

CONQUERING CHAOS



Catelynn Lowell
and Tyler Baltierra

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By Catelynn Lowell
and Tyler Baltierra

Conquering Chaos
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INTRODUCTION

There are not enough words to describe the love we have for everyone who picked up this book. Whether you've watched us on MTV as we grew from terrified teenagers that were forced to grow up way too fast or you just happened upon this book while browsing the bookstore, we feel very humbled knowing that you have invested in our story.

This book was written for one reason: to inspire you. Maybe you relate to the struggles we have overcome and you'll walk away feeling empowered to change your life. Whatever your takeaway might be: The reason we wrote this book was for you. Plain and simple. That's why we didn't hold back when it came to sharing our happiest moments, like our love story, or our darker days, growing up in the shadow of violence and abuse.

There's a lot to be learned from our story. The whole story. It's easy to forget that there were sixteen years before the cameras started rolling. And those sixteen years were filled with highs and lows. One thing you'll learn about us is that we are very open and honest about the obstacles we have faced, many of which never made it on air but have shaped us into the people we are today.

And it wasn't luck that got us this far. From the day we found out Catelynn was pregnant with Carly, we knew we wanted a better life for her. That meant we needed to better ourselves. We also knew that placing Carly for adoption, while it was the right thing to do, would be a sacrifice harder than anything we have ever faced. What we didn't realize was that our decision would give us the determination to go after everything we wanted out of life.

Life before Carly meant being shuffled from trailer park to trailer park. For us it was normal to have to keep tabs on an intoxicated parent or have to deal with the cops. We were all too familiar with the way that drugs destroyed lives, leaving children to pick up the pieces. Sometimes our lives felt so unstable we weren't sure we would even make it through high school. It would have been easy to blow off our education, to continue the cycle of drug abuse and teen parenting, but because of Carly we knew we had to forge our own paths to get far away from where we started.

Of course, there were bumps along the way. Choosing adoption drove a wedge between the relationships we had with our parents. Their reactions to our decision broke our hearts and made placing Carly harder than we'd imagined. At the time we didn't realize that Catelynn's mom would take it personally that we wanted a different life for our daughter than the one she had chosen for her own kids, or that Tyler's dad would rage against placing Carly with adoptive parents who could give her a stable home despite his record of being in and out of jail throughout Tyler's life.

With our parents pleading for us to parent the baby we had to take a good look at our lives. Could we provide a secure and happy home for a child at sixteen without jobs, diplomas, or reliable parents of our own to help out? Not only that, but we also had to take into account the long history of abuse and addiction within our families, some of which went all the way back to our great-grandparents. We realized that because of this history, we grew up seeing exactly what we did not want our futures to look like, and we knew the cycle would never end if we decided to parent our daughter in the same environment. We did not want to end up like our parents, and we certainly didn't want that for Carly either. By choosing adoption we could be the first generation to put an end to the vicious cycle of abuse, addiction, and poverty.

Even with all the backlash that came with our decision, we stuck by it because we knew it was the

right choice for everyone. By placing our daughter for adoption we gave her adoptive parents one of the greatest gifts you can give, and we gave Carly a chance at the life we always dreamed of. From the moment we watched her drive off with her adoptive parents, we knew we were going to do everything we could to become people that she would be proud of one day. That's how we went from teenage delinquents to hard-working young adults with big plans.

We traded in partying and getting into trouble for jobs, eventually becoming caregivers for kids and adults with special needs. We started to take school more seriously because we knew if we wanted to go places we had to buckle down, get our diplomas, and start making plans for college. At this point we were making something of our lives together, and nothing was going to get in our way. Not the effects of our childhoods, and not any obstacles in our relationship. But that doesn't mean those things didn't creep up on us, sometimes testing our bond.

We couldn't erase the fact that we had gone through an eight month separation early on in our relationship, or the lies and trust issues that came from it later. We couldn't erase the sexual abuse that Tyler suffered early on in his childhood and how it had continued to affect him throughout his life. And we couldn't erase our ties to the past and the dysfunctional world we'd come from, which was still full of friends and family we loved with all our hearts. We knew we needed to deal with these issues if we wanted to make it as a couple and be the kind of people Carly would look up to one day.

We had been lucky to have had very little conflict throughout our relationship when we were still “just kids,” but after Carly we didn't feel like kids anymore. Our relationship took on a whole new meaning. At sixteen we felt like adults, which meant we were now in an adult relationship. Catelynn's history of lying and the pain that Tyler still harbored from our separation really began to chip away at our relationship's solid foundation. If we were going to make it we knew we needed to heal so we could continue taking control of our lives and empowering ourselves.

This isn't just a story about relationships, teen pregnancy, or even adoption. This is a story about breaking the cycle of dysfunction and learning how to overcome even the toughest obstacles that life throws your way. This is our story and we are grateful that you have chosen to read it.

Thank you. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you. Without the support of the people who have watched us grow since we were scared teenagers, we would never have become the people who are now writing this book. During all the challenges and sacrifices, we were able to lean on the love and encouragement of so many strangers who connected with our story and reached out to tell us what it meant to them. Not a day goes by when we aren't grateful for the time you've taken to get to know us and hear our story. For hearing us, for respecting us, and for reading this book, thank you, thank you, and thank you.

CHAPTER 1:

A VERY UNUSUAL LOVE STORY

If you know us from television, you know us as a couple. For the five years we've been appearing on MTV, from *16 & Pregnant* to *Teen Mom* and all the specials and spin-offs in between, it's always been "Tyler and Catelynn," "Catelynn and Tyler." A single unit, practically joined at the hip. But in real life...

Nope, just kidding. In this specific case, the real story isn't a whole lot different from the one you've seen: We've been a package deal for a long time, ever since we fell for each other at the unripe age of twelve. That's not to say we're not individuals — we definitely are! But in the years since we were childhood sweethearts, we've shared the most meaningful and difficult experiences of our lives. We've grown up together, and after all the ups and downs, we're still a team.

We know, we know. You probably didn't pick up this book because you wanted to hear two kids from reality TV brag about their perfect relationship for a hundred pages. We promise we're not going to do that to you. But this isn't just "Catelynn's Story" or "Tyler's Story." It's our story. And if we're going to open up about all the tragedy, triumph, mischief and mayhem of our journey, what better place to start than that fateful year in junior high?

Anything Can Happen on the First Day of School

Tyler:

Looking back on the first time I saw Catelynn is like watching a movie I know by heart. I remember every detail.

Picture the scene: A middle school hallway crowded with kids, most of them holding papers showing their class schedules and room numbers. It's the first day of seventh grade, and the energy is high — especially for me, a troublemaker from the trailer park who's been raising hell since daycare.

As I slide through the kids in the hall, I look at my schedule to see my last class before lunch: music. I think, sweet! Easy A. I walk in with my chains clanking behind me and grab a seat, scanning the room to see what kind of kids are in this class, looking for anyone that I knew.

Then it happens. I see her.

The whole room seems to go quiet as I lock eyes with a blonde bombshell. She only makes eye contact with me for a second, and then she turns away to talk to one of her friends, breaking the moment. But I can't stop staring at her. I feel like a creeper, but I don't even care. The girl is cute as hell, but in a tomboy way. She isn't wearing tons of makeup and she hasn't styled her bright blonde hair. She has on a couple studded bracelets, flare jeans and skater shoes, and a shirt that says "I'm with the drummer." Her smile lights up the room and her eyes are beautiful piercing gray. Plus, she's got bigger tits than any other girl in the seventh grade.

Definitely my kind of chick. I think to myself, "I have to have her."

The class ends and lunch starts. I hurry and scan the crowd of kids by the doors to see if I can spot her, but I can't. Pushing through the suffocating crowd of kids, I finally spot her bright blonde hair disappearing around the corner of the hallway. I jog to catch up and then slow my roll as I turn the corner, playing it cool, and there she is again. She's just standing there, the coolest, prettiest rock chick my seventh-grade eyes have ever landed on, and I feel like she's just waiting for me to walk up

and grab her by the hips and tell her she's mine. There's no question in my mind: I have to make a move. So I take a deep breath and walk right up.

But just when I get close enough to say hi, she spots somebody and takes off running. Before I know it, the girl of my dreams is locking her arms around some guy, and they're making out hardcore by the lockers.

My heartbeat is now in my ears. I close my eyes and sigh. Of course a girl like that would already be taken.

Feeling like an idiot for the rest of the day, I finally meet up with my friend Ash after school for our usual ten-minute walk home. She hitches her backpack over her shoulder, pulls out two cigarettes, and hands me one.

"Thanks dude," I say, my head still full of the rocker girl. "I'm dying." I shield the lighter for her and then stand against the wind to light my own. We walk and smoke, making sure to cuff our cigarettes just in case a cop drives by. In a small town like Marine City, police will stop an old lady for jaywalking if they're bored enough.

As usual, we head to Ashley's house and straight on into the garage, which was originally fixed up as a room for her older sister but later turned into Ashley's lair and our traditional hangout. The door is scribbled with graffiti of all sorts of stuff fourteen year olds aren't supposed to be into, from pot leaves to retro mushrooms. Ashley throws on some Bone Thugs N Harmony, one of our favorite groups, along with Sublime, Tech Nine, Eminem and a whole bunch of rock bands. I wonder what kind of music the beautiful blond bombshell chick from today listens to.

That's what I'm thinking while Ashley grabs a familiar box from under her bed and opens it to release the beautiful aroma of weed. We spark up the bud in her homemade pipe, and finally I start to let it all out.

"I saw the hottest chick today, dude," I say after coughing out a cloud of smoke. "She has the biggest tits in the seventh grade, long blonde hair, and a smile that don't stop."

"Really?" Ash takes the pipe. "What's her name?"

"I don't even know, actually," I say, gloomy about it. "I didn't even talk to her, I tried to find her after class, but she's got a boyfriend."

Ash laughs. "Who cares?"

I cough on the last hit. Ashley knows me too well. "I'll get her," I say. "Don't worry."

When You Know, You Know

Catelynn:

I'll let Tyler direct that movie, but I know it by heart, too. The usual craziness of seventh grade was especially crazy for Tyler and me, even before we met. Tyler, obviously, had his own reputation going on. He was a real smart-ass kid, and like all of our friends back then, his life was rough around the edges: A dad in jail, a single mom who'd worked hard to move them out of the trailer park, and he wasn't exactly known for being well behaved.

And I could relate to a lot of that. Tyler describes me back then as a blond bombshell with a big smile, but at the time, this "bomb-shell" was living in a shady trailer park. I wasn't the kind of person to cause trouble at school, but trouble was definitely something I was familiar with. I've got all the

usual “trailer park kid” stories. My mom’s trailer wasn’t as bad as a lot of the others, though. It was a newer model with a nice open-concept living room, dining and kitchen area, and a hallway to the right that led to the bathrooms and bedrooms. My room was where I showed my personality. I painted my walls hot pink and splattered them with neon paint that looked awesome under my black light. My whole door was covered with stickers. My sister and I loved scribbling little messages and drawings on our doors, and there was always funny stuff written all over the place. After I got together with Tyler, you could find “I love Tyler Baltierra” written in Sharpie everywhere.

But really, the trailer park was not a good place to live. We never had good relationships with our neighbors, and there was always crazy drama going on between the people who lived there. Drunk fighting, drug feuds, nasty kids getting in your face, you name it. And our nice, spacious trailer had its own share of that crap. Believe me, we’ll get to that later.

School was where I escaped that whole scene. My friends were all trailer park kids, too, but school was a more comfortable place for us to just relax and let down our guards. I was a real social butterfly back then, which unfortunately took priority over being a student. In my own easygoing way, I was pretty bad in school. I didn’t get called to the principal’s office all the time like some people, but I wasn’t getting any passing grades, either.

Tyler spotted me before I spotted him, but I found out who he was pretty quick. We had a few classes together, and it wasn’t long before we were hanging out with the same big group of kids. We weren’t close, but we were familiar with each other and talked casually sometimes. Of course, I had no idea this kid had already made up his mind to get me!

The first I heard of it was from our friend Alexa, who quietly gave me the news one day when the usual group was gathered at school. In true junior high school girl fashion, she just came out of nowhere and said, “You know, Catelynn, Tyler really likes you.”

“Oh, really?” What else do you say? I didn’t see it coming, but Tyler must have known what was up: When I walked out of the classroom, I remember glancing over at him and he was giving her the darkest death glare I’d ever seen.

So from that point, I knew Tyler was interested in me. But I still had a boyfriend at the time. I didn’t know how *serious* Tyler was about getting together with me until one night a few weeks later when I had a party at my house. All of my friends were there, including my boyfriend. And Tyler was there, too.

I can’t explain how, but I could just sense that whatever might happen between Tyler and me would be something serious. Maybe it was the way he was focused on me, or the look in his eyes whenever he glanced at me with this other guy. Whatever it was, I knew that Tyler had made up his mind to be my boyfriend, and I knew that if I encouraged him, it would be a done deal. I think that’s why I told him he couldn’t stay at my house after the party. That wasn’t true at all. I had several girlfriends over that night, and my mom was fine with all of us kids being there until whenever. But when Tyler asked if he could stay, I lied and said no. I wasn’t even sure why I did that, at the time. It was weird.

Tyler:

I begged Cate to ask her mom to let me stay over that night. I definitely had plans. The whole reason I went to the party in the first place was to scope things out, and the first thing I noticed was that she totally wasn’t into her boyfriend. Every time he tried to pull her down on the bed to make out

with him, she'd get up and walk away. When I saw that, I knew I was in. And I knew she felt it, too. ~~That's why she wouldn't let me stay! She was just nervous because she knew, deep down inside, that~~ she wanted to be with me, too. She knew if I stayed we'd be together by the time the party was over. She just wasn't ready for it. But right after that party, she broke up with her boyfriend. I went for it.

There was no big production about it. All I did was walk up beside her and take her hand. Of course, that took some nerve. I was terrified. It was the scariest thing I'd ever done in my thirteen-year-old life. But I made up my mind that that was the way to do it: I was going to run up and grab her hand, and if she let go, well...I couldn't plan that far ahead. But I went for it.

Catelynn just held my hand back. We didn't even look at each other. That was just it. We just walked on ahead, holding hands, and we've been together ever since.

No Ordinary Middle School Romance

Catelynn:

I fell for Tyler because he was always making me laugh. Whether he was writing funny notes for me, cracking jokes in class, clowning around with his friends, he always brought this fun, positive energy to the room. I was a social kid, but I was pretty shy and reserved. I loved that he was funny and outgoing. It helped bring out bigger parts of my personality, too.

From the very beginning of our relationship, Tyler and I have had a strong bond. Not just a boyfriend and girlfriend, but as really good friends. No relationship is perfect, but even back then, we had a connection and concern for each other that was really different from what we saw in other couples around us.

People think junior high relationships are no big deal, and maybe they're usually not. A lot of our friends at the time were going through relationships one after the other, dating just to date. But Tyler and I weren't like that. When we got together, we didn't feel like messing around. Even at such a young age, we somehow brought out these grown-up, serious instincts in each other. Suddenly it was clear that we both wanted a long-lasting relationship, someone who would be there forever. Of course we didn't know how to handle that kind of goal right away, and there was a time early on when we broke up for awhile and each dated someone else. But we got right back together, because we both wanted to be serious and we had what we wanted with each other.

Tyler:

We started the relationship with a promise to be honest and open. We each brought out something in each other: Cate mellowed me out, and I inspired her to be more outgoing. But we had to stumble around a little bit to find that balance. I've always had a strong personality and always speak my mind. Catelynn, on the other hand, is a natural people-pleaser and grew up doing anything to avoid conflict.

I didn't want to steamroll over her, and I didn't want her to hide her feelings and opinions from me. So I put my big mouth to use and told her, "Hey, if you don't like something, you have to tell me. Don't just agree with me to make me happy." God gave you a mouth for a reason!

Catelynn:

It was really hard for me to get used to Tyler's kind of honesty. I was not the kind of person who stood up to speak my mind whenever I wanted. Growing up in an unstable house, it was always my job

to be a peacemaker and saying whatever I needed to say to make things go smoothly. The last thing I ever wanted to do was make waves, hurt feelings, or cause a fight.

For awhile, I tried the same thing with Tyler. Whenever we had a disagreement, I would always choose the path of least resistance and go along with what he said. To me, it wasn't even something expected people to notice. It was just second nature to choose the path of least resistance. But one day all of a sudden, Tyler came out and said, "Okay, this is annoying."

Tyler:

It wasn't an argument — we never really argued or fought, and it's still very rare — but it was definitely our first big talk. The problem was that I could tell she wasn't speaking her mind to me, and she was always holding in what she really wanted. For example, I'd suggest doing something that I knew she really wanted to do, and I'd ask her what she thought. And without fail, she'd never say "Yes, I want to do that." She'd say, "Whatever you want to do." And if I said, "Okay, let's not do it," she'd agree with me, even though I *knew* she was disappointed! I couldn't understand it. When I asked her what she wanted, it was because I wanted to know! Finally I just couldn't take it anymore, and I had to bring it up.

I said, "Listen, I'm not into this thing where you say 'yes' and agree to everything I say. I can't have you pretending you're okay with something when you're not. That doesn't make me happy. I don't want to be with someone who goes along with everything I say. I want a girl who has her own voice and is confident about it. You can't be afraid to disagree with me."

Cate's reaction was the funniest thing. She had a surprised look on her face, like the idea had never even occurred to her before. And when I was done she just shrugged and said, "Okay."

"Can you do that?" I asked her. "Can you actually say what you want so we're not just always going with what I want?"

"Well," she said. "Shit, yeah, I can do that."

Catelynn:

After that, my habits completely changed. It was like I was just waiting for someone to tell me it was okay to speak my mind. The thing was, no one ever really had. Not like that. I know it had a lot to do with my upbringing and home life: When I got together with Tyler, I'd already lived in ten different places, and I was used to living in unstable, unpredictable, emotional situations. So speaking my mind and sharing my feelings just wasn't at the top of my list of survival skills. It wasn't something that had gotten positive results in the past.

But to have someone tell me for the first time that he really wanted me to disagree with him sometimes, that he cared about my point of view, was a big deal for me. That was one big way that our relationship empowered me from the start. And once I got the hang of it, it was on! I was objecting to things left and right. And if Tyler ever acted surprised, I was quick to say, "Hey, you told me to!"

I know a lot of people struggle with this same thing. They try to hide certain thoughts or feelings because they're afraid of how their partner will react. But Tyler and I made communication a priority from the start, and when we had an issue, we worked it out like friends. We've always been good at talking to one another and figuring out what to do as a team.

Tyler:

It hasn't always been easy to figure each other out. Regardless of age, the first couple of years

any relationship are about getting to know how the other person works. How do they process their feelings? What stresses them out? What makes them feel safe? What parts of their personality or my personality are causing issues? What's the best way to stop our differences from coming between us? It's different for every couple.

Catelynn:

In our case, learning how to be honest with each other made our relationship strong. Since we weren't hiding how we really thought and felt, we were able to trust and know each other better. And that made us *want* to solve problems together. When you're open to the other person's unique point of view, you double your power to figure things out.

It was never about erasing the differences between us. Not at all. I'm more reserved and easygoing and he's more outgoing and loud, and we pull each other out of our comfort zones. I've taught him how to calm down and not get anxious or mad about the little things that he used to get mad about. And he's taught me how to get a little tougher about what I want. And when we're facing something difficult, we each bring a different perspective to every situation that the other person wouldn't naturally think about. That's what teamwork is all about.

Tyler:

We've both mutually benefited from what we taught each other. We started working on this stuff when we were just kids, really. We've been a team for a long time, and the bond we have together matured as we grew up. We're not perfect, and we've had some rough patches. But once we figured out how well we worked as a team, we tried to keep that going. Neither of us ever had any interest in being one of those couples who fight hardcore all the time. What's the point?

Catelynn:

We've never been a fighting couple. We're just not interested in making each other miserable like that. In the first years of the relationship, we didn't argue much at all. If we did, we were probably drunk and laughed about it later! Basically, when we had a problem, we talked it out. That was our rule, and it still is.

Since we've gotten older and started dealing with more adult stress and challenges, we've had some bickering here and there. But overall, we can remember maybe six fights we've gotten into. Most of them happened in the years after we'd placed our daughter Carly for adoption. Those were some overwhelming times, and we're human. But for the most part, and definitely for the important parts, we've been a team since day one. Not only are we proud of that, but we're thankful for it every day. Without each other, who knows how we would have come as far as we have?

Tyler:

Just imagine if I hadn't grabbed her hand.

Catelynn:

Yeah, just imagine if I hadn't let him!

Closing Thoughts

From the very beginning and continuing to this day, we get asked for relationship advice. Even our parents ask us! ~~We try to give the best advice we can, but all we can really do is share what we've learned from our own experiences.~~ Every single time, it boils down to a few important things.

First, be with the person you want to be with. Don't just date to date, or date because you're afraid to be alone. A good relationship is based on mutual love and dedication, and that's all there is to it.

Second, honesty is absolutely necessary in a relationship. Be open about your feelings and what you want, and make sure the other person feels safe doing the same thing with you. Don't let problems build up in silence because you're afraid to bring them up. That's like throwing a grenade under the rug. It *will* blow up later, and it'll cause a lot more destruction than if you would have just talked it out in the first place.

Third, be kind to each other. Never say or do things just to hurt the other person. If you're lucky enough to be with someone who trusts you enough to show you their weaknesses, the worst thing you can possibly do is turn around and use that against them. No low blows. Ever.

Fourth, respect the other person's point of view. Even if you don't agree with what they're saying, try to see where they're coming from. In the end you might have to agree to disagree, but at least you'll know you respected each other enough to try and understand why. And who knows? They might be seeing something important from their point of view that you just weren't able to see from yours.

These things are all easier said than done. Emotions can get in the way, and people make mistakes. That's why relationships are hard! But if you work together with love, honesty, kindness and respect, you can take on the world as a team. Like we always say, we can only speak from our own experience. But working on these good habits made our relationship a source of strength that got us through the most difficult experiences of our lives. In the years since we joined hands for the first time, we've had to draw on that strength many, many times. If we hadn't been able to turn to each other when times were dark, who knows where we would be now? Probably not writing this book!

CHAPTER 2:

“ BAD KIDS ”

Ever looked at a young person and saw something in them that made you say, “That’s a good kid”? We’ve heard that said about us a few times in the years since we started sharing our lives in the public eye. “They’re good kids.” It makes us feel good to hear that, but it also makes us wonder sometimes: What does that mean, really, to be a “good kid”? People make it sound like it’s something you either are or you aren’t. Like there’s some sign they can spot early on that says, “This kid is gonna grow up right.” Sometimes they’re right. And it’s a nice thing for a kid to hear, that they’re “good” – and it gives them pride, something to live up to.

But we wouldn’t have that idea of “good kids” if we didn’t have an idea of “bad kids” to compare it to. And for every kid in school who grows up hearing they’re good, there’s another one wearing the other label. You can probably think of one right now. Maybe you’re a teacher and you’ve got a boy in your class who just has no respect for rules or authority. Maybe you remember a girl from seventh grade with a mean streak who was always picking on other kids. Maybe you’re a parent with a teenager whose only goal in life seems to be to make your life miserable.

Or maybe you *were* a “bad kid.” Like us.

Yep. That’s right. People don’t seem to take it seriously when we tell them, but it’s true: We didn’t start out as the “good kids” we might have come across as on TV. *Hell* no! Back in the day, we were more like the ones the “good kids” weren’t allowed to hang out with. The fact is if you’d seen us before MTV, back in junior high or even in elementary school, your first thought probably wouldn’t have been, “Those kids are definitely gonna turn out right.” More likely you would have shaken your head. You might not have come right out and called us “bad kids,” but that’s what plenty of people thought we were.

We like to think we’ve proved them wrong.

See, it’s never as simple as “good kids” and “bad kids.” That kid in kindergarten tearing up all his notebooks and yelling at the teacher? He might be the most sensitive kid in class, if he could just figure out how to channel that energy. That first-grader with the sweet manners who always follows instructions? She might have problems at home that’ll drive her to drugs by the time she’s twenty. Kids are complicated. You can’t just look at them and think you know what’s going on inside, and you definitely can’t say for sure how they’re going to turn out.

We’re glad people think we’re good kids now. And we sure as hell don’t want to change anybody’s mind! But since we’re lucky enough to have all these people listening to us with open minds, we want to show the rest of the story. We want to give you a chance to reconsider that whole idea of “good kids” and “bad kids,” and how much people can change.

Daycare Delinquents and School Slackers

Tyler:

Trouble started early with me. I got kicked out of every daycare I was ever in. How, right? Well, I was very defiant toward any kind of authoritative figure. Even before I was five years old I remember thinking in my head, “What gives you the right to tell me what to do? Who gave you the title to tell me that I’m wrong because I don’t agree with what you’re saying? Just because you were born a fe

years before me?" I just wanted to battle them constantly: Cops, teachers, parents, anybody in charge

The first time I remember really getting into it with a teacher was at a monastery daycare. It was run by nuns, and the place had a strict, crazy, cultish atmosphere. It wasn't the right place for me from the start, to put it bluntly. For example, when you got in trouble, the nuns used to put you in an extreme time-out. They'd lock you in this little room with the lights off, nothing but a filing cabinet and a chair facing the window, and they'd tell you to sit there quietly, think about what you did, and pray.

That wasn't working for me. As soon as I knew the door was locked, I started kicking it as hard as I could. I kicked it and kicked it and kicked it. Nuns are really patient, you know. They probably thought I'd wear myself out. So they let me kick my heart out...until the wood started cracking. Then it was on. When the nun opened the door, she was really upset, but I was in beast mode: I got a hold of that filing cabinet and shoved the whole thing over. Even worse, the corner of that thing nicked the nun's arm, and she freaked out. That was it for monastery daycare. It was like, "Take your crazy devil son and get the hell out of here!"

That last daycare, though, that worked out. It was the first one I didn't get kicked out of, which was good, since it was the last one left in the county. The woman in charge was named Debbie, and she worked a miracle on me. All she really did was take the time to talk to me, individually, instead of just making me part of the group. She never just treated kids as kids. She tried to understand them and communicate with them. When she told me to do something and I said "I don't wanna do that," she didn't just say "Well you have to." She said, "Well, why not? Why don't you wanna do that?"

That worked like magic. I did great at that daycare! I was there for about a year, right up until my mom saved up enough to buy a house and we packed up and moved forty miles away. The last day I was at daycare, that teacher was bawling her eyes out. When I left she told me, "I will never, ever forget you. I will remember you for the rest of my life." I said the same thing to her, and it was true. I do still remember everything she did for me at that crazy time in my childhood. So Debbie, thank you.

I did fine when I felt like someone was actually hearing me. I just didn't like being told what to do without a civil conversation. And honestly, that was the theme that repeated over the course of my years at school. I didn't even make it through second grade before the trouble started up again. Some kid had knocked over my crayons and spilled them all over the floor, and I told him to pick them up. Of course he said no. So we started to fight about it, and when the teacher noticed, she said, "Tyler, pick your crayons up." Well, that wasn't fair. I wasn't the one who dropped them! So I refused, I got defiant, and bam. I was suspended.

The second time I got suspended . . . well, we'll save that for another chapter.

Catelynn:

I didn't really have problems in school. Well, my grades sucked. I guess that's a pretty big problem. But as far as fighting with teachers, I didn't have the same experience as Tyler at all. I was a really laid back person at school. I didn't act up in class or make people mad. My problem was just being a social butterfly. All I really cared about at school was hanging out and talking with my friends. So it was fine for me.

My social life was important, because I didn't really like going home. There was just no stability. That was how I got away with failing everything all the way through middle school. My mom just wasn't involved. She wasn't going to meetings with the teachers to see what my issues were,

showing up to parent-teacher conferences. Nobody ever made a big deal out of it or tried to get me straighten up my grades. Well, a few teachers tried to help me out, of course, but it didn't really matter. Seriously, I failed everything. Our middle school didn't kick anyone out for bad grades, so they just pushed me on through. I didn't start doing well until later, in high school. For the most part, I just floated through school and focused on hanging out with my friends, because that was where I could relax and be myself.

Basically, school wasn't the battleground for me. Home was the battleground. At home it was parties and drinking. My mom had a different boyfriend every few months, and people were always over at the house partying and playing music loud. All the time there were parties! I used to get out of bed at night and ask them to turn it down so I could get some sleep before I had to go to school. And there was tons of drinking. My mom was always drunk. The only time she was sober was in the two years after my little brother was born. When that time was up, she went right back to her old way of passing out at the kitchen table with the kids running loose. I'd have to put pillows under her head and make sure she was okay, then take care of my brother and sister. It felt like I was on guard all the time. We moved around a lot, too, from house to house. It was just never stable at all.

My mom and I didn't fight a lot, though. We actually got along really well, at least right up until I got pregnant. But before that, we were good friends. It wasn't the healthiest relationship, though. She never pushed any rules or restrictions on me, and I pretty much got to do whatever I wanted. And growing up in a trailer park without supervision, you know, eventually I did end up finding lots of stuff to do that I shouldn't have been doing. Tyler's a witness!

Tyler:

At home, my mom was begging me all the time: "Tyler, just keep your mouth shut, for God's sake, and you wouldn't get in trouble! It's simple!" And I would have to say, "Mom, I'm sorry, I can't." I didn't have those authority problems with her, though. In our house, we'd get into it, but then we'd work things out. She debated things with me. She listened. She let me have the conversation. It wasn't like "I'm 30, you're 10, and this is what it is." It was, "Let's talk about this. What happened? What are you feeling? Why are you acting that way?" She gave me the opportunity every time to explain what was going through my head. I still got in trouble plenty of times, but at least I had a chance to feel like it was fair and we both got to tell our sides of the story. That's what I wanted. I just wanted someone to listen to me, and then I was ready to listen back.

But the school wasn't really up to my mom's methods. Teachers weren't so much about sitting down and communicating through every problem. So my mom used to get called every single day from the principal's office to come get her kid. She'd say "Sorry, I'm 40 minutes away at work." But when we both got home, she'd ask me what happened and I'd tell her.

Sometimes I was wrong and sometimes I wasn't, and sometimes my mom had to have it out with the principal, too. He used to ask her, "You really believe his side of the story?" And she said, "You know what? As his mother, I have no choice. I have to. If I don't listen to my son, what kind of parent would I be? What's gonna happen if something really bad happens and he doesn't tell me because he doesn't trust I'd listen?"

Mom was right. There was weird stuff going on sometimes. There were times when teachers were really out of line. There was a time a teacher was getting in my face and saying "What are you gonna do about it?" I shoved him against a locker. There was a time in the eighth grade when a teacher swung his car around in a parking lot and said to me, "You lookin' at my wife? Are you checkin' out

my wife?" What the hell is that about? So of course we got into it, and then I got suspended! And when I told my mom about that, she called up every single teacher from every class and sat down and said, "What the hell is going on? I have this teacher doing this and this teacher doing that, what's going on here?"

Just because you're a teacher doesn't mean you're a good person. It doesn't even mean you should be teaching. And sometimes it's those kids who act up who become the target for a teacher's aggression and anger. Teachers are people too, honestly. I'm not trying to make them out to be monsters. They're human and they get stressed out and sometimes they don't act right. But a lot of times when they act wrong with the wrong kid, the kid ends up taking the blame. And all you see is the kid freaking out at the punishment, and you think the kid has a problem with authority. But in fact the kid might be fine with authority, as long as they get a little respect.

Fighting Up a Storm

Catelynn:

Everything I said about being laid-back at school wasn't really the case once school was over. Before and after school, I wasn't always very nice. This doesn't excuse it at all, but mean behavior was kind of business as usual where I grew up. There was always some kind of brawl going on in the trailer park. One neighbor would start some shit with another neighbor, and then the families and friends would get involved, and the next thing you knew it was *Wrestlemania*. And these were all-age events! Kids learn early in those kinds of neighborhoods.

Here's an example. One day I'm hanging out at home in the trailer park with my mom and my aunt when we hear a bunch of commotion. My mom's boyfriend at the time is fighting with some other guy in the neighborhood, and they're kicking up a fuss out on the street. So we walk out to see what the hell's going on. At the same time as my mom, my aunt and I are walking down the road towards the fight, this crazy older lady comes screaming in on a bicycle. She spots us and assumes we're enemy soldiers. So she screeches up beside us, jumps off her bike, and wails *me* right in the face.

Of course that sets it off. My mom jumps on the old lady and gets her off of me, and they start fighting. So then I jump back in to help my mom, and we're wailing on this old lady together. Then the old lady's *son* comes charging in, picks me up, lifts me off the ground, and throws me through the air. I remember landing on my elbow, getting up, and running over to jump right back in again. This happened about four times, this guy throwing me across the trailer park road.

Trailer park beefs were a regular occasion. In fact, that one was a rematch. The first time my mom's boyfriend had fought with that guy, the dude had whaled on him with a tire iron. So there would be these long feuds and revenge sagas between the trailer park families, and I would always get involved when my family was involved. My main goal was always to keep the peace, but when a fight started up, I wound up in the middle of it. If someone came at my mom, it was on.

This stuff was constant. I remember once when my mom was having a party. My uncle was there and my aunt, and a few other people. A car pulled up outside, and they all went outside for some reason. And a huge fight broke out in my front yard. Someone threw this handicapped man out of the car and left him laying on the road! When I saw that out the window, I walked out onto the battlefield to try and help this guy back into the car. I remember my uncle helping me get him back in.

Those are just a few of the battles I remember. It was chaos all the time. I didn't like it, and didn't thrive on it, but I was familiar with it. It was normal to me.

Tyler:

I got into it with teachers a couple of times. When I was in fifth grade, there was one teacher who drove totally over the edge. I punched a filing cabinet, and he stomped up behind me, grabbed my backpack, and threw me across the room. Then he screamed at the whole class to leave the room. I couldn't show my fear, but to be honest, I was pretty freaked out. I'd never pushed a teacher that far before. But when he got the kids cleared out, he turned and faced me and he had tears coming down his cheeks. He said to me, "Tyler, I want you to know that what I just did was not right, and I am sorry." He told me he'd had his own problems with his temper, and he'd lost control.

I was like, "Psh, yeah, whatever." But while I was walking home, I started crying! I was so worked up with adrenaline and caught off guard, I sort of fell apart. Of course when I told my mom what had happened, she freaked out. She was about to call the school and get this guy fired. But I said, "Mom, no. He doesn't deserve to be fired. I was pushing his buttons and he lost his cool. Don't do anything." That put her in an impossible position, pretty much. But I said, "Mom, if you get that teacher fired, I'll never forgive you." She finally agreed.

On Monday when I went into that teacher's class, he had probably had a hell of a weekend. I'm sure he thought it was all over for him, but apparently he did a lot of thinking between Friday and Monday about how to make things right with me personally. I think what he realized was that I needed some way to channel all that restless energy I was putting into being a dick. I was always trying to be the class clown, always interrupting, always acting crazy. So that Monday he pulled me aside and said, "All right, Tyler, from now on, the first ten minutes of class is gonna be Tyler time. Whatever it is you need to get out of your system, just go ahead and do it. Then we'll have our class." And after that, it was like magic. The kids loved it, and I loved it. Every morning I got to have my Jim Carrey stand-up time. I got my outlet, he got his class back, and I ended fifth grade on the honor roll. Ten minutes of Tyler-time a day was all it took.

That experience hit me hard. This teacher who snapped and lost his temper ended up being one of the best things that ever happened to me. At the very least, it taught me that not every authority figure who scolded me was out to destroy my life.

Fast Times at Junior High

Catelynn:

By the time I was in middle school, I had learned how to act tough in certain situations. Most of the time I was the most easygoing person in the world. But certain conflicts triggered something more angry and aggressive in me, and sometimes things got violent. Like the time I busted down a door and beat this one girl's ass. No, I'm not proud of it.

It was the summer after the sixth grade, and I'd just gotten broken up with by this kid named Nick. I didn't know why he did it at first, but one day on the bus he told me it was because of my friend Katy. It turned out he'd dumped me out of the blue because of something she told him.

When we all got off the bus, Katy was walking ahead of me toward the trailer park where we both lived. I ran after her and called her out. This girl was about six feet tall, and I was just a little thing.

but I was livid! I was yelling at her, “We’re supposed to be friends! What are you doing talking behind my back?” And then right there, in the middle of the trailer park, I just went at her. I started whaling on her in the middle of the street with all our friends looking on. And when she started running toward her house, I took off right behind her. I whomped on her a few more times before she got inside and locked the door, and then I started kicking it down. I was just going crazy. But the neighbor next door started screaming she was going to call the cops, so I had to get out of there.

I went straight home and started calling people up to tell them this “cool story” about how “I just whooped Katy’s ass,” thinking I was a rebel. I was bragging away, thinking it was all fun and games and drama, but then the next thing I knew, I looked out the window and saw a sheriff’s car pulling up. Talking tough to the sheriff didn’t help me at all, and I wound up having to go to juvenile court. I was put on probation for ninety days.

Tyler:

Seventh grade, the year we got together, was was when I started growing my hair out, going to Hot Topic, wearing the chains and goth stuff, listening to metal and all of that. Seventh grade was one of the worst years ever for getting into trouble. From seventh grade on, I never saw the last month of school. They used to rush me out early. I had so many suspensions and stuff racked up that as soon as the teachers could, they’d say, “Tyler, clean up your locker and get out of here.” I’d go grab all my papers and run down the hallways throwing my papers everywhere screaming, “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!”

Catelynn:

Tyler really was in trouble a lot in the seventh grade. I used to walk by the room where they had detention and always see him sitting in there. I’d poke my head in and go, “Tyler, what did you do?” And he’d say something about teachers, you know, whatever. Then I’d tell him what everyone else was always trying to tell him, which was “Tyler, keep your mouth shut!” It didn’t work, but I tried!

Obviously I was getting in trouble, too. We both were in our own ways, but we didn’t really do together. Right around the time we started dating, Tyler had just started to steal a lot. He stole a lot of lip gloss for me, and I didn’t exactly talk him out of it. It was kind of a Bonnie and Clyde situation.

Tyler:

The stealing became a real problem, almost like a compulsion. If I walked out of a store without stealing something, I’d get this anxious feeling, like, “Crap! Why didn’t I grab something?” And wasn’t just lip gloss for Catelynn I was stealing, either.

Taking It to the Limit

Tyler:

At thirteen I was in the prime stage of my gothic appearance and bad attitude. My dad had just gotten out of prison a couple of weeks before, the first time he had been out since I was eight years old. He had just moved in with this desperate woman who, for some odd reason, thought he had the potential to be a stable lifelong partner. I don’t know how she came to that conclusion, but my dad was always the best con artist. He could sell glasses to a blind man, and he was especially good at convincing people he was reliable and then using that to get what he needed.

I decided to stay with my dad for a couple weeks that summer. He lived in Warren, Michigan, a real ghetto cookie cutter of a town desperately holding onto the hope it could be something nice one day. My cousin Brandon was staying not too far from where my dad was, and we had plans to hang out and get into trouble just like we had the first time my dad had gotten out of prison. Back then, at the age of eight, Brandon and I had gotten our first tastes of weed, cigarettes, and beer. Now I was thirteen, and we were all geared up for another round of delinquent fun. For a couple of days we went to work with my dad, helping him install fences for some spending money. Afterward we'd hang around smoking cigarettes and drinking forties.

Then one night we got an extreme idea. The houses in Warren were so close together that most people parked on the street to save room in the driveway. Brandon and I decided these parked cars would be a great place to look for some spare change. It started like a fun game, crouching, ducking, and whispering between the cars like spies. But then we slipped into a car and saw a set of keys in the center console.

We sat there and looked at each other in silence, and then Brandon started the car and took off. We went slow at first, on edge and almost shaking with adrenaline. But then we got cocky and started peeling out, screeching the tires and letting every whip and turn around a corner carry us into a whirlwind of excitement. After we put the car back where we found it, we weren't interested in looking for quarters and nickels anymore. We went hunting for keys.

We ended up stealing about a dozen cars that night. We actually couldn't believe how many people were naïve enough to leave their keys in the car in that kind of town! For the rest of the night we jumped concrete driveways, e-braked every turn, and skidded along curbs, blasting Tupac, Biggie, and Bone Thugs until sunrise. Finally Brandon dropped me off at my dad's girlfriend's house, where I sneaked in and slid onto the couch with adrenaline still flowing. That was a night I will never forget.

In those days I had a friend who would slip into houses with me, too. It was an adrenaline addiction kind of thing, like playing Mission Impossible. There was one guy we knew of, for instance, who mowed his lawn every week like clockwork. And I timed how long it took him to take his lawnmower from one end of the house to the other. It took exactly two and a half minutes to do the one strip. So I knew I had two and a half minutes to go through the bushes, run into his house, get his wallet, pull out some cash, and run out. I did it all the time. I'd take twenty bucks a time, and I had no idea. Or at least, I never got caught.

Another neighbor down the street was a target of mine, too. That was the craziest thing I ever did. This woman was typing on her computer in the office about fifteen feet from the kitchen. I sneaked through the garage and went into the kitchen, where she had her wallet on the kitchen counter, and I grabbed it and ran. But I remember feeling so bad. I just wanted some cash, but I had this wallet with all her debit cards and her driver's license and everything. So I did something even dumber: I went back to the scene of the crime that night, crept in the same way, sneaked into the kitchen, and slid the wallet back onto the counter.

When I was younger doing all those things, I think I was sort of daring someone to catch me. Part of the whole rush was thinking I was going to get caught, but then I kept on doing it. It's like I was asking for it. I don't know. Maybe I wanted somebody to get me in line.

Catelynn:

Oh my gosh. We sound completely insane.

Closing Thoughts

You know, when we put all these stories in writing, we started to wonder if it was really such a good idea. We were worried we sounded like we were really crazy, messed up people. Like we said in the beginning, we get a lot of positive comments from people who have watched our lives and really feel like they know us. We didn't want to change their opinions by telling them all the bad stuff we did before they "met" us.

But then we realized that was the whole point of being honest. Of course we want people to think good things about us, and we want people to recognize our accomplishments. But we don't want them to think we were born knowing how to act right and make good choices. It was a process for us, one that started as soon as we realized we were going to be bringing another life into this world. Even the time the cameras showed up, we were already trying as hard as we could to do right by the child we had on the way. But before that there were plenty of mistakes and bad choices and behavior that went on right up to the day we found out Catelynn was pregnant.

Think of how many "bad kids" out there have that potential to grow and change. You never know. There are a lot of kids out there who are born into the wrong environments, or don't know how to handle themselves when they're young, and sometimes it takes them longer to figure things out. But when you see one of those "bad kids," just remember, they might just be waiting for someone to do something to help them be better. That's why we want people to know that we made that transformation. So we're being honest about the before and the after. Once upon a time, we were the "bad kids." But it's not a permanent label.

CHAPTER 3:

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