



where are the
cocoa puffs?

a family's journey
through bipolar disorder



a novel by
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BOOK EXCERPTS

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Excerpt One: Chapter Five

Amanda's mother, Carol, and Jerry, Amanda's father, have a little argument.

"She's getting worse, not better," Carol complained to Jerry. She had survived — just barely — three days of hell with her daughter, the only reprieve being the few hours she could go to work while Amanda was at school. But now they were safe in their room. It was Wednesday night and Amanda was out with Ryan for a couple hours, giving the house a welcome calm. "Maybe she needs to try a different medication."

Jerry shook his head. How many times must they have this discussion? "It takes time. She's not even up to a therapeutic dose of Depakote yet."

"It's making her worse," Carol persisted, as if she knew what she was talking about, as if she were the psychiatrist with over twenty years of experience. This was one of the many things he found frustrating about treating mental illness: the families' impatience, their constant distrust, made all the worse because they were correct not to trust; he did not really know what he was doing. He could not know if the medication would work. He could not know if the diagnosis was even correct. What the diagnosis even meant. There was no exact science, no lab test or x-ray. He relied on his gut and experience and he was using this, this not really knowing what he was doing, to try to save his daughter's life.

"You don't know what it's like! How badly she treats me when you're not here!"

You don't know what it's like. How many times had he heard these exact words from his patients' family members over the last twenty years? And he had always assured them that he did, because didn't all these years dealing with these difficult patients give him perhaps even a better understanding, a more solid medical understanding? And then there was, of course, his mother, her first break when he was very small, certainly giving him the empathy he needed. He had truly believed this. But now, knowing that he'd not understood at all, not understood *at all* what the families were going through, how it felt to lose a family member — his mother, never having quite been his — to lose your child, and yet not lose her, because there she was, in your face, hating you. Not just hating you, but *loathing* you. And there you are, grieving as if she were dead — even *wishing* she were dead so you could get on with it. But she was there, in your face, loathing you.

Maybe if he had spoken these thoughts to Carol — thoughts that shouldn't be said aloud, thoughts that should have not even been thought — things might have gone differently. Instead, what came out of his mouth when he responded to Carol's mistrust and distress and

resentment was something else, some manifestation of his own frustration. "Damn it, Carol! It's not the medication that's making her worse," and he said it harsher than he needed to. "You need to give it time. It's not like the brain has a switch that can be turned on by a few days of medication, and suddenly decide, 'Oh! Now I'm going to be normal!'" he continued with mean sarcasm. "You've got to trust me, damn it!" It felt good to say what he always wanted to say but could not to his patients and their families, but the look that Carol gave him, after he spit his frustration at her, made him feel more alone than felt it too, the loneliness, the isolation. The only one she could talk to, now an enemy. She hadn't told a soul what she was going through. Not her mother, nor her brother, not Sarah, and certainly no one at work. And why? If Amanda had just been diagnosed with a brain tumor or cancer, something more tangible, she would have told them, gotten their support, not been ashamed or embarrassed.

"How do you know it's not the drugs?"

He was tired now. He wanted to go to sleep. "Marijuana isn't causing the manic state she's in. If anything, it calms her down; she's self-medicating." He'd told her all this before. They'd been through all this before and he was so tired that all he wanted to do was sleep, but his wife was like a terrier, with unlimited access to her daughter's doctor.

"Maybe she should be in the hospital," Carol said. Jerry sighed heavily. "I told you before; I don't think it's warranted. She's not suicidal. She's not a danger to anyone. You don't know how bad things can be at the hospital." Then he told her something he'd told his patients and their families many times over the years, but he said it coldly, without compassion. "You are, of course, entitled to a second opinion." And with that, he rolled his back to her, a period on the end of the discussion. He added an exclamation point as he flicked off his light.

Before his mind drifted off to restless sleep, he wondered again about the inanity of what he was doing - treating his own daughter.

Carol lay on her back in the dark, staring at the ceiling she could not see, and enjoyed the sensation of the tears that rolled slowly down the sides of her cheeks, knowing that she'd been wronged, that he was being a jerk, and that she'd lie there all night and cry just to spite him. Tomorrow, when she was crippled by lack of sleep, he would see what he had cost her. And then she'd find her daughter another doctor — one who wasn't a jerk; one who actually knew what he or she was doing. That would show him for thinking he's God's gift to mental illness.

Excerpt Two: Chapter Five

Jerry, Amanda's father, has a little talk with Ryan, the boyfriend.

Jerry intercepted Ryan in the front yard. "I need to talk to you." He led Ryan through the kitchen and down into the basement. If Ryan thought he was going to be given a tongue lashing or have a shotgun put to his head, he didn't let on. He followed Jerry good-naturedly, ready for anything — but not ready, as it turned out, for what Jerry had to tell him.

Jerry sat Ryan down in one of the old couches they'd thrown down there years ago. He sat across from him on a small wooden chair that he pulled close, closer than Ryan would have liked. Ryan also didn't like the way Jerry rubbed his chin, trying to decide how to begin, or the tired, worried look in his eyes. By the time he finally spoke, Ryan was longing for a shotgun, and holding his breath for what was to come. "Amanda's sick," Jerry said, and before the thought of cancer and chemo — her losing her beautiful hair — could take hold of Ryan's mind, Jerry continued. "Have you ever heard of manic depressive ill-ness? You may know it as bipolar disorder."

"Sure, I guess so." Wasn't that something that crazy people had?

Other than Bill McIntyre, who didn't really know Amanda, Jerry realized that Ryan was the first one he'd told directly. Ryan, most likely, hadn't a clue what he was talking about, so he switched into his doctor mode. Ryan nodded dumbly, as if he understood. He was told that it was a brain disease, that there was no cure, but could, in all likelihood, be controlled with meds. Jerry told him that Amanda was in a mixed state — she wasn't necessarily excessively happy or sad, but restless and irritable, volatile and quick to tears.

"Surely, you must have seen some of these behaviors?" It was more of a question than a statement, so Jerry waited for an answer.

"I guess so." Of course he had, but wasn't that just Mandy? Wasn't that the thing that made her so much of a rush — the unpredictability, boundless energy, and boundless sexuality? Even the violence and flood of tears — wasn't that just a part of her personality? What was this man trying to say? That she was a disease and not this girl who he was crazy about — maybe *not crazy*, but —

"Are you saying that Mandy ... isn't Mandy?"

Jerry had forgotten that he called her Mandy. The irony suddenly hit him, that Ryan would call her by another name, having met her, most likely, in her manic state. Jerry raised his hands in a gesture of uncertainty. How could he begin to answer that? "I think it's fair to say that," and he made a small movement of acceptance of the name,

“Mandy is Mandy, but the extreme swings and excessive aggression or excitability, intense restlessness — these sorts of things will soften with treatment.”

“Well, that would be good!” They both laughed in concurrence, and again Jerry found himself liking this young man — at least enough to be upfront with him.

“There is also the possibility that she won’t get better. She could get worse, regardless of treatment; no matter what the final outcome, the getting there won’t be a pleasant trip. Right now, she’s very fragile and vulnerable, and if you are going to stick around, then you must stick around until she’s at least more stable. If you can’t do that — and let me tell you, if I were you, I’d run like hell — then you need to end it now.” He said this bluntly and meant it, but mingled with the knowledge that he wouldn’t wish a relationship with an unstable manic depressive on his worst enemy was the uncertainty of what was best for Amanda. Could she handle Ryan breaking up with her now?

“I don’t want to stop seeing her.”

“You understand what I’m saying?” Jerry said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Twenty-five percent of manic depressive patients attempt suicide. Ten percent succeed.” If he said this to shock Ryan into the seriousness of what he was talking about, it worked. Ryan sucked in a breath, and for a moment Jerry thought he might cry. Jerry had to look away from this young man’s face for fear that he, himself, would cry, and two men crying together in an old, dirty basement was really just too much.

Excerpt Three: Chapter Seven

Ryan's and Amanda's flight in the woods.

Ryan could not see her as he hit the outside, but he could hear her as she made her way through the brush behind the house. If only she'd stayed on the driveway and ran toward the road, but no — she was heading into the trees. He took off after the noise, but was quickly confused by the sound of his own movement and had to stop to listen in the dark woods. She was still moving, off to his right now, and he called her name and turned to the right. How was he going to tell Dr. Benson that he'd lost the guy's daughter in the Adirondack Forest? He called again. She didn't answer.

He stopped again and realized he was gaining on her; he had his shoes on, after all. He brushed at the undergrowth, trying to protect his face, feeling the scrape of branches against his arms and face as he made his way toward her. Finally he could see her in the gloom of the night, a movement against the stillness of the forest. He picked up his pace, quickly diminishing the distance between them. He could hear her raspy breathing as she sobbed and tried to run at the same time. "Leave me the fuck alone!" he heard her scream.

"I won't!" This was the second time in the last five hours that he'd said these words.

She slowed to a walk. "Don't come near me!" she warned. She struggled through the undergrowth, feeling the rocks and fallen branches slicing into her bare feet — a sensation she actually enjoyed because it was something real, something tangible. What she really wanted to do was to go back to the card table and take the queen with a "Fuck you, David" and a smile, but now she needed to get away; how could she face anyone ever again? She longed to stop, to drop to the forest floor, to lick at her wounded feet, to allow Ryan to take her — to take all of her until there was nothing left — but then the pleasure of the pain in her feet would stop and what would happen then?

He also slowed to a walk, staying close enough as not to lose her in the darkness. He could see her tripping in her bare feet, staggering, but she didn't stop, and they went on like this for an unreasonable amount of time. He had the sudden fear that they would both be lost in this forest. How many days would it take before they would find their way to the road or for someone to find them?

He took a few quick steps in her direction and was on her before she had a chance to react. But when he wrapped his arms around her, she became an animal trapped in a snare, and it took all his strength to subdue this creature — this thing he loved? — and really, why the fuck was he here? Bleeding, tired, and angry, Ryan wanted to punch her in the head and knock her out, drag her back to her father and say, "Here you go! Good luck!" and walk away. He'd grab his crap

(though he hadn't brought that much) and at the first faint light of dawn, he would head down the road and hitchhike back to Albany. Was it only yesterday afternoon that her father had warned, "Run like hell"?

Suddenly she was captured, impeded. She fought while the trees were spinning about her and the cold earth was grasping at her feet. She was mystified by a screaming so loud that she screamed to make it stop, struggling against the cold terror of his embrace, struggling to save some small part of what was left — almost getting away — feeling his arm close to her face and opening her jaws to its flesh. Then the sensation of falling down onto the wet, waiting earth

He twisted his arm away as she tried to bite him and forced her to the ground. "Damn it, Mandy! Cut it out!" He straddled her, his knees pinning her arms to the ground — the only things still able to move were her legs, which were harmless to him now. He brought his hands to either side of her face, well away from her mouth, and braced himself against the earth, dropping his head toward her chaos, small shushing sounds coming from his throat. And he waited, catching his breath, resting, holding her down with his weight while her legs thrashed about. Even crazy people had to get tired, didn't they? He felt his heart beating in his chest, heard it — even over her screams — beating in his ears, and he closed his eyes, briefly fantasizing about a straightjacket for her and a warm bed for him.

Amanda felt the weight of his body as she listened to his soothing sounds. She felt the weight of her fear lift as it eased away. She felt safe and angry, hot and cold — her legs still thrashing on their own accord. She wished he'd put his face just a little closer so that she might use her teeth to rip at its sadness. Then, like the coming of a slow train, the thick blanket of fatigue

It took longer than he would've thought possible, but finally, after a good ten minutes, her legs slowed and her screaming subsided, and he brought one of his hands carefully to her face. "Are you done?" he asked. She was shivering now beneath him, her face passive and vulnerable, and she leaned slightly into the touch of his hand. He risked shifting his legs and pulling her up into his arms. Instead of resisting, she wrapped her freed arms around him and clung like a small child.

"You're freezing," he said, holding her in the dark forest. His knees were wet and cold from the earth — the wetness soaking into his jeans. A fall breeze hit his face, cooling the burn of his scratches, gently blowing his hair into his eyes, rustling the leaves of the surrounding trees — the only sound he could hear on top of the *I love you, I love you, I love you* that she repeated over and over into his ear.