

DON'T DARE TO DREAM

A Thriller



DAN FRIEDMAN

Part 1

Dare to Dream

Chapter 1

David Pascal parked in front of Target and stared at a blonde woman coming out of the store. She steered the red cart with her elbows, her eyes glued to her phone screen. A little girl strolled a few feet behind her, wearing a pink dress with white stripes and a pink hair bow to match.

Exiting the car, he saw a big pickup truck driving toward the red-brown pavement crossroad, the driver's eyes on his phone.

David had only wanted to get snacks for dinner, but what happened next felt like a movie in slow-motion; he saw the driver blow the stop sign, and with a force only God could explain, he ran, grabbed the girl and tried to finish crossing the road.

He had not run in over ten years.

The truck driver screeched to a halt, a few inches from them.

David exhaled slowly and tried to smile at the girl, but she was crying for her mother.

The next thing he knew, someone helped him sit on one of the red concrete balls in front of the store, while a woman offered him water. People gathered around him, staring. Someone pulled his arm and asked if he was okay. A woman hunched over him, her hand over her mouth.

He thought he heard someone somewhere say the word hero.

Every inch of his body ached. His heart raced as he gasped for air. The little girl stared at him from her crying mother's arms. She hugged her mother and inspected the crowd around David. When the crowd dispersed, the mother bent over him, hugged him tight for a few seconds and kissed his cheek.

Some of her tears wet his face.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you so much."

He tried to smile.

Almost dying was worth the hug and the kiss.

Too bad she was probably married.

Rick MacMillan sat in his new Chevrolet Camaro in front of Target and could not believe what he had just seen.

Chapter 2

David drove up to the black gate in the entrance to his apartment complex and pushed the remote a few times until it opened. The stupid thing worked randomly, and when it did, it took ages for the gate to open.

The management had installed the gates following a few burglaries not long after he moved into the apartment complex. They wanted the tenants to feel secure but never gave actual statistics. The gate was like putting a Band-Aid on a broken skull—anyone could just wait for a tenant to open the gate and drive in after them.

David tried to feel good about saving the little girl's life, but his body ached from the short run which had caused him to pull every muscle in his legs. He wondered if he had really moved fast or if it had just felt that way.

A sidewalk separated his car from his apartment. He hated it since it prevented him from parking closer. When he raised his foot to climb it, his legs could not hold his weight, and he tumbled backwards. He missed his car by an inch. When he hit the ground, his head smashed last, and he felt like he made a dent in the pavement.

He tried to push himself up, but could not. After a few tries, he decided he should wait for someone to help him, or maybe try to call 911.

It would be embarrassing. *I've fallen and I can't get up*, he thought of the old commercial. He was too young for that.

He fumbled for his iPhone, but it took him a few minutes to roll over his wide body and get it out. When he tried to overcome his blurred vision, a man kneeled down next to him and grabbed his arm. "Are you okay, buddy? What happened?"

Where the hell did he come from?

David had met Rick a week ago. The tall, handsome neighbor from upstairs had come knocking on his door one day. Rick was at least a head taller than David and wore a tight T-shirt, which emphasized his bulky shape. His body seemed as if it could burst out of his shirt.

Rick said he had made a scratch in David's car when he moved in, and insisted on reimbursing David for it, who had dismissed it for being an old car.

Lying in the parking lot now, looking up at Rick with a blank stare, he figured it was not so bad to have a friendly neighbor.

"I'm fine. Thanks," David whispered.

Rick's eyebrows rose. "Let me at least help you up." Rick pulled him, using his big muscles, but David was too heavy even for Rick. After a few pulls, he let Rick help him and he slowly got to his knees, then sat on the curb.

Rick examined him. "Do you need an ambulance?"

David shook his head. He hated doctors.

Rick pulled a bottle of water out of his bag and handed it to him.

After David sipped, Rick helped him up and walked him into his apartment, holding his hand until they reached David's recliner in the living room.

Rick examined the apartment. "Is there anything I can get you? Would you like me to call someone?"

David stared up at him from his recliner, then shook his head and gazed at the ceiling. Rick sat across from him on the couch. They avoided each other's eyes.

A few minutes later, David dozed off.

Rick watched David fall asleep on the recliner.

He sighed. *This man needs to reshape his life immediately or he'll die.*

He went to the kitchen and saw a sink full of dirty dishes. He inspected the unopened mail on the counter which included medical bills, bank statements, and junk mail.

He moved to the bedroom and saw an unmade queen-size bed without a frame. He doubted the fatso's bed had seen any action. One brown plastic nightstand stood next to the bed with an old night lamp and a phone charger on it. A small desk with a printer covered with dust stood in the corner of the room. Dirty clothes filled half of the carpet. He opened the drawer but a noise from the living room startled him. He closed the drawer, sprang to the bathroom and flushed the toilet. When he returned to the living room, David still slept.

Rick sat for a few minutes then returned to the nightstand drawer. He feared a sex-toy jumping at him, but instead saw an old iPhone, earphones, and batteries.

He returned to the living room and stared at David. Rick shook his head and slipped his hands into his front pockets.

David opened his eyes and saw a man in his bedroom.

What the hell is he doing there? Is this a dream?

He dozed off again. When he awoke, a man lay on his couch a few feet from him reading from a phone. David wanted to speak, but his mouth was too heavy. He gazed at the man.

"You're up?" Rick dropped his feet to the floor and sat up.

He said nothing, so Rick continued: "It's me. Rick. Your neighbor. You fell outside, and I helped you into your apartment. How are you feeling, buddy?"

"You're still here?" David asked after a while.

"I hope it's okay. I didn't think I could leave you like this." Rick rose, bent over to look at him, really close, imitating a doctor, then sat back down. "Are you feeling better?"

David stared at him.

"You want me to take you to a hospital or call an ambulance? I'm kinda worried."

He shook his head. After a while, he said, "Why are you still here?"

"I didn't go to med school, but I looked it up online"—he held his phone up—"and saw you might've gotten a concussion. I didn't want to leave you alone like this. In fact, I almost called an ambulance a few minutes ago. Are you sure you're okay?"

David nodded.

"Do you want me to go?"

David nodded again. "I'm sorry. I want to be alone."

Rick rose and straightened his shirt. "Sure. I have a meeting I have to go to anyway. I'll leave you my card. Don't hesitate to call me if you need anything."

"Thank you," he whispered.

As Rick turned the doorknob to leave, David asked, "Did you go into my bedroom?"

Chapter 3

David held Rick's card. His full name was Rick MacMillan and his title read *Life Coach*.

I should've known. A scammer.

That's how he got his shiny new Camaro. He had noticed it when they walked together to their cars and Rick insisted on reimbursing him for the scratch.

He wanted to stand but did not have the strength. He wanted to tear the business card to pieces but could not.

He'd read an online article once with tips on how to improve your life. They suggested some bullshit New Age stuff and recommended getting a life coach. He felt so bad back then that he almost considered it, but he came to his senses soon enough.

Rick's the only person in the world who helped me.

David turned on the TV then turned it off. Maybe he should have gone to the hospital? Someone would have taken care of him. He would get meals, not good ones, but better than nothing.

Would you like me to call someone? Rick had asked, *as if he didn't know there's no one else.*

He wanted to tell Rick he'd saved the little girl's life. He was not a complete loser. Someone called him a hero.

But what good did it do now? No one would remember.

He looked for comfort food, but didn't have any. He had gone to Target to get more food, but saving the girl stopped him from getting the food he liked.

He recalled having something in his trunk—some chips he'd bought and forgotten.

With very little strength he ambled to his car. It was almost dark and he held onto his car so he would not fall again. When he tried to open the door to his apartment with the bag of chips in one hand, he heard high-heels going down the wooden stairs.

Music.

He looked up and saw a tall, blonde young woman floating down the stairs. A white blazer covered her top, a black miniskirt covered very little of her long, skinny legs. Black pointed-toe, four-inch heels covered her feet. She checked her phone, which he considered a dangerous combination.

If she fell, I could catch her.

Two rescues in one day.

He stared at her, mouth open slightly. She did not notice him until she reached the bottom of the stairs.

When her eyes met his, she smiled.

He had never seen such a perfect, white smile.

Unlike a lot of the women he had seen in Target or Walmart, her smile seemed genuine. She seemed younger than the women he usually went for.

“Hello.” Her smile grew. “How are you doing?”

The heartburn he had suffered since morning disappeared.

He'd wasted time at Target when this amazing complex building had *this*.

Oh my God.

"Hi," he almost whispered.

Okay. The moment of truth. *I must talk to her.*

Or maybe not. If she lived there, he could talk to her on any other day. But what if she did not? What if she was only visiting her parents? Then he may not see her for a couple of months. It would explain why he had not seen her before.

He could not risk it.

He had to talk to her.

He had to *speak*.

He had thought about the perfect opening line a million times. He had not started a conversation with a potential wife for many years. Should he talk about the weather? Should he compliment her on her looks?

His mouth dried.

Maybe he should just introduce himself and ask her for her name. Maybe ask if she'd just moved in.

I hope she didn't notice I stopped breathing.

She advanced as if she walked on a runway. She stopped a foot away from him, still smiling, and extended her gentle hand. "You must be David," she said. "It's nice to meet you."

She knows my name.

She was taller than him, but not as tall as Rick. He shook her soft hand, and she almost had to force it out of his hand.

"How did you know my—"

Heavy footsteps going down the stairs interrupted him.

He looked up and saw Rick.

I should've known.

Rick wore a black suit with a white button-down shirt and no tie. Rick put his arm around the beautiful woman's waist. "I see you met my wife, Angela."

They looked like Barbie and Ken.

David's heartburn returned.

Chapter 4

David sat on his recliner with a bag of chips. The TV was boring and he felt like puking.

He glared at his dirty apartment, his body, his life.

"You'll never make anything of yourself again," he thought aloud.

Ever since losing his job, he'd found it hard to get back on the horse. He could not find a woman either. Meeting the new neighbors made him feel worse. He would never look like Rick. He would never find a woman like Angela.

His iPhone dinged. A reminder he had set a few years ago stabbed him in the chest. He had forgotten to cancel it.

Or maybe he didn't want to forget it.

The next day would be Mia's birthday.

He had not seen or talked to her in almost two years. As far as he knew she still lived in Tulsa, on the other side of town. Thankfully, he did not have to run into her at the grocery store.

He decided he needed more information, and Facebook was the best way to spy on people. She had unfriended him as soon as they separated. He did nothing wrong, but she wanted nothing to do with him.

When he found her page, he could see some of her pictures. She probably blocked most of them.

In the second picture, she wore a wedding dress.

She got married.

It felt as if someone had dropped a huge truck on his head.

He tried to breathe, but had a hard time filling his lungs. The text under the picture read, "I married the love of my life!"

Another stab in the chest.

Did she do it on purpose? Did she make sure I could see her happy with another man?

David had tears in his eyes. Slowly the tears became longer, heavier. Then he sobbed. He held his belly, then his face. The tears came down through his fingers.

He looked at the picture's date; it was over a year old.

He had no idea.

Did she meet him right after she dumped me?

Did she meet him before she dumped me?

He had no job, no woman, no life. He wiped his eyes and rose from his recliner.

Too bad I didn't get a gun. It's so easy to get one these days.

He walked slowly to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. He only had headache pills. He had a headache, right? The box suggested he should not take more than six pills a day.

She got married.

He took the box and went to the kitchen. He took a glass, filled it with water, and held the box in his other hand.

Will it work?

He took a pill.

Don't do it! an inner voice tried to shout.

He took another one.

Inside the box he saw many more pills. He took two more in his hand and swallowed them.

He filled his cup of water when his phone startled him. Someone called him.

Who? It's been a while since someone called.

Should I get it?

Could it be Rick? Did he have my number?

Could it be Mia? Maybe she got divorced and wanted me back?

He put the pill bottle and water cup on the counter and went for his phone. He recognized the number. It was the complex management. Did he not pay the rent?

Who cares.

They'd be happy to get rid of me.

He went back to the bottle with the blue pills, looking down inside, and saw the abyss.

She got married.

He stopped counting the pills after a while. He kept swallowing them until the box was empty.

Was it enough?

Did I make a mistake?

No one'll know. No one'll care.

Who would want to live in this apartment after I die?

When he felt dizzy, he walked toward his recliner.

On the way there, his world became blurry, and he fell to the floor.

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