

**Addict in the Family:  
Stories of Loss, Hope,  
and Recovery**

*BEVERLY CONYERS*

**HAZELDEN®**

ADDICT  
IN THE FAMILY

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BEVERLY CONYERS

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Author's note

All the stories in this book are based on actual experiences and personal interviews. Names and certain facts have been changed to protect the anonymity of the men and women who shared their stories for this book.

*This book is dedicated to the Tuesday night  
group with heartfelt appreciation  
—and to my daughter with love.*

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## INTRODUCTION

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It is a Thursday night in late November. The sky is blanketed with low, thick clouds, the air heavy with impending rain. Bare branches of old trees carve faint silhouettes in a world of black and gray, relieved only by a single light above a narrow door and a horizontal row of five small square windows close to the ground and lit from within.

Inside the church basement, thirteen people sit around two rectangular folding tables pushed together. On the tables are books and pamphlets, a few bottles of water, and a box of tissues. The room is brightly lit by suspended fluorescent tubes, revealing pale yellow concrete walls, a green-and-white tile floor, and thin white curtains on the windows. The lights emit a faint whine, punctuated by the chirps and occasional clangs of three old radiators. No one pays any attention to the noises. All eyes are on Dot, a woman in her sixties with soft, peach-tinted hair, a tired face made up in muted shades of pink, and sad blue eyes. She is, in her way, an attractive woman, with a large, soft body and a kindly face—the kind of face you associate with grandmothers who have spent their lives looking after their families and putting others first.

Tonight, Dot clutches a tissue in her hands. She announces to her support group, “He almost drowned in beef stew.” Her voice holds amazement, as well as grief. “Honest to God. I was in the front room watching television with my husband. And something in the back of my mind says, ‘David’s been

awful quiet,' so I went out to the kitchen, and there he was with his face in a bowl of stew. He didn't seem to be breathing. So I lifted up his head, and there was gravy and little bits of meat all over his face. 'You gotta stop this,' I said to him." She twists the tissue in her hands. "Honest to God. If I hadn't checked up on him, he would have drowned."

She is speaking of her thirty-six-year-old son, the baby of the family, the one who, as a little boy, had been the clown who made everyone laugh. A person couldn't be around David for five minutes without smiling at some silly thing he said or did—like the time during the third-grade Christmas pageant when he stood on stage with a dozen or so other children and sang both verses of "Silent Night" with his eyes crossed. She had wanted to kill him but ended up giggling instead.

Even now he can make her laugh, though tears are never far behind. David has been a heroin addict for eleven years and on methadone for the past three. She knows he still shoots up on occasion, but his latest thing is pills. He's been prescribed painkillers for a knee injury he got from falling down a flight of stairs. The pills are morphine based. David has gone through a month's prescription in four days.

"I locked them up in my safe, but somehow he got into them," she tells her group. "A drug addict can get anything if he makes up his mind to do it, you know."

A few heads nod in understanding.

"The thing is, I didn't say anything to my husband. I didn't want to get him going, because he would've been off the wall. I just told David to go wash his face and put on a clean shirt." She shakes her head. "I'm learning."

There's an extended silence. No one rushes to fill it. It's as if the group has all the time in the world to think things over and wait for Dot to conclude her tale. One woman surrepti-

tiously wipes her eyes, while a man gazes grimly at a distant wall. The sound of breathing blends with the faint whine of the lights. After two or three minutes, Dot says, "I thought it would be different when he came home this time. You know?"

She laughs, but there is no humor in the sound.

A few minutes later a man is talking. He is a big man, broad shouldered and physically powerful. He wears metal-framed glasses with thick lenses that magnify his eyes, giving him an oddly vulnerable look. He owns his own business and is thinking about retiring in a few years. What is utmost in his mind tonight is his daughter Lila. She is twenty-two and has already caused him more heartache than his other three kids combined. After almost dying of anorexia in high school, she discovered pot in college and quickly moved on to crack cocaine and heroin. She dropped out of school in her sophomore year and moved with her boyfriend a couple of states away.

"She was home last week for Thanksgiving," he says, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "She looked pretty good. Thin but not skinny, thank God. I wouldn't want to go through that again." He squints, searching for words. "My wife said she was high, but I couldn't tell. She wasn't falling into her plate anyway."

There are a few chuckles.

"I hated to see her go back, but I know she has to live her own life. I can't live it for her." Some heads nod in agreement.

"Anyway, my wife was changing the sheets after Lila left, and she found some clean needles under the mattress. I wanted to throw them in the garbage, but my wife said no. She said the next time Lila comes home we want her to have clean needles, don't we?"

A few people squirm, as if their chairs have become uncomfortable. "I'm still thinking about that one," he says. "I mean, I guess so. But I don't know."

The hands on the big round wall clock move on. “I could kill my sister for what she’s doing to my parents!” exclaims a pretty, young woman. “I told him I’m not bailing him out this time,” asserts a middle-aged man. “I went through it with my daughter, and now it’s starting all over again with my grandson,” says a woman with white hair. Her voice is angry, but before she finishes speaking, her anger dissolves into tears.

One by one the members of the group speak. They talk of children, husbands and wives, parents, brothers and sisters. They share tales of deception, theft, jail, homelessness, institutions, sickness, and poverty—bleak narratives that document the destructive course of substance abuse. At the heart of every story lies the pain of having an addict in the family.

Few experiences in life quite match the feelings of horror, fear, helplessness, and grief that families experience when someone they love becomes addicted to alcohol or other drugs. They watch in dismay as the addict becomes alienated from the family and undergoes profound changes. Activities that once brought the addict pleasure are abandoned, old friends are pushed away, and the addict withdraws into a world that is inaccessible to anyone who tries to help.

Families ask themselves if their loved one is gone forever, replaced by an untrustworthy, soulless being like the empty-eyed creatures in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. More urgently, they ask themselves what they can do to effect a “cure” and get their loved one back to normal. They hope for a quick fix. Maybe detox and a good treatment facility will be all it takes. All too often, they end up joining the addict on the merry-go-round of denial, anger, confusion, and blame.

It’s a depressing business, one that’s experienced annually by millions of American families. In 1999, the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse revealed that an estimated 10.3 million Americans were dependent on either alcohol or

illicit drugs. Chances are someone in your family is among them. If that is the case, you have my sympathy. I have been in your shoes. The heroin addiction of my own daughter has motivated me to write this book. After the initial shock of learning about her addiction, I began to look for answers to overwhelming questions: Had I caused her addiction? How could I have been so blind as not to see it earlier? What was it doing to her health, her happiness, her future? Was there any hope for her recovery? How could I help her get well? Was it possible to find any peace of mind and have a life of my own?

I found that while there were many books that dealt with various aspects of addiction and recovery, none seemed to fill my need for reliable information and helpful advice from people who have endured a similar crisis. I decided to expand my research to substance-abuse counselors, to other families of addicts, and to addicts themselves—both active users and those in recovery. This book is the compilation of what I have learned.

It does not promise simple solutions or definitive answers to all your questions. That would be an impossible promise to keep. What it does offer is education and support in the form of practical information, advice from others who have been there, and the healing power of shared experiences. The real-life stories that people have shared in this book are intended to do much more than illustrate a point. They are intended to reduce the feelings of isolation often experienced by families who are coping with addiction and to be a source of comfort, insight, understanding, and hope.

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## O N E

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### A FAMILY DISEASE

When Shelly began to talk about her daughter, she seemed to visibly shrink. Her shoulders slumped, her head drooped, and even the muscles of her pretty face went slack. She suddenly looked ten years older than the chic, petite blond who had walked through the door only moments before.

“I know this is hard for you,” I apologized.

She waved her hand and paused to gather her thoughts.

We were seated at a corner table set apart from the others in the bookstore café. Around us people chatted, laughed, or read one of the books or magazines set out for customers’ enjoyment. There was a pleasant smell of coffee and baked goods.

The café was one of my favorite places, full of warmth and life. But in our little corner, the air was weighted with sadness. “If someone had told me two years ago that I’d be having this conversation, I’d have said they were out of their mind,” she said with an attempted laugh. “Colleen was always the most responsible, considerate, and *respectable* girl you could ever meet. I don’t think she ever even got a parking ticket.”

I shook my head in sympathy.

“She had a perfect life. Everything she ever wanted. Her husband adored her. They had that sweet house and those beautiful babies.” Her voice caught a little, and she swallowed some water before almost hissing out her next words: “And then she met that bum!”

“That bum” was a twenty-nine-year-old drug dealer named Marlon. How he and Colleen had met isn’t clear, but soon after, her life took a 180-degree turn for the worse. She experimented with cocaine and in seemingly no time at all was hooked on crack. At first her husband had no explanation for Colleen’s wild mood swings, evasiveness, irritability, and occasional incoherence. He urged her to see a doctor, but on the day of her appointment, he came home to find a note taped to the fridge: *Jeff, I’m sick of living for everyone else. I’m going to start living for myself.*

“She dropped the kids off at my house that day,” Shelly remembered. “I thought she looked tired. And thin. Awfully thin. But I had no idea anything was going on. Jeff didn’t say anything until later.”

Colleen moved in with her dealer and quit her job as an insurance claims adjuster, a position she had held for more than four years. At first she visited Jeff and the children three or four times a week, but the visits tapered off to no more than once or twice a month.

Shelly speculated, “I think Jeff was relieved, in a way, because her behavior was so unpredictable that she upset the children. I think she scared them.” Shelly’s eyes filled with tears. “Can you imagine? My grandchildren being scared of their own mother.”

After nearly a year of begging Colleen to get help, Jeff filed for divorce and was awarded full custody of their children. Although the divorce was not final when Shelly and I talked, she was certain that reconciliation would be impos-

sible. "I think he hates her for what she's done to the kids," she said. "And all the rest of it. The lies, the stealing. He won't let her in the house anymore. Not since she walked out with the CD player and the VCR. We *know* where they ended up. At some pawnshop and up her nose."

Shelly's voice was harsh, but behind the anger was, I suspected, boundless grief. Her next words confirmed my thoughts. "Where will it end?" she whispered. "I think about it every waking moment of my life. No matter where I am or what I do, she's right there with me, filling up my head. Last month, my husband and I left for a weekend to get away from everything. We shouldn't have bothered. I was like a zombie. I was sick with fear the whole time. I can't stop worrying about what's going to happen to my daughter. I know she's done horrible, despicable things. But it's the drugs making her do it. It really is. Underneath it all she's still a good person."

She wiped her eyes with a napkin. "I'm so afraid. She's my baby, and I'm so scared she's not going to make it."

Her worry is not unwarranted. The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) reported 19,102 street-drug-related deaths in 1999, up from 14,843 in 1996, excluding accidents, homicides, AIDS, and other potential consequences of drug addiction. The Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN), which tracks drug abuse in forty-one major metropolitan areas across the nation, reported 601,776 drug-related emergency room visits in 2000, up from 527,000 in 1997. From 1999 to 2000, the total drug-related emergency room visits increased 20 percent in patients between twelve and seventeen and 13 percent in those between eighteen and twenty-five. The numbers of alcohol-related deaths, accidents, and diseases are even higher. NCHS reported 19,358 alcohol-induced deaths in 1999 and 26,552 deaths from chronic liver disease and cirrhosis. Liver disease, often the