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Mommy, May I?

CHAPTER ONE

1968

Before...

That last night was so cold that Richard could see his own breath. Even The Beatles, his favorite group, belting out Yellow Submarine from the other room couldn't warm him, or make him feel better. The next few hours were always miserable no matter which record his mother decided to play. Hail barreled down outside sounding like pellets from his BB gun hitting the roof. In the corner of his room the constant drip from a leak in the ceiling hit the bucket his mother set there, certain to be filled long before morning. He pulled the cape of his Superman pajamas tighter around himself.

His light flickered inside the cramped room of the two-bedroom house, illuminating worn wallpaper and the young boy's pale face as he listened to his mother read to him. His stomach twisted into a knot so tight he thought it might burst open and out would come the snakes he imagined lived inside him. They would slink into the next room and bite his mother's visitor to death.

When her visitors stayed over, Richard would bury his head under his pillow trying to drown out the noises that came from the other room. Sometimes if he heard the front door close behind his mother when she'd leave for a date, he would lie awake waiting like a time bomb to hear the click of the lock opening again, and her heels on the linoleum. The stupid babysitter his mom had over would always sneak her boyfriend into the house and tell Richard to keep his trap shut. Then she'd laugh and say, "As if it really matters to your mom that I have a guy here."

"But he never knew that it really was his own bunny, come back to look at the child who had first helped him to be real," Elizabeth Shelton read to her son. She closed *The Velveteen Rabbit* and patted Richard on the head.

"I love that story, Mom."

"I know you do, honey."

Beer on his mother's breath mixed with the jasmine incense she'd lit in the other room in attempt to rid the house of its mildew smell, made him pull his covers up tighter around his face.

The eleven-year-old boy loved when she read to him, when he could pretend they were like every other family. It was their nightly ritual, while on many nights some man—young, old, fat, or skinny—waited for her in the family room, along with the stupid babysitter.

"Do you have to go out tonight?"

Elizabeth Shelton kissed her son on the cheek, her lips soft. "I'm sorry, baby, you know I do. I wish I didn't have to, but you're gonna need new clothes for school when it starts next week. You'll be in the sixth grade, and we can't have you looking scrappy."

Richard also knew that Mom liked to buy him the best clothes, and she usually bought a few expensive things for herself when they went into Portland. She liked buying clothes, shoes, and cosmetics much better than she liked fixing leaky roofs. She claimed that the money she earned was one of the perks of her trade, which she explained to Richard, as being a friend, kind of like a nurse for people who were lonely. Men. Richard knew the truth. Everyone knew the truth.

“But, Mom, I want you to stay home.”

“If I didn’t have such wonderful friends, then we wouldn’t have food on the table. They’re kind enough to give us money and gifts, so please try to understand.”

A tear rolled down Richard’s face. He didn’t understand. He wanted his mother to be like everyone else’s mother. The kids in school called her a whore. Even so, he loved her fiercely. He’d do anything for her and had been suspended more than once for fighting with the older kids who taunted him about her.

“Oh baby, no, don’t cry.” She wiped away the tear. “Tell you what, I won’t go out tomorrow night. I’ll cancel the date and we’ll go to town and see a movie.”

“Really?”

“You bet.” His mother hugged him. “How’s my lipstick look?”

“Perfect.”

Elizabeth Shelton had a thing about her scarlet lipstick, always drawing the line around her mouth and filling it in just so. It was worth the effort; she always had beautiful lips. Richard loved them.

“Thank you, precious. Now remember, tomorrow it’s just you and me.”

She hugged him again, her body warm. He watched her leave his room. Her laughter from the other room echoed in his ears as he tried to fall asleep. He hated that men could make her laugh like that.

Had his father made her laugh? His father? Richard’s mother said that his father had been Mills Florence, the great cosmetics guru of the fifties. But Mills never had the opportunity to know about Richard. As his mother explained to him, their affair was brief, but they were very much in love. She’d met him on a vacation in Hollywood where she’d gone to try out her acting abilities. She’d wound up pregnant instead. By the time she planned to tell Mills, he’d been killed in a car accident.

There was no proof that he was Mills Florence’s son, and therefore, he wasn’t heir to the fortune his father’s company had produced. His mother never achieved her dreams, but made an existence for them the only way she knew how—with her looks and personality.

Richard was the outcast amongst his peers—the bastard son of a whore. No one ever believed that Mills Florence was his father, and so Richard learned not to repeat it. He knew, however, that he was not a bastard.

The next day Richard didn’t disturb her. He’d figured out early on that she was always tired in the morning. She usually didn’t rise before noon.

They lived in a small town in Oregon, right outside of Eugene. When it wasn’t raining, Richard liked to explore. This morning he walked along a dirt road lacing its way against the Cascades, playing kick the can, and whistling. Buzz saws rang out in the distance followed by the rumble of falling timber as it hit the ground. It had rained earlier that morning and the dampness in the trees and dirt hung in the air. Richard was happy that tonight he’d be alone with his mother.

A truck-full of kids passed him, then stopped about a hundred yards up. Richard watched as they jumped out. He knew he was in trouble.

“Hey, look, it’s whore boy,” they yelled. “How’s that whore mama of yours?”

Anger rose inside Richard at the words, like the giant grizzly known to stock the woods. But there were too many of them to take on, and basic instinct urged him to run. He sprinted through the pines, their taunts filling his head.

“Bastard boy, where are you?”

Richard kept going, but they were impossible to outrun. The boys surrounded him. There were about eight of them, all at least fourteen. They closed in on him. He tried not to cry, tried to break through them as his heart pounded hard against his chest. Trapped he could hear his own breathing and wanted to scream, 'Leave me alone!' His legs grew weak, and the trees swirled into one big blur.

The gang closed in. "I'd like to fuck your mama, she's pretty sweet."

"Nah," another one said. "I'd just make her suck me. Who knows what she's got crawling inside her."

Richard covered his ears. He hated what they were saying, hated them. His skin burned. His mother was beautiful and good. They were evil. If only he were bigger...

When the largest kid hit him first, Richard went down and curled into a ball. They kicked him hard all over while cursing and spitting on him. One blow to his head almost caused him to lose consciousness. As the beating, angry words, and his own heart pounding against his chest blended into one, a loud gunshot rang out, disturbing the attack and the boys rapidly dispersed.

"Get on outta' here," someone yelled. Richard felt strong hands lift him up. "You're a mess, boy." A lumberjack, one of his mother's friends, dusted him off. "You okay?"

Richard nodded. "I think so." He was still dizzy.

"Well, you got a few cuts and bruises, and that gash on your head looks like it hurts pretty bad. Why don't I give you a ride home?"

Richard replied, "That's all right." He was afraid the man might want to come inside and see his mom.

"Hmmm, well, okay then. But them kids might come back for you."

"A ride halfway home might be okay," Richard said.

The lumberjack respected that, and dropped him off down the road from his house. He washed up with a hose outside, not wanting his mother to see him this way. She should be up by now. He prayed she hadn't been crying this morning. She did that a lot. He wished he could make things better for her.

He opened the front screen, then stopped for a moment and listened. The house was silent. Normally she would be in the kitchen making her coffee and lunch for him right about now.

"Mom?"

She didn't answer. He peered inside the kitchen. The coffee canister was still in the pantry—untouched. The shower wasn't on. Richard went on back to her bedroom, where her door was shut.

He knocked. "Mom?" Still no reply. His stomach started hurting. His mouth went dry. He was afraid he'd find her in bed with a man, but he had to find out why she didn't answer him.

He opened the door a crack, then wider.

"Mom!" he screamed. His mother lay there on the bed, sheets stained with blood. She was not breathing, and when he pulled back the sheets he could see the gaping wound he knew to be caused by a gunshot. He grabbed the phone on the nightstand, his hands shaking as he tried to dial the number to the police station. He was crying hysterically by the time a voice on the other end answered. He could barely get the words out, as his voice quivered with emotion, "My, mom, my mom's been shot."

In minutes the police arrived. Several had been friends of his mother's. All the men liked Elizabeth.

The chief of police took off his hat as he walked into the bedroom, bowing his head, “What a shame,” he said. “She was such a pretty thing, too. Sweet lady, and she loved you very much.” He patted Richard on the head, who had no reply as fresh tears filled his eyes.

It didn't take but a matter of hours to make an arrest. In a fit of rage, Trudy Walker, the wife of one of Elizabeth's customers had decided enough was enough upon reading a love letter that she found tucked inside her husband's jacket pocket. Trudy had known about Mr. Walker's visits with Elizabeth for some time, but when she discovered that he had real feelings for her, she became enraged. She'd taken her husband's revolver, and going to Elizabeth's house that morning, she'd broken in, and shot her. She'd actually even confessed when the police had gone to question Mr. Walker.

“Yeah, I killed that husband stealing whore. She was nothing but a disease-spreading slut. And, I'm not sorry for it” she said to the police as they arrested her.

Even though, his mother's killer was behind bars, nothing could pacify Richard as hatred brewed deep in his heart. He sobbed through the night while he stayed at the police chief's house, waiting for morning when the aunt and uncle he'd never met would arrive from Redding, California to take him home to live with them.