

- Chapter One -

"...come on Cody. Help me clear out all this junk..."

"...Okay!"

Voices echoed around the small cramped attic and dust cracked off boxes as young hands sifted through the junk. Sitting quietly at the back of the attic, a marionette, his strings cut and lying around him, rested against the wall. His skin looked as though it was made of human skin, it had been painted so cleverly, but the joints at his knees, elbows neck and shoulder gave him away. Life size too, he had been the favourite toy of the children who played with him in the years past, but as they grew older they wanted to play with their technology and computer games more and more, so he got put away, up in the attic.

The size of a small ten year old boy, his dark skin still held a lifelike glow, and his glossy curls of hair fell about his cheerful face, it's brown painted eyes seemed to peer out from the dark with a life of their own. He wore only a simple shirt, pale brown as a tea stain and laced at the front, the style of clothing that was worn when he had first been created almost a hundred years ago. The children had played with him carefully, looking after him as the kings of old looked after their treasure. His strings had once been connected to a stand, a frame that made him dance and play with the children. But the frame had broken, and his strings had been cut, leaving him abandoned in the attic.

The junk in the attic slowly cleared, box by dusty box, until the marionette was revealed for all to see. The film of dust covering him was lovingly wiped off and fond memories of childhoods past had been traded, before they had left him alone again. It was his home, they decided, and that was where he should stay, until a child came and wanted the toy to dance once more. So the light was turned off and the door closed, leaving the attic in darkness again.

But back in the gloom, a wooden finger twitched. Those final words of kindness, those childhood memories they had exchanged, reached the ebony heart that had been put in his breast. And as a steady beat echoed from within, they embraced and it and whispered;

Time for the game to begin again...

- Chapter Two -

Wooden joints creaked and old leather clothes cracked as the marionette stood. "This is odd." he said to itself. "I haven't been awake for years!" Looking around slowly, his wooden eyelids clicking. "Very empty..." he murmured to himself.

A thin thread of light ran across the floor from the gap in the door. Standing up slowly and stiffly, the marionette walked towards the door. Pushing against it gently, he found it could open. Stretching his limbs once more, he pushed it open completely and walked out into the hallway.

Voices could be heard from down the stairwell, and the marionette circled it carefully and quietly before the voices slowly faded away and the marionette descended the stairs.

The stairs led down to a bright kitchen, lit up by the large windows. The marionette looked around with wide eyes and took in the clean, white kitchen. He sighed vehemently under his breath. "It used to look so homely." he murmured to himself. "Now it looks something like what the children described the doctor's clinic; sterile and professional..." The marionette trailed off as he continued to walk around the house, admiring every gleaming surface and every piece of furniture.

Running his hands along the gleaming bench top, the marionette's fingers stroking the gleaming stone and he marvelled at it's smooth beauty. He walked out of the kitchen and into a living room. A large flat-screen television graced one wall and a large mirror the other. The marionette walked towards the mirror and was graced by his own reflection. There had not been many full length mirrors like this one when he had last been played with, only small hand-held ones or head height ones, but this one reached all the way to the floor. The marionette studied his reflection carefully and with great interest. His wooden skin had been polished and sanded to such a degree that looked just like human skin, smooth but tanned. The carver that had shaped his head had taken great care to make his facial features look as realistic as possible and when he smiled, his wooden cheeks seemed to glow with a human-like realism. His hair had been donated by an aunt, all women had long luscious hair in those days so she had cut off a foot at the end to donate to the

marionette's hair. It was as dark as the darkest chocolate and as winding as the waves at sea.

The marionette looked down at his clothes and frowned; they were very old and dirty, a brown tunic with a laced together collar and short sleeves with baggy, brown, knee-length breeches and a cracked leather belt wrapped around his slender waist. He wore no shoes, but he had no need for them. The only thing that made him look un-human were his joints. They were ball joints, crafted by the marionettes original owners grandfather, were exquisite and moved as smoothly as the wind through trees. They graced his shoulders, neck, waist, back, hips, wrists, elbows, knees, ankles, fingers, toes and the arch of his feet making him able to move as any ordinary human could.

The marionette twisted and turned before the mirror, looking at himself from every angle. As he marveled at how his reflection moved with him, he heard the snap of a lock and a door opening. He froze, no-one could find him here. Dashing towards the stairs again, his wooden feet clicking teeth jarringly against the wooden floor, he leaped up them two at a time and threw himself through the first door he came across. He pressed his back against the door and listened carefully, his ebony heart fluttering in his chest. He heard no footsteps come up the stairs or hand on the doorknob and eventually came away from the door and looked around at the room he had found himself in.

It was a bedroom, and quite a messy one at that; clothes were strewn across the floor and the bed was a mess, the covers were creased and crumple into one corner of the bed. Looking around carefully, the marionette saw that the curtains were closed and that a door to the left lead away from the bed and the main room. Going through this door, he stepped into a walk-in wardrobe. Clothes lined the walls and draws were filled to bursting with all kinds of clothes. The marionette took a quick look back out of the wardrobe to check if anyone was coming and when he was satisfied he pulled several long sleeved garments from the shelves and a pair of sock and some shoes from a draw. He pulled on a long sleeved shirt and jumper to hide the joints on his torso and a pair of long pants to cover the joints on his legs and hips.

There was another mirror in this room and when he looked at himself this time, the marionette saw a completely different person. Not wanting to leave them behind, he folded his old clothes and put them inside a small rucksack he picked from a draw. Walking quietly out of the wardrobe he sneaked down the stairs listening carefully all the way.

The kitchen was empty and so the marionette crept through without being spotted and slipped silently out the front door.