

THE BLACK CHAPEL

BY

MARILYN CRUISE

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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# 1

I think I heard somewhere that there are no wrong turns in life, that everything you go through and every path you take is nothing but a learning experience on an unexpected path. I doubt whoever said such a ridiculous thing had ever heard of me, because if they had, clearly, they'd see that my job is nothing but a very wrong and very degrading turn.

Well, degrading doesn't even scratch the surface of it. Quite frankly, I'm disgusted with myself. Don't get me wrong—I'm not a regular saint, by any means. I can't even remember the last time I went to church or prayed.

Not that I don't believe in Him, it's just I don't have the time to commit myself to such matters when my entire ship is going down. And although I work at a place called *The Black Chapel*, it isn't your regular place of worship.

It's a strip club.

The Black Chapel is really hopping tonight. The twenty or so girls working here are yapping and laughing, and the air is inundated with hairspray and rich perfume.

I apply my make-up: heavy glitter around the eyes, black eyeliner and crimson red lipstick. My first outfit is *Little Red Riding Hood*. I moan inwardly as I feel those familiar butterflies flurrying in my stomach like they always do before I perform. *Just don't think about it, Scarlett. Just do it.*

The good news is that my income has doubled since I arrived here six months ago, which is, well, great I suppose. I can't exactly jump for joy though, as I'm still struggling with paying my parents' mortgage, my mountains of student loans, and my maxed-out credit cards, all the while trying to save up for my father's chemotherapy treatments. It's going to take a hell of a lot more to dig myself out of these vacuums of debts than my current income.

When I was twelve, I dreamt I would become a respectable prima ballerina and that I'd meet a really nice guy, get married in a church, and have three or four kids.

Instead, here I am, fresh out of college, having just lost my mother in a car accident, struggling to make ends meet, and supporting my sick father.

When I first started this lowly job, I promised myself I'd only stay until I found a better one, and told myself it wasn't *that* bad. But if I'm truly honest with myself, I'm sickened, knowing that if my mother had been alive and saw me working as a stripper, she'd be mortified.

"You're up in twenty, Samantha," Laila yells in my direction. Samantha is my stage name. My real name is Scarlett.

Laila is the owner, and has more balls than any man who's ever set foot in her high-end facility. She's tall, voluptuous and feisty, and always has her black, shoulder-length hair flat-ironed to perfection.

"Don't be late, you hear? Last time there was an awkward pause before you took the stage." She peers over at me with a dagger-like stare.

"I just wanted them to be even more excited about my arrival," I say cheekily, dabbing some more sparkly, ruby-red lip gloss onto my full lips.

Laila huffs. "Well, the gentlemen pay a hefty price to see your performance, and you don't wanna disappoint any of 'em, you hear? Disappointment leads to loss of income for the club, and loss of income for the club leads to job loss."

Laila is a businesswoman first, and an entrepreneur second. If you follow her rules, you'll be treated with respect and she'll even go so far as to show some kindness. But never too much, and always at arm's length.

"Yes, Laila." I desperately need this job, so I follow all her rules to a T, despite my so-called delay last time I took the stage.

Laila purses her lips and flips the page on her clipboard. "After Samantha, comes Anne. Why the hell am I reading this list off for you gals anyway?" She tears the paper off and tapes it over yesterday's schedule, and leaves.

Anne, AKA *Wonder Woman* at the moment, nods. Anne is my best friend, and the one who got me the job in the first place. She's worked here for three years, and doesn't mind it one bit. Or at least that's what she tells herself and everyone around her *all the time*.

Anne has talked about attending college lately, and I think it would be a smart move for her. Problem is, she doesn't have money. Parents? Yeah, right. When she was just seventeen, a senior at her high school raped her, and she became pregnant. Her parents didn't believe that she was raped and kicked her out of the house. She didn't have the heart to have an abortion, so she put the child up for adoption.

The family who adopted the child took her in until the baby was born, but then, dealing with all the emotional turmoil after the birth of her daughter, Anne fled. She could have stayed with the family—they were great people—but it just became too complicated. I can't imagine the heartache she must have gone through.

I tie a red cape around my shoulders and put my red mask on. I'd never dare perform if I couldn't conceal my identity. Ha! Almost makes me sound like a superhero. Yeah, right. Thankfully, I always wear a mask when performing, so I don't have to be afraid someone will recognize me in here or on the streets. That would be humiliating.

I do one last check in the mirror. I look skinnier than before. Last month I went to the doctor and found out that I had contracted bronchitis.

We don't receive health insurance here at The Black Chapel since we're considered Independent Contractors. And since I'm paying off so many other things—I'm basically half a million dollars in debt at age twenty-one—this month instead of buying food, I'm paying down the ER bills, which are steep, and a hell of a lot too many.

I should have gone to medical school instead of majoring in Art History. A degree in Art History is a useless degree I've learned, especially when it comes to finding a decent paying job.

"You look super sexy," Anne says to me, winking at me through the mirror.

"Thanks," I reply. "If only sexy equaled three billion dollars, I'd be happy."

She laughs. "No, seriously, that gold glitter really makes your brown eyes pop."

I'm not so certain, but I do think the fiery red against my black wavy hair looks pretty striking. I roll my eyes at myself.

"Are you coming to church with me tomorrow?" Anne asks, her perfectly arched eyebrows rising.

Every Saturday night she asks if I'll come to church with her on Sunday morning, and of course I always refuse. It's like our ritual.

"No, thanks, I'm good." I'd feel too guilty sitting in a pew next to a real saint, someone who has a respectable job and is a decent person, having made all the right decisions in life. Someone not like me.

I glance at Anne. She is an enigma. She's a stripper, but goes to church. She's a huge supporter of animal rights, yet she loves to eat veal and lamb. She refuses to spend money on lattes—saying it's wasteful—though she doesn't think twice about splurging on getting her nails manicured every single week. But she's a dear friend, and I love her no matter how many quirks she has.

"Hey, isn't Wonder Woman supposed to have dark hair?" I smirk.

“This Wonder Woman is blonde. Besides, haven’t you heard that blondes have more fun?” She adjusts her Wonder Woman crown.

“I never heard that,” I say. “And here I am thinking brunettes have all the fun.”

“Only in your dreams, darling.” Anne kisses me on both cheeks and I’m off to the stage. Costumes, props, and accessories like boas, fans, and scarves line the hallway.

I pass a few girls on their way back from performing. “Is it a good crowd tonight?” I ask, squeezing past them.

“Oh, the best,” Gina says, sweat glistening on her brow. “Wait until you see who’s here.” She giggles.

I’m kind of curious who she means, but I don’t really care. I’m not here to check out the guys or to try and get them to notice me. I’m here to get my bills paid. End of story.

I arrive in the wings and wait for my cue. When the lights dim, I close my eyes and take a deep breath—an unofficial ceremony of sorts I’ve developed for getting into my performance alter-self mode.

“Please welcome, Little Freaky and Hot Red Riding Hood,” Jim says over the speaker with an all-too excited tone of voice.

I sigh. He got my name wrong—again. It was supposed to just be *Little Red Riding Hood*. Whatever.

Jim is Laila’s husband, and a very kind man. Not that Laila isn’t, it’s just she wears the pants and the tie in that relationship, and he doesn’t say much. But their relationship works, and we love them both dearly. Well, at least from a distance.

I walk onto the black lacquered stage. The lights are a dim red now, and I get into my opening pose. Slowly, the lights come up and my music, *Lady in Red*, starts to stream through the speakers.

I perform my pre-choreographed moves as I take each article of clothing off very slowly. The crowd is definitely very energetic, whistling and whooping non-stop. I do my least favorite, but most popular move: face the back velvet curtain, straddle my legs wide, and lean forward.

The audience cheers for me, and I hear a few grunts and moans. Of course they love it, but inside, I cringe. I hate everything about this job. It makes me feel like I'm an object to be had and not an individual with value.

Standing up straight, I pull my bra off, making sure I don't rush. I've learned you need to draw the audience in and make them anticipate the final reveal. That's where the magic is—make them go crazy as you take your own sweet time.

Laila taught me that.

I despise it.

At the end, I'm left standing in nothing but my red and black lacy thong, a couple of sparkly red dots covering my nipples, and my stiletto heels. Applause ensues, and I'm relieved to have the first of three numbers completed.

During the dance, I've managed to collect several twenty-dollar bills and I smile, knowing this will be a great night as far as money goes.

There's only one new face in the crowd, a man, maybe in his late twenties, early thirties. Is that who Gina was talking about? He looks kind of familiar, but I can't remember where I've seen him before.

He's got cinnamon, perfectly messy hair, the intense blue eyes of Tom Cruise and the lips of Brad Pitt. Wow. Nobody should be that good-looking. And he doesn't seem all sex-crazed like most of the men who come here. Interesting.

Our eyes connect, and for a moment, it's as if time is suspended. But his gaze becomes so intense I'm unable to hold it and look away.

My stomach flutters.

What the...? My stomach hasn't fluttered since—I can't even remember when. I think I see him smiling out of the corner of my eye, but I'm too embarrassed to look back at him. My cheeks feel hot. Taking a bow, I get a few more ten and twenty-dollar bills and then I leave the stage.

I take another look at him from behind the wings, and my heart begins to hammer—fast. I can't explain it, but there's just something about him that has caught my attention.

Maybe it's the way he sits somewhat aloof, almost appearing to be bored. Has he been to so many of these clubs that it takes a lot to excite him? Immediately my competitive side wants to win him over, make him want me.

Wait... what the hell?

That's not who I am! I don't want to win anyone over, especially anyone who comes to this club. It's not that I feel I'm better than or above them, my personal rule came about after having seen what the other girls have gone through when they date these men. I don't want to end up heartbroken when I'm tossed to the curb like a ragdoll. This

was the main reason why Laila had a rule against dating patrons, but it was a rule that often went ignored.

The next song comes on, snapping me out of my reverie. Having another costume to get into, I rush back to the dressing room.

When Anne is done performing, I'm already in my next outfit: *Cat Woman*. The audience always loves *Cat Woman*. The shiny black vinyl unitard is, of course, to my great displeasure, can-hardly-breathe skintight.

I pull my black mask on, secure my cat ears and then smother on another layer of ruby red lip-gloss.

Anne, halfway undressed already, smiles at me. "Great audience tonight, huh? Did you see Michael Manning out there?" Her eyes are big and bright, her voice deep and sensual.

"Who?" I ask, almost ready to go out again.

"Michael Manning, the billionaire?" Anne's jaw drops open. "Please tell me you've heard of him?" She gives me a look like she thinks I'm crazy.

I bite my lip and shake my head almost unnoticeably.

"Come on, you know, the handsome young real-estate guy who owns like tons of major hotels on the West Coast?" she says. "The most eligible bachelor in all of Oregon? Did you seriously miss the article about him in the paper last week?"

"Oh, yeah, sure, I think I saw it," I say, pretending I did. Maybe that's where I've seen him before—in the paper. But no, that doesn't seem right. There's somewhere else I've seen him, in person, I think.

Anne rolls her eyes. "Never mind." She sprays more hairspray in her already stiff hair.

I shrug my shoulders. Just because the most eligible bachelor in Oregon comes here doesn't mean I'm going to change my mind about any of my rules. I've had enough trouble with men to last forever, and I don't have the time or the desire to get caught up in a roller-coaster-ride relationship to hell. Because that's where they eventually all end up.

Take for instance my last relationship a year ago. It ended when the guy I was dating beat me black and blue. I should have seen the signs, like the incident where he smashed my phone when he decided I was talking too much with Anne. Not to mention how he constantly complained about how I was spending an inordinate amount of time with my father.

After he beat me, I reported the incident to the police, and the guy was arrested and thrown into jail. And then, a few days later, the creep was released.

I was—and still am furious with how he got off so easily. Now he's probably out abusing other helpless young women, who will end up like I did. Men like that should come with a warning label.

I run to the stage and wait in the wings for my turn. Then I take the stage again, and strike a pose. My song begins and I go through the sensual motions of my dance. I make it maybe thirty seconds in before against my better judgment (which is basically missing at this stage in my life), I take one more look at Mr. Manning.

He's laughing now, talking with...Laila? Shit. I better make sure I don't screw this performance up. Suddenly, as if sensing me, Mr. Manning looks toward the stage, and our

eyes connect across the divide. Laila makes her way over to the bar.

My heart starts racing. Why is my heart racing? It's not like I've even spoken a single word to the guy. But there's just something about him.

He smiles at me across the room, his eyes catching the colorful flashing lights. Despite my reasonable self now yelling at me to stop this insanity, I move in his direction, sashaying my hips and working through the crowd. To hell with my choreography.

Stepping down the stairs, still fully dressed, I catwalk between the crowded tables and chairs. I am barely aware of the cat calls and the cheers that follow in my wake. My focus is entirely on Michael Manning. Another young man sits next to Michael—a friend?

Michael takes a sip of his beer, but his eyes don't leave me for a second. It's quite dim in here, but it's bright enough for me to see his sculpted body beneath his thin linen shirt, his broad shoulders and chest, and how his leather belt hugs his tight waist. Muscular thighs. Tall. Dark. Fucking handsome.

Without my consent, my heart starts to beat in a forceful, disjointed rhythm. This has never happened at work before—me being attracted to a client, me wanting to find out more about a guy who frequents strip clubs.

Ugh! I don't really want to get to know a guy like this, do I? Deep inside, I know he's nothing but trouble. I'll get burned. Yet something invisible, but oh so forceful, draws me toward him and I can't for the life of me stop myself.

Now that I can actually see the details of his face I find him even more attractive. I break my own rules—not

Laila's—of not approaching a customer (they're more like guidelines at this point) and sit down on his lap.

On top of him, I feel his rock hard body against the backs and insides of my thighs. As I inhale, his cologne fills my nostrils. It's intoxicating as hell.

He is *almost* as aloof as before, but now I think I see a small spark in his deep, blue eyes. He doesn't touch me anywhere—his arms are still on the armrests—but by the way his hand twitches, I think he wants to. Something about that thought sends a shiver through my spine. But he doesn't move a muscle. Is he unsure of what to do? Maybe he isn't sure if he's interested or not.

I peer into his eyes, and it's as if I can see to the very bottom of them, a man who is powerful, yet kind, confident, yet uncertain, strong, and yet unbelievably tender.

I have to remind myself to breathe.

I quickly stand up because I'm starting to fantasize about how good it would feel to have his hands on me. Naked me. Oh...

My shoulder, my breasts, my stomach...my...

Delightfully outraged, blood rushes to my cheeks. Where is this coming from? I lay my palms across his firm chest and he laughs a low, deep grumble. His eyes dance with the smile, making his dimples come out, making me think about what it would feel like to kiss him.

My arms are trembling, my knees wobbly, but I can't pull away. What if I...just...

I don't know how he would react if I pressed my lips to his, and it's too rash a move even for me, even at this moment. So instead, I turn his head to the side and lick his

cheek, just like *Cat Woman* would do. His skin feels rough against my tongue, as if he hasn't shaved today.

His laugh is spontaneous and nervous at the same time—a sweet reward for my actions. The room has gone quiet, and suddenly I realize what I'm doing.

As if saving me from a potentially embarrassing situation, my music is almost over. I whisper a farewell into his ear, and then I head back toward the stage, doing my best sexy prow.

Even though I can't see him, I feel Mr. Manning's burning eyes on me. I blush. How is it that he's having this effect on me? I'm completely in a trance, mesmerized by this mysterious billionaire. Most eligible bachelor—definitely. Although I don't think that's the real reason. It's as if...I belong with him.

That's just crazy talk. I haven't even spoken a single word to the man.

Well...it was fun while it lasted, because if I'm completely honest, a guy like him would never want to be with me, plus, I still have my rules—*not* guidelines. They're the type that are indestructible, absolutely permanent, and I will uphold them until the day I die.

Crawling up the stairs like a sexy feline, my heartbeat still pounding steadily, I hear a voice behind me.

“Hey, beautiful!”

I turn around so I'm lying on my back and see Mr. Manning standing there with a crisp hundred-dollar bill. I stand up and move toward him, snatch the bill out of his hand, and stuff it down into my cleavage. I feign confidence, but in reality, I'm so nervous and so spellbound by this god-like man that I've completely forgotten my

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