Beautiful Boy

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID SHEFF

Sheff was born in Boston, Massachusetts and graduated from the University of California at Berkeley before beginning a long career in journalism. He has written for *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Playboy*, *Wired*, *Fortune*, and NPR's *All Things Considered*. His son Nic was born in July 1982; he and his wife Vicki divorced in 1985, and Sheff remarried in 1989 to Karen Barbour. He and Karen had a son, Jasper, in December 1993, and a daughter, Daisy, in June 1996. On February 6, 2005, Sheff published a story called "My Addicted Son" in *The New York Times Magazine* about Nic's drug addiction, and the positive response to the article prompted Sheff to write *Beautiful Boy*. He has since written several other books about his and Nic's personal journeys with Nic's addiction. Sheff currently lives in San Francisco, California.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While *Beautiful Boy* focuses on one family's story of addiction, Sheff also references some of the history surrounding addiction in the United States, particularly methamphetamine addiction. The drug amphetamine was first made in 1887 in Germany; methamphetamine, a more potent and more easily made substance, was developed in Japan in 1919. Methamphetamine was then widely used during World War II to keep soldiers awake. In the 1950s, meth was widely available, often prescribed as a diet aid or to fight depression. In the 1960s, meth became increasingly available, exacerbating the epidemic. In 1970, the U.S. government made it illegal for most uses; simultaneously, the "war on drugs" began, which set out drug policies intended to discourage the production, distribution, and consumption of drugs—though often targeting marginalized communities. Through the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan expanded penalties for possession of marijuana and expanded mandatory minimum sentences. The "war on drugs" has largely been deemed unsuccessful: in the 1990s, drug trafficking organizations set up large meth laboratories in Mexico and the American Southwest, gradually spreading across the United States and into Europe. As David notes, at least 12 million people have tried meth in the U.S., and it is estimated that more than 1.5 million people are addicted to it. David uses many of these facts to bolster his argument that the government needs to better its policies toward both drugs and addiction more broadly, to mitigate the ongoing epidemic.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sheff has written several other books about addiction: *Clean: Overcoming Addiction*; *Ending America's Greatest Tragedy*, which looks at the issue of drugs and addiction in America on a broader scale, and *High: Everything You want to Know About Drugs, Alcohol, and Addiction*. Nic has also written two memoirs about his own experience: *Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines*, which was published just prior to *Beautiful Boy*, and *We All Fall Down*, which documents his subsequent relapses and the reaction following the publication of his first book. Other memoirs that cover similar topics of addiction and family relationships include *A Very Fine House* by Barbara Cofer Stoefen, *Drunk Mom* by Jowita Bydlowska, *The Lost Years* by Kristina Wandzilak, and *Addict in the Family*, by Beverly Conyers—the last of which Sheff mentions in *Beautiful Boy*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction
- **When Written:** 2004-2008
- **Where Written:** Inverness, California
- **When Published:** February 26, 2008
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** California
- **Climax:** David and Vicki visit Nic at a rehab center.
- **Antagonist:** Addiction
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Picture Perfect. *Beautiful Boy*, as well as Nic's companion book, *Tweak*, were adapted into a 2018 film starring Steve Carell and Timothee Chalamet.

Life in Recovery. Although Nic has written about several relapses he experienced after *Beautiful Boy* was published, as of 2020 he has been clean since 2011.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *Beautiful Boy*'s introduction, author David Sheff writes about wanting to tell the story of his son Nic's addiction. He hopes that it might provide some comfort or guidance for those with addiction or those who have a loved one with addiction.

Nic is born on July 20, 1982, to David and his wife, Vicki, who live in Berkeley, California. But when Nic is three years old,

David falls in love with a family friend, and he and Vicki get divorced. Vicki moves to Los Angeles, while David remains in the Bay Area. At five years old, Nic starts to fly between them, spending the school year with David and summers and holidays with Vicki. The divorce is difficult for Nic, who feels divided between his parents.

At school, Nic's teachers describe him as creative and a leader. He loves writing, surfing, and music. When Nic is eight years old, David remarries a woman named Karen. They move out of San Francisco to the more rural town of Inverness just as Nic starts sixth grade. Nic's younger brother, Jasper, is then born in December 1993. As Nic goes through middle school, he starts to experience some of the pressures of teenage life. David smells smoke on Nic's clothing one day and finds a small bag of marijuana in his backpack. He speaks with Nic about the dangers of drugs and grounds him, and Nic agrees not to try marijuana again. Nic's younger sister, Daisy, is then born just after Nic graduates from middle school.

In high school, Nic gravitates toward kids who are clearly stoners, and he is suspended for buying marijuana on campus. As a result, he is assigned an advisor named Don, who also loves to surf. Don steers Nic back to the right path, getting him involved in the swim and water polo teams. Nic also writes for the school newspaper. The summer after Nic's junior year, however, he travels to Paris for a French language program and comes back with a stomach ulcer (later, it is revealed that he was getting drunk almost daily). Don leaves the school, and Nic quits his sports teams and the newspaper. David notices that Nic is getting high more frequently and more openly, but he doesn't know what to do. He thinks that forbidding friends or drugs will simply push Nic further toward them. Once, Nic is even arrested for failing to appear in court after he was cited for marijuana possession. David bails him out, hopeful that this incident will teach him a lesson.

Nic decides to go to UC Berkeley for college, but he quickly grows depressed and tells David that he isn't ready for college. Nic returns home, planning to take some time off and apply to a smaller college on the East Coast. However, a few months after Nic returns home, he disappears in the middle of the night. Four days later, Nic calls David. When David picks Nic up in an alleyway, he is feverish and rambling, having been high on meth. David is horrified that Nic has used meth, which is a particularly dangerous drug. One of David's closest friends in college, Charles, also used many drugs including meth (and David frequently joined him). Charles died of liver and kidney failure the night before his fortieth birthday, and so David is particularly upset by Nic's own drug use.

David provides some information about meth: it is quickly absorbed and results in a euphoric high, remaining in the body for 10 to 12 hours. However, it depletes the brain's levels of neurotransmitters, leaving users "bleak, depleted, and agitated" afterward. At the time *Beautiful Boy* is written, there are 35 million meth users globally, compared with 15 million for cocaine and 7 million for heroine. Meth use is also increasing and often leads to "tweaking": auditory and visual hallucinations as well as aggressive and violent behavior.

David insists that Nic go to rehab, but Nic refuses. Nic then disappears once again later in the spring. David feels helpless and out of control with Nic gone. Nic returns to the house a week later, an unrecognizable ghost of his former self. David searches for a rehab program, telling Nic that if he wants to live in the house or have help paying for college, he must go to rehab. Nic is angry and resistant but agrees to go to Ohlhoff Recovery in San Francisco. Nic spends a month there; at the end of Nic's time, he asks to work and be independent rather than return to college. He moves into the halfway house at the center, but three days later, he disappears again.

Each time Nic disappears, David goes through the same steps: he calls hospitals and the police and speaks to Jasper and Daisy to try to get them to understand what Nic is going through. He even drives around San Francisco, hoping to spot Nic somewhere. After a few days, David hears from Nic, who says that he has been sober for five days but is obviously lying. When David picks Nic up, he looks terrible and has a gash on his forehead. David enrolls Nic in a program at Saint Helena Hospital in Napa Valley, threatening Nic with the choice of rehab or the streets. Nic agrees to try rehab again.

At Saint Helena, David and Karen attend family sessions. In one, a lecturer talks about the disease model of addiction, which argues that addiction is a disease like any other. There is a genetic predisposition for addiction—though addicts are responsible for their recovery and getting themselves necessary treatment, they did not cause their disease. David and Karen also go to group sessions with Nic to hear others' stories about battling addiction. Afterward, Nic blurts out how sorry he is for everything.

Nic completes the program and asks to go back to college. In the fall, he sets off for Hampshire College in Massachusetts, agreeing to find a 12-step meeting there and to work with a sponsor. After a month, however, Nic uses again—but he quickly stops himself from experiencing a full-blown relapse. He completes the spring semester and returns home. But a few days after his return, he admits that he was using the whole spring semester. He steals eight-year-old Jasper's **$8** worth of savings and disappears.

David and Karen continue to go to meetings, and David blames himself for what is happening, worried that the divorce or talking to Nic about his own drug use contributed to Nic's addiction. Nic turns up at Karen's parents, Nancy and Don's, house, sleeping under a pile of blankets and high—but then he disappears again. A few nights later, Nic returns home to search for something in his room, but David is unable to make him stay. The following day is Nic's 20th birthday. In the ensuing days, every time the **phone** rings, David's stomach lurches. He is

anxious and incapable of sleep.

Nic tries to ask Vicki for money, but David tells her to refuse. Vicki persuades Nic to have dinner with family friends, and they suggest staying with them in New York while detoxes. Nic agrees and moves into an apartment in Brooklyn while seeing a psychiatrist, who gives him medication to help stay off drugs. Around this time, David discovers that Nic has been forging checks from David's account. Soon after, David learns that Nic has been rushed to the emergency room; he is in critical condition and on life support. Luckily, he recovers, and David helps him check into Hazelden, another rehabilitation program in New York. After this program, Nic moves back to LA and works with a new AA sponsor named Randy. Nic turns 21 in June, and in September, Nic celebrates a year of sobriety.

Six months later, however, Nic stops returning David's calls, and David soon discovers that no one has seen him in days. Vicki calls Z., Nic's girlfriend, who says that Nic called her high from San Francisco. David is both frantic and exhausted trying to track Nic down. Nic is gone for weeks, and David and Karen discover one day that Nic had broken into their home and the home of family friends. Three days later, Nic calls David, who suggests that Nic go back to LA and call Randy. Nic agrees, and David hopes that this nightmare might end. He tries to figure out how to stop constantly worrying, knowing that it is debilitating.

Two months pass, and David visits Nic in LA. Nic apologizes again, and David is again cautiously optimistic, hoping that Nic can stay in recovery. Nic also writes a letter to Jasper, telling him that he wants to be there for him and returning the $8 that he stole.

In February 2005, David writes an article for *The New York Times Magazine* about his family's story. Encouraged by feedback, he and Nic both start writing books about their experiences. Then, in June, David suffers a cerebral hemorrhage. He spends over a week in the hospital and can't remember his own name, but he still worries incessantly about Nic. He slowly recovers and has a revelation: that his children will live with or without him. His incessant worry does not help Nic and only hurts David and the rest of his family.

At the end of that summer, Nic calls David, high once again after having made it almost two years in recovery. David tries to let go, simply praying for Nic to heal. Nic spends weeks getting high with Z., asking for money and lying about where he is. Nic tries to break into Vicki's garage and pile things into shopping bags, but he accidentally locks himself inside. With prompting from Vicki and David, he agrees to try rehab again.

Nic goes to one more program in Santa Fe. David and Vicki visit him for a weekend; it is the first time that they have been in the same room for more than five minutes since their divorce. They attend group sessions together, and Nic shares in one session that he is trying to heal, not make excuses or blame others for what he is responsible for. David thinks that it is a miracle that he and Vicki are there together and wonders if it's too much to ask for another miracle: for Nic to stay well.

David finishes his story with advice to others: to talk to kids early and often about drugs, to go to Al-Anon meetings, and to err on the side of caution in knowing whether kids are experimenting. He tells family members to be patient with themselves and not to blame themselves for what is happening. David also speaks about the necessity of reform when it comes to drug policies in the U.S., calling for more funding for research and treatments. He also writes about the importance of removing the stigma of addiction as a moral failing, handling it instead as a disease that needs to be treated.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

David Sheff – David is the author and narrator of *Beautiful Boy*; he's Nic's father. David writes *Beautiful Boy* to discuss the impact that Nic's drug addiction had on his family, and to catalogue some of his potential missteps in dealing with Nic's drug addiction. When Nic is three years old, David and his wife Vicki get divorced, and David feels that their long-distance joint custody arrangement may have put Nic at a higher risk for developing his addiction. Eventually, David gets remarried to Karen and has two more children, Jasper and Daisy. As Nic enters his teenage years and begins smoking cigarettes and marijuana, David tells Nic about his own heavy drug use in college—in retrospect, he worries that this may have glorified drugs in Nic's mind. Over the course of *Beautiful Boy*, as Nic's addiction worsens, David continues to blame himself for what has happened. As Nic's drug use escalates over his late teen years and early twenties, David tries to talk to Nic about drugs and take disciplinary action, all to no avail. And as David feels Nic rebelling against him, he yearns more and more to feel in control of the situation. When Nic continuously relapses and David doesn't know where Nic is for days or even weeks at a time, David is stricken by panic and constant anxiety. This culminates in David suffering a brain hemorrhage, partially due to the stress he has experienced. Even though David does not remember his own name, he still worries about his son—and it is at this moment that David recognizes that for his own health and for his family, he has to understand that he cannot save Nic and must detach from Nic to a degree. By the end of the book, David acknowledges that it is impossible to know how much his actions contributed to Nic's addiction. He loves his son and wants to be there to support his recovery as much as possible, but David also realizes that he must also let Nic live his own life. Now, David is committed to outreach and education about addiction, in hopes that sharing Nic and his family's story will help others with similar problems.

Nic Sheff – Nic is author David Sheff's son. *Beautiful Boy* documents Nic's slow slide into drug addiction in his teens and twenties and his many horrific incidents of relapse and subsequent recoveries. Nic's story shows the deep toll of addiction as a disease, as David illustrates how much promise Nic had growing up as a bright and creative child. But Nic's childhood isn't without difficulties: David and Nic's mom, Vicki, divorce when Nic is young, forcing Nic to split his time between his parents in different cities. As *Beautiful Boy* progresses, David then shows how quickly that promise is squandered as Nic gets involved with hard drugs like meth and heroin in his young adult years, forcing him to drop out of college and often live in squalor when using. Nic also proves how addiction affects more than just addicts. Though Nic loves his family, when he is relapsing, he frequently terrorizes them—for instance, he breaks into both David and Vicki's home and forges checks of David's. Nic also causes his family significant emotional pain: he disappears for days or weeks at a time, triggering significant anxiety for David, Vicki, and Nic's stepmother, Karen. Nic frequently lies about where he is and that he is getting clean, and he manipulates David and Vicki into trying to give him money. He also scares his younger half-siblings, Jasper and Daisy, even betraying the trust of eight-year-old Jasper by stealing his **$8** savings. But Nic does experience a significant transformation in how he understands his addiction. Though Nic initially asserts that he can recover alone, over time, he recognizes that he needs a rehab program and the support of AA sponsors like Randy in order to get and stay clean. Additionally, even though Nic relapses many times even after seeking out this support, Nic's journey shows the importance of maintaining hope that addicts can recover, because not to do so would represent resigning addicts to self-destruction.

Karen Barbour – Karen is David's second wife, Nic's stepmother, and Jasper and Daisy's mother. Karen and David marry when Nic is seven years old. She is an artist, and she and Nic share a deep bond over activities like art and speaking French. Karen loves Nic and worries about him as his addiction grows worse; she attends visiting days and group sessions with David when Nic is in rehab and sees a therapist with David as well. Gradually, however, Karen becomes exasperated with Nic's addiction and with David's obsessive worry over Nic. She also grows angry over David's rationalizations of some of the ways in which Nic terrorizes the family, like forging checks or breaking into their home. The more harm Nic does, the more Karen becomes afraid of Nic. Once, when he drives by the house during a period of relapse, Karen gets in her car to chase him. When she returns, she realizes that she didn't want to catch him—rather, she wanted to drive him away from Jasper and Daisy. Karen serves as another example of how addicts can ruin their relationships with the people they love most. When Nic is in recovery for year-long periods, however, they are able to repair their relationship to a degree.

Vicki – Vicki is David's first wife and Nic's mother. David and Vicki divorce when Nic is three years old, after David falls in love with a family friend. Vicki subsequently moves to Los Angeles and remarries. David and Vicki agree to a custody arrangement whereby Nic spends summers and holidays with Vicki, and the school year with David. Nic begins flying between them alone at five years old, and David worries that their divorce contributed to Nic's addiction. Vicki loves Nic and shares David's concern over Nic's increasing drug use during his teens and twenties, and Vicki also experiences a lot of pain at Nic's hands. Nic treats his mother much like he treats his father: he breaks into Vicki's home and steals from her, asks her for money, and rarely heeds her advice about getting help. Thus, Vicki represents another person whose life is severely affected by Nic's addiction. At the end of the book, Vicki takes a trip to visit Nic when David is also there—even though she and David had spent very little time in the same room for the prior 20 years. This significant gesture of unity and support for Nic makes David hopeful that perhaps another miracle might occur, and Nic might be able to get well.

Jasper Sheff – Jasper is David and Karen's son and Nic and Daisy's brother. Jasper is 11 years younger than Nic. Over the course of his childhood, Jasper develops a mature understanding of what Nic's addiction means. When Daisy asks why Nic does drugs, Jasper explains that it is as though Nic has an **angel and devil** on his shoulder, and sometimes the devil speaks more loudly. Jasper and Daisy both love Nic, but at the same time, Nic's actions and the worry that it causes their parents make Jasper and Daisy afraid of him. Jasper is especially hurt when, after Nic relapses following his first year at Hampshire College, Nic steals Jasper's **$8** worth of savings (Jasper is eight at the time). Nic tries to rectify this damage in a note to Jasper that he writes over a year later, explaining that he wants to be there for his brother. The toll that Nic's addiction takes on his siblings illustrates how addiction not only affects addicts, but has severe consequences on their family members as well.

Daisy Sheff – Daisy is David and Karen's daughter and Nic and Jasper's sister. Daisy is 14 years younger than Nic. She understands that her brother is ill but has a difficult time fully grasping what Nic's addiction means. Daisy and her older brother Jasper both love Nic, but at the same time, Nic's actions and the worry he causes their parents make Daisy and Jasper afraid of him. The toll that Nic's addiction takes on them illustrates how addiction not only affects addicts but has severe consequences on their family members as well.

Charles – Charles was David's roommate in college at the University of Arizona. Charles was wealthy and led many exploits involving drugs during his time at school—exploits in which David frequently participated. Charles's addiction led to several dangerous escapades, including Charles and David skydiving while high. Charles died of kidney and liver failure on

the eve of his fortieth birthday. Personally losing a friend to addiction makes David extremely wary of Nic becoming addicted to drugs.

Dr. Edythe London – London is a professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at UCLA who studies brain scans of normal brains in contrast with those of meth users. She speaks with David about her research, which illustrates that drugs create biological changes in users' brains that alter their decision-making abilities and make them depressed, argumentative, and anxious.

Z. – Z. is one of Nic's girlfriends whom he dates after dropping out of Hampshire College. Nic and Z. have a sporadic relationship, breaking up and getting back together again several times. Z. is also a drug addict, and she often she enables Nic's bad decisions, causing him to relapse on several occasions.

Randy – Randy is Nic's AA sponsor when he moves to LA. Randy is 15 years sober and helps Nic stay sober and clean as well. The two of them often go on long bike rides together as a healthy coping mechanism for Nic. Randy serves as a support system, particularly when Nic is feeling depressed or when he relapses.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Don – Don is an advisor to Nic when he is in high school. Don serves as an important role model for Nic. Like Nic, Don is a surfer, and he also gets Nic involved in the water polo and swim teams at school.

Julia – Julia is a girlfriend of Nic's whom he meets in his first year of college at Hampshire. When Nic relapses, he steals hypodermic needles and morphine that were intended for Julia's mother's cancer treatment.

Nancy and Don – Nancy and Don are Karen's parents, Nic's step-grandparents, and Jasper and Daisy's grandparents. David and Nic's family visits them once a week for dinner.

TERMS

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) – AA is an organization dedicated to helping alcoholics stay sober. It founded the 12-step program, which involves admitting that one cannot control one's addiction and that a higher power can give strength. Many rehab centers are rooted in the 12-step program and the principles of AA. In *Beautiful Boy*, **Nic** attends AA meetings and has an AA sponsor named **Randy**.

Al-Anon – Al-Anon is an auxiliary group of AA that helps family members of addicts to find support. In *Beautiful Boy*, **David** and **Karen** attend Al-Anon meetings, where they hear stories from other people who also have loved ones who are addicts.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ADDICTION, RUIN, AND REDEMPTION

In *Beautiful Boy*, author David Sheff recounts the true story of his son Nic's battle with meth addiction. Despite David's attempts to intervene, Nic becomes addicted to drugs as a teenager and becomes imperiled by that addiction as he undergoes a cycle of recovery and relapse in his early twenties. Throughout these years, Nic engages in increasingly dangerous behaviors that harm himself and also devastate his family. Through the book, David paints a harrowing portrait of addiction and its horrific consequences on his family, illustrating how it is an incurable, lifelong disease. Yet even in the face of his addiction, Nic works to try to recover and redeem himself. David thus emphasizes the importance of maintaining a cautious optimism, as the disease of addiction is a treatable one. Even when it appears that addicts are beyond hope, David demonstrates that, like Nic, they can still put themselves on a path to redemption and recovery from that struggle.

David presents Nic as a bright and creative child growing up—an image that contrasts with Nic's addiction as a young adult—in order to highlight the life-altering harm that drugs have on Nic. In a report card, a teacher writes about Nic's "burgeoning sense of kindness and generosity" and concludes, "I wonder at the gifts he will undoubtedly bring to the world." Teachers and friends describe Nic as a leader who is intelligent and talented in the arts, showing how much promise he had. But Nic's accomplishments start to evaporate the more he becomes involved with drugs: in ninth grade, he is suspended and almost expelled from his private high school for buying marijuana on campus. When he travels to Paris for a three-week program between his junior and senior year in high school, he gets drunk every day, to the point that he gives himself an ulcer. When he returns for his senior year, he cuts classes and quits the swimming and water polo teams and the newspaper. Just before Nic turns 18, he is arrested after being cited for marijuana possession. All of these issues serve as warning signs for the damage to come, and yet Nic's addiction makes him unable to stop his decline. Over the course of the next several years, Nic is accepted at and drops out of the University of California at Berkeley. As he tries more dangerous drugs like meth, he disappears for days or weeks at a time and is hospitalized on several occasions. He also commits crimes in order to score more drugs and almost ends up in jail. When Nic is 23 and recovering once more, he tells David that

after years of drug use, he feels that his life has been "stolen." Nic's perspective reflects how much ruin his addiction has brought upon himself.

Nic's addiction also threatens the wellbeing of his family, proving how addiction can devastate not only those who are addicted, but those around them. The destructive nature of Nic's addiction becomes apparent to David when Nic commits crimes against his own family. At various points, he steals hypodermic needles from his girlfriend, Julia's, mother; tries to cash forged checks of David's, breaks into his stepmother, Karen's, parents' house; breaks into his mother, Vicki's, house; and breaks into David's house multiple times to steal money. He even robs his eight-year-old brother Jasper of his **$8** of savings. These acts depict Nic's level of destitution and desperation, even at the cost of his family's trust. Apart from these tangible violations, Nic also places an enormous emotional burden on his family. David in particular becomes sick with worry, constantly anxious about where Nic might be and whether he has relapsed again. This dynamic creates tension with Karen, who grows increasingly frustrated at David's obsession with Nic's addiction. David's worry over his son also contributes to a brain hemorrhage that David experiences when Nic is 23, after Nic has had several relapses and near-death experiences. Nic's addiction thus also makes "casualties of the family," as David puts it.

Yet even though Nic continually tips himself toward disaster, each time he falters, he eventually recognizes the need to go to rehab and try to recover from the disease. Thus, David emphasizes that even though it is difficult to live with a disease like addiction, it is worth holding onto hope that an addict can be rehabilitated. After each one of Nic's relapses, he reaches a point when he realizes how dire his situation is. He goes to several rehabilitation programs of various lengths, in which he tries to learn about the disease and to get treatment. His attempts, David illustrates, are borne of the idea that he can still hope to recover from his addiction and make better choices in the future. As David recounts, even rehab sometimes fails: Nic relapses after each of these programs. David thus argues that addiction is not something that is cured—rather, it's a disease with which a person must live for their entire life. Still, he emphasizes that seeking recovery, even knowing it could fail, is important. A counselor at Nic's college tells David that "relapse is part of recovery." Even though this may seem counterintuitive, David learns that it's better to think of relapse as a step to improving rather than as a failure, because it motivates addicts to continue seeking help. Through his continual pursual of treatment, Nic comes to see how just how seriously his addiction has harmed himself and his loved ones, which sets him on a path to try and progress the next time. Though addicts often have a long road ahead of them—Nic even relapsed after the publication of David's book in 2008—there is still a chance that they can recover, as Nic has been clean since 2011. Thus, even when an addict appears to have ruined various aspects of their life, David uses Nic's story to show that there is always hope for redemption.

RESPONSIBILITY AND BLAME

A central idea of *Beautiful Boy* is that of personal responsibility and blame. Author David Sheff relays the complicated and contradictory nature of searching for someone or something to blame for what has happened to his son, Nic, who is addicted to drugs. Despite multiple counselors telling David that he did not cause Nic's addiction, David blames himself for the actions he did and didn't take when Nic experimented with drugs as a teenager. Similarly, he grapples with how much Nic is liable for his own situation, again exploring the contradictory reality that although Nic may not be entirely responsible for his condition, he must be held accountable for the choices he makes when he uses and relapses. David's opinions on the matter evolve over time as he realizes that assigning blame isn't easy or straightforward. Though he recognizes that addicts aren't entirely to blame for their situations and that they often need help shouldering the burden of their disease, the book ultimately argues that an addict must take responsibility for themselves if they want to heal.

In recounting Nic's childhood, David faults himself for not preventing Nic's addiction. David worries about several key decisions he made over the course of Nic's childhood and early teen years—he wonders whether different choices might have led to different outcomes for Nic. David fears that his divorce with Nic's mother, Vicki, made it easier for Nic to develop the addiction. They divorce when Nic is three years old, and in accordance with their custody agreement, Nic spends the school year with David in San Francisco and the summers and holidays with Vicki in Los Angeles. David calls the divorce the "most traumatic event of Nic's life." Later, David reads statistics that "children of divorce use drugs and alcohol before the age of fourteen more often than the children of intact families." Though he admits that many children who go through divorces *don't* resort to drugs, and that many drug addicts come from intact families, he can't help but feel that the divorce could have put Nic more at risk. David also worries about revealing his own drug use to Nic, which included heavy marijuana and alcohol usage growing up and in college, as well as psychedelics, mushrooms, Quaaludes, cocaine, "random uppers and downers," and even meth on one occasion. Later, he learns later that many counselors suggest that parents lie to their children about their drug use out of concern that it will make drugs seem more acceptable, despite parents' message that they are dangerous. Instead, David told Nic the truth, feeling "naively" that Nic would tell him if he was using drugs. Afterward, he regrets telling Nic the truth—an additional worry that puts the blame on David's shoulders. David also agonizes in hindsight

about sharing a joint with 17-year-old Nic. This comes at a point in high school when David is concerned about Nic's increasing drug usage, but he hopes that smoking together will help them bond. He hopes that the action will also convince Nic that David knows what he is talking about when it comes to drugs, and that it will thus encourage him to take David's message more seriously. Afterward, however, David realizes that he should absolutely not have smoked with Nic, as this might have been a tacit endorsement of Nic's behavior. As David looks in hindsight on his choices, he blames himself for not acting differently.

Additionally, David has to reconcile Nic's responsibility for his own addiction, arguing that even if it may not be Nic's fault that he has a disease, he is the only one who can control his fate. During Nic's second stay in a rehabilitation program, David starts to learn that the predisposition to addiction can be genetic—which explains why some people are more susceptible to addiction after trying a drug once than others are. Counselors explain that the disease is in control of addicts, and that this makes it easier for people to succumb to relapses. This provides evidence for the idea that Nic may not entirely be at fault for his own addiction. At first, David is skeptical of this idea. While he recognizes that addiction is a disease that needs treatment, he also argues that people who are dying of diseases like cancer would do anything to live whereas addicts are actively harming themselves. To him, it appears that addicts have a solution to treat themselves—to stop using their substance of choice—yet they simply cannot implement it. But gradually, David recognizes that the symptoms of the disease are using and being out of control—and these are issues that people cannot help. What David realizes is that if Nic were not ill, he would not lie, steal, or hurt his family as he does over the course of his young adulthood. David comes to the conclusion—once again, a slightly paradoxical one—that even though it is not Nic's fault that he has a disease, "it is his fault that he relapses, since he is the only one who can do the work necessary to prevent relapse. Whether or not it's his fault, he must be held accountable." He does not absolve Nic of responsibility entirely, but he knows that Nic would not want to hurt himself or his family if given a clear-headed choice.

David ultimately tries to reconcile the contradictions inherent in addiction. He comes to understand that the disease is caused and exacerbated by a multitude of factors, many of which cannot be predicted or controlled. Reflecting on the many potential avenues of blame, David writes, "whatever the cause—a genetic predisposition, the divorce, my drug history, my overprotectiveness, my failure to protect him, my leniency, my harshness, my immaturity, all of these—Nic's addiction seemed to have had a life of its own." Even this summation bears contradictions: David could not have been both under- and over-protective, both too lenient and too harsh. There is so much of the disease that is unknowable. Thus, rather than placing blame on actions in the past, it is instead important for Nic to take responsibility for continued sobriety in the future, and for David to help him shoulder that responsibility.

PARENTHOOD AND CONTROL

Beautiful Boy is largely an examination of parenthood when one's child is in crisis. For David, being a parent is both "sublime and terrifying," because children at once bring joy as well as "piercing vulnerability" to parents. Children develop with the guidance of their parents, yet they must also separate from their parents in order to find their own way as adults. David tries to ride that balance, wanting to guide Nic's choices as his drug use escalates without being too indulgent or too harsh. But as Nic reaches adulthood, David feels that he has no way of helping Nic or intervening on his behalf. David's lingering need to control the situation thus proves detrimental to his own health and the wellbeing of his family. David's biggest revelation over the course of his experience with Nic's addiction is that he cannot control everything around him. David's story thus makes the case that even loving parents who want the best for their struggling child must detach from that child to some extent—only then can they properly care for themselves and the rest of their family.

When David initially discovers Nic's drug addiction, he attempts to find the best way to handle Nic and guide him toward better choices. David understands that Nic is going through a period of teenage rebellion, and he attempts to strike a balance between leniency and discipline as Nic makes choices that are harmful to himself. When David first discovers marijuana in Nic's backpack when he is 12 years old, David describes how he doesn't want to underreact or overreact. David talks to Nic about the harm of drugs and grounds him, trying to compromise between being too harsh (which could make Nic even more deceptive) and being too lenient. Despite this early discipline, Nic continues drinking and smoking weed regularly while he is in high school. As Nic's behavior worsens, David feels conflicted over how to parent Nic. He describes how friends offer contradictory advice: some say kick him out, some say not to let Nic out of his sight. But David knows that kicking Nic out will only exacerbate his behavior, and not letting him out of his sight is impossible. He senses control slipping away from him, which only makes him want to tighten his grasp on his son. David continues to enlist the help of teachers and counselors to talk to Nic and steer him in the right direction. But when Nic steals the car, money, and wine for a weekend in Death Valley with friends, David responds by grounding him once again. Nic grows angry and frustrated, yelling, "You're always trying to control me!" David's need for control becomes apparent to Nic, which only pushes him further away. This desire for control is natural for a parent who feels their child slipping away, but it becomes worse just as Nic is trying to gain

more independence as an adult.

David's increasing desire for control mirrors the worsening of Nic's addiction, even when Nic reaches adulthood. Slowly, that desire becomes paralyzing, illustrating how David's inability to relinquish control over his son's actions pushes him to the brink of depression and anxiety. After Nic drops out of Berkeley, he disappears for weeks. David grows sick with worry, describing how "it scares the hell out of me to be so lost and helpless and out of control and afraid." This fear of having no sense of Nic's whereabouts—something he cannot control—comes at the cost of David's own wellbeing. When Nic finally goes to rehab, one of the counselors articulates David's problem precisely: that "one of the most difficult things about having a child addicted to drugs is that we cannot control it. We cannot save Nic. 'You can support his recovery but you can't do it for him.'" The counselors suggest that David not try to control where Nic goes and who he hangs out with, because addicts cannot be controlled. They recognize that parents can become obsessed, to the point where they cannot think or care about anything else in their lives. David recognizes this in himself, saying that he is "overcome by worry and panic and a futile need for control." This futile need for control is literally debilitating, something that lingers in the background regardless of whether Nic is currently relapsing or not. David's anxiety becomes so bad that he wishes Nic could be expunged from his brain, illustrating how his need for control in parenting has become so overwhelming that he wishes he didn't have to parent at all.

It is not until David has a brain hemorrhage that he recognizes the need to relinquish his control over Nic's life. He explains that, lying in the hospital, he came to the realization that his children would survive without him if he died. He writes, "I can try to protect my children, to help and guide them, and I can love them, but I cannot save them. Nic, Jasper, and Daisy will live, and someday they will die, with or without me." This knowledge gives David a sense of peace, as he comes to the conclusion that obsessing over and trying to control what is happening to his son is only harming him. Rather than control his son, he chooses to control how he views the situation and distances himself from Nic so that he becomes less worried over Nic's every choice. It is difficult for any parent to let go of their children, much less one with a life-threatening addiction, but David's understanding that his son has his own life to live provides him with the peace to live a healthier life for himself.

SUPPORT VS. ENABLING

One of the most difficult aspects of Nic's drug addiction is his insistence that he can handle it alone. Each time he relapses, he resists getting the help he needs from other people, asserting that he can control his disease. Yet eventually—usually following a life-threatening incident—Nic recognizes the fact that he needs help in order to treat his addiction. Even people like David, Nic's father, require support to deal with their own frustration and grief over Nic's addiction. However, David makes a point to delineate between supporting someone with addiction and enabling them. Rather than allowing Nic to continue on his abusive lifestyle by giving him money or a place to live, David makes his support contingent on Nic seeking out help from a program. Thus, David argues that no one can treat addiction alone: it is necessary for addicts to seek out to people and programs that can support them in their treatment, rather than simply enabling their abusive lifestyle.

Each time Nic relapses, he insists that he can take care of himself—that he is in control and can remain in control without support. Yet at each juncture, he gradually sees that he *isn't* in control, and that he has to lean on others in order to stay motivated in treatment. After Nic moves home and drops out of Berkeley, he disappears one night. When he returns home four days later, he is ill, frail, and rambling—but he asserts that he doesn't want to go to rehab. He admits that he has taken meth, but he maintains that he's okay. He states that he "learned how dangerous meth is" and that he'll "never do that shit again." Yet soon after, Nic disappears once more, for nearly two weeks. When David tracks Nic down in an alley, he describes him as a "barely recognizable phantom." It is this incident that motivates Nic to find help. At the Oakland rehab center, a counselor affirms that she sees addicts like this all the time, who believe that "everything is all right, they can stop when they want." The counselors recognize, however, that this insistence often causes addicts to lose everything and wind up in jail or the hospital. Alone, the prospect for recovery is bleak. After Nic's final relapse in the book, in which he is hospitalized to detox, David again insists that he has to go back to treatment. Nic demands, "Why can't I do it myself? Why do I need to go into another program?" But David recalls the words that Nic himself told David while he was in recovery: "Nic said he couldn't trust his own brain and needed to rely on [his sponsor] Randy, meetings, the program, and prayer" to recover. While under the influence, addicts believe that they can get on without support—but once clear-headed, they recognize that they need help from others to remain sober and clean.

In addition to relying on the program as a whole, there are key figures along Nic's path that help support him in times of need, and key figures in David's life that also help him cope with the hardships of Nic's illness. Reflecting on both of their ordeals, David argues that no matter how directly or tangentially affected a person is by addiction, it's important to identify avenues of support. Throughout his adolescence, Nic is supported early and often by various people who serve as good influences on him. These supporters are later replaced by sponsors who help keep Nic on the right path. When Nic's high school informs David that Nic has been suspended for buying drugs, the school identifies a teacher named Don to help him

get on track. Don serves as a mentor for Nic, getting him involved in the school's swim and water polo teams and surfing with him so that he can stay out of trouble. Nic's sponsor Randy later mimics this dynamic, going on long bike rides with Nic when he is feeling most vulnerable. These key figures serve as a means for Nic to feel supported and comforted, so that isolation doesn't drive him to using again. David also finds key means of support for his own anxieties surrounding Nic. He describes going to family group sessions with AA and Al-Anon, writing how he "learned how much it helps to talk about my son's addiction and reflect on it and hear and read others' stories." He and the rest of his family also find value in visiting a therapist to talk about how Nic's addiction has affected their family. Leaning on others, even just having someone who can listen and understand, makes a world of difference for David.

Yet David also makes a point to recognize when support crosses a barrier into enabling. He says explicitly, giving advice to others, "I would not in any way help someone using drugs to do anything other than return to rehab. I would not pay their rent, would not bail them out of jail unless they went directly into rehab, […] and would never give them money." At several points, David refuses to give Nic money and encourages Nic's mother Vicki to refuse him as well. He knows that monetary support would simply be a means of fueling Nic's drug addiction; instead, what is important is getting addicts the support they need to stop using—primarily through rehab.

David writes that he was motivated to write *Beautiful Boy* because of other accounts that he read about addiction. He writes, "others' experiences did help with the emotional struggle; reading, I felt a little less crazy." And so, in this way, the book becomes a means of support for others as well. Nic also says that the support he received in writing his own book (a companion book called *Tweak*) served as "a powerful affirmation of his hard work in recovery." Thus, David and Nic's books themselves become an exercise in mutual support.

THE DISEASE MODEL, STIGMA, AND TREATMENT

In addition to recounting Nic's personal struggle with addiction, his father, David, aims to educate readers on addiction generally. He provides scientific information on drugs and exactly how and why addiction is so harmful. He also examines the policies surrounding addiction that have exacerbated the issue nationally. In providing all of this information, David ultimately argues for the disease model of addiction, which holds that addiction has a biological basis and should be treated like any other illness, dispelling the stigma of addiction as being caused by a lack of will or a moral failing. With this framework in mind, David proposes that the government and individuals must treat addiction as a disease and take concrete steps in order to mitigate it.

David provides a background on drugs in the United States, illustrating how they have become more addictive and harmful than they have ever been, which leads to a general increase in addiction. David notes that a body of research has unequivocally shown a wide range of dangerous physical and psychological effects of drugs, and how they are becoming worse than they have ever been. For instance, there is twice as much THC in marijuana now than in marijuana a decade ago. Additionally, psychedelics and ecstasy are now frequently laced with meth. Without the knowledge of which drug a person is ingesting, it is easier for a person become addicted to something much more harmful. David then illustrates how drug use itself has increased. He writes, quoting statistics from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "'The mortality rates from unintentional drug overdose have risen steadily since the early 1970s, and over the past ten years they have reached historic highs.' First-time users are younger, the drugs themselves are stronger, and there are many more types of drugs to abuse. Users can get their drug of choice whenever and wherever they want." Meth specifically has become "more potent and pervasive than ever," and this greater availability and potency has also contributed to addiction.

David then emphasizes the disease model of addiction, and how meth specifically manipulates the brain to cause addiction and relapses. Meth is quickly absorbed in the bloodstream whether it is sniffed, smoked, or injected. It stays in the body for 10 to 12 hours and triggers elevated levels of dopamine, which causes euphoria. However, after the high, those levels become severely depleted, and drug users often have to increase their dosages in an attempt to recreate the initial high. This, in turn, causes more nerve damage, which "increases the compulsion to use—a cycle that leads to both addiction and relapse." Thus, the drug itself changes brain chemistry in a way that reinforces and increases harmful behaviors. David interviews a woman named Dr. Edythe London, a professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at UCLA. Her studies of brain scans of meth users versus a control group illustrate that when meth users try to stop using, withdrawal from the drug triggers depression, aggression, and anxiety in their brains. Her findings led her to conclude that "meth addicts may be unable, not unwilling, to participate in many common treatments, at least in the early stages of withdrawal. Rather than a moral failure or a lack of willpower, dropping out and relapsing may be a result of a damaged brain." Given the very real psychological and physiological symptoms of withdrawal, it's important to treat addiction as a disease. The stigma of addiction as a moral failing rather than a medical problem leads to lack of support in funding treatments.

Finally, David illustrates how the government has not treated addiction as a disease in the past, and how it needs to do so going forward in order to find better treatments and preventative measures. David writes that "each year we spend,

or rather misspend, more than $50 billion on the war on drugs. (In total we've spent more than $1 trillion.)" He explains that the United States spends billions more on prisons as a result of drug use, often jailing addicts rather than treating them. And yet the annual budget of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, which includes almost all drug-related research and development, is less than $1 billion. Twenty thousand people die each year of drug overdoses alone—yet health insurance companies, Medicare, and Medicaid, refuse to pay for treatment of illnesses or injuries caused by drugs or alcohol. Thirty-two states enforce statutes that allow insurance companies to refuse to cover medical care in an emergency room if drugs or alcohol contributed to the condition. Life insurance can be denied if drug or alcohol abuse led to death. All of these policies are based on the idea that addiction is a personal failing, rather than a disease which should be treated it like any other. Stigma and prejudice have also curtailed financial support for research into addiction, which has resulted in few effective treatment options. The cost of effective treatment programs is prohibitively high, often running from $30,000 to $50,000 a month. Therefore, addicts rarely seek treatment—only one in 10 do. The stigma of addiction versus an illness like cancer is apparent, and so is the difference in how research for the disease has been funded and how treatments have developed. "The incidence of cancer began dropping in 1990 and has continued to fall every year since then. Since 2004, the death rate from cancer has decreased at double the rate of the previous two decades." David suggests that the war on drugs should be handled similarly to the war on cancer: well-coordinated and funded, with long-term goals. Changing the stigma of addiction, and thus funding the "war on drugs" in a way that treats it more like a medical disease, can save hundreds of thousands of lives each year.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE PHONE

The phone represents David's anxiety and his lack of control over Nic. After Nic goes to college, David keeps in touch with him mostly by phone. But as Nic relapses again and again, David is constantly worried whenever the phone rings, describing how his stomach "constricts" every time he hears it. He worries when Nic doesn't call him (fearing that Nic has relapsed); he worries when Nic calls him (fearing that Nic will call him high); and he also worries when others call him (fearing that Nic has wound up in jail or the hospital). Thus, the phone is a constant and random reminder of the fact that he doesn't always know what Nic is doing, and that Nic might be in trouble. This is further reinforced when David ends up in the hospital following a brain hemorrhage: even though he can't remember his name, he desperately wants to call Nic to make sure that Nic is okay.

David only finds the remedy to this problem with the help of a therapist, who suggests that David make plans for Nic to call at specific times so that he doesn't worry when he hasn't heard from him, and for David to turn his cell phone off for periods of time so he isn't constantly reminded of his anxiety. In setting up these boundaries, David is able to control what he can, and he alleviates his worry over the things that he cannot.

$8

During one of Nic's relapses, he steals $8 from his brother Jasper, who is eight years old at the time. The $8 is Jasper's entire savings, and the money represents both Nic's ruin and his attempt at recovery. The fact that he stoops so low as to steal $8 from his young brother in order to try to buy meth signals the desperation and the degradation of his morals. Jasper is deeply upset by what happens, and thus the $8 also illustrates the emotional toll that addiction takes on close family members.

However, about a year later, when Nic is once again in recovery, he writes a letter to Jasper explaining how he wants to be there for his brother again. Along with the letter, Nic encloses $8. This symbolic gesture demonstrates Nic's attempts to recovery not only from his addiction, but his desire to recover his relationship and his esteem in Jasper's eyes. Even though Nic has made mistakes, the $8 illustrates that he always has an opportunity to right his wrongs.

ANGEL AND DEVIL

The angel and devil are a metaphor for the complex nature of responsibility in addiction. One day, Daisy asks Jasper why Bob Dylan does drugs after watching a video of him (though it is clear that she is really asking about Nic). Jasper explains that Dylan doesn't actually want to do drugs. Rather, Jasper says, it is like in the cartoons: Dylan has an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, and sometimes the devil speaks too loudly and causes him to take drugs.

Jasper's metaphor captures the difficulty of finding someone or something to blame for addiction. It acknowledges that there is a force outside a person like Nic, for which they are not responsible, that is drawing them to make self-destructive choices. However, the metaphor also recognizes that Nic is still responsible for heeding the advice of the "devil" or "angel," and choosing to relapse or to remain in recovery.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner edition of *Beautiful Boy* published in 2008.

Introduction Quotes

People are relieved to learn that they are not alone in their suffering, that they are part of something larger, in this case, a societal plague—an epidemic of children, an epidemic of families. For whatever reason, a stranger's story seemed to give them permission to tell theirs. They felt that I would understand, and I did.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In *Beautiful Boy*'s introduction, author David Sheff informs readers that the book's origin sprang from an article he wrote for *The New York Times Magazine* about his son, Nic's, drug addiction. Many people related to the story, and it even emboldened them to write to David and tell their own tragic tales about addiction.

The relief that David describes here provided the impetus for him to continue writing, and to ultimately publish *Beautiful Boy*. The book itself is an exercise in support, both for himself and for others. David relays earlier in the Introduction that hearing other people's accounts of addiction filled him with a sense of being understood and of being less crazy. This is critical in dealing with addiction, as David goes on to argue throughout the book that it is impossible to truly battle the problem without the support and understanding of others.

Yet David also recognized a gap in the literature: that very few people had written about the experience of having a loved one who was addicted. But addiction does not simply affect addicts—it also has a profoundly tragic effect on those who love drug addicts. And such, David wanted to provide the same support to others that he had found in tales of addiction. While others' stories made him feel less isolated, his story in turn allows others to feel less isolated.

Whatever the cause—a genetic predisposition, the divorce, my drug history, my overprotectiveness, my failure to protect him, my leniency, my harshness, my immaturity, all of these—Nic's addiction seemed to have had a life of its own. I have tried to reveal how insidiously addiction creeps into a family and takes over [...] in the hope that readers will recognize a wrong path before they take it. If they don't, however, I hope they may realize that it is a path they can't blame themselves for having taken.

Related Characters: Vicki, Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In David's Introduction to the book, he touches on several of the major themes that will follow. In this quote, he discusses the difficulty of knowing who or what to blame for Nic's addiction. David's musings make it clear how many different aspects of Nic's childhood he blames on himself, but the contradictions inherent in his words are telling. For example, David cannot have been both lenient and harsh. This illustrates that addiction can be caused by many different things, but it can be predicted by none of them. It is possible that David and Vicki's divorce or David's revelations about his own drug history did affect Nic, but Nic could also have become an addict without either of those factors. In the final sentence of this paragraph, David implores others to be gentle with themselves when placing blame; it takes a long time for David to come to the same conclusion about himself.

In addition to blaming himself, David also wonders how much responsibility to place on Nic for what has happened. It highlights an inherent contradiction of addiction: even though it is a disease, it involves the active participation of the people it afflicts. Again, David's words subtly hint at the conclusion that he has come to. In saying that Nic's addiction has a "life of its own," David implies that in some ways it is uncontrollable, and that Nic has very little power over it. David will ultimately come to the conclusion that although Nic may not be fully responsible for the fact that he has an addiction, he alone is responsible for fighting that addiction. Thus, it is less important to place blame in the past and more important for Nic to shoulder his responsibility for his future.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Other comments from his teachers are effusive praise of his creativity, sense of humor, compassion, participation, and stellar work.

I keep a box in which I store his artwork and writings, like his response to an assignment in which he has been asked if you should always try your best. "I don't think you should always try your best all the time," he writes, "because, let's say a drug atick asks you for drugs you should not try your best to find him some drugs."

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

David describes how Nic receives high compliments from his teachers when he is in elementary school. David then illustrates Nic's remarkable critical thinking in this writing response, wherein he professes that sometimes people should not always try their best—like in the case of helping drug addicts find drugs. Both David and the readers, who already know that Nic will one day be a drug addict himself, see the irony in Nic's writing. But the story shows more than prescience: it illustrates that Nic understands, even in elementary school, that using drugs is dangerous. And coupled with the praise from his teachers, it demonstrates just how far Nic can fall from being a smart, creative leader to being someone whose life is marred by drug addiction. Even though he is conscientious and intelligent, he throws so much of that promise away due to his disease.

The story is also crucial in another way: it foreshadows some of David's decisions later in the book as he tries to support Nic. David recognizes, as Nic does in elementary school, that there should be a limit to the support that he shows his son. He cannot enable Nic's addiction by taking actions that will allow Nic to get drugs. The most that he can do instead is ensure that Nic finds help and is supported in that recovery.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Many drug counselors tell parents of my generation to lie to our children about our past drug use. […] Kids see that their parents turned out all right in spite of the drugs. So maybe I should have lied to Nic and kept my drug use hidden, but I didn't. He knew the truth. Meanwhile, our close relationship made me feel certain that I would know if he were exposed to them. I naively believed that if Nic were tempted to try them, he would tell me. I was wrong.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

After David finds a bag of marijuana in Nic's backpack when Nic is 12 years old, David explains to readers that he spoke to Nic about drugs from a very early age. However, he laments here that he told Nic about his own previous drug use. His explanation highlights his guilt over the potential that he tacitly endorsed Nic's drug use in doing so. He later relays instances in which Nic calls him hypocritical, because David repeatedly tells Nic not to do drugs, even though David had many experiences with drugs himself. This will become yet another factor in David's self-blame as Nic's addiction becomes more and more pronounced.

Yet David also acknowledges that blame isn't as straightforward as this. He ultimately realizes that Nic could have just as easily become addicted if he had lied; David's parents were teetotalers, and David's own drug use was a rebellion against their warnings, because he believed that they didn't know what they were talking about. Thus, while there are many factors that contribute to a child becoming addicted to drugs, he recognizes that it would have been impossible to know exactly what might have spurred Nic's addiction. Even though he may have taken a wrong path, he always wanted what was best for Nic, and for that he cannot be blamed.

❝ I look at the three of them and recall a bewildering emotion that I recognized for the first time back when Nic was born. Along with the joy of parenthood, with every child comes a piercing vulnerability. It is at once sublime and terrifying.

Related Characters: Karen Barbour, Daisy Sheff, Jasper Sheff, Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Nic's half-sister Daisy is born a month before Nic turns 14, and by this time David has already experienced a deepening concern over Nic's drug use. Nic has already admitted to smoking with other kids and has been caught with marijuana in his bag. The disparity between the hope and joy of a newborn with the moodiness of his 14-year-old son is pronounced, and here David takes a quiet moment to reflect on parenthood. With each of his three children at slightly different ages, David recognizes how easy it is for children to come to harm, and how frightening that is as a parent.

David understands that parents must guide their children, but as Nic gets older and begins to rebel, David is also forced to come to terms with the idea that he cannot control Nic completely. Instead, Nic has to make his own choices and mistakes, especially as he enters adulthood and wants to be more independent from his parents. This is part of what makes David so terrified: Nic does not always make the best choices for himself, but David's attempts to exert control frequently backfire. Thus, while David (and all parents) wish that their children could always be safe and happy, this cannot always be the case. The most that David can do is to control his own actions, and to not make himself so sick with worry over Nic's addiction that he neglects his own life and the rest of his family.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Drug stories are sinister. Like some war stories, they focus on adventure and escape. In the tradition of a long line of famous and infamous carousers and their chroniclers, even hangovers and near-death experiences and visits to the emergency room can be made to seem glamorous. But often the storytellers omit the slow degeneration, psychic trauma, and, finally, the casualties.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, Charles, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After 17-year-old Nic returns home from a summer abroad in Paris with an alcohol-induced ulcer, David recounts some of his own drug stories from his first years in college, particularly when accompanied by his roommate, Charles. In one, David nearly died because he and Charles skydived while high, and his parachute didn't open. Here, David underscores why drugs can be particularly harmful and how drug stories like this one reinforce a harmful stigma regarding addiction. When drugs are glamorized in stories like this, it is easy to see how choosing to consume an excess of drugs can be seen as a moral failing because they often come with stories of debauchery and recklessness.

Yet in this passage, David also highlights how this is not the reality of most drug stories: these exploits either narrowly escape much more dangerous outcomes, or those telling the story exclude the toll that drugs and addiction can take. Throughout the book, David recounts these and other stories about adventures he has with Charles. However, David also provides the chilling conclusion to Charles's story in a later chapter: he died from multiple organ failure, brought on by the drugs that he was taking. Thus, in providing a full picture on how drug stories can be sinister, he reinforces the idea that addiction and drugs are not glamorous: they are incredibly harmful and often prompt users to self-destruction.

❝ Finally someone has said it: so it is my fault that Nic has been increasingly sullen and shadowy and taking drugs and is now lying and stealing. I was too lenient. I am ready to bear this judgment, to accept that I have blown it, though I do wonder about the children in trouble whose parents were overly strict and those who were far more lenient than me and yet whose children appear to be fine.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Just before Nic's eighteenth birthday, he takes the car, cash, food, and wine, he and doesn't call for two days. David calls Nic's therapist, who says that Nic is simply "exercising his independence," and that his rebellion is extreme because David has been lenient with him up to this point. This causes David to sink into blaming himself for Nic's behavior, feeling that his leniency is the reason that Nic is acting out. This eventually fuels his further assertion that his lenience caused Nic's addiction entirely.

Yet here, David also recognizes an inherent contradiction in the therapist's argument. If David had been very strict, Nic might have rebelled in exactly the same way. Additionally, there are many kids with parents of varying degrees of leniency who do not engage in this kind of behavior or take drugs. Ultimately, this helps David come to terms with the idea that he did not cause Nic's addiction—or at least, that he is not the sole reason to blame. He argues that it is impossible to know what contributed to Nic's drug use and how much. Taking responsibility for addiction is complicated, and rather than focusing on the past, David determines that he needs to try to help Nic make better choices in the present and the future.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Meth users include men and women of every class, race, and background. Though the current epidemic has its roots in motorcycle gangs and lower-class rural and suburban neighborhoods, meth, as *Newsweek* reported in a 2005 cover story, has marched across the country and up the socioeconomic ladder.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

After revealing that Nic has used meth for the first time at age 18, David includes statistics and background information on meth and how its usage came to be an epidemic in the United States. David also tries to address some of the stigma surrounding addiction and drug usage, noting that people from all walks of life can become addicted to meth. He notes in other chapters that many people become surprised when they learn of Nic's meth addiction because he seems like a good kid, but this perception plays into the stereotypes of what meth users look like and what their values must be. Despite the fact that Nic is intelligent and comes from a loving family, he still falls into addiction and uses meth. In acknowledging that anyone can be a meth user, David aims to bolster his eventual argument that addiction is a disease, and that anyone can get it.

Additionally, David later addresses the fact that the proliferation of meth that he describes here could have been stopped by greater government intervention. This allows him to then call for policies that would help curtail meth production as well as addiction on a wider scale. His ultimate goal is not only to reveal Nic's personal story, but also to raise awareness about ways in which the government can improve upon its procedures regarding addiction.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ He's in denial. It's typical of addicts, who maintain and believe that everything is all right, they can stop when they want, everyone else has a problem but not them, they are fine, even if they wind up losing everything, even if they are on the streets, even if they wind up in jail or in the hospital.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

After Nic tries meth for the first time and returns to the house as a "barely recognizable phantom," David insists that Nic must go to a rehab center to get treatment for his addiction. Up until this point, Nic had been resistant, but David threatens to remove all financial support for him if he did not go. David brings Nic to Thunder Road, a program in Oakland, where a counselor speaks with Nic and then with David. The counselor's advice here completely pinpoints Nic's feelings on what he is experiencing: Nic continues to insist that he can handle himself, despite the fact that up until this point, his trajectory has steadily grown worse. He doesn't even fully admit that he has an addiction, arguing that he is in complete control even as he grows sicker and sicker and resorts to more and more deplorable behavior.

In this episode, Nic's assertion that he can stay sober whenever he wants to is quickly proven false—after going through a 28-day program, he disappears only three days after leaving to get high once again. Yet over the course of the book, as Nic lands in the hospital or is almost arrested several times, he has moments of clarity in which he does understand the severity of his addiction. Each time this happens, Nic ultimately recognizes that he needs programs and people supporting him and holding him accountable for his recovery—one of David's major arguments in the book.

He says that one of the most difficult things about having a child addicted to drugs is that we cannot control it. We cannot save Nic. "You can support his recovery but you can't do it for him," he says. "We try to save them. Parents try. It's what parents do."

He tells us Al-Anon's Three Cs: "You didn't cause it, you can't control it, you can't cure it."

Related Characters: Karen Barbour, Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

While Nic is at his first rehabilitation program at Ohlhoff Recovery, Karen and David meet with a specialist in addiction to talk about Nic and to get advice about steps they can take going forward. The specialist counsels them about not trying to control Nic and introduces them to Al-Anon's "Three C's" of coping with a loved one's addiction.

This advice, and particularly the Three C's, touch on several of the major themes in *Beautiful Boy*. First, David has struggled deeply up to this point with the idea that he might have caused Nic's addiction through actions that he did or didn't take. The creed that he didn't cause it, therefore, is a complicated one for him to accept. He gradually understands that even if he may have contributed to Nic's addiction, there is no way to know exactly how much or in what ways. Thus, given that uncertainty, it is unfair for David to blame himself for Nic's addiction.

David also struggles to understand that he can't control Nic's addiction. Having a child in crisis makes David want to try to do as much as he can for Nic. But similarly, David accepts that Nic has to live his own life, and his anxiety over what Nic is or isn't doing is only hurting himself. Lastly, David understands over time that addiction cannot be cured: the cycle of relapses and recoveries that Nic goes through makes that fact abundantly clear. And yet even if it is incurable, it is necessary for David to always retain hope that it is treatable.

It led her to conclude that meth addicts may be unable, not unwilling, to participate in many common treatments, at least in the early stages of withdrawal. Rather than a moral failure or a lack of willpower, dropping out and relapsing may be a result of a damaged brain.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, Dr. Edythe London, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

As Nic is recovering at Ohlhoff, David seeks out more information on meth addiction and how it affects users' brains. He meets Dr. Edythe London, a professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at UCLA, who studies brain scans of normal brains in contrast with those of meth users. Her research illustrates that drugs create biological changes in users' brains that alter their decision-making abilities and make them depressed, argumentative, and anxious.

London's studies provide evidence for the argument that addiction is a disease with a biological basis, and that it should be treated as such. Her research counters the stigma of addiction as a failure of willpower, as she notes here. Instead, being unable to stop using is a symptom of the disease, not its cause. This also alleviates some (though not all) of Nic's responsibility for his own addiction, as he has experienced biological changes that make it very difficult for him to remain sober. Dr. London's findings also illustrate why research is so important, because reducing the stigma of addiction and learning how it can be better treated is crucial for mitigating addiction's pervasiveness.

Chapter 12 Quotes

It's a tricky illness. Yes, people do have choices about what to do about it. It's the same with an illness like diabetes. A diabetic can choose to monitor his insulin levels and take his medication; an addict can choose to treat his disease through recovery. In both cases, if they don't treat their illnesses, they worsen and the person can die.

Related Characters: Karen Barbour, Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

Nic's second rehab program is at Saint Helena hospital. David and Karen go to the hospital on weekends to visit Nic, and they also attend educational lectures given by the program. At this talk, a lecturer explains that while people may not be forced to make bad choices, they still have a disease. This is David's first introduction to the disease

model of addiction, and the lecturer provides a helpful analogy comparing addiction to diabetes.

The analogy allows people to understand the complicated nature of responsibility in addiction: first, it emphasizes that no one is to blame for addiction. It is not an addict's fault that they have a disease, just as it is not a person's fault if they have diabetes (particularly because the predisposition for addiction is thought to be genetic). However, an addict *does* have the responsibility to get help, meaning to find treatment through programs like the one at Saint Helena and through adhering to a 12-step program. Thus, treating addiction this way does not alleviate the responsibility of an addict to seek help and get well, but it does attempt to reduce the stigma of those who look at addiction as a purely moral failing with a seemingly simple solution.

Chapter 13 Quotes

"I felt the same way about my son until I realized that he couldn't get to school or work or a therapy appointment but he could get to pawn shops, get to his dealers, get whatever drug he wanted, get alcohol, break into houses, get needles—whatever was required. [...] I felt so sorry for him, thinking, He's depressed. He's fragile. He's incapable. Of course I should pay his bill if he winds up in the hospital. Of course I should pay his rent or he'll be on the streets. So for about a year I paid for a comfortable place for him to get high."

Related Characters: Karen Barbour, Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

When Nic is at Saint Helena hospital, Karen and David visit him on weekends and join for group therapy sessions. Several family members of addicts speak about the mountain of things that they do for their loved ones—and these people realize that even though they may not think addicts are capable of certain things, when it comes to drugs, they are often able to accomplish pretty sophisticated and energy-involved tasks. If addicts are able to go to extreme lengths to get drugs, they reason, they should be able to go to the same lengths to get their life in order and support themselves.

The example given by one man here illustrates that there is a line between supporting someone and enabling them. It is one thing to make sure that an addict can get the help and support that they need through rehab programs or other resources, but it's another thing to give them resources that only allow them to do more drugs. David emphasizes this boundary several times throughout the book when Nic calls after relapsing, asking for money or plane tickets or for his debts to be paid. Even though David wants to help Nic, he knows that doing so will only allow him to continue his dangerous behavior. At the end of the book, David even explicitly states that he would never help an addict using drugs to do anything except get back to treatment, affirming his own view on where the line between supporting and enabling lies.

Chapter 15 Quotes

If Nic were not ill he would not lie.
If Nic were not ill he would not steal.
If Nic were not ill he would not terrorize his family.
[...] He has a disease, but addiction is the most baffling of all diseases, unique in the blame, shame, and humiliation that accompany it.
It is not Nic's fault that he has a disease, but it is his fault that he relapses, since he is the only one who can do the work necessary to prevent relapse. Whether or not it's his fault, he must be held accountable.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

When Nic returns from his first year at Hampshire College, he quickly reveals that he has been using drugs the whole spring semester, and he disappears again. While Nic is gone, David thinks about Nic's addiction, the responsibility that comes with it, and his conflicted feelings over whether he truly believes that it is a disease. Here, he comes to several clarifying conclusions, building on the arguments of the lecture that he attended while at Saint Helena hospital. David recognizes that Nic's addiction must be a disease, because Nic would only do the horrible things that he has done if he had some sort of illness.

Additionally, David grapples with the responsibility that Nic has for his own disease (just as he grapples with the responsibility that he himself bears for Nic's disease). He comes to the conclusion that it is impossible to know exactly what is to blame for Nic's disease—likely a genetic predisposition and a combination of unknowable factors. But David concludes that it is more constructive for them to think about responsibility going forward: Nic must be held

accountable, as David says, for his actions.

David also recognizes that unlike many other diseases, addiction is unique in the shame that it brings on. The perceptions of addicts and their failings make it doubly difficult for people with the disease, because the stigma reinforces the shame. This is why David ultimately argues for the fact that addiction *should* be treated as a disease: by removing the stigma, governments are more likely to fund research and treatment programs, and addicts are more likely to seek the help that they need.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ I shock myself with my ability to rationalize and tolerate things once unthinkable. [...] He's just experimenting. Going through a stage. It's only marijuana. He gets high only on weekends. At least he's not using hard drugs. At least it's not heroin. He would never resort to needles. At least he's alive. I have also learned (the hard way because, as it turns out, there's no other way to learn such lessons) that parents are more flexible with our hopes and dreams for our children than we ever imagined.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

After Nic's returns home from his first year at Hampshire College and reveals that he has been using drugs throughout the whole semester, he disappears and reappears several times. David is finally able to have lunch with him, but he is unable to convince Nic to go to rehab again. When they say goodbye, David is amazed at how much he is now tolerating from Nic, to the point where his only hope for Nic is that he is alive.

The catalogue of rationalizations that David recounts here tracks Nic's slow degradation. As the list goes on, readers see how much self-destruction Nic has brought upon himself even at such a young. But the difficulty, as David's list implies, is that the change has come so slowly that it was impossible for David to track exactly when Nic went past the point of no return into addiction. This is one of the aspects of addiction that makes it so difficult to prevent, particularly as Nic was often resistant to his control.

David wants desperately to rescue his son from this decline, and yet he is unable to. While David is trying to hang onto his son, Nic is simultaneously gaining independence and resisting what he perceives as being controlled by David. This is why David's dreams for Nic have to change. Despite the fact that David simply wants Nic to make the best choices, he understands that his son is now outside his control.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ Jasper responds, "I don't think he wants to do them, but he can't help it. It's like in cartoons when some character has a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. The devil whispers into Nicky's ear and sometimes it gets too loud so he has to listen to him. The angel is there, too," Jasper continues, "but he talks softer and Nic can't hear him."

Related Characters: Jasper Sheff (speaker), Nic Sheff, Daisy Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

2003 starts as a good year for Nic: he moves to LA, turns 21 in July, and celebrates a year of sobriety in September. But soon after, he relapses yet again, until David is able to convince him to get help and get clean. While Nic is experiencing withdrawal, Jasper and Daisy discuss Bob Dylan one evening after watching a video of one of his performances. Daisy wonders why Bob Dylan did drugs, and Jasper provides this explanation in response.

First, even though Dylan is the topic, Jasper immediately shifts to talking about Nic, knowing that this is really what Daisy wants to know. The question is not springing from curiosity, but rather out of the pain that these young children have already experienced in witnessing their older brother's drug addiction.

Jasper's metaphor of the angel and devil in the cartoons is an astute one, as it captures the complicated nature of responsibility in addiction. It acknowledges that there is an outside force that is pressuring Nic—something that he cannot control. Yet it does not absolve him of responsibility completely: it still holds that Nic bears some of the weight of what he does, because ultimately he heeds the "devil" or the "angel" in his actions. Thus, Jasper's own metaphor echoes David's understanding of blame and responsibility: even though it is not Nic's fault that he has an addiction, he

is accountable for the actions he takes because of that addiction.

I guess what I can offer you is this: As you're growing up, whenever you need me—to talk or just whatever—I'll be able to be there for you now. That is something that I could never promise you before. I will be here for you. I will live, and build a life, and be someone that you can depend on. I hope that means more than this stupid note and these eight dollar bills.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff (speaker), David Sheff, Jasper Sheff

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

Following Nic's relapse and recovery in 2003, he sends a note to Jasper apologizing for the impact that his addiction has had on Jasper. He also returns the $8 that he had stolen from Jasper a year earlier, after he had returned from his first year at Hampshire and immediately disappeared. Nic's letter acknowledges the harm that his addiction has wrought on Jasper and the rest of the family. He knows that stealing the $8 was not simply a relatively small theft but represented a larger symbolic betrayal—the fact that he was stealing from his eight-year-old brother and using that money to buy drugs. The theft represented a degradation of Nic's morals and damage to his relationship with his brother.

Nic's return of the money is thus a symbolic gesture as well. It represents his attempts to repair the relationships that he knows he has damaged with his addiction. Nic understands the responsibility that he bears for his past actions, but he also wants to take on a different kind of responsibility: that of caring for and being there for his brother.

The note is further complicated by the fact that this is not the end of Nic's story with drugs. He relapses again in *Beautiful Boy*, and also relapses after the book is published. And so the words are complicated even further, because while they offer hope that Nic wants to support his family, they also always come with the caveat that Nic may not be able to remain in recovery and be there for his brother. David acknowledges the disappointment of not being able to end the book with Nic's letter, but he understands that it represents the more complex reality that addiction is a lifelong disease that comes with lifelong struggles.

Chapter 21 Quotes

I have learned that I am all but irrelevant to Nic's survival. It took my near death, however, to comprehend that his fate—and Jasper's and Daisy's—is separate from mine. I can try to protect my children, to help and guide them, and I can love them, but I cannot save them. Nic, Jasper, and Daisy will live, and someday they will die, with or without me.

Related Characters: Karen Barbour, Daisy Sheff, Jasper Sheff, Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

While David is recovering from his brain hemorrhage, Nic relapses again after being in recovery for almost two years. David begins to reignite the worry that had plagued him before his hemorrhage, but he remembers an epiphany that he had while he was in the hospital: the knowledge that Nic, Jasper, and Daisy's fate is separate from his own is crucial to his understanding of Nic's addiction. For so long, David has tried to control Nic, but now he realizes that this desire for control is not helping Nic and is only hurting himself.

David can do what he can to guide his children, as he explains, but ultimately the responsibility falls on Nic to live his life in recovery. Part of David's desire for control certainly stems from the guilt that he experiences, thinking that he caused Nic's addiction. Yet in order to be able to live his life, to support Karen and Jasper and Daisy, David has to come to this realization that he must step back from Nic's addiction. Nic's life is his own, and even though David doesn't agree with all of his choices, Nic is an adult whose life belongs only to him. This is a turning point in David's understanding, because going forward David is able to alleviate some of the debilitating panic that he had been experiencing prior to this. Thus, David illustrates the necessity of stepping back from his son so that he can live his own life.

Chapter 22 Quotes

In recovery working with Randy, Nic was the one who explained the insidiousness to me: "A using addict cannot trust his own brain—it lies, says, 'You can have one drink, a joint, a single line, just one.'" It tells him, "I have moved beyond my sponsor." It says, "I don't require the obsessive and vigilant recovery program I needed when I was emerging from the relapse." […] And so Nic said he couldn't trust his own brain and needed to rely on Randy, meetings, the program, and prayer—yes, prayer—to go forward.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff (speaker), Z., Randy, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

When Nic is relapsing and lying to David about going to Joshua Tree, Nic explains that he and his girlfriend, Z., are getting sober together. Because of this, he argues that he doesn't need a rehab program. Yet David recalls something that Nic himself once said while in recovery, contradicting Nic's argument in the present. This quote emphasizes that even Nic, when his brain isn't corrupted by drugs, understands that he cannot get sober alone. He needs the support of his sponsor Randy, of a recovery program, and of group meetings to be able to stop using. This again affirms the need for support in order for a person to truly deal with addiction.

In contrast to people like Randy and programs like Ohlhoff or Saint Helena, Z. is not actually helping Nic. While it may seem as though Nic is getting support from Z., in fact they are actually just enabling each other's addictions. This is confirmed when they get high together through the weeks following Nic's message. Thus, David also emphasizes that Nic needs the right kind of support around him—not someone who is also relapsing, but someone who can help Nic get back into recovery and not be tempted by drugs.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ Addicts' families walk an unhappy path that is strewn with many pitfalls and false starts. Mistakes are inevitable. Pain is inevitable. But so are growth and wisdom and serenity if families approach addiction with an open mind, a willingness to learn, and the acceptance that recovery like addiction itself, is a long and complex process. Families should never give up hope for recovery—for recovery can and does happen every day. Nor should they stop living their own lives while they wait for that miracle of recovery to occur.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

In the book's final chapters, David thinks about calling an interventionist so that Nic can get back into rehab. As he calls various experts, he reads a passage from Beverly Conyers's *Addict in the Family*, another book that deals with addiction in families. The quote that David includes from this book supports several of his own beliefs about addiction: first, it acknowledges that families can be just as victimized by addiction as addicts themselves, something that David knows firsthand. Second, it also holds that families should always maintain hope that their loved ones can recover. Nic goes through many recoveries and relapses, and even though David checks his optimism each time this happens, he still necessarily holds out hope that Nic will eventually return to recovery.

Yet the passage also acknowledges that families should not eschew their own lives to for those of addicts. This is a lesson that David learned the hard way, with his stress over Nic potentially contributing to his brain hemorrhage. In this way, David uses the quote to emphasize the lessons that he has learned. Additionally, it shows how books on the subject can provide comfort and support for those going through a similar situation. David hopes that *Beautiful Boy* can provide the same support for others.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ The phone, when it rings, brings on the same state of panic. I am always worried that there is news of another crisis. Or it's Nic, and I don't know if he will be sane or high. Or it won't be him, and I'll be disappointed. My body tenses up. Oftentimes during meals or when we're hanging around in the evening, I let the phone ring until the answering service picks it up, because I don't want to deal with whatever might be coming. I think that everyone feels tension.

Related Characters: Daisy Sheff, Jasper Sheff, Karen Barbour, Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

When David, Karen, Jasper, and Daisy visit a family therapist to talk about Nic's addiction and its effect on them, the therapist starts to identify triggers that push them into a state of panic. Hearing this, David realizes that his cell phone serves as another trigger. He explains here that, for him, the phone represents a lack of control. This is because, as he explains, he never knows what will be on the

other end—whether Nic will have relapsed, or if he might be in the hospital.

The therapist then suggests that David take steps to mitigate the anxiety that the phone causes, by setting up times with Nic to speak on the phone or turning his phone off for periods of time. In this way, David is able to regain some of the control that he did not have previously. He still loves Nic and wants to make sure that he is okay, but maintaining some control over his own life and his mental health is equally important. As he notes here, the whole family recognizes the tension that David feels when the phone rings. Managing the panic that the phone induces will help not only David, but it will also set the entire family at ease—once again proving that sometimes when a child is in crisis, it is important for parents to recognize when they cannot control their children's actions and to detach from them.

> Parents of addicts learn to temper our hope even as we never completely lose hope. However, we are terrified of optimism, fearful that it will be punished. It is safer to shut down. But I am open again, and as a consequence I feel the pain and joy of the past and worry about and hope for the future. I know what it is I feel. Everything.

Related Characters: Vicki, Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 305

Explanation and Analysis

David ends the main section of the book with this passage, and it captures the bittersweet nature of being a parent to a child that is frequently in crisis. He echoes the sentiment of an earlier chapter: that being a parent is both "sublime and terrifying." David consistently hopes that he will be able to maintain a good relationship with Nic, and that Nic will be able to stay healthy and in recovery. Yet David also acknowledges that addiction is a lifelong disease, and it is likely that there will be more painful moments in the future because of it.

David ends the book with "everything," calling back to the word that he and Nic would say to each other in place of goodbye when Nic would fly alone from San Francisco to Los Angeles. In that circumstance, "everything" captured the joy of loving Nic, but also the sadness of seeing him go to Vicki's. Having a child with addiction, even one who is in recovery, holds that same bittersweet feeling. But as with the custody arrangement, David understands that there are times when he must let his son go and live a different part of his life, without David there. Even though David still worries slightly about the future, David knows that he must relinquish some of his control as a parent and that Nic has his own life to live.

Afterword Quotes

> "The mortality rates from unintentional drug overdose have risen steadily since the early 1970s, and over the past ten years they have reached historic highs." First-time users are younger, the drugs themselves are stronger, and there are many more types of drugs to abuse. Users can get their drug of choice whenever and wherever they want. Yet in spite of these facts, the federal government boasts that we're making progress.

Related Characters: David Sheff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 326

Explanation and Analysis

In the Afterword, David tackles the issue of addiction on a national scale, examining how the government can shift its strategy in order to better address addiction. Here, David cites data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that illustrate how the government—even while arguing that it is addressing addiction through the "war on drugs"—is failing at protecting citizens from drugs. The fact that drugs are more numerous, that they are more widespread, and that users are younger provide evidence for why addiction has become an epidemic relative to usage in the past.

Building on this information from the CDC, David is then able to argue that the government is not addressing addiction in the way that it should. Primarily, it has criminalized addiction rather than evaluating it as a disease, likely due to the stigma surrounding addiction. Because it is usually treated as a failure of morality or willpower, it is easier to fault individuals rather than systemic problems of how the government is addressing drugs and addiction. David's critique calls necessary attention to the fact that the current policies aren't working, before suggesting steps that he believes the government should take in order to address this horrific disease.

> Can we cure addiction? Again, despite thirty-five years of aggressive research, many cases of cancer resist treatment. But we have made dramatic progress. And in the process we've relieved incalculable suffering, saved hundreds of millions of dollars, and saved millions of lives. A war on addiction would do the same—and more. By dramatically decreasing emergency room visits and prison populations, we'd eventually free up funds to treat other illnesses, improving health care across the board. We'd eliminate much homelessness and dramatically reduce violence, including child abuse, spousal abuse, and violent crime. We'd help families stay together and repair broken neighborhoods. We'd alleviate immeasurable suffering.

Related Characters: Nic Sheff, David Sheff

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 331

Explanation and Analysis

To close the book, David offers this final passage. As he has done throughout the Afterword, he compares addiction to cancer. In doing so, David implicitly reinforces the idea that addiction, like cancer, is a disease. From there, however, he contrasts how addiction and cancer have been treated by the government and the public. Both issues have been addressed with significant funding, though in notably different ways. Cancer has had significant amounts of money go into research, while the war on drugs and addiction have largely been funded through criminalizing drugs and those who use them. This difference illustrates how the stigma against addiction is being reinforced even by the federal government.

Instead, David argues that treating addiction similarly to cancer would alleviate much of the damage the disease causes. He holds that it is necessary to fund more avenues to prevent addiction and treat it, because this will actually save money and lives down the line with lower prison populations, emergency room visits, and violent crimes. David has spent most of the book depicting how much addiction has taken from Nic's life and from his family as a whole. By broadening the perspective, David strengthens the argument for the difference these policies could make on a national level, in addition to an individual one.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

David drives to the airport to pick up his son Nic, who is coming home from college for summer vacation. Also in the car are Nic's half-siblings: eight-year-old Jasper and five-year-old Daisy, who are thrilled to see him and catch up on their lives for the past six months. Nic jokes with them as well as promising that he will come to their "step up" ceremony, in which they graduate from one year of elementary school to the next. When they arrive home, Nic gives his siblings gifts he's brought back: American Girl dolls for Daisy and Super Soakers for Jasper.

It's significant that the memoir—which is largely riddled with pain and anxiety—opens with an episode of deep familial love. Nic's battle with addiction (which will become apparent shortly) still leaves room for hope, as sometimes he is able to find these moments of clarity and joy with his family. This passage also foreshadows the idea that addiction can be deeply harmful to families, not just to the addicts themselves.

After dinner, Jasper and Nic play with the water guns while David and his wife Karen watch from the living room. Daisy even joins in, wielding the garden hose. After everyone is properly soaked, David sends Jasper and Daisy to take a bath, and afterward Nic reads a Roald Dahl story for the kids. They are riveted by his voices. When everyone else is asleep, David hears Nic restlessly making tea and playing guitar. David is amazed at how far Nic has come: the previous year he dropped out of Berkeley, but he has just completed his freshman year at another school in the east. It is almost his 150th day without methamphetamine.

These moments also illustrate the joyful aspects of parenthood for David. Thinking that his children are under control and that he is helping to guide Nic to good choices, he feels some of his anxiety ebb away. Despite Nic's addiction, he believes that Nic has been able to get his life together. Even though this will quickly prove untrue, it shows the importance that David places on maintaining hope and keeping up the battle against Nic's addiction.

The next day, Jasper and Daisy goes off to school, while Nic prepares for a job interview at an Italian restaurant. After dinner, he asks to borrow the car for an AA meeting. He had lost his driving privileges the previous summer after driving one of the family cars into the other, but David grants this reasonable request. Nic returns after the meeting, announcing that he asked someone he met to be his sponsor while he is in town. The next day, Nic asks for the car again to meet the sponsor, and David agrees once more.

Again, David relinquishes some of his worry because Nic seems to be improving, and David feels that he can control where Nic goes and who he sees. David's mention of Nic's accident with both cars, however, starts to hint at how much destruction and ruin Nic has caused in their family over his teenage years and early twenties.

The next day, Nic once again leaves for an AA meeting in the evening. This time, however, he has not returned home by 11 p.m. David starts to worry: when Nic ignores his curfew, it usually spells disaster. David's anxiety mounts as the hours tick by, until the car pulls in at 2:30 a.m. David confronts Nic in the kitchen, demanding to know if he's high. Nic denies this irritably, explaining that after the meeting, people went back to a girl's house and watched a movie. He apologizes angrily for not calling and goes to sleep.

This moment illustrates how David's worries come to the fore whenever he feels that he is not in control of his son. When David doesn't know where Nic is, his anxieties spike. Even though this may be for good reason, David still has to struggle to find the balance between caring for Nic and not allowing his son's poor choices get in the way of his ability to live his own life.

The next morning, David confronts Nic once more about using: the giveaway is Nic's body quivering uncontrollably. David says that he can tell Nic is using again. Nic initially denies it, but when David presses him to take a drug test, he admits that he's been using the whole spring semester. He pushes past David, takes the car, and leaves. That afternoon, Jasper and Daisy ask where Nic has gone.

This is another introduction of the insidiousness of addiction: Nic has betrayed David yet again in using—and in hiding the fact that he'd been using the whole semester. This is despite the fact that Nic has already undergone several rehabilitation programs, illustrating how addiction is a lifelong struggle that cannot simply be "cured."

David writes that he tried everything to prevent Nic's fall into meth addiction, which has a "unique, horrific quality." In the United States, at least 12 million people have tried the drug and 1.5 million are addicted. Worldwide, there are more than 35 million users, more than heroin and cocaine combined.

Throughout the book, David provides educational information on meth and on addiction generally, illustrating why it is such a harmful disease. Here, the statistics he cites demonstrate how meth is a particularly harmful drug that ruins millions of lives.

David explains that his family's story is unique, but it is universal to every other tale of addiction. He writes that hearing others' stories helped him feel less isolated and crazy. He decided to write about the subject himself, culminating in an article published in *The New York Times Magazine* with his family's permission. From there, a book editor contacted Nic to write a book about his own experience in hopes of inspiring others who were similarly struggling.

David reveals the impetus for writing the book itself, explaining how others' stories gave him a sense of support. Through Beautiful Boy, *and through Nic's companion book,* Tweak, *he hopes that others will find similar comfort and support in knowing that they are not alone in experiencing the horrors of addiction.*

David also heard from other people after the article was published: outpourings of "compassion, consolation, counsel, and shared grief." Readers were grateful to hear that they were not alone in their struggle and felt emboldened to tell their own stories as well. Many had more tragic conclusions, ending with the death of their children or loved ones. David explains that this response led him to continue writing, culminating in this book.

David's article and Beautiful Boy *become an avenues for mutual support: David's writing prompts others to tell their own stories, which in turn make David feel less alone. This network of support, as David illustrates, is crucial for anyone who is affected by addiction.*

David explains that Nic has used drugs on and off for more than a decade, and David admits the difficulty of not knowing exactly the best way to guide Nic as he fell into addiction. He explains that he feels equally distraught over what he did do and what he didn't do. He writes that he often blames himself.

Here, David introduces the theme of responsibility and blame, explaining that he often struggles with the choices he made as Nic was falling into addiction. This also ties into the theme of parenthood, as one of the most difficult things about the situation is how little control he had at the time and the fact that there is no clear path in figuring out how to guide an individual away from drugs.

David also writes that many people are surprised to learn of Nic's addiction, explaining that their family seems perfectly functional. He explains that addicts can come from all different kinds of backgrounds. He also writes that he was in denial for a long time about Nic's addiction. David wishes that someone had told him to intervene before it was too late—though he's not sure whether he would have taken the advice.

The fact that many people are surprised to learn of Nic's addiction due to the fact that they are a relatively normal family again contributes to the stigma of addiction. Addiction, as David goes on to explain, can befall anyone, regardless of their race, age, socioeconomic background, family structure, or intelligence. It is important for David to include this information in order to dispel some of the stereotypes associated with addiction.

David describes how he effectively became addicted to Nic's addiction. Eventually, however, he learned that his obsession did not help Nic and instead harmed the rest of his family and David himself. He also learned that he cannot control everything that happens; he cannot make Nic's choices for him.

David recognizes his own struggle with his son's addiction, proving once again how addiction can have a terrible effect on the lives of a person's family. Yet it also prompts David's ultimate revelation that his anxiety over his lack of control of Nic's actions only hurts him, and helps no one.


David also struggles with how much to absolve Nic of his addiction. He notes that Nic becomes another person while on drugs, and David doesn't know how to reconcile the two people Nic has become. David also explains that whatever the cause of Nic's addiction (genetics, David's divorce, David's drug history, his leniency or harshness), the problem spiraled out of anyone's control. David explains that he aims to recount Nic's slow slide into addiction so that readers might have a better idea of the path to take with their own children. But he also says that they should not blame themselves if they take a wrong path.

David grapples with the responsibility that both he and Nic bear. He recognizes that drugs turn Nic into a different person, and this profound change in Nic makes it harder for him to remain clean. The potential causes for Nic's addiction that David lists makes clear that it is hard to know who or what, exactly, to blame—after all, David could not have been both too lenient and harsh in bringing Nic up. In recounting his family's story, David once again hopes to provide some support for others experiencing the same thing—but he also emphasizes the idea that people with loved ones who are addicts should aim not to blame themselves for what has happened.

CHAPTER 1

Nic is born on July 20, 1982, to David and his wife Vicki, who live in Berkeley, California. They are "enraptured" by Nic, seeking out the best for him. As a child, Nic loves music and building structures out of Legos. He is thoughtful and curious, enjoying puppet shows, board games, and sing-a-longs.

The early chapters of Beautiful Boy *are largely spent detailing Nic's promise and innocence, and David's early understanding of parenthood and how to navigate it. While Nic's early childhood is idyllic, the missteps that both David and Nic make in his upbringing have a deep and lasting effect on his development.*


When Nic is three years old, however, Vicki and David start to feel their marriage dissolving, despite their shared devotion to him. David falls in love with a family friend, and when they visit a couple's therapist, he insists that his marriage is already over. Nic is hit hard by the divorce, and Vicki and David agree to joint custody, shuttling him back and forth between two homes.

David and Vicki's divorce becomes the first major struggle in Nic's young life—David later describes it as the most "traumatic event" of Nic's childhood. This is one of the things for which David blames himself, wondering whether Nic might not have been as inclined to use drugs if David and Vicki had stayed together.

Vicki then moves to Los Angeles and remarries, and she and David arrange a formal custody agreement. They decide to ask Nic's therapist, whom he has been seeing since the divorce began, to figure out the best arrangement for Nic. The therapist launches a "three-month investigation," interviewing family, friends, and Nic. She explains what she has learned: while Nic is an "exceptional child," he is suffering from the divorce, and the therapist's goal is to minimize that stress. She determines that Nic will spend the school year with David, and Vicki will have Nic for summers and holidays. David and Vicki agree to the arrangement.

This is another aspect of David and Vicki's decisions of which David becomes critical in hindsight. He states later that Nic should not have been made to do the traveling in their arrangement—that on top of the divorce itself, this adds yet another source of stress and instability in his life. As David searches for something to blame for Nic's addiction, he returns to the custody agreement to place the responsibility on himself.

It is tough for Vicki and David to lose their son half of the time, but it is harder for Nic. At five years old, he starts flying alone between San Francisco and Los Angeles. When he and David say goodbye, they say "everything"—their way of saying I love you, I miss you, and I'm sorry in one word. On the plane, Nic orders Coca-Cola (forbidden at home), because the flights are the only times he does not have a parent watching over him.

David illustrates how much he and Nic love each other in their goodbye, which will recur throughout the book. Yet at the same time, David begins to hint at the inherent loss of control of his son that now comes with losing him half of the time. David's mention of Nic ordering the soda is a subtle hint at the idea that Nic, under less supervision, has a tendency toward indulging in things he knows are forbidden.

At five, Nic begins kindergarten in San Francisco and begins to display his creativity, confidence, and individuality. He gains an eclectic group of friends and develops a deep interest in movies. He also gets in trouble occasionally, prank-calling local restaurants and bars, but mostly he behaves well. Report cards note that he is creative, compassionate, funny, and "a leader in class."

The fact that Nic is so widely admired by other kids and praised by his teachers at a young age again illustrates how much promise he has. This is one of the things that makes Nic's early drug use so difficult for David to recognize as a problem.

David keeps a box of Nic's artwork and writings. One writing assignment asks if a person should always try their best. A young Nic writes, "I don't think you should always try your best all the time, […] because, let's say a drug atick [*sic*] asks you for drugs you should not try your best to find him some drugs."

This story serves two purposes: the first is to illustrate that Nic understands at a young age that drug use is dangerous—it is not as though David didn't impress these values upon him, even in elementary school. But it also foreshadows an important lesson that David must learn: while he must try to support Nic, he shouldn't enable Nic's drug addiction, as Nic so astutely points out here.

Sometimes, teachers report that Nic seems a little depressed, and David explains that Nic is sometimes afraid—perhaps because of his parents' constant watchfulness or the "faces of missing children on milk cartons." Nic and his friends won't play outside unless David is there. Before Nic goes to sleep, he asks David to check on him every 15 minutes. David sings to Nic to soothe him, a song about a father making a monster go away.

This is another instance of David foreshadowing the events to come, planting the seeds as to why Nic's addiction is so difficult for David. He loves his son deeply and is used to being needed and helping him. But unlike Nic's nightmares, David cannot chase the "monster" of Nic's addiction away—it is something that Nic must battle on his own.

CHAPTER 2

One fall morning, David goes through his routine with Nic: they go for a walk in Golden Gate Park before making pancakes at home. The apartment is strewn with toys and Legos, and Nic sings as he dresses and gets into the car. They're running late. Nic asks to be tickled and then changes the subject to ask if he can take Klingon in school so that he can watch the *Star Trek* movies without subtitles. David hurries to the school before remembering that it's Saturday.

This passage provides more insight into some of the idyllic aspects of Nic's childhood, and it again emphasizes his brightness and creativity. Despite the divorce, David tries to create as calm and normal a life for Nic as he is able—despite occasional chaos like not knowing what day it is.

Soon after, David's girlfriend (for whom he left Vicki) leaves him for another man. Nic has to contend with David's heartbreak and his subsequent girlfriends. Once, when a woman stays over, David forgets to lock his bedroom door, and Nic crawls into bed in the morning to find the woman there. David later tries to explain why she is there, but he knows he has made a mistake. Shortly after, David takes a break from dating. Together, he and Nic spend time taking walks, riding cable cars, going to movies, cooking, and reading.

David also recognizes that he sometimes made parenting mistakes during Nic's childhood. Here, he learns the necessity of putting Nic's needs over his own. While it is important to prioritize his son, this will become an issue for David during the grip of Nic's addiction, when David still wants to care for Nic at all costs.

In summer 1989, David meets a woman named Karen at a friend's dinner party. She lives in Manhattan and is visiting her parents; she is a painter and a writer of children's books. David gets her phone number, and they agree to meet when David visits New York. They keep in touch by telephone and letters, seeing each other on visits to New York and California. After six months, he introduces Karen to Nic. They spend hours drawing cartoons together. Soon after, Karen moves in with Nic and David in California; they relocate to a new house with a backyard.

Even though the divorce separates David and Vicki, Karen's addition to the family provides Nic with another parental figure in his life and more stability than when David is dating. While David frequently blames the divorce for potentially contributing to Nic's addiction, it is clear that his and Vicki's divorce also allowed David to provide Nic with a happier family.

In May, David and Karen marry. Nic, who is now nine, is nervous about the change but relieved when they return to the house and everything is basically the same. Karen and Nic grow closer: she takes him to museums, teaches him French, and plays video games with him. Karen resists motherly duties, but gradually she starts driving carpool and tasks Nic with various chores. Karen calls Nic "sputnik"; he calls her "Mama" or "KB."

Karen also gradually takes on a parental role in Nic's life. With it comes an increased responsibility but also an increased sense of authority over him. The fact that Karen isn't Nic's actual mother, however, may cause conflict between Karen and David once Nic is in the throes of his addiction.

Being a stepmother is not completely natural for Karen, but she is amazed how much she enjoys being a parental figure. Sometimes she wishes she were Nic's real mother, though she is realistic about the fact that she isn't. Occasionally, David unintentionally undermines Karen's authority, and Nic frequently misses Vicki. Nic calls Vicki often, though hearing her voice sometimes makes him more upset.

Nic's relationship with Karen adds to the idea that parenthood can be a gift, but it can also be difficult—Karen feels as though she has no way of controlling Nic. Without the ability to determine his upbringing, she feels that she doesn't fully have the same authority as his parents do.

As Nic grows up, David recognizes that Nic is still clinging to some tokens of his childhood—but he is also approaching teenagerhood. He wears grungy flannel and styles his hair like Kurt Cobain. Nic gradually begins succumbing to peer pressure, but he continues to do well in school. In a report card, a teacher writes, "I wonder at the gifts he will undoubtedly bring to the world."

David reinforces once more that even as Nic slips away from his innocence, others recognize his promising future. This only makes Nic's imminent drug use and addiction even more heartbreaking, as he ruins the potential that was so evident in his childhood.

CHAPTER 3

Karen has a small cabin in the diverse and friendly town of Inverness, about an hour north of their home. Nic and David enjoy the water, and Nic quickly picks up surfing. He and David love spending time together when the swell is up. David and Karen decide to build a house and painting studio in the Inverness hillside, moving in before Nic begins sixth grade at a new school.

The decision to move to Inverness is another that David eventually questions, wondering whether it contributed to Nic's drug use (though he eventually concludes that Nic likely could have found drugs anywhere). It serves as another illustration of how difficult parenting is—it's simply impossible to foresee every potential danger to children.


After Nic's first day at school, he relays that he likes it. He says that the teachers seem nice and that he made a friend who remembered him from when he visited the school. Each day, Nic gains more confidence and friends; he starts talking to a girl named Skye on the phone at night. Karen and David attend the school's art shows and plays, in which Nic often participates.

David initially presents the many positive attributes of Nic's new school, and how Nic succeeds quickly there. Having a rosy perception of the school will likely make it more difficult for David to determine future incidents that are flukes versus things he needs to be concerned about.

Every Wednesday, Nic, Karen, and David go to Karen's parents' house for dinner. Nancy and Don live within driving distance of all three of their children, and they are a very close family. Don is a retired doctor who now evaluates the effectiveness of new medicines, and Nancy works every day in the garden. At these dinners, Nancy often reports news of children's deaths in the area, mostly as cautionary tales.

Nancy's reporting on the terrible incidents happening to children around the area illustrates the terrifying nature of parenthood. It supports the idea that it is impossible to control children's lives all of the time—sometimes, difficult and terrible things happen regardless of how protective parents are.

At one of these dinners in October 1993—when Nic is 11 and Karen is seven months pregnant—Nancy tells the story of a 12-year-old girl named Polly Klaas who was abducted from her bedroom in a town a half hour from Inverness. The police arrest a man soon after, and he leads the police to her body. Nic's friends become obsessed with the murder. David worries about the effect that this has on them, but there is no way to tune out these horrific stories.

Polly Klaas's death provides a specific example of one of the terrible incidents that Nancy speaks of—again reinforcing the idea that sometimes bad things happen to children, even with loving parents and in safe neighborhoods. While addiction is not necessarily the same situation, there is still an aspect of randomness to addiction that is difficult for David to understand.


Jasper is born in early December. Nic seems to like playing with him, but David knows that it is complicated for him, wondering where Nic fits into the new family. Still, not much changes afterward. David and Nic surf and play guitars together. On New Year's Eve of 1993, they go to a Nirvana concert for an unforgettable evening. But three months later, Nic comes home distressed, announcing that Kurt Cobain shot himself in the head.

David again illustrates some of the difficulties in controlling what kind of news and situations that children come across. He and Nic love and bond over Nirvana, but the reality of Kurt Cobain's suicide hits Nic hard. David also references many other artists, musicians, and writers to whom Nic looks up, many of whom were addicts or were depressed, which creates a dangerous set of role models.

After summer, Nic begins seventh grade, and David worries about the new perils of being a teenager that Nic is experiencing. In 1940, top disciplinary items for public school teachers included talking out of turn, chewing gum, running in the halls, and dress code violations. Now, they are drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, and robbery. When Nic enters seventh grade, he finds a new advantage of a baby in the family: the girls in his grade love coming over to play with Jasper. Nic also starts spending free time with a group of boys with buzzed hair and skateboards. They talk about music and girls.

David considers how much more dangerous middle and high school have become generally, providing support for the idea that no one might be responsible for Nic's addiction—it is simply more probable now than it has been in the past for children to be affected by life-altering issues. While Nic does choose to hang out with boys who are not a good influence on him, their presence springs from a gradual, widespread worsening of problems in schools.

One day, in early May, David picks Nic up after school and smells smoke on his clothes. Nic says that he was hanging out with kids who were smoking and admits that he had a few puffs. David lectures him, and Nic promises not to do it again. The next Friday, Nic and a friend are playing football at their house before a sleepover. David is packing a bag for Nic and looks for a sweater in Nic's backpack. Instead, he finds a small bag of marijuana.

This passage marks Nic's first incidents with drugs, and it begins the slow crisis of control for David. Given Nic's reputation as a gifted kid who mostly stays out of trouble, the realization that Nic is smoking cigarettes and marijuana is likely a shock to David's innocent perception of his son.

CHAPTER 4

When David was young, he moved from Massachusetts to Phoenix, Arizona. He often reminisces that the world during his childhood was far more innocent and safer than the world is now—though he acknowledges that that wasn't entirely true. The proximity to Mexico meant that drugs were "abundant and cheap." Marijuana was prevalent: David smoked his first joint as a high school freshman. Pot, he admits, was what initiated him into his teenage social circle. David continued smoking, as he felt that it helped him assuage his awkwardness and insecurity.

David's own drug use provides some nuance to his understanding of responsibility and blame, as he tried drugs just like Nic is beginning to experiment. Yet the fact that Nic becomes addicted to drugs, while David does not, indicates some greater, more random factor. While some people might believe that drug addiction is a product of will, some people simply have a greater predisposition for addiction.

David acknowledges that drugs were different as he was growing up: there is twice as much THC (the active ingredient) in marijuana in 2008 than there was in marijuana a decade ago, which was already more potent than the pot of previous generations. Additionally, psychedelics and ecstasy are often laced with meth or other drugs. And unlike when David was growing up, a body of research now shows the range of dangerous physical and psychological effects of drugs, including marijuana. Thus, David talks to Nic about drugs from the time he is seven or eight.

David cites concrete research which provides evidence on why addiction might be more prevalent now than it has been in the past. Drugs are more addictive now than they were in the past, and they can often be laced with much more harmful substances. Without understanding what a person is ingesting, therefore, it is easier for someone to become addicted to something quite dangerous.

When David was growing up, his parents warned him about drugs, but because they were "teetotalers," he didn't believe their warnings. David knows about drugs from firsthand experience and thought that he would have some credibility. He acknowledges, however, that many drug counselors tell parents to lie about their drug use. This is because kids see that their parents turned out all right in spite of the drugs and in spite of their warnings. David realizes that perhaps he should have lied to Nic about his drug use, but he didn't. He thought that their close relationship meant that if Nic were trying drugs, he would tell David.

This is yet another decision about which David questions himself. He wonders whether lying to Nic about his previous drug history would have been better than being honest with him—if telling him about his drug history glorified it in some way. This adds to his sense of blame and responsibility for what happens to Nic—he wonders whether making another decision would have helped guide Nic toward better decisions.

David is therefore shocked to discover the marijuana in Nic's backpack. He confronts Nic and his friend with the joint. Nic explains, embarrassed and ashamed, that it's the first time they bought the drug, and they'd tried it one other time. David wonders whether he can trust what Nic is saying; he and Karen decide to ground Nic for at least two weeks. David explains that he doesn't want to overreact, but he also doesn't want to underreact—he wants to show how seriously he takes the breach of their relationship. David also wants to limit Nic's time with his new friends, even though he knows he can't control who his son hangs out with.

As David discovers Nic's infraction, he again debates how, exactly, to handle it. He implicitly understands that he cannot control Nic's behavior—he can only control how he reacts to what Nic has done in order to guide him to make better choices. Yet as Nic's choices get worse and worse, David struggles even more over the idea that he has no control over his son's friends and actions.

David asks Nic why he tried pot: he knows that not long ago, the idea of smoking anything repulsed him. Nic says he was curious about pot, but that he didn't like it. Nic promises never to try it again. David asks about other drugs and alcohol. Nic is adamant that he hasn't tried other drugs, but that once, on a ski trip, he and a friend tried just a bit of all the liquor in the house's cabinet. They wanted to see what it was like to get "good and drunk." David remembers waking up in the morning to find them throwing up, thinking that it was the flu. Nic says that he hasn't touched alcohol since because it makes him sick to think about. Nic adds one more thought: that it's hard to say no when everybody else drinks and smokes.

Nic's deception is another turning point his relationship with David, and makes it even more difficult for David to understand how best to proceed with his son. So much of David's treatment of Nic is predicated on the inherent trust he has with Nic. But the more deceptions that are uncovered, the more that David recognizes that his son is out of control. The uncovered incident with the alcohol is another warning sign that Nic is lured by drugs and the social cache that comes with them, even when he knows using them is harmful.

David calls Nic's teacher at school to tell him what happened. The teacher explains that Nic does well in school and is a leader, but he notes that Nic is being pulled by the kids that are seen as "cool." He tells David not to worry, that most students try pot—even as young as Nic is, at 12. He suggests that David and Karen talk to Nic about it but counsels against forbidding friends, as it makes the friends more attractive. The teacher says that "steering them works better than forcing them."

Nic's teacher also begins to voice the idea that David cannot control the actions of his son—he can only try to "steer" Nic in a positive direction. In trying to explicitly control what Nic is doing, David is likely pushing him further toward drugs rather than away from them. It is also notable (here and in future chapters) how nonchalant many of Nic's teachers and advisors are about his drug use. Even though many children do try drugs, David ultimately suggests that it's important to intervene and educate early, because it's impossible to predict who might become addicted.


David warns Nic again about pot. He notes that almost everyone he knows who smoked pot in high school tried other drugs—and everyone he knew who used hard drugs started with pot. David starts to worry about all of his past decisions—their move out of San Francisco, the divorce. He also blames his hypocrisy in telling Nic not to use drugs when he used them. Nic listens intently, but David is unsure whether he is taking it in. Three weeks later, David decides that Nic is no longer grounded, hoping that the incident has taught Nic a useful lesson.

As episodes of Nic's drug use add up, David starts to wonder what the cause of this might be. He can't help but look at himself for blame, wondering whether actions that he took or did not take might have contributed to Nic's decision to use drugs. Yet, on some level, David also realizes that there are many factors that lead to someone becoming an addict.

Nic soon starts eighth grade, and things seem better to David. On one weekend when Nic is 13, the two of them go out for evening surfing when the swell is up. The surfing is the best it's ever been, and they surf well past sunset. Fog obscures their view, and David realizes that they are on opposite sides of a current, pushing away from each other. David paddles blindly for a half hour, frantically searching for Nic through the fog. Finally, he sees Nic through the fog, "tall and magnificent" and surfing beautifully. When Nic sees David, he smiles and waves.

This episode encapsulates the often-terrifying nature of parenting. In this incident, David thinks that Nic is in danger, so he rushes to his side in an effort to protect him—only to find that Nic is perfectly fine on his own. When it comes to addiction and drugs, however, the opposite proves true for Nic—thus making it difficult for David to recognize when his son needs a firmer hand in the choices he makes and when Nic does not need his father's help.

On the way home, Nic and David stop at a taqueria. Nic talks excitedly about his new high school. After he spent a day visiting the school, he relayed that everyone seemed so passionate, and that the teachers were really engaged. He says that "everything seems pretty great." Middle school graduation soon arrives, and David is moved by the ceremony, observing that the students are children testing the waters of adulthood. The students cheer wildly for one another when they are called up.

Each milestone in Nic's life up to this point continues to hold the promise of what Nic is likely to achieve in the future. Nic even explicitly acknowledges his excitement in the opportunities he will have in high school. Given what readers know about Nic's future drug addiction, however, it seems that he'll ruin many of these opportunities for a good life as he increasingly resorts to drugs and alcohol.

After Nic's graduation, he is soon to leave for another summer in Los Angeles. He arranges with Vicki, however, to wait until Karen's new baby is born. Marguerite (whom they call Daisy) is born on June 7. Nic helps give Daisy her first bath. He tells Nancy, "I never thought I would have a family like this." The next day, Nic and Jasper play in the grass as Karen and Daisy watch. David is struck by the fact that parenthood comes with a great deal of joy but also anxiety over how vulnerable children can be. He wishes that his children could always be nearby, happy, and safe.

This moment, in which David's children safe and happy together, gets at the heart of David's struggle in parenting Nic. He is desperate to make sure that his children can remain this way—as all parents would. But as Nic grows up and makes increasingly dangerous choices, David will be forced to let go of Nic to a certain extent. This passage also emphasizes the reality that David cannot funnel all of his energy into protecting Nic—as a husband and a father of three, he must also consider Karen, Daisy, and Jasper's needs.

CHAPTER 5

It is the morning Nic is set to leave for Los Angeles. He says meaningful goodbyes to Jasper and Karen, and says "everything" to David at the airport. David acknowledges how much he hates joint custody: children are divided between two homes with different sets of expectations and values that can contradict one another.

As Nic leaves for Los Angeles, David experiences some of the pain inherent in parenting: of letting go. He has to do so with Nic much earlier than most parents, due to his and Vicki's divorce, and this is one of the reasons that David wants to keep a firmer grasp on Nic than he might have otherwise.

The week after Nic leaves, David interviews child psychologist Judith Wallerstein, who investigated the effects of divorce on children. In a series of books, she interviewed children whose parents divorced in the early 1970s, and she followed up with them for the next 25 years. Her findings showed that more than one third of these children experienced moderate to severe depression, and a significant number were "troubled and underachieving." She explains to David that going back and forth gave them a sense of impermanence. Children found it difficult to find stable friendships with other children, and teenagers complained about having to spend summers with parents instead of friends. She writes that it's difficult for children to keep up these "parallel lives."

The statistics that David learns from this interview bolster his belief that much of Nic's problems have been caused by his and Vicki's divorce and the "parallel lives" that Nic must juggle as a result. David is constantly looking for something to blame for Nic's increased drug use, and he views Wallerstein's findings as an explanation for this. Yet his mistake is that he is looking for something to blame in the past, rather than trying to help Nic take responsibility for what is happening to him in the present.

When summer is over, Nic returns to Inverness. The day before Nic's freshman orientation, the family spends one more day at the beach. Nic and David surf together. Nic and Jasper build a sandcastle together, and Jasper asks Nic what LA is like. Nic says that he stays in a town on the edge of LA that is not unlike Inverness—but he missed Jasper. Jasper asks if Vicki can come and live in their house in Inverness so that they can all stay together.

Jasper's interaction with Nic here foreshadows the way in which Nic's problems quickly become family problems. Here, Nic's difficulty dealing with the divorce and going back and forth from LA is also difficult for Jasper. But later, the same thing occurs with Nic's addiction, as his disease puts a great deal of pressure and sorrow on the rest of his family.


On the way home from the beach, Nic complains about the back and forth between his parents. Nic would never choose between David and Vicki, but his current situation is also not ideal. David concludes that the divorce has made Nic more responsible and sensitive than he might have been otherwise, but the toll has been great as well. David thinks in hindsight that Nic should not have been forced to do the traveling: David and Vicki should have.

David once again emphasizes how he blames himself for the divorce and the subsequent difficulties that the situation placed on Nic. Yet it is important to recognize that David was doing what he thought was best given the circumstances. There is no use dwelling on the past—instead, it's better to focus on what can change and to take responsibility in the present.

CHAPTER 6

Nic's private high school is more akin to a college—in addition to the basics of math, science, and language, it has courses in journalism, justice, religion, and politics. The teachers are devoted, and Nic quickly becomes engaged. Within the first month, he is playing on the freshman basketball team and has a role in the school play. He also gains new friends, who seem to David like good kids.

At each new juncture of Nic's life, he quickly becomes engaged and excels. In this way, David continues to highlight the success that Nic might have found if he had not fallen victim to addiction.

The school year goes by quickly. Nic makes time for Daisy and Jasper between his work, sports, and plays. His report cards are glowing. Then, on an afternoon in May, the freshman dean calls to tell David that he and Karen must come in for a meeting, to discuss Nic's suspension for buying marijuana on campus—which Nic hadn't told them about.

This is another warning sign for David about both Nic's continued drug use and his continued deceit. The fact that David did not know about Nic's suspension only highlights his feelings of losing control of Nic's choices.

David starts to rationalize Nic's behavior, saying that he is simply experimenting. Nic is not a "typical druggie." David thinks back to his own drug use: he and friends would get stoned and hang out in the street, listening to music. Brian Jones, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Jim Morrison all died from overdoses, but these tragedies did not slow David and his friends down. They believed the stars' deaths did not apply to them, and they felt that the public service announcements and warnings were simply ways that parents sought to control their children. One night in high school, David tried LSD, tripping as he watched a movie with his parents.

David's thoughts here illustrate how even he viewed his own parents as trying to exercise too much control over him. This causes him to be lenient and to rationalize Nic's behavior—something for which he eventually blames himself when Nic's drug use escalates past experimentation. Additionally, David's belief that Nic is not a "typical druggie" illustrates that even he buys into the stereotype of what a "typical" drug user looks like. Ultimately, however, David realizes that anyone can fall victim to addiction.

David and Karen meet with the dean and a school counselor. They say that the boy who sold Nic the pot has been expelled, but Nic will get a second chance—he will be on probation. The dean also says that Nic must attend an afternoon of drug and alcohol counseling. The counselor says that they want to help Nic make better choices, and they view this as an opportunity to learn from a mistake. David and Karen think that this is reasonable.

This is one of the first instances of the way in which support from outsiders makes a large difference in Nic's battle. If the teachers had simply written him off, he might have slid more easily into addiction. With the help of the school, however, Nice seems to be getting back on track—for the time being.

The dean also suggests an advisor for Nic named Don, one of the school's science teachers. Don also loves surfing, and he is very passionate about his students. He is the school's swimming and water polo coach. Nic is very excited about Don—the two of them even go surfing together. In the fall, when Nic returns to school, he joins the swim team on Don's suggestion and then also joins the water polo team after the swim season is over.

Don is a key figure during Nic's high school experience, and he's an early example of how support can be critical in setting people on a better path. Getting involved in the swim and water polo teams gives Nic a positive activity to get involved in, which prevents him from spending time with potentially corruptive friends.

Don also encourages Nic's interest in marine biology. At the end of Nic's sophomore year, he applies for and is accepted into a marine biology program at the University of California at San Diego. When Nic calls from the program, he is very excited—even saying that he may want to be a marine biologist. When the program is over, he joins Vicki in LA.

Don again proves his impact as a role model for Nic by setting him up for success over the summer. Don's encouragement affirms Nic's activities and motivates him to do well in the program.

Nic's junior year is his strongest in school yet: he is engaged in politics, the environment, and social issues. He loves his classes, especially writing, and he writes a column for the school newspaper. Encouraged by his journalism teacher, Nic submits his writing to the Earnest Hemingway Writing Award for high school journalists and wins first place. Nic continues to write, submitting a column to the "My Turn" section of *Newsweek*—an indictment of long-distance joint custody.

Nic's promise is on display yet again. This also illustrates that even when he missteps (like buying marijuana), he always retains the ability to set himself on a better path and succeed once more. This underlying optimism and perseverance becomes crucial as he wrestles with drug addiction over the next decade.

Nic's taste in books and movies evolves. His favorites are "an assortment of misanthropes, addicts, drunks, depressives, and suicides": Burroughs, Kerouac, Kafka, Capote, Miller, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald. During Nic's spring break, David and Nic set off on a tour of colleges in the Midwest and on the East Coast.

The fact that Nic might look up to those with substance abuse problems is another source of blame for David, as he worries that this glorified drug use rather than warning against it.

Nic has an aptitude for French, and he decides to attend a summer program in Paris to study the language at the American University there. When he calls from France, he says that he's having a great time—even landing a part in a student film. But when he returns home, David notices that he looks "terrible," with shaggy and unkempt hair and circles under his eyes. When he asks what's wrong, Nic simply says that he is fine, flaring up when David questions him further.

Yet again, despite the fact that Nic is excelling in school, his choices can return him to the path to ruin. Visibly unkempt when returning from Paris, readers can infer that that Nic may have been doing drugs while he was there. The fact that drugs are so consistently alluring for Nic hints at the fact that his addiction will be a lifelong condition.

Within days, Nic complains about stomach pain, and David makes an appointment with his doctor. The examination takes an hour. When David meets with the doctor, he can sense that the doctor has more to say, but the doctor simply tells him that Nic has an ulcer. David is shocked, wondering how Nic could have an ulcer at 17.

Again, although Nic claims to be fine, it's an enormous red flag that he has a mysterious ulcer at the age of 17. Readers can infer that this ailment is likely the result of Nic drinking heavily while he was in Paris. This early indication of Nic's substance abuse problem illustrates just how quickly he is succumbing to addiction. It also highlights David's lack of control over Nic, in being both unable to prevent Nic from damaging his body and unable to even discern exactly what he is doing to himself.

CHAPTER 7

After high school, David attended the University of Arizona in Tucson. His roommate, Charles, was from Manhattan. Charles was wealthy, and both of his parents had died—possibly from drugs and alcohol or from suicide. Charles was impressive in his "worldliness," telling stories about high school hijinks and sexual exploits. He also drank and used drugs abundantly. David would often join in those escapades, variously consuming mushrooms, psychedelics, marijuana, Quaaludes, whiskey, cocaine, and "random uppers and downers."

Relaying the full extent of David's drug use in college adds nuance to David's response to Nic's drug use. Through his friendship with Charles, David has seen firsthand the toll that addiction can take on others at an early age. And so in talking to Nic about drugs, David does have a degree of authority, and yet he blames himself for perhaps unintentionally glorifying drug use.

David recalls several drug-fueled incidents with Charles: tripping in the desert in Tucson; setting out to watch the sunrise over the ocean in San Diego (only to realize, hours after it had risen, that they were facing the wrong way); skydiving while high and narrowly avoiding disaster when David's parachute didn't open (though, thankfully, his reserve chute did). David relays that such stories about intoxicated exploits are dangerous, because they highlight adventure and escape while omitting the trauma and casualties.

Here, David illustrates how drugs can be harmful even if a person does not become addicted to them. In this incident, David nearly dies from taking drugs because it leads him to an unsafe skydiving experience. Thankfully, he lives to tell the tale, but he notes that so many people do not. This is why drug stories are often misleading: only those who survive can speak about the "adventures" they had.

One night, after Charles returned from a two-day high, David became worried after he had been in the bathroom for a long time. David broke into the bathroom to find that Charles had fainted and cracked his skull on the floor. Later in the year, David visited the University of California at Berkeley and decided to transfer. He wanted to focus more on studies, but drugs were "plentiful" there too. He kept in touch with Charles, whose drinking and drug use continued to escalate.

Again, David emphasizes the disastrous consequences that drugs can have, noting that Charles almost died from his drug use. David, on the other hand, recognizes those potentially disastrous consequences and works to remove himself from the situation and get on the right track—providing an early duality between those who choose to give up drugs and those who do not.

After Nic's summer in France, he begins his senior year in high school. Don has accepted a position at a different school, and so Nic quits the swimming and water polo teams, as well as the newspaper. He maintains good grades, but he cuts classes and comes home late. David and Karen grow more concerned, and the school counselor suggests they keep talking it out with him. Nic continues to hang out with boys who are stoners, but he maintains that he's only using marijuana, an only occasionally. David's advice and frustration go unheeded. Nic accuses David of being hypocritical, pointing out that David smoked a lot of pot. David tells Nic that he wishes he hadn't.

Nic's downward trajectory after Don leaves the school illustrates just how important his support was to keeping Nic afloat. Now, Nic is once again on a path to self-ruin by cutting classes, quitting activities that had been important to him, and hanging out with kids who are a bad influence. These are all choices that Nic himself makes, yet David highlights his own responsibility in Nic's life and frets over losing control of Nic's behavior.

In the late spring, Nic graduates from high school. During the summer, his behavior grows more erratic and moodier. David doesn't know what else to do other than warn Nic, enforce curfews, deny him the car, and take him to a therapist. At one Wednesday night dinner with Nancy and Don, Nic rants incoherently at Nancy about the archaic nature of monogamy and how Dr. Seuss is a "genius." The next morning, David realizes that Nic must have been high, though Nic denies it.

David recounts how Nic is more and more pushing the boundaries with his drug use—even getting high before a dinner with Karen's parents. Nic's decline, and his evaporating sense of what is acceptable, mirror David's escalating sense that he does not have any control over his son.


David doesn't know what to do: Nic's therapist advises that forbidding drugs will simply force Nic to hide his drug use further. Some friends say to kick Nic out, and others tell David to never let Nic out of his sight. David can't fathom how he could do either one.

This passage encapsulates one of the ideas that makes David's decision so difficult: the most he can do is give Nic ultimatums that he can no longer stay in his home. Yet David is still struggling to find the balance between leniency and harshness that will set Nic on the right path.

One weekend, just before Nic's eighteenth birthday in July, Nic steals the car, cash, food, and a case of wine. He doesn't call for two days, and David is panicked. Nic's therapist says that he is simply "exercising his independence" and is trying to rebel; his rebellion is extreme because David gave him little to rebel against. David thinks that he has been too lenient with Nic, but he also wonders about other kids who had stricter or more lenient parents.

This incident illustrates how Nic's need to "exercise independence," and his use of that independence to satisfy his drug addiction, still have profound effects on the rest of his family. Not only is he stealing from them, but he is also causing deep emotional pain in his father. This proves how even though Nic's addiction primarily harms himself, it also affects the rest of his family

When Nic finally calls from Death Valley, David demands that he return home. He does so, and David grounds him. Nic shouts that David is always trying to control him, and repeating "fuck you" before storming off to his bedroom. David takes Nic to therapy, but Nic simply lashes out. David realizes, again, that Nic must have been high during the appointment. At a follow-up session, Nic is more civil and apologizes, promising that he will work hard in school and that he won't blow the opportunity.

Here, Nic acknowledges that David always seems to be trying to control him. This desire for control is natural for a parent who feels their child slipping away, but it becomes worse just as Nic is trying to gain more independence as an adult.

David doesn't know how to make sense of Nic's behavior, saying that it's difficult to figure out what is happening when changes take place gradually. Two weeks later, Karen and the kids are planning to go to the beach. As they pack the car, two police officers pull up and get out of their cars. They head for Nic, handcuffing his wrists and putting him into a squad car before driving away. Jasper starts to wail inconsolably.

This is a turning point for David's understanding of the harm that Nic can do in his life, as his foray into drugs has seemingly escalated beyond the point of simply missing classes in school—presumably, it's what leads to his arrest here. David is once again flabbergasted by Nic's actions, and he also observes the toll on Jasper.

CHAPTER 8

The arrest is a result of Nic's failure to appear in court after being cited for marijuana possession. David bails him out, assuring himself that this is the only time he will bail Nic out and hoping that the arrest will teach him a lesson. Afterward, Nic is moody, but he gets a job as a barista and dotes on Jasper and Daisy. As they play together, David is baffled at how Nic is acting as if nothing is wrong.

As conditions grow worse and worse for Nic, David starts to distinguish between supporting and enabling him. While he bails Nic out of jail here, he states later in the book that he would not bail a drug addict out of jail unless the person immediately went into rehab. Thus, it is important to aid people in getting help but not to enable them.

That fall, Nic decides to attend Berkeley. Jasper, Daisy, Karen, and David all drive with Nic to drop him off. A few days later, Nic seems engaged by his courses, but he complains about his classes in subsequent **phone** calls. Gradually, he stops returning David's calls. David suggests that Nic meet with the school counselors or his therapist. A week later, Nic's roommates call David because they are worried that Nic hasn't shown up for a few days. David is distraught.

Now that Nic is no longer under David's direct supervision, David's desire for control and his distress at not knowing what is happening to his son escalate severely. He has yet to fully accept that Nic, as an adult, is free to make his own choices. David can only control how he himself responds to the situation—but at the moment, his lack of control over Nic only makes him sick with worry.

Two days later, Nic calls, admitting that college just isn't working. David suspects drugs, but Nic says that he's simply been feeling depressed and that he wasn't ready for college. This makes sense to David, as there is evidence that children use drugs to self-medicate for mental health disorders. Many symptoms of those disorders appear identical to the symptoms of drug abuse. David's research on teenagers and drug abuse illustrates that teenagers' brains are particularly malleable, and that drug use can have deep, problematic effects on brain chemistry.

David continues his quest to educate reader on drug abuse and how addiction can be particularly difficult to overcome as a teenager because the disease can have a major effect on brain chemistry. This, in turn, can make addicts more likely to use drugs. This serves as another support for the disease model of addiction, which holds that addiction has a deep biological basis.

When Nic says he may be depressed, David is eager to believe that drugs are the symptom rather than the cause of Nic's problems. Nic moves home and decides to apply to another college, Hampshire College in Western Massachusetts, because he wants a smaller college experience. In the meantime, he will go to therapy, honor curfews, help around the house, and work. Nic agrees, and a few months later he is accepted to Hampshire College.

At this point, David still somewhat subscribes to the stigma surrounding addiction: he is more willing to believe that Nic is simply depressed, and is using drugs to treat that depression, than to believe that he is addicted to drugs. Still, despite Nic's missteps, David also believes that Nic can set himself back on the right path and return to college next fall.

One night, David goes to bed early and wakes with a start in the middle of the night. Sensing that something is wrong, he knocks on Nic's door and discovers that he is not there. David relays that he is becoming used to constantly feeling angry and worried. By three in the morning, Nic is still not home. By seven, David starts calling Nic's friends and his therapist, but no one has seen him. Every time the **phone** rings, David gets anxious with grisly thoughts. He starts calling jails and hospitals. When Jasper and Daisy wake, they sense that something is wrong, and when David tells them that he doesn't know where Nic is, they start to cry.

David's feelings in this period when Nic is home are the beginnings of a cycle that he will experience many times: the cautious hope that Nic can get better, the worry upon realizing that he might have faltered, and the despair in being unable to control him. This cycle repeats over and over throughout the remainder of the book, emphasizing the difficulty of living with addiction and the fact that it is a lifelong disease.

Four days later, Nic finally calls, saying that he's in trouble. David drives to meet Nic, who is in an alleyway behind a bookstore. Nic is "bruised, sallow, skin and bone." In the car, David insists that Nic must go to rehab, and Nic agrees. He spends the next three days feverish and rambling, curled up in bed. The morning of the appointment at the rehab center, however, Nic refuses to go, insisting that he doesn't need rehab. He says that he learned how dangerous meth is and will never use it again. David is horrified that Nic has used meth, as David had his own experience with the drug.

Over the course of the book, Nic will frequently insist that he doesn't need rehab in order to get well because he can do it alone. In this way, Nic is a barrier to his own recovery as he denies the support he desperately needs. Additionally, this is another turning point in David's understanding of Nic's addiction. Nic has escalated quickly from smoking pot to using meth, and David is desperate to stop the decline that he understands meth can bring.

CHAPTER 9

During David's first summer at Berkeley, Charles moved up from Tucson and enrolled in summer school. One evening, he brought home crystal meth, and David snorted the lines through a dollar bill. The body quickly absorbs meth, which triggers 10 to 20 times the normal level of dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine in the brain. This renders the user euphoric. Meth remains active for 10 to 12 hours, but afterward users feel "bleak, depleted and agitated." David never touched meth again. He lost touch with Charles but eventually learned that his life was defined by drug abuse; Charles died on the eve of his fortieth birthday from liver and kidney failure.

David's personal experience with meth, as well as his friend's death, provide more detail on why meth addiction can be so difficult to overcome and how harmful the drug is. The high is so powerful that for many, trying to return to that state overwhelms any other desire, despite the negative aftereffects. But as with Charles, this creates a cycle that can leave a person's health and life in shambles. Charles's death serves as a warning for David of the path that Nic might follow if he does not try to find recovery and redemption.

Knowing that Nic has used meth, David tries to learn more about it. A German chemist first synthesized amphetamine in 1887; a Japanese pharmacologist then synthesized methamphetamine in 1919, which was more potent and easier to make. Meth was widely used in World War II to increase U.S. soldiers' endurance and performance. In 1941, milder forms of meth were sold over the counter, marketed as a medication that would increase energy and liveliness. But many people hallucinated and became violent while taking the drug.

David's research illustrates how meth became such a problem in the United States. At first, it was treated not as a harmful and addictive drug, but rather as a treatment for a variety of ailments. Yet the irony lies in the fact that the government does not treat the problem as an addiction of its own making, but rather a failing of the people who were exposed to the drugs.

In 1951, the Food and Drug Administration classified meth as a controlled substance, requiring a prescription. Illegal meth labs soon emerged in San Francisco, and a national epidemic of the drug began in the middle 1960s. Use of meth has fluctuated over time, but many experts say that the drug is now strong and more widely circulated than ever, creeping across the country from the West Coast to the East Coast. Former D.E.A. chief Asa Hutchinson called meth America's foremost drug problem.

The statistics that David cites here illustrate just how ubiquitous the problem is, and how drugs are more addictive and harmful than they have ever been. The widespread nature of meth makes it increasingly difficult to control and curtail, and the greater availability and potency of the drug makes it easier for people like Nic to become addicted to it.

Meth users include men and women of every class, race, and background. The World Health Organization estimates 35 million meth users, compared to 15 million for cocaine and 7 million for heroin. The most pervasive form is crystal, which can be manufactured with ingredients from nonprescription cold pills. Thus, drug stores limited the amounts of these pills that can be purchased at one time. This has led many small toxic labs to shut down but has instead encouraged business from international drug cartels.

David's research also allows him to try and dispel some of the stigmas and stereotypes surrounding addiction. The fact that there are so many drug addicts, and that they come from any and every background, further emphasizes how addiction (like most other diseases) can befall anyone. Additionally, it cannot necessarily be blamed on any one factor, like socioeconomic status or whether a person's parents were divorced.


Reporter Steve Suo holds that the government could contain the meth epidemic but is often prohibited by pharmaceutical companies, which do not want the distribution of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine to be controlled. As a result, meth users can find the drug virtually anywhere, and meth use is increasing.

David also introduces the idea that the way the government is currently handling addiction doesn't benefit the people who are addicted. The pharmaceutical companies have too much sway over its policies, and therefore the problem is often treated not like a disease, but rather as a crime.

As many as half of all meth users "tweak," an experience characterized by auditory and visual hallucinations, paranoia, and delusions. This can lead to aggression and violence, and many incidents have been reported of people killing their neighbors, spouses, and children while tweaking.

These tragedies of violence and murder provide additional examples of how addiction can lead to ruin not only for addicts, but also for those around them. Fortunately, Nic is never as violent as this, but David frequently worries about what Nic might be capable of on drugs.

In addition to crime, meth causes significant environmental damage, as one pound of meth creates six pounds of corrosive liquids, vapors, and metals. The health effects of meth are incredibly serious, as drug overdoses from meth land more people in emergency rooms than any other club drug combined. Meth also contributes to fatal accidents and suicides and can lead to ruptured aortas and lung problems. Many meth addicts lose their teeth, and chronic meth use can cause "Parkinson's-like cognitive dysfunction" from meth-induced strokes.

David highlights other ways in which addiction—particularly meth addiction—can cause destruction, and provides evidence for the prudence of finding alternative ways to treat addiction. Because meth contributes to costly health problems and accidents, it would be better for the government to try to preempt its problems and make treatments cheaper and more readily available.


David continues asking Nic to go to rehab, but Nic refuses, insisting that he won't use meth again. Because Nic is over 18, David cannot involuntarily commit him. He says that if he had seen this coming, he would have forced Nic into rehab while he still could. For the next three days, Nic sleeps for 20 hours a day, and afterward he is depressed and withdrawn. In the spring Nic disappears again without warning.

Again, David blames himself for what is happening to Nic, realizing how vicious his son's addiction has already become. But there was no way for David to know what was happening to Nic at the time; his tendency to blame himself comes only with hindsight. Additionally, the idea that Nic can stay clean alone is quickly invalidated by his nearly immediate disappearance. This proves the importance of addicts getting necessary support from rehab programs, even if they don't think they need it.

CHAPTER 10

With Nic gone, David once again calls hospital rooms and jails. He is bombarded by more advice, including to kick Nic out. Nic is gone for six days, and David is frantic, spending hours on the internet reading about the effects of drugs on teenagers. He holds it together in front of Jasper and Daisy, but privately he breaks down, weeping uncontrollably in a way that he never has before. Davis is terrified at how lost, helpless, and out of control he feels.

David returns to the cycle of worry and despair that accompanies Nic's relapses. His feelings reinforce the idea that Nic's addiction is harming the family profoundly in addition to Nic himself, and that David's lack of control over Nic's situation is also starting to prove detrimental to David's own health.

David calls Vicki, who shares David's worry. Karen and David go back and forth, each trying to console the other, assuring the other that Nic will come back. A week later, Nic returns to the house—"frail, ill, and rambling—a barely recognizable phantom." David once again implores Nic to go to rehab, but Nic simply collapses on his bed and falls asleep.

The fact that David, Vicki, and Karen all rely on and console one another is yet another indication of the support that people need in dealing with addiction, regardless of whether they are the addict themselves or whether they are trying to care for the addict. Nic's return as a "phantom" also depicts his very real physical deterioration as a result of his drug use.

While Nic sleeps, David searches for a rehab facility. They variously claim 25 to 85 percent success rate for getting sober, but a nurse admits to David that the real number is in the single digits. The more David learns about the rehab industry, the more he recognizes its disorganization. Most are rooted in the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous. Other than that, they are inconsistent and often based solely on the philosophies of a program's director, some of whom have few qualifications. Even rehab programs run by doctors and clinicians aren't much more effective.

David begins his research into the rehab industry here, discovering how ineffective it often is. Later, he explains that this is due to many people's misunderstanding of addiction as a disease. Because of that stigma, people are often jailed rather than treated for addiction. Instead, David proposes, a massive effort should be rallied to help find better treatments and improve rehab centers, thereby giving people a better chance of recovery.

David chooses a highly recommended place in Oakland named Thunder Road. On the day of Nic's appointment, David tells Nic that they are going to rehab. Nic once again refuses, saying that David can't make him go. David gives Nic an ultimatum: if he wants to live in David's house and have David pay for college, and if Nic wants to see the family, he must go. David asks Nic if he wants to die. Nic pounds his fist against the table and kicks the wall, sobbing—but then he follows David to the car.

This is a difficult decision for any parent to make, and it illustrates how little control David feels like he has. The only way to support Nic and to help Nic help himself is to control his own support for Nic. Thus, David tries to ensure that he is not enabling Nic by simply allowing him to continue his drug abuse, but is instead supporting him and leading him to get the help that he needs.

CHAPTER 11

As David drives to the rehab center, Nic tries to talk him out of it. He says that he'll try to run away. He screams, "You fucking think you know me? You don't know anything about me. You have always tried to control me." When Nic's words start to slur, David realizes that he is still high. David starts to think that Nic is like a stranger to him.

Nic and David's interactions here highlight the difficulties of parenting a child who is a drug addict. David does want to control Nic because Nic is not making good choices for himself. Gradually, however, David recognizes that he cannot live Nic's life for him—though he can try to support his son, he must let go to an extent and live his own life.

At the rehab center, Nic meets with a counselor, seething. After an hour, the counselor asks to speak to David. She tells him that Nic could die from the drugs he's using, and that he doesn't understand that he's in trouble. She says it's typical of addicts to be in denial and to think that they can stop whenever they want, even if they wind up in jail or the hospital. The counselor gives David recommendations for other programs, explaining that Nic is too resistant and nearly too old for this program.

The counselor emphasizes the need for addicts to seek support from programs, and from people in their lives, in order to get well. When they are adamant that they do not need others, they are more likely to slip and resume using. Nic has already proven this: without going through a program, the prospects have been bleak for him as he continues to relapse.

David calls more rehab programs and finds one named Ohlhoff Recovery in San Francisco. Nic agrees to go for an evaluation. He has a session with the program director, and then David joins them. The director says that Nic is in denial that he is an addict, and that he's only there because David is forcing him. She says that this is okay, that Nic has as much of a chance of recovery as someone who wants to be treated. The director says that she will check him in in the morning for the 28-day treatment.

Here, David hints at some of the ideas that make recovery from addiction so difficult. Nic doesn't believe that he has a problem, and therefore it is easier for that problem to escalate and worsen. But with the support of the program, David hopes that Nic can lift himself out of the harmful cycle of addiction and put himself on a road to recovery.

The next morning, when David drops Nic off, Nic is terrified and trembling. David hugs him and leaves. David is guilty, thinking that he has betrayed and abandoned Nic, but he is comforted by the fact that he knows where Nic is. At home, David looks through Nic's room and throws away Nic's hidden drug paraphernalia: a glass bong, hand-blown meth pipe, cigarette papers, and empty bottles.

When David drops Nic off at Ohlhoff, he is torn by what he is forcing his son to do. Yet this is a crucial step in David and Nic's gradual realization that finding support from programs and other people is necessary to recovery. David is supporting Nic by helping him get to one of those programs, rather than enabling him to remain at home and continue his drug habit.

David and Karen make an appointment with a local specialist in drug addiction. They explain to him that they worry whether they have made the right choices in getting Nic into rehab and worry about Jasper and Daisy. The doctor is supportive of their decision to get Nic into rehab, but his major advice is to take care of themselves, because addiction can destroy families. The therapist also suggests that they go to Al-Anon meetings.

David illustrates how he and Karen need support from others, too—not only from each other, but from someone who can help them understand Nic's addiction. The specialist's advice, to take care of themselves, also foreshadows David's eventual crisis. Because he spends so much time worrying about his son and his lack of control over Nic's situation, David jeopardizes many other aspects of his life.

On Nic's third day at Ohlhoff, he calls, begging to come home. David refuses. The counselor from Ohlhoff reports that Nic is depressed and confrontational but explains that this is normal. David worries that Nic might run away from the program. When he sees the specialist again, the doctor emphasizes that the most difficult thing about having a child addicted to drugs is that parents cannot control it. He says, "You can support his recovery, but you can't do it for him." He also introduces David to Al-Anon's "Three C's": he didn't *cause* it, he can't *control* it, and he can't *cure* it.

David is determined to be supportive of Nic's recovery, but he recognizes that allowing Nic to come home would simply enable him to return to his old habits. Additionally, the Three C's of Al-Anon represent the crux of what David wrestles with throughout Nic's addiction. He worries constantly whether he might have caused Nic's addiction and blames himself. David also continues for years to try to control Nic's choices, as the specialist recognizes here.

A person whom David interviews for work is a recovering drug addict. When David tells him that his own son is in rehab, the man says, "he's in God's hands." David is startled, saying that he never believed in God, but that he wishes he did. The man assures him that he will come to believe in God before this ordeal is over.

The religious aspect of the 12-step program is something that Nic wrestles with himself later in the book. But David comes to understand that the belief that God (or some higher power) is the only one that can determine Nic's fate—and that David himself cannot—is crucial for his own peace of mind.

David calls the counselor at Ohlhoff again. She says that it has been difficult for Nic, as meth is a particularly tricky addiction to treat. David frequently hears that meth is worse than other drugs. It depletes the brain's dopamine, meaning that recreating the initial high is often impossible. This impels users to take more of the drug, causing more brain damage, which increases the need to use in a cycle.

David provides more information on why meth is particularly addictive, illustrating how it changes brain chemistry in a way that makes it dependent upon the drug. This illustrates that addiction to meth is not simply a lack of willpower: there are tangible changes in the brain that make it more difficult to abstain from meth in the future.

David meets with Dr. Edythe London at UCLA to find more about the brain on meth. She conducted studies of brain scans, comparing average brains to those with meth users. Meth addicts are often depressed, argumentative, and anxious—and London's studies indicated that these conditions have a biological basis. She concluded that relapsing isn't a failure of morality or willpower—rather, it may be the result of a damaged brain.

Dr. London provides further evidence for the fact that addiction is not simply about personal choice and control. It is a difficult disease to overcome alone because a person's own brain chemistry begins to betray them. This is crucial because understanding that addiction is a disease can change its stigma and hopefully change the way that governments and individuals treat the problem.

After a month of abstinence, the depressive symptoms and pain following meth withdrawal are less severe but far from normal. This is why most programs do not succeed, because they only last several days or a week. London tells David that the images also suggest cognitive impairments to various areas of the brain, including those related to decision-making.

London provides even more evidence for the biological basis of addiction: decision-making skills are particularly impaired even after withdrawal, making it difficult for people to make good choices in both the short term and the long term. The study also proves why the disease is thought of as incurable, as meth makes long-lasting impressions on the brain.

David finds another study by Stephen Kish, who studied the brains of those who had died from meth overdose or had a high level of meth in their systems when they died. He found that neurons in the brain are destroyed by meth. Kish also found that the levels of some neurotransmitters were 90 to 95 percent lower than a normal brain. His research did show, however, that the brains of meth addicts can probably recover, as long as addicts stay off the drug.

Kish's study, like London's, illustrates the damage that addiction can do to the brain and why it is so difficult to remain in recovery as a meth addict specifically. Yet even while his research illustrates that addiction can have long-lasting effects, David holds onto the hope that Nic can avoid drugs long enough for his brain to start to recover from them.

Karen and David join Nic for group sessions at Ohlhoff. They hear the stories of other addicts and the family members of those addicts. At the third week's family session, Nic confesses that he would rather work and be independent than return to college. David is surprised: he still doesn't believe that Nic's problems are that bad. Rehab is necessary, he thinks, but he believes that Nic is just postponing college and will go back at some point.

Nic's decision to work and be independent shows how much he has already lost, including the opportunity afforded by college. David's reaction also emphasizes that he is still having a difficult time fully understanding Nic's problems. He is spending more time trying to make sure Nic can follow the path of a normal young adult, rather than trying to help guide Nic toward meaningful recovery.

A week later, Nic says that he realizes he needs more time in rehab, and he asks to move into the program's halfway house. David agrees, and at the end of the 28 days, Nic moves into the halfway house. Three days later, however, Nic has vanished once more.

Nic's disappearance is an immediate repudiation of all of the work he had done over the previous month. His reversal highlights the pernicious nature of addiction: even after doing the work of recovery, one can quickly fall back into the cycle of relapse.

CHAPTER 12

When Nic vanishes from Ohlhoff, David "know[s] the drill." He calls the hospitals and the police, and talks to Jasper and Daisy. He realizes how preoccupied by Nic their lives are becoming. He sometimes snaps at Karen, and she gets particularly exasperated by David's preoccupation. They cry together, unsure of the path forward.

The fact that David "knows the drill" in this situation suggests that he's becoming accustomed to his son's disappearances. This illustrates the extent to which Nic is already trapped in a cycle of relapsing, trying to recover, and relapsing again. Karen and David's reaction, in turn, shows how much they have already been affected by Nic's lifelong disease.

David decides to drive to San Francisco to find Nic, scouring the neighborhoods in which he thinks Nic might be. David even asks some kids on the street if they know Nic. One waifish young woman, who is clearly high on meth, says that Nic sounds like most of the guys she knows. David offers to buy the girl some food, and she agrees. As they eat, she tells David about her life: how she used to be good in school until a boy gave her meth at 14 years old.

David's decision to simply go looking for Nic is another reinforcement of the idea that he is feeling completely helpless and out of control—desperate to have any means of understanding where his son might be or what he might be doing. He then approaches another meth user as a kind of proxy for Nic, trying to understand what Nic might be thinking and feeling through her story.

The girl continues, explaining that even though she knows how awful meth is, if she had the chance to start over, she would do it again. She tells David about her parents, who live in Ohio and who hired a private detective to find her when she ran away. She tried a rehab center but ran away from that as well. The tells David that she uses crystal almost every day. She has been in the emergency room three times and even stabbed a guy once, and she makes money by dealing or prostituting herself. David asks the girl if she misses her parents. She says that she does, and David suggests that she call them, at least to tell them that she is alive.

While this girl's story is more extreme than Nic's, it has the same hallmarks that his does. What was once a life filled with promise has been essentially ruined by drug addiction. While Nic's morals and wellbeing have not yet deteriorated as severely as this girl's, he is on a similar path to make worse and worse decisions. David's counsel to the girl to call her parents is also a kind of wish fulfillment for himself: he knows that Nic will not call him, but he hopes that he can help other parents who are feeling as helpless as he is.


David drives home, thinking that he is probably exactly like the girl's parents. He again is consumed by guilt and self-blame, wondering what he could have done differently. After a few days, he hears from Nic, who is calling from an ex-girlfriend's house. Nic says that he has quit and has been sober for five days, but he is talking fast and obviously lying. David says that Nic has two choices: rehab or the streets. Nic says that rehab isn't necessary, but when David insists, Nic begrudgingly agrees to try again.

By now, David is able to recognize Nic's deceptions more clearly. Rather than allowing Nic to simply come back and continue living the way he has been, David insists that Nic must get help. This is another example of David distinguishing between supporting Nic's recovery and enabling his drug addiction.


David picks Nic up from the girl's house. Nic has a bruise on his cheek and a gash on his forehead. Nic says he was robbed, and that it was no big deal. David is shocked, feeling like the boy in the car is not Nic. On the way home, Nic grows angry, saying that he just wants to go to Paris. David lets him rant and rave. Nic claims that he doesn't need rehab and insists that he is sober. He curses David, and finally he says that he needs drugs to survive.

David recognizes Nic's declining sense of normalcy and morality, as he is desensitized to being attacked and robbed. Nic's anger helps David understand his problem further, as David is better able to see the influence of the drugs on Nic's thought patterns and behavior.

David enrolls Nic in a program at Saint Helena Hospital, located in Napa Valley. David and Vicki's insurance pays most of the cost of the program, which is $20,000. He says he is not sure what they would have done without this coverage. At the hospital, Nic fills out forms and undergoes a physical exam. When Nic returns, he says that it's time for him to go to his room. David and Nic hug and say "everything."

Here, David emphasizes that while addiction may affect a wide variety of individuals, treatment is more accessible for some than others. Nic is fortunate to come from a privileged background that allows him to get treatment, rather than having no support and winding up in jail. This is another implicit call for a reform of how the government treats drug addicts; David argues toward the end of the book that all addicts should be able to receive treatment, regardless of their ability to pay.

The following weekend, David and Karen visit the hospital for family sessions. First, he and Karen attend an educational forum on the disease model of addiction. David is at first confused by this, believing that Nic's addiction is a choice: cancer patients are not responsible for their condition, whereas drug addicts are. The lecturer explains that the predisposition for addiction is actually genetic, and roughly 10 percent of people have it. Drugs and alcohol then activate the disease.

This lecture serves as David's introduction to the disease model of addiction, which argues that addiction is not simply a moral failing or a choice. This is another important step in understanding addiction better, because it reduces the stigma. Although Nic has agency to choose between worsening or healing his disease, the underlying cause is biological.


One man argues with the lecturer, saying that the disease model lets people avoid responsibility, because no one forces addicts to do terrible things. The lecturer agrees that people have choices about what to do about their illness, but they still have a disease. A diabetic, for example, can choose to monitor their insulin levels and take medication; an addict can choose to treat their illness through recovery. No one wants to be an addict, she emphasizes, but the drugs are in control.

The lecturer's points illustrate the complex idea of responsibility when it comes to addiction. The disease model helps people like David understand that it is not his fault that Nic has a drug addiction. Yet at the same time, it emphasizes that addicts are still responsible for making choices that set them on the road to recovery.

After the presentation, families sit in a circle and share stories—stories which have become very familiar to David and Karen. Afterward, they meet Nic for lunch. Nic moves slowly: he has been given sedatives to help him detox. After lunch, Nic shows them his room, which looks like a modest hotel room. Finally, Nic blurts out how sorry he is about everything. David and Karen look at each other, unsure of what to say.

Nic's apology is a meaningful one, as it is the first time he has really taken responsibility for his own disease and the choices he has made to relapse. Yet at the same time, David's hesitation demonstrates that while he holds out hope that Nic can recover, Nic has also caused tangible emotional harm to the family in ways that Nic cannot fathom.

CHAPTER 13

David and Karen return to the hospital the next weekend. This week's forum is on how addiction can affect families: family members of addicts often blame themselves and feel rage and worry. Because of the stigma surrounding addiction, they often don't confide in friends or other family members.

The speaker at Ohlhoff explicitly notes how addiction can not only ruin the lives of addicts but can also have a profound impact on families. David has experienced this firsthand to a degree, and the level of havoc that Nic wreaks in their lives only escalates from here.

The speaker then holds up a mobile with paper doll figures. The addict (Nic) is in the center, surrounded by figures on the periphery, which represent Karen, Jasper, and Daisy. They are helpless, but tied to the whims of the addict. Another figure hangs between them: David, who is an "enabler," trying to prop Nic up and make excuses for him—trying to protect the others from Nic while still making sure they are all connected. David is stunned by the accuracy of the model.

The forum also brings revelations about David's relationship with Nic, and how that is harming the rest of his family more than it is helping Nic. As much as David tries to control Nic and keep him close, this dynamic only ends up hurting others. Instead, David understands that he needs to help Nic find support but not make excuses for his behavior or allow him to cause anguish for Jasper, Daisy, and Karen.

The speaker also emphasizes that addictions are not families' faults, because many addicts have ideal childhoods. It is also important to know that families can't control the addict, as much as they want to try and make better choices on behalf of the addict. The speaker says that people can become obsessed, losing their identities because nothing matters except for their addicted family member.

Here, the speaker addresses several fears and experiences of David's, which helps assuage David's worry that he is responsible for Nic's addiction. Additionally, the speaker foreshadows the way in which, David, spurred by his desire to control Nic's choices, will quickly become obsessed with and debilitatingly anxious over Nic's situation.

David and Karen meet Nic for lunch, who seems a little better, but still somewhat dejected. Nic confesses to David that he has a difficult time with the second step of the 12 steps, which emphasizes that a higher power can restore one to sanity. The third step then says that one must turn one's will to the care of "God as we understood him." Nic says that he doesn't believe in God. David points out that there is room in those descriptions—that he may not believe in God, but he does believe in a conscience telling him what the right thing to do is. Nic is unimpressed.

Nic's wrestling with questions of God are poignant ones. Even though he questions the religious aspect, at the crux of the problem is Nic's own ability to understand how little control he has over his life and his problems. Nic has to understand how much damage addiction has done and can still do in his life, so that he can continue to do the work of recovering from that damage.

Nic introduces David to two friends he has made: The first is James, a businessman who is treating a Vicodin addiction which began after the drug was prescribed following back surgery. Before he checked himself into St. Helena, he was taking 40 pills a day. The second is Stephen, Nic's roommate, who is a chef and an alcoholic. His addiction has almost killed him twice and has nearly destroyed his marriage.

The friends that Nic has made at St. Helena are additional examples of how addiction can ruin a person's life. James's addiction also reinforces the idea that sometimes nothing and no one is to blame for addiction. Some people are just unlucky to have a predisposition for addiction, while others are not.

David asks Nic if he thinks addiction is a disease. Nic says that he goes back and forth. David asks what initially flipped the switch, and Nic says that it began in Paris, where he frequently got drunk. When Nic got home, he couldn't get alcohol, so he started smoking pot. He started doing hard drugs the night he graduated from high school: there was ecstasy at a party he went to. After that, he took anything he could find, and meth made him feel better than anything.

Nic finally reveals how pernicious his addiction has already been, escalating far more quickly than David could have realized. It's now clear that Nic immediately spiraled out of control once he was out of parental supervision. It's possible to look at this as a reason for David's need to control Nic further, but it also illustrates that Nic could and would go to any lengths to satisfy his addiction regardless of what David did.

David, Karen, and Nic then go to a group session. People sob as they talk about their addictions and their family members' hardships. James's wife talks about how he went from being a kind and gentle person to a complete stranger: depressed, unkind, and abusive. David notes how similar all of the loved ones seem, spending years accepting and rationalizing behavior and constantly worrying.

Again, the group sessions represent a means of supporting other people. The loved ones of addicts support their family members by showing up for them, but those loved ones also receive support in being heard and in others' acknowledgment that they, too, have been deeply hurt by addiction.

One woman talks about her sister, who is addicted to meth. She says that she doesn't give her sister money, but she buys food and pays for medications because her sister can't make it across the apartment to the refrigerator. The session leader prods her, questioning that the woman is capable of scoring drugs but can't make it to the fridge. Another parent interrupts, saying that he paid his son's bills and rent for a year because he thought his son couldn't hold down a job or go to school—and yet his son was able to go to pawn shops and dealers and break into houses.

The woman's story is another illustration of how support can quickly turn into enabling. Family members gradually understand the line between helping their loved ones' lives get back on track and providing things like money or places to live for those who will simply take advantage of those luxuries.

Some stories are shocking to David: a doctor who admits she conducted surgeries for more than a year while high on meth, a person who had a DUI and fell asleep at the wheel, a woman who abandoned her three-year-old son for crack. One woman explains that her husband, Kevin, a GI, beat her up while high on meth. Kevin says that he is grateful for the program and can't believe he attacked his wife. He says that he is looking forward to beginning a new life at home.

Others' stories are not only further examples of the ways in which addiction has ruined their lives—they also shows the potential harm addiction can have on others, even strangers. These examples are some of the reasons that David insists on reforming how addiction is treated: the disasters that can result from drug addiction are a high price to pay for not enacting effective policies.

Nic says to David and Karen that Kevin's wife would be safer if he were locked up. At the end of the meeting, Nic speaks up before the group leaves. He speaks directly to Kevin, saying that Kevin is arrogant, doesn't listen, and doesn't seem to understand that he is powerless over his addiction. Nic tells Kevin's wife that he is saying this for her benefit, because he thinks that Kevin needs more time before coming home. She starts to sob, thanking Nic and agreeing that she doesn't trust Kevin. Kevin glares at Nic. When the meeting is adjourned, Kevin's wife runs over to Nic, hugging and thanking him.

This is a turning point for Nic: while he has recognized the harm that his addiction has inflicted on others, this is one of his first big affirmations of how crucial the program has been for him. As such, he's become adamant about his fellow addicts subscribing to the program. Standing up for Kevin's wife shows his self-awareness and his need to protect. It provides hope for the idea that Nic, too, might have enough faith in the program to fuel his recovery after leaving it.

CHAPTER 14

Nic continues going through the program, expressing his gratitude to David for getting him there. During his third week, he asks David if college is still an option in the fall. Nic promises to attend AA meetings regularly, to work with a sponsor, and to request a substance-free dorm. David says tells Nic that he thinks he can do it. He is secretly glad that Nic wants to return to college and may be fine from here on out.

Through the support of the program and the other patients at St. Helena, Nic realizes some of the larger missteps that he has made in his life. Yet in asking to go back to college and in promising to take tangible steps to help him in his recovery, Nic holds out hope that he can still redeem himself.

Nic tells David about two other events: Stephen left the program, walking out and immediately relapsing at a bar. The other news is that Kevin, the GI, asked Nic to "stand up" and speak for him at his graduation from the program, to send him out into the world. Kevin said that he respected Nic and wanted to prove him wrong. Nic agreed to do it, and afterward, Kevin and his wife hugged Nic and left holding hands.

The other addicts' stories reinforce the idea that addiction is a lifelong illness and that even rehab is not a cure-all. Additionally, Kevin's request for Nic to speak for him illustrates how tough love can still represent support. Nic's own actions show the value of not enabling a person and yet still trying to encourage them to do better.

Following Nic's graduation from the program a week later, David picks him up from St. Helena. Nic speaks brightly about the future and wants to commit to stay away from drugs. Then, at the end of the summer, Nic sets off for Hampshire. When they drop Nic off, David meets with the head of the college's health service, who can help him find a 12-step meeting and introduce him to other students. She assures David that there is support for people who want it.

Nic again retains hope for the future as he wants to commit himself to the program's steps. The school also knows the importance of support for addicts like Nic, and it strives to make that support available for those who are willing to take it. Nic's teachers and counselors have been vital reinforcements of Nic's sober living, and David recognizes their importance here.

Nic calls from school, excited about his classes. A month later, he still sounds okay. He has had regular sessions with a drug and alcohol counselor, attends meetings, and has found a sponsor. David start to feel his worries ebb as Nic speaks about new friends and things get back to "seminormal."

David's anxiety is directly related to Nic's own wellbeing. When David feels that Nic is in control, his anxiety wanes. But otherwise, David is completely debilitated by not being able to maintain that control.

After another month, Nic stops returning David's calls, and David assumes that he has relapsed. David asks a friend visiting Amherst to check in on Nic, and the friend reports that Nic was high in his room. David calls the Hampshire health counselor, and her response surprises him: "relapse is part of recovery," she says. At Nic's rehab programs, David heard that it can take time and mistakes for a person to understand how easy it is to relapse—like smokers who need multiple tries to stay off cigarettes. Treatment is conceived of as an ongoing process.

The counselor's information is yet another contradiction, but one that David has to accept. Relapse is a part of recovery because it helps people like Nic recognize that there is no cure for addiction; it is something that he will live with his entire life. Thus, he always has to be vigilant—and even when he relapses, he must maintain hope that he can still recover from those relapses.

David worries, however, as every relapse is potentially lethal. When Nic calls, he admits that he screwed up and promises to stop using—he had to go through it to learn. He keeps in touch and comes home for winter break. Nic seems to be doing much better, and David thinks that perhaps he simply slipped. Nic goes back to school for the spring semester, getting into a competitive writing course by writing a story with fictionalized versions of the people at the rehab centers. The teacher asked if Nic is an addict, and when Nic said he was in recovery, the teacher said that he would continue to teach him as long as Nic stayed sober.

Here, Nic acknowledges the idea that relapsing can actually help spur him to recover, as he makes a new commitment to staying clean. Additionally, the teacher of the writing course serves as another mode of support. He motivates Nic to stay off drugs by providing incentives like allowing him to take a competitive course and making him a better writer. This is another small way in which people around Nic offer him support in his recovery.


David visits Boston in late winter, where Nic and his new girlfriend, Julia, meet David for a fun dinner. David is traveling with a friend who lives and works in Shanghai, and the four of them have coffee afterward. The friend is impressed with Nic and Julia and ask if they want to teach English in China for the summer. They are enthusiastic and grateful. It is easygoing and assuring to David that Nic is moving on with his life, putting his problem behind him.

Seeing Nic in recovery, David's anxieties ease, and he maintains some optimism that Nic can continue with his life as David expected him to. However, given Nic's deception in the past, David can never really know whether Nic is truly doing well or not. This serves as yet another reason David feels that he has no handle on his son's life.


As the school year winds down, Nic plans his trip for China. He is overjoyed to be coming home for a bit before he heads out. But when he returns, he confesses that he has been using the whole semester and leaves, slamming the door behind him. When Jasper and Daisy come home, they see that Nic is gone. David is in tears and dissolves into a panic. The next morning, Jasper comes into the living room holding a satin box in which he keeps his savings of **$8**. He is confused and says that he thinks Nic took his money.

This particularly heartbreaking episode is the same one that David recounted in the introduction. Nic has hit the point of desperation where he is not only stealing from his parents, but stealing a few meager dollars from his eight-year-old brother. Thus, while Nic's stealing is certainly a physical crime, the real violation is that of Jasper and David's trust, as they see the depths to which Nic will stoop in order to get drugs.

CHAPTER 15

In late May, while Nic is still gone, Karen and David go to an Al-Anon meeting—their first group meeting without Nic with them. David kept his family's problem a secret for a while to protect Nic, but he has learned how much it helps to talk about Nic's addiction and to hear and read others' stories.

Here, David highlights the more personal aspects of why the stigma against addiction can be so harmful: people are less willing to support others when they see addiction as a moral failure or a failure of willpower. Yet David is able to find that support through others' stories at group meetings.

The Three C's are repeated throughout the meeting, and David still has a difficult time believing that he didn't cause Nic's addiction. He worries about the tacit permissions he gave Nic by talking about his own drug use and is horrified about the time they smoked together. David shares his story of Nic's addiction. He is mortified to cry in public but also relieved. He continues to go back to the meetings, and he hears heartbreaking stories.

David continues to grapple with his responsibility for Nic's addiction, referencing the things he wishes he had done in hindsight. Yet in hearing other people affirm that he did not cause it, David is able to take some comfort. This is another reason why support is necessary even for those who have loved ones who are addicted—they often feel as guilty as the people who are addicted.

During one meeting, a mother shares that her daughter is in jail for up to two years. But the woman says that she is actually relieved, because she knows where her daughter is. Another woman chimes in to say that she knows how the first woman feels, because it is safer for her daughter to be in jail than to vanish into the streets. David wonders if this is where he will get to: the point where Nic being in jail is good news.

These women's heartbreaking stories touch on the level of ruin that some addicts get to, where being in jail is better than being on the streets. Their sentiments also hints at the crisis that parents of addicts face, as they feel that their children are so out of control that any sense of certainty—like just knowing where their children are, even if it is in jail—feels comforting.

David continues to think that there must be something he can do. Each hour and day that Nic is gone is torturously, physically painful. David tries to "detach," as they counsel in Al-Anon, but he doesn't know how to let go of his son. He continues to wonder where he went wrong.

David illustrates how his desire for control is just hurting him. Even though he knows that it would be better to detach from Nic to a degree, he can't help but try to desperately hang onto his son.

David thinks about how the divorce was the most difficult aspect of Nic's childhood. He cites statistics showing that 85 percent of children of divorce were heavy drug users in high school, compared with 24 percent of those from intact families. Yet he knows that many children who go through much more contentious divorces don't resort to drugs, and many drug addicts come from intact families.

David continues to blame himself and his actions in his divorce for Nic's addiction; the statistics add evidence for his argument that divorce can be correlated with drug use. However, David also understands that the situation is more complicated than that, because not everyone who uses drugs becomes addicted, and addiction isn't always connected to the type of home one grew up in.

David thinks about what else there is to blame, like the privileged upbringing Nic had or his private school. But research confirms that addiction affects people regardless of wealth, education, race, geography, or intelligence. Sometimes, David understands that nothing is to blame.

David continues to reinforce the idea that blame and causality are not straightforward. Here, he recognizes that there is no singular factor that made Nic susceptible to addiction.

David also struggles with understanding that addiction is a disease, reasoning that people with cancer don't lie and steal. But the issue of addiction is that people who are afflicted are unable to do the very thing that will cure them. Doctors argue that a symptom of the disease is being unable to stop using, not the cause.

Like the complex issue of blame and responsibility, David grapples with the complexities of addiction as a disease. Yet his journey ultimately brings him around to the idea, as he knows that changes in the brain are what make people addicted, even if behavioral changes are the only thing that can prevent it.

David also notes that there are practical reasons to treating addiction as a disease: for instance, insurance companies provide coverage for diseases but rarely cover treatments for addictions. Instead, money ends up being lost replacing livers, hearts, and kidneys; there is a high cost on those who cannot work and an additional cost of addiction-related crime.

Even for those who still buy into the idea that addiction is not a disease, David provides compelling points for why it is better to treat addiction as a disease—or at least differently than how it is currently being treated.

Some still believe that addiction is a moral failing. Others understand that no addict wants to be addicted to drugs; something has happened in their brains to cause the addiction. David reminds himself that if Nic did not have a disease, he would not lie, steal, or terrorize his family. While it is not his fault that he has a disease, it is his fault that he relapses, and he must be held accountable to do that work.

This section sums up where David ultimately lands on blaming Nic and viewing addiction as a disease. He sees how much addiction has taken from Nic's life and recognizes that Nic would not be acting the way he is if he did not have a terrible illness. David compromises, knowing that Nic must bear some responsibility for the way he is treating himself, but he also acknowledges that it is not entirely Nic's fault.


Some experts believe that designating addiction as a brain disease rather than a behavioral disorder gives addicts an excuse to relapse. Others disagree, arguing that diagnosing someone with heart disease does not eliminate their responsibility to eat healthier or stop smoking; likewise, having an addiction does not eliminate responsibility to try to relapse. But it acknowledges that there is a biological basis for the disease that makes it difficult to overcome purely through willpower.

This is another illustration of both how addiction is a disease, and how addicts can still bear some responsibility for that disease. Even though biological factors contribute to an addict's disease, they are still responsible for taking the necessary steps to help treat their condition.


CHAPTER 16

In June, Nic is not at Jasper and Daisy's step-up ceremony. David watches the ceremony, in which each class year "steps up" from the step they are sitting on to the next higher row, indicating that they have graduated to a new grade. David has tears as he watches, remembering when Nic, too, was standing tall, full of potential.

The similarity between Nic's past and Jasper and Daisy's present illustrates how much potential Nic has lost in the intervening years. David's tears relay his continued understanding of the idea that each child is so vulnerable to tragedy, and there is very little that he can do to control their futures.


Every time the **phone** rings, David grows anxious, wondering if it is Nic calling. David wonders where he could be. Meanwhile, at Nancy and Don's house, Nancy is shocked to discover Nic sleeping in her laundry room under a pile of blankets. He is clearly high, shaking and skeletal. Nic wakes, startled to find himself in Nancy's home, and apologizes. Nancy, also shaken, offers Nic food. Nic takes a banana from the kitchen and walks out of the house. Nancy calls David to tell him what happened, wishing she could have made Nic stay.

Over the next stretch of chapters, the effect of Nic's addiction will not only stretch over David, Karen, Jasper, and Daisy, but also over many of the other people whom Nic has known throughout his life. Nic is paving a path of destruction, and he deliberately shutters himself from all of the people who could be giving him support.

There is no news for another week, until Nic calls his godfather, who invites Nic to his house. Nic's godfather makes him food and begs Nic to get help, seeing his gaunt appearance. Nic lies that he's stopped using and leaves. Again, David calls hospitals and jails, but there's no news for another two weeks. One day, Karen comes in and hands David a canceled check made out from David to Nic. The signature is an obvious forgery. Karen is furious and hurt. David tries to say that Nic wouldn't do this if he were in his right mind, but Karen doesn't want to hear excuses.

Again, Nic's self-destruction makes casualties of other people. He is more and more blatant about his drug use, shocking those around him who have known him for years. He even begins to commit deliberate crimes against his own family, like check forgery, in order to fuel his drug habit, demonstrating how much his morals have dissolved. Nic's addiction is causing real emotional damage to his family, dividing Karen and David as they discuss what to do.

A few nights later, Nic returns home. He grunts a "hey" and rushes past David into his room. David asks him where he has been, but Nic doesn't answer and starts to search his room. David asks Nic to sit and talk, saying that he has to go back to rehab—that he's throwing his life away. Nic says that it's his life to throw away, but David implores him not to do so. Nic responds that he has nothing to throw away, and he rushes past David and leaves.

Nic's destruction has reached a point where he feels not only that he's thrown his life away, but that there isn't anything in his life that's worth throwing away. This is a way for Nic to justify his drug use, highlighting the pernicious mentality of addicts that fuels the cycle of addiction.

That night, David is awake at four a.m. He realizes that it is Nic's 20th birthday. The next morning, David hears from Julia, Nic's girlfriend. She cries on the **phone**, saying that Nic stole hypodermic needles and morphine from her mother's house when they visited last month—which were for her cancer medication. She tells David that her sister had an addiction as well, and she implores David not to help Nic at all or give him money. Julia says that from her family's experience, her only advice to David is to take care of himself. David hangs up, stunned that Nic is now injecting drugs into his arms.

Julia's story reinforces the degree of harm that Nic is willing to inflict on those around him for the sake of getting drugs. The hypodermic needles also indicate that Nic's drug use has escalated, showing how corrupted by the drugs he has become at only 20 years old. Additionally, Julia's advice emphasizes what David already knows: that he should help support Nic, but he shouldn't enable his addiction.

David continues on with life, but the disparity between Nic's experience and Jasper and Daisy's worlds is sometimes overwhelming. Once, when David hears Eric Clapton's song about the death of his son, he breaks down in the grocery store while Jasper and Daisy are with him. They are horrified and frightened.

David's story here demonstrates the emotional toll that Nic's addiction is taking on him and subsequently on the rest of his family. Even though David believes that he is continuing on with his life, in reality, he's been so wrapped up in Nic's wellbeing that he has no way of enjoying the positive aspects of his life.

Two weeks pass, and Nic sends an email asking for help and money. David writes back that he will only help him return to treatment, which Nic declines. After another agonizing week, Nic calls to say he's doing fine. David asks him to meet for lunch, and Nic agrees to meet at a café—but Nic is an hour and 15 minutes late to lunch. David and Nic hug tentatively and sit together to eat. Nic is clearly high but insists he's doing great and is finally responsible for himself. David says that everyone is worried about him, but Nic dismisses David's concerns as he eats.

David draws a line here between supporting Nic and enabling him. He wants to be there for his son and make sure that he is okay, but he knows that simply giving Nic money will allow him to further pursue his drug use. Yet even though Nic refuses to return to treatment, David can't help but try to connect with his son.

After David and Nic say goodbye, David realizes how much he is now tolerating that he once thought "unthinkable." He also thinks about how his expectations for Nic have changed. With Nic's escalating drug use, he now hopes simply that Nic will live to 21. Summer ends, and each time the **phone** rings, David's stomach lurches. He does not sleep.

David's phone, which has become a recurring symbol, represents his lack of control in his dynamic with Nic. He is not in control of when Nic calls him, and each time the phone rings, David grows anxious over the news that might come on the other line.

CHAPTER 17

David goes to a farmer's market with Daisy and Jasper, where neighbors—most of whom now know about Nic—ask about him with trepidation. Then, David's cell **phone** rings. He answers the phone, but no one is there. There's a message from Nic, his voice slurring, saying that he's crashing out and has been sleeping a lot. Nic says that he's confused and hangs up.

David reinforces how his phone becomes a symbol of anxiety and lack of control. He is constantly worried about Nic's wellbeing or about missing a message that may reveal that Nic is in crisis.

A week later, Nic writes to Vicki. He tells her that he has no money and has been kicked out of the house. He writes another email, telling her that he stole some checks from the mother of a friend and that he may warrant out for his arrest if Vicki doesn't help him pay the debt. Vicki wants to pay, but David fears that this will simply help him pursue his dangerous path.

Vicki feels like she is supporting Nic in trying to pay his debts, hoping that it will help him and keep him out of immediate danger. However, David understands that this is not support: this is enabling Nic to simply continue as he has been.

Nic continues to disappear and reappear, keeping contact with Vicki but not with David. Vicki persuades him to have dinner with family friends visiting from New York. They are horrified by Nic's condition and the track marks on his arms. They ask him to come to New York, where he can stay with them and detox. Nic agrees, but his dealer gives him a huge amount meth before he leaves, which he snorts before boarding a cross-country flight.

Nic's decision to go to New York prompts David to feel like he is even less in control of Nic than he had been. And even though their family friends believe that they are trying to support Nic, in reality, they are simply providing another means of enabling: a place in which he can do whatever he wants, outside of the influence of his parents. The fact that Nic uses the flight as an opportunity to get high proves this idea.

In New York, Nic sees a psychiatrist who specializes in addiction. The doctor prescribes sleeping pills, and Nic sleeps for most of a week, experiencing the physical withdrawal and mental anguish. A week later, a bank calls to tell David that someone wrote a check for $500 on a closed account. David feels traumatized, having been robbed by his son.

David relays one of the most sinister aspects of addiction: it ruins the brain so fully that trying not to succumb to that addiction is both physically and mentally painful. And in juxtaposing this anguish with what David experiences after discovering that Nic stole from him, David shows that he experiences some of that same physical and mental pain.

A month later, Nic sounds less desolate. Vicki helps Nic move into an apartment in Brooklyn, and Nic gets a job. He tells David that he wants to return to school, paying his own way. He also says that his doctor thinks it's fine to smoke pot or have an occasional glass of wine so that he can "keep even." David worries, thinking of a study that shows an addict is 12 times more likely to relapse on meth if he smokes pot or drinks alcohol.

Nic's experience with the psychiatrist in Brooklyn ultimately ends up corroborating the idea that the best support can be found in rehab. Instead, Vicki (by paying for his apartment) and the psychiatrist (by allowing Nic to do some, if not the most harmful, drugs) are simply enabling him to relapse again.

Soon after, David gets a call from Nic's stepfather at five o'clock on a Sunday morning. He tells David that a doctor in Brooklyn called, saying that Nic is in critical condition and on life support. David calls the doctor, who explains that someone called 911 because Nic was unconscious. He says that if the EMTs hadn't responded right away, Nic would have died. David knows that Nic has been irresponsible, but he also knows that he loves him more than ever.

David hopes that this is a turning point in Nic's journey. Nic is on the brink of ruining his life to the extent that he may no longer live, providing an illustration of the ultimate horrors that addiction can render. This is the phone call that David has been dreading for months, and his feelings of love indicates the strength of their bond despite everything that's happened.

David makes arrangements to fly to New York. Soon after, the doctor calls back and tells David that Nic should pull through. David is able to breathe again. He calls the hospital later in the day. Nic is hardly coherent, but he asks to go into another program, saying it is his only chance.

Even Nic recognizes the need to go into recovery and find the support he has been lacking for the previous several months. Nic finally takes David's perspective, hoping that he can still get his life together.

David drives to the airport and calls the hospital again. The nurse informs David that Nic checked out against the doctor's orders, simply pulling out his IV and leaving. David hangs up and drives home, thinking that if this overdose didn't stop Nic, he doesn't know what will. David does not sleep that night.

David continues to experience the roller coaster of emotions with his addicted son. Believing that even after a near-death experience, Nic does not want to get help, he refuses to visit him. David knows that only Nic can bear the responsibility of his addiction.

Nic calls back in the morning from his apartment. He says that he freaked out in the hospital and had to get out of there. Nic asks if David is coming, begging to go to rehab. David agrees, hoping that this is what "hitting bottom" means. David flies to New York to help check him into Hazelden rehab center. When Nic arrives at his hotel, he looks gaunt and haggard.

Again, David exhibits the difference between support and enabling. When David believed that Nic did not actually want to go to rehab, he refused to visit. But with Nic's renewed commitment to recover, David is again willing to do whatever he can so that Nic can put himself on the right path.

The next morning, David and Nic go to Hazelden, the nation's best-known drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. It is an ongoing program of six months, and patients are required to work or attend school. There is a long list of rules, but they are able to come and go as they please, as long as they are present at dinner and required meetings and appointments. Nic has an admission appointment, and then he and David say goodbye. They hug, and David thinks that Nic's body feels brittle and fragile.

David once again remarks on the vulnerability and fragility of having a child; this time, that fragility is made literal rather than metaphorical. The only thing he can do, he starts to realize, is to try and make sure that Nic can get the professional help and support that he needs. David knows that he can't do that work for Nic; Nic must do it on his own.

CHAPTER 18

David stays on the West Coast, monitoring Nic's recovery from afar. He conducts more research on meth addiction and asks experts what they would do if a family member were addicted. They are divided on whether inpatient recovery programs (like Ohlhoff) or outpatient recovery programs (like Hazelden) are more likely to work. Outpatient programs integrate recovery work into an addict's life, but there are more opportunities to slip.

One of the most difficult aspects of dealing with addiction is the lack of treatment options and the lack of research into how effective each option really is. This fuels David's later argument that more funding is needed for better research and better treatment of the disease.

The goal, experts say, is to keep addicts in treatment long enough to retrain their brains when confronting situations that would lead to relapse. Some programs are designed to teach addicts to stop themselves at the "choice point," the point at which they decide to use drugs. It also helps identify triggers (the "people, places and things") associated with drugs that can start a cycle of craving and using.

The therapies used in these treatments add to the idea that even though addicts may not be to blame for their addiction, they still bear the responsibility for maintaining their recovery and choosing not to use drugs.

Researchers are also investigating medications that can counteract symptoms and ease addictions. But top researchers in the field admit that with a lack of funding, it is difficult to feel optimistic about the success of the drugs. Some believe that antidepressants might help addicts because depression is prominent in the early stages of withdrawal, but preliminary tests show that those drugs have little effect. Most agree that behavioral and cognitive therapies are better ways to treat the illness.

Again, David lays the groundwork for his argument that a much bigger funding effort is needed in order to treat addiction. He bolsters that idea with these sentiments from researchers, who know that progress in medications is tied to how the government views addiction and attempts to solve the problem.

In December, Hazelden's inpatient program closes its doors. Nic chooses to move to LA to live near Vicki in Herbert House. He works with a new AA sponsor named Randy, who has been sober for more than 15 years; the two of them go on long bike rides together. On the **phone**, Nic seems like "the old Nic." David is glad that Nic seems to have found a program that suits him. Nic also finds a technician job at another drug and alcohol program, helping to assist counselors and drive patients to appointments.

Like Don, the teacher who helped Nic during high school, Randy is another individual who serves as a key supporter of Nic's recovery. The help that Randy provides reinforces the idea that no one can deal with addiction alone. Only through finding this program, a community of people like Randy, and a job is Nic able to really commit to his recovery.

In July, Nic turns 21. David visits Nic in Los Angeles and is glad to see that he appears "whole again." Karen has been wary of seeing Nic and wary of Nic hurting Jasper and Daisy again. They wonder how they'll know when they can fully trust him. Still, at the end of the summer, David, Karen, Jasper, and Daisy visit Nic in LA; they all start to feel more comfortable together again.

Nic's birthday reminds readers how much Nic has already gone through even in his short life. It highlights the idea that addicts often experience many bouts of relapses and recoveries because of the incurable nature of the disease.

Nic calls frequently, reporting things that seem like small steps but to him are huge. He has a bank account and is saving money, and he buys a car and moves into an apartment. Still, some days are difficult: Nic has mood swings and craves drugs. But he says that calling Randy really helps. Nic celebrates a year of sobriety in September.

This is the longest time that Nic has spent in recovery so far, and David recounts the different ways in which Nic is pulling his life together and becoming independent from drugs once more. The fact that these small rites of passage are huge steps for Nic also proves how destructive and debilitating addiction can be.

Nic starts a new romance with a girl, Z., but one day he calls to say that she has broken off the relationship. He calls Randy, and the two go on a bike ride together for three hours. Afterward, Nic is elated, feeling that he's going to be all right. But a month later, Nic stops returning David's calls. David isn't sure why he is so upset, but he feels his intuition saying that something is wrong. He wonders if he is simply being paranoid.

Once again, David names Randy as a central figure in making sure that Nic stays in recovery. Even the simple support of being there during a breakup and going on a bike ride together makes the difference between Nic relapsing and not.

David calls Vicki, asking her to check on Nic in his apartment. She reports that his roommate hasn't seen him, and his bed hasn't been slept in. A coworker of Nic's says that he has not shown up in two days. David calls the police and hospitals, while Vicki files a missing person report. David tries to keep it together, wary of saying anything to Jasper and Daisy before they know exactly what's wrong.

Even with all the progress that Nic has made, David continues to show how the path is never easy. The repetition of these incidents, and the ways in which each one is new but also very familiar, emphasize how this is a lifelong illness. And as much as David might want to, he cannot make Nic's choices for him.


David continues to try to reach Nic's cell **phone**, and he calls the customer assistance for Nic's cell phone company to see if there have been any recent calls. The woman says that it's against regulations to tell him, but she empathizes with David. She reports that Nic's phone is accessing a cell tower in Sacramento. Two hours later, the operator calls back to report that Nic's cell phone is now in Reno. Later, she calls again to say that it's in Billings, Montana. David wracks his brain for explanations, even wondering if Nic has been kidnapped. The hours feel endless.

Even though Nic clearly does not want to be reached, David can't help but continue to try and grasp the situation in whatever way he can. He tries desperately to find out where Nic is, but in doing so, he only fuels his panic even further. This hints at David's later realization that when Nic is relapsing, David needs to let go to a degree so that he can live his own life, and not be constantly filled with anxiety.

CHAPTER 19

Four days after Nic has disappeared, someone finally answers his **phone**—but it's not Nic. The man explains that he doesn't know Nic; Nic gave the man his phone at a bus station in LA, and the man hasn't seen him since. David calls the cell phone operator and asks her to disconnect the phone, explaining that it has been stolen. David and Vicki are frantic, calling anyone they can to see if he has heard from Nic. When Vicki tries Z., Z. says that she just heard from Nic. He called her, high, from San Francisco.

The fact that Nic gives away or possibly sells his phone to a stranger illustrates how his addiction makes him want to out of reach for his parents and anyone he knows and loves. Still, David and Vicki cannot help but try to find him. As his parents, they are compelled to try and hold onto him in any way they possibly can, unwilling to give up on him.

David wishes that he could completely remove Nic from his mind—he doesn't know how much more he can take. Karen counsels him not to look for Nic, but David doesn't know what else to do. Karen is increasingly frustrated, knowing that David has completely given over to his anxiety. David drives around San Francisco, looking everywhere for Nic, but he doesn't find him.

Karen's mounting frustration with David again reinforces the idea that he is trying to control Nic and keep him bound to the family at the cost of healthy and normal relationships with his wife and other children. So many people have counselled him to take care of himself at this time rather than worry exclusively about Nic, yet David has not yet fully come to that turning point.

Nic is gone for weeks. David tries to keep busy. One weekend, David, Karen, Jasper and Daisy visit Bear Valley, biking along a trail through the forest, then hiking. When David and Jasper reach a clearing first, David experiences déjà vu: Nic had once climbed the exact tree at which they've stopped. Nic was young and had been afraid to come down. David stood underneath and told Nic to take it slow, one leg at a time. Nic was terrified, but David knew he would catch Nic if he fell. Jasper notices David crying and says that he thinks about Nic a lot too.

This story from Nic's childhood encapsulates the dynamic between him and David. In the tree, Nic was afraid and unable to help himself, while David knew that even if Nic couldn't get down himself, David would be there to catch him if he fell. Yet David does not realize that their current situation does not carry the same dynamics: David may not be able to be there if Nic falls, and has no way of helping Nic do what is best for himself. This lack of control over the situation is what spurs his panic.

One morning the following week, Karen notices a few things out of place in the house. David and Karen then find a broken deadbolt on the door to their bedroom; David's desk drawers have been ransacked. They know that Nic broke in. David, feeling sad and furious, calls a locksmith and a burglar alarm company. David also calls the sheriff about the break-in. He would never have contemplated calling the police, but now, like the parents in Al-Anon, he knows that Nic would probably be safer in jail.

Nic's has committed crimes against his family before, but a break-in is a new degree of ruin for Nic. This is reinforced by David's sentiment: the fact that he calls the police on his own son and that Nic might actually be safer in jail shows a new level of hurt and broken trust between Nic and his family.

The next day, David hears from family friends. They relay that Nic and his friends broke in and spent the night in their living room; in their wake, they left evidence of smoking and shooting meth. David starts to become afraid of Nic, wondering where else he might break into.

The amount of people that Nic is harming is also a slowly widening circle, as he breaks into a family friends' house. Thus, David emphasizes how addiction can have a deeply negative impact not only on addicts or loved ones, but on society as a whole.

The next morning, Karen is outside when she sees Nic drive by in his car. She calls to David, who jumps in the car to chase him—but he can't find Nic. When he returns home, Jasper and Daisy say that Karen saw Nic driving down the hill in the opposite direction, and she jumped in their other car to follow him. She doesn't come home for almost an hour. When she does, she explains that she followed him down Highway 1 until she realized she didn't know what she would have done if she caught him. Later, she confesses to David that she was simply trying to chase him away from the house. David realizes how chaotic their lives have become.

This incident involving David and Karen trying to chase Nic in their cars is a reinforcement, as David says, of the lack of control that they have in their lives. As in past encounters with Nic, even when they see him, they have no way of stopping him from walking out of the house or out of a rehab center—there is no way to make his choices for him. And yet, even with this knowledge, they are still desperately trying to maintain some control over him.

Three days later, Nic calls, telling David everything: he has relapsed on meth and heroin. David tells him that the police are searching for him as a missing person in Santa Monica, and that sheriffs are patrolling his home and the home he broke into. David says that he can only tell Nic what he already knows she should do: call Randy. Nic is crying. David wants to drive and get him, but he knows he can't.

David again recognizes that he cannot enable Nic's addiction by being lenient on him. The only thing that he can do is get Nic back into recovery and to guide him back to people like Randy who can support Nic's recovery more than David can.

Randy calls in a half hour, saying that he heard from Nic and he encouraged him to return to LA. He reports that Nic sounded ready to come back, and David thanks Randy. In the evening, Vicki calls. Nic had enough money for a ticket back to LA; she picked him up from the airport and dropped him back at his apartment. Nic calls David the next day, saying that he feels terrible and that all he can do is pray.

While it is important for David and Vicki to hold onto hope that Nic can recover, it is even more important that Nic does so. The fact that he is praying, after all of the times he fought against the idea of a higher power, shows his understanding of the lack of control he has in his own life and the faith he maintains that he might be able to break the cycle of relapse.

David continues to go to Al-Anon meetings, crying as he retells the story of the previous weeks. David is unsure how life can go on, but it does. Jasper and Daisy play games and sports together. One night, they watch a video of a Bob Dylan performance when he was 20. When Daisy asks why Bob Dylan does drugs, Jasper explains that he doesn't think he wants to do them, but he can't help it. It's as though he has an **angel and a devil** on his shoulder, and sometimes the devil whispers too loud.

Jasper's explanation of why Bob Dylan does drugs (which is really an explanation of why Nic, or anyone, does drugs) captures the complexity of a person's own responsibility. Jasper understands that addiction (personified by the devil) is a part of a person, but it also acts outside a person and not in their best interests. Nic might be responsible for his relapses, but the part of him that spurs those relapses is out of his control.

Nic reports to David that Randy is helping him get his life back; they take bicycle rides together. Randy helps find Nic a job. Nic says he's shocked that he relapsed after being sober for 18 months; he says that he got cocky, and that he is going to two meetings a day now and is starting the steps all over. David is relieved and cautiously hopeful.

The fact that Nic has stayed hopeful for his recovery shows that he understands his mistakes, and that he hopes to be responsible for preventing those mistakes in the future. It is even more crucial for Nic to have hope for his own recovery than it is for David.

David and Karen continue to see a therapist on occasion, and David admits that their lives have gotten out of control. The therapist says that parents of kids on drugs become debilitated, depending on their children's moods, decisions, and actions. David wonders how not to be codependent on Nic's wellbeing, because any parent would be—but he also admits that there must be an alternative to his constant worry.

David finally seems to recognize how his desire for control has become truly harmful to both him and to his family, yet he seems unable to take the steps to find a better path. David's obsession with Nic's addiction appears to be a kind of addiction in itself, as he recognizes that it would be better to let go but is unable to help himself do so.

Two months pass, and David visits LA. He and Nic get dinner. Nic apologizes, unable to fully express how much he is sorry for. David reminds himself how difficult staying sober is for Nic. As much as other people have suffered at Nic's hands, Nic himself has suffered the most. Since Nic's relapse, Karen, Jasper and Daisy have not seen him. Karen is wary of letting Nic visit Inverness. But at the end of the summer, when Karen, David, and the kids are going to stay in cabins on a beach in Hawaii, Karen suggests that Nic come with them.

Despite the fact that Nic has caused the family a great deal of trauma, Karen also recognizes that they are family and that rebuilding their relationships is important to Nic's recovery and to renewing trust between them. Yet at the same time, David and Karen know they have to be cautious with Nic—while they always maintain hope that he can recovery, they also always understand that he could always relapse.

The reunion in Hawaii comes with excitement but also trepidation. The family drives to the camp, and Nic narrates a tale of PJ Fumblebumble, a detective of Nic's own invention. Jasper and Daisy fill Nic in about school and their friends. Jasper asks if Nic is going to use drugs anymore, and Nic promises not to. They spend a beautiful week together, enjoying the natural beauty of Hawaii and feeling a little more optimistic about the future.

Jasper's question to Nic of whether he will continue to use drugs shows the danger in reuniting him with the family. As much as Nic might try to promise Jasper that he will not, his addiction is uncontrollable, and any subsequent relapses will continue to feel like emotional blows to his family.

When they return from vacation, Nic goes back to LA. A week later, Jasper receives a letter from Nic, writing that he wishes he could express how sorry he is. He explains that he loves Jasper and that he wants to be there for Jasper whenever he needs him. He concludes that he hopes being there for him will mean more than a note and the **$8** enclosed.

In returning the $8 to Jasper, Nic makes a symbolic commitment to do better for his brother. Where stealing the money demonstrated Nic's self-destruction, giving the money back and apologizing demonstrates Nic's commitment to bettering himself and caring for his family.

CHAPTER 20

David's article "My Addicted Son" appears in *The New York Times Magazine* in February. The feedback on the article is encouraging, and Nic and David both embark on writing books about their experience. Later in February, Nic takes a few days off work to join David and the kids for a ski trip. Nic seems enthusiastically committed to his sobriety. He is writing short stories and movie reviews for a magazine. He tells David that he loves his life.

The encouraging feedback that David and Nic both receive on David's article illustrates how hearing about people with similar stories can be extremely supportive to those who are suffering from the same issues. This is what prompts them to write their books (Beautiful Boy *and* Tweak)*, so that other people can feel understood.*

On June 2nd, David feels as though his head is exploding—literally. Karen calls 911, and David is taken to a hospital. He is wheeled into an emergency room, half-conscious; his condition worsens. He hears the phrase "cerebral hemorrhage." David can't speak; he is operated on, and a hole is drilled into his skull to alleviate the pressure. He is then transported to the neuro ICU at the University of California in San Francisco. He is confused and unable to lie still, with tubes all over his body.

David's hemorrhage indicates the severity of the stress in his life. Because he has felt his life to be completely out of control, and because his anxiety about Nic has escalated so much, his life is literally threatened. This shows not only the toll that Nic's addiction has on David, but also the toll that David's obsession with his son's addiction has on himself.

David is anxious, and his thoughts are only of Nic. He panics that he cannot remember Nic's **phone** number. When he wakes, a nurse explains that he is bleeding inside his brain, which is usually caused by an aneurism. David asks the nurse to help him call his son. She assures him that Karen will be there in the morning with the number. David wishes that he could hear Nic's voice to ease his worries.

David's desperate attempts to call his son, even when he can't remember his own name or Nic's phone number, represent a need to maintain control over his life even in the direst of circumstances. The phone again symbolizes this lack of control.

David remembers wishing that he could expunge Nic from his brain, so he wouldn't have to be disappointed and hurt by him and wouldn't have to blame himself or Nic. He remembers secretly wishing for a lobotomy, and the irony of his situation sinks in. He cannot recall his name or the year, but he still worries about Nic.

In this revelation, David recognizes how ingrained worrying about Nic has become in his brain—even more so than his name or the year. Looking back on this moment later, David understands that he must find a way to detach from his son to a degree in order to maintain his own health.

David remains in the hospital for days, confused and in pain. On June 11, he can answer the doctor's questions: his name is David Sheff. He begins to move again, walking shakily. Jasper and Daisy come to see him, and he reassures them that he will be fine. Nic also calls: he is fine, too. He has been speaking to Karen every day since David arrived at the hospital. Nic is coming up to visit, and David is relieved.

David's own recovery from his brain hemorrhage reinforces the same idea as Nic's recovery: he cannot do it alone. David is only able to get back on his feet and get his life back together with the help of his family—particularly Nic. This passage shows that David is still dependent on Nic's wellbeing, something that he will later try to remedy.

After two weeks in the hospital, David goes home. He sleeps most of the time, but he plays games with the kids. David works to read a sentence in a magazine, then graduates to a capsule review in *The New Yorker*. Soon, Nic arrives. David is comforted that he has come. Nic says he was worried that David was going to die. David replies, "that's a switch."

David's relief at Nic's arrival at the house is, as he notes, an ironic reversal. Yet it also reinforces how much they need each other, and how valuable their mutual support is when each of them is going through a hard time.

Each day, David feels a little better and can walk for longer periods of time. But he also hopes that things don't go exactly back to normal: he does not want to continue to worry endlessly about Nic. He is struck that a brain hemorrhage could not remove his worry.

David's revelation serves as a turning point in his need for control: he recognizes how literally debilitating his worry over Nic was, and he resolves not to try to be anxious over an uncontrollable situation.

David gets out more and more, and Nic reaches the milestone of being sober for a year and a half. David now has a hole in his head, but doctors tell him it will grow together. He recalls Dr. London's scans of the brain on meth, and he wonders if Nic's scans would now match the scans of those with normal brains.

David and Nic's conditions continue to parallel each other, as each one resolves to return their brains to normal. Their twin recoveries highlight the need to always maintain hope that they can continue to improve their health and reduce their self-destructive tendencies.

CHAPTER 21

Having missed most of the summer, David tries to hang onto it as much as he can while his head heals. He, Karen, Jasper and Daisy hike together, and when they drive home, Daisy says out of the blue that it would be sad to be old, because David and Karen and even Jasper would be dead. But she says that she wouldn't be scared to die: it's like the end of a vacation when you're ready to go home.

Daisy's precocious understanding of death touches once again on the theme of control. Daisy understands that she can't be afraid of the unknown or of something she can't control, like death. This is in contrast to so much of what David has been experiencing, where Nic's life has been all that he can focus on despite its uncontrollability.

The kids return to school, and David starts to write again. The next day, they go to Nancy and Don's for their weekly dinner and decide to spend the night when it gets late. David checks his answering machine in Inverness and discovers a voicemail from Nic, who is crying. It's from three hours earlier. He calls Nic, who admits that three days prior, he was at a party with Z. and he did a line with her. He admits that he's been high since then. He knows he messed up, and says he's going to stop. David tells him to get help.

As Nic relapses yet again, David is reminded of the incurable cycle of addiction. By this point, however, David understands that the most he can do is tell Nic to get help from his support network, knowing that this is the only way that he can recover. This is in contrast to Nic's relationship with Z., which he views as supportive but in reality only enables him to justify bad behavior.


David hangs up, furious. Nic had made it almost two years sober. David erupts in worry again before becoming overwhelmed and falling asleep. He remembers that lying in the neuro ICU, he'd had a realization: Nic, Jasper and Daisy would survive his death. David is inconsequential to Nic's survival. He can try to protect his children, to help and guide them, but he cannot save them.

David's brain hemorrhage actually prevents him from worrying about Nic to a degree, because he becomes so exhausted that he no longer can. His revelation again reinforces the idea that Nic's life is his own, and David's constant worry over his choices does not actually help anyone.

David admits that he wanted to end his book with Nic's letter to Jasper; he wanted to move on from Nic's addiction. But he knows that addiction is incurable, and there won't be a perfect happy ending. David prays, "Please God heal Nic." David has never prayed before, but he knows that this is the only thing he can do.

David's prayer represents another turning point—a recognition that Nic's situation is out of his control, and that the only thing that he can do is appeal to a higher power. This ties back to AA's principles, wherein addicts must also come to terms with the idea that their addiction is incurable but that they must seek support from others to manage it.


Nic shows up high at work and loses his job. His **phone** is disconnected, and he deserts his friends, including Randy. He says in an email that he and Z. have sold their clothes to pay for food. Vicki drives to his apartment and finds the place filthy: there is brown water on the floor and trash everywhere. Nic is trembling and high, and Z.'s legs are bleeding; she explains that a lightbulb broke on the floor. Nic tells Vicki to leave and not come back.

Again, Nic descends into this place of complete self-destruction. He and Z. live in complete squalor, and he is also pushing away all of the sources of support that would help him recover once again. Again, David emphasizes how impossible it is to support someone and help them recover from addiction when they actively avoid help.


A week goes by. On Sunday, David is driving Daisy and a friend to a birthday party. They play a game where they start a sentence with "fortunately," then another with "unfortunately." David plays his own version: "Fortunately I have a son," "Unfortunately he is a drug addict," "Fortunately he is in recovery," "Unfortunately he relapses." He repeats these last two sentences in his mind until he concludes, "Fortunately he is not dead."

The game that David plays echoes the cycle of Nic's addiction: it is fortunate when he recovers and unfortunate when he relapses, and he may be doomed to repeat this cycle again and again. David's conclusion is an ambivalent one. It inherently acknowledges that the cycle could continue until Nic is dead, but it also retains some hope that he is still alive—and that he still has the ability to get well.

CHAPTER 22

Randy continues to call Nic and leave messages on his cell **phone**. Using Z.'s phone, Nic leaves messages saying that they're going to meetings and getting sober. But the more he speaks, the more David believes he sounds high. David remembers something Nic told him during a past recovery: that his brain lies to him, telling him that he can have one drink or a joint and that he doesn't require a vigilant recovery program.

While Nic maintains that he can get sober alone, David uses Nic's own words to contradict this belief. When Nic is going through recovery, he knows that he needs the support of programs and people like Randy because he cannot trust his judgement on drugs.

Two weeks later, Nic calls asking for rent money. David and Vicki both say no. Nic emails on Monday saying that they're in Joshua Tree, where Nic is writing and Z. is working wardrobe on a commercial. David hopes that this is true. There is no news for days, and David feels that some of his panic is lifting. He is no longer sick with worry; he is "letting go."

David illustrates the progress that he has made: even though he might not know exactly what is happening to his son, he is not debilitated by his anxiety. He has been able to detach enough to continue with his own life.

One evening, David receives calls from Nic's godfather and Vicki, who just heard from Nic. Nic said that he is in Oakland and that he'd lied about being in Joshua Tree. Nic said that they were in trouble and needed plane tickets back to LA. Vicki is unsure of what to do, and David tells her that he won't help Nic unless he wants to go into rehab.

When Nic asks for money, David again makes the argument that they should not help pay for plane tickets without knowing that Nic will go back into rehab. Even though David and Vicki want to support Nic, enabling him will not accomplishing this; only getting him back to rehab will truly help.

The next day, Nic leaves more messages for Vicki and his godfather, saying that he and Z. found money to fly home. David is working in the library, and when he sees Z.'s number calling, he turns his **phone** off. Later, he listens to the message: Nic saying that he's driving back from Joshua Tree and that he's in cell phone range again. David is struck by the intricacy of Nic's lies and by the fact that Nic thinks that Vicki and Nic's godfather wouldn't have told David about his messages. Nic says that he misses and loves David.

David turning his phone off when Nic calls is another symbolic act that indicates how much he is letting go. Before, not knowing what is happening with Nic would have filled David with anxiety, and he would have always answered the phone. But now, David is choosing to control what he can (his own behavior in picking up the phone) and letting go of what he cannot (Nic's behavior).

CHAPTER 23

Nic calls again, explaining that he knows that David found out the truth about what happened. He says he's sorry for lying and that he didn't want to worry David. David sits in the living room when he spies a pile of newspapers that he doesn't recognize. On top is a flyer from Nic's favorite record store. The papers aren't Karen's, and immediately they jump to the conclusion that Nic broke in. But they soon realize that the newspapers belonged to a friend who visited the previous weekend.

The fact that David and Karen immediately jump to the conclusion that Nic broke in due to some extra newspapers illustrates the damage that he has done in their lives. Not only has he broken into their homes enough times that they now expect him to, but he has also made them paranoid and anxious at even the slightest abnormal thing in their lives.

David looks at his desk and puts away a recent photograph of Nic when he was in recovery. Then, David hears a song Jasper wrote as he edits it in Garage Band in another room—it is haunting and beautiful. David tells Jasper that there are places they can go for kids with siblings or parents who have addictions. Jasper agrees to try.

David acknowledges how he and Karen are not the only ones who have been deeply traumatized by Nic's behavior. While they have been seeing therapists and specialists for years now, David reaches out to Jasper to make sure that he can also get the support he needs.

The next day, David thinks about Nic. He is momentarily stunned by the thought that Nic could die. He realizes that he would miss having Nic in his life, but then he has a further realization: he misses it now. He has not had Nic whenever Nic is on drugs. He knows that he will always love Nic, but that Nic on drugs is only a ghost of his sober self.

David's thoughts here are yet another revelation. So much of the book has centered on how a parent deals with a child in crisis. Yet David understands that when Nic is on drugs, he does not have his son. This framing allows David to maintain the necessary distance from Nic's drug use.

David returns to statistics of rates for rehab of meth addicts. He hopes the most meaningful statistic is this one: that more than half of the people who enter rehab are sober 10 years out, even if they've had relapses. Nic leaves another message for David, saying that he and Z. went too far and now plan to get sober. David doesn't believe it. All he can do is hope that Nic has some kind of "near miss"—something dramatic enough to make him return to treatment, but not enough to kill him.

The cycle of Nic's addiction has become so repetitive for David that he actually hopes for something worse to happen to Nic, in order to snap him out of it. This shows how difficult Nic's addiction is for all of them: the only way for things to get better is to hope for Nic to have a near-death experience.

CHAPTER 24

David and Vicki agonize over what to do. Nic calls again, high, asking for money. While Vicki argues that they have to try, David responds that they cannot control what Nic is doing. Still, he doesn't know how to give up completely. He recalls a woman he met in Al-Anon meetings who said that after seven rehabs, her son has now been sober for three years.

David again confirms the idea that while he holds out hope for Nic's recovery, and while he wants to support Nic, he refuses to enable him. He knows that even though Nic is living in a dire situation, any money that David might give him would simply fuel his addiction.

David, Karen, and Vicki decide to pay the cost of rehab one more time if they can get Nic to go. They don't want rehab to become a lifestyle for Nic. David speaks to Dr. Richard Rawson at UCLA, asking what he would do if his son were addicted to meth. Dr. Rawson says that he would seriously consider using an interventionist to push him toward treatment.

Even though their hope is waning, David, Karen, and Vicki still understand that they have to try to put Nic on the right path. They hope that with many people encouraging him to go to rehab, he will recognize the necessity of finding support through treatment.

One morning, Nic calls and tells David that he has a new plan: he and Z. finished their stash of meth, and they're going to keep each other sober. Meanwhile, David hears from another friend, arguing that it's a mistake to try rehab again and again, because rehabs are designed to keep people coming back.

David is not the only one in danger of enabling Nic. Nic's relationship with Z., even though they try to keep each other sober, only leads to them enable each other's' drug addictions.

David calls interventionists, who suggest that he, Vicki, Karen, Nic's friends, and Z. all intervene and offer Nic the chance to go to rehab. David thinks it over. He reads a passage from *Addict in the Family*, arguing that families should never give up hope for recovery, but also that they should never halt their own lives.

The passage from Addict in the Family *affirms what David already understands: even though Nic has been locked in a cycle of relapse and recovery, it is always worth holding onto hope that he can escape that cycle. At the same time, David knows that he cannot obsess over trying to heal Nic so much that he bankrupts his own life, as he did leading up to his hemorrhage.*

In a week Nic leaves a message, saying that he is now 11 days sober. Yet later, when Nic calls again, David can tell that Nic is high. Nic says that it's only from drugs that doctors prescribed to get him off meth, coke, and heroin. Nic says that he's not "AA sober" but maintains that he's sober. David hangs up. In the morning, David receives an emergency email from Z., who says that Nic dropped her off at the market that morning and said he'd be back in 15 minutes. He left her there for four hours and never came back.

Nic attempts to argue that he is getting the support he needs. However, David conveys that Nic's addiction is simply being enabled by these doctors. When Nic presumably relapses the next day and abandons his girlfriend, this proves David's assessment of the situation to be correct: Nic was not actually getting the help he needed.

CHAPTER 25

David calls Z., who explains further: Nic dropped her off at the market at 5:45 a.m. and took her car to Vicki's. He was going to break in and steal Vicki's computer and come back, but he disappeared for four hours. David calls Vicki, who finds Nic in the garage, piling things into shopping bags. He's tweaking, and he managed to lock himself inside somehow. Vicki tells Nic that he has a choice: she will call the police, or he can go back to rehab.

The degradation of Nic's values are on display yet again. He has broken into his house to steal from his mother, which Z. describes as an acceptable thing to do. Vicki's response to this incident also highlights how her and David's reactions have had to evolve over time. Letting Nic go without any consequences, they recognize, would simply be condoning this behavior. Thus, they can try to get support for him in rehab, but they cannot enable him to continue to break into their houses.

David makes more calls to rehab centers. He speaks to someone at Hazelden's four-month program in Oregon. If Nic is willing, it is likely that he can go there. David calls Nic, telling him about the bed in Hazelden, but Nic says that he can recover alone. With pressing from both David and Z., Nic relents and agrees to go. He says that he thought he could stay sober because he wanted to, admitting, "I guess this is what it means to be an addict."

Even after all these years and many rehab visits, Nic still attempts to assert that he does not need help in order to get well. But with pressing from Z. and David, Nic seems to understand that his addiction is not something he can control alone. Instead, he needs a program to help him get well.

On Monday, Nic speaks to a counselor at Hazelden and says that he is going to Oregon. David books a flight and calls Hazelden to be sure that someone will pick Nic up—but the counselor at Hazelden says that Nic was not approved for admission. David is confounded, but the supervisor is adamant that he cannot come. David immediately makes arrangements for Nic to detox at a hospital instead.

On top of help from a program, it is incredibly clear how valuable David's support of Nic has been. Without his help in searching for these programs and coordinating where Nic should go to get help, David has allowed Nic to have the best chance possible for recovery.

Nic goes to the hospital, and David checks in with the nurses at the ward. One says that she doesn't think Nic's body could have survived another month, given the amount of drugs he was taking. After a few days, David speaks to Nic, who sounds extremely depressed. He thanks David for getting him to the hospital, cries, and tells David that he feels like his life has been "stolen." David finds a program in Santa Fe for Nic to go to, and Vicki drives him to the airport.

Nic's revelation, that he feels as though his life has been stolen, shows just how much of an impact his addiction has had on his path, and how much ruin it has brought into his life. So many times, he has been near death or at the point of losing everyone who cares about him. Yet in going back to recovery, he still carries hope that he can turn his life around.

David and Karen take Jasper and Daisy to a family therapist, whom David and Karen met with earlier. The therapist talks to the kids reassuringly, telling them that David and Karen told him what's happening with Nic, and that it's very scary to have a brother addicted to drugs. He says it's normal to feel confused and to feel like they both love Nic and might also be afraid of him. The more the therapist and the kids talk, the more open they get.

Just as Nic needs support, and just as David goes to therapy himself or finds comfort in the Al-Anon sessions, so too do Jasper, Daisy, and Karen find value in speaking to someone about Nic's addiction. David thus reinforces that even for people who are more tangentially linked to addiction, it is important to get support.

Karen talks about how whenever something is missing, she panics that Nic might have broken in again. The therapist explains how triggers can return people to a state of panic, like the newspapers they found. David nods, saying that he thinks this happens when the **phone** rings. He says that he is always worried there will be news of another crisis. The therapist suggests shutting off his ringer for periods of time and establishing times when David and Nic can speak on the phone so that he doesn't constantly worry about Nic calling. Afterward, everyone is relieved to have been able to talk with the therapist.

Speaking to the therapist, David finally links his cell phone to his constant sense of panic; the phone is connected to David's need for control. It is a thing that links him to his son, but because he cannot control when Nic might be calling or what the news might be on the other end, it is panic-inducing. Instead, the therapist helps David to control what he can, like turning it off for periods of time or establishing boundaries with Nic to alleviate his worry.

Three weeks after Nic enters rehab, he is still in acute physical and mental pain—once, he is even rushed to a hospital. But Nic says that he cannot believe he relapsed, feeling incredibly guilty. David is glad that Nic is on a better path, but he's wary of being hopeful. Another month passes, and David takes a trip to visit Nic in Santa Fe. He wonders why he is there, thinking about how everything he has done over the years has helped so little. And yet, he still misses his son.

Going to a visit Nic at his third rehab, David understandably questions why he is continuing to help his son. The fact that Nic is still battling this disease demonstrates again that it is a lifelong illness. And David, as the author, implies that he is helping his son because it is the only thing that he can do and the only way for him to maintain his relationship with his child.

David drives through the town and arrives at the rehab center. He sees Nic, and they hug. Vicki arrives at the center as well. Even now, David still feels guilty over their divorce. Though they have talked on the **phone** and grown closer in the last few years, they have not been in the same room for more than a few minutes in the past 20 years.

Even though Vicki and David still have lingering pain from their divorce, they both recognize the importance of supporting Nic. As much as they have been negatively impacted by Nic's addiction, they know that he needs support from both his parents to get well.

David, Vicki, and Nic join a group session. David is upset, thinking how many times he has done this before. They fill out a questionnaire and then move on to art therapy. David is again furious, thinking that he has been through too much to be finger painting. Still, they start to draw. David, Vicki, and Nic are given a piece of paper that is divided into three.

The irony of David's thoughts here are that they likely mirror Nic's in some ways. Nic has been through so much in his addiction and has also been to so many meetings and rehabs and group sessions—and yet both he and David must recognize that there is still value in these therapies, because they are the only hope for Nic to be able to treat himself and repair his relationships.

David starts to draw with chalk, merely pushing it around on the page. Vicki uses watercolors, painting a pretty beach scene. Nic draws a heart with muscles, tissue, and ventricles. Vicki smears her scene with swashes of black over the sky. Nic writes "I am sorry" over and over again. David continues to draw branches and circles randomly. He soon realizes that it is the opening of his brain.

Each of Nic and his parents' drawings represents their own personal entry point into Nic's addiction: Vicki feels the pain of something that has been ruined. Nic feels the guilt and blame of what he has done to his wellbeing and that of those around him. David feels the weight of his own anxiety: his lack of control caused so much stress that he literally caused his own brain trauma.

Families take turns talking and sharing their drawings. Nic says that it's amazing that Vicki is there and that the work he's doing at the program is about trying to heal, not trying to make excuses or blame others. David starts to cry, and Nic puts his hand on David's shoulder. Later that night, David wonders if it's possible to get beyond blaming.

Nic's acknowledgement of his own responsibility is an important one; for so long, he had blamed those around him (and David willingly accepted that blame). But here, Nic recognizes his own responsibility to stay in recovery in the future.

The next day, David drives to the center for another group therapy session. It is a relief to talk about his problems. On the final session of the last day, they are instructed to think about the future and the steps they can take to get better. Nic's small steps forward include attending AA and repairing his relationships with Karen, Jasper, and Daisy. David thinks that it will take a miracle for Nic's recovery to succeed, but he also thinks that it is a miracle that he and Vicki are there together to support Nic.

For Nic, recovery means not only rebuilding his own life (his health, job, and future potential), but also the restoration of the relationships that he's damaged. This again emphasizing how addiction can affect so many different people besides the addict themselves. Additionally, while David seems skeptical of Nic's recovery, his last statement here admits that it is always worth hoping for a miracle.

David returns home, feeling completely raw and exposed. He watches Jasper play lacrosse, his **phone** off in his pocket. He reminds himself that his addiction to Nic's addiction did not serve Nic or anyone around David; now, David is in his own program to recover through small steps like this and through therapy.

While Nic was dealing with his addiction, so too was David trying to wean himself off of his obsession. His need for control over Nic's life has finally eased, and he, too, is taking steps to make sure that his relationship with his son is a healthy one.

After practice, David and Jasper go to a sporting goods store, and a piece of paper falls out of Jasper's wallet when he retrieves a gift card: it's Nic's letter to him. At home, when the kids are asleep, David tries to understand what he is feeling: a combination of hurt and happiness about the past and a combination of anxiety and optimism for the future. Or, as he thinks, "everything."

David's conclusion, which echoes the words that he and Nic would say to each other when they said goodbye for long periods of time, encapsulates the contradictions of addiction. There is much despair, but there is also hope. There is sadness, but there can also be joy. And while David might always want to be there for his son, he knows that he won't always know what Nic is doing or where he is, and that Nic's life is his to live.

EPILOGUE

After Nic completes three months at Santa Fe, his counselors recommend that he go to a program in Northern Arizona to continue his work in recovery and to get a job. Instead, Nic decides to travel east, where he gets a job and meets someone new. He continues writing his book. David is uncertain about these changes, but he knows that it is Nic's life to do what he wants.

David's ability to recognize that Nic's life is his to do with as he wishes shows just how far he has come. While David still cares deeply about Nic's wellbeing, he knows now that he can't control Nic's life and must let him be independent.

David turns 50 that December. He thinks about all that he experienced in the previous few years, including his stay in the ICU. He realizes, with the help of his therapist, that even if stress didn't caused his brain hemorrhage, it didn't help. He decides to go to therapy multiple times a week to work through his worry and guilt.

Just as Nic gains support from his programs and his sponsors, David gains the same support from his therapist. He continues his own program of recovery (trying to mitigate his obsession with Nic's addiction) by adding more therapy sessions.

David continues to attend Al-Anon meetings. Though he has been doing good work in therapy, he is still unsure of whether he was partly responsible for Nic's addiction. He does, however, recognize that he can never know how much he contributed to Nic's addiction. David has accepted the other C's: he cannot control it or cure Nic's problem. David is confident that he has done everything he can to help Nic, and now it's up to Nic to make his own choices.

Even as David makes progress in other areas, he still grapples with how much blame to take upon himself for Nic's addiction. Yet in acknowledging that he will never know how much to blame himself, he recognizes that dwelling in the past and focusing on things he cannot change isn't helpful. What has *made a difference is how much he has supported Nic through his entire journey.*

David continues to hear stories from friends, friends of friends, and strangers who have read his article, often asking for advice. He advises talking to one's kids early and often about drugs and being careful not to glorify drugs. He also suggests erring on the side of caution in knowing whether kids are simply experimenting. Looking back, David wishes that he'd forced Nic into a rehab program before he turned 18. Nic might not have been ready for its lessons, but it might have slowed him down.

David's advice partly stems from what he perceives as his own mistakes in dealing with Nic: talking to Nic about his own drug use, not viewing the warning signs with more trepidation, and not committing him to a rehab program while he still could. While this still acknowledges blame, he hopes that other loved ones of addicts can feel a sense of support from the lessons that he has learned.


David also recommends getting opinions from many people—doctors, therapists, and counselors—to decide what to do with a child on drugs. He says that sending a child to rehab is one of the hardest decisions a parent can make, but it can be a life-saving one. He says that rehab isn't perfect, but it's the best thing that exists. Medications cannot replace recovery work. David also notes that he would not help someone using drugs to do anything other than to return to rehab.

David's second set of advice also stems from the lessons he has learned: the necessity of support for loved ones and making sure that they have as much information as possible when making decisions. He also reiterates the necessity of support for addicts—getting them the help they need through rehab programs. Yet David also highlights the line between support and enabling, making sure that one's help isn't taken advantage of.

David also gives advice directly to family members to be patient with themselves and allow for mistakes. He suggests they go to therapy and Al-Anon because shared stories can help people support one another. For David, reading and writing has also helped. Though sometimes he still becomes anxious about the future, he has learned to take it one day at a time.

David returns to the impetus of the book: to serve as a support system itself for family members of addicts. In writing Beautiful Boy, *he hopes that readers will find comfort in relating to his story, but also affirmation that if they want what's best for their loved one, they cannot blame themselves for what has happened.*

Daisy's tenth birthday is also step-up day: Daisy is stepping up to fifth grade and Jasper to seventh. It is also exactly a year since David's brain hemorrhage. That night, the family goes to Nancy and Don's house for their weekly dinner. They play games together, run around with the dogs, and have dinner and cake.

This return to an episode of a happy family celebrating its milestones reinforces that just as Nic can recover from his addiction, so too can their families recover and find joy in their lives and milestones.

Summer comes quickly, which brings surfing and time at the beach. At home, David continues to write when an email arrives from Nic's girlfriend: photos from their recent road trip, with Nic smiling in front of Yellowstone National Park. David calls Nic to say hi: he sounds like Nic. Nic says to give Karen and Jasper and Daisy his love, and then he has to go.

While the book proper ended on a bittersweet note, the epilogue ends on a hopeful one. The contrast between these two endings shows how, in the middle of a crisis, it can seem like things will never get better. But one can never give up hope, because hope is the only thing that will allow Nic to reach moments like this one.

AFTERWORD

David writes an afterward to the book in October 2008. *Tweak*, Nic's book, is published in February 2008. David is breathless reading it, learning about Nic's self-destruction from his own perspective. Nic had nearly died many times, and David learns that Nic also nearly lost an arm due to an infection from shooting up. But reading also helped David understand how Nic's biggest victim was himself. David, Karen, Jasper, and Daisy were simply "collateral damage."

Reading Nic's book gives David a glimpse into Nic's perspective on his own addiction. While it is true that Nic's addiction had had a deeply negative impact on the rest of his family, David becomes even more aware of how Nic's addiction, and the havoc that it wreaked, brought most of the ruin down on Nic himself.

Beautiful Boy is published in February as well, and David and Nic go on tour to talk about the books. They meet hundreds of people, many of whom break down as they speak about their own stories. Many of them have more tragic endings: children or loved ones who died. Hearing this, David is flooded with gratitude that Nic is alive.

Speaking about the book tour, David reinforces how stories help people to understand their own situations better and perhaps to find some support. Even though many others' stories had tragic endings, they feel supported in hearing David's account and in being able to share their own with him and Nic.

There are also stories of hope: people who have been in recovery for three days to 37 years and everyone in between. One girl says she spent her last $20 on Nic's book instead of meth. People tell one another not to give up hope. One woman talks about her daughter, a heroin addict who disappeared for a year, was raped, and spent time in jail, but who is now three years sober.

The girl's story, of spending money on Nic's book instead of meth, shows how the books can make a tangible difference in the lives of addicts. Reading about how much damage addiction can do to a person's life helps them to feel understood and supported, and it perhaps even provides an incentive to stay off drugs.

The last leg of the tour brings David and Nic back to California. Nic then returns to Savannah, Georgia, where he's lived for the past two years. Three months later, he moves back to Los Angeles. Later in the summer, Nic reveals that he had relapsed a few weeks earlier, more than two years after he had stopped using the last time. But this time, he stopped his relapse before it led to catastrophe and immediately checked himself into a residential program.

This incident, of Nic relapsing once more, shows how much progress Nic has made. The story acknowledges that addicts can sometimes be compelled to relapse even after long periods of recovery. What is important, however, is the ability to prevent oneself from succumbing to the same self-destructive tendencies that exacerbate an instance of relapse, and to seek help from the necessary people and programs.


David then writes about addiction more broadly: in 1971, President Nixon began the war on drugs. It has cost hundreds of billions of dollars, while the use of drugs has risen steadily. First-time users are younger, and the drugs are stronger and more widespread. More than 20,000 people die each year of drug overdoses alone, and there are related tragedies—like crime, accidents, suicide, illness, lost productivity—that also harm the nation.

In the last part of David's afterword, he takes some time to address addiction on a national level and argue for why drastic reform is needed. The statistics he cites here indicates the scale of the problem and prove how even though the government is treating addiction as a serious issue, the way in which they are trying to address it is not actually leading to progress.

Health insurance companies, Medicare, and Medicaid often refuse to pay for treatment of illness or injuries caused by drugs or alcohol. Payment of life insurance may be denied if drug or alcohol abuse led to death. Addiction also remains a secret because of the deep shame associated with it. Addicts are often viewed as having a character deficiency rather than a serious illness. Besides criminalizing addiction, society tends to overlook the issue.

David highlights specific policies used by insurance companies and other government programs that discriminate against addiction in contrast to other diseases. This bolsters his argument that if addiction were thought of as a regular disease and not stigmatized as a failure of morality or willpower, it could be treated more easily.

Stigma and prejudice also curtail financial support for research into addiction, and thus few effective treatment options have been developed. Costs for the best treatment programs may run at $30,000 to $50,000 a month, and therefore addicts very rarely get the treatment they need. Caregivers are also often less likely to want to treat addicts because of their belligerence and the persistence of their illness.

David catalogues other reasons why it is important to destigmatize addiction: without a stigma and with more support for research into treatments, better treatments might be made available. Additionally, he notes that addiction is a disease that affects people of all income levels, and for people without wealth or insurance, it is difficult to get the proper treatment.

In 1971, Nixon also declared a war on cancer, which is now much more treatable than it was in the past. In contrast to addiction, the incidence of cancer began dropping in 1990 and has fallen every year since then. David argues that a similar war on addiction is needed: it must be organized and heavily funded. He writes that we spend more than $10 billion a year researching cancer, and each year we misspend more than $50 billion on the war on drugs. We spend billions on prisons, but the annual budget of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, which conducts almost all drug-related research and development, is less than $1 billion.

David again emphasizes how thus far, the government's attempts to curtail addiction have largely focused on the wrong avenues. Criminalizing addiction merely adds to the stigma of it, whereas David argues that it needs to be treated as a disease. He contends that money is better spent on research into treatments and educational programs than on jails. These serve as far more effective methods of deterring addiction in the future.

More money will allow for better medications, cognitive and behavioral therapies, and combination treatments. Insurance companies should be required to cover comprehensive addiction treatments. RAND Corporation's research found that for every dollar spent on treatment for addiction, taxpayers save more than seven dollars in other services through reduced crime and medical fees and increased productivity.

Here, David provides astonishing facts about how treating addiction as a disease is not only a more empathetic and life-saving way of looking at the problems—it can actually cut down the cost of addiction on society.

The other necessary step is prevention: intervening early and preventing the progress of addiction. Some addictions may resist treatment, just like cancer. But cancer treatment has still made dramatic progress, relieving suffering and saving millions of dollars and millions of lives. A war on addiction would do the same: reduce crime, reduce homelessness, reduce emergency room visits and prison populations, and alleviate "immeasurable suffering."

David's conclusion ties together all of the arguments for why it is important to treat addiction as a disease and emphasizes how reforming our views and policies on addiction can tangibly benefit the country. For a book that tries to understand the complicated issue of responsibility for addiction, David illustrates how the country itself is responsible for its addiction epidemic and is therefore also responsible for taking steps that can reduce that epidemic.

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