

CHAPTER 1: A BAD DAY

W*hy, why, why did I promise to do this?*
Joel calculated in his head that he had three minutes and thirty-five seconds to pull this off. The next class started in six and a half minutes. He wanted to give himself a buffer.

Three minutes and thirty-five seconds—the exact same duration as “Hang on Darkness,” the sixth song on Biledriver’s first album.

Joel blinked a few times as he tried to refocus his thoughts.

WEEEoooWEEEoooWEEEooo

A high-pitched warbling sound squealed in his ears, accompanied by a brief, sharp pain that shot through his head from left to right. The sound lasted for two seconds, and then it was over. He looked around. No one else seemed to have heard it.

Joel rubbed his temples, closed his eyes and exhaled. It was the second time today that he had heard the strange noise, but there was no time to worry about it now.

He opened his eyes and caught a glimpse of his target: a head of long, shiny black hair cascading over a blood-red blouse. A cold, empty feeling gripped his stomach.

I can’t do this. I can’t even pass a stupid reading comprehension test. What makes me think I can do this?

Joel scanned the hall of his high school and saw that the other students were blocking off all possible avenues of exit. He replayed a vision of his sister in his mind.

“You promise, right?” Taylor’s button-shaped ten-year-old face said to him.

With that, he took a deep breath and strode forward.

Three minutes exactly.

Sometimes, you just gotta say, what the heck.

And go with it.

The head of shiny black hair turned away from the locker it was facing, revealing a soft, pale face with deep brown eyes and bright red lips. The eyes regarded Joel with an air of bemused expectation.

“Um, hi,” Joel whispered at his shoes.

“Sorry?” the lips said as the head leaned in a little closer.

Joel cleared his throat. He had only learned two weeks ago that “sorry” in this context meant that the other person did not hear you. “Hi, um, Suzi, right?”

“Right,” Suzi said. “And you are—?”

Joel could almost feel his synapses firing. “Um, Joel—I’m Joel. Joel Suzuki. We’re in, uh, the same chemistry class. Honors chemistry.”

Suzi’s eyes widened with recognition. “Oh yeah, second period, right? Sorry I didn’t recognize you—don’t you sit way in the back?”

Joel searched his brain for an appropriate response. The script was not going quite as he had planned. A large Junior Prom poster announcing a day of the week that was mismatched to the actual date distracted him for a moment. He shook his head to refocus once again. “No, I mean, yeah, I guess. It’s not really way in the back, actually, it’s the third desk from the back, and, uh...”

“Okay,” Suzi chuckled. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Joel.”

“Um, nice to meet you too,” Joel replied. His mind started to drown in a pool of his own jumbled thoughts, one of which cried out *now what was I supposed to say next?* “Oh, well, the third desk from the back—in the second row on the right side of the room—if you’re facing the class from the front, um, you know, from the teacher’s perspective.”

“Uh, okay,” Suzi said.

Joel clenched his teeth. Faced with internal panic, he retreated to safer, familiar ground. “Um, speaking of chemistry, that’s like science, right? And, um, did you know that Newton was the first person to come up with the theory of air resistance? It’s like, for low flow speeds, drag is due to the dimensions of a body, the density of the fluid, and the—”

A hand with long red-painted nails closed a locker door. “Hey, um, Joel, I really have to get to class, but it’s been nice talking to you, okay?”

“Oh—uh, yeah, okay,” Joel stammered. He wanted to tell her that they had one hundred and thirty seconds left to get to class, but she had already turned to leave.



Joel flung open the door to Art’s Guitars and trudged inside. “Sorry I’m late,” he muttered as he flipped his bangs out of his eyes.

“Hey, bud,” Art said, looking up from the cherry-red five-string bass that he had been restringing. “Everything okay?”

“Well, no, not really.” Joel walked behind the counter, dropped his backpack on the ground, and took the gig bag off of his shoulder. He placed the bag on top of the glass counter and unzipped it, revealing a Fender Stratocaster that had been smashed into pieces.

Art, a balding, middle-aged man in a rock concert T-shirt and faded black jeans, whistled and stroked his goatee. “Yikes, that doesn’t look too good. What happened?”

“Mitch,” Joel said with a sigh. “He, um, he saw me talking to Suzi this morning and said that she was his girlfriend. I didn’t know.”

“What?” Taylor exclaimed, putting down her hand-held video game.

“Yeah, so he cornered me after school in the parking lot,” Joel said without looking at Taylor. He was grateful that Art had agreed to watch his little sister while their mom was at work, but right now, he didn’t feel like talking to her.

“Oh geez,” she said.

Joel pulled out the remains of his guitar, which were held together by its strings like a fractured marionette. “He, um, he ran over it with his car—that stupid souped-up Mustang of his. Art, can you fix it?”

“Hmm, probably not even worth it at this point,” Art said with a grim expression as he inspected the wreckage. “I’ll look at it some more, though. Oh, I picked up your usual ham sandwich—it’s by the computer.”

Joel sighed again and sat down at the store’s computer. “Well, at least I kept my promise,” he muttered. He took the sandwich out of its wrapper. *Art forgot the lettuce again.*

“So what did she say?” Taylor asked.

“About what?” Joel replied, navigating to his favorite Asperger’s forum website to read the latest posts.

“Duh, about the prom,” Taylor said. “You asked her, right?”

“Um, well, I—she’s Mitch’s girlfriend anyway. It, uh, it doesn’t matter.”

“Jooooel,” Taylor whined.

“What?” Joel snapped while he read through a post titled “Dealing with Bullies.” “Um, look, at least I talked to her, like you wanted me to. Why do you even care?”

“You’re sixteen and you’ve never even been on one date.”

“So? Um, have you been on a date?”

“Hello, I’m ten.”

“Just—just forget it, okay?”

“I just want you to be happy.” Taylor pouted, going back to her video game.

“Happiness is a state of mind,” Art interjected in a gentle tone of voice. “You can simply choose to be happy with life the way it is rather than chasing after things you don’t have.”

Taylor shrugged the way she always did whenever Art spouted one of his philosophical sayings.

“I don’t think she can understand most of the things you tell her,” Joel said, now looking at his updated grades on the school’s website. *Calculus: A. Language Arts: D.* He grimaced. *Ugh. Neither Nerd nor Normal.*

“Sure I can,” Taylor huffed.

“She may be young, but she’s wiser than you think,” Art chuckled. “By the way, Joel, I’m almost finished mixing that awesome song you wrote. That was a killer solo you

added to it yesterday. I'll burn a CD of it for you after I add the drum track. Really good stuff, I tell you."

"Um, okay." Joel felt himself blush as he kept his eyes glued to the computer monitor. Despite all the progress he had made in his social skills group, he was still working on the whole "accepting compliments" thing.

A car horn sounded from the street outside. "Gotta go," Taylor announced as she hopped off her stool.

"Uh—is that Mom already?" Joel asked. "I thought she was working."

"Nope, I guess she took the night off. Something about big news. She said to come home right after you're done here."

Big news? Joel wondered. *Hope it's something good. I could use some good news today.*

He navigated to the official Biledriver website, hoping to find that his favorite band had added a Seattle date to the North American leg of their tour. He couldn't afford a ticket, but he thought that maybe Art could give him one in exchange for a few extra hours of work at the store. Instead of a tour schedule, however, what he saw made him nearly choke on his lettuce-less sandwich.

Latest news—Marshall Byle thrown from tour bus in crash along Irish coast—body cannot be located—presumed dead.

Joel shivered as he continued reading.

Byle, 27, was evidently thrown from an open bunk window after the band's tour bus hydroplaned and tipped over while traveling through a torrential downpour. Search parties combed the area but were unable to find him. Band management is undecided at this time as to whether or not to continue the tour.

Continue the tour? Joel thought angrily. *How can they continue the tour without their lead singer and guitarist? I can't believe this. This is just—*

WEEEEoooWEEEEoooWEEEEooo

Joel winced as the weird sound blared painfully in his ears once again. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Art asked as he tried to piece together two sections of Joel's broken guitar.

"Uh—nothing," Joel said. That was the fourth time today, and he was getting worried. He started a search for "hearing loss symptoms" on the computer when suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw movement on the far wall of the store. He looked around. His eyes gravitated toward an old Biledriver poster that showed all of the band members in full scowl. He blinked several times. Did Marshall just...smile?

Two minutes passed. Joel took another bite out of his sandwich as he continued staring at the poster. He could have sworn that he saw Marshall smile for a fraction of a second. *But that's crazy, right? It's just a poster...*

"Well, sorry, bud," Art said sympathetically as he set Joel's broken guitar aside. "It's pretty much totaled. That guy really did a number on it."

"Yeah," Joel sighed, finally looking away from the poster. *Stupid Mitch*, he thought. *What have I ever done to him? He owes me a new guitar. Rock stars don't have to worry about people breaking their guitars. In fact, they break them themselves, onstage. That is so cool. Must be nice to have endorsements and get stuff for free. After I make it big, who should I endorse? Fender, Gibson, PRS? Maybe I'll get to design my own model. That would be awesome. The Joel Suzuki Special. What would it look like? Maybe like a Jaguar, but more angular, or the Explorer—yeah, that would be cool, or maybe—*

"Oh, hey, I have an idea," Art said. "You know how sometimes I have to pay you in, like, strings or cables and stuff like that? When things are slow like this?"

"Um, yeah," Joel said, glancing around at the empty store. He was quite familiar with the dire financial condition of Art's business, but he loved working there anyway, surrounded by guitars and music. It was a good place to hide from his problems at school and at home. Plus, Art used to play in a band some twenty years ago, and Joel loved hearing the occasional story about those days, whenever Art took a break from giving him the usual boring philosophical sermons.

"Well, how 'bout this? I'll give you the back pay that I owe you for the last couple of months, and an advance on your next few paychecks, all in the form of—wait for it—a new guitar! Whaddya say?"

Joel's mood instantly perked up. "Um, wait, what? Are—are you serious?"

"Yup," Art said, walking over to where a black Epiphone Les Paul hung from the wall. "How 'bout this baby? I know you've been eyeing her up for a while now."

Okay, this totally makes up for the lousy day I've been having, Joel thought to himself with renewed enthusiasm as he stood up from his stool. He reached out his hand to receive the guitar. Just as his fingers closed around the neck, however, he paused.

"Um, are you—are you sure about this? Can, um, can the store afford it? I'm worried," he said.

"Don't worry," Art said in his usual reassuring tone. "After all, worrying is a waste of time."

"Um, who said that one—Lao Tzu?"

"No, Axl Rose."

Joel grinned and strummed an open G chord on his new instrument.



Joel was so happy with his new guitar that he forgot about his mom's big news announcement until Art reminded him about it, twenty-five minutes past his usual quitting time. He raced down the four city blocks to his apartment building, his smile only interrupted by yet another strange warbling sound and the accompanying jolt of pain that shot through his head just as he reached the elevator. He shook it off and made a mental note to take some aspirin as he rode up to the nineteenth floor.

Ding went the elevator.

Joel got out and dashed down the hall to his apartment.

"Sorry I'm late," he panted as he opened the door. Something didn't feel quite right. He noticed the sad expressions on the faces of his mother and sister. "What's—what's the big news?"

"Joel, honey, why don't you have a seat?" his mother said, motioning to the small, round dinner table with the un-washable stains of many years of use. She was still wearing her waitress uniform with the name tag that read *Alison*.

I thought she took the night off, Joel thought. He shot a glance at Taylor, who just looked away. He put his guitar case on the floor and sat down at the table. "Um, is something wrong?"

Alison looked down at her hands and paused for a moment. She sighed before raising her head to look at Joel. "Honey, I lost my job at the restaurant today, and they raised the rent here again. We—we can't afford to stay here anymore."

Joel swallowed hard. Amidst the swirl of sad and angry thoughts that began to boil inside of his head, one in particular stood out: *What was that thing Dad always used to say before he left? "Real men don't cry."* Joel could feel the tears welling up in his eyes. *What did he know anyway.*

CHAPTER 2: A HOODED STRANGER

One thing that Joel had a problem with was letting things go. He wasn't quite sure where that issue came from, although he suspected that it might have had something to do with his parents' divorce. But even before that, he had always been a sentimental person anyway, probably to a fault. He had a classic Foo Fighters T-shirt that was four sizes too small for him still tucked away in his drawer; he kept it because it was his first-ever "rock tee" that he got as a ninth birthday present. When his mom had tried to donate it, he went into a genuine panic attack, and she relented.

Also, despite the difficulties he sometimes had in expressing his emotions, he had nevertheless always been an empathetic person. Even though he and Taylor had their

usual share of brother-sister disagreements, he loved her, and her sadness made him sad as well, possibly even more so. When they had moved from Hawaii to Seattle six years ago, he had no friends, but she had, and having to leave them behind broke both of their hearts.

It wasn't so much that their little apartment was the greatest place in which to live, but Joel couldn't bear the thought of leaving it and all of its associated memories. It was the first and only place they'd lived in since they had moved. And to make things worse, Taylor's new best friend, Emma, lived two doors down the hall.

"Um, well, so," he said, trying hard to keep his emotions in check, "that's it? There isn't anything else we can do?"

Alison looked Joel in the eyes. "No, honey, I'm really sorry. We have ten days to move out."

"What? Why so fast?"

Alison sighed again. "I'm sorry, they actually told me earlier, but I thought I could scrape together enough to make it. I didn't want to make you kids worried. But then the restaurant had to cut back, and—"

"And now we don't even know where we're gonna live," Taylor interrupted.

Oh man, I hadn't even thought about that part, Joel realized. His stress level went up yet another notch.

"We'll figure something out," Alison said, although she didn't sound too convinced. "I applied for another job today, so hopefully that will work out."

"Um, when will you hear back about that?" Joel asked.

"Soon, I'm sure."

"So, uh, can't they give us an extension or whatever it was, like last time?"

Alison paused before replying. "I asked, but they won't give us another extension unless we can come up with about five hundred dollars, which we don't have, since I had to get the car fixed."

Having lived through a somewhat challenging childhood, Joel was good at latching on to glimmers of hope and mining them for all they were worth. "Wait," he said, "you mean, if we can get some money now, they'll give us some more time until you hear back about that new job?"

"I suppose, but I don't know how we would come up with enough."

Joel fidgeted as his mind raced around for ideas. *Money...where could we get...*

His foot hit the guitar case on the ground.

"Uh—how much money did you say we need?"



Joel walked through the door to Art's store, guitar case in hand. It had taken a truckload of acting skills that he never knew he had to convince his mom that he was okay with

this idea, and although he was dying a little inside, he knew that it was the right thing to do.

“Art?”

Art walked out of the back room. “Oh—hey, bud, what’s up? Something wrong with the guitar?”

Joel’s hands were shaking. “No—no, it’s fine. I just—I just have to return it.”

Art took a few steps forward, a worried expression on his face. “Why? What happened?”

“We—um, my family, we’re getting kicked out of our, um, our apartment. We, uh, couldn’t make the rent.”

“Oh no, that’s terrible.”

“Yeah, so, um, I was wondering if—if I could, like, um, exchange the guitar, for, well, you know—”

“For cash?”

Joel felt his heart sink. “Yeah. I mean, I know the store doesn’t have much money and all, but, um, this is like, an emergency and stuff...you know. I’ll work extra hours, or whatever.”

Art gave Joel a warm smile. “Say no more, bud. I’ll help you out.” He disappeared into the office.

Joel slumped onto a stool and looked at the guitar case. As he sat there, all of the bad events in his life, recent and past, started to drip into his thoughts, and slowly they began to coalesce into one giant overwhelming cloud of negativity.

Art came back out a minute later, holding a check in his hand. “Here you go. Don’t worry about the store, okay? We’ll be fine.”

Joel just nodded. *Don’t worry? All I do is worry. How can I not worry when everything just goes wrong all the time?*

“Joel? It’ll be okay, trust me. Worrying is a waste of time, remember?”

Joel didn’t hear the last thing Art said—his mind was becoming too overwhelmed with his own stressful thoughts. “I swear, when I become a rich and famous rock star, none of this will happen anymore,” he said to no one in particular.

Art pulled up a stool next to Joel and sat down. “I know that things seem bad right now, but believe me, life will get better. Remember, ‘this, too, shall pass.’ You just need to be patient.”

“All my problems will be solved when I make it,” Joel continued, ignoring Art as he clenched his fists. “Money, school, girls, bullies, whatever—everything will be taken care of, and I’ll finally be happy. I’ll be the one in charge. Everyone will listen to me. I’ll even be able to get my mom and dad to—”

Art put a hand on Joel’s shoulder. “Joel—listen to me.”

Art’s words and the physical contact broke through the angry fog for a moment. Joel looked at him.

“It’s okay to have dreams, but don’t make your happiness dependent on them. We often think that if we get or achieve something, doing so will make us happy. But that’s not always the case. Thoreau said that happiness is a butterfly—if you chase it, it flies away. But if you just sit there and wait, it’ll land on you. You can be happy right here, right now—all you have to do is decide that you *will* be happy. Happiness is a state of mind.”

Joel blinked as he tried to make sense of Art’s words. But the angry fog was too thick. It rolled back in, stronger than ever. “You know what?” Joel snapped, grabbing the check from Art’s hand, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Joel—”

Joel stood up and started for the door. “Or—or maybe I do. I think you only say these stupid things because you never made it in music yourself!”

“Joel, I—”

“That’s it, isn’t it? Your dream never came true, so you just—you just read and repeat all these nonsense sayings and quotes, to make yourself feel better about failing—failing as a musician, failing as a rock star. And now you’re trying to destroy my dream, too!”

“Joel, please—”

“Well, you know what? I’m gonna be different. I’m gonna make it. You—you’ll see! Everyone will see. You and Mitch and Suzi and everybody else!”

Joel shoved the check into his pants pocket and grabbed the door handle. Just as he was about to turn it, Art called to him.

“Joel,” Art said as he held out a silver disc in his right hand. “Before you go, here, take this.”

“What—what’s that?” Joel snapped, his insides roiling.

“Your song. I finished mixing it. I think you’ll like how it turned out.”

Joel paused for a moment and looked at the ground. A part of him knew that he was going to regret this outburst later on, but when his emotions took over like this, it was basically impossible to just turn them back off.

“Look,” Art said gently, “maybe after you’ve had a chance to calm down, come on by and we’ll—”

Joel snatched the CD and stormed out, not bothering to listen to the rest of what Art had to say. He glanced at the disc and noticed that it had been preprinted with the store’s name and phone number.

No problem, I’ll just make copies of this at school and then send them out to every single record label. Then they’ll all come calling, starting a bidding war, wanting to sign me to a record contract. It’s gonna be awesome. First we’ll buy our apartment, then we’ll buy a mansion on Mercer Island, and then another one in Kahala. I’ll have eight hundred and twenty-three, no, make that eight thousand, three hundred and fifty-two guitars. I’ll have a huge finished basement, like, three thousand and five hundred square feet, just for my guitars.

Joel was so wound up that another occurrence of the strange warbling sound barely fazed him. He wandered around aimlessly for a while, losing track of time while thinking about all of the things that he would buy for himself and his family. He didn't feel like going back home, but he had no alternative destination in mind. The world felt like one big blur. He was so distracted by his own thoughts that he didn't notice the tall stranger wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt and a long black trench coat who sidled up next to him.

"Joel," the stranger whispered in a low, husky voice from within the confines of the hood.

Joel didn't hear the stranger. He continued to walk with his eyes fixed forward.

"Joel," the stranger whispered again, a little louder.

Joel heard him this time. "Huh—what?" he said as he jumped and looked around, startled out of his daze. "Whoa, you scared me—um, wait, who are you?"

"I'm Marshall Byle," the stranger said in a familiar British accent as he turned to look Joel in the eye.

Joel quickly looked away. "What? You can't be..."

For a second, Joel debated whether to turn and run or stand and yell at whoever this was for playing a lame joke on him, but then he turned his head back around and got a good look at the stranger's face. Although it appeared a bit older in person, Joel instantly recognized that the face's features and details—the light-green eyes, hooked nose, long sideburns, uneven jawline, the scar on the cheek from an on-stage accident—were exactly the same as the ones that he had been seeing on posters, album covers, and website photos all of these years.

Joel's jaw dropped. "Oh my g—"

"Shhh," Marshall hissed, his eyes darting around. "Don't blow my cover, mate. I'm supposed to be dead. Just keep walking."

"Your what? Cover? Um, why are you—what are you doing here? How—how do you know who I am?"

"Joel, listen to me. We don't have much time. I can make your dreams come true—your dreams of becoming a rock star. You just have to come with me."

"Um, go with you—where? And how do you know what I want to become?"

"It'll just be for a little while. You want to be a rock star, right?"

Joel's mind was reeling. Marshall Byle—his all-time favorite musician—was here, talking to him, offering to make him a star. Was this really happening? "Well, um, yeah, of course, but—"

Marshall stopped walking and grabbed Joel by the shoulders. "Joel, *trust me*," he said. "I know this all sounds very strange right now. But I assure you, you won't regret it."

"Regret what? Where are we going?"

Marshall's expression tightened. "We only have a few more minutes if you really want to do this. Are you in or not?"

“Um, I—well—”

Marshall sighed and raised his hands. “All right, if you don’t want to be a rock star, fine with me.” He turned around and started to walk away.

Joel stared at the back of his idol, a man who had somehow risen from the dead to appear next to him. He pushed aside the jumble of confused emotions filling his mind. As crazy as all of this seemed, he couldn’t pass up what sounded like the opportunity he had been so fervently wishing for.

Sometimes, you just gotta say...

“Um, okay, what the heck, let’s go.”

Marshall looked over his shoulder at Joel, a wide smile on his face. “Excellent.”

“So, uh, what do I have to—” Joel started to ask before Marshall gruffly ushered him into a side alleyway between two old buildings. Joel panicked for a brief moment, thinking that he was about to get mugged. “Hey! What—what are you doing?”

“Shh, don’t worry. We just can’t be seen,” Marshall said as he reached into his trench coat.

Joel, half expecting Marshall to produce a knife or a gun, was quite perplexed by what he saw instead: a small-scale, odd-looking musical instrument that resembled a mandolin, with strings that glowed like the filaments of an incandescent light bulb and a teardrop-shaped body made of material that looked like it came from the inside of an oyster shell. “Wow—um, what is that?” he asked.

“I’ll explain everything later,” Marshall replied. “For now, just stay right there and try to relax.”

I’m getting pulled into a dark alley by my dead musical idol who says that he’ll turn me into a rock star while whipping out some crazy alien guitar—and he tells me to relax.

Marshall closed his eyes and seemed to enter into a state of intense concentration. He strummed the strange instrument, but Joel couldn’t hear any sound coming from it. Joel was about to ask another question when a feeling of dizziness suddenly overcame him, not unlike when he first got seasick as a child. His vision became blurry, and the dizziness quickly gave way to a more intense sensation, which made him feel like he was being turned inside out. He wanted to scream, or perhaps throw up, but he found that he had lost all control of his own body. The CD that he had been carrying fell to the ground and rolled away, but that was the least of his concerns now. Tiny colored streams of light danced before his eyes before everything suddenly went dark.