**Maya Ivancevic:** [00:00:00] Growing up as a universal experience, yet uniquely personal for each one of us, we navigate the maze of adolescence, confronting challenges that mold our identities and shape our futures. But what happens when those challenges become overwhelming? When the weight of expectation crushes the spirit and the path forward seems obscured by shadows?

**Maya Ivancevic:** Join me as I delve into the story of my own boyfriend, Atanas Milev, who has faced these challenges, dared to confront his demons, and emerged stronger on the other side.

**Tanas Milev:** My earliest, like, memories are, like, my grandparents raising me, because my parents would be working, so, like, my Baba and Dedo, my dad's side would always pick me up from school, cook, take me to the park all the time. Which was good, until I was, like, [00:01:00] four or five, when my grandmother had a stroke. But I'll never forget that.

**Tanas Milev:** I wouldn't call it traumatizing, because I don't think of it as, like, that negative. I didn't understand, like, why. First of all, in my head, like, I didn't really know what death was, but, like, I knew things died. So I was like, holy shit, is she dying?

**Maya Ivancevic:** Tana spent his early years in a quiet suburban neighborhood, enjoying a childhood that, for the most part, mirrored that of his peers.

**Maya Ivancevic:** He played with his friends in the park, eagerly anticipated birthdays and holidays, and navigated the ups and downs of school life with a mix of excitement and youthful worry.

**Jacky Milev:** Tanas , as a young child, was very inquisitive, and he loved to take things apart and then try to put pieces back together. He wanted to know how everything worked.

**Jacky Milev:** He was very happy, always wanted to be around people, socializing, he was always outside playing all day long, and the neighborhood kids loved him. He couldn't sit still.

**Maya Ivancevic:** It wasn't until his teenage years that life took a significant turn. [00:02:00] The once stable foundation of his family was shaken when his father was diagnosed with cancer, thrusting Thanos into a world of uncertainty.

**Tanas Milev:** The first day, the first day, like, I felt nothing. Like, I didn't, like, I felt like, whatever. I prayed about it, though. So, like, I had, like, a good feeling. Like, I felt okay. Like, I don't know if I prayed, but I felt okay. So, I didn't, it didn't, like, I don't know, it didn't occur to me. And then, The next day, like, it just, like, it really occurred to me.

**Tanas Milev:** And I just drank, and I decided to drive my parents car, like, just around the neighborhood. I didn't hit anything, thank God. But, and then, like, yeah. Then I started, like, doing, having, like, worse decisions. I was very, like, stressed and anxious. Depressed. Like, I tried to kill myself. As

**Maya Ivancevic:** he grappled with his father's illness, the weight of uncertainty and fear compounded with the challenges of adolescence.

**Maya Ivancevic:** Intensifying the mental health issues he already struggled with under the pressure of his [00:03:00] circumstances. Taana found himself looking for an outlet.

**Tanas Milev:** I started selling drugs at like 16, and that was just to make money and 'cause like I watched Narcos and that was like, I thought I wanted to be Pablo Escobar.

**Tanas Milev:** So there was that, and then, you know, I kind of did that. For the rest of high school. I started hanging out with, like, actual gang members now. Like now, instead of just, like, people who, like, fucked around in school, like, now I'm hanging out with the actual fucked kids who, like, broke the laws. So then, I followed in their footsteps.

**Tanas Milev:** I also still, like, like to be friends with the fucked kids. Like, I was always kind of like that. Like, that was just, like, more of, like, uh, an enabler. Because, like, when my dad's going to treatment, like, there's no, like, it's, like, less supervision, so more opportunity.

**Maya Ivancevic:** It wasn't until he got into university that he began to experiment with substances, leading him down a [00:04:00] dangerous path.

**Tanas Milev:** The first day, my roommate brought him a dab pen and like three grams of weed. To me right now, not a lot, but back then I was like, like, well, it wasn't a lot, but like, it was enough for me. Like, I wouldn't smoke that in freaking a month. I would smoke that in like a month. We killed that in like two days, if that.

**Tanas Milev:** If, if two days, a day and a half. And then like from then on, like, I was just smoking weed, and like, I would like, do anything. Like, cause I didn't, I guess I didn't like my situation, like I didn't really want to be there. And like, like I didn't really think of it like that, I don't think, at the time, like, it was more like, I was just fucking around.

**Tanas Milev:** Just like, I, and like, I thought cause like, I got into university, into biochemistry, without freaking even trying in high school. I'm like, I can just go do the same thing in university. Like, I'm getting older, okay, yeah, it's getting harder, but it's all, I'm getting the same grades, doesn't matter. [00:05:00] So I didn't go to any classes, and I didn't go to half my labs, and I didn't go to, I didn't do anything, any assignments, which was, I can't pass without doing any work.

**Tanas Milev:** And like the whole semester, I just smoked weed and drank and won out. Yeah, we went, we, we started selling it. And like, we went from like, you know, ounces to pounds, and it was like, holy shit, like, people were like, holy shit.

**Maya Ivancevic:** Tanas returned home after his first semester of university in a bad place. Having failed all but one of his classes, he knew something needed to change.

**Jacky Milev:** After returning from a n un successful first semester, he seemed defeated and ashamed of himself, and realized he had to prove that he did deserve to be in university. We always believed in him, and knew he could do it, if he tried.

**Maya Ivancevic:** with encouragement from his parents, Tanas was able to find the motivation to improve his grades in school, bringing his failing grades up to an A.

**Maya Ivancevic:** But Tanas still had other [00:06:00] challenges to overcome.

**Tanas Milev:** There was that, so like, that was like the beginning of like, you know, starting to try and something, like I started doing good. And like, same thing over that like winter break, like I, I, at 310 pounds, I looked at, I looked at myself and I'm like, Oh, my double chin's a little big.

**Maya Ivancevic:** So, Tanas embarked on a weight loss journey. By changing his eating habits and introducing exercise into his routine, Tanas was able to lose 20 pounds in about two months. When COVID hit, he was able to work even harder at his goal. However, there was a lot more going on beneath the surface.

**Tanas Milev:** And I started eating healthier and working out.

**Tanas Milev:** And, yeah, but at the same time, I started hanging out with, like, I was hanging out with gang members and doing horse shit.

**Maya Ivancevic:** So, while Tanas's health and academics were improving, he still continued to follow the negative influences in his life.

**Tanas Milev:** I had fun. It was fun. I mean, I guess adrenaline. And then, like, you get, like, you get, like, brainwashed.

**Tanas Milev:** And the drugs do that to you, too. [00:07:00] Being consistently not sober, you're really not thinking right. I enjoyed it, and I felt powerful, too, because, like, you know, my friends have guns, and, like, we were, like, literally, like, you couldn't say anything to us, like. You, you would lose.

**Maya Ivancevic:** Tanas felt invincible, but that quickly changed.

**Maya Ivancevic:** When he began to grasp the seriousness of the situation he found himself in.

**Tanas Milev:** People started dying. I can't tell you who the bullets were for, but like, you know, no one has aim. It doesn't matter 'cause you're in that group of friends. Like they know if, if, as long as they know that, like you're kind of associated with them, it doesn't matter.

**Tanas Milev:** You're done. You could, you're just as good as someone who freaking killed their friend.

**Maya Ivancevic:** For Tanas , it got very real, very fast. When the people he knew became victims, his eyes were open to the reality of this life he was choosing to live.

**Tanas Milev:** I'm the only person here who has two loving parents, grew up in a good neighborhood.

**Tanas Milev:** I only hung out with these people because my high school like accepted kids from like, we like [00:08:00] got expelled from their like schools and like Jane Finch. So like, I just became friends with them because I was like my habit to be friends with those types of kids. And then. Yeah. Like I was like, really? Like, and even like, some of them would say that.

**Tanas Milev:** Like, I just decided enough was enough. But I didn't just stop. Like, just kind of like stopped. I slowly stopped hanging out with them, I guess.

**Maya Ivancevic:** With this new outlook, Tanas slowly pulled away from the fast life he was living and focused his energy inward on himself.

**Tanas Milev:** And I lost a lot of weight. I lost like 120 pounds, or 130 pounds actually.

**Tanas Milev:** And I was like, looking good, feeling good, I was smart, doing good in school, everything was good. So I was like, yeah, you know what, like, there's really no reason to do any of this shit. And that's kind of how it stopped.

**Maya Ivancevic:** Now this is where I enter the story. I didn't know Tanas during this time in his life, though I had heard a few things about him from my best [00:09:00] friend, who would eventually set us up to meet.

**Maya Ivancevic:** As I learned more about his past, I felt myself getting drawn in, as we shared many things in common. While we didn't go through quite the same experiences in our teenage years, I could relate to his attraction to danger, and the thrills that come with it. We became very close very fast. When I met Tanas , I was at a low point in my life, and he was the one that brought me up from it.

**Maya Ivancevic:** The stories of his life have profoundly influenced me, shaping my outlook and inspiring me to navigate life's challenges with resilience and grace. Through his stories of triumph over hardship, Tanas has instilled in me a belief in my own ability to overcome obstacles. Today, Tanas is on track to graduate his bachelor's in biochemistry this June, and is planning on continuing his learning in grad school, where he hopes to achieve his master's and one day his PhD.

**Maya Ivancevic:** His journey inspires me every day, reminding me that every struggle is an opportunity for growth, and every [00:10:00] step back a stepping stone towards success.