
THE LAST TEN POUNDS

One Woman's Journey to Love (by Shedding Fear, Anger, Hatred... and Everything In-Between)

A Memoir

by Lina Sage

For Dad. May you rest in peace.

“The wise need not do anything but to surrender to the eternal void that is nothingness.”

-Lina Sage -

STAGE ONE:

FEAR

PROLOGUE

“Uncle Quinn... please stop. Please stop, Uncle Quinn! Stop it, you’re hurting me!” I wailed loudly.

“Shhh... I’m just playing with you,” he replied with a sly look on his face, as he continued to grope me with both hands.

This had happened many times before, the constant touching and fondling of my private parts every time Uncle Quinn saw me. See, the thing is, I didn’t make it easy for him because of my feisty nature. Usually I would be able to run away before he could really get ahold of me and on the times that I couldn’t get away, his inappropriateness would only last a few minutes until I would squirm so hard that he would finally release me from his grasp.

But today was different and I felt it immediately. His huge hand pinned down both my tiny wrists and with his other hand he proceeded to maliciously rip off my summer jumpsuit. His weight crushed my petite frame to the floor so much so that I couldn’t move. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t create enough wiggle space to escape his 6’2” lanky stature. With his free hand he pushed his fingers inside me with such ferocity that a loud scream escaped my mouth before I could even discern what was happening.

This was so different from the other times. All the other times he was gentler. It was just rubbing and touching but today it was so painful I couldn’t bear it.

“Uncle Quinn... stop it! Stop!” I continued to beg as I lay there sobbing uncontrollably.

He didn’t stop nor did he respond to my cries; instead, he kept forcing his fingers up there, repeating his actions, each time leaving a greater indentation. The pain was so excruciating that my cries grew progressively louder but even that didn’t manage to get any reaction from him.

When he did finally stop, it gave me brief hope that the terror was over, but it was only to unzip his pants to pull out his package.

Oh God, oh God... oh God, make him stop! What is he doing to me?

I don't remember ever feeling this scared before in my entire life. The fear I felt in this moment was so paralyzing that it made the fear I felt when Dad would come home drunk and bash Mom's head against the wall seem inconsequential.

In a rhythmic manner he continued to finger rape me while masturbating to it. It seemed like my colossal fear, combined with my crying pleas, was the catalyst that turned him on even more – like it wasn't only the sexual violation but the power he had over me and his awareness that I couldn't do anything to defend myself. When he finally unloaded his bodily fluids on me, he pulled himself off and flashed me a bright smile as if nothing had happened. He didn't say a single word as he pulled up his zipper and made his way downstairs.

My small mangled body lay there for a few minutes until I finally garnered the strength to pull myself up. Immediately my legs felt weak and wobbly and the burning sensation of my raw and chafe vagina made me fall down again. I was soaked in his sperm and sweat but managed to hold myself up long enough to wipe myself clean from all traces of him.

What did I do? Why did he do this to me?

I limped slowly downstairs to find Mom in the kitchen cooking.

“Mom, Uncle Quinn touched me down there and it really hurts. Can you tell him to never do that again? I don't like him,” I sobbed loudly.

“What do you mean he hurt you? He's just playing with you!” Mom yelled.

“Well, I don't like the way he plays with me!” I shrieked back.

“How dare you speak to me in that tone and how dare you disrespect your uncle,” Mom replied, raising her hands and whipping me with the chopsticks she was cooking with.

“Why do you have to scream and cry all the time? I can't have one single minute of peace in this house?” Mom screeched as she continued to beat me with the chopsticks. I guess she was having a bad day because she unleashed all her rage on me, repeatedly whipping me with those chopsticks with such force that she didn't stop until one snapped in half and fell to the floor.

“Mom, stop! I'm sorry,” I cried while holding both my arms up against my face to protect it.

“Go to your room and I don’t want to hear about your uncle anymore!” she instructed.

I carried my beaten body back up the stairs to my room and out of the corner of my eye I saw Uncle Quinn sitting on the sofa with an invincible look on his face. I curled my body into a fetal position and cried myself to sleep all the way until the next morning. When I awoke, the six-year-old girl that I was the day before no longer existed. Whoever that little six-year-old girl was meant to grow up to be just simply vanished. I believe there’s a moment in everyone’s life when a situation occurs that can change the course of your destiny. Usually it happens later in your adult life or at least when you’re old enough to comprehend things, but with me it happened that fateful day. That moment changed my life forever.

Even at such a young age, in that moment, I felt like something inside of me had died. Because my brain was too young to understand actions, all I had to go by was how I felt. And how I felt was a deep sense of violation, like someone had robbed me of something so sacred. I also felt immensely rejected by my mother and felt that she had made it pretty clear that she loved Uncle Quinn more than me. All I desperately wanted was for Mom to believe me for once and to comfort me. I wanted Mom to kick Uncle Quinn out of our house instead of always telling me that he’s living with us to help pay bills. Mostly, I just wanted to feel safe in my own home rather than the gut-wrenching anxiety and fear I felt on a daily basis.

The abuse continued on for many years. It included a lot of fondling and rubbing of my genitals. His attempts at making me perform oral sex on him as I got older failed miserably because I made sure to keep my mouth wired shut to avoid him forcing himself in. Not to undermine his abuse, I was lucky in some ways because he never penetrated me with his penis. I don’t know if I would have survived if that had happened.

When I was feeling strong enough, I would fight him off me and he would let me get away. Other days when I wasn’t as strong, I would surrender to the unjust and lie there until he had finished satisfying himself. Afterwards my best and only coping mechanism was to sleep it off. Every time he abused me I felt like he would take a little part of me away. Eventually all those little parts added up to where I felt nothing. I never told Mom of the continued abuse because in my mind if she didn’t believe me the first time, then she wasn’t going to believe me now.

So I continued on with my life just as my parents had taught me. I went to school and said nothing to my friends or teachers. One day I showed up to school with a perfect palm imprint on the side of my face that Uncle Quinn had so graciously given me.

My parents told me, "If the teacher asks what happened, tell them you fell." I eventually became an expert liar whenever there was a bruise on me I couldn't hide. They say it's good for children to have routine. My routine was going to school every day trying to excel academically to avoid getting beaten by my mom for being stupid; meanwhile trying to hide the fact that my dad was an abusive alcoholic and that my uncle repeatedly molested me.

CHAPTER ONE

“Lina! Can you hear us? Lina, wake up! How old is the patient?!” I heard someone frantically ask.

“She’s fifteen!” another voice replied.

I tried to open my eyes but my eyelids felt so heavy and blinded by the bright fluorescent lights that I was unable to keep them open for long.

Am I in heaven?

“Lina... you’re in the hospital. Can you tell us what you took tonight?” a man in green scrubs asked me.

“Pills...” I replied groggily.

“Yes... we know, but what kind of pills? How much did you take?”

“I... I... don’t know.”

“Okay, we’re going to give you some charcoal and it’s going to make you throw up. You’ll feel nauseous from it but everything will be okay.”

I lay there in and out of consciousness, throwing up a foul-tasting concoction until my stomach burned in its own acidity. I didn’t care so much as to the fact that I was hooked onto a whole bunch of foreign machines that were beeping away and that all the people buzzing around me were trying to keep me alive. The fact that my sister Carmen was right by my side, stroking my hair as I continually threw up or the fact that Mom was standing beside us sobbing didn’t even register. Whatever lucid thoughts I was able to conceive were all about if Miguel was there. Then just like that, I fell into an abysmal sleep.

I don’t know how long I slept, but when I awoke I was greeted by a friendly woman. “Hi Lina,” she said. “You’re okay. You’re in the hospital because last night you took a whole bunch of pills. Your mom and sister are here. I’m going to go get the doctor.”

Still feeling disoriented, I tried to sit up, but my throbbing headache and the weakness of my body made me fall back, pinching the IV in my arm.

“Lie down. You’re weak,” Carmen said. She then tried to make me comfortable as she made way for the doctor entering the room.

“You’re a lucky girl,” the doctor said, examining me with his stethoscope. “You took enough Tylenol 3 to kill yourself, but luckily you got to the hospital just in time. Your liver is damaged so you’ll have to stay in the hospital for a week so we can monitor things and get you some psychiatric help.”

“Psychiatric help? What does that mean? I feel okay, doctor. Can I go home now?” I asked in a weak voice, still not fully grasping my actions from the previous night.

“I’m sorry, but you tried to take your own life last night. That’s serious stuff. We want you to talk to a psychiatrist so that she can help you deal with any issues you have in your life that would lead you into thinking that suicide is the only way out.”

There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m just heartbroken. Is Miguel here? Does he even know I’m in the hospital?

“Listen to the doctor. He’s right,” Carmen chimed in.

As soon as the doctor left, I turned to Carmen and asked, “Where’s Miguel?”

“He’s not here. I talked to him this morning to tell him that you were in the hospital but he said he was too busy to come and see you. Listen, the guy is an asshole. He’s not worth your time. He obviously doesn’t care about you but we do. What you did last night scared the shit out of us... and over a guy?” Carmen spoke gently.

Just like that, my already shattered heart broke again for the millionth time. Miguel was my first love and my only love up until now. It was destiny that brought us together. How else can you explain the fact that we only lived a house away from each other? He was my savior of sorts because he offered me a sense of security that no man in my life had ever been able to do. In the six months that we had been together, all the incessant bullying that I had been experiencing at school seemingly vanished due to the fact that I was Miguel’s girl. He was the only guy that had ever given me the time of day. And our endless phone conversations only solidified the fact that he truly cared about me.

Miguel was a sixteen-year-old 'bad boy' whose suave and charismatic personality made him the popular guy. Everyone liked him. In addition, he was the only one at the time with his own car. Not to mention, he provided access to buy alcohol and cigarettes to all his friends with his fake ID. All this added to his uber-cool persona. He was very attractive with his dark skin, full lips, and great sense of fashion which only made him that much more desirable to all the girls. So the fact that he would pay attention to me and want to be with a not-so-cool girl like myself made me feel like the most special girl in the world.

Our worlds instantly merged the moment we were introduced at the mall. We spent an entire summer being completely inseparable. If a love spell existed, I was definitely under it. It only took a couple of weeks before I had fallen madly in love with him and him with me. I remember the first time he told me he loved me. We were a couple of hours into a heated make-out session. He stopped and whispered into my ears, "I love you." Those three words completely melted my heart. I finally felt a sense of validation, like I was worthy enough for someone to love me. I couldn't remember ever feeling happier.

Naturally, when Miguel and I were in the back seat of his car and he asked me to make love to him, the thought petrified me. But, the notion of losing Miguel because I wouldn't have sex with him was so frightful that it dictated my inability to say no. I agreed and gave up my virginity to Miguel even though I knew we were moving too fast. My mind justified it by convincing myself that what we have is true love and that we were going to be together forever. After we graduate from high school we would get married and, unlike my parents, we would have the perfect marriage. He would protect me from all harm, but most importantly he would love me unconditionally.

So when Miguel abruptly broke up with me a couple of weeks earlier by telling me that he didn't love me anymore, my whole existence was utterly destroyed. The one person that I felt loved and protected by did not want anything to do with me any longer. I trusted him enough with my delicate soul to lose my virginity to him. Wasn't that supposed to bind us together for life? Was I too naïve to believe that?

The pain became so unbearable that all I wanted to do was die. I didn't see the sense of living anymore. I felt like every guy I ever trusted in my life has hurt or abandoned me. I was an empty vessel just walking about trying to make sense of what I had done wrong for Miguel to

stop loving me. It was a desperate attempt for Miguel to see that he had made a big mistake and that we did in fact belong together but at the same time, without even realizing it, it was a desperate plea for help from what was happening at home.

“What would we do if you died?!” Mom wailed. “How would I live without you? You’re fifteen years old. There will be plenty of other guys in your life. Why would you do something so stupid?” Mom cried while Carmen quietly stood there holding my hand.

But I only want Miguel.

Mom’s open affection surprised me as I had never seen this side of her. As Mom and Carmen said their goodbyes, promising they would come back tomorrow to visit, I let my tired self fall back into another deep sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

With my body still feeling fragile, the nurse pushed me in a wheelchair down to the psychiatrist's office. I was physically and emotionally exhausted and I was in no mood to talk to anyone about my issues. Seeing a therapist was only for wacky people and even though I did try to kill myself, I still declared myself sane.

If only I could talk to Miguel... explain things to him. If he comes back to me, then all this pain will go away and I'll be happy again.

I was greeted by an older woman whose face showed me enough compassion as she asked, "How are you feeling today?"

"I'm fine," I lied.

"Okay," she hesitated. "Well, can you tell me why you're here?"

I sat there quiet for a long time before the psychiatrist broke the silence and said, "Listen, you don't have to be scared. Everything we talk about will be confidential. Nothing will leave this room. I'm here to help you."

"It's nothing really..." I stammered. "My boyfriend and I broke up and I was so sad. I... I... just wanted to get his attention. I didn't really want to die."

"Okay. Can you tell me more? Are there things happening at home that make you unhappy?"

There was a long, awkward silence again before I lied and said, "No, everything is fine."

The look on her face clearly showed me that she didn't believe me. So, she switched gears and asked me, "Tell me something interesting about yourself. Were you born here in Canada?"

"No, I was born in Vietnam but came to Canada when I was one. My family... we were boat refugees."

"Boat refugees?" she asked.

"Yes, we escaped Vietnam by boat. That's how we came here," I said.

"That's interesting. Can you tell me more?" she urged.

The story of how we came to Canada is a story that Mom and Dad liked to tell my siblings. They would continually remind us that they didn't risk their lives so that we could come to Canada to become underachievers.

It was a remarkable story of sorts and reiterated just how fortunate we were to have made the journey. In 1979, even though the Vietnam War had ended four years prior, the country was still suffering socially and economically. Shortly after I was born, Dad decided that the conditions in Vietnam were damaged to the point beyond repair. He wanted to escape the country. Dad especially hated the communist ways and in order to provide a new and better life for us, the only thing he could do was try to put together an escape plan to leave Vietnam for good.

During those times, people tried to escape Vietnam on a daily basis. Some would try to go by foot and cross the border into Thailand and others would try to escape by boat. The lucky ones ended up making it to a refugee camp where they would stay until they were accepted to another country. Those who didn't make it would risk their lives and die in the journey. A lot of the boats were caught by the Viet Cong and sent back to Vietnam where the people would be sent to jail to rot. Some boats simply vanished, while others would run out of food and one-by-one, everyone on the boat would die. Others were robbed by pirates where they would beat the men senseless and rape the women. Chances of survival were slim to none, and only those who were lucky enough made it.

It took him months to put together a plan that involved escaping by boat. It was a dangerous mission, but Dad thought the risk was worth it. To him, living in Vietnam at the time was like a death sentence. Dad teamed up with the help of a local villager who had a fishing boat. The plan was that the man would supply the boat while Dad would supply the fuel and food. Our family didn't have any money to buy such supplies, so Dad started selling seats on the boat to others in the village for a small fee. With that money, he slowly started buying fuel. He had to hide the fuel underground so that the Viet Cong wouldn't catch on to what they were doing. Each time fuel was bought they would find a spot and bury it. He also got people to start rationing out their food. He told them to put away rice and potatoes as well as collecting and hiding well water.

Everything was working out and the plan was to leave right after “Tet” – the Vietnamese New Year. Tet typically occurs in January or early February. The truth was, nobody knew how to keep track of the weather patterns, but typically every year the winds would be calm after the Tet holidays. So, the plan was to leave immediately after. Unfortunately, that year, the winds continued on well after Tet, so we didn’t leave until much later.

On the evening of March 10, 1980, in the middle of the night, my family along with others escaped Vietnam. In total there were sixty people (men, women and young children) on a tiny fishing boat. We were crammed in like sardines and there was still not enough room. Nobody wanted to be left behind, so out of desperation and panic, people started throwing water and fuel overboard to make room for their families.

We were out at sea for three whole days before we reached the international line. During those three days we were blessed with perfect clear skies and not a breeze of wind. Unfortunately, because most of the drinking water had been thrown overboard, everyone was suffering from severe dehydration and by the fourth day, the situation on our boat was dire. We were now completely out of water. People were starting to drink the salt water. Even though there was still food on board, without water there was nothing to cook with. In addition, the cramped conditions on the boat, underneath the sweltering hot sun, only amplified the discomfort. Just when everyone thought they were doomed, a miracle happened.

Off in the distance, Dad spotted an oil drilling rig. Luckily for us, one of the men on our boat worked as a translator during the war and spoke decent English. They refused to let us onboard because they were not a rescue boat. However, they were kind enough to load us up on supplies and direct us in the proper direction towards Malaysia. We loaded up our tiny boat with all the fresh fruits, water, and fuel they gave us. Then, we were on our own again. For the first time in two days all the babies onboard, including myself, had stopped crying while their mothers continued to nurse them with their renewed hydration.

Another full day passed before we came across a large vessel. As we pulled in close, we realized that this was the supply boat that made its weekly rounds to the surrounding oil rigs. Dad knew that it was our only hope. It was now or never. He did something really gutsy and broke our boat’s engine with full knowledge that international law states all capable boats must rescue shipwrecked boats. His plan worked because they took all sixty of us onboard their ship.

They fed us, provided showers for us, and dropped us off at a refugee camp where we stayed for seven months until Canada accepted us.

“Wow! What an amazing story,” marveled the therapist.

“Are we done for the day? I’m feeling very tired,” I complained, not wanting to talk anymore.

“Yes, we’re done if that’s all you want to share for today. We’ll pick back up in a couple of days once you feel more rested,” she replied sympathetically.

CHAPTER THREE

A couple of days later, I was back in the psychiatrist's office with the same lady.

"How are you feeling today?" she asked with concern.

"Better," I replied.

The last two days were occupied with me being in and out of sleep, only waking up when the nurses and doctor came in to check up on me. In those times, I would see my family there. Mom and Carmen were a constant fixture. The occasional times I saw Dad and my two brothers. But there was still no Miguel.

Maybe he'll come tomorrow.

"That's good. I'm glad you're feeling better. Lina, can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?" she asked.

What does she want to know?

The vulnerable state I was in made me want to reach out to the kind stranger. But it was engrained in me to avoid the truth when asked about what was happening at home. I was raised with the fear that if the authorities ever knew about my parents' domestic violence, then I would be taken away to live with strangers. Even though my home life was not ideal, the notion of living with strangers was enough to scare me from betraying my family.

My reluctance to talk only fueled her probing as she continued, "Are you scared to talk to me? Do you think something bad will happen if you talk to me?"

"No," I replied, looking down on the floor to stop myself from crying.

"It's okay," she continued. "Just take your time. We don't have to talk if you don't want to. We can just sit here all session but you might feel better by expressing your feelings. You've just gone through a traumatic breakup. I understand."

When I heard the word 'breakup,' the flood gates opened and the tears came pouring down.

"It's okay," the psychiatrist said as she wrapped me in her arms to console me. "You loved him a lot, didn't you?"

“Yes, but he still left me,” I lamented as my heart continued to feel the pain as if it was fresh.

“Why do you think you love him so much?”

“Miguel’s my first love and I thought we had something special. He said we were going to be together forever and I trusted him. I trusted that he would never leave me and then he just up and abandoned me. The worst part is, I don’t even know why,” I bawled.

“Is this the first time that someone has made you feel abandoned?”

I sat there with my face buried into my hands not wanting to think or feel anything. But being with her and in that office brought an upsurge of childhood memories that were filed deeply in the back of my subconscious. As a young child, it didn’t take long for me to realize that Dad’s only source of comfort was alcohol. His addiction caused him to leave me at home by myself on plenty of occasions. But before he left the house, I would always attach myself to his ankle and howl at him not to leave. The guilt of leaving his three-year-old daughter at home by herself must have gotten to him because he would lie and say he was going to the store to buy me ice cream. Each minute that I sat and waited for Dad to come home felt like an eternity. And, every car that drove by was false hope. The anxiety that I felt waiting endlessly for my father petrified me. I felt so alone because what is a three-year-old supposed to do by herself? By the time Dad made it home it would always be with empty hands as he was too drunk to remember the ice cream. It was always broken promises with him and somehow my first experience with a boy had been one of broken promises as well.

“Yes,” I lied.

“Why else do you love Miguel?” she asked.

“Because he made me feel safe. He was like my security blanket, and with him I felt like I belonged somewhere,” I replied.

“Do you feel safe at home?” she continued.

Do I feel safe at home? If she only knew.

My mind wandered back to the night when I was five years old and Dad came home in his usual drunken rage. He proceeded to go into the kitchen to grab a knife to butcher Mom into a million pieces.

“I’m going to kill you, bitch!” Dad screamed at Mom repeatedly.

Never one to back down with her mouth, Mom tempted, “I’m right here. What are you waiting for? You’re nothing but a worthless drunken asshole!”

“No, Dad... put down the knife... please... put down the knife...,” my siblings and I begged. We stood with our knees shaking, trying our very best to protect Mom, knowing that his violent outbursts were only directed towards her and never at us.

Dad managed to shove and lock us kids in the bedroom, but not before he locked Mom out of the house in the bitter cold of winter, wearing only a nightgown. Needless to say, the police were called to our house again, but this time instead of giving Dad a warning, they decided to arrest him and take us somewhere safe. I should have felt protected now that we were away from Dad, but despite what he continually put us through, and our lack of security, I still loved him. I didn’t want anyone to hurt him just as I didn’t want him to hurt Mom. As bad of a drunk as he was, he was the polar opposite when he was sober. He was a kind and loving husband... a perfectly great father who taught me how to ride a bike and tie my own shoelaces.

It was that constant push and pull of good husband versus bad husband that would pull on Mom’s heartstrings and make her stay. That and the fear of raising four young kids as a single mom in a foreign country whose language she barely spoke was what kept her with him.

At times I often wondered if having no dad was better than having a dad that put his family through so many panic-stricken nights. And in return, it spawned a deeply resentful wife whose only outlet to release her own anger was on her children.

“Lina! Did you hear me? Do you feel safe at home?” the therapist asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Um... yeah... everything is fine. I feel safe,” I deluded again.

“Were you and Miguel intimate?” the therapist continued to probe.

“Umm... yes,” I replied as I bowed my head down.

“It’s okay,” she replied tenderly as if sensing the embarrassment I felt in my admission to her. “Is this the first person you’ve been intimate with?”

Does Uncle Quinn count?

Uncle Quinn's escapades had stopped a few years earlier when he decided that my puberty-ridden body did not turn him on anymore. The abuse was something that I was determined to forget now that it was over. As long as I could make my mind believe that it never happened, well then it never happened. I learned from my parents that denial is the best coping mechanism.

"Yes," I replied again avoiding eye contact.

"How's school going for you? Do you have a lot of friends?" the therapist continued.

"School's okay. I've got a good group of friends now but before Miguel and I started dating the kids were really mean to me."

"How so?"

"You know... making fun of me because I'm Asian. They would pick on me whenever they wanted to. Well, not just me... basically every ethnic kid in school would get bullied," I replied.

"How would they bully you?" the therapist asked earnestly.

"You know... they would make fun of what we eat... what we wear. They would call us names like 'chink' or 'paki'."

"And how did that make you feel?"

"Of course I hated it, but what was I supposed to do? If you try and stick up for yourself then they pick on you even more, so you're better off ignoring them but some days are so hard," I responded, tearing up.

"Is that why being with Miguel made you feel safe?" the therapist asked in a soft voice.

"Well, yes. He was popular and most of the kids were scared of him. When we started dating... like overnight... everyone was so nice to me and it made me feel so good. Now he's gone..." I said, trailing off. "I don't want to talk anymore. Is it okay if I go back to my room?"

"Sure. We can pick up in a few days. Get some rest now," the therapist urged.

CHAPTER FOUR

The rest of my stay in the hospital was uneventful. My family were my only visitors. Every day I prayed that it would be the day that Miguel would come and see me so that I could rid myself from the deep void I felt without him in my life. Not having Miguel in my life dug deep into my biggest fear of being alone. And I hadn't yet connected it to the abandonment I felt from Dad as a child. At fifteen years old my consciousness could only grapple with the direct problem at hand. I needed a solution to the problem as opposed to relating it to 'why I ended up like this.'

My strapping fear of being alone only amplified my other fear of being so inadequate that no one would love me. By Mom choosing Uncle Quinn over me and now with Miguel gone, I was certainly convinced that I had no qualities that could make anyone love me. I was someone who was not worthy of love. How else could I explain Mom's and Miguel's rejection? But still I yearned for Mom's approval and for her to be proud of me. Getting out of the hospital meant that I had to work harder academically to make something out of my life.

As for Miguel, by the time I walked into the therapist's office for my last visit, all hopes of us getting back together had completely vanished. The illusion of the stability I perceived from being with him was only to satisfy the craving I desired for a stable upbringing. I realized that if killing myself was not a big enough reason for him to show any concern, then he truly didn't love me. I swore to myself that I would never let a guy break my heart again. In that, I convinced myself that love was somewhat of a fantasy and it didn't really exist.

"So how are you doing?" the psychiatrist asked.

"I'm feeling much better. I'm glad to be going home," I responded.

"Okay, so is there anything you want to talk about today?"

"No, not really. I just want to go home. I'm fine," I lied.

"Listen, Lina. I'm here to help you but I sense that you're afraid to tell me more. I can't force anything out of you but I feel like there's a lot more going on than just Miguel. I want you to take my card and know that I am here if you want to continue our sessions. I'm hesitant to give your doctor the clear to release you, so promise me...".

“I promise I’ll call you if I need to talk. Trust me – I just did a really selfish thing over a stupid guy. I’ve learned my lesson. I swear,” I interrupted in my most persuasive voice.

“Okay...,” she replied hesitantly. “Well then, you’re good to go.”

The truth was I was still in denial that I needed any kind of therapy and I just wanted to forget about Miguel and anything bad that had happened to me. So after my release from the hospital, I stayed in that opulence of denial for a long time before unforeseen events made me climb out of my comfort zone.

STAGE TWO:

ANGER

(Hatred, Resentment, Denial, and Everything In-
Between)

CHAPTER FIVE

Flashing red lights and turbulent commotion outside made me abruptly wake up to a scene of a dozen men who were heavily armed, dressed in black armor and gas masks, jumping out of what looked like black SWAT vans. I was anesthetized in my own trepidation; unable to run or hide. All I could do was stand by my window. As if in slow motion—taken straight from the movies—I watched these men approach my house. You couldn't engage in an illegal grow op for long without getting busted and I had enough marijuana plants in my house to face a strong conviction. In that moment, my usually rapidly thinking brain experienced the unusual phenomenon of an out-of-body experience where time stood completely still and I felt like I was listlessly floating amongst the clouds. Harps played in the background replacing the loud bangs of the SWAT team trying to break down the door. And just as if I was protected by a sea of angels, I slowly came back to my body and realized that the loud bangs were that of my neighbor's door and not mine. The SWAT team had veered off to my neighbor's house without me even realizing.

As I let out a long exhale, I sprinted down to the basement, passed rows and rows of perfectly groomed marijuana plants, until I reached the breakers and proceeded to flip them off. The entire operation had to be shut down, regardless of how damaging it would be on the plants, just in case the men carried geo-thermal guns and could detect excessive heat coming from my house.

Back upstairs, I positioned myself by my window to keep a watchful eye. My heart was still racing as I peered through the windows but the men were nowhere to be seen. The two vans that came in were still parked—with their lights flashing amber. I assumed they were inside my neighbor's house now, which got me to thinking about what illegal activities they were up to. I'd only been living in my house for six months, and the truth was, I only bought it to start my grow op. The entire time I lived there, I'd only seen my neighbors the few times they pulled their minivan into their garage. I didn't even know who lived there or what they looked like.

Slowly, when my heart slowed down, and my nerves un-tingled, I couldn't help but wonder how I managed to pull this all together and how a twenty-three-year-old could run a full-fledged marijuana grow operation.

It all started eight months prior, when I was still living with my best friend Tanya. One day out of the blue, Tanya came home distressed. It looked like she was on the verge of crying, so I sat her down and asked her what was going on.

She sighed and then blurted out, “I’ve been growing pot with Dean for the past three months. We were so close to harvesting our first crop. But, then he left the basement window open last night. This morning, all the plants had died! We were supposed to make \$20,000 off that harvest and now it’s all gone. I’m so mad at him!”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I would have never suspected in a hundred years that Tanya was growing pot. We’d been best friends since high school and Tanya was always more book smart than she was street smart. She trusted people way too easily and was always against any kind of drug activities. So the fact that Tanya was growing pot was shocking. But Tanya’s bizarre actions as of late made perfect sense now – from her absence at home to random things missing around the house to her asking me for a few months’ rent in advance.

Dean was a tall, obese fellow in his fifties that Tanya had worked with in her previous job at an ad agency. Even though there was a significant age gap between them, they became fast friends. Tanya was attracted to how worldly and intelligent he was. Even though I didn’t like him and thought he was just trying to get in Tanya’s pants, she reassured me that they were nothing but friends and that he had a girlfriend back in the Philippines. Dean’s much younger girlfriend in the Philippines had milked him out of his life savings and now he was completely broke. He came to Tanya asking for her help but Tanya was broke as well.

Like me, they were both tired of living paycheck to paycheck and wanted a quick way to make money. They got together and threw around some ideas. The one that stuck was to start up a grow op. Tanya had some childhood friends that she had kept in touch with that were involved in the business and could get them set up. When you grow up in a low-income area as Tanya and I both did, you always knew someone who was involved in the drug business.

Dean was all over the idea like moths to a flame. Almost immediately, he went out and rented a house to start on their new business plan. Tanya’s hook-up came over and set up the equipment for her and taught her and Dean how to grow pot. In return, he charged them a small fee. They both agreed that Dean would live in the house and take care of the plants. Tanya would go out and try to find buyers through her childhood connections.

It all sounded very good until they got to the operations side and started trying to grow these plants. They were supposed to have a crop in about two months' time but Dean continually messed up on things that would stunt the plants' growth and delay the harvesting of the buds.

Apparently these marijuana plants were very finicky—it was imperative that these plants run on a consistent feeding and sleeping cycle. The “babies,” as Tanya called them, liked to be fed based on a specific feeding chart and slept on a twelve-hour awake and twelve-hour sleep schedule. On their awake cycle, all the lights must be fully turned on, and on their sleep cycle, all the lights are to be turned off so the room would be pitch-black.

Dean, proving that he had the intelligence of a five-year-old who couldn't figure out math, was feeding the babies the wrong amount. Initially, they weren't growing as quickly as they should. Then on various occasions he would completely forget to set up the timer so their sleep cycles weren't uniform. On the night before they were supposed to harvest and get their big payday, Dean, being the overweight guy that he was, found the house overwhelmingly hot and decided to keep the windows open for some fresh air. He ended up falling asleep until the next morning and by the time he woke up to check on the babies they were completely wilted and dead. It had been -30°C out the night before and the babies didn't stand a chance.

What also got Tanya so irate was the fact that when the plants have full buds and are ready to harvest, they amass a very strong smell. Take the smell of the weed you occasionally smoke and times that by hundreds of plants—you can imagine how overpowering the smell could be. The fact that Dean kept the windows open potentially could have exposed the smell to the neighbors who could have called the cops on them. But that was besides the fact that a buyer was lined up to purchase the inventory.

Why on earth would she go into business with Dean?

“The guy is so stupid,” Tanya cried. “I should have never done this with him. He always seemed so smart. I didn't think anyone could possibly be this dumb! What should I do now? I maxed out all my credit cards to get this thing up and running. I needed that money to pay bills.”

I sat there quietly, not knowing what Tanya could do. Her crop was gone and there was nothing she could do to save it. All I could think about was how much money she could have made and that got me thinking that I wanted in on a potentially lucrative business. My mind whipped into a frenzied vortex and all of a sudden my thoughts wouldn't shut off.

I'm already looking for a house to buy. I can turn the basement into a grow op. Tanya can show me how to grow and we can do it together. All she has to do is take the set up and put it in my basement and we can be partners. Dean just needs to fuck off.

“How much did you say you can make off this?” I asked.

“Well, if you have good quality pot, it'll sell for around \$1800/pound but it can go as low as \$1500/pound for the shitty stuff.”

“How often can you get a crop?”

“About eight weeks but I hear it can be as soon as six weeks.”

“How much would it cost to set up everything?”

“Well, it depends on how many lamps you want and how big you want the operation. Why are you asking me all this?”

“Because I want in. I'm sick and tired of living paycheck to paycheck. I've been looking for something to do that could make me some quick cash. This is perfect. I'll do it with you. We can be partners.”

“Whoa! Wait a second! Are you sure?” Tanya asked. “Are you absolutely fuckin' sure? Because it's not as easy as it sounds and a lot of things can go wrong. What happens if we get busted?”

“Well, you didn't seem overly concerned about getting busted when you did it with Dean,” I replied.

“Well, that's because the house lease was under his name. If anything happened, he would take the rap. Plus, I really don't care a whole lot about him but I don't want anything to happen to you or me.”

“Well, what's the worst-case scenario if we were to get busted? Knock on wood of course. Is it jail time?”

“No, for first-time offenders it's just a fine and probation. They confiscate all your plants and equipment and that's about it.”

“Well, it doesn't seem all that bad and it's a risk I'm willing to take if it means I'm going to get rich quick! So what do you say?”

“Well, okay,” Tanya continued on hesitantly. “I think this might be able to work.”

“We can grow it at the new house I’m planning to buy.”

“We’ll need as much space as possible in the basement,” she said. “How big do you want to go?”

“Well, as big as we can. Let’s fill up the entire basement. If we’re going to risk it, then we might as well do it all the way.”

“Um, okay. Are you sure?” Tanya asked again hesitantly. “You don’t think we should start off smaller and eventually go bigger?”

“No, what’s the point?” I responded. “If we have the space we might as well do the entire basement. Listen, since this is going to be in my house, if anything happens, I’ll take the rap for it. I’ll never mention you. I’ll do what Dean had been doing and take care of these plants. You can go find the buyers and sell it. You still have buyers, right?”

“Of course I do,” Tanya responded, this time with more ease.

“Well then, it’s settled. That’s what we’ll do. We’ll split all the costs and profits fifty-fifty.”

“Sounds good,” Tanya nodded. But I could tell by the look on her face that she still wasn’t certain.

In no time I’ll make my millions and buy everything and anything I ever wanted.

My overwhelming desire to get rich quick was to relinquish me of all the anger that I had pent up inside of me. I rationalized that money would be the only thing to make me happy. My ambition and desperation had overtaken any common sense and left me completely blinded by any danger I was getting myself into.

The rustling of footsteps snapped me back to my current reality. I was witnessing some of the men carrying black garbage bags with marijuana plants pouring out of the top. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Had I known that my neighbor was growing pot, I would have never bought this house. But what I saw as an ideal location, being situated in a quiet family-friendly neighborhood with an affordable price tag, also seemed ideal for my neighbor. What are the

chances of two houses on the same block growing marijuana? And why was I the lucky one that didn't get my front door kicked in?

CHAPTER SIX

With the warmth of the sun beating down through my windows, I sat up and threw my arms up in the air. I needed to stretch out all the kinks. I peered out my window hoping that last night was just a terrible dream but the loud yellow “DO NOT ENTER” tape that surrounded my neighbor’s house confirmed that last night really did happen. I wanted to kick myself for having fallen asleep when my intention was to stay up and keep an eye on the raid.

“You better get your ass over here,” I demanded as soon as Tanya picked up her phone.

“Why? What happened?” Tanya asked.

The thing about engaging in illegal activities is that it can turn a normally reasonable person into an ultra-paranoid mess. Before growing pot, I was the kind of person who was always oblivious to my surroundings. Now I was the kind of person who was constantly checking my rear view mirror when driving to make sure no one was following me. It didn’t help that I also lived all alone. My boyfriend, Beaver, was always out of town working and only came to visit every second weekend.

“My neighbor’s house got raided last night by the cops. It was a marijuana grow op!” I shouted.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Tanya exclaimed.

“Do I sound like I’m fuckin’ kidding? Bring today’s newspaper over too. I have a feeling this is going to be in the news.”

As I waited for Tanya to come over, I found myself wandering outside to see if there was any other info I could find out. Sure enough, my neighbors were huddled together and talking amongst themselves.

“I can’t believe someone would be crazy enough to grow pot here... there’s a cop that lives right across the street,” one neighbor asserted.

“What?! A cop lives right across the street?” I asked in surprise.

“Yeah, right over there,” the man pointed. “And this manages to happen right underneath our nose.”

Well, isn't it just my bloody luck?!

I walked back into my house shaking my head in disbelief. How in the world did I manage to buy a house next to an existing grow op? And on top of that, have a cop live across the street from me without even knowing?

This whole growing pot ordeal had been plagued from the first day. The plants gave us problems immediately: a bug infestation got us off to a slow start and affected our yield. What was supposed to be a ten-pound harvest turned out to be only five pounds of bad-quality pot, so we were only able to sell it for \$5,000 which meant my big payday was only \$2,500.

In our second harvest, we managed to produce a good ten pounds of high-quality THC pot. Tanya and I spent an afternoon trying our crop to test the quality. We weren't big stoners, so within minutes, we were high as a kite and giggling away like two school girls!

We were positive our new crop would be able to sell for the premium rate but the buyer took advantage of the fact that Tanya and I were two young rookies.

"The buyer says he'll give us \$1,000/pound," Tanya said.

"What?! That's bullshit and you know it! We have good stuff this time!" I yelled.

"I know. I can't fuckin' believe it! He says it's because there's too much inventory."

"Too much inventory my ass! He's just trying to rip us off because we're girls!" I said.

"Yeah, I know. But what do you want to do? We need the money."

"I don't know. You know it's worth at least \$1,800/pound. Do you know any other buyers?" I asked.

"No, I don't. I think we should just sell it and then I'll try to get us some new buyers for the next crop. We're both broke and you know we're desperate right now," Tanya replied.

Tanya was right but I still couldn't help but feel enraged. I knew that we were being cheated. This only fueled my disdain towards the world and how unfair everything was. It seemed the harder I worked, the more debt I was drowning in. All of my credit cards were maxed out. I was already behind on my mortgage payments. And that didn't include the mountains of bills that needed to be paid.

But the massive debt that weighed heavily on me was the money that I had borrowed from Mom to purchase the house. Mom had happily lent me the money for a down payment. I

had promised to pay back the substantial loan within a year. Little did she know that I had used a part of the loan to get the grow op up and running and the hefty payday that I thought would come so easily has failed to arrive.

A couple hours later, Tanya arrived at my house with the newspaper.

“Listen to this,” she started. “Apparently a neighbor had reported the house because the owners were coming in and out at odd times and it seemed like nobody was living there. They seized hundreds of marijuana plants that have a street value of over \$500,000.”

“What a load of shit!” I replied while Tanya nodded. It was just like the cops and media to inflate the prices of these actual drugs to make it seem like a massive drug bust. In actuality, it’s never really that much. “I just can’t believe how lucky you are!” Tanya uttered over and over again.

I was grateful that the world decided to throw me a bone for once, but that was not enough for me to call it even. As I saw it, the world had decided to screw me over a long time ago. In my mind, I was trying to absolve myself from my misery by doing something that was supposed to make me fast cash. Instead, the world decided to throw obstacles in my way to refrain me from getting to my happiness. Why wasn’t I allowed to sleep in a bed full of cash and be blissful for once? Why was the world so dead set on having me be the bitter person that I was?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tanya and I decided to play it safe and keep the lights off for another couple of days until the cops had finished their business next door. The interruption ended up stunting the growth of the plants and delayed the harvest by two weeks. By the time the buds looked ready for harvest, we decided to keep them under the lights for an additional week in hopes of bulking up the smallest bud size.

On the day of the harvest, Tanya and I sat down on our little stools and began the long and tedious process of trimming the leaves. An hour into trimming and the sauna-like heat combined with the circulating dust was making it inconceivable to breathe. Just when things couldn't get any worse, I noticed a web-like cloud on some of the buds. At a closer glance, there was no disputing that it was mold. We had made the wrong call to leave the plants under the lights for an additional week. I couldn't believe I didn't notice the mold in the past week while watering the plants but it wasn't obvious until you looked closely.

“Great! It's one thing after another with this shit!” I shouted.

“Well, let's keep going and see what we can salvage,” Tanya said optimistically

“I'm so sick of this! This is not working out as I thought. I'm so done with this shit!”

“What do you mean you're done?”

“Look, we're still sitting on ten pounds from the last crop because our buyer has disappeared off the face of the earth. I mean it's bad enough that he has been ripping us off but now he's nowhere to be found. What's the point of growing this shit if we can't even sell it?! I just want to shut everything down.”

“I know. I feel the same too, but how are we going to get out of debt?” Tanya asked.

“I don't know. Sorry, I'm just beyond stressed and I know you are too. I just don't even know what to do anymore.”

“Well, let's just focus on what we have to do now and I'll continue trying to find a new buyer for our stuff. Everything will be okay,” Tanya replied, trying to console me.

That was the great part about Tanya—she always knew how to be strong for the both of us. But for the most part, Tanya was notoriously always more optimistic than I was... choosing

to see the glass as half full rather than half empty. It was with that attitude that made Tanya instantly likeable by everyone. I, on the other hand, walked around with a huge chip on my shoulder, wary that people couldn't be trusted. This explained why I loathed people and didn't have many friends while Tanya was the life of the party. In fact, Tanya's friends often wondered how she could be so close to someone like me, but Tanya saw beyond my tough exterior and knew full well that I was deeply misunderstood. The tough shield that I wore was only to protect myself from getting hurt.

I wanted desperately to believe that everything would be okay, but I wasn't convinced. I wanted out of this mess but I just didn't know how. After Tanya left that evening, I lay in bed reeking in my own self-loathing and blaming myself for being stupidly ambitious. I cried buckets until my eyes were sore and until my nose hurt from blowing it so hard. I was scared of getting busted and I wasn't sure how I was going to pay off my insurmountable debt. Thoughts of shutting down the operation flashed through my mind but that was a luxury I couldn't afford. I had to suck it up and continue on, hoping that it would all work out.

Just when I was about to fall into my depression sleep, the ringing of my phone woke me up.

“Hi babe. How are you?” Beaver asked enthusiastically.

Of course Beaver wasn't his real name. It was a nickname that Tanya had made up for him. We would refer to Beaver behind his back, which seemed like a mean thing to do, but we couldn't help it. Beaver had the misfortune of being born with the worst case of buck teeth you've ever seen. They were complete with a very wide gap separating his two front teeth. His smile was almost comical looking and resembled that of a beaver's. So within weeks of dating, that nickname kind of stuck.

Beaver and I met through my sister, Carmen, and had been together for a couple of years. I was instantly attracted to Beaver's upbeat personality and wry sense of humor. But because there was no physical attraction it took everyone by surprise when they found out that we were dating. The truth was I didn't really care whether or not I was attracted to him—I just didn't want to face my fear of being alone. After Miguel, I had gone from one relationship to the next to avoid the emptiness I often felt and Beaver proved to be a great distraction. It also didn't hurt that he loved me enough to stand by me when I told him about my plans to grow pot.

“I’m so stressed!” I wailed loudly.

“Is there anything I can do?” Beaver asked sympathetically.

“I need some money to pay the mortgage and bills and to live,” I replied.

“I’ll send you some money. I don’t have much but I can send you \$1,000 for now. Is that okay?”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

“Hey, don’t worry. Everything will be fine. I’m here for you, babe. You know I love you, right?”

“I know,” I replied.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Two days after trimming the leaves, Tanya and I finished the harvest by spreading the buds out on the floor to dry. Then we began the other arduous task of cleaning up and replanting. This was before the time of hydroponics. We were still doing it the old-fashioned way... by soil. This entailed emptying copious amounts of soil into garbage bags and dragging it up the stairs into my trunk to dispose of at a landfill. The process had to be repeated many times because there was only so much my small sedan could carry. By the third trip my dainty arms and legs would succumb to the heavy duty lifting. Luckily for us, Tanya's athletic build and strength were so much more beneficial to the process.

We ended up getting eight pounds of weed, which was better than we anticipated, after we threw away the moldy buds. Now the next hurdle was to find a new buyer who would pay us a hefty price for our product.

Our prayers were answered when Tanya managed to get a new contact from an acquaintance. It turned out that the new contact was a middleman that would sell our product to the highest bidder, keeping a small percentage for himself. He insisted on us handing over our entire supply to him as opposed to the standard sample bag we would give out. Even though we knew this guy couldn't be trusted, when you're in dire need of cash, you go with the only option you have no matter how brash.

The twisted knots in my chest along with my constant headache and stomach pains pretty much left me incapacitated to think clearly let alone make any wise decisions. Even when I was feeling my worst physically, I kept persuading myself that it was all from the stress of the grow op. I was in complete denial of the fact that my bulimia had slowly crept back into my life like an old unwanted friend.

CHAPTER NINE

The previous year Tanya had basically blackmailed me into therapy. It wasn't hard for Tanya to catch on to my bad habits especially when you live with someone and the walls are thin. When Tanya finally confronted me about my bulimia, I lied through my teeth convincing her that I'd only done it a few times and that I would stop even though I had no plans to stop. To me it wasn't that big of a deal and I saw it as a great way to control my weight in my quest to achieving perfection. The fact was, I wasn't anywhere near overweight, but it was always the quest to lose five pounds or to make X amount of dollars that gave me the perceived ideation of a wholesome joyous person.

Tanya gave me an ultimatum to either go to therapy or she would expose me to my family. I didn't want them to know because I didn't want Mom to view me as flawed. They had a hard enough time dealing with Carmen coming out as gay and confessing she was in a relationship with a woman. That had Mom crying as if someone had died and had Dad wanting to admit Carmen into a psych ward. If they were to find out about my bulimia, their hopes of having one normal daughter would vanish.

So I reluctantly agreed. A couple of weeks later, I found myself back in therapy for the second time in my life.

"Hi Lina. I'm Vicky. It's nice to meet you," the therapist greeted in a soft-spoken voice.

"Hi. It's nice to meet you," I replied as fake as ever.

"I've been counseling young women like yourself for ten years now. I know how hard it is to take that first step to get help. I'm very proud of you for that."

I so don't want to be here.

"So can you tell me a little bit about yourself?" Vicky asked.

There was a long pause from my end. "Well, what do you want to know?"

"Can you tell me a bit about your eating problem? My notes tell me that you binge and purge from time to time?"

"Yes," I admitted, "but I have it under control. I'm only here because my best friend Tanya thinks I need to get help but I think I'm doing okay."

“Well, how many times a day do you do it?”

“It used to be a lot more, like two to four times a day, but I’ve got it down to just once a day or every other day.”

“That’s good. You’re making progress. How do you feel after you binge and purge?”

“Well, initially I feel good because I got rid of all the food that’s going to get me fat but then afterwards I feel really sick... all the stomach acid and the nasty taste in my mouth.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? To control my weight!”

My God, is she dumb! Isn’t that what every bulimic or anorexic person wants? To be skinny. We wouldn’t be doing this to gain weight.

“I see,” Vicky responded while writing down some notes on a paper pad. “How long have you been doing this for, or I should say, when did you start?”

“After high school. Around when I was twenty, so I guess two years now.”

“What made you start?” she asked.

“Well, I wanted to lose weight because I was dating a guy who told me I was just average. I didn’t want to be average. I wanted to be skinny like those models.”

“Can you tell me how that made you feel when he said you were average?”

“Like shit! Who wants to be average? It made me feel like I wasn’t good enough to be with him because I wasn’t the perfectly skinny and pretty looking girlfriend. Just because I don’t believe in love doesn’t mean that I don’t want to be loved and to feel important.”

“Okay... very interesting,” Vicky paused, “Have you lost significant weight over the past two years?”

“No. Not really,” I replied disappointed.

“Did you know that bulimia is found in women of all shapes and sizes? It’s those with anorexia who are ones that lose a significant amount of weight.”

What the fuck? Is she encouraging me to be anorexic?

“The reason why I’m telling you this,” Vicky continued, “is to let you know that in most cases bulimia isn’t really about losing weight. It’s more about control issues or emotional issues that could stem from childhood. Most of the time you couldn’t even tell if someone was bulimic by looking at them because the women can be any size, but you can always tell if a person is anorexic. That’s why bulimia most often is overlooked but it’s just as damaging as anorexia.”

That’s true. I’ve never really thought of it that way.

“Do you feel like you always need to be in control of a situation?” Vicky continued on.

“Yes.”

“Do you feel like this bulimia is a way for you to control certain aspects or things in your life?”

“Possibly.”

“What do you think would happen if you gave up that control?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never let it happen.”

“What is it that you’re trying to control?”

What is it that I’m trying to control? Well, what about my whole fucking life? If you can’t even control what you put in your mouth, then you’re a weak person!

“I don’t know,” I lied.

“What was your childhood like?”

“I don’t want to talk about my childhood. I don’t see how that’s relevant to my problem,” I responded, feeling agitated.

“Okay. Fair enough. Do you have a boyfriend, Lina?”

“Yes... his name is Beaver... we’ve been together for a while now,” I replied, relieved that she changed the topic.

“That’s great! How is your relationship with Beaver?”

“It’s fine.”

“Fine... okay... would you say you love him?”

What is she getting at?

“I don’t believe in love.”

“Why don’t you believe in love?”

“To me love is like a drug. First it feels like euphoria but when it wears off, you crash and burn and are left feeling like shit.”

“Okay. I’ve never heard that analogy before,” Vicky paused and then continued. “But do you believe love exists?”

“Maybe for some people but not for me. I gave up on love a long time ago.”

“Such a bold statement to make for someone so young. If you don’t believe in love, then why are you with Beaver?”

“For convenience, so that I don’t have to be alone. Plus, I know that he loves me and would do anything for me. It’s safer to be loved than to love.”

“I see,” Vicky replied while jotting down more notes. “Tell me more about Beaver. What is he like?”

“He’s just your average skinny white guy. He has a stable job working in IT. He’s a little older than I am. He’s twenty-nine but he looks young for his age, so I’m okay with it.”

“What does his family think of your relationship? Do they accept it?”

“What family?” I retorted. “His dad basically left him to fend for himself after his mom passed away from a brain tumor. He was only thirteen at the time. He has an older sister but she moved out shortly after to live with her boyfriend.”

“That’s unfortunate. Why do you think Beaver is with you if you don’t love him?”

“Just because I don’t love him doesn’t mean I don’t care about him. Besides, he doesn’t know that I don’t love him. I mean, we tell each other that we love each other all the time; it’s just that I don’t really mean it on my end. Besides, as much as I say I’m with him for convenience, I think Beaver likes being with me because of my family. He keeps telling me that being with me makes him feel part of a family that he never had.”

“And how does your family feel about him? Do your parents think the seven-year age gap is too much? Are they okay with the fact that you’re dating outside your race?”

“They like him. After my sister Carmen came out as gay, my parents are just happy that I like guys.”

“I see,” Vicky continued scribbling down more notes. “How do you feel about your sister being gay?”

“It doesn’t bother me one bit. I love my sister. She’s always been there for me.”

“So then you are capable of love. You love your family? Your sister?”

“Yes, but that’s because it’s my family. I’m incapable of loving another man!” I exclaimed.

“And why is that?” Vicky probed.

Oh God. I don’t have all day to get into Miguel and Dad and Uncle Quinn.

“What does this have to do with my eating disorder? I thought I came here to get help on my bulimia, not talk about my love life,” I responded.

“Are you generally a happy person?” Vicky asked changing the subject again.

“Not really. What’s there to be happy about? I’m twenty-two years old, living with my best friend and just making ends meet.”

“What would make you happy?”

“Having lots of money. People with money are always treated better.”

“I see... have you been mistreated by people?”

“I just don’t like people. I can’t trust anyone. The world is a bad place and only the shrewd can survive,” I responded curtly.

“You sound very angry. Why are you so angry at the world?”

Because I hate Uncle Quinn. I hate Dad. I hate Mom. I hate everyone!

“I don’t know,” I lied. “I guess it’s just the way I am.”

“Is this your first time in therapy?”

“Yes,” I lied.

There’s no way I’m telling her about my botched suicide attempt.

“Lina, I think it would be beneficial if you continued coming to see me on a weekly basis. We’ve covered some ground today but I feel like there’s more we need to do for your recovery. Since you’ve acknowledged that you feel the need to control things in your life and the bulimia is one of them, I’m not going to stop you this week from throwing up what you’ve eaten. In fact, you have the control of how often you’d like to do it.”

I shot Vicky a confused look. *What the fuck is she saying?*

“Yes, you can throw up as many times as you’d like this week but every time you have the urge to do it, you have to stop and think of who’s really in control. Is it the bulimia or is it you?”

I nodded, still a little confused. This was not what I expected from therapy. I thought I would be fed all this nonsense about how to stop bingeing and purging and the kind of harm it inflicts on you. Not that I already didn’t know because I had already suffered a torn esophagus and broken blood vessels in my eyes.

“Okay, our session is done for today. How about we meet again next week at the same time?”

“Sure,” I replied, relieved that the session was over.

I never made it back to see Vicky again, convincing Tanya that the one session had helped me tremendously and I was now equipped with the tools I needed to help me recover. In truth, that session barely scratched the surface of my deeply troubled mentality. I should have continued therapy but I was so engulfed in a cloud of anger and hatred that it was impossible for me to accept any kindness or grace from life. My emotions were still trapped in my past even though life was moving along.

CHAPTER TEN

“Ah! I’m going to kill that fucker!” Tanya bawled. “It’s gone! It’s all gone! He ran off with our pot and his number is disconnected.”

It was two in the afternoon when I rushed over to Tanya’s house only to find her strewn across her chaise lounge crying mercilessly into the sleeves of her pajamas.

“It’s okay,” I consoled, pulling Tanya’s long black hair away from her face.

Heaven knows why I was so calm that day. But as Tanya continued to weep, I found the strength to be the strong one for the both of us. Everything that could have possibly gone wrong had gone wrong. Now we were left with nothing but a gargantuan amount of debt and the stress that came along with it.

“What are we going to do?” I asked rather calmly.

“I don’t know. Do you want to shut it down? How much is your debt at now?” Tanya sniffled.

There’s the money I owe Mom, the credit card debts, my default mortgage payments, overdue bills, and the money Beaver lent me.

“I’m over \$50,000,” I replied. “How about you?”

Tanya thought about it and then responded, “Around \$40,000.”

“I think we need to start thinking of a plan B,” I urged. “I regret ever doing this. I know you tried to warn me but honestly I didn’t think it would be this hard. I thought it was supposed to be easy cash.”

“So you want to shut it down?” Tanya asked.

“Yeah. I’m done. I don’t want to do this anymore,” I responded. I was exhausted by the thought of having to endure the continual emotional rollercoaster.

“Well then, what are we waiting for? Let’s tear it all down,” Tanya replied. She looked like she had lost all sensibility. I’ve only seen this happen a couple times. But when I saw that look in her eyes, I knew better than to argue with her.

Tanya and I charged over to my house and proceeded to cut down every single pot plant. Basking in our temporary euphoria, and with heavy-duty scissors in our hands, Tanya and I

didn't stop until every single plant was destroyed. When we had finished, it finally hit me the complexity of our grow op. For the first time in my life, I felt a sliver of gratitude towards whoever was watching over me the entire six months I was doing this. I should have felt more grateful towards this greater force; however, I was still living in the mindset of a victim.

When all was said and done, we managed to sell our equipment for a fraction of the cost. Within a week, my basement was completely empty with all traces of me ever growing pot vanishing. The only thing left to do was to figure out quickly what I was going to do to pay off my debt. Tanya and I ran ideas back and forth. She contemplated accepting an out-of-town job from a friend. All her accommodations and food would be covered which meant all the money she made could go directly to her debts. I, on the other hand, needed another means to make quick cash. I thought back to the easiest cash I ever made... giving a client named Gary a hand job for \$1,000 during my days working as a mobile massage therapist.