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A door slamming makes one jump, but it doesn't make one afraid. What one fears is the serpent that crawls underneath it. ~ Collette, Cheri

CHICAGO, NOVEMBER, 1956

Images raced through my mind like pictures in one of those flip books—the kind that look like animation when the pages are fanned. As those images swirled faster and faster, terror consumed me like a raging fire.

Flip. Flip. Flip.

Can't breathe. Arms... hurt. Legs...hurt. Move. Can't!

Panicked thoughts hammered at me non-stop. Mama? Where's Mama? Breathe. Breathe. Mary Margaret. Where's Mary Margaret?

I tried to cry out, but my tongue hit something wedged in my mouth. My eyes filled with hot tears that dripped onto the sheet already damp with my perspiration.

Concentrate!

Some bits of dust nestled in a leafy design pressed into the plaster ceiling above me commanded my attention. The more I concentrated on them, the more they looked like furry caterpillars, undulating as though they were ready to spin cocoons. The terrible realization hit me like a sledgehammer. This isn't my ceiling! It's not my room!

Flip. Flip. Flip-

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Door hinges squeaked as though in need of oil and broke the suffocating silence.

Footsteps. Gardenias. Stale tobacco smell.

My heart pounded so hard I felt like it wanted jump right out of my chest. A tall woman walked to the foot of the bed and stood there holding a tray. In one graceful move, she turned and placed it on the dresser, shrugged and came back to the bed. She bent toward me, blonde hair spilling over her shoulders like a glistening shawl. "Well, Laurie, I see you're finally awake."

*Sherry?*

Waves of relief cut through my fear until those familiar strange gold flecks in her hazel eyes flashed like caution lights. Full lips, painted brilliant scarlet, drew into a sneer. My jumbled mind shrieked that something was horribly wrong.

"Aw, look at that. The little ballerina is frightened." She shook her head. "You know, you're really a trusting idiot."

She reached out and stroked my hair, her long fingers catching in the mass of tangled black waves. It was her cruel smile that scared me most. She held my chin in a vise-like grip and fixed me with a gaze as cold as ice.

"You know, you're not only trusting, you're awfully naïve for someone seventeen years old." The sound of her high-pitched laugh raised the hair on my arms.

“You know how you said the Coke tasted funny at lunch yesterday? Well, that was because I slipped something into it to knock you out. Honey, you lost your cherry last night.”

Cherry? What was she was talking about?

She tightened her grip and her fingers dug deeper into my shoulders “Stop that damn crying. You’d better do exactly as I say or—”

Sherry had always been sweet and caring which was why I adored her. I didn’t recognize this terrifying stranger hovering over me.

“Damn you, quit wiggling! Just calm down! Her fingers traced a line along my cheek, and stopped at the fabric jammed into my mouth. “I brought you some toast and juice. Here, let me take that thing out of your mouth for awhile.” She untied the knot and the gag fell away. My mouth was so dry it felt like it was full of cotton balls.

“Sherry,” I pleaded. My voice sounded dry and raspy. “Get me out of here. I want to go home.”

Silence.

I became aware of a pain between my legs. It was only a dull ache at first, but one that increased as I became more alert until, finally, it hurt more than the time I fell on the edge of a wooden milk crate in kindergarten. Mama had taken me to the doctor back then and he told her my vagina was bruised. I remembered giggling through the pain because that word sounded funny.

Without warning, the tears welled in my eyes rolled down my cheeks and left damp tracks in their wake.

I couldn’t understand why my mind was so fuzzy.

“Sherry?”

She fixed me with a malicious stare. Not a word. The aura in this strange room chilled me more than a winter wind blowing off Lake Michigan.

“Sh-Sherry, you’re frightening me.”

She moved her face very close to mine. Hot puffs of breath peppered my cheek. “You’re a real pain in the ass, Pavlova. Quit bawling and drink this damn juice. Know why you’re here? Because Tommy Boy and I kidnapped you, that’s why.”

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As though from a distance, a goofy hee-haw kind of laugh sliced through my confusion, followed by, “Here’s what I think, Sher. I think that horny old goat is gonna just love our sweet little ballerina.”

That laugh. I recognized it instantly. Sherry’s boyfriend Tommy was in the room, too. “Yep. Just like I told you, the cops will think this sweet little thing ran away.”

I tried to focus on Sherry, but her face now appeared to be covered by a chiffon veil. Her voice drifted farther and farther away, “Yeah, if we’re lucky. I’m keepin’ my fingers crossed!”

For some reason disjointed memories of a horrible fight Mama and I had the past November flitted through my baffled mind. I could hear Mama’s nasty shouts as clearly as if she stood by my side. “I will never sign the contract. The only way you will go to New York is

over my dead body!” New York City Ballet wanted me. No. No. Can’t go.

After that day, every emotion I might have had faded away until there was nothing left but an empty shell. Oh, I still walked to the bus stop on Clark Street after school every day, and I took the bus to the Karakova Academy of Dance on Howard Street. Once there, I sat on a chair and watched the other dancers. My existence was that of a body without a soul because in my heart I knew I’d never dance again.

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The first time I saw Sherry’s boyfriend Tommy I was at the Academy sitting on my chair in the corner watching the others as I did every day. He winked and said, “Hey, gorgeous, how about a smile for the new piano player?”

I looked at him without smiling, more like a robot than a person. Nothing unusual about that. Since the fight with Mama, I was like that most days. You see, the robot-me could shut off feelings and that was much better than wanting to cry all the time. Every time Tommy saw me, he teased me about having the saddest eyes he’d ever seen, but he never got a rise out of me. Not once.

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Sherry and Tommy both stood there staring at me as though I was a piece of meat in the butcher’s case. My eyes darted around the room frantically looking for anything faintly familiar. The pounding of my heart echoed in my ears. I told myself it was okay and tried not to be so afraid. After all, the walking dead aren’t supposed to care about anything, are they? It didn’t work. I was petrified.

Tiny blood red specks blinked furiously, growing larger and larger on the dark blanket inside my head. Then everything turned pitch black.