

## PROLOGUE

# The Kiss of Death

The last time I looked into a mirror and I saw daddy? It was the last time I tried to phone my daughter. It was the day I got an ankh tattooed onto the back of my hand. Now, hand tattoos skate the fine edge of legality/illegality across the United States. So hand tattoos are hard to get, unless you know the right people. It was 1996. I was living in Seattle, back when the city was still gritty. I was far enough underground to know someone who knew someone, and presto: a hand tattoo was mine for twenty-five dollars. I tipped the guy another five bucks because people say it hurts to get a tat that close to the bone—but it didn't hurt me.

Thousands of years ago, North African priests, priestesses, and holy people of genders neither male nor female used the ankh to mean something along the lines of *Eternal Life*, *The Divine Androgyny*, or *The Power of Sex*. Take your pick. To me, it seemed like just the right mix to mark the place where Death—sweetheart that She is—kissed me on the hand.

Earlier that day, the free queer clinic had called to confirm my diagnosis of chronic lymphocytic leukemia, and I didn't yet believe the doctors when they told me that CLL is a slow-moving cancer and probably wouldn't kill me. I was forty-eight years old, Lady Death had just kissed the back of my hand, and I wanted to make peace with my daughter, with whom I hadn't spoken for nearly sixteen years.

It wasn't that I hadn't wanted to speak with her for all these years—it was that she most likely didn't want to hear me. My best educated guess is that she believes—with all her heart and soul—that I am completely and irredeemably evil. Fact is, there are many

x \* Prologue

reasons that people would agree with her. Permit me to count the ways:

I'm sixty-three years old, and for the past quarter of a century I've been living in queer subcultures out on the margins of America. I write books that have been condemned by Pope Benedict—and those are just the books that are taught in universities around the world. I don't think the pope knows about all the porn I've written, but he'd probably condemn that too.

There are a great number of people in the world—I dare say most of 'em—who would say I'm a pervert and a bad person because I'm a transsexual woman. I was born male and now I've got medical and government documents that say I'm female—but I don't call myself a woman, *and* I know I'm not a man. That's the part that upsets the pope—he's worried that talk like that—*not male, not female*—will shatter the natural order of men and women. I look forward to the day it does.

I call myself *trans*, or a *tranny*—and the latter angers a small but vocal group of transsexual women who see *tranny* as the equivalent of *kike* to a Jew. Right, I'm a Jew, and everyone knows someone who's got a thing about Jews. I'm also a tattooed lady—which in most cases means I can't be buried in a Jewish cemetery. But that's OK, because after the doctors harvest whatever's useful, I wanna be lit on fire. My girlfriend knows where to scatter my ashes. Right, I'm a dyke on top of all this. Constant through my incarnations as *man* then *woman* then *neither*, it's always been women who've made me weak in the knees . . . well, knee, singular, nowadays. My right knee is titanium and space-age plastic and it never gets weak, and that makes me the bionic tranny. My daughter doesn't know any of this about me, and even if she does, none of what I've told you so far is why she thinks I'm evil.

And—full disclosure—there's more. I'm a sadomasochist. I enjoy mixing up pleasure and pain. I'm not a sadist—strictly a masochist. I'm the one who gets whipped, paddled, cut open, and pierced. I like it when people cut on me—I've been a cutter since I was a teenager. As for piercings, I've got 'em in body parts I wasn't born with.

And I live with borderline personality disorder (BPD). This gives me a whole lot to write about as a performance artist, and as an advocate for queer youth, freaks, and other outlaws—which are all more reasons some people think I’m a bad person.

In 1970 I ducked out of military service in Vietnam with a psychiatric deferment. It was an act back then, but today? On good days, I’m merely depressed, and more than one therapist has considered a diagnosis of bipolar disorder—but they’ve finally settled on BPD. Well, I settled on it as soon as I heard that the “borderline” they’re talking about is the impossible state of mind that exists between neurosis and psychosis—not unlike the impossible state of gender that exists between man and woman. Several doctors have developed theories of borderline archetypes. I’m the waif. For some real fun, google Princess Diana AND Borderline AND Waif . . . that’s us. My eating disorder is a lot like hers. I love food—can’t get enough of it. And I love to starve myself long enough to see bones poke up just under my skin—and that’s yet another borderline.

And still . . . in my daughter’s eyes, none of this matters much, if at all. There’s a whole other reason I’m bad. I’m a certified post-traumatic stress survivor—no, that’s not the reason my daughter Jessica thinks I’m a bad person. Surviving my trauma, though—that’s what makes me evil in her eyes.



A few hours after the guy drew the ankh into the back of my hand, it was throbbing. It occurred to me for the first time that because of my leukemia, I no longer have enough mature white blood cells to go after possible infections. I had to call Jessica, let her know that this disease was lurking in her own blood. I wanted to say . . . I didn’t know what I wanted to say. I hadn’t thought about it much before that moment—I’d always assumed we’d always be out of touch. But I wanted to say, *Hello*. I wanted to say, *I’ve always loved you*. I wanted to say *goodbye*. I didn’t know how to reach her. I’d sent letters and cards and cash to several addresses, but they’d all come back to me with *Addressee Unknown* scrawled across the envelope. Like me,

xii \* Prologue

my daughter has moved around a lot in her life, and I didn't know where she was living at the time. I couldn't afford a private detective and no amount of Internet sleuthing had revealed her whereabouts. This was 1996—there were no sophisticated people-finding websites yet.

But the back of my hand was still bleeding from where Death had just kissed me, and I couldn't go another day without trying to reach her. After a few hours, I managed to squeeze a phone number out of the Internet for Jessica's mother, my ex-wife Molly. She answered the phone after three rings. I recognized her voice from the single word: "Hello?"