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CHAPTER 7: FEARLESS

Brett

It was going to be the best weekend! There was anticipation for the "big game." Longtime rivals were going to bring together my family and friends to what has long been called "Central Western weekend." My parents had been planning the tailgate with friends and family. I was excited to have my best friend Chris come up from Western for the first visit of our freshman year in college. The early November football game was on a cold, fall Friday evening where some snow flurries were expected. You couldn't ask for a better setting for the big event.

I had a light track practice that day. We spent most of our time in the weight room lifting. After my mom set up at the tailgate, she and my sister Jenna walked over to the field house and watched me lift through the windows. As soon as I was finished with my workout, I walked over to the tailgate. I was a bit tired, having struggled with a cold for the past week or so. However, as soon as I had some food and saw my family and friends, I was energized for the night's events, at least that's what I thought. I had no idea that my life was about to take a major turn.

After tailgating for a few hours in the cold, we decided to forgo the game for the warmth of my dorm. We said our goodbyes to the families and my friends and I walked back to my dorm room to get warm. My mom remembers the last thing she saw was me riding piggyback on Chris's back, laughing and having a great time. Of course, as always, she said to us, "Make good choices!"

Back at my dorm room, as we were hanging out and just having some fun, Chris gets on my Facebook and writes "Brett loves Chris" on my status. I have learned about foreshadowing events in my English classes and if this isn't the best example of one, I'm not sure what is.

Soon after, we all headed to my friend Tyler's apartment. By now, it was about 9:30pm and the game was just about over. We watched the exciting finish on TV, as our parents were doing the same at the local pub. There is not much I remember from this point on in the story, and much of what preceded this has been retold to me so that I could remember. One minute I was standing at a table and the next I had fallen, face first onto the table, bruising my eye and landing unconscious on the floor.

As soon as I fell, Chris, not knowing what I was doing and thinking I was joking around like usual, turned me over. He saw my face was blue, realized I was gasping for breath and my eyes were rolled back, he yelled for someone to call 911. Tyler called right away. My friend Lauren began to cry and wasn't sure what to do. Chris knew right away that he needed to perform CPR. He began chest compressions and told Lauren to do the mouth to mouth breathing. Meanwhile, Tyler was on the phone with the EMS giving an account of my whereabouts, as well as my condition. Due to the fact that I was an 18 year old and it was one of the biggest college party nights of the year, it was assumed that I was having a reaction to drugs or alcohol. Little did anyone know at the time that I had had a sudden cardiac arrest.

Meanwhile, the police showed up after hearing the call. As soon as they saw me, they checked my pulse and did not feel one, so they told Chris that he could stop with the CPR. They told him that I was dead. Chris got angry and said that he would not stop and continued with the CPR. This determination would eventually be what saved my life.

After about 15 minutes of CPR and talking with the EMS dispatch, the EMS arrived on the scene. They immediately took over and shocked me with the AED twice before taking me to the ER where my parents were waiting. Somehow in all the chaos, Chris had called my mom to tell her that I was on my way to the hospital. My parents arrived before me and were not able to see me right away as I needed to be shocked once again with the AED.

After doctors realized that I had a sudden cardiac arrest and needed to be at a hospital that was equipped to handle the trauma, they asked my parents if they wanted me transported to Grand Rapids or Saginaw. Thankfully, Chris's mom, who is a nurse, jumped right in with the decision to airlift me to the University of Michigan Hospital. As soon as I was on my way, my family left to make the trip themselves, not knowing what they would find upon arrival. Chris, Lauren and Chris's mom left for Ann Arbor as well.

Around 3:00am, I arrived in Ann Arbor where they immediately began the inter coolant system. I was brought to the CICU where I would lay in a coma for the next 58 hours. Through the grace of God and the excellent medical care from the U of M hospital staff, I survived my cardiac arrest. I awoke to a roomful of my family and closest friends. Confusion hit me; I didn't recognize anyone. Shortly, I began to regain my memory and a flood of over a hundred visitors came to see me. My Facebook page had blown up over the past few days and I had received more posts than someone would get on their birthday. Within the day, I regained controlled breathing on my own and was soon transferred to another area of the hospital.

Within the next couple of days, doctors would determine that I would need an ICD. On November 12, one week from the day I had my cardiac arrest, I would have the ICD implanted. There was no known cause of my cardiac arrest. An electrical issue with my heart was the best determination the doctors were able to make. According to the rumors, it was from taking Adderall or it was from drinking Four Lokos. However, neither theory could be proven.

After my surgery, I was given one last night to stay in the hospital for recovery then was sent home. My best friends surprised me at my house. Still having no memory from the moment of my arrest, until after I got home, the next few days were spotty. I was told many stories of the hospital and still to this day hear stories of things I had done and do not remember. I was told that I was very humorous, which is a way to try and cope with what had happened. I tried to forget about the whole occurrence. However, the thought that I had cheated death made me feel supernatural. I went back to living life the way I had left it, with few minor changes.

Throughout the next 10 months, I lived life the way I would have before the arrest. A trip to Crystal Mountain with 16 of my closest friends was just what I needed to keep this off of my mind. Despite everyone's sympathy, I was able to put it behind me and live life without the effects of post-traumatic stress. With the 17 of us living so closely together, in a 2-bedroom, 6-person condo, time spent over the New Year was amazing. Snowboarding had been my favorite hobby since I learned how to ride when I was 9 years old.

After the winter break, I returned to Central Michigan to the start of my spring semester. I also got back to training with the track team with a couple of setbacks. I wasn't allowed to lift some parts of my upper body due to the implant of my ICD. However, I was back in the rhythm of long jumping, and had tied my personal best at the first indoor meet at 21' 9.5". Throughout the rest of the spring semester, I lived as though the cardiac arrest never happened.

Then summer came and I was back with my friends at home. Nothing makes me happier than to see them and we have a lot of fun together. Together, we don't make the best decisions but that's why I love them. Beach volleyball, swimming, bonfires, and longboarding take up most of our time. Unfortunately, on one of the first days of the summer, I had broken my wrist after a fall off my longboard. After being dragged by a car to have faster speed down a hill I got speed wobbles and jumped off. I was going about 35 mph, too fast to use my feet to run it off. I had to have three pins put in my wrist and had a cast on for 6 weeks. Once again, I didn't let this impact my life, so I went on having one of my favorite summers.

As August rolled in, everyone prepared to go back to school. I will always remember two days in my life. November 5, 2010 and August 15, 2011, the day I moved back to school. I woke up around 11am, packed up my Malibu, said goodbye to my family, and was off to Mt. Pleasant. After a near two-hour drive, I pulled into the city and turned toward my apartment. I noticed that my friend, Taylor, had an apartment in the complex right before mine. I stopped in to catch up with him; I hadn't seen him since May. Thirty minutes passed and I began to feel woozy. When I looked up, Taylor noticed it too. My face was pale. It was difficult to sit straight up. I thought it was nothing, so I played it off like I needed some fresh air. I asked Taylor to come longboard with me and we made our way out to the parking lot. But I still couldn't shake the feeling. I felt my heart beating out of my chest. I didn't know what to do, and paranoia set in. Taylor suggested that we head to the ER and within a minute, we were on our way.

The walk to the doors seemed like forever. With each step, it seemed like the doors were getting further away. After I checked in, I was seen immediately. A simple check of my pulse was all it took for the ER to swing into action. My standing heart rate was 164. I was put into a room and onto a bed. I was attached to one IV, then another, and then a third. There were several doctors rushing around me, talking fast. I felt like they were speaking another language, I couldn't understand them. But after a bag of fluids and an injection of some medicine that I still have no clue of the name, I was stable. Once again, the cause of this incident was unknown. An hour later I was released, it seemed like nothing big happened, so I wasn't worried. But I didn't know that this would affect who I was for the rest of the semester.

The day was over but not forgotten. The event was stuck in my head throughout the rest of the weekend. It was the worst thing that could've happened. The next weekend was supposed to be the most fun weekend of the summer. It was Welcome Weekend at Central and since it was the first school to go back, friends from every school came to visit: Michigan, Michigan State, Western Michigan, Michigan Tech, and more. My three-bedroom apartment went from sleeping my two roommates and myself, to a group of near twenty. It was an amazing weekend, but the end of it wasn't expected at all. At around 5:30 on Sunday morning, we were just getting to sleep. However, I couldn't sleep. I was paranoid. I felt my pulse. Three rapid beats were followed by a pause, and then a couple, slower, beats. The irregular heartbeats are called tachycardia. I had my friends take me to the ER once again. Without hesitation, the doctors rushed to get me into a bed, but this time it was

in the middle of a room where other patients could see. I was attached to a heart monitor, and again three IVs were put into my arms. Paranoia was getting the best of me.

Ten minutes passed and all I did was watch my heart monitor go from 60 to 90, back to 70, up to 95. Then a decision was made to have me airlifted to Saginaw. I let my parents know; at this point it was 6:15 in the morning. Not quite the wake-up call they were hoping for. I was exhausted myself; not having much sleep from the weekend of partying had drained me. I got on the helicopter and was so excited. It was my second time on a helicopter, but the first time I was able to remember it. At the time, I was stable, and just went through some tests when I arrived at Saginaw. I was released after a few hours, and was sent back to school.

For the next three months, I quickly went from a happy person to the lowest point I had ever been in my life. Depression quickly sunk in. I began to feel helpless. After the second week of class, I found myself sleeping in way past my classes. I easily spent over 14 hours a day in bed. I avoided contact with other people. I barely talked to anyone besides a few kids I knew from school. It affected my whole life. I began to have frequent flashbacks and had nightmares that would wake me up in the middle of the night with my heart pounding out of my chest. I was scared, frightened, and nervous to die. I thought I was going to die and I accepted that. I didn't care; I didn't try to reach out to anyone about it. My parents noticed that I wasn't doing too well in school, so they asked me why. But I lied and said I was doing fine. Grades do not lie. They brought me home for the spring semester to try to get my head straight.

When I was home, my sister was the one who suggested that I try to take anti-depressants. I had been so miserable that I didn't even take advice from others, but for some reason, I listened to her. I went to the doctor and got a prescription for an anti-depressant pill. I took half a pill for the first five days, the doctor said the whole thing would be too much for me. He was right. After the third day, I felt happier. I was ready to take on the world. I was able to process thoughts in my head. I realized what I had to do with my life. It was as if this pill was the solution to all my problems. Throughout the next couple months, I continued to take the pills. It was an amazing change in direction for me. I started doing well in school. I read a book after my first class and wrote the book report that was due on the last day of class, over four months later. It was the first book I finished in over 10 years. I had never felt better in my life.

Don't take from this story that all you need is a pill to be better. It is not. I am currently not taking the pill because the things I have learned over the past few months of taking it have changed me. Don't live your life thinking negatively about your situation. Whether you had survived a cardiac arrest or have something wrong with your heart, you cannot let it affect who you are. Everybody loves to see you happy and they love to see you smile. Be productive. Don't be lazy. And certainly don't act like there is a time limit on your life. Get out and do something you have never done. Don't live in fear.