

## Chapter 1 (Where the Clouds Sleep)

Billene watched him from her favorite, quiet place, a large area concealed under the azalea bushes in front of their ramshackle cottage. It's where she always went - after - to hide and cry silently. He hurt her more this time. She was bleeding. At twelve years old, she had been proud that her breasts were beginning to grow and that her step father, Joe Clode, wanted her, but now as a fourteen year old, she had begun to realize the danger he posed to her and to feel the shame of her reality.

Billene was freckled and thin, "lanky" some would say. Her long red hair tangled in things and she wanted to cut it but Joe refused permission and she always did what he told her to do. "The boys'll lak ya' better with it long," he always said with a sort of jeer. "Ha-el, I lak ya' better with it long," and his pallid gray eyes would grew cold, changing from the softness of the overly doting father he always liked to play at being, to the dominating, sadistic child molester that he was. "So don't be talkin' a' cuttin' it no more. Ya' hear? Somethin' might happen to ya' like what happened to yer Ma."

The words chilled her, gave her goose flesh. The look in his eye when he said it and the coldness in his voice confirmed what she had long suspected. Now she knew for sure. Her mother's death was not some serendipitous slip on the part of Mother Nature or her own mother's clumsiness.

Her mother's accident' had always been a mystery to her but now the accident itself was explained by the events leading up to it. Now, she finally understood, or thought she did.

Billene's Mother, Darla had gone to Beckley, about 25 miles away, shopping with some girl friends. The plan was to have an early dinner together then come home, so Joe expected her to arrive around 6:00 or 7:00 P.M. Billene would have gone along but she was working on a project she wanted to finish for school. Joe's plan for the day was to go trout fishing in one of the small, mountain streams up toward Chad's knob.

Joe actually had gone fishing but an afternoon drizzle brought him home early, around 3:00. He was bored, frustrated, wet, and had caught no fish. He stomped into the house, after throwing his fishing gear in a pile on the porch. As he came through the door he started tearing off his wet clothing, cursing the weather, the upstream breeze which he blamed for his poor luck with the fish, and the fact that he was having a hard time finding a clean towel. That he had been drinking all afternoon did not help him find the towel. By now he had all of his wet clothing off and was in the bedroom tossing things around and demanding a towel.

After a few minutes of his grouching, then twelve- year-old Billene appeared in the doorway of his bedroom with a towel in her hands. He didn't see her at first, but then he did. She was wearing cotton print shorts and a white sleeveless blouse. She had her hair tied back in a tight pony tail, tied with a blue ribbon and was wearing a smirk on her face, thinking it funny that she had caught him naked. She was pleased that Joe also seemed to think it was funny. He sat down on the bed with a smile and said, "Bring that towel here Billene. You can help me dry off if you want to."

That was their first encounter and Joe lost track of the time. When Darla came home earlier than expected, only half an hour later, she caught them in the act. The

hysterics were unbelievable. At first Joe didn't see her, but by the time she had laid her hands on the nearest weapon she could find and was approaching him from behind, Joe heard her and turned in time to fend off a blow from a cast iron skillet.

As soon as the fight began, Billene ran to her own room and closed the door to hide. That was the last time Billene ever saw her mother. Within a few minutes the screaming and sounds of a struggle stopped. She heard them leave the house. Joe returned a few hours later alone, asking if her mother had come back yet.

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Now, she watched him fearfully through the tangled growth of azaleas, flower petals all around her on the ground, withered a little. The azalea blossom season was over for this year and summer was about to begin. He had just returned from the mail box, out on their road, "Goshen Trail" by name, little more than a no-name dirt track coming up from Piggs' Cemetery Road, "The Bulleevard," as the locals affectionately called it, also dirt.

Goshen Trail wound up through the heavily wooded mountainside to Chad's Knob, the bare stone top of the mountain. A few hardy souls lived along its reach, back in the woods, out of sight. Billene knew some by sight and none by name.

He was sitting on the top of the steps to the front porch, reading a letter. Billene thought this odd because he seldom did any reading on his own. He nearly always asked her to read his mail to him. She took pleasure in watching him struggling over the words,

sounding them out like a first grader, "*stupid for a grown man*," she thought. "I don't know what I ever thought I saw in him."

But she remembered the first time. She had always envied her mother because of the attention her Mom got from him when she was younger. She never knew her real father. He was sent off to prison somewhere near Pittsburgh, Joe told her, just before she was born. Joe Clode was the only father she had ever known. She was six and a half when her Mom, Darla, started seeing him. Darla was working nights at the Slipped Disk Lounge just down the road, on the south side of the town of Copper Head, about 2 miles away. Joe was a coal miner and made more money than Darla ever dreamed of, at least since Billene's real father, Bill Parsons, had to go to prison. Bill had been a truck driver, "over the road," as Darla used to say. "Seldom seen the son of a bitch, but he sure was makin' good money."

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Billene clearly remembered the day she first saw Joe Clode. The Slipped Disk Lounge was a concrete block building with peeling white paint, a flat, shed style roof, rotted soffits and a wooden front door with a two-inch crack between its bottom and the floor. The parking lot was mostly the gravel shoulder of State Road #307 and sported two motor cycles, a rusted-out pickup truck and a water-runoff ditch on either side connected under the gravel by a two foot wide drainage pipe. The sign on the side of the building said in huge neon letters "Nude Dancing, Nightly, Cum As You Are."

As Darla's old Chevy ka-chunked into the parking lot, the door swung open revealing a woman of about Darla's age, wearing a knee length green coat. The woman's

long, blond hair was blowing in the afternoon breeze as she glanced at them approaching her pickup truck. Darla, slender, tall, strawberry blond and light on her feet, jumped out of the Chevy and called after the woman, "Hey Karen, why you leavin' sa' early? Yer shift ain't up till five."

The woman called Karen stopped and looked at Darla then ran to her and hugged her, sobbing. "My shift is up forever," Billene could hear her say. "I'm leavin' this place and never comin' back. This place is a hellhole and what they want me to do ain't worth no damn money. How can you stay here? You're not like them."

"When ya' have a youngin' ta raise, ya' do what ya' have to do," Darla replied solemnly, brows furrowed slightly. "At least I know Billene won't have to go through this. I'm gonna' git her a education and she can leave Copper Head West-f'ing- Virginia and get a decent job, maybe marry someone nice."

"Well, you do what you have to do, Darla. I'm outa' here." The blond fumbled in her purse for a cigarette.

"Where can you go Karen? There ain't no work around for girls like us but this."

"I'm goin' up to Parkersburg and maybe work one a' them truck stops. The truckers 'll sure treat me nicer 'n at ole Horace. Good luck to ya' Darla. Maybe I'll see ya' again some time."

The inside of the Slipped Dysk smelled musky with spilled beer, sweat and pool table chalk. It was dark. Even though only two customers were present, Joe Clode being one of them, the cigarette smoke burned Billene's eyes. The walls were covered with advertisements, signs of all sorts. Behind the large bar where Joe and the other man were

sitting was a wall size mirror with shelves of liquor in front of it and the slogan "I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy."

The two men heard 6 year old Billene and her Mom come in and turned to see who it was. "Well, well. What have we here," said the man who would become Billene's step father. "Two a' the prettiest ladies I ever done seen."

This was high praise to Billene, being called not only a lady, not only pretty, but one of the prettiest ladies this man had ever seen. "And jist look at you blush," Joe continued. "Why yer jist as cute as they come, ain't chou. Come here and sit on ole Joe's knee, now and le' me have a lookit' chou." Seeing the look of concern and distrust in Darla's eyes, Joe responded, "it's okay mama. You kin have ma other knee." And both men laughed vulgarly, exchanging knowing glances.

Sitting under the azalea bushes watching Joe Clode now, stumbling through a letter on the front steps to their falling down mountain cottage, Billene's perception of him was completely different than on that first day. He could still make her blush, but now it was for different reasons. He could still make her heart pound, but now it was with revulsion, hate and fear.

Billene remembered when she began hating Joe Clode. It was the day after her twelfth birthday. There was a strike at the mine, so Joe was home for several weeks without much to do but drink beer and harass the women, but Billene still thought the harassment was all innocent fun, then.

Darla was dead only three months. Billene had just returned from school to find Joe sitting on the porch in the midst of a case of empty beer bottles with a second case in

the refrigerator chilling. His eyes were glazed. He had not bathed or shaved that morning and a lock of sandy hair was standing straight up, as though he had just crawled out of bed. Joe had stopped shaving 3 weeks before when the strike was called, so he had a growth of whiskers on his face with one side sort of smashed down by last night's pillow.

Joe was a thin man, but tall and finely muscled from the strenuous work he did for the mining company, "two miles down," as he liked to put it. His face was narrow, the result of it being at one end of a very narrow head. Billene used to think this was charming, but now she thought that his blue eyes were a little too close together for him to be "all right in the head." This was an expression she over-heard from Mrs. Overby, one of the ladies who worked in the kitchen at her school.

Joe usually wore a mustache but since he had quit shaving, his mustache had gotten out of control, hanging down over his lips, partially hiding his mouth. Joe had a wide mouth for such a skinny face and his grin revealed big, white, straight teeth. This very grin had charmed Darla right out of her pants on the first night he came to the house. Billene could hear them thrashing around in her bed, wondering why in the world they would choose to mess up the bed by wrestling in it when they would have so much more room on the floor.

Joe was sporting his famous grin when Billene showed up after school. She was not too charmed since he had bits of food stuck in his teeth. His mustache was clumped together with food and moist from the swig of beer he had just taken from the bottle in

his hand. He had worn the same shirt for the last four days. It hung open half way down his hairy chest and he stunk.

Still, he was the man who married her mother, who earned their bread, well, most of the time, and didn't he, after all, deserve a little recreation after endangering his life in the mines and working such long hours for them? *"Of course he does,"* she remembered thinking.

"Come eere honey," he slurred through his soggy mustache. "I got somethin' yere' gonna' lak." It was not the first time she had seen that look in his eyes, but she had always shrugged it off since he had never before hurt her. She walked up to him with the intention of giving him the usual kiss of greeting on the cheek then going inside to change her clothes and do her homework. As soon as she was within reach, she knew something was different, dreadfully different.

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A light breeze stirred the azalea bush over Billene's head. She had missed her mother badly after the accident, but never so badly as now, while she watched Joe Clode stumbling through his letter. *"Who would write to him anyway?"* she asked herself. *"He doesn't know anybody who can write. Well he knows me. Maybe he does know someone else who can read and write."*

Joe stood suddenly looking around, *"for me,"* she thought. *"Oh God!! He's looking for me again."* She sat very still hoping he hadn't noticed her under the azalea bushes; hoping she could avoid another bout with him. She quietly felt herself and looked at her hand. Still bleeding.

Joe began walking toward the road, crumpling the letter in his hand. Every few steps he looked around again as if watching for someone. Billene could see him as he approached the trash bags he had set out for pick up the next day. As he approached the bags, he paused and looked around for her again. Not seeing her watching him, he stuffed the letter inside the nearest trash bag, looked around again, just in case she might have come back into view then headed back to the house, coughing, then spitting.

When he reached the front porch of the cottage, he again took a seat on the top step and reached for his now empty beer bottle. He lifted it to his lips, threw back his head as if for a long swig, then realizing it was empty, he heaved it with a curse into the woods surrounding the house on three sides.

The forest around their home was heavily littered with Joe's empties. When this bottle hit the ground, Billene could hear glass shattering. Before the sound of the impact, Joe headed into the house for another. Since the kitchen was in the back of the house, Billene knew that for a moment, he would not be able to see the road. She counted a few seconds, then darted out from under the azalea bushes, ran to the street and reached inside the trash bag where she had seen Joe hide the letter. It was damp already from the other trash, but she got it and quickly pulled it out, hiding it in the pocket of her cut-off jeans.

She could hear Joe coming back toward porch. His coughing was loud enough to announce his presence fifty yards away. She ducked behind some bushes hiding from him, then slipped quietly down Goshen Trail toward another secret shelter, hidden among some wild elderberry bushes, next to the road.

She liked this spot, because Joe was less likely to find her there. She could hear any vehicles coming up the road and see anyone walking without being seen. All she had to do was keep quiet and watch, but this time, instead of watching, she pulled the crumpled letter out of her pocket and began reading in the fading light of the afternoon.

There was no date on the letter and no return address. As soon as she saw that it began "*Dear Darla,*" she realized, "*This fool don't know my Mama's day-ed.*" Quickly, she turned the letter over to see if there was a signature. It was signed, "*All my love, Your husband, Bill Parsons.*"

"*My Gawd!!*" she thought. "*This is from my real Daddy.*" She turned the letter back over and began reading.

"*Dear Darla,*

"*I know it's been a long time since I been away, up here in the pen. I ain't forgot I promised to never git in touch on account a' Billene. What I was accused and convicted of was jist horrible. I kep swearin' and swearin' I never done it but nobody believed me and I thought I was gonna' be put to death. Hael, I been on death row for 14 years. Thank the good Lord that lawyer and all them anti-death penalty people kep getting' them appeals goin.'* They would a' fried my butt for sure, but wouldn't ya' jist know it. After all this time, they come up with a new kinda' evidence - they call it D-N-A. I got

*no idea what them letters stand for, but it's some kinda' way they can tell one man's seed from another's. They tested my semen an' compared it to the semen they found in that dead girl's body and they say there weren't no chance of it bein' mine. They finally proved what I been tellin' 'em all along. I'm innocent. I never done that terrible thing to that poor Trudy Griffin, Ben and Lu-Anne's kid. They don't know who done it yet, but they know it twern't me.*

*"I'm comin' home Darlin.' I know you divorced me an' all, an' I don't blame ya.' Ya' might even have a new man for all I know an' if ya' do, there's nothin' I can do about it. I'll respect your choices if you made some like that, but I hope ya' didn't git married agin, cause I love ya' Darlin.' But if ya' did git married agin, I hope you'll jist let me see my little girl. Ya' know I never even seen her, afore they arrested me an' by the time she was born I was already in the slammer. I ain't never even seen a picture of her. I bet she looks jist like you. You sure were pretty. I layed awake many nights in this hell hole dreamin' a' seein' you again, an' holdin' my little girl in my arms. Hael Darlin,' I don't even know what you*

*called her. I don't even know my little girl's name - only that the baby was a girl.*

*"My ma used ta' come up here to see me an' she tole me it was gonna' be a girl. But you know my Mama passed away after I come up here. I think my gittin' put away like this flat out killed her. God I miss seein' her. An' I miss seein' you.*

*"I'll be home real soon Darlin.'*

*"All My Love,  
Your Husband,  
Bill Parsons"*

Billene was quietly sobbing as she finished the letter. *"My Mamma called me 'Billene' for my Daddy,"* she muttered to herself. *"My Daddy's comin.' Maybe he'll take me away with him - away from ole Joe Clode. God. My Daddy's comin."*