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R O A D
H O M E

TOMMY & TENNEY
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Chapter 1

Las Vegas, Nevada

I was thirty years old when I endured the worst day of my life.

The day began with my eyes flying open, followed by a shudder. The face swimming into focus before me, to be brutally honest, resembled that of a ghoul—swollen, distorted, with eerie green-orange skin and eyeballs. The dull stare of a man who could measure the rest of his life in hours. Shallow, staccato breaths rasped in and out between cracked lips.

I remember thinking, *if only this was a nightmare . . .* as my awareness grew.

He looked like death incarnate.

I sighed in despair. Another morning had found me back in the same hospital, slumped in the same, sadistic vinyl visitor's chair in which I had spent so many days and nights, drifting through that disorienting no-man's-land between discomfort, sheer exhaustion, and shallow sleep. Most heartbreaking of all, though, I was back at the same agonizing vigil, watching a loved one slowly die of liver disease.

His name was Mel. The poor soul was not only a dear friend but my brother-in-law—the only brother to Lonnie, my husband.

My *first* husband. Yes, that's right. Some of you may have forgotten, or maybe never knew, that I was married once before. So long ago now that it seems like another lifetime, another world.

Both Lonnie and Mel were kind men, good men by the humblest of street standards, although weak and prone to addictions, which made Vegas the worst possible city for them to inhabit.

Yes, Las Vegas.

I met Lonnie in the cocktail lounge where I was a waitress.

Yes, a cocktail lounge. There will be some shocking revelations, but please don't let those initial skeletons in my closet frighten you off!

I lived with Lonnie briefly and married him in Las Vegas, Nevada. And that, my dear family, is where your esteemed matriarch came from. The city of a thousand nicknames, few of them wholesome.

I chuckle just now, picturing some of your faces as you read this. *Aunt Ruth had a first husband, and was a cocktail waitress . . . in Las Vegas?? How much more shocking can it get?*

I'll tell you how much—for here goes the next truth volley. I was born Ruth Simone Escalante, of the San Moises, Sonora, Mexico *Escalantes*. My family and I were migrant farmworkers in the fields of central California, Arizona, and Nevada. I grew up with my back bent and my fingers in the soil, pulling produce of every kind for the supermarkets of America. Some of my brothers and sisters are probably still out there, somewhere, this very day, though I have not been able to locate a single one.

I am by birth and heritage a Mexican-American migrant farmworker. I believe my family had immigrated legally, although I was too young to know for sure. But regardless, we definitely occupied the lowest social rung human beings could cling to in these United States. While I'm fairly certain we weren't an illegal immigrant family, we certainly lived like one—including having a fierce distrust of the authorities and the banking system. Of this part, I am quite clear; I missed way too much school in order to work in the fields. Both to make ends meet for my family and out of fear of my father.

Because of things I suffered (which I'll probably reveal over the course of this story, when my courage has gotten some practice) I was removed from my birth family as a young teenager and lost touch with them.

And when my third foster family brought me to Las Vegas, I thought I had died and washed up on the shores of Paradise. Las Vegas shone to me then like a beacon of hope and opportunity as bright as the neon along its famed Strip. Back then, any future that involved being indoors and air-conditioned, standing up straight and not being paid by the filled bushel basket, represented a giant leap forward.

Hours after my eighteenth birthday, I left the constant abuse of my so-called foster family and struck out on my own. My first boyfriend, a sleek blackjack dealer named Darryl and the first truly kind man I had ever known, quickly landed me a waitressing job working the graveyard shift in the casino cocktail lounge where he dealt cards.

Yes, again, my real career began in a bar as a cocktail waitress. I had never even drunk alcohol before then.

The job wasn't on the Strip but on the outskirts of town, in one of those casinos that tried to lure travelers in before they saw the Strip's glitz and glamour. Working along Las Vegas Boulevard represented a higher rung in the pecking order, which I had yet to achieve. But that was okay with me. I was young, had my energy, and knew how to work. Compared to my lost birth family, or even those foster families, I was in the proverbial tall cotton.

Darryl didn't last. Neither did Leon. Or Patrick. I was seemingly cursed with the ability to attract men. A few good men, more bad men, even some married men—just *men*! I was told so often that I was beautiful that I came to believe it was just another lie. Another come-on.

Until much later in life, when one man caused me to believe it was actually true.

But the job itself lasted. And I survived, out on my own. One day I spotted an open, good-looking face scrutinizing our microbrew list. That face looked up as I approached, and as our gazes locked, so did our destinies.

He brought me home to meet his widowed mother to whom he was unusually devoted. And also his brother, Mel, who was his closest friend in the world. Lonnie became my husband, and they became my family. I finally belonged, and it was wonderful.

Then, only three years later, Mel's vibrant face had cruelly morphed into the death mask now lying next to me, and Lonnie was a crushed soul in a bar somewhere, unable to face either his dying brother, his heartbroken mother, or his disappointed wife.

I looked away, unable to bear the sight on the hospital pillow. Just a few feet away, sitting in the chair beside him, was his mother, Naomi, trying to read a novel. Anytime Mel's wife, Orpah, (yes, that really was her name) vacated that spot, Naomi would occupy it in seconds. Whether Orpah only left for a quick bathroom break or an afternoon shift of unavoidable work, as was the case at that moment, no sliver of time was too short for Naomi to be nearer her son. Orpah would never see her make her way into it, only scurry out as soon as she returned, always with a kind apology. Naomi would then retake her seat and resume what she had done almost

nonstop during her long years of isolation in that Vegas apartment—reading voraciously. Naomi was such a prolific reader that both Orpah and I were shocked to learn, not long after meeting her, that the well-spoken Naomi was actually an eighth-grade dropout who had sharpened her mind through the consumption of thousands of library books over the years.

Naomi was losing a son and Orpah was losing a husband. Both of them knew that the two dreadful experiences were only inches apart in the realm of emotional agony. Naomi was doubly aware of this because, not so many years before, she had lost her own husband.

That's right. The wasted body now before her was the next-to-last member of a once-thriving family, including her good-looking husband and a pair of strapping sons—boys she once shook her head at with the bemused smile of a mother barely concealing her pride in the energy and invincibility of *her men*.

Her Eli had passed on just three years before, slumped forward of a heart attack at the massive Hotel Bellagio check-in counter where he had been employed for going on six years. He had worked his way into management, only to die before enjoying the benefits.

Both Lonnie and his brother, Mel, were in construction, helping support themselves and their mother after their father's death. The two brothers were so close they seemed to function as a single unit. If you knew one, you knew the other. That's why my marriage to Lonnie also led to a warm friendship with Mel. In fact, the four of us often went out together, preferring one another's company to all others.

But today, with the liver disease ravaging his brother, Lonnie remained at work on the girders, desperately trying to keep the family afloat. Naomi had become too fragile and emotionally scattered to work. During the day, Lonnie had been too concerned with earning a wage to ask for time off to see his brother in the hospital. Sometimes it seemed he and I merely passed like the proverbial ships in the night, scarcely aware of each other or our marriage any longer.

And yet I knew Lonnie loved me intensely. So intense was that love that I was hardly aware of the pain from my past. He had healed so much with his unwavering affection. Lonnie was a good man with bad faults and an occasional penchant for bad decisions, yet I adored him for the way he loved me. That's one thing I learned from this family. How to love while in pain.

Now Lonnie was drowning in a new pain of his own, and I felt powerless to help him. He could barely make himself look at the wasted shell of a man who was his beloved brother.

Admittedly, Mel was hard to look at by this point. And hard to listen to as well. Toxins had settled into his brain and erupted into full-blown delirium, and his rants had become nearly unbearable. Hepatitis in its last stages is relentless.

Even now, Mel's withered hands reached out and weakly grasped the nurse's as she tried to take his pulse. "What's the frequency, Kenneth?" he muttered at her with the tiniest grimace of a smile. "Kenneth, what's the frequency?"

I couldn't help but grin at his words. After all, few people would remember them as the phrase of CBS anchorman Dan Rather, who, years before in Manhattan, claimed an attacker had growled the phrase at him as he was being mugged. Not long after that, the rock group R.E.M. had mockingly recorded a song with the words as its title and main lyric. It was just the kind of random trivia Lonnie had been summoning from the dregs of his memory for days now.

I was always amazed by both brothers' ability to remember the minutiae of life. Because they had spent their early years without pop culture, Mel and Lonnie later had developed an excessive admiration for its history. They became fanatical movie buffs. Trivia wizards. Music savants. Their favorite game was peppering their family talk with pop-culture factoids, a foreign

language which Orpah and I learned ourselves over time. Naomi, however, from a different place and era, had never been interested enough to master it.

Now Mel's fevered brain muttered one pop-trivia reference after another.

The nurse gently placed Mel's wrist on his stomach and gave me a somber look.

"Any preferences for last rites?" she asked softly.

I glanced over at Naomi. Her eyes were wide open but unfocused.

"No, he's not . . . religious," I said, my voice also low. "Is the end really that close?"

The nurse shrugged, but her expression held genuine care. "It's impossible to say with hepatitis. He could slip further into the coma and stay there for weeks. I couldn't make that call, and of course, I shouldn't, not being the doctor. But his life signs have gotten much worse, and rapidly. His blood pressure has dropped pretty dramatically. His kidneys are now completely shut down and his urine has turned brown. And his breathing . . . ?" Her voice faded, yet her insinuation seemed to shout at me.

I paused, listened, and realized I'd been tuning out something. It was a soft, steady rattling sound, floating out from between his lips whenever his chest moved. I had been so focused on measuring the ever-lengthening intervals between his breaths, wondering if each one was the last, then sighing in gratitude with each one, that I hadn't noticed it.

With a quick, unexpected hand on my shoulder, the nurse was gone.

Naomi turned to me, her face set.

"Better call Orpah right away," she said, her voice shaky.

Strangely, the directive brought me back to the first time I'd heard that odd name, shortly after meeting Lonnie.

Several things you must understand about Orpah.

First of all, in case you're wondering, I've been spelling her name correctly. It seems her mother, who hailed from someplace like Ethiopia or Somalia, had met and married a visiting Global Aid relief worker. The husband's idealistic rescue of a beautiful, ebony-skinned refugee had eventually clashed with the hard reality of multicultural marriages. The union didn't last long—just long enough to produce a child. She wanted to name her daughter Oprah after the famous African-American talk show host with whom she was enamored, and whose daily program had helped tutor her rudimentary English.

But when the baby was born, the woman, still befuddled by equal parts epidural, sleep deprivation, and poor English, had transposed the letters on the birth certificate and been too distracted afterward to return and correct her mistake. Her mother continued to call her Oprah, but school and society called her Orpah, as it was spelled. I guess you can tell which part of her life had the most lasting impact.

Orpah was a stunning example of human beauty, and I envied her quite openly and vocally. Being half Caucasian and half African, she had the creamiest coffee-colored skin and long curly black hair tumbling down a fit, six-foot-two frame seemingly composed mostly of long slender legs. Orpah turned heads even along the Las Vegas Strip, which is where she made her living—as an exotic dancer at the Olympic Gardens cabaret.

I never looked down on her for that. As they say, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, at least until this story. Residents of Las Vegas quickly learn an unspoken law of never judging anyone for their choice of profession. If you're going to do that, better to move somewhere more righteous.

Secondly, I'd admitted to myself not long after meeting Orpah that I probably would have been tempted to take up the profession myself, if only I'd had legs "up to here." Don't get me wrong; I'd gotten my share of looks along the Boulevard, and good genes are probably the most valuable inheritance my Hispanic family ever bestowed on me. (Funny, but no one here or in Vegas ever thought I looked Hispanic, and I worked hard to lose the residual accent.) But merely having good-looking bronze skin didn't get you onto the casino stages. Only bona fide genetic mutations have the looks *and* the legs for that kind of work.

Her husband, Mel, had no problem with her occupation. Actually, that is where he first met her. Naomi, however, could never bring herself to say the word *topless*; in fact, she hardly ever mentioned that her daughter-in-law was a dancer. Only that she "worked in a nightclub." But Naomi loved "O," our private name for Orpah, just the same.

Third, and most important, Orpah was my best friend. By marrying brothers, it seemed we'd both washed up on the troubled shores of the Yoder family with baggage that, while quite contrasting, proved equally messy to unpack. But unpack it, Naomi most certainly did—in both of our cases. Unlikely though it might have seemed, we each wound up finding a haven there. Sometimes it was abundantly clear that Naomi was that *haven* more than her two hapless boys. But neither of us was staring gift horses in the mouth.

By then, the name Orpah sounded as ordinary and proper as any I could think of. But she was also the last person I wanted to call, with this message, on this day.

"Make sure Lonnie gets here soon too," Naomi added.

"Orpah's show ends in five minutes," I answered. "And Lonnie isn't answering his phone. Naomi, I'm afraid he's off at a bar somewhere."

"Well, you'll have to find him. He would never forgive himself, not being here for—for his brother's last moments."

"Naomi, you know I can't drive."

Although I had survived my years in Vegas relatively intact, I did struggle against an intermittent problem with drinking. That struggle had resulted in several DUIs and a recent suspension of my driver's license. As a result, Naomi had driven me to the hospital in her old Chevy Impala.

"I know you're not supposed to drive," Naomi insisted with a little shake of her head. "But could you please make an exception? We can't let my two boys miss their last words to each other."

"If I get caught, I go to jail," I said, shaking my own head.

"Please. I'd go myself, if it didn't take me away from him." She was clutching his hand with both of hers like she'd never let go.

Finally, I nodded my agreement. I rose from my chair, leaned over and grasped Mel's other hand.

Looking into his face at that point was more difficult than ever. Every feature that had once made his face appealing was now either swollen grotesquely or turned some foul, unnatural color. Thank God the rest of his body was covered by blankets, for his stomach was now bloated the size of several basketballs. Just looking into those orange-colored eyes swimming in withered, discolored skin made me want to scream, be sick, and strike someone—all at the same time.

"Mel, can you hear me?" I half whispered. "I'm going to go now and bring back Lonnie. Okay? Will you try to hang in there until I return?"

His pupils turned in my direction, and he seemed to smile.

I lifted my head and risked a look into Naomi's eyes and saw something there which further broke my heart in pieces.

Four miles away, sitting in one of the grim, dimly lit bars that catered to working-class Vegas locals, Lonnie picked up his cell phone, saw the vibration was me, calling for the fourth time, and dropped it back on the table. The shaking caused it to skitter across the surface and nearly fall off. He slapped the phone with his hand and held it there, muffling the sound, and closed his eyes in anguish.

The sinking feeling in his insides told him all he could bear to know. His brother was losing the battle.

He raised a callused index finger to a nearby waitress. The only way he would reenter that nasty hospital room, he told me when I found him, was with a lot more booze in him.