

## Chapter One

### The Darkness

"The journey into darkness has been long and cruel, and you have gone deep into it."

What happened to my generation is that we never grew up. The problem isn't that we're lost or apathetic, narcissistic or materialistic. The problem is we're terrified.

A lot of us know we have what it takes-the looks, the education, the talent, the credentials. But in certain areas, we're paralyzed. We're not being stopped by something on the outside, but by something on the inside. Our oppression is internal. The government isn't holding us back, or hunger or poverty. We're not afraid we'll get sent to Siberia. We're just afraid, period. Our fear is free-floating. We're afraid this isn't the right relationship or we're afraid it is. We're afraid they won't like us or we're afraid they will. We're afraid of failure or we're afraid of success. We're afraid of dying young or we're afraid of growing old. We're more afraid of life than we are of death.

You'd think we'd have some compassion for ourselves, bound up in emotional chains the way we are, but we don't. We're just disgusted with ourselves, because we think we should be better by now. Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking other people don't have as much fear as we do, which only makes us more afraid. Maybe they know something we don't know. Maybe we're missing a chromosome.

It's become popular these days to blame practically everything on our parents. We figure it's because of them that our self-esteem is so low. If only they'd been different, we'd be brimming with self-love. But if you take a close look at how our parents treated us, whatever abuse they gave us was often mild compared to the way we abuse ourselves today. It's true that your mother might have said repeatedly, "You'll never be able to do that, dear." But now you say to yourself, "You're a jerk. You never do it right. You blew it. I hate you." They might have been mean, but we're vicious.

Our generation has slipped into a barely camouflaged vortex of self-loathing. And we're always, even desperately, seeking a way out, through growth or through escape. Maybe this degree will do it, or this job, this seminar, this therapist, this relationship, this diet, or this project. But too often the medicine falls short of a cure, and the chains just keep getting thicker and tighter. The same soap operas develop with different people in different cities. We begin to realize that we ourselves are somehow the problem, but we don't know what to do about it. We're not powerful enough to overrule ourselves. We sabotage, abort everything: our careers, our relationships, even our children. We drink. We do drugs. We control. We obsess. We codepend. We overeat. We hide. We attack. The form of the dysfunction is irrelevant. We can find a lot of different ways to express how much we hate ourselves.

But express it we will. Emotional energy has got to go somewhere, and self-loathing is a powerful emotion. Turned inward, it becomes our personal hells: addiction, obsession, compulsion, depression, violent relationships, illness. Projected outward, it becomes our collective hells: violence, war, crime, oppression. But it's all the same thing: hell has many mansions, too.

I remember, years ago, having an image in my mind that frightened me terribly. I would see a sweet, innocent little girl in a perfect white organdy apron, pinned screaming with her back against a wall. A vicious, hysterical woman was repeatedly stabbing her through the heart with a knife. I suspected that both characters were me, that they lived as psychic forces inside my mind. With every passing year, I grew more scared of that woman with the knife. She was active in my system. She was totally out of control, and I felt like she wanted to kill me.

When I was most desperate, I looked for a lot of ways out of my personal hell. I read books about how our minds create our experience, how the brain is like a bio-computer that manufactures whatever we feed into it with our thoughts. "Think success and you'll get it," "Expect to fail and you will," I read. But no matter how much I worked at changing my thoughts, I kept going back to the painful ones. Temporary breakthroughs would occur: I would work on having a more positive attitude, get myself together and meet a new man or get a new job. But I would always revert to the patterns of self-betrayal: I'd eventually turn into a bitch with the man, or screw up at the job. I would lose ten pounds, and then put them back on in five minutes, terrified by how it felt to look beautiful. The only thing more frightening than not getting male attention, was getting lots of it. The groove of sabotage ran deep and automatic. Sure, I could change my thoughts, but not permanently. And there's only one despair worse than "God, I blew it." -- and that's, God, I blew it again."

My painful thoughts were my demons. Demons are insidious. Through various therapeutic techniques, I'd become very smart about my own neuroses, but that didn't necessarily exorcise them. The garbage didn't go away; it just became more sophisticated. I used to tell a person what my weaknesses were, using such conscious language that they would think, "Well, obviously she knows what her patterns are, so she won't do that again."

But oh yes, I would. Acknowledging my patterns was just a way of diverting someone's attention. Then I'd go into a rampage or other outrageous behavior so quickly and smoothly that no one, least of all myself,...