

CHAPTER THREE: RAY

My buddy Ray had just got a job at Fidelity, and he wanted to celebrate.

“Meet me at San Juan. They’ve got half-priced rum drinks on Thursday.”

“Holy shit! I’m not sure if it’s my kind of place.”

While he was at Tech, he worked at Dusty’s, and now he was out on his own. They cut me at ten, so I was ready to let loose.

I got there before he did. It was still somewhat early, and the place was deserted. Maybe this was not a good night.

The bartenders were all women in the skimpiest costumes. Leather bustiers. Jeans shorts and heels. As the dj played Beatles songs remixed to a disco rhythm beat, the girls worked the beat for every ounce of rump-shaking passion. They all labored under an illusion that the glamor of the stage made the job all the less onerous. So they kept up the fantasy that they were all celebrities. And their tight-fitting clothing only exaggerated their youthful exuberance

“No one is alive here. They have just been well-preserved.”

Ray apologized for being late, “Sorry to have left you here alone for so long.”

“Alone is the word for it. I am the only one who is really alive. The rest of them are just pretending.”

He laughed, “That’s being a little hard on them.”

“Look at them. Closely. Look in their eyes. No real life.”

I watched one of the girls bounce to the beat.

Ray followed my lead, “She has it.”

“It’s like Frankenstein’s monster being awakened by electricity.”

“She’s cute.”

“She’s a walking skeleton.”

Ray seemed adamant, “She’s got a great body.”

“They’re good in the lab these days.”

“You’re a weirdo”

“Talk to one of them.”

“I bet half the girls here are in college.”

“That proves my point.”

He seemed engrossed by the talent. The girls dazzled him as they mixed drinks.

“This is an art!”

It still seemed like a mausoleum. It was important that none of them let on.

Ray tried to correct my attitude, “Working here is different. They need to figure out how to break the routine.”

“It’s just scary! Everyone has a deep dark secret that they’re hiding.”

“You’re killing the buzz.”

“I don’t like the vibe in here.”

“You’ve got to groove along with them.”

I expressed my displeasure, “This is not something that can be helped.”

“Have another drink.”

He was already two sheets to the wind. I needed to keep him somewhat alert.

“See that girl over there!”

“She is hot!”

“Ray, look really closely. You can see her soul.”

“You are crazy.”

I shuddered with my observation, “She’s a vampire, a very ancient vampire.”

Ray started to be afraid for my sanity.

“How old is she? She’s twenty five if she’s a day.”

“That’s what they want you to think.”

She was the most spry of the group. She had a great sense of the music. They had just put on INXS, and she let the bass take her body to other side.

I pointed out, “Look at the eyes. She’s not all here. She just doing what she’s told.”

“And what is that?”

“She is looking for victims.”

Ray was insistent, “You couldn’t touch that girl.”

“Maybe not.”

“So you’re making excuses why you can’t get close to her.”

My seriousness was freaking him out, “I know these things. Time is getting to her faster than you know. She is so caught in this web that it is pushing her up and spinning her around. She can never catch up. Except by accepting her true nature.”

“Explain that to me!”

“The life here ages them prematurely. Like Dorian Gray. They’re given these youthful bodies. They exercise all the time. At work, they’re always moving. But the drugs, the easy passion, the tireless front of ecstatic pleasure. It’s too much for a normal human to maintain. So they revert to their ancient souls.”

Ray remained unconvinced, “You really mean this literally?”

“I might as well.”

I was shaking him up.

“I need to smoke.”

“Go ahead. I’ll be all right.”

“They’re not going to whisk you up and take you to their coffins.”

There was a flair to his gait as he slipped out to smoke. He had to leave his drink at the table.

To our left were a row of sandwiches left from Happy Hour. Revelers could stock up for that action that would follow. None of the girls ever touched the food. There were inspired by a more profound appetite.

“You’re doing it again.”

Ray startled me when he came back in.

He continued, “You think that can know some eternal truth about the women who work here simply by observing them.”

I challenged him, “Am I wrong?”

“About the vampire thing. There is no way that I am go along with that shit. Call it for what it is.”

“I’ll tell you what it is! You’re letting your imagination get to you.”

“There is no real affection here. Everyone is on the hunt.”

“And the vampire thing.”

“There are those who are able to rise above their human nature. Special circumstances. That is what is happening here.”

“Lenny, you need a snack.”

“I don’t want you calling me Lenny too.”

Ray was munching on one of the sandwiches.

“This is good!”

I held my hand up to turn down the offer, “I don’t need any food!”

“You worked too long this evening. You need something to get the juices flowing again.”

I laughed, “I don’t want them taking me while I’m vulnerable.”

“You’re not going to have another drink.”

“If I’m already nuts, it’s only going to make it worse.”

“Could it be any worse? You could quiet down. We need to meet some women.”

We had watched two women get drinks at the bar, and then they went to sit at the far table in the corner.

“What about them?”

He warned me, “It’s not a percentage shot. If we go over there, and they turn us down, we’re going to look silly. It will just kill the night. We’ll have to leave right away.”

“I didn’t listen.”

These two were definitely out of their league. They were like a lot of the patrons who had their eyes on the bartenders. They all pretended that they had the same charms as these supergirls. The more athletic of the two was in jeans. She was dressed quite smartly. Her friend was in a long summer dress. It was hardly the elegant attire that was meant to impress at San Juan.

They were both a little intimidated by the place. They were trying to keep up, but they could sense that the competition was way beyond their skills. They were doing their best to recover from the initial shock.

As I started to introduce myself, Ray arrived to offer moral support.

He whispered to me, “This isn’t even fair. They’re going to both end up crying on our shoulder.”

They both worked as secretaries at law offices at Tower Place.

“We’re roommates. We even work out together.” Dawn was the vivacious one. She kept hoping for a brighter day. She perked up from the moment that I was in her sight.

Ellie was a little more reserved.

“I feel like a fish out of water.”

“You don’t sound like you’re from around here.”

“I moved from Montgomery. After college. Some college. I still haven’t finished. But I’m going to go back.”

Ray leaned over, “Why do you get the pretty one?”

“Shut up, Ray.” I turned to the women, “Ray is a little shy.

Shy he wasn’t. But I needed to make up for his rudeness.

“Why are we here?”

I ignored him. I called over the waitress to buy them drinks. I didn't have a lot of money. But I could afford a round with the prices tonight. Ray slipped me a ten.

“You're not drinking?” Dawn asked.

“No, I've had my fill.”

Ellie speculated, “You're not in rehab, are you?”

“Should I be?”

She back-pedaled, “I didn't mean to be insulting.”

“Not at all.” If you didn't drink, in here, you'd be a real freak. You'd be climbing the walls and hiding behind the columns.

“I'm not one of you!”

Ray was trying to work his magic. But it all felt forced. He blamed me for setting him up. He gave me a face.

“Ray just got a great job.”

Dawn managed her best drawl, “I'm overjoyed for you.”

“You're out celebrating,” Ellie was beaming. He seemed too perfect for her. Little did she know.

Ray tried to be philosophical, “This is the kind of bar where you get stood up by a real lout, and you start to wonder if your life is over.”

Ellie wasn't sure if the comment was meant for her. But she did her best to recover.

“I like it here. The music makes me want to get up and dance. Look at all the girls here; they are having a fantastic time.”

I repeated, “Fantastic.”

Ellie was staring at Ray. I informed her, “You can't trust Tech boys.”

“I heard that!”

“Ray hates to be teased. He can dish it out. But he can't take it.”

Dawn came to his defense, “No one likes to be on the hot seat. We all have feelings.”

She had rushed too quickly to help him out. She was missing the humor. Her heart was too big.

“I'm not making any accusations. But Ray fancies himself a player.”

Momentarily, Ellie looked away.

“Ellie's my best friend. I don't want anyone messing with her.”

After the drinks arrived, the women excused themselves and headed for the washroom.

“We've got to throw these two back.”

“They like us.”

“What are you doing? Trying to sabotage the night. Because this is really a stupid idea.”

“Chill out!”

He seemed livid, “I'm going to chill out out the door. These girls need to learn a quick lesson. You're not going to find paradise in a shit hole like this.”

“You're making it a worse shit hole. Give them a chance. We haven't even got to know them.”

“What do you want? To go home and see their macrame and neon posters of Elvis.”

I hit back hard, “I love Elvis!”

“You’re missing the point. I haven’t even got to know any of the bartenders, but I probably have more in common with them than these two wallflowers.”

I worked to calm him down, “Drink your drink and enjoy yourself.”

“You ruined it when you called the bartenders zombies.”

“I never said *zombies*.”

“You might as well have. Now, you’re getting technical on me.”

“Everyone who works here has that strange gaze.”

“So instead you set me up with a deer in the headlights. I might as well be collecting road kill.”

Ellie and Dawn seemed so prim when they came back.

“We really should be leaving,” Dawn told us.

Ellie had her own version, “I’d love to help you celebrate, Ray. Call me sometime.”

“You’ve hardly touched your drinks.”

Dawn spoke like her senior English teacher, “We hate drinking too much on a school night.”

“Whatever,” Ray muttered under his breath.

As soon as they left, Ray let loose.

“We get shot down by Carrie and her in-bred cousin. And you’re talking horror movie to me! The night is fucked!”

“Why are you such a massive weenie? The girls could sense your attitude.”

“Huh! We’re the best thing that’s happened to them since their high school proms forty years ago. You know how to pick ‘em”

“I was only trying to be a gentleman.”

“Are you kidding? I’m not a missionary!”

Ray took a big gulp from his glass. He shook it off.

“What next, Bobby Knight?”

I surveyed the floor. Hardly anyone had come in since we had been chatting up our lovely company.

Ray felt as if he dodged a bullet. He wasn’t used to such hits to his fragile ego.

“The aftershock is coming!”

“Sure, Ray. If only people could see how you really are. Behind the starched shirt and the fancy watch,”

“The watch is a gift.”

“So is your whole world.”

“I worked hard to get where I am.”

“Dawn and Ellie are going to work their whole lives and will never approach your plans for success.”

“Doesn’t that tell you something?”

I admonished him, “Any second, anyone can experience a disaster that will put everything that they love in jeopardy.”

“Now, you’re playing the grim reaper again. I’m sure if I went back to Ellie’s place she’d have five cats.”

“Everyone gets lonely.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here. And I know how to work on that feeling.”

“Ray, I should go too. I’d like to do some writing before I head off to sleep.”

“That’s just your excuse because you didn’t get any. Look at these hotties.”

“They’re going out with the valet parker or the security guy.”

“There’s an army of these hot babes. We’ve got to go into action.”

“This is not my style.”

He consoled me, “Let one of the vampires bite your neck.”

“I’ve got to leave.”

I got up but he pulled me back to my chair.

“Have one more with me. I’m celebrating!”

I agreed, “I’m not drinking. But I will hang around.”

I stretched out in my chair. Ray called over a waitress to set him up. He tried to get him into a conversation, but she acted busy.

“The place is almost a ghost town. What’s her story?”

“She could sense that you were a loser. She saw us with Dawn and Ellie.”

Ray had a comeback, “You’re the dick. I told you that those girls were toxic.”

I was waiting for him to break down completely. One drink was going to be enough to send him over the top.

“I’m not asking for forgiveness,” Ray mused.

“I’m not your confessor.”

“Were you really in rehab?”

“Of course not. I was just saying that.”

“Honestly, those girls had no personality. I could spot it a mile away.”

Ray swirled around the drink his glass.

I answered, “I needed to know something. See that they were real.”

“Too real. We were lucky that they didn’t stay. I mean reality TV is too dramatic for chicks like that.”

“Always a put down!”

Ray motioned with his hands, “I’m keeping it real.”

“They were nice girls. No subterfuge.”

“They made you buy them drinks, then they ducked out.”

“No harm, no foul!”

“Lenny, you are too understanding.”

“You call me Lenny when you say something that pisses me off. I really do have to go Ray.”

“We haven’t even started.”

“No more drinking.”

If he didn’t keep drinking, then his game was definitely over. And I already knew that I was going to have to give him a ride. Good thing that he lived close to Lenox. For the time being, I had to keep him talking. Maybe let the truth would sober him up.

Ray wasn’t about to learn any lessons.

“I already sent the Church Ladies home. I can’t even imagine doing that Ellie girl. You’d have to sedate me.”

“Look at yourself. You’re hopeless.”

It wasn’t late enough to do a post-mortem. He was trying to survive among the other skeletons.

I encouraged him, “Go have another sandwich. It will help you get even.”

“I don’t want to get even. I want to get over!”

But he did head back to the sandwich tray.

“This is good shit.”

He slobbered as he ate.

“Sure it is.”

“You ought to try one.”

“Not now!”

He was making a spectacle of himself. The waitress smiled at me as she walked by.

“Is there anything that I can do to help?”

“Time is on our side. Thanks. I’ll tell you if we need anything.”

Her smile became bigger as she headed back to her station.

Ray went to the toilet and came back with a Cheshire-cat smile.

“Did you just eat the parakeet.”

“No, I asked the washroom attendant to hold my dick while I pissed.”

“You didn’t.”

He shook his head, “Of course, I didn’t. But I might as well have. You’re right. This is one big crypt.”

He had all this nervousness in his step. Guess it was the frustration.

“We have had enough.”

“Sit down, buddy boy. I want to tell you my life story.”

“I know all about your years at Tech.

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

I wasn’t ready for him to start crying in his beer.

“I’ve just never felt that I was good enough.”

“For what. The zombies.”

“I’m serious.”

“It’s the alcohol talking. It’s eating away at your brain.”

“Lenny, why are you such a little bitch. You’re so sympathetic to these two girl who you don’t even know, and you’re not about to hear any of my problems.”

“Problems just feel so much worse at night when you’ve been drinking. You feel as if you’re never going to solve anything.”

“I just feel so worthless.”

“You’ve just landed this great job.”

“Doing what? Lying to people about stock trades.”

“That’s not what you do.”

He let the scorn overtake him, “I might as well be.”

“It’s a job. A good job. It lets you have a nice place.”

“I want more than nice.” He pointed at the waitress, “I bet she wants more than nice.”

“She wants a tattooed love boy who’s going suck all her blood out.”

“I thought that you told me she was already a skeleton.”

“So she is. Then he’ll use her as a toothpick.”

He became moodier, “Can’t you be serious?”

“Drinking makes you too serious!”

“Not drinking makes you a jerk.”

“I had a couple of drinks.”

“You never ate the sandwiches.”

I grinned, “Is the mustard psychedelic?”

I felt that we weren’t going to get anywhere playing amateur psychologists. There just wasn’t any traction here.

“I don’t want to play the dick. I just need to know how girls like Dawn and Ellie can survive in this world.”

“Easy. They have no pretense.”

“But what are their dreams?”

“To meet a nice real estate agent and settle down in Alpharetta and have a family.”

“I thought that was my dream.”

I stared at him up close, “Is it?”

“I’ve always had this hollow. And it’s only got deeper.”

“It’s only one night. You feel vulnerable. Let it go”

“I’m feeling sick.”

“It’s the drink and the sandwiches.”

I called over the waitress to bring him some water. He sat back in the chair and stretched out his legs.

“What have I done wrong in my life?”

“Ray, it’s not what you’ve done. It’s what you haven’t done.”

“It’s penance for the whole weekend.”

I wonder if that meant drinking only PBR. As soon as the waitress walked by, he seemed to come to his senses.

“What was that?”

“I think that I have one good play in me.”

“No more drinking.”

“I can handle it.”

“Tell yourself that now. But you’re going to be even worse in a half hour or so.”

“I’ll do it for you. I’ll stick to water.”

He tried to shake himself back to sanity.

“Now, I feel like a twelve year old.”

I asked him what he meant.

“I see these hot girls. But my tongue gets all tied in knots.”

“Tell them about your plans.”

He grimaced, “What plans?”

“How you want to abscond with them to an island paradise where you wear scanty outfits and drink rum drinks all day.

“I think that’s what got me in trouble in the first place.”

“Maybe you should say anything to any of the girls.”

“Then where’s my entertainment.”

I wondered how this could be fun for anyone. There was that brief moment before intoxication really set in. Then everyone was clamoring just to sit down. Ray was a casualty like any other. Just as long as his wallet was lighter, they had done a stupendous job in making things right.

“So what do you want me to do from this moment on? No drinking.”

“Not tonight.”

“I guess your right. I’m seeing double. Two lovelies over by the register.”

“There are two women by the register.”

“I guess that I’m OK. I deserve another drink.”

“Not so fast.”

I held my hand up as a stop gesture. He slapped it back.

“You’re done, bucko!

If he said anything of real significance, could I imagine him remembering it the next day?

But he wanted to ramble on.

“I need to find out what’s wrong with me.”

“I thought that you told me that you were ready to party.

He looked forlorn, “I think that is all part of my self-loathing.”

“And that is why you drink?”

He joked, “I think that I like the taste. The rum drinks are really tasty here.”

“I didn’t think that you were so partial to rum.”

“It is a little sweet. But I am trying to stay in the tropical theme of the night.”

I just didn’t want to see him hop up and try to dance. I imagined him collapsing on the floor. Then it would be useless trying to get him out of here.

“Try and calm down, and we’ll be able to walk away without too much of a mess on our hands.”

“I have a better idea. You leave me alone. And I will work out an end game.”

I could imagine the waitresses like flies ready to pick his bones.

“The only way that I’m leaving here is if you’re with me. Even if I have to carry you.”

I motioned with my hand. And he slapped it away.

“I’m perfectly OK on my own. I just had a bout of indigestion.”

“So you don’t want to talk about your drinking.”

“You brought it up.”

He was getting testy, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to argue with a drunken friend.”

“I guess I did bring it up.”

He tries to score points, “You were drinking too!”

“Nowhere near as much.”

“But it affects you worse. I’m a pro.”

“Sure you are, buddy boy.”

“The waitress came over to the table.

“I can call him a cab. I can get security to help him out if you need it.”

“I’m perfectly OK. Do I look like I need help.”

She gave a big smile, “It takes a man to admit what he’s really about. I love honesty in a guy.”

Ray thought that he was making headway.

“You have lovely eyes.”

“And I can see that you could use some help.”

Finally, I was able to get him on his feet heading towards the door.

“Sister, I’ll be back next time!”

She waved at him, “I’ll be waiting.”

She knew that she couldn’t make a living without pathetic types such as this. It made me troubled.

“I guess that I’ve learned my lesson.”

“No drinking?”

“Less drinking.”

I made a deal with the valet to leave his car overnight. I drove him myself.

“I’ve got him.”

We eased him into my Honda and sped away.

For a moment or two, I was worried he would throw up on the seat.

“Hold my hand, and I’ll be all right!”

He had been OK for much of the night. The encounter with Ellie and Dawn set him for a loop. At that point, his drinking went into serious overdrive.

After I got him back to his place, I headed back home. I looked over at Monroe’s apartment. It was still dark.

I was pretty tired. But I forced myself to write. I had certainly learned enough from the night.

I wasn’t waiting for Ray to change. I wanted to tell myself that the cheap rum and the craziness of San Juan had turned him into a monster for the night. I had seen him worse. But he usually did his best to hide it.

The waitresses had done their best to calm him down. This made him think that there was more to their attention.

I was lucky that I didn’t have to start deliveries until three. I needed to rest.

I had survived our Night of the Living Dead without hardly any wounds. No one had tried to suck our blood. No one had bit into our flesh. But Ray was left with a big question mark about our approaching Dawn and Ellie. For him, they had no game. They drifted through their lives motivated by a vague sense of the future. They never thought of themselves as celebrities; there wasn’t this raging conflict between their public and private selves. So there was nothing that Ray could leverage in his favor. Sure, they could react to a compliment. But there was no magic. He did one of his tricks, and it just fell flat. For their part, they didn’t know how to use the illusion of the night to their advantage. As the minutes wore on, they seemed more and more out of place. You could watch the bartenders and see their elegant ballet as part of an artist’s response to her vicinity. The watcher wanted to believe that there was more.

As Ray observed Dawn and Ellie, he was only reminded of the drabness of their world. Perhaps, Ray didn’t want to face the drudgery of his own life. A few drinks, and he could spin an amazing tale of luxury and delight. He had all the accouterments of wealth. His usual victims

took his interest as a cue for their own Academy Award-winning performances. That was his craft. He was the ideal method actor.

I hadn't worked cooperatively with Ray. I busted through his vision and forced him into a meeting the two women. Both Dawn and Ellie were entirely oblivious. They didn't use the bartender and waitresses to increase their own possibilities. They weren't living through these other girls. They just wanted to get home. They didn't appreciate the free drinks. They didn't even take us for granted. They just ran.

Ray wanted to teach me a lesson. That was why he had brought me to San Juan. For all my commitment to be a writer, I gave little credibility to the games people played at San Juan. Why did we need tabloids? What was the worth of reality TV? Who really listened to Oprah or Dr. Phil? Ray wanted to prepare me for the Super Bowl. He was showing me the competition. This was the game that he enjoyed on the stock market. It wasn't based on the hard work of the individual. It converted work into this phantom currency that could be exchanged for anything that the mind could imagine. Hollywood stars and supermodels simply provided the motivation. Everything was overvalued because it included the cost of thousand of pitches from guys like Ray. Hype was not simply an accompanying feature. It was the engine which drove the giant conveyor belts. No wonder flitting butterflies like Ray could engage the hurricanes in Sri Lanka or China. So his nights out on the town weren't simply a reward for a day closely monitoring the leader board. He was putting the massive dynamo into action. And I had acted like a Luddite by throwing a wrench in his lovely machine.

Deep inside, Ray felt I was the one who needed to do his penance. I need to accept the hit for the team.

"We're going to live to play another day." were his last words that night.