

# BLOODY WATERS

JASON FRANKS



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**Jason Franks**

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Published by Outland Entertainment LLC

3119 Gillham Road

Kansas City, MO 64109

Founder/Creative Director: Jeremy D. Mohler

Editor-in-Chief: Alana Joli Abbott

ISBN: 978-1-954255-51-7

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-954255-52-4

Worldwide Rights

Created in the United States of America

Editor: Scott Colby

Cover Illustration: Chris Yarbrough

Cover Design: Jeremy Mohler

Interior Layout: Mikael Brodu

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Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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*For Celia.*



## — PROLOGUE —

### I. Badder Than a Bluesman

**T**he bluesman sat at the crossroads wringing music from his scarred old six-string. Just him and the blues and the moon above. The sky was clear, but there were no stars. It was autumn; perhaps they had fallen out of it. The bluesman's voice rumbled low and raw beneath the progression of chords.

A second guitar took up the song, matching him beat for beat, lick for lick. The newcomer did not sing. The bluesman did not look to see who had joined him. When he reached the end of the chorus the second guitarist kicked into a solo.

The soloist's left hand slid down the neck of his instrument, his right picking and raking and scratching over the sound hole. The bluesman strummed rhythm, stomped a beat with his foot, slapped the body of the guitar with the heel of his right hand, hummed deep in his throat.

The soloist's guitar lurched higher and faster and meaner, wailing and screaming and begging. Then it moaned its way down into sadness, despair, and silence.

The bluesman sang the third verse, repeated the chorus one more time. He struck the final chords of the song unaccompanied and raised his head.

The soloist was sitting on a rock with a steel-shelled Dobro across his knee, all the way across the blacktop from the bluesman. "Bad Jack Saunders," he said. The bluesman did not think the rock had been present when he had sat down to play. He supposed that the soloist had brought it with him.

The bluesman inclined his head. "How y'all doing?"

The soloist rose once more. "Doing good, thanks. Yourself?" His face was masked with shadow, though his collar was down and he wore no hat.

"Can't complain," said the bluesman. "That's why I play the blues."

The soloist seemed to smile as he crossed the street. His guitar swung loosely from his left hand; his right was outstretched. The bluesman rose and shook it.

"I'd say it's good to see you again, but ain't nothing good happens when the likes of you an' me sit together," said the bluesman. The rock that the soloist had been using for a seat had disappeared when he wasn't looking.

The soloist grinned through his mask of shadows. "That's the stone truth," he said, "but I enjoy seeing your face." He sat down on the bench beside the bluesman.

"Can't say the same, but I do like to hear you play. You're pretty good, for a white man."

"I'm no more white than I am a man, Jack," said the soloist, crossing his booted feet and settling the Dobro in his lap.

"Well, you dress like a white man," said the bluesman, grinning. "An' I bet you sing like one, too."

"That's why I play the guitar." He raked a chord.

"Fair enough, too," said the bluesman. "Ain't a lot of singers come to you for no favors, I'll bet."

"Just so," said the soloist. "Singing is for good people. Guitars are for the bad."

The bluesman considered that. A nightbird called, somewhere out in the woods. Police sirens warbled and rubber squealed, somewhere in the town down the road. He couldn't remember the name of it. Couldn't remember the name of the bar he'd played, either. "Ain't nobody on earth badder than a bluesman," he said.

"The stone truth," said the soloist.

"It is, for now," said the bluesman. In the old days he'd remembered everything—every show, every note, every step—but those days and those people were gone. Used to be he'd play for laborers, farmhands, field workers. Workingmen. Now it was just shit-kickers who thought it was bluegrass night or yuppies who wanted an authentic juke-joint experience, encouraged to venture out of the city limits by the new cell towers that had sprung up along the interstate. "But there's less of us every day. Soon we'll all be gone, an' you'll have to find something badder to take our place."

"Sooner than you think," said the soloist. "I already found it. It just hasn't grown into its badness yet."

"I thought that was the kind of thing you liked. New kinds of badness."

"I do," said the soloist, "but this time it's different."

"I thought every time was different."

"Not really."

The bluesman looked at him, but the soloist wasn't going to say any more. "Well, you need my help, you know where to find me."

"Thanks, Jack, I appreciate it," said the soloist. "But I think this new badness is gonna find its way to you all by its ownself."

"What kind of a badness we talking about?"

"Rock'n'roll badness."

The bluesman blinked slowly. "You serious?"

"Is cancer of the bowels serious?"



He snorted. "Them rock stars talk big, but there ain't a one of them that's really, truly bad. If passing out drunk in the lobby of a five-star hotel is the worst it gets, I'd say you got bigger troubles than you know."

The shadow-faced soloist seemed to smile again.

"Trust me, them rock'n'roll boys ain't nothing to concern yourself over."

"You're right, Jack, they aren't," said the soloist. "But this one's a girl."

## — GIRLHOOD OF A GUITAR FIEND —

### I. Rock Star Barbie

**F**or Clarice Marnier's tenth birthday, her mother bought her a Funtime Barbie in a pink dress with a pink Barbie House and a pink Barbie Convertible.

Funtime Barbie languished in her pink dress next to the pink house and the pink convertible until Clarice, left to her own devices in the Macy's toy department, found a Rock Star Barbie accessory kit hanging amongst the He-Man and Transformers displays.

"I'm not buying you that."

Amy Marnier was still wearing her uniform, although she'd put her sidearm and her badge into her purse since coming off duty. She folded away the Egyptian cotton towel she had been inspecting and turned to frown down at her daughter. "You haven't even taken Barbie out of her box."

"That's because she's pink," said Clarice.

Clarice's mother looked at the coveted accessory pack. "Rock Star Barbie is pink, too."

"Yes," said Clarice, "but she has a guitar."

"You don't ever play with the Barbie you have. I'm not buying you another one."

"Fine," said Clarice. "Then I'll just have to steal it."

When they got home, Clarice ran upstairs to her bedroom and opened the Rock Star Barbie kit. She tore Funtime Barbie out of her box, threw the glittery pink frock into a corner and dressed the doll in her new plastic jacket and skirt. She strapped the guitar onto the doll and leaned it up against the convertible.

It was still awfully pink.

At midnight, Clarice sneaked downstairs and stole into the kitchen. She pulled a chair up to the cabinet and climbed onto the alcove where the toaster and the kettle sat, reached up over her head, and drew her father's model airplane kit down from its shelf. Then she set to work.

Clarice carefully coated Rock Star Barbie's pink vinyl skirt and jacket with black enamel. Barbie's guitar got an even more careful coat of black. She put silver on the strings and the input jack, gold on the tone and volume knobs, white on the tuning machines. There was no matte black for the amplifier, so Clarice made it brown. She cut Rock Star Barbie's hair with a pair of manicure scissors.

Amy was furious. Clarice could have slipped and fallen and broken her neck while climbing onto that cupboard. Ray Marnier muttered and grumbled because Clarice had used up all of his paint. They sent Clarice to her room.

That was fine with Clarice; she'd been planning to spend the day playing with her newly renovated Rock Star Barbie.

At the end of the week, Clarice issued an ultimatum to her parents: she wanted a guitar for Christmas.

## 2. Hendrix is Dead

Mr. Peabody was a portly, balding, bearded man who taught clarinet and saxophone at the local high school. He also gave private guitar and piano lessons from his home. A friend of the family had recommended him to the Marniers.

"Peabody?" Clarice said, upon first introductions. "For real?"  
"Mister Peabody," he replied.

"Okay, Mister Peabody," said Clarice. "Teach me to play the guitar."

In her first lesson, Peabody taught her the anatomy of the guitar. Clarice knew it already—she had read everything she could find about guitars and music during the interminable months she had waited for Christmas. Peabody then proceeded to teach her a simple three-chord song, "Little Brown Jug." He insisted that she sing as she strummed.

"You sing," she replied. "I'm here to learn guitar."

He sent her home with instructions to practice the chords and to learn the words that went with them.

When Clarice returned the following week she had tried to learn an additional fifteen chord shapes, and she was upset that her fingers refused to form them correctly. Peabody told her that she couldn't learn everything at once; he would make sure that she progressed at an appropriate rate. "What about your homework?"

"What homework?"

"Little Brown Jug."

"Oh, that," she said.

Clarice played the whole song through without error, but she claimed to have forgotten the lyrics. Peabody made her hum.

Clarice improved quickly. Soon she could finger every one of those eighteen chords quickly and clearly, and she was learning more all the time. Peabody forced her to sing by refusing to let the lesson progress until she complied.

"I'm not interested in singing," Clarice complained.

"You have a nice voice."

"I don't care," she said.

"I do."

"Jimmy Page doesn't sing."

"Bob Dylan does."

"Yeah, as badly as he plays the guitar."

"Eric Clapton sings."

"Most people wish he wouldn't."

"Jimi Hendrix used to sing."

"I'm not Jimi Hendrix."

"But you could be," said Peabody.

"Hendrix is dead," she said. "I'm Clarice Marnier."

Clarice started going for lessons twice a week. Peabody taught her to read music, and she learned a finger-picking piece based around the three natural notes that could be played on the high E string in the third position. There were no lyrics for the note-picking piece. Clarice returned the following week knowing every note on every string, all the way down the fret board.

Peabody gave Clarice more and more difficult classical pieces to learn. His praise of Clarice's progress went from grudging to effusive.

At school, Clarice's grades began to drop. She was spending all her class time thinking about playing the guitar, imagining chord shapes and right-hand patterns, dreaming about what it would be like to play an electric. She stopped doing her homework altogether.

Clarice's father broached the subject tactfully: "If your grades don't improve, I'm taking away the guitar."

"I'd like to see you try," she replied.

Ray looked at his wife, who squelched a smile and frowned. "Good grades are important, Clarice," she said. "You want to get into college, don't you?"

"I want to play the guitar."

"You can play the guitar and go to college," said her father.

"If I have to."

"I want to see your grades improve," said Clarice's mother, "or there'll be trouble."

Clarice's grades did not improve. Her parents didn't take away the guitar, but they did terminate Clarice's tuition under Mr. Peabody before she moved up to junior high. That was fine with Clarice; the lessons had been eating into her practice time.

### 3. Volcano High

After Clarice had ceased taking lessons from Mr. Peabody her grades improved—not because she had more time to devote to schoolwork, but because she began to get over the fact that *she had a guitar*.

Once the knowledge that she could play became implicit, the delight of it ceased to occupy all of her attentive resources. Clarice's grades returned to their previous levels, then exceeded them. She never took less than As for English and Mathematics, and it was Bs and above for everything else. Her parents were so pleased that they allowed her to spend as much time in her room with her guitar as she liked. They did not seem to care that Clarice's playmates were dwindling in number, and neither did Clarice.

She was saving up for an electric guitar.

Junior high was a new environment. A new place, new classmates, new subjects, new opportunities. The school offered students the option of learning an instrument, and Clarice jumped at the chance. They did not offer guitar or piano, so, after careful consideration, Clarice chose the trumpet. She claimed that this was because it "had balls". Another important consideration was that it was a relatively small instrument that would not take up much of the space in her bedroom that she was saving for new guitars.

Clarice could already read music, so she progressed quickly on her new instrument and she was made first trumpet in the junior

band. She was the best player in the ensemble, and everyone knew it. She was also the only girl who played a brass instrument.

Clarice preferred to joke around with the trumpet boys and the fat kid who played the tuba, rather than giggling with the flute girls or muttering amongst the mixed crowd of clarinetists. This developed into a fierce enmity and, before long, the giggling and muttering—and hissing and snarling—was almost exclusively about the topic of Clarice Marnier. But Clarice wasn't interested in feuds. She was interested in music, and only music.

Clarice's mother finally became worried that she was fixating a little too much on music, but she knew that forbidding Clarice from playing would do no good. After some careful thought she braced Clarice at the kitchen table before her pre-dinner guitar practice.

"Honey, there are some important things we need to discuss."

Clarice looked up from the sheet music she was eating over and swallowed her mouthful of sandwich. "Yeah, Mom, I know where babies come from."

"No, Clarice, this is about being healthy—"

"It's okay, Mom. This is California. They taught us about birth control already." She took another bite of her sandwich and looked down at the music again.

"Clarice, listen to me."

She sighed, swallowed her mouthful and looked up again. "I promise not to do any drugs?"

"Clarice."

"All right, Mom, just spit it out already."

Clarice's mother took a deep breath. "It's important that a young lady be able to take care of herself."

"Yeeees...?"

"And I want you to get some exercise, too."

"Aaaandd...?"

"I want you to start coming to jujutsu with me."

Clarice looked down at the music again. "Sounds okay."

It took a bit more wrangling, but they quickly arrived at a deal: Clarice would go to jujutsu once a week, provided that she was allowed to stay up late on that night to make up the lost practice time.

## 4. Ride the Lightning

Clarice continued to save for her electric guitar.

She checked out every secondhand music store, pawn shop, and junk dealer she could find, looking for the best instrument she could get for the best price. She spent hours poring over price guides and technical specs, trying out different rigs, and generally annoying the shit out of every salesman in every music shop within bussing distance of her parents' house in Los Angeles County.

Finally, she found what she wanted: a scratched-up, blue Ibanez. The paintwork was damaged, but the electrics and the neck were in perfect shape. Clarice visited it in the pawn shop in Inglewood every fortnight until she had enough cash to buy it.

For an extra twenty bucks the clerk threw in a thirty watt Marshall amp that he had in the window, muttering that he was pleased to have finally gotten rid of the instrument—and Clarice. The amp was worth about two hundred.

Once Clarice had the Ibanez she quit playing the trumpet. "I don't have time anymore," she told the heartbroken conductor. "I'm joining a rock band."