

# Chapter One

## EI

*The Body That Wouldn't Break*

Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I would like to see you living in better conditions.

— Hafiz

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She was in the middle of a difficult year. A relationship had ended. She had moved back from another country — the details belong to her, but the emotional texture is legible in what she did next: she started doing two to three hours of yoga every day. Not because of any particular plan. Because it was the only place she felt steady.

She had been practicing for years by then. She could do the poses. She was committed in the way that serious practitioners are committed — showing up, pushing through, earning the shapes. She had learned, as many experienced yogis learn, to treat discomfort as something to be overridden rather than interrogated. She called it, later, "sucking it up and breathing through the pain." She said it like a confession.

## The Sound

Her teacher quoted Bikram Choudhury the same way every class: "You can mess with the Gods, but don't mess with your knees." She laughed every time. In all those years of practice, it had never once occurred to her that the joke might not be a joke.

It was day six of her thirty-day hot yoga challenge. She was feeling good — feeling strong, her body and spirit glowing from weeks of intensity. Two to three hours a day, the practice filling the space that the year's upheaval had left open. She was deep in the rhythm of a Bikram class: the heat, the sequence, the familiar architecture of ninety minutes she knew by heart.

Tree Pose. Then Toe Stand. She went in carefully — she always went in carefully. She came up from her fingertips, brought both hands in front of her heart, straightened her spine. She balanced for a moment. And thought to herself: *Hell yeah. Look at you today.*

She heard it before she felt it. A loud, sickening SNAP from the outside of her left knee — sound and sensation arriving at once, the kind of signal the body sends when something that has been

holding has finally given way. She collapsed onto her mat. Did a quick damage assessment: she could still bend the knee, she wasn't feeling much pain. Maybe it wasn't so bad.

She made it through the rest of the ninety-minute class. On the way out, she arranged her carpool for a double session the next day.

The aching set in that evening. It spread through her entire leg. Ice packs couldn't numb it. Anger and hopelessness arrived alongside the ache. *I don't have time for an injury. I need my yoga.* But this time it wasn't her mind's decision. Her body had already decided.

## The Couch

She was not, by nature, a person who went to doctors. She pulled out her anatomy books and worked through a self-diagnosis: likely a torn lateral collateral ligament — usually difficult to injure in isolation, but she had apparently found a way. Research indicated the treatment, assuming it wasn't a full tear requiring surgery, was ice and rest. She kissed the thirty-day challenge goodbye, pulled out the ice packs, and settled into what she called "a bit of a funk."

She was reading Dan Millman's *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* at the time. In it she found a story she kept returning to:

An old man and his son worked a small farm, with only one horse to pull the plow. One day, the horse ran away.

"How terrible," sympathized the neighbors. "What bad luck."

"Who knows whether it is bad luck or good luck," the farmer replied.

A week later, the horse returned from the mountains, leading five wild mares into the barn. "What wonderful luck!" said the neighbors.

"Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?" answered the old man.

The next day, the son, trying to tame one of the horses, fell and broke his leg. "How terrible. What bad luck!"

"Bad luck, good luck?"

The army came to all the farms to take the young men for war, but the farmer's son was of no use to them, so he was spared.

"Good? Bad?..."

She liked the idea that something that seemed like bad luck might turn out to be good luck. At the time, she could not imagine a knee injury being anything but bad. She would revisit that conclusion.

## The Parking Lot

A couple of weeks after the injury, her knee had healed enough that she was walking with an almost normal gait. Some stiffness. Some tenderness. She had resumed a cautious home practice, carefully avoiding any posture that might strain the knee.

She spent an afternoon with me. We were walking through a parking lot when she started complaining — as she had been for years — that her knees hurt in various poses, that her inflexibility was keeping her from moving fully into postures. She was focused on her knees. She had always been focused on her knees.

"Show me," I said.

She set up Tree Pose on her good knee — the same way she'd always done in class — and started making her way down into Toe Stand. Before she was halfway down, I told her to stop.

"There's your problem," I said. And I pointed at her hip.

Her *hip*? She was thinking about her knee. Her knee was what had snapped. Her knee was what she had been icing for two weeks. But I didn't mean her knee. Her hip was so restricted that she couldn't rotate her leg out far enough to get her knees anywhere near alignment in Tree Pose. Every degree of movement her hip couldn't provide, her knee was being asked to compensate for — through a rotation the knee joint was never designed to make. The knee paid the price for the hip's limitation. It had always been paying it.

"I found it ironic that for a long time I had been placing a great focus on my knees, tweaking and holding them past my comfort zone, breathing through the pain — mind over matter — assuming this would eventually bring more flexibility. The possibility of tight hips being the origin of my limited range of motion had never even crossed my mind."

One observation. Twenty seconds in a parking lot. It changed everything she thought she understood about her own body.

**She didn't think: this worked. She thought: I've been doing this wrong for years.**

## The Prescription

She asked the natural next question: how do you open up a hip? Her mind went immediately to poses — Triangle? Pigeon? Camel? Frog? Which muscles? Stretch or strengthen? The possibilities were dizzying.

I gave her a simpler answer. Opening the hips means addressing the quadriceps, adductors, and lateral rotators — the structures that allow the femur head to rotate fully in the hip socket. More specifically, it meant reaching the connective tissue, the deep inner fascia, which requires something different from ordinary stretching: sustained load, held long enough for the tissue itself to respond.

I gave her five poses. Butterfly, Swan, Square, Half Saddle, Abdominal Twist. Hold each for five minutes. Do them in that order, every evening. That was the whole prescription.

She already knew Yin Yoga — she had taken classes several months earlier, had found them "relaxing, calming." She had not understood what the practice was actually doing beneath the surface. Now she had a reason, a goal, a sequence, and a timer.

That evening, she rolled out her mat.

*"Pain is not your enemy. It is a very devoted messenger. The trouble is we are too busy managing it to actually receive the message." — Osho*

## The Holds

The first thing Yin Yoga asked of her was the thing she found most difficult: to stay.

Not to push. Not to stretch further. Not to correct or improve. To arrive at the edge of a sensation — the point where the tissue begins to signal it is at its limit — and simply remain. Breathing. Waiting. Not for the sensation to stop, but for it to say something.

The first few sessions hurt like hell. She couldn't get into some of the postures, let alone hold them for five minutes without what she described as "some choice sharing of words" — the language of someone trying to focus on breathing and letting go and failing at both. I took her grumbling in stride. She noted this later — that I smiled rather than worried, which she found at the time either reassuring or deeply annoying, depending on the pose.

But she finished every session feeling reborn. That word was hers. Not relieved — *reborn*. Something about the depth of the hold, the long surrender into stillness, produced a quality of release she had not encountered in years of vigorous practice. She crawled into bed after each final Savasana and slept like someone who had put something down. She woke up with her body feeling "happily stretched out." She came back.

After a few sessions, something changed. The pain stopped being the primary experience. The practice blossomed — her word — into something her body started to love and crave. Her mind felt clearer and more at peace. She was learning, for what felt like the first time in years of yoga, to follow her body rather than override it.

## The Morning She Knew

It had been a while since the injury. She had not gone back to Tree Pose or Toe Stand — not once. The avoidance was fear: she had grown protective of her knees in a new way, and she wasn't ready to test the boundary that had already failed her once.

One day she decided to see where things stood. She promised herself she would back out at the first hint of a tweak.

She set up Tree Pose. And she was shocked. Her word: *floored*.

For the first time in her years of practicing it, her knees came into alignment from the side. Not almost. Into alignment. She felt no strain in the knee joint at all. She stood there, registering what had happened, and the only thought that came was: *like the Tin Man finding his inner Gumby*.

She moved into Toe Stand. No problem. A couple of months earlier, her brittle, aching knees had been practically screaming at her to get out of this posture. Now there was space where the strain had been. Room where there had been resistance.

"One simple, educated observation from a talented yoga teacher changed my practice and my entire approach to yoga. Even after years of practice, I humbly gained a new respect and awareness for really listening to my body instead of just sucking it up and breathing through pain like I was used to doing."

She finished the posture. And she thought about the farmer and his horse. About good luck and bad luck. About how impossible it had seemed, lying on the couch with ice packs, to imagine any version of a snapping knee that might one day be called good luck.

She laughed.

The knee that brought El to Yin Yoga was the beginning, not the story. The story was what she found on the other side of the injury — a practice that asked her, for the first time, to be curious about her body rather than afraid of it. The capacity she built there — to be present with discomfort without being consumed by it — does not stay on the mat. It travels.

**The injury that looked like bad luck was the beginning of a different conversation with her body.**

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*From The Pose Begins When You Want to Leave — Gabe Yoga*