

Dark Love: Part Two
By JB Duvane

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All characters are 18 or over.

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ABOUT THE DARK LOVE SERIES

Dark Love: Part One

Charlotte couldn't escape ... from the prison Raymond put her in or from the dark love she found with him. Especially when she realized that the darkness was inside her too...

Charlotte:

I ran away from my crap life of stripping and living with my father in a trash heap of a trailer.

I thought I was headed toward freedom but I woke up in another prison.

A prison that was built just for me.

He knows things about me that no one should.

He sees things in me that I can't see.

I don't want to be here.

But I don't want to leave him either.

He's a monster for keeping me prisoner.

But I'm a monster too for loving the dark, dirty things he does to me.

Raymond:

I know I messed up.

I've been alone in this house for far too long.

Alone except the servants that skulk around in the darkness.

But then I found Charlotte and I had to have her.

I had to take her.

I have to make her mine.
Now I don't want to live without her.
But if I can't convince her to stay ...
they won't let either one of us live.

*Dark Love is a dark romance that contains dark sexual themes and is 40k words in length.
It's the first part of a two-part series.*

* * *

Dark Love: Part Two

*Even though she was free, Charlotte found herself in another prison. She was a
prisoner inside her own heart.*

Raymond:

I set her free.
I let her walk out that door, but now she's in grave danger.
And it's all my fault.
If they kill her it will be because of me.
I have to find her ... and bring her back.
I don't want to live this life if it's without Charlotte.

Charlotte:

No matter where I go I'm in a prison of some kind.
My father's trailer ...

A jail cell ...

Even this beautiful island feels like a prison.

But I know that the prison cell I'm really in is inside me.

I want Raymond's love ... I need it.

But I'm afraid that the only way I can truly have it is to let him go.

Dark Love: Part Two is the second and final part of the Dark Love series. It contains dark subject matter and sexual themes that may not be suitable for everyone.

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Chapter 1

Raymond

"That was a very stupid thing for you to do."

I turned around and one of the servants was standing in the doorway of the library. After watching Charlotte drive off to her father, I almost left to follow her. I couldn't stand the thought of her driving away from me, of losing complete control of the situation ... and her. I had Gerald bring a car around but he convinced me to wait. He had a way about him. He was always able to see clearly when my mind was muddled and I trusted him more than anyone on the planet. I even trusted him more than I trusted myself sometimes.

After he left I wandered the halls a bit. I felt like I was completely lost in my own home. I had to find something to occupy myself or I felt like I was going to go crazy. I couldn't stop thinking about Charlotte and the intensity of what had gone on between us. I wanted so badly to believe that she felt it too, that she wasn't lying to me when she told me she'd come back. I finally decided to occupy myself with some reading of the handwritten books in the family library.

I had gone through some of those old books years ago, but the details were a bit fuzzy now. My mother had told me some of the history, but none of it really made any sense to me. Or really mattered. But if I had some kind of mutiny on my hands I wanted to know exactly what the Beauchamps believed. To me this was a history that was woven with myth and superstition. But I was starting to realize that to them it was very real.

"What do you want?" I asked the servant.

"You shouldn't have let her go."

"First the lot of you tell me that I can't keep her here unless she agrees, now you tell me she shouldn't have left? You need to get your stories straight."

"This isn't going to work."

"What? Will you people just tell me what you want? This house doesn't belong to you!"

"You're very wrong there."

"Oh really? I've been going over these books for hours. It's the same story I've heard for years. This house belongs to *my* family. It gets passed to the Beauchamps in the event that the Valice lineage has ended. That hasn't happened! If you want to leave, then leave. No one's stopping you. But get the hell out of my sight. I'm tired of all of this bullshit!"

I turned my back on the servant and the next thing I knew I had a knife at my throat. "This is serious, Valice. One of my brothers went after your beloved Charlotte. Do you know what he's going to do when he catches up with her? He's going to kill her."

I closed my eyes and tried to figure out what I was going to do. Charlotte had been gone for hours. It was almost dawn and I had been sitting on this couch all night, reading about my ancestor's fucked-up history while these animals were going behind my back to kill her. They were not going to get away with this.

"Why? What the hell is your problem with her? And who the hell *are* you anyway? Every time I turn around there's someone new walking through that goddamned door." I could feel blood run down my throat as the blade of the knife cut through my skin.

"I'm Geoffrey, Renard's oldest son."

"Why haven't I ever seen you before?" It was alarming to me that there were so many of them. And that they had access to this entire house when I had no idea where they were most of the time.

"I've been in and out of the rooms of this house many times. You don't seem to pay much attention to any of us, which is another mistake you have made. You are going to die, Valice."

"Don't count on it," I said as I reached up and behind my head with both hands, grabbing the collar of the man standing behind me and pulling him over my

head. I leaned forward and threw his body onto the coffee table in front of me, splitting it in half.

Geoffrey's body crashed through the table and landed on the floor. He jumped up and whipped around, his hands like claws ready to grab me. "I'm going to tear you apart, Valice."

The knife had flown out of his hand and was now on the floor in front of the fireplace. I moved so that I was inching closer to it but he knew it was there too. It was ultimately going to be a race to see who got to the knife first. "Why haven't you just killed me? You seem to have had more than just a few chances by now. You could have easily killed me in my sleep hundreds of times."

"You weren't as much of a threat."

"What makes me such a threat now? As far as I understand it, the will states that if any foul play is discovered—if a Beauchamp murders a Valice—then the contract is over. Your family doesn't get the money. It doesn't matter when you do it, you still won't get your share of the estate if you kill me. How is it any different now?"

"We both know there is no innocent party here. Plenty of blood has been spilt on both sides over the centuries."

"Yeah? So?" I shrugged. "I had nothing to do with any of that."

"That is of no consequence to us."

"Jesus Christ, you people." I was exasperated with these constant interruptions. "I've had enough of this."

We were both eying each other as we made our way closer to the knife. In a split second Geoffrey ducked down to grab it and I reached for the fireplace poker. As he stood up, the knife pointed up at me and ready to slice into my gut, I brought the poker down on the side of his head. He staggered for a moment, then came at me. I fell backward, hitting my head on the broken coffee table but I still had the poker in my hands. As he fell onto me with the knife aimed at my face, I held the poker up and drove it into his stomach.

The look on his face was nothing short of surprise as his body slid down the metal rod. I threw him off of me as his body convulsed in the last throes of his life. I lay there for a moment, covered in his blood and waiting for my head to stop throbbing.

"Jesus, Raymond. What the hell happened?" Gerald said as he ran into the room and helped me up.

"One of the servants. I don't know what's going on. He attacked me. He was going to kill me, Gerald." I stood up and looked down at my bloodstained clothes.

"Is any of that yours?" he asked.

"No, he got me in the neck and I got a nasty blow on my head, but this is all his blood."

"We need to get out of here, Raymond."

"Why? What happened?"

"Stephen called. He was run off the road. I'm not sure but I think he died while I was on the phone with him. It didn't sound good."

"What?!" I ran out into the hall with Gerald right behind me.

"That's what that bastard in there told me! He said his brother drove off after Charlotte to kill her. Bring a car around." I grabbed the handle on the front door and looked down at my blood covered hand. "Goddamnit! I can't go out like this. I need to grab some clothes."

"I'll meet you out front."

I ran to my room and washed the blood off of my hands and changed, then headed out to the car that Gerald had pulled up to the front of the house.

"Have someone clean up that mess in the library."

"It's already taken care of."

"Thank you, Gerald. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"It's my pleasure."

"Do you know what route they took?"

"I'm tracking Stephen's phone so I know where he is. Probably not far from the car. But Charlotte is a different story, if she's alive, that is. Hopefully she stayed with the car, but there's no way to know."

"Okay, just go. Just get me to her."

Chapter 2

Charlotte

I could still smell the sweet scent of rotting paper, and see the light pouring in through the library window. The memory of the whip lashings still tingled across every inch of my skin as I thought about what Raymond did to me in that room. Everything was a blur. The pain and pleasure and the intense orgasm that ripped through my body with him inside me.

Then that bizarre vision of my father. After that everything happened so fast. Saying goodbye to Raymond and watching him stand there as the car drove further away from that dark place and further into the darkness ahead. As I sat there in the car, hurtling toward my old life that I had been so desperate to escape from, all I could picture was him. Not my father. Raymond.

He would be sitting in an armchair or pacing around the room. Most likely desperate to bring me back to him. It killed me to think of him like that. Again I wanted to comfort him, when I was the one that really needed to be soothed. What was it about him that made me want to take care of him? Why did I want to comfort someone who had taken my life away from me?

But that's not all he'd done. He also gave me the promise of a new life. One seemingly with love and appreciation. I wanted to believe that it was possible. That someone could love me that much. That I was *the one* for them. But now I was running away from that promise. I was running back to death.

It made me wonder if I had done this to myself. If I was sabotaging my own happiness. It wouldn't be unlike me, actually. It wouldn't be unlike me at all to believe that all I was good for was singles stuffed into my thong as I strutted off the stage.

The further I drove away from Raymond and his lonely life of solitude in that strange place the more I realized that I had the escape I had been praying for. I could ditch him and run far away. But the further I got away the more I missed his dark eyes and his touch.

I had to stop thinking about him. I had to cut him out of my mind for at least a little while. Then decide if I was going to return once I had a fresh perspective. One that wasn't marred by the feeling of his hot skin on mine and the marks that the whip made on every inch of my body ... and my soul.

When I left the house with Raymond's driver, I assumed that we were only a few hours away from my home town. But we had been driving for quite a while when I noticed the landscape change. We had travelled from forest to desert, but it wasn't like any desert I recognized. The terrain that surrounded the deserted highway was almost completely flat, save for the river beds, which were completely bare, not like the ones at home that were littered with scrub brush.

I had no idea where we were and it made me uneasy, mostly because I knew that this was one of the men who had abducted me from my car and had thrown me in that beautiful cage that Raymond had created for me.

"What's your name?"

"Stephen."

"Where are we, Stephen?"

Stephen's pale skin glowed in the light of the dashboard and contrasted against the car's black interior. "Northern Arizona. Just north of the Grand Canyon."

He turned the radio on and set the volume loud enough to drown out any further questions. I turned the volume down and continued to stare straight at the man who had been ordered to be my babysitter. "I need you to give me a little more information. Where are you taking me? Are you going to drop me off at my car?"

"I'm here to watch over you."

"And make sure that I don't run."

"That's right."

"You seem really enthusiastic."

"I'm just doing my job," he said as he hit the gas, racing down a patch of straight road into the blackness that stretched out in front of us.

It felt like we had been in that car for hours as we sat there in silence and listened to the staticky radio stations that phased in and out of reach of the car's antennae. There were small towns and a few lone gas stations on the way south but other than that there wasn't much to see.

We passed a wooden shack at the southern edge of a thin forest. Above the door somebody had painted *Food and Gas*, but now the faded white letters were barely visible. Like a ghost that had been seen so many times it didn't scare anyone anymore.

The store reminded me of the ramshackle road-side buildings that littered the secondary highways of the state, but for some reason this place didn't feel like a town in Arizona to me at all.

Once again, I found myself thinking I'd been caught in a parallel universe where everything was similar, but not exactly the same. Just slightly different enough to create a sense of unease. A feeling I'd had ever since I'd been taken by Raymond. Something about him and that house felt so strange to me, and it colored the way I saw the world now.

Just beyond the desolate shack I saw an old, white single-wide trailer running a generator like my father had. It must have been where the people who ran the store lived. The faint glow of blue light from a TV set emitted through the curtains of the tiny, dingy windows and looked incredibly sad. It reminded me of my old life so much it almost made me sick. Suddenly everything felt like that horrible prison of a life again and I wished more than anything that I wasn't speeding through the dark night toward it.

But so what if I hated my life? That didn't mean I had to be a part of Raymond's bizarre world to escape it. There were other worlds out there. I could find one just as easily as I had found Raymond. But really it was Raymond who had found me. From all the way up here in the middle of nowhere, he was drawn to me, almost as if a part of me had been calling to him. And a part of him had been calling to me.

How had he found me? I wondered as I listened to the song on the radio slowly melt into a pool of static. Now I would be forced to be content with my thoughts and the view outside my window. But my thoughts were far from content. I still couldn't understand what I was feeling. Everything seemed off kilter now.

Raymond was a puzzle. His life was so foreign to me it almost seemed like it had been a dream or a movie. And the further I got away from him the less real it all seemed.

Had he really walked me down dark corridors of long-unused rooms filled with ancient medical equipment? Had he really told me a story, the story of his own family's legacy, that involved a voodoo priestess? Had I really been suspended in mid air while he whipped me? Had I really had that vision of my father dying in his trailer? None of it seemed real now. But this car and this driver were very real, and so was the fact that I was still a captive. This man wasn't going to let me out of his sight. I was positive Raymond made sure of that.

Everything about Raymond was mired in mysticism and darkness. I didn't understand him, but I couldn't stop trying to figure him out. He was too alluring, and that's what scared me the most. And I still didn't have enough information to make any kind of decision about him.

Especially since every time I thought about the way he touched me and looked into my eyes, my body filled with a warm, fuzzy feeling of desire. When I closed my eyes and felt his hot lips on my neck and his teeth as they bit into my skin I had to clench my thighs together to stop the tingles that threatened to explode into a full-blown orgasm.

I shook my head every few minutes, trying to get that image out of my head of him standing between my legs, his massive cock inches away from penetrating me and filling me up. But what I couldn't shake was the feeling inside me. The tingling sensation that coursed through every vein in my body and wouldn't let me be. It was almost as if I could feel Raymond running through my veins. As if he had projected himself into me and we were part of each other now.

I knew that he wasn't going to stand by and wait either. Not someone as controlling as Raymond. I was surprised he wasn't in a car right behind us. I

was stuck. I couldn't leave. But I knew that it wasn't just because he would come and find me — no matter where I was. He had already found me. I was already his.

The radio station faded back in once we got past the mountains. I turned the volume up and found a station that came in clearly. "Why do you work for him?" I asked.

He seemed almost startled that I was talking again, but his flat voice let me know that he didn't see part of his job description as chatting with the captive girl.

"Like I said, I'm here to protect you."

"And to take me back. I know he's not going to let me go."

Silence. Not a word out of the ice man for more than five minutes.

"You think it's right to keep a girl prisoner? You think it's right to hurt people for money?" I was seeing how far I could push this well-dressed thug. I knew there was nothing I could do to fight him and that I was fooling myself if I thought I could really use this opportunity to make an escape. But I wanted to see if I could rile him up a little. "You think you're a tough guy 'cause you have a boss who has a lot of money and a girl in your car who you can throw around? I know you were one of the men who forced me off the highway and bashed in my car window. I know you were one of the men who dragged me back to that place. Is that how you get your kicks?"

"Look, sweetheart, this isn't personal. I'm doing a job. My job is to do what my employer asks. That's all. I'm not going to throw you around or drag you anywhere. As far as I'm concerned I could just leave you on the side of the road. But my job is to make sure you get back to Mr. Valice safely and that's what I'm going to do."

"You don't have anything to worry about. I'm sure you'll do your job and get your damn check." I stared out the window and watched the faint light of pre-

dawn color the night sky off in the distance.

When I looked back at the driver he was pursing his lips and gripping the steering wheel. I wanted to ask him about how he became a sociopath. Whether or not he was born that way or if it some sort of childhood trauma. I thought about asking him about abuse and neglect inflicted on him by his negligent parents. Or what he told the women he fucked when they asked him about his career path. But all of those questions hit a little too close to home for me. If I could ask those questions of him what did that say about the person I was, or the choices I had made. I didn't want to think about any of it.

In the end I just sat there and watched the sky change to incrementally lighter shades of blue, then yellow, then pink as the sun peeked out over the snow-covered mountains in the distance.

When the sun was up in the morning sky and the beige desert that surrounded us was fully lit up, I rested my head back and closed my eyes. I had nothing to say to this gangster. He was proof to me that the suit did not make the man. He had made his own choices in life, regardless of his past. He was nothing more than a bag of smelly trash in a two-thousand-dollar garbage bag.

We had driven throughout the night and were just now coming upon familiar grounds. I knew we were not far from my dad's trailer and with each passing milepost my stomach grew tighter. I didn't want to see him now. Part of me hoped that he was already dead, that I wouldn't have to be faced with any of his insults or the heaviness of his presence. Being in the same room with him always made me feel like I was suffocating.

Sadly, another part of me was terrified that he would be dead before I got there. I hated myself for being so weak and not being able to just leave him. I didn't understand it any better than I understood my feelings for Raymond. It made me want to throw up to think that the feelings I had for both of these men were rooted in some deeply fucked up part of my brain. A part of my brain that I didn't seem to have any control over at all.

I felt something slam into the car from behind and screamed as my head was

jerked violently backward.

"What the fuck?" I yelled out as I looked over at Stephen. He was gripping the steering wheel even harder than he had been before and was looking in the rear view mirror.

"Holy shit it's the Beauchamps!"

"What? That little old man? How the hell could he —"

"There's a lot more of them than just him. Those bastards are all over that goddamned house!"

"What are they doing out here?"

"My guess is they're after you!"

"Why?!"

The black car that had just rammed us from behind drove up alongside ours. The windows were completely blacked out so whoever was inside was invisible. They rammed the side of their car into ours, which sent us swerving off the highway and almost into the ditch that ran alongside, but Stephen corrected the wheels so that we got back onto the highway without careening down the steep slope.

The black car rammed into us again but this time it was with so much force that we went over the edge. I watched as the world rolled around and around in front of me, like we were driving straight through the center of a washing machine. Then everything around me went black.

Chapter 3

Raymond

Gerald brought a car around and I tore out of the house after Charlotte. I couldn't believe those asshole Beauchamps. Where the hell did they get off going after her. They had no right to be doing any of this. When I got back that would be the end of them.

I knew from what Renaud had told me that they wanted me dead and I figured if I followed their goddamned commands and Charlotte agreed to stay that she would be safe. I had no idea they were this messed up. I didn't know how, but I was going to figure out a way to get rid of them for good.

The further we traveled, the angrier I got. This wasn't fair. This was my life and just when I felt like I was getting somewhere, when I felt like I had finally found someone to share myself with, these good for nothing servants had to rise up and start making demands and threatening our lives. Where had all of this come from?

They had their bizarre beliefs and as long as what went on had to do with their voodoo queen's sacred contract everything was just fine. But as soon as it came to anyone else's desires we were shit out of luck.

"You're bleeding, Raymond."

Gerald had been my right hand man for years. Not only that he was my best friend. My only friend. He was the only one I could confide in and the only one I trusted implicitly.

"Do you think she'll come back?"

"Do you want to know what I'd do if I were her or what I think she's going to do?"

"Neither, I guess."

I gave my heart to her, and I was terrified that everything she said to me was just a lie to get away. I couldn't blame her though. What I had done was the worse thing you could do to another human being. Put them in a cage. I knew how that felt because I had been a cage my whole life. I didn't remember a time when I wasn't surrounded by the dark halls of that goddamned house.

I had ruined her life and put her in danger and now she was out there somewhere, injured and alone. I felt like nothing, worse than nothing. I was a monster, just like the servants said. I was pathetic, unrealistic and incredibly stupid. She had every right to leave. I should never have tried to keep her there, or tried to convince her to stay. I had nothing to offer her but a crumbling mansion and a hollow heart. She had every right to do what she had to do to get out. If that meant hurting me, then it *was* fair. I deserved everything she gave me. Even her hatred.

Gerald handed me his handkerchief and gestured to the side of my head. I held the piece of cloth over an area that felt incredibly tender and when I pulled it away it was covered in blood.

"That doesn't look good. We should get you to a hospital in case you have a con
—"

"We're not going to a hospital until I find her. I'm responsible for everything that has happened to Charlotte and her safety is the number one priority right now."

"Whatever you say."

We drove in silence for a long time.

"So do you think what I did was wrong?" I knew the answer, I just wanted a shred of reassurance that I wasn't as bad as I thought I was.

"What do you think?"

"I know what I did was not necessarily right, but I'm not ... she's not ... what I mean is ... Yes. What I did was wrong. I know it now. But I did it for *her*." I ran my hand through my hair in exasperation and wound up poking the bloody wound near my temple. Gerald looked at me like a truant officer that had picked

me up at the mall on a school day, but his face softened when he spoke.

"Look, Raymond. Either she'll come back or she won't. But if you try to corner her—if you try to force her to come back with you—she'll come back, but she'll just wind up hating you. Is that what you want? She needs to make her own choice—really make her own choice, without you standing over her—and you need to let go."

"I don't know if I can."

"Sure you can. You have to learn to let go sometime."

"All I know is how to control."

"Yeah and look at you. You're alone, Raymond, and you're going to stay that way for the rest of your life if you keep this up. No one wants to be hovered over and escorted everywhere. She'd be a prisoner in that house, just like you were."

I flinched at those last words. I knew I was doing to her exactly what my mother had done to me. And I knew how horrible it was to be hidden away from the world. I couldn't do that to her, but I was terrified of losing Charlotte now that I had finally found her.

I checked on our location as we passed through a forested stretch. We were still a few hours from the trailer. Stephen had said that they crashed a few miles from there. That was almost five hours ago. Anything could have happened to her in that time.

"Why don't you lay back and get some sleep. We still have a couple hours ahead of us."

"There's no way I can sleep. Not while she's out there on the side of the road somewhere."

"Chances are she's not still on the side of the road. She probably walked or hitchhiked back to her home."

"That place is not her *home*."

"Raymond."

"Okay, I'll close my eyes."

I was convinced that I wouldn't be able to sleep but soon I was wandering through dark corridors that resembled and even darker and more dilapidated version of my house. I could hear Charlotte calling for me and I searched for her desperately, only to keep coming to dead end hallways and empty rooms that were only lit up by the moonlight coming in through the windows.

The feeling in the dream was horrible. Complete loss of control in what appeared to be my own house, which was only fitting considering what had been going on there over the last few weeks.

I woke up from my fitful dream as I felt the car come to a stop. I had fallen asleep after all. Gerald had pulled the car to the side of the road and turned off the ignition.

"Where are we?" I asked as I bolted up in my seat. We were in the middle of the desert but the shoulder of the highway fell down abruptly into a steep, rocky gully.

"The GPS tracker I have on Stephen's phone shows that he's down there somewhere." Gerald pointed in the direction of the rocks and shrubs that jutted out just as the shoulder of the road gave way to nothing.

I jumped out of the car and ran to the edge of the road, and there at the bottom —about thirty feet down—I saw my black Cadillac sitting upside down on its hood. "It doesn't look like anyone's messed with it. No tow truck or anything."

"I'm guessing that no one witnessed the accident. You can't see the car from the highway unless you're on the shoulder so no one's even called the highway patrol."

"I don't think she's down there, Raymond," Gerard said as he grabbed my arm and held me back from running down the dangerously steep slope. "The passenger side door is open."

"It could have happened when the car was rolling. She could be in there, Gerald!"

"No, look. The trunk is open and a suitcase is sitting next to the car. It doesn't look like it was thrown out. It looks like it was taken out and opened up. I'm willing to bet she changed into something she could hike in. Was she wearing a dress when she left the house?"

"Yes, a green dress and some pumps."

"I'd be willing to bet that's what she did. That girl isn't stupid enough to go wandering off into the desert in heels."

"But she could be anywhere! And she could be injured. I'll never forgive myself if she's dead."

"We'll find her, Raymond. I promise you that. Let's head to her father's trailer. She has an eight hour head start on us so she's bound to have made it there by now."

As we got back in the car I heard Gerald making arrangements with one of my men to have the car and Stephen taken care of.

"I want your foot pressed down on that accelerator, Gerald."

Before I brought Charlotte to the house, I'd had cameras placed in various places around the trailer and I'd had one of my men break in and grab some of her belongings. I knew how she lived, but I had never felt the magnitude of it until I actually saw the trailer for myself. It was hidden behind a row of desert bushes where a clothesline had been attached. The line still held some heavily stained t-shirts and men's underwear. I tried not to picture her washing her father's filthy clothes by hand and hanging them out on that crooked clothesline. It was too depressing to even fathom.

What bothered me the most about it was the degradation. She was a fiery,

independent woman who had been forced to grow up in this small, squalid space with an abusive father who kept her prisoner here through guilt. I could give her so much more than this, but I had to admit to myself now that I was no better than him. Because of the way I went about bringing her to me I had turned my house into her prison as well.

"It doesn't look like anyone is in there," Gerald said as we approached the trailer.

"No cars. She could be inside."

"No lights, though."

"They rely on a gas-powered generator," I said, trying to see if I could detect any movement through the grimy windows. "I'm sure that bastard wouldn't have had a way to keep it going, and by now it's definitely empty. I don't hear anything running."

I stepped up onto a rickety wooden porch and knocked on the door. There was no answer.

"Allow me," Gerald said. He pulled my arm back and stood in front of me, then kicked the flimsy aluminum door in with his foot.

"I could have done that with my hand. I don't think the door was even locked."

"Eh, what else am I gonna do here."

I stepped inside and caught the smell of death immediately. I called Charlotte's name but there was no answer.

"What the hell? You know what that smells like?" Gerald's muffled voice was right behind me. I turned and saw that he was covering his mouth with a handkerchief. We had both smelled that unforgettable scent of decaying flesh before.

I waded through the pile of trash toward the back of the trailer to see if Charlotte or her father were there. There was no sign of anyone. I looked through the few rooms that were accessed from the single hallway and stopped

when I came to a bedroom that was obviously hers. It was the only room in the trailer that wasn't littered with garbage. Some of her clothes were still hanging in the closet. There were old band posters taped to the walls and stacks of art books on some shelves in the corner.

I could smell her in that small room, even over the incredible stench that filled the rest of the trailer. She had made her own place in this hell hole. A beautiful flower struggling to grow in a garbage dump. I walked over to the closet and ran my hands over some of the clothes she had left behind. I wanted to touch her so badly. I wanted to wrap my arms around her and protect her from all of the horror and degradation in the world. But that would mean that I would also have to protect her from myself.

I hated myself for what I had done.

"She's not here." Gerald walked up behind me while I let a feather boa slide through my hand.

I felt like I was invading her space somehow, even though this room was filled with things that she had left behind. But I needed to be in that room for a little while longer. If I never saw her again I wanted to remember exactly what she was like. What it felt like to touch something that belonged to her.

"We're going to find her, Raymond."

"Where's the closest hospital?"

Gerald pulled out his phone. "Stafford."

"Let's go."

Chapter 4

Charlotte

After the car was forced off the highway and rolled down into the rocky gully, I made my way to the trailer. The driver had been thrown from the car and I wasn't about to go looking for him. I managed to pop the trunk and grab some decent clothes and a bottle of water, then headed off in the desert heat.

I don't know how long I walked with the sun beating down on me but I know it was hours. I stayed off the highway, keeping to the scrub brush covered desert and the occasional rock formations. I didn't want whoever ran me off the road to catch up with me and plow me down on this stretch of relatively deserted highway. I hoped that they were long gone by now, but I had to try to be safe and stay hidden.

The longer the sun beat down on me the more exhausted I became and I was terrified of having to see my father all alone. But I kept pushing forward because I had no choice. If I died out here in the desert then this whole thing would have been for no reason. Although I still didn't understand why I was doing any of this.

When I left Raymond's house I was desperate to get to him and make sure that he was okay, but now I had a bad feeling that I had made the wrong decision. Apparently some lunatics were after me and I was out here trying to help someone who never wanted my help to begin with.

The minute I got within sight of the trailer I knew he was in trouble. The generator wasn't running and the front door was wide open. I tried to hurry but after walking through the desert for hours I felt like I was about to collapse.

I got out of the brutal sun that had been beating down on me and found my father exactly as I had seen him in my vision. His skin was gray and clammy. He was sweating and the stench coming off his body told me that his system was beginning to shutdown. He had no shoes on and his feet were bluish-grey. They both looked like they were rotting right on his body.

"No!" I ducked down and shook him. "Wake up!"

Nothing. I slapped him in the face. "Wake up!"

I sat there on my knees, hovering over the man who had beaten me and belittled me and blamed me for my mother's death, and I was astonished when I realized that tears were running down my cheeks. "I need you, Daddy."

But just as the words came out of my mouth and I heard them out loud, I knew it wasn't true. It wasn't the lump of flesh on the floor in front of me that I needed or wanted. It wasn't the pathetic excuse for a man that was laying in his own filth in front of me. What I had been desperate for all these years was approval and love and I had been trying to get those things out of someone who didn't have them to give me.

But still I couldn't just let him die. Regardless of how he treated me he wasn't going to become a wasted memory. He was my father, and regardless of his bad choices and selfishness he deserved another chance.

We were out in the middle of nowhere and I had no car or phone on me. My purse had gone flying during the car crash and I hadn't been able to find it. I knew it was up to me to do something. I had come this far and I had to at least try.

I sat up and slammed my hands against his chest. "Come on, Dad. Let's go!" I slammed his chest again and could have sworn I felt something snap underneath my hands. It could have been his rib but I didn't have time to worry about it. I did chest compressions for a full minute, then checked for a pulse. It was faint but at least it was there.

Suddenly his mouth opened and he gasped for breath, struggling to draw air into his lungs. Then his eyes moved towards me. He touched my arm with his hand and his eyes closed again. I didn't have any other medical tricks up my sleeve. My only chance was the highway.

I dashed out of the trailer and ran through the yard towards the empty road and waited. Somebody would come. They might not come in time, but somebody would come, and when they did, I planned on jumping out into the middle of the

road to stop them.

Eventually I saw a car in the distance, its outline blurred by the waves of heat that were rising up off the asphalt. As the car got closer I realized that it was the highway patrol and every muscle in my body relaxed. Someone was going to help him. This whole grueling trip wasn't going to be for nothing.

The car pulled over next to where I was standing and waving my arms and two police officers got out and sauntered over to me. They didn't look like they were in much of a hurry, even though I was talking to them a mile a minute about my father needing an ambulance. I stood out in the gravel yard while they took a couple steps inside the trailer, but they immediately came back out.

"Aren't you going to do anything? He's dying!"

"Just stay calm. My partner is radioing for an ambulance," one of the cops said, his mirrored aviator shades still covering his eyes. "It should be here in fifteen minutes."

"He could be dead by then!"

"I'm going to need you to tell me what happened in there."

"It's my father's trailer. He's been sick."

"Did you attack your father?"

"Of course not!"

"It looks like there's been a fight. That place is a mess and you're all scraped up. And I don't see a car anywhere."

"I was in an accident. I ... I was on my way here," I stammered. I didn't understand how they could think I attacked him. "Th-that's the way he lives. I've tried to clean up after him but—"

"Do you live here?"

"No. I mean ... I did, but I don't now."

I felt like I couldn't explain myself fast enough. No matter what came out of my mouth the cop acted like I was suspicious.

"Where do you live?"

"I ... I guess I don't really live anywhere right now."

"What's your address, young lady? I'm going to need to see your identification."

As the cop stepped closer to me I realized that he looked familiar. In all of the commotion with my father and the questions I didn't notice, but I used to see him at Red's all the time.

"I ... I don't have it with me."

"No driver's license? Nothing?"

"I was in a car accident back on the highway and my purse —"

"How did you get here?"

"I walked."

"You walked away from an accident?"

"Yes! I was on my way because I was worried and someone ran me off the ... I mean I got a flat tire."

The officer stared at me for a long moment. "Okay, so you walked here and found your father like this?"

"Yes."

"Where was the accident?"

"On 70. A few miles down the highway."

"We didn't see any cars on the side of the road, young lady. No one radioed for a tow truck."

"I walked! The car went off the side of the road and I walked here!"

"How far?"

"I don't know! Maybe it was more like ten or fifteen miles. I'm not sure. Why are we talking about this when my father could be dying in there?"

"Just trying to get a straight story out of you," he said with a lopsided grin.

"I'm telling you one story and it's the truth!"

"Uh-huh," he laughed with a mocking tone to his voice. "You say your father's dying. You're covered in blood and you're going to tell me you were in an accident and walked fifteen miles through the desert. I know your type, little girl."

"You don't believe me? I'm telling you the truth!"

"Why don't we go down to the station and you can tell your story to the chief?"

I heard the sound of gravel crunching behind me as the other cop walked up.

"Chopper's coming."

"No meat wagon?"

"Nah, it's too far. It'd take a couple hours for an ambulance to get all the way out here and back to Safford General. They're sending a chopper. So what do we have here?"

"She says she got in an accident and walked here."

"*Walked* here? From where? This rat trap is in the middle of nowhere."

I tried one more time to explain what happened but the more I tried to convince them, the more I realized that it didn't make that much sense. And the fact that I couldn't tell them about the man who forced the car I was in off the road made it worse. I was almost hysterical by the time the helicopter appeared in the distance.

"Why don't you wait in the squad car while we get your father into the chopper? Then we'll see about your story."

I sat in the back of the police car and watched as my father's body was brought out of the trailer. They had an oxygen mask on him so I knew he was still alive, but I didn't understand why they wouldn't let me near him. None of this made any sense. The only thing I could fathom was that they didn't trust me because they thought I was trailer trash. I couldn't believe they thought that I had done that to him. It was insane.

I yelled at the idiot cops as the helicopter took off. I wanted to go with him to the hospital but I was locked in the back seat of the cop car.