

Dark Love: Part One
By JB Duvane

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Chapter 1

Charlotte

When I walked on stage with my lace underwear glowing in the black light, he was sitting there cupping a wad of cash in his right hand with glazed, cocaine eyes and a face so red he must have been nursing the bottle for two days straight.

I got down so I could crawl toward him with my hips swaying left and right, a predator moving past the pole just a few feet away from the railing. Then I sat up, arched my back, and grabbed the pole with my legs spread wide. There was just a thin strip of cloth between the man and what he wanted. He lunged his head forward, and I let him get about a foot away before I shot back, stood up, and twisted around the thick metal bar like a piece of meat on a stick.

"Yeah!" He threw me a twenty-dollar bill.

I could see his eyes getting wider, and the sweat just pouring down his forehead.

"You want this?" I teased him.

"Fuck, yeah!" He smacked my butt.

I stood up, wagged my finger, and laughed softly in his face. He reached out and

grabbed my ankle so I twisted around and kicked him in the throat with the heel of my sharp stiletto.

"Don't touch me!"

A large shadow crept out from the side of the bar. "The fuck you think you're doing?" Mando, the guard, walked up behind him and slapped him upside the head.

"Hey," the man shot up off his stool and whipped around with his fist spinning through the air. "Listen, motherfucker," he tripped on the stool next to him and fell down to the ground. "I pay good money to sit here and watch these fine ladies dance." He stared up at Mando defiantly. "I don't need you coming over here and messing up my high."

Mando picked the man up by the arms.

He thrashed his head back and forth, drool flying out of his mouth. Mando swung him over his shoulder while I watched laughing.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you!" the man shrieked.

When he got to the door, Mando grabbed him around the waist and threw him out like a shot put.

"How do you do that?" I asked when he turned around and walked back into the empty bar.

"Do what?"

"Spin them around when you throw them like that."

"You gotta twist 'em just right." He sat back down at the bar.

Dancing had nothing to do with sex. It was a hustle.

Onstage, I had to learn how to give just enough to keep the men throwing money at me, and how to draw back when they were getting too close without putting them off.

I wasn't there to get high or look good in front of the other girls. I danced at Red's because, with my makeup brush and collection of wigs, I could be anyone or anything I wanted to be.

I had a million faces—the sexy dominatrix, the bad school girl, and of course, the sequined goddess. The men got a peek. They'd swing their heads back and forth like dogs following a piece of meat, but it was just an illusory dream.

That was the fun of it: the thrill of the chase. I was always one step ahead. No man owned me. They couldn't even touch me because I was never really there.

Between the costumes and where I went in my mind when I was on stage, the only real part of me that they saw was what I was willing to show them.

I hopped backstage and began getting undressed. Nobody knew what was really underneath all this makeup and shimmery fabric and expensive wigs except the people backstage. I spent a lot of time making sure of that.

I rubbed my makeup off in an empty stall so nobody could see my real face taking shape. I wasn't sure why. It just felt like a private thing. The makeup and wigs made me into someone so different sometimes I didn't even recognize myself. When I was done, I checked the mirror.

My face was white and round, and my eyes were too close together. I was too short and too lumpy in the middle compared to the other girls. The only thing with any aesthetic value was my hair. It was long and dark and flowed around my arms like a sheet of silk.

But that I always kept to myself.

My costumes were a shield. I didn't like being up there, like a piece of meat swinging around a kebab skewer. I wanted to dance in the city or perform with a traveling troupe. But that wasn't going to happen in this shit town. I had to get out of there.

I liked to dance at Red's, and for a long time, I made myself believe that it could

be what I needed it to be. But I didn't like being demeaned by the sewer runoff that streamed in from the city. They took all of the art out of it and made it hard for me to get lost in my act.

Dance is the idea that the intangible can be expressed through movement and brought to life. A dancer has to be able to feel the room, catch the crowd, and tell them a story.

In that sense, dance was a form of literature, one that spoke to the senses. It used rhythm, speed, momentum, and visual displays to paint a picture for the audience. Dancers could evoke suspense and despair just as easily as they could express sexuality. But none of that was happening in this dead-end joint.

Focusing on sex was like painting every canvas black rather than creating a compelling work of art. Sex had no substance, no emotion. At least it never had for me. I could dress it up, put on a beautiful outfit and play with the crowd, but in the end, it was all about one thing: putting me on display so they could get their dicks hard. That's all my dancing wound up feeling like at Red's, anyway.

And one thing I hated more than anything was being on display.

* * *

It was three in the morning by the time I left, but it was still hot enough that I could feel the heat rising off the pavement. My car was sitting at the other end of

the lot near the entrance. Mando usually walked me out, but it was kind of annoying having him hover over me, especially considering the fact that he watched me all night, so I decided to walk to my car myself.

The only sound was the hum of the electrical equipment to the right of the door. When I passed it, I heard something grate against the pavement behind me and I stopped.

I flipped around and scanned the lot. There didn't seem to be anyone there. I looked down and saw a piece of old newspaper skittering across the pavement. That must have been where the sound came from.

I reached into my bag and felt around in the side pocket, fingering the hard metal revolver. It was there if I needed it. I never did. In fact, I hated carrying it around in my bag. I kept thinking the thing could go off at any time, but it made me feel better knowing that I had something just in case.

I took short, quiet steps past the grated electrical equipment, toward the corner of the building.

"Hey there, little girl!" The drunk from the bar jumped out from around the corner. He was swaying back and forth while holding a fifth of whiskey, smoking a joint. "You stupid bitch. Where's that big asshole to protect you now?"

He dropped the bottle, hunched forward with his head down, and started running at me to try and tackle me. "Ah!"

Just before I stepped aside, I noticed a strip of metal in his hand catching the light. He was holding a knife, and I wasn't far enough away to get away from it. The man could have easily killed me, so I did the only thing I could think to do and fell backward on the pavement, kicking my legs up into the air.

His hand shot forward, the knife pointing straight at me. I kicked out to stop him, caught him in the chest, and his body shot over me. I jumped up and looked down at his bloated red face. He was swinging the knife wildly but was too drunk to realize where he was putting it.

I lifted my foot and brought it down onto his face with a bloody crack. I turned around and started running toward my car when he screamed, blood gurgling in his throat.

He was still on the ground crawling toward me with a snarl. I had a strong urge to put a bullet in his head just so I could see the contents of his skull spray all over the concrete.

Instead, I turned around and got into my faded white sedan. That's why I changed faces. There was always a chance that the wrong guy could come in and bash my head in against the pavement. I didn't want them to see who I was long enough to decide what they were going to do to me.

I whipped out onto the road, tires squealing, and reached into the glove box to grab a cigarette. By the time I had it lit, I was racing past the patchy desert, trying to catch my breath. Sometimes I felt like a little girl who ran away from home, playing a grown up on a stage that she had no business on.

I didn't feel like I belonged in that club and on that stage, but I didn't have any other options. We lived two hours from the nearest town in a deserted patch of desert in Arizona. All there was in Graham County was a convenience store, a small grocery store with an overpriced, last-stop gas station, and Red's.

The only time people came through was when the truckers started making their Christmas hauls. Even then, they didn't put enough money into the place to make it worthwhile for them to hire anybody. So I worked at the club and leeches off of whatever poor sap wandered in.

Financially everything was covered. There were no bills to pay, nothing to get except household stuff. When my father first started getting disability, they gave him a ten-thousand-dollar check, all in one lump sum. He used it to buy a patch of land just off the freeway and a second-hand single-wide trailer.

We had a place to stay, but the ten thousand wasn't enough to cover utility hookups, so when I would get home at night and pull up in front of the crumbling white hunk of aluminum, I had to jump out and pull a hose from the trunk of my car so I could replace the gas in the generator.

I could hear my father snoring through the thin metal wall which was only drowned out after I started the generator and the sound of the engine ripped through the air. I still had to be careful when I opened up the front door or else he would wake up.

When I passed the front window, I could see him sitting up, sleeping on the couch with his head rested against the arm. Just the thought of the slimy beast with his eyes following me made a shiver run down my neck.

The door opened with a pop and he jumped, sending a rancid cloud of body odor spewing out from his yellowed tank top. I watched his round face move from left to right while he smacked his lips, but his eyes didn't open. Instead, he leaned to the other side.

I carefully stepped through the door and pushed aside the pile of trash so I could walk in. I had no idea where all the garbage came from but every night there seemed to be more. The floor was always littered with everything from old beer cans to styrofoam soda cups, and everything was plastered with old Chesterfield cigarette butts. That was his brand. Not many people smoked them anymore but he wouldn't change. He hadn't changed anything in twenty-one years — not since the day I was born.

I had given up trying to clean up after him long ago, but the irony of the whole situation was that I seemed to be the only one who suffered. He didn't notice or

he just didn't care.

The front room smelled like rancid piss and body odor. The air was so thick with it that the stench drove itself up inside my nostrils and stuck there. I could never get rid of it.

He was sitting in the epicenter of the trash pile surrounded by paper plates and old malt liquor bottles, wearing nothing but a tank top and crusty boxer shorts. He only got off the couch when he absolutely needed to, and never bathed.

His arm jerked when I walked through to the hallway. I stopped. The floor creaked. I had a sudden urge to jump through the hall straight to my room.

He lifted his head and tilted it in my direction.

I jolted forward and prepared myself. I'd planned on running into my room before he saw me.

His head dropped and he went back to snoring, so I relaxed and started walking back to my room. I was exhausted.

"D'you get my cigarettes?" A deep, husky voice sprung out of the living room.

I pulled the pack out of my purse and waded through the trash to hand it to him. When I reached out, he grabbed my arm and grunted. "See you got that makeup

on. Smell too. Where you been?"

"That's none of your fucking business," I tore my wrist away from him. Then I turned around and took a step forward.

He rose up, releasing a wave of stench from the couch below him. No sooner had I smelled it then I felt him behind me. "You don't talk to me like that, you little bitch."

"Fuck you." I lunged for my room and locked the door.

I could hear his feet pounding down the hall. He was going to ram the door. It would give easily underneath his weight. I couldn't believe this was happening again. I didn't have anywhere else to go, but if I stayed there was no way of knowing what he would do.

I grabbed my things and hopped out the window. Halfway down the driveway, I heard the door crash open.

"Hey!" He shrieked. "Hey! Where do you think you're going!?"

I ignored him and jumped into my car. When I peeled out onto the highway, I didn't know where I was going, or what I was going to do. I just knew that I was never going back there again.

Chapter 2

Raymond

"Are you ready?" Mama parted my bed curtain brimming with excitement.

"Yeah!" I shot up and hopped right off the bed. I had dressed the night before so that we could go as soon as she came in and got me.

"Now just wait a minute, little mister," she said, stopping me and crouching down next to me. "You've got to ride on my shoulders."

"Of course," I replied with a very serious face. "I love you, Mama." I threw my legs over her neck and she grabbed my ankles, steadying herself and ducking down under the ornate archway as we walked out of my room. She bobbed up and down, causing me to giggle, as she wended her way through the corridors and into the parlor where she'd set out milk and cookies on a side table.

"You have to eat more than one. I don't want any fussing from you."

I hopped off and shot towards the table at supersonic speed, snatching cookies and drinking right out of the jug. I had developed a habit of grabbing things when they came. I never knew when Mama's mood was going to change.

There were days when she would shower me with gifts. She would give me

anything I asked for; piles of presents and food and toys just for me.

She was a firm believer that young boys should be given free reign of the house in order to learn how to properly manage their home when they get older. She always told me that a free boy becomes a strong, assertive man, one who knows how to command others.

But then other times she didn't seem to remember her own words. Those times —times when she said I had been bad—I might not see a meal for days.

"Come here." Mama reached out for a tissue sitting on a console table next to the window.

I stomped my feet. "No!"

"Why not?" The warmth in her eyes started to melt away and a cold hollowness took its place.

"I like my milk mustache. It makes me feel grown up."

A smile crept across her mouth but didn't quite reach her eyes. "You don't know the first thing about what it means to be a grown up. Now come here."

I lifted my head and went to her. When she was done wiping my face her voice softened. "You want up?"

I nodded my head up and down quickly to emphasize my point. Mama ducked down, grabbed my ankles, threw me over her head, and ran towards the door. "Yay!" The air rushed past me and blood filled my head. All I could see was the bright red carpet zooming under me and all I could feel was the rush. The excitement.

I could feel the energy almost like it was shooting out of her like a colorful blast in a comic book. These were the days I loved. Mama was with me. She wanted to be with me.

She insisted on days like today that I should be by her side at all times. That it was where I belonged. I loved her so much and I wanted to please her and on days like today I did everything I could to keep her happy. But for some reason, even with my strongest efforts, she would eventually take an unexpected turn.

"You want down?"

"I don't ever want down!"

"Don't be silly, Raymond. You can't stay up forever," she said as she whipped me around and sat me back down on the floor. "Whatever goes up must come down." Her eyes were still hollow as they peered down at me.

That morning was special because Mama had arranged for us to take a walk

through the narrow, rocky mountain trail that led toward an overlook so we could enjoy the view of the desert.

The desert had been my family's home for a long time. When she taught me my lessons, Mama told me that her mother lived in the house and her mother's mother. She told me that the house was big enough for three whole families to live in, but I only ever got to see the rooms in my special part of the house. They were big rooms and I had plenty of space to play, but when I turned and looked back at the house as we left on our walk I thought the house was the biggest building in the world.

Bigger than any palace or castle that Mama had told me about in the far-off lands in my picture books. Bigger than that giant cruise ship that sank in the ocean. The picture that she showed me had people standing next to it that were as small as ants, and looking back at the house now I felt even smaller than that. I didn't understand why I wasn't allowed to see all of the house that we lived in. But I never wanted to make Mama unhappy so I stayed where she told me to stay.

Mama led the way, taking a clear path at the foot of the wraparound driveway that wound through a series of boulders and low bushes that surrounded the house. There were no other houses anywhere. In every direction that we walked, on days that Mama would bring me outside, I never saw another house or building or person. Not one.

We walked along narrow cliff trails that required us to carefully place our feet in order to avoid falling hundreds of feet down, but it was worth it. The view was spectacular. Pink sand that led up to rolling gray hills capped with pointy white hats. And when the sun peeked over the hills like it was now, with reds and oranges falling like a blanket on everything, it turned the world into a different place. A place that I felt Mama and I could disappear into and never have to go back.

It wasn't that I didn't like my home. I just didn't feel safe there. I didn't understand it. I felt like the house was the reason Mama changed.

I had a dream once where I was playing in my bedroom and Mama was in the next room. I couldn't see her but I could hear her singing and laughing. She called to me and told me about all of the beautiful things she was making and I told her that I wanted to see them. I wanted to be a part of the beautiful things she did.

In the dream, she told me that she would be right in, that she was bringing what she had made to me. I was so excited for her to come into my room, but the second she crossed the threshold she changed. Suddenly her face had a deep scowl and her eyes were on fire. She yelled at me and told me that I had been bad and needed to be punished, then turned and went back through the doorway. I watched her in tears as she walked through the doorway, but as soon as she was on the other side she turned around and smiled at me. It wasn't that scary, cold smile she had just given me. The smile she had on her face was the

smile she gave me when she was the *other* Mama. It was the sweet, kind smile of the Mama that I loved.

Ever since then I believed that it was the house that made her change. It made perfect sense to me. The house was strange and mysterious and I even started to believe that it was the house that didn't want to see me. That the house made her keep me in those rooms that made up my entire world. My entire world when I was inside the house, that is. But now that I was outside I was free. I looked at Mama and I could see that she felt free too.

"Let's never go back, Mama," I wanted to say. But I was too scared. I didn't want to ruin the moment.

Mama brought a shoulder bag filled with cookies, chips and soda for me, along with some sandwiches for both of us. We ate as my eyes scanned the landscape — the mounds of eggshell boulders with their chaotic clusters, snaking through the summit, interrupted by small patches of thick green brush.

Mama, after having finished her sandwich, walked over to where I had been standing on the edge of a steep drop, testing my courage. I had been walking closer and closer to the edge, trying to see if I could get past the surge of adrenaline and rest my feet at the very end so I could look down and see what was at the bottom.

She took my hand and squeezed it. "You don't want to fall."

"What will happen if I do?"

Mama stopped and stared out at the sky, its fading pinks and yellows casting an eerie orange glare over the horizon. "You go past there." She pointed to the end of the sky, where the world seemed to drop off at the edge. "And you never come back." Her voice sounded dead with those final words and sent a chill up my spine.

I continued to stare out at the horizon with Mama's hand in mine. "Will I fly?" I remember thinking that there was another part of the world, one that I didn't understand and that she knew about. *Just like the house*, I thought as a feeling of dread crept over me.

"No." She said after a long moment. "You will go away and you won't ever be able to come back. You won't see your Mama ever again," she said in that same dead, monotone voice that sounded like it was coming from a different person off in the distance.

"That's terrible!"

After a long moment, she seemed to snap out of her spell and looked down at me with a faint smile. "Well, that's life and at some point, we all go there." She bent down and whisked a few crumbs off my shirt then straightened my collar. "I'll go there someday, but only after I teach you everything I can."

"No Mama!" My voice flew down the mountain, causing a flock of birds to fly off to a safer location. "You can't! I won't let you."

"Well, there's nothing you can do about it, Raymond. It's the one thing in life you won't be allowed to control."

"But you told me I control everything! I make the rules. And you're Mama. You can't do it. You can't leave me. I need you. I won't have anyone! I'll be in the big house all alone!"

"It doesn't work that way, Raymond." She pushed my hair back on my head but that's all she said, leaving me to imagine myself wandering the dark halls in the unknown parts of the house by myself for eternity. I was terrified.

"Promise me you'll never leave me, Mama," I cried into her neck. "Please." But I could feel by the way she held me that it was a promise she would never be able to keep.

Chapter 3

Charlotte

All I had was a quarter-tank of gas and a night's worth of tips, enough to get me out of the desert, but nowhere near enough to survive once I got out. I was going to have to find a way to make money, and that meant sticking around a little longer.

I swung a right into the gas station and filled up the whole tank, along with two extra canisters I kept in back. By the time I was done filling up I could barely stand. My heart was racing and all I could think of was my father. I let my head fall against the roof of the car, shaking with sobs.

He was my father. As disgusting and pathetic as he was now, he had raised me and had taken care of me my whole life. We used to be close. When I was little, he'd tell me stories about my mother, who he claimed to be the most beautiful person in the world, and how they planned to move to Phoenix and get a house together.

I came to love the beautiful person that I had never met, and wished every night that I could be half as beautiful and loved as she was. I would lay in the dark and stare at the ceiling and imagine myself tall and beautiful, with adoring men surrounding me.

My father was stuck in that time, I guess we both were. He was still mourning her death and I was still wishing for beauty and adoration.

But my father was so focused on what he had lost that he had to drown out the present just to keep the past alive. How could you hate somebody like that? It was a tragedy, but he didn't exactly do it to himself. He was just a victim of the circumstances. His problem was he stayed in that victim role long after she was taken away from him. From us.

I tried to bring him with me into the present where he might find some value in me and the people who were still alive. But I wasn't entirely here either so I couldn't exactly blame him for wanting to block the world out. My dream world consisted of costumes and the feeling that being on stage got me. But at least I knew it was all a fantasy world.

But I also knew that if I didn't leave I would wind up buried under that pile of filth right next to him. Staying wasn't helping him or me. But I had a bad feeling that without me he wouldn't be able to survive. He was too lazy to get up and start the generator. He didn't have enough money for gas and food and he didn't even have a car, so he couldn't go out and get the household supplies he'd need.

And of course, he wouldn't have his precious beer and cigarettes.

As I drove back out onto the highway, I tried to focus on the lines on the road. I needed to focus on something, because if I didn't, I'd start sobbing again. Then I

wouldn't be able to drive at all. I'd end up pulling over, turning around, and going right back to the house to apologize.

I was killing him. That's what I was doing. I swung my car onto the shoulder and let my head hit the steering wheel. I was killing him. He raised me. He loved me. I was the only thing he had, and I was killing him.

Could I do this? Could I just turn my back on him knowing how badly he was going to suffer? I thought back to last night before I left for work. I wore nothing but simple, plain clothes like I always did when I left. I was carrying a black duffel bag with palettes of some of my more expensive supplies when I walked by the couch, careful not to wake him up.

I was almost to the door when he grabbed my hand and threw me to the ground, where a nasty piece of pizza stuck to my back. "You walk out on me girl, I'll kill you."

That was enough to justify leaving. No man owned me. Nobody threatened my safety, especially my own father. A father was supposed to be his daughter's protector. He was supposed to be her support system, her confidante, and when the time came, he was supposed to be the one that would put his life on the line to make sure that nobody hurt her. My father twisted the bond we had and turned our house into a prison built out of his own fear and filth.

That was enough. Anyone pathetic enough to threaten to kill his own daughter

didn't deserve her care. I got back onto the highway, unsure of where to go or what direction to take. There was nowhere to sleep — no motel, not for miles — and I didn't have enough cash to go spending sixty bucks a night while I saved money to move into the city.

Every quarter mile or so, I would pass small turnouts into the desert — God knows where they led. The land was mostly flat, but farther out there were dry river beds running south that had trees surrounding them and mountains off in the distance.

Desperate for a place to park and rest, I took a right at a thin dirt road, and carefully made my way through the bare patch of land, watching to avoid the deep craters and boulders that could have easily cracked an axle.

Eventually, the road curved downward and dusty banks sprung up on both sides. That was when the road started to get patchier. A layer of flat river rocks bigger than my head barred my path. I stopped and stared past the thin, mesquite and palo verde trees jutting out into the road ahead.

Beyond them was a patch of sand that looked like a dry river bed intersecting the road. It was possible that this was a dangerous place to stop, but when hiking out in the desert, there was pretty much only one rule. You weren't trespassing so long as you didn't cross a thin wire fence.

This was open land, and there wasn't much out here except coyotes and javelina

to bother me. They wouldn't be a problem, so long as I didn't keep any food or wrappers sitting around. I hopped out of the car and walked back to the trunk to pull out a blanket, and adjusted the backseat so I could lie down.

It was too small; I couldn't stretch out, but I was warm. The old comforter was thick, and when I closed my eyes I immediately fell asleep.

When I came to, my face felt like it was melting. The stale air suffocated me and a razor-sharp pain in my head dulled my senses. I reached for a water jug sitting at my feet, opened it up, and turned it upside down, forcing the hot liquid down my throat.

"Fuck!" My voice was like smoke and leather. I reached down to unlock the car and jumped out, allowing my lungs to take in the soft, dry air.

I was lucky that I woke when I did, or the heat would have cooked me alive a few minutes after the sun hit the car. I looked around, my whole body still covered in sweat, and wondered if maybe there was something I could use to cover the car.

The creosote bushes and the trees were too thin to offer any cover, and it probably wouldn't have made much difference what I did. The car was going to get too hot for me to sleep in. This would have to be my last day in Graham County.

I stood up on shaky, aching legs and pulled out some jerky and a cigarette. Would I be able to make enough dancing that night to leave?

Probably not.

I only had three hundred dollars, minus what I spent on gas. I had enough fuel to get me to Phoenix, but I estimated that in order to make a real move, it would take me at least a thousand to go and get a hotel long enough to find work.

I felt my forehead and pulled my hand back with a sharp intake of breath. It was hot and it was just going to get hotter out here in the open.

"Fuck!" I stamped my foot on the ground, stirring up a cloud of dust.

One thing was for certain, I had to get to Red's. That's where the money was. After that, I would decide what I was going to do. I looked back at the car. I had nothing, just a ratty old sedan, and my body. Somehow, I was going to use what I had to make it out of this hell hole.

I wasn't going back.

I took another shot of water, swishing the hot liquid around in my mouth before swallowing, then looked around. The place where the car was parked was too thin to turn around, but the river bed a few feet away was long and wide. If I could get my car through the sand I could turn around and get back onto the

highway.

I shut the comforter back up in the trunk and replaced the seat. Then I grabbed the water jug and threw it onto the passenger seat before getting in. The car made it through the sand easily enough, and glided up the dirt road, bouncing every time it hit a rock or pothole. I had to hold onto the handle above the front window to keep my head from bashing against the ceiling and giving myself a concussion.

The monotony of the highway curving through the desert allowed my head to clear a little bit, and I managed to get some water down. Today was going to be hell, and there was no way of knowing what tomorrow was going to be like.

I was never comfortable with uncertainty. It was something I had to deal with every night while trying to leave the trailer, wondering whether or not my father would wake up while I was walking past. Only this time, there was a lot more at stake. He might have cussed me out or even slapped me across the face, but at least with him I had a place to sleep ... and I wasn't alone.

I wondered if I should have just gone home. I could always leave another time. It didn't have to happen this second. I could get prepared and take a week or two, going back and forth between Graham County and Phoenix getting everything ready. But what would I tell my father if he asked where I had been.

Plus, I knew myself well enough to know that if I went back, the old guilt would

kick in and I'd stay there, taking care of him and eventually getting in so deep that I'd never be able to leave. No. I finally had the momentum. I was going to make use of it.

Red was standing outside smoking a joint, his long, greasy red hair in a ponytail when I pulled up to the club. He spat out a black wad of chew and looked at me for a second. Then he put out his joint and went back in.

I reached into my duffel bag and pulled out a compact. There was a red triangle pointed down over the tip of my nose. It was bright and peeling. He probably wouldn't let me dance like this. I couldn't take that chance, so I set about the task of covering it up with a layer of makeup, thick enough to hide it, and thin enough that it didn't look too fake.

The result was a clear canvas, one that could be painted on and renewed at will. It would be good enough for the men, but Red was the one that would have to decide. Not that he had much to choose from out here.

Inside, there was one girl, a pearly white ginger, spinning around the pole, trying to get money out of a drunk trucker that was bobbing his head along with the music.

"Hey." I turned around to see Red, his head drunkenly swinging from side to side. He offered me a drink from the fifth of whiskey he'd been nursing.

I turned it down.

"Well, whaddya doin' here so early?" He had to lean against the bar to keep from falling over.

"I wanted to see if I could pull a full one today. That all right with you?"

His head jutted forward and he squinted, inspecting my face, then my body.

"Yeah," he laughed. "That's all right, sweetheart. You just shake that little ass of yours and make us some money." He turned around and walked back to the DJ's booth near the bar.

"Why are you here so early?" Maddie, the aged bartender asked.

"I ran away last night, slept in my car in the desert, and woke up in a freaking oven. I don't want to go back and I can't keep sleeping in my car, so I'm going to make every cent I can today and drive out to Phoenix."

"You'd better already have some money saved up, honey." She shook her head while she wiped the bar. "It's been slow."

I turned around and watched the ginger flapping her legs. It reminded me of a chicken. "I've got to find a way, Maddie."

"First thing ..." She leaned in with a playful tone in her voice. "We gotta get rid

of this bitch. Can you believe her hair?"

It looked like she'd cut a poodle fop out of a red clown wig. "That's not what they meant when they called this place Red's. Dammit, Maddie. She's probably scared away all the customers."

"It's barely ten in the morning. Believe me, honey, you can run circles around that one."

I sighed as I watched the ginger shake her ass at the mostly empty bar. "That's great, Maddie, but what am I supposed to do if I can't make enough tonight?"

"Just dance."

"Okay, have the DJ introduce me as Sally Sue. Put on 'Sweet Home Alabama.'"

"Sure you don't want something with a little more banjo?" Maddie asked, nodding at a hick in a tattered cowboy hat who was sitting in front of the stage.

"Maybe for the second set," I said with a grim smile.

Maddie would get rid of the girl, saying that Red wanted to give somebody else a turn, even though Red was probably passed out on top of his desk with his cheek smeared with cheap cocaine.

The truckers all loved the southern angle. For some reason, I don't know why, it got them going. So I threw on a pair of denim booty shorts with a couple threads for the crotch, a red plaid shirt tied up at the bottom, and did my hair in pigtails. I even added some freckles to make it look authentic.

I made Sally a little shy at first, sticking close to the pole while I watched the hillbilly carefully to see if I had him. The man was so drunk that he could barely talk. He was hollering incoherently, cheering me on. Halfway through the set he got up and tried to get up on the stage, so I whistled for the bouncer to kick him out.

Mando walked up, grabbed the hick, and escorted him out. When the DJ cut the music I got off the stage. "This is bullshit!" I said to Maddie as I walked past the bar to the dressing room.

Maddie followed me in. "What's going on?"

"I gotta make some *money*, Maddie. I gotta get out of here."

"I mean, why did you run away?" she asked.

I'd never told anyone about my father before, and I didn't know how to begin. I could tell her that my father was a pig, but I couldn't really describe it well enough for her to understand.

I could tell her that he threatened me, but that probably wouldn't mean anything to an ancient country bartender. But I had no way of explaining what I was feeling. Why I felt like I was betraying him by going out on my own. I couldn't explain it because I didn't understand it myself.

"My dad."

"He touch you?"

"Well ... no," I lied. "But he's been threatening me."

She nodded her head. "I got a one bedroom with a couch. I'll give you a week to make up the money."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I like you. We all do. I'm not gonna let you get into a bad situation if I can help it. Just no men and no drugs."

"Thank you." I rushed up and gave Maddie a hug. "You think I could rest a little till tonight since it's so dead in here, maybe take a shower? I've been out in the heat this whole time."

"Sure." Maddie left the empty bar to Mando and let me follow her car back to her triplex. It was a simple place with a white sectional, a clock, and a tiny table

in the corner with an old box TV sitting on top. It was strange seeing a home the way it should be with everything in its place. There were no food containers lying around, the floor was clean, and the smell was tolerable.

"After what I've been through, this is heaven."

"Is it?" Maddie turned on the lights, sounding skeptical. She pulled out a cigarette and offered me one. I took it and lit it, allowing the smoke to saturate my lungs before letting it out. She motioned for me to sit at the table. "What are you going to do when you leave?" she asked.

"Dance."

"You don't want to do that forever, do you?"

"For now. I haven't really planned things out."

"You know, I am sixty-two years old, and stripping has been my biggest regret. The men are shit. The drugs and booze are everywhere. It's just not the kind of life you want. I mean, how are you ever going to have a decent relationship if you dance for a living? Men won't respect you."

"I just want a stage." I took a puff of smoke. "I'm never going to spin around Carnegie Hall or travel Europe performing ballet. I don't have the body for it. But I know that I want to dance."

"And you'd give up your dignity and well-being to do it?"

"I don't feel like I'm giving up my dignity." I took another puff.

"You don't?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Not as far as I'm concerned. I'm not really there when I'm on stage. I'm in my own world and none of that scum can touch me."

She shook her head. "Does that make you feel better?"

I sighed. "Not really."

"You see where I'm going with this? You're a good kid. You deserve more than this."

"Thank you, Maddie." I put my cigarette out then wrapped my arms around her.

"You're a dear."

Chapter 4

Raymond

I opened my eyes and blackness surrounded me. I thought for a moment that I was sitting up in bed or against my toy chest in my bedroom and it was the middle of the night. But even when I woke up in my dark bedroom, when the house was silent and still, I could still see light coming in through the window and I could feel the softness of my bed and my sheets.

I didn't feel any softness or see any moonlight where I was.

I shifted a little and rubbed my eyes, hoping that when I opened them again the shadowy corners of the room would come into focus, but that didn't happen. I shivered when my hands fell away from my eyes and I was faced with the pitch black darkness again.

"Mama!" I called out. My voice cracked and sounded weak, but it was the best I could do. "Mama, where are you?"

I moved around a little in the dark, feeling the wall next to me, the one I had been sleeping up against, and tried to figure out where I was. The wall was smooth and hard and felt like bare wood, not like the walls of my bedroom that were covered with paper that had pictures of boys riding horses and playing in red wagons.

What did I do? I thought to myself as I felt along the wall. I had to have done something very bad this time if Mama put me away like this. She must have been really mad at me.

I remembered playing in my room and I remembered getting thirsty. I went into the bathroom to get some water but I decided to try drinking directly from the faucet. I had tried it before but had never been tall enough. I could feel that I was growing, though, so I figured I give it another shot.

I leaned over the edge of the counter, standing on the tips of my toes, and lapped at the water that was trickling out of the silver spout. I was so excited that I was actually tall enough to reach the faucet. I couldn't wait to tell Mama what I had ...

"Raymond!"

I stood up immediately and stared in horror at Mama as she came stomping into the bathroom. She turned the water off and grabbed my arms, shaking me and yelling at me.

"We do not *ever* drink out of the faucet. Ever! You know better than that!"

"I'm sorry, Mama. I didn't know!"

"Don't give me that act, Raymond. You knew exactly what you were doing. I *was* going to make something special for you, Raymond. I *was* going to treat you to a giant ice cream sundae and maybe even a movie. But now that you've been such a bad boy you can go to bed without supper."

"But, Mama, I ..."

"If I hear one more word out of you, Raymond ..."

"Yes, Mama."

I went into my room and got in bed and watched Mama shut the door to my room with tears in my eyes. I thought she would be proud of me. I thought she would be as happy as I was that I could finally reach the faucet. I thought she loved me.

I lay in bed for hours while I waited for the day to end, but it just kept going. I didn't want to make a sound or even move in case Mama was standing outside my door. She'd done that before. Times when I was taking a nap and thought she was gone she would stand there, silently waiting for me to move. I would hold my breath when I heard the floorboards in the hall creak and then after what seemed like an eternity she would open the door and peek around the corner, then tell me she knew what I was doing.

"I can always see you, Raymond. I always know what you're doing," she said one

time, and even though I couldn't see her face I pictured her dead eyes and half smile superimposed over the dark head that blocked out the light of the hallway.

But last night was different. After I had spent hours laying in the same position in bed, until my body started to sweat and my legs started to cramp, Mama opened the door. She brought a tray into my room and set it on the table next to the bed, then sat down and pushed my bangs back off my wet forehead.

"Are you feeling better, Wayme?"

I didn't know what to say. I hadn't been sick. I hadn't felt bad. I was in bed because she had told me to get in bed and that I couldn't have any supper.

"Yes, Mama. I'm better."

"Good. Here's a little something for you to eat. Some cookies and chocolate milk. If you're feeling better tomorrow maybe we can play a game."

"Okay, Mama."

She smiled that half smile that never really made me feel any better, then got up and left me alone. I scarfed down the cookies and the milk as the sky grew dark and that's the last thing I remember.

Did I do something after that? Did I do something I don't remember? I wondered as I slid

my hand further along the wall. I didn't move very far, though. I couldn't see a thing and kept imagining that my hand would suddenly touch something that I couldn't identify. Or worse it would sink into a puddle of warm, sticky blood. After that, all I could picture were walls covered in blood. The walls of all of the secret rooms in this house. I knew it now. I knew that they were all covered in blood.

I started to whimper and rock as I sat there holding my knees and shivering. I didn't want to be in that creepy, dark place anymore. I wanted to be with Mama.

"Mama?"

"Surprise!"

The cupboard door flew open and I saw Mama's silhouette. As my eyes adjusted I realized that I was in one of the cubby holes in my bedroom. The rooms in the house were full of all kinds of cupboards and cubby holes. Some were filled with toys or clothes but some were empty. Somehow I had gotten into one of the empty cupboards and had fallen asleep there. But I didn't remember doing that. I didn't remember that at all.

"Are you ready for a fun day?"

"Yes, Mama," I said.

"You don't sound very excited, Raymond. Mama wants to play with you!"

"Yes, Mama." I crawled out of the cubby and stood in my bedroom. I rubbed my sleepy eyes again and when I opened them I looked around in amazement. My bedroom had been decorated like we were having a party. There were streamers hung everywhere and a table set up in the middle of the room with a big cake on top. Mama strapped a pointy hat onto my head and started singing.

"But it's not my birthday, Mama," I said as I watched her move across the room with long steps like she was being waltzed around by an invisible partner.

"It's not a birthday party, Raymond. It's a get well party! Sit down! You're all better now. We need to celebrate!"

In that moment, I finally realized that there was something not quite right about my mama. I loved her more than anything, but none of this made sense. I hadn't been sick and I hadn't crawled into that cupboard on my own. I didn't understand what she was doing but I was too young to do anything but obey her. I waiting a little longer while she danced around the room, then sat down at the table, watching her as she cut the cake, her eyes wild and dark.