

The Body Shop

by **Brandon J. Clark**

I lost my footing on the bottom step and stumbled clumsily into the entrance of the Body Shop show club. The smell of beer and cigarettes mixed with cheap perfume hit me hard; this was the first time I had actually been in the place. The strip club was located in the basement of an old vacant office building in the downtown area Houston. The fact that it was pouring down rain outside, combined with my eyes not adjusting quickly enough to the darkness of the stairwell, had caused me to miss one of the steps on my way down.

“Whoa buddy, watch those stairs!” came the overly friendly suggestion from the doorman.

“Jesus Christ man, ever think of turning a fucking light on to keep that from happening?” He cocked his head and grinned widely while patting my shoulder. Most of his teeth were missing, and the ones that had survived were stained a dark yellow from too many smokes. He seemed to study my face for a moment, as if he had originally mistaken me for someone else.

“Four dollar cover tonight” he shouted over the loud music blasting from the stage, still smiling as if I was a long lost cousin who had just returned from a war. Truth be told, he’d rather kill me than talk to me, but he was one of “them” – those evil beings that existed only to bring havoc upon the innocent. I pulled a damp five-dollar bill out of my back pocket and slapped it into his thick, callused hand. He began sifting through the wad of cash in his other hand for a single.

“Keep it” I said quietly as I turned and examined the seating area. The doorman shouted a “thank you” as I looked for a seat close to the door. I grinned at the thought that it didn’t matter what I tipped him, as I would be taking it back in a few short hours. My eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I began surveying the rest of the bar. There were maybe fifty patrons currently sitting throughout the place. If a guy has seen one strip club, he’s seen them all. Music blaring out louder than it ever should, not good music...shitty music. The kind that men only listen to when they’re in a strip club or trying to pick up girls, or both.

There are always two types of men in these bars, the packs, those who managed to find some friends to go with, and the loaners, the ones that have ventured out without anyone else. The packs are sitting around pretending that they came to socialize and not to see naked women that they can think about later while masturbating. These guys are generally a little rowdier than the loaners. In fact, making fun of the loaners is something the packs enjoy most. The truth is both types of guys are there for one reason, to see half-naked women. Then there are the people who are working the place. This includes the tables, the security, and of course the show. Every successful strip club in America shares one distinct characteristic, anyone who works for the place is extremely friendly to anyone who does not. This is especially true of the dancers, who would French kiss the elephant man if he was willing to buy a lap dance. Of course, just like my best buddy working the door, this is just an image to get as much money out of the perverts as humanly possible. It’s very similar to flying to Las Vegas and sitting down at one of the blackjack tables. The beautiful waitresses bring cocktails for free all night, only it isn’t free at all, because you’re gambling all that money away. When all is said and done, nothing, and I mean nothing, is free in this world. There is a price to be paid for anything,

whether that price is cash or something else, there is always a price. That was why I was here tonight. To make sure someone paid the price for what had been done to me.

“Hey baby, what can I get you tonight” one of the ever-friendly waitresses was smiling at me. She looked like she was once a dancer, but either got too old or too tired of rubbing her naked body all over strangers. I ordered a beer and sat back to relax for a while. Tonight the crowd seemed to consist mostly of loaners. This was good; exactly how I wanted it. Loaners were naturally going to be submissive in this type of place. They wouldn’t want any trouble once the action started. I imagined most of them were probably going to worry more about their wives finding out that they were in a place like this. The fewer people I had to kill in order to accomplish my goal the better. But at the moment, I was willing to execute every single person in the bar to ensure the plan was successful.

For the next few hours I sat quietly drinking beer and studying the movements of every person in attendance. When the girls came around I tucked dollars in their g-strings and smiled when they kissed my cheek. I had to pretend to be enjoying myself in here. Arousing the suspicion of anyone would only make this more difficult.

At about 1:00 am, three hours after I had entered the place and settled in, a girl wearing a white g-string and white leather boots strolled over to me after dancing on the stage for two songs. She looked slightly out of place on the stage, and it seemed obvious to me that she had not been dancing as long as most of the other women. I had stopped drinking over an hour ago in preparation for this event. Partly because I needed to keep my head straight, but also to make sure there were no traces of me in this place once I was gone. I reached into my right jacket pocket and pulled out a pair of black leather gloves. As I slipped them on under the table my heart started pounding, and I told myself

to relax, the worst thing I could do was get nervous and make a mistake. It was time for the show to go down, it was payback time.

“Hey baby, you tipping tonight?” she said this in a voice as sexy and seductive as she could muster.

“Yeah, here’s a tip, don’t talk to strangers”

The game had begun. The reality of the moment hit me as adrenaline surged through my veins. I grabbed the girl’s hair in one hand and reached for my pistol with the other. I fired two shots into the ceiling as she screamed like a child who had just seen a ghost. The place fell silent and everyone sank to the floor. Grown men began weeping like children as they instinctively curled into the fetal position. The bartender stood motionless with his hands held high. I was overcome by the realization that this was the night I had been waiting on for fifteen years. I was in complete control of the situation, nobody was moving. I glanced over at the giant sitting next to the door. He was still sitting on his stool, a fist full of money in his hands, looking a little too relaxed given the situation. He was lowering one hand under the stool. I brought my gun around and aimed it at the center of his huge chest. For the slightest moment in time he made eye contact with me, and I caught a glimpse of hatred in his eyes. That was all I needed to rip off one shot into his body. The bullet buried itself deep into his chest, my aim was good and it caught him just left of the sternum. He screamed out as the bullet tore into his flesh and burrowed deep in his rib cage. He threw his hands in to the air, the right one now clutching a small caliber pistol. For a brief moment, I assessed my options. The sensible thing to do seemed to be to let him live, or at least allow him a fighting chance with the bullet now buried in his body. After all, killing this bastard wasn’t necessary to accomplish my goal. But then I remembered what he had done, all those stories I had heard, and my next shot was true. The second shot proved that the countless hours I had

spent taking lessons at the firing range had not been wasted time. The bullet hit the doorman directly in the throat and went clear through. Blood splattered up on to the wall behind him. His arms dropped down as his massive body slumped backward lifelessly and then crashed to the floor. A pool of dark red blood began to form around him.

I cursed myself for choosing emotion over calculated action as several screams erupted amongst the dancers and patrons. This was not part of the original plan, and now I would have to improvise in order to regain control. “As everyone in here can see by now I’m not fucking around, you move and I blow your fucking head off!” The screams died and I had the full attention of everyone in the place. The curses combined with the psychotic tone of my voice had worked. Once again all faces were buried into the floor, hanging on every word I said. I walked to the back of the room and stood on the stage, dragging the beautiful hostage with me. Here I had a clear view of everyone.

“OK, nobody try to be the hero here. We do this nice and easy and I leave without killing anyone else. Now I want everyone to slowly, AND I MEAN SLOWLY, reach down and take out your wallets, take all the cash out of it, and place it on the floor beside you. Dancers! Take all the money out of your thongs and lay it down on the floor! My new friend here is gonna come around and pick it up for me.” I dug into my coat pocket and retrieved a large plastic bag. “Be quick,” I said as I released her hair. She obediently circled the room, gathering wads of cash and stuffing it into the crumpled bag. She returned to me, shaking and on the verge of tears, and held out the bag. I grabbed it from her and handed her a second bag I had been hiding in my coat.

“Now” I said as I pointed towards a door behind the bar “get me what’s in the back too.” The girl was only gone for a minute or two, but it seemed like an eternity to me. The patrons lying on the floor were beginning to get restless and I could tell someone was about to leap up and attempt to be a hero. I surveyed the room and my eyes fixed on

3 young men hunkered under a table sitting approximately 40 feet from the stage. One of them was whispering quietly and the other two were listening intently and nodding their approval of whatever he was saying, oblivious to the fact I had a clear view of them from where I stood. ‘Damn packs’ I thought to myself. ‘Never know when to leave well enough alone’. I aimed the pistol carefully and fired a shot right at the pitcher of beer that was still sitting on the table above them. Several patrons screamed as the blast rang out, and all 3 of the boys who had probably been planning a sneak attack were now lying on their stomachs with their faces buried in the floor. The pitcher had exploded and beer was now pouring off of the table and covering them.

“Nobody get any ideas!” I screamed, “I got plenty of bullets left for heroes” The dancer finally reappeared with the second bag. It was stuffed with large bills. Now the plan was coming together nicely. The girl handed me the bag and attempted to dart away, but I reached out and grabbed another fist full of hair. She yelped and then clutched my arm with both hands.

“Listen closely people, if I hear so much as one siren when I walk out of here, you all die. And if the cops chase me and I got no place else to run, I’ll come back and shoot the place to hell” the words I was spewing out now made me sound like some crazed maniac. That was exactly what I was going for. The crazier these people thought I was the less likely they were to jump up and dial the police as soon as I left the building. I moved quickly out the door and up the stairs to the exit. As soon as we were out the door, I released the grip on my hostage’s hair.

Out on the highway I replayed the last few moments of the night in my mind. The entire process had gone smoother than I ever imagined it could.

“You OK?” I asked the girl sitting beside me. She was wearing a blank expression on her face; I knew what she was upset about.

“Its just, well, I, why did you kill Dave?” I knew the question was coming, and I had thought my answer out carefully. “Jessie, he wasn’t scared like the rest of them. He was going for that damn pistol under his stool. To be honest, that worthless prick would have probably fired five or six shots at both of us before I stopped. I told you going in that someone could die, and unfortunately that’s what happened.” I put my arm around her and gently squeezed her shoulder. “Besides, we both know what a useless prick he is. Drug trafficking, prostitution, gambling, if I didn’t end his life someone else was bound to soon!” She buried her face into her hands and began to choke back tears.

“I know, its just that, well, you know I didn’t love him, but we were intimate, and it’s just” She broke down in to sobs. “And you still haven’t told Bobby everything about Dave and I. And Dave was the first person I’ve ever seen die”

The streetlights shined down inside of the car and made her silky blond hair shine more radiant than ever. Her tears were causing me to lose focus. I had to calm her down and do it quick. Jessie was not aware of my entire plan for this evening. She would be soon enough.

“Well, I know that’s not true...you told me yourself that you saw some girl die in a car wreck once” I said as matter-of-factly as I could. She gazed out the window for a second and then slowly nodded her head as she recalled that night.

“Yeah, I forgot about that, but that wasn’t really the same. And to be honest Bobby and I never actually saw that kid die” she managed a giggle and then continued “he saw her bounce off the windshield. I was busy with my head in his lap when it happened.” My stomach lurched and I clinched the steering wheel as hard as I could. I

had to stay calm and pretend for just a few more hours. Then it would all be over, and time to move on with life.

“Just relax, we’ll be at your place shortly, then we’ll tell Bobby all about it and shoot up and count the money. That should make us all feel a lot better” She placed the cigarette between her lips and took a nice long drag. I could see that she was coming around, which was good. I needed her to be in a celebrating kind of mood tonight. The game wasn’t over yet. “And once Bobby has a good buzz going, and I’ve tucked you in to bed, I will sit down with him and have a nice long talk about everything.” She glanced up and smiled at me.

“You promise?”

“Yeah, cross my heart”

We pulled into the drive of a run down little shack about 25 miles from the scene of the crime. By now, Jessie had gotten over the initial shock of seeing her former lover get blown away, and was simply looking to get a fix. The heroin would relax her and make this whole night seem like an unpleasant dream. And when she came down off the high she would have a lot of money to cheer her up. At least that’s how I sold it to her. I parked the in an old barn behind the house, and I threw a large blanket over it as Jessie retrieved the bags filled with cash.

As we walked in the back door, we saw Bobby sitting on the couch watching TV, even though it wasn’t turned on. As soon as he heard us step in he shot up and stumbled toward us. He was already drunk and stoned, and his speech was slurring.

“Fuck! Man I was shitting....aww hell....you pulled it off?” I wrapped my arms around him and brought him close to me. “We pulled it off buddy, check this out.” I pointed over at Jessie who was holding two plastic trash bags stuffed with cash.

“Hell yeah!” he shouted as he threw an arm into the air, which caused him to lose his balance. He stumbled, almost caught himself, then crashed down to the floor.

“Bobby you fucking idiot!” Jessie shouted, and the three of us began laughing. It was the first time in many years that I had laughed, and it felt good.

“You guys start counting the cash, I’m going to get the dope ready” I shouted as I headed into the bathroom. I could hear Jessie and Bobby in the front room talking about the night. Jessie was telling him how I was “so convincing” that even she was scared at first. She told him about Dave getting shot, but this time she seemed almost excited about it. And I heard her yell and then laugh as Bobby grabbed and embraced her. This re-ignited a love deep inside of me. It made what I had to do next all that much easier.

Four hours later, I was sitting on the couch in Bobby’s old shack. He was drinking a beer in an old recliner and I was staring down at the gun I had used to kill a man just several short hours ago. I felt no remorse for what I had done, nor did I give a second thought as to what I was about to do. I had come too far to turn back now. On the kitchen table sat two bags containing more than seventy-five thousand dollars. Most of it was from the back room of the strip club, where Dave the Doorman/Owner was running a pretty good drug operation. He was part of the disease of this world, and I was glad to be the man that executed him. His death meant there was one less piece-of-shit scumbag to repopulate the earth.

“Hey man, there’s some shit I need to talk to you about,” Bobby shouted to me in slurred speech. I smiled and nodded to him.

“That’s funny Bobby, because I need to talk to you about some things too.” He sighed and sank down in his chair, dropping his empty beer can on the floor beside him.

“Really? You decided when we’re heading south?” he shouted between belches. I shook my head and laughed and finished polishing off my gun with a handkerchief. That piece of cloth was the only item from my past that I still owned. It was a father’s day present I received many years ago, and it was being put to good use at that moment.

“We’re not heading anywhere Bobby, the plan has changed.” Bobby’s eyes narrowed as he tried to comprehend my last sentence. For almost a year I had been selling both him and Jessie on the idea of knocking this bar over. It wasn’t the money from the patrons that we were counting on. It was the money I had Jessie take from the back room. Through a few contacts in the lowlife bottom-feeding underworld of drugs and dealing, Bobby and his Jessie had discovered Dave’s secret back room business. We knew that for a very short period of time every couple months, there was a ridiculously large amount of cash waiting in the back room for his suppliers. I knew that if we hit the place on the third Saturday of the month at around one in the morning, the cash would be ready and waiting. It did not require very much persuasiveness to convince Bobby and Jessie that we would have enough to skip the border and end up somewhere on a beach in Mexico. It was all I talked about for months; clear up until both Bobby and Jessie were foaming at the mouth to rob the place. This was the reason that Jessie auditioned to become a dancer at the Body Shop, and had repeated sexual encounters with Dave, until we knew every detail of the drug operation. Jessie also knew that the security cameras in the bar recorded activity on a videotape system in the back room. The videotape from tonight’s robbery was sitting in the kitchen, in the bottom of one of the cash bags. And now, after the plan worked flawlessly, I was sitting here telling Bobby that we weren’t going to Mexico.

“So, what are we gonna do then?” he sat up in his chair and leaned forward. “You thinking about doing this again aren’t ya! Man I knew you were a crazy bastard! So where we going man? We got tons of money, we can go wherever the hell we want!” I leaned forward and looked Bobby dead in the eye, it was the first time I had ever looked at him with such intensity, and I could tell he knew something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong.

“WE aren’t going anywhere Bobby, I believe I just told you that” he sat back with a look of utter confusion on his face. “You see Bobby, the plan worked to perfection, just like I told you and the Jessie it would. What you don’t know is that there is a little bit more to the plan. It’s not finished yet, but it will be very soon” I wrapped my hand around the gun and raised it up off the arm of the chair, pointing directly at Bobby. His eyes widened as he looked down at the gun and then back up at me. I could see him sobering up almost instantly.

“What’s wrong pal! This is about Jessie aint it? I thought we were like brothers man.” He had obviously realized the extreme nature of the situation, and decided calling me “pal” instead of “man” might help him make it out of this alive. Unfortunately, he was incorrect.

“Oh, we’re not like brothers Bobby. In fact, one of us is going to walk out of this house tonight and start a new life and the other one is going to lay here dead until next month when the landlord doesn’t get a rent check and comes looking” He sat in his chair, staring at the gun, then into my eyes. The shock and disbelief on his face told me what I already knew, that he never saw this coming. “When the landlord gets here, you know what he’s going to find? You, sitting dead in a recliner with a gunshot wound to the head. He’ll call the cops, then I suspect they’ll find the wallets and the bag in the kitchen, and

link the this to the robbery/murder at The Body Shop show club downtown a month before. Two problems will be solved, and I'll be long gone”

“Hold up buddy, as soon as you shoot me Jessie is going to wake up and then.”

“She's dead already Bobby.”

I interrupted his defense with what must have been a startling revelation for him.

“Jessie is lying on that bed completely lifeless. I gave her so much heroine in that needle that it stopped her heart hours ago.” He started to get up but I raised the gun at him. “Sit down Bobby, we have a few things to talk about” He looked at me for a moment, contemplating charging me, then he sat back into his chair.

“You killed Jessie? What the fuck is wrong with you! She didn't love you so you fucking killed her!”

“No Bobby, It wasn't about love. Perhaps under different circumstances, Jessie could have had a much better life than the one she ended up with. And to be honest, she made it very hard for me to do what had to be done. But tonight, it was vengeance I was after, and there was no turning back.”

“Ven.. what? What did she ever do to you?”

“It wasn't just her, it was both of you. You destroyed everything in my life that was precious to me.” When a man loses everything he cares about, he becomes capable of actions he would have never before imagined. Bobby was listening intently to every word I was saying now. I could tell he was just as confused as he was terrified. It was time to set the record straight.

“Do you understand what I'm saying Bobby? A man can be a good upstanding citizen, with a wife and a full time job. He can play golf on Sundays and take his family out for ice cream when he gets home. And he would never dream of committing murder. Until all those things he loves are taken from him.” Bobby was still focused on me, trying

to make sense of it all. His knuckles were white as he clutched the arms of the recliner. Terrified that at any moment I might squeeze the trigger and end his pathetic meaningless life. I leaned forward and spoke slow and steady; I wanted to make sure he heard my next sentence.

“Until his daughter is walking home from her dance class and a drunk driver comes flying down the road doing 80, and, while he and his girlfriend are making out, he jerks the wheel hard toward the right and his car thunders up over the curb and onto the sidewalk. And this drunk driver slams into my daughter and sends her flying over the car. And the driver gets out with his girlfriend and they look back at that little 11-year-old girl. And she pulls her head up and whispers “help” with her dieing breath.” Now my voice began to raise, it was coming out loud and fast, and I couldn’t have stopped it if I wanted to. “And that SON OF A BITCH TURNS TO HIS GIRL, AND THEY BEGAN LAUGHING TO EACHOTHER, AND SHE SAYS, “BOBBY WE BETTER GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE”, AND HE RUNS BACK TO HIS CAR, AND THEY LEAVE THE SCENE, AND LEAVE MY DAUGHTER TO DIE ALONE. THAT’S WHAT THIS IS ABOUT BOBBY.” I forced myself to stop then, it was out, and I couldn’t afford to become more emotional now and make a mistake. Bobby’s head was spinning fast as he tried to make sense of it all. I could tell the exact moment it all came back. His face went ghost white, and he realized what this was all about.

“Oh shit man, it was your daughter? Come on man, I’m sorry. I never meant to kill nobody. I did my time for it”

“You did eight YEARS, I was destroyed Bobby. I couldn’t go to work, I lost my job. I couldn’t look at my wife without breaking down because I saw my little girl’s eyes every time. I lost everything I had! And you did eight years!”

“I...just.....so sorry” he broke down into sobs. I told myself it was more out of fear for his life than true guilt for what he had done.

“At first I didn’t know how I would go on. Then when I heard you got out, I decided to come find you and put a bullet in your head. I didn’t care how long they put me away. I had no reason to live. But then I realized that you weren’t worth going to jail for. I decided I would figure out a way to kill you with no chance of getting caught. I devoted my life to watching you, and Jessie. And when I had my plan all figured out, I went into action. It never even crossed your mind tonight did it Bobby. Why I sent you in to the club to study the place while everyone else was becoming familiar with you? Why I wore your jacket into that strip club? Why I grew my hair out and let my beard come in like yours? It was to set you up Bobby. Tonight, you robbed a strip club, pretty amazing for a person with your intelligence I’ll admit, but somehow you pulled it off. You came home with your girl to celebrate, but something went wrong and she OD’d, and when you couldn’t bring her back, you ended it all”

“Please, just...”

“It’s over Bobby”

“I promise, I’ll never...”

“I’m sorry”

Before my daughter died, I was an accountant. It was in my nature to plan effectively. I used that ability to plan the murder of three people. Everything I had set out to do had worked to perfection. I had planned to leave the bar patrons’ money for the authorities to find, but take the drug money and move to the east coast. I would start my life over and put everything behind me. This was supposed to be the culmination of years and years of careful planning. For so many years I have been obsessed with righting this wrong that was done to my daughter.

I dropped to my knees and extended my arm out and aimed up at his jaw. I pulled the trigger. The top of his head instantly became a mass of dark red blood. His head flew back from the force of the shot, and I could see a large piece of flesh stretched over the top of the chair. Before I had time to think, his head flew forward and he looked right at me. His body lurched and he gave a deep rasping cough as blood shot out from what was left of his nose. He reached his hand out to me, and without a thought I extended my hand back to him. This was not part of the plan, but suddenly, the plan wasn't important to me. Now a man was dying, and he didn't want to die alone. I sat there on my knees holding his hand for what seemed like an hour. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds. But our eyes remained locked on each other, and in those seconds we shared our entire lives without speaking a word. It was not about guilt, or revenge, or drugs, or anything else. Fifteen years after this man had killed my daughter, and 10 seconds after I had delivered the gunshot that would soon kill him, I discovered the meaning of life.

The grip of his hand loosened on mine, and I knew he was dying. This man who had killed my daughter 15 years ago was now paying for that mistake with his own life. Bobby's head began to fall back and I could tell he was fading out. Then something very strange happened. Something I can't explain. He stared at me, but his eyes focused on something beyond me, what he said next sent a surge through my body.

"A-m...ber" It was my daughter's name, Amber. Then Bobby closed his eyes and spoke his last sentence. "What.. a...pr..etty....name"