to their problems—or so they think.

"As addicted individuals, we need the relief that our chemicals provide, and we aren't about to go back to the pain and discomfort for anyone or anything. Until we hit bottom."

Maybe, Joe said, if he had known that he was already primed to isolate himself, and if he had known the triggers that kept him isolated, his story might have been different. "But I didn't. All I knew is that from a young age, I seemed to always feel uncomfortable around my peers. I wish I would have been able to understand and communicate what was going on with me, but I didn't know, myself, so how could I relay it to the adults I was supposed to trust? But those adults didn't know any better, either. What I knew was that I'd found my solution with drugs and alcohol."

"Until you knew that it wasn't your solution," I said.

Joe nodded.

DIFFERENT WAYS TO BECOME ADDICTED

"I want to acknowledge the difference between psychologically addicted feelings and physically addicted feelings," Joe said, shifting slightly in his chair. "When your mind is wanting something to make you feel better, that's psychological. When your body *has* to have those chemicals to feel better, that is physical addiction. At that stage of my life, I was abusing the chemicals, but I was addicted to wanting the high. It went back to that moment of my feeling relief and pleasure from the effects of the codeine cough syrup. At that moment, I know today, I was psychologically addicted—from that day forward, I couldn't get that feeling out of my mind. But I hadn't yet experienced any of the *physical* aspects of addiction.

"This is why it is so important for parents and loved ones to intervene with teens early on, before they move into a full-blown physical addiction," Joe added. "Then it becomes much harder.

"It can be easy to *get on* the addiction train because many individuals are predisposed to the biochemical imbalances.

But once a person moves from being psychologically addicted into being physically addicted to the chemicals, now they've got the biochemical piece *and* the problems being caused by the addiction.

That is why it's harder to get off the train. It's compounded."

Joe leaned toward the screen. "This bleeds through the whole addiction community, Sharon. Even when loved ones or those in authority want to help, they don't always have the resources available and aren't educated consistently on how to help specifically. Just loving a person isn't enough. Just taking them to a 'facility' or 'center' to get help isn't enough. Just paying for

things and bailing them out isn't enough. Those solutions rarely take into consideration the whole set of circumstances that got the person to the addiction stage in the first place. The complication of symptoms and warning signs are rarely taken into consideration because so many professionals aren't trained with the methods specifically needed to be effective."

"Like that time your mom took you to the UCLA program for learning disabilities?" I asked. "After swallowing the pickle juice?"

Joe nodded. "She was trying to help me. But because there wasn't a complete understanding of what I needed help with, the result was that I didn't feel helped. Instead, I felt frustrated and even more isolated. My trust in my mom became less and less.

"The people at UCLA didn't know how to reach me either. It was before I ever was introduced to codeine, alcohol, or pills, but I still felt exposed, embarrassed, and on the spot with a bunch of grown-ups who didn't have anything for me to fix my problem. That distrust became an expectation, down the road."

THE DESTRUCTIVE MOMENTUM BUILDS

Throughout the years, Joe told me, he used his disappointing experiences with people in authority at various institutions to build up the momentum on his addiction train.

"That, Sharon, is why it took me so long to get help. I had no faith in the system, or in the ability of people who stepped in to help. Even with those specialized facilities. Even with love and pleading from loved ones."

Joe took a deep breath.

"And because the addiction train seemed better than the empty answers and broken promises that happened so many times when those in authority didn't have the answers, it became important for me to do things my own way." It seemed, he said, better than nothing.

"Looking back," Joe mused,

> "the loneliness, frustration, and pain of being on my addiction train are what finally turned me in the direction of finding an answer to this problem.

It's why, years and decades later, I was so persistent in looking for—and finding—a new way to work through addiction into recovery."

"We're talking about the addiction train a lot, and I get that it's defined your journey," I said. "Where did you hear about it, exactly?"

"Oh, many songs and poems have used trains as a metaphor for addictions," Joe said. "But one song touched my soul—'The Poverty Train,' by Laura Nyro. I heard it at a pretty high point in my beginning stage with alcohol and drugs. I didn't realize how powerfully this song would play out in my life later. At the time I just admired the meaningful way she could express herself in her songs. At a very low time in my life, the words came back, almost haunting me."

Joe stopped looking at me through the screen and looked down at his desk, in concentration.

"In the lyrics," he continued, "Ms.Nyro touches on the feelings that are up and down and out of control when riding an addiction train. For her, it was intertwined with the desperation of being destitute, and she captured that. For me, she caught the desperation of feeling anxious and dazed and lonely in the latter years of my addiction. Not being able to get off the drugs and alcohol. Just like in her song, life was closing in, and I couldn't get off the ride. For her, it was a poverty train. For me, it was my addiction train."

As Joe recited the lyrics to me (he knew them by heart), I heard the raw emotion in his voice.[22] "The way she sang of the trip being 'good and dirty,' and if you didn't get beaten down, then it was worth it. It was an honest, raw view of the risks

and rewards. The feeling of elation that goes along with the consequences."

There was a catch in Joe's voice. "Right along with dying a hundred different ways, there was nothing better than getting off on the high. It felt so good." Joe looked down at his desk again.

"When I finally found myself in recovery," Joe resumed, "I began listening to Laura Nyro again. I heard it through new ears, and could start to understand her connection and words relating to my own struggles in my twenty-year addiction journey. It described my ride throughout the years so well that I kind of adopted the song as something I strongly related to." He paused again, taking a moment to compose himself.

"The one question we hear again and again when someone comes to the center for treatment is, 'Why does it take so long to get off this ride?' Their loved ones have the same question. 'Why did it take them so long to hit bottom, or get help?' And one answer is simply that they don't know they need help. They don't know that the addiction is the primary problem."

Joe's phone rang, startling both of us. He answered it and held up his finger in our predetermined signal that he was with a client who needed him. It was the only reason he would interrupt our sessions. I paused the screen recording and got up from my desk.

Joe was right, of course. Addiction was a last-resort answer that no parent or loved one wanted to hear. We'd rather eliminate all other possibilities first. Something serious like addiction meant our loved one, and therefore our responsibility, was getting "out of hand." It meant getting others involved. It meant money and time and feelings, investments that weren't planned for.

I'd much rather solve routine parenting problems—things I'm responsible and equipped for, I thought. *The ones that included life lessons and an ice cream cone at the end, preferably for an eight-year-old.* But that was wishful thinking at this point. And a play for

control. As a parent, it became crystal clear just how big a part of the problem I was in Lorin's addiction. My part was avoiding the problem, dragging out the timeline as to when we needed to get help.

I wanted to solve Lorin's issues quietly, conveniently, and with as little fuss as possible, instead of opening up to what was actually wrong. It hindered my acceptance, for sure. *It's hindering Micah and Lorin's acceptance, as well.* We'd all like for our problems to be based on simple, behind-the-doors corrections and go on our merry way.

Leave it to Joe to see right to the heart of things.

TRADING RELATIONSHIPS FOR PLEASURE

"The first time I ever dared to show off the alcohol that I was siphoning from my parents' liquor cabinet was to my friend Herbie, when I was fourteen," Joe said, when we resumed. "Herbie was my one particularly close friend. I'd go over to his house and he'd come over to mine. We hiked around in the hills behind our home and played basketball and just hung out together. Whatever kept us moving. He loved nature like I did. Found it to be very spiritual, if anything was.

"It was a major friendship and I valued it highly," Joe added. "But it was the first relationship that suffered because of my chemical use. He wasn't interested in alcohol the same way I was. I was surprised, but I never thought it would affect our friendship."

There was never a fight or argument, Joe told me, but Joe was intent on pursuing alcohol and those friends who loved it like he did. Gradually, he and Herbie drifted apart.

"And then there was Gary," Joe said. "He and I played around with Crown Royal and Coke one night. I hated the taste of alcohol, but I loved the effects of the high. That pleasure was what I started to chase.

"I'd been experimenting for a while, but Gary hadn't. I gave

him a swig, and it was hard for him to get it down, coughing and sputtering, but he kept at it. We drank and drank, pushing through the taste to get to the effects."

Gary became a constant in an ever-changing group of friends that drank all through high school. "It was a way to feel free and be accepted socially," Joe explained, "just as much as it was a break from controlling the effects of my anxiety and exhaustion."

"It sounds exhausting, just keeping up with the need to be in control so much of the time," I said, shaking my head.

"I think it stems back to those night terrors, Sharon," Joe said. "The desperate feeling that I had to freeze, or else the bad guy would get me. Or maybe it was how nervous I was around strangers. At school or wherever I needed to talk, and knowing I couldn't get my thoughts into words. It carried over into many other situations and became a default for me. I was hyper-aware of my insecurities and I needed to be in control. But not when I got high. It was a release that allowed me to let go of that need to be in control, and to know that everything would be okay."

It makes sense, I thought. *A release valve, so to speak*.

As Gary stayed part of the drinking group, Herbie went into sports. "And I went in the direction of…well, addiction," said Joe wryly. "At the time, I didn't realize the separation with Herbie was happening because I was spending so much time with my drinking friends. This was a classic early warning sign, but how would I know that as a kid? I was busy partying and getting high. Herbie and my parents probably noticed the difference in me more than I did at the time. They just didn't know why or what to do about it."

Joe let out a sigh. "Letting that relationship with Herbie go is one of my saddest regrets. My friendship with Herbie was especially important because it was a healthy friendship. Innocent and fun. We'd play outside, up in the hills above our neighborhood. Everything from finding snakes and frogs in the stream

to exploring the area for caves or hidden treasures. The great outdoors of California stimulated our creativity and provided countless opportunities for a spiritual, respectful connection with the plants and animals around us. We didn't need much to feel freedom."

Ending that friendship with Herbie, Joe said, was the start of a new pattern.

"I started to trade the pull of my addiction for the only loving, spiritual, healthy connection I had known in my life. Before any drug or alcohol experience, pleasure and freedom were based on nature. The spirituality I felt, of being at peace, I chalked up to Herbie's shared interest in the outdoors.

"I eventually lost that, trading it for the short-lived pleasure I felt from getting high. It didn't become obvious until many years later, when I was sober. But the loss of that friendship was the start." I could hear in Joe's voice the regret he still felt.

> **"The more I craved the solution that the drugs and alcohol gave me–the absence of anxiety and shyness, the ability to feel pleasure–the more unaware I became that I was losing what I had cherished before alcohol and drugs became a part of my life."**

Relationships that included myself, my family, and even my love for nature. I was losing my spiritual connection.

"I later traded those relationships, to different extents, for the experience that came with feeling 'normal.' I traded them for pleasure." A look of pain and regret passed across Joe's face. "My friendship with Herbie was the first major relationship in my life that addiction destroyed, but it was far from the last."

I stopped taking notes. What a vulnerable, trusting space Joe had put himself in to have this book written. I didn't count on how raw I would feel as he spoke about his memories.

"Thanks, Joe. I've got lots to work on," I said gently. "Let's

pick this up at our next session." We scheduled our next meeting and signed off. I made a few last notes and left my home office, closing the door behind me.

We were back on a video call a few days later, and this time it was Joe who dove right in.

"I was thinking some more about high school," he said. "I loved a lot about that time in my life. I loved the high I got with pills and alcohol, but ultimately, I was in love with that feeling of peace. I had latched onto the release of pain and anxiety, and my vehicle for it was fun. Pleasure. I was experimenting with different ways to have this particular fun, but at the high cost of my relationships, like I said. My family. My friends. Girlfriends."

I stopped taking notes for a moment and looked up at him. This was the first time he had ever mentioned girlfriends.

"They got the short end of the stick because I was attracted to pills and alcohol more than to them," Joe said. "I felt horrible as each relationship ended, but my drive for peace won out."

Those relationships formed a pattern, he said, starting with girls he dated in high school. "We would fall in love, but neither of us knew that I was more in love with the drugs and alcohol. With the high. With the pleasure that came from not being in control."

Despite Joe's attempt to drink and use less, the girls would notice how disruptive things got when Joe got high. Eventually they connected the dots. "But it was like trying to plug up a bursting dam," Joe said. "Ultimately, the addiction would win, and my use would damage—and then end—the relationship. The addiction caused a lot of heartbreak."

Joe was counting off on his fingers—Charlotte, Connie, Joanne, Debbie, Kathy, Mary. "All took the brunt. Others, too," he added. "They were no match for the power of an addiction.

"I have made amends to some of the girls, but for others, it did not feel healthy to reopen old wounds," Joe said. "I just regret so deeply any harm I caused."

IF NOT LOVE, WHAT?

We took a break so Joe could check his messages, and my thoughts turned to Lorin, as they did so often. About how many relationships his addiction had started to destroy, including the way it was crumbling my relationship with him. It had become a habit, obsessing about the things I was unable to fix and not knowing how to stop trying to solve the mystery of why he had gone down this road. All I knew was that as a mom, letting go simply wasn't an option. *Oh, how I wish I could*, I thought. *How I wish I had the guts, or the strength, to simply drift in another direction.*

I stared out my window. Joe had experienced people pull away from him as his behavior and focus changed. I had started to see the same pattern with Lorin. I saw the effects already, in my home. In our family circle, and with his childhood friends. His girlfriends.

So many people had washed their hands of my son, probably to hold onto their own lives, sanity, and pocketbooks. Or they came to their own conclusions and simply stopped wondering about the circumstances, inserting their own explanations instead.

"He's so selfish." "He's gotta learn on his own." "He's an idiot." I imagined Joe's former friends and girlfriends saying some version of these words. Short, simple statements that seemed to explain the whole story, and why friends and family would no longer be in his life. The problem for me was that I knew these were not the whole story.

I remembered the funny, witty, kind soul Lorin was in seventh grade. He had brought home a new friend named Nate. The boy was always at our house, partly for the stability our home provided, but mostly because Lorin was a great friend. Our family grew to see Nate as our son; we adopted him in every way but the paperwork.

But what had started as a wonderful relationship was

strained now. He and Lorin rarely spoke. Their friendship hovered at the breaking point. The amount of healing that would have to happen for Lorin to mend fences with Nate and all his former friends and loved ones seemed astounding, like there was nothing he could possibly do to make up for the betrayal and selfishness he'd shown, and the many bridges he'd burned so far.

I returned to the original question I yearned most to have answered. If a person with an addiction doesn't have drugs or alcohol to fall back on, then what would give them peace or pleasure, instead? What do I have to offer that would be more alluring and effective, long-term, than what Lorin was possibly using now? I felt like the answer should be love. Or maybe connection. Or respect. Memories. None of those seemed to be enough, though.

What could someone like me use to put the brakes on the addiction train? I thought peevishly. *What do we have to offer, except the bargaining, the cajoling, the pleading and bribing?* Nothing so far, I wearily concluded. I currently had nothing effective to offer Lorin that actuall*y* spoke to my loved one on a deep enough level that he would choose my solution over his proven method for relieving the pain/loneliness/emptiness in his life.

I had no idea how Joe's family relationships survived his choices during the high school years. Or if they ever did. But if Joe could turn out okay, maybe Lorin would, too. I should talk with Joe about Lorin coming to his center, despite my son's dismissal of the idea.

I turned back to the video screen, ready to ask.

Joe looked distracted.

"Sharon, I'm sorry, but I've got to cut our time short," Joe said. "I'm needed at the center. Can we pick up where we left off tomorrow?"

– JOE –

As I got in my car, the anguish in Sharon's voice continued to echo in my brain. Her dilemma with Lorin came down to what I'd heard a lot over the years: "Love means you never give up." That was Sharon, helpless to let go, and holding onto her ways. Something would have to, and eventually would, give. And yet, bottom line, I didn't disagree with what I'd also heard in her voice: Don't ever give up.

But never giving up on the addicted person doesn't mean giving up everything else, to the exclusion of everyone except that person. There needed to be boundaries, and setting them is a hard-fought battle. Sharon would learn that, in her own way and time.

CHAPTER 7

'So I'm Using–No Big Deal'

"Stop operating on a normal playing field. It's *not* a normal playing field. It's like you're fighting Goliath as a mere human, but with no weapons."

—JOE

– SHARON –

WHEN LORIN CAME UPSTAIRS THE NIGHT AFTER Joe and I had videoconferenced, I was loading up the last of the dinner dishes. He asked me to sit down in the family room and just listen. It was an odd, direct request. My heart started to race, and I got the first pang in my gut that it was going to be another hard talk. *At least he's alive*.

I took the chair next to him, and he started talking. "Mom, I know you know there's something going on with me. I know

you think it's depression and that I'm smoking weed. And both of those are true. Brian's helped me recognize the signs of depression, and he says you're worried about what else is going on. So please just listen."

Is this happening? Lorin was actually, finally naming our hell?

"I've been using, and transporting," he announced. I sat, dumbfounded, as his words pierced my ears. *Transporting what? Using what? What could be worse than weed?*

THE HELL THAT WENT UNDETECTED

I spent much of the next few weeks trying to wrap my head around everything Lorin told me that night, and with what happened to him and to me after he did. When Joe and I finally reconnected on video two weeks later, I was glad to see his friendly yet concerned face. He clearly sensed that something had happened—I'm sure one look at my pale, pinched face told him so.

"He opened right up, Joe," I said. "Maybe it was working with Brian. I don't know if he expected me to judge him or forgive him. It was seriously bad stuff." I took a deep breath so I could go on. "Seriously illegal stuff. He had hidden it from me for over a year while living in my house. Right under my nose."

My chest felt tight and painful as I disclosed my family's reality. Lorin was using and had transported methamphetamines. My nightmare had a name: meth. All I knew about it was how highly and quickly addictive it was.

"I realized that all the other lies he had been caught in were infantile compared with what he was confessing to." Joe nodded for me to continue. "I remember wanting to scream, 'No!!! I didn't sign up for this! No more!' But he just kept talking."

My efforts for the next half hour became trying not to throw up as I relayed Lorin's confession to Joe. How my eyes darted from room to room as Lorin explained just how bad the Bad Guys

were. How he did an occasional 'favor' for 'some people.' How occasionally he'd had close calls with the law, but his friends had his back, and I 'shouldn't worry about it.' What I was left with was how, any second, I expected them to crash through my windows, or barrel up the stairs spewing bullets from big guns.

"Then," I said softly, "I realized Lorin had become one of the Bad Guys to me."

"Sharon," Joe interjected, "you've been doing your best. There is no protocol for this. You've had your mom radar going off for years, but you second-guessed yourself on what you were detecting."

That brought me up short. He was right. "I just thought he was depressed," I said. "I mean, not *just* depressed, like it was something to be brushed under the rug, but ... I guess that's exactly what I did. Over those months, I got used to him going through the rough patches, tempered with bouts of manic happiness, and tinkering with electronics. Tearing apart and building ... nothing. Just planting graffiti all over his projects."

That worrying, and then surviving, is a classic hallmark of well-meaning, but entrenched, loved ones, Joe said.

"And where was Micah, and your daughter, during this?"

Ouch. I thought about this and answered honestly. "Addie wasn't supposed to notice. I wanted to shield her from all the chaos, so I told her nothing, checked my feelings around her, and tried to keep things normal. Dinners, homework, and seeing her friends. It didn't work, of course," I added. "She's become withdrawn and somber. And Micah was magically supposed to know what I was thinking, in spite of my silence and distance," I said wryly.

"The lies sucked me in, Joe," I added, bitterly. "Like an addicted person justifying the chemicals, I've wanted to believe

Lorin's lies. And that he was being sincere when he told me he just 'needed some time' to get on his feet. What a fool I was for wanting to trust him."

Joe listened intently but said nothing. No doubt he sensed there was much more. I took a breath and kept on.

"But that day—the confession day—Lorin talked and talked in the kitchen, and then he got up and went to the living room. I imagine it was to be alone with his shame," I said. "He felt all talked out, and I was glad. I turned to my own habit when he was out of sight. I researched. I sat at the kitchen table poring over websites that spewed lingo at me. I needed to research the slang that Lorin talked about. 'Taking a hit.' 'Tweaking and being spun out.' And so much more I'd never heard."

Unlike the tame, academic sites that Joe had steered me to earlier, this search took me down a chaotic, jumbled rabbit hole—everything from drug rings to witness protection programs to how to spot a user. I had no clue what was relevant and what was pointless crap. I looked at it all, and desperately researched different tools drug addicts might use. Glass pipes, straws, tin foil and aluminum cans, empty ballpoint pens and plastic sandwich bags. All things I recalled seeing scattered around in Lorin's room. I'd been thinking more of needles and syringes, but it wasn't that simple.

Eventually, Lorin fell asleep in a haze of what I now know is a drug detox. He didn't want to use the stuff anymore, he'd told me, and was currently dealing with withdrawal. He let me know, very matter-of-factly, what to expect: he'd be sleeping for days and would be incredibly hungry when he was awake.

Despite being stunned and raw, I felt like I could breathe for the first time in months. My son was detoxing in my house. Added to that was his apparent relief for coming completely clean.

"He seemed to feel better as he spoke to me, Joe," I added. "He hugged and kissed me when he got up."

"And that was something, right?" Joe said. "That was a bit of hope?"

"I think so," I said. "It was a glimmer, anyway."

SMASHING THROUGH BETRAYAL

When I knew from his deep, even breathing that Lorin was asleep, I went through his bedroom and then his bathroom, on a sick, twisted treasure hunt to find all the possible tools of his weakness. I rooted around for something, anything, that Lorin could have used to get himself high.

"I became a desperate junkie," I confessed to Joe, knowing that he would never call an addicted person a junkie, "looking for those toxic tools. Desperate to find what had been hidden in my safe place. In my home."

The tools showed up as bongs, pipes, needles, spoons, lighters ... on and on and on. Some were his, and some belonged to friends who had come to stay for a night or a weekend. All in all, fifteen pieces of chaos lay on the table.

"I felt so betrayed," I said to Joe. "I'm so bitterly angry."

"I can imagine," Joe said, nodding. "That moment of seeing things you know nothing about, in your home, can be jarring."

"I put them on a cookie tray," I said, nodding back through the screen. The only advice I could find on the web about what to do with the filth was to fit it all into several bags, tie up the bags, and smash the whole mess with a hammer in a large bowl. That was it, Joe? It sounded awfully anticlimactic, considering the devastation it had caused. I couldn't bring myself to do it at first.

"I felt like all of it was personal—Lorin's problems, his friends, his mess, his drugs. I felt that all of it was aimed at me, and that's what got me moving again, finally, out of my shock and stupor."

"I called the police department and requested that an officer come to the house. I had a drug addict with criminal tendencies

living under my roof, and I wasn't about to shelter him anymore. Let the chips fall where they may."

"The officer and I stood talking in my living room, away from the tray. All I could think of was, *Of course, Micah's out of town again!* I was grateful Addie was at school, though. I didn't want any of this to haunt them like I was sure it would haunt me."

"When he heard my story, the officer asked if Lorin had ever been arrested. I said no, not that I knew of. Immediately, he told me to get him some help, but that I should be prepared for a hard road. *No kidding,* I thought sardonically."

"And get rid of the stuff," he advised. "Just smash it so he can't use it again." Then he gave me a sympathetic look. *Another family member with the wool pulled over their eyes,* I figured he was thinking."

"The officer didn't arrest me for harboring a criminal, or arrest Lorin," I said to Joe. "He didn't even ask to see the evidence."

"Lorin got a break," Joe said. "He's lucky he doesn't have a record yet, considering what he's been up to."

"Maybe that was good, Joe, but part of me wished the officer had flown into action. Then I wouldn't be in charge anymore."

"And yet, you didn't call me?" Joe said.

"No. I know you were right there for me. But admitting this newest chapter to you would have been one more disappointment," I said. "To admit to you that I had heard your side of things, but hadn't been able to turn my son's life around with everything you had told me. Believe me, I wish I would have called you sooner."

I shook my head and let some tears fall in frustration, telling Joe how, after the officer left, I still wasn't brave enough to smash the evidence into oblivion.

"I guess I was still in shock, Joe. So it just sat there, staring at me from a tray on the table."

Seven hours later, I used my good food prep bowl for the violence. Lorin's drug kit still felt threatening to me, even through three pillowcases. As if I'd get poked or scratched by the paraphernalia and contract drug addiction. I felt like I was smashing a snake or some disgusting rodent. Even swinging a wrench with all my might was a lot quieter than the thumping sound in my ribcage as I pounded out my frustration.

"I hammered those life-wrecking tools into oblivion," I said. "I was angry and scared and adrenaline was running high in my body. I kept a running conversation in my head to distract me from the enormity of my task. What if some thug from ... somewhere ... felt like they needed any of it and came looking for it? Wasn't I obstructing some sort of justice, smashing this stuff? And Lorin slept through the whole damned thing.

"He slept for over a week, Joe," I said wearily, drained even by the retelling of the sordid tale. "Lorin lying in oblivion, sleeping and eating, sleeping and eating. For eight days. Then he popped up and said he felt like a new person. He acted like a new person. I, meanwhile, I feel like I have whiplash!"

"That's how detoxing works in some scenarios," Joe said. "Lorin was lucky in that he was able to detox from drugs in his body without having to go to the hospital. It depends on the chemicals in a person's body, and how long they've been on them. A lot of factors go into that."

"He hugged me, Joe. Lorin apologized over and over again. I tempered my resentment at the time with hope that it was over. I don't really believe that it is, but I hope it is. Maybe this was him hitting bottom and moving on, back into mainstream society. Back into what's comfortable for me."

Joe said nothing.

I plowed forward. "We even have a deal that I am allowed to ask, as many times as I want, about how he is doing, who he's seeing, and where he's going. But something still seems off, Joe.

I still have my radar going off. Lorin's started seeing friends and former co-workers, but just the good ones, he says. Deep down, though, I am afraid he doesn't actually care about me or our family. Not like he used to. Maybe he *is* done, like he says. Maybe it's time to start believing him. But I just don't know."

Joe was quiet for a moment and I hung my head, looking down at my lap. *I can't keep doing this*. Then he spoke.

EMOTIONALLY EMPTY, SPIRITUALLY BANKRUPT

"Sharon, during those twenty years I spent chasing the high in my addiction, I was losing all recognition of the important, loving connections I had. Those connections with my family, my girlfriends, or being out in nature, and even with my parents and friends—they all lost out to the chemicals. Those connections became damaged or severed because of my strong addiction to drugs and alcohol.

"When I arrived in Colorado, I was emotionally empty, spiritually bankrupt. I couldn't feel love for anything or anyone. All I felt was hatred for what I'd become. I had forgotten and lost touch with anything good, and genuine." Joe paused for a moment, no doubt to let those last words sink in.

"No wonder your radar is going off," Joe continued.

> **"Lorin seems to be doing and saying the right things, but it takes a little while for a person to reconnect, spiritually, back into something other than their addiction."**

And it may be that Lorin is white-knuckling it, without knowing what he's doing. There's a very good chance that he still needs help. And education."

I nodded, knowing that we were at a critical point as a family. With Lorin saying that he was done, there was almost no chance now that he would agree to take a look at his possible drug

addiction and get help. When I approached it with him later that day, he just laughed. "Mom, I'm okay now," he said. "Really, it's different now."

I took him up on the deal we'd struck and asked him, almost constantly, where he was going, who his friends were, and what he was doing. He answered me without anger, each time. I started to believe, just a little bit. Enough to breathe. Enough to schedule some more time with Joe.

It was time for the harder conversations that came with Joe's consequences of chemical abuse. Like the fallout from Joe's relationships, and how it grew as he became more and more committed to staying high.

But first, I wanted to ask him that question that had been gnawing at me.

"Joe," I said, "I just have to ask: is there something that we can do to combat the addiction train? That the addicted person's loved ones can do, I mean. I was thinking about this and I felt so helpless. Like I didn't have anything to combat this condition with except nagging, bargaining, or looking the other way, or just being angry. Those don't feel like very strong tools. And I don't feel like I'm a very good help or defense against addiction."

OWNERSHIP BY ALL CONCERNED

Joe rubbed one side of his jaw, a gesture I'd noticed he made when he was trying to help someone (usually me) understand.

"Sharon," he said, "this may not be the answer you want to hear, but the biggest tool and defense you can have on the

addiction journey is knowing your role. And letting other people play out their role."

"So, do nothing?" I asked.

"Addiction is a difficult journey," Joe continued. "It's a gradual, very hard trip for the person battling for their freedom. It is also painful and long for those loved ones who are caught up in it, through no fault of their own. So it can be hard to watch the struggle without trying to hurry it along to its end. Whether you are struggling with addiction, are a loved one, a counselor, or someone in the legal system who works with them after their consequences have caught up with them, the addiction journey is intense.

In any role, the biggest responsibility is taking ownership."

I blinked. *Ownership*, I thought. *How much more ownership was I expected to take on?*

"Look, Joe," I said wearily, "I'm already at the bursting point with my son. Taking on even more ownership in Lorin's addiction is …"

"No, no," Joe said quickly. "Sharon, I'm talking about the responsibility of ownership for *all* parties concerned. Not just your role as the loved one. Not just the addicted individual or the medical professionals."

He let me mull over that for a minute before continuing.

"As hopeful as you are that you are helping, you are misguided in the effectiveness you currently have in the addiction battle. You are up against an individual seeking massive amounts of pleasure, which they're getting from the chemicals."

Misguided. The word stung.

Joe continued.

"They might have experienced pleasure beforehand, doing things with family or friends–going to a ball game or hanging out together. But once drugs or alcohol are introduced and they become addicted, there is no way to compete.

The power of that pleasure-high is so much more intense."

"So there's nothing I can do," I said tartly.

"Yes," Joe corrected me, "there is. The first part of the solution is to acknowledge that *there is no competition*. Your love, your prior relationship and memories, your blood ties, aren't part of the equation now. But this takes away the nagging need for control over the situation. It takes away the illusion of power."

That was a solution? I was getting frustrated. "So what do we as loved ones do?"

"Stop operating on a normal playing field," Joe said. "It's *not* a normal playing field. It's like you're fighting Goliath as a mere human, but with no weapons. You need help. No parents or friends are up for the battle, unless it's very early on. And even then, it's about intervention done correctly. But past that, get help. It's the only way to establish boundaries and ownership."

"But I thought I *was* taking ownership of our family problem. Because he won't step up or wake up, I have to—"

"Let me explain," Joe said, holding up his hand. "There are a few different types of ownership roles required from the many different parties involved. Especially loved ones.

Ownership is needed in different areas, and it's when people don't stay in their roles that there is resentment."

Ownership roles, Joe explained, have to do with establishing strict boundaries around themselves. What is healthy and effective? "Even to the point of stopping the support of the addicted person until they stop using and accept help."

Joe then shared that he didn't hit rock bottom and start on the road to sobriety until his mother said, "I can't do this anymore, Joe," and sent him away, unsupported. "I'll talk about that later, but it's crucial to know about ownership, and a tool or two for how to actually navigate your own role, however hard it might be."

"Yes, but doesn't the ultimate ownership fall on the person who is addicted?" I countered.

He held up his hands again.

"Most people are at the breaking point, Sharon. It's simply a matter of knowing which responsibility is yours, as a loved one, and which is theirs, as the driver of their destiny. And the hardest part is knowing how to step back and let them fight. Or letting them lie down for a bit. It can be bewildering and frustrating. I've seen it in my own life."

I felt the panic rising as I said aloud the words I'd held onto for years: "I don't want to be the reason my son dies, Joe. I don't want to have to say goodbye and watch him walk out the door, knowing he will end up dead in a ditch, and feel I could have done more. I don't want that responsibility and guilt on my conscience! Also, Joe, I love him. But I am just so tired of feeling like I'm the main thing that keeps him from the ditch."

I couldn't believe the selfishness that I felt as I blurted all this out. The desperation had bubbled up, and it was right there for me to look at. I wasn't only wanting to help my son. My desire to help didn't come purely from a service-like attitude. Ultimately, I just wanted the nightmare to end. As a mother, though, I couldn't let it go; I could feel that something was still off, despite Lorin saying he was done with the drugs. I was afraid he hadn't hit bottom. If he did die, as I felt sure he would if I gave up or turned away too soon, then I'd be living with his consequences long after he was gone. *That* was what it came down to. I needed to survive this. My cheeks flushed, and I felt ashamed.

"Sharon," he said, "you can be mad at the pills, the alcohol,

the drugs, and the chemicals, because it's the illness of the addiction that's causing the problems. But to be angry at your son or loved one who has the addiction—all that does is drive them away. To the person who doesn't have the illness, outwardly it looks like they are choosing to use the chemicals. But—and this is an important but—there is no healthy individual that I've ever met who would *choose* the life that an alcoholic or addicted person lives. Their mind is sickened as their body sickens.

It's the sickness of the illness that keeps them stuck on the addiction train. It's not their choice to do those things on purpose.

"Sharon, you're not the first, or last, person to feel this way," Joe continued. "I hear it in the office time and time again. It's the most natural human response, especially for a mother, but helping until you are numb and resentful is not effective. I didn't hit rock bottom and really start on the road to recovery until my mother sobbed, 'Joe, you're killing yourself. You're killing me, and I can't do this anymore,' and bought me a one-way ticket away from her."

A very different ticket on a very different train, I thought. I appreciated Joe's mom for the courage it took to send him away, knowing she wouldn't be able to protect or help him, anymore. It made my heart pound to think of doing the same for Lorin, but the truth was, I was getting there. I was starting to have the "it's me or him" thoughts at night before I went to bed, right alongside the tears and worry. Self-preservation was winning. I didn't want to become hardened or resentful of my own son until there was nothing left except a one-way ticket. I wanted all this heartache to be worth something in the end.

In addition to getting help, Joe explained, the loved one's ownership role follows strict boundaries–for example, resisting the incredibly strong urge to enable the addicted person financially.

This role is very different from the ownership role that an addicted individual has, which is realizing that addiction is firmly their own responsibility.

"And therefore," Joe said, "it is their responsibility to understand that they cannot do this on their own.

It is up to them to get healthy and effective support, and to show up by themselves. Not waiting for others to fix the circumstances."

"So what about your role, Joe? What do you own?" I asked.

"Therapists, mental health professionals, and any medical or legal professionals are neutral parties through the family's journey, providing specific tools to help the specific set of circumstances that the members of the family need," Joe said. "This is varied and depends on how far down the road the addicted individual has gone. For instance, are there legal ramifications? Are there medical needs that have to be addressed before the person can get to a stable enough place to start recovery? Will the individual, and will the members of the family, be open to the counsel that is given? All these questions and more need to be taken into consideration before there can be a solid plan of support."

Thinking about Lorin's circumstances, I said, "Getting help and staying strong when my addicted son needs money or a place to stay seems pretty straightforward, Joe, but how in the world do loved ones resist their pleas when it is life-and-death important? It's easier said than done. Especially when we are just so tired."

"I get that you are going through a long journey," Joe said sympathetically, "so of course you are tired. Most people feel

tired and don't know what else to do to help. This wall is what lots of people hit up against. In fact, this came up in my own addiction journey. Some of my deepest relationships hit a wall. And they had to choose whether to stay in the relationship and experience the chaos, or to move on. Parents and family can't choose out of the relationship. Friends and other loved ones can, and do, but for family, those blood ties are strong, and the majority don't give up."

INTERVENTION TOOL: THE FREEDOM CONTRACT

I felt sick inside, listening to Joe's frank words, but this was my experience to a T, so far.

"Families can learn more healthy ways to cope," Joe continued, "but they don't get to move on. Until their individual gets off the addiction train, they cannot get off. I have yet to meet a family that can totally disconnect from a loved one with an addiction. Family looks for the hope, the option that maybe one day their loved one will hit bottom, and that they will get help."

"And yet your mother did let you go, Joe," I said. "She had to break with hope and send you away."

"You're right," Joe said, sadly. "She didn't have the tools to intervene in any other way."

An intervention, I thought, alarmed. Was that the next logical step? *Are we already at this point?* I thought of what that word meant to me and felt ... nothing. Time to go to the source.

"I'm interested to know how a healthy intervention would go, Joe. It sounds like the simplest thing would be to catch the addiction train early, if possible, and right now I have no idea where Lorin is with his journey, other than to be secretive and withdrawn. Maybe there's still time."

Joe shared a method he and his colleague, Dr. Ken Ash, had used when they'd worked together. Dr. Ash had been the medical director for Seven Lakes Recovery Program in Fort Collins,

Colorado, not far from where InnerBalance was now. "We'd meet with parents about their teens' possible drug and alcohol abuse. Then we'd create a parent group to combat the illness of addiction, with a workable plan for the battlefield parents had with their teens."

The intervention was as much for the parents as it was for the teens, Joe explained—all part of getting everyone to take their ownership of the problem.

"Because this was an intervention with the goal of getting their youngster through high school without abusing drugs and alcohol, we let the parents know they were battling the same enemy, but that their ownership roles were different. As a result of the parent meetings, occasionally they would call me because they thought their youngster was in way over their head.

"Then, it was a few conversations, first with a teen to see if they thought they had a problem with alcohol or drugs. Almost always, they'd say, 'I don't have a problem at all with this stuff. It's just fun. Not a big deal.' And then I'd say, 'Your parents think it may be becoming a problem and they are worried. But you feel you are in control?' And the teen would say something like, 'Yep. But my parents are always trying to take my freedom away and make me stop.' And that's the point. They want the freedom and control they think they have when they start drinking."

I could hear Lorin saying something very much like that. "So what would you do, Joe?" Now I was curious.

"This is where a freedom contract would come into play," he said. "It was an actual written contract—not legally binding, but all about accountability. It would acknowledge that as long as the teen was sober, parents would give them their freedom. If the teen agreed to stop drinking or using drugs, they could have as much freedom as they wanted. A let-up on grounding, or curfews, and so on, provided they agreed

to weekly testings like urine checks for addictive chemicals. But the consequences of this freedom would be on them, the teen. Not on their parents, or the school, or the law. The teens thought that was great!

"When there was an agreement by the teen, then the signed contract would go back to the parents. They would acknowledge that the teen was choosing to be in charge of his or her consequences and that it was not up to the parent to get in the way of those consequences. When it was signed, time and circumstance would dictate the outcome. Not the parent and not the teen. That way, there was no conflict. It was all in the contract."

"A lot of the time," Joe continued, "the teen would break the contract terms. They would go back to drinking or using drugs because, of course, if they were addicted to the intense pleasure-high, it would always win out. But then it became an opportunity for the teen to see that they were not in control of the situation, like they thought. Consequences for their new actions would show up, and that is what would be addressed."

At that point, Joe said, the teens had a choice—go see an addiction counselor, or keep getting their privileges and freedom taken away. "They would usually agree to go to counseling or therapy, on their own and as a family, with more open lines of communication," Joe said.

"Each member of the family knew their role and didn't step on each other's toes. That program had a lot of success because each member of the family stuck to their role.

"And then," Joe added, "the responsibility boils down to this: once an addicted individual gets treatment, it is then their total responsibility to do everything in their power to use the tools they have to stay in sobriety.

Unfortunately, most people getting treatment today don't get all the tools that could help them. The vast majority of recovery programs leave out that most important element of full recovery: the biochemical restoration.

So it becomes round after round of relapse. It's why having more information available is so important."

Although Lorin wasn't a teen in high school, I knew that interventions were for adults, too. Joe had just given me a glimpse into a healthy way to own our individual roles on this painful journey. I had to speak with Lorin again about getting some help, but this time, I would find another way to address my concerns. It was crucial to get help. Both for my sanity and his.

– JOE –

Once again, I could see that Sharon left our meeting with a lot on her mind. The roles of ownership were always a big concept for people to wrap their minds around. It took time and patience, and guidance to get there.

It was true, what I shared with Sharon, that once an addicted individual gets treatment, it's their responsibility to do everything in their power to use the tools they have to stay sober.

But most people don't know about that most critical tool of biochemical restoration, so continued relapse compounds their journey.

It's why having a team of professionals to help is so crucial. Sharon and her family were in the beginning stages of Lorin's addiction journey, and they would need every bit of information and support to become a team in order to battle addiction. I hoped she could reach out to those resources. The bigger

question was whether Lorin would be ready to accept help, assistance, and resources when the opportunity came.

CHAPTER 8

Avoiding Accountability

"As my addiction progressed, I truly thought that other people were out to get me, always trying to get in the way of my next high. It was their fault when something went wrong. The chaos was never about me or what I left for others to clean up."

—JOE

– SHARON –

"I HAD SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT the relationships you've had."

I was in the car, talking with Joe by phone since we couldn't meet in person this week. There was something therapeutic about talking into the empty air as I clocked the miles to my destination three hours away. Chatting by phone as the recorder

whirred quietly on the passenger seat gave me a different perspective—I was able to concentrate on Joe's inflections and the words he chose, focusing with my ears instead of my pen.

I'd had a lot of time to think, too. About the patterns that kept the churn of past relationships going in and out of his life as addiction grabbed hold.

"So many friendships, and the relationships with girls you dated, ended badly because they had hit your wall of chemical abuse."

"I imagine so," Joe said. "It was a wall, sort of."

"Well, if you put your parents through any of what Lorin puts me through," I said, "being patient feels like hitting a brick wall. A little leeway is allowed to a point, because it's parent and child, but also frustrating because we seem to be unappreciated. Everyone hits their limit eventually, Lorin's friends and girlfriends included."

"I hear what you're saying," Joe said. "At that point in my life, I just didn't necessarily think of it from their point of view. I was trying to be in control of my life. Sometimes, the things people did interfered with my growing addiction. They just got in the way."

Joe's ruined relationships piled on—with girlfriends, his buddies, his brother and sister, his mother and father. "There is more to the damage than just 'My addiction won out,'" he said.

RELATIONSHIPS BREAKING DOWN

"But what did that look like?" I said. "I'm asking because, just like when we spoke about what a healthy intervention looked like, or what roles actually looked like, I am missing a deeper picture of what a breakdown in a relationship looks like for you."

It was a risk to be this blunt with Joe's pain, but all I knew was what Lorin looked like and what our relationship looked like as it started to suffer. Miscommunication, hurt, resentment,

anger, and the cold shoulder dominated the space between our words. I wanted Joe's experience for perspective.

A moment passed. And then another, before Joe said, "I'm ashamed to say this, but my temper kept getting worse as my addiction progressed. I thought of it as hypersensitivity, but it came out as anger and distancing from others."

"What do you mean by hypersensitive?" I asked.

"It was a growing intolerance for any noise or actions," Joe said. "Voices, loud noises, even birds chirping could grate on me like nails on a chalkboard. The hypersensitivity was a result of my continually worsening hangovers and biochemical imbalances. Those consequences magnified in my hungover state. When that happened, I had almost no tolerance for anyone."

Joe continued, "I was becoming more judgmental; it was easy for people's words and actions to offend me. I just wanted to pull the covers over my head and make the world go away. For me to alleviate the hypersensitivity, I'd turn to drugs or alcohol. I didn't know at the time that the drugs and alcohol were a big part of what was *causing* my hypersensitivity."

"Something like what a migraine would amplify," I suggested.

"Everything was too loud, too jolting and just too much," Joe said. "But *nothing* I know of is similar to the hangover hypersensitivity I experienced after going on a binge.

"I had a hard time being around women sober," Joe continued. "I didn't know what to talk about when alcohol wasn't making things easy. And also, the things that were triggered in me around women could have been a partial result of the evolving relationship I had with my mom. My difficulty with her came from her need to be in control of my life. She needed to keep me safe, but at the time, and to me, it felt like smothering, snooping, and being invasive.

"The more I would get in trouble for my drugs and alcohol,

the more she would get involved, and the more I would hate her for it. She was doing it out of an instinctual need to protect me, but it came through as control."

"That sounds like regular parenting, Joe," I said.

"It does, doesn't it?" Joe replied. "But when you add a youngster who becomes drawn into the addiction of drugs and alcohol, it makes things a lot worse. I thought that if I could just control my mom and keep her from telling me what to do, then things would be better. It took decades for me to see how I projected that need for control into anger and annoyance when females told me what to do and how to act. I felt that all they wanted to do was to get me to straighten up. It became a battle. When I was hung over and they would be saying these things, that's when I would really overreact."

"So then," I guessed, "the more love or attention or communication that was thrown your way by the women in your life, the more it was perceived as negative, am I right?"

"You are right," Joe said. "I was a young person trying to meet my own misguided needs. Combine that with the tendencies I had for anxiety, racing thoughts, hormonal changes, and the addictive chemicals I was using—I was destined to never live up to my potential. So, yeah, I'd call my reactions hypersensitive, but anger was what others saw in me that I couldn't see."

"And how common is the anger or hypersensitivity in others who start and then continue down the path of addiction?" I asked.

"Well, I'd say it's a major red flag, Sharon. It happens almost like clockwork as part of the progression of addiction. For instance, it was perfectly acceptable to my way of thinking that I hit my brother, Richard."

Joe then told me about the first time he used physical force with someone. He was sneaking out one night with his drinking buddy. Richard had wanted to come with him. "He was

making a lot of noise about it," Joe continued. "I was worried that my parents would wake up, so when he wouldn't get out of my way, I clocked him. I just pulled back my fist and walloped him. Punched him right in the face. Knocked him right down to the ground.

"I left him there in the backyard and drove off," Joe added, matter-of-factly. But I could hear the regret in his voice.

I let the words hang there in the empty air in my car, unsure of what to say, if anything. It was unsettling to hear this story come from someone who, from my perspective, would be the last person to deck anyone at all.

Joe spoke the next words softly. "I'd never hit him out of the blue like that before. We'd tussled, as most brothers do, but this was different. It was outright mean. It stunned me, as it was the first time my temper had surfaced so…obviously. I felt awful the next day. Richard and I never talked about it, though. It was easier left unsaid than to confront the outburst head-on. We just didn't tackle stuff like that in our family."

I couldn't tell what was worse for Joe—that he didn't feel bad at the time, or that it went unresolved.

"It just seemed reasonable to make him do what I said," Joe added, "even if that meant forcing him to stay by knocking him down." I could clearly hear the regret in his voice.

"Did that end your relationship with Richard?"

"Well, it didn't help, I can tell you that. We had done a lot together usually, but I couldn't see the damage I was doing to my relationship with him. I regret it to this day." I could hear Joe take a breath on the other end of the phone.

"There are other reactions a person can have to using chemicals, Sharon," Joe said, "but anger and hypersensitivity were my main manifestations, along with misplacing responsibility.

As my addiction progressed, I truly thought that other people were out to get me, always trying to get in the way of my next high.

It was their fault when something went wrong. The chaos was never about me or what I left for others to clean up."

AVOIDING ACCOUNTABILITY

Taking another breath, he said, "In fact, my time as a teen in California was a mix of sneaking around and freedom, and I'd say I missed out on the consequences a lot, too."

"How so?" I asked.

"Well," Joe said, "my mother would go to any lengths to keep the peace and protect us kids. It supported me in being sneaky or dodging responsibility. Remember me telling you about when our window got broken as a small child? It was Richard's and my fault, but Mom was obsessed with hiding the accident so Dad wouldn't find out. Nothing changed when we were teens.

"When I got caught sneaking around, my mom hid it from my dad and hoped that my misbehavior would kind of resolve itself. She really worked hard at not having confrontations, and I used it to my advantage."

"I can see how that might make for a pattern of avoiding accountability," I said.

"One time after a friend and I had been drinking," Joe said, "we got caught setting off a cherry bomb in a movie theater bathroom. We lit the fuse with a cigarette butt. We stuck it in the garbage can and took off, but when it didn't go off right away, we went back in to see why not. There were a few guys in there when it did finally blow up. That's how we got caught. I had to go down to the police station. I was pretty nervous.

"My mom was having a party when she got the call. She freaked out and said she'd be right over to get me, but first asked a friend of hers to go with her to the police department instead

of my dad. Once she got there, she did what she had to, bailing us out quickly and rushing us out to the car. She tried to hide everything about it, and we got away scot-free."

Another time, Joe told me, that same theater was showing Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds." Joe was with another friend, and they decided to let a seagull into the theater. "We thought it was pretty funny," Joe said. "But then again, I didn't have to deal with the consequences—the mess or the chaos or the cleanup from feathers and overturned popcorn. I heard they had to close down the theater and refund everybody their money." Joe paused. "We didn't have to do anything about it. Mom just kept cleaning up my messes. My teenage years were all about getting high, not taking responsibility."

I thought of the ways I'd let Lorin out of his responsibilities over and over again, citing to myself the evidence that he was in no shape to perform the work it took to right the wrong. "He just needs to sleep it off." Or: "It's faster for me to just pay his debt so it doesn't make people wait on him." Or: "I don't want to be embarrassed for longer than I need to be. What can I do to make it go away?" I'd done my fair share of trying to shortcut the consequences because I thought it didn't matter that much.

Joe continued, "I think we've established that my family was pretty light on the communication and involvement scale. My parents had friends over on the weekend for parties, which provided access to alcohol. And I had a lot of time on my hands when the parents were out enjoying their social life. A small slap, or no slap, on the wrist for my consequences was great feedback as far as I was concerned—it let me know that there was no reason to stop what I was doing."

NEEDED: A DIFFERENT PARENTING APPROACH

I thought about Joe's words, and how Lorin and my other

boys dealt with the inconsistencies they experienced from me as a parent.

"Ugggh! Can I stop you right there, Joe?" I pleaded. "I have to say that as a parent, I can see why it's hard to find a clear method to deal with alcohol or drugs in my son. Or any form of solid consequences. Parenting is hard and thankless work sometimes. I hate saying this, but I have no idea of the level of severity that should be dealt out where those particular consequences are concerned. It's one of the biggest blind spots I have with Lorin."

My words continued in a rush. "I've read things that directly contradict my gut feeling, which is to bring down the hammer, hard! I never know if my staunch religious upbringing is where my gut feeling stems from, or if it truly is to punish him so he's scared straight. And I honestly don't have time to focus only on him. I have other kids and other responsibilities. Grounding him for a month, or taking away everything he owns and supervising all of his activities, isn't realistic."

"Do you honestly feel that those things would solve Lorin's problems, or yours?" Joe asked.

"Well, maybe not," I conceded. "But it's what I feel like doing when I'm so angry or shocked and don't have time to think about what would be appropriate. It's a knee-jerk reaction sometimes. But the panic and the urgency to do something are a gut reaction, Joe."

"And why do you doubt your gut, Sharon?" Joe asked.

"Well," I said, thinking about it for a moment. "I hear advice from 'experts' on news shows, online, or in parenting books that contradict my gut. And, likely as not, they contradict each other. They are conflicting pieces and difficult to put into play in real life. I end up bouncing from one theory to another. One parenting tip to another. One bit of advice that will make it a little easier on our lives. But if I tried them all, I'd still be inconsistent. So I end up discounting them all, if you want to know the truth. But that brings me no closer to an answer."

I told Joe how, over the years, I'd heard that alcohol and drugs were a phase or a stage, right alongside their being "the devil's work" and that my kid could just "be a bad seed." Of course I'd rather believe that an addiction could be a phase.

"Now I'm not saying I'm lenient with what I'm finding out, Joe," I added quickly. "But I'm more confused than anything else. Also, shell-shocked. Sometimes I do nothing because I'm afraid I'll do the wrong thing. Maybe that's where your mom was. Afraid of doing something that was worse than nothing."

A steady stream of cars was moving around me. I realized I'd been slowing down as I confessed my imperfections as a parent. I changed lanes, letting the cars go ahead of me, and sped up a bit.

"Sharon," Joe said, "I'm glad you said this because I hear it more than you'd think. It could very well be what was going through my mom's head. I hear that a lot. 'Joe,' people say to me, 'What's the big deal with them just being kids? I don't want to traumatize them or take stuff away. Then they will just sneak around and want it more, right?' But Sharon," he added emphatically, "that is just not the case."

His voice became more intense. "Kids want and need boundaries, Sharon. They also crave interaction and communication. If I would have had more interaction with my parents—and I don't mean them buying me stuff or taking me places, I mean just simple conversation with known consequences—I *know* my life would not have taken decades to course-correct. It goes back to control. Kids are wanting to control their life, and their parents want to control them."

WHY ADDICTION IS LIKE A CANCER

"We all compensate when life throws us off. But people tend to avoid honest conversation when control is being fought for in families," Joe said, "and any constructive dialogue about drugs and alcohol usually gets pushed off.

But the only thing that can bring the family back into balance is to directly address the cause of the imbalance. Seeking help starts the process.

"Remember when I talked about my anger and hypersensitivity?" Joe asked. "It wasn't just a conflict, it was a classic warning sign, and an opportunity to find out what was wrong in my life. My parents didn't take time, nor did they know how, to talk with me about the issue, and I was left to compensate on my own. It wasn't ever a medical issue to my parents. It was an out-of-control-teenager issue. So I found my own coping method."

I thought about his words, comparing them with my own parenting methods. I knew there were things I did wrong.

"When my kids were little," I said, hoping the empty air would make this easier, "I watched them like a hawk, and I know I still missed things, and they still ended up getting hurt. Stubbed toes and broken arms happened, sometimes in my own home. But I was on it! And still, Lorin had a secret life. He formed negative relationships that led to alienating us and himself. What more could I have done?" I hoped my voice didn't sound as plaintive to Joe as it did to me. "I feel like I was pretty attentive. I know you are saying to have an open relationship with our kids, taking time to get to know them, and to interact with them to gain access to their lives, but I know there are kids out there that already had their parents' attention, and they still started down this path."

"There are several parts to this problem, Sharon," Joe said.

"The most misunderstood aspect is still the biological factor. It's what slips through the cracks the most: taking into consideration the missing link that deals with a person's genetics, their family history, and finding out how brain function or hormone and anxiety levels may be off.

They are an important part to consider. Doctors and therapists should be discussing these aspects of their patient's life on an ongoing basis, educating and making adjustments as needed."

Okay, I thought, *but what about plain old moms? What do* we *do?*

"On the social and behavioral end, it gets trickier," Joe continued, as if hearing my thoughts.

"Loved ones become so close to the problems around addiction that it's easy to overlook some of the signs.

Most symptoms of addiction start off small and get worse. Or start small and get stronger. It's like watching grass grow over time. Little steps or progressions can go unnoticed. Sometimes they are not so clear."

"What kind of signs?" I asked.

"Kids not living up to their potential. Pulling away from family. Starting to come in late, maybe intoxicated or under the influence. Their friendship group changes. Lying. Trouble at school. It can progress slowly or subtly, and only when we look back do we notice it's gotten out of hand as a whole."

"So what do we do about it if we see the telltale signs?" I asked. "What's some advice to give us as caregivers?"

As usual, Joe's response was spot-on. "It goes right back to being nosy. Getting into their business, even though they are most likely pushing you away. But if it's not done productively, it causes pain and isolation on all ends. This is why parents who want to fix things usually end up enabling instead.

The key is to get nosy productively. With a genuine interest in the kid and their interests.

"If warning signs have already progressed beyond the nosiness stage," Joe continued, "parents may start to see they have a problem. If their child is starting to dabble in drugs or alcohol, or shows warning signs of negative and inward behavior, and the teen says there's no problem—that's where having a third party intervene would be necessary. Most of the time, parents wait too long to get help. And like cancer, the addiction progresses."

I winced hearing Joe compare addiction to cancer. But it was a complicated, uncomfortable topic, just like addiction.

"Teenagers need to find something more than the freedom that drugs and alcohol provide," Joe said. "A job. A hobby, or good friends. A positive outlet." There was a momentary silence. Then: "I wonder what my life would have been like if I'd had this conversation with my parents and had been able to redirect to a positive outlet."

I felt bad for Joe as he said this, but I also felt defensive and hopeless about the responsibility it put on me as Lorin's parent. "It just seems like too much," I informed him. "I'll mess it up and miss something. I already have, Joe. Who knows how many warning signs there've been and I didn't even realize it? I don't think I'm up for this."

"I know many parents who say the same thing," Joe said soothingly. "Including my parents, at one time or another—they wanted to wash their hands of me. Let's look at it this way," Joe continued. "What if you got early indications that your son had cancer, or another deadly disease? How would you react to knowing that, if left unchecked, untested, and untreated, your son's life would be cut short, for sure?"

My stomach dropped.

"Joe, you know I'd do everything in my power to get it cured. And isn't that a little bit different? A little dramatic?"

"Sharon, I assure you, this is not about using scare tactics for you or anyone else." He paused, and I felt like my heart would beat out of my chest. I felt cornered because I couldn't shy away from his words. I had to listen, no matter how overwhelmed I felt.

"This reasoning is sound," Joe said. "If parents knew, right when kids were at their most vulnerable age—say, twelve through eighteen—that emotionally, physically, and mentally, their kids were experimenting with precursors to a deadly disease, more people would act, and the course of many, many lives could be turned around and saved.

So I don't apologize for linking cancer and addiction, where prevention is concerned.

"Addiction is treated as a shameful thing in society, Sharon, so people sweep it under the rug, but with cancer, it's out there. We don't hide from it. Addiction is an epidemic and causes as much damage as cancer and other deadly diseases. It's severely underestimated. Chemical addiction is killing kids and adults who've developed the warning signs in greater numbers than cancer."

Joe paused, letting that sink in, and then continued.

"So, it's about stopping the shame, and the practice of looking the other way. It's time to get educated. It's about taking addictions as seriously as if your young one had cancer. As if Lorin had leukemia or any other deadly disease. If my young one was experimenting with pot or alcohol, I'd take it with the same level of seriousness as precursors to cancer. Not necessarily in anger, mind you. But serious, nevertheless.

"I can't tell you the number of kids I ran around with," Joe continued, "whose parents thought—or at least acted—like it was no big deal that we were running around and drinking.

But it went bad for so many of us. Our parents didn't know how much we drank and did drugs, and it shaped our lives for decades—if not cutting some lives short because of the seriousness and length of the disease.

"Even if some of my friends ended up with good careers, they had marriages end, and their emotional growth had been significantly stunted," Joe added. "We lost out on reaching our potential by miles, simply by having what were essentially warning signs downplayed."

I blinked a few times as tears came to my eyes. I definitely hadn't been thinking in terms like these as far as how grave this disease was. Joe was right.

NOWHERE TO RUN, OR HIDE

Joe could tell I was struggling. My silence and sniffles attested to it. He said, "Maybe see it from my story a bit more. By seventeen-and-a-half, my partying had gotten disruptive to my schooling, and my parents were worried. So was I, to be honest. Even though I still cared about my parents' feelings, staying sober was getting to be too much. The anxiety and racing thoughts depressed me, causing me continued pain.

"More and more, I'd focus on finding relief. I'd started skipping classes and stopped doing homework. Where I'd always been very careful not to blur the lines of school and partying, school stopped being so important to me. My parents' comfort and approval stopped being more important than me getting high. It was getting to be more than a phase."

It really hit home, Joe told me, the morning he approached his dad after a night of heavy drinking at a friend's house. "Dad was at the breakfast table, reading his newspaper and drinking coffee. It startled me. He was fresh and crisp in his suit, brown hair slicked back, as put together as ever. Never had I felt so different from him as I did then, my hangover in full swing, thinking

about how bad I felt, scared that I wasn't in control of my life, and worried that something was wrong with me, as usual.

"I sat down across from him. I looked down at the table, trying to pluck up courage, not able to even look him in the eye. Finally I said, 'Dad, I don't know what's wrong with me. I think maybe I need some help.'

"Dad just looked at me with a what-are-you-doing expression on his face. He said nothing for a moment, taking in my sorry state. Then he said, 'Aww, you just need to quit all that drinking and get a job.' And that was that. I was dismissed, and so was my problem. He walked out of the kitchen and left for work. He had shut me right down."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I got up from the table," Joe said quietly, "and I never asked him for help again."

What a defining moment, I thought. *To know you cannot confide in a person, especially your parents.* I was driving past nothing but trees and meadows; the scenery looked all the lonelier at that moment.

"I never really asked any male authority figure for help after that day," Joe added, "not for decades after. But I was worried."

Not long after the kitchen table fiasco, Joe told me, his parents talked with some friends who had sent their son, Ben, to a Catholic school in Spain to "straighten up." Even though Joe's family wasn't Catholic, his parents decided to do the same with him.

"Ben and I were friends from the neighborhood, so I guess that was enough of a connection for my parents to piggyback on that possible solution—or punishment," Joe said. "All I knew is that when I had reached out for help, I got sent away to Spain."

"I met my buddy Dillan at a party the night before my flight to Europe," Joe continued. "I got really drunk, excessively drunk, on vodka. I think now that I was afraid of flying. But I was also nervous. That next morning, I had a horrible hangover as I got on the plane to Spain. I was sick the whole way.

"I was taken out of my comfort zone in every way when I stepped onto that plane," Joe said. Once he got to his new school, it got worse. His teachers spoke very little English, and Joe spoke no Spanish. "There was no drinking, of course. They were very strict. We had to pray a lot every day."

The school was a cold, lonely environment, very regimented, sparsely decorated. "The majority of teachers were priests," Joe said. "I felt lonely and disconnected from the other students, and having these male authority figures didn't help, especially after the episode with my father. I was solo most of the time." Even so, Joe said, he got into more trouble than Ben did. "Some of that came from simply not doing well in school. Ben definitely conformed and could blend in better than I could."

A lot of Joe's old, ingrained feelings resurfaced. "Anxiety, loneliness, and not sleeping well were long-time acquaintances. I simply couldn't concentrate. It was hard for me to do well, and I had my knuckles rapped in class on more than one occasion. Being publicly humiliated just made things worse."

The lack of freedom was a big deal for Joe, as well. He couldn't come and go as he pleased, as he was accustomed to in the States. And there was no opportunity to find a drink around the isolated school grounds, let alone any pills. The only respite Joe had was on occasional trips into Madrid.

"We were allowed, if we were doing well in school, to go into Madrid on the weekends. So then I would go with Ben. That's when I'd drink and would inevitably come back intoxicated. Very quickly, my trips were cut short. My resentment grew for that school and everyone in it."

Then came the Easter break. Joe had been in school for four months. He told Ben he was going to go see his Aunt Donna in Paris for the week. His father's sister had lived abroad for a few years and would be excited to see him.

"I packed everything I owned," Joe said. "I didn't tell anyone,

but I'd made the decision to quit. I just needed to feel better, and this school was not providing that solution."

On the train to Paris, he began to get excited.

"Did you drink while you were on the train, or right when you got to Paris? I imagine that was on your mind at least a little bit," I said.

"No, not at all," Joe replied. "Aunt Donna was expecting me for a couple weeks, and I wanted to make a good impression."

Joe's aunt showed up at the train station with her seven-year-old son, Bobby. Donna showed him around for the first few days and then he was left alone while they did their own schedule. Joe was in heaven. His freedom restored, he gradually started drinking with his meals while out on his own.

"I was always up for meeting people," Joe said. "The bands and patrons in the bar were friendly, and I would have two or three beers. Usually with a meal of ham sandwiches, which I loved. And alcohol at meals was the norm in Paris.

"I stayed with Aunt Donna, going unchecked through the ups and downs of my addiction. She didn't mind me staying, at all, and I loved her for it." Donna broke the news to Joe's parents and they let him stay, presumably because he was still out of their hair.

"How long did you stay?" I asked.

"About six months," Joe said. "That was the start of a deeper, more chaotic time for me, looking back. A lonely time, because I didn't have my friends around me. As I returned to the peace and relief I experienced when I was high, I felt firmly committed to the alcohol. It was hard to imagine, in fact, that I could or should be without it. After all, it was the perfect solution to all my problems."

Joe's time in Paris quickly became a routine of evening alcohol consumption at bars and nightclubs. "I had white-knuckled my way through the school in Spain, sober for the most part, but once

I let the brakes off, I got to a stumbling-around level at night pretty quickly. My likelihood of getting in trouble increased as well."

One such instance occurred at a bar where two members of different military branches started a fight and Joe got caught in the middle of it. He was smacked hard in the head but somehow stumbled home.

"The next morning," Joe said, "I couldn't see out of my right eye, and Aunt Donna took me to the American military hospital. The doctor was very concerned and made me stay still on my back for six days. There was a very real possibility that it could have hemorrhaged, ending my eyesight."

Good grief, I thought.

Joe's aunt became worried that she was having to cover up his drunkenness to the family. Her dad, Joe's grandpa, had come to visit, and Donna lied to cover up Joe's state. "I'd keep looking for more and more of my solution at the bottom of a glass of booze," Joe said. "Eventually, she got tired of the trouble I got into and sent me back home."

"So, it really didn't matter how far from home you went," I said, "or how long you kept traveling, you were still dodging consequences—but all the time feeling more and more lonely."

"Yes," Joe said. "It was a pattern that I was starting to see, even through the haze. But that need for relationships was still there. And what was now definitely the heavy side of abuse—and probably the early progression of addiction—just kept ruining all the connections I'd form. Somehow, I'd ruin the moment, or the event, or the trip. But I couldn't see quite that far. I just knew that alcohol could free me from the chaos, at least for the moment. It was my friend, and what I was truly committed to. And the adults in my life shuffled me and 'my problem' around, avoiding the warning signs. Or maybe," Joe added, "they just did not know how to work on them with me."

I pulled up at my destination, and Joe and I wrapped up our

call. Joe's last statement stayed with me. There was so much I simply didn't know about Lorin's life at this point. I wondered if Joe's parents had worried as much as I do. Unlike them, I still had time to do things differently.

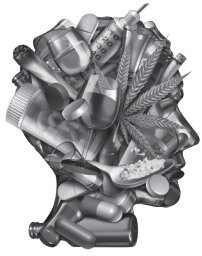
– JOE –

I hung up with Sharon, knowing she wanted to know more. More answers. More information about how to fix Lorin's addiction. It was a long haul for her, but there was no shortcut. She had to be patient, and keep going.

The last thing Sharon said to me was that she was making an appointment with the family therapist to chat with Lorin. Laura, she said. I'd be interested to hear how it went; I felt for them. It is a long road to get to the healing side. Heck, we hadn't even gotten to the worst of *my* addiction story yet.

But I could be patient, too.

PART TWO



Addiction

CHAPTER 9

No Longer in Control

"The brain becomes self-sabotaging. It tells the person it is just fine and doing the most logical, best thing possible when really, that person is unable to clearly see the damage the addiction is causing."

—JOE

– SHARON –

"WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU GOT BACK from Europe? And did you finish high school?"

I was in Joe's office at InnerBalance a week after our last meeting, ready to hear more of his story. I had my own week's events to share with him, when Micah and I went with Lorin to the family therapist, but I'd do it when there was a break. I

wanted to know more of Joe's story.

"I came back after my hospital stay feeling even more out of place than when I left," Joe said, "because I'd had even more experiences that these other kids hadn't." He seemed hesitant to share this part of his life, like he knew it was part of the process but wasn't looking forward to talking about it. I would need to let him unspool the story at his own pace, allowing some long-buried emotions to surface.

"I felt isolated from my friends and my home, keenly aware that I was even more different," Joe continued. He went back to high school, just long enough to graduate. "And that was only because the teachers pushed me through," Joe added. "Probably didn't want to have me for another year."

I nodded. I'd known kids that the teachers just wanted out of their classroom.

Things were no easier when Joe returned. "I'd brought back my problems from Europe," he said. "The growing hypersensitivity to noise. No patience for people when I was hungover. I was even more anxious now, so I was more dependent on alcohol and drugs to desensitize myself against my pain and problems."

By this point, Joe had started relying on chemicals to get through the day. He hesitated as he searched for the right words. "I would describe it as ... numb. An escape from my conditions, between the fogginess in my brain and body. I know now that it was me juggling being high and having high histamines." This is exactly what InnerBalance looks for when they run tests, Joe told me.

"I'd almost forgotten about how revved up you felt from having high histamines," I said.

"I couldn't forget about any of it because alcohol and drugs no longer masked the feeling as well," Joe replied. "I had built up a bit of a tolerance to the high by this time, so I was needing more to feel peace and keep those problems at bay."

So whatever Joe was taking more of to keep the problems in check was exactly what the addiction needed to manifest and get locked into place, I thought. *The perfect environment for the addiction to grow.*

CONNECTING THROUGH ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

After graduation, Joe lived at home for a couple years. "Then I went to Santa Monica College with Tony, an acquaintance of mine. My mom and his dad knew each other pretty well from the neighborhood. They came up with this idea that they'd get us two kids to give college a try." Joe paused. "I can see why they thought it was a good idea, but it was a breeding ground for my addiction.

"College didn't matter much to Tony and me," Joe explained. "There weren't any expectations on our parents' end, either. They just wanted us to get out and do something. Anything. So we took the freedom, and now that we were older, we had access to a lot more drugs and a lot more alcohol."

Joe found a doctor in nearby Venice who would give any young adult drugs. "All he had to say was, 'Oh Joe, what's wrong today?' and I'd say, 'Oh, I'm tired. I'm run down.' He'd give out Valium, and amphetamines, or anything we wanted. It was a money maker for him. He ended up in jail, or so I heard."

Joe and Tony also found a local bar where they could gamble in the back office after the bar closed. They made friends with Rosie, the sometimes-bartender, and she would give them free drinks. "Everyone wanted to be Rosie's friend," Joe said.

I wonder why, I thought sardonically.

"We'd close down the bar at night," Joe continued, "and then go gamble in the back office. Just poker, but I enjoyed it. Rosie made us feel welcome, and that's what I needed at the time. It solidified for me that drinking and drugs equaled connection with people."

"Sounds kind of like the bar on *Cheers*," I remarked. "Where everybody knows your name."

"It was a little like that," Joe agreed. "Between that bar and one at the Santa Monica Pier, that's how I filtered my validation and connections. I was running from depression, family problems, and school issues. They all overlapped at this point. I ran to the bars as the solution to all that."

He couldn't hold it together at school any longer. So he'd go bar hopping, looking for friends, creating fleeting companionship as he fought off loneliness by partying.

"That's when I would start to get into trouble," Joe said.

THE ADDICTION TRAIN SPEEDS UP

The faster the addiction train was moving forward, the more trouble it created. He got comfortable going to bars by himself. "I'd meet friends or strangers there, equally at ease, as long as alcohol was involved. Without it," Joe grimaced, "I was a nobody. I'd drive my car over, not just for a drink, but for the whole evening. It became normal for me to stay until the bar closed. Pretty often, I'd get to the stumbling-around stage. Then it would be time to leave, and I'd walk out the door, not knowing where I parked.

"Every once in a while, I'd get picked up by the police and spend a night in jail for being a common drunk. They'd let me out in the morning and I'd find my way back to my apartment, eventually tracking down my car. I started having blackouts from drinking so much at one time. I'd get awful hangovers."

"That's definitely a progression, Joe," I said. He leaned back into his chair, a sure sign he was getting comfortable with talking about his memories.

"That's exactly what it was," Joe nodded emphatically. "A progression. I progressed past the use and abuse stages, and was firmly moving deep into the addiction stage. I relied on it to get through my life. Starting with a few drinks, then going into the fog of intoxication, and after that fog, I started blacking out. This

was the new norm for me. That's when trouble would find me. I never started fights or arguments, but I got caught up in them, more and more as the drinking progressed. It just seemed to be part of the environment."

Joe sighed but kept on. "I thought that the fight in Paris was bad, but that was just the beginning. Things started to get dangerous."

I wasn't prepared for his next words.

"One night," he said quietly, "I had a gun pointed right up against my head."

My stomach dropped. I could see from Joe's expression that this wasn't a memory he casually dismissed.

Joe had found himself with a guy he'd made friends with at the apartment complex where they both lived. He took Joe to a bar in a bad part of town. Joe met a couple girls there who wanted to go to a house party. Not one to miss a party, Joe piled into the girls' car, still drinking and having fun. Unbeknownst to Joe, his new friend saw him get into the girls' car and presumably got worried. To his credit, he followed them in his own vehicle.

It wasn't long before they all pulled up to a house. When Joe stumbled out of the car, arms around the women, a guy came running out of the house, swearing loudly and threatening to kill Joe for messing around with his girlfriend. Then he brandished a gun and pointed it at Joe's head.

"I would have been in worse trouble, but he came up behind him with a tire iron," Joe said. "Luckily, my friend was an intimidating guy, and the man with the gun backed down and went inside with the women. I was so drunk I didn't realize the danger of the situation until I woke up the next morning. I could have been seriously hurt."

"Or dead," I added, every mom muscle in me tightening.

"Or dead," Joe echoed.

JOE'S BEHAVIOR, NORMALIZED

I wondered how much more of Lorin's life I knew nothing about. I only really knew he was safe when he was in his room. And maybe not even then. At the therapist appointment, he'd told us little bits of what he was up against.

"The shine had worn off a bit," Joe was explaining, "and I had some hard realities to contend with. My self-esteem went down, and later on, I even got a DUI. This stage was a slow enough progression to me that I was never alarmed. My behavior had normalized in my life. After all, everyone I hung out with had stories just like mine."

A *DUI*, I thought. *I was wondering when this would happen.* For many people, this would be a defining moment in their life, but for Joe, it seemed to be just another bump in the road. *Good grief*.

"But for people outside your partying group, surely it started to become obvious you had a problem," I said sternly, mom muscles still tensed. Joe nodded. "So, then you continued getting high to relieve the problems that came with the consequences of…using?" I asked.

"That's the addiction train, Sharon," Joe said, a trace of weariness in his voice. "The more problems it causes, the more it becomes a desperate solution, which causes more and more problems. It just speeds up. But understand this," said Joe—now he was the one sounding stern. "The brain becomes self-sabotaging. It tells the person it is just fine and doing the most logical, best thing possible when really, that person is unable to clearly see the damage the addiction is causing to oneself and others. And the longer a person is on the addiction train, the more damage that's inflicted.

"In Lorin's case, for example," Joe said, his voice softening, "there has been damage done to his thinking and social maturity. He doesn't have as much damage as, say, a thirty-four-year-old who had started as a kid, because Lorin is younger. His addiction

train could stop earlier. But I was in my mid-twenties and still had the maturity of maybe an eighteen-year-old. If that. My social and emotional progress slowed considerably when drugs and alcohol took center stage. And I stayed at that stage until much later in life. That's a lot of damage."

I nodded, relieved he had brought up my son. I hadn't thought of damage being on an age continuum before, but it made sense.

STILL TRYING TO GET THAT FIRST HIGH BACK

"Now, as addicted individuals," Joe continued, "we don't see a pattern. In my case, the pattern had gone on for years. Decades. But we're only wanting to experience that first, best high again. That magical time we first hooked ourselves on the good feelings that drinking, or drugs, gave us. And part of the sickness is that we think we can recapture it. The relationship with those chemicals is so good, the attraction is so powerful. That's why I gravitated to others that used like I did: so it would look normal to me.

"We are brilliant at justifying," Joe added, "the addicted person *and* the loved one."

He paused for a moment, no doubt taking himself back to when he knew he was hooked.

"I can't tell you how many times I switched up my drug and alcohol combination, Sharon, looking for the magic formula," he said when he resumed. "Whenever I'd get in trouble, or hit a snag, I'd keep changing it up. It never occurred to me to just stop." His voice grew more urgent. "People addicted to alcohol and drugs cannot just *stop*.

Everyone from my dad to doctors to judges and police would make suggestions, but it never once occurred to me to just stop."

After all, how could they know my solution better than me?"

"It's just so logical for those on the outside of the problem to expect you to stop. That's just rational thinking," I said, shaking my head.

"You're right, Sharon," Joe agreed. "It is. But *my* thinking wasn't rational. My thinking was insane. The addiction attacks the sanity. Think of it this way: If someone is in a physically abusive relationship, other people might say, 'Can't you see what is happening to you? You're in danger!' But that person doesn't have that resolve yet. They keep thinking, 'This isn't going to happen again. Not again.' They don't see the big picture, or the pattern. They use rationale and excuses, because they don't have another solution for a way out.

"If they could see that it was the abusive nature that was causing the pain, they'd have to leave. Instead, they keep thinking that they can change the situation. That they can make it different and keep it under control."

I had instantly seen the correlation Joe was making. It was disturbing yet clarifying.

"And the abused person," Joe continued, "all they want back is that wonderful feeling that got them in the relationship in the first place. Their own love affair. 'I'll get him or her to love me again,' they think constantly. They're stuck in that loop of time, mentally, and can't see that everything has changed and is getting worse."

"You keep thinking you'll find the right combination, the solution," I said. "But the true solution was giving up the idea that you could ever control the effects of drugs and alcohol."

Joe nodded. "Addicted individuals are running from the pain and chaos the addiction is now causing. They're not able to face the reality of life, sober.

Ultimately, and with a lot of help, I had to allow myself to feel the pain of where my life had taken me in order to fully recover.

In order to be free and heal. Abused individuals must also allow themselves to feel the pain that is being created by the abuser, putting the responsibility for the pain on the abuser, and not mistakenly on themselves."

I thought of this comparison, uncomfortably concluding that, in this scenario, *I* could also be the abused person, not able to take advice from trusted sources about Lorin's consequences and actions. *I have to fix this*, I'd say over and over. *I can fix this. I can fix him. I just have to make him remember how he was before…*

I shuddered at the similarities.

A crucial part of starting the healing and growth is first recognizing, and then accepting, that part of our life is gone, Joe said.

GRIEVING THE LOSS

"The twenty years that my addiction had taken from me are gone, and I can't recapture them. My addiction robbed me of my emotional growth, my mental development, my spiritual experiences. For decades, I lost the ability to feel love for things in my life. The addiction doesn't allow for any of that. I probably will never be as emotionally mature as someone who's never gone through a chemical addiction."

"Never?" I asked, shocked.

"Never," Joe said firmly. "After the abuse we put our bodies and minds through, we must accept that that part of us is gone and we can't get a do-over. It's gone, and it's got to be grieved, and then accepted. Like the phantom-limb feeling an amputee may feel. There comes a time when it's acknowledged that the limb is gone. Then the focus has to be on recovery, dealing with

the pain and loss. Not running from it, but facing it, and eventually it can be turned into a positive cause that can help ourselves and others. Only then can we move forward, compensating in a new way. That's the only way we can recover.

"It's a mental acceptance, eventually taking a hard look, gaining a support system, and compensating for your loss, knowing you'll never be the same again. It's a new normal. And that's exactly what we have to do to come out of our addiction into sobriety. Only then can there be full recovery."

MISDIAGNOSING AND DRUGGING

Things got more and more difficult the more he added alcohol and drugs to the mix. Eventually, he had to drop out of college. "I ran around a lot until I moved back close to home, got a job, and got an apartment with got an apartment with Tom, a childhood friend."

I thought about my own kids, living close by, and how many times we got together and chatted. "Did you keep close to your family, then, when you moved back?" I asked.

"By that time, I didn't really talk to my parents," Joe replied, "even though we were just fifteen or twenty minutes away. The best I can say is that we were still 'dysfunctionally functional.' Mom was having a tough time with my brother, too. She and my dad sent Richard off to military school when he was about fifteen. Judson Military School in Arizona. From there, he went into the Army for about three years. When he got back, he got worse."

"Drugs?" I was almost afraid to ask.

Joe nodded. "Richard went down a different road than me with drugs, and he went hard. Heavy drugs, seedy friends, and dealers."

Every parent's worst nightmare, I thought with a gulp. "How is he now?" I asked.

"His first sobriety birthday was in 2009," Joe said, his face

brightening for a moment. "But before that, it got pretty bad. He almost died, taking his daughter and dog with him. They were in an RV accident. They all survived, and it was a big wake-up call for him. He did end up going through InnerBalance, but not for a long, long time into his addiction."

Joe, meanwhile, was trying to compensate for his own struggles. "From the time I was twenty-one to about thirty years old, it was one big blackout drunk, with intermittent stints in hospitals and jails. In a nutshell, I was neck-deep in my addiction.

"Looking back now, Sharon, I knew I had made it pretty bad," he said, "but there were some who were worse off than I was. If you had problems back then, you were first diagnosed as having mental disorders. Like, if something was 'wrong' with you, then you needed to go to the loony bin. Then the solution was to drug those people back to being 'normal.'"

That reasoning is what sounds loony, I thought.

"It seemed like nobody was focused on the addiction part," Joe said, "so I just thought I was crazy. I didn't want to be, but inside, I just figured that's how I felt and acted. I couldn't square it with my actions and emotions. So that scared me, but it was becoming a possibility to me."

BLEAK OPTIONS BEFORE THE MISSING LINK

Joe's mother, still desprately seeking solutions, got him an appointment at a center in Venice, California. "It was advertised as a life-changing experience, and by this point, my mom would try anything.

"I remember I was nervous and was on Valium for the interview. There were a lot of red flags for me, but the one thing that stuck out was that they wanted me to turn over all my worldly possessions and shave my head. I laughed, because I didn't have a lot of worldly possessions at the time, but it was enough that I walked out when I heard that."

"That sounds like quite an extreme measure to find peace, both for you and for your parents," I said.

"I know," Joe said. "But my parents didn't really know what to do with me. They couldn't understand what was going on with me because addiction wasn't on a lot of people's radar back then. Betty Ford Addiction Centers weren't a thing yet. My parents didn't know why I was such a troublemaker, when they knew I was a good kid, deep down. So, either I actually *was* a troublemaker, or there was something wrong in my head that made me normal sometimes and act out other times. That behavior wasn't logical, so it must be a mental thing, right?"

No one at the time was looking into the brain's neurotransmitters or anything having to do with biochemical restoration, Joe explained. There was no such thing, even in California, as holistic treatments for addictions. Even traditional treatment centers weren't that strong.

"It was all talk therapy," Joe said. "Nobody knew about the missing link. I think that would have given me and my family some hope, but we knew nothing about it."

I shook my head at the frustration and pain Joe had to go through back then.

"Addiction certainly wasn't thought of as an issue in our household," Joe continued. "And it certainly wasn't discussed. The closest my parents got to being informed back then was a 'tough love' outlook. That's as far as it went. And that attitude was cultivated through chatter with neighbors or friends. Not reliable sources for educational purposes. Tough love, but without solutions. If there was too much drinking going on for them, it was viewed as distasteful, and spoken of as a 'problem.' But never an addiction."

Joe took a sip of water, giving his voice a break.

"And really," Joe said, picking up his same thought a moment later, "Mom looked at other options that were talked about at

that time. In the seventies, that was 'finding yourself' or 'losing yourself.' There were a lot of crazy fads back then, and because I did so many illogical things, my addiction looked like mental illness to them. Eventually, I thought that maybe I was crazy, too. It looked like the simple, logical answer as to why I was so committed to acting like a mess-up.

"I worked very hard to keep my parents and girlfriends away from any of my 'out-of-control stuff' firsthand," Joe continued. "They'd hear about it, sure, but they rarely saw it firsthand. We'd all go on over to the Marina City Club and I'd party with my parents. My friends would come, too. Social time, always based around drinking, kept us Eiseles feeling connected to each other. We just never connected the drinking with my 'problems.' Or our problems as a family.

"Partying was just a normal thing to do, but we glossed over a whole lot of stuff. Not a lot of healthy talking. I'd say, 'Hey, Mom. I need a little help,' and it was apparent to her that things weren't going well.

"There were some somber conversations, as well," Joe added, "about things like how I was feeling depressed and anxious and that I was a failure. I remember I'd try not to drink during the day, and it was a real challenge. The problem was, as a family, we all kept trying different combinations for me, but the family habits were still the same.

"When I was around my family, everyone drank. We didn't communicate effectively. They didn't know how to help me, except through money and looking for other people to fix me. That's where mental hospitals started to come in."

MENTAL HOSPITALS FULL OF DRUGS

When the so-called life-changing experience in Venice didn't work out, Joe's mom decided to check him into the psychiatric unit at UCLA.

"The facilitators didn't understand how to treat addiction," Joe sighed. "They'd give us Valium for anxiety and Seconal for sleeping. Then I'd see a doctor for about fifteen minutes a day, and that was it."

After Joe had been there for about two weeks, he seemed to be doing better. Sobered up a bit. So the staff let him and some others out for a trial period. Joe's first stop was at a Mexican restaurant in Westwood. He looked at the menu.

"The first thing I saw was a picture of a margarita," he said. "I thought to myself, 'Just one margarita won't hurt me.' After all, I hadn't been drinking for a couple weeks, so it really seemed like it was not a big deal. Like ordering iced tea, or lemonade. So I ordered one."

And then another. And another.

He left the restaurant and headed to a bar. Finally he made his way back to the facility around eleven that night. "I was very intoxicated, stumbling around, and felt like I had molasses in my brain," Joe recalled. "I slurred a hello to the night shift crew as I rang the bell to let me back in. They were all upset with me and told me to go to bed. The next morning, a counselor met with me and said, 'Because of your actions yesterday, Mister Eisele, you are grounded for the rest of your stay.'"

Joe stayed another two weeks, for a total of thirty days. "I really did want to get better, I really did want things to change. But when I left, my brain was still the same." They released him with a supply of Valium and chloral hydrate sleeping pills.

"Psych places were kind of like holding cells back then," Joe explained, "places for people with troubles to be put out of the way of normal folk. It didn't really matter to the hospital why you were there. The treatment was the same. Talking, pills, and detoxing if you needed it. It was about treating the symptoms more than looking for the solution. The talking was about why I would get in trouble, and why I shouldn't do it anymore. Or

some variation of that. It didn't really tackle anything deeper.

"There was a schedule and planned time with doctors and counselors," Joe continued. "The problem was, it was based around the assumption that the drugs they were giving us were for the purpose of battling depression, anxiety, the need to detox, and the need to sleep. Not alcohol or drug addiction. But the side effects for those of us who were in there with an addiction were pretty much magnified. Any detoxing we did for one drug or drink would be countered by the addictive medicine we were given for our side effects."

"Do you know how your siblings felt about what you were going through?" I asked him.

"I don't know about Sally," Joe said, "but Richard was in and out of my life for a lot of it. So he didn't really have an opinion about my use or abuse."

He got a bit more intense as he said the next words, leaning in.

> "Siblings are tricky when talking about the addiction train. Many times, like with Sally and Richard–or your daughter, Addie–they can become silent victims. They can be caught between loyalty for their sibling and loyalty to themselves and their parents.

Or possibly, they were participants or co-conspirators themselves, getting caught up in the chaos. That may be what happened with Richard. I wish we would have spoken more about it, looking back. Maybe it would have shortened some of the process of recovery for us all. But we all had our own problems with abuse. They are doing better now, just like me, with a lot of help."

I nodded, making notes, and we took a break.

I made a quick phone call to members of my family. Micah was busy at work, Addie with friends. Lorin, instead of the open conversations we've been having lately, was surly and angry I'd

checked on him. Odd, that. I'd speak with him later. I walked back into the building.

"So, what happened once you got out of the facility?" I asked, when we resumed.

"I started drinking again," Joe said, "a couple of weeks later. Right after I ran out of their pills."

That became a pattern: getting out of a facility, running out of pills, and starting up again with alcohol. Joe lost his apartment during one of these stays. "I came back and lived with my mom and dad while I was finding another place to live. That's when I met Kathy."

Joe stopped for a sip of water, and I wondered how his justification would play into this next relationship.

"I met her at a bar with two of my friends, Tony and Bob," Joe continued. "It was kind of a nice, upscale bar. I asked Kathy for her phone number and she gave it to me. I fell hard for her, Sharon, and she fell hard for me. I hooked her roommate up with Tony, and the four of us would hang around together.

"We were together for about a year and a half, total. I tried really hard to keep alcohol out of our relationship, I really did," Joe said. "This time, I reasoned, I'd keep the two separate." But after just a few months, alcohol slowly crept into the relationship. "I had a date with her one night, and I stopped off at a bar first to say hi to my friends. They talked me into taking a drink with them. I told them I didn't have time, but they were my friends, right?"

They ended up buying Joe a drink. Then another. "Then I ended up drunk, racing my car across town to make our date. This started happening more and more often. Then I got that

DUI, about seven or eight months into our relationship. But she kept trying with me. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore. She eventually moved on." Joe shifted slightly in his chair. "She thought I wouldn't make it, honestly."

TANGLING WITH THE LAW

"Back up for a minute," I said to Joe. "DUIs are a big deal to most people. What happened?"

"You're right, Sharon," Joe said, "they are. Sometimes I forget that what had become normalized to me is alarming to others. But it was just another step in the progression of addiction. When I got my DUI, I was on the freeway. The cops pulled me over because I was going over the speed limit and weaving. But my thinking at the time was so off that I was really upset that they pulled me over at all. It didn't occur to me that it was my fault or that anything was wrong. As far as I was concerned, I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. This was how I always drove, and I never got pulled over before. So I was belligerent to the cops, and got arrested. It escalated from there, and I lost my license. It felt very unfair to me."

Unfair? I looked at Joe to see if he was being ironic, but of course he wasn't. It was eye-opening.

"This is that rationalization you were talking about, right?" I asked.

"Absolutely," Joe said. "That is how addicted people operate in the insanity of the sickness. *Nobody understands why I do stuff*, they think, but that doesn't make them feel like they could be wrong. Just misunderstood.

That's why, as an addicted person, our problem isn't about self-control as much as it is rationalization and excuses.

Alibis. Those came into play with Kathy, just like with my other girlfriends. This one hit me hard, though."

Joe looked down at his hands.

"This was another big example," he said softly, "of how alcohol and drugs always won out. I couldn't give it up. She'd comment about it, wanting a closer, sober relationship, but my addiction always won out."

"How did it end with Kathy?" I asked.

"Well, this is how I knew she cared about me. She stayed with me through a lot of my behavior that others would have cut and run from. Once I lost my license, she started picking me up to go out. Or sometimes Tony did, because he was dating her roommate. I'd moved out of my parents' place a while ago and was back on my own. But I lost another job, and my parents said I had to move closer to them, and that they'd pay for an apartment. It turned out to be a flophouse, honestly. And it was next door to a liquor store. I didn't have a stove or a real fridge," Joe said, "just a mini-fridge that I could barely put a six-pack in, and what amounted to a toaster oven. I'd go next door to get vodka and my dinner for the night—a frozen TV dinner. I lived off those things.

"I never wanted Kathy to see my apartment, but she came over one time and it shook her up, I could tell. After that, she started pulling away. I don't think it was because of my apartment, but in addition to everything else, maybe. Eventually, she was done. She came over to my place one day, and I thought she was picking me up to go do something, but she just said, 'I don't think this is working anymore.' And that was that. I didn't believe it was over, but it was."

Joe looked at me sadly. "I spoke with her on the phone, years and years later, at Tom's office in Beverly Hills. After talking

with Bill C., my sponsor, I had come back to California from Fort Collins, in Colorado. It was partly to make amends to Kathy. She had married a dentist. Tom had seen her occasionally. I told her I was sorry about my behavior and how my drug and alcohol abuse affected our relationship, but that I was sober now. She was good about it. I would have gone back and made amends to all my girlfriends, but after looking at each individual case, it didn't feel appropriate because it might have negatively affected their life. It reminds me of another Laura Nyro song, 'I Never Meant to Hurt You.'"

"It sounds like you have both regret and relief about it, Joe," I said. "Like it would have been really hard on you, emotionally."

"Yep," Joe said. "It was hard. Really hard. I hurt for a few years after that relationship ended. And I blamed myself for being out of control." He stood up abruptly. "Let's take a break."

– JOE –

Sharon left the room and I did the same, taking a deep breath to shake off the heavy moment. It had been a long time since I'd brought up these memories and I was feeling the sadness. A thought popped up suddenly, and I closed my eyes, clear about what that time in my life meant now, if not back then.

I had been dying for pleasure.

The phrase was one I'd said at times while in recovery. It's why people use to such destructive excess, even though they know they're hurting themselves. We start out experimenting with drugs or alcohol for the pleasure, or relief, we find in the chemicals. In the beginning, they work. Oh boy, do they work. As long as I was just using with my friends, it was good.

The chemicals helped me deal with the emotional, mental, and physical pain in my life for a few years, or so I thought. But

what happened—what always happens—is that once you stop using for fun and enjoyment and start depending on drugs and alcohol, our brains start needing that pleasure. Without the chemicals, all that's left is pain.

I opened my eyes, bringing me to the reality I've known for so long. Pleasure became my need, at the cost of the loss of control. The loss of control became greater and greater. I needed more of the chemicals to achieve pleasure.

I frowned, thinking about how that trade-off blocked the joy in my relationship with Kathy.

The need for more of the chemicals to get relief just overwhelmed the pleasure I had with Kathy, or any other relationship. What I didn't realize back then was when that pleasure wore off, it gradually gave me pain and problems in addition to what I was already running from. Drugs and alcohol had started me slowly dying inside—emotionally, physically, mentally, and most important, spiritually.

Some of us would chase pleasure right to our death.

I headed back into my office. The worst of this memory was knowing that I traded Kathy for chemicals that were severing the loving, spiritual connections I needed to feel whole in life. I envied Kathy that she could see clearly enough at the time to get out of the way of the destruction.

CHAPTER 10

Dark Times

"People with addictions can exaggerate, withhold
the truth, and at times, can lie with the best of them.
They can be whatever they need to be at the moment,
if their chemicals are in jeopardy."

—JOE

– SHARON –

AS I WALKED AROUND OUTSIDE, stretching and enjoying the crisp Colorado air, I thought about the spiral that was the twenties for Joe. So much like Lorin. Joe's decision-making ability seemed to slowly circle the drain, getting sucked down first by the choices he made to compansate and survive, then from his solution; drugs. I was frightened for Lorin, and our family.

What was in store for us?

I came back in just as Joe was sitting back down.

It turned out the DUI was just one of several run-ins Joe had with the law. Maybe that was why he hadn't found it as alarming as I had.

BLACKOUTS AND BAILOUTS

The next one was when he was twenty-five, and it was worse. He and a buddy were partying one night in Marina City, at a bar. "Kind of a classy place," Joe said. "We were already really drunk, and the last thing I remembered was walking into this place and then blacking out. The next thing I knew, I was being put in handcuffs, heading off to the Inglewood police station."

The police took Joe to the L.A. County jail for the weekend. "It was awful. They served us garbage food and Kool-Aid. And it was cold."

Four men were in one cell. "One of the guys said, 'The police think I murdered someone, but I'll never admit it.' It was pretty scary, Sharon. The sound of metal clanging was all around me. Prisoners banged on stuff and yelled profanities all night long. I didn't sleep a wink. I was really careful not to mouth off or do anything that would have set someone off.

"The worst part was that I was imagining I could be there for months or even years because I didn't know what I'd done and why I ended up there. Turns out, I was very lucky, but I didn't know that at the time. None of us had been to court yet. I was in the holding cell with some pretty sketchy-looking guys." Joe laughed once, to himself. "Huh. I must have looked pretty sketchy, too."

The next morning, the police put Joe, his cellmates, and several other prisoners into vans and took them back to the Inglewood courthouse.

"By this time," Joe said, "I had started showing symptoms of

withdrawal from the chemicals I was used to having in my body. It had been about three days. I was feeling extremely anxious and depressed, not to mention being overwhelmed and fearful. When I got there, they put us, all shackled up, in a holding area right next to the courtroom. The public defender questioned us all, and it looked like he had seen some of the guys before. He said, 'Harry, what are you in for this time?' like he'd seen him before.

"I kept hearing the P.D. say 'common drunk' about a lot of the cases, so I figured that's what I was in for. When he got to me and asked what I was in for, I said, 'Common drunk.' He said, 'Have you ever been in front of this judge before?' I said no, and he said, 'Plead nolo contendere.'"

Ahhh, "no contest," I thought. Joe wasn't going to challenge it, he just wanted out.

"Now, Sharon, I didn't know what that term meant, but figured that's what I needed to do. The judge had apparently seen a lot of these other guys before, as he had a familiarity with them. He'd say, 'Go on and get some help, Harry. Here's some community hours, and I don't want to see you in here again.' I thought that's what would happen to me, too.

"Instead, the judge took a look at my report for a minute and then was looking at me. Finally, when he said, 'How do you plead?' I said, 'Nolo contendere.' The judge looked back down at the report, then he said, 'Young man, if you say either that you're guilty, or you plead nolo contendere, I would need to give you a year in jail if I sentenced you today. From what I see on your report, you need to bail out. Get your own attorney and come back.'

"I don't know if the judge was trying to scare me or what, but it worked. I was *really* scared. I couldn't imagine what I'd done that was so serious that nolo contendere and some community hours wouldn't get me released. I wondered, had I murdered someone, or what?

"I got an attorney, and he got the police report after a few weeks. The report said that I showed up at the bar drunk already. But I kept drinking until I was out of control. I got into a big fight. There was a group of ladies and I got in a fight with them and flipped their table. Some guys came over to help them. It escalated, and I threw a pitcher of beer at the bar. It shattered the big mirror. Mugsy, my drinking friend, left at some point. It was a mess."

"Wow, Joe," I said, trying not to look as shocked as I felt. "And you didn't remember any of that?"

"Nope," he said. "I went back to the judge pretty shaken up, and the plea bargain was that I would go get help. But the help that was available was me getting into Brockman."

STRAITJACKETS AND ZOMBIES

"What was Brockman?" I asked. "Another hospital?"

"Yeah, Brockman Memorial. It was supposed to be for my drinking problem, but it was mostly a mental hospital. My attorney had to tell the judge I would do something to get some help. That was the plan, and with a year of probation afterward."

Here we go, I thought. *Another institution, with those in authority passing him along through the system*. It was starting to sound like Joe's high school administration giving him passing grades, just to get him out of their hair.

"At this time in my life," Joe explained, "I knew I had emotional problems. Why else was I such a troublemaker? I had no solution to my fogginess, depression and allergies except for drugs and alcohol. They were the only thing that worked for me. The side effects had been acceptable up to this point. Disappointing my family and dropping out of school and being a bit of a failure, those were all on me, but at least I could function. Until this."

"And was Brockman any different?" I asked.

"Nope," Joe said. "They did the same thing. Group therapy and drugs. But I met a gal there. We became friends. She got out before I did, and she said to come to her place when I got out and we would have dinner.

"I went over there about a week after I got out. She was really loaded. Like, scary. I left a few hours after I got there. The next day, I found out she had died of an overdose."

I was quiet, unsure whether Joe wanted to continue. Then I decided to wade in. "How did you handle her death?"

"With more alcohol and drugs, of course. It really shook me up. I couldn't confide in anyone at this point, so I found my solace in the bottom of a bottle. She was a really nice gal—and a pharmaceutical representative, of all things! The night I went over, she showed me the inside of the trunk of her car. God knows how many different drugs were in it. I would have loved to have gotten my hands on them at the time, but I didn't. I was shocked and scared about her death. I was grateful for the Valium Brockman sent me home with, I'll tell you that much."

"Did every hospital give you Valium as you left?" I asked, still reeling from the emotion in Joe's voice.

"Every hospital except for Camarillo State Hospital did that," he said, matter-of-factly.

Another one? I thought.

"What was Camarillo?" I asked.

"It was California's state mental hospital, where they sent the really bad, really crazy people. Which were one and the same to most people back then. The ones that needed to get out of society. At the time, I was twenty-six, and living in an apartment in Santa Monica again, and had been dating a girl. But I got in a fight with her one night and got really drunk. I had been taking a lot of Valium, and when she called me at my apartment, I didn't answer the phone.

"She told me later that she was worried that maybe I passed

out or had died. So she called the police and reported that I was suicidal. When they came to the apartment, I didn't answer, so they broke the door down. I started to come to, and they picked up the Valium bottle. There were no more pills in the bottle, just because I'd run out beforehand, but they thought I had overdosed."

Joe sighed, as if exasperated at the person he had been. "I was belligerent, of course, because I was so intoxicated from drinking all day. They took me in handcuffs to the hospital to make sure I hadn't overdosed. The orderlies found out I was just being belligerent and drunk, so then I was transported in an ambulance and straitjacket to Camarillo. They put me in a padded room to detox so I wouldn't hurt myself."

Joe leaned forward in his chair, his voice quiet and intense.

"I'll tell you, Sharon, that was a different kind of scary. It looked and felt just like I imagined an old, rundown hospital would look like. Stark, bleak. Some kind of tile lined the floors, and I heard the clicking of shoes up and down the hallway. Not a lot of lighting, either, and the windows were small and caged over. A real 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' scene. No-nonsense attitude, and no tolerance for getting out of line."

"You must have freaked when you ended up in a straitjacket." I shuddered at the thought.

"They took me out of it once I got into the padded cell," Joe said. "The next day, the gal in charge says, 'Alright, Mr. Eisele: You will be in front of a bunch of professionals. So, you have to convince them why they shouldn't keep you here for six months.' Everyone around me in that place was on Thorazine"—he caught my quizzical look—"an antipsychotic medication. They were just shuffling around like zombies. And that's what they would do to me, I was convinced. I would become one of those zombies.

"The panel of professionals asked me all kinds of questions," Joe continued. "I lied to them straight-out. The best job of lying I

could do. It was probably the best acting job I'd ever done because I had to get the hell out of there. I could have won an Emmy. I said I was an alcoholic and that I was in sobriety, but I had relapsed and accidentally taken too many Valiums prescribed by my doctor. I was really sincere and accountable, which is not how I felt at all, but I knew my sanity and the next six months depended on me convincing them that I wasn't crazy or suicidal. I was just an alcoholic. And they believed it. They let me go."

"They bought it?" I asked, incredulous. "How could they not know you were lying to get out?"

"They were looking for mental instability, those professionals. Luckily, I didn't fit that criteria, but again, it was more of a mental hospital, not an alcoholics hospital. I got lucky in this case. But I'll tell you this, Sharon.

People with addictions can exaggerate, withhold the truth, and at times, can lie with the best of them. They can be whatever they need to be at the moment, if their chemicals are in jeopardy.

I knew that, even if the circumstance never got this bad for Lorin—*fingers crossed that they won't*—the feelings could be very similar. It was a grim thought.

"I was only there for thirty-six hours," Joe said. "But it was by far the scariest time I'd been locked up."

Something didn't make sense. "So, Joe, even when you were locked up and admitted to being an alcoholic, there was no action plan put into place, and they just let you go?" I asked.

"Yeah," Joe said. "It was standard procedure." Then he added: "The mental hospital that came closest to diagnosing me with alcoholism was when I actually did try to commit suicide."

SPIRALING INTO SUICIDE MODE

The S-word. *Oh God*. I shivered at how matter-of-factly Joe

said it. So I was somewhat surprised when he was hesitant to give me details. He wasn't dismissive about it; I guessed that he merely touched on it because it was just too intensely painful and personal to him.

"It brings up so many memories, Sharon, but the gist of it involved drunkenly reaching for a butcher knife and gashing my left wrist. I did everything to prepare, including putting a note for my parents on the door."

"What did it say?" Was it ghoulish to be so curious, I wondered?

"I remember every word, to this day," said Joe. "I wrote, 'I love you all, but I'm in such pain that I could not go on anymore. Please don't feel sorry for me. It had to come to this. There was no hope for me, so this was the best way out. I hope you don't think I'm a coward.'"

If Lorin ever wrote this—I stopped myself from taking that thought any further. "Then what happened?"

"I had taken several Valium about 45 minutes before, and after cutting my one wrist, the wrong way, I passed out," Joe said. "My mom found me and called the ambulance. She came home, found my note, came into my room, and that was it."

I had so many questions. They warred with Joe's obvious reluctance to revisit this memory any more than he already had. I couldn't help but look down at his left wrist. A quick glance showed me nothing but the cuff of his long-sleeved shirt. I looked guiltily away. Joe had enough scars; I didn't need to see them all to know they were there. *Both physical and emotional*, I thought. It was enough.

I had just one last question. I felt I could ask it because it was not about details. "Was this rock bottom for you, then?" I asked softly, feeling almost empty from the raw emotion.

"Not the way you mean. As it turns out," Joe said, "at this time in my life, I just wanted the pain, the misery, and the loneliness to stop. I wasn't looking to change my solution. I wanted the negative

consequences to stop. That's all. All of my friends had moved on and I was alone. Nobody else can understand the absence of hope, isolation, and anger this dark time invoked.

"But I couldn't stop it. There was no other solution I could see, and zero hope it would get better. I felt pain coming from my mind. That's how it felt, and it bled into my emotions. Amplified them. The pain was so, so strong, I was riding a wave by this time. I Just. Wanted. To Die."

My mouth went dry.

> "So to answer your question, Sharon," Joe resumed in a steady voice, "it wasn't hitting *the* bottom, but it was hitting *a* bottom, and that's what's important to know.

Without the right solution, a person can hit rock bottom and bounce several times, or just stay there. It's why it's so important to find the right solutions for those who need them so desperately in their addiction journeys."

Joe reached past the screen for some water, breaking eye contact. He had moved past the moment, and I respected his space by staying silent.

STUMBLING ONTO THE TWELVE STEPS

After his suicide attempt, Joe was taken by ambulance to St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, where he stayed for a month. His doctor there convinced him to attend a twelve-step program at a local church, accompanied by three staff members.

"That was the first time I'd been around anything like that," Joe said. "A lady got up and told her story. I looked around and didn't feel like I belonged there, so I struck up a conversation with the gal who was sitting next to me."

That sounds like typical Joe, I thought. "Why didn't you feel like you belonged?" I asked.

"Because they were all happy and smiling, and I was not. I was in this church, and it felt like one of the churches I'd gone to when I was a little kid. I didn't want to be preached to. Unfortunately, Sharon, I think too often this might be the feeling that newcomers have at their first twelve-step meeting when it's held in a religious building. I know today that it wasn't the meeting, but me, my anxiety, and addiction that made me feel uncomfortable. They were wonderful people just trying to help."

After the meeting, instead of going back to the hospital, Joe went to a bar with the young woman he'd met. They both spent the night drinking.

"The next morning, she drove me back to the hospital, and the doctor was upset, but what could you expect? I was an alcoholic!"

I smiled at the rationale. So did Joe.

"That was the closest any hospital ever came to diagnosing me with alcoholism or drug problems," Joe said, and abruptly stood up.

I stood up too, stiffly. I felt like I had been there for weeks, we had covered so much of his life.

"How are you feeling, Joe?" I asked him. "About sharing all this stuff. The desperation, the attempt at suicide. Is it triggering, or hard to talk about?"

"If we don't talk about the rough stuff, then other people who are going through their own rough stuff may not open up about it either," Joe replied. "And then we just stay isolated, coming up with our own answers and using up our energy until we lose hope. That's no way to live."

As I packed up my things, Joe said, "We'll get into the harder stuff when we talk again."

Harder than this? I thought, slightly panicked. *It seems to never end*. Attempts at suicide, and recurring bouts with depression, all while clinging to drugs and alcohol as a solution.

But this was the struggle, and in my own life, things seemed to be dragging on and on, just like Joe said. I headed for the car and got ready to deal with my family's life.

- JOE -

Leaning back in my chair after Sharon left, I let the silence surround the room. I was keenly aware that talking about such dark times—especially the despair and isolation—was still difficult for me. My addiction had negatively affected all my meaningful relationships, especially with myself. I leaned back further in the chair, looking up at the ceiling. How, I wondered for the hundredth time, would my life have turned out if there had been some way to fix my biochemical imbalance early on? If I could have gone through lab testing as it related to my addiction, the way my clients do today?

No one ever thought about this back then. Would I have listened to the doctors? Would my parents have believed the results? Would my siblings or friends have investigated for themselves as well?

I'd never know, and that was that.

I decided to get to work on the papers on my desk, which were all related to the needs of my clients at the center. It wouldn't take away the what-ifs of my life, but I could help those who still had a chance to change their future, today.

CHAPTER 11

Desperate Isolation

"Thoughts of suicide can come from a place of kindness, in a muddled sort of way."

—JOE

– SHARON –

"WHAT'S GOING ON, SHARON?" Joe asked me gently.

A week after our last session, this time it was Joe who'd asked the first question: how was my family? I waved it off, saying that we needed to keep going on with his story. Joe wasn't buying it. He heard the shake in my voice and knew I wasn't looking him in the eye. Now he waited in his quiet, kind way for me to tell him.

My eyes filled with tears, but my chin came up as I wiped them away quickly. *Maybe I can talk about it clinically,* I thought,

really quick, and then we can go back to his story. "It's just some stuff with Lorin. I mean, I'll get through it, but …"

Joe stopped me. "Sharon, I understand that this is my story we are writing about. But it's more than that. It's about knowing that addiction doesn't just affect the person who's addicted to the drug or drink. It's really a story about the lives and the community that addiction affects. The way it's affecting yours."

And with that, my emotions cracked wide open.

PULLING AWAY, AND NOT KNOWING WHY

"Joe, I never thought in a million years that I'd be having a night like I did three nights ago. I truly don't know where it came from, or what triggered it. I thought we were doing so well! Now, I'm really questioning what Lorin is up to, and I don't think I know how to do this." My words were spilling faster and faster. "Ugggh. I'm terrible at parenting, Joe, or maybe just figuring out how to parent someone with an addiction. I feel like a terrible human being. And I don't want my son to die."

My tears spilled then. Joe pulled a tissue box from under his table. "Want to tell me what happened?" he asked.

I nodded, dabbing at my eyes.

"I'd come in to check on Lorin, late the other night," I began. "His bed was pushed into a corner and piled with clothes and tools and art supplies. He was lying on the floor next to it. His back was against the wall with his feet under the bed. He was shivering, and all he was wearing was boxers and his blue ski jacket."

On his shelves, oil paints, spray cans, and crusty paintbrushes mingled with tools, evidence of the frantic graffiti on the wall. I'd wondered, like I had so many times before, I told Joe, what had changed with him. How had my son come to be a pack rat, living in misery and disarray again, the way he had been when he confessed about the meth? Just two years earlier, he'd held down a well-paying job and was out on his own.

"When Lorin would come home to visit back then, I'd worry about his schedule," I continued. "He seemed so exhausted and worn out, but he would hug me and tell me not to worry about it, back then. He was going to be fine. But I did worry, even back then." I wiped at a tear and said softly, "And I was right to, I guess."

Joe got up and closed the door that had been partially open. He settled back in and nodded for me to continue.

"He had been funny and full of life, with a girlfriend that loved him, and that he just adored. We all did," I said. "He played a lot of basketball, and joked around with his family, and did whatever twenty-year-olds love to do. And then gradually, these things faded away.

"He stopped smiling. He almost never opened his eyes all the way, looking bored and annoyed. In fact, he stopped looking me in the eyes at all. Hugs and any kind of physical touch were gone. He grew sullen and withdrawn. His girlfriend stopped coming over with him, and then they broke up. It was weed. And the meth," I said bitterly.

Within six or eight months of his new job, Lorin moved back in with us—just for a few months, he said, so he could pay some bills. We set up a rent agreement, and it was fine. But then he started staying up until the early hours of the morning, in spite of his twelve- and fifteen-hour workdays.

"He never paid his rent and was belligerent when Micah and I finally brought it up. Then he started sleeping hard, off and on. It was so difficult to wake him. He'd be up all night, and then sleep in and miss work the next day. I knew how much this job meant to him, but he seemed to just stop caring. Then he…he st-stopped going to work altogether." I found it hard to voice the feelings of frustration and pain I'd stuffed down for so long, in order to keep the family going.

"Sharon, you've been hurting inside for a while," Joe said. "It's good to share and get it out."

I nodded. "Thanks, Joe. I feel like I still don't have Lorin's whole story. Like I'm back at the beginning again. All I go on is the signs, and the little dribbles he's telling me."

A few months later after he moved in, he was visibly thinner and his eyes were sunken in. "My intuition, my 'mom radar,' was pounding out of my heart, but my brain was completely silent on this," I said to Joe. "I just couldn't figure out what it was, back then. So I kept trying to motivate him even when all I could do was nag him to go see a doctor, or get another job." I added, almost in a whisper, "Eventually, I wanted him to Just. Move. Out. That was my endgame." I took a breath and blotted my eyes with the tissue.

He was belligerent and wandered around the house when we tried to sleep. My son had become some kind of depressed, tortured soul that Micah and I could'nt reach. That's where we've been for what seems like forever," I said. "I thought we were finally at the end of the nightmare—or close to the end—when he confessed about his drug of choice."

'MOM, I DON'T WANT TO BE HERE ANYMORE'

"But this night, three nights ago," I said, "he was unusually quiet. He had grown progressively sullen again, and we'd had a few spats. I was getting ready to go to bed, and thought I'd say goodnight, maybe smooth things over. When I came to his door, I knocked and heard a sniffle, then a soft 'come in,' and I knew something was different, Joe. He didn't look at me. Just stared at the wall next to me.

"I felt alarmed when I saw the mess in the room, but I schooled my voice to sound calm when I saw where he was huddled. *What would my dad do?* I asked myself. It became the mantra I followed as I picked my way around and over the clutter and made room to sit next to his head on the floor. On an impulse I stroked his hair, hoping he wouldn't turn away. He didn't.

"All I could think was how my dad used to come into my room when I was a teenager, hurting over some drama. He would touch my hair, and simply say he loved me, and then listen. I decided to do the same thing with Lorin.

"I told Lorin that I just wanted to come in to say I loved him. And it seemed to work, the way it had with my dad and me."

"How so?" Joe asked.

"Lorin started talking to me," I replied. "But what he said had triggered my mom radar again. 'I don't think I can keep going like this, Mom. I don't want to keep doing this.' The last part was said in a whisper. Joe, I had an idea that what he was referring to was unthinkable to me. It was terrifying, but it sounded like he didn't want to live."

My face felt hot as I continued to open up to Joe, crying as I remembered the feeling of heartache and absolute panic that ensued.

"I took a breath and said, 'What do you mean, son?' I asked it as calmly as I could, but my heart was pounding inside my chest. I knew what he was talking about. 'Do you mean looking for work? Or being a little bit depressed, or…what?' I couldn't think of anything else to say. I hoped I was at least keeping a soft, neutral tone in my voice. I don't think I succeeded.

"My hand kept stroking his shaggy, fine hair. I could tell it hadn't been washed in a few days, maybe a week. I scooched closer and picked up his head so it was lying in my lap. He didn't move away. He just started sobbing silently, his body shaking over and over. After a minute or two, he said, 'Mom, I don't want to be here anymore. On this world.'

"Joe, I didn't know what to do, or what to say. I felt way out of my depth! For my son to want to take his life from me? From everyone? From himself? What could I say that might not make things worse?"

Joe looked at me kindly but said nothing.

"I said to Lorin, 'Okay, son. I hear what you're saying. But

you are not alone. You're not alone tonight, so how about I just stay here with you and love on you for a little bit, and you can see how you're feeling tomorrow? You don't have to go anywhere tonight, okay?' It was all I could think of, Joe. My dad's been gone for a few years now, so it was just me that I had to listen to, and I was coming up empty."

"Tell me more," Joe prompted, and I spoke steadily now, calmly, even as tears overflowed and ran down my cheeks.

"All I could think of was how much pain and loneliness he was in, Joe, even though I didn't understand it. I wanted to know what could possibly be so bad that he would want to die, but my curiosity could wait. My son was in pain, and all I could do was let him know I loved him. That we loved him as a family.

"I reassured him for hours that night while he alternated between tears and sleep, just stroking his hair, or his face, and holding his hand. Every once in a while, he'd get angry and tell me to just leave. I'd match his intensity then and tell him I wasn't giving up on him even if he felt like giving up right then. God I was so scared!

"And then I'd remember my mantra, playing over and over again like a broken record player: *What would Dad do? What would Dad do?* He'd love, that's what. And I'd say, 'I love you, Lorin. Let's just hold on together until the morning.' That was a long night. Such a long night. But he's still here, for now." I felt raw, sharing this with Joe, and saying it out loud made it real, all over again.

"I'm still terrified. I'm afraid that the suicide talk will happen again, Joe. Or worse, that I won't get a chance to talk with him again. Lorin was absolutely sure his family would be better off without his selfishness and anger. He felt it would be better if his loved ones just went on without him. He was convinced that we would hurt for only a little bit, and then we would move on and be better off, and he wouldn't have to keep hurting us. He

could stop the pain for all of us. And that was the most chilling, haunting part, Joe. I can't shake it."

Joe stayed quiet, probably because he had learned long ago to let parents in pain play it out until they were done talking. By having me talk about this, Joe let me know I wasn't alone, no matter how hard it was. I wiped away my remaining tears and blew my nose.

SURVIVING THE SUICIDE WATCH

"I know the feeling, Sharon," Joe said. "The thoughts of suicide can come from a place of kindness, in a muddled sort of way. I tried to convey all that in the suicide note I taped to my door, so long ago. Along with cautioning my mom not to come in, but to get one of my friends to come in instead, that's all I could do. That was the only amount of control I felt I had left. To just end the pain, both for me and for my family.

> I never wanted my loved ones to have backlash from my consequences, so being out of the picture seemed like the quickest way to stop the hurt for everyone."

"I'm so sorry, Joe. I'm sorry that you ever felt that way. I'm sorry that Lorin feels this way now. I just ... that night was the first time I really felt like my son was gone," I said, feeling drained. "Taken from me, whether he was in this life or not. His personality, his wit, his lighthearted banter were snuffed out already by dark thoughts, dark words, and dark actions. I didn't know if I could keep going, after that night on suicide watch. We have both survived it, but now I'm afraid of the night. What's to say that every other night won't look just the same?"

Joe reached across the space, picked up my hand and squeezed it. "I know it can get better, Sharon. I've seen it get better. I've been on both sides. And it's why my career came

about in the first place. And this center. It's a place for answers and action, a practical, viable solution for people who are needing help just like you are, just like I was—not to mention putting their family life back together after the war zone it had turned into.

"Sharon, your own journey, just like other people's, is how you get your answers. Once you find those answers, there will come a time to act on that knowledge. For each person, that time is different. The pain threshold is different. The line in the sand, and the fear, and the risk level are different for every person.

But know this: Once you have enough information and are truly ready to act, that's when hope starts to grow. Until then, it's really just living in survival mode.

"I guess you've seen a lot of people who were simply not ready to face their reality, huh?" I asked, still sniffling.

"Yep," he said. "They thought they were ready, though. Loved ones and addicted people both. They said all the right things, but then other things got in the way. Life. And who can blame them? Addiction and recovery are hard paths. But I have a feeling that you want answers and support, Sharon. You seem to be at that point."

I was. "Joe, after the night I spent with Lorin on suicide watch, I was basically drained. I holed up in my room for the entire next day. I knew I was taking a gamble, that he could be dying at any moment I wasn't watching over him. But I still stayed in my room, exhausted, hoping I could let go for a few hours.

"When I saw Lorin again the following day, he was sullen and angry with me. It was as if the night before had never happened. In a way, Joe, I counted his attitude as a win because it meant that he was still fighting. There was energy behind his voice. I'd take it." The still, hopeless inertia of that night was gone for the time being, so I could go back into my regular mode of watching and waiting.

"And how are you now, after saying it out loud?" Joe asked.

"I'm feeling a lot better after talking with you. Stronger, somehow. Lorin still won't hear about anything that's 'getting him help.' And honestly, I'm a bit too drained to do anything but recover, for now. There's always more to tell, but basically, I'll keep looking for solutions for him, hoping that I'll find a way for him to listen to my advice or help. I haven't brought up your center specifically, because he just denies he's using any kind of drug anymore. But he did agree to see Laura, our family therapist, so I brought him to see her yesterday."

"How did that go?" Joe asked.

I sighed. "I had to push him to go. But he's agreed to go to each appointment, three times a week, at this point. Reluctantly, so I usually resort to guilting or bribing him. But he's quiet about what he talks about with her."

Joe nodded, and his phone rang.

I stood up, needing a moment to pull myself together. As I stepped out of the room, Joe hugged me with one arm, because he was listening to whoever was on the other end of the phone. I was grateful for his acceptance and support. And if this last week was any measure of what could happen, I'd need all the support I could get.

Five minutes later, I was back in Joe's office. I was ready to get back to his story. But Joe wasn't—not quite.

LETTING GO OF BEING IN CHARGE

> **"Sharon," Joe said, "the hardest thing a loved one has to learn is that they are not in charge."**

We touched on this a bit, before. A loved one is not in charge of another person's recovery, or consequences, or relapses, or successes. No matter how much experience or knowledge

they have for the person struggling with addiction. But it is something that every person has to face. Convincing with logic and facts is unproductive. This is an individual journey that requires a lot of help, both for the loved one and the person riding the addiction train."

Joe's words were hard to hear. I'd been in charge of my kids, their schooling, and their very lives for a long time. How could I let go and just trust that my son would be in charge of his recovery or his failures? Of his life? How could I trust that Lorin would ever learn without my guidance and help when he'd been so bad at it so far? It just seemed like it was too much for one person to handle alone.

I'd come back to this later. For now, I said, with what I hoped was some semblance of a professional tone, "Okay, Joe, I'll trust your process. Thanks so much for your insight. I feel a bit better, so let's get back to you."

Joe was quiet for a moment, and then said, "Throughout the years of ups and downs, my mom had been the support system for me. She was the cushion between myself and my dad because he and I didn't have a great relationship. The communication just wasn't there. And she was there whenever I messed up. A soft place to land, I'd say.

"When I needed food, or rent, or some other kind of help, she was there. Now, she didn't always like it," Joe added. "In fact, it got so that there was a lot of resentment and frustration when we'd talk. My parents weren't equipped to deal with my addiction. There were very few, if any, resources for them.

"I mean, if the doctors weren't equipped back then, how could regular people know what to do? So when I landed in the mental hospital after attempting suicide, it broke her heart, and understandably so. When I got out, I stepped away from communication with my complicated family, and it didn't take long before I went on a bender. A bad one, where I was

living out of a car with a taxicab driver. I'd met him at a party, and we got along great, in our drunk and high state of mind. When we weren't sleeping, we'd drive around Hollywood, partying with friends. For three days we went from his friends to mine, drinking heavily and taking a lot of drugs, over and above the parties."

'MOM, I THINK I NEED SOME HELP'

"I was thirty years old and had hit a new low, becoming truly homeless. Finally, my brother Richard and his friend tracked me down and tricked me into getting away from that guy."

"How?" I asked.

"Oh, they asked me if I'd like to go to the horse races, because they knew how much I liked to gamble. It's where I found another source of companionship and booze. So, when I got in the car with them—extremely high, of course—they drove me back to Brockman Hospital to see if they could check me in again. It didn't matter to them whether I wanted to or not, and honestly, I was so high, I was in a foggy state of not really caring where I was going or what I was doing."

Richard brought in the bag of drugs Joe had on him as proof that the hospital should admit him. Brockman refused. His last bill hadn't been paid.

"I'm wasn't sure why they wouldn't accept me," Joe said. "I was in the waiting room of the emergency area, and all I knew at the time was Richard came back from speaking with them and walked right out the door, frustrated and angry-looking. He left me there, not knowing what else to do with me."

"So what did you do?" I asked, already sensing what his answer would be.

"Even in my drugged-out state, I knew the only thing left was to call my mom. There were some pay phones on the other side of the lobby. I emptied my pockets on the side table, looking for

a dime, and when I found one, I stumbled my way over to the pay phone and dialed her number. I was sure she would help. When she picked up the phone, I said, 'Mom, I think I need some help. I'm not feeling well. I'm at the emergency room, and they won't take me.'"

Joe paused for a long moment. *Oh lord,* I thought.

"That's when I heard her sobbing on the other end of the line. It must have sobered me up a bit because I remember her words clearly. She said, 'Joe, you're killing yourself. You're killing me, and I can't do it anymore.' Then she said, 'What I can do is buy you a ticket to Colorado. I'll talk to your cousin, Marilyn, and you can stay with her.' Marilyn was a cousin on my father's side. She had quite a few years of sobriety under her belt, so my mom thought she could help me.

"What Mom didn't say," Joe added, "was that it was a one-way ticket."

"You heard her cry," I said. "How did that impact you differently than all the other times?"

"I'd known for years how much pain I was causing, but I just couldn't stop using. Hearing her cry like that, I knew she couldn't go on anymore like this. Looking back now, I know that was *her* hitting bottom," Joe said. "It just clicked into place, the accountability for what I'd done to cause her pain. It didn't go much further than that at the time, just because I was so high. But that part got through. That, and that I had no other choice but to go to Colorado. I couldn't go home because of what it was doing to my mom. I couldn't stay out in a taxicab with nothing but the clothes on my back, whatever was in my pockets, and a backpack stashed with drugs as my life's possessions. I must have stunk to high heaven. So I said, 'Okay, Mom. I'll go.'"

"It was the only thing left for you to do," I said.

"Yep," Joe said. "I used the last dime I had on me to call her up to come get me or help me out. Actually, I had walked into

Brockman with about thirty-eight dollars in bills, but someone had swiped them. I had taken all my cash out of my pocket, along with other things, and only taken my last bit of change to the pay phone with me."

"You walked away from your money?" I asked. *I sound like a mom.*

"Well, remember, Sharon, I was still very high. I literally only knew what was around my immediate vicinity. So yes, I truly left California with not a penny to my name."

"And I'm assuming Richard found you? You got to say goodbye to him?" I asked.

"Richard came and picked me up," Joe said. "I still had a lot of pills on me in my little bag, and my brother knew that. He walked with me through the airport, supporting me while I tried not to fall down. There wasn't much to say at this point because I wasn't very responsive to anything and we'd been through this state of mind before, many times. I don't have a lot of recollection about that ride, or the steps going through the airport. Just glimpses of ceiling lights or the floor tiles as the room seemed to whirl around. My head moved unsteadily. But I'll always be grateful that he didn't just drop me off and leave again. He actually took me to the gate to make sure I got on the plane."

Unbeknownst to Joe, Richard had taken his pill bag.

"I hallucinated that I had dropped it down in between the passenger seats," Joe explained. "I was panicking. I told the flight attendant that I'd dropped an expensive necklace in between the seats and needed them to lift up the seats to find it. She wasn't eager to help me. She hadn't even wanted me on the plane in my condition, but my brother had convinced them at the gate that someone else was going to pick me up at the other end of the trip, and that I was just sick. So she had to let me stay.

"They put me in the back of the plane," Joe continued, "right

next to the window, and didn't let anyone else sit next to me. I looked like hell, and probably didn't smell that great. I was desperate and hallucinating about this necklace, so the flight attendants helped me look between the seats at the end of the trip, and it wasn't there. Of course, it wasn't.

"And that's how I landed in Colorado," Joe said. "It was a mother's tough love, for sure, and I couldn't tell who was more hurt, my mom and my family, or me. I wish I could say I felt anything but numb, high, and stoned, getting off that plane. But all I wanted was my bag of pills and to get warm. I knew Mom hadn't given up on me, even though I knew I needed this fresh start. But I was living in a fog. I wasn't thinking straight at all.

"I walked off the plane pretty anxious. I didn't believe I could ever live without some kind of mood-altering drug. I was worried because I knew that when I was not using, which was not very often, it was a living hell."

I remembered Joe's description of withdrawal symptoms when he had been in a jail cell or detoxing in hospitals. I hoped Marilyn was ready to help him through the start of a very long dry spell.

– JOE –

After Sharon and I finished up, I found myself thinking back again to that time in my life, walking off that plane. A fresh start and daunting experiences both lay ahead. At the time, though, there was no way I could see the big picture, or the future.

Maybe that's the stage Lorin was in now. I knew Sharon was hopeful that he'd hit bottom. It was *a* bottom, but until he reached out for help, it couldn't be *the* bottom. Lorin's willingness to go to a counselor and therapist, albeit reluctantly, was definitely not

enough to get help with something as complicated as addiction, but it was a good start.

Whatever his journey, though, a medical diagnosis would need to be part of Lorin's path to find the way back to himself.

CHAPTER 12

Hitting Bottom and Surrendering

"In the end, that's what it came to. I opened up to the possibility of there being something bigger than myself."

—JOE

– SHARON –

BACK IN JOE'S OFFICE FOR OUR NEXT MEETING, we greeted each other with a hug instead of a handshake. After settling in, I picked up where we left off. "Were you upset that Richard took your pills before you got on the plane?"

"Not really," Joe said. "My thinking didn't go that far out, in the state I was in. Even when I was coming off my high, my only thought was for the anxiety and pain I was feeling, not about my brother getting me to the plane. He knew me well enough to get

me where I needed to go, whatever that took at the time. What he didn't know was that I hated flying. I was freezing cold and severely anxious."

I nodded. "Coming from California to Colorado with just the clothes on your back would be quite a shock to your system."

"Oh, it was!" Joe said. "It was January, and I had only a light windbreaker on. It was a terrible jolt to my body. There was snow on the ground, and I immediately hated it. I can't tell you how much I hated the snow and cold."

Marilyn was at the airport, waiting for him. Having gone through addiction and recovery herself, she knew that Joe needed to detox. She put him up in her home to do it, in the unfinished basement, on a mattress.

"Up until now, detoxing wasn't something that happened in my life," Joe explained.

> **"Being without my pills, and feeling the effects of going without, was always a fear, but detoxing was different. It wasn't a familiar part of my getting-sober routine.**

Especially not safely detoxing. I didn't know how to do that. I just went along with what people told me to do. Marilyn had a place for me to lie down and sleep. That was the best offer I was going to get."

"I had blankets and a pillow, but I was terribly vulnerable. I was coming off of daily alcohol for months and a ten-year addiction to Valium, among other drugs. I kept throwing up, and had relentless stomach problems. I was just miserably sick. I didn't know where I was, or what time of day it was. I lay on the mattress in January, shaking and shivering uncontrollably. I felt terribly alone, and much too sick to move."

On his second day of detox, Joe dropped a glass of water, and it shattered on the concrete floor. "I focused on that broken

glass for minutes at a time, while I tried desperately to sleep. All I wanted was to sleep so I didn't have to focus on the pain I was going through. I really couldn't, though. I'd go in and out of consciousness, in a fog, just trying not to focus on the pain. The muscle pain, the vomiting and diarrhea—horrible. Intense hunger pangs. And anxiety that left me with chills, incredible fatigue, and tremors." Joe seemed to wince—a faint echo of the long-ago pain—as he recounted his ordeal.

"One of the times I came to, there were some smears of blood on the floor. I was curious about how they got there. Only gradually did I realize I'd cut my foot on the broken glass shards stumbling to the bathroom."

The third day was the worst. Joe started hallucinating. "That was new to me," he said. "Bugs started coming out of the walls, first one, then several. It scared the heck out of me. And for the last three days, I'd only really slept a few hours, total. I still hadn't showered, so I smelled terrible and felt terrible. Crusty and sweaty and cold. I couldn't hold anything down, and the shaking was getting worse, not better."

By that time, Marilyn knew she had to get some help. She was acquainted with a Dr. Kenneth Ash from the Hope Center, an outpatient addiction recovery facility in Colorado. They had both been on the center's board of advisors.

'I AM NOT MY WORST ENEMY': JOE'S EPIPHANY

"She took me to Dr. Ash's office," Joe said. "He could tell I was detoxing intensely because I was having difficulty speaking. The tremors were getting extreme. He didn't make me explain myself in my stuttering, anxious way. That's how I knew he got what was wrong."

Joe leaned forward in his chair. "Dr. Ash was the first professional who knew exactly what was happening with me and immediately hospitalized me because of my symptoms. He

knew it was alcohol and drug withdrawal. And he was very knowledgeable about addictions as a primary illness."

He came to see Joe every day. "On the seventh day, he strongly recommended that I go to a residential treatment center in Estes Park called the Harmony Foundation," Joe continued. "I agreed, because I agreed to anything at this point; I had no other options.

"I went in vulnerable and weak. I felt scared, anxious, and depressed. It eased over time, but even during treatment, I was still not healthy. My mind would race. My eating habits were terrible. Fast food for meals, a pack of cigarettes a day, soda."

Despite all this, Joe had a life-changing experience at Harmony. "I came to an understanding that drugs and alcohol were destroying my life. For the first time in years, I had hope that I wasn't just a crazy person with a broken mind. I wasn't just Joe the family screw-up. There was more to me than my actions. It took some time, but I became open to the possibility that drugs and alcohol contributed to, and then overshadowed, so much of the negativity in my life. I made the connection! It seemed like such an obvious conclusion for others, but for me, in my jumbled, desperate state of mind, it was a huge realization."

I felt goosebumps on my arms. It took Joe decades to wake up to what had been obvious to Dr. Ash, right off the bat. Why did Joe get it this time?

For people just starting recovery, Joe explained, realizing that drugs and alcohol aren't really their answer is as earth-shattering as learning that up is down.

Most addicted people rely on the false reality that drugs are their *answer*. To hear that their self-made solution is the *cause* of some, or most, of their problems…that's a huge risk. Life-and-death important. Their chemical solution has been, in their mind, what has kept them afloat.

"It takes time to get past the betrayal of our previous logic," Joe added. "Even more time to rely on a new normal. This concept is everything in their world being turned upside down! That's what I was battling during my time at Harmony."

Joe leaned forward in his chair. "That was an important first step—*the* most important step. As long as a person is in the grips of an addiction, their mind is their worst enemy. It keeps telling them, '*This time,* it will be different,' and '*One* drink or drug won't matter,' and '*This time*, I can handle it.' That thinking is our first and biggest hurdle to overcome." He was looking at me intently, as if determined that I would grasp the enormity of what he was saying.

The psychological shift that ultimately has to happen, Joe explained, is to understand that that first drink or drug is not the solution to your problems; it's what's caused even more problems.

"In the recovery community, this is called being restored to sanity," Joe said.

"So once I understood that the enemies in my life were drugs and alcohol, and not myself, my mind, the law, or my family, I stood a chance.

"I had a chance to change my circumstances, when so many other times I just went with the flow."

So Joe committed to following the program. "But because of my anxiety and depression, it was very hard to be around people I didn't know. In spite of this, I made some friends there and stayed the regular twenty-eight days before graduating from the program."

"Graduated? Didn't they just release you?" I asked.

"Oh no," Joe replied. "All through my time in the mental institutions, I did my time and was released, like a prisoner after his sentence was up. But this was the first time I went through a

'program' where, upon completion, I was able to 'graduate.' It was very gratifying."

I nodded. Who doesn't enjoy the praise that comes with graduating?

"Marilyn was very sweet throughout this process," Joe continued. "She helped me get a job with a friend of hers at a car dealership after I graduated. His name was Bill. I didn't know until later that he actually didn't want to hire me when he found out that I wasn't just an alcoholic but was also in the program for drugs. He thought that was too much of a risk, but he decided to take the chance anyway."

I nodded again. This would be a big risk for any company to take.

REALITY, IN THE FORM OF RELAPSE

Joe confessed that he wasn't great at selling cars anymore—not very reliable, even though he'd been at the dealership for a few weeks. One day, he overslept. He was worried that Bill would fire him.

"So I made up a story to tell him," Joe said. "I went to his office and told him about how I'd been taking Antabuse, and that I was out the night before and had accidentally taken a long drink of what I thought was just a Coke, but there had been whiskey mixed in with it. So I got really sick, and that was why I was late."

Antabuse, Joe explained, is a drug that's designed to be a preventive to drinking because of the bad side effects that kick in if you do. He sighed and shook his head. "This was such a big, fat lie. I wasn't taking Antabuse, I had just said I was for the sake of the story. I rushed through it, and it didn't even make much sense. Nobody should have bought it. Heck, I didn't even buy it.

"When Bill got up and shut the door, I thought I was fired, for sure. Instead, he said, 'What's Antabuse again?' I told him

it was used for alcohol addiction and that it makes you sick if it mixes with alcohol. He walked over to his desk, sat down in his chair and leaned back, quiet for a few long moments. Then he leaned forward, looked me in the eye and said, 'I think I might have a drinking problem, too.'

"Bill told me how he had been feeling like his life was out of control," Joe continued. "He felt depressed and anxious all the time. He had confided in his wife, but she didn't know how to help or what was wrong. He even called his lawyer friend one night to come over. Bill said to me, 'I was so ashamed and fearful, I had to turn off the light in order to talk to him.'

"The next day, Bill said he called his doctor, but his doctor couldn't tell him what was wrong, either. 'I've been searching for an answer, big time, over the last few days,' he said to me. 'And now you've told me some of your story.' Bill started crying then, probably from relief, and that's when he shared with me that he might be an alcoholic, too. So I got him in to see Dr. Ash."

"That was all the result from a big, fat lie, eh?" I said.

"Yeah," Joe said, "but I wasn't working the program at the time, so I reasoned that lying wasn't a big deal."

We chuckled over that for a moment, and then I circled back to Joe's relapse. "So, what caused your initial relapse in Colorado, Joe?" I asked.

"Ah, good question. When I left Harmony, I made a big mistake. In addition to still feeling anxious, depressed, and only sleeping two hours a night, I hung around with the guys I went to treatment with. One by one, they each started to relapse, over a period of about six months. I hadn't gotten a sponsor yet, and was picking and choosing what I wanted to do in the program.

"I was lonely as well. But I was going to meetings on and off for six months with Marilyn. I was trying not to relapse. I was not consciously looking for something to relieve my depression and anxiety, but I ended up in a dental office one day to have a

root canal. They asked if I wanted something for the pain. My mind went right back to my mother's medicine cabinet when the pill bottle stated that those pills were 'For Pain.' Automatically, I said yes, knowing I wasn't being too smart about it. But I did it because I really was in pain. They gave me pills that started me on a three-and-a-half-year battle."

Oh, crap. My heart sank at hearing his words. Three and a half years of a backslide after only six months of a new life.

"After the pain pills ran out, it was mainly alcohol that I struggled with," Joe explained. "But I was still trying to make recovery work.

For three and a half years, I was trying to hide my relapses. I was ashamed, and I still couldn't bring myself to get a sponsor."

"You were hiding your relapse ... how?" I asked. It would have been fairly obvious to anyone if Joe was stumbling around drunk, or acting obviously hypersensitive. Wouldn't it?

"The insanity of this illness, Sharon, is that I could mask my behavior a surprising amount of the time, Joe said. Even from myself.

I would go to the market and buy a couple of bottles of peppermint extract—you know, what they use for making cakes and stuff. Well, those bottles were 90 percent alcohol. I would drink it down thinking I wasn't relapsing—I was just substituting and doing things differently. I told myself constantly that it would be okay. Then I would go to a meeting thinking I was doing fine.

"We will have all kinds of reasons to justify that what we're doing is okay, just for the peace that comes from chasing that first drink's high."

My god, still going back to that first drink! But I decided I'd try to be positive.

"That makes a lot of sense, Joe," I said, mentally adjusting my view of what a relapsed person's personality would be like. "It sounds like you spent a lot of energy making excuses, but you were still looking for help. That's something, at least," I said. "You were looking for support, right?"

"Sort of," Joe said. "When I'd go to the meetings, I'd pick and choose what to do. The last thing I did was actually follow all of the steps, the advice, or become coachable. I acted like everything was okay when I was there. And I couldn't tolerate staying afterward to talk with people because of the anxiety I felt. So I didn't really have a big support group that I leaned on there. Plus," Joe said, "I didn't like male authority figures because they reminded me of my dad, and because sponsors were based on your gender, that meant a male sponsor for me.

"I felt way too vulnerable for that, having such a fear of male authority, as well as being rejected. So I couldn't take getting a sponsor seriously. To top it off, I wouldn't share much at those meetings because I felt guilty. I was relapsing and didn't want it to be happening, let alone talk about it."

Joe said he felt scared and alone and ashamed. He didn't have a lot of hope, and was going along with other people's ideas and programs because he felt there were no other answers. "No other choice," Joe added. "I was still trying to make alcohol my solution. And my brain wasn't functioning well. Even when I was sober for small periods, I battled the biochemical issues."

"Joe," I asked tentatively, "do you feel your relapses wouldn't have happened if your biochemical issues had been addressed? It sounds like, even at good places like Harmony, nobody was really thinking along the lines of checking patients' thyroid, diet patterns, and genetics features."

"I can't say for sure," Joe replied thoughtfully, "but I believe so. It's what I've seen in my own practice that makes a difference for clients on a daily basis. But here's the thing: I would like to

believe I would have accepted and acted on that information if it had been presented to me. But that's the other part of it. I could have had access to a lot of information and testing, all day long, but unless I was ready and willing to act on that information, it would just be noise that would get in the way of my habits and beliefs. Make sense?"

It did. I sighed, feeling defeated for this younger Joe. *How on earth can a person beat addiction under conditions like this?*

"Then something happened that was a game-changer," Joe said. "A really powerful experience."

"What was that?" I asked.

"I surrendered."

SURRENDER: A NEW BEGINNING

The words hit me hard as I heard the emotion in his voice.

"I had just come off a horrible binge," Joe said. "I started going through bad withdrawals. The doctor wouldn't help me with medication anymore, and the staff at the treatment centers wouldn't let me back in because I'd relapsed twice, and had an outstanding bill. Took me five years to pay that thing off."

I grimaced in sympathy. That thought had crossed my mind with Lorin, if he ever agreed to get help. *Where will we get the money?*

"I felt like I had nowhere left to go," Joe said. "I was right back to my feelings of despair before my suicide attempt in California. The absence of hope, the isolation, and the anger saturated my life again. There was no solution I could see, and zero hope it would get better. I didn't know anywhere else to go but to a Wednesday night twelve-step meeting in Loveland.

"That's what got me into my crappy, '73 Oldsmobile the night I surrendered. There on the road from Fort Collins to Loveland, I started to get angry. I was pissed off, screaming at the top of my lungs, 'If there's a God, then why is this happening to me?

Why am I in so much pain?' and 'Why is my life so screwed up? *Why. Can't. I. Get. Sober?'* And then I broke down in tears. It was overwhelming. The pain was so strong, I thought about ending my life just to make the pain stop."

He considered it. All it would have taken, Joe said, was a turn of the wheel, and the pain *would* stop. But something deep inside drove him toward the meeting.

"As I rolled into the parking lot, I came to the realization that if I didn't stop drinking, I'd never find out what else was wrong with me, besides my alcoholism. When I was sober for six months or so, I knew that I still wasn't normal.

There was more to why I was so depressed and anxious all the time. That's the biochemical stuff. I *knew* there was something more,"

Joe repeated, emphatically. "Something that screwed up my mind and made it so I couldn't stop drinking, even with traditional recovery methods."

Joe's voice got quieter now, steady and firm. "In the end, that's what it came to. I opened up to the possibility of there being something bigger than myself. In that moment, I walked into the building, hoping that something might change."

There were only ten people in the room. It smelled like doughnuts, coffee, and cigarette smoke, just as it always did. Rickety, steel chairs were set up in a circle. "The space always felt too big for the few people who filled it," Joe said. "I hated that feeling. It was the feeling of being vulnerable. I felt cold and anxious, but I stayed anyway. I had to. I had nowhere else to go."

That night, when Joe was asked to talk, something changed. He opened up and shared.

"I had never shared at meetings before," Joe explained, "being anxious and having a hard time putting my thoughts

into words. I had a fear that I would make no sense to anybody. I also hated asking for help. Especially from any male authority figure, which in this case would have been a male sponsor."

Joe cleared his throat then, trying not to choke up as he recounted what happened next.

"I said, 'My name's Joe. I'm an alcoholic, and I'm going to die. I don't know how to stop drinking.' Then an older lady named Ida Mae Stevens spoke up. I'll never forget her. She was sitting right next to me. Glaring at me, she stuck her finger in my face and said in a stern voice, 'Joe, you've got to go and get a sponsor. Tonight. You've been trying this alone for too long. You can't do it alone. Nobody does recovery alone.' She was out to get me. To save my life.

"That was the moment of truth," Joe said. "She was right. I had to get a sponsor to get sober. So I shared, asking for help despite my anxiety.

"Sharon, if these two things had never happened—Ida Mae Stevens being there to push me to get a sponsor, and me surrendering and asking for help—I don't know if I'd be here today. I doubt whether I'd be alive, but I know for sure I wouldn't be sober. I believe that these were two very powerful things that happened to me that night—miracles, maybe."

I wondered briefly what Lorin's miracles might be.

"That night, I did just what Ida Mae said," Joe continued. "I went over to Bill Corbett's house, the guy who'd given me that job at the car dealership. We'd become friends, you see, and Bill had stayed sober even though I'd relapsed so much. He had been patient with me through my bouts of drunkenness.

"I knocked on his door, late at night after his wife and kids had gone to bed. I said, 'Bill, I need help.' That was the moment, Sharon: the moment I surrendered. I. Asked. For. Help. 'I need a sponsor,' I said, 'because I can't do this on my own. Would you help me?' His response was simply, 'Are you ready, Joe? Are you

ready to stop drinking and do whatever it takes to get well?' My immediate reply was yes. He said he'd be glad to sponsor me.

"We talked for two hours. He knew how emotionally drained I was, so he invited me to sleep on the couch that night. Sharon, I lay there all night, just thinking. This incredible peace came over me, and stayed with me all night. It was something spiritual, the result of me being exhausted and surrendering, but that night I knew I was willing to do whatever it took to get sober and that I'd do whatever Bill asked me to do. I was finally feeling hope."

"And did you?" I asked. "Do whatever it took to stay sober, at this point?"

"I did." Joe smiled. "This was truly, finally, a turning point in my life. And Bill never led me wrong. He said, 'Joe, I want you to go to meetings every day, and call me every day, and then come to meetings with me on Wednesdays.' That night really started my sobriety. I went to meetings. I contacted him. I still had the depression and anxiety, but I had hope, too, because I was working my program and I knew I had to stay sober. Otherwise I'd never know how to solve my depression and anxiety."

Joe paused for a moment, pondering his next words. "Looking back, Sharon, maybe I'm better off now, having gone through my addiction, than I would have been without having the addiction at all." he said thoughtfully, "just because of the support system I eventually gained, the pain I went through, and the growth that came as a result of that pain. Even though it was a different path, it is a rich and satisfying path. And I get to help others."

He said the last part with a smile.

"If I had it to do over again," Joe said, "I would have liked to have this growth without addiction, but it turned out exactly the way it was supposed to."

– JOE –

After Sharon and I wrapped up, I stood in front of my office window, looking out at the aspens. *Hope.* I reveled in the peaceful, loving feeling again. It was a welcome change from the dark parts I'd been sharing with her. And although my throat was raw from talking for so long, sharing this part of my life felt cathartic, too. I felt spent after such frank, raw memories, but it was freeing to know it was out there. Especially knowing what came next.

It didn't get any easier, but this feeling made moving forward worth it.

CHAPTER 13

A Loved One Says 'No More'

"It's a hard and complicated process, and can be as difficult for the loved one as it is for the addicted person."

—JOE

– SHARON –

"HOW'S LORIN? HOW ARE YOU?" Those were the first questions Joe greeted me with when I called him about three weeks after our last session. After what had happened in Lorin's life, and by extension, my family's, since Joe and I last spoke left me craving the visual curtain that the telephone offered. And the idea of seeing anyone in person, including Joe, was just unthinkable.

I hesitated for a long moment and then said, "I don't know how to answer that yet, Joe. But thank you for asking. I appreciate

it more than you know." I drew in a breath and said, all in a rush, "Can we talk? I need to talk about what's going on in my life right now before I can get back to your story. Okay?"

"Sure, Sharon," Joe replied easily. I started in, wanting to tell him everything—I was pretty sure there'd be some crying on my part.

Things had gradually gotten a little better, I told Joe, after the night I spent with Lorin in his room. More communication. A few trips to Laura. Some antidepressants that seemed to work. More smiles.

"He started therapy again with Brian. He helped with meals and chores the way he used to. I could see that he was different and that he was trying, and I started to trust him again, a bit. Then one night, we got a phone call, around midnight."

It jolted me right out of a dead sleep. A police officer called asking that we come as soon as possible to the emergency room, as Lorin had requested. *Lorin?* I asked the officer what had happened.

"'The case is still under investigation,' was all he would say. He had called only because Lorin had asked him to. *Fine, Officer Tight-Lipped, I'll do it your way*, I thought as I hung up. I was so mad, Joe. You don't startle a person awake and then say, 'You'll have to come over for the rest of the scoop.'"

"That's standard procedure, Sharon," Joe said. "He couldn't give details over the phone, but was giving you as much information as he could by letting you know he was responding to Lorin's request."

"My heart just sank, Joe. How could Lorin be in the hospital? Micah and I had just said goodnight to him two hours before." I thought of Lorin overdosing but dismissed it. Drugs wouldn't make sense now—would they?—since he was turning his life around—wasn't he? "I thought of twenty different scenarios on the way to the hospital, but the real one didn't occur to me even once.

"At the hospital, a police officer and the hospital pastor escorted Micah and me through a hallway into the emergency wing. Seeing the pastor brought no comfort, only fear."

Two more officers were posted outside the room where Lorin was lying on a metal table, his body beaten, and hooked up to tubes. My son was moaning in agony.

"My heart was beating out of my chest," I said to Joe. "He looked like he was in excruciating pain. Who could blame him for moaning like that?" Then I thought for a moment and added, "Except, well, I did blame him. I blamed him all over again."

There was silence on the other end of the phone, but I could tell Joe was listening intently. I was surprised I wasn't crying.

"I walked over to Lorin and held his hand, saying words that were meant to comfort him, I guess, but they just sounded flat in my ears. He held on tight to my hand and nodded, saying how sorry he was, over and over again." I shook my head, reliving that moment. I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my voice as I added, "I kept hoping the painkiller that the nurses were trying to pour into him would seep into me, Joe, but it didn't."

The hospital pastor led Micah and me off to the side and gently explained that our son had been beaten and stabbed.

"We took that bit of information in the same way as everything else, at this point," I said, "with this weird kind of calm. Everything we saw and heard in that room seemed unreal. If this could be happening, then *anything* could happen; I felt like I was having one whopper of a bad dream. So when the officer who had made the midnight call asked us who we were, he might just as well have asked us to check Lorin's body for fingerprints."

Once the policeman knew we were family, he let us stay as he started to interrogate Lorin. "Right there on that cold metal table," I said to Joe. "Right in the middle of all that pain." I did start to cry then.

"The loved ones of addicted people are made of tough stuff,

Sharon," Joe said. "They have to be. Resilience comes from going through some horrible experiences."

I needed those words to keep going.

Lorin spilled it all. He had gone back to "those friends," the ones who provided him with his drug of choice in return for certain jobs. He'd been in touch with them for over a week, sneaking out when Micah and I were asleep.

"Sneaking! As if he were a little kid," I said angrily. "Those friends would pick him up, right outside my front door, and take him to a particularly shady house in a sketchy part of town to 'hang out.' I feel like such an idiot."

"Sharon," Joe said patiently, "you're not an idiot."

When chemicals are on the line, many people with addictions become the best, most inventive con artists around.

Their drug or drink is life or death to them, so they have to get to it, no matter what. Anyone could have been caught up in the lie."

How can my heart break into a million pieces and still feel detached? I thought.

The violence done to Lorin came when he got caught outside the house at the wrong time. He had pissed off the wrong woman, refusing to do a job for her earlier that day. Apparently, you didn't say no. She sent over some enforcers to give Lorin a message.

Lorin said his so-called 'friends' inside the house had gotten wind that something was going down, and when Lorin walked down the street to get a pack of smokes, they locked the house down. Unfortunately, Lorin had forgotten his wallet and went back. Nobody opened the door, despite his banging on it, and he was caught. He knew they heard him banging on the door and windows, he said. They knew, they peeked out, but they didn't open up.

The two big men who walked up onto the front porch never even asked Lorin a question. They just started hitting him. It was only after his ribs and nose were broken that he tried to break through their assault. That's when a knife came out and stabbed my son as he ran, puncturing his lung and aorta near his left shoulder blade.

GRIEVING FOR A SON…AND TURNING AWAY

"The doctor said he shouldn't have been able to run with the punctured lung." I choked the words into the phone. "But the endorphins gave him some staying power." My eyes teared up again, thinking of how close Lorin had come to my worst fear: death.

"Do we need to take a break for a minute?" Joe asked in that kind voice. I thought about it for an instant but then told him no. I badly wanted to tell him the whole story. I pushed on.

"Lorin managed to get away," I said, "even though the guys came after him in their car. He hopped over a fence and waited under a bush for them to give up. He said to the officer, 'I thought I might just close my eyes and go to sleep, but I didn't. I didn't want my mom and dad to know that's how I died, so I stayed awake.'" I stuttered out the last part, feeling sick that Lorin had had this moment under a bush, all by himself.

I took a deep breath, brushed a tear away, and kept going, saying the next words quietly. "I turned away from my son then, Joe. When he said those words, something tore inside me. I think Lorin was thanking me somehow for meaning enough to him to get him through, but I felt kicked in the gut. I was still going through the grieving process of the son I had known being gone."

"Grieving is a productive part of learning to let go," Joe said.

"What you're going through is common for the loved ones of addicted individuals. Lorin will eventually feel grief, too. If and

when he reaches out for help and commits to doing the work that it takes to move into recovery, he will most likely feel a sense of loss. I know I did, when I finally realized what I'd traded away: my potential for higher achievement, if I'd just left the chemicals alone. That was a devastating loss for me."

We both were quiet for a moment. I thought maybe Joe had more to say, like, "But never give up!" I knew I couldn't bear to hear about hope at this moment, so I didn't give him the chance to say the words. I continued relaying the nightmarish saga of that night in the ER, staying in that moment of pain.

With the officer's continued promptings, Lorin had relayed the rest of his story. After the enforcers drove away, Lorin staggered to the neighborhood liquor store and flagged down the first person he saw. He showed him the blood on his hands, told him where his wallet and identification were, begged him to get some help, and then collapsed.

"That customer called the police," I said, "and the officer first on the scene was the one who called us, it turns out. That customer was Lorin's saving grace. And so was the officer, for getting my son to the hospital."

"Sharon, I'm so glad he made it to the liquor store," Joe said. "That's an almost impossible task to do, with puncture wounds. And the professionals that deal with addiction, like that officer, are usually kind and compassionate."

While the pastor murmured about the miracle of Lorin's wounds not being fatal, especially the punctured lung, the medical staff worked various bits of magic to stop Lorin's profuse bleeding. Finally he was declared stable enough to be moved into ICU. The officer left to track down Lorin's attackers, but Micah and I stayed with Lorin as he got transferred. Once Lorin was in ICU, Micah left to check on Addie.

"But I stayed, for seven more days, Joe, while Lorin slept in a stupor of morphine and through umpteen bandage changes.

Micah was living in his own hell, separate from mine, as he had to leave on a business trip the day after the emergency room event. Before he left, he arranged for some good friends to watch over Addie. I knew she needed me just as badly as my son did. Even though she acted brave, we knew she was safer at someone else's house rather than our own.

"We still hadn't heard whether the Bad Guys were still out there, gunning for Lorin, or if they would come after us, his family, to get to him. It was a conversation we had with the officers that night in the emergency room. My daughter and I were terrified, but I was too busy to be terrified at a surface level. Addie, however, was having nightmares and was a wreck."

"And still, you stayed at the hospital," Joe said. "A terrible predicament for any mom." I nodded miserably, even though Joe couldn't see me. "These are traumatic circumstances, Sharon," he added, "and the only way to get through is however you can." I was grateful for his encouragement.

I watched Lorin detox for the second time, only this time under watchful eyes in the hospital. It gave me time for my heartache to turn to shock, and then to cold anger.

"I was resentful as hell, Joe.

The kind of resentment that settled right into my bones. I knew he was my son and that I was supposed to love him no matter what, but I had hit my line, Lorin had crossed it, and I didn't even know such a line was possible.

I could hear my voice rising as I spat out the words.

"Sharon, loved ones hit bottom, just like addicted people do," Joe said. "Sometimes, they can hit bottom earlier than those who are addicted. It's a hard and complicated process, and can be as difficult for the loved one as it is for the addicted person."

I nodded to myself. "Something else adjusted inside of me," I

said. "Lorin's betrayal and deceit became worse than the tragedy itself. Any thoughts of forgiveness that I had started to have, any compassion and understanding for Lorin's struggle with his addiction—they all felt frozen. Not gone. Not dissolved, just on hold." I'd been looking out the window as I shared this with Joe, but now I closed my eyes. "It honestly seemed like I'd spoken with you years ago. That's how far away any understanding, any compassion, any solutions—all those things you've talked about—seemed to me.

"Something changed, deeply, inside me," I continued. "I just knew I couldn't go back to the person I was before. To accepting what was acceptable before this night. My heart had closed up shop for the moment. At least for Lorin's chaos."

"Some people are changed when they hit bottom, Sharon," Joe said. "That can be a good or a bad thing, depending on what they choose to do with their feelings." Was Joe cautioning me not to cut Lorin off?

"You seem to have decided to get off the addiction train, but exiting is never painless." Joe was warning me, I was sure. "Once you do, the best course is to assess, treat your wounds, and find healthy ways to heal. And that can be challenging."

"I don't know if this resentment will stay with me, Joe," I said, "but the second I felt myself emotionally exit Lorin's story, logic took over. It's not that I don't care about him anymore. I still hurt deeply for him, but logic was in command now. It started taking over in the hospital. Just a little at a time, but it was real and steady to me."

"That's a key component in hitting bottom," Joe said, "That where you are stays steady. No more yo-yoing based on an event."

All the time this ... man-child…that I both loved and loathed was in the hospital, I felt miserable and resigned. But

finally, a day came when I felt enough like myself to relax."

Joe asked me what changed.

"Lorin decided he would leave town and stay with some distant family in the country, as soon as the doctors cleared him for travel," I said. "I was standing by his hospital bed when he announced it to me. I immediately turned and walked straight out of his room. The first thing I thought of as I made a cup of tea in the lounge area was you, and how you had finally surrendered and admitted that you needed help."

"It takes a lot to get to a humble place to ask for help, Sharon," Joe said. (Was he reading my mind?) "And not everyone can get there. Getting the ego out of the way is a huge step in getting help. Sharon," he added, in a firm but kind voice, "I'm here to talk to you. I'm here for your family, too, whatever that looks like."

Joe had offered to listen before. He had been willing to take our professional relationship and bump it into a different level. All I had to do was choose to trust. I made my choice at that moment—I added Joe to Team Lorin.

THE SECRET SHAME FOR A PARENT

The next time Joe and I spoke, we were back in his office. I realized it was the first time I'd been away from Lorin in weeks. It was both a worry and a relief, as if I were the mom of an infant, leaving my child with a babysitter for the first time.

"So how is your family, and what has happened?" Joe asked, as soon as he closed his door.

"Well," I started, "as you know, up until our last phone call, I'd been glossing over just how serious our family crisis has been. And when I could have leaned on your experience and expertise, I froze, if you want to know the truth.

"That's when I realized how fully I had looked at this tragedy with Lorin as a secret. A secret shame that had befallen my house, my parenting skills. My life. That's why I felt I needed

to fix it on my own. But all the red flags and gut feelings I've ignored came to a head after I spoke with you the other week on the phone."

Joe came over and hugged me. I'd started crying at some point through my words, and he handed me a tissue box. While I put myself back together, he took the chance to speak.

> "Sharon, this stuff is just too important to stay isolated. It's a big part of what keeps the addiction community fractured, and it's how so many good people fall through the cracks."

I pulled out a fresh tissue. "Joe, I've been fighting for a way to get through the toughest thing I've ever gone through. And I could really use some damn good advice."

Oh god, I thought. *I just discovered the piece of the puzzle I'd been looking for all along. Connection*. It had been so long since I hadn't been in charge and had just connected with people. But it was time to own the storm. To let it go and get real about getting help.

Joe's laugh said everything I needed. "It's about time."

A FAMILY STARTS COMING TO TERMS

"Alright, Sharon, so where's Lorin now?" It was Joe's turn to be taking notes. His handwriting was precise and tight, in direct contrast to my loose definition of penmanship.

"Well, he was at my house for a few nights," I said, "but he's decided to stay out of state. The police think it's best until the case dies down, too, and Micah and I think that getting a change of scenery will do him good. He can't fly yet because his lung is still healing from the puncture wound, but he left on a train a couple days ago." The irony of Lorin's traveling on a train was not lost on me, and probably not on Joe, either. "I think he's nervous to go out on his own but relieved to get out of town."

"And how has Micah been doing through all of this?" Joe asked.

"I know you haven't been doing this all on your own, because Micah's been there in the house right alongside you, but the last time I knew, he had removed himself, emotionally, about Lorin."

"Micah's had his own realizations, Joe. And this experience was hard on him. He felt betrayed all over again. More than that, the way we've been handling Lorin's addiction has been hard on our marriage. We were partners for the kids, but the journey has affected our communication. It's affected that spark of spontaneity. Hell, Joe, it's affected the very foundation of our love, our trust ... our connection." Joe nodded understandingly.

"Marriages and other solid relationships can be either ripped apart or brought closer together because of an addicted family member, but they're rarely left the way they were."

"I can attest to that," Joe said. "There is a reason why my wife, Donna, and I sought out meaningful relationships from positive mentors and the support groups we tapped into. So we could heal and model healthy behavior. This helped to repair what had become a shaky foundation."

"Maybe down the road, there will be room for our relationship with Lorin to heal, too," I said. "Maybe Lorin leaving will be the start of a solution to help heal our family, to where we can start trusting again."

"Maybe so," Joe agreed. "What about Lorin going into a treatment center, as a transition? Someplace near where he's gone? I can look into some places for you if you'd like. What's important to look for, Sharon, is a program that is somewhat holistic in approach, although I know they can be hard to find. Someplace where they'll do lab work to look at his neurotransmitter levels and histamine levels—a lot of the testing protocols that we do at InnerBalance. That would be the most helpful for Lorin, along with traditional treatment methods."

I was so grateful Joe would look into other treatment centers for Lorin. It gnawed at my heart to have to say the next words. "Thanks, Joe. Lorin already got accepted into a drug rehab program, by the skin of his teeth, I might add," I said, "and he turned it down. I worked for hours while he was in the hospital to find a place that could take him so quickly, but because he was technically an adult, it had to be his choice to go in. And he wasn't having any of it," I sighed.

When he'd found out I'd been working on a place for him, Lorin had raged his defiance at me. "I'll go back to my friends before I'll go into a rehab program! I am not an addict! I'm not like that!" And then the swearing started, the f-bombs as he told me to leave him alone, to get away. To just *leave*.

"So he's not going to get into rehab," Joe said quietly.

"No," I said wearily. "He's convinced he's not an addict, that he's in control now. And Joe, I'm just so blinkin' tired. I need some distance. My daughter needs some distance, and so does Micah. But Lorin did agree to go see a therapist while he was there, so that's something. 'It takes a village to raise a child,' I'm thinking."

"Sharon, you did the best you could in trying to get him to go," Joe said. "In the end, this is his journey. It's his choice because he's over twenty-one, and ultimately, he needs to be the one reaching for help.

Pushing or guilting our loved ones into sobriety rarely, if ever, sticks. I can personally attest to that. This is Lorin's choice. Your choice is how to stay in his life."

IT IS NOT YOUR JOB TO FIX HIM

"I changed the locks, Joe," I said abruptly. "It felt selfish at first, but I felt that's what needed to happen. Lorin knew it and I knew it, too. I feel finally as if I have some breathing room."

"And will *you* be seeing a therapist, now that you have the breathing room to think about it?" Joe asked.

"Absolutely," I said. "A therapist will help. For both myself and my daughter. I hope Micah sees one, too."

"You're doing the right things, Sharon," Joe said. "It's time to let go a bit. Let Lorin's nightmare go for a bit. Of course you still love him.

And I hope this is him hitting bottom, but it is not currently your fight, Sharon. It is no longer your job to protect him."

Joe paused for a moment, to let that sink in. I could feel myself exhaling…

"It is no longer time to be in control of a life that doesn't want you to care for it," Joe continued. "It is your job to love him. Not to fix him. Or own him. To encourage him from afar. Lorin gets the opportunity to show up for himself, and you have the opportunity to practice strengthening your boundaries."

Boundaries. Until this moment, I'd felt like the word was some foreign term, intended for people other than me.

"Joe, I couldn't keep nursing him through his post-hospital doctor appointments and police visits and heal myself of so much resentment and exhaustion. I had hit a wall. But then I passed through it a few days ago, while waiting for all of his departure plans to fall into place. Once I shut the door behind him, I left what was on the other side behind me. The hurt, the anger, being held hostage emotionally—they all got to stay on that other side. All that was left was breathing. And that's what today is for."

"It's a big step, coming upon that wall," Joe said, "and recognizing when something is overdue for change."

Joe was right. I had learned to recognize my limit, even if the way I recognized it was by going over it.

Just minutes after saying goodbye to Lorin I found my broom, wanting to clean out the dark space that my home had become. *Sweep. Sweep. Sweep.* I looked forward to feeling joy in mucking out, and mopping, and taking out the trash. That day, I smiled with gratitude—for letting myself move forward.

"This must have been a little bit of how your mom felt, sending you off to Colorado," I said reflectively. "It must have torn her heart out to buy that ticket, but if she had any of my heartache and resignation, she just needed some breathing room and the new belief that her son could do it on his own. For a while, at least."

"I imagine my mom did need breathing room," Joe said thoughtfully. "I didn't recover in the way she thought I could, or should. She didn't have my answers. And she loved me enough to let me hurt in a way that helped me." He shifted in his chair. "Our relationship gradually got better. Probably because she didn't have to watch from so close while I made my mistakes and learned from them. It was a blessing for both of us."

We talked for a few more minutes before wrapping up for the day. My head felt as clear as the crisp Colorado air. I was finally ready to get back to Joe's story. I could breathe.

– JOE –

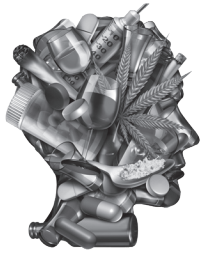
Knowing that Lorin was somewhere else gave Sharon an important cushion: she no longer needed to know everything. That could be a relief for Lorin, as well. Having a loved one let go of the "perfection" part of an addicted person's journey is a big part of healing. As long as Sharon was looking to create situations that produced her idea of perfect results, she was in for disappointment. Lorin's choices, and therefore his path, were his own. Her inconvenience would take a back seat to his desires,

every time. It was up to Lorin to get help, gain perspective, and work toward a higher purpose than his immediate needs.

Lorin was still in denial that he was an addicted individual. There was no way at this point that Sharon could convince him to be tested for biochemical imbalances so that he could start on a better path.

This next part of Lorin's life would be telling, both for himself and his mother. I hoped their relationship could recover from the damage done. If it was anything like my mom's relationship with me, we just moved forward. You can never go back. And that's not a bad thing.

PART THREE



Recovery

CHAPTER 14

The Missing Link: Biochemical Restoration

"Holistic healing provides the method
of the most productive healing."

—JOE

– SHARON –

JOE AND I AGREED TO MEET at my house next. With Lorin gone, I could fully engage with Joe in my home.

"We've spoken about what brought you to the brink of surrender," I said, as we settled into reclining chairs in the living room. "But what happened afterward? What was it that caused such a shift?"

"When I was six months sober," Joe said, "I was white-knuckling it, just getting through the minute, then the

hour, then the day without drinking. I still felt terrible.

The mind of an addicted person is his worst enemy in early recovery.

All we are thinking about is the bad parts of our lives, and how good it would be if we just had one drink, or one hit. Our minds are relentless."

Even after his talk with Ida Mae, when he had gotten himself a sponsor and was working a program with Bill, Joe said his symptoms were still quite extreme. He had found some peace, but he still had all of those physical problems.

That's when he realized something.

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF ISOLATION

"My depression, anxiety, and racing thoughts were there before I ever picked up a drink or a drug," Joe said. "I felt like I was different than anyone else, so drugs and alcohol fixed that problem in the beginning. Most of the feelings of relief the booze and pills had given me had left me some time ago. The lack of confidence, though, was always there, and it resurfaced once I got sober. This realization made all the difference to me in finding a better answer to my problems than alcohol and drugs."

"And you could only find a better answer when you were sober and your symptoms were noticeable again," I said. Joe nodded vigorously.

"I was on a mission to feel normal," Joe continued, "confident and calm around others and with myself. Not suffering from depression, anxiety, and sleeping problems. After the night with Ida Mae and Bill, I had a renewed sense of hope. A real sense of purpose. So my mission was attainable. Because, you see," Joe said earnestly, "this time around, I wasn't alone. I broke the cycle of isolation by reaching out for help.

I wasn't being *told* anymore to get help. Now I was *asking* for it.

With that fundamental shift in thinking, commitment to fixing my life became a realistic possibility."

FINDING BOTH MISSING PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

Joe knew he could never go back to alcohol or drugs; withdrawal would be hell all over again.

"I just knew I couldn't do that to myself again. So that was my commitment. *Never again.* That meant I could learn to be sober for real, and if I discovered how to become normal, I'd be without the pain and misery from childhood problems.

That was the missing piece of my sobriety puzzle: with help from my sponsor and others, I really could stay sober long-term, so I could learn how to heal.

This was a new and exciting revelation, Sharon, and it came with a sustained feeling of hope, which is what I'd been chasing for so long. A natural, chemically free feeling of peace."

Joe sank deeper into the recliner, as if on a long exhale.

"My mind started to clear, but I still had to heal from both the effects of my addiction and my childhood issues. That was another realization I had, although it wasn't really obvious until later—that what I was dealing with were *two* distinct sets of issues to overcome, not one."

"Do you mean your anxiety, depression, and trouble sleeping, were just one set of problems?" I asked.

"Yes," Joe said, "and the other set of problems were the habits and health issues that were the result of my addiction," Joe said. "My nutrition habits, for one, but also being stunted emotionally, spiritually, and socially. Again, none of that was clear to me as I was tumbling off the addiction train. I just knew I wanted to get

free." A picture popped into my head of someone jumping from a train car, hurtling down an embankment. Painful but freeing at the same time.

"All it meant to me at the time was that my problems were complicated, but that I finally felt like I could ask for help," Joe continued. "Or look for help from books and other sources. I'd looked through that PDR—the Physicians' Desk Reference—so much for information on different pills, remember?" I nodded. "Why not take the same energy and passion to look at information differently, for ways it could help?"

Joe shifted in his chair, sitting up straighter. "Most important, I began to realize on a deeper level that I wasn't broken or just a screw-up. All that self-talk had combined with my failure to overcome my addiction for years, and had imprinted a pretty low view of my self-worth. But as my mind cleared, I started to feel different. Just a little at a time, mind you, but it did start to become apparent that my health issues were real. And if that was so, then logically, I couldn't be the one messing up my health.

That stuff was truly out of my control, and that meant I could give myself permission to ask for help.

"Once I reached that conclusion, the harder question came to mind: If it wasn't just me choosing to screw up my life, then what was it that was causing my anxiety, depression, and sleepless nights? Especially if they didn't all come from my alcohol and drug addiction?

"These questions were like missing pieces to the puzzle of me having a normal, healthy life," Joe said, looking intently at me. "Finding those answers became my mission."

RECONNECTING, STEP BY STEP

"I was getting a lot of help from people in the twelve-step

programs," Joe continued. "I also leaned on people from prior treatment centers, like Harmony Treatment Center. I utilized a therapy group that Dr. Ash facilitated. Anyone who could help, I got help from. But the most help I found was working with Bill as my sponsor."

"That's quite a support system!" I said. "And they all had time for you? You finally got lucky with those who came into your life."

"Oh, this wasn't luck, Sharon," Joe said, wagging a finger at me. "They were there for anyone who reached out. It's part of the community. So many people were such a help to me. I can't even list them all. They would do things with me during the day to keep my mind off the drinking. And then they'd go out for coffee again with me in the evening. They may have been little things to them, but those frequent connections during that time made all the difference. A little effort from a lot of people committed to making a difference."

"Wow," I said. "These people just happened to all be in Colorado and all show up for you in exactly the way you needed, at the same time. That's…well, that's incredible. Sounds like a miracle!"

"Sharon, it's not luck and it wasn't an accident how they showed up, either," Joe said firmly. "They had been through twelve-step and recovery programs themselves. They had *exactly* the experience I was looking for because they had ridden the addiction train before me, and come out on the other side successfully.

"And because of their experience, and because I was ready, I wanted what they had. I saw the motivation, dedication, and compassion it took to live life differently. To make a difference. That's what I wanted. And I trusted them to show me how. They had the ability to share those steps with me because someone had shown them how, too."

I thought about that for a moment. Joe's mentors were

working their programs and adding their life experiences, which built Joe's trust and confidence in them. *Brilliant,* I thought.

"And was it the relationship as a sponsor that endeared Bill to you?" I asked. I didn't know much about what went on between the sponsor and the sponsored.

"With Bill, it was more than just having the title or the commitment that comes with a sponsor relationship. It went a lot deeper with him than even friendship. Bill was instrumental in starting the process of me beginning to love…anything…again."

Anything, Joe? Really? But I decided not to interrupt him.

"Bill was effective in modeling the importance of love because he radiated it," Joe continued. "He could teach me because he already was a gentle, kind man. He worked with me to understand the importance of building strong, loving relationships with myself, my family, my friends, nature—and he showed me how to be in service to others."

"How did he do that?" I asked.

"First by simply noticing life outside the realm of alcohol and drugs," Joe replied, "and then by learning to assign a higher value to people. As high a value as I had once placed on drugs and alcohol. Then, because I knew what I needed to get better, I could recognize warning signs in others and direct them to getting the right help for their circumstance. I was practicing the compassion I had relearned—or learned, as the case may be."

Love, Joe told me, gradually became important again in his life.

"In fact, that was the cornerstone of my sobriety," Joe said.

> **"It was the most significant part of healing: how to become a loving individual and find love in others.**

Bill helped me regain a part of myself that had been lost for a long, long time. He restarted the process of connections in my life."

"He sounds amazing, Joe," I said. *What he really sounds like is a saint*, I thought. *Otherwise, how could a person put so much commitment and love into one person for so long?* Then I thought of how long I poured love into Lorin. And how long others, including Joe, had poured their love into me, investing time, energy, and connection over the years. It wasn't saintly if there was love. It was a natural result of a solid bond and connection.

"The twelve-step program was such an important lifeline for me because I was still feeling spiritually and emotionally empty, even as I started to heal," Joe said. "I'd go back to that dumpy little apartment I had, watching that stupid little television set and feel sorry for myself. Then I'd run to a meeting or call someone to get out of the feelings of self-pity and low self-esteem. For a time, I was going to three meetings a day, which meant that for at least three hours a day, I was getting my mind off of how bad I felt. Over time, I realized for myself how utterly important human connection was for me, and deeply felt how it changed my life."

I nodded, grateful for Joe's words. I'd never experienced firsthand insight into the perspective of someone in early recovery. Being an outsider in the addiction world, I was just now realizing how much I had glossed over. It was clear now how much a person had to overcome just to function, let alone thrive, in mainstream society, once chemicals weren't there. Joe's words opened up a whole new way of seeing myself, and my son.

GETTING OUTSIDE ONESELF

"What did it take to get through the early part? Going from one minute to the next, or the next hour, or day?" I asked.

"Whatever it took to keep my word to myself and my sponsor," Joe said, spreading his hands wide, as if to gather everything it took. "Mostly, keeping my word to Bill and doing whatever he asked me to do," Joe replied, "but also trying to

keep peace in my life. I got as inventive as I needed to in order to keep sober.

I used the same passion it had taken to get me high to now stay sober.

Listening to spiritual tapes, reaching out to people I trusted, going to meetings—I read the twelve-step book over and over again simply because Bill asked me to. Keeping my word to myself was new to me at that time, but it was so worth the work it took." Joe said it simply, but I sensed some of that passion in his voice.

"The thing I worried most about in my recovery was that, because I used drugs and alcohol to excess, I'd never be able to live up to my potential. I came to a realization about that, too," Joe said, with a slight smile.

"As long as I'm not putting drugs and alcohol in my system, I *am* living up to my potential. Every day, I reach goals sober that I never could have when I used.

"And that's taken me pretty darn far. What I've learned with a lot of help is that the quality of my life is up to me."

That's what Lorin needs to realize, I thought. *And me, too. There* is *something on the other side of addiction*.

"Joe, I really hadn't thought about the twelve-step programs as viable until now," I said. "From your earlier experiences, I kind of got that they were ineffective, but now I see that it was you that wasn't ready to reach out, am I right?"

"Absolutely," Joe said. "Sharon, it's important to know about why using those twelve-step programs is crucial. For those who are skeptical, like I was for so long, just think about it: if we get nothing else out of an hour of a meeting, we might just get outside of ourselves and the pain we are experiencing, if only for that hour.

"This was the defining group of people that started my early recovery. And it went on this way for at least several months, maybe a year. But they couldn't be there for me, helping me, until I was sober and reaching out for help on my own."

I let that sink in as Joe shifted in his chair.

"But keep in mind that twelve-step programs aren't the only way to get sober," Joe added. "In thirty-four years of treating addictions, I've never met anyone who has been able to do this on their own. They may be out there, but I've never met them.

Most of us with this illness need a lot of help in addition to a twelve-step program.

There are plenty of other support groups in this country—churches, synagogues, Women for Sobriety, Rational Recovery, and many more."

FROM GETTING HIGH TO GIVING BACK

Joe returned to his story. Although he was still anxious, depressed, and had racing thoughts, he knew he was starting to heal emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. "I was working on developing strong connections with my family and friends," he said. "That was a turning point."

"That's really great," I said, thinking about how long his family may have been waiting for that reconnection. "What happened then?" I asked.

"When I had been sober for eight or nine months, I volunteered at Matthew Street in Fort Collins, a home for troubled youth," Joe said. "My job was to keep kids from sneaking in or out at night. Turns out, they were getting drunk and loaded, and then they couldn't function at school the next day. It was my first position outside of car sales after getting sober. Art, the director, knew people from the twelve-step meetings I went to. He heard

about me and saw how hard I worked to keep a sober life, and felt I could work well with kids. He valued my insight because I seemed to know what it took to get sober and stay that way. So he took a chance on me, but from a place of respect, and that felt new, too. Imagine, someone respecting *me*?!"

I smiled, thinking about how right Art had been to hire this man.

"I gained valuable experience in what I'd come to know about myself," Joe said. "I knew I wanted to help others like me. I wanted to be in service, to give back to my mentors, and to learn whatever it took to help others like me. This was my jumping-off point."

But after working there for a month, the kids were still sneaking in and out. "So Art and the staff and I worked together to open up a place dedicated to helping youth with addiction problems," Joe said. "We named it the Larico Youth Home."

"Wait—Art trusted you to work on this? You'd only been there a month, right?" I asked skeptically.

"I think he saw how much I cared for the kids' well-being and wanted to help. But there were just so many ways they could slip out of this home. Art was dedicated, too, and wanted to help them. So the staff, the teachers, and I all brainstormed with him, and the result was the Larico Youth Home."

"What was different about Larico?" I asked.

"Larico Youth Home was a much better fit for those teens with alcohol and drug problems because it was centered on teens and their needs," Joe explained. "It took into consideration the social and emotional capacity of this age range, and tailored their programs based on their unique needs."

"Wait, what's different about teen needs?" I asked.

"Teens' capacity to follow directions without being driven by their emotions is very different from someone who has started their addiction as an adult," Joe replied. "An adult, generally

speaking, has already had some experience with growing their emotional capacity for change. They are better equipped to tolerate not getting what they want immediately, and dealing with loss and pain.

"Teenagers and youngsters have, in general, not gained that perspective. Their brains are not fully developed, and their bodies are still growing, which hinders that kind of tolerance. Make sense?"

I nodded. "And that's why you wanted to work with the youth at Larico?" I could see how he would be able to relate to the teens, or at least offer sympathy, compassion, and tolerance for their plight.

"Exactly," Joe said.

Joe then mentioned once again some of the minefields that can explode into addiction or alcoholism, especially for young people. Shyness, emotional or physical trauma, not feeling loved by parents, being bullied—all of these can lead to someone experimenting and using, and eventually becoming addicted.

"The person is, in essence, self-medicating," Joe explained.

What was it for Lorin? I wondered, for perhaps the thousandth time.

"Then compound these with biochemical imbalances," Joe said, "which can also cause someone to self-medicate."

Joe reviewed again some of the most common imbalances.

"A young person can experience adrenal exhaustion from too much caffeine, neurotransmitter imbalances due to poor nutrition, or amino acids being out of balance."

Racing thoughts, difficulty slowing the mind down, problems getting to sleep—a lot of kids, Joe reminded me, are being diagnosed with ADHD and ADD when they just have too much histamine in the brain, which can be fixed naturally. Even though we'd talked about these things early on in our collaboration, they were making so much more sense now, with Joe fitting

each piece of the biochemical puzzle into place with the others.

"I loved my time at Larico," Joe said. "But it instilled an even deeper desire. I wanted to work *with* the professionals in this community, not just work *for* them. I wanted to contribute officially. That meant getting certifications."

Joe's cousin Marilyn referred him to the Hope Center for a volunteer position, and after a year there, he got state certified as a Level 1 Alcohol and Drug Counselor. Dr. Ash, whom Joe had been working with, then asked if he wanted to get involved in developing an outpatient drug and alcohol treatment center called Seven Lakes.

By now, doctors and therapists knew Joe by reputation. He had a good start at being solidly sober, had demonstrated he was stable and could hold down a job, and showed a deep desire to help people.

Joe worked at Seven Lakes for fifteen years. "It made all the difference in knowing how to connect with people," Joe said. "The staff were very caring with each other. We knew each other's families, and bonded over powerful training experiences."

BUT WHY IS IT REALLY SO HARD TO REALLY QUIT?

It was shortly after starting at Seven Lakes that Joe picked up the book *Hypothyroidism: The Unsuspected Illness,* by Dr. Broda Barnes.

"I was in the health section of a bookstore and came across it," Joe recounted. "The words 'Unsuspected Illness' jumped out at me because I was looking for something out of the ordinary for my answer to feeling healthy. What else could be the solution, except something I hadn't thought of before?" He went right to the section on symptoms. "They fit me perfectly. Cold hands and feet, fatigue, even the anxiety and depression."

Here in this book lay the answer to one of Joe's questions about what was wrong with him. "This book was the first step on my path into biochemical restoration—the idea of healing

the body within."

I could sense the relief in Joe's voice even now, after all these years. Finally, an answer!

"The book changed the course of my life," Joe continued. "Up until this point, I had been going along with what people told me to do. They were good people, and I feel they were people who were put in my life to guide me. But with this book, I became resourceful and innovative enough to start the questioning, learning phase about holistic healing and biochemical restoration. The people I started questioning just so happened to be the right people at the right time. Now I was strong enough and ready to research with a single purpose."

"What purpose was that?" I asked.

"To find a science-based, holistic, dignified answer to the underlying question of why it's so hard to get away from alcohol and drugs," Joe said simply.

"And all these events lined up one after another, it seems," I said.

"No," Joe corrected me, "it wasn't just one thing going on at a time. Many different things were happening concurrently.

"There were a lot of experiences in my search for better health that were dead ends," Joe explained. "And the hypothyroidism book didn't address all of my problems. It wasn't a cure-all. But so many things led me to the next step. For example, I had migraine headaches my whole life," Joe said. "And always on one side of my head." He pointed directly to the spot above his ear on the right side of his head. "Getting to the bottom of them entailed a series of dead ends and misdiagnoses from doctors and dentists, but eventually I found professionals who shared my beliefs about whole-body healing, and that all different aspects of health are connected.

"It was all a steady journey of learning first one aspect, then another, then another, about how the body and mind are connected with our emotions, our upbringing, and environment. I needed to know how they can all come to be so out of balance, to cause the kinds of conditions I was struggling with.

If our systems are connected, then shouldn't our wellness solutions be connected, too? And ultimately, as professionals, shouldn't we be treating the causes of a problem, not the symptoms? That's what biochemical restoration does: it treats the underlying causes of whatever keeps many addicted individuals from advanced recovery."

"Underlying causes like…what?" I asked.

"Depression, anxiety, and genetics, to name a few," Joe answered.

I nodded thoughtfully. "Like you said, whatever impacts their success."

"You know, Sharon," Joe added, "the founder of the first twelve-step program was looking for a biochemical approach to his depression, originally. And he suggested strongly that an addicted individual seek outside help as part of a long-term solution to addiction. His philosophy made perfect sense to me."

Joe was sitting forward in his chair by now, too energized to be lulled into reclining. It was pretty much the same for me, as I listened to him tell me how he had come to his all-important epiphany on biochemical restoration.

"It wasn't until I picked up the book by Dr. Barnes that I started to move from sobriety into recovery, because it started me on the path to biochemical restoration," Joe continued. He caught the pained expression on my face and looked steadily at me. He knew I was thinking of my son.

"Something to remember, Sharon," he said gently, "is that it's not about the length of time a person is not using their chemical.

'Dry-drunk' and 'white-knuckling' are terms you'll hear for those who just don't touch their drug or drink. But that is not the same as being clear-headed, let alone being in recovery. The difference is making the decision to get help for the underlying problems."

He added what, by now, I knew was coming. "Nobody can make another person get to this point if they aren't ready."

I nodded, inwardly sighing. "Let's get back to your making the connection with biochemical restoration," I prompted. Once again, I could sense how energized Joe was.

THE CRISSCROSS PATH OF HOLISTIC HEALING

"Dr. Barnes's book was the first time I'd heard of anything along the lines of holistic healing. It was the missing link I had been searching for that took into consideration the medical, biochemical healing aspect, correcting those imbalances I always felt but never understood. I mentally added them to the mix with talk therapy, and the will and desire to get better.

"From that base," Joe continued, "I started searching for doctors who had knowledge in holistic medicine. I decided to tackle the foggy brain and allergy symptoms I struggled with. Stuffy head, watery eyes, itchiness, and constantly needing to sneeze were symptoms that had plagued me for as long as I could remember.

"In the first seven or eight months of being truly sober, I found a doctor who confirmed that I had serious allergies. Not just environmental or seasonal allergies, like grass and pollen, but food allergies, as well. Once there was no alcohol to mask some of the symptoms, they became worse. Unbearable at times. So I went to see Dr. Vedantha, who ran tests on me and started me on some allergy shots to bring me into balance."

"I kept on researching, and while I was in the health section of another bookstore, I ran across a book called *Brain Allergies*, by Dr. William Philpott. It was the first I knew about food allergies

having a link to the brain. I learned that the foods I'm allergic to can cause inflammation in the brain, which in turn causes a foggy feeling in your head. I had always thought of it as having a brain fog, and I was right!"

What a revelation, I thought. *Another huge step in Joe's recovery process that kept him committed to his recovery*. Although it didn't happen overnight.

"The allergy testing happened around the time I worked at Larico," Joe said, "and it was months of work before I saw any tangible results. But when I did, it coincided with other steps in learning about my overall wellness journey. They all fell into place together, and it was part of the many aspects of healing that sent me on the holistic healing journey. They were the start of my biochemical restoration answers."

THE SECOND GIANT LEAP

A year and a half after picking up Dr. Barnes's book, Joe found Dr. Terry Grossman in Denver. He'd just opened up a holistic medical treatment center.

"On my first visit, he did a full exam and took a lot of blood, urine, and saliva samples, and sent them off. What he found were many of the things that were causing continued problems in my life."

"What were they?" I asked.

"Heavy metals—mercury, arsenic, and lead—which had to be detoxed, by the process of chelation, over a two-month period," Joe said.

"Where did *those* come from?" I asked.

Joe shrugged. "Diet. Air quality. Water."

There was more.

"He found I had adrenal exhaustion, with low levels of adrenal hormones, such as DHEA and testosterone. Dr. Grossman started me on natural DHEA and sublingual testosterone. He

also found out I had neurotransmitter imbalances coming from low levels of tryptophan, GABA, and tyrosine. He treated this with a pharmaceutical grade level of amino acids—"

I held up a hand, interrupting him. "Joe, my head is starting to spin again," I said. "Gotta sum it up for me. I'm not a professional, remember?"

Joe chuckled. "Right," he said. "Basically, this was the beginning of my personal biochemical restoration approach. Combining this missing link with a knowledgeable support group and working through a twelve-step program was the powerful combination that was bringing me into advanced recovery."

"You started to feel…better," I said, summing up with my layperson's brain.

Joe chuckled. "Yes! I was feeling better. I was gaining more energy, and feeling less depressed and anxious. My mood swings were not nearly as significant anymore."

"You were getting stronger in every way," I said.

"Absolutely, and it's a good thing I was," Joe said. "Because what I didn't know at this time—which would be my next phase of physically healing—was just how horrible my diet was. Fast food and a six-pack of soft drinks every day, as well as a pack of cigarettes daily. All of this was preventing my systems from working in a healthy state."

Dr. Jacquelyn Fields, in Fort Collins, was the first doctor to point out that Joe's nutritional shortcomings were detrimental to his health and had contributed to his anxiety, depression, and trouble sleeping. In other words, they had contributed to his addiction.

"Hormone therapy was Dr. Fields's specialty," Joe said. "She is also brilliant in linking food intake to health or harm. She clarified just what chaos my food allergies and food choices were causing in my body and mind." But there was something even more disturbing that Joe discovered.

"What I didn't realize until I started working with Dr. Fields is that these food allergies were all linked to my desire to self-medicate with chemicals."

Joe weaned himself off sugar and nicotine. No more soft drinks or cigarettes. To manage his nicotine cravings, he went shopping—for an expensive pair of running shoes.

"Bill, my sponsor, ran marathons, so I decided to do that, too. That first day I went out to run, my goal was just to run around the park near my house. When I came back, I flopped down on my couch, gasping for breath. So I lit up a cigarette," Joe said, with a wry smile. He looked at the cigarette, then looked down at his new shoes, and something clicked in his head. He had to give up one or the other.

"Something inside me said to give up the smokes," Joe said. "I took my shoes everywhere, so that when the cravings hit, I'd run instead of smoke. It took me a year, but I ran a marathon. I'll never do it again, but I accomplished what I needed to."

I smiled right alongside him, and thought about what Joe had shared so far.

> **"The steps that it takes to go first from addiction to sobriety, and then from sobriety to full recovery, are two distinct, separate accomplishments–two giant leaps.**

Each is monumental in risk to the addicted person but critical to moving forward. And each is complicated in its own way. *No wonder so many people relapse and struggle to truly heal,* I thought.

Having that support system, then, for both the recovering individual and their loved ones, seemed even more crucial to long-term recovery. It made biochemical restoration and holistic healing logical, optimal options.

I was excited to think about the biochemical testing that could help get to the bottom of Lorin's underlying problems.

The testing might kick-start him into recovery. I found myself mentally summing up Joe's method again, piecing and clipping parts that might fit, both financially and practically, with my family's situation. *If and when Lorin ever chooses to get help,* I amended. *But maybe I could convince him to just do some of the testing. But which ones first?*

"Joe," I said, "you tackled your biochemical issues, your dietary problems, and your emotional issues. You tracked down solutions for your hypothyroidism, the heavy metals, your malnourished food habits and your cigarette habit. Do you think it mattered which topic you focused on first?"

DOING THE WORK, IN THE CORRECT SEQUENCE

"On the one hand," Joe began, "doing the work is what's important. Just getting help. Any of it is better than none. On the other hand, as far as professionals being able to help in the most effective, productive way, it's *all* about prioritizing, or assessing, a client's needs. If we don't know what to tackle first, we could get it wrong, or slow the healing process, which causes undue frustration. We already know how hard a process this will be for a person, so we don't want to waste anyone's time, effort, money, or patience."

I nodded.

"But what I suspect you are doing," Joe added with a slight smile, "is trying to prioritize which aspects are really, actually needed." I looked at him sheepishly. As usual, he saw to the heart of the matter.

"In my case," Joe said, "I did the work as I could find people to help me, and the doctors and holistic practitioners weren't all in one network, like we have access to at InnerBalance now. I did it the hard way, I'd say. My symptoms were all coming up at the same time, but the origins of those symptoms were what threw me off until I found a practitioner who had those answers. But the key was that I was open to help."

Joe reminded me how, before he was sober, he had tried several times to pick and choose what to work on. First it was his use, then abuse, of the chemicals—the cough syrup, then pills, and then alcohol to slow his racing thoughts and dampen his anxiety. Then, when he became addicted, his next "solution" was finding friends that supported him getting high, and pulling away from family and those who counseled him to go into recovery: to stop using the substances and get help.

"Even as an adult, it didn't occur to me to listen to *all* of what those in the twelve-step support groups advised. I cherry-picked what felt comfortable, and it unraveled any good I was getting by going to the meetings at all," Joe said with a sigh. "I didn't want a sponsor for a long time. I didn't really want to quit alcohol completely, so I'd substitute it with vanilla extract or other acceptable household items with alcohol in them. The point is that I *didn't* do all of the work in the right order, Sharon. It's why it took me so long to get sober and stay that way."

He leaned back in his chair. "Sharon, in treating the causes of addiction out of order, I missed the most powerful combination for long-lasting healing."

I looked at him quizzically.

"The main conditions I had—depression, anxiety, and racing thoughts—were contributing to my physical, mental, and emotional pain," Joe continued. "That's what was left after I stopped using drugs and alcohol. If I hadn't stumbled onto holistic healing and the biochemical restoration process, I'd be relapsed, dead, or miserably sober, acting like everything's okay." Joe paused for a moment, to let me take all this in. Then he continued.

"Biochemical restoration is detective work. Its tests and methods are the process that leads to true recovery.

Holistic healing provides the method of the most productive healing. But you have to do it in the right order, to get the most effective results."

"Fine, I get it, Joe. Don't shortcut the process. It causes frustration. But how do I know what's the right order?" I asked, frustrated.

Joe turned up his palms, as if weighing the matter. "Each case is different, Sharon, based on the length of an individual's addiction, the depth of the damage done and how it was caused, as well as what is needed to heal. But," he added, now gesturing with both hands, "the steps we take to get them on the right path are the same. First, we assess. This includes asking questions and possibly running tests to know how to safely move forward. Then, we help the client detox safely, either on-site or at a medical facility, while providing the right nutrients for the body."

"So you flush out the toxic chemicals and at the same time, introduce nourishing food?" I asked. I thought of how thin Lorin was the last time I saw him. How incredibly gaunt and bony he felt when I hugged him goodbye.

"Correct," Joe replied. "It has to be done safely, on a case-by-case basis." I noticed it was the second time that Joe used the word "safely." He continued.

"Then, as the person stabilizes, we can move into the healing portion. That involves more testing and counseling, as well as continued monitoring, to effectively become sober. Eventually there are opportunities for them to reconnect to their environment in healthy ways. Continued healthy meals and snacks are crucial during this time, for the brain and body to get the essential nutrients needed."

"So," I said, "the first step is assessment, then detox, then treatment. And then, healing. Is that…everything?"

Joe shook his head. "The next steps are about transitioning back into everyday society. The habits, triggers, and hurdles that need to be relearned or learned for the first time, as well as integrating their loved ones into their program as appropriate and needed. The last portion," Joe said, "is the lifelong work of integrating their program into their lives, every single day."

"So helping the addicted, now recovering, person and their family, in the right order," I said. "That sounds so daunting. How do you do that?"

"That's where the support system comes into play," Joe explained. "There are doctors, therapists, counselors, and nutritionists that put together the initial detox. They also monitor the continued progress through the program up to completion. That's where, optimally, their family becomes educated for themselves. For their recovering loved one, there is the aftercare support, as well."

"This includes a year of follow-up support with their life coaches," Joe continued. "They are the much-needed link for staying connected with our doctors, nutritionists, and counselors. And the ones who've gotten to know each graduate's history. Then we keep in touch as long as the clients are willing, through their lifelong program steps. We have some who have kept in touch for years. Decades." Joe smiled at me sympathetically. "It's a pretty involved process, and difficult to sum up, but that's a good start."

He sat back in his chair, letting me take in all that he had just said, which addressed all the major concerns I had about abuse, addiction, and recovery. I ached for Lorin to talk with Joe.

"So yes, Sharon, we feel that there is a huge need to have access to all the options, combined in a way that makes the most sense." Joe went on to tell me what more traditional methods included, which was emotional support, spiritual counseling, and a fair understanding of the person's addiction.

"But they also need that full physical exam," Joe said. "They need lab work like the kind I had—urine, saliva, blood—to uncover possibilities of any genetic or biochemical imbalances." Joe leaned forward in his chair. "If you don't have that in combination with the other forms of treatment, and right up front once treatment starts, there is a lot of room for misdiagnosis, underdiagnosis, and relapse. That's why so many young people don't stop using, even after going to several traditional treatment centers. And of course," Joe added, "first they have to admit they need help. Otherwise, the chances for relapse soar because they are getting help for reasons other than their own—out of obligation, or even as a result of a legal order."

"And that's when the cycle repeats," I said, dejectedly.

Joe nodded. "This doesn't mean that some people don't come to their own realization, all on their own. Just that their timeline is rarely of the same importance as it is to their loved ones."

I thought about all the cycles that were involved on the addiction train, both from Lorin's side and from Micah's and mine. "Breaking the cycle for ourselves is the optimal course, and it's worth talking about, from all points of view. But it's exhausting, Joe. Addiction and relapse feel like a vicious, vicious cycle," I said wearily.

"It is. But we *can* break it, Sharon. Our goal in treatment is just that—to break that cycle. It *is* possible."

BREAKING THE CYCLE

"Sharon, when I came to Colorado some forty years ago from California, I was pretty much penniless," Joe said quietly. "But that wasn't the real problem. I was spiritually bankrupt. I could not feel love for anything in my life."

I felt my chest start to constrict as Joe said that. He had said before that he had felt empty. But *bankrupt*? How do you not care about anything, any of the time? No matter how many times

I was frustrated over the complicated relationship I had with Lorin, I could always feel some part of me that cared, even if it was just in some small way.

"I think that's a hard thing for an addicted person's loved ones to truly grasp, Joe," I said.

He nodded. "Absolutely. The reason it's hard to grasp is that their loved ones don't actually see what's going on inside the addicted person. Once we, as addicted individuals, have hit bottom, the addiction has done serious damage. We don't like ourselves or where we are in life. We feel spiritually empty and can't feel love for anything, even ourselves. Our feelings are anesthetized.

"As humans, we're already selfish and self-centered—that's just a natural part of life, Sharon, especially as young people. Our compassion grows as we mature. But addiction starts to slow that process. The alcohol and drugs create additional pain and problems, and the addicted person starts obsessing about the solution, which is more chemicals.

They stop becoming outward-focused, and become inward-focused. Obsessed with their world of addiction."

"So they're back to being selfish and self-centered," I said. "A never-ending cycle."

Joe nodded. "All we're thinking about is getting relief from the pain, which is now being caused by what we have mistaken as the 'cure'—the drugs and the alcohol themselves. It becomes a constant cycle of drinking, using drugs, pain, damaging relationships, legal problems, and drinking or drugging again, because we can't tolerate the emotional pain we're in, plus the physical pain if we're addicted.

"The only solution we have that works for sure, or so we've deceived ourselves into believing, is to get more drugs and

alcohol. And this is the point: when I got sober, Sharon, I still had the belief that I had to *get* things in life; those habits from when I was a self-absorbed youngster were still there. I thought the way to happiness was getting things, just like when I was a kid. I focused on that, instead of tapping into my progression of compassion, love, understanding others, and experiencing joy in an outward-focused way."

"Since you no longer needed, or at least wanted, to get the drugs and alcohol, what would you feel compelled to 'get'?" I asked.

Joe smiled ruefully. "Getting a girlfriend, getting married, getting a nice car, and getting money. It's what I knew. It's what most of us know. But what I know now, thanks to other ways of thinking, like twelve-step programs, and Buddhism, and some other spiritual avenues, is that I had it backward most of my life.

"The solution to having a quality life was not seeing how much I could acquire that might bring me happiness. What makes me feel the best as a recovering addict, Sharon, is the ability to feel love for things like family, friends, nature, animals, and a connection to a higher power as well as those around me. And also, to give back." Joe's voice became more animated as he shared his discovery of this other kind of happiness.

"There's nothing wrong with acquiring stuff," Joe continued. "And there isn't anything *inherently* wrong with drugs and alcohol, in moderation. We have prescriptions and social gatherings that can be useful in our lives. But for me, and for many, many addicted and recovering addicted individuals, the problem was that there was no moderation.

I wanted more of everything–drugs, alcohol, girlfriends, stuff. A little was not enough. Even enough was not enough.

"I had it backward back then, and it showed itself as I got sober. I thought the more I acquired, the happier I would be. But

the happiness never lasted. This is a hard concept if you are an addicted person."

"And you think most addicted individuals have this same problem?" I asked.

"Yes, I do," Joe said firmly. "It's easy for anyone to fall into acquiring as a way of life, Sharon. Addiction and chemical dependency become a selfishness problem. And again, we all have some selfishness, which is a normal, human trait. But in order to have a good, lasting, quality life, we have to learn to put the reins on self-centeredness and start thinking of others. People with addictions find this to be an uphill battle when recovering."

"You're certainly not like that now, Joe," I said. "What changed you?

"What I started implementing in my life is what helps just about any addicted person. I started, and then kept practicing, the principles of twelve-step programs," Joe replied. "I stayed in touch with my sponsor, and did what he said. Bill helped me to start thinking of others, and to value myself. To reconnect and start to value nature and, by extension, the world around me.

"That's when accountability can begin," Joe said. "It's how those of us with addictions start to see what has been causing our problems as the result of our alcohol and drug use. By acknowledging our part in these things, we can see how we have contributed to the damage or the dysfunction of our relationships.

"Eventually, we need to look at our character defects, to see how they have interfered with our ability to have loving relationships. And then we move on to thinking of how others would need help in recovery. Being outward-focused."

Joe paused for a moment, then looked at me thoughtfully.

"And that's how we finally achieve that second recovery, Sharon—spiritual recovery.

After mid-recovery, or recovering from the alcohol and the drugs and the biochemical imbalances, comes the advanced recovery, which is lifelong–literally.

It's how we start coming back from that spiritual bankruptcy."

With that, Joe stood up. It was time for him to go. We hugged, and I walked him to the door, still processing it all.

– JOE –

As I drove back to my office, I thought of Lorin. Sharon's update was only that he said he was healing and that he was lonely, but that he wasn't getting high. I knew well enough that something had to give in this young person's life. He'd either relapse, or he'd act out in another destructive way, trying to distract himself. The concern I had warred with the relief I felt for Sharon about her not having to interact, for a while, at least, with Lorin's chaos in person.

But she was avoiding, right alongside her son. They thought they'd found their answers. In truth, those answers were just temporary, another part of the addiction train.

CHAPTER 15

Transitioning into Recovery

"We can't guarantee that nobody will ever relapse. But even if relapse happens, there *still* is hope. There *is* life after addiction. After relapse, and through life's difficulties."

—JOE

– SHARON –

"JOE, IS IT POSSIBLE TO HAVE A GOOD RELATIONSHIP with a recovering addict?"

Joe and I were meeting again in my home, a clear signal that Lorin was still away. I missed him, and although we'd had sporadic conversations while he'd been out of state, I knew I wasn't ready to see him if he was still using drugs. All I had to go on were his words, but I still felt like he was hiding something.

Questioning him would just bring on an argument, and the idea of more conflict was nauseating. The version of Lorin I remembered felt dead and buried, and I yearned for more time to grieve so I could move on, somehow.

"Yes," Joe said, "it's possible. I'm not saying it's easy, but with the right tools and support, it's doable." Joe had reclaimed the same chair from our previous meeting. He seemed quiet—perhaps the effect of the gray, rainy day. But maybe, I thought, from reliving his own journey with me over these past months. "That's the good news, long-term." I braced myself for what was coming. "The bad news is that getting to that point can be difficult because of an addicted person's tendency for immature behavior and their hyper-focused tendencies for control."

'REACTIVATING' MATURE BEHAVIOR

"What distinguishes their immaturity from the kind most of us have at some point?" I asked.

"What most people have is childish behavior based around a specific event or tendency," said Joe. "For people recovering from addictions, their immature behavior is part of a pattern that can dominate their personality."

"That's quite a difference. Give me a for instance," I prompted.

"A person might have a bad day and take it out on other people. They may make snide or passive-aggressive comments to those around them, or pout and complain about things not getting done quickly enough. Ever been around someone like that?"

Of course I had. Hell, I'd done things like that myself, and then found myself apologizing for being so out of line. I nodded.

"Those tendencies can usually be traced back to some event that didn't last long, is fixable, or at least fades into the past. Stubbing a toe, not feeling good, getting embarrassed at work or school—even puberty has been to blame for events like this."

I nodded, recalling bouts of immature and controlling

behavior I'd experienced while studying for a big test when I was younger, and throughout pregnancy when I got older.

"Once the event is over," Joe said, "that person usually goes back to the responsible, reasonable self that their friends and family recognize. Bad days can happen to anyone, and the damage done because of their snappish attitude can usually be undone with a relatively small amount of repair needed."

"Repair, meaning with chocolate and an apology?" I said, smiling.

"Possibly," Joe replied, smiling back.

Repairing damage usually means some form of communication with those who've been in the path of that immature behavior.

Being able to receive some feedback, and then taking time and action to find the cause of the behavior.

"But," Joe continued, "for someone who has become socially, mentally, and emotionally stunted due to addiction, micromanaging their personal environment, and everyone who happens to be in it, is a way of life. They can't afford to be wrong, or unsure. Their hyper-awareness and tendency to manipulate their environment become their dominant personality traits."

"So does that mean they're angry most of the time?" I asked.

"Not necessarily," Joe replied. "Mostly, it just means that they have learned how to bend the circumstances their way, in order to get what they need. Through anger, kindness, passive-aggressive comments, or avoidance. It becomes a daily part of life."

"And by 'getting what they need,' you mean getting whatever their fix is?" I asked.

Joe nodded. "It's a trait that became dominant way back when they progressed from the abuse stage into the addiction stage. They become a chameleon, in order for their brain to get what it needs—alcohol or drugs."

"Okay, but wouldn't they realize what they were doing, once they got sober?" I asked. "It would make sense to stop needing to be a chameleon when they're in recovery." It seemed a logical progression.

"It's not that simple, Sharon," Joe said. *Of course not*. I smiled ruefully to myself; how many times had I heard that from Joe?

> **"Once a person goes into sobriety and eventually recovery, those habits stay with that person to one degree or another.**

It depends on many factors of that person's addiction, like at what age their brain locked in on the trait, and how long they have been operating with the self-serving behaviors. Sometimes the habits can start to be unlearned, or countered with positive behavior. Sometimes, however, the tendencies have settled in so deeply and become so subtle that it's almost impossible for that person to act any other way. Especially if they became addicted at a young age, and therefore have no knowledge of how to act compassionately or rationally, putting someone else's feelings at the same level of importance as their own."

"So going into recovery, there is very little that is 'mature' for them to go back to, right?" I asked. "They are almost having to start over."

"Right," Joe said. "As an adult in recovery, they may know how to get dressed and find a job, but will they have the social maturity to dress appropriately for different occasions, or to hold down that job and not skip work when they don't feel like going in? They might find a place to live, but will they pay their rent on time, every month, without complaining and throwing a fit, or taking it out on the nearest loved one? They may not have a mature internal behavior to 'reactivate.' They would initially have to trust solely on someone else's advice and direction about how to act like an adult."

A grown-up being told by other adults to grow up. I knew how that would go over with me.

"Joe," I said, "if it was me, I'd most likely dismiss those who were giving me direction." *And probably give them the finger,* I thought. "I hate to say it, but I'd keep 'adulting'—acting like a responsible adult—the way I was already doing, simply because it made the most sense and was comfortable. I'd keep following my gut, because that's how I'd gotten this far."

Joe pondered that for a moment before answering. "Sharon, remember that each person is different. The very fact that they've started to come out on the other side of addiction into recovery gives some hope. They exercised enough trust and reason to overcome their isolating tendencies to ask for help in the first place. And some people do much better than others, in this area.

> **The work comes in being willing to continue taking direction, trusting others more than ourselves, initially, and recognizing the hundreds of tiny ways that micromanaging, selfishness, and control can creep back into our lives every day."**

THE LOVED ONES' RECOVERY

"So that's what the recovering adult is contending with," I said. "What about the loved ones of that recovering adult, and what they're dealing with?" I thought of how Micah and I were relating to each other these days. We were still sensitive and resentful about Lorin. We still worried about him and got angry that we did. And sometimes, we took that anger out on each other.

Joe nodded, silently acknowledging that he knew why I was asking. "Loved ones deal with trauma and pain, too. They are in their own form of recovery, so aftershocks are quite common."

I felt somewhat mollified; at least Micah and I were normal in that regard. Then Joe said something that made me sit up straight.

"You know, Sharon, addiction is a form of trauma, for everyone that is touched by it. And while not everyone can relate to chemical addiction—like you and Micah, who haven't experienced it for yourselves—most of us have had some form of trauma in our lives. Trauma is traumatic, no matter how we experience it, and it causes pain. Pain is painful, no matter what form it takes. I say this because this is what people who haven't experienced chemical addiction can relate to."

"Agreed," I said, sighing.

"Because most people have suffered trauma of some sort, there is also the potential for a deeper level of understanding that they can reach," Joe continued.

> "It may be that not all people are cut out to stay in a relationship with a recovering addict, but you'd be surprised how many people are, partially because of their own resilience gained through their own trauma and survival."

"You'd be surprised how many people can handle what it takes to find solutions. There is potentially a higher level of compassion, ingenuity, and patience to work through problems. With a lot of work and support, they might even form a new relationship that has a stronger bond."

That was what I was looking for. A sliver of hope for down the road, even if it involved a lot of hard work. I had no idea if Lorin would ever come back, but if he did, I needed to know there was a way through another bout with him growing up. And the three of us growing together.

"So, how would I learn to distinguish between what a recovering addict is doing as a result of the addiction, and which part is just their personality?" I asked.

"I know you want a straightforward answer, Sharon," Joe said, "but we are not dealing just with the recovering person's

baggage. Yes, it's about the potential juvenile actions of the recovering addict, but it's also about the loved ones, and whether they bring issues into the relationship that compound an already complicated situation. So there is support needed for both sides to heal in their own way." Joe tapped his fingers on the arms of the chair. "It takes work."

I sighed inwardly, hoping that Joe didn't see the frustration that I felt. Even though the grown-up part of me knew that he was right.

"One thing we do at InnerBalance," Joe continued, "is to stay connected with the client—the recovered person—through their life coach, for up to a year after they complete the program we developed for them. The life coach helps them if they have any relapses, and with problems that may come up with family, work, finances, nutrition—or with any mental or emotional issues. The coaches will connect the graduate with the right therapist or counselor to help them. We also provide a three-day intensive family workshop so that their loved ones are getting education and support as well."

If only Lorin would check into the place, I thought. But then I set down the mug of tea I'd been nursing and opened my notebook. It was time to turn the questions to Joe's life.

"Let's talk about how your life worked out as you started up personal relationships again."

"You mean doing life sober," Joe said.

I nodded. "Yep. Sober. Once the new reality started sinking in, what did life look like?"

REESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY

After four years of sobriety, Joe met Donna, now his wife, and they raised three kids—two of Donna's and one they had together. As with any marriage, there were some difficult times, in their case, often because of the challenges that came from Joe's years of addiction.

"When I got sober at the age of thirty-four, I had the social and emotional maturity of about a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old," Joe explained. "That's what it felt like. I had to learn to deal with feelings. My anxiety and desires. But I felt awkward, and had difficulty speaking in front of people, especially in settings like twelve-step meetings. That's where I was in my post-addiction development when I met Donna. I had my own place, I was starting to work with respected professionals, and I had a clear goal to heal myself. But emotionally, mentally, and especially socially, I hadn't developed in a healthy way, and didn't realize it. What made me excel in helping clients—like standing firm in spite of their excuses, and being persistent in showing them what they needed to do and how to do it—were not the best traits when I came home from the office and into a partnership role."

That sounded ominous. "So 'standing firm' and 'being persistent' translated to 'inflexible' when you got home?" I asked. Joe nodded.

"I'd say they were control issues, plain and simple," Joe said. "I was needing control twenty-four hours a day, but me wanting my way, always, wasn't healthy for a relationship. The closer my relationships, the more my childhood issues surfaced.

"I was probably not much different for friends who only saw me for a few hours—say, for a movie or lunch. They saw a much more relaxed version of me. But my close family saw me for longer periods, and therefore experienced times when I reverted back to my past habits. It was probably hardest on them. The last thing I wanted to do was to treat my loved ones badly, so I had plenty of opportunities to improve."

It tended to be the same at my house. Thinking about my week, I noticed times where both Micah and I could be calm with a client on the phone, then hang up and snap at one another over some tiny little thing.

Joe leaned forward in his chair. "Sharon, I know you're still looking for a clean wrap-up with a happily-ever-after ending. We'd all like that.

But what I can tell you is that any ending is better than the ending I was headed for if I didn't stop using drugs and alcohol.

With work, there are a lot more happy endings. I know a lot of families that have happiness, mine included."

"I'm so glad to hear that, Joe," I said, smiling. "What are some of your happy endings? The good memories you have?"

"Oh! So many!" Joe exclaimed, leaning back again in the chair and folding his hands behind his neck. "Just off the top of my head, I recall taking the kids to Yellowstone, and traveling to the beach a lot in California. Even after the kids were grown, Donna and I took lots of trips, especially road trips in our little trailer. All around Colorado, and to hot springs.

"I thought I'd missed the boat as far as having my own family," Joe continued. "I'd spent so much time getting myself to a stable place in life that it was just then occurring to me that I would want to share a meaningful life with someone else."

"I'm so glad you got to that place. How did you two meet?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Let me tell you about the first dating service in Fort Collins."

"This is how you met her?" I interrupted, laughing. "A dating service?"

"Absolutely," Joe said. "By this time, I knew that if I wanted to try something out, I couldn't wait around for someone to come find me with the right idea. So I started nosing around and found the best solution for me at the time. There wasn't an app or anything online back then, remember. Instead, there was a married couple that put out a newsletter for singles to

meet each other. Everyone who was interested provided a bio. They were supposed to have a picture, too, but I didn't provide one."

Joe picked Donna's picture out of all the others. Although she didn't know what Joe looked like, she agreed to a lunch date.

"She had me over to her place for lunch, and I got to meet her kids. Andrew, her little boy, was two. And her little girl, Lindsay, was four. I loved them right from the start, but Donna and I dated for a year and a half before we got married."

The sun broke through the clouds just then, the light shining off the droplets on the window. Our mood had lightened as well.

PLAYING CATCH-UP EMOTIONALLY, SOCIALLY, AND MENTALLY

"How did the memories of your childhood influence your relationship with your new wife and kids?" I asked.

"I really wanted things to be different," Joe said firmly. "I compensated for what I saw as a lack of involvement from my parents."

I hesitated a second or two, then dove in. "Do you feel you stayed on the same emotional path as your dad?"

Joe waited a moment before answering. Then he smiled. Once again his voice was firm. "No. I loved having the kids, and I recognized that affection was what was missing from my experience with my own father. I always tucked them into bed at night and read them bedtime stories. I took them trick-or-treating, and to the park to play. I knew what I had missed out on, and didn't want my own kids to miss out. They are the smartest, greatest kids around," he added. I smiled at the proud dad.

Joe shifted in his chair, and his voice took on a thoughtful tone. "But it was never easy. For Donna, I'll just say that she had prior experience with loved ones who were alcoholics. Not everyone could put up with my past, but Donna could. Luckily,

she was strong enough to take me on. We knew of each other's pasts, but we both wanted a different future."

That's where that resilience comes into play, I thought.

Shortly after marriage, Joe and Donna were in therapy together. "Even though I was sober, I was still playing catch-up emotionally, socially, and mentally," Joe said. "I was just starting to become aware of why accountability mattered, both to myself and others. That included working on how to trust that she knew how to make perfectly acceptable choices on her own. She'd done just that before I ever came into her life. I struggled a lot to keep that boundary."

Joe got up from his chair and started to pace. "Donna had a ready-made family. She welcomed me into her life, but I struggled, in general, with all of the catch-up. I wasn't used to taking anyone else's life or routines into consideration. All these years later, some of those issues still pop up every once in a while."

I looked at him quizzically. "But you seem incredibly capable of taking care of your business and everyone who walks into InnerBalance."

"Oh, I've made it my life's work to be on point about InnerBalance," Joe said. "But it's different when I walk out the door and stop working. That's when those effects show up. At the core of my life, I'm still a recovering addict."

So you live with it all your life, I thought glumly. *No wonder Joe says it's a lot of work.*

"My tenacity for getting what I feel I need can be an asset in a business setting, Sharon," Joe continued, "but not in a social or informal setting, and that can cause some chaos. So if you're asking how my wife and those outside my professional life have dealt with my need for being right, I'd say the people in my life are those who are understanding, have worked with me, and are people of substance."

"So you have some…*tenacious* people in your life, Joe," I said, smiling.

He laughed. "Yes, and practical, too. That's how Donna has dealt with my past and hers. She's a very strong woman. She sincerely believes that life is what you make of it. That includes the blows that life has given us.

Whereas I was looking to constantly fix what life had thrown at me, she accepted her circumstances and moved on the best she could.

It is a series of choices and consequences for her, and she chose our life together.

"It's not that we 'overcame' problems and never had to deal with them again," Joe continued. "It's more like we gathered tools that we used to work through those problems when they came up again. We still use them."

"Do you ever wonder what your relationship could have been like if you both didn't have addiction stories in your past?" I asked, selfishly thinking about my family.

Joe sat down again in his chair. "We won't know, so we just do the best that we can."

He let the ensuing silence between us stretch on for a minute before adding, "The best thing I can say for you, Sharon, is to start going to some support groups for the loved ones of addicted individuals. They help in several ways: You get to be heard. To know you are not alone in your journey. And they provide great resources and ideas about tools to use in your own life. Plus, they are an opportunity to be part of a community of people who have resilience in the area of chemical addiction. Donna swears by them."

I promised Joe I'd find some of these support groups for loved ones in the next few weeks, to gain some perspective, if nothing else. And then we'd plan to meet again.

HEALING TOOLS FOR EVERYONE ON THE TRAIN

"Going to support group meetings has been an eye-opening experience, Joe," I said. It was several weeks later, and we were back in Joe's office at InnerBalance. "I heard so many stories that I related to. Not all of them, and some made mine look like no big deal, but it was eye-opening." I was still finding it difficult to give up the storybook ending. I wanted all the plot twists straightened out and everything neat and tidy.

"Do you feel like you are getting what you need from the meetings?" Joe asked.

"Yes," I said. "I originally went to check out how to support Lorin, but I realized that these support groups were there to support *me*. It felt like I'd found a safe, confidential place to let go. As a result, I started opening up to Micah a little bit more. Baby steps, I suppose."

Micah and I were tentatively sharing how we felt with each other, although he hadn't yet gone to any meetings with me.

"What I didn't realize," I continued, "is just how much of a toll being in a relationship with Lorin as an addicted person had taken in my other relationships. With my other kids. With my view of a traditional marriage. With work. It just wears on a person." Joe's nod validated my discovery. I continued, "Everything that was important before the addiction train now seems surreal. Silly, even. Just functioning through daily life seems so unimportant right now, with all of the pain we're dealing with. And Joe, I wasn't aware that these emotions were so close to the surface until I heard them echoed by others who had similar situations."

"It's always good to hear different perspectives," Joe said. "It comes down to needing help to build up our emotional resilience. Working our emotional muscles that had atrophied."

Joe then shared with me some of the nuts and bolts that he and Donna had used to stay together.

"When things didn't go right, we needed a different way

to behave around each other, other than the high-strung, high-alert, or checked-out state of emotions we had been used to, in order to survive the current situation we were dealing with," Joe explained. "We ended up in counseling, on and off, over the years, working out how to navigate our past, our family history, and the day-to-day workings of family life without our past habits."

Whew, that's intense, I thought. *But whatever it takes to get through those struggles*. I admired them all the more for it—the amount of time and effort it must have taken them to work on their relationship. Then again, look at how much time Micah and I had spent with Lorin on his addiction train. Didn't it make sense that the healing side would take time, too? I needed to stop expecting a shortcut answer with long-term results.

"So you and Donna worked with therapists, and did your own work at home together and separately. Was that enough?" I asked.

"That's not all we did," Joe replied. "Donna and I got into an additional group with five other couples who came from different twelve-step programs. We'd read from a powerful book called *Getting the Love You Want* by Harvel Hendricks.[23] Nobody showed us how to conduct those meetings, or what to do. There was no mentor for us at the time. We just knew we needed support and shouldn't go through this alone, so we did the best we could. We did that for a couple years. Then I went on my own to the Chovies—"

"What's a Chobie?" I interrupted, confused.

"Not Chobie," Joe corrected me, "Cho-vie. It was a support group that I was part of for fifteen years."

"Was it also for loved ones of those with addictions?" I asked.

"No," Joe said. "I went to it without Donna because it was based around my colleagues and professional network. There were seven of us who gathered, year after year, doctors and therapists included."

"But why 'Chovie'?" I was still puzzled by the name.

Joe smiled. "One of the members was named Ann. The group nicknamed her Ann-chovie, for some reason—you know, like anchovy—and the shortened version 'Chovies' stuck." We both laughed.

Joe explained that they created the group as a professional resource. "Most of us were deeply affected by addiction, either personally going through it, or as a result of the years of experience being submersed in different aspects of addiction and recovery. A couple of us who work in the recovery centers were talking and said, 'Why don't we create a group of what a healthy family would be like, and support each other?' It was a wonderful place to brainstorm."

"What would you talk about?" I asked.

"Our family and personal issues for that week," Joe replied. "We learned a lot from each other, and it really helped us focus." He paused, concentrating for a few moments on the view from the window. "So this is what it took for me to grow a support network sufficient for my family and me to work through sobriety and start long-term recovery."

So here's your takeaway, Sharon, I said to myself. *If our family is ever going to heal, we must be willing to do whatever it takes, go down whichever paths come up, and try to solve our problems rather than bury them.*

And one more thing: *Grow more emotionally resilient.*

JOE'S JOURNEY TO INNERBALANCE

We took a short break, both of us checking messages. When we settled back in, I decided to ask Joe how he started on his path to helping others, once he'd learned some ways to help himself.

He told me that Dr. Ash trained him in doing interventions when he offered Joe a position as an addiction counselor at Seven Lakes.

"What exactly does one of your interventions look like?" I asked.

"It's a little like translating," Joe explained. "A good intervention is being able to understand what the person needs, being a really good listener, and educating the family on what they need to do. And making sure they hear me clearly. That's what makes a good intervention."

Dr. Ash had Joe work with him when some parents at a high school in Fort Collins asked for help. Their children were lying about their drug and alcohol use, and sneaking out of school. It was the same scenario Joe had encountered at Matthew Street.

"I loved working with Dr. Ash and learned so much from his practice," Joe said. "The staff was like a second family to me. We got to know each other's families, too. There were holiday parties and other celebrations that really brought us together. We needed that, with the level of communication that was necessary in the roles we were in."

During Joe's time there, he earned his Level 2 certification, and then his Level 3 as a Certified Alcohol Counselor, the top level achievable. He was still working on his own health issues and seeing the different allergists, doctors, and holistic healers he had told me about. "It's what educated me about the importance of holistic healing, and ultimately led me into biochemical restoration," Joe said. "I was learning an entirely different aspect of healing and wanted to add some of it to the practice there at Seven Lakes."

But Dr. Ash held to a different view. "He was a psychiatrist, and worked from a philosophy that anything that took away from the focus of the client's illness—holistic methods included—was a detriment to the client," Joe said. "The focus, he believed, should be on the addiction itself."

Joe realized that he would have to go elsewhere if he were to pursue his own approach of combining biochemical restoration

and holistic healing with addiction recovery, offering all of them at the same place. It didn't take too long for him to figure out that the only way he would really find such a place would be to start it.

> **"I started InnerBalance because there weren't enough places to send loved ones and those with addictions to receive holistic care backed with biochemical testing.**

Basically, I wanted a place where we practiced functional medicine."

I looked at him somewhat resignedly. I thought I had completed all my crash courses in medical terminology. "Okay, Joe, I give: what's functional medicine? I mean, shouldn't all medicine be functional?"

Joe chuckled. "Functional medicine is a wellness model where both the client and the doctor, or whoever the practitioner is, work together on getting the client well. You look at lifestyle, genetics, and biochemical influences to develop a specific treatment plan. And that plan relies on a minimum of pharmaceutical drugs."

"So biochemical restoration is a component of functional medicine, right?" I asked.

"Right." Joe smiled, and then continued his story.

"There were two of us in the beginning: Ron, who was the business director, and myself, who was the clinical director. Later, we brought an M.D., Dr. Groves, into the partnership." It was Dr. Barry Burnes, a member of the Chovies, who introduced Joe to Ron.

"You wanted to create a…*functional* path to long-term recovery, just like you were experiencing in your own life," I said. "It certainly seems like you got your wish. Did you have investors?"

"Nope," Joe said with a laugh. "We went to a bank and asked for two hundred thousand dollars, with no credit and

no collateral. We never should have been able to get a loan, but at the time, banks were lending out way too much money to people who probably shouldn't have qualified for the loans, and we were one of them. But I'm grateful to that bank because it enabled us to get started.

"We enlisted the help of Dr. Fields to do basic labs on our clients, and that was the start of it. We were very rudimentary in the beginning, nothing near what it is today," Joe continued. "Dr. Groves worked with us for about a year and a half, and then got an opportunity to run a medical facility in Arizona. So Ron and I looked for another M.D. who was open and experienced in holistic medicine. It seemed like a tall order at the time, but Dr. Billica, the physician who headed the health program for the astronauts at NASA, had just moved to Colorado, looking for a change. He was very interested in holistic medicine and agreed to bring his expertise to our treatment center."

"So you were all set then, with everything you needed," I said.

Joe smiled. "Not quite. Dr. Billica also found us a bed and breakfast in Loveland that we purchased. Our services at that time were outpatient, but we saw how many people struggled to find housing close by when they were being treated, so Cattail Bed and Breakfast was a perfect solution. We could be in charge of teaching our clients how to correct their dietary and sleep needs by cooking all their meals and monitoring their sleep patterns, as well as providing a blueprint for new habits."

"How did it feel when you were finally doing what you wanted to do to help people?" I asked.

"Honestly," Joe replied, "it felt scary. We were flying by the seat of our pants in the beginning, and working all hours to keep it going. Once Dr. Billica came on board, he brought a level of expertise to the testing that really pushed us forward. Up until that point, we had been doing more suggestive work."

"Meaning …?" I asked.

"Like, 'Don't eat sugar. Eat this instead. Take these supplements. Go to sleep for this many hours.' Things like that. Dr. Billica took us to a different level medically. We could finally look at possibilities that we hadn't known to look for. Things like genetics, hormone imbalances, chemical sensitivities, mood disorders. It upped our game in the universe of functional medicine.

"We gathered insight, techniques, and even some staff from valuable relationships in the professional community here in Colorado, but that expanded, too," Joe continued. "Our network is national and beyond now. It means that we can now work around the clock to give the best care available, and provide a tailored program with a year of support from top professionals."

Joe stood up and walked over to the window. *That's his signal that we're done for the day,* I thought. But not this time. He turned around to face me. "We all want what our clients and their loved ones want, Sharon: to provide a blueprint for a healthy self. We will never say it's easy. It's not. But there is hope. We can't guarantee that nobody will ever relapse. But even if relapse happens, there *still* is hope. There *is* life after addiction. After relapse, and through life's difficulties."

And no one knows that better than someone who's been through it, I thought. In many ways, Joe was his own best proof.

His voice softened somewhat as he added, "And as you know, Sharon, we provide care and support for the loved ones, too. We teach you—them—how to have healthy boundaries in a way that makes it possible to have a healthy relationship with those who want it."

I felt the tears welling up. *I've got to figure out a way to get Lorin here, to get him to want to be here.*

Joe smiled, no doubt reading my mind. "We won't quit on anybody, Sharon. We are here to stay."

– JOE –

Here to stay. I thought about Chris, a particularly challenging client we'd recently treated. A young attorney clearly on the rise, he came in expecting to tame his addiction the same way he'd built his career: quickly, and always knowing what his next step would be. No surprise, then, that he hated giving up control.

Chris was sure that when he graduated from his month-long stay with us, that that was it—he'd done his recovery, and he was cured. Even during his stay, he was always trying to outthink the counselors and beat his addiction without bowing to the people who actually know how to treat it. It came down to the simple, painful fact that he just wasn't ready to do the work. It took several relapses before he finally surrendered his need for control. Only then did he really get on board with his program.

Once he did, he became a model recovering person. I saw him not too long ago at a twelve-step meeting—the very ones that he had loathed and avoided. He'd made friends in the program with younger people like himself. They'd get together outside of the meetings. He was connecting.

I knew Sharon would ask, *So what changed from fighting fighting fighting to surrender?* The answer was the same for Chris as it was for me: hitting bottom, reaching out for help, and starting the connection process again.

Relapses happen, and often. At InnerBalance, we calculate that almost a third of our clients will relapse. It happens when clients aren't ready to give up their control. They haven't come to fully understand and accept that they are powerless over that first drink or hit of their drug, even after going through recovery.

But there's one thing I know for sure, having been there: no addicted individual would be doing this to themselves if they were healthy. As long as Chris tried to control his addiction, he

wasn't healthy. He was where I believed Lorin was now: still thinking that the drugs and alcohol were the solution to his problems and pain. It's a long way down before you hit bottom.

But once you do, you can start to heal. Chris got there, and I had a feeling Lorin would, too.

There is something inside of us humans that pushes us to survive. To make it.

CHAPTER 16

Taking the Opportunity to Heal

"The minute that window of opportunity opens,
I try to capitalize on it because I know it
can close as fast as it opened."

—JOE

– SHARON –

"I WANT TO COME BACK, MOM. I feel like I'm ready."

Lorin's words hung in the air as I looked up from the speakerphone at Micah. I wondered if I appeared as shocked as Micah did. It had only been two months, after all. Thankfully, Micah recovered before I did.

"It would be really nice to see you, son, but first let's go over what you are doing out there, okay?" My husband's voice was

calm, gentler than his usual firm tone. *Nice save,* I thought, knowing Micah was scrambling as much as I was to slow things down. We weren't ready to face Lorin's drama just yet. "Let's go over the reasons you're not here in Colorado in the first place, son."

First, Micah asked, was there anything Lorin needed to do here in Colorado related to the police investigation of his stabbing? No, Lorin replied, the detective was handling the case. Next, was Lorin getting a job, keeping a job, and staying clean? Well, no. Not exactly. Lorin said he had been visiting a few of his relatives for the past two months instead. He was healing nicely, but he had yet to get a job.

Whew, I thought. There was our out.

"Okay," I said into the speaker, "when you've kept a steady job and are saving money, let's revisit this, okay?" Lorin reluctantly agreed, and after telling him that we loved him, we hung up. My hands shook as I shut the speaker button off. I was hoping we would have at least a few more months until we had to deal once again with Lorin's reality.

THE BEST LAID PLANS OF THE ADDICTED OFTEN GO AWRY

Apparently our conversation put a fire under Lorin's butt. He started working at a truck stop just three days after the call. Then he spent another several months saving money, taking all the shifts at work that he could.

At that point, Micah and I started talking details. What would it actually take for him to come back and have it be a good thing for him, and for us? A record of sobriety, reliable transportation, a job, and a place to live away from us, ideally. No matter how hard it was to see Lorin lonely, we had to have those things worked out before he could come into our personal space again. We'd have to stay strong and hope he was resourceful.

I stuttered out the requirements for Lorin to come back on our next call with him. He seemed elated at the possibility of

coming back. It took only a few days for him to come up with a workable plan. We were pleasantly surprised at how resourceful he'd become.

"I've got a place to stay, and my boss will let me transfer to Denver," Lorin said. "Aunt Anne said if I fixed up their old truck, I could have it, too. So Grandpa is helping me get it up and running." His plan was to get back to Colorado within two weeks.

How could I feel so relieved and nervous at the same time? He'd be near us, but susceptible to all the influences of his old circle of friends if he came back. *Was there no place safe from drugs?* Obviously not, I knew. Lorin had to carry his boundaries with him wherever he went, and I had no idea if they were firmly in place or not.

I called Lorin's Aunt Anne—my sister. Lorin had gone to her house several times over the months, reconnecting with his much younger cousins. She told me she'd been impressed with his positive attitude and how happy he was to help out around their house when she needed a handyman.

"The kids love Lorin, and he seems like just a regular, fun-loving guy around them," she said. Talking to her helped to calm me down. Anne was a solid judge of character, and if she saw something off, like him being hyper or super sleepy, she would tell me. Maybe things would be okay this time.

As promised, Lorin's company transferred him to one of their Denver locations within a week of his making the request. He did ask to stay with us for three days before he moved in with Jesi, a childhood friend who we had always felt was good for Lorin. "She can't get off work until the weekend to let me move stuff in." I wondered why he didn't just wait until the weekend, but agreed that he could sleep on our sofa for a day or so. Things were looking up.

But then came a call from Lorin the day he was to set off. "I messed up, Mom." His words cut deep, a personal stab at my

trust. He'd relapsed. But, he assured me, he was recovering and just needed to push his trip out a week. To finish fixing the truck. To get his last paycheck. *To detox*, I thought bitterly as I hung up the phone. *That was the real reason.*

I knew that if I talked with Joe, he'd understand my anger. But I also knew he'd say that ultimately, I should be pissed off at the illness.

He might even remind me that I was on my own addiction train as a loved one, still trying to control the situation. I knew he'd be right, but it did nothing for how panicked and hopeless I felt. I just wanted to get through this latest crisis. I rushed around, frantic to get Lorin home, out of that environment. I wondered if Micah and I were just keeping the cycle going. "Let's just get him here and then we can reassess what he's like," Micah said.

When Lorin pulled into our driveway the following week, he left his belongings in the truck, tied down with twine, and asked if he could sleep. He slept that entire night and left early for work, using our car so he didn't have to take the overloaded truck. It seemed like a reasonable request, but after a few days, there were no signs of him going to his own place in Denver.

"Mom, I've just gotta concentrate on work, okay?" he'd say when we asked about arrangements. The weekend came and went, with no change. After the fifth day, two days after the agreed-upon time he would stay with us, it was time to get some answers, whether he wanted to give them or not.

BETRAYAL ALL OVER AGAIN

The moment Lorin walked in the door the next evening, Micah set the terms, having spoken with Laura, our family therapist, that day. "You can stay for a little while, Lorin, but only if you start seeing Laura again to stay on track." Lorin's other

therapist, Brian, wasn't available. "Only if you are transparent with us," Micah continued, "and only if we can drug test you, whenever we feel like we need to."

"You don't trust me? I'm working my ass off, trying to get things handled, and this is the first thing I hear when I walk in the door? Thanks a lot!" Lorin yelled, stomping down the stairs. We looked at each other worriedly. He came up later, though, apologizing, and agreed to our terms.

"Yes, I relapsed, but I'm done with all of that," Lorin said to Micah and me. "You'll see. Being sober feels good, and I want to keep that in my life. I want to keep you in my life, okay?" His words felt genuine, and I smiled even as I looked at his frame. I never saw him eat. He was always sleeping, and when I asked what he'd had that day, he said he ate at work. But he looked better than before he'd left the first time. Still skinny, but not quite so distressingly thin.

I sighed with relief. It would be okay. We were resolved this time, and those tests would tell us all where he stood, objectively impartial to emotion, and Laura would help us, too, even if Lorin wasn't open to hearing about InnerBalance.

Then he told us why he was still at our house. His housing arrangement had fallen through a few days before he'd started back home, and he was ashamed to tell us; he hated to admit that he didn't have another place to stay.

"You knew before you left that you didn't have housing lined up?" I asked, mad all over again.

"Yeah," Lorin replied, looking down at the floor. "I know I shouldn't have kept it from you, but I really thought I could just get here and take care of it before you knew."

He seemed contrite, just trying to do the right thing, and here I was, nagging him. His explanation ratcheted down my high-alert that he could still be using. But once again, there were lies, and once again, we needed to take care of him when we barely

trusted his words. I was terrified I'd do or say the wrong thing and push him back into using.

All of this felt very familiar. I looked at my husband and knew that he had the same thought: *Here we go again.*

FINALLY, THE CRY FOR HELP THAT COULD BE ANSWERED

It didn't take more than two weeks to know that Lorin was lying about more than just the housing. We didn't need another positive test result, or to hear back from Laura about her concern, to know he was still using. His sullen, negative behavior was back. His high-on-life, go-go-go energy was back. And his need to take everything apart…well, that was the final nail in the coffin. He was using again, and we all knew it.

The conversation that night, between Micah and myself, was agonizing. Tears fell onto my bedding as we held hands, weighing the possibilities. Where could he go if we made him leave? Were we betraying him by bringing him back home, and then kicking him to the curb? It came down to how best we could truly support him and keep him safe, in the long run, while keeping us sane.

"We have ourselves and the other kids to think of," I said.

"His behavior and unwillingness to change put the entire family at risk," said Micah.

And that's what it came down to. We could no longer afford to keep interfering with his natural consequences. We were getting in his way. But still, our fear for Lorin's future was that without our help, he'd die.

How could we make the choice to leave our son to possible harm?

My hands tingled, knowing in a few short hours, I'd have to say this horrible truth, right out loud to my son.

"Micah," I said softly, "if we make him leave, and he ends

up dead in a ditch from an overdose, or from exposure to the weather, or more violence from this lifestyle, could we live with ourselves?" I looked into my husband's eyes and he looked away, blinking back tears of his own. *One, two, three*. I counted the seconds of silence before he slowly, deliberately nodded. When he looked back into my eyes, I nodded, too.

Our combined answer broke my heart. Yes, we had to let go of control. I didn't know if I could live with myself if the worst possible scenario happened, but I'd have to cross that bridge if it happened, down the road. Lorin had to hit bottom for himself, no matter what the consequences to any of us were. Joe had instilled that in my head, and now I knew it for myself, in my heart.

We confronted our son the next morning.

"Because you are using again, you'll have to leave." Micah's voice didn't shake, like it had when we practiced the words in our room.

"Wait," Lorin said, looking at me. "That's all in the past. I can stop right now. All I have to do is …" he saw that we weren't buying it. A long moment passed and he hung his head. "What about ... what if ... Mom, what if you set up a meeting so I could talk to Joe? Think he would even see me?" Micah and I looked at each other, stunned.

"Why wouldn't Joe see you?" I asked.

"Well, you know," Lorin replied slowly, "because I've messed up so much. Maybe I'm too much of a screw-up. Maybe it's too late to trust me …"

He stumbled over the last words and I hugged him tightly, marveling at the amount of courage it had taken for him to say those words. I'd given up all hope of him asking for any kind of assistance after the conversation between Micah and me the night before. I'd forgotten that he was in anguish, too. *Finally, Lorin is ready for help*.

ANOTHER NON-STARTER

"Come in, Lorin, I've been looking forward to meeting you." Joe held out his hand to our son. I had called him right after Lorin had dropped that *good* bombshell on us, for a change. Joe had said he would make time for Lorin that day. *Thank goodness for Joe's kindness and compassion,* I thought to myself, for perhaps the fifth time that day. Now I was every bit the nervous, worried parent, wondering what Joe would think.

Lorin shook Joe's hand, smiling and friendly, but I knew how nervous he was. I started into Joe's office behind him, but Joe stopped me. "Hey, I'm just going to speak with him for a few minutes, and then we can all talk together, okay?" Surprised, I retreated to the lobby.

What did I expect? Full access to everything?

Joe eventually opened his door and invited me to join them. He was smiling, but Lorin looked troubled. Joe restated what they talked about, in general terms: that Lorin thought he needed some assistance to stop using and had asked if Joe had room in his schedule to help.

"I'm happy you came to us, Lorin," Joe said evenly. "Let's get you started today."

Whoa. We were putting him in that day? Yes, I had hoped that we'd be working out a time for Lorin to go in, but…today? Lorin looked panicked, too, and he asked for a week to get time off work and to prepare.

I looked at Lorin sharply. "Have you really been working all this time?"

"Of course I have," Lorin said awkwardly, and I felt he was lying again. He'd been gone for hours at a time, but they'd become sporadic and he'd said he had started looking for another job. It was all part of the muddled mess I'd come to recognize as Lorin's life.

Joe pressed him to check in that day, but I could see Lorin

was pushing back. I considered for a moment, and then stepped out of Joe's office to call Micah. He was already worried about getting our finances in order. "What harm could a week make, Sharon, especially after we'd been going through this for so long?" *None,* I decided. I hung up with my husband and walked back into Joe's office.

"Ready to get started?" Joe asked.

"We are okay to wait a week, Joe. It will give us time to make arrangements and let the family know, too."

Joe gave me a long look but said he'd be there when we were ready. We set the day for the following Monday.

On the way home from Joe's office, Lorin was quiet. I asked him what was on his mind, and he confessed that he had still been using, high even while he spoke with Joe. *No wonder Joe wanted Lorin in today,* I thought, furious once again. *He already knew.* This felt like hell. All the old signs, the old lies, and my old feelings popped up. But this time, all I had to do was hang in there until Monday, and then I could breathe.

– JOE –

I know it was a surprise to Sharon when I wanted to speak to Lorin alone. A lot of times when there's a family member in the room, the addicted individual is reluctant to share everything about their addiction and what they're using. That was the main reason; I wanted Lorin to know he had a safe place to open up. And yes, Sharon was right: from what Lorin said to me, I did believe that he was still using. I had a reasonable assumption.

There were several reasons I'd hoped that Lorin would start immediately. The minute that window of opportunity opens, I try to capitalize on it because I know it can close as fast as it opened. People can try to talk themselves out of it—"Maybe it's

not that bad, maybe I don't need it." It can also be a serious risk to wait. The person might do harm to themselves or hurt others. One person who was alcoholic did just that—a DUI where he ended up killing three people.

Even so, you have to balance all this against pushing too hard. I didn't want Lorin to feel threatened and have him walk away for good. It's always a balance.

– SHARON –

For the next week, I stayed busy, not asking Lorin where he was going or why. As long as he was still willing to go to InnerBalance, I didn't want to know. The days crawled by. I didn't want one more complication. I wanted him out of my house and in with Joe as soon as possible. Sullenly, I found myself counting down the hours.

We'd worked out finances, schedules, and the initial part of registration with Keri, the program manager, so that by the time I delivered Lorin to InnerBalance, there wasn't much to do. And not much to say. Lorin's brother and sister were meeting us there in a separate car, as a show of support, so I wouldn't have to be alone through all of the registration. They hadn't opened up to him about whether they were happy he was going into treatment. *Reserving judgment*, I thought. And who could blame them?

Micah was absent again—due to work, officially. Unofficially, he wasn't there because he didn't know what to expect, and preferred to hear it from me, secondhand. "You're the one who knows Joe, Sharon. I think it would be awkward if I went." And that was that. I resented him just a little bit more.

It was a quiet trip to Loveland.

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD TO A NEW BEGINNING

My heart pounded as we parked and helped unload Lorin's luggage: one suitcase and two garbage bags of his worldly possessions. Cattail House, the residential center, bordered on a city golf course, and I wondered if Lorin was as impressed with the luxurious setting as I was. My other kids certainly were.

"Well, you won't be locked in a cell here," Addie said, smiling. Lorin made some funny comment about being strapped down, and they laughed at the absurdity of it for him. Then, it was time to go in. My mouth felt dry. "Okay. Here we go," I said flatly.

The three of them pushed past me through the double doors. I hesitated, wondering what was waiting for my son inside. Of course they'd want to make a good impression. They wanted us to keep him there, after all. *Maybe they did have secret rooms where they held down my son if he didn't do something right.* Horror movies started playing in my head. I pulled that mental plug almost immediately, though. Joe would never do that, especially after the horrors he'd endured for himself.

I walked through the doors and immediately felt better. It looked like a beautiful two-story home, all open and airy.

"Hello, I'm Dianna, the head resident on duty. Welcome to Cattail, Lorin." Dianna smiled at all of us and started our tour of where my son would be staying. The rooms were spacious and well-appointed. Both the single and shared rooms had four-poster beds, beautiful furniture, large bathrooms. She took us on a tour of the kitchen, the public rooms, the library, and dining area. We saw where the clients watched movies, played games, and had ping-pong matches. We met the chefs and house managers, all gracious and kind. It was beautiful, and it made me feel better about leaving my son.

This was the residence Lorin would be staying in for the next twenty-eight days. Although using the internet and texting were

allowed, visits were limited to one day a week, on Sundays. It helped keep him focused on his recovery and on the program. *Better for him, and better for us*, I thought.

After his suitcase and bags were checked in and had been thoroughly searched, his siblings, Ethan and Addie, gave him hugs and wished him luck. Their words were heartfelt, but vague enough that I knew they didn't want to know much more. It was enough for Lorin, though. He returned their hugs and said he'd make them proud. I hoped he'd make himself proud.

We watched them drive away before we wandered back outside to the InnerBalance offices, a short walk. Lorin was visibly nervous. He would be starting his tests and meeting his life coach and the counselors who would keep him on track from now on.

It was the start of...whatever came next after that. We had three minutes to talk, but we just walked, passing a pond and some homes. We both knew our lives were about to be altered.

We crossed the threshold of Joe's business center. We met the office staff, some of the medical staff, and Lorin's life coach, Cody, who would work with him throughout his stay and into his recovery.

Exactly two minutes into that process, I felt I had overstayed my welcome. I gave Joe a quick hug when I saw him, but this was prime business time for him. He was busy getting people well, and I was on the loved one's side this time. With a last hug for Lorin, I was back in my car.

I barely made it out of the parking lot before I pulled over, tears leaking down my face. They were tears of relief this time. *Finally, he was in good hands*. It was no longer up to me and my inadequate, imperfect ability to get him better. To keep him alive. The folks at InnerBalance would get to see the games he ran, his

charm, and his addiction in all its forms. *God, I hope they're up to the task.*

How will they do it? I wondered, pulling back onto the road. How would they get through to my son and get him healthy in just twenty-eight days? It was roughly four years of abuse he'd put his body through, from what I could piece together. There would be follow-up care as well, so that made me feel better. I'd be forever grateful, and yet, it still felt like a pretty tall order.

The mom part of me felt resentful; if it went like we hoped, they would succeed where I'd failed. With all the worry and work to keep him alive and safe, I still wasn't the one with Lorin's answers.

But the bigger part of me, by far, felt thankful.
I was *No. Longer. In. Charge.*

Now, it was up to them. Now it was up to *him*. I didn't get to see the actual process, but decided right then that I was just too damn tired to care.

I was getting exactly what I'd hoped and prayed for in endless dark moments. This was the wrapper that "getting help" came in, and I would no longer whine about what it looked like for me.

This day was almost done, and I could breathe.

APPROACHING THE END OF THE LINE

"Sharon, I don't want to go to this thing. Do I *really* need to go?" Micah asked for the umpteenth time. The family workshop at InnerBalance was coming up, and it was, admittedly, at the busiest part of our week, Thursday through Saturday. *There goes my weekend, too, but you don't see me complaining,* I thought.

He kept on with all the reasons his time was more valuable than this workshop. *Enough,* I thought angrily.

"You are damned well going to do this part with me, Micah."

I tuned out his whining as he got in the driver's seat. I tuned him out all the way to Loveland, and even tuned him out as we got seated inside the family workshop building. I decided to adopt a new mantra I'd heard from my daughter: *Not my circus. Not my monkeys.*

Once we got into the family workshop room, I decided I was no longer in charge of Micah's journey, either. He'd been observing my experience up to this point, offering his thoughts and emotions when it suited him, but making it clear he was just a passenger on my loved one's version of my addiction train.

I'd become addicted to Lorin getting well, staying alive, and keeping life–his and ours–smooth.

Micah refused to believe he was involved. *Well,* I thought as I settled in, *Micah has his own version of his addiction train, whether he knows it or not.* He avoided, blustered, and resented the hell out of the addiction invading his space. I didn't want to fix him or his resentment anymore, and he didn't get to keep playing the victim. Not now, in this room with me, and not in the long-term, if he was going to partner up with me. It was time for him to show up. For himself, for Lorin, and for me.

Now, looking over the reading material in the InnerBalance Family Workshop manual and meeting the other couples and families, I could focus on my addiction ride and how to get the hell off of it.

The facilitators introduced themselves, then we made introductions. Micah and I were among a few other parents who had their kids in for substance abuse. Some others were there for their siblings, or their own parents. Two women, looking scared and resigned, were there to understand their husbands' addictions.

After the introductions, there was no small talk.

Our facilitators were kind and straightforward, but it was

immediately clear what everyone's job was. Our job was to take notes, be honest about what was coming up, and communicate our hurdles. Their job was to educate us on what was happening with their clients, what could have gotten them to this point, and why there could be hope for the future.

They talked in logical, scientific, but simple terms so we understood and could piece together the chaos.

We also were challenged to look for opportunities to heal and to forgive—ourselves, our partnerships, our families, and also those who brought us here in the first place. Could I forgive my son and the tumult he'd brought into our lives? Could I forgive myself for not knowing how to help my son? Or could I forgive Micah's avoidance behavior that made me feel so incredibly alone?

Accepting the opportunities to heal and forgive sounded like a tall order, but as the day went on, I promised myself I'd be doing this course wholeheartedly, putting my trust in the staff. I hoped Micah would too. We'd also be taking what we learned back to our other kids, to help them learn how to cope with Lorin's addiction. By the end of the day, I was on board.

It took a day longer for Micah to come around. For him, the first day was purely shell-shock. The facilitators gave us tons of information and used every minute of our time with them so reality could sink in.

We learned that as loved ones of those with addictions, our own addiction trains were a result of care-*taking* instead of care-*giving*, along with a lack of healthy boundaries. This resulted in an unhealthy addiction to the wellness of our loved ones, at any cost to our own health.

We also received homework and writing assignments that helped the information sink in. Micah and I slowly started talking about our experiences as we completed assignments, which led to a sense of companionship. He took it on, and so did I.

As we learned, Micah's complaints stopped, and my sense of righteous indignation went away. So did the all-encompassing loneliness that lay beneath it. We unconsciously held each other's hand, or touched a leg or an arm as we spoke of our feelings to the room of people, or with each other—a new sign of affection in what had been a desert of loneliness and resentment for so long. We were becoming partners again. All of a sudden, it was Us Against Addiction. Much better odds.

TURNING POINTS

"What do you think so far?" I asked Micah as we drove home Friday night.

We had only one day left in the family workshop, and we were going to see Lorin for part of it. He'd been in for almost two weeks.

"I think ... it has been eye-opening, and much different than what I was afraid of," Micah said. "I have so much to bring into my life and our family, and I'm worried that I'll forget it all. There's so much new to take in."

It sounded as if Micah felt as jumbled up as I did. We were both quiet for a moment, and then he spoke again.

"Sharon, I'm sorry," Micah said. "I hate how reluctantly I've shown up. Not just for Lorin but for you." Micah's words were

soft, and he kept his eyes on the road. I kept my head turned forward, too, but kept listening.

"I was trying to support you," he said, "but my fear got in the way. I kept withholding from you and Lorin. I forced you to do it alone. Not anymore, okay?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything. We drove on in silence for a few more minutes and he continued, his words almost thoughts to himself. "I guess I've hated feeling like a failure, Shar. I know that it's Lorin's choice, his own addiction journey, but my entire role, what made me a good father, husband, and *man*, has been to protect and provide for my family." He laughed roughly. "We taught our kids to stay away from drugs. That drugs are bad. That's basic parenting 101, right? But here I was, failing at both. I couldn't protect Lorin from drugs, or us from having them in our lives. I failed you and my family."

I could see how he was processing through his thoughts, the ride home providing the same space for reflection as it had for me, so many times. I stayed silent and let him go.

"Well," Micah said, "saying 'Don't do drugs' just didn't cut it and I was ignorant of the signs. I didn't want to see how deep Lorin's rabbit hole went." He stuttered out, "Nevertheless, Sharon, it-it's just been ... easier to ignore this whole thing and put my head down. To focus on work and provide any excuse—any situation to stay away. That's how I could control my life, but I hung you out to dry in the process. I'm sorry that I couldn't provide, Sharon, and that you had to step in and make it possible for him to have the best care. I couldn't do it and I felt inadequate.

As long as it was about me and my issues, and not us against a disease, I just couldn't get on board."

Never had I heard Micah confess his weaknesses, real or imagined. Never had he provided accountability without

justification. Finally I said, "And until your line of thinking went from him making bad choices to him having a disease, you couldn't get past it."

"That was a huge turning point," Micah agreed, glancing over at me. I nodded, and he kept on. "The family workshop has helped me to see that it wasn't something I did wrong, or even something that Lorin did wrong, really. Through a series of events, it happened. I have the opportunity to fight against the addiction or I can stay stuck with my head in the sand. I've made it hard on you, and on me, as well as for Lorin, and although it is going to be a lot of work—a huge amount of work—Sharon, I'm finally on board."

I was glad Micah was driving. I was busy holding back tears as he said the words I'd been aching to hear. I felt less alone and more hopeful than I ever had throughout this process. "Thank you, Micah. I'm so glad not to feel alone anymore." It was all I could say, but I smiled and squeezed his hand. He didn't ask for more.

We rode the rest of the way home in silence, lost in our own thoughts. With the information and insight we'd gained from the family workshop, we were able to start digging in, working on our own to find healthy ways to support our son as he worked his own program.

We learned how important consistent boundaries are, and how to enforce them in a healthy way. We had to know our limits, and what was negotiable.

The next day at the workshop, Lorin walked in with his class, looking happy, relaxed, and healthy. He spent time with us alone, talking about what he'd learned so far, and then spoke in a class presentation. He seemed humble, hopeful, and open to his coaches and classmates. We had a chance to talk with his

life coach and his counselors, his nutritionist and doctors as well. Joe shared a little of his story with the room, adding his insight. *No wonder Lorin feels safe about relaxing and opening up to him,* I thought. *I feel the same way.*

The workshop came to an end and we hugged Lorin goodbye. But we still had assignments to complete: discovering what we really needed and wanted for boundaries so that we could communicate them to Lorin. The workshop gave us a small window into what our son was going through, and we felt incredibly close to our counselor and the others sharing the class with us. We kept in touch with them and they became a part of our solution, part of Us Against Addiction.

– JOE –

When Sharon told me at the workshop how healthy Lorin was looking, I was happy to hear her say that, but not all that surprised. A lot had happened to him during the two weeks he'd been with us, as it did for all of the new clients.

The first day they see the doctor or nurse practitioner, who performs a full physical, looking at what kind of chemicals they've been on. Then early the next morning before the clients eat anything, the medical staff does a urine analysis, the most important test for extracting critical information. We look at vitamin and mineral levels, amino acid levels (which feed the neurotransmitters of the brain), and organic acids, which help us establish genetic factors.

After that, the clients get their first IV of vitamins and minerals, while at the same time we draw blood to send off to a couple of labs. This is the first step in the biochemical restoration. We're looking at basic labs like liver function and red blood cell counts, but we also want to determine elevated histamine levels,

kryptopyrroluria—a deficiency of zinc and vitamin B6, which is linked to a number of neurological issues—adrenal function, thyroid function, MTHFR genes 677 and 1298, cortisol levels, copper levels, and iron. It takes one to two weeks to get the results.

After clients are a bit more stable, we do a saliva collection to get cortisol levels, as high levels of cortisol can be a sign of heavy alcohol consumption. Then we look at glucose and blood sugar levels to check for things like diabetes.

Once we get the lab results back, every week the medical team gets together with the life coach, the bio counselor, and the doctor to discuss the results. Then the bio counselor meets with the client and goes over what was discussed.

The medical team gives the client the supplements based on those results. The vast majority of clients are depleted in vitamins and minerals—brain stuff. So we give them what's called the detox protocol. We combine that with good, healthy meals and snacks. No sugar, no caffeine, just natural organic meals. Healthy protein, meat, and vegetables. Our hope is to get the supplements into their body until the good-quality food can get their body back in alignment. There are some supplements that we recommend they continue, even after they leave.

All of these things had happened by the time Sharon and Micah came to the family workshop.

When Micah came up to me at the end of the workshop to thank me, I knew that he and Sharon were making progress with their own struggle. We see it a lot, where one spouse is ready to listen and the other is not. The workshop helps them start to communicate in a different way, a healthier way. They start feeling the freedom to share things they hadn't.

It doesn't happen to every family, but a big percentage get honest like that. They leave with a more honest, open relationship. They had a long road to go, still, but like Lorin, they were making good, solid steps toward healthy boundaries.

CHAPTER 17

Relapse Can Happen

"Addiction cannot be won. It can be managed,
and treated, and beat back, but it is a disease."

—JOE

– SHARON –

I WAVED AS LORIN CAME DOWN THE STAIRS of Cattail House, bags in hand, and gave me a big hug. Lorin had completed his InnerBalance program, and although there wasn't a ceremony, he had crossed a threshold nonetheless. I'd only seen him a week ago, and it was still a surprise to see just how much better he looked.

"You look good, son," I said, as I hugged him back.

"I feel good," Lorin said with a smile. "There's no way will I ever go back to that crap again. This feels way better!"

He looked around at what had been his home for the last month. People were eating lunch, reading, or chatting together, and I took it to mean a feeling of clean living. I compared this young man with the memory of my gaunt, lifeless son who walked through the doors of InnerBalance twenty-eight short days ago. His bursts of humor back then had been tinged with bitterness and self-deprecation. I'd take this guy, any day. He looked happy and healthy.

I remembered then that Joe had called the feeling the "Pink Cloud" in the family workshop—an incredible high that graduates, as well as loved ones, can experience. When we stopped by to say goodbye to him, Joe cautioned both Lorin and me.

"You'll feel ready to take on the world," he said to Lorin, "but remember, you are in a vulnerable state. We can all feel bulletproof against addiction, happy and healthier than we've been for months or years, so we might not see the warning signs. It's easy to let old habits, triggers, and friend circles back in." Joe turned to me. "And Sharon, family members can easily overlook the signs of a return to addiction."

I nodded. Micah and I would need to be vigilant against the Pink Cloud.

"Keep in mind, Lorin," Joe continued, "it's hard to focus on what career sounds good when all we can think of is going back to that drink or drug. It's a daily decision you have to make, over and over again, to not go back. You'll have to make it hourly, sometimes by the minute.

> "As a recovering person, we—and I say 'we' because I have to do this, too—we really only have one job to do. It's to reconnect to ourselves and to establish a track record of keeping the focus on recovery and developing new habits. It's exhausting, tricky, and a full-time job.

So stick with those meetings, Lorin, and stay plugged in." Joe hugged us both and headed back to his work.

On the drive home, I told Lorin that his dad and I had agreed to help him out financially for a month. Offering any financial help hadn't seemed fair to me, but Micah clarified for me why we should.

"Sharon, Lorin having the space to learn life skills, reconnect with himself and others, and stay in meetings is exactly what we wanted for him, remember?" Micah had said. "I would be nervous if we just said, 'Good luck, and don't relapse.' They told us at the center that it's going to take time to undo what the addiction has done. This gives him the best chance of success, long term."

The staff at the center had helped us with all our questions about money, location, quality of accommodations, and the level of responsibility and connection that Lorin would need. They were making sure that not having a pile of money dedicated to our barely sober son would not be a barrier. So now we had a plan, starting with paying for a room at a sober living facility for Lorin.

At first it was odd, not telling Lorin how to solve his problems. And yet, it brought more peace into our life than Micah and I had experienced in years. A month later, Lorin moved in with a friend he'd met at one of the meetings; a few months after that, he moved in with his new girlfriend, closer to our side of town. Although we worried that moving in with her was happening too fast, we weren't in charge. And with each positive transition and relationship Lorin built, his smile got bigger.

Six months after he completed his program, Lorin brought us a gift. As I opened the little jewelry box he handed me, I saw the words "To thine own self be true" painted around the edge of a small blue coin. In the middle was the number 6. I smiled, giving Lorin a fierce hug. The coin was his six-month marker of sobriety, hard-won recognition he'd earned at his twelve-step meetings. This was the only one I'd seen, as he was deeply private about these precious coins.

"I know I'm doing the work," Lorin said to Micah and me, "but you guys are my support team, and I don't know where I'd be without you. This is our milestone."

At this, I finally turned off the high-alert status I'd so firmly planted around my heart.

THE DESTRUCTIVENESS OF PATTERNS

"I don't think Lorin is being honest with us." The words came out of left field, just five days after Lorin shared his coin with us. Micah whispered them to me over the kitchen counter, out of earshot of Lorin. My mouth went dry when I saw he was serious. I would have dismissed those words easily, except my fears flooded back, like an old, familiar blanket. *What if Micah's right? Could this happen again, just six months in?*

For the last few days, I had to admit, Lorin had sounded a little off. And when he had asked if he could stay with us for a night or two because he'd broken up with his girlfriend, I thought it was odd, but I had still said yes.

Oh. There it was, the major pattern I'd overlooked: him coming to stay with us for "just a night or two." And here I had been the one reminding Micah that there was no room to let down our guard, that we had to be vigilant.

It took less than an hour for me to swallow my pride and call Joe. I worried he would say what I was already saying to myself: "Sharon, we've been focusing on addiction this whole time! How

could you have missed Lorin's warning signs?" Of course, Joe didn't say that. Not anything of the sort.

- JOE -

When Sharon called to tell me Lorin had relapsed, I cleared some time so we could talk.

I knew this could happen, of course; relapse, even after someone has gone through a program, is not uncommon. About 35 percent of our clients relapse—a low figure, actually. It's as high as 80 percent in some programs.

Lorin had done well during his stay. He had participated in group meetings, the twelve-step meetings, and exercise programs. His therapists, counselors, and life coaches had helped him navigate his days with us. They'd taken Lorin and the other clients on trips to the mountains and other places to reconnect with themselves and nature.

One of the most critical parts of Lorin's treatment was the biochemical aspect—the supplements and nutrients he received based on his lab work and symptoms. They acted as healing agents.

Some of the major causes of relapse are when people haven't developed a strong support system, when they stop reaching out for help, and when they stop their biochemical regimen. They stop taking their supplements and getting the right nutrients, thinking they no longer need them because they're feeling good. Then depression, racing thoughts, and anxiety can return, and pretty soon they are reaching once again for alcohol or drugs to relieve these symptoms.

When I went over some of this with Sharon on the phone, she sounded shaky. "I have no idea if he stopped taking his supplements. I'd have to ask him. But if so, you're saying that this is

what could have contributed to him relapsing? That maybe if Lorin hadn't stopped taking the supplements, then maybe he could have just stumbled, instead?"

"Or he may have been able to pass the situation up altogether," I said.

Remember, Sharon, passing up an opportunity to use, especially the first time it happens, is incredibly hard for every recovering person.

Sticking with their program drastically improves the odds, but it's always a close call."

We made an appointment for Sharon—and, hopefully, Lorin—to come to the office. But three days later, when I opened my office door to see them, it was just Sharon in the waiting room.

– SHARON –

"He's not here," I said miserably. "Micah and I don't know where he is. We confronted him about using again, after I called you. I already knew the drill: Lorin couldn't stay with us, not even for a night, if he was using. So we booked a room down the street for him. It was just for two days, but we haven't seen him since."

"How are you holding up?" Joe asked, leaning into my quick hug and closing his office door. I sat down in my usual spot, on his sofa across from the door.

"I'm over it," I replied wearily. "All my worst fears are coming back. He could be dead, for all we know. It's the not knowing that's killing us. I feel like he played me, Joe. I feel betrayed, both by him and by myself. I'd stopped being on high alert—you know, the just-in-case I need to fortify myself against something bad happening?—that part. I had let my guard down,

thinking, 'I've got this whole recovery thing down. I know how to do this.' Well, Joe, I don't. My ego is gone, and I don't know how to just be fine with him being such an…such a …" my weariness was morphing into resentment, "such a jerk."

I needed the tears of frustration that leaked down my cheeks to carry this stress and anger away. I felt caught in the middle of mayhem and hated the feeling of helplessness. Being in Joe's office gave me permission to acknowledge how I was feeling—again.

"Sharon, I'm not saying you shouldn't get away from the chaos he is causing you," Joe said. "You are right to keep anyone away who is causing harm to your safety or sanity, until they commit to and get help. You have to stop empowering the disruption they can cause. But," he added sternly, "they aren't jerks."

How could Joe defend this behavior? My cheeks flushed, feeling sullen and angry all over again.

RECOGNIZING ADDICTION AS AN INSIDIOUS DISEASE

"Name-calling is just adding to the problem," Joe continued. "The majority of our population thinks that addiction is a decision and not a disease. It's time to acknowledge that addiction is a disease, and not just an excuse that makes it marginally okay for addicted individuals to do horrible things to loved ones and strangers."

Ouch. That was exactly how I'd been treating Lorin's addiction. It was a disease, in general, but when it came to my own son's journey, it was…different, somehow.

Joe said, "I'll ask you this: if Lorin was healthy, do you really think that he'd do these destructive, chaotic things to you, in your home? Would he lie to you, and betray you?"

That brought me up short. The Lorin I had known *before* was a happy, caring teen who went out of his way to love his family.

"No," I replied. "No way would he do these things, Joe. He was an awesome kid before…this. Before addiction messed with his sense of reason."

There was no mistaking the sadness in my voice. Joe's own voice was measured and calm as he continued.

"Sharon, have you ever known people with Alzheimer's or dementia, or brain tumors or cancer—where they were the rational, loving people you'd known one year, and then they became a different person the next?"

I felt a stab to my heart. My dad had passed away from cancer five years earlier. My mom was showing signs of dementia. I answered softly, "In fact, I know several."

"Me, too," said Joe. "These are diseases that attack the functions of the brain. When addiction takes over a person's life, this bizarre behavior is based on the effect of alcohol and drugs on neurotransmitters and other parts of the brain, the same way other disorders of the brain work. Experiencing this disease as it spreads to the mind can be jarring and sad, an overwhelming experience for both the person going through it and for their loved ones.

"It doesn't excuse behavior that hits against your boundaries, Sharon, but it explains it," Joe said. "These bad-behavior examples—personality changes, gaining a temper, or becoming distressingly emotional—those are symptoms of the illness. Addiction is not a decision to behave badly. It is a disease that attacks a person's reason and logic, as well as their body.

In fact, many years ago, the AMA—American Medical Association—wanted to see if alcoholism fit their criteria for other illnesses and diseases. When they ran it through their process, they found that it did.[24]Addiction changes the brain and body, making the choice to stop almost impossible. It's as difficult to successfully treat as cancer or heart disease."

Joe's words hit me to the core. I talked about my parents'

diseases with pity and compassion, not anger at them for going through it. Why would the disease of addiction be any different? And yet ...

"Some of the stuff people pull is really bad, though, Joe," I said. "We still have to survive it."

"Yes," Joe said, matter-of-factly, "that's true. The biggest thing about addiction is it keeps people from living up to their potential. And some of what addicted folks can resort to, as a result of their continued use, can be truly awful. Reprehensible. Illegal. Criminal. But do you feel that if the majority of people with addictions were healthy, they would be doing these criminal, illegal, reprehensible things?"

"No," I whispered. My anger started to dissipate. Not completely, but it shifted to the disease itself. *Effing addiction*, I thought miserably.

"Joe," I said, after a moment, "I think I've been on my own pink cloud of invincibility. I felt that all the hard stuff was behind Lorin and me."

"I'll tell you how it was for me," Joe offered. "I relapsed over and over again for three years. I tried to get clean and sober on my own. I made bargains with myself, trying to drink just a little, or use mouthwash and peppermint extract instead of alcohol for my fixes. But they were just excuses. I had to get to where I wanted to be clean and sober more than I wanted drugs or alcohol.

I had to surrender my control. It's what each person has to come to in order to get help. And nobody can make a person surrender. That is a very personal battle.

"All we can do is give the addicted individual every opportunity to get them clear-headed. Give them all the tools we can for them to do battle. But," he added emphatically, "they must

come to the conclusion for themselves: addiction cannot be won. It can be managed, and treated, and beat back, but in the end it is a disease.

And like a doctor treating a cancer patient, we don't give up on our clients just because they don't always follow the regimen that keeps illness at bay. We don't turn them away, we keep battling as long as they are willing to battle." Joe stood and walked toward the window. "That's how it is with addiction, or how it should be. It's how we do battle in our center."

"Do you think Lorin could come back to the center if he gets to the point of doing it for himself?" I asked.

"Of course!" Joe said, turning to me. "He needs to know he is worth it.

That lapses and relapses are very real parts of recovery, and there is a plan to get through them.

It takes work, and help, and healthy connections with himself and his new, sober environment, but it is manageable."

"But why would this time be different?" I asked.

"His program would be quite a bit different," Joe explained, settling back into his chair. "More intense. More accountability and input from him. But he would still have a team—our staff, and you and Micah—if he's willing to get on board."

"But," I protested, "what else can Micah and I do? I mean, aren't we supposed to be keeping our distance?"

"There are always things that families and good friends can do, Sharon," Joe replied. "It's Lorin's battle, no doubt about it, but remember that it's also a disease, and getting sober takes help."

"So what can families do?" I was trying hard to lose my defensive tone.

"For example, an intervention that will possibly help the person get closer to that place of surrender. Also"—and here Joe

looked at me, sternly but kindly—"families can take better care of themselves, by getting help so that *they* don't continue being dragged down the path of addiction with their loved one."

Save me from going down that path again, Joe, I thought as I nodded.

– JOE –

Lorin had a choice to make. He could reach out to his life coach, or to me, or he could keep using. No one but Lorin was in charge of that choice.

Addiction is not a decision for people to unmake, it is a process to unravel, and it takes time and help to get through.

As long as we, as recovering people, have it in our minds that we can get high once and walk away if we really, really want to, we're vulnerable to relapse. It's every recovering person's chink in the armor.

As a recovering addicted person, I will never be able to control drugs and alcohol. But in full recovery, as long as I stay healthy, I can put the illness into remission, and no longer suffer the consequences of this disease.

– SHARON –

On Halloween evening, Micah and I stayed close to the front door, busy giving kids in costumes their sugar rush. We would barely shut the door against the chilly night air before there would be another knock. I swung open the door for the umpteenth time.

"Hi, Mom." I stared into the eyes of my tired, addicted son. Although we'd heard from him sporadically over the last month, Micah and I hadn't seen Lorin in at least two weeks. He'd texted us a few lines that he was at work, or just going to sleep, and would call later—although he never did. *At least now we know he isn't dead*.

"I want to go see Joe again." Lorin sounded calm and determined, despite looking rumpled and scruffy.

"Oh—okay," I stuttered, "I can—" He cut me off.

"No, Mom," Lorin said firmly. "*I* will call him. But…can I come in and talk?"

I nodded, turning off the porch lights and leaving the bowl of candy outside. The three of us sat down at the dining room table.

LORIN'S RELAPSE, UNMASKED

"It's good to see you, son, but why did you knock?" I said. "It's your home and you never asked to come in before."

"I knocked because *it's not* my home, Mom," Lorin said. "Not anymore. Because of my actions, the stuff I've put you through, I've earned the right *not* to walk in. I can't keep thinking of it as my home because I just keep leaning on you if I do. It's how I keep taking advantage of you." He took a deep breath, then continued.

"When you kicked me out this last time," he said softly, "you stuck to your boundaries. That was the best thing you could have done. It was huge for me, because I had time to feel really alone. And I don't want to be alone. Not because I wouldn't have people to con, but because I really value my family and my friends. I want to be with you, but you can't be around me when I'm using."

He turned in his chair, looking into my eyes. "I'm sick of bullshitting myself. That has been the point of me talking to you, I realize. To get you on board with the bullshit I tell myself. And I thought I'd seen the worst when I had to go out of state to recover.

I thought I'd hit the lowest point when I went into InnerBalance. Those events were rock-bottom, I thought. But I apparently haven't hit rock bottom for myself until now. I know I'm ready to do this for myself, but I also know I cannot do this alone."

I felt frozen, torn between being glad to see my son alive and knowing I'd heard it all before. I couldn't afford to crack. I looked at Micah, who had his arms crossed. *He's pissed,* I thought. Pissed that Lorin had gone radio-silent on us, that he looked rumpled and exhausted, that he sounded so calm and assured.

Lorin turned to the picture window, pointing to his car—the one we'd lent him two weeks ago, at his request, so he could get to work—parked way down the street. "That's where I've been for the last hour or so. Just down the street from my home with the people I love. I knew you two and Addie would be giving out candy to the neighborhood kids. And that I wasn't part of it." His voice dropped. "I wasn't. Part. Of my own. Family." He drummed his fingers on the table as he released those words, quietly but forcefully. My heart beat faster, knowing how simple his logic was to him. I couldn't speak.

"I want that again," he said softly. "I want to be happy like that."

I started to speak, but Lorin clasped my hand and continued. "See, after you kicked me out, I went on a bender. I got high for a week straight and didn't sleep. I kept going and going until I finally ran out. Then I crashed, missed work the next day, and got fired from a great job. Again. I barely had any money left, and my room hasn't been available for a while. So I just ... started driving around in the car, little by little, running out of ideas.

"It took me a while, but I realized I wasn't doing that great," Lorin said somberly. "This wasn't me just messing up for a minute and then getting my life back on track. It was me throwing my life away.

And then tonight came. I basically had been driving around because I was too cold to sit in a parking lot any longer. Every

time I got too tired, I pulled over and slept for about two hours, and then kept driving because I had nowhere to go. Around six this evening, I was down to empty on the gas gauge again, and ended up down the street from you guys. I wasn't here to get money so I could be on my way. I didn't want to leave at all. Home was the only place I wanted to be.

"So I got out of the car and walked down the street to your lawn." Lorin stopped for a minute, looking first at me, then at Micah. "It was the hardest thing I've ever done, crossing that grass and walking up the steps to ring your bell. And then to admit, right out loud, that I've failed at sobriety." He took a sharp intake of breath, choking on his next words. "I can't do it on my own."

I hugged him then, fiercely. It was too late to call Joe, so Micah and I kept talking with our son.

"How is going back to InnerBalance going to be any different the second time around, Lor?" Micah asked. It took a moment, but when Lorin answered, I could tell he'd put a lot of thought into it.

"You didn't waste your money and love on me the first time I went through," Lorin said. "I learned a lot. But I didn't give it a chance like I will now. I was cocky back then, thinking I had it all figured out. Like, just being in the program was the answer, and if I just showed up, the knowledge would somehow seep into me, whether I paid attention or not.

"Now I know that the goal isn't just to go get through the classes; it's to really, really learn. I know for sure, now, that it actually takes work to stay clean and sober. Lots of hard work.

"I know I'm going to need help detoxing and getting my brain and body levels back to normal again. My brain is playing tricks on me and my depression and anxiety are all out of whack again. And I know my eating habits have been crap, full of sugar and nothing nutritious."

I knew Joe would say his adrenals would be well on their way to being exhausted, contributing to Lorin's depression and anxiety, as well as lack of sleep. His backslide into relapse would have made it even harder for him to overcome the desire to stop relying on his high to get relief.

"This time," Lorin continued, "I'll listen harder about finding the right nutrients for me. I'll ask questions so the supplements stay in my life, not just until I get out. I have to be there for me, and up until now, I haven't been honest with you or myself about that."

Humble, I thought suddenly. My son looked humble.

"Lorin, how did it happen in the first place?" I asked.

"How did I relapse, you mean?" he said. I nodded.

"Such a little thing," Lorin said, a small smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. "A few days after I brought over my six-month chip, I found a box of my old clothes in the basement. I thought I'd run 'em through the laundry, and in one of the pockets of my old pair of gym shorts, I found a little plastic baggie, all wadded up."

It was a small bag of meth. Lorin told us he threw it in the trash, telling himself he didn't need it anymore. *So what happened?* I wondered.

"Then I went on with my evening, proud that it had been such a tiny brush with relapse. The danger of seeing the stuff again ... I'd confronted it, and it was over. But as I lay in bed, I started thinking about what I'd thrown away," Lorin said, as if reading my mind. "Who throws out dope?! I tossed and turned, thinking about that baggie just lying there, going to waste. I couldn't get it out of my head, and in the morning, I fished it back out of the trash and I got high." He paused to let that sink in.

"But—," I began. He put up his hand, stopping me.

"I smoked it because I needed to know."

"You needed to know what?" I asked, softly.

"I needed to know if I was really done," Lorin replied. "I needed to do it one more time, and then I'd never do meth again. I'd *know* I was cured. Now that I think back on it, that was me basically confirming that I *wasn't* done. But this is what my drug-addicted mind asked me to prove. I needed to put my sobriety to the test…so I got some tin foil and a straw and I smoked it." He took a deep breath and let it out. "It was the worst high I'd ever had."

He had never had a bad high, Lorin told Micah and me, so he couldn't imagine there could be such a thing.

"So I thought, 'Let me try it again,'" Lorin said.

"And what happened?" Micah asked.

"It didn't get better," said Lorin. "So I tried again, and again. Still a horrible experience." He shifted in his chair. "Now that I'd been through rehab and had been clean for six months, it was ... tainted. I felt ashamed. I decided I couldn't have that tainted high on my track record, so I kept powering through the tainted, shameful experience."

"Why didn't you stop?" Micah asked. The look of concern on his face mirrored mine.

Lorin sighed. "My drug-addicted mind basically told me it was okay now. 'You already ruined it. Already screwed it up, so you might as well binge.' So I got in touch with someone I'd gotten meth from before. That's when the binge started. I did that for another week or so, and now—well, you know the rest."

He took a deep breath and said, "Look, I love you, but I can't bullshit you anymore. Like, you're onto me. Everyone's onto me. I'm just the last one to know. You showed me that when you kicked me out the last time. I cannot fool you or any family or friends. Not anymore, because we all learned stuff at the center. The family workshop and my time with the staff—my games and my charm don't work anymore to get me what's easy. And if I'm not fooling you guys to get to my next high, then the only

one left I'm bullshitting is me. I know now that I need and want honesty, and I don't remember the last time I was honest. I don't think that the high is worth being alone, Mom. I want to stop."

WHAT WOULD BE DIFFERENT ON THE SECOND TRY

Before I could say anything, Micah asked the question we both needed an answer to. "What makes you think you'll stop this time? You've been sincere before about wanting to stop, and we've all believed you. How is this going to be the time you get off that damned addiction train?"

Lorin stood up and walked around the table to where Micah was sitting. He stood close, towering over Micah, but my husband didn't move. Instead, Micah looked past him. Lorin tapped the table to emphasize his words. "You want to know what the bottom line is for me, Dad? What's pushing at me to get clean and stay clean now, even when nobody's watching?"

Micah nodded, pushing back his chair and refolding his arms in front of him. "I do, Lor."

"You."

Micah looked up at him then.

Lorin said, "I used to spend hours figuring out ways to pay you and Mom back. Grandpa, Aunt Anne, Addie, and everyone else, but Mom and you the most, for how you helped keep me alive. I could work my whole life to pay back the money, but even if I gave you back triple what you've paid on my behalf, it wouldn't be enough.

"But," Lorin continued, sitting down again, "now I know that if I really want to pay my debt to you, and to all the others who were on my side before I was, the best thing I can do is stay clean. No matter what. That's my lifelong repayment to all of you, and to myself."

I couldn't believe he was finally here, at this accountable spot. Micah seemed to be holding his breath. I knew I was.

"Is that enough to keep you honest and accountable when things get hard? Even if you get triggered?" Micah finally asked, his voice softer now, his arms unfolding.

"Dad," Lorin said, "Family is what keeps me going. When I was stabbed, when I was in Utah, when I was beating myself up over finding that bag of meth. It's what brought me to you now, and what will bring me to Joe and InnerBalance again, just as soon as he'll see me."

"Do you need to look at other places?" Micah asked. He was testing Lorin's resolve. "Maybe Joe's place just didn't work and you want to look elsewhere." But Lorin was firm.

"The help I got through Joe's center makes the most sense," Lorin replied. "I don't need to keep looking. I already know they help me. They help do the detox, find the answers for my body and brain, and build a program for me."

I knew Joe's center did what's called a medically managed detox, but if someone were to show up drunk or going through deep withdrawal, his staff would need to take that person to the emergency room to get stable. The medical staff in the emergency room would be able to use higher dosages of medication. But Joe's place was sufficient for what Lorin and many users needed.

"I need to get my body and mind back into balance," Lorin continued. "And I already know that Mom couldn't find anywhere else around here that does that. It's what brought me to Joe the first time, right?" He looked at me and I nodded.

"I'm going back," Lorin said. "I don't want to bullshit myself anymore. And I sure as hell don't want to do my sobriety half-assed. I don't want to risk only getting part of my treatment and only part of the support that's available. I've done the pick-and-choose thing with my sobriety, and it doesn't work. Even if I relapse again," Lorin added, "I'm not giving up."

I stole a look at Micah. *He's still not completely convinced,* I thought.

Lorin seemed to sense that. "Dad, I know the steps now. I've just got to put them back into practice. I know how to get back on this path and do the same exact steps, over and over again: reach out for help, follow the steps for sobriety, keep following my program, stay connected."

Lorin paused, weighing his next words. "You guys can come with me when I go see Joe, but it's *my* meeting with him," he said firmly. "It has to be."

Micah nodded. I nodded, too, speechless but grateful. This was the first time Lorin had taken the lead in finding help. Maybe, just maybe, it was the turning point we had all been waiting for. Maybe, just maybe, Lorin's sobriety was progressing, and recovery had finally started.

"Honestly, I am changed," Lorin said earnestly. "We are all changed, really. For good or bad, it's a family affair. It's Us Against Addiction."

With that, Micah stood up, touching Lorin's shoulder. Lorin stood up, too, and embraced his father, something he hadn't been able to do for quite some time.

-JOE-

The day after Halloween, I got an early-morning phone call at home. It was Keri, putting through a call from the office. Lorin Montgomery was on the line.

This time, I felt, Lorin was going to find the place he needed to reach to really heal. That's when life can ultimately restart. It's the process of sobriety, and the procession into full recovery. While it begins with the addicted person, it quickly touches the lives of everyone around them—including their family.

CHAPTER 18

The Progression of Recovery

"That first year is the hardest part of the battle. Recovery is brutal as far as just staying sober goes. If a person can get through that first year or so, some solid signs of recovery start to manifest."

—JOE

– SHARON –

"HI, JOE." I SMILED AS I OPENED my door. He gave me a quick hug before finding his way to the recliner he always used in our living room. The plush chairs were a welcome change for us both when conference calls and visits to his office got monotonous. I no longer asked him if he'd like some water. He'd just hold up his shiny water bottle and ask me if I was drinking enough liquids.

My intake had gone up dramatically in the two-and-a-half years I'd known him.

We were getting closer to wrapping up the book, but I had some follow-up questions about what recovery looked like—especially after going through Lorin's experience. But before we could start in, Joe's phone rang. He only took the call if it was patient-related, and only stayed on the call if the issue had already run through Keri first. He stayed on, so I left the room to give him some privacy.

"Do we need to reschedule?" I asked, once I knew he had finished.

"No," Joe said, "Keri and the staff are on it. They are just keeping me informed." There was a troubled look on his face. "But this is a hard one, Sharon. A sad situation. He may not make it."

"Your patient could die?" I asked, voicing the fear I'd had throughout our journey with Lorin.

Joe nodded slightly. "Unfortunately. He's not showing any signs of recovery. Cases like this come up every once in a while, and even though we've got processes and procedures in place for especially difficult situations, it still gets to me. The crux of the problem," Joe explained, "is that it's so hard for the family to stop enabling their behavior."

"It sounds like it's a double-edged sword. Very understandable," I said, with the conviction of one who had been there. "You want to enable a person because you want to save the person you love or care about."

"Bottom line, Sharon," Joe said, "loved ones enable in order to stop their pain, just like the addicted person is using something to stop *their* pain. They think, 'If I can just stop him or her from using, I won't feel the pain of their addiction.'" *I remember,* I thought to myself. *I used that excuse countless times with my son.*

I flashed back to the time Joe shared that his mom had finally

had enough and put him on a plane to Colorado. I could imagine the agony in her voice as she spoke the words: 'Joe, I can't do this anymore. You're killing me and you're killing yourself.' I wondered at her resolve, in those weeks and months after he left. She might have doubted herself, almost wavering. She had to have had those moments—I'd had a million of them myself. But there was a point where I was just like Joe's mom, and just couldn't cave in anymore. I wondered what it would take for this family to get to that point…and if they would.

"In this case," Joe continued, "he keeps going over their boundaries and they don't realize that they keep enabling him. His loved ones are inconsistent about their involvement and the urgency of him getting help. He goes back to using, over and over again." Joe sighed. "That's not to blame the family, because we both know that addiction and recovery land ultimately on the recovering person's shoulders. But their support system is also crucial."

"Your client hasn't made the decision to help himself," I said, relating all too well. "He isn't surrendering. That's such a painful time." *For both the user and their loved ones*, I thought.

Joe sighed again, shaking his head. "Hopefully, he'll hit bottom without too much pain. Hopefully, he *will* surrender and remember that his family has given him a choice to get healthy and well. And hopefully, they will stick with him all the way through, changing their habits about how to support his recovery."

Of course, there was client confidentiality, and Joe was a stickler about it, but Joe's phone call came down to what I could relate to: addiction and recovery are a family affair.

"But…he may never choose to get well," Joe continued somberly. "He's been out of InnerBalance for quite a while now. He's stumbled and is struggling, just as his family is. He may keep using, tuning them out. We offer help and it's a tough thing

when he turns it away—that's what *I'm* struggling with." Joe paused, looking down at the floor, and then said quietly, "Our kid may die because he won't accept help."

I noticed he referred to his client as "our kid." Joe continually amazed me with how deeply he cared.

Joe took a long drink of water and shifted in his chair, a signal to move on in our discussion. "What's new with Lorin, and with your family? I'd love to know."

MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES MEANS MAKING PROGRESS

Joe sat back in his chair while I leaned forward in mine, happy to fill him in on the latest happenings. It had been more than a year now since Lorin had relapsed and gone through InnerBalance for the second time.

"We're all doing well," I said. "Lorin's been working at a shipping company. Before that, he was working at a mechanic's. Each time at a new job, he's stayed a few months and has either quit or been let go. But Joe, as far as I can see, it's not because of his bad attitude, or because he doesn't care. And it's definitely not because he's using. I think ... I think he's ... learning. To trust himself. To trust others, maybe. And I see that it's a lot of risk for him, but he's doing it. He knows it's hard. He's exhausted and hustling to keep himself employed and busy. But he's doing it."

I looked at my hands and said softly, "He's living here again."

"Why do you look embarrassed about that?" Joe asked kindly.

"Well," I replied, "I thought maybe it was a step backward, both for him and for us. You know, being independent."

"Sharon," Joe said, smiling, "this isn't a step backward. It's progress if he's still working and is sober. It's progress, however it looks, if you still have your boundaries in place and so does he. He's establishing his routine in recovery, even if his housing,

his relationship, or work status is in flux. This is part of recovery, and it sounds like he—and you—are right on track."

I thought through Joe's words. "After he graduated from InnerBalance for that second time, Lorin said he chose sobriety as his method to repay us and those who helped support him throughout his addiction and into his recovery journey. I think it's helped him to stay clean so far. He is slowly but steadily rebuilding his life on a foundation of sobriety."

I paused and then asked, "'Sobriety'? 'Recovery'? What's the correct term, here, Joe?"

"People use the term 'sobriety' in many ways, and that's just fine," Joe replied. "But as far as the progression of recovery goes, sobriety is just the basic state the body is in when not physically under the influence of chemicals. It's the necessary foundation for recovery."

I thought about my son. "Lorin isn't white-knuckling it like he used to, but he's the first one to say he will never be cured, either. I guess it's ... Lorin's journey."

Joe nodded, taking a drink of his water. "Saying it is Lorin's journey is absolutely true. He's starting to utilize an important part of recovery: rebuilding his foundation. As he draws strength from that foundation, he can give of himself again.

He's caring about himself and others, which eventually returns a person to the greater community.

He's in the beginning steps of recovery, for sure."

"The way we use 'recovery' and 'sobriety' is pretty broad," I said, contemplating the two terms. "I witnessed Lorin going through what I know now are stages of his addiction and saw what he went through as he detoxed. Now, I think he's moving through stages of sobriety ... uh, recovery, too." I took a breath, trying to frame my thoughts. "I feel like I should know more

about this part. The after-addiction part. Does the part of life after using count as another stage?"

STAYING ON TRACK AND OFF THE ADDICTION TRAIN

"Absolutely," Joe said. "It's another stage. Although I'd say it's more of an ongoing progression. You touched on it just a minute ago when you said that Lorin was somewhere in between white-knuckling it and being cured.

> But recovery is not being 'cured'—it's long-term healing being put into motion."

"So there are stages of drug or alcohol use," I said, "and those recovery indicators are another part of those stages, right?"

I ticked them off on my fingers as I remembered them from before: "Use, abuse, and addiction," Joe nodded. Adding another digit, I said, "And now, recovery." Sighing, I dropped my hand into my lap.

"I don't know why I'm still surprised about any of this, Joe. Your time going into addiction, as well as hitting bottom and getting help, took years. Decades, really. So why would the stage of recovery be any different?"

"You're right," Joe said. "My time recovering from my addiction has been equally as long to shape."

I stared up at the ceiling. "But for some reason," I said, "I truly thought Lorin's time would be …"

"Shorter?" Joe added.

"Shorter," I echoed. "Maybe because we caught things sooner. Or learned from you. I'm embarrassed to say it, but I thought my son had avoided a huge collision, skirting around the worst of addiction. Probably because he's been sober a year and more, so I figured he's out of the woods." Joe cocked his head as I said this, but I kept on. "Maybe I think he got a lighter

version of addiction, averting the agony and work you went through to get where you are now." My cheeks burned as I said the words.

"Ha! Why do you think Lorin's skirted around anything?" Joe asked. "Or averted anything? His story's not done, any more than mine is. Not his work, or his accomplishments."

"I ... I don't know. I think I've forgotten to think about how Lorin's future looks," I admitted. "Joe, I don't think I've dared to think that far yet. He's jumped from job to job for so long, and I have just practiced living in the moment, accepting things as they are. I'm just grateful that he …"

"Grateful that he isn't using anymore, right?" Joe finished.

"Yes," I said softly. "How in the world did I forget to believe that he could do great things?"

"You haven't," Joe assured me. "Neither has he, I'd bet. You're on the same healing path of recovery as Lorin is.

"It takes time to wake up. To hope again. To look down the road."

I nodded, and he continued. "That's why knowing about the levels within recovery is going to be important to you."

There it was, back to the recovery stage. "I guess I just ... forgot that once a person's addicted, it's always going to be with them." *And with me, as the loved one,* I thought, *by default*. "But I'm excited to learn if there's more to it."

"Well, as you've heard me say, Sharon, every person's addiction story is unique. Their circumstances and choices make up those differences. But there are some things that are the same. The recovery stage can be broken down, just like the addiction part." Joe took a drink and smiled at my look of resignation.

"Don't look so glum, Sharon," Joe said. "In some ways, I wish you could call recovery an end to addiction because I can see you'd like to just put it away. But I don't feel that way.

It's never going to be complete. Recovery is just another part of life. It's just a different path than we'd originally planned. But then, so is every stage of addiction."

"Isn't that the truth," I said softly.

"None of us—myself included—are done working on ourselves or setting goals," Joe continued. "Even throughout recovery. Holistically, there's always work to do to improve ourselves. Staying clean and sober is a daily routine. You've got to be proactive and stay on top of it. If and when we can get there, this last part of the addiction journey is an acknowledgment that as long as we are alive, we need to keep working on ourselves, on our potential, and on loving life."

"And on keeping off the addiction train," I said.

"If we are in recovery, Sharon, we are still always one use away from a relapse and finding ourselves right back on it." He paused for a moment and then added, "Believe it or not, this reality is also empowering."

I looked at Joe quizzically. "Being one step away from a relapse is ... empowering? How so?"

"Because," said Joe, "this part is up to us."

THE THREE LEVELS OF RECOVERY

Clearly, Joe was in a very different place than Lorin, who had just over a year under his belt and was unsteady in his progress. Joe, after so many years, was humble but also sure of himself. Both men were choosing to take control of their lives through sobriety. *That is empowering,* I thought to myself.

"Lorin's got a ways to go," I mused, "but he's got a good start, and he sure acts like he's doing his work for himself."

Joe nodded encouragingly. "These are the early signs of his recovery. A big sign is that Lorin seems to accept his responsibility for it now." Joe looked out the window for a moment,

then said, "But you're right about the progression of addiction, Sharon. It continues right past when a person gets help. We've been caught up in those first three stages—use, abuse, and addiction—because the descent into addiction and hitting bottom is so …" Joe searched for the right word.

"Insidious?" I offered.

"Relentless," Joe finished. "Both, really. Not everyone who uses, or abuses, a drink or drug will keep heading into addiction, but for those of us who do, it's a relentless, one-way trip." Joe shook his head. "But if you recall, once I'd had that moment of hitting bottom and surrendering control over my addiction, I transitioned into that last stage: recovery. It was early recovery, the first level in the recovery stage, but the moment I acknowledged I couldn't do it by myself, my mindset changed."

I thought of Joe behind the wheel of his car so long ago, careening down the road, yelling at God, pleading with him. It was later that night, after listening to Ida Mae's advice, that he reached out to get a sponsor. The moment in his car was his moment of truly surrendering.

"Once a person hits rock bottom and surrenders," Joe continued, "they have started recovery, which is really broken down into three levels. Some parts of the progression of recovery go almost hand in hand, like me hitting bottom and surrendering control. Other bits take a little while longer."

I thought about the levels of recovery. "What are they?" I asked.

"If I had to break them down, I'd make them a progression of three different levels with various steps in each, Sharon," Joe said. "Early, mid, and advanced levels of recovery."

"Okay," I said. *Easy enough.*

"A few steps, or milestones, occur as a person progresses through those levels," Joe explained.

"The steps for early recovery break down into surrender, acceptance, treatment, and education.

At this point, it's all about discovering. Discovering the kind of work it takes to get, and then stay, clean and sober."

That made sense. *Discovering the work*. I automatically tried to gauge Lorin somewhere along those lines. As far as I could tell, he'd done all those things.

"What about mid-recovery—what are those steps?" I asked.

"At mid-level, recovery's about commitment, accountability, and awareness," Joe answered.

"This level is about *doing* the work. Actually putting the work in motion."

Doing the work sounded like the level my son was smack-dab in the middle of.

"And finally, the level of advanced recovery is about living the work.

The steps are," Joe looked up toward the ceiling, trying to frame his ideas in a way I could easily grasp them, "healing the damage, strengthening what's there, and fully experiencing the results. It's being able to love and be loved. It's living up to your potential."

Wow. Living the work was exactly what I'd been so impatient for Lorin to experience! The look on my face had to have conveyed the many questions I had about what Joe shared. He held up his hand. "I know," he said. "That's a lot to take in."

"Well," I said, smiling, "I love that you broke this part down. I'm ready for you to expand on them though, that's for sure." I was glad my recorder was picking it all up.

"I'm really happy talking about this level, Sharon. It's the

positive aspect of my journey, and of my life overall, because," said Joe, smiling broadly, "this stage has lasted the longest."

"I know Lorin isn't at that level yet, but I feel like I already know the steps in the first two levels pretty well," I said.

"Your family's been living them," Joe agreed.

"Looking back through them, like we are now," I said, "I didn't realize how hard it has sometimes been to define that progress. It can feel a little overwhelming when you're in the slog of it. So thinking of the progress Lorin's made in this way makes me feel a lot better. I'm really excited that there are steps I can use to gauge his progress."

"I get that," Joe said. "Once a person moves out of addiction, usually by hitting some kind of bottom, we want to know: How long? How long to get back to normal, to regular life? But we rarely have anything specific to compare our progress to."

I nodded. That was the topic of many conversations between Micah and me.

Joe sighed. "It would be great to have an easy answer, but because everyone is so different, and our journeys are unique, it depends on the person. Nevertheless, these steps seem to be consistent, in general."

Fair enough, I thought. "So take me through the three levels, Joe, in more detail." I glanced to make sure my recorder was still on.

MILESTONES IN EARLY RECOVERY…

"Early recovery starts first when someone truly surrenders," Joe said. "That first step is to acknowledge that only by doing whatever it takes to get well and follow a plan will they stay sober. Then, as they accept that help, *and* commit to sticking with that help, they've hit acceptance, the second step. I like to think of them as milestones."

Surrender and acceptance. Lorin's moment happened when

he waited outside our home that Halloween night, and then as he walked through our door. Determined and humble, I remembered. "Lorin hit bottom lots of times," I said. "He even started the recovery process a few times before bouncing back. But once he truly committed, it felt different: solid and real."

"It's a big deal to get to that mindset, because only then can a person experience that third early milestone of treatment," Joe said.

> **"Going from surrendering and accepting help to taking ownership is a major leap, and some form of treatment is the best chance for that.**

A recovering person needs help detoxing as part of their treatment, as well as needing counseling. Accepting that help, and committing to stick with the help that's provided, is a huge change, not just for their body, but for their mind to adjust to, as well. But it's possible. It can be done."

Joe is evidence of that, I thought.

"Once a person has started their treatment plan, they are in a delicate, beginning state of sobriety," Joe continued. "That fourth step in early recovery; education. It combines gradually with a recovering person's treatment plan so they start to learn what's to come, in order to stay sober. What's important about this part is how essential it is for them to continue getting help, even as they start to feel better. Even when they're thinking clearer than they have been. It's a fragile time."

I thought of the pink cloud of invincibility that Lorin carried around that first time he left InnerBalance, believing he could take it from there, all on his own. He let his guard down and relapsed under that invincibility cloud, six months into his early recovery.

IN MID-RECOVERY...

Joe continued, "This brings us to mid-recovery: doing the work."

"So this part is putting what they've learned into motion, right?" I asked.

"Right," Joe said.

> "When a person progresses into mid-recovery, they are doing the work that they've just discovered.

Putting in the time and effort to form healthy habits. The milestones or steps for this level, as I mentioned, are based around commitment, accountability, and awareness. Continuing to educate themselves about the damage the chemical has done, which brings an even deeper understanding. This level takes a strong, continued commitment to do whatever it takes to stay sober. And combines it with accountability and awareness of self and others."

"I feel like it was a few months before Lorin kind of woke up again to that self-awareness," I said. "I'd say it took maybe four or six months, really. And there are still times when I see him go back into himself, like he's taking stock of his reality. But then he keeps moving forward. Adjusting to the consequences of his new choices. Moving forward some more. And he's gradually adding people to his life."

"Lorin's taking a more solid, consistent ownership of his addiction journey," Joe said approvingly. "But as you've discovered, it can be a gradual process. Several months, at least, to move through early recovery. Moving through mid-recovery, he, and others at this point, are starting to see positive signs that things are getting better. Their mood may improve slightly. Maybe they sleep a little better or are a little less anxious. But once that sense of worth for themselves and others sinks in sufficiently, and a healthy awareness of their world is solidly part of their routine, that person moves into the third level: advanced recovery."

"Living the work," I said, remembering.

Joe knew I was thinking of Lorin. "Sharon, it can take months or years to get to this point, but think of advanced recovery as successfully experiencing a lifestyle change. For me, this is an immensely satisfying, long-lasting, important step."

...AND ADVANCED RECOVERY

Joe could see me trying to piece together what I'd learned. "That first year is the hardest part of the battle. Recovery is brutal as far as just staying sober goes.

> But if a person can get through that first year or so, some solid signs of advanced recovery start to manifest."

"Like what?" I asked, encouraged by Joe's words.

"Advanced recovery is experiencing the full effects of the biochemical restoration that started when the first level of recovery began," Joe said. "The milestones appear as time and dedication to holistic healing bring about solid, clear results."

Did I dare hope that Lorin was moving into this level? If he wasn't yet, I felt more confident that he was getting closer. "Well, that's the difference, then," I said.

> "Instead of getting clients back to their pre-addiction health, a holistic course of treatment can get a person truly healthy in all areas."

Joe smiled. "Yes, several milestones are apparent around this level of recovery. That's the good news of advanced recovery. A person at this point is healing the damage from the consequences of their addiction. Not just in their body and mind, but financially, legally, and socially. Often this step includes strengthening their family connections as well. Because of this, they are also widening and strengthening their support system. This milestone usually includes believing in, participating in, or trusting in something

spiritual. Some meaning, larger than themselves, even if that cause is love or a deep connection with nature."

Very deep connections, indeed, I thought, remembering how Lorin used to love the mountains and only recently started to show any interest again in the paths and trails that had meant so much to him. That was one of Joe's most passionate parts of his life, too. A shiver of happiness ran up my spine as I thought of Lorin experiencing the results of all-encompassing, ongoing healthy living. I smiled as Joe continued talking.

"They are also experiencing the results of biochemical restoration," Joe said. "Holistic healing has, at this step, eliminated or reduced depression, mood swings, and anxiety, all through the use of exercise, diet, counseling, and their support system." Joe leaned forward. "Sharon, a recovering person who has gone through the early and mid-recovery steps and is flowing into advanced recovery has a much better chance to achieve their full potential."

I'd heard Joe speak about achieving one's full potential on several occasions. Each time, he got the same passionate look in his eyes. Now that we'd spoken about this stage of his addiction journey, I could tell why living the work mattered so much to him. It gave him the best chance of living up to his full potential, to the best of his ability, and he wanted the same opportunity for his clients.

"So this is how full recovery comes into play. This is the part of life where you've experienced what hope was leading up to, right?" I said.

"Absolutely," Joe said. "Full recovery isn't about being done. It is the natural, new normal. To the recovering person, the good, positive, healthy consequences become real and normal. Everyone around them can see it in their results, too. Those results are fully manifesting, proof of how the person lives and gives back. Proof of what becomes important to them.

This person is able to experience a full, rich life without destructive chemicals."

A FOUNDATION FOR HOPE

I thought back to Joe's journey, remembering some of the ways that biochemical restoration worked for him. The doctors he met with, the tests they ran on him, the nutritional and lifestyle changes they encouraged him to add to his daily routine. The knowledge he gained that homed in on what corrected the imbalances in his body and mind.

Joe had been working on his own biochemical restoration for years because it takes continued work. But it's become much easier for him—a natural part of his rich, full life. Full recovery has been a steady progression of advocating for himself, as well as for others. Those tests, holistic treatments, and all of this knowledge worked the same way for Lorin. I was comforted by that comparison.

"I love seeing the changes in Lorin, and in our family," I said. "I can't believe how many people perk up when they learn that biochemical testing could be part of their loved ones' solution, too."

I recounted to Joe the people I'd run into over the last few years who, after asking what I was working on, would chime in with their own story. "I have a cousin who needs something like that ..." or "Oh, my daughter is struggling with …" or "My parents don't know what to do about my …" Then they'd share how addiction affected their own siblings or cousins or friends. Addiction intimately affected their own family's lives, too.

"So many people are on their own journey. The addiction train reaches far and wide, Sharon," Joe said.

"It feels good to be a part of a solution that helps to educate the community," I said.

"I agree," Joe said. "It starts with collaborating about how to educate better, how to support better, and how to heal better. But there's still a long way to go."

"If individuals, families, and communities know they aren't alone," I said, "and that there's a whole community of professionals out there—"

"—and that there's still room for traditional methods that work in conjunction with holistic healing," Joe added …

"—then recovery can be even more effective," I finished, smiling at the thought we both shared.

"It's true. I never get used to how many people are affected by addiction," Joe continued. "It still amazes me, even today. Addiction is everyone's problem. The good news is that there is hope. At InnerBalance, we work with our clients and their families, of course. But we also work with doctors and therapists, and even legal professionals so that there is the best chance at recovery. But it comes down to this:

Our job is to love our clients. Believe in them. Support them with information and healthy, effective solutions.

It's up to them how they respond. Just like a doctor treating a patient with cancer."

I nodded. There was that reference again. A doctor guiding and treating a patient with cancer. I remembered the many times Joe had referred to addiction being as invasive and serious as that illness. I couldn't agree more. "It all comes down to providing that hope," I said.

Joe rose from his chair, signaling that it was time for him to leave. But he finished the thread of our conversation. "Whatever, and whoever, it takes to help our clients navigate the path of recovery. Whatever moves them further down the path of hope, it's worth it."

Joe's former client, the one from the earlier phone call, couldn't have a better champion, whether he knew it or not. I hoped that he and his family could weather their storm with a good outcome.

As he headed for my front door, Joe turned to me. "Sharon, Lorin is in a good place and heading in a good direction. He needs all the healthy love and support you can provide. Hang in there. It continues to get better and better." He smiled, and opened the door.

There it is, I thought. *His mission doesn't get much simpler than that: providing hope*. Even when things get tough.

– JOE –

Heading north on the highway toward Fort Collins, I thought about my conversation with Sharon. Talking about the progression of recovery as well as the worrying situation that one patient was in reminded me once again of the sheer power that addiction has over us.

The illness creates its own perfect storm of destruction, making us vulnerable. But the only solution to the pain of that destruction is more of the chemicals. That's why it's so hard to get free of the addiction. That storm of havoc and destruction keeps building on itself. And for the addicted person, they have to have more of the chemical to deaden the pain.

I was glad that our conversation progressed to talking about the healing that comes from recovery. From what Sharon told me, Lorin sounded like he was on that path. It's not over until—actually, recovery is never over. Not even after thirty-eight years of practicing it. But those helpless feelings of pain and self-destruction can definitely be over, with the right help. And in their place grows a true sense of hope. Who knew—even that patient

that my office had called me about might yet decide to give himself another chance, for his sake and his family's. Tomorrow was a new day for all of us.

I reached the exit for Loveland and headed for home.

CHAPTER 19

The Gifts of Full Recovery

"It boils down to two things that everyone,
everywhere can experience: the ability to feel love for self
and others, and to live up to your full potential."

—JOE

– SHARON –

"JOE, DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN WE SPOKE about the gifts of full recovery?" It was about a year ago now, I noted.

"Yes," he said slowly. "We spoke about how the capacity to love ourselves and others is a big part of full recovery. And also the ability to live up to our potential."

"Exactly," I said. "What really stuck with me was how you

made sure I knew that it was being able to run your own life, Joe, without relying on drugs or alcohol, that allowed you to build your life to what you wanted to achieve. That, along with hard work, a solid support system, and all the knowledge you gained on how to stay sober and in recovery, and then on biochemical restoration," I added. I paused for a moment, then cleared my throat. "I want you to know something."

"What's that?" Joe asked.

I leaned forward and tried not to let my voice waver. "Those words are what gave me hope. They empower me every day and help keep me in balance when I want to micromanage, or give up or tune out to the hard parts of Lorin's life. Or my own. The ability to feel love and gratitude for Lorin, when I was so, so angry with him ... I thought I'd never get here. Let alone knowing, deep down, that no matter what life throws at my son, or at me, we have the tools and the support system to handle them in a healthy way. I cannot thank you enough. You brought back hope. Thank you, my friend."

It didn't work—my voice broke at the end. Joe simply smiled, letting me compose myself.

We were sitting in Joe's backyard sanctuary, his favorite place to relax, he told me. It felt good to sit outside in the September warmth, sunlight filtering through the trees. We lounged comfortably in his rocking chairs, his patio set up for the last hurrah of summer. The yard was ringed by beautifully tended ferns, decorative rock, and tall grasses. Poplars, willows, and elms stood as sentinels at the yard's edge, all ample evidence of Donna and Joe's labor of love for nature.

I'd looked forward to this meeting for days; it was our last appointment on our calendar for the book we had begun three-plus years ago—a book that now told not only Joe's story but Lorin's, too.

But there would be no peppering Joe with questions this

time. Just a visit with a man who had become my friend and a mentor in the world of addiction and recovery.

There was one more thing I wanted to add, my voice now steady. "Joe, you've helped me through some of Lorin's chaos in a way that allows us to have him around for the good times. Thank you."

"We've all got hard things in our life, Sharon," Joe said. "The trick is learning how to react positively to those things and have a support system to help out. I'm glad to have been there for you and your family."

I'd had only four years of experience on the addiction train. Lorin had had about eight, near as I could tell. But Joe ... Joe had ridden it, off and on, over and over, for decades before becoming what I saw him as now: a conductor. A facilitator strong and experienced enough to guide people along their journey, and to guide their loved ones along, as well. He had certainly done that for my loved one and for our family.

KNOWING HOW TO GET BACK TO WHERE YOUR BODY WORKS BEST

Joe hadn't heard much about Lorin in the last year, other than that he was busy, happy, and in a job he loved. We both knew that the many jobs he'd bounced around in were part of the progress he'd shown in building social and personal skills. These were what eventually helped him keep a good job in the utilities industry. His pride and confidence showed every time I saw him. But Joe didn't know the latest news.

"Lorin's engaged," I announced happily. "He's ecstatic, and we're thrilled for him. And about every other time I see him, he says, 'Say hello to Joe for me, will ya?' To which I respond, 'Go tell him yourself!'"

Joe just smiled, a big grin that let me know he wasn't upset about Lorin not seeing him in a while. "Congratulations to him!

He seems social and well-adjusted, and it sounds like his resilience to change is getting stronger. He's staying pretty even-keel when things don't go his way?" he asked. I nodded. "Good. Good," Joe said.

"He plays a lot of basketball," I said, "at the rec center and with his friends and coworkers. Lorin even ropes in his siblings, when he can do it. I enjoy the hell out of him," I said, knowing I had that beaming, proud-parent look.

Joe gave me time to savor the moment before he said, "I'd say that if Lorin is happy and well-adjusted to his job, his family, and his social life, I understand why he doesn't come see us at InnerBalance. But he better be taking his …" and Joe surprised me by recalling exactly the supplements that Lorin needed after his initial biochemical testing so long ago. Lorin still used them to balance his genetic and other conditions. "And," Joe added with a raised eyebrow, "I hope he's hydrating."

I enjoy the hell out of this guy, too, I thought fondly.

Joe still followed his own treatment advice, I knew. He still took supplements and stuck to his regimen of sleep and a healthy diet, although he did admit to having a sweet or two around the holidays. "But I know what to do to get right back to where my body works best," he had told me, "and that's how our clients learn, too. By getting back to where their bodies work best."

Joe took a sip from his glass and we both enjoyed a moment of quiet. The soft grass in the yard quivered in the slight breeze. The sun felt warm on my face as I sank slightly into the rocking chair, enjoying the friendship of this man who had made such an impact on my family's life.

"Joe," I said, "you've run InnerBalance, or some version of it, for over twenty years now. Learning from ever-emerging technology and collaborating with members of the medical and legal field to provide assistance consistent with what you wish you'd received, right from the get-go. How," I asked, sitting up straight

in my chair, "in all these years, have you stayed calm when so much chaos and so many powerful emotions were swirling around? How…are you not tired?" I laughed, but underneath it was huge curiosity. *How could he continue to give back, over and over and over again, and not get burned out?*

"That's a simple answer for me," Joe said, smiling. "I don't get tired of it because I'm not in that emotional state of panic and desperation anymore. I'm not in your, or their, situation anymore. Which means I can step back and support.

"And I can have empathy," Joe added, "not just sympathy. I can feel for them. Remember, Sharon: I have felt each of these emotions before. I've been in the role of someone experiencing addiction, in all the various stages. I've also watched and felt all the emotions as some of my family members and other loved ones went through their addiction rides, too."

"I think it's incredible that you have used your experience to give back through your center, Joe," I said. "I've really loved seeing you work with your staff and partners to provide education and support to so many. And now I've seen my son reach out many times to others, to talk about the services and work that you do."

"Well," Joe said humbly, "it does feel good to see so many come through our doors. The center gives me a way to pass along the experience of recovery and what honest accountability looks like. The addiction community is vast, as you and I have talked about, Sharon. More vast than anybody thinks it is.

Everyone's community stretches into the addiction community. It's global."

We let a few minutes go by without speaking, the birds in the backyard trees doing the talking. The sound of a lawnmower buzzed somewhere in the distance.

"Joe," I finally said, "the gifts of full recovery are great for recovering individuals and their loved ones, but what about you? How have you integrated those gifts of sobriety into your life? Into your business? I mean, what are you excited about, moving forward?"

"I love those questions!" Joe said brightly. "I'm loving that after thirty-eight years sober, I'm still learning how to strengthen my ties with family and the community. I'm learning that I don't always have all the answers, but I'm able to turn to people for help and listen to their solutions. I love learning that we've just scratched the surface of alternative methods for healing and preventive care. And being able to tell you that you aren't alone, Sharon. You are now a part of the addiction community, and that's a good thing. It means you've got many resources to lean on when you need to."

WHAT GIFTS CAN LOOK LIKE

I thought about the sources of information I was privy to now, thanks to knowing Joe and his method of healing. Apart from his staff and the material we'd gathered through his center, I had many holistic resources at my disposal. Workshops, support groups, and online options, sure, but now I knew there were therapists, medical centers, and nutritionists out there, all dedicated to finding an integrated way to keep our bodies and minds healthy for the long haul.

Joe was right: I wasn't alone in the least. Neither was Lorin. But we hadn't been ready to accept all those options until we had some time to get past the immediateness of Lorin's addiction. "I think Lorin couldn't really love himself or others until he was healthy enough, and started to live up to his full potential," I observed.

"That's absolutely right," Joe said. "When we are abusing drugs and alcohol, exhausted from too little sleep and bad

nutrition habits, genetic issues ... when our systems are so out of balance and we are feeling stressed, depressed, and anxious, then feeling detached and being in pain is the biggest part of our lives. There is something in us that turns inward and feels almost desperate to get relief. And if all you have known are addictive chemicals, that's what we turn to.

But when we get the right treatment, and learn that there's a better way to get relief, our very life and our outlook changes. We have energy, and a desire and capacity for more.

We want to reach out to others, to build healthy connections, and to love others and ourselves. That is one of the gifts of full recovery."

"The ability and desire to give back," I said, remembering our past conversations.

"When I think about the gifts of full recovery," Joe continued, "I'm thinking that we, as addicted individuals, are no longer a burden on our community. Once we are now in advanced recovery, there are gifts that are given back, both to the individual doing the work that it takes to stay sober and clean, and the gifts that their loved ones receive. They are huge! But they all boil down quite nicely."

"Well, what are they to you?" I prompted.

Joe smiled. "I'll tell you about the gifts in my own life, like being able to feel what loving connections are like. I hadn't felt that in twenty years while in my addiction. Having a clear mind when I wake up in the morning, no foggy brain. The freedom from fear, like the fear of what I did the night before. Fear seemed to be with me most of the time. So without fear, I felt free. Those daily gifts are huge, Sharon."

Joe leaned forward in his chair, his eyes scanning the yard as he thought some more.

"The gift of sanity, not feeling insane. To have a family that I desired for so many years. To be the kind of husband and father that my wife and kids deserve. To have the wonderful friends that I have, both in and out of the twelve-step programs. The gift of health, and the ability to help others. To have peace of mind."

Joe paused and then added, "And being able to access something inside of me that, when I pay attention to it, always leads me in the right direction in life. Call it God, a higher power, my conscience, intuition. Whatever it is, since being in full recovery, it's always led me in the right direction."

"Joe," I said, "these gifts sound similar to the gifts I've been getting from Lorin. Gifts that our whole family, and all his loved ones, are receiving from him being in advanced recovery."

"Absolutely," Joe said. "Everyone will have their own specific list of what they get back as a result of full recovery. It boils down to those two things that everyone, everywhere can experience. The first is that ability to feel love for self and others, and the ability to live up to your full potential.

When drugs and alcohol aren't running your life, it's a very empowering place to come from."

I agreed. I started noticing it in Lorin as he achieved little wins and used them to build a life with plenty of healthy connections. They truly were gifts. A weight lifted inside me somewhere. I'd taken steps over the months to lessen the guilt I felt. But I'd stubbornly held onto how important a part I'd had to have played in Lorin's addiction. Joe's words resolved all that. What I was left with was…gratitude.

"Life can ultimately start, or restart, once an addicted person starts healing," Joe said. "They—we—will always have those

addictive tendencies, but it's manageable through the recovery process of sobriety, recovery, and full recovery. Healing starts with just that one person, but quickly touches the lives of everyone around them."

We smiled, getting up from our chairs. Nothing else was needed to wrap up our visit. Joe walked me out and I left him to the rest of his afternoon. As I got into my car, I thought again of how hope was indeed what I had received from Joe and his network of information and resources. His experience and courage had provided the path for my life and my son's to move forward, through addiction and into the future.

– JOE –

I felt a profound sense of gratitude for the time I'd spent with Sharon today, hearing how well Lorin was doing. Helping them reminded me of the many other families that inspired me as they struggled and then got on the path of full recovery. It *is* possible. My staff and I help start the recovery process, and then the whole family has that ability to live up to their full potential. I've seen it happen over and over again.

I headed for the kitchen; I could hear my dogs, Benny and Bella, barking upstairs—they were great about letting me know they were ready to eat. My life was a series of small moments now. Predictable and focused. One thing this part of my life has taught me is to be grateful for each moment I am sober and clean, living one day at a time.

The thing I am most grateful for in recovery now is the ability to live up to my potential, beating the odds. It's the gift I want every addicted person and every one of their loved ones to be able to feel. To be able to experience love again, which gives meaning to their lives.

As I climbed the stairs to get Benny and Bella, I remembered I'd need to call Keri about tomorrow's schedule. It was full, and as relaxed as I felt right now, I knew I'd be ready to get back to the work of recovery in the morning.

Afterall, to see somebody who has been fighting addiction come to know enough, and feel enough, to believe in their potential is powerful and humbling. It's seeing that hope manifest, and their eyes light up in a way that says, *With help, maybe I can do it, too.*

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ENDNOTES

1 *Of course, I knew nothing of the detriment of absorbing fluoride, or the chaos as it built up in my system.* According to the handbook Clinical Toxicology of Commercial Products, fluoride is "more poisonous than lead and just slightly less poisonous than arsenic ..." James E. Lemire, MD, *10 Facts About Fluoride,* http://www.lemireclinic.com/10-facts-about-fluoride/#comments. Also: "At some level of intake and duration of exposure, therefore, the effects will cease to be "tolerable" and will begin to exert a stress on the organism. D. Rose and J.R. Marier, "Environmental Fluoride 1977," Fluoride Action Network, https://fluoridealert.org/studies/nrcc-1977/.

2 *And nobody back then knew about the complexities of the MTHFR mutations, like the one identified as A1298C.* "We screened consecutively admitted patients who were dependent on heroin and/or other opiates, for C677T and A1298C polymorphisms. Over a six-month period, 86 of 96, or 90% of subjects, were positive for at least one of these MTHFR variants ..." From Andrew Farah, MD, et al., "The Prevalence and Role of MTHFR Polymorphisms in Opiate Dependency," *Journal of Addiction and Therapies* (23

February 2018), https://www.gavinpublishers.com/articles/research-article/Journal-of-Addiction-and-Therapies/the-prevalence-and-role-of-mthfr-polymorphisms-in-opiate-dependency.

3 *As if reading my mind, Joe said, "My poor diet, high sugar, and caffeine intake brought about intense cravings and worsened the medical elements like allergies and adrenal glands malfunctioning.* "…diet plays a critical role in adrenal fatigue…A nutritionally inadequate diet that is high in sugar, caffeine and junk food places daily stress on your body that your adrenal glands have to respond to and, at the same time, deprives your adrenals of the nutrients they need to function." Dr. James Wilson's adrenalfatigue.org, https://adrenalfatigue.org/faq-on-adrenal-fatique/.

4 *"Adding environmental elements like being in a new home, night terrors, and non-communicative parents just complicated things."* "Over-stimulation of your adrenals can be caused either by a very intense single stress, or by chronic or repeated stresses that have a cumulative effect." Dr. James Wilson's adrenalfatigue.org, https://adrenalfatigue.org/faq-on-adrenal-fatique/.

5 *"Oh, and social inadequacies like shyness and difficulty communicating."* "Whether you have an emotional crisis such as the death of a loved one, a physical crisis such as major surgery, or some other type of severe, repeated or constant stress in your life, your adrenals have to respond to the stress and maintain homeostasis. If their response is inadequate, you are likely to experience some degree of adrenal fatigue." Dr. James Wilson's adrenalfatigue.org, https://adrenalfatigue.org/faq-on-adrenal-fatique/.

6 *"Looking back, I now believe that the feeling of my brain freezing up was more due to brain allergies and high histamine levels."* William H. Philpott and Dwight K. Kalita, *Brain Allergies: The Psychonutrient and Magnetic Connections,* 2nd ed. (New Canaan, CT: Keats Publishing, 2000). See also Joe Leech, "Histamine Intolerance: Everything You Need to Know Explained in Plain English," *Diet vs. disease*, 23 July 2019, https://www.dietvsdisease.org/histamine-intolerance/. See also William L. Philpott, MD, and Dwight K. Kalita, PhD, *Brain Allergies: The Psycho-Nutrient Connection* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).

7 *Adrenal glands that functioned below the normal level—adrenal fatigue, in other words—could contribute to the complications of alcoholism and other addictions.* "A common, but often ignored, component of alcoholism and some other addictions is fatigued adrenal glands. Adrenal fatigue and its associated hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) may often precede substance abuse, and create physiological and biochemical conditions that can be conducive to addiction—whether the addictive substance is alcohol, carbohydrates or stimulants." Dr. James Wilson's adrenalfatigue.org, *Alcoholism and Addiction,* https://adrenalfatigue.org/alcoholism-and-addiction/. For more on the role of adrenal glands, see https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3845705/ and https://www.wilsonssyndrome.com/can-treating-adrenal-dysfunction-help-alcoholism-or-other-addictions.

8 *"As I looked through the sites and articles, the nearest I could get was that the mysterious MTHFR 1298 gene helps keep alcohol consumption in check—provided it's working correctly. Otherwise, the opposite occurs."* For more on the role of

MTHFR genes, see Dr. Ben Lynch, "MTHFR Mutations and Association Conditions," MTHFR.Net, 7 September 2011, http://mthfr.net/mthfr-mutations-and-the-conditions-they-cause/2011/09/07/; Farah et al., "The Prevalence and Role of MTHFR Polymorphisms in Opiate Dependency"; and Traci Stein, "A Genetic Mutation That Can Affect Mental & Physical Health," *Psychology Today* (5 September 2014), https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-integrationist/201409/genetic-mutation-can-affect-mental-physical-health.

9 *If undetected and untreated, it can play havoc with how children's brains develop as well as with their physical development.* "Aside from regulating your metabolism and weight by controlling the fat-burning process, thyroid hormones are also required for the growth and development in children and in nearly every physiological process in your body." From "What You Need to Know About Your Thyroid Health," MERCOLA, 15 September 2019, https://articles.mercola.com/thyroid.aspx. For more on the role of the thyroid, see https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4266183/.

10 *links between the thyroid and addiction existed in ways I had never heard of, nor thought to consider. A lengthy dependence on alcohol doesn't just damage the thyroid, it alters it.* "Dependence on alcohol, nicotine and duration of alcohol consumption are known to alter thyroid function tests." J.B. Honnamurthy et al., "Effect of Interaction Between Duration of Alcohol Consumption and Alcohol Dependence on Thyroid Function Test: Cross Sectional Observational Study," *Indian Journal of Clinical Biochemistry* 33:1 (January 2018), 61–68. In *PubMed.gov, U.S. National Library of Med-*

icine, National Institutes of Health, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29371771.

11 *No one test or treatment seemed to be the magic pill of wellness, but it was encouraging to see how much effort was put into the scientific solutions.* M. Miller et al., "Early intervention of intravenous KB220IV—neuroadaptagen amino-acid therapy (NAAT) improves behavioral outcomes in a residential addiction treatment program: a pilot study," *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 44:5 (November-December 2012), 398–409. In *PubMed.gov, U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health,* https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23457891. For more on the role of amino acid therapy, see: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4074362/.

12 *They change the chemical makeup of our brain to the point where they change our behavior—hence the term brain allergy.* "A plethora of epidemiological and clinical data suggests higher incidence of anxiety and increased emotional reactivity in individuals suffering from allergies.…In studies of food allergy, specifically, it has been shown that the prevalence of anxiety or depression is higher in adults with food allergy than in nonhealthy controls with lactose intolerance or in healthy controls …" L. Mirotti et al., "Neural Pathways in Allergic Inflammation," *Journal of Allergy,* 2010, https://www.hindawi.com/journals/ja/2010/491928/.

13 *Almost eight out of ten of them had an adverse reaction to artificial food colorings and preservatives.* "As many parents with hyperactive children have long suspected, some artificial food colors and preservatives commonly found in snack

foods may wind up some kids, investigators here found." Mirotti et al., "Neural Pathways in Allergic Inflammation," https://www.hindawi.com/journals/ja/2010/491928/.

14 *The same dopamine receptors were activated when sugar was in a person's system as when alcohol was.* "What science has started to understand is that sugar has a symbiotic link to alcoholism. It's exactly the same dopamine receptors in alcoholic brains that light up when we consume sugar. In fact, it's the same D2 dopamine receptor that identifies alcoholics and addicts that we see in sugar addicts …" From "Sugar Addiction Linked to Alcoholism, *Australian Spinal Research Foundation,* 27 October 2016, https://spinal-research.com.au/sugar-addiction-linked-alcoholism/.

15 *Then the truly chilling news: for adolescents, caffeine could serve as a gateway to illicit drugs.* "According to NIDA (National Institute on Drug Abuse) 'chronic caffeine use produces greater tolerance in adolescents compared with adults, suggesting that caffeine may cause greater brain changes in young people. Caffeine consumption is also known to be correlated with increased risk for illicit drug use and substance use disorders.'" From "Caffeine Addiction, Alcohol and Drugs," *Alternatives for Alcoholism,* http://www.alternatives-for-alcoholism.com/caffeine-addiction.html.

16 *One sentence stuck out: "...depression, anxiety, OCD, ADHD, schizophrenia and suicidal tendencies."* "People with pyroluria have been found to have exceptionally low levels of both vitamin B6 and zinc. Deficiencies of these important nutrients have been linked to a wide range of emotional and psychiatric issues." Dr. Dave, "Pyroluria—A

Hidden Cause of Addictions, ADHD, Anxiety, and Other Afflictions," *Integrative Psychiatry*, 4 September 2017, https://www.integrativepsychiatry.net/blog/pyroluria-a-hidden-cause-of-addictions-adhd-anxiety-and-other-afflictions/. For more on the role of pyroluria, see https://www.truenaturehealthconsulting.com/blog/2018/2/28/pyroluria-what-it-is-and-how-it-impacts-mental-and-physical-health.

17 *What I found on night terrors basically confirmed what Joe had said—fear during the night, with no recollection of nightmares despite the terror the person felt.* "Children are smaller and are vulnerable to many more threats than adults. Nightmares may partially reflect this vulnerability." Scott Edwards, "Nightmares and the Brain," *On The Brain*, Harvard Mahoney Neuroscience Institute, https://neuro.hms.harvard.edu/harvard-mahoney-neuroscience-institute/brain-newsletter/and-brain/nightmares-and-brain.

18 *"Underneath the everyday activities, Sharon," Joe continued, somber now, "something was screwing up my dopamine receptors. There was too much dopamine and not enough serotonin."* "Subtle changes in neurochemical function and signal transduction and transcription mechanisms in sensitive neuronal elements in the extended amygdala may be mediators of chronic drug action that lead to vulnerability to relapse and may provide exciting insight into the neuroadaptations associated with drug addiction." G.F. Koob and E.J. Nestler, "The neurobiology of drug addiction," *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences,* 9:3 (1997), 482–97, http://psycnet.apa.org/record/1997-07082-013.

19 *Like testing for things like histadelia—those elevated histamine levels in the blood.* See Jeremy E. Kaslow, MD, "Under-methylation/HISTADELIA," Frontdesk@dr.kaslow.com (website), http://www.drkaslow.com/html/histadelia.html; and "Histadelia (Histamine High)," Digital Naturopath (website), https://www.digitalnaturopath.com/conditions/histadelia-histamine-high/.

20 *A doctor could test for hormones to check those levels, too."* "TSH Test: A thyroid-stimulating hormone or TSH is a blood test that measures the amount of T4 (thyroxine) that the thyroid is being signaled to make. If you have an abnormally high level of TSH, it could mean you have hypothyroidism. T4 (thyroxine) Test: The thyroid gland produces T4 (thyroxine). The free T4 and the free T4 index are blood tests that, in combination with a TSH test, can let your physician know how your thyroid is functioning." Priyathama Vellanki, MD, "How Doctors Diagnose Hypothyroidism," *Endocrine Web,* 22 January 2019, https://www.endocrineweb.com/conditions/hypothyroidism/how-doctors-diagnose-hypothyroidism-0. See also Broda O. Barnes, MD, and Lawrence Galton, *Hypothyroidism: The Unsuspected Illness* (New York: Harper, 1976).

21 *Doctors can run an adrenal profile plus cortisol level test to check the health of adrenal glands.* See Nadia Rachdaoui and Dipak K. Sarkar, "Effects of Alcohol on the Endocrine System," *Endocrinology and Metabolism Clinics of North America* 42:3 (2013), 593–615, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3767933/; "Alcoholism and Addiction," Dr. James Wilson's adrenalfatigue.org, https://adrenalfatigue.org/alcoholism-and-addiction/; and Buddy T (anonymous founding member of the Online Al-Anon Outreach Com-

mittee), "Chronic Drinking Increases Cortisol Levels," Verywell Mind (website), https://www.verywellmind.com/heavy-drinking-increases-stress-hormone-63201.

22 *As Joe recited the lyrics to me (he knew them by heart), I heard the raw emotion in his voice.* Laura Nyro's works are in copyright. You can find her performing "Poverty Train" by following the links to various sites when you Google "Laura Nyro song Poverty Train." One link to try is https://video.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search;_ylt=AwrVrN7Msydct1MAbqwPxQt.;_ylu=X3oDMTByNWU4cGh1BGNvbG8DZ3ExBHBvcwMxBHZ0aWQDBHNlYwNzYw--?p=lyrics+to+laura+nyros+song+poverty+train&fr=yhs-Lkry-SF01&hspart=Lkry&hsimp=yhs-SF01#id=12&vid=5b68d26bc0ecea621024a50ac7d24a55&action=view. Ms. Nyro died in 1997 at the age of forty-nine from ovarian cancer.

23 *We'd read from a powerful book called "Getting the Love You Want" by Harvel Hendricks.* The most recent edition was published in 2019: Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt, *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples,* 3rd ed. (New York: Griffin, 2019). See also the authors' website: https://harvilleandhelen.com/books/getting-the-love-you-want/.

24 *When they ran it through their process, they found that it did.* "Addiction as a Disease," *Center on Addiction* (14 April 2017), https://www.centeronaddiction.org/what-addiction/addiction-disease.

ABOUT THE STORYTELLERS

JOSEPH EISELE is the co-founder and clinical director of Inner-Balance Health Center in Loveland, Colorado. A holistic treatment center established in 1999 for individuals battling drug and alcohol addiction, the center provides a comprehensive program that employs ongoing biochemical restoration as a critical step in long-term, sustainable recovery. Eisele is a pioneer in the use of biochemical restoration, the "missing link" he discovered during his own journey to sobriety more than thirty-five years ago. He holds state and national certifications as an alcohol and drug therapist and received specialized training as an interventionist from the Johnson Institute, which maintains strong ties with the Hazelden Foundation Center for Public Advocacy.

SHARON MONTGOMERY is an author and business storyteller living in Denver, Colorado. In 2015, She founded N-Compass Writing Services, a business content agency for small business owners. Sharon has worked both internationally and locally to create "informational narratives", her solution to boring, cheesy, salesy corporate books and biographies.

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