

STORY TO STAGE

*The Badass Guide to Rising from Pain to
Power*

GININE EMILY SMITH

Story to Stage

Story to Stage: The Badass Guide to Rising from Pain to
Power

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Ginine Emily Smith



Dedication

For my dad, who lived behind eyes of darkness.

*For my mom, who held six of us together
and loved us in the ways she knew how.*

For Tracy, my partner in life, love, and legacy.

*And for every woman who feels invisible through the
noise:
I see you.*

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A Note from the Author

When I was fifteen years old, I made a promise to myself that I'd write a book called *Through the Eyes of Darkness*. I was sitting with a grief I couldn't name and a heaviness I couldn't shake, watching my father disappear into a fog that our family never had the language to explain. I wanted to tell his story because nobody else would tell it right. My mom kept changing the narrative, my siblings were too young or too lost to remember, and my dad, the most caring man I've ever known, was being reduced to the worst chapters of his life. I wanted the world to know who he really was.

That was over forty years ago. I never wrote that book.

Instead, I lived one. And the story turned out to be so much bigger than the darkness.

This isn't the book I planned to write at fifteen. This is the book I earned. Through decades of hiding behind perfectionism, performing for applause I didn't need, numbing pain with anything that would keep me from feeling it, surviving a brush with a serial killer, and flatlining on the way to the hospital after my body finally said, I'm done carrying this for you.

I people-pleased myself into exhaustion. I performed myself into burnout. I wore every hat there was to wear: servant leader, overachiever, peacekeeper, provider, corporate climber, worship singer, and the strong one who never fell apart. I had no boundaries, no margins, and no clue how to say no. And then one ordinary day, walking up a simple flight of stairs, my body shut down. I collapsed, flatlined in the ambulance, and suffered a Transient

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Ischemic Attack that left the doctors shaking their heads because every number in my blood work had bottomed out at zero.

But in that space between life and death, something happened that I've never been able to explain in a way that does it justice. I felt arms wrap around me from behind, strong and loving, holding me as if I had always belonged there. The weight of every sorrow and every shame I had carried for decades was stripped off of me like a sweater I no longer needed. We were ascending on something like a celestial elevator, and I felt complete peace, floating but with purpose, anchored by His arms. Just before we reached the top, He whispered: You aren't ready yet.

When I woke up in that sterile hospital bed, my body was wrecked. But I was changed forever. Because once you've been wrapped in that kind of love, you can never go back to living small.

I wrote this book because I know what it feels like to be invisible in a noisy world. I know what it is to carry a story so heavy that you forget it is even there, mistaking the weight for who you are. I know what it means to show up successful on the outside and utterly lost on the inside. And I know, because I've lived it, that the other side exists.

This book is part memoir and part methodology. My personal story is woven through a framework I call RISE and ROAR because I don't teach from theory. I teach from survival and from the other side of it. Every principle in these pages was forged in real life, tested on real stages, and refined through years of working with women who walked through my door successful on the surface and uncertain underneath.

I'm not going to sit with you in your feelings for another ten years before asking you to take action. I have too much love for you and too little patience for excuses. If you know you were made for more, later may never come. We aren't guaranteed tomorrow.

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So here is my invitation, the same one I offer from every stage I stand on: if this wallflower girl who once wanted to be invisible can turn into a badass lioness singing and speaking on stages around the world, so can you, my Lovely. Take a deep breath. Think back to your five-year-old self who had majestic dreams and goals. What did she want before the world hushed her down and quieted her voice?

If you don't own your story, your story will own you. Your past will own you. Other people's opinions will own you.

Pick up the pen. Rewrite the narrative. This is your book now, too.

But before you pick up that pen, there's something you need to understand about the quicksand you've been standing in, and why the very thing you thought was saving you has been pulling you under all along.

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Introduction: The Call to RISE

Do you ever wonder, is this all there is?

Do you feel down to your core that you are meant for more but find yourself sinking in quicksand so deep you can't grasp the smallest limb?

I see you, and I know that ache.

I know it because I lived inside it for the better part of three decades. On the outside, I had it together. I was earning straight A's even when I was sick. I was singing on stages that people only dream about. I was climbing corporate ladders, leading teams, and showing up at church with a smile that could convince anyone I was fine. But inside, I was navigating the world with a fractured lens, my head noisy and my heart guarded. I was constantly doing, and I was dying inside.

If you're reading this and something in you just went tight, if your chest clenched or your eyes burned or you thought, she's talking about me, then this book was written for you.

I'm Ginine Emily Smith, and I've spent my life on stages of every kind: worship stages, corporate stages, concert stages, recovery stages, and kitchen tables where the most important conversations happen when nobody else is listening. I've been a keynote speaker, a singer-songwriter, a Celebrate Recovery leader, a corporate executive, and a woman who knows what it is to rise from the ashes and overcome.

Everything I teach comes from everything I've lived. This book isn't theory. It's testimony shaped into something you can use.

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The framework at the center of this work is called RISE and ROAR. RISE is the internal transformation: Reclaim, Integrate, Storytell, Empower. It's the deep work of remembering who you really are beneath the masks and the noise, weaving your pain and your power into one unified story, and stepping into a life that's wide open and on fire with purpose. roar is the external transformation: how the world sees you, how you show up in the room, how your body, your voice, your presence, and your brand all communicate the same message.

But I want to be honest with you from the very first page. You don't have to be fully healed to begin. Healing and action happen together, and the work is never a straight line. I think of it as a spiral. You start out in a small circle, and it expands, but you keep revisiting the same themes at deeper levels. Each time around, the circle gets bigger. Each time around, you understand more. I'm still in that spiral. I was still learning and still catching things that surprised me the last time I watched myself on video. You never fully arrive, but you can start right now, today, in the middle of the mess.

I spent nearly thirty years doing deep internal work before the pieces clicked into place. Real transformation doesn't happen overnight, and it didn't happen for me. But that doesn't mean you have to wait thirty years. It means you shouldn't wait another day.

Because here is what I know: if you keep waiting for later, and you stay doing exactly what you're doing right now, five years from now, would you be happy? Or would you be quietly disappointed?

That question wakes people up, and it woke me up the first time someone asked it.

In the chapters ahead, I'll take you into my childhood as one of six kids navigating a home where addiction and depression lived in every room. I'll tell you about the night two police officers walked into my workplace and asked if I

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knew George Russell, and how the floor dropped out of my world when I realized I had been sitting in a serial killer's car just nights before. I'll walk you through the collapse that nearly killed me and the near-death experience that changed everything I believed about love. And I'll show you, step by step, how I turned all of it into a life and a business that now reaches women around the globe.

My favorite client is the woman between thirty-five and sixty who is in her next and best chapter. She knows she was made for more. She's ready to invest in herself. She isn't making excuses. She's asking, what do I need to do to get started?

If that's you, keep reading.

If you don't own your story, your story will own you. But the moment you pick up that pen and rewrite the narrative, everything shifts. You stop being lived by your past. You stop performing for applause. You stop shrinking to fit rooms that were never meant to hold you.

This chapter isn't just my story. It's a mirror, a roadmap, and an invitation for you to rise into the most powerful version of yourself.

If you're ready, take a deep breath, and let's go.

One more thing before we begin. At the opening of each chapter, you'll find a line in italics. Those are lyrics from original songs written and performed by Tracy and me I . Music has always been part of how I process, heal, and communicate what words alone can't carry, and these lines are meant to set the tone for what you're about to read. Let them land before you turn the page.

Because the story starts in a place I didn't talk about for decades, a house where the heaviness was so thick you could feel it the moment you walked through the door, and a little girl who decided, before she even understood what she was deciding, that she'd rather disappear than let anyone see who she really was.

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CHAPTER 1

The Awakening

*Worry was my middle name. Fear, it trips
me off my game. -Lyrics from Surrender-
HeartSoul Revival*

From the time I was about six years old, I hated myself with a thoroughness that most adults would find difficult to imagine in a child. I didn't have a word for it then, and nobody around me was offering one. I just knew, the way you know the sky is up and the ground is down, that something fundamental was wrong with me.

I looked at myself as the ugliest, the stupidest, the worst person in the room wherever I went, and I couldn't figure out where that feeling came from because I don't think I was sexually molested when I was young and I don't remember anything that would explain it. It was just there, like a frequency running underneath everything, a low hum of inferiority that colored every friendship, every classroom, every mirror I walked past.

I assumed I was born broken, because that was the only explanation that made sense for why I felt the way I did.

We were a Catholic family, Polish and German, old-fashioned in every sense of the word, and there were six of us kids growing up in the mountains with a father who was either deployed overseas or sitting on the couch in a fog so thick you could feel it the moment you walked through the door. He'd sit there, stoic, and silent, barely talking, so

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heavy with something none of us had the language to name that the whole house took on his weight.

I didn't understand what depression was. Nobody talked about it in our family, and back then the world didn't talk about it much either. In our household, you didn't name the darkness. You lived around it, walked quietly past it, and prayed it would lift before dinner.

My dad, and I'll say this plainly because he deserves the truth even now: he had a shitty life, excuse my language. His mother, my grandmother, was a German woman straight from the old country who had no love inside of her, and she abused him growing up.

He went into the Navy at a young age just to get away from his family, because they treated him like crap. He was the oldest son, and he started numbing himself by drinking from the time he was fourteen, according to my mom. By the time I was a little girl, he was carrying the weight of an untreated disease on top of a childhood that had already broken something essential in him, and the combination was more than any human being should have to hold.

But here is what made my dad so complicated to grieve, even before he died, and what makes me weep for him to this day: he was the most caring, loving man I've ever known. He loved Jesus with everything in him, and he'd just break out in song sometimes, sitting right there on that couch, singing about the Lord with a voice that cracked with devotion so raw it almost hurt to hear. When we drove those winding mountain roads and he saw a dog hit on the side of the road, even a wild one, he'd pull over to see if it was still alive and if he could help. Every holiday, he brought home the homeless to feed them at our table. His heart was almost too big for the body that carried it, and I think that's what makes his story so unbearable, because a man with that kind of love inside him was never given a fair shake at this life.

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When he was out of the country, I was actually kind of happy, and then I'd feel guilty for being happy, because what kind of daughter feels relief when her father leaves? But I was happy because I didn't have to be around that heaviness, I didn't understand that thick energy settled over everything when he was home. It was a double-edged sword: I loved my dad and I ached for my dad, and I also couldn't breathe when he was in the room. I took on his heaviness the way sponges take on water, and I took on my siblings' energy too, because that's what the oldest daughter does in a family where the adults can't hold it together.

And then there was my mother, who was a force and a diva if I'm being honest, the kind of woman whose way was the only way. She expected perfection from me. She was this perfect princess, or at least that's how she positioned herself, and I put her up on a pedestal so high that I could never quite reach her, which left me with this constant ache of never measuring up. If I stepped out of line, even slightly, the punishment was swift, and so I learned early to be perfect, to be silent, and to keep the peace, because those were the only conditions under which life felt survivable.

I understand now that my mother had her own woundedness, deep and real. Her father, my grandfather, was abusive and alcoholic and did genuine damage to her self-esteem. She did the best she could with the tools she had, and she's evolved into a whole different person as she's gotten older. But when you're a child, you don't have the capacity to do the generational math. You don't see your mother's wounds. You just feel the weight of her expectations and assume you're the one who's failing.

What I carried from those early years was a belief system built on the idea that I wasn't entitled to the normal things in life, things like love and respect that other people seemed to receive without earning them. I believed that God loved everyone, absolutely, and that Jesus was real,

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because I'd been a believer from the start and never once doubted His existence. But deep down inside, in a place so buried I didn't even know it was there; I had decided that He loved them but not me. Not the way He loved the good ones. Yeah, Jesus is real, that's all real, He loves them, but not me. And that twisted, quiet conviction followed me like a shadow for decades.

I created a character in my mind that I now call ND, which stands for Not Deserving. ND was the inner critic who ran the show for most of my life, the voice that told me I wasn't smart enough, not thin enough, not worthy enough, not good enough to sit at any table in any room. She drove me to overachieve, to earn straight A's even when I was sick, to stay busy every waking minute so I'd never have to sit still long enough to actually feel what was happening inside me. ND was relentless, and for years I thought she was telling the truth, because the evidence seemed to be everywhere I looked. I fell short with my friends, fell short with my family, fell short in the mirror every single morning.

But there was another version of me living in my head at the same time, and this part is a little embarrassing to admit, but I'm going to tell it anyway because it matters. I didn't have multiple personalities, so please don't hear it that way. What I had was a vivid inner world, a daydream that played on a constant loop, and in that world, I was someone else entirely. I was beautiful and thin, because I always had a terrible relationship with my body and my weight, and I was bold and fearless and powerful in ways that the real me couldn't even imagine. When I was little, I was Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. I'd go through the motions of doing all this stuff, hating myself worse than anybody could hate themselves, and then I'd retreat into this safe place in my mind where brilliant colors shined through the black and white.

As I got older, the daydream grew with me. I'd see myself as if I was Stevie Nicks on these massive stages, singing to

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thousands, commanding rooms with a power that made the real Ginine, the one with the gutter self-esteem and the knot in her chest, seem like a distant memory. I was dreaming when I was awake, if that makes sense, constantly daydreaming, and it was the only place where I felt safe.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was already visualizing the life I'd eventually live. Looking back, I believe it was God allowing me to see who He created me to be, even though my own sick mind couldn't accept it yet. On the outside, it looked like I was bold as a lioness, making the grades, performing in choir, showing up for everything. But inside? Oh, heck no. Inside I was thinking, Oh God, oh God, I hope nobody's looking at me. I suck. And that gap between who I appeared to be and who I believed I was grew wider every year.

My father's depression, which the family called thickness because that was the language they had, was a stigma in our old-fashioned Catholic household, the kind of thing you hid and never named out loud. Back then, they didn't have the information or the treatment options we have now.

My dad suffered from severe depressive illness, and I carried depression from the time I was a little kid without ever understanding what it was. I just thought I was broken, like I was born defective, because why else would I hate myself from the age of six? Where does that come from if not from something fundamentally wrong with who you are? That's what I believed, and ND reinforced it every single day, whispering that the ugliness I saw in the mirror was the real me and that the daydream girl, the one who was Stevie Nicks and Dorothy and a fearless lioness, was just a fantasy I'd invented to survive.

Then, when I was fifteen, my father went missing.

A few long weeks later, his body was discovered at the bottom of a cliff.

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My mother told everyone he committed suicide, and then years later she changed the story and said she never said that. She's changed the narrative about ten times over the years, each version adjusted to make it easier for her to carry. But I was there. I remember. A murder investigation opened and eventually went cold, and to this day nobody knows exactly what happened to my father on that cliff, and that unresolved mystery is another kind of weight that never fully lifts.

My sister Angie was barely four years old when he died, not even four, and my youngest brother was about two. They were just babies. My two other brothers were already out running with drugs and getting into a life of crime, so they were mostly gone. I had my sister Mary Beth as well, so, it was a lot. And my mother, the force, the diva, the woman who had held herself up as untouchable for my entire childhood, locked herself in her bedroom and wouldn't come out. She was a mess. She was crying constantly, yelling at us, or disappearing behind her door, and the family that was already cracked wide open started shattering in every direction.

It was chaos, man. There was always something going on: somebody getting arrested, somebody doing something they shouldn't be doing, somebody needing something that nobody had the resources to give. And right in the middle of all of it, at fifteen years old, I became the parent.

I was in high school, trying to graduate, dealing with a depression I still didn't have a name for, carrying the trauma of watching my dad put in a straitjacket, carrying the grief of his death, carrying the chaos of a family that was falling apart around me and the poverty that came with my mom being a single mother of six who didn't know what to do.

And she needed my help.

I survived by doing. I was in choir, in theater, working a job and making the grades. I didn't numb with drugs yet,

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not at that age, but I numbed with high achieving and constant motion, because when you're always moving, you never have to think, and you never have to feel. I was so busy all the time, in every extracurricular activity I could find, working any job I could get, constantly keeping my brain occupied so I'd never have to sit with the grief, the fear, or the self-hatred that was always waiting for me in the quiet.

The promise I made to myself that year was to write a book. I was going to call it "Through the Eyes of Darkness", and I didn't want to write it to help anyone or to build a platform or to launch some kind of career. I wanted to write it to honor my father, because nobody else was going to tell his story the right way.

My mother's version kept shifting, my siblings were either too young to remember or too lost in their own chaos to care, and my dad was being reduced to the worst chapters of his life by the only people who should have been protecting his legacy.

I wanted to vindicate him. I wanted the world to know that John was more than his disease, more than his addiction, more than the way his story ended. He was the man who sang to Jesus on the couch with a voice that broke with love. He was the man who pulled over for dying animals on mountain roads when the rest of us just wanted to get where we were going.

He was the man who fed strangers at his own table on holidays when his family barely had enough for themselves. He deserved more. He was made to be more. But he never got the chance to step into it, because the depression and the lack of understanding and the cruelty of the world he was born into never gave him room to become who God actually created him to be.

Maybe you didn't lose a parent at fifteen. But I'm willing to bet you've had a moment where the ground fell out from under you, a moment that split your life cleanly into before

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and after, when everything you thought you understood about yourself and the world was rearranged without your permission and there was nothing you could do but stand in the wreckage and try to figure out which direction was forward.

That's where this story begins. Not in the darkness itself, but in the awakening that happens when the floor drops and you realize, maybe for the first time, that you've been sleepwalking through your own life.

I was awake now, terrified, carrying more than any fifteen-year-old should ever have to carry, and I had no idea what to do with any of it. So, I did the only thing I knew how to do: I ran. Not away from the pain, exactly, but straight into a darkness that was louder than the silence at home, a darkness that felt like freedom and looked like belonging and came with a tribe of people who accepted me exactly as I was, until the night two police officers walked into my workplace, asked for me by name, and said something that turned my blood to ice.



For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

Chapter Lesson: Awakening begins the moment you realize you've been sleepwalking through your own life, and you decide to open your eyes.

*Open your eyes and find you lost reality.
Look up from way down there and find out someone*

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cares.

*Unpack your clothes and things and find yourself a pair
of wings.*

"Open Your Eyes," HeartSoul Revival

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CHAPTER 2

Flirting with Darkness

*Do you see my face at night when you sleep,
do you still cry when you think of me? Lyrics
from 'Christmas Wish' by Ginine Emily &
Mr. Tracy Lee Smith*

The night I sat in George Russell's car, driving around in the dark looking for our missing friend Mary, I had no idea that the man behind the wheel had already killed her.

I didn't know that the quiet, polite regular from the Black Angus who left big tips and remembered everyone's name, the guy who'd been giving me a shoulder to cry on while I was devastated over some idiot DJ who'd broken my heart, had been breaking into women's apartments for months and stealing their most intimate belongings: photographs, negligees, jewelry.

I didn't know that he'd started his criminal life as a cat burglar under the care of his adoptive parents, well-to-do dentists from Mercer Island, and that somewhere along the way he'd graduated into something far worse. I didn't know that a local author would write a book called *The Charmer* about the whole thing, and that my name would be scattered throughout because we'd lived in the same apartment complex and worked the same restaurant and I'd called this man a friend. I didn't know that bodies had been showing up across the East Side, or that one had turned up right down the street from my mother's house.

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And I absolutely didn't know that within a few weeks, two fully uniformed police officers with big guns would walk into the bank where I worked my day job, ask for me by name, and say words that still sit in my chest decades later: Do you know George Russell?

But I'm getting ahead of myself, and the truth is that the serial killer, as terrifying as that chapter was, isn't what this part of my story is really about.

The question underneath all of it is simpler and more important: How does a girl who once dreamed she was Stevie Nicks on a massive stage end up sitting in a killer's car at twenty-one years old, thinking she's safe? The answer has everything to do with what happens to your nervous system, your identity, and your ability to recognize danger when you've spent your entire life numbing yourself so thoroughly that chaos starts to feel like home.

I didn't understand any of that then. I didn't have the framework or the language. But the framework I teach now, the RISE process that has helped hundreds of women reclaim their lives, was forged in the wreckage of this exact season, even though it would take me another twenty years to recognize what I'd learned.

When people hear that someone went off the rails after a trauma, they picture some cinematic unraveling: rock bottom in a ditch, sirens and flashing lights, a dramatic intervention with tearful family members holding letters they wrote the night before. That wasn't how it happened for me. I was still showing up. I was still performing. I was working at a bank during the day, cocktail waitressing at the Black Angus at night, going to college full-time, and playing in a band on the weekends. I was still the high achiever, still the girl who never stopped moving, still the girl who got the grades and made it look easy.

That's the thing about high-functioning people who are falling apart: nobody sees it because the performance is so

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convincing that even you forget you're drowning. And I'd been perfecting that performance since I was six years old, so by twenty I was world-class at it.

I had a detrimentally low self-worth, and I spent years living in fear, in addiction, in self-loathing, and in a life that was far too small for who I was meant to be. I wasn't making a five-year plan. I was barely making it to Friday. And the part I didn't understand yet, the part that would later become the foundation of everything I teach, is that when your nervous system isn't regulated and you've numbed yourself to the point where your baseline is chaos, things become normal that should never be normal. You stop recognizing danger because danger feels like Tuesday. That's why people stay in abusive relationships. That's why I stayed in mine. Because I genuinely didn't know what normal looked like anymore, and the abnormal had become so familiar it felt like home.

I didn't start using drugs or even drinking until well after high school. All through those earlier years, numbing came through overachieving and constant busyness, which is something I want to make clear because a lot of people think numbing has to involve substances. It doesn't. You can numb yourself with high achievement just as effectively as you can with a bottle or a pill. You keep yourself so busy, so constantly in motion, that you never have to sit still long enough to feel what's actually happening inside you. That was my drug of choice for years before the real drugs entered the picture.

But when I was about twenty, I started hanging out with people who partied, and at twenty-one I started working as a cocktail waitress at the Black Angus in Crossroads. That's when the floor tilted.

I met the DJ. He was thirty-nine, gorgeous, and for reasons that my self-esteem couldn't even begin to process, he noticed me. Out of everyone in that restaurant, he noticed me. And for a girl who had spent her entire life believing

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she was the ugliest, the stupidest, the worst person in every room, that kind of attention was like being handed oxygen after years of holding your breath.

We started dating, and it turned out he was a drug dealer from Miami, not the kind you picture on a street corner with a hoodie and a burner phone, but a man with real money who lived well and did the DJ thing on the side because he loved it. He introduced me to cocaine, and it was free, and at first, I'm going to be honest with you because there's no point in writing a book if you're going to lie in it, cocaine felt like the answer to every problem I had.

It gave me confidence, the thing I'd been starving for since childhood. I stopped eating and started losing weight, which fed the part of me that had always had a terrible relationship with my body. It gave me energy to work all those jobs and go to college and play in the band without ever slowing down. I'd do a couple of lines and then clean the entire house like a machine. And I told myself I wasn't a drug addict because drug addicts live under bridges and lose their jobs and can't function, and here I was, functioning better than ever. Is delusional the right word? Because that's exactly what it was. I was delusional, and the delusion was comfortable, and the comfort was killing me so slowly that I mistook it for progress.

Then the DJ broke my heart, because of course he did. He was sleeping with everyone in the bar, including my friends, and when I found out, the source of the cocaine and the source of the attention disappeared at the same time.

My heart was broken and the addiction was still alive, and suddenly I was scrambling, running with people who were shady, getting into groups and situations that were dangerous because I didn't have that cocaine source anymore and I needed what it gave me. It wasn't a long period of time, truly. You hear about some people who

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spend two decades in that world, but for me the whole thing took about a year or two. But a year or two was long enough to put me in a serial killer's passenger seat.

Here's how I ended up close to George Russell, and it's such a painfully ordinary story that it almost makes the horror of what he was doing feel surreal. The DJ who broke my heart was still working at the Black Angus, and I had to keep working there too because I needed the money, so every shift I had to look at this man who'd shattered me and act like I was fine. George was a regular customer, everybody's favorite, charming as anything, the kind of guy that a cop named Lightning who was a regular at the bar considered a personal friend. That's how smooth George Russell was, charming like Ted Bundy, the kind of charming that makes you feel safe precisely because it's designed to.

And when the DJ destroyed me, George was the one who showed up with kindness. He gave me a shoulder to cry on because this idiot guy so devastated me, and he never hit on me, and he never asked for anything in return. That's how I got close to him.

The people at that restaurant were my family, and I know how that sounds, but anyone who's worked in a bar or a restaurant knows exactly what I mean. When your real family is shattered and scattered and your mother is locked in a bedroom and your brothers are in trouble with the law and your baby siblings need someone to raise them and you're twenty-one and alone, the people who work beside you every night become the people you belong to. They treated me with respect and love, and maybe it was disingenuous, I don't know, but at the time it felt real, and real was something I hadn't felt in a very long time.

What I've learned since then, and what I now teach, is that there's actually more realness sometimes in those tribes than in the polished, put-together communities we think we're supposed to belong to. Darkness brings people close

Ginine Emily Smith

in ways that comfort never does. Unfortunately, that closeness can also bring you to the edge of something you can't come back from, and I was standing right on that edge without even knowing the ground beneath me was crumbling.

George Russell was the East Side Killer, and the criminal psychologists who studied him years later pieced together something that still chills me: he didn't hate all women. He hated women who rejected him. Any form of perceived rejection could trigger him: walking away from a conversation, telling him you didn't want to be friends, anything that felt like dismissal. I treated him with respect, and that's why he didn't target me at first. But toward the end, I had distanced myself from him, and to a man like George Russell, that was enough. That was all it took.

He'd broken into my place while I was gone and stolen intimate things, the way he'd done to other women, the ones who didn't survive. And when the police came to my door holding my own belongings, a photograph, a negligee, pieces of my private life that should never have been in anyone else's hands, and they asked me, is this yours? I said yes without understanding what it meant. They told me they'd found those items in George Russell's apartment when they went to arrest him, but he'd gone on the run by then, and for a while nobody knew where he was.

Ultimately, what tied the murders to him was the jewelry he'd been stealing from victims and pawning, but before they caught him, there was a window of time where a man who had decided I was a target was loose in the world and I was walking around living my life as if nothing had changed.

I believe that sometimes God will shake your world to save your life, and it doesn't always feel like grace. Sometimes it feels like the floor falling out. Sometimes it feels like two