

I Found My Heart in Prague

(Free Preview)

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Chapter 1—May 1, 2011

Fact 1: I know the day I'm going to die.

I know that I've lived a fulfilling life.

Scratch that. I lived an amazing life after I met her. If you learn nothing else from me with this story, know I found my kindred soul. It's out there. You just have to be patient.

As I was saying, before I met her, I was doing anything but living. You see, I grew up privileged. My dad was very good with money. He was also very good with bourbon, but that comes later.

My father wasn't around much. I would like to think I would have been better with my kids. Please know kids are/were wanted.

I grew up with everything at my disposal but friendship, fun, and having any real say over my own life. My dad would always make sure my head was either in the books or out shooting free throws.

"We have a reputation!" Dad would always like to remind me with a fresh drink in his hand. "Don't let the family down."

I would like to say it was a bad thing. Hell, I would never motivate my kids in this manner. Still, I was a straight "A" student my whole life and I got a college scholarship for my basketball abilities. So, I guess you can say it worked for me.

By my junior year of college, I had NBA scouts coming to all of my games. ESPN even aired one of my games and showed a half-court shot I swished like a rock star. Everybody around me thought I was having the time of my life.

"You have mail!" The grin on my dad's face...it was like the letter was for him. "It's from the Mavericks!"

"Let him see for himself," our maid muttered.

I looked at the opened letter and it was an official invitation to go down and practice with them. I had declared for the draft and this was my first official workout request. It would be nice to stay on this side of the country. I thought I was a city boy; I was born and raised in Oklahoma City. Yes, you'd be surprised how immature and wrong you can be.

"Everything is starting to come together for this family," my dad said. All of his dreams were coming true.

It was probably the sweetest thing that man ever said to me; probably to anybody.

As luck would have it, the Dallas Mavericks did draft me 30th after all. Before long, I was down in Texas showing off my skills in front of men twice my age. Yes, part of it was very awesome. My dreams were coming true, just like my

dad said they would. Still, all I did was sleep and play basketball. I had teammates, I had one night stands, but I never had anything close to love or even just friendship.

“You complain too much, kid,” the Mavericks’ trainer said. “People would kill to have what you have. I’ve tried once or twice.”

“I suppose,” I replied. It was quickly becoming my company line.

The first three months of my rookie season flew by. I was the first guard off the bench and would be cheered or jeered based on my ability to shoot three-pointers and scramble on the floor after all loose balls. Remember, I was a 6-foot-1 guard, in a giant’s league.

My size disadvantage wasn’t really a big deal like they made in the media. I’d argue it helped me wake up from a dream. But let’s stay on track here. Things became very busy for me. Again, the media would always talk about the great life I had, with the huge hotels, and famous people tabloid magazines said I supposedly met. Oh yeah, I was on the cover of one of those grocery store rags. Never moon a fan in public when you are known from television. Too many people have seen my hairy... well never mind.

Yet I never got to experience anything. Well, not for real or without a hundred people mobbing me for autographs or hugs. I didn’t mind the hugs much. Usually, I spent most of my time in my hotel room or airport. I was going nutty being lonely. I could buy three expensive cars for my 21st birthday, but I had nobody to text I trusted. Everybody wanted something from me.

Then my life changed forever.

It was game three of the Western Conference finals. The Mavericks were leading the series 2-0 and it looked like we might even sweep the Hornets. I was assigned to New Orleans’ best guard when I entered the game and I stuck to him like a virus. In my head I could hear the announcers talking my praises. I was holding Marc Johnson scoreless.

At halftime the Mavericks were up by 12 points. It looked like we were going to win the game and the series. I started in the second half and immediately had the ball in my hands. My center was wide open, so I passed him the ball and he shot and missed a dunk. I tried to live up to my reputation and went up against two big forwards for the rebound; Russell Westbrook style. As I was coming down with the ball, a Hornet forward mistakenly knocked his elbow straight into my head.

The force of the elbow knocked me backwards and my head thumped against the floor. I didn’t feel a thing. Instead, teammates said I was knocked out on the floor in front of a sold-out crowd and millions watching at home. I came to three minutes later. People were going crazy around me. The team doctor was sticking up fingers while his assistant was putting a back brace on me.

“My head is killing me,” I said. “But I can play.”

I was later told I tried to talk my way back into the game. Coach Cash said I barely knew my name, but I knew I needed to play basketball. He meant it as a compliment, but I really just think I wanted to do the only thing I was programmed for in this life. God, my life was so small.

The team doctors took me to the back on a golf cart and checked me out. They knew I had a concussion, but they also wanted to make sure my shoulder was okay, due to past injuries. So, I made the trip to Dallas Price Hospital.

There is nothing like sitting at a hospital for hours knowing what is wrong with you already, but still having to sit there until the words pass through a doctor's mouth. I was sure the doctor was going to tell me I had a concussion. I just needed to know how long it was going to be before I could play again. Was I going to be ready for the finals?

Finally, a doctor came walking into my room. It was our team doctor, Mitch. This man is a silly son of a gun. He was one of the team's defacto-mascots. Especially on losing streaks, he was the target of many pranks.

"The tests came back and the doctors didn't like what they saw," Mitch said.

"Did the fall cause brain damage?" I asked mockingly. "I feel great. When can I play again?"

"The doctors would like to run a couple more tests," Mitch replied.

"What's wrong, Mitch?" I questioned.

Mitch couldn't look me in the eyes. He was well known for his poker face during even the most stressful of situations, and he couldn't look me in my eyes.

"The doctors think they found a tumor in your brain," Mitch said. "It's strange, but I remember noticing he had no idea what to do with his hands. "We need to do some more tests to see what our next course of action will be for your treatment."

Over the course of the next day, several doctors did more tests on me. Mitch came back and informed me I had a grade III anaplastic astrocytoma. That's just a fancy way of saying I had brain cancer and a nasty form. You see, search Grade III and you will find it's inoperable. There are tons of kinds of cancer and I happen to get the one that is a death sentence.

"How long do I have?" I didn't look up.

"You're young and strong," Mitch said. "The team has already agreed to pay for all of your medical expenses. I have never seen somebody with more heart than you."

"How long do I have?" I repeated.

"It's really hard to say," he relinquished. "It could be four months or it could be four years. We'll get you started on chemotherapy and radiation right away."

My dad was the first to enter my hospital room. He had a look of despair on his face. Of course he would, right? His only son had just been told he was going to die.

“Don’t worry about basketball, son,” my father said. “You didn’t let me down.”

That’s right, my dad has his quirks. Please don’t judge him harshly. I’m sure you are bright, so hopefully you’ve already picked up on his issues.

My mother entered the room slowly. You could tell she was barely keeping it together. She had such sad eyes. Her hands were trembling.

“A child is never supposed to go first,” my mother said. Her voice was no more than a whisper “You are my only child. I love you more than all the money in Hong Kong.”

“I love you too, Mom,” I replied.

My mother reached for my hand. Hers was still trembling, yet reassuring at the same time.

“You need to give us a second,” my mother said.

My father protested for a second, but lost the argument by just a glimpse into my mother’s eyes.

“Maybe I was wrong,” my mother whispered.

“Wrong about what?” I asked.

“I let your father push you and push you,” she replied. “I should have spoken up.”

My mother was distraught. She couldn’t look at me. Yes, my mom has always been dramatic, but she was just so serious and appeared ashamed.

“Mom, it’s not your fault I have cancer,” I said. “I don’t have cancer because Dad pushed me.”

“You’re right,” she answered. “You just looked so happy; my little basketball player.”

“Mom, it’s not your fault,” I replied.

“You need to spend the rest of your time exploring life,” my mother said.

“You need to be free from the misery of your dad.”

She pulled out her phone and called her secretary.

“There, you are all set,” she said. Then she hung up her phone. “You have access to our company plane miles. Use them all and have a million adventures, my dear.”

Being an NBA player, I really didn’t need the miles, but it was my mom’s way of helping. She has always been a quiet woman, but her authority was never questioned. My mom was also a rock star with her flower business.

Plus, she had brought up a good point. I had never thought about death before that moment. The only thing in my life had been basketball. All I knew was how to play. Honestly, outside my family, I hadn’t loved anybody more than

I did myself.

Being given a death sentence is a humbling experience. Realizing you have never really lived is just plain scary.

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