

## **PART ONE**

**who am i?**

## CHAPTER 1

Phillip Anderson stood in the shadows of the door curiously watching his eight-year-old son mimicking ballet dancers on the television.

His mouth dropped open, dumbfounded, not sure what to think about what he was seeing.

He was a calculating man now in his mid-fifties. At six feet seven inches tall, he was once the starting left offensive tackle on the University of Washington football team, who was dedicated to following his dream of playing in the National Football League after graduation.

He still showed a slight resemblance of that collegiate physique if one looked past the slight bend in his back and dangling shoulders pulled forward by a somewhat incriminating beer gut.

His face, once framed with a chiseled jawbone and taut skin he wore like a leather jacket over hard bulging muscles, had diminished; only the image of his broad rigid skeletal frame suggested that he was once a tough motherfucker. Eyes that once radiated intensity when engaged in competition now sagged into shadows like a setting sun. A retreating hairline was bridged by the onset of accentuating graying hair sprinkled around his temples. The end strands of what had been a full mopped head of locks now bordered his head like the brim of a clear evening after a raging storm had passed, giving way to a cluster of gray clouds framing the edge of the horizon.

"What the fuck!" he mumbled seeing his young son twirling around on his tippy toes, arms waving, face alight with a peculiar sort of self-contained joy that was disturbing for him to see.

He wondered if this spectacle carried any meaning; if his mimicking was because kids his age always do such things because their minds are devoid of the significance of what they do, or whether it was something more.

Brandon was the youngest of his four children. He was born ten years after Janice, his wife, had a late stage miscarriage and decided she did not want any more children.

His son pretending to be a ballet dancer hit him hard. He deemed this "sissy-boy" behavior to be unacceptable.

Set to put a stop to this nonsense, he headed towards him before suddenly stopping. Something distinct drew his attention. He suddenly noticed how easy his son duplicated the movements. Brandon's uniformed movements were coordinated and balanced. Phillip recognized how precise he copied each movement, displaying natural athletic ability bordering on being remarkable.

In Brandon's mind, the dancers appeared to be like hummingbirds he'd been dreaming about after seeing them on a recent school trip to a bird sanctuary. He marveled at how they flew so different from any other birds.

To Brandon the dancers seemed like birds too. The music, he imagined, was the wind sweeping under them lifting them up. He was amazed to see them gliding through the air in the blink of an eye, as if the same magic in the birds was in the dancers bodies as well. Bedazzled to think he could do the same, he stepped into their shadows, copying them leap for leap and turn for turn.

His eyes were wide and the joy pulsating through his body filled his head. The sound of the music entered his ears drowning out everything around him as he raced to keep up with his imagination, adding his own movements when he stumbled slightly.

Phillip, pulled into a sphere of fascination, found himself marveling at his son's athleticism.

He managed to unfurl a discerning smile of discovery. He recognized this display as an introduction into what physical abilities Brandon had to mimic the intricate athletic movements of

the dancers with equal dexterity. Phillip was hinged, momentarily suspended on the possibilities of the natural athletic talent Brandon possessed.

Brandon leapt into the air. He spun, completely in control of his little body. As soon as his feet touched the floor, he leapt again into the opposite direction. His arms duplicated the dancer's poses as he flowed along with them.

They paraded over the stage; he followed step for step, lifting his little chest, gliding and holding their image in an almost exact duplication.

Phillip had seen enough. His first interpretation settled back into the harsh realization of what this display suggested to him.

His son acting like a little girl disturbed him; the athletic abilities he clearly possessed might go in the wrong direction.

He went crashing into the room propelled by his determination to nip this in the bud. Phillip lifted him up and began to shake him. Brandon gasped. Startled and shocked at the abruptness of his father's intrusion into his moment of delight, he squirmed inside his father's big hands, which were clasped around his ribcage.

"Stop this instance!" Phillip bellowed, his hands squeezing his son's tiny, fragile body.

Phillip shook him as if he were trying to dislodge whatever it was that made him want to mimic ballet dancers.

Brandon dangled limp like a life-size rag doll. His eyes peered innocently into his father's eyes; they seemed to grow larger the more he stared into them. His father's eyes were cold steely round boulders, filled with anger he not seen before.

"You are not a girl. You understand me. Do not carry on like one," Phillip's voice boomed.

Brandon nodded his head.

"No. No. No," he commanded. "You don't nod your head. You answer me boy."

He held him up with one hand.

"Yes father," Brandon gurgled.

He could not control the cascading weight of his fear rising in him causing him to begin to piss in his pants. The stain went unnoticed by his father.

Phillip peered into his son's eyes, looking for something that would reassure him that he might be wrong. He considered the thought. The cold chill in his eyes evaporated. The tautness of his hand relaxed. He put Brandon down.

An assuaging smile enveloped his face as he patted Brandon's head.

Brandon was confused by the harshness of this sudden anger, which did not fit with the tenderness that his father had previously showered upon him. This confusion would continue to concern Brandon for the next seven years. He waited for his father to do something else. He was still frightened and did not know what to do next.

He wanted to escape, so in the moment he decided his father was not going to inflict more of his anger on him, he fell into a fleeing panic and ran to his mother. Phillip chased after him, scooped him up in one swoop, and hauled Brandon off into his study. Brandon struggled to contain his tears, holding his breath to curtail his sobbing.

Phillip threw him in the big leather chair at his desk and began to swirl him around repeatedly. Disoriented, but not so much that the fear inside his belly had subsided, Brandon had no intention of doing anything more to upset his father.

Phillip waited. Brandon was too afraid to move or even take another breath. The boy's legs were wobbly and weak. His chest was tight. His eyes were wide.

He teetered in the stillness, tilting forward and snapping back, all the while not removing his eyes from his father's face.

"What am I going to do with you little man?" Phillip growled.

His eyebrows arched and folded into the frowning lines of his forehead.

"I..." Brandon began to say.

"Shhhhh." His father interrupted, putting his finger to his son's mouth pressing against his lips.

"Speak when you are spoken to. My father never let me run away looking for my mother when something went wrong or was not to my liking. You need to learn to be your own man. I don't want you ever crying and sobbing like a little girl ever again. Do you understand?"

Brandon nodded. His head jerked and delivered his quick reply all in one motion.

"Don't nod. I asked you a question."

Phillip yanked his son from the chair, twisted him around, and gave quick flushing spanks to his butt.

"Yes father," Brandon replied, fighting back the tears.

He surrendered. The burning hurt in his heart ignited. This was the first time his father had ever spanked him. Even his bed-wetting did not make his father angry to result in punishment from him.

Phillip ordered him to go up his room. Brandon took short hushed breaths as he lifted himself up the stairs toward his bedroom. Once there, he dropped his head onto his bed pillows. He began to think about why his father had erupted. He could not understand what he had done wrong. He fell asleep without an answer.

## CHAPTER 2

"I don't want you babying him Janice," Phillip said, his face within inches of hers.

Weeks had passed since the frustrating dancing incident of his son had begun to weigh heavily on his mind, on top of that, things at work were becoming worse, adding further pressure and disappointment; he felt everything in his life was falling apart and heading in a direction he did not want.

He had begun to drink several glasses of scotch in his study to ease the stress he felt about his work and his concerns about his young son that were rattling around in his head.

Everyone in the house had learned to judge how the evening would pan out by the stench of alcohol on his breath. The consumption of some drinks, he reasoned, helped him to analyze his problems from afar to the extent that nothing seemed as pressing or important as they did when he confronted them sober. When he drank, he believed things moved at a slower pace. The effect lightened his load and untied the knots in his head. He enjoyed the smooth ride of feeling unattached and isolated.

At this juncture of another crossroads in his life, it was how he dealt with the weight of uncertainty when meaningful action did not come clear.

This night, Brandon crept up to his parents' bedroom door and peaked through the spacing between the floor and the space at the bottom of the door. Each step he had taken to get there was occupied with a deep inhalation quietly exhaled in order to filter out the thought that his father might surprise him sneaking about in the hallway.

His father's loud angry voice echoing through the walls and up through the heating vent into his room had garnered his attention and began to send a familiar cold chill over him to have to sit through another night of his drunken tirade. This night he was alone to endure the night curled up under his blanket, plugging his ears with his fingers.

An unyielding curiosity had stirred in him. The urge to explore what he had come to be afraid of pulled at him.

His sister, Meagan, was away on a school trip. Without feeling any anxiety, she normally kept him safe on nights like this. He would go to her room for refuge. He suddenly felt the desire to be like her stir in him. It offered him the courage to venture to see how his mother dealt with his father when he was venting his anger on her.

Looking through the space beneath the door, he could see his mother had her back against the wall. She seemed to be repelling the hard, snarling face of his father as if she had no fear of him. His father poked his finger down into her chest as he spoke.

"He is a little boy," she said, with enough resolve in her voice to sound convincing.

"He's my son and I will not allow you to turn him into a momma's boy!"

It seemed that they were arguing again about the time his father caught him prancing about like a little girl. Since that episode, Phillip had been monitoring Brandon in the shadows; each time he noticed some behavior that indicated he was behaving like a girl, his father confronted him, sometimes harshly. He had argued with his wife, Janice, blaming her for encouraging this sort of behavior.

"No need for you to be so rough on him," Janice said.

"What, woman? He's not right I tell you. Something about how he goes about doing things confuses me and I am dreading ..."

He went on to recall the ways in which his son carried himself; the way he would sometimes walk, sit, and make motions when he was talking to people. Sure he was a child, but he sensed differences in those moments when he acted more girlish than boyish.

"Confused? Dread? What do you mean? He is your son and whatever you are wondering about him, he needs you to love him regardless," Janice responded.

It was obvious to her that Phillip hoped Brandon would be the one son who would be the athlete in the family who would follow his footsteps. His two older sons did not share his DNA for athletic competition; it did not take much for him to realize this. He had been watching Brandon with scrutinizing eyes even before he could crawl, sizing him up for any indication of athleticism.

"How dare you question the love I have for my son. I want to do right by him and show him how to be a man, a real man, as I have done with our other boys."

Phillip's dream to play professional football was shattered by a knee injury. His rehab did not return him to the player he once was. He was devastated. For a while, he walked through life as if his heart had been ripped out. Janice comforted him, determined to help him through his depression; she helped him to focus on his studies so that he was able to graduate on time and move on with his life. He emerged from the depression and after graduation they got married.

The birth of his first child energized him. He poured himself into his business and into raising his first child, William, as if a life raft saving him from his shattered dream of playing in the NFL.

Robert, their second child, was born one year later. Eventually, Phillip buried himself deeper into his work and spent less time with his sons. Their only girl came along a few years later. A miscarriage followed.

When the boys were almost into their teens, Phillip, without recourse, tried to make up the lost time with them; however, it only ended up causing a rift between them, as they had no interest or abilities in sports.

William and Robert resented him for trying to change them. They hated every kind of sport. Janice surmised it was because he tried to mandate they get involved as if it was a rite of passage.

"You been doing a real shitty job of setting an example for him with your drinking and stubbornness," Janice bellowed.

It came from her gut, unabridged between what she sensed in her heart and was thinking in her mind. As soon as the words crashed into his head, he wobbled as if she hit him with a cheap shot.

He hoisted his hand and slapped her across the face with minimal force to indicate that the discussion was over. She shrieked, catching the volume of her voice into a whimper before leaving her mouth. Her eyes dashed toward the door, worried their arguing might have awakened Brandon. She often wondered how she would react if he or his sister were to witness their father striking her.

Despite his physical stature, she never feared he would strike her hard enough to do damage past the sting of his slaps. Having been a gymnast and cheerleader in high school and college, her body was still firm and toned; it had not become so sedate that it couldn't endure being roughly handled. She accepted the source of his rage and she knew what buttons to push to diffuse him.

She did not contend with those thoughts when the older boys were living home, as his outburst only started two years ago. She understood they coincided with the problems he had with his business; it was part of the burden of being his wife. It was unfortunate that this “thing” he had about Brandon had become enmeshed with everything else he felt was going wrong for him.

Brandon backed away from the door and hurried back up to his room as his father continued to rant. The tears that had begun to soak into the collar of his t-shirt had stopped. He bit down on his lips with clenched teeth, redirecting his angst down into the pit of his stomach. The thought to leave the house and run away popped into his head.

He was a precocious child who began walking and talking earlier than most babies. His mother would read him children stories before introducing him to more advanced fiction.

His favorite book was Oliver Twist. His imagination began to take off when he started reading on his own. Janice was astonished that he read so voraciously.

The collective journey of a homeless boy burst inside Brandon’s mind as he pondered how to deal with his own situation. If he followed Oliver’s path perhaps he too might elude the bad person by running away.

He peered at the shadows in the corner of his room and out past the woods at the back of their home.

He had wanted to take Robert's old room which was adjacent to his parents’ room. His mother convinced him to take William's room up in the attic as it offered a better view of the stars and the moon at night.

He climbed out the window to a branch of a big tree running up the wall of the house. He perched himself against a clump of the intersecting limbs; leaning back into them, he paused to allow the frustration in him subside.

He wished his sister were home, so that she could comfort him.

### CHAPTER 3

"Don't tell me how to raise my son. You are the woman, your daughter is your responsibility- don't confuse the two," Phillip continued his tirade.

"Why are you so hard on him? What happened to the man who was so full of joy to hold his son in his arms when he was first born, as if he were the most precious thing to come into your life? He is scared to death of you," Janice responded, seeking to diffuse him.

She went a step further; she talked about the distance he felt with his other sons. She reminded him that parenting is a joint effort.

"He should be intimidated of me. I am his father and like my father did for me, I'll teach him to be a man. This would not be a problem if you stopped cuddling him the way you do."

"Jesus Christ, Phillip. He is too young. William and Robert never got this kind of attention from you about making a man out of them."

"They never pranced around either. I didn't like the expression in his eyes when I caught him watching them ballet sissies on the television, as if he were in some goddamn trance. I don't like the way he crosses his legs and I don't like the way he helps you in the kitchen. If he is old enough to absorb what you are teaching him, he is ready to learn how to become a man."

"What about you?"

"What about me...?"

She twisted her head.

"What?"

"You are not the man I fell in love with . . . You talk to me about raising your son to be a man. Don't think he doesn't understand how you treat everyone when you are like this. The other day, he asked me why you are so mean to us. He's a boy and when you get into this mood, it confuses him."

"I am done talking about this. I am doing for my son what my old man did for me. He'll thank me one day."

His body tightened. Every muscle he flexed pulsed. He stared down at his wife accentuating his command. His posturing sent her the message that if she said another word, he would consider hitting her again.

She pondered with an urgency to speak her mind.

"Is all this about you imagining he might have too much sugar in his tank like my brother Winslow?"

The words connected into a spiraling question. Her lips quivered. He froze. He glanced past her. He had recognized Brandon's raw athleticism. To push the faggot notion of him aside and dwell on the athletic foreshadowing in him offered promise. He knew what being a "homosexual" implied. Janice also understood, as her only brother was gay.

"Yes," he replied. "I thought it may be a phase, and if not, my obligation is to guide him to channel such confusion to help him to develop into a strong, confident man."

"He is our son and whatever you think is happening I think you need to stop scaring him as if you don't love him. Find a better way to deal with this, and please don't ever berate him with homophobic phrases."

She got his full attention.

Janice continued, "You are familiar with what everyone says about my brother, Winslow? I don't want my son traumatized in the way he was growing up. You don't either, I am sure."

Phillip's initial reaction toward Janice's brother had bordered on revulsion. He managed to contain his distain and not voice his opinion, which would have drawn snarling scorn from Janice. It was quite clear to him that she cared for her brother.

Phillip's mother had also pressed upon him not to make Winslow feel any less loved as he was now going to be a part of their family as well. Phillip often wondered how Winslow, more a woman than a man, functioned with the resolve he exhibited. The physical beatings and psychological taunting Phillip was subjected to by his father affected his development. Therefore he believed that being rough with Brandon and acquainting him with what's expected of him will help him to become the man he will need to be to make his life fulfilling.

"Brandon will be all right woman."

He anchored his stance, not sold on the idea of allowing his son to become his own person, despite his wife's insistence that he be allowed to find his own way

"He is a boy."

"Nooooo, he stopped being a boy when he first started to go to the toilet on his own."

"Sounds like something your father said when you ..."

"Yes he did. I will make a man out of him the same way my father did me."

Janice never wavered from loving her husband. His good characteristics far outweighed those frictions parts she came to uncover as the years of their marriage rolled by. In her mind she never

sought perfection. Janice thought women were brainwashed to think that the men they would marry would be their prince charming.

Phillip gave her the best he had to offer. In her heart, she fell for him on their first date. They made each other feel more alive. She'd grown close enough to him to perceive his burdens before he even knew about them, and that intuitive sense gave their marriage its sustenance; it was the glue that held it together because she knew exactly how to support him.

The glazed over look in his eyes reminded her of the tenderness inside him which she cherished. She should abandon pressing him for now, she reasoned.

## CHAPTER 4

"Your father is under a lot of stress dear. He has a lot is on his mind, just give him time. When things are better for him, we all will be happier. He means well, so don't think he doesn't love you when he raises his voice at you."

"Mother, he does more than just yell at me. He slaps me across my head and punches me."

"Now dear, your father does not do such things."

"He sure does, and he does the same to you," Brandon said.

"Where did you—?" Janice began.

"I came downstairs after I heard him yelling at you the other night."

"Your father yells when he gets beside himself."

"He slapped you."

"Child, what an imagination you have. Perhaps it was in a dream that you saw him hit me. Nightmares can stir up the imagination of young boys your age because your father can sometimes act like a monster"

"Why does he yell at me every time I sit with my legs crossed and help you cook?" Brandon asked. "The other day he went berserk when he caught me dancing in my room"

"Oh child, that is his way of trying to make a man out of you."

"I don't like when he won't let me do the things I like to do. I hate him," Brandon screamed.

## CHAPTER 5

On Brandon's ninth birthday, he and his mother were making his birthday cake together. As they went about it a conversation about the little girl next door, Sally, who was also nine years old unfolded. He told his mother that they, he and Sally, often play "mom and dad" at her house.

They would dress up in her parents' clothes and pretend to kiss and hug; they would wrap their arms around each other like loosely tied ribbons on a makeshift present. They would get into bed together naked.

Brandon did not shy away from undressing. He also had no difficulty following Sally's directions to climb on top of her and wiggle around while he pretended to kiss and hug her; she would then moan as she had seen her mother do.

"That is not what you should be doing with little girls," Janice said.

"She says her parents do that together and she said that they do not scream and fight like you and Dad."

"Well I am they have their moments, like I always say to you..."

"Nobody is perfect." Brandon finished the sentence; his mother said this all the time with a smile.

"People try to be as good as they can. No matter how your father can get, he loves both of us. He always returns to being the good, loving, caring person I know he is."

"So you say Mom, but I get nervous sometimes to be around dad and not be afraid he might blow up over something I did wrong and I don't even know what it is I did to piss him off."

"I want you to stop playing "mom and dad" with Sally. Your dad and I are live in the real world. We do not pretend to be anything that we are not. Can you understand?"

"I think I do," Brandon replied.

Brandon didn't really understand.

He remembered a recent incident when his father yelled at him. His father did not like something that he did. Phillip shoved Brandon and slapped him across his head.

"You little shit. Don't you ever walk away from me with your arms folded into your chest twisting your behind like your sister," Phillip yelled.

After seizing him, Phillip slammed Brandon against the wall in disgust. He retreated from the room careful not to give his father more cause to press further.

He walked up to his room, locked the door, and sat waiting for him to come up and add to the punishment. He never came. He paced up and down in his room several times. It was the first time Brandon was agitated enough to want tell his father how much he hated him. He stomped his feet as if he could dislodge the agony from his body.

He took the "Code of Honor" game discs Phillip brought him for his X-box, smashed them, and threw them out the window.

The pieces floated to the ground and disappeared into the dark shadows of the late evening. His mother came up the stairs. She knocked on his door and pleaded from him to let her in. He sat on his bed.

Silent.

Alone.

Confused.

She repeated her pleading for him to open the door until finally Brandon got up and let her in.

"Are you okay?" his mother asked.

"He pushed and smacked me."

She stood looking at his head while she stroked his hair. Her hands were like a magic wand. He shut his eyes. In his mind, Brandon welcomed her despite the continuing turmoil of his desperation to understand his father's rage. It would be so much better, he thought, if his father was as endearing to him as she was.

"Why does he have to be so mean to me? Aren't I a good son, Mother?"

"Yes you are," Janice replied.

"Why doesn't he think so?" Brandon asked.

The tears in his eyes eroded the youthful enthusiasm from his face. "I hate him."

"No you don't," his mother said.

He rolled his eyes at her. She gave him a defiant stare.

"Don't you ever again say such a thing about your father. It's a terrible word to apply to people you may not approve of."

She looked at him as she sought to understand his reasoning. In his eyes she saw his innocence and it reminded her why a child's mind is so vulnerable and fragile as if the ten years between her Megan being born and then Brandon had eroded that motherly sense. The scrutiny on her face, as well as the hardness in her voice softened.

"Your father will always be your father. He is not without faults; no one ever is, so try to learn to deal with him."

"Like you do right?" Brandon questioned.

Janice said nothing. Her warm hands seemed to melt the worry from his head. He slowly let himself be absorbed, everything was alright.

"You father means well. He is a good man. Sometimes he forgets he is trying too hard to be everything for us. He gets frustrated. Understand that people can get lost and when they do they snap."

The tears in his eyes dripped down his cheeks and rested on his lower jaws.

Janice took the edge of her blouse and wiped his cheeks. His glassy eyes mirrored the reflection of the night table lamp next to his bed. They sparkled in the dimness.

"Was he like this with Robert and William?"

"He disciplined them. He yells at everyone when he is angry"

"Did he ever hit or kick them?"

Janice saw the begging in his eyes. She pondered about what was the best thing to say to him. He was still a child and she was concerned about the impact it would have on his psyche.

"Yes," Janice finally replied.

It wasn't exactly true. Phillip had on occasion spanked both of them but it was only when they had become too rambunctious and animated.

She cuddled his head back into her arms and again raked her hand over his hair.

She released him and pulled the covers over him as she rose; she then bent over and kissed him on the forehead. She watched him curl tightly into the blanket. Janice remembered other times she had put each of her children to bed after some trying experience in their young lives.

She turned to walk out of the room and closed the door behind her.