

First 2 Chapters of Head Above Water  
Upcoming novel from Benjamin Jones

Chapter 1 – Last Words

*Good morning, Diary. The time is now 4:09 AM and the date is February 24<sup>th</sup>. I haven't been able to catch a wink of sleep. I'm so nervous that my body won't let me do anything other than lie here with all these crazy thoughts running around in my head. In less than nine hours I'm supposed to be a bride. Can you believe it, me as a bride? The very thought sounds absurd.*

*My mind is weary and full of worry, overflowing with the words that she had told me. Should I believe her or not? Just because someone calls themselves a clairvoyant and carries a deck of tarot cards around with them doesn't necessarily qualify someone as truly being able to predict the future; if that was all it took then everyone would be doing it. The chances of her being genuine, as convincing as she may have sounded and acted, were a billion to one but it was that one chance that keeps me up at night.*

*I don't know, I really don't know. How does one even fix their lips to tell someone that love, out of all the things in the world, could possibly be the death of them? People's lives are not to be played with like that.*

*My life is now one of fear – the fear of the very thing that I've wanted the most in my whole life – love. I find myself questioning everything that I do now when it comes to showing emotions, even on the eve of my wedding, holding back the feelings I have for fear that I will one day find real love and, in turn, find death. It's hard. You can't help but to love no more than you can control who you fall in love with. I couldn't stop loving him no more than I could stop breathing and still continue to live.*

*Having read over the last paragraph that I just wrote I realized that I was writing it as if what she told me was one hundred percent authentic questioning whether I should run from love or let it find me and then run right into the Grim Reaper; this is all nonsense. I'm getting married today and starting a new chapter in my life, that's all there is to it.*

*With that being said, goodnight Diary. I'll be a bride the next time that you hear from me and everything will have went just as I planned it to – it has to.*

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*Dear Diary, it's 4:32 AM on February 24<sup>th</sup>. I'm being overwhelmed with visions of my wedding and they're all bleak. The more I continue to think about the more paranoid I become. She has really gotten into my head.*

*I've decided that this entry is going to be the last one that I ever make. If he truly is the cause of my death then it was well worth the sacrifice. I love you, Darryl, and I always have. Even when I didn't choose you it was still always you that had my heart.*

*Goodbye Diary. You have been an invaluable confidant.*

## Chapter 2 – Her, I and the Wheel

“Here you go, Granny.”

The air inside the room smelled sweet with the aroma of vanilla that married itself with orange peel and cinnamon, spreading itself outwards from the steaming cup of tea that Darryl carried from the kitchen into the living room, setting it down in front of his grandmother. In her advanced age she had become very particular about how she liked things and her tea was no exception: three spoonfuls of Equal, a drop of cream and a teaspoon of honey, all in that order.

“Thank you.”

He sat down across from her in a wine red recliner, his tall and lanky frame sinking down into it. Darryl was everyone and no one at the same time, an average man that blended in with the crowd, always playing the background and letting everyone else hog the spotlight. “You’re welcome.”

He did what came naturally to him and that was to sit and observe, soaking in his surroundings like a dry sponge. “Be careful,” he told her as his eyes followed her every movement with the cup. The words came automatically to him with no thought needed. It was in his blood to watch over her. “Don’t burn yourself, it’s very hot.”

“I will,” she replied as her pencil thin fingers took hold of the cup and brought it to her lips, her voice scratchy like an old vinyl record. She took a small sip and then set the cup back down on the table, her movements slow and steady like a tortoise.

“Does it taste alright?”

“I couldn’t have made it any better; it really hit the spot.” Against the faded mustard colored sofa she rested, the piece of furniture being Darryl’s senior by a couple of decades. Her face was tired and layered with more wrinkles than a newborn Shar-pei puppy, engraved with deep lines from many years of hardship and struggles that she had always managed to persevere through.

Darryl’s eyes, a shade of darkened amber, drifted over to the television, watching the particulars of her favorite show. The wheel spun around and around while the three contestants took turns calling out letters and spitting out answers. Pat Sajak was giving his usual banter while Vanna White smiled with glee, no doubt thinking about how ridiculously high her paycheck must be for doing nothing more than walking back and forth touching electronic screens all day; it’s a hell of a good job if you can get it. “Why do you like this show so much?”

“I like the simplicity of it. With this show you know exactly what you’re going to get when you watch it. People spin the wheel, guess a letter, solve the puzzle, win some money or a prize of some sort and then it repeats itself all over again. Simple.”

“It’s boring to me.”

She glanced over at him with a look of disbelief on her face. “I don’t even know how you can fix your lips to say that, especially considering how much you used to love it when you were growing up. The show is a lot of things but boring is not one of them. It’s a nice wholesome show that the entire family, everyone from adults all the way down to the kids, can play together. It’s nothing like that show

you used to watch where they would force people to eat insects, rats and other foolishness like that. What was the name of that show?"

"You're talking about *Fear Factor*."

"Yeah, that's the one. Is it still on?"

"No, they canceled it a few years ago."

"Good, I'm glad that at least one television executive smartened up. That show, along with the rest of what they call game shows today, has gotten away from the whole idea of what game shows are all about. Maybe it's the changing of the thinking of your generation but the people on television today are all mean to each other where as the ones I've always watched had people on it that were actually friendly to each other and weren't angry or bitter when they lost."

"You make a very good point."

"It's the same thing with the music that's being put out today. Some of the things that I hear coming out of peoples cars is embarrassing and appalling to me. I'm not trying to say that all of it is that way or even that it's necessarily bad, it's just not something that I'm used to hearing. Everything seems to be driven off of degrading women, sex, violence and bragging about what they have. There is so much more in life to talk about, you know? Music used to be about love and feelings and having a delivering a message; I don't know when all that changed."

"Things are a lot different now. To be fair, there is a lot of good music out there but it's not played nearly as much as the other stuff. Radio stations have their hands tied because they have to play what the people want to hear and, a great majority of the time, the music they want to hear is crap just like you mentioned. I like to call it throw away music because you hear it a few times and then you forget about it; it doesn't stick with you the least bit."

"I'll have to take your word for it, sweetie."

"The next time I come up here I'll bring my ipod so that you can hear what I'm talking about."

"That's fine but I don't want to hear too much cussing."

"Fair enough."

They both drifted off into a settled silence, enjoying being around each other without having to necessarily express it in words. Darryl used the time to perform a slow scan of the room, something that he had done a million and one times before but he was more observant this time around. For the first time in his twenty-two years of life it dawned upon him that what he was viewing was his grandmother's whole life, everything that was near and dear to her, all being contained in this whole room.

There were scores of pictures of her with various friends and family members stuck to the walls and on any surface that would support a picture frame, piece of tape or the occasional thumb tack. Plants snaked their leafy vines over and around the window sill and the bulky floor model television that they resided on. The coffee table where her cup of tea was cooling was saturated with items: a stack of crossword puzzle books, a notebook that was opened to reveal an incomplete shopping list on one side of the page and a recipe for beef stew on the other, her ever present Bible and many other objects. A small section of the left wall contained nothing but birthday, Christmas, Mother's Day as well as many other miscellaneous

varieties of cards that she had acquired over the last several decades. Various knick knacks and assorted items that one accumulates from only God knows where filled out the rest of the space.

As his eyes continued to travel they found their way down to his grandmother's legs which were covered by a blue and white striped quilt that she had pulled up to her waist. "Have you checked your sugar level today?"

"I have a routine setup to where I always check it right after *Divorce Court* goes off."

"What about on the weekends when *Divorce Court* isn't on?"

"Then I do it right after the nightly news."

"Let me see your foot." He got up out of his chair and knelt down in front of her, removing the quilt from around her legs to expose her swollen and discolored left foot; dark blue and green splotches that were similar to deep bruises were everywhere. The sight of those imperfections brought a frown to his face.

"It's starting to get better," she said proactively, trying to convince him of the fact as her eyes danced briefly from the television down to him and then back at the television once more.

"That may be true but it still looks awful." He gently pressed his index and middle finger down along various places on her foot and ankle. "Does this hurt?"

"It doesn't hurt much at all any more."

"What about your medications? Are you taking them like you're supposed to?" he inquired, continuing to examine her foot for a moment longer before covering her feet and legs back up again.

"Of course I'm taking my medicine," she answered back in a tone that made it seem as if his question was a dumb one to be asking.

He sat back in the recliner and looked over at her, not truly believing her story but having no proof to the contrary. "Good. You need to start taking better care of yourself. You can't keep putting things like this off and thinking that it will be okay if you ignore it or let it go. This is very serious. Do you remember what the doctor told you the last time you went to see him?"

"I remember."

"If you remember then you should realize just how critical it is that you stay on top of these things. According to the doctor you were only a couple of weeks away from possibly losing your foot. Do you understand what could have happened next? They have moved you out of here and put you in a nursing home where you would have lost all of the independence that you currently have. We both know that you don't want that."

"You don't have to keep worrying about me," she told him with a slight air of defiance in her voice, "I have it all under control now."

"I've heard that before and I really want to believe you this time. I'm not trying to get on you or anything, I'm really not. I want and need for you to understand that I love you and that I only want for you to continue to remain healthy. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

She nodded her head up and down several times, this not being the first time that she had heard this speech, or one very similar to it.

He could do nothing but shake his head, feeling like a parent who was trying to talk some sense into their hard headed and stubborn child. The task seems downright impossible at times but you keep on trying, believing in your heart that one day it will all make sense to them. “Do you need anything from the kitchen?”

“No, I think I’m okay.”

“Alright, I’ll be right back.”

He got up and stepped into the kitchen, opening the cabinet above the stove to retrieve one of several blue plastic cups that were in it. As he went to close the door a cockroach scurrying around in the back between the rest of the cups and glasses caught his eye. “Shit,” he muttered quietly to himself as he grabbed a paper towel, careful to keep one eye on the critter, and folded it in half, using it to crush the creature with. The paper towel and the remains of the roach were then deposited into the trashcan.

Sliding over to the sink he turned on the knob for the hot water. Several drops of the cheap lemon scented dishwashing liquid were squirted into his cup and he then proceeded to take the yellow dishrag that was draped haphazardly over the faucet and use it to clean the cup. With it thoroughly cleansed he opened the fridge that was jam packed with Tupperware containers full of old food and pulled out a gallon of orange juice, filling his cup halfway before placing the container back in the same place he got it.

He began to walk back into the living room but came to a stop when glanced over to find that his grandmother had fallen asleep just that quickly. He placed his cup on the counter and then walked over to her, nudging her gently on the right shoulder. “Wake up Granny.”

She slowly opened her eyes and sat up a little bit. “I’m tired, baby.”

“I know. Here, let me help you up so that I can get you into bed.”

She steadied herself on his arm as he assisted her from the couch and walked her the short distance from the living room to her bedroom. She climbed into bed as he flipped on the lamp that sat on her nightstand. He pulled the covers up to her chin so that she was as snug as a bug in a rug. “Goodnight,” he told her as he leaned over and kissed her on the top of her head. “Sweet dreams.”

“Goodnight.” He cut the light off and then turned to walk out of the room but she extended her right hand out and grabbed him by the arm. “Darryl?”

“Yes?” he answered as he turned back around.

“Will you turn the light back on for a second? I want to talk to you about something important.”

“Sure.” The light was turned back on and he sat down next to her on the bed. “What is it? Is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine,” she said, looking up at him with her big dark eyes. “Listen, I know that I may not show it as much as I should but I really do appreciate you coming all the way up here to check on me the way that you do. Your Uncle Mike, God bless him, he comes around every now and then but he has his own things going on so I really can’t fault him for not coming around more than he does. I know that he means well.

“You’ve been really good to me, Darryl, really good. Your mother would be so proud of you if she were here. I wish that she would have been a better mother to you but she did the best that she could, I guess.”

“You really think that she would be proud?”

A sweet smile dawned on her face. “I know so. God I miss her. It hurt me to my soul when she died. It’s said a lot but it’s true that no parent ever wants to outlive their children, no matter the circumstances. Your mother was such a wonderful and beautiful person and it broke my heart when those two policemen showed up at my door that night to tell me that she was gone. I tried my best to get her away from all the drugs and stuff but she was too far gone; I was a failure to her in that regards. Though she wasn’t always doing right in her life she always took care of me and, now that she’s no longer here to do that, I feel like I have become a burden upon you. You’re a bright and handsome young man that should be out living your life and having fun, not sitting here babysitting and worrying about me.”

“Don’t talk like that. You’ve never been a burden to me.”

“Hear me out. I keep having these thoughts that if I were to die then you could take the insurance money, the little that there is, and do something real nice for yourself.”

“Granny, please!” he begged her as tears formed in his eyes. “Why are you saying these kinds of things? We are family! I’m supposed to worry and care about you whether you’re sick, healthy or somewhere in between. If family doesn’t worry about each other then no one will.”

Her heart was warmed by his words. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to upset you. You were always a smart kid and made family your top priority. I’ve always loved that about you. I don’t know if you remember this or not but, a long time ago, I guess it was about ten years or so, a couple of your friends had come over to see you. One of them had made a joke about me and the both of them were laughing about it. You got so mad at them that you ended up kicking both of them out of the house. I loved you so much for standing up and defending me like you did. I’ll never forget that.”

“I remember,” he said as he took her hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze. He got a little choked up as he thought about it and briefly relived it in his mind. “I did that because I love you and I will never let anyone talk bad about you.”

“Thank you,” she replied, a sweet little smirk on her tired face.

“You’re welcome.” He leaned over and planted another kiss up on her head. “Get some rest, alright?”

“I will. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. Love you Granny.”

“I love you, too.”

The lamp was turned off and he exited the room, the door being pulled shut behind him. Entering the living room he picked up the remote from the coffee table and used it to turn the television off. The remote was then sat down by her cup of tea which had long since cooled. He carried it into the kitchen and set it down on the counter.

He opened the cabinets and all of the cups and glasses were removed and stacked next to the double sink. After completing this he reached over and placed the

stopper in the drain of the sink on the right. The hot water was cut on and slowly began filling the sink up. He squirted some of the dishwashing liquid into the water and, as the sink continued to fill, he took the yellow dishcloth that he had used earlier and then wetted it, using it to wipe down the inside of the cabinet and clear it of the built up dirt and crumbs that the bugs had been feasting on.

Having finished with the cabinet he shut the water and then piled all of the drink ware into the soapy water. Taking a new washcloth from the drawer on the side of the oven he began to scrub, giving the dishes a thorough washing before placing them in the adjoining sink where they waited to be rinsed. After washing and rinsing he laid out three paper towels on the counter and placed the dishes on them to dry. He repeated this process with the plates, saucers, and bowls. He got a large dish towel from the same drawer he pulled the dish cloth from and then used it to dry all the dishes before placing them all back in the cabinet where they came from.

Not to be content with simply doing the dishes he next grabbed the broom and dustpan from inside the pantry, using the broom to sweep up what seemed like a mountain of debris from the kitchen floor. He deposited the mound of dirt into the trash and then returned the broom and pan back to the corner of the pantry.

Done cleaning he picked up his forgotten cup of orange juice and then made his way into the living room, stepping over to the left wall where his grandmother's collection of cards were located. He looked over a few, recognizing some that he had given her throughout the years, as he moved towards the back wall. He stopped in front of the television and picked up a forest green picture frame that contained an aging picture, about fifteen years old it was, of his grandmother and a dark skinned woman with short hair and hollow eyes that happened to be his mother.

With picture in hand he strolled into the dining room where, off in the corner across from the fine mahogany dining room table, sat a baby grand piano that contained a thin coating of dust on it. He placed his cup down on the floor and then moved the piano bench out so that he could sit down, all the while continuing to stare at the picture, entranced by the sight of his mother. He brought the frame up to his lips and planted a kiss on both his mother and grandmother before placing the frame on top of the piano so that their faces were looking back at him.

Both of his hands were placed on the keys but he didn't move them, instead allowing them a moment to get reacquainted with the feel of the piano. A moment passed and he was finally ready to play, his fingers moving nimbly over the ivories, filling the house with the sound of beautiful music.

*When you really think about it, life is nothing but a painful, slow and deliberate process that is designed to eventually subtract all of the things that you love and care about from you; it's up to us to make the most out of the little time that we do have. I make the six hour trip to see her every few weeks to try and steal a little bit of time with her, never knowing when the grains of sand in her hourglass will run out. Sitting in front of the television with her as she faithfully watched the Wheel of Fortune was something that was beautiful and irreplaceable to me.*

*Looking back on things, it's amazing how important some things become when you get older and are able to gain a bit of wisdom and insight into life and the things that really matter. It feels like it was only yesterday. I can vividly recall when I was*

*young all of the times that I sat in this very spot with Granny sitting right here next to me teaching me how to play the piano and appreciate music. Thinking back on all of the hours I spent here I now know that those were some of the best times in my life, though I failed to recognize them as such at the time. She was forever patient with me, always loving and caring. "You know that's not where your fingers go," she would tell me each of the millions of times that I messed up and then she would softly place her hands upon mine and guide my fingers onto the correct spot. I always assumed that she would live forever like Peter Pan, never growing older and always being around when I needed her.*

*I am nothing if not a realist and, thinking realistically, I know that one day she will be taken from me just like my mother was so many years ago. When I hear her talk about the subject of death as she so often does now for some reason it only serves to hammer that point home even further. I've tried to mentally brace myself for it because I know that it's inevitable, especially given her health condition, but who am I to tell the mother of my mother how to take care of herself? She's been on this earth more than three times longer than I have so she must be doing something right. Right?*