

CHAPTER 1

It was May 1994. I was standing outside. The smell of spring. Just an hour before, I watched my three school-aged children get on the big yellow bus, singing the “no more pencils, no more books, no more teachers’ dirty looks” song as the end of the school year loomed. The upper-middle-class neighborhood I had spent 10 years living in boasted manicured lawns and the gloss of morning grass, still wet from so many sprinklers. I waved hello to my neighbor across the street, Nancy; she gave me a forced half-smile and low-waisted wave, you know, the kind of wave you give someone when you don’t want the rest of the world seeing you acknowledge them. Maybe Nancy and her husband Jim were having trouble again; maybe she was jealous of my very active social life and handsome boyfriends, or maybe she was just uncomfortable seeing me in my pink nightie. What, a woman can’t stand on her lawn wearing anything but the best Victoria’s Secret? Whatever...

This particular morning was sunny and promised to become a beautiful day. I had just begun making plans when I found myself sitting in the back of a sedan, handcuffed, with two federal marshals beside me. Now, in my defense, I would have gotten dressed, but the officers forbade me from re-entering my house. I was dazed and confused. In all of my life, I had never seen someone arrested in front of me, much less been the one in

handcuffs. A seasoned moviegoer, I knew they had to read me my rights and give me phone calls, but one thing I didn't prepare for, was the Egg McMuffin. That's right, these generous officers, while arresting me in my underwear for thirteen felony counts, made sure that I got an Egg McMuffin for breakfast. Sitting in the McDonald's parking lot, I okayed around and saw commuters coming and going to work, and here I was trying to cover my nipples, figure out how to eat while handcuffed, and make sense of what was happening while the federal marshals were happily eating their breakfasts.

Let me back up a little. It all started at around 8:00 am. My kids had just gotten on the bus and were headed for school. Thank God they missed the drama. I was leaving my house to give my nephew a ride to work and was surprised by two sedans flying into my driveway. Four federal marshals quickly emerged and approached, announcing, "This is the day," and ordered me to put my hands behind my back. Oh, I knew what day they were referring to alright. This day had been long in coming.

I put my hands behind my back as instructed, was handcuffed, and placed in one of the sedans. We drove to the local McDonald's and met up with two more sedans and four more marshals. It amazed me that the feds had sent six marshals to arrest me. They knew I would have no weapons and that in actuality I was only a housewife and minor league immigration fraud boss. But be that as it was, they sent six agents. Looking back, I feel a little sorry for them; someone must've thought they'd find Jimmy Hoffa's body or cases of cocaine buried under my kids' swing set.

I was startled when the car's back door opened and one of the federal marshals instructed me to get out. I did as I was told and stepped into the parking lot. Customers

entering the McDonald's stared at me standing there surrounded by six people while I was in that damned nightie with my hands handcuffed behind me. Then it hit me: the feds were putting me on display, essentially trying to embarrass me in front of my community. Think 18th-century witch trials, or the book *The Scarlet Letter*. But instead of itchy bonnets and heavy-wool dresses, we have sheer nighties and McDonald's parking lots. Well, the joke is on them. I had already been humiliated in *The Washington Post*, *The Baltimore Sun*, and my local newspaper. Standing in my nightie in the parking lot of McDonald's was child's play to me.

Once again, I was instructed to sit in the back of a sedan, a different one this time. One of the marshals must have remembered something more important than his McMuffin and turned around and read me my rights. He asked me if I understood, and I pointed out that he had cheese on his upper lip.

I understood my rights. After all, the movies we watch played them out over and over; and what I did not learn from the cinema, my attorney had reinforced many times. I knew I had the right to remain silent, advice I should have taken a year earlier, but instead I took the right to make a fool out of myself. I also knew I had the right to an attorney, and if I couldn't afford one, one would be appointed for me. Yes, I got it, got it all. At least the one marshal had been kind enough to take off the handcuffs so I could eat that damned egg McMuffin. I had no idea when I would eat again.

I was driven to a 16-story professional building in the city of Baltimore. As I rode the elevator to the booking area, workers were staring me up and down. I'm sure I was a sight standing there, and by this time, I was shivering. It was cold and not one

marshal seemed to take notice that I was practically convulsing. People were coming and going, all wearing professional attire. And when they saw me half naked and shaking, they quickly looked away. At least some people had manners.

This was the day, the day I had waited for over a year, the day I was arrested for immigration fraud. It was the day I would have to make bail, and despite my year of warnings, I had no one in mind who could post bail for me. Maybe this professional building was going to become my home until trial. I just wasn't sure.

CHAPTER 2

I was born in 1954, in a small town in Illinois across the Mississippi from St. Louis, Missouri. I would describe my upbringing as middle class, surface-level Norman Rockwell per my mother's tireless efforts. I had one brother, Terry, four years older and every bit the tyrant older brothers usually are. My mother, Betty, stayed home and raised Terry and me, and my dad, Odell, worked at the time as a lineman on the poles, like many of the other fathers in our circle of friends. Ever the go-getter, my father graduated to union manager and eventually got transferred to Washington, D.C. We bought a home in Maryland where I had my first dances with psychotic episodes, mental illness, drugs, marriage, and children, in no particular order.

My parents, through my childhood, took my brother and me to a Baptist church, and for the most part, my mom and dad were easygoing, that is if you choose to overlook my mother's narcissism. To this day, and despite having a clinician for a daughter, it's impossible to know where my mother's narcissistic and controlling nature stems from. She herself had great and loving parents but was very poor and grew up in the middle of an army of children. My dad had a violent father, but was so calm I sometimes wondered if he weren't a saint. He had a wickedly funny sense of humor. My mother was funny in her own right as well, mostly when she was telling you like it was.

I remember once waking up shortly after having fallen asleep one evening, hearing music coming from the living room. I got out of bed and crept into the living room where I saw my mom and dad sitting on the couch listening to Conway Twitty singing, "It's Only Make Believe." I walked in and my dad stood up. Instead of shooing me back to bed, he grabbed my hand, placed my small feet on his, and we danced. I was a marionette doll, in bliss. It was magical. I know it sounds like something you see on *Hallmark* or in country music videos, but this was my dad. On that occasion, my mother looked upon her husband and daughter with rarely seen gentility and pride, and then shooed me off to bed.

I can recall as a teenager going to some of my wealthier friends' homes and then returning to our smaller house complaining about not having what so and so had. One evening I came home and complained that one of my friends had a color TV in her bedroom! My dad walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of ice cream. He scooped some into my bowl and then some into his. He sat down across from me. "But do they have delicious ice cream like we have?" I was furious. "They have friggin' color TV's in their rooms and dishwashers in their kitchens. I'm sure they have ice cream." He looked at me, shrugged, and with a small wink replied, "But theirs probably isn't as good as ours."

Years later I realized that most of my wealthier friends envied me. I had a mother and father who loved one another. I had a father everyone adored, who sat with his daughter eating delicious ice cream. It turns out my dad was right. Theirs was not as delicious as ours.

But I still wonder to this day, and I've asked my therapists the same question, if my anxiety stemmed from the control my mother had over me and our family. If my mother disapproved of our actions, she would shun us until we came around to her way of seeing things. She did this to me as an adult as well. I do believe this contributed to my high levels of anxiety and the desperate need to be approved at any cost. My mother could go for years upon years not talking to someone just because she felt betrayed on some matter. No one wanted to cross her; we all sought her approval. I no longer need to ask a therapist if this contributed to my anxiety. I now know it did. I also know about conditional and unconditional love. I received unconditional love from my father. I received conditional love from my mother. My father taught me self-worth, and that in turn made me feel powerful. My mother taught me that if you make people mad or angry, they in turn will cut you out of their life. She set that example from the time I was a child.

When I was young, we were never alone. I had tons of cousins. We would frequently drive three hours to Missouri to visit them every other weekend and all summer. Family was all around me, and that's why I wanted one of my own. I wanted children, cousins for them to play and grow up with, and a nice home in the suburbs.

In school, I was definitely an underachiever. I was happy just passing a course. My parents never pressed me to do better. Looking back, I think I suffered with depression, but never was formally diagnosed. My problem was that I would daydream for hours while in class. When the bell went off, it jolted me; I was 1,000 miles away in a daydream. Some of my teachers spoke to my parents about it, but back in the 50s and

60s everyone thought things like that were only a phase, that I would grow out of it. Some parents believed in beating a child into doing better, but my parents were more like the “go-at-your-own-pace type.” Maybe that was good, maybe that was bad, but that’s the way things were. When I graduated from high school, I don’t think I even knew how to string an intelligent sentence together. I was doing 8th-grade math and knew very little about the world I lived in. But I had street smarts, and I guess that’s what saved my ass.

Growing up in the 60s, I remember only too well the discrimination that was all around me. I was just a child when at the St. Louis Zoo I read a sign above a water fountain that read, “Whites Only.” I asked my dad why it mattered, and he replied, “To some it does, but don’t pay any attention to it.” At that young age, I had the privilege of blissful ignorance. If you would have told me then as a child, later as a teenager, or even later as a young adult that I would be discriminated against later in my life I would have laughed. Preposterous.

All through elementary school up to the 4th grade, my class was all white. In 4th grade the school had its first black student, a girl named Nancy. I remember the teacher making an announcement to the class that someone of “color,” a “Negro,” was going to be joining us in our classroom and we were not to stare at her. Well, once she said not to stare, it was all I could do. When Nancy came into class, she sat one row behind me. I kept dropping my pencil on the ground so I could bend over and look at her while I picked it up. She looked so foreign. Her hair was different, her skin was different, and her clothes were different. I didn’t know then, but her family was very poor and they sent Nancy to school in her older siblings’ hand-me-downs that were five sizes too big.

I don't know to this day what happened to Nancy, but I do know that the little girl that joined us in the 4th grade that day had more guts than I'll ever have. She walked into a classroom filled with white kids, white kids with parents who probably looked down on her and her parents, and even though she was surrounded by white people she had grace and courage. Later, when I was alone with my thoughts in prison, I would think about Nancy and what became of her. Now, I was the one who was different

As I emerged into my teenage years, I had the usual array of boyfriends. Throughout high school, I went to all the usual dances and parties, though I didn't really push the envelope with teenage high jinx until after I graduated. If I even got close to a boy's penis, I feared pregnancy. I might fool around with a boy, but never—would never—“go all the way,” because I knew I would have been ostracized by my family if they ever found out, my mother having made that quite clear. But after high school, that was different, that's when I discovered the pill. Oh, the pill! Just swallow a little pink pill, and you could dance with that sexy devil all you wanted and not fear the “off-with-your-head” speech from your mother and the ball-and-chain of unplanned motherhood.

The pill opened up many new doors for girls back then. Finally, a woman could have sex without worrying about getting pregnant, like men had been doing for years. I think I found equal footing with boys back then. I no longer had to fear pregnancy; I was free to experiment. But that did go directly against my Baptist upbringing, hard to settle in my mind. But I compromised; I was a Baptist Monday through Thursday, a young woman on the pill Friday through Sunday.

I had no real aspirations after high school other than to get married and have children. My brother followed our father into electrical work, and I guess I was following my mother into domestic life. After I graduated from high school, my dad landed me a job with a union in Washington, D.C. where I worked as a secretary for a lobbyist. I just could have been the worst secretary on the planet. No, on second thought, I am sure I was the worst secretary on Earth. The only thing that kept me from being fired was my sense of humor and a modicum of charm. If one of the lobbyists asked for a letter to be typed—and this was before computers—it took me hours. I would misspell every other word and get distracted by others in office gossip. I was terrible. But I was skilled in small talk and fetching coffee for everyone—and I was cute. But it didn't actually bother me that I was terrible, because all I ever really wanted to be was a wife and a mother. I used to watch the clock at work and daydream about being in my own home and decorating it. I saw myself greet the kids after school and prepare dinner. Female coworkers made fun of me, which I didn't mind, as they had different ambitions in life. I just wanted to be Suzie Homemaker. But first I had to get some partying years behind me. And suddenly it all came to a screeching halt while I was listening to the Steve Miller band.

It was 1973. The Steve Miller song, "Keep on Rocking Me Baby," was blasting on the radio. I had four friends crammed in my Dodge, and my speedometer was broken. It was stuck on 100 miles per hour. I would drive around with my friends, and as they got high or drunk, they would suddenly look at the speedometer and freak out. I was probably going 40 miles per hour, but they would think I was doing 100. Funny how

they took issue with my speeding, but never minded the intravenous drugs and french fries shared in my backseat.

One night I was driving around, nowhere in particular; we never went anywhere in particular. Just drove around our community like the idiots we were, wasting precious fuel. Back then it took me all of five dollars to fill up my tank. We would all chip in a buck here and there, and then off into the night we would go. And did we worry about DWI's? Not a bit. I remember being pulled over a couple of times by a policeman for speeding while I was totally drunk and high, and the officer just telling me to go home; or sometimes even offering me or my friends a ride. A far cry from today, but honestly, I believe the laws we have today about drinking and driving are better than those of the good old days. Too many of us either got killed while drinking and driving or we killed someone else.

As that Steve Miller song played, I took a hit of weed. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with terror and paranoia. I had smoked pot before, but this time, a gut-wrenching fear gripped me, and I began to hyperventilate. Normally, you can identify a trigger for your fear, like a spider, and remove the stimulus. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't keep a rational or straight thought in my head. From the tips of my toes to the center of my churning gut, all I could make sense of was doom. I managed to park the car somewhere. I dashed out. When the terror subsided, I was still confused and frightened. Or as they say today, "dazed and confused." One of the stoners fell out of the car and asked me what the hell was going on. I just doubled over and told him I didn't know.

“Bad trip, eh?” he asked with his eyes fighting to stay open and his body hunched halfway outside of the car.

“Yeah,” I said. “Bad fucking trip.” I got back in the car and asked everyone if the pot was laced with anything. The one who brought it said it wasn’t; it was the same batch they had all smoked for weeks.

I stared at him. “Well what in the actual fuck just happened?”

“You probably had a panic attack,” he said. “That’s a common reaction to pot.”

“How in the hell do you know what I just felt? Are you a psychiatrist? Common? I never heard that before.”

He replied, “I read about it somewhere, and it happens to my sister a lot. That’s why she switched to just drinking wine. She can’t handle pot anymore.”

“You think?” I said with a laugh.

Whatever it was, it was intense. I was freaking out. Freaking out! Out-of-mind experience. It felt like my back was up against a brick wall, nowhere to turn or run to, a wild tiger staring me down and charging me. My brain froze, I was in a state of terror. I was losing my mind.

“Kind of ruined the whole Steve Miller experience, didn’t it?” the guy said, laughing.

“Oh, fuck you. I’m being serious.”

“So am I.”

I wrote it off as a bad pot experience and went on with my life. But weeks after that first panic attack, I had another one. This time I wasn’t smoking pot. I was walking

down K Street in D.C., going to meet my carpool. The same terror seized me, and I froze in my tracks. I felt like I was going to hyperventilate, and when the symptoms subsided, I was shaking. From then on the panic attacks started coming at me like waves crashing onto the shores of my life. They came with no rhyme, warning, or reason. I didn't know when to expect them. I didn't know what triggered them. I became a prisoner. I was going crazy. Who could I tell? Who would understand? Up until the cute stoner with the wino sister, I had never even heard of a panic attack. My friends would surely think I'm a lunatic and not want to hang around me; my family would make me feel like I disgraced them for having some mental experiences that they couldn't fit into their pretty box. Most important, I was afraid of what was brewing inside of me. So I did the only reasonable thing a girl could do: I swept it under the rug and tried to ignore it.

But they came, they still came, and when they did, I would feel extreme, intense terror. As soon as the terror crested, it would begin to descend back into normalcy, leaving me feeling that my surroundings were surreal. My palms were sweaty after each attack, and it took hours to feel stable. What the hell was happening? There was terror in my mind, and it was made worse by the fear of yet another attack. Anxiety times 1,000!

I began to stay indoors for fear I would have another attack and lose control in public. I developed what psychiatrists call 'agoraphobia,' an irrational fear of open areas, outdoors especially. I didn't, or felt I couldn't, leave my home. I couldn't go anywhere. I couldn't escape from that fear that I would have another panic attack. My biggest fear was that I would have an attack in public and be out of control. It was irrational thinking on my part—or was it? I imagined that I would leave home, go to a public place, have a

terrorizing attack, lose control, and they would have to lock me up somewhere where I would have even less control.

Agoraphobia kidnapped my social life. There was no more hanging out with friends, or going to the mall or trips to get groceries. It's all about staying in your own environment, home, where you feel safe. It's hard for me to explain why your mind goes there. It's more of a fear of having panic attacks in an open area and having nowhere to run and hide. Keep in mind we are talking about an era where most mental health treatments on an acute level involved restraints, rubber rooms, and electric shock therapy. No thank you. Fear of the unknown left me inside my home for many weeks at a time. Since I had a job, I had to make decisions about how I was going to address my agoraphobia.

If I could have, I probably would have stayed home indefinitely, maybe forever, and never gone past my front door. But since I was in my 20s and living at home, I knew my mother would be in my face about not working and who was going to support me. My mother was a believer in "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," and this time I had to take her advice. Faced with having to choose between the lesser of two evils, somehow I had to reach down inside and find the strength to walk out that door into the open and face what was to come. I took all my vacation time at my job, which was two weeks, and stayed inside. I thought by doing so I would eventually work up the courage to go outside. I made small strides at first, such as walking outside to the street. When I did that, I felt encouraged since I had finally gone outside and didn't fall apart.

The Saturday afternoon before I went back to work, a friend came by and wanted to know if I wanted to go to her house and look at her vacation slides. I felt as if I had just been asked to jump out of an airplane without a parachute. I knew I had to go back to work that Monday, so I swallowed hard and mustered up the courage to go. That friend of mine, like the others, had no idea what was going on inside my head. She, like most, just thought I was being unsociable and going through a phase. No one knew the terror that was in my mind because of the paralyzing fear of another panic attack, of losing control. It was indescribable.

I was almost shaking when I got in her car. I remember distinctly her talking, and when we got to the end of my street and she was about to turn left, I was flooded with anxiety and with the thought, there is no turning back, what will be will be. And then I began to think some comforting thoughts, like, so what if I have a huge panic attack in front of her, so what? Then at least she will know I'm suffering and maybe I'll get some help.

Am I of control? What was I going to do? Jump out of her car while she was driving? Again, so what? Then at least people will see the depths of my pain and maybe this will bring me help. My final thought while we were driving was, I don't give a crap anymore. I'm tired of being held hostage by my irrational thoughts. Go ahead, Janie, lose control. Let the world see the anguish that you are in. In fact, I hoped I would lose control. Let the world see. Oh, how I wish I could have just talked to her about it, without having to go through every worst case scenario in my head.

And you know what happened? Nothing. I felt calm and collected when I got to my friend's house. I felt a silent sense of pride for making it through another small step, the car ride, that long, terrifying car ride, without slipping into the abyss. The satisfaction and relief I felt fueled me to keep moving. I looked at her vacation pictures and, while I would like to say I stayed there all afternoon, that would not be true. I did get antsy and wanted to go to my protective home, but I stayed long enough to see her slides and not have an episode. I made a huge stride.

I went to work the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that. I had some setbacks, panic attacks at work, but it didn't lead to staying indoors as before. Nevertheless, I lived in fear; all was not perfect, but at least my thoughts weren't holding me captive in my home. And what helped the most? The "I don't care anymore attitude." Just go and get it over with, that is, getting out of control and losing it. I was tired and just wanted to live a normal life. Once I faced my fears, they all but disappeared. I am not saying that it's just that easy to conquer agoraphobia, I'm just saying that for me, it really helped to call the monster out of the closet and tell him to go fuck himself. He could hold me hostage no more.

But that's not the whole story to be honest. I left out a huge part. I did not do this on my own. The start was mine to be sure, but not the finish. Those irrational fears only went away for good when I took medication. Only then did I begin to feel normal again. Not leaving my home was never, I mean never, an issue again. And even on medication, I have setbacks, but I now know that medication can be tweaked to address my issues, and that I have a chemical imbalance in my brain which leads to irrational thoughts. And

finally I no longer blame myself. A chemical imbalance is not my fault. It affects my neurotransmitters. I'm just as sick as someone with diabetes. It feels good to no longer blame myself and be labelled "weak."

I stopped socializing for fear I would have an attack. I only went to work and back home. And did I ever start screwing up at my job. I was already a terrible secretary, but now I was like a bad secretary on crack. I don't think I performed one task correctly. There was no one I could share this with. My boyfriend at the time was a big weed man, and he couldn't understand why anyone just wouldn't "fucking love pot." They had not coined the term "panic attacks" yet. I didn't even know what to call what I was experiencing. No computer to Google it, and couldn't look it up at the library since I had no idea what to search for. My boyfriend at the time started every sentence with, "Hey, man," and if I had shared it with him his response probably would have been extended to, "Hey, man, that sounds fucked up." I knew he would be useless to talk to.

Like I said, my mom is the "pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps" kind of person. My dad, he was sweet, but had no understanding of psychiatry. He always said psychiatrists were a waste of time. I wasn't seeing many friends and didn't trust they would understand, anyway. I wasn't particularly close to any of my coworkers. I was lonely, and while becoming used to my symptoms, was nervous about how they were pervading my life.

I made an appointment with my OBGYN and told him what I was going through, thinking these panic attacks could be hormonal. In fact, it felt good to think it was hormonal, that way I could rationalize it wasn't something bad happening in my brain. I

finally worked up the nerve to tell my mom that something was happening. She agreed that it was probably hormonal, pushing aside it could have anything to do with mental illness. She would say things like, “I get very emotional also when my period is off. It’s probably linked to your period. You go and see him. I’m sure he’ll fix you right up with hormone pills.”

Well, the good doctor didn’t agree with my mother. He told me after a few blood tests and a couple of visits later, that in fact it was not hormonal, and that probably I needed to see a psychiatrist. And then he threw in that he could do an exploratory operation on me to see if my female parts were in working order. I briefly considered it, and then thought no better of the idea. Something told me my vagina wasn’t the culprit, and to follow a false lead would be a waste of time. It would mean being hospitalized, put to sleep, and then going through a recovery time. And my inner voice kept telling me it wasn’t about my ovaries at all; it was all in my brain.

It was 1974, but it might as well have been the Dark Ages. No one knew much about what was going on in the brain. I’m surprised the OBGYN didn’t suggest a lobotomy. Maybe he did, I just don’t remember. I got very depressed and didn’t know what the hell was happening to me. I thought pot had permanently damaged me and couldn’t talk to anyone about it, especially my family. And how could I tell my friends I had a bad pot experience? They wouldn’t have been able to keep a straight face. And go on to tell them that the bad experience keeps continuing even when I’m not smoking weed?

“Hey, Jim, remember that pot we smoked last week?”

“Yeah,” he would respond.

“Well, that was some strong shit, man! I tripped on that stuff and am still trippin’ even when I’m not smoking.”

“Say what?” he would say, surprised.

That’s exactly how the conversation would have gone down. I did try to broach the subject with my pothead boyfriend, and his response was as predicted, “Man, I think it’s all in your head.”

“No shit, stupid,” I said. “But exactly what is going on in my brain, you whack-out?” He didn’t have an answer; he just rolled over and took another hit off his joint.

My family opposed my going to see a psychiatrist, as that was for the mentally ill, the homeless people who push around shopping carts while muttering to themselves. Certainly not for me, a person raised with a loving family and support. Going to a psychiatrist would have been a black mark on them, they certainly would have thought.

In my family we were forbidden to use the “P” word. Not pussy, but psychiatrist. Psychiatrists were for the weak of character. My family was above such maladies of the mind. If I had to see a psychiatrist they would have to either deduce they were bad parents and raised me poorly, or it was genetic. Either way it would be a lose-lose situation to them. So, the answer to that was, if I go to a psychiatrist, make it like the now-antiquated view of homosexuals in the military during the Clinton years: “Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

But I will admit it was a defeating moment for me once I decided I had to seek professional help. Psychiatrists were the bad guys. The scary guys. It was though I had

decided to see a witch doctor, crazy headpieces, white face paint, straw amulets, chanting. All I knew of psychiatrists was what I saw on TV or in movies. The last time I saw a psychiatrist in a movie was “The Three Faces of Eve,” with Joanne Woodward. Then I got to thinking. Did I have multiple personalities? How crazy was I? My mind raced from one strange thing to the next.

And to make matters worse, *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* had just been released. Jack Nicholson in a mental hospital with assorted loons. My pothead boyfriend dragged me out of the house to see it, and all through that movie I kept envisioning myself living in that insane asylum. I almost wished a big, tall Native American would smother me. Worse, would I end up with a lobotomy? When I got home, I jumped into bed and pulled the covers up over my head.

This was my life in the 70s. Hiding in my house, fighting off panic attacks and dreading the next one. I tried to appear normal and let no one know what was going on, because in essence I myself didn’t know. I had been taught all my life that being seen as normal and happy was what my mother expected. I did my best not to let her down.

Through all this I didn’t pray much and didn’t feel particularly close to God. You could say I felt somewhat betrayed by God. Why would He allow an illness to invade my brain? And even worse, without some sort of treatment being available? But God did give me something. He gave me a friend that I met apparently quite by accident. She, too, was suffering with the same mental illness I was. We became close friends and would talk for hours. I felt vindicated when I spoke to her and knew then I wasn’t alone.

This is partly why I'm writing this book. I never want another person to feel alone with their illness.

CHAPTER 3

Years went by after my first panic attack, and yes, I did see a few psychiatrists. One in particular, in the early 80s, put me on life-saving mental medications. He made it possible for me to live without fear of a panic attack. But then, years later, I was being court-ordered to see another mental-health expert. I had just been released from prison after having been locked up for 18 months for immigration fraud. It was 1996. I was assigned to a halfway house, and one of the conditions of the release was for me to see a psychologist.

I knew I would tell him my story of how I ended up in prison and my struggle with mental illness, but I was freshly released, and quite frankly didn't feel like being court ordered to do a damn thing. I spent one year and several months being told where to stand, what to eat, when to get up, and when to go to sleep. Now, I'm released, in a halfway house, but being told again what to do.

"Hi, Janie, come on in. I'm Dr. Marks. It's a pleasure to put a face to the name on the referral. Please have a seat."

Have a seat my ass, I thought. I knew why I was here, he knew why I was here, and anyone that read *The Washington Post* knew why I was here. Yes, I was court ordered.

I looked him over, nice-looking guy, maybe fortyish, but I was betting he was younger than I. He had only spoken a few words to me at this point, so I couldn't make

an assessment of his stodginess. To my dismay he was not the homely schmoe I had hoped he would be.

“Hmm. OK. I’ll sit down, but I won’t talk to you. Ask as many questions as you like. I won’t answer them. They can court order me to see you, but they can’t make me talk to you.” I was having my *Good Will Hunting* moment. The movie was yet to be released, but I think they stole a page from my life story.

“That’s right, Janie, they can’t make you talk. I can’t make you talk. I’ve been paid for a fifty-five-minute session, so let me know when you’re ready. I’ll just sit here and catch up on some reading.”

I sat in silence for 45 minutes, watching the doctor flip through files, and curiously, he never looked over at me, not even once. The first solid ten minutes of our stalemate I sat in triumph. Ha, I didn’t have to carry this guy down my yellow-brick road of shame. The next 25 minutes I was at war with reality. Even if we spent this entire session in silence, he would still document that I was disengaged. If I come in here with walls up and mouth shut every time, it could be viewed as non-compliant by my parole board. I would have to hatch another plan, one that didn’t involve my doing any real work.

Suddenly, he startled me when he spoke. “Since we only have ten minutes left, I think I’ll take my chances and ask you some questions.”

I just shrugged my shoulders. Shoulder shrugs could be documented as a response, right?

“Why were you ordered to see me, Janie?” he asked.

I responded, “Oh, c’mon, Doc. You’ve got the papers right in front of you; I see my name on that file there. I’m sure they told you what it was all about. Why are you bothering to ask me?”

I didn’t like what I was feeling. I was irritated and angry, and out of the confines of a prison camp or of a halfway house where I could be irritated and angry and it was simply the cultural norm. Why was I taking it out on this seemingly nice man? Because he was poking the bear? He was only trying to do his job. But I felt infringed upon, once more, by the federal government. I had done my time, all of it, now why do I have to be forced to see a shrink? And for how long would I have to see this shrink? Until the federal government decides I’m stable enough to rejoin society? I hoped that wasn’t the case, since that might take a lifetime.

He looked down at a file, I guess it was mine, and said, “Well, I read their side of it, but there are two sides to every story. What’s your side?”

“I’ll tell you my story. I got sick, took meds, committed a crime, went to prison, and lost my home, business, and pride. Now, I’m here. End of story.” Damn I was feeling so angry.

“Aw! No happy ending? You don’t have a happy version for me? Geeze, quite depressing.”

“Your whole job sounds depressing to me, Doc, listening to people who are screwed up and wanting answers, answers you can’t give them. Well, let me cue you in on something, Doc. I’m not looking for answers from you. The only question I want an

answer to is, ‘Why in the hell can’t an inmate take back fruit to her room without being punished?’ Do you have the answer?”

“Nope, Janie, I do not.”

“You don’t sound like you’re a very good shrink.”

“Oh? What does a good shrink sound like, Janie? I’ll try to find one for you.”

“Typical shrink comeback,” I answered. I had to force back a smile here. I friggin’ love bantering.

“Well, time is up. What a boring session, don’t you agree? I was expecting a somewhat more interesting story than ‘I got sick, blah, blah, blah.’ Maybe next time.”

I grabbed my purse, walked to the door, turned around to face him, and said, “There won’t be a next time.”

“Oh? Aren’t you forgetting the court order, Janie?”

“Oh, fuck you, Mr. Doctor with-none-of-the-answers.” I left, but not without slamming the door behind me. Damn, I thought, this is just like torn out pages from *Good Will Hunting*.

When I left, I felt like kicking myself in the ass. For starters, of course, there was going to be a next time. Saying that there wouldn’t be was as silly as a toddler grounding his parents. I also had to accept that he was only trying to help, but I wouldn’t let him. I could feel heaviness in my chest, and I knew it was anxiety. Why wouldn’t I let this man help me? I consider myself a friendly person, so why all the hostility? Of course, I knew the answer to that. I was being *forced* to do something. It didn’t matter it was for my own good, it was the point that I was tired of being told what to do. I was being

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oppositional defiant. I'd already given them nearly two damn years, now this? "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," as the Bible states. Well, I gave to Caesar my time and to the federal government my restitution. My trauma, my hurt, my disappointments, and my fears belonged to me, not Dr. Marks or anyone else.

Actually, I knew I wanted to see him again and spill out everything. The illness, the losses, the crime, sentencing, and prison. It was all inside of me waiting to come out. I had been released from prison. Wasn't that something to be happy about and to count my blessings for? Living in a halfway house wasn't as bad as living in the confines of a prison, I rationalized. I would just go back to the halfway house and wait for my next visit to Dr. Marks.