**SKIN AND BONES**

By Sherry Shahan

Chapter 1

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To Jack Plumb room number 19-B looked like an ordinary college dorm. Two beds, two dressers, two desks, two chairs. Cinder block walls painted eggshell. If the linoleum ever had color, it had long since been scuffed off. Even the bedspreads appeared to be sickly.

Unfortunately Jack knew the sorry truth. The room was in the corner wing of a hospital that treated all kinds of patients—in the wing that housed a program for people with major food issues, the Eating Disorders Unit (EDU).

“Welcome to the loony foodie bin,” said the orderly. His name was Bruno, and he was muscle-bound with a square head and bushy unibrow.

Jack guessed he was trying to ease the tension. “Uh, thanks.”

Jack hefted his ratty duffle onto the bed that had to be his. The other one was unmade and a poster hung above it with Rachael Ray in a skin-tight, low-cut T-shirt with *Yum-O!* written across her chest.

“And Jack,” the guy said, “group therapy is at ten o’clock.”

“Got it.”

“The rest of the gang is in the dayroom watching TV if you’re interested.”

“Thanks, but think I’ll unpack,” Jack said, unzipping his duffle.

He hoped he wouldn’t have much interaction with Unibrow, especially after the thoroughly embarrassing pat down an hour ago with Jack in a flimsy cotton gown with ties in back. Unibrow’s job was to make sure no one smuggled contraband into the hospital. And that didn’t mean cigarettes, drugs, or razor blades taped between butt cheeks.

“Damn,” Jack had mumbled after Unibrow discovered the ankle weights he’d stashed in what he’d thought was a secret compartment of his duffle.

Unibrow had dropped the weights into a wastebasket with an ominous clunk.

Jack had tried to act like he didn’t care. But he cared a ton, *damn it!* Ankle weights turned squats into relentless fat burners.

Unibrow had taken the standard vitals: temperature, blood pressure, height, and weight. Jack had sucked all the air from the claustrophobic four-by-four of a room before stepping lightly as possible onto the old-school mechanical scale with sliding weights.

“One-hundred-two and nine-ounces.” Unibrow had scribbled on Jack’s chart. “You can get dressed now.”

Jack had grabbed his sweats and let out the breath he’d been holding. He’d lost four ounces.

\* \* \*

Jack unpacked sweatshirts, sweatpants, thick athletic socks, wool beanies. He wore them to encourage his body to reach a temperature hot enough to melt solids. No matter what anyone said, sweat was nothing but liquid fat. That’s why it smelled like rancid bacon grease. As conundrums go, sweat was also his most private and trusted confidante.

His sister had helped him pack for the extended incarceration, because his mom was upset about his being away for six weeks. The length of time the program was designed to accommodate teens over summer vacation.

Jack had reluctantly agreed to the program, because it wasn’t one of those lock-down facilities. Also because his school counselor had said, “If you keep going like this, you’ll end up in a coma.” Bully tactics.

Jack’s parents blamed themselves for his eating disorder, convinced it was caused by something they did or didn’t do. “I’m sorry I made you eat those disgusting strained carrots when you were a baby,” his mom once said.

“Seriously?” his older sister had put in. “I ate them too and I’m not skinny.”

Most of the time his dad avoided discussions like these.

Here’s the truth: Jack didn’t blame his family for his problems with food. He liked his parents okay. His workaholic dad sold car insurance, house insurance, life insurance, and had memorized how much his clients were worth dead—he was the kind of guy who’d give the shirt off his back, then offer to wash and iron it.

“Try to get better,” his sister had said while folding the Darth Vader sweatshirt she’d picked up for him at a garage sale.

Jack had looked away, feeling guilty, knowing what Jill meant. *It would be great if we could go out for pizza sometime. Maybe even sneak a beer, you know, like normal teenagers.* He wasn’t sure what she had meant by *better*, but he was hoping to come home less obsessed about what he would or wouldn’t eat.

Jack had opened up for a hug, holding her tight, even though he’d known he’d be absorbing calories from the vanilla extract she dabbed behind her ears, praying the huddle would produce enough sweat to burn it off.

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Jill had bought him paperbacks from a used bookstore, cheesy novels with sexy women on the cover. As if she thought he should have a different date every night to keep him company. No way these books were safe to read. People ate all kinds of things while curled up on a recliner—smearing grease and leaving crumbs that an unsuspecting person might ingest. Used books were definitely a slippery proposition. “I love you, weirdo,” she’d said. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Like I’ll have a chance,” he’d said. “It’s a hospital.”

Jack had sobbed a little. More leakage. He couldn’t wait to weigh himself.

“No laxatives.”

“I stopped using them after, you know—” he’d paused, embarrassed all over again remembering the day he didn’t make it to the bathroom in time.

“No diuretics either,” she’d said. “No ipecac syrup. No enemas. And, please, promise me, no fingers down the throat.”

“No fun!”

They’d both laughed, knowing how crazy this sounded. Then he reminded her, “I don’t do that stuff anyway.”

“I mean it,” she’d said, suddenly serious.

“I know.”

And he meant it too. No one *likes* to be sick. Any more than a heroin addict *likes* sticking a needle in his arm or a chronic masturbator *likes* having all that free time on his hands.

Jack finished hanging his clothes in the closet, pointing neck holes in the same direction. Everything was black so he didn’t have to worry about coordinating colors. Next he checked out the boxy bathroom. It had a toilet, no urinal, and a mirror over a porcelain sink. A toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste stood in a plastic mug, crowding a shelf with a brush matted with black hair. Next to the mug, shoelaces hung over a small box of hemorrhoid cream.

Jack decided to shower off the smog and exhaust from the drive through San Fernando Valley. He undressed quickly, annoyed because he couldn’t see below his chest in the mirror without overturning the waste can and balancing precariously on its circular bottom.

Jack was proud of his body, especially the six-pack stretched tightly across his abdomen. He stared into the glass and flexed a bicep, roughly the size of his wrist, and wondered if he’d ever be brave enough to be naked in front of a girl.

Then he blushed because he was really thinking, *A skinny girl like me. But with curves and bumps where curves and bumps are supposed to be*.

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Jack stepped down from the waste can. He looked around for a scale, alarmed when he didn’t see one. *I’ll have to ask a nurse about it*, he thought, suddenly shivering. He cranked the faucet in the shower. For a moment he considered getting his sneakers so he wouldn’t have to touch the floor of the shower. Maybe the gift shop sold flip-flops.

He left the bathroom door open. “As per EDU rule number one hundred,” he muttered sarcastically.

An open door was supposed to discourage purging, at least from the two most obvious orifices. Jack never threw up, unless he had the flu and except that time he got food poisoning from his sister’s undercooked meatloaf. Anorexics got such a bad rap; people often assumed they threw up after eating. Although he’d met an anorexic girl in his last therapy group who’d stuck her finger down her throat after her mom forced her to eat a cup of vegetable broth.

He scrubbed with a loofah and dribbled pee the color of root beer. It didn’t smell so hot either. Dehydration. But he never drank water until after he weighed. An eight-ounce glass of water weighed just that. Eight ounces. Eight glasses per day? It didn’t take an Einstein to calculate.

Jack toweled off and grabbed his sweatpants and Darth Vader sweatshirt. Because it was from his sister and somewhat comforting, it gave him enough confidence to venture into the corridor and look for a nurse.

He stopped the first woman he saw. “Excuse me,” he said. “My bathroom doesn’t have a scale.”

“Jack, isn’t it?” she said, her voice chirpy. “I’m Nancy, head nurse on the ward. How’s it going?”

Nancy looked his mom’s age and could stand to lose the same twenty pounds. She had an old-school perm, but on her it didn’t look to bad.”

“Do you have digital scales?” he asked. “Calibrated to a quarter ounce?”

“Sorry but you’re only weighed once a week while you’re in here.”

Jack felt the familiar rumbles of panic. In the last four years he’d known his weight day by day, sometimes hour by hour. After waking up, before peeing, after peeing, before breakfast, after breakfast, before jogging . . .

He slumped against the wall. “No one told me.”

“Have you gotten your menus?’ she asked, changing the subject.

He shook his head. “No.”

“I’ll make copies and bring them to your room,” she said. “You’re in nineteen-B, right? With David. They put you two together because you’re the only guys. You’ll get along great.”

Jack retreated to his cave, feeling sick to his stomach. Really sick. He just made it to the edge of the toilet, bending over, head between his knees. He willed himself not to throw up. The staff would think he did it on purpose.

When the woozy feeling passed, he went to his spartan desk. The other one was jam-packed with magazines, cookbooks, and a forty-eight ounce mug that said *Don’t Leave Home Without it.* The bulletin board was covered with recipes torn from newspapers.

Jack scanned the recipes, stricken by a case of the dreads so thick they rolled through the room. For the next six weeks he’d be stuck with a roommate who was obsessed with eating. Which confirmed what Jack already knew—agreeing to check into this rehab for food losers was a mistake.

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