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Catherine Ryan Hyde

A Novel

Falling Apart *and* Other Gifts *from the* Universe



Falling Apart
and Other Gifts
from the Universe

A Novel

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Catherine
Ryan Hyde

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Before you begin reading, a content warning.

This book contains references to a subject sensitive to many—the attempted sexual assault of two unhoused teens. It's not a subject I enter into lightly when telling a story. My goal was to shed light on the extreme vulnerability of the many young people who have fallen through the cracks of family and protective services. It was not to exploit anyone's suffering. I feel that when something that awful happens in the world, the answer can't be to look the other way and say nothing, even in our fiction.

Not only are there no graphic details, but the attempts fail, and the close calls happen, for the most part, “off the page.” Still, I know this can be triggering for some, so I wanted to share these thoughts with you first, so you can make your own choices.

One

Addie

Chapter One

When Your Soul Needs a Good Night's Sleep

Addie Finch fell asleep, her chin leaning on the palm of her hand, well before the meeting ended. The young woman sitting in the next chair jostled her awake with an elbow to her ribs.

“What?” Addie said, sputtering up into consciousness and blinking under the fluorescent lights.

“Addie,” the group leader said from the end of the long table. “Do you want to share?”

“Somebody else can go.”

“Everybody else has shared already.”

“Oh.”

She sat up a little straighter. Blinked hard and shook her head slightly to clear away the last of the cobwebs from her half-asleep brain.

“I’m Addie,” she said, “and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi Addie,” the group of ten said in nearly one unanimous voice.

“And I’m just . . . tired. I don’t know what else to say. I’m just really tired. I know you all know I started a new job a few weeks back, and it’s a night-shift thing, and changing your nights and days around is hard. But I have to go a little deeper and tell you it’s not just that. It’s not only the one kind of tired. Yeah, I’m sleepy, but I’m tired deeper down than that. My brain and my heart are tired. My nervous system is tired. I swear it feels like my soul needs a good night’s sleep. I mean, I’m sixty-two years old. I should be getting close to retiring, but there’s just no way. I guess it doesn’t help that I misspent so many years, but financially I just can’t do it.

“I really don’t mean to sound like I’m complaining. I just figure if I tell you the truth, even if the truth is not all that pretty, you’ll trust me when I say I’m okay. Assuming I ever do. Look, I know there are some newer people here tonight, and I don’t want to send out a message like you can stay sober for eight years and still not be very happy. On the other hand I don’t want to send a message that people with a little time are liars, or that

the new people are the only ones feeling like life is hard. Life *is* hard. But it's better than it was when I got here. By a big margin.

"Anyway . . . I'm sorry. I don't know. I'm just tired and not functioning at a hundred percent. But that's all I've got."

"Thanks, Addie," the group murmured as one.

Then they all rose to their feet and formed a circle around the table, clasped hands, and recited the Serenity Prayer.

"Hey," Addie said as the group separated off again. "Hey. Wendy."

Wendy was a tiny woman, barely five feet tall, with a dress size of pretty much zero and hair that always looked like she had just stepped out of a beauty parlor and into a world of no wind.

Wendy stopped on her way to the door.

"What can I do for you, Addie?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Talk away."

"I just wondered . . ."

Then she floundered, and felt weak.

Damn, she thought to herself. A life like I've had, the things I've done, and it feels intimidating to talk to a woman who's probably not tall enough to go on half the rides at the state fair.

She shoved the feeling down deeper and forced herself to speak.

"I just wondered if you sponsor people."

Wendy just stood a moment, fixing her with a piercing gaze that looked the way Addie could only assume x-ray vision looked from the outside of the thing.

"You have a sponsor, though," Wendy said after a time. A long time from the feel of it.

"Joan was my sponsor."

"Oh. Oh, no. I'm so sorry for your loss, honey. Well, what the hell. Let's go get a cup of coffee, and we'll see if we're compatible enough to pull it off."

The waitress was a gruff middle-aged woman with a ton of unnaturally red hair piled up high on her head.

"You eating?" she asked Addie as she filled Wendy's coffee mug.

"Yeah."

"I'll get you a menu. Coffee?"

"Yes to coffee. But if you serve breakfast all day I don't need a menu."

"They serve breakfast all day," Wendy said.

"I'll have two eggs over easy with hash browns and rye toast."

"Coming right up," the waitress said. She flipped over Addie's mug, filled it, and hurried away.

"Why didn't she ask *you* if *you* were eating?" Addie asked.

"Because she knows me."

They sipped their very hot coffee for a minute or two without talking.

"Must've broken your heart when Joan died," Wendy said.

"Definitely not the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Wasn't it almost a year ago?"

"Thirteen months. But who's counting?"

"And you've been without a sponsor all this time?"

Addie shifted around slightly on her seat, as if the padded bench of their booth had suddenly stopped being comfortable.

"I wasn't sure who to ask."

For a moment, Wendy only stared at her with a gaze like an auger.

"I'm waiting," she said after an uneasy time.

"For what?"

"For you to dig a little deeper."

"Oh. Okay. Well . . . I guess if I'm being honest, I didn't really *want* to ask anybody else. She knew me so well. And I suppose I wasn't doing a great job of accepting that she was gone. I mean, I know she was ninety-two and all, but she meant a lot to me, and I guess I just had a resistance to starting over with anybody else."

Wendy offered a satisfied nod.

"Now *that* I believe," she said. "Did you have a string of sponsors, or just the one for eight years?"

"Just Joan. For almost seven years. I had just under seven years when she died, and I've turned eight since then."

"Oh," Wendy said. "Right. Well. Okay. We can give it a go. I only have one rule. One gigantic deal-breaker. You have to tell me the truth."

“I always tell the truth,” Addie said.

“But I think I mean it on more levels than you do, hon. I don’t mean not lying. I do, but not *only* that. I’m talking about no withholding, no minimizing, no lying by omission. For example, I just made reference to the fact that you went a year without a sponsor, and your first answer might not have been a lie, but it wasn’t the honest one. I’m talking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, like they say in court. And it’s not because I’m such a delicate little flower that I’ll wilt and die if someone isn’t honest with me. It’s because if I’m going to be your sponsor, without you telling me the whole truth there’s just nothing I can do for you. The whole thing is just a waste of time without that.”

“I can do that,” Addie said.

“Take a little time and think about it. Make sure you’re sure.”

“I’m sure,” Addie said.

Her food arrived, and she pulled a bottle of Tabasco out from behind the napkin dispenser and doused her eggs with the sauce.

“That’s a lot of hot sauce,” Wendy said.

“And your point is? I like a lot of hot sauce.”

“You always eat breakfast at almost ten at night?”

“Pretty much, yeah. This is my morning. I have to be at work in an hour.”

“Oh. Right. Tell me about this new job.”

Addie shoveled a huge bite of the spicy eggs into her mouth and sighed. She chewed slightly before answering.

“Security-guard thing,” she said. “Night shift. Obviously. I work at that self-storage place over on Hastings. Mostly I just sit in the office all night and stare at a bunch of monitors. There are security cameras everywhere.”

“I didn’t think those self-storage places bothered to go to the expense. I figured they just told people to put a lock on their unit door and left it at that.”

“Usually,” Addie said, and shoveled in another huge bite. Chewed. “This place used to do it like that, but there’s that old abandoned warehouse right next door. Lots of people live there. And I do mean lots. It’s like a whole little underground community over there. Not literally underground, but you know what I mean. Squatters. Teenagers, mostly. They’d come over to sleep in one of the empty units when things got rough over there. Which

is most of the time. It's a rough place. So then the owner put locks on the vacant ones. But then somebody got smart and got their hands on a good bolt cutter. And then, well . . . once you've got the bolt cutter it's a pretty short hop to breaking into the rented units and seeing what's worth taking. A few burglaries too many and you either have to get some security or watch your occupancy rate drop down through the floor. That's where I come in, just in time to make my property taxes."

"At least you own your own place. That's a good thing."

"It was my parents' house. I inherited it. But I still have to work to keep it up."

"Aren't you scared out there in the middle of the night all by yourself?"

Addie set down her fork and looked straight into Wendy's face.

"I did two tours with the army in Iraq," she said. "Desert Storm. I did eleven years as a beat cop in Central LA. You think a few homeless teens can scare me?"

"You just did it again," Wendy said.

"What did I do?"

"Gave me defenses instead of honesty."

Addie sighed again. She leaned her head on her hand and wondered if maybe she'd spoken too soon and too easily about her commitment to Wendy's rule. She wasn't opposed to telling her new sponsor the whole truth. The problem was more that before she could report it, she had to know it.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe. I guess the honest answer is, what difference does it make if I'm scared or not? I need the work, and I just have to buck up and do it."

She picked up her fork again and pitched back into her food, pausing to splash more hot sauce on the potatoes.

"I thought the army and the LAPD had good pension plans," Wendy said.

"They do. If you can hang in long enough to get them. When you flame out with your alcohol problems it doesn't work out so well financially."

"Got it."

Addie ate, and they sipped coffee for a moment in silence. Addie looked out the window and watched the traffic go by. It seemed as though

every third vehicle was some kind of emergency responder. Watching them brought a lump of heartburn-like stress into a spot just under her breastbone, and she briefly wondered if that feeling was what other people meant when they talked about fear.

“You at least carry a gun for your own protection?” Wendy asked.

Addie was suddenly acutely aware of the holster under her left arm. The feel of its leather edge. The bulk of it.

“Unofficially,” she said.

“I have no idea what that means.”

“It means I’m not supposed to, and the job doesn’t provide one, but I’m licensed to carry and the owner knows I do. She’s made it clear that if I ever have to use it at work, she’ll deny she knew anything about it and I’m out of a job.”

“Better than being out of a life.”

“It all starts to run together in my head,” Addie said. “But—yeah. I suppose.”

Wendy slugged down the last of her coffee and set a ten on the table. “I should get home to the dogs,” she said.

“You don’t want change for that bill?”

“Nah. I tip big. When all you ever do is sit and drink coffee, it pays to tip big. Otherwise the waitresses aren’t so thrilled to see you coming. Call me every day if you want, but I have no rule about that. Call when you want to call.”

She threw on her overcoat and turned as if to walk out.

Then she stopped.

“One more question,” she said. “Why me? Why now?”

“That’s two questions.”

“Ha ha. Very amusing. Answer them.”

“Okay. A couple of nights ago I had a dream about Joan. She told me to just go ahead and pick somebody and go for it already. She said hurting myself was no way to pay tribute to her, and that I should just look around and find somebody who had what I wanted.”

“And that was me? I’m surprised. We’re such different people.”

“You have like thirty years sober.”

“Thirty-five.”

“Okay. Thirty-five. Well. That’s what I want.”

Wendy paused, as if to think that over, then nodded once and walked out the door.

Addie could briefly see her through the window, standing on the sidewalk, clutching her coat around herself and breathing steam. She seemed to be trying to decide which way she was parked.

Addie glanced down at her plate just long enough to pick up a piece of toast. When she looked out the window again, her new sponsor was gone.

Addie sat awake in front of the monitors for a long time. An hour or two at least. But around one in the morning she drifted off to sleep sitting up, without knowing it. She might even have been sleeping with her eyes open, and she might have seen the movement on the monitor for row B. Or maybe the sound of the door being rolled up tipped her, and caused her to open her eyes and see motion.

However it happened, it rocketed her up out of sleep with a colossal start, accompanied by a gasp, the way you might jolt up from a half-asleep state feeling as though you're suddenly falling.

Someone had the door rolled up just a couple of feet on unit B7, an empty unit, and was crawling underneath to get inside. Addie couldn't see the person well, but she thought it might be a teenage girl, because the figure was so small and slight. The person moved slowly and wincingly, as if every movement brought pain.

She saw no bolt cutter. Not in the squatter's hand. Not on the ground nearby. And yet she had checked every lock at the beginning of her shift, just to make sure none had been cut and removed.

She unholstered her pistol, shrugged on her jacket, and grabbed the flashlight on her way out the office door.

As she walked over to row B, she watched her breath flow out as steam and listened to the jangling in her chest and belly. She thought, *Note to self: Admit to Wendy you think you might have been scared tonight. Whatever scared is.*

She stopped in front of B7.

Its door had been rolled back down, its lock hanging uselessly open on the hasp. Addie could see a few inches of air underneath.

Holding the flashlight under her arm, she pulled hard on the door with her left hand, pointing the weapon with her right.

The door flew up with a great metallic bang, and a young man of maybe sixteen or seventeen blinked into the light. He threw one arm up to shield his eyes. He was wearing jeans and a pullover sweater. No jacket. No blanket. He had a small backpack that he was using as a pillow. His long hair was dark blond, shaggy and uncombed.

“Oh God, don’t shoot me,” he whispered. “Please.”

“I’m not going to shoot you if I don’t need to defend myself against you. But you can’t sleep here.”

She could hear the young man breathing, but for a long time he said nothing at all. He moved his arm away from his eyes, and Addie saw he’d been crying. A lot, from the look of it.

“Have you ever been just completely at the end of your rope?” he asked her after a time.

“More than once,” Addie said, “if I’m being honest.”

“I have no place else to go. I just had the worst night I’ve ever had in my life. Literally. And I’ve had some bad ones. Please. What am I hurting if I sleep here one night?”

“You’re hurting *me*. I need this job, and the gist of the whole gig is making sure you don’t sleep here, and I could lose my job for letting you. And I can’t let that happen.”

“Who would even know?”

“Honey,” Addie said, “there are cameras everywhere.”

“Oh.”

Addie holstered her gun while he struggled to his feet. She watched his movements carefully, and they confirmed her suspicion that he was in pain.

“You get beat up tonight?” she asked him.

“Something like that,” he said, his eyes cast down toward the concrete floor.

That was when Addie did something she normally would not have done. She did it with little thought, if any, though she would later look back and wonder what had changed in that moment and why.

“Come with me,” she said. “It’s nothing bad.”

He followed her out into the parking lot.

She led him to her aging SUV and unlocked the back door, holding it wide for him.

“You can lock it from the inside,” she said. “One night. But wait. Before you get in . . .”

She took hold of the sleeve of his sweater and pulled him under one of the light posts. Then she took a picture of him with her phone.

“What’s that for?” he asked.

“If you steal my car in the night I’ll have this to show to the police.”

“How can I steal your car without the keys?”

“The fact that you don’t know makes me feel more secure.”

They walked back to the SUV together, and he threw his backpack in first. Then he gingerly climbed in, easing himself down onto his belly on the back seat.

Addie was helping him bend his legs so she could close the door when he spoke.

“Wait,” he said. “Lady.”

“What?”

“Do you believe in Karma?”

“I don’t know. I don’t suppose I do, no. Why? Do you?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “But just now I got bowled over by how much I want it to be true right now. I want the universe to give you some big, wonderful thing as a reward because you were kind tonight to somebody who really, really needed it.”

“Just get some sleep,” Addie said, and closed the SUV’s back door.

But inside her very tired brain she could feel herself clinging to the idea of a big, wonderful thing from the universe.

I really, really need it, she thought.

She checked the lock on B7 to see how it could possibly be open. She found that it was not one of the locks the owner had given her to put on the empty units. Someone had apparently cut and removed that lock and replaced it with a lock that looked similar but worked on a combination rather than a key.

She confiscated the rogue lock and brought it into the office, where she found another official one in a filing-cabinet drawer. She walked back to B7 and properly locked the unit.

Then she watched her car all night on one of the monitors, just to be safe. It never moved, and no one moved inside it. Everything remained still.