

BRETT BERSON

*first loves  
are forever*



*This is a true love story, involving reconnection with author Brett Berson's first girlfriend via social media after nearly 40 years apart. The story covers an entire lifetime, and includes the bloom of first love, the pain of lost love, the passion of rediscovery, renewal, and reunion, and the painstaking process of eventual reconciliation and vindication. It's a wild ride, with a very happy ending, one which resonates with anyone who has ever been deeply in love.*

# First Loves Are Forever

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# **FIRST LOVES ARE FOREVER**

**(My True-Life Fairy Tale)**

**Brett Berson**

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# **PART I**

## **Chapter 1**

**April 26**

It began like every other ordinary Monday. As usual I slept poorly. As usual my alarm was set for 5:30. As usual I got out of bed at 5:15. I did what I do every morning...I took a quick shower, had a cup of coffee, pulled on my nondescript surgical scrubs, and drove to my office in the dawn of a late April south Florida morning. It was already hot and humid by 6:30, when I got out of my car. The A/C is automatically turned off all weekend in the office building, so it's usually stifling inside and even hard to breathe. I'm always the first person in the parking lot, the first person in the building, the first person in the office, the first person to log on, and the first person to turn on the lights and greet the staff. It was a Monday morning like any other.

And the day started like all others. Effie, the receptionist, came in at 7 and prepared the front desk for the first patient, who arrived at 7:30 for an 8 o'clock appointment. Fanny, my medical assistant, showed up at 7:59, a little rushed and harried, as usual. Yvonne, the office manager, came in shortly after 8, as usual. The usual parade of patients rolled in, with the usual list of ailments, the usual complaints and requests for meds, or forms, or disability, and always looking for sympathy. After twenty-three years, I've calculated that I've seen close to 250,000 patients. By now they are a faceless and nameless stream, never-ending, continuously flowing by with barely a ripple. The beginning and the end are nowhere to be seen. I stand on the bank, watching this mass of humanity floating by, barely disturbing the flow,

barely touched by those I've pledged to help, heal, save. The innocence, optimism, idealism of the long-ago medical student had given way under a lifetime of boredom and emptiness and disappointment. I was too numb even to wonder how it had come to this, or why, or where to go from there? The silence was deafening, and the ennui crushing. I think my public face appeared normal, even interested. Internally was a hollowness that was bottomless, infinite, seemingly eternal.

So it was just another day like any other. Or so it seemed...and then something happened, not with a bang but with a whisper; not even a whisper, but the faintest hint of a shift in the wind, a barely perceptible but undeniable disturbance in the ether causing an unfamiliar imbalance in the forces that defined my universe; call it what you will, but something had happened, something that, without warning, would slowly gather steam and momentum until it rocked my world and changed my life forever. I never saw it coming.

## Chapter 2

“...keep your cast dry, elevate for pain and swelling, and come back in a week. If you have any problems before then, give me a call. We’ll check the X-rays then, and see if you’re ready for therapy.”

I came back into my office to dictate my note, sat down at my desk, and opened the patient’s electronic medical record. Ever since we went “paperless,” I spend more time dealing with my computer than with my patients—electronic medical records, voice-recognition dictation, digital X-rays that appear on my desktop screen. Our zeal to become more efficient through technology has distanced me from my patients. I may be more efficient as a record-keeper but am less connected; the therapeutic touch has been replaced by high-tech wizardry, sophisticated scans and techniques that are full of promise, devoid of good old-fashioned hearing and feeling and caring. My dad was a general practitioner who spent thirty-five years in a two-room office with one nurse and, without any tools but his hands and his heart, he took better care of generations of patients than anyone I knew. His soul and saintliness were powerful therapies indeed! He was an amazing role model—as a dad, as a doctor, and as a human being. I always tried to be a physician in his image.

So I finished my note, and quickly scanned through my emails before moving on to my next patient. I saw the usual: general notices from various hospital staff offices; online credit card and bank statements; Word of the Day...and one from “Alana,” subject “old friend.” I had only known one Alana in my life, and so long ago that it couldn’t have been the same person! Who could this “Alana” be?

I was glad for any excuse to stay at my desk a few extra minutes. So I opened the email and read the following:

“Hi Brett,

“I was looking on the ACS website and found your profile. It made me start to wonder how you are doing and what life is like for you in Florida.

“I am practicing breast surgery on Long Island. I am married and have a 17 year old son. Mom lives across the street from me and my dad passed away 2 years ago at age 89.

“How is your practice? Your life? Your family?”

“I am going to my 25<sup>th</sup> medical college reunion in NYC on 5/22. I can’t believe it has been that long since I graduated.

“Hope you and your family are well.

“Love, Alana”

I went off to see my next patient with a curious excitement I hadn’t felt in many years. After all this time...Alana...What’s up with *this*? I couldn’t wait to get back to my desk. The longest journey begins with the first step, and little did I know that I had already taken mine.



## Chapter 3

I went through the motions with Jesus Ramirez, an injured worker with back pain. He spoke little English, I speak no Spanish, and so a translator was present, who must have been new at this because she didn't get the basics of interpreting. She kept talking while I was speaking (rather than waiting until I paused), so it took not just twice as long but four times as long (and wondering about Alana made it feel like ten times as long!) Eventually—probably no longer than five minutes later, but which felt like an eternity—I sat down again at my desk to re-read the email. How could this be? Alana? *Alana*??!?! The familiar office walls began to recede and shimmer a little (just like a dream sequence in a movie). I remembered a young girl named Alana from the distant past, from so long ago it felt like a previous lifetime. “Al” was my first serious girlfriend, whom I had met when I was eighteen and had last seen almost thirty years before. I knew immediately that I would be writing back. But what was she expecting, and what could she possibly want with me after all these years? My heart was racing, and I had no idea what to write. But I started typing, and surprised myself ...

“What a very nice surprise to hear from you! It has been a long time but I have thought of you often and fondly over these many years. You sound well, and I hope you're enjoying your surgical practice after all it took to get there. I graduated from medical school 32 years ago! I've been a doctor for longer than I haven't been a doctor!! Somehow the years really have flown by.

“After finishing my orthopaedic residency I went to San Diego for a fellowship in Joint Replacement surgery. It was a good time for me to be leaving NYC because my father, who always took proper care of himself, developed metastatic pancreatic cancer and died within 3 months of being diagnosed at age 68. That was in July 1987, and I was

glad to get away and head west. I still think of, and miss, him every day. My mother is still alive and lives in your old stomping grounds at North Shore Towers. She is now 87, and, unfortunately, suffering from Alzheimer's disease. She still knows who I am, but I dread the day when I call or see her, and she doesn't recognize me. I'm sure that day isn't too far off. But she is physically healthy, has no pain, and is happy as a clam. So at least she is not suffering at all, which is a blessing.

"I'm sorry to hear about your Dad. I still remember when he and your Mom went to Cleveland for his kidney surgery. Apparently it worked wonders if he lived to 89! And I'm glad your Mom is alive, I hope well, and living near you. Please give her my regards.

"I moved from San Diego to South Florida in 1995 when managed care came in with a vengeance and California was going bust (which it still is). I loved living in San Diego, but it became impossible to make a living there as a physician. My whole group of 4 guys all left, along with an exodus of hundreds of others because the economy was so poor. Things have been somewhat better in South Florida although we're all feeling the crunch, and, I'm sorry to say, it will only get worse with the new healthcare reforms.

"I have a 26 year old daughter who has been the love of my life. She graduated from the University of Florida with a degree in Elementary Education, got a Masters from U. of P., and is now getting a second Masters in Library Science from Pratt. So she remains on the payroll (still largely mine) but may get a job someday. Her fiancé and I are hoping! She lives in Manhattan, and I try to get to see her whenever possible.

"I have patients waiting so I will sign off for now. Thank you so much for writing. It's been nice, if only for a few minutes, to get back in touch with that 18-year old boy who spent New Year's Eve with you, Eddie, and Dale 40 years ago! To be perfectly honest, you're the one old flame that never went out, and I still carry deep feelings for you.

"All my very best wishes to you and yours.

"Love,  
Brett"

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I hesitated for a brief moment, then pressed “Send” and got up to see my next patient.

## Chapter 4

The rest of the day passed in a blur—Alana! Why did she write to me? After all these years! What could she want? Why now? It seemed like a different lifetime when I had known Alana, so long ago, “in my salad days when I was green in judgment,” as Shakespeare said. I had buried that part of my life, but I could still remember what she was like, what I was like back then. Alana! We met on a blind date one New Year’s Eve, set up and double-dating with her cousin and my best friend. We had a whirlwind romance that lasted two and a half years, a lifetime when you’re eighteen. I wondered if I would hear back from her. Was I too forward by telling her I still had “deep feelings”? What the hell...If she weren’t open to that, why would she have written? She must still have some feelings, or else why would she reach out?...What was her agenda?

I couldn’t stop thinking about her...After so long...it seemed surreal...Was I dreaming?

I went about my business, seeing one patient after another. After all these years, I could almost function on autopilot. There may be 1000 possible musculoskeletal diagnoses patients present with, but 90 percent are one of the ten most common ones. Medical knowledge supposedly doubles every five years, but common things are common, and most of my patients fell in the very middle of the bell-shaped curve. Although I tried to read orthopaedics nearly every day and stay up-to-date with the literature, the more I read, the more I realized that major discoveries are few and far between, and, despite the popular media, very little has changed regarding most orthopaedic problems in the past twenty-five years. So I continued to smile, appear engaged, nod my head, ask the right questions, dictate the right notes, fill out the right paperwork—when, all the time, I was “long ago and far away,” wondering if some major phase-shift were about to occur in my life. *At this late (st)age?*

My life had been so steady for so long—not particularly good, not particularly bad, just very steady. I had given up on finding true happiness and the “meaning of life” long ago. My marriage was not what I had hoped for (whose is?), and I had grown to accept an okay life, considering the alternatives. I had a healthy, grown daughter, I was healthy, my practice was successful, and there were no major disasters in the past or in the foreseeable future. I never really liked risky adventures, roller coasters and the like...so I was accepting, if not satisfied, content, or fulfilled. I thought that all my life’s “dramas” were behind me, and my life would simply play itself out with the script that had been already written and finalized. My job was merely to show up.

My marriage had been one of those that probably should never have happened. I got married at the wrong time and for the wrong reasons, and, not surprisingly, things didn’t work out. It is amazing that it lasted so long, twenty-five years—a combination of refusal to accept failure, refusal to face divorce, a focus on work, the love of my daughter, and belief in the sanctity of the nuclear family. Divorce was certainly not alien to me—most of my friends had been divorced at least once. But divorce was foreign to my family. No one in my family was divorced— not one person. They weren’t necessarily happily married, but they never chose divorce. My father was a staunch believer that everything was genetic—*everything*, including behavior, beliefs, etc. He was way ahead of his time in that respect. I always knew he was very bright, but in this belief he was a true pioneer. I grew up in an age when psychotherapy was coming into its own as a science, and more available to the everyman, not just the neurotic Hollywood celebrities and crazed rock stars. The average middle-aged suburban housewife was allowed the luxury of emotional problems, post-partum depression, panic attacks, anxiety disorders, and the like. And the various popular psychotherapeutic/psychoanalytic theories of that time claimed validation and justification by endorsing nurture over nature as the pivotal determinant of one’s personality and psychopathology. But my dad didn’t believe that. Years of treating generations of patients lent him wisdom and insight into human behavior that few others possess. He believed that, by and large, our

destiny is determined the moment sperm meets egg, and everything after is just manifestation of that chemistry.

I grew up believing the popular mythology that one's upbringing influences, if not determines, one's development. But as I've gotten older, I have come around to my dad's way of thinking, and perhaps even to a greater extent than he. Certainly physical qualities are genetic. Most mental attributes, including intelligence, are genetic. And I even believe that most emotional and personality elements are genetic. How else to explain the ease and aplomb with which some people navigate through one divorce after another, without missing a beat, while others, including myself, stay married despite all reason and logic dictating failure? There must be a "divorce gene" somewhere on the human genome, but it was missing on mine because I was absolutely stuck in my marriage. I wasn't afraid of divorce, of the process, of the cost...I wasn't afraid of being alone...and there were certainly very few positives keeping me in the marriage. But year after year I stayed married, not because I had any hope that things would improve, but because divorce was not for me, regardless of the consequences of a failed marriage. I had been a true romantic in my youth, and felt that finding love was undoubtedly the Holy Grail of human existence. As years went by, I had to face the fact that I would never drink from that intoxicating cup. Because of my aversion to divorce, I rarely indulged the fantasy of "What if...?" But every now and then I would look off into the distance, and the haunting voice of "I could have been a contender!" would suddenly permeate my insulation and defenses, and a deep sense of sorrow and emptiness would momentarily strike, until I could regain my balance and composure.

Over the years I learned how to survive in my marriage—how to accentuate the positives, and essentially ignore the negatives. My work was satisfying and interesting so I threw myself into my practice of orthopaedic surgery as much as I could. But my greatest love was my daughter. Jennifer was my wife's child from a previous marriage, and I had fallen in love more with Jenn as a toddler than I had with her mom.

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Then, just when things seemed to be going smoothly and as well as could be expected, the unthinkable and unimaginable happened, and everything suddenly went haywire.

## Chapter 5

I finished seeing my last patient around 6 p.m., took care of some last-minute business, and couldn't stop thinking of Alana. I was about to log off my desktop and head home when I saw another email "re: old friend"! This one was much longer, and I was very surprised. I didn't know if I'd hear back from her at all, and certainly didn't expect such a rapid response. One question was answered: Alana had more than just a passing curiosity.

"Dear Brett:

"Thank you for taking the time to fill me in on what you have been doing for the past 32 years. I am sorry to learn that your father died at such a young age. It must have been devastating for you and your family. How are your siblings? Do you keep in close contact with them?

"Where is Plantation, Florida? Is it unbearably hot in the summer?

"My son is interested in looking at U Florida in Gainesville because it has a good business program, but very difficult to get in from out of state. He has no interest in medicine and that is fine with me. I don't know if business is a good choice either but he is still young and may stumble upon an interesting field in college. My cousin Karen (Dale's sister) is a dean of the medical school at U of Va. It is a magnificent school and I would love for my son to go there but he is not in the top 5% of his class.

"I live about 25 minutes from your mother. It would be wonderful to see you when you come to visit.

"Let's try to keep in touch.

"Love, Alana"

I sat for a few minutes and re-read the email a few times, trying to figure it out. I was looking for a hidden meaning, something between



the lines. She has a son preparing to go to college. She's writing to an old boyfriend. She wrote earlier that she is married, but clearly something isn't going well and she's looking for something. "It would be wonderful to see you when you come to visit," she had written. Is it *me* she's looking for?

I needed to think about this before replying. I wasn't sure if I *should* reply, but I knew I would. I had never cheated on my wife, despite twenty-five years of an unhappy, unsatisfying marriage. I had had opportunities, and temptations, but wouldn't consider an affair unless I was prepared for the consequences and ready for a divorce. I'd never been willing to consider it.

But there was only one Alana in my life. And as I drove the twenty miles from my office to my home, I kept rubbing the eyes of my hindsight, trying to wipe away the dust and cobwebs and improve my focus. I pulled into the garage and spent an extra minute in the car, bringing myself back to current reality, before going in. I knew what to expect inside, and wasn't sure if I was ready for this unexpected development, and the potential minefield ahead. But I knew that great rewards usually result from taking great risks. I was certainly ready for some great rewards!

I switched to auto-pilot when I got home, going through the daily, routine motions that comprised my so-called "activities of daily living": bringing the empty garbage cans up from the foot of the driveway, picking up the newspaper from its usual spot in the front bushes, bringing in the mail.

As usual, my wife Sharon had already eaten dinner and was sitting on the couch watching TV. My standard black poodle was lying next to her, heard me come in, and stood up looking at the back door. When I came in, Shanee jumped off the couch and came over to me, her tail wagging, her pink tongue moving as she panted.

"Hi, girl," I said, putting out my hand for her to lick. "What a good girl you are!" Sharon never looked up or said anything. She always seemed angry, ostensibly because I worked long hours although I doubt that was the real reason. I did work long and hard, but likely because I was so unhappy at home. I would so much rather have enjoyed some down time, but that was never my experience. When I

was off from work, on weekends and holidays, Sharon still didn't seem happy. She never wanted to do anything or go anywhere. She had very particular eating habits, and wouldn't eat out very often, and only in one of two restaurants near the house. Although I made more than enough money to support a comfortable lifestyle, she was frugal as could be, and always acted as though she were doing me a favor by "saving your money." I never wanted to save more than I had to. My father and both his brothers had died at age sixty-eight. I hoped that would not be my fate, but I knew that life is short, and my "longevity gene" may be shorter than most. I was caught in an impossible situation, and knew that I could never make Sharon happy, no matter what I did. She inherited the "unhappiness gene" from her mother, who was certifiably miserable and generously showered her misery on everyone around her. She inherited the "entitlement gene" from her father, and, once married, she felt that she was entitled to be taken care of with little to no input or obligation on her part. Sadly, I was stuck, paralyzed, without any traction to get out of this marriage. Had I joined Thoreau's "mass of men leading lives of quiet desperation"? My God, I hoped not, but realized that I probably had.

Until now...maybe this was the push that I needed to get off the dime and overcome my marital inertia?

I came over and said hello to Sharon. She looked up and said, "Hi," and murmured "How was your day?" in a disinterested tone. "Fine," I said, "and yours?" "Okay," she replied.

And with those nine words our conversation for the day was essentially over. I went into the bedroom to change and shower. I looked through the day's mail—the usual bills, bank statements, an expected invitation to a wedding of a friend of my daughter Jennifer's scheduled for the following month, and the requisite throwaway ads and magazines. By the time I was finished, Sharon had warmed up my dinner, put it on the table, and returned to the couch. I sat down to eat dinner alone, as I did most nights. But this night, unlike most, I didn't feel resentful or unappreciated. In fact, I was glad not to have to make small talk, which I had to do all day every day at work. Besides Jennifer, Sharon and I seemed to have less and less in common as the years went by. It's amazing how little we had to say to each other. I'm

reminded of the old joke, “What’s the longest sentence in the English language?” Sadly the answer is simply, “I do.” My sentence so far had been twenty-five-years-to-life.

But on this night I was grateful to be left alone. I smiled inside and amused myself by rhetorically posing the famous “Four Questions” of Passover: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” But I modified the traditional biblical answers with my own spin, apropos to that day’s events:

On all other nights I sit alone at the table wondering how it has come to this? But on this night, I have other, far more pleasant thoughts in mind.

On all other nights I sit alone at the table, planning my office and surgery schedule for the next day; but on this night I am a million miles away.

On all other nights I sit alone at the table exhausted, with little to look forward to but getting up tomorrow morning and doing it all over again; but on this night I allow myself the guilty pleasure of recalling happier days from my youth, when any dream seemed possible and my life’s potential was limitless.

On all other nights I feel old and tired; but on this night I feel young and full of life.

The Passover Seder celebrates the Jewish exodus from Egypt, leaving behind a life of slavery for a new life of freedom, self-determination, and an uncertain future, but one filled with hope and promise. Perhaps I too was about to embark on such a journey, not knowing what lay ahead but glad to escape from what lay behind, regardless of the risks and uncertainties. I slowly ate my rotisserie chicken (precooked at the local supermarket, but not bad nonetheless) as I enjoyed my little fantasy.

My heart was pounding, my thoughts were racing, and I felt excited...feelings that seemed vaguely familiar from a distant past. I was busy thinking of the events of my day, and of what I was going to write to Alana the next day. I slept unusually well that night, and awoke to the dawn of the first day of the rest of my life.



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