

HOW A LIFE-ALTERING ACCIDENT LED ME TO  
**EVERYTHING I ALMOST MISSED**

# ONE STEP **CLOSER**



RYAN S. ATKINS

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## Praise for *One Step Closer*

“*One Step Closer* is not a glum recounting of a car accident, but rather an encouraging reminder of what is possible when we look beyond our circumstances for eternal hope. Get ready for Ryan to inspire you to make the most of your brief time on this earth.”

—Bob Goff, New York Times best-selling author of *Love Does*, *Everybody Always*, and *Dream Big*

“This book is a phenomenal read. It’s a story of faith, perseverance, tenacity, grit, and guts. But it’s mostly a story of the gospel lived out in a radical way. You’ll be moved, challenged, and inspired to live differently.”

—Matt Massey, senior pastor of Vineyard Cincinnati Church

“Ryan has gained so much wisdom, and it is the kind of wisdom that can only be acquired through unimaginable heartbreak. Answers to really tough questions about trust, hope, faith, and eternity are contained in the pages of Ryan’s book. Trust me, this is a must read.”

—Robert Buck, chairman of the board, Beacon Building Products, author of *Well Built*

“Ryan shares his story in such an authentic and human way. His words are so beautifully written and deeply engaging—it is a book you can’t put down. My perspectives on suffering and purpose in light of eternity have been profoundly changed. Yours will be, too.”

—James Lenhoff, president, Wealthquest, author of *Living a Rich Life*

“I first came to know Ryan when I was president of the University of Cincinnati, where he was a student. I watched with awe as he overcame his challenges to complete his degree. Along with

everyone else who has been privileged to know Ryan, I was moved by his spirit, his determination, and his faith. I am delighted he is sharing his story through this book, which will bring his message of hope and perseverance to a larger audience.”

—Santa J. Ono, president and vice chancellor,  
University of British Columbia

“At the heart of every person is a desire to live a life of purpose and meaning. When hardship or tragedy hit, we can lose sight of our identity and the way forward. Ryan has a gift for writing with such transparency that the reader feels what he feels as he shares his thoughts on why the quality of our lives does not depend on physical capabilities or circumstances. I was deeply moved by his struggles with paralysis, pain, and discouragement and inspired by the life-giving truths that sustain him in the midst of hope deferred.”

—Dr. Jane Glenchur, author of *Seven Secrets to Power Praying*

“*One Step Closer* is the inspirational story we all need. Ryan’s words serve as a powerful reminder to be intentional with the life we have been given. We all have days when we are discouraged and defeated, but the perspective Ryan offers challenges us to grow closer to God, invest in others, and think less about ourselves and our own story. I am excited for others to get a chance to read this book.”

—Cory Carlson, author of *Win at Home First*

“Ryan chose to take something most of us can’t even imagine and use it as a platform for not just good, but for great. His optimism is so deeply moving that I often ask myself, ‘How would Ryan think about this situation?’ This book is no different. In the world we are living today we need hope and perspective. Ryan gives us both. He is a personal inspiration and reading his story, struggles, and joy will give us a glimpse into a life that God can give us if we follow Ryan’s lead, no matter our circumstance.”

—Kirk Perry, president, Global Client and Agency Solutions, Google

“As Ryan transparently shares his story, he inspires and challenges the reader to look at their assumptions and expectations. The result is peace—the freedom to ask hard questions and rest in the reality of God’s sovereignty.”

—Beth Guckenberger, co-executive director,  
Back2Back Ministries, author, speaker

“I always tell my players that learning to fight is more important than who wins the fight. Toughness will help them achieve their dreams. Ryan is a true fighter, and we can all learn from him.”

—Mick Cronin, UCLA men’s basketball head coach

“This is more than a book. This is more than a memoir. This is more than a story. This is truth. This is the heart of a man who has humbled himself before God—something we’re all called to do and yet often don’t know where to start. Ryan could have given up a long time ago. We all should be grateful he didn’t. If you’re one to put things all on your own back and struggle to actually let Jesus take control of your life, you’ve got to read this book. You’ll fall deeper in love with Jesus than you ever thought possible—or at least that’s what happened to me after just a few chapters. Don’t think about it. Buy it. Read it. Read it again. Buy one for a friend. Repeat.”

—Kurtis Kersey, founder of The Grown Man Project

“Ryan’s insights in *One Step Closer* help to sharpen our focus on stewarding our lives for eternity by reminding us of the big picture. If we fear something is going to happen to our body, God promises us a new body. If we think we’re going to lose our home, God has an eternal home he’s preparing for us right now. I am thankful for this crucial reminder we all frequently need. Ryan is a man who is leading an exemplary life. When Ryan speaks or writes, I listen, and I encourage you to do the same.”

—Brian Tome, senior pastor of Crossroads Church, author  
of *The Five Marks of a Man*

*One Step Closer*

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*"He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."*

-Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946)

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

**T** HIS BOOK IS A work of nonfiction and reflects my present recollections of experiences over time. Nevertheless, some names and identifying details of certain individuals have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved. Additionally, while I have sought to stay as close to the accuracy of events in the story as possible, some experiences and conversations have been edited, recreated, or supplemented for the sake of length and clarity. When necessary, the chronology of some events has been compressed.

# PROLOGUE

*November 19, 2016*

**M**Y EYES OPEN SLOWLY as a sliver of light cuts across my dark bedroom at promptly 6:00 a.m. My nurse enters the room, and I hear her footsteps padding softly toward the closet. Though I am only able to stare straight ahead at the ceiling, I know she is gathering the supplies needed for the morning ahead. I have become accustomed to this routine for the last seven years, ever since my body was left battered and paralyzed after a life-altering car accident.

Every morning is the same. Lately I've joked that my life feels like the movie *Groundhog Day*, with each day similar enough that I can anticipate exactly what comes next, moment by moment.

It suddenly hits me, though: today is different.

Today is my wedding day.

As my nurse begins to transfer me out of bed using a full-body sling connected to a motorized ceiling lift, I brace myself for the agony of the ensuing muscle spasticity that ratchets up a notch each morning after an entire night of lying in the same supine

position. I grit my teeth as I am lowered into my chair and rolled into the wheelchair-accessible shower in the bathroom adjacent to my bedroom. I close my eyes as the warm water drips down my face, and I begin to think about the day ahead.

A jolt of realization brings a shiver of excitement: this could be the final time I am reliant on the help of a nurse to start my day. Everything has been building up to this day. My soon-to-be bride and I agree that a miracle is certain.

Life with quadriplegia will soon be a thing of the past.

My thoughts are interrupted by a painful convulsion as every muscle in my body reacts in unison to the water droplets hitting me, despite my not having any topical sensation of the water rolling down my chest and back. The allegedly permanent damage to my spinal cord interrupts the signal from my brain to my body, forming an invisible line across my collarbone that serves as a marker where movement and sensation abruptly ceased years ago. The disconnect causes my limbs to involuntarily and violently spasm from something as insignificant as being sprayed by the showerhead. As I helplessly wait for the uncontrollable shaking to pass, I can't help but wonder how I will possibly transition from this situation to walking independently by the end of the day.

As confidently as I am believing for a miracle, hesitation and doubt are still bubbling beneath the surface. My sense of excitement intermingles with worry and anxiety, and I remind myself to focus on the mounting evidence for a supernatural healing, which has seemingly been pointing to this exact day. To my fiancée and me, it seems clear that for the last several years God has been sprinkling his clues for us to piece the puzzle together.

My mind drifts to our guests joining us at our wedding later today. Specific friends and family members flash through my mind as I envision the excitement on their faces when they witness the miracle. I have already gotten a taste of what it will be like, as countless people have reached out to me in the years following my

accident to share their vivid dreams of my healing. I contemplate the twenty-three-page document on my computer that contains my detailed chronicle of these dreams, the document I have frequently revisited in the preceding months to stoke my faith. Nearly every dream has consisted of the same theme: I am on my feet, moving around with ease, just as I did for the twenty-one years prior to the fateful night my car flipped off the highway.

The deadline has arrived. The temptation arises once more to do away with all our faith-filled plans that began taking shape over a year ago. I do not want to look foolish. I do not want to speak incorrectly on behalf of God. But the events of the past few years have felt like a movie trailer, teasing me to imagine the possibilities of what might lie ahead. There are the descriptive dreams. The boy at the park. Pages of unmistakable confirmations that we have been tracking in a journal. The small team of praying friends with whom we have discussed our conclusions, who have partnered with us by agreeing in faith that I will be dancing with my bride at our wedding.

Today is the culmination of it all.

My nurse rolls my wheelchair back out into the bedroom and once again transfers me through the air and into my bed. I grimace as she maneuvers my tuxedo over my spastic limbs. The nagging pain in my shoulders renders it impossible to put the jacket on. Unless something changes drastically before the ceremony this afternoon, I will have to go without.

Once the morning routine is finally complete, I close my eyes, hoping to rest before the events of the day unfold. But my mind will not stop racing. I have meticulously reasoned through all factors, yet one lingering thought continues to thrash through my brain: *Are we just setting ourselves up for massive disappointment by believing for this miracle?* I think of my fiancée, already hours into her morning getting ready with her bridesmaids at the church. I think of the Caribbean honeymoon I booked months ago, our

flight departing in less than forty-eight hours. I feel relieved that very few people know the extent of our plans and just how audacious they are.

For many long years, I have missed countless events, milestones, and opportunities, culminating in prolonged discontentment and an increasing difficulty to stay connected with my peers. While my friends finished college, started their professional careers, got married, and began growing their new families, I could only look on from my status as a longtime resident with my middle-aged parents, continually feeling as if life was passing me by.

But not anymore. Each step of the journey has simply been laying the groundwork for the moment at which I have now arrived.

After all, the story of this impending miracle began almost exactly seven years earlier.

# PART 1

# 1

## A TYPICAL DAY

*November 20, 2009*

**A**S THE FOG CLEARED and the buzzing increased, I quickly realized my alarm clock was not going to turn itself off. Begrudgingly, I rolled over to check the time. As had become routine, I had once again overslept. The numbers 11:37 stared back at me. A sense of urgency rushed through my veins as I remembered I had to be at a meeting across campus at noon. I quickly tossed the bedsheets off my bare chest, swung my knees toward the edge of my lower bunk bed, and hopped onto my feet into the mess I had managed to make of the room in my fraternity house at the University of Cincinnati. Amid a pile of clothes on the floor, my eyes locked on a pair of wrinkled jeans that I could only hope had been washed in the past month. After speedily brushing my teeth, I threw on a sweatshirt, and grabbed my to-do list for the day, glancing at the clock as each precious minute passed by. I snatched a bagel from my desk for an on-the-go breakfast. With that, I hustled out the door and locked room 306 behind me.



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As I raced down two flights of stairs, I caught a glimpse of the wooden plaques on the wall displaying names of all the fraternity brothers who had come before me. I passed some friends along the way, and with a quick “What’s up, man? See you tonight!” I made my way outside and moved into speed-walk mode. Only a few minutes remained before the clock would strike noon.

It was a crisp November day, and as I raced for the meeting, I removed the wadded-up paper from my pocket and scanned my scribbled to-do list for the afternoon:

*12:00: Meeting with advisor for the campus fall concert*  
*Sign up fraternity for intramural basketball*  
*Stop by College of Business to reschedule accounting test*  
*2:30: Campus tour for high school seniors*

Since I was about to cross Clifton Avenue, one of the main roads to campus, I figured now would be a good time to look up. I crossed the street and once again set foot onto the university campus. As was always the case, my school spirit pumped up a notch. I felt a rush of adrenaline as I passed by hundreds of fellow Bearcats and the historic university buildings at the place I was proud to call my school.

Though the temperature was dropping each day as winter approached, the campus was still abuzz over our undefeated football team, ranked in the top five in the country. I reveled in the moment as I joined the rest of the gawkers outside the dining hall, catching a glimpse of the football players being fawned over like collegiate royalty as they maneuvered through the swelling crowd. Strolling through campus always gave me an ego boost. I could not take more than a few steps before running into someone I knew. I was heavily involved in a multitude of activities around the university, ranging from student government to athletic spirit-related groups, and I was well

## *A Typical Day*

acquainted with students from all different backgrounds. I was on a full-ride scholarship in a prestigious business program, enjoying a well-paying internship at a top accounting firm, and having the time of my life as a college student. In the middle of my third year on campus, I considered myself essentially invincible, always living in the moment.

As I checked off each item on my to-do list for the afternoon, I realized I had limited time to prepare for the upcoming weekend events. In a few hours, I would be on my way to Gatlinburg, Tennessee for my fraternity's annual fall pledge retreat, a brotherhood event focused on our new-member class. Even with the trip looming ahead, my mind remained focused on only one place: New York City.

Just a few months earlier, I had learned I was one of 150 college students from across the country selected for an all-expense-paid trip to participate in a business conference in our nation's financial epicenter. There would be networking opportunities with CEOs from dozens of national corporations, seminars to learn the nuances of the financial world, and an all-encompassing business case study with a chance to team up with the many Ivy Leaguers in attendance. However, what I was most excited about was the entrepreneur competition: an opportunity to present my website idea to a forum of venture capitalists. I was confident they would jump at the chance to invest in the business plan that a friend and I had developed in the late hours of the night. The thought excited me, as big green dollar signs flashed through my mind.



*Attending a campus event with my parents.*

## ONE STEP CLOSER

I snapped back to the present moment as I passed by the historic Nippert Stadium. I envisioned thousands of die-hard Bearcat fans packing the venue for the upcoming football game against Illinois. This was yet another event to look forward to in the coming week that included Gatlinburg, New York City, and a brief stop home for Thanksgiving with my family. I enjoyed the nonstop busyness that defined my life. I never wanted to leave college.

I returned to my fraternity house after successfully completing my tasks for the afternoon. I had just begun to handle some last-minute packing details for the weekend ahead when I heard a knock at the door. I'd sent out an email earlier in the week volunteering spots in my SUV for the trip down to Gatlinburg. I told myself it was a purely altruistic move—but splitting the cost of gas and portraying myself as a generous member of the fraternity worthy of being elected the next fraternity president had actually been my central motivation.

Out of roughly one hundred fraternity brothers, the first four who responded to my offer were now knocking at my door for a four o'clock departure, as I had requested. Dan had recently joined the fraternity, and I was looking forward to getting to know him better. Mike was a guy I had played a role in recruiting into our fraternal bonds. He had a sharp sense of humor and was notorious for getting my Type A personality to loosen up. Jon and I were in prominent leadership roles within the fraternity. Only the floor beneath my feet separated our rooms in a house of twenty-seven college guys. I would often stomp my feet to guarantee he would not be sleeping, for no other reason than juvenile fun. Kyle and I had enjoyed interning for the same company and often discussed our plans to “make a dent in the universe,” as Steve Jobs would say. I was looking forward to what I was sure would be an entertaining car ride with this eclectic mix of personalities.

## *A Typical Day*

I quickly stuffed a plastic bag with the only essentials needed for an overnight with dozens of fraternity brothers: a change of boxers, deodorant, and a toothbrush. We packed up the trunk of my car and lightheartedly heckled the freshmen pledges waiting in the parking lot about the shenanigans in store for them in the upcoming weekend. Pulling out of the fraternity parking lot, we made our way to I-75 South.

After driving for nearly three hours, we stopped at a McDonald's in southern Kentucky for a quick bite before hitting the road for the final stretch to Gatlinburg. As the sun began to set, the car quieted down. We were about an hour from the Tennessee border. Mike was engrossed in a movie on his laptop. Kyle's snoring reverberated throughout the car. Dan, Jon, and I carried on a small conversation, and Jason Aldean sang his latest country hit in the background. As I went to switch from the fast lane into the right lane, I caught sight of a white car in my rearview mirror, rapidly approaching the spot I was merging into. Fearing a collision, I jerked the wheel to the left. In my panic, I overcorrected and veered into the guardrail. I heard a loud thud, and suddenly the car was airborne.

The five of us swore simultaneously as we braced for impact.

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My eyes slowly opened. An early morning-like fog hung over me. But as my eyes began to adjust to the surroundings, I realized I was not waking up from a dream. There was no daylight. Everything was completely black except for a blinking red light, visible only from the corner of my eye. Feeling as if I were waking up in a bed not my own, I tried to shake the disorientation and piece together where I was and what had happened.

The image of the white car flashed through my mind. I recalled overcorrecting the steering wheel. Replaying the scene in my head,

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I was brought back to reality by the recollection of going airborne over the guardrail. In a split second, I had gone from driving mindlessly along the highway to . . . wherever I was now. I did not know that after flipping over multiple times to the opposite side of the highway, my silver Envoy lay on its top, suspending me upside down by my seat belt, approximately sixty-one miles north of the Tennessee border.

As my mind continued to regain clarity, I realized how eerily quiet it was inside my now crushed SUV. I was unable to make out anything except the blinking red light. I attempted to feel around for where I was. After failing to maneuver myself out of my seat, I figured my body must be completely trapped.

In the darkness, I tried to sense where my limbs were. I could not move anything. Then it dawned on me that I could not feel anything, either. I could not detect a hint of pain anywhere in my body, even though I was fairly certain I had just flown through the air in a vehicle. *Where am I? What is going on?* My numb body lay motionless. I noticed breathing was becoming a struggle. I panicked as I wondered, *Is this the end? Am I dying?* As the red light blinking in the corner of my eye continued on, I murmured one final thought before closing my eyes.

*God, please spare my life.*

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Bright lights shone all around as the fuzziness of the scene took shape. I began to regain consciousness as I was carted away on a stretcher. Paramedics and police officers were spread out across the area, and the highway had been shut down in both directions. I had no way of knowing how much time had elapsed, or that a Jaws of Life hydraulic rescue tool had dissected my car as if it was a cadaver so a paramedic could rescue my trapped, seemingly lifeless body. I attempted to scan the scene, but the bright lights and shouting of those around me overloaded my senses. I did not realize blood was

## *A Typical Day*

covering my face or that a bruised eye was causing my blurred vision.



*My car at the scene of the accident on November 20, 2009.*

I wondered how I could have lost control of the car. Then another more pressing thought entered my mind: *Where are the other four guys?* As the paramedic team hoisted me into a helicopter, I saw Dan run toward me. A monumental sense of relief came over me.

He was alive.

“Dan! What happened? Is everyone OK? Where are the other guys?” I began firing off questions like a drill sergeant. Trying to get my bearings, I peered around in search of the other three guys.

“Everything is OK, man,” Dan told me. “I’ll see you at the hospital. Everything is going to be OK.” I was desperate for more information but was suddenly struggling to keep my eyes open. With the sound of helicopter blades reverberating all around me, I slowly slipped into unconsciousness once again.

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The next few hours were a whirlwind. A helicopter traveled fifty miles north to bring me to the University of Kentucky Hospital. After landing on the roof, I was rushed to the emergency room, where a series of tests were performed. The hospital phoned my parents, informing them that their son had been in a serious

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accident. They made the ninety-minute trek down to Lexington, having no idea what to expect when they arrived.

For the third time that day, my eyes opened to scan the scene. I once again attempted to piece together what was going on around me, but everything was still blurry. Through the haze, I made out the vague shapes of my family on my right. My parents and my sixteen-year-old sister, Laura, eagerly came toward me. I greeted them with a confused smile. *What are they doing here?* They squeezed around me, jostling the curtain barriers that gave some privacy around the hospital bed.

“He wasn’t wearing a seat belt,” I overheard a nurse tell my parents. This got my attention.

“Yes, I was!” I insisted. I knew full well that my seat belt had kept me in the car. My parents exchanged a relieved glance. My emphatic retort had eased their minds and given them the peace that my assertive personality had not changed. While my body had been harmed, my brain was still functioning.

As the minutes passed, my awareness of the situation grew. I flashed back to the scene on the highway, and panic hit me. I remembered seeing Dan as I was lifted into the helicopter, but I had not spotted the other three. Fear escalated as my mind raced through possibilities about what had happened to the other guys. *Where are they? Did they make it? Are Mike, Kyle, and Jon still alive?* My parents insisted they were not given information about the other guys in the accident due to privacy policies. Maybe they were just trying to keep me calm. Maybe something awful had happened. What if the guys were dead or seriously injured?

“Go get Dan,” I pleaded with them. “I need to see him.” Sensing my desperation, they began searching the emergency room for a young man they had never met.

Dan came in sometime later, miraculously uninjured but visibly distressed. I was relieved to see him again. “Where are the other guys? Are they OK?” I asked frantically.

*A Typical Day*

“They’re OK. We all made it,” Dan assured me. A resounding peace came over my entire being with the news that my friends were alive.

Suddenly, I realized I had a hospital gown on.

“Where are my clothes?” I demanded. Hearing that they had been cut off me and discarded did not please me. “That was my favorite Cincinnati Bearcats shirt! Did you get my keys and wallet? Did they recover the car?” The questions spilled out rapidly. I learned that the only possession of mine that had been recovered was my wallet, and I insisted on seeing it. After ensuring nothing was missing, I was satisfied. (Because the only thing worse than lying in the emergency room after a traumatic car accident would, of course, be losing three dollars in the process.)

Always thinking ahead, I turned my mind toward the plans for the weekend. My chances of making it to Gatlinburg were probably out the door at this point, but what about the most important event of the weekend?

“Will I still be able to go to New York?” The long-awaited trip was now less than thirty-six hours away. My parents exchanged glances.

“We will see,” was the response. It was very evident by the trivial nature of my questions about possessions and weekend plans that I did not have the slightest clue that I had broken my neck and lay paralyzed with an array of monitors attached to my body. A team of doctors and nurses appeared and began to poke and prod me.

“Can you feel this?”

“Which leg am I touching?”

“Can you wiggle your toes?”

“Can you make a fist?”

I sheepishly shook my head each time, unsure why I could not respond to such simple commands. I noticed I was feeling very tired.

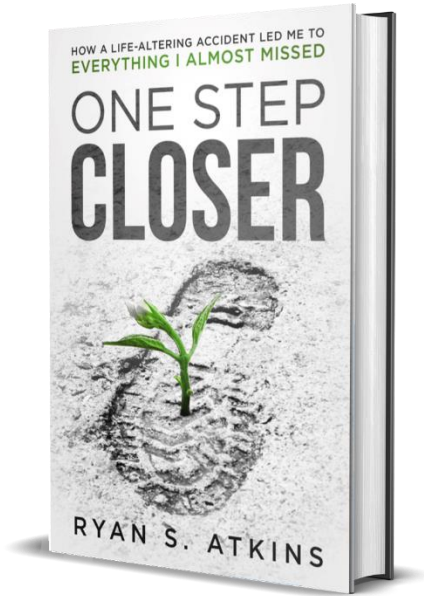


## ONE STEP CLOSER

As pain medication and IV fluids pumped through my veins, I began to fade, and my breathing slowed. It was soon determined that a blood clot in my lungs was restricting my breathing. Intubation became necessary to get oxygen into my lungs. I was given medication to help break up the clot and was put into a medically induced coma while the doctors waited for it to dissolve. My family was told this could take anywhere from several days to a month. While they were grateful that I was still alive, they were unsure of what was to come. What had started as a typical day on campus earlier that morning had become a drastically different situation.

I was now officially battling for my life.

**WANT TO KEEP READING?**



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*One Step Closer* here:

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