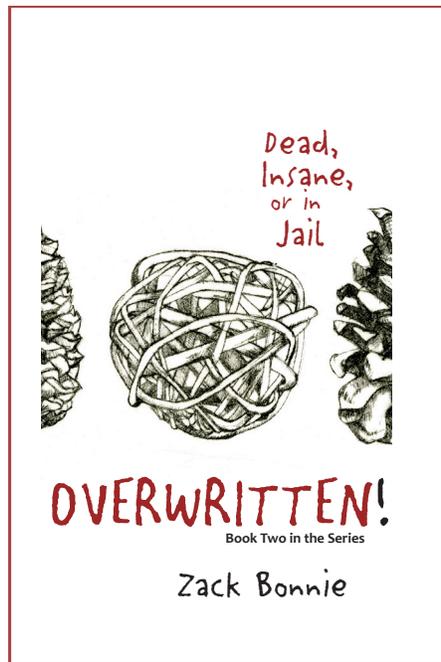


Excerpt, Book Two

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Chapter 1

Survival called its closing ceremony at the end of month-long ordeal, “Trail’s End.” Over a memorable hour at the Oxbow Truck Stop and Restaurant, we ate luxurious, greasy, diner food from plastic plates, and drank soda that I felt seep into my spongy teeth. I ate cooked food with abandon, followed by a shower in a dank stall. Clean clothes! One kid in our group tossed his cookies n’ yogurt and got to shower twice.

So, I survived Survival. That wasn’t a sure thing.

I reviewed my situation.

The only way I’ll ever see ol’ Mom and Dad again is to return to RMA; the only way I’m going home again is to make my parents love me so much they don’t ever want to have me so far away.

That’s unlikely.

I could be in Idaho forever.

Kids I’d never see again got to meet their parents and go home with them. Not me. I got into Sheriff Darren Snipe’s cruiser for the long drive up along Idaho’s spine, almost to Canada. Hardly anybody had spoken with me on Solo the last four days; come to think of it, hardly anybody had spoken to me the last four weeks on Survival.



When we left Trail's End to begin the voyage north to my ill-regarded destination, I got my first good up-close glimpse at the sheriff's traveling companion, the infamous Albert Guerre. I'd seen him before, but I doubted he remembered. According to rumor, the former Army Green Beret – with a face so scarred it could have been etched by quartz, and a permanent grimace under eyes shiny like a crow – had made a full-time career out of nabbing kids in the middle of the night and taking them to places made for kids “like me.”

Alternating driving duties, the two men kept the sheriff's cruiser in motion all night. I didn't sleep much due to the intestinal cramping and watery leakage of my active case of Survival-acquired giardiasis. Sheriff Snipes and the bounty hunter jabbered about winter sports and hunting for hours. When they talked to me, the conversation inevitably began, as so many would, with the question of what had nutritionally sustained me during the month-long forced march in the desert. At first, I felt like a hero talking about primitive fire-making, setting traps, and eating hand-caught fry and rattlesnake. But I quickly tired of my own anecdotes. I knew why I was in the car – my certain captivity was just hours away. From what I overheard in the back seat, my parents had made contingency plans. In case RMA had not permitted my reintegration, it appeared that Mom and Dad had also looked at sending me to CEDU – the California flagship of Sol Turnwell's business model, and sister school to RMA – among a host of other options recommended by their educational consultant back home in Virginia.



Cold darkness and familiar stars greeted me when Sheriff Snipes and his companion released me from the car. They had successfully delivered me to the door of my Rocky Mountain Academy dorm. My final moments under those stars didn't forebode anything, although they should have.

Albert Guerre followed me inside.

La Mancha, the dorm, had been named for a villa, which I thought of like a town park, not quite knowing the story of Don Quixote, although I had several times heard references in Idaho to Cervantes' epic. My dorm head, an older kid named Jasper Browning, flipped on a light and pointed up. Just like on day one, back in July, I spotted a rolled-up comforter on an empty bunk space above his. Jasper's clock told the awake people in the room that it was 3:30 AM. Guerre departed, saying, “See you in the morning.”

I'd spent the whole drive up here imagining the worst about coming back, in intestinal agony, wondering if I'd ever again see my little sister, brother, or parents.

Or friends. I used to have friends, too.

Anyway, I was happy the ten-hour drive was done. I climbed up the bunk. The mattress under my body was as foreign as my first French kiss.

Nothing in nature is this soft.

I sank in to sleep.

Around 6 AM, thirty minutes before our regular time to rise, my dorm support Jasper Browning made the bed under me creak. Returning from the commode he mixed a tremendous yawn with a disgruntled moan when he saw me nestled into the comforter above his bunk.

“Shit. That’s right! Well, get up in five. Take a shit. I gotta take you up to the house so George can move you in. We’ll get a shower after. Do they already know you’re back? Dude! Your feet fuckin’ reek!”

I shrugged from his eye level, knowing all that he suggested to be true. None of the other four dorm mates seemed to care that they were awakened thirty minutes early. One familiar face even smiled and waved. They’d all be heading for the house, too, in a little while, at breakfast time.

How different from yesterday will today be? I don’t have to make a fire in order to eat? Wow! And, there will be breakfast and lunch!

Jasper ushered me to the house, RMA’s central building. My armed and protective escorts from the desert must have napped in the car before signing over my custodial paperwork. They both waved to-go coffee cups happily from the vehicle when they saw me with Jasper. All they’d needed were a few signatures to reassign me to this wooden world of “unacceptable” music, clothes, and hair; mandatory touchy guilty feelings; absolute conformity under the guise of universal intervention therapy – all enforced by a system of creepy staff and nuttier older-school students who wanted me to smoosh together with them in body-piles on the house floor at night, or hug and cry after especially hairball raps where girls shrieked and everyone sobbed or screamed.

George Daughtry said good morning to Jasper, and then smiled eagerly at me. My return “interview” was gentle compared to the first time in July. That interview had been conducted by the oversized animal named Andrew Oswald, another RMA staffer, who demanded my clothes.

My hair had grown unacceptably long in the five weeks since I had split RMA. After mowing brown hair down with a crackling set of clippers in a cramped bathroom, George led us into the adjacent office. Prescott Freshwater, the head of Brave Family, was waiting for us with a couple of paper grocery bags full of work jeans and flannels, and the other few belongings that I abandoned when I split.

Oh, shit! I see my journal. Did they read it?

Time to be strip searched. This wasn’t because Prescott or George thought I had contraband; it was just CEDU policy to do this every time a kid left campus without permission. I wondered if the older kids that visit Bonners Ferry – the nearest town – were searched after every trip to the movies, every five-dollar-budgeted trip into a grocery for Mentos and Folger’s instant coffee. Or if even the Warrior kids get searched after home visits?

This guy George who’s searching me has got the juice to make those decisions.

For the fourth of four times this summer – and of all time – my strip search was unnecessary. Prescott and George, heads of Brave and Warrior families respectively, wouldn’t have allowed me into the dorm to sleep if there had been any doubt I had smuggled contraband onto campus.

Glad to put on clean socks a third time in 24 hours, I also looked forward to my third warm shower in a month – well, as long as I made sure it lasted less than five minutes. Because that’s the Agreement.

This entire routine to get a kid started at RMA is called orientation, but it should be called “disorientation.”

The smell of wood in my nostrils, George Daughtry’s mangled face, the boxy, rugged work-jeans, T-shirt, and blue flannel I pulled on, all had undesired familiarity. George’s face was sliced all down one side, an injury sustained in an act of violence before he worked for CEDU. He wedged himself into a creaking wood seat. Prescott Freshwater and his puffy face lingered next to me while we watched George sign papers. Prescott’s early-morning eyes were extremely red, the albino red of some of the ground dwelling creatures I’d seen in the Owyhee Desert.

George squared the papers and put down his pen. From over the modest pine desk he smiled with intensity, trying to make sparkles dance from his bright blue eyes into my bland browns. One of his eyelids was always only half-open, because of the big scar down the side of his face. How was I supposed to look back at him without staring at his permanently bulging, pale-blue orb?

I already know my way around campus. This interview is to make sure I’m remorseful for splitting.

“OK. Well firstly, welcome back. Bright and early. Your parents and I are hoping that you’ve got this out of your system, alright? Splitting didn’t solve your problems, did it?”

“Hmm.” I did not feel like answering George.

The running away from here, and the problem of being here for my problems were, in themselves, problems.

Splitting from here that August day felt like it happened long ago.

Oh, his question is not rhetorical.

“Um, no, I guess not. Sir.” I was aware of my sunburned flaking lips. They felt shriveled, like dehydrated black caterpillars on southern asphalt following a steamy Virginia rainstorm.

George Daughtry wet his shiny lips under a feeble mustache before continuing. I was anxious to get upstairs, but paid attention. I could smell toast and coffee, and hear kids banging around in the over-sized wooden rooms.

“You know, Bonnie, it doesn’t have to be as bad as you think. There’s no chains or locks here. We don’t even lock the dorms. Remember? Choose to be here...to believe what this special place can offer you. It’s your choice, you see.”

The Warrior family head paused to see if I’d rebut this assertion.

George’s argument about the lack of locks on the RMA campus was void. The school surrounded itself with a no-man’s land of impassible rivers and mountains.

I didn't take George's semantic word-bait about "choice," either. I knew that game well, from home, and from raps here.

Rocky Mountain Academy people play unfair word games.

We all knew I was acquainted with the up-sized threats of worse places than this, with locks, fences, no food, and cells for dorms. And, worse than any military school, there were long-term deprivation scenarios like the Survival program – where I had just spent four weeks in the desert – that kept kids outdoors living in tipis all year long, struggling against the elements. These places had also been mentioned among my parents, the educational consultant, and the parent communicator who worked in the basement of the academic building here.

Choice? Not really.

Prescott's turn for my attention arrived. Insinuations of breakfast between his sentences flavored the air between words. I smelled apples and brown sugar, a remnant of the oatmeal the power staff had been slurping up.

"So you probably understand a little more about consequences. About responsibility now, don't you? Taking responsibility for your own actions is one of the most important lessons a young man can learn. You're responsible for what you say, and do, and what you feel. Right? Like right this minute for example! Your parents don't make you feel angry, sad, happy, hurt, or whatever you're feeling; you choose to be angry as a consequence of your actions. That's on you. Right? That'd be a choice to be angry or feel whatever you're feeling. In your gut, right now. You'll see. Consequence and awareness."

I detected slurs and a mild lisp in Prescott's voice. I didn't know what he was talking about, either. That, along with my desire to get upstairs, was making me antsy.

Is he drunk?

It was early and they were still wearing comfortable sweatpants. Prescott hadn't made it into his customary suspenders – formal for night-time, and wide, red ones for the laborious forest-thinning occasions I would share with him in the months to come.

Prescott's last word bathed in the pine-incensed space between us. A nose whistle indicated more would be said:

"This place is expensive, Zack, and it cost you a lot splitting, didn't it? But it was worth it. Maybe you're the boy who's gone into the outhouse and come back smelling like roses."

George signed another document.

"OK, let's get you moved back in. Er, Bonnie, we found your journal in your belongings. I'm returning it to you. Here. Be careful though – making a habit of thinking negative brings negativity, son. Can't you see that? It's the eternal struggle in the I Want To Live. Well, heh, hopefully we'll see you make it to Warrior, and I'm going to put in a special request that you be one of my kids when you get there? With me. Alright?"

"Oh, good."

George is talking about next summer!

A peer group goes into the I Want To Live propheet normally around the anniversary of starting here. George thinks I'll still be around in July or August of next year. I'll have to finish Papoose with Tess, get through Brave with Prescott, and get to Warrior before that.

Will I be here? Maybe so. What other option do I have but to perhaps plead my case at Christmas visits when I see Mom and Dad? Of course, that possibility is still three full months away – twice the amount of time I found unendurable here before.