



LISA

*“I had to find a way out.”*

“We shall draw from the heart of suffering itself  
the means of inspiration and survival.”

~WINSTON CHURCHILL

*Washington, DC, 1989*

After exhaling the smoke from the last hit off my crack pipe, I knew what came next. It was time to hit the streets and make some money. After all, I had been doing it for the past year. You'd think I would have been used to it, but I don't know if you ever “get used to it.” At this point I was as much addicted to the lifestyle as to the drug. It assassinates your conscience and thwarts responsibility, eliminating your morals, ethics, and values. I had no job, I paid no bills, I had no schedule. I took no showers, for that matter. I did whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, staying up all night and sleeping all day. I was thirty-one years old.

Crack addicts are extremely clever, manipulative people. When we meet you, it doesn't take long for us to determine

if you are going to be an easy target. If you have a deeper, personal interest in or compassion for humanity, immediately you become my victim. Your care and concern will never change me; but I promise it will devastate you, allowing me to use and abuse your kindness. Always being on the defensive, my mantra was *I will beat you before you get a chance to beat me*. On this summer day, I was determined not to be beaten.

I fluffed up my hair, put on some lipstick, and took my place on the corner of Rhode Island Avenue near 3rd Street. It was 2:00 a.m., and it was “go time.” Suddenly, self-recriminating thoughts raced across the surface of my mind. *I'm caught up in a vicious cycle. Oh, how I hate what my life has become, but I hate it more when I'm sober. At least when I'm high the voices of shame and anger aren't quite as loud—the self-loathing not as prominent. How did I get here? When did anything, no matter how depraved, become acceptable to me as long as the end result provided me with a way to get high?* But such thoughts were too deep for me to contemplate for long; their consequences were too far ahead. There was money to be made, work to be done, and a man who waited for me to bring home the cash, so . . . game on.

Washington, DC, is the most influential, commanding city in the world. It has a thriving, diverse culture that represents many different types of people. In this power-driven city your worth is determined by who you know rather than your bank account. Everyone is jockeying for position: legislators, journalists, lobbyists, socialites. You could call it unique. You could also call it bipolar.

Each year, thousands of people descend upon our nation's capital to learn about our government and our history, making their way along the National Mall from the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials, past the Washington Monument, and up the Smithsonian corridor to the US Capitol. During the day, those noble symbols of American democracy and freedom

stand pristine and powerful. Veterans stand in front of precious names inscribed on memorials, families snap selfies with elegant monuments, public servants and foreign diplomats go about the business of government. Neighborhoods like Georgetown, Adams Morgan, and Chinatown provide great entertainment and abundant diversity. It's a culture steeped in the awe-inspiring people and events of American history.

But as the sun sets an entirely different culture emerges. Blocks from the Oval Office and on the same streets diplomats and lawmakers and history-minded tourists traverse by day, men and women alike seek to feed their souls with illicit sex, booze, violence, and things even more perverse. At night open-air drug markets located along commuting corridors and within public housing projects provide customers from the neighboring Virginia and Maryland suburbs or from within the city a steady availability of illegal drugs. This is an entire culture steeped in self-indulgence and illegal activity. This was the DC in which I was going about my "business." This was my life.

One bright spot in my night was that the bars had just closed and most customers were so drunk that my services wouldn't be lengthy. Men pay for sex for different reasons: some out of loneliness, some out of lust, and others just to be free from emotional investment. My reason? It was for love. I wasn't in love with my clients. No, I hated the desperation in their eyes, their bizarre desires, and the way I felt when I was with them. But I endured all these feelings to nurture the love of my life. A love that made me feel alive and full of energy. An enchanting love that literally had me under its spell. A love that swept me off my feet, allowing a momentary escape from



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my crazy life. Even when this love failed to provide the utopia I had imagined, I found it difficult to turn my back on what I desperately needed in order to survive. Without it my life was empty and the pain unendurable. It had become my confidence and security, my lover and my friend: crack cocaine.

Crack is a crystal form of cocaine that is derived from cocaine powder and smoked from a pipe or inhaled as fumes. Its name describes the crackling sound it makes when heated and inhaled. As the drug's impurities are cooked out, its form changes from powder to crystal, enabling the user to inhale it as smoke. Crack was an immediate "best seller" because of its convenience. Before crack was sold on the street, users had to cook powder cocaine themselves to smoke it, which Markus and I had done. This is called freebasing.

Smoking crack allows cocaine to reach your brain more quickly than snorting it does, providing a more intense and immediate high. But because the high is short lived, lasting only ten to twenty minutes, addiction develops very quickly. Initially you can get high from a \$20 rock of cocaine, but the expense escalates rapidly because of the forever-increasing amount needed to support your habit. Eventually you become immune, so that although you might get high, you never reach the heights of that first euphoria. But for me, the only joy I had in life was to escape reality—I was homeless, hopeless, and hurting. Crack cocaine provided the escape I was desperate for, even if it was only for a few minutes.

After making enough money for a couple of rocks of cocaine, a pack of cigarettes, and a little more rent money, I retreated to our by-the-hour hotel room—one of the many establishments in this part of town accommodating "ladies of the night." "Fleabag" would be a step up from this place. It was an old house converted into a hotel with paper thin walls and one bathroom shared by all. Sticky floors, peeling paint, and

mice infestation made it apparent that cleanliness wasn't a priority. I walked in, immune to its shortcomings; I had worse things to contemplate. Markus, my longtime lover turned pimp, was there waiting.

Markus. What had happened to the tall, dark, handsome man I met and fell in love with so many years ago? He had been so full of drive then, with a passion for success. That man was gone. Now, with a crazed look in his eyes, fist raised above his body, all 250 pounds of him, he was ready to pounce.

"Where you been, bitch? You ain't nothing but a filthy whore! Nobody's ever gonna want a slut like you! Now where's the rock and the cash?"

As usual, he was first. Snatching the goods from my outstretched hand, he slapped it on the table, loaded the pipe, and lit up. All the while, he was accusing me of having gotten high while I was out on the street working, using some of my profits on drugs for myself. I stood there and took his treatment for a few reasons, but mostly because as the coke melted, my desire for the magical yet murderous stream of white smoke overwhelmed any other thought. At all costs I would take a hit from that crack pipe to escape the reality of my life. Even if it only perpetuated that reality. Didn't matter.

With habitual crack cocaine use, some form of paranoia usually develops, and it can be scary. This varies in intensity; and when combined with alcohol or other drugs or situations, it manifests itself as uncontrollable violence. Many users hear voices, footsteps, sirens, and other noises that weren't real—like I did. Again and again I would stop and sit motionless, listening to any small noise, thinking it was the police or an intruder attempting to make his way in and assault me. This paranoia would last for hours even after the cocaine was gone. Other people have amplified paranoia, believing people are plotting against them to hurt or even murder them. These types

of illusions increase the possibility of physical aggression and suspicion.

The first time this extreme paranoia exhibited itself in Markus had been a few years back. This is also when the physical abuse began insidiously making its way into our relationship. We had just copped some crack. Pulling off into an alley, Markus took a hit from the pipe. While he was exhaling, we began to cruise 14th Street NW—known as the red-light district—adjacent to its many massage parlors and strip clubs. As so often happened



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when he was getting high, he began to accuse me of stealing the crack from him, overlooking the fact that he had just smoked it. Suddenly he reached over and viciously ripped my clothes off, first my yellow t-shirt and then my striped cotton pants. He opened the car door, shoved me out, and took off, leaving me in my underwear—only to return a short while later in tears, apologizing for what he had done. Of course, I forgave him. I loved him, or so I thought. But the abuse grew in intensity: over time I had the wind knocked out of me, got doused in alcohol and chased with a lighter, awakened to a dagger being held to my throat. And then the beatings started: broken nose, damaged ear drum, fractured ribs, bruises, mild concussions.

When Markus got high he became a vicious and uncontrollable predator. Standing in our hotel room, watching him take his turn at the crack pipe, I knew I had to act quickly.

Finally, it was my turn. The escape for which I had worked was just a moment away. As I began to inhale a long, steady stream of the intoxicating vapor into my lungs, *BAM!*—a sucker punch came at the right side of my head, knocking the pipe out of my hand and landing me on the floor.

Despite all I have endured, never have I been one to just take it. His size and his rage made it difficult, but I always fought back, and boy, did I fight now! But it was no use. Pulling me back by my hair, he slammed my head down onto the floor and delivered one violent kick after another. When it became too much to endure, I reminded him through my screams that if I was too bruised I wouldn't be able to make money. It was a good point—being roughed up was common in the life of a girl like me, but it was one that could put me out of commission for weeks. Sometimes this reminder would stop Markus; other times it would further enrage him, stirring up jealousy and bitterness over the fact that in order to bring in money I was having sex with other men.

This time, just when I was about to pass out from the pain, he stopped. I lay there momentarily stunned: no tears, no movement whatsoever. The pain was intense. I hurt all over my body. Blood was all over too, since I'd been hit in the nose. But above all I felt the gnawing need to achieve the numbness that enabled me to live inside the self-created prison of my mind. In that moment, battered and bleeding, all I could think about was the crack pipe.

Later I would convince myself, as I always did, that I was somehow to blame for his violent behavior and that I needed to forgive him. He had a way of making me believe that he couldn't survive without me—nor I without him. This created a recurring succession of events, a pattern that would not be easily broken.

Sexual abuse and rape were part of my everyday life: the exorbitant price of staying high. I couldn't live with my addiction, yet I thought I couldn't live without it. Of course, living was not what I was doing; I just barely existed.

My carefree days of disco, dating, and drinking were long gone. The 1970s-era liberation that had once felt so inspiring

now felt like a pillow suffocating me. Living without boundaries had started out feeling like really living—but its detrimental results were killing me. I just didn't know how to get out. My mind was full of conflict and hatred, with regular thoughts of suicide and even homicide. My relationships had been stretched to their limits. For many years I had been stealing from my parents, grandparents, and friends; shoplifting, embezzling, and implementing money-making schemes that alienated anyone who could or would want to help me. I thought if there was a God He surely didn't like me, and I lived under the illusion that nobody else cared anymore. But I managed to justify all that: who needed them, anyway! There was just one thing I needed—and lying on the floor now, I needed it more than ever.

The coke was gone, the fighting had subsided, and we fell asleep. It was the hotel clerk who finally jarred us out of this latest episode of dysfunction. Banging on the door at noon, he demanded we either pay up or get out, or he would call the police. Panic struck me as I realized that it was late morning. We were out of money, with no place to go except the streets. The energy it took to free the room of remaining drug paraphernalia and make myself presentable for daylight was a monumental task—while Markus lay in bed waiting to be physically tossed out. Even though I was living a criminal lifestyle, I still had a healthy fear of the police and incarceration and didn't want to be confronted with either. Many girls turned tricks during the day, but I wasn't one of those girls, especially not in downtown DC.

We were lucky it was a hot summer day, not the middle of winter. At the very last moment before the police showed up, we withdrew from our seedy, stench-filled hotel room to our favorite resting place: Lafayette Square, regular haunt of a gathering of drug-dependent outcasts. Directly across the

street from that famous symbol of independence and power was the White House.

Lying in the grassy turf of the Square, we hid our faces under sunglasses, not so much to protect against the glare but against being recognized by business owners we had ripped off, men I had slept with, some of Markus's former insurance clients, even old neighbors. Grandiose thinking, since I don't think any of those people would have wanted to acknowledge us. But we lived in constant fear of getting caught. Life without restrictions sure felt enslaving to me.

As day turned into night, I spiffed up for the evening in the local McDonald's. Actually, there wasn't that much "spiffing" to do, given the fact that my worldly belongings fit into a small gym bag. The same clothes day after day, the same holey shoes, and the occasional bottles of stolen drugstore hairspray and cologne.

This wasn't always my life. Before I was homeless, when I still held a job, I would have nightly binges—partying till the sun came up with no time to go home and change before getting back to work. At that time my cocaine use was not habitual and nothing was going to keep me from impromptu opportunities to get high, not even the need to go home and get ready for work. I never met a problem I couldn't solve! After a night out, I would duck into the Woodward and Lothrop department store on F Street. "Woodies" was the premier store in the downtown shopping district where wealthy women shopped for Halston and Givenchy and powerful men bought high-priced ties and designer suits. Strolling through the women's clothes section, smiling and nodding at the sales staff, I'd pretend to be on a morning shopping excursion. Choose a few hip items, make a quick visit to the dressing room, and emerge in a new, clean outfit for the day. Bypassing the cash register, I would head for the door via the perfume counter to chat with

the salesgirl who still considered me a prospective client. Spritz with Chanel or maybe Lauder and walk out a new woman.

But those days were long gone. Spending most nights on the street corner and many daylight hours lying on the ground in the park without soap and water made it nearly impossible to cover up my earthy bouquet. I had lost my glow; I was being swallowed up by my environment. My chameleon-like ability to blend in had changed into sticking out like a sore thumb. Dark roots now invaded my beautiful blonde “Farrah Fawcett” hair, which was rarely clean now anyway and almost always pulled back into a ponytail. I couldn’t conceal the dirt under my once perfectly manicured nails. No longer able to pull off the legitimate shopper façade and after many close calls with DC police, I created a self-imposed restraining order on Woodies.

Living on the streets not only proves tough for hygiene, but most times you can’t even see your own physical decline. When you run out of money for drugs, you balance your time between conjuring up new schemes and looking for food. Markus and I were under the illusion that nobody really knew we were homeless. So just like normal couples, we would enter a restaurant, sit down, and order a meal. However, we weren’t like normal couples—we wore the same dirty clothes day after day and showered sparingly. Even when we were not under the direct influence of drugs, it was evident something was wrong because we argued and fought with one another constantly. The deep-seated resentment we had toward each other and our individual inner turmoil made it impossible for us to carry on a civilized conversation—which made it increasingly more difficult to pull off our charade of running out on the check.

In our earlier days of addiction, when we were short on money we would run out on the check; but we still had jobs, took pride in our appearance, and hadn’t yet reached the point of homelessness, so it was easy. But now restaurateurs began to

take immediate note of our unkempt appearance and constant bickering with each other, and they knew we were up to no good.

One day while eating lunch at a Connecticut Avenue bistro we had a run-in with the law. We had ordered several alcoholic drinks, appetizers and entrées, dessert and coffee. The manager of the restaurant became suspicious and called the police. Before we even were done eating an officer showed up, sat down, and ordered lunch. We had no alternative but to attempt our getaway. Markus, as usual, was able to get out of the restaurant, but the officer caught me by my arm as I headed toward the door. Fortunately, he allowed me to go to the ladies room; I was able to exit through a small bathroom window, run down the alley, and catch up with Markus at the subway station.

Before the officer made the mistake of allowing me to use the restroom, he asked why I was running out on the check. I explained that we were hungry and homeless. He suggested we visit SOME (So Others Might Eat), an organization where one could receive a meal free of charge with no questions asked. I thought, *Are you kidding me?* Even though the condition of my life was pitiful, never would I stoop low enough to eat from a soup kitchen or food bank. That was for bums and the mentally ill, not someone like me. If it came to that, surely I would have to change. After all, I did have some standards, even if they were low. This made it easier for me to justify my illicit behavior. I was always more willing to accept that there was something wrong with your thinking rather than mine.

I wasn't ready for change yet, but I was so tired of the merry-go-round. One would think being caught up in a profession that takes one of the most precious and valuable attributes of



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a woman and treats it as a disposable commodity would have sparked a need for change in me. But I pursued it anyway, believing that personal virtue was worth more spent than preserved. Chasing the fantasy that using my sexuality was a tool to getting what I wanted, I didn't realize that every time I gave away my body, I also surrendered pieces of my heart, ripping to shreds the part of me that needed to be honored and respected the most. Not only does it darken the present, but it follows you into your future, because wherever you go, there you are. After a while there is no heart left to be ripped apart, and what becomes of you then?

I was living on the streets of Washington, DC, literally selling myself, body and soul, for a hit of crack cocaine. Going from one desperate moment to the next, unable to face the fact that I had hit such a low. An empty shell is what I had become—hopeless and victimized by my own decisions. I was tired of being used up, beat up, and abused. I had to find a way out.