

CAPTURING HOPE
From Pain's Deepest Prison
to Freedom's Dawn

A Memoir

BJ RAE

**"Nothing's impossible, Little Angel. Your hope and strength
are greater than anything."**

—Grandma

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Capturing Hope:

From Pain's Deepest Prison to Freedom's Dawn

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We become stronger by doing what is possible,
capturing hope with each step forward.

--BJ Rae

**Serenity Prayer
for Chronic Pain Sufferers**

Grant me the serenity to accept the pain I cannot
change today, the courage to pursue healing when it is
possible, and the wisdom to know that this moment's
intensity does not define me.

Grant me strength when my body feels weak, peace
when my nerves are screaming, and hope when
darkness surrounds me.

Grant me the patience to weather the storms of
flare-ups, understanding to forgive myself on days
when getting out of bed is my greatest achievement,
and grace to remember that my worth is not measured
by what my body can or cannot do.

Grant me the insight to listen to my body without fear,
rest without guilt, seek joy in small moments, and trust
that even when I'm in pain, I am whole.

Finally, grant me the clarity to distinguish between
what I can change and what I must accept, the courage
to continue striving for better days, and the serenity to
find peace within my journey of healing, knowing that
each step forward, no matter how small, leads toward the light.

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Prologue

I thought I knew pain.

What a foolish assumption that was.

What ambushed me that Tuesday morning wasn't mere discomfort—it was biological warfare conducted by my own nervous system. Every heartbeat detonated glass fragments beneath my skin. The RV's couch transformed into medieval torture equipment, and each breath became a calculated negotiation with agony that made my son's birth seem like a gentle massage.

Outside, morning commuters rushed toward normal lives while I lay trapped inside this metal cocoon. I was discovering that pain is a geography of territories mapped in screaming nerve endings, with borders drawn by raw flesh that interpreted even a slight brush of fabric against my skin as assault with a deadly weapon.

Note to self: when your body stages a coup, it doesn't bother with a gentle takeover.

The sensation started as pinpricks before exploding into molten lightning. My body had apparently enrolled in an advanced paranoia class and was treating cotton clothing like razor wire soaked in battery acid. The remnants of this morning's ginger ale threatened rebellion in my stomach, while each breath required strategic planning worthy of a military operation.

"BJ? What's happening?" Tom's voice cracked as our RV swerved slightly, and his knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. Through the windshield, pine trees blurred past like silent witnesses to my biological meltdown. His eyes darted between me and the road, calculating distances to hospitals with the desperation of a man watching his world implode in real-time.

Because nothing says "romantic road trip" like your wife spontaneously combusting from the inside out.

I tried to speak, but words dissolved into fragments before reaching my lips. This wasn't the familiar ache I'd carried for decades—my old companion that arrived predictably, almost expectedly. This agony possessed teeth. Claws. Intelligence. It studied my anatomy like a predator mapping territory and claiming ownership of nerves that had forgotten their job description.

"Just drive," I gasped between waves of fire that felt like being electrocuted by lightning while swimming in molten copper. "Keep driving."

Tom's reflection caught mine in the rearview mirror—two souls staring into an abyss neither of us understood. His hand reached back. His fingers hovered near my feet without touching, already learning the cruel rules for loving someone whose body had declared war on comfort itself.

Yes, we'd discovered new depths to the phrase "for better or worse." Marriage counselors never covered spontaneous nerve mutinies.

The highway stretched endlessly ahead, each mile marker counting down to a future I couldn't yet comprehend. Through the fog of anguish and terror, one thought crystallized with devastating clarity: whatever switch had flipped inside my body wasn't flipping back. This wasn't a temporary malfunction requiring gentle coaxing. It was a permanent revolution, and my anatomy had rewritten its own constitution without consulting the previous government.

This moment marked the end of my old existence and the beginning of an education in surviving insufferable physical torment. It was the starting point for my doctoral studies, in which I discovered that the human spirit can endure what the body insists is unsurvivable.

The disease that would soon earn its nickname—the suicide disease—had just submitted its formal application for permanent residency within my body.

I had no idea that pain would become my greatest teacher, or that learning to inhabit a body at war with itself would show me exactly what strength means.

End of Chapter 23: The Greatest Wisdom

The frightened child who once sought safety in dark hiding places has become a beacon of possibility. The radiance she carries wasn't born from avoiding the tempest—it was forged within its very heart. Today, when someone asks me how I survived, I no longer search for clinical explanations or describe medical miracles. The answer lives in the simplest truth: I survived by choosing hope over despair, one breath at a time.

I used to think hope was something that happened to other people—those with easier lives, stronger bodies, and gentler stories. I thought it was a luxury I couldn't afford, a privilege reserved for those who hadn't been broken the way I had. Now my hope refuses to stay contained within me. It demands expression, seeks connection, and insists on being shared. What I thought was the end of my journey—learning to live with chronic illness—was actually preparation for what came next: discovering that my hardest-won insights might ease someone else's suffering.

No one is certain of what tomorrow will bring—more struggles, perhaps, or unexpected grace. But I understand this: the greatest wisdom isn't knowing all the answers. It's recognizing that my path through pain can become a map to freedom.

Whether your pain is caused by illness, loss, betrayal, addiction, poverty, memories from your past, service to your country, religious issues, or any of the million ways life can bring us to our knees, it is real. Your anguish has purpose. Your scars tell stories. Your survival carries meaning far beyond what you can imagine. The dawn you're seeking isn't just coming—it's already

breaking, one courageous breath at a time. Your greatest fears carry the very energy you need to transform them into stepping stones toward the life that awaits you beyond the next sunrise.

I urge you to nurture hope like candles burning against a fierce storm. Shield their flames from the very gales that threaten to defeat you and the tempests that make your circumstances seem impossible. Never let them die. When darkness presses close and change feels too distant, dream about moving mountains one pebble at a time. Then each breath you take becomes rebellion. Each small step forward—a boundary drawn, a laugh shared, another morning faced—tends hope's fragile fire. Hope isn't captured in grand moments but in the quiet choice to believe tomorrow might differ from today. If you recognize that your greatest strength was never in your muscles but instead in the power of a spirit that refuses to be extinguished, you will capture hope, just as I have.

And, as it happened with me, the very thing that breaks you open can become a doorway to the greatest wisdom through which the hope you've captured shines for others to follow.

Epilogue: Mountain Peak Perspective

My nose was completely stuffed. At 1:30 AM, this felt like a miracle.

Well, isn't this delightfully normal? My sinuses have apparently decided to throw their own little party without consulting my need to sleep.

In these peaceful moments between sleep and waking, I floated in the center of our king-sized bed like a ship anchored in a safe harbor. Apache's solid warmth pressed against my spine, his breathing a steady metronome. Gizzie's five-pound frame nestled against my chest, her soft hair tickling my chin as she dreamed whatever notions fill the minds of creatures who know they're loved completely despite their flaws. Their combined presence created a fortress of dog hair and devotion, evidence of the healing power of unconditional acceptance.

I shifted slightly, marveling at simple, normal congestion that had been imperceptible beneath CRPS's screaming symphony. During my darkest days, when my nervous system waged war against my own flesh, minor secondary ailments were overwhelmed by intense agony that consumed every cell in my body. My allergies, headaches, and minor aches became casualties of a far more intense war. Now this stuffy nose represented the miracle of the return of life's smaller irritations and my body remembering how to prioritize its complaints.

Tom stirred beside me, his soldier's instincts still sharp. Even in sleep, he monitored my rhythms with the devotion of someone who'd learned that love sometimes means becoming a human early warning system. His eyes opened, finding mine in the darkness like a man who'd spent years

navigating by the stars of my pain levels. His voice carried the automatic readiness that comes from dealing with countless crises. "What do you need?"

"Just tissues," I breathed, marveling at the simplicity. No emergency medications. No ice packs or heating pads. No frantic calculations about which position might offer relief. Just the most ordinary of remedies. Finally, a medical situation that can be solved with something from the bathroom instead of medications that cost thousands of dollars and sometimes require international travel.

Tom slipped from the bed, his bare feet finding their path like a mountain guide navigating familiar trails. The sound of the soft rustle of the tissue box painted normalcy across our sanctuary. Apache's ear twitched at Tom's movement, but he remained pressed against me, understanding somehow that this wasn't the urgent mobilization his instincts had learned to expect.

"Here, Sweetie." Tom appeared beside the bed, extending tissues like offerings of the most precious silk. In his other hand, he held a small wastebasket that was ready to receive allergy's evidence. His face, illuminated by moonlight streaming through our windows, bore an expression I'd come to treasure—not the tense vigilance of crisis management, but the soft attentiveness of ordinary love.

How many times had he gotten up during the night to help me during my worst episodes? There had been countless occasions when my tears had drenched our world like rain during a hurricane and the only trash he collected was the crumpled remnants of hope I'd discarded in despair. Now his steady presence transformed a mundane moment into something sacred. I blew my nose carefully, trying not to disturb the warm bodies flanking me like living sentries. The sound, muffled yet satisfying, carried the weight of a thousand small victories. Gizzie's eyes opened briefly, her dark gaze reflecting understanding before she settled deeper against my arm. Apache's rhythmic breathing continued unchanged, his trust in his safety absolute.

"Better?" Tom asked, settling the wastebasket within reach before resting on his side of the mattress.

The question carried layers of meaning neither of us needed to voice. Better than nights when the strongest pain meds couldn't touch my agony? Better than hours spent researching experimental treatments in foreign countries? Better than terrifying moments when permanent escape had whispered false promises through amber bottles?

"Better than I ever imagined possible," I replied, my words barely disturbing the hush of darkness.

We talked for a few minutes, our conversation meandering like mountain streams through perfectly mundane topics. Tom snuggled as close as Gizzie's presence allowed. His arm encircled me, and our fingers intertwined as we discussed tomorrow's plans—a grocery run, a call to check on a friend, and perhaps a walk on the dogs' favorite trail if the weather cooperated. These ordinary aspirations, once impossible dreams, now seemed as natural as breathing.

Who knew that grocery shopping would become a radical act of hope? Next thing you know, I'll be getting excited about doing laundry.

"Remember when you couldn't even touch a room-temperature teapot?" Tom murmured, his thumb tracing gentle circles against my palm.

That October morning in 2019 seemed like another lifetime—a memory of the woman I'd once been but barely recognized from this summit of understanding. The room temperature teapot that had announced CRPS's arrival with devastating finality now felt like the opening line of a different narrative entirely—one that led not to destruction but to profound transformation.

"I remember thinking my life was over," I whispered. "That the woman I'd been was gone forever."

"She was," Tom replied with quiet certainty. "But look who took her place."

If someone had told me ten years ago that I'd one day be grateful for allergy symptoms, I'd have recommended immediate psychiatric evaluation. Now I understand that recovery means finding joy in problems you're healthy enough to notice.

As I drifted toward sleep's embrace, surrounded by love and gentle breathing, I reflected on the journey that had brought me to this moment. My climb up pain's mountain had been steep and treacherous, with many days when I nearly collapsed on the slippery granite terrain. But I persisted and made it to the peak—despite CRPS, systemic autonomic dysfunction, and the cascade of other secondary conditions that had tried to consume my spirit along with my body.

In the quiet moments before sleep claims me completely, I sometimes marvel at the woman typing responses to desperate emails at midnight, the same fingers that once couldn't hold a room-temperature teapot now offering hope across digital distances. Messages from strangers arrive daily—fellow warriors who've found courage in my words, discovering they're not alone in battles others can't see. This book itself has become another form of medicine—not pills that arrive in amber bottles, but healing that spreads from soul to soul and proves that recovery

multiplies when we dare to share our scars. The child who survived by staying invisible has learned that true strength sometimes means becoming gloriously and unapologetically seen.

I am a survivor. A warrior. I have survived abuse and murder attempts as a child, a violent first marriage that bruised the top two-thirds of my brain and nearly ended my life, years of struggling with numerous health issues, and the agony of the suicide disease with its accompanying torments. I owe my survival to my mentors throughout my life—my grandma, my adopted mom, my stepfather, my older brother, my husband, and our dogs, each of whom taught me that true strength isn't measured in what we can lift, but in what we refuse to let crush our spirits.

As I stand on this summit of understanding, I now know that every trial has prepared me for this view from the highest point in my life and the transformation of anguish into survival and hope. After sunrise, I would awaken transformed, wielding strengths forged in pain's fire: the ability to find light in absolute darkness, the ability to transform suffering into service, and the ability to recognize that sometimes the most profound healings happen not despite our struggles but because of them. From pain's deepest prison to freedom's dawn, I've learned the truth about hope: it isn't something that happens to us—it's something we choose to cultivate, nurture, and share. Every morning we wake, we face this same choice again. Will we surrender to the voice that whispers our problems are permanent, or will we plant seeds of possibility in the soil of our struggles?

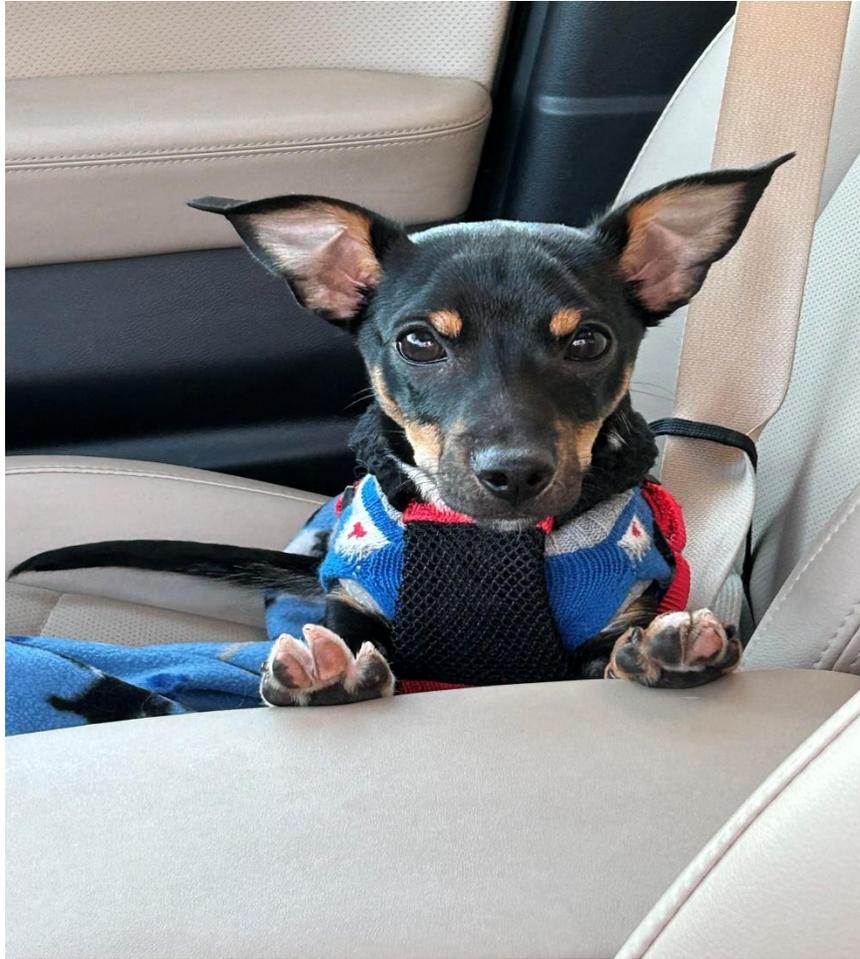
Your battles—whatever form they take—are not your ending. They're your beginning. The very challenges that seem determined to break you are actually forging the strength you'll need for the life waiting on the other side. Choose hope, not because it's easy, but because it's the only path that will lead you home to yourself.

I used to think capturing hope meant permanently solving all my problems, but I've discovered it actually means living peacefully surrounded by love while finding miracles in the most ordinary moments—one stuffy nose at a time.

Pictures



When Chico promised the nursing home director to spread hope, he failed to mention he also hogs the bed. But hey, doesn't shared hope also mean shared blankets?



**When Apache had just eaten the couch in the RV and was on his way to the
vet to make sure he hadn't swallowed anything that could hurt him,
he said,
"The defendant pleads adorable and claims the couch started it."**



When Gizzie was only three months old, she was already a professional snuggler with a diverse portfolio of toys, love, and hope.



**Lana the Doberman said, "I used to chase intruders.
Now a 2 1/4-pound furry alarm clock
that insists on stealing my space chases me."**



During my first water taxi ride after arriving in Venice, Google Maps said, “Regular navigation has left the chat. Please follow the lights dancing on the water to healing. Let the memory of your mother's husband laughing while you almost drown become a pathway that carries you toward wholeness. Prove that even your deepest fears are doorways to freedom.”



**St. Mark's Square in Venice revealed a plot twist;
the real healing was the breathtakingly beautiful Christmas spirit
I found everywhere along the way.**



My Italian doctors asked, “BJ, have you noticed any functional improvements?”

And I replied from the top of Suave Castle, “FUNCTIONAL? I JUST FUNCTIONALLY CLIMBED TO THE TOP OF SUAVE CASTLE AND CLAIMED IT AS MY NEW SUMMER HOME!”



BJ's home security includes advanced guardian angel technology with built-in unconditional love features.



Mission accomplished! The same hands that once couldn't touch a room-temperature teapot just typed the last sentence of a book about capturing hope. My writing headquarters include: my laptop displaying the finished manuscript, the precious plaque my adopted mom gave me that inspires every word, Grandma's silk flowers that reinforce her enduring love, a strategically placed tissue box (because celebrating ordinary congestion is now a victory lap), and wall art reminding me that 'This Life Is Yours to CREATE.' Side effects of completing this book include: uncontrollable gratitude, the urge to high-five my laptop, and proof that sometimes making a dream happen just needs a stubborn refusal to give up and the right keyboard.

Hope status: officially captured and extremely contagious.



On Election Day, Gizzie voted for hope, healing, and a future in which everyone gets the love they deserve. Her favorite campaign slogan? 'Big hearts come in small packages, and miracles happen when you refuse to give up.' Always remember that every day you choose to keep going is another vote for hope!