



The Existence Game

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"When I was little, my dad called me 'Spongy.' He said I soaked up everything, good or bad, that I came in contact with. I guess that's kind of how things are with kids - they absorb everything, just suck it all in. People should be more careful about what they do around kids."
– Eileen O'Keefe

CHAPTER ONE THE SET UP

I am Alexis Moser. I like the name “Alexis,” but when I hear it, I feel like I’m in trouble. So I go by Alex. The day before I landed in the hospital doesn’t explain everything, but the events of that day are what brought me to Jonathan Frank, and without him I’d be dead, so it seems like a good place to begin.

The Beatles’ song, *Tomorrow Never Knows*, calls life a game and suggests that when it’s over, we begin something new. I always liked that perspective – existence being a learning game of sorts. You’d live one, or perhaps many lives, in order to learn the most you could as a human being. That would be playing the game. Reincarnation as a learning vehicle made sense to me. One lifetime didn’t seem long enough to learn everything – not for me, anyway – so I thought we probably just kept coming back until we got it all right. My definition of “right” included honesty and fairness in one’s dealings; actively caring for the poor among us; avoiding judgment, excess, and greed; and certainly not murdering each other. After we finally got through the existence game, we began something new. I had no idea of what that might be, but I felt certain that it was a good something, since learning to be a good person seemed to be what most people held as one of the highest ideals – even when they fell short of the mark themselves. I was also pretty sure we weren’t supposed to cut our mission short; that if we did, we might have to come back for the same lessons. I suspected the existence game didn’t allow for cowardly departures.

So I was more than a little hesitant to check out, although I wasn’t particularly afraid of dying. I had known a good deal of happiness in my life, but since pain and fear trumped happiness by about ten to one, I often felt somewhat inclined to end my existence. What worried me was that all of the pain I’d already lived through was supposed to teach me something; if I bailed out early I’d probably have to come back and repeat all of that misery. I often wished I could just figure out what I was supposed to learn, and learn it, so I could leave. No revelations ever came to me, though, and I was quite sure I did *not* want to come back for the same lessons.

I wondered, periodically, if I might have been some monster in the past, but I really didn’t believe in karmic retribution. I thought that every person, no matter how evil their behavior, must have some convoluted reason, with its roots deeply embedded in unbearable pain that then created an unmanageable, horrible fear which expressed itself through evil action. Every act of evil I could think of had to do with having power over another, so it seemed plausible that the roots of evil behavior lay in a desperate need to control someone or something in order to protect one’s self from pain. I figured God understood all of these things, even if I couldn’t, and I didn’t think God punished people for being weak.

All of that said, however, on Tuesday, February 4th, 1989, I felt that I could no longer manage to play the existence game; all I wanted was for the abundant, virtually ceaseless pain and fear that comprised my life to finally be over.

The night before, Nick Alexander, my next door neighbor and landlord, had let me know that the January rent was five weeks overdue and the February rent hadn't been paid, either. He expected January's rent within the week. I had no idea my boyfriend, Vince, hadn't paid Nick, and I was steaming mad, as well as frightened by the prospect of eviction. The previous summer, Vince and I had moved into the lovely second floor apartment of a beautiful wood-frame house near Tenley Circle in Washington, D.C. We'd agreed to split the rent, but after the first month Vince never seemed to have it and I'd been paying it since then – something I could hardly manage on my waitress wages. In December Vince agreed to pay the entire rent for the following six months. Then we'd split it again, as originally intended. I had no idea he hadn't followed through.

To make matters worse, Vince didn't come home Monday evening, so I fumed all night about both the rent and about a fact I'd been trying to pretend didn't exist: Vince was probably cheating on me. By ten on Tuesday morning, with still no sign of Vince, I was so furious that I collected all of his possessions and, stuffing them into large garbage bags, I hurled them over the side of our second-story landing. I didn't think of myself as a vengeful person, but I admit I felt some satisfaction when I tossed Vince's leftover pizza into the same bag as his favorite suit.

Dating Vince was one of my bigger mistakes. I felt like I was somebody because the great Vince Linaldin was my boyfriend, and I wasn't anxious to let that presumed prestige go. In the beginning, he'd seemed so perfect. Frankly, I was as surprised as my family to find myself going out with such a successful guy. But I'd always hoped that maybe I was better than my family believed. Better than I believed. I imagined that Vince saw something good in me that I'd somehow missed. Vince was a fairly well-known reporter on one of the local TV news programs. My family all thought he was wonderful. They were thrilled that I was dating such a "great" guy. Except – no surprise – my grandmother, who simply asked, "What's he doing going out with *you*?" Everyone was appalled that she would ask such a nasty question, but they were all secretly wondering the same thing.

When Vince finally arrived, I blasted him about the rent – about not paying it and about lying to me. Then I blasted him about staying out all night. He started getting rough, but I was so angry I didn't care. Fortunately, Nick had been watching for Vince's return, and shortly after he arrived, Nick charged into our living room and ordered him to leave. I had thought no one knew that Vince knocked me around, but Nick obviously did and although I felt great relief at being rescued, I also felt terribly embarrassed to be living with a man like Vince.

Nick wasn't a large man, and towering over him, Vince just sneered. Nick had tremendous presence, though, and he wasn't intimidated in the least. He treated Vince like a cranky toddler, calmly informing him that the police were on the way. A moment later, when the unmistakable sound of sirens could be heard, Vince had a change of heart. Cursing us both, he headed downstairs and began tossing the garbage bags into his car. When the police arrived, I heard one of them say, "Figures it's you. Again."

Nick asked if I wanted to press charges. I didn't. I just wanted Vince out of there. So Nick took Vince's house key, and waited with me until he finally drove away. One of the policemen came up to the apartment and asked again if I'd be willing to press charges. He said Vince had been in this type of situation before and that he got away with it because no one would take him to court. I was too scared of Vince to file charges, though. My life was just too complicated. I was ashamed of my weakness, but I couldn't do it. The policeman looked frustrated as he wished me well and left.

Nick suggested that I find a woman to rent the second bedroom. I was glad he wanted me to stay and felt sad to have to shoo him away so quickly, but I had to get some sleep or I'd never make it through work that evening. I couldn't sleep, though, and here's where the real admissions begin. Having an abusive boyfriend was nothing compared to the rest of my problems.

I couldn't sleep because I was afraid to be by myself. I always had been. I mean, I'm not anymore, but this is after a lot of therapy. Back then, when I was alone, I couldn't stop imagining someone was hiding in my house, ready to rape and murder me, or someone was going to break in while I was asleep, and then murder me. That fear took such control of my thoughts that I couldn't sleep. During the day, if I wasn't trying to sleep, I usually managed to hold the fear in enough to uneasily accomplish a minimum number of tasks, provided I was wary. But trying to fall asleep was nearly impossible. When night fell, I became utterly terrified and no amount of logical reassurances made one bit of difference. I stayed awake and vigilant until exhaustion finally knocked me out – hours after I should have fallen asleep. I fashioned my life to accommodate this all-encompassing terror, and either lived with a boyfriend, or, more frequently, in a group house. As long as I was engaged with others, my fears took a back seat, so it wasn't until bedtime that I ran into difficulties. At bedtime, however, it was just as bad as when I was growing up.

Between the ages of five and twelve I'd slept with my sister, Shelby. I was less afraid, and therefore could fall asleep more readily. Although I was still plagued by nightmares, often awakening in abject terror, it was still better than when I turned twelve and my mother made me start sleeping in my own room. Every night was the same. I reluctantly bade my parents good night, and headed for that most fearful of places – my bedroom. Terrified, but without options, I checked under, behind, in everything – even, I am not kidding, my desk drawers. Then I donned the following: underpants, tights, leotard, tank top, long-sleeved tee-shirt, shorts, sweatpants, sweatshirt, and socks. It was an utterly miserable outfit, but I felt safer, like I was wearing armor. Then, instead of getting into my bed, I got into my closet, pulling shoes, comic books, blankets and other stuff over me, so that when the murderers came in, they wouldn't see me. They'd figure I was just a pile of junk. But even then, the pile of junk couldn't get to sleep; constantly hallucinating the sound of footsteps, breathing, even threatening whispers that were not quite discernable, but rich with evil intent. Roasting under the blankets, I read by flashlight until I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer, usually falling asleep around five a.m.

This made for very difficult times in school, where I slept more often than not. I always managed to move to the next grade, but I never actually learned anything. I was constantly humiliated because I didn't have more than a basic understanding of math or English, and had learned virtually nothing about history, current events, or geography. Being in school was a nightmare. With the exception of my very small handful of friends, none of whom were in my elementary school classes, being around other children was an excruciating struggle. I knew I wasn't the only child who had a rough time, but that didn't make it easier.

Life at home was no party with my insane mother continually shifting between Good Mommy, Evil Mommy, and Absentee Mommy. Trying to balance my responses to the Mommy of the Moment was impossible. She might be going along in a pleasant, "I'm so happy to be your Mom" sort of a way, and then something inexplicable occurred, and PRESTO! She turned into Evil Mommy and sought me out as her target of choice. There were no clues as to what brought about the change, and like my father and sister, I learned to stay away from her as much as possible – quite a challenge since I had a powerfully conflicting desire to win her good opinion, which required that I remain in her sphere of awareness. The only respite I had was to bury myself in a book. I grew up inside of books, and usually read several

dozen each week. The local librarian loved me and always got up to hold the door for me as I marched in, or out, with borrowed books loaded from as far down as I could reach to just under my chin.

Fortunately, there were some exceptions to all of the miserable times. From the age of three on, I had a wonderful friend, Jane. Until we were seven, when I moved, we were inseparable and had many fantastic adventures together – hunting butterflies, crayfish, and minnows; playing in the creek; climbing trees; building a real go-cart (we forgot about brakes); plastered to her heated dining room floor on Sunday winter mornings to read *The Washington Post* comics, (*Peanut's* and *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* were our favorites). After I moved, we lived too far apart to see each other every day, but our mothers were in a bridge club that met regularly, so we still managed to get together fairly frequently.

After my family moved, I became close friends with the boy across the street, Chris. He and I picked up where Jane and I had left off, and spent as much time as possible outdoors doing anything and everything imaginable – building forts; attempting to reach China with our little shovels; turning dark purple picking mulberries; pretending to be space men, or whatever struck our fancy. When the weather forced us indoors, we spent hours meticulously building and painting plastic monsters from an endless supply of models Chris's mom kept on hand. My favorite, and I still have it, was *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Chris was very bright and funny; always doing crazy stuff, like sending away for samples of things, and following his name with "MD." As a result, at the age of nine, he was receiving all sorts of medical samples, including thousands of tongue depressors and gauze squares, which were great for our numerous craft projects.

Chris moved when I was eleven, and although he was still in Maryland, they didn't live close enough to visit and I was only able to see him a few times. We spoke on the phone a lot at first, but he made new friends and our conversations dwindled down to a couple of calls a year. When Chris was fifteen, he called me one day, excitedly telling me he had a girlfriend, and then again, several months later, to tell me he had leukemia. I didn't know what that was. I visited him in Georgetown Hospital, and was broken-hearted to see my beloved friend so emaciated, pale, and hairless. Chris died shortly after his sixteenth birthday, and my world seemed to nearly die with him. When my father passed away soon after, I felt my life had ended. From that point on I was just going through the motions.

Before that horrible time, though, I had a reprieve each summer from the madness at home. Beginning in the summer of my eighth year, I was able to attend a wonderful overnight camp in West Virginia. Although I was still terrified when I was alone, I was rarely by myself, sharing a cabin with seven other girls. For some reason, at camp I was not considered weird. In fact, I was fairly popular. For one thing, the rigorous activities of the days left me utterly exhausted, and I slept well at night. I excelled in most sports and made friends easily. No one ever tried to make me feel awful about myself. I didn't feel stupid or ugly, and there were even kids who looked up to me – mainly because I was good in sports, but also, to my surprise, because my personality actually seemed okay. I was funny, sensitive, sharp, and bold – all things I could hardly express at home. It felt indescribably wonderful to be liked and to feel that I was a part of a group. Camp was heaven on earth. At home, in spite of Jane and Chris, endless hours of school were sheer torture, nights were filled with nightmares, and the ongoing tension between my mother and me was nearly unbearable. Camp was so different – and *I* was so different – that I went by another name: *Fern*; a favorite character from one of my favorite books. I never had to hear "Alexis" and I felt like a new, whole person. After my first summer, I wrote to my camp friends and their return letters were like gifts from the angels.

Another good thing was that in seventh grade I became friends with Sue, and we were inseparable for three years. This was the first time that one of my friends was in any of my classes. Having a friend in school made all the difference and my days became reasonably tolerable. We passed endless notes, giggled over our cute geography teacher (the first male teacher either of us had ever had), and sat together in the cafeteria. We laughed our heads off about everything and I wasn't alone anymore. Sue was a "normal" person; popular, confident, and talented, and yet she sought me out and enjoyed my company. Her parents practically adopted me, and I loved being a part of her boisterous and loving family. Unfortunately, when we finished junior high, we were zoned for different high schools, and while I got into pot, and my grades plummeted, Sue was on the fast track to graduate early and then she was off to college and I pretty much lost track of her. She left the area, developed a career, married and had some kids. When she moved back, I was so far gone that although we tried to pick up where we had left off, Sue was so far above me on the functional scale that we had virtually nothing in common. The realization made me ache with ashamed disappointment.

The last good thing about my childhood, and the best, was the wonderful relationship I had with my father. We sometimes did yard work together, and every Sunday he took Shelby and me out for breakfast – without Mom! She viewed this as her time off, but we viewed it as a brief reprieve from the insanity. Shelby and I always had fun with Dad on Sunday mornings. Between Mommy-less time with my father, and the many weeks I spent each summer at camp, I was able to experience what life was supposed to feel like.

The good times didn't outweigh the bad, though. As I grew older and was expected to shoulder greater responsibilities, I became more mentally ill, developing increasingly strange ways of handling the growing number of situations that I didn't know how to cope with. I couldn't admit to my problems, so I had to just allow people to think I was very stupid and/or unbelievably weird, which really hurt. Things might have been different, at least in school, had I been able to sleep at night, but while others slept through their nights, I was vigilantly surviving through mine.

When I was eighteen, and Mom kicked me out of the house, I moved in with a new boyfriend, Dorian – the first real "love of my life," and a very troubled man; something I was ill-equipped to recognize at the time. I had no other options, anyway. Mom had never allowed me to work, so I had no job and no money, and although Dad had left money for our college tuition, Mom had informed me that it would be like flushing money down the toilet to pay for me to attend college. There was simply nowhere else for me to go – unless I wanted to try my hand at living on the streets. The damage Dorian did to my self-esteem took years to undo. There's no point in getting into it, but all the good I ever got from my relationships with Dad, Jane, Chris, and Sue, plus the many positive experiences I'd had at camp, were completely undone by Dorian. When I finally got away from him, I was ready to let anyone walk all over me. Every shred of confidence was gone and a life that was already more than difficult had now become nearly impossible and utterly joyless as well.

I was so anxious to leave Dorian that I didn't realize I was incapable of living on my own. In my new apartment I nailed all of the windows shut, making the summer months unbearable, especially since I had to go back to wearing my bizarre nighttime armor. Each time I came home, I checked every conceivable hiding place, including inside the oven, and, after locking the four extra dead bolts, I pushed my ultra-heavy couch in front of the door. I couldn't shower comfortably, convinced that in spite of my efforts, someone would break in, and I vigilantly kept my eyes glued to the locked bathroom door, often leaving shampoo in my hair as I anxiously dried and dressed as quickly as possible. The laundry room in the basement of the building terrified me, so I washed all of my clothing in the bathtub, hanging it on

the furniture to dry, and then had to spend hours ironing stuff that would have come out of the dryer wrinkle-free had I been able to muster the courage to brave the basement. But with its winding hallways, numerous alcoves, and storage areas, there was no way on earth that I would venture into that dangerous labyrinth.

As a result of my inability to sleep at night, I gave up day jobs and surrendered my life to nighttime waiting and bartending. Although the choice meant that I'd never be able to have any of the jobs I'd dreamed of, at least I didn't have to go to sleep until dawn, and fewer people were aware of just how dysfunctional I really was. To compound the problems, I quickly discovered alcohol, which didn't help anything, although it certainly seemed to at the time. In high school I had smoked pot to get away from how awful I felt, but after high school, pot was harder to come by. Working in bars enabled me to drink regularly, which numbed my pain and made it easier to tolerate my intolerable existence. With all of the obstacles, there was never any reason to believe that I would ever accomplish anything meaningful, and I sank into a numb existence that, from the outside, appeared fairly comfortable and happy, but which, when the alcohol was removed, revealed itself as a particularly insidious form of hell.

Eventually I found a room in a group house, which made most aspects of my life a lot easier, but the Nazi nightmares that had plagued my precious sleep since early childhood were still a big problem. In group houses, however, when I woke up frozen with fear, I could calm myself more readily, knowing that others were around. When a nightmare was particularly difficult to shake off, I tiptoed to each housemate's bedroom door, where I stood silently, waiting to hear a sign that they were still alive. After moments of stillness, even the softest breathing became evident and I could return to my room and read myself back to sleep.

After that first apartment fiasco, I had always lived in a group house until I met Vince. And now here I was, alone, because I'd kicked him out. How stupid to prefer being knocked around to being alone. And yet I had preferred it because being hit occasionally was better than feeling too frightened to sleep. I was terrified of not getting enough sleep because the more exhausted I became, the closer I danced toward making that final decision to just end everything – a decision I didn't really wish to make.

As soon as Nick left, I brought my alarm clock, pillow, and blanket into the living room and burrowed into the couch. My mind was racing, though, and each sound grew into something deeply sinister. After an hour of checking every ominous noise, I decided a shot of scotch with some codeine would help me relax. The next thing I knew, the alarm was blaring and as I stared at the time, I couldn't believe I'd slept for an hour through that racket. Once again, I was late for work.

Rusty's was a pretty laid back restaurant, and being tardy hadn't seemed to matter very much. On this particular occasion, however, my manager, Charles, had a new take on my apparently casual attitude toward punctuality. He said that anyone who lived only two blocks away ought to be able to get to work on time. When he fired me, I was furious, but in retrospect, how could I blame him? I was frequently late and he'd put up with me for nearly a year. Burning with shame, fear, and anger, I wandered down Wisconsin Avenue, not really sure of where I was heading. I rifled through my mental rolodex, searching for anyone who might be able to lend money to me. Unfortunately, I'd borrowed money from just about everyone I knew who had any, and I really didn't feel I could ask for more – even from the few people I'd already paid back. As I walked, I began formulating a plan. Even though Mom had never been willing to help me, I thought she might loan me the \$400 I needed for the rent if I could guarantee her that I'd pay her back within a month. It's taken me a long time to learn that this was

totally delusional thinking – on two counts. The first was that I almost never seemed able to earn enough to pay loans back, and the second was that Mom wouldn't have thrown me a rope if she had one in her hands and I was drowning.

My regular stomping grounds included a bar – a dive, really – called *The Pub*. It was about four miles from my house, and many of my friends were either employees or ex-employees. Lots of them had tee-shirts proclaiming, “*I finally came to my senses and stopped working at The Pub.*” They still drank there, though, because it was the greatest bar in D.C. It was an Irish bar, not far from Capitol Hill, and the place was a total hoot. Above the front door, Kieran, the owner, had painted, “THIRSTY? HUNGRY? CONFUSED? COME ON IN!!” and installed a rusty mechanical winking eye that periodically got stuck, making a dreadful grinding noise. The Pub was not a meat market pick-up station, or some upscale yuppie hangout, and had many regular customers of all ages and from all walks of life. Congressional reps rubbed elbows with sales clerks, nurses, and med students who came in for shooters on their Friday night “liver rounds.” The core contingency of regulars, however, was formed by the simply drifting through life, like me, and to us, The Pub was home. There were a few raging alcoholics among us, but the vast majority were there for the familial camaraderie. Although there were some sad cases, The Pub was filled with some of the most vibrant, talented people, and I felt more alive there than anywhere else. I'd never applied for a job with Kieran because I didn't want to risk ruining my favorite watering hole, but I began to consider the possibility. I could make decent money if I worked the bar with my friend, Eileen O'Keefe. And if it became unbearable I could presumably come to my senses, too, and look for work elsewhere. Walking toward The Pub, I eventually convinced myself that a job opening did, in fact, exist, and that I wouldn't have any trouble getting hired. I was attractive and engaging, and landing restaurant jobs had never been difficult – keeping them, of course, was another story. At any rate, when I passed a pay phone, I gathered my courage and dialed Mom's number.

“Hello?” Ugh. I could not suppress a shudder when I heard that voice.

“Hi, Mom,” I managed in something approximating a casual tone. “It's me.”

“Alexis?” She had a way of saying my name that made me cringe. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this call? Is that traffic I hear? Where are you? Are you in some sort of trouble?”

“I'm calling from a pay phone. I'm on my way to a new job,” I lied. I didn't like lying to her, it was a self-preservation tactic; she used the truth to tear me to shreds.

“A new job? What was wrong with the old one? You change jobs more than anyone I know. You weren't fired again, were you?” Even though she was right, that was really rich, coming from a woman who'd never been able to hold a volunteer position, much less a job, for more than six months in her entire life.

“No, Mom, I wasn't fired. I can make more money at The Pub. I'm starting there tonight, and I'll be bartending instead of waiting tables.”

“Bartending? When are you going to get a real job, Alexis?”

“Bartending is a real job, Mom. Listen, I'm calling because Vince moved out and he owes me several months rent. I don't think he's going to pay me back, which is why I got a better job.”

“What did you do to make Vince move out, Alexis?”

“Nothing, Mom, I told him to leave. He wasn’t as nice as he seemed.”

“Oh?” It was obvious that she thought my intrinsic worthlessness had finally become apparent to the great Vince Linaldin, and he’d jumped ship.

“It’s a long story, Mom, but what I wanted to know was if you might be able to lend me \$400 until the end of the month. I don’t have all of the rent because Vince didn’t pay his share, and – ”

“Alexis, stop. This makes me very uncomfortable. You turned eighteen years ago; I would not be doing you any favors if I bailed you out. I’m sorry you’re having problems but you’re an adult, you’ll have to solve them yourself. Good night.”

A fine rain began as my mother was hanging up on me; the heavens opening up in sympathy. When I arrived at The Pub, soaked as well as thirsty, hungry, and confused, Eileen tossed a green sweatshirt at me, asking, “What, you never heard of an umbrella?” I could always count on Eileen, and sometimes thought it was too bad I wasn’t gay. Actually, she would have had to have been gay, too, which she wasn’t. For a while, it seemed to us that even if we weren’t gay, it would be better to be sweethearts than to continue to betray our minds by being in relationships with guys we couldn’t understand, and who definitely couldn’t understand us. If we were lovers, we would only have to betray our bodies. We even started to attempt it once, when a heavy alcohol haze had suggested that it might be possible to overcome the obstacle of being straight. However, we found we were hopelessly hetero, and even kissing seemed wrong, so we awkwardly abandoned the project before it got started. It probably would have been the perfect relationship, but instead we just kept trying to figure out why all the really great guys were either already involved, or were, themselves, gay.

Gratefully accepting the sweatshirt, I changed in the restroom and came back to warm up with an Irish coffee. Tuesday nights were usually slow, and there were only a couple of regulars when I arrived. Clark was at his post by the waitress’s station (so he could force himself on them whenever they came to pick up drinks from the bartender). He was a retired postal worker who lived almost exclusively in a time long past, reliving memories of a woman who’d left him in 1943 while he was fighting in Germany. He played Marlene Dietrich’s *Falling In Love Again* on the juke box every night, and unfortunately, he was irritatingly lewd. We avoided him like the plague, until the pressure of feeling sorry for such a lonely man prompted us to fall into yet another conversation with him which we almost always regretted. Unbeknownst to Clark, *Aqualung* was on the juke box in his honor; he really was a dirty old man, and it was hard to feel sorry for him for very long because the things he said just made you want to get away from him as quickly as possible.

Kevin was there on a break, knocking back his customary four scotch and sodas before returning to his job as a security guard at a pretty swank hotel around the corner. He wouldn’t really start drinking until he got off of work at eleven. There was a table of loud, innocent-looking young interns from the hallowed halls of Congress, still very green and very excited about working on “The Hill.” A couple of college kids were shooting darts in the back, and Jethro Tull’s *Songs From The Woods* was on the juke box – a warm, welcoming song that made me feel I’d arrived at the home of dear friends. Not surprisingly, Kieran was snoring quietly in one of the back booths. Three tremendously talented young musicians were sitting on the tiny stage, but their instruments were on the floor and they were deep in their pints of Guinness.

“Eileen,” I said, “I’m not working at Rusty’s anymore and I need a job. I was thinking I could tend bar with you on Friday and Saturday nights, and wait tables the rest of the week. You think Kieran will go for it?”

“Shit!” Eileen screeched, and then lowering her voice, “Kieran just hired this weird little guy, Glatwater, to work the bar with me. That’s him, over there,” she pointed surreptitiously to a man I hadn’t noticed, who was nodding off across the table from Kieran. Eileen continued, “Kieran doesn’t need anyone right now. Shit! I’d much rather work with you! Damn, I wish you’d been here this morning; you’d have had it!”

“Glatwater?”

“Yeah. Glatwater Bellinghan, the third, but you can call him Glat. His mother does. She came with him to his interview – can you believe it? Talk to Kieran tomorrow, when he’s back on the planet.” She gave another nod toward the dozing mountain. “Maybe he can give you a couple of waiting shifts on the weekend until something opens up. It won’t be a long wait!”

“Right. Okay,” I smiled, but my heart sank. I had been so sure I’d just waltz in and pick up the best shifts. What was I thinking? Eileen set up shooters, which we tossed back, toasting Glat’s good timing.

“Good God, Eileen, what was in that?” I gasped.

“Everything,” she grinned.

“Yeah? How about another one? It’s on Glat.”

* * *

I know I’ve been rambling. It’s because eventually I will have to talk about what happened at the end of the night, and that includes explaining the Grim Reaper, which I can’t stand the thought of doing. I was embarrassed to admit being afraid to be in my apartment by myself, but that doesn’t hold a candle to the GR. He doesn’t exist in my life now, but he had tremendous power over me back then. It’s horribly embarrassing to talk about something that is so obviously insane, but here goes: Except for the fact that he didn’t carry a scythe, he looked like the classic image of the grim reaper, complete with cowl – hence the name – and he’d been with me for as long as I could remember. Although I knew he was a figment of my imagination, he seemed to stand out as a separate and particularly dangerous adversary. When things were going pretty well – rare – he hung back, but I could always sense his presence as he waited for the inevitable crash and burn that always followed any good times. When problems did surface, he was ready to exploit my misery; he actually seemed to feed on my pain. I could see him then, as I was processing the fact that there was no miracle job waiting for me at The Pub. The GR stepped to the fore and began his long litany of why I should be dead:

“You’d be better off dead. Everyone would be better off if you were dead. You are never, ever going to get anything right. No one loves you. No one cares about you. Get off your big, fat, sorry ass, and get this over with once and for all!”

It made no difference that I knew the GR only existed in my mind – after all, no one else could see or hear him – he still terrified me. When my whole world was toppling in on me, and I could see no path out; he could effortlessly knock me into oblivion. The worst thing, and the most painful to admit,

was that he could push me to the point where I'd get a razor blade and cut my arms in wild frustration and anger. It always felt, at first, like I was punishing myself at his behest. But after I began cutting, I'd lose myself and turn into a zombie – which generally was a relief because then I no longer felt the pain and fear that plagued my life, nor could the GR's continuous diatribe burn into me. I became a mechanical Alex Robot.

The problem with being a self-mutilator *and* having my very own personal grim reaper was that he wasn't satisfied with my cutting. He wanted to take things to an entirely different level and put an end, once and for all, to my miserable existence. No one knew about either the GR, or the cutting. I wasn't stupid enough to tell anyone about the GR, and I almost always wore long-sleeved shirts, even in the summer, when I'd wear gauzy blouses, thin as gossamer threads, with spaghetti strap tank tops underneath. I've spent my entire life hiding these ugly truths, and now here I am, admitting to having been unbelievably messed up. People don't want to know these crazy things about their friends. It scares them. Then they go away.

David Bowie's *Space Oddity* started on the juke box, and I thought 'Right. Here I am, floating along with The Major, unable to raise Ground Control on the telly. And there's not a thing I can do, either.' I didn't even think of telling Eileen how bad everything had suddenly become. Admitting things were bad was admitting to being guilty of not being able to manage my life. The only reasonable conclusion was that I should at least be responsible enough to end it.

Actually, things hadn't *suddenly* become bad. My problems with Vince began when we moved in together. My problems with being late for work had started with my first job. Phobic fears of being murdered had been going on since I was born, and I'd launched my lifetime career in money mismanagement when I was three and my grandfather gave me a special silver dollar, which I immediately turned over to the ice cream truck driver in exchange for twenty popsicles. But it always *seemed* that everything suddenly went from completely good to horribly bad. I never saw any writing on the wall. In fact, I never even saw the wall, let alone the writing. There were no transitions, no cause, no effect, no awareness of losing ground. Suddenly, everything just blew up in my face. Patchwork remedies that obviously wouldn't hold didn't seem like patchwork to me. Once something stopped being utterly devastating, then in my bizarre little world, it was all just fine again.

Just then, however, everything was not fine. Business had picked up and Eileen was busier, so she sailed over to my corner as work allowed, bearing shooters which we'd knock back, identifying ourselves to one another as being on the same team. Then, off she'd go, leaving me in the abyss, and although she had no idea of the misery I was experiencing, she really was a great friend. As the GR became more persistent, I suddenly realized that I could spend the night at Eileen's house. That was a great idea! My cats, Pooky and Sebastian, had plenty of food and water, and I'd always felt a real commitment to not killing myself in a friend's home. No one wants to wake up and find a dead body.

So, that was the plan. I'd foiled the GR; whatever he said wouldn't hurt me because I'd be safe at The Pub, and then I'd be safe with Eileen. "So HA! to you!" I thought triumphantly. (Sometimes I couldn't help talking back to the GR, even though that was even weirder than hearing him talking to me.) I was so elated at the prospect of being safe for the night that I forgot what I'd been so worried about. I'd talk to Kieran the next day and I was sure he'd have several shifts for me. I forgot about the eviction notice and my completely unsympathetic mother, and I was drunk enough to even forget about my general inability to be responsible for myself, which had been weighing heavily on my mind, prior to all of the shooters. I sat in the corner of the bar that I usually staked out for myself, safe in my invisible

fortress. Waiting for Kevin to return, I quietly watched the humans making their flailing attempts to connect with one another, hoping desperately that they could stay two steps ahead of their aloneness. At eleven-fifteen, as exhaustion was creeping up on me, Kevin arrived. I loved Kevin. We all did. He was a great guy and always looked out for us, whether we needed him to or not.

Kevin had been a D.C. cop until recently. One night he decided that he was too drunk to drive his car home, and thought it would be better to take his police cruiser; it made sense to him at the time. Shortly after beginning his journey, he decided he was too sleepy to drive, so he parked the cruiser – facing the oncoming traffic because he thought he might get rear-ended if he stayed in his lane – in the middle of the bridge going out to Arlington Cemetery, beyond the Lincoln Memorial. His last conscious thought was that it would be safer if he turned on his flashing red and blue lights. He might have managed some type of probation, but when he showed up for his hearing he was only wearing boxer shorts and a sheet tied like a cape around his neck. On his chest was a backward “S,” drawn in red lipstick. He was completely lit and thought he possessed Superman-like powers.

The hearing was on the second floor of the police headquarters. On the street below, an attractive woman walked by and Kevin hollered, “Hey, baby, come on up!” She replied, “Come on down,” and Kevin promptly climbed out of the window and launched himself, Superman style, doing something along the lines of a belly flop onto the top of a parked Volkswagen bug. He didn’t remember any of this, but he was sure it was true because someone with a VW bug had sent him a bill for damages to their roof. Kevin’s Superman stunt effectively ended his career of making the world safe via D.C.’s Finest, but he remained ever-vigilant, always on the lookout for a damsel in distress. After he got out of the hospital, he was required to attend AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings and he always came into The Pub afterwards, saying that the stories he heard were so sad that he just couldn’t take it. Then he’d start knocking back his scotch and sodas.

Shortly after leaving the hospital, Kevin landed an evening security job at the Crystal Gardens Hotel, and he was in a particularly gleeful mood when he arrived from work. Seeing Kevin lifted the last vestiges of my depression as he told me about his night. There had been a huge formal ball, and Kevin had spotted a particularly attractive attendee that he thought he’d like to get to know better. Probably due to all the scotch he’d already had, Kevin had missed a fairly important point about this ball: it was a drag queen’s ball. While he was chatting up the attractive young lady, whom, because of her height, he had decided was a model, he gradually began to notice something strange about the crowd he was casually surveying. Many of the women seemed over-large. With big faces. And hands. And feet. Then he noticed that there were virtually no men, and finally he realized that they were *all* men. Including the woman he was hoping might go home with him. I asked him what tipped him off, and, giggling, he reached into his backpack and held up a keepsake size 13 golden slipper the young lady had given him to remember her by. She had written her phone number inside the shoe, in case Kevin ever changed his mind, or his orientation. Laughing his head off, Kevin flagged Eileen, who was already on her way with his scotch and soda. Kevin could really laugh at himself. As John Wayne-ish as he appeared, he was actually very comfortable with anybody who didn’t or couldn’t fit into the mold. Live and let live was Kevin’s motto, and I never once saw him stray from his mission statement: rescue all damsels and defend all underdogs, regardless of the consequences, demand justice, enforce it when necessary, and never judge another because you don’t know where their journey had taken them.

Kevin’s glee was infectious and soon I was up for a game of darts. As we headed to a dart board, we passed the juke box, and as always, Kevin plugged SSgt Barry Sadler’s *The Ballad of the Green Beret*. Kevin had been an Army staff sergeant, and had done three tours of duty in Vietnam,

earning three Purple Hearts. I don't think Vietnam was what caused Kevin to drink so much, but it probably contributed to his overall desire to avoid the rather enormous pain he seemed to hold behind his laughter.

We shot darts until about one-thirty. Almost everyone had gone, leaving one attractive guy at the bar and two of the musicians, both of whom were fast asleep on the stage. Eileen was deep in animated conversation with the good-looking young man when Kevin drained his final scotch, slung his backpack and trademark leather bomber jacket over his shoulder, swept me into a dramatic farewell embrace, and then headed out. I put chairs up on the tables for Eileen and woke up the last two thirds of the band, who staggered out. The good-looking guy was still there, though, and I was wondering why Eileen hadn't asked him to leave when she cantered up to me and chortled, "Come on, you have to go to the bathroom." She was all twinkly smiles as she stood in front of the mirror, combing her hair. "Isn't he cute?!"

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, yes, he is. Who is he?"

"His name's Paul. He just moved to D.C.; he's got a job at the Library of Congress, and he's been in for the past few nights. I *like* him." She grinned maniacally, pirouetting in front of the mirror.

"Yeah, he looks nice, Eileen." I smiled, both happy for Eileen, and utterly miserable because the wall I never noticed with the writing on it was coming into sharp focus. It would have been a whole lot better if I'd picked up on Eileen's interest in Paul earlier, when there had been other people I could have attached myself to. Kevin's couch was always available, and he hadn't minded the few times I'd crashed at his place.

"What are you guys doing when you leave here?" I already knew the answer, but was hoping there was some remote chance they were heading for Chinatown and I could pal around with them for a few hours and avoid the GR until the sun came up and I might be able to withstand his venomous abuse until I could fall asleep.

"Paul's invited me to his place," she twinkled.

"Oh. Cool," I said. I really wanted to be happy for her, but I was struggling. "I'll help you finish cleaning up," was all I could muster. I could see the GR, smirking as he leaned against the wall behind Eileen.

"Great!" Everything's done except the floors." She gave me a big hug. "You're the best," she said as the GR rolled his eyes.

Right. The best. That's me, I thought. While Eileen and I swept and washed the floors, Paul made himself busy checking out the juke box. Just as we were finishing, he plugged Crosby, Stills and Nash's *Suite: Judy Blue Eyes*. Even though it was a great song, I could have done without that particular selection. When it got to the part about being lonely I couldn't stand it. I hated hearing that admission in the song, in my head, in my life. I felt utterly separated from the human race, and I couldn't stand the feeling or myself for feeling that way. Somehow, feeling lonely was an unforgivable character flaw. It was a state of being that I not only hated being in, but couldn't tolerate admitting to. It seemed that *feeling* lonely, awful as that felt, wasn't anywhere near as painful as having to admit – to myself or to anyone else – that I *was* lonely. Being lonely was being a loser and being a loser was completely intolerable.

I made my exit before more of the lyrics could rip into my brain. Giving Eileen the traditional thumbs up, I hurried into the night. With no money for a cab, I headed toward Independence Avenue and the National Air and Space Museum. There was hardly any traffic, and the low-hanging sky was that weird, smoky brown-orange color that comes from too much pollution, too much humidity, and too many street lights. It wasn't raining but a fine mist quickly had my hair sticking to my face. Three bodies, swaddled in filthy sleeping bags, were huddled together over a steaming vent outside of a federal building. Why, in what was supposed to be the greatest nation on earth, did so many people slip through the cracks? Was there a silent agreement among the "haves" of the country to look the other way rather than find a way to help the "have-nots?" How was it possible that it was okay with just about everyone for a certain segment of our society to live on the streets?

Why was it okay with my own mother for me to be living on the streets?

A small child peered out from under the sleeping bags. I had three dollars and ten cents in my pocket, plus an unopened package of Wild Cherry LifeSavers. I walked over and laid my little treasure on the sidewalk in front of him. His face quickly disappeared; a frightened little turtle child. When I looked back, I saw his tiny hand pulling the precious gifts into the safety of his familial nest.

"Some lifesaver you are," mocked the GR.

"Drop dead!" I snarled at him, quickly hoping no one had heard me.

He started chanting, in a sing-songy way, *"Alex is gonna die,"* the word "die" stretched into two syllables. *"Alex is gonna die, Alex is gonna die."*

"SHUT UP!" I screeched, this time just inside my head.

Counting my steps, I tried tuning out the GR, but he was persistent. In addition to his song, he bombarded me with horribly realistic-looking images. Visions swam through my mind: I was swinging from a rope, lying in a blood-filled bathtub, hurtling over the side of the Calvert Street Bridge. I couldn't stand it!

"Four hundred and sixty-three. Four hundred and sixty-four," I kept counting, but he wouldn't stop!

"Alex is gonna die. Alex is gonna die."

Normally, to get to my house from The Pub, I walked up Independence Avenue and then down 15th Street, cutting past the White House and making my way to Massachusetts Avenue. From there I headed up toward Wisconsin Avenue and home. But there was a very high bridge over Rock Creek Park if I took that route. With the images the GR was throwing at me, I didn't want to cross any bridges. One brief moment of desperation at the wrong time and I could find myself dropping to my death with no turning back. Unfortunately, Rock Creek Park lay between me and my apartment, and all routes included high bridges over the park; all of which had bid good-bye to more than their fair share of lost souls. I was terrified of walking down *through* the park – rapists and murderers were always waiting in the woods. Although I felt like I wanted to be dead, I knew if I could get through this I wouldn't want to be dead later. In spite of how hard everything always was, I liked being alive. I liked my cats. I liked my music. I liked my friends. The GR was working hard, though. Each thought that came to me, whether a reason to keep on living, or a possible solution to the current problem of job/home/money, the quintessential king of sarcasm blasted me with all of the ammunition in his

arsenal. I uneasily decided I'd take my regular route home, but when I reached the bridge, I'd walk down the middle of the road, instead of near the railing.

Crossing Dupont Circle, I saw more homeless people collected in doorways, huddling together, sharing warmth and lice. I couldn't imagine living on the street. I couldn't imagine eating out of trash cans, or even in a soup kitchen. How did a person get off the streets once they were there? If you didn't have a phone and an address, how could you get work? For that matter, how could you find work if you couldn't bathe and wash your clothing? If you couldn't work, how could you pay for a place to live? As far as I could tell, once you were on the street, you were stuck. Then you died and the city cremated you.

It seemed there was an unspoken agreement among those who had not slipped through the cracks to believe that those who had were to blame for the fact that they had nothing, and therefore, since it was their fault, they were unworthy of any meaningful assistance. I'd heard more than one person say, "It's their choice," but who in their right mind would *choose* to live in danger of being attacked, starved, frozen, and gnawed on by lice and maggots? People who felt compassionate concern for those who lived in abject poverty abroad seemed incapable of acknowledging that in our land of opportunity we could actually have people dying from lack of food, shelter, and medicine. There weren't enough people who could wrap their brains around the fact that the many opportunities America did offer did not extend to all of her citizens. Even those who were concerned about America's homeless often believed that if anyone *wanted* assistance, it was available; a great "safety net" that our society had lovingly created for "those less fortunate than ourselves." But although some effective programs did exist, the vast majority of "those less fortunate" were often simply ignored. They had become invisible. The wind was picking up, and the sweatshirt Eileen had given me was not enough to keep the chill out. I walked as quickly as I could, and wished that I could warm up, but as the icy winds whipped through my clothing, I was becoming invisible, too.

Walking along Embassy Row – a very wealthy section of Massachusetts Avenue – I felt more and more inadequate. The GR was delighted with the direction my thoughts had turned, and he walked along in companionable silence. What a dichotomy the homeless people created, juxtaposed against the stately mansions. I felt like my family was a microcosm of society. Here I was, at three in the morning, walking four long miles to my house in the cold, unsafe streets, toying with the idea of suicide. My sister, on the other hand, had recently graduated from college, and was teaching tenth grade English. She was also working part-time on her Master's degree. Right now, she was nestled in her warm bed, in an apartment that she wasn't being evicted from. My cousins on my dad's side were, respectively, in medical and law school – and would not be facing loan debt when they graduated, thanks to my uncle's hard work, coupled with his generosity. Getting to and through medical and law school is no small feat, to be sure, but having been given cars and college, they were guaranteed fairly smooth sailing ahead.

My mother's sister's grown children all owned their own homes. My aunt and uncle supported the two who were incapable of growing up; paying for their homes, cars, and the tuition to send their own kids to boarding schools – which enabled these two cousins, and their spouses, to live just about as irresponsibly as I lived – only without financial worries. My aunt and uncle had put their third child through prep school, followed by under grad and then law school at Yale. He was doing just fine on his own; he and his wife had just purchased an eight-million dollar "home" in Connecticut. Mom and all of her relatives were wildly excited about this enormous monument to opulence – the family message was clear: through hard work and/or a share in the family fortune, wildly huge assets defined our worth as human beings.

I actually didn't begrudge any of my cousins their money, or the security they hardly even realized they derived from having that money. What made me feel so miserable was that they all believed we had started on a level playing field, which meant that although they laughingly referred to me as a "free spirit," they really could only view me as a failure. They simply could not grasp that I hadn't started where they had, nor did they understand just how vitally important the loving support of their parents had been to their many successes. Whether the family had helped any of my immediate relatives to get to a better place, or just helped them to stay afloat, the only one of us cousins who had *really* made it on her own was my sister. And the only one who was being allowed to die, rather than being helped, was me. If Dad had lived, things would have been different. But, he hadn't, and we were left in Mom's "care," if you could call it that. Everything in Mom's world was about Mom, though. Everything. There really was no room for either of us.

In my family, I stuck out like a sore thumb. The ones who were as dysfunctional as I was were being kept afloat artificially, so all of the cousins appeared to be successful except for me. In the midst of my family I fit in exactly the way these hungry and cold homeless people fit in, in one of the most affluent neighborhoods in the nation. I *was* a loser. There was no getting around it, and I could not see how anything would ever change. Although I was popular at this point in my life, no one really knew who I was. Plenty of guys had found me attractive, but solid relationships eluded me. My friends loved me, after a fashion, and I loved them, but it was not that familial love – those family bonds I'd witnessed so often among people, but never personally experienced, except, to a degree, with my father, who was dead. I didn't think anyone would really be affected if I just disappeared.

As I approached the bridge, the GR started tossing out images of me vaulting over the side, and I ended up sprinting down the middle of the street. Tucked away in a small wooded area, not far beyond the bridge, was a little park which had been dedicated to one of my favorite authors, Kahlil Gibran, whose compassionate, insightful, and poetic writing had moved me to tears on more than one occasion. As I breathlessly raced into Gibran's sanctuary, I fervently prayed that something of this great man's wisdom would come to lift me up. But all that picked up was that bone-chilling wind, and with it, a real rain. I was too lost to find any answers, and, sadly leaving the little sanctuary, I began forcing one foot in front of the other, unable to tune out the GR's maddening litany.

Arriving at my apartment, I saw that Vince had come by and spray-painted "ALEX IS A WHORE" in huge red letters that bled down the side of the house. Nick was going to be livid but I felt so weary I could hardly think about it as I dragged myself up the stairs. At the door, my cats wound their furry little bodies around my legs, but I was soaked and they quickly backed off. Before changing into dry clothing, I checked everywhere to be sure no one was in the apartment. I wondered why I was so scared if I was planning to kill myself anyway. It didn't make sense. If someone was in there, I should have just said, "Hey, go for it." But I was afraid of being raped, beaten up, all that painful stuff that so often accompanies murder. And there was that part of me that never really wanted to be dead, anyway. After I put on dry clothing, I got the nearly full bottle of scotch, and pouring a drink, I began a note to Nick:

Dear Nick, Please don't think this has anything to do with being evicted; it doesn't. You're a great landlord. I'm just sorry that I'm such a loser that I can't hold a job and be responsible for myself. I know you like Pooky and Sebastian, so I hope you can keep them for me. They'll be happy to have you for a father. Sincerely, Alex Moser

I was undecided about killing myself, but my actions were robotically moving me toward that final moment, as though my body and mind were disconnecting. I started seriously working on the scotch and after about half an hour, it was gone. I wasn't sure if I was trying to muster the courage to go ahead and end the nightmare that was my life, or if I was secretly hoping to pass out before I could do any real damage. I must have been high on adrenalin, though, because the alcohol only seemed to break down the last remaining inhibitions I had about ending my failed career as a human being.

The GR was acting like a doting old lady. He scurried into the bathroom and brought back the codeine. There were thirty-eight pills left. I had used the prescription twice; once for pain, and once earlier in the day, when I was trying to get some sleep before going to the job I no longer had. I mechanically swallowed small handfuls of pills with swigs of vodka, finally getting them all down, while the GR nodded his encouragement. When the pills were gone I sat down unsteadily on the couch feeling very sleepy and quite nauseated while the GR went to the bathroom and got my single-edged razor blades. I was vaguely surprised to see it was already growing light outside.

I'd never cut my arm in the living room before. I didn't want to make a mess, especially on my couch, or on a beautiful afghan I had. I'd made the afghan for my parents when my dad had cancer and we knew it was going to be my parents' last anniversary together. It was the first and only afghan I'd ever made. It had one hundred squares; each one unique and all of them connected with black yarn. After my father died, my mother had given it back to me. She didn't want it.

It crossed my mind that if I cut my arm, I'd just fall asleep and quietly bleed to death. That seemed like the best way to go, so, forcing myself to sit up, I put a pillow on my lap and laid my arm across it. Taking the razor blade, I squinted until the inside of my arm, and the blade, came into focus. Pushing the corner of the blade until it popped through the skin, I dragged it from my elbow down to my wrist. The cut was worse than anything I'd ever done before, and I saw deep inside my skin for a brief moment before droplets of blood formed from a million tiny holes. Very soon there was a ravine filled with blood that spilled down the sides of my arm. I experienced a moment of horror over what I'd just done, but I felt so exhausted, and so utterly hopeless, that the initial fear and shock slipped away as I drifted off. Leaning against my parents' afghan, I numbly watched as the GR tenderly patted my head and then sat down beside me, snuggling his head against my shoulder. If there was a heaven, I thought groggily, it would be good to see my dad. He loved me.

"I like my motorcycle because of the helmet laws. Really. 'Cause when the world gets too damned big, I put on the helmet and get on the bike. Then it's just me in there, with the wind, the noise, and that little patch of road in front of me."
– Kevin Sheheen

CHAPTER TWO A WOBBLY RESURRECTION

Struggling to think, but unable to do so, I felt vaguely frustrated, but not really attached to my frustration. I didn't feel connected enough to assess my situation as I nodded in and out of consciousness, but gradually I realized I was in a bed, in some place that seemed very bright. There were people, and something persistently beeping in the distance. I swallowed, and my throat felt obstructed, but as I was noticing this, I drifted off again. Eventually I learned that I was in the intensive care unit of George Washington Hospital. A doctor told me that I had nearly died, but before that blessed relief had been bestowed upon me by the god-who-ends-all-suffering, my landlord, Nick, had looked in on me. Vince's spray-painted proclamation on the side of Nick's lovely white wall had caught his attention and, knowing Vince, Nick decided to be sure I was all right. As diligent as I am about curtains being drawn, I had left the curtain open on my living room door, and when Nick looked in, he immediately called an ambulance.

I must have left that curtain open so there'd be a chance that I'd be rescued. With my paranoia, I never left curtains open. Further, if I hadn't cut myself, Nick probably would've assumed I was just asleep, and not bothered me – until it was too late. Cutting turned out to be a red flag – literally. I'd frequently teased Nick about being such an early riser; often outside gardening at the same time I'd been tripping home from an all-nighter. I'd never tease Nick again about the hours he kept. As much as I thought I'd wanted to be dead, I *didn't* want to be dead even more.

I was in the ICU until they could take me off the ventilator – a breathing machine with a very unpleasant tube that ran down my throat; it was this that had given me the sensation that my throat was blocked, and I was very glad when they took it out. Then they wanted to make sure my blood work was okay. I'd done some minor damage to my liver and they wouldn't let me leave the ICU until that was resolved. One doctor told me that the amount of alcohol I'd had in my system would've killed a three-hundred pound man, and he recommended that I consider AA meetings. He said anyone who weighed 110 pounds and could tolerate that much alcohol obviously drank way too much.

I was horrified when I learned that their plans were to transfer me to a psychiatric hospital. If I refused to sign myself into a private one, (G.W.'s psych unit was full), they were going to get a court order to have me committed and then I'd have to go to the local state hospital. The private hospital was creatively named, "The Psychiatric Hospital of Northwest Washington, D.C.", or "Psych" for short. The social worker who helped me enroll in an emergency medical coverage program strongly suggested that I admit myself to Psych rather than go to the state hospital. She said, persuasively, that the state hospital had inadequate funding and that I'd be lucky to see a doctor once a week. Psych, on the other hand, would provide me with daily therapy and other activities.

I tried to get them to just let me go home. As far as I was concerned, my problems all centered around not having enough money. The longer I was in the hospital, the less money I'd have. Also, Eileen thought a couple of waiting shifts were open at The Pub and I didn't want to miss that opportunity, but the doctors didn't think that was a good enough reason to release me. Nick was taking care of my cats, so that problem had been resolved, and I could not persuade them to let me go home

after what I'd done. One of the nurses told me that no one in the emergency room had believed I'd make it. The thought was sobering. I really didn't want to be dead, but I also really couldn't take any more of the life I'd been living. I couldn't imagine how therapy would change anything, but they weren't giving me a choice, and I was well beyond the end of my rope. I hadn't been living, I'd been surviving. I survived from day to day, and year to year. So, reluctantly, I signed the papers admitting myself to Psych.

"In a very real sense, although you wouldn't have known it at the time, your plunge into Psych was like falling into a pool, drowning, and then being born into a new life." – Shari Davies

CHAPTER THREE THE FRANKSTER

The guys on the ambulance crew were cute, and part of me felt utterly humiliated as Jessica, the nurse who accompanied me, chatted gaily with them while I looked like a circus freak. Another part of me couldn't have cared less. Each day that passed left me in greater financial trouble, but the fact that I had actually made such a serious suicide attempt was foremost in my thoughts. I'd been cutting myself for years, and although I hadn't believed that I was trying to end my life, thoughts of suicide were almost always with me. Coming so close to actually dying scared the daylight out of me.

When the ambulance arrived at Psych I was very surprised to discover that it was not only near my house, it was right across the street from Rusty's. The catalyst for my hospitalization had been losing my job, coupled with the eviction notice, of course, and here I was, soon to be assigned a room from which I could see both Rusty's and, if I pressed my face against the window, the home I was about to be evicted from. I had no idea a psychiatric hospital lay behind the concrete and brick façade. I'd thought the building was full of offices, but it turned out that apart from the ground floor, the building was dedicated to taking care of the unbalanced segment of the local population who were both in crisis and had medical coverage.

We went into an underground parking garage, and Jessica and I got out and took an elevator to the third floor. My stomach clenched as the elevator opened into a small reception area housing a couch and a desk with two nurses. Jessica told them my name and one of them put out her hand, introducing herself as Joan. She seemed neither friendly nor unfriendly, just all business. Jessica handed her a manila envelope with my transfer papers.

"Is her chart in here?"

"Yes, everything was copied." She smiled and, turning to me, she said, "Alex, try not to worry. You'll do fine." Stepping back into the elevator, she disappeared.

Feeling painfully awkward, I glanced at Joan. I was in pajamas and a sloppy-looking bathrobe that hung open since I couldn't be trusted with a belt. My tennis shoes had no laces, because I might choke myself with them. Joan asked if I had any personal possessions and I looked down at my feet, holding my empty arms in front of me. It seemed like a pretty stupid question. She glanced at my chart and said, "I see you're on suicide precautions. No one is on precautions for long, you'll need to arrange to have clothing brought in. Dinner's been served, but we'll get you a tray."

"I'm not hungry."

Ignoring me, she said to the other nurse, "Suzanne, will you please order a tray for Ms. Moser?" To me, she said, "You may find you have an appetite once your food arrives. Shall we get you settled?" And with that she asked Suzanne to "buzz us in."

A loud chime came from a door with a long, narrow window that had wire mesh criss-crossed inside of the glass. Joan opened the door and motioned for me to step inside. As the door closed behind us, my throat tightened. I didn't think I could tolerate being locked in a building. As I looked around,

however, the place didn't *feel* frightening; it actually had a safe feeling, and I began to view the locks not so much as something that trapped me inside, but as something that might keep the bad guys *out*.

We were in a large room with a nursing station to the right and a beautiful fish tank built into the wall on the left. People glanced at me, but apparently I wasn't particularly interesting, and they went back to their activities. Against the exterior wall in front of me were three long couches with end tables and lamps between them. I noticed that the windows had double panes, and the inside ones had the same criss-crossed wire grid that was in the door. There were many arm chairs; their backs to where we stood. Three people were working on a jigsaw puzzle at a card table. Other people sat in small groups, chatting quietly, or reading, while I tried to figure out how to tell the patients from the staff. I finally noticed that a few people, including Joan, had brightly colored plastic bracelets that looked like coiled wire, and each had a key or two hanging from it. It seemed the key people were the staff.

A young woman galloped up and sang out, "Hi, Joan!" Then, turning to me, she announced, "I'm Grace. I'm here because I embezzled twenty-six thousand dollars from a bank I worked at. My father is a famous lawyer. He put me in here to keep me from going to jail." And with that, she cantered away.

"This is the lounge," Joan said, as she watched Grace skipping down the hall. "Your room is this way."

The wall-to-wall carpet was medium gray and the walls were a pale gray with deep burgundy trim. The furniture was mostly cream colored, and the dark wooden tables looked like cherry. The atmosphere was surprisingly warm, and I was glad I hadn't been sent to the state hospital. I thought this place probably cost an arm and a leg, and I felt thankful that there was money available in the social service system that allowed me to be here. I was actually sort of afraid of the state hospital. I'd heard some unpleasant stories over the years. I didn't know if they were true, but they were frightening. Beyond the nurses' station, we turned left into a room with four beds along one wall, each with a nightstand and a lamp. The rug was steel-blue and each bed had a light yellow cotton blanket over white sheets, with a second, dark blue blanket folded at the foot of the bed. There was a large snoring lump in the bed farthest from the door, but it didn't move when we came in. Four matching dressers stood along the wall across from the beds, each with a wooden chair next to it.

"Wake-up is at seven, and breakfast is served at seven-thirty," Joan said. "You can get a shower whenever your schedule allows, but beds have to be made before nine, or you'll forfeit privileges." I wondered what privileges I'd be forfeiting; I wasn't even allowed shoelaces. "This will be your bed," Joan continued, indicating the bed closest to the hallway. "You'll see Dr. Frank, the therapist, tomorrow morning at nine. He will determine what group you'll be in, write orders for meds, and go over the expectations that will allow you to come off of suicide precautions."

"Group?"

"You will have individual therapy six days a week. You will also meet in group therapy every day. Group therapy is different from individual therapy. Some patients feel more comfortable in – "

"Yeah, I know what group therapy is. Do I have to participate?" I was too horrified to be polite.

"Yes, you do," Joan pursed her lips and continued, "Sometimes it helps to hear other people saying things you thought no one else felt. Dr. Frank will run all of the group therapy meetings except the one on Sunday, which will be run by a nurse."

“Oh.” I felt completely overwhelmed.

“Come out to the lounge, Alex. I have to look over your chart, and I don’t have anyone who can sit with you in here. Until I can assign someone, you’ll need to stay by the nurses’ station.”

On the way out, I peeked into the large bathroom, which was next to the door that went into the hall. There was a frosted glass shower stall. The top of the toilet tank held an oblong planter with silk scarlet begonias, and set into the wall above the sink were four ceramic toothbrush holders with soap trays and cup holders. The place felt like some strange shadow world version of a four-star hotel suite.

There were about ten people in the lounge; some reading, some absorbed in conversation. A woman with carrot-colored hair was engaged in a very animated conversation, but there wasn’t anyone with her. I wondered whom she was speaking with. I headed for an empty couch in one corner of the room. There were many magazines and I picked up a National Geographic with a Jacques Cousteau article on coral reefs. I was glad no one bothered me; I was in no mood to meet anyone. Flipping through the Cousteau article, I couldn’t focus, so I looked at the beautiful pictures. It would be amazing to see the Great Barrier Reef someday, but I knew I’d never, ever be able to do anything like that.

The door chimed and a tiny woman with tight silver curls walked in carrying a tray. Joan nodded in my direction, and the woman came up and set the tray on the table next to me. “Miss Moser? Here you go, Hon. Be sure to fill out that menu and leave it under your plate so it don’t slip off the tray. There’s a pencil there.” I thanked her and as she was leaving, I looked over the menu, checking off a few things. I wasn’t sure when I’d last eaten, but it had been a while. My dinner included broiled salmon and I began to feel hungry in spite of the misery I was feeling over the extremely bizarre, embarrassing, and frustrating experience of being locked up in a nut house.

The girl who might have been a lawyer’s daughter, and might have embezzled a pile of money from a bank she might have worked at, was sitting on the floor, against a wall near me. She had a cassette player tuned down low and she was listening to it with her head bent almost to the floor. Her hair hung in front of her face and the song she listened to, *Our House*, seemed painfully at odds with her forlorn appearance. I loved Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, but I thought there were a lot of other tunes that would have been more appropriate to the situation. 4 + 20 came to mind. At the time, I never dreamt that a nut house could feel like a loving home. I tasted the fish and was surprised at how good it was.

“Hello,” a deep voice welcomed me. I looked up and there was a very tall, good looking man with a warm smile and twinkly eyes. He had short, dyed hair that stuck out all over in weird little clumps. It was an unnatural reddish color that was totally at odds with his beautiful, chocolaty skin. “I’m Bob,” he said. “I’m going to be your nurse this evening.” He had a lovely smile and as he pulled up a straight-backed wooden chair and sat down, he reminded me of my father. Bob, like my dad, had that too-big-to-fit look, and his knees were higher than his lap, giving him the appearance of an adult sitting in a kindergarten classroom.

“There’s a movie in Room A,” Bob said. “*The Philadelphia Story*; good flick. It’s got Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, and Jimmy Stewart. You wanna check it out when you’re finished with dinner?”

I didn't feel like going anywhere, though. This spot in the corner of the couch was okay with me. I needed to catch up with myself; I couldn't believe I was in a nut house. I doubted this new doctor would be able to help, but I hadn't really seen enough therapists to warrant my low opinion of them. I'd been to four or five other shrinks, which was probably a lot for one person, but still a whole lot less than one percent of all available therapists, so I didn't really think I should judge them all on those four or five. However, I was judgmental; none of them had worked out and it was hard to imagine that there might be some doctor who could help. Maybe the gods would have mercy and decide it was time to send someone my way that I could connect with, though. I felt skeptical, but my life was in the sewer. I was beginning to think that if I'd found it acceptable to be dead, I shouldn't have any objections to trying another therapist.

A nurse announced that it was time for meds and people began ambling over to the nurses' station, where one nurse was checking off patient names on a clip board while the other handed out tiny cups with pills, and Dixie cups of juice. Bob said I didn't have any orders written, so I didn't need to go up, which I was glad about. I didn't want to take any medicine, and I didn't want to stand in line with people I didn't know, especially in pajamas and a ratty, beltless bathrobe.

The following morning when I awoke, a sour-looking woman was sitting in the doorway in one of those chair/desk combinations they have in schools. She was reading a book and as I headed toward the bathroom, she jumped up, shrilly calling, "Wait!"

"I have to use the restroom,"

"Not by yourself," she said, following me into the bathroom. The nurses in the ICU had allowed me some privacy, but this woman stared straight at me. It was disconcerting and irritating.

"Could you look at something besides me?"

"You are under constant observation," she said sharply.

"You *could* stare at the ceiling, you'd still be able to see me," I said but there was no response. "Is suicide precautions supposed to be a form of punishment?"

"No, but you shouldn't expect a reward," she snapped.

"I don't, but you could be more courteous," I snapped back, finishing as quickly as possible. Some of the nuts, apparently, carried keys.

I made my bed, and, ignoring my shadow, I headed to the lounge, leaving two snoring lumps behind. The bed closest to me was vacant, which gave me a feeling that I had some level of privacy, even while being under constant surveillance. The clock on the wall behind the nurses' station was shaped like a race car, with giant wheels, but the car itself looked like a rocket lying on its side. It was five-thirty and the clock made me think of the song, *Cosmic Wheels*. Donovan apparently thought God was indirectly creating havoc for him, whereas I was pretty sure *I* was the one creating all the havoc in my life. But I thoroughly agreed with the stumbling down the highway, dragging a heavy load part. I was definitely *not* soaring along as I so desperately wished to be. And I was pretty sure I wasn't going to find my way any time soon, either. I felt no inkling of hope and I kept turning over the fact that I had no family that would help, no friends that could help, and no future worth living for. I was a wasted creation.

Five-thirty meant that this cretin who was following me around would probably be getting off of work soon. Ignoring my unpleasant shadow, I perused the contents of a small bookshelf and finally chose a science-fiction book by one of my favorite authors, Marion Zimmer Bradley. Reclaiming my corner of the couch, I found I couldn't concentrate, though. Wondering if I should let my sister know where I was, I was filled with trepidation. I was an embarrassment to her, and this made an already tense relationship even worse. I had never been much of a big sister; she'd always been more mature and successful. She was the one who excelled in school, and now in the real world. She knew where she was going, and had mapped out a plan to get there. On the rare occasions when I met her friends, I knew she was ashamed of me. It seemed she was always surreptitiously watching; ready to run interference before I could embarrass her. Also, I myself felt embarrassed among her friends, all of whom had either accomplished important, adult things, or were well on their way to doing so. I did nothing but party and work in bars, which was fine if you were twenty, but at almost thirty, it was usually a pretty strong indication that you weren't taking life as seriously as most people expected you to. At least not as seriously as *my* family expected. Around Shelby, I felt like a hopeless failure. And my real job, the top secret one of surviving through each night, was not cocktail party conversation. Now that my insanity had leaked out into the public sphere, there was no room for excuses anymore. Hospitalization had forced my truths to the front page of my life.

When Shelby was little, she had adored me, yet I'd ordered her about like a slave, and threatened her when she was nothing but sweet. I was so ashamed of how I had treated such a wonderful little girl. I played vicious pranks on her that I got away with because of her innocent trust in her big sister, coupled with a mother who paid very little attention to us. An image of Shelby's round little face, aglow with sparkling dark eyes above an enormous smile, framed with big, looping dark curls, haunted me. I felt enraged with myself because I was responsible for extinguishing the lovely light in those trusting, beautiful brown eyes – not only the light directed at me, but her childlike faith in being loved simply because she was alive. It was irrelevant that my mother's treatment of me created the monster I became to Shelby. The fact that my mother, theoretically the responsible adult who was supposed to prevent older sisters from torturing younger ones, hadn't prevented anything, still didn't absolve me of my sins.

To compound Shelby's difficulties, our father, who absolutely adored Shelby, didn't give as much of his time to her as he did to me. I was certain that this was because Dad felt guilty that he was unable to protect me from Mom; he was trying to make up for all the abuse Mom showered me with, and he didn't see the abuse I gave Shelby because he was at work so much of the time. Dad loved both of us deeply, but it seemed that Shelby couldn't see the love Dad felt for her. She grew up feeling neglected by both parents, and Dad passed away before Shelby was old enough to see that the opportunity *was* there for her to develop the relationship with Dad that she craved.

I couldn't give Dad back to Shelby, but as an adult I had tried to make up for my part in making her early years painful and lonely. It was too difficult, though. Shelby was the successful one, and she wasn't innocent anymore. She no longer adored me; she felt ashamed of me, and there didn't seem to be anything I could do to right all of the wrongs. She had shut me out long ago. I couldn't make a connection even when I tried. I'd hurt her so deeply that she was unwilling to open herself to the possibility of more pain. And I was so unreliable that even though I'd told her I was sorry and that I loved her, there was nothing that I could do to back that up. My life was too out of control to offer her anything concrete. No one could count on me, although I didn't realize it at the time, and would have been furious with anyone who might have dared to point this out to me. I felt my life was so hard that no one understood all of the difficulties I was up against, and therefore, any small successes I did have,

like arriving at work on time, or remembering someone's birthday, were monumental achievements that should have been enough, and more than enough, to excuse the numerous shortcomings I couldn't acknowledge.

I lied to myself about who I was and who Shelby was, and about everything that had to do with my life. Too busy mulling over these unpleasant truths to pay attention to my book, I mindlessly read the first page several times. Finally forcing myself off of the Shelby guilt train, I found myself on the Wonder Doc train, wondering what he would be like and whether he could be helpful. I thought this new shrink would probably just see me as an eventual candidate for either the streets or a successful suicide. I had nothing to offer the world, and no way to move forward. Why would he want to waste his time on me? In this upscale hotel for the moderately insane, there were much more fruitful pickings.

It was easy to think about what a loser I was, but it was hard to think about what a mess I was in. In the ICU, they had tried to get me to talk about what had been going on before I came into the hospital, and every time I tried to answer, I just couldn't. My voice simply disappeared. My thoughts all rushed together, and it seemed there was a bottleneck which they couldn't all fit through. The result was that I looked like a complete idiot.

The nurses in the ICU seemed to think my problem centered around breaking up with Vince, which Nick had mentioned to them. He apparently had *not* mentioned the details, or these people would have had to have been insane to think I'd be depressed about ending such a relationship. Regardless of the circumstances, though, having or not having a boyfriend was the least of my worries. The catalyst for my depression and anxiety came from chronic exhaustion coupled with a severe shortage of money. The sleep problem was insurmountable. And I could not alter my financial situation, either by earning more money, by managing the money I had more wisely, or even by dating guys who had money – which is what my Uncle Matthew repeatedly advised me to do. In fact, I had broken up with several really terrific men simply because they had *too much* money. Mom used men for their money and I couldn't stand to be like her. I got rid of money as fast as I could. Mom loved money above all else; I had to despise it to distance myself from her.

Although I'd been unsuccessful in reading my book, I had succeeded in ignoring the imbecile who was currently earning her living by following me around. Eventually a woman walked over to us and said to my shadow, "Hi, Donna. I'm ready to relieve you." Then, turning to me, she smiled brightly. "I'm Janine Michaels. I'll be your nurse today." Donna got up and left without a word, and Janine sat down, folding her legs underneath her. She was thin, with a head of bushy, reddish-brown hair, warm brown eyes, and a happy expression on her face.

"What are you reading?"

"Oh, I don't know. I've read it before. It's science-fiction. I'm not really reading, actually. I can't keep my mind on it." I regretted what I'd said as soon as the words left my lips, as it was an invitation to ask questions which I had not intended to offer.

"Anything you'd like to talk about?"

"Um, not really. I mean it's all jumbled up. I can't find a way to put my thoughts into any kind of rational order. When I think of trying to say anything of import, my throat tightens up and nothing comes out."

Just then the door chimed and a gray metal dolly rolled in, followed by a white-clad young man with a hair net that didn't even begin to contain his blonde dreadlocks. Several people came up to the nurses' station and asked if they could get their breakfast early. "You know the rules," the nurse said. "Seven-thirty."

"Come on, it's only ten minutes. I like my food hot, don't you?" A man smiled sweetly and batted his eyelashes.

"You know the rules, James," the nurse said, but then, "Oh, all right, go ahead." She sounded exasperated, but she was grinning. The patients located their trays and headed down the hall, away from the direction my room was in. I asked Janine if I could eat my breakfast in the lounge and she said there was a dining room but eating in the lounge was permitted. I found my tray and brought it back to my little corner. Raisin Bran, skim milk, banana, cranberry juice, Postum. Finding a menu for the following day underneath my cereal, I filled it out, which was kind of fun. I liked being in hospitals, although I'd never been in a psychiatric one before, so I wasn't so sure about this one. But I liked the routine, I liked temporarily being absolved of all my responsibilities, I liked being taken care of, I liked feeling safe, and I liked filling out the menus. Several years earlier I'd been in a car accident that landed me in the hospital for five weeks, and I had such fond memories of that time. It was insane. I felt about it the way people feel after they've been on a great holiday. One time I was watching some talk show and Bette Midler – I think it was Bette Midler – was asked what she did to relax, and she said she checked into a hospital for her R & R. I totally understood that.

After I filled out the menu, Janine asked me about the book. "You say you've read it before? What's it about?"

"It's about a planet called Darkover. The author's written a lot of books about it, spanning hundreds of years. The planet has a caste system, which I'm generally not wild about, but the circumstances are unusual, and the powers that be are usually able to bring the occasional abusive overlords back in line. The highest group are the telepathic families, and they have the responsibility of maintaining a positive quality of life for the entire population, so in some ways, their rewards of greater wealth and power can be seen as justifiable. Realistically, they are more powerful, due to their telepathic abilities, so whether a caste system is right or wrong is sort of a moot point. For the most part, the telepaths are honorable in their dealings..." I droned on; one meaningless sentence after another.

Talking about something that had nothing to do with me, like the book, although it felt utterly pointless, was at least something I could manage. I couldn't organize my thoughts about myself or my current situation, but by gosh, I certainly could talk up a Darkover novel.

"That sounds like an interesting book," Janine said, startling me. I had sort of blanked on the fact that we were in the middle of a conversation. "I don't think I'd like it if people could read my mind, though."

"Yeah, well, most of the time people are courteous enough not to read other people's thoughts without permission. It makes relationships quite different from what we experience, though. Telepaths have a hard time telling lies..." I rattled on and on.

It occurred to me that people expected adults to get over the atrocities of childhood. It seemed that many people had some issues with their parents. No one wanted to hear that I couldn't get over my mother. If I did mention problems, no one really understood. They thought I ought to just grow up. But

growing up meant either sacrificing myself to her cruelty or banishing her completely. There was no middle ground, and neither choice was acceptable or possible. Submitting to her abuse was intolerable, but kicking her out of my life went against all of the training I had received from her to place every need of hers above any need of mine. When I had stopped seeing her, something I'd done several times, most people thought I was going too far. "Everyone has problems with their mother. You're going to regret it if you don't straighten things out."

And, invariably, the longer I went without interacting with her, the more I glossed over the problems. The craving I had for her good opinion eventually brought me back on my knees, looking for absolution for the crime of leaving her. I was a terrible daughter for abandoning her, but she always graciously forgave me by pretending nothing had happened; everything was lovely. There was never any discussion about the problems. That set her teeth on edge, and God knows I didn't want to do that. Whenever I returned to the fold, Mom behaved fairly well for a short period of time, and then she was right back to willfully and happily hurting me. Most of my friends never understood that, nor did therapists. People constantly said or implied that the only way for me to move forward with my life would be if I could forgive my mother. Forgiveness seemed to be the universal key that nearly everyone subscribed to. Well, I didn't. They said I should work harder to try to mend fences. But you can't mend fences with someone who will not stop attacking you, who will always attack you, who gets real pleasure out of seeing you suffer. You work to fix the fence and they just come along and knock it down. What's the point?

Most people were operating from a different paradigm than I was. They might have problems with their parents, but there was a basic love there. They assumed that that same basic love existed in our household, and could not fathom that my mother was intentionally destructive. They believed that I was being petulant and immature when I complained or periodically stopped the relationship. I believed my life would be infinitely better once my mother was dead, but if I said that, you'd think I'd suggested using babies for target practice. "That's your mother!" In my opinion, though, if your mother wished you would kill yourself so that she could get attention; that was not a mother you should want to be in a relationship with. During the times that I kept in touch with her, my mother demanded that I participate in the "Let's Be Cruel To Alexis Game." She constantly found ways to hurt, belittle, shame, and insult me. Shelby told me I should just do what she did and not let Mom get to me. Shelby said I shouldn't let Mom know about anything that was important in my life, but Mom had a way of ferreting out vital information and then using it to bring me pain. And somehow she made me feel like I was an accomplice in my own demise. Unlike my sister, I could not exorcise from my psyche the desperate need I felt for my mother to love, care for, and approve of me.

"Alex," Janine startled me from my thoughts. "Your chart says you don't have any extra clothing."

"Yeah, that's true." I wondered if she was going to suggest that I contact Mom. An involuntary shudder ran down my spine. My mother would be furious with me; she would have wanted my attempt to have succeeded. The point value to her of having a dead daughter was much greater than the point value of helping a daughter in need.

"Well, we have a huge clothing closet. It's mostly second-hand stuff, but there's new stuff, too. Why don't we check it out before your doctor's appointment?"

After I put my tray on the breakfast cart, I followed Janine down the hall in the direction the patients who first picked up their trays had gone. On my left I passed a room with propped open double doors. Inside were lots of small round tables, each with four or five chairs, and several patients sitting together, chatting as they finished their meals. Beyond the dining room was a large closet filled with shelves piled with loosely organized clothing. Janine pulled down a pair of cotton, short-sleeved pajamas and held them up, saying, "I think these will fit." I agreed and she put them on top of a school desk. On one shelf there were new underpants, bras, and socks in plastic wrap. "These are new, all the other stuff is second-hand," she said.

I found several pairs of underpants and socks, and one bra. I hated bras and rarely wore them. It wasn't like I really needed one. Eileen and I used to wear buttons that said, respectively, "President" and "Vice President" of the "Tiny Titty Committee." I usually just wore a camisole or tank top under my shirts. Janine pulled out a small pair of black jeans that she thought would fit. "I thought I had to stay in pajamas," I said, hoping that I could change.

"No one is on precautions long. We might as well get these now. Joan's big on making patients have someone bring things in for them, but we have all these clothes and they're here to be used. So, let's use 'em." She smiled warmly.

When we finished, I put the clothing in my dresser and Janine said, "You've got time for a shower before your appointment."

I felt inexplicably exhausted, and I wasn't keen on showering with an audience, either. However, it seemed like a good idea to get cleaned up, so I reluctantly followed Janine as she chattered away. "We can pick up toiletries at the nurses' station: let's just trot on over there." She unlocked a closet and handed me a plastic bag filled with shampoo and other bathing paraphernalia, snatching a razor from the bag and saying, "Oops, you can't have this, but when you're off precautions you'll be allowed to shave." Handing the razor to a woman at the desk, Janine asked, "Marta, would you label this for Alex Moser and put it in the drawer, please?" Then, turning back to me, "I think we'll have to take that bandage off and check your arm before you can shower." She unlocked another closet door, told me to stay put, and went inside for a moment, returning with gauze and other supplies.

When we went into the bathroom, Janine said, "Okay, put your arm out," and I dutifully held my left arm in front of her, my face burning with shame. "Wow," Janine whistled low. "You really did it, didn't you? It looks like you won't have too bad a scar, though; you can see whoever stitched you up put in lots of tiny sutures. That'll make a nice, thin scar. I'll bet it was McKelvey. She's a plastic surgery resident at G.W. and she does great work. Was it a woman who did the suturing?"

"I don't know. I was unconscious," I mumbled.

Janine spoke so matter-of-factly about this, though, that I stopped feeling so embarrassed, although I wasn't sure feeling comfortable about slicing up one's arm was a good thing. At any rate, it was not infected, and Janine cleaned and dressed the wound, laying a clear plastic sheet of waterproof stuff over the entire thing. "After you shower we'll take this off. Your skin needs to breathe. We'll put a light gauze dressing over it, but this'll make it possible for you to shower without getting the sutures wet. Okay, let's get moving."

She dragged a chair over to the bathroom doorway and, pulling a book from her pocket, she positioned herself so that she was facing the doorjamb rather than me. I felt grateful that she was

sensitive to my discomfort, and I actually enjoyed the shower tremendously. I felt completely safe with Janine sitting in the doorway. So much so that I washed my hair three whole times, luxuriating in the fact that I could keep my eyes completely closed while rinsing the thick mounds of soap from my face and hair. I only peeked twice to make sure she was still protecting me. What a treat! That was what I needed, I decided. I needed to make a bundle of money so that I could hire a bodyguard!

After my shower, I put on the clean pajamas, once again donning the beltless bathrobe. It was nearly nine. “You certainly love long showers,” Janine quipped.

“I haven’t had a shower since Monday,” I answered. I didn’t care to explain my shower phobia. “Do we have time to change the bandage?” I held out my arm.

“Oo, right, I forgot. Yes, let’s do it quickly.” She took the clear plastic off, which hurt, and then she put two large gauze pads over the sutures and lightly taped them. “That’ll do,” she said. “This way air can get in and help the skin heal. We’ll put a more durable bandage around it at bedtime, ‘cause this’ll come off while you’re sleeping. It’ll come off if you’re not careful, too, so be careful!”

We walked down the hall, farther away from the nurses’ station, to an office with a door that had a window in it, again with the criss-crossed wire running through the glass. The door was open and a serious looking man in a business suit was sitting at a desk. “Hi Dr. Frank,” Janine said, “This is Alex. She’s on precautions. I’ll be back for her at nine-forty-five, okay?”

“Thank you, Janine,” the man had a rich tone of voice. “Alex,” he stood and put his hand out. “Welcome,” he said, indicating a chair next to the desk. A bronze plaque pushed to one side by a huge stack of papers read:

L. JONATHAN FRANK, MD

Given the fact that I firmly believe I never would’ve survived were it not for Dr. Frank, our first meeting fell far short of the drama I’d like to be able to ascribe to it. Nothing of The Frankster (a nickname I found myself using shortly after meeting him), registered as even the tiniest blip on my radar, and I’m sure I wasn’t showing up on his screen, either. He was just a man in a suit, and I was just a girl in pajamas. About the only thing I did notice was his voice, which was deep and warm. And the warmth in his voice had nothing to do with me. I was another borderline with another bandaged arm on another day.

I’d been given the diagnosis of “borderline personality disorder” during high school, and psychological testing I had later during my hospitalization confirmed this diagnosis. After the psych tests, Dr. Frank had told me that he liked working with borderlines. I learned from some of the other staff that most people either liked borderlines or they couldn’t stand them – it was pretty rare to have no feeling about them. They could change their emotions and behavior so abruptly it would make a person’s head spin. Drama in one form or another was a part of the borderline persona.

Although I eventually came to trust and rely on Dr. Frank, the day I walked into his office I was carting an enormous load of preconceived ideas and all the anger I felt toward all of the therapists who had preceded him, who had failed me and left me to die. I was utterly powerless to alter the circumstances of my life, angry as a hornet, and totally incapable of managing my anger appropriately. I kept it buried so deeply I didn’t even know it was there most of the time. Then, suddenly, it burst from

me with the force of a tidal wave. After the wave broke I hardly realized I'd even been angry, and I felt baffled by the carnage.

The continuous upheaval in my life was completely unmanageable, although I never could tolerate thinking that anything was unmanageable, so I viewed myself as a very flexible, "go with the flow" sort of girl. Really, though, I was adrift. In spite of my general belief that my life was not like other people's lives, and my awareness that I was usually unhappy, I didn't think of myself as being particularly ill. My bizarre world seemed normal to me, and although I often felt totally separated from humanity, somehow this didn't seem particularly strange. I was dramatic and needy, but I almost never realized it. And though I knew that self-mutilation was thoroughly insane, I compartmentalized everything, so except for when I was actually cutting, I didn't think of myself as being that far off course – even as I dressed each day with hiding my scars and bandages in mind. My personality functioned in fragmented concert.

Dr. Frank looked to be about forty-five or so, with salt and pepper hair, attractive hazel eyes, and heavy black eyebrows. He looked very formal; wearing a dark blue, neatly pressed suit with a pale yellow oxford and dark blue tie. There was a photograph on his desk of a beautiful young woman standing near a flowering tree, which had been taken in the early spring, when everything is that perfect shade of new green. What made the woman so exquisite was the extraordinarily lovely smile she had. She looked somewhat similar to Dr. Frank and I asked if she was his daughter.

"No." He smiled a soft smile, "She's my wife."

"Oh. She's very pretty," I felt embarrassed that I'd thought she was his daughter. "What's her name?"

"Ellen," he answered in a gentle tone. I had no idea of what to say to him. He just sat there, looking at me in a way that – and I could not understand how a person could do this – in a way that held absolutely no expectation. It seemed to me that if I talked that would be okay. That no matter what I said, it would be okay. And if I said nothing, that would be just as okay. He didn't ask me what every other person had asked – why I was in the hospital. He just sat there. I felt uncomfortable with the silence, but he seemed quite calm; just spending some time existing. I began watching his chest rising and falling as he inhaled and exhaled and I tried to match my breathing with his. I couldn't manage it, though; he was able to go slower than I.

"What are you thinking about?" I finally blurted out.

His thick eyebrows arched up and he said, "Me? Hmmm. Well, let's see. I was wondering if the weather will be as nice tomorrow as it is today."

"Why?"

"Well, I'll tell you," he really had a lovely, sonorous voice. "We just got a puppy and he likes going for long walks. Or, rather, we like taking him for long walks to tire him out. He has a great deal of energy. If the weather is nice tomorrow, when I'll have some time, I can take him for a good long walk."

"Oh." I didn't know what to make of that. I felt sort of privileged to be invited, even in such a tiny way, into his private world. My experience with shrinks was that, as a rule, they didn't talk about their private lives with patients. I also felt a little confused. Why wasn't he spending his time thinking

about me? I was his patient, after all, and this was my time, which he presumably was being paid a lot of money for. That was stupid, though, since I wasn't talking. His mind was free to wander, and I was glad he'd mentioned the puppy. "What's the dog's name?" I asked.

"Shorty," he said with a grin. "Our daughter named him."

"Is he short?"

"He was, but we think he'll be at least eighty pounds when he's done growing."

"What kind of dog is he?"

"I'm not sure. We got him at a shelter."

I didn't know what else to say, so I just offered, "I hope you have good weather, too." We sat in silence for another few minutes, and Dr. Frank looked so placid I finally asked, "Did you have to work at it to sit so calmly for such a long time without having any conversation?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. But now I'm quite comfortable with silence. And you?" he smiled.

"No, not really. Not unless I'm trying to unnerve someone."

"Do you feel that I'm trying to unnerve you?" he asked.

"No," I said. "No, I don't."

"Well, I'm glad because I do not want you to feel uncomfortable here. My wish is that you should feel safe here in this room." He smiled warmly.

"Right, I appreciate that. I never feel safe anywhere, though."

"I'm sorry you don't feel safe. That must feel pretty bad, not having a safe place to be." He looked sad, too.

"Yeah, well I'm used to it," I said acerbically; hardened cowgirl that I was. I instantly regretted my insolent tone, though, as it changed Dr. Frank's pleasant affect. It was a subtle change, but I felt like I had been relocated farther away on his plane of awareness. He now sat there with the same comfortable feeling, but he seemed more remote.

"Were you feeling unsafe on Tuesday night?" he finally asked. That was the night I had lost the battle with the GR.

"Yeah, I guess. It's too complicated to try to explain." I couldn't find a way to say that my landlord was evicting me, I'd lost my job, my boyfriend thought I was a punching bag, and that my mother didn't care if I dropped dead.

"Would you like to try? You can take it one step at a time," he said, in an inviting, warm voice.

"Um, there's this man." I stopped. I'd almost told him about the GR, and how he nagged and nagged me, trying to get me to just die. I'd never told anyone about the GR, and it startled and frightened me that I had almost let that slip.

"Yes?" Dr. Frank prompted me. I was sure he thought I was talking about Vince.

“I’m not talking about that idiot I just broke up with,” I said, wishing I’d never said anything at all. I suddenly felt cornered, and pulled my knees up under my chin; a favorite position when I was worried. I pushed myself into the corner of the chair, but I couldn’t quite disappear.

“Alex?” Dr. Frank said my name so gently. “You are safe here.”

Dr. Frank’s gaze was warm and concerned, and I locked onto his eyes as though they were a life raft. My world had suddenly turned inside-out and I was trying desperately not to disappear as the GR began bombarding me with a vicious assault.

“He just wants to screw you, Alexis – you always were such a little tart. Pull your pants down and get it over with! That’s all he wants. That’s all you’re good for!”

“No!!” I whispered desperately.

Dr. Frank was talking, but I couldn’t hear him over the sadistic laughter of the GR. I had never told anyone about him and I was terrified to say anything now. But Dr. Frank looked genuinely concerned; perhaps telling him was what I had to do. “There’s a voice,” I answered, “just a voice.”

“A voice?” he asked. “What does this voice say, Alex?”

“I don’t talk about him. He says things. Cruel things.” I was barely whispering, and Dr. Frank had to lean close. I thought, this is it, I really sound crazy, now.

My mother’s voice rang through my thoughts, “They’re going to lock you up and throw away the key, young lady. You see how you like that, missy!”

I jumped up and ran from the room. I had to get away. I couldn’t believe I had allowed myself to mention the GR. I wanted to crawl right out of my skin. Someone called out, “No running!” but who cared? I didn’t. I ran into the bedroom that had become my new home, feverishly looking for something, anything, to hit myself over the head with, something to knock me out. I had to get away from myself. There was nothing, so I stood in the doorway to the bathroom and started banging my head as hard as I could against the doorjamb. My head exploded in a burst of agonizing pain, but the evil jeering of the GR had disappeared. The next thing I knew, a million people had jumped me and I was face down on the floor, some holding my head, some sitting on various parts of my body. I couldn’t move. One person was kneeling into the backs of my knees; it was excruciating. Then I was lifted and carried, tightly pinned on all sides. They put me on a bed, not in my room, somewhere else, and wrapped my arms and legs in some kind of cloth which they attached to bed railings. Someone sat on top of me while several people held my legs and then I felt a sharp stick; someone had given me a shot of something. The world melted away.