

PREFACE

I'll never forget the day I met Chris Kanyon. I was a newspaper journalist, sent to cover National Coming Out Day in 2006 at the local university. The day — October 11 each year — was one of celebration for those who wanted to announce their sexuality and celebrate their choice while feeling comfortable and confident among peers in a supportive environment.

Kanyon was speaking at Northern Kentucky University, and I was there to cover the speech for the local newspaper, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Why was Kanyon so important? In the late '90s he had been one of the most famous wrestlers on the planet. He'd appeared on national television multiple times a week, made more than a million dollars and even had his own action figure. He was a legend in the professional wrestling world.

That is, until 2004 when he let everyone in on his secret: He was gay.

He was a gay professional wrestler.

Kanyon spoke to a large group at the university that day, and his story was riveting. I am not a gay man, and I am not a huge fan of wrestling, but I know a good story when I hear one, and Kanyon's was full of passion and rage and sadness and something else — hope. Kanyon wanted others to avoid the pain he had endured. He wanted those who are gay to be honest with themselves and others, to celebrate who they are and not have to live in fear of the repercussions.

I approached him afterward. He was tall, and still fit even though he'd been away from wrestling professionally for a couple of years. He had long, black hair, pulled back into a shiny ponytail. But the first thing you noticed was his easy smile. Kanyon could talk to you and make you feel important. He was someone who didn't seem like he'd ever been famous — he looked like he could be your lifelong friend.

I complimented him on his speech and asked him where his book was — surely, I said, anyone with a story this good had a book in the works. He told me he was talking to several people about writing a book. I gave him my card and said I wanted to write it. I'd already been involved in writing another sports book, and I have friends who are editors in the publishing world. I told him we could have a deal done that week. We parted ways, and he promised he would keep in touch.

Over the next few months we kept in touch via email, and it led to us agreeing to write his book. For the next 18 months, both in person and over the phone, Kanyon shared his life story with me. I recorded much of what he said and took notes on the rest. Together we crafted his story, which I quickly realized was going to be a tragedy. Even though Kanyon grew up to achieve his dreams, he was destined to fall, because his success was dependent on being someone he wasn't. He was trapped in a world of false realities. In his professional life he played a role, and in his personal life he played another role. Rarely, if ever, could he truly be himself. To make matters worse, he began to realize he suffered from manic depression, a serious mental affliction that swung him between high points of energy and happiness and the lowest lows of severe depression.

Even after revealing his secret, Kanyon was still dealing with the new life of being an out gay man in a society that is anything but comfortable with such honesty. For decades Kanyon had kept his secret to himself, for fear that he would lose his job within the ultra-macho world of pro wrestling — and that's exactly what happened. Before coming out, he was forced to participate in skits mocking gays, and when he did announce he was gay he was let go from his job in World Wrestling Entertainment. Kanyon always said he was shunned because he was finally honest about being gay. The rejection by the industry he'd dedicated his life to fueled his illness, leading to madness and suicidal impulses.

On April 2, 2010, Chris Kanyon committed suicide. Just a few months prior he and I had agreed that his book was finished. He seemed in good spirits;

he talked of starting a wrestling school. Sadly, Kanyon became another of a long line of wrestlers to die tragically by age 40. Whether felled by suicide, heart attacks, strokes or drug overdoses, an alarming number of wrestlers hadn't reached that age.

Not only did I lose someone I now count as a friend, but of much lesser importance, I wondered what we should do with his book. It's written in the first-person, and the story's tragic conclusion threatened to shift the focus from one of courage and determination to one of defeat.

But no. That isn't Kanyon's legacy. It isn't about the last lost battle, but about the fight itself. The fight against depression and the fight to be honest about who you are.

Even now, I'm haunted by a question: If Kanyon had felt more comfortable about coming out sooner in his life, would he still be alive today? There's no way to be sure, but I know it would have given him more of a chance. This is the chance he wants to pass onto others struggling with their sexuality.

These are Kanyon's last words — his story, in his voice, the way he wanted it told on the page. Finally, he got to define his own reality. I only wish he'd had more time to enjoy it.

— Ryan Clark, August 2010

INTRODUCTION, *by Jim Mitchell*

For 18 years I had the privilege of experiencing Chris Kanyon's friendship. Though we initially met through our mutual love of and involvement in professional wrestling, our roots would go far deeper than that. Kanyon was the one person I knew I could always count on, regardless of the miles between us or how difficult and inconvenient the situation at hand may have been.

I told Chris early on, as many people did, that he was too nice of a guy to be in the wrestling business. He was honest, generous to fault, loyal and had an incredible degree of personal integrity. He stood up for deserving underdogs, despite what it may have cost him, because he innately felt it was the right thing to do.

Kanyon was directly responsible for making my childhood dream of being involved in wrestling on a national stage materialize, in addition to my professional success outside of wrestling. I once told him I felt guilty that I couldn't possibly return the favor in kind on the same grand scale. He told me, "I don't expect you to. You're my best friend. I did what I did because that's what friends are supposed to do."

It's impossible to fully articulate my gratitude for the positive impact his friendship and selflessness made on my life.

At times we fought and argued like wild animals, often to hilarious extremes. Despite that, our bond remained unbreakable.

Many of the secrets Kanyon revealed to the public in recent years had been shared with me long ago. I was honored that, out of his many friends, he chose to confide in me early on. Chris dealt with a level of internal torment most people will never be able to grasp. To see someone I cared for experiencing that kind of ongoing anguish was painful beyond description at times, yet insignificant compared to what he endured.

The last time I saw Kanyon in person he told me that he planned to leave us. It was a matter of "when," not "if." He wasn't sad. He wasn't angry. If nothing else, he seemed to be at peace with himself. As I had done countless times before over the years, I tried to convince him that he had plenty to live for and listed all of the people who loved him and would be devastated by his passing. He told me that I was being selfish because I was more worried about my own pain than his. He said that he had no control over wrestling politics or his mental health, but the one thing he could control was his own existence. He felt no one had the right to insist that he go on living when he found doing so to be unbearable.

I knew I was seeing Chris for the final time when he summed up his feelings by quoting part of Morgan Freeman's closing monologue from one of his favorite movies, *The Shawshank Redemption*:

"Some birds aren't meant to be caged. Their feathers are just too bright. And when they fly away, the part of you that knows it was a sin to lock them up does rejoice." Now that he's gone, those words have a profound and surprisingly comforting resonance.

All I could do was to give Kanyon a tearful hug and thank him for being such a truly wonderful friend. Kanyon left Freeman's final two lines off of the quote he shared with me that night. I can think of no better way to describe the void his absence has left in my life than to close with them:

"But still, the place you live in is that much more drab and empty that they're gone. I guess I just miss my friend."

— Jim Mitchell, Summer 2010

PROLOGUE

September 14, 2003

I figured I had 20 minutes left to live. That's all. Then I'd have my peace.

Minutes before, I'd gotten out of bed for the first time in days and walked into the bathroom where I'd grabbed a full bottle of sleeping pills. There were 50 pills in the bottle. *That should be enough*, I thought as I headed for the kitchen. At the sink, I filled up a glass of water, and for what seemed like hours I stared at that bottle of pills, my thoughts racing.

Is this real? Am I dreaming? Am I really going to do this, and if I do, what will happen? Where will I go? Will any part of me — my consciousness, my mind, spirit or soul — continue to exist?

"Just do it," I said aloud. Slowly, I brought the bottle to my mouth, my hands shaking as much from nerves as from the weakness and fatigue of lying in bed for two months. I tilted the bottle up, but my subconscious made me stop. My tongue had involuntarily blocked the pills from rushing out of the bottle, and I put it back down. I got mad at myself. "You puss, do it!" I said. I tried again, and again, but my subconscious seemed to disagree.

It didn't matter. I was hell-bent on ending the pain. I had to focus on the present. I had to focus on my freedom.

The radio in the kitchen blared one of my favorite songs, "Amazing," by Aerosmith. As Steven Tyler sang about living a lie and wishing to die, I felt

like Aerosmith was singing that song just for me. I blocked out all thought and focused on swallowing the pills. Soon, I'd be free of the suffering. The pills tumbled out of the bottle and down my throat.

I was buoyed by a sudden rush of energy and excitement. I had done it. Years of suffering were about to end. The ultimate question of what it was like to die was about to be answered. It was exhilarating and powerful.

Oddly, I wasn't afraid. Not because I'm incredibly brave, but because although I'd been raised Catholic, over the years I had become very agnostic. Because I didn't really have a belief, I had no expectations, good or bad, of what was next. But to think I was about to know the answer to the most important of questions was incredible.

I went back into my bedroom, and lay back down on the bed. It'd be about 20 more minutes until the pills began to work and for the first time in years, I felt like I'd escaped. I was free from this serious, debilitating depression, and I would have peace.

I knew it was a serious act, but what I had done was the culmination of two months of the worst depression a person can have. You are completely unmotivated, pessimistic and without energy. You feel like you can't tell anyone the truth and you're boxed into a corner. You're confused about who you are and who you want to be. You don't know what else to do. I thought it was the only escape from the horror I was living in.

The most alone I'd ever been, I fell into a conversation with myself. I thought about how some people say when you try to kill yourself and you're not successful, you're looking for attention. Well, believe me, I wasn't. I truly wanted to end it all. I started to think of other ways I could've done it. Maybe I should've jumped off the roof of the building. That would've done the trick. But jumping off the roof was no good. *With your wrestling training, you'd land perfectly right*, my inner voice said. *You'd distribute your weight perfectly and you wouldn't die.*

Yeah, too risky that I might survive. So what else could I have tried? I thought maybe I should've slit my wrists. That would be easy. Boy, it's obvious you're not thinking straight when you're trying to killing yourself, right? This is morbid, crazy shit. My thoughts wandered back 15 years to the summer of 1988, to Long Beach, New York. I was with a bunch of friends eating lunch on a beautiful Sunday afternoon at a beachfront restaurant and bar. I looked down at my friend T.J. Moran's hands and I saw two bad scars on his wrists.

"What's that T.J.?" I asked. I was innocent and naïve.

He was quick and honest with his answer. "I tried to kill myself," he said. "I was stupid. And now I have to live with these forever." He pointed to the reddened, jagged scars that streaked both wrists.

I had always liked T.J. I was impressed by his honesty and his confidence. Lying in bed, I smiled as I thought about him. He probably barely remembers me, if at all, and there I was, 15 years later, on my deathbed, thinking about him. Of all the thousands and thousands of people I'd met, thanks predominantly to my life as a professional wrestler and being on television, it was T.J. from the old neighborhood in Sunnyside who I thought about.

It's odd how the smallest thing can change a life. Or save one. It was almost unbelievable that those 30 seconds of interaction with T.J., 15 long years ago and 1,000 miles away, may have ultimately saved me. It was because of him I didn't slit my wrists right then and there.

Well, if they somehow find me, and they save me, I'll be walking around with those two constant reminders on my wrist, I thought. Everybody's going to know what I did. So instead of cutting my wrists, I took the pills. Cutting my wrists may have worked, if it wasn't for T.J. It made me think of the song "Name" by the Goo Goo Dolls, lyrics that lit up my own memories of scars and stardom until they were almost blinding. But the final darkness, a sweet relief from those spotlit memories, crept closer.



You think some weird shit when you know you're going to die. The next thought that flittered into my brain was that I'd hid \$3,000 in one of my socks. It was a seemingly insignificant thing to think of at such a moment. And that is one of the ironies of all of this: In that state of mind, I thought about how awful it would be if I died, and no one got that money. I saw tragedy in wasting \$3,000, but totally missed the tragedy of wasting my life. I thought about getting the \$3,000 out of the sock drawer and sitting it on the dresser. I wanted the police or paramedics to find the money when they found my body. Then maybe my brother or my parents would get it.

Oh shit. Oh God. My parents. My brother. I saw them crying over my coffin at my funeral. I saw my cousins and Aunt Pat and Uncle Johnny. Then my best friends: Dan, the Toms, Kidman, Hurricane and the rest. They were all crying, all hurting.

And it was all because of me.

But after two months of severe depression, I'd gotten pretty good at blocking thoughts out. I had to block out the thoughts of my family and friends suffering if I really wanted to die. I had to if I wanted to stop myself from putting my fingers down my throat and vomiting those pills back up. I had to. So I did. And poof: All thoughts of them were gone.

In bed, I waited for death. I don't know how long it would take for the sleeping pills to kick in, but I was trying to keep my mind off my parents and my family. "I gotta watch some tv," I said. I was lucky. It was a Sunday night, so I got to watch one of my favorite shows, *The Simpsons*. Homer, Bart, Marge and the rest of the gang allowed my thoughts to stop. And as I watched their antics, the colors of the characters and the background started to meld together. I felt myself fading away.

A peace came over me. I was finally escaping the despair that had been choking me for years. I slipped away into something—I'm not sure if it was a fantasy, a sleep or death. I have no recollection of the next three hours. There were no bright lights at the end of a tunnel, no out-of-body experiences or visions. I wish I could tell you stories of eternal bliss and peace and happiness, or that I saw my dog Ace, who had died years before. I wish I could tell you how I apologized to Ace for all the wrestling moves I'd practiced on him and that he forgave me and said "It's ok, I still love you." But I felt and saw nothing. I remember nothing.

But in the abyss something happened. In the middle of wherever my consciousness was, a feeling came over me, one I'd felt before. One I remembered from long ago, from nights of parties and drinking. One that rises inside of you, warning you, telling you it's time.

I had to throw up.

Somewhere deep inside of me, I was trying to save my own life. *Get to the bathroom, my body said. Get to the commode. Now!* I tried to get up from the bed, but in the three hours since I'd taken the pills they'd begun to take effect. My body was partially paralyzed and I fell to the floor, face first, busting open my nose. The blood started flowing immediately like dirty rain water in a gutter. My only thought was to get to the bathroom.

I started crawling across the floor, streaks of crimson streaming down my face and onto the carpet. The pill-induced haze was smothering me. I peed and shit on myself. And the vomit was coming too.

What a picture I was, this big, supposedly happy, successful pro wrestler. My dark eyes ringed with black circles and my goatee and long black hair covered in blood, I crawled like a baby through my own piss, shit, blood and vomit. It was pathetic. I was pathetic. But I finally made it to the bathroom and what a sight it must have been: a six-four, 250-pound athlete curling up as small as he could around the toilet. In short, violent spurts, the pills were coming out of me. I threw up all the food and bile from my stomach, and I dry-heaved for about 20 minutes more. I finally pulled back from the commode and I leaned back on the wall, just across from a mirrored closet door.

I saw what I looked like in that mirror: sad and pathetic, certainly no champion. Certainly no role model. As I literally faced myself, I realized I was not a good son, brother, uncle, friend or person. I was a beaten, selfish, sick loser. I saw what I'd become, and I was not proud.

I uttered the words — the words I would never forget — staring down this broken-down person: "How did you let yourself get to this point?" I asked. "What the hell have you done to yourself?"