



THE
TORMENTORS

FACE YOUR DEMONS.

JACK PHOENIX

The Tormentors

**By
Jack Phoenix**

Credits Page

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by Jack Phoenix

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Dedication page

This novel is dedicated to the women who taught me that my twisted passions have value; Doctor Suzanne Ashworth, Doctor Tammy Birk, Doctor Patricia Frick, and Doctor Glenna Jackson. Thanks for the push, ladies.

I would like to thank Joe Dallacqua, Mickey Webster, and Lori Gum for their assistance with this book, inside and out.

Chapter One

The fear fueling his footsteps was unceasing. From the blood pumping furiously through his sixty-five-year-old veins to the perspiration that now streamed from his brow, it was the most exercise he had in years. He was little more than savage now. He had no direction, just the purest instinct of self-preservation. The alley puddles from the night's rain splashed violently beneath his bare soles. The cool night air met the moisture on his naked body, adding another layer of gooseflesh.

Osteoporosis had set in a few years back. He should not have been able to run so quickly. Fear is *the* great motivator, the ultimate performance-enhancer, and his terror bypassed all limitations. However, he couldn't keep running on panic-induced fumes much longer, not with his aged and malnourished body. If only he had not poisoned his youthful years with cigarettes and alcohol. Now he had no chance of outrunning the cause of his desperation. In this tunnel-vision state, no amount of speed would save him from such a pursuit.

He paused for a moment to look behind him. It was a moment too long, and he regretted it immediately. Their shadows were swimming towards him along the brick walls. They were gaining. Their horrible din filled his ears, their screams were daggers that aimed for his mind, entering his soul and rattling it. No matter how many times the intrusive sound pierced his skull, it inflicted the worst kind of pain. His nails dug into his scalp when he heard it as though trying to rip his skull open to relieve the pressure.

He had to keep moving or else they'd be right at his face, right in his ears, and he'd once again find himself in their clutches. Every step pained him, muscles aching, lungs burning. He upset a couple of trash barrels as he passed; a desperate, futile attempt to slow them down. Even if he couldn't see them, he could still hear them, and that was the worst part. His was the worst fear imaginable; danger lurking about, ready to spring, insidious, and unseen.

He dashed through the alley, his silver chest heaving. They were closer. Their shadows just around the corner, he was sure of it. There was nowhere to go. He was trapped. A scuffle, and his back was to the wall.

"You! Drop the weapon! Turn around, and put your hands above your head. Now!" the police officer commanded.

The officer could see in the old man's eyes that something had him spooked... no, petrified, and she had an inkling that it wasn't her. He was thin and pale. Whatever he was running from was of more concern to him than an armed cop. He seemed barely aware of her presence. He kept looking past her, shaking his vibrating liver-spotted hands against the wall.

Officer Lang aimed her gun at his forehead. "Put your hands on your head now!" she ordered, as the old man reached for his own gun and clumsily tried to pull it from his belt.

"Drop it!" she ordered.

The old man didn't respond.

"Drop it, or I *will* shoot you! I don't want to, but I will!"

He lowered the gun. He appeared to be crying.

"Listen, don't do anything stupid. I want to help you, okay? We can get you help. Just drop the gun and kick it to me." She said, trying to get the man to make eye contact. "Now, I am giving you to the count of three to drop the gun and kick it to me...one!"

The man's free hand covered his eyes. He was indeed crying.

“Two!”

His hand went to his ear, as if to block out some loud noise as the gun slowly rose again in his other.

“Three!”

“I have sinned,” the old man murmured through his slobber and tears as he put the gun in his mouth and squeezed the trigger. The contents of his head scattered across the brick wall.

Officer Lang stood still and silent for a moment, her gun still pointed at the now nearly still body. Slowly she lowered both arms and momentarily turned her eyes from the mess.

“Shit,” she said sadly as she grabbed her radio, reported the incident, and requested an ambulance.

She then approached the old man’s body, her firearm still un-holstered, just in case. He lay lifeless on his back, the gun still in his right hand.

“Oh, Christ!” her partner blurted as he came running down the alley and saw the horrible sight.

Lang knelt down over the old man, the ever-increasing pool of blood beneath him reaching the toe of her shoes as it flowed down the concrete. Then she heard a sound, like a gagging and saw that drops of red were spraying from his mouth as his jaws convulsed. The poor bastard had failed in his attempt somehow missed instant death, and was now suffering.

“He’s still alive!” Officer Lang exclaimed.

“You shot him?” asked her partner.

“No. He shot himself. He was off.”

Suddenly, with one last gurgling breath, the old man put his gun to his temple with preternatural speed and pulled the trigger. Blood spattered, gray matter flew in Lang’s face.

This time, he was dead on.

* * * *

“That was quite fun.”

“Yes, but far too fleeting. This one didn’t last long.”

“Nevertheless, his anguish was appetizing.”

“Indeed. What shall we do now? On to the next?”

“Patience, Sisters, we await our command.”

“Perhaps the next will be even tastier.”

Chapter Two

Roderick growled. The sound came from deep within, along with a rumbling in his chest, like an echo bouncing along the walls of an empty cave.

He was almost finished. He grabbed her long blond hair and pulled, while she, on her hands and knees, didn't even give a squeak of pleasure. She was far too sullen. "Take it, you bitch! Yes!" and with one final clench, it was over.

She collapsed onto the bed, sighing with relief. Roderick wiped the sweat from his forehead and ran his fingers through his stylish dark hair as he headed into her bathroom to wash up. She had noticed that he needed to rinse himself clean after each of their encounters.

She decided to be cliché and lit a cigarette though she was trying to quit. The way the smoke made her hair smell and how it turned her teeth and the white walls of her apartment into a similar shade of yellow had caused the habit to lose its appeal, but she always craved one after being with him. Chelsea Palmer remembered the days when she was a teenager and everyone would comment on how pretty she was. Now she was reduced to what those same people would call 'trashy', resorting to placating her sexual urges only with men who could not and would not respect her.

"So, you're still clean, right?" she called to him from the bed over the sound of the running water.

"You're still on the pill, right?" was his only reply as he stepped out of the shower.

She sneered, covering herself with the sheet while he dried off, "Do you have to be so rough every time?"

"Thought you liked it," he said, buttoning his shirt.

She added the blanket over herself as well. "Well, it was pretty hot the first few times, but it's getting kind of annoying and painful."

"How would you like it then?" he asked, tucking his shirt into his pants.

"I don't know, maybe a little slower with some music or something."

"Not really my thing," he said as he prepared a line of cocaine along her countertop, selfishly snorting it. Chelsea didn't mind, though, since *that* was another habit she'd been trying to quit.

"Do you have to call me names every time? Like I said, it was hot at first, but now it's just kinda creepy."

Roderick twitched his right nostril with his forefinger. "I just get caught in the moment," he said to her while slipping on his shoes.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," was his only word as a Nickleback ringtone blared from his smartphone. He answered it, taking the call in another room. All Chelsea could hear were mumbles. She leaned against her pillow with a groan and grabbed her favorite Care Bear off of the floor, holding it tightly against her breasts. When Roderick came out of the other room, he looked distraught, staring off on in the distance while he slid his phone back into his pocket.

"What is it?" she inquired. "What's wrong?"

He finished tying his shoe and grabbed his jacket. "I have to go."

"Is it your wife?" she asked.

"I have to go. I'll talk to you later." He headed out the door without another word.

She released another deep groan and threw her Good Luck Bear across the room. Chelsea Palmer had always sought love in all the wrong places. All it took was a few years with the wrong crowd

during high school to steer her in the direction, which led to this lonely existence. The lives of Chelsea's classmates and those around her were filled with learning and experience and romance. He was filled with coke, heroine, two miscarriages, bitterness, and abusive men.

Though she had sworn after the last boyfriend who broke her jaw that she would never be in a relationship again, she was still a woman with needs, and she found her physical desires satiated only by stranger after stranger. Usually disgruntled husbands who dreaded going home to their nagging wives and spoiled children. However, a part of her still yearned for something more. Deep down, she still craved the love and affection that she had never known and that all other women seemed to have had fallen in their laps.

With every new hookup, Chelsea held out hope that one of them would recognize some beauty within her and rescue her from her existence, breaking down the protective barriers she had placed around herself. For a time, she thought that Roderick Whithers would be that man. She realized, however, that he was only returning to her because he so desperately wanted to call a woman 'bitch' her face.

He was neither her knight, nor her hero. He would never be willing to share his life with her, and she decided that she'd take the next best thing. Roderick Whithers wasn't a millionaire, but he was a man with enough wealth and prosperity that he could afford to share. She knew of his many moral, social, and legal breaches, both past and present. There were things that she had seen with her own eyes, not to mention certain unintentional drunken and coked-out confessions.

If he won't share his life with me, she thought as she turned off the digital video recorder she had hidden in the closet with full view of the bed through the cracked door, then he can share some of his money.

* * * *

"What's this?"

"Our next play thing, of course."

"Our first sight of him, and already his sins are apparent."

"It's not his 'apparent' sins that we will cleanse, Dearest."

"This woman... it appears she will be initiating her own game with him."

"Well, we can't allow that, can we? His fear will be ours. No distractions, Sisters, no distractions"

Chapter Three

Suburbia: Some would give anything to get in, and others would give anything to get out. Outside the city was a suburb like any other. Oaks and ash trees lining the sidewalks and medians, their leaves crisp and glowing from the bright summer skies, near-identical houses with wooden fences going on for miles, the gas company coming along each month to check their meters. Some would call it the best place to raise two point five children while others would go mad with boredom, thirsting to be closer to a cultural pulse. Some could appreciate the status quo that such an environment offered, claiming that the lack of excitement was indicative of safety. Indeed, the community hadn't seen much excitement in years. No crime, no noise, no problems.

One house in particular had additional securities from such annoyances. It was a house that would have stood out among all the rest, but few would ever know it. It was bigger than the other houses, it was more elaborate than the other houses, and its property value was comparably astronomical. Despite its lavish furnishings, this house was tucked away, virtually out of sight from the rest of the neighborhood. It was far away from prying eyes, standing tall at the end of a cemented driveway that was nearly a quarter of a mile long, surrounded by trees and a man-made pond with a state park behind it. The property was designed to impress the socks off of anyone who would ever have the privilege of seeing it but not to attract unwanted attention.

Elizabeth refused a housekeeper for this home when her husband offered. She walked about the house, dusting all of their many family photographs. When she learned she was pregnant with their daughter six years ago and agreed to get married, she eventually accepted that her husband would simply not allow her to continue her career. He explained to her that a mother's place was at home with her child, not in a classroom taking care of *other* people's children. With no job to call her own, she was often restless.

She loved teaching. It was the profession she had yearned for since childhood, and when she finally acquiesced to her husband's demands and became a housewife, she regretted it every day. If she was to be stuck in the house, Elizabeth had decided that she would do her best to make it a home. Cleaning and taking care of the house herself helped mark her claim on the place. It gave her a sense of personalization and empowerment. Besides, it was good to teach her daughter some humility from the get-go. Coming from such privilege, her daughter had to learn that there were other forms of ownership other than just the ability to make a purchase. It also made her feel a sense of pride when someone dropped in unexpectedly who didn't know her very well. A person new to their home would certainly assume that such an upper-class establishment would have a hired hand, until they saw Elizabeth on a step ladder dusting the high ceiling fans or scrubbing the toilet.

She delighted in breaking or even surpassing the expectations of others in such ways, since there were many times she felt pressured into sacrificing more than her fair share. Every time she caved to the pressure, she felt a little more of herself disintegrate. This was why she had insisted on keeping her maiden name upon marriage, since identity was so important to her. When she explained to her then-fiancé that she wished to carry on her own family's name and heritage, it turned him and his father into boisterous howler monkeys. She even remembered the term 'unwomanly' coming up a few times. The only way to shut them up was to compromise; she and her child would use both names.

Elizabeth had just finished making dinner for her daughter, pleading with the girl to eat something. Once she oversaw the completion of three full bites, she collapsed into her favorite armchair with her

copy of *The Woman in White* which she was trying to finish for nearly a year. She kept it right next to her husband's precious hippopotamus statue on the coffee table, and was surprised at how much dust had accumulated since she'd last picked it up. Only a 265-page dent was made in the 548-page novel, and she'd only accomplished two pages' worth of progress when the doorbell rang.

The woman at the door bore an unassuming presence. It surprised Elizabeth when she referred to herself as 'Detective'.

"Nice to meet you, Detective," Elizabeth greeted. "How can I help you? Has something happened?"

"May I come in? I would prefer to sit with you," the detective said.

"Yes, of course, please do. Can I get you some coffee or tea?"

"Tea would be splendid, thank you. You have a lovely home," she complimented as her eyes shifted about the room, settling on little Samantha who was solemnly watching cartoons, her dinner gone completely cold.

"Sam," Elizabeth said to her daughter, "why don't you go on to your room while I talk to this nice lady?"

Samantha obeyed without saying a word or even so much as glancing up at the visitor, slouching a the way to her bedroom.

The mother smiled bashfully for her daughter's sake. "She's just very shy," she explained.

"I understand completely," assured the detective, "I have children of my own."

Elizabeth brought the detective her tea and they both sat, sipping in an uncomfortable silence. At least it was uncomfortable for Elizabeth. The detective seemed perfectly at ease, well versed in delivering bad news.

"The tea is delicious," said the detective. "Now, it's time to tell you why I'm here."

The detective explained her business. When she was finished, a distraught Elizabeth called her husband's phone, which he did not answer.

"You need to come home right away," Elizabeth said to his voicemail. "I'm serious, it's an emergency."

Roderick was hoping that no one saw the police pull in. The last thing he wanted to deal with were questions from the neighbors.

The voicemail on Roderick's smartphone had him anxious enough as he drove into his long driveway, but seeing the police car parked in front of his house sent his heart into rapid pace. There was an officer leaning casually on the car, as if waiting for something, and he gave Roderick a slight nod of greeting as he parked.

Oh, God, Roderick thought, the police are here. What are the neighbors going to think? Hopefully they didn't see the cops pull in. What could be so bad that the cops have to be here?

"What's going on?" he asked the police officer.

He replied, "There's someone waiting for you inside, Sir."

When he came through the front door, his wife threw her arms around him saying, "Oh, Rod. Oh, Rod, I'm so sorry," as the detective approached him.

"What is it? What happened?" he asked Elizabeth.

"It's your father," she said, wiping away a tear, "he's dead."

"What? My...my father is..."

The detective introduced herself, "Mister Whithers, I'm Detective Yost. First, I just want to say that I'm terribly sorry for your loss..."

"Please," Roderick began, "just tell me what happened to my father."

She replied, "Of course. It appears Robert Whithers committed suicide tonight in the alley behind

Saint Anne's church near High Street and Muirwood Avenue."

"Suicide?" Roderick fell into the chair behind him, hand at his forehead.

The gentle and unassuming tone the detective used with Elizabeth earlier evaporated.

"Yes, a result of formal investigation is pending, but it looks cut and dry." She stated bluntly. "I can tell you that two officers actually witnessed the event when pursuing him. They saw him shoot himself twice."

"Jesus! He shot himself?" Roderick shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "And did you say, 'pursuing'? Why were cops pursuing my father?"

"We received a 911 call about an assault from a Diana Rivera, your father's housekeeper, who claims that he attacked her. I've only just begun my investigation, but I've already been told by your wife and by Diana that he wasn't well."

Roderick wiped a tear from his eye. "Yeah, that's...that's true. He's...he's been under a lot of pressure with the new project. He's been acting strange for a while now. Really quiet. He made a few crazy phone calls."

"Crazy phone calls?" the detective asked.

"I never thought...he'd...oh, God." Roderick did his best to muster a full-fledged cry, after all, wasn't that appropriate for such situations?

Elizabeth, knelt by her husband, and embraced him as she answered the detective. "Yes, he called us a few times in the middle of the night saying that he thought someone was after him. We thought it was a stalker or something, maybe someone who is upset about the Mound project. We told him to call the police."

"Which he did," Detective Yost responded. "I looked over the reports. Unfortunately, he had very little detail about his alleged stalker to give us. When was the last time that the two of you saw him?"

"I saw him about two months ago. I honestly didn't see him that often socially, just holidays and when we'd see each other at work. I haven't seen him there for a while, though, I've been running things since he stopped showing up," Roderick answered.

"The last time I saw him was at Thanksgiving," added Elizabeth.

"So, you haven't seen him since he made those strange phone calls claiming he was afraid of someone?" the detective clarified.

Roderick answered simply, "No."

"I see. Well, his condition may have been far more severe than anyone realized," she explained. "Miss Rivera claims that he assaulted her. She tells me that he'd stopped sleeping. He was constantly erratic, stressed, and was even keeping weapons under his pillow. It is not my job to speculate about his mental condition, but it is my job to collect any evidence I can, so that's what I'll be doing. I will be in touch with any information that I uncover. I have to be going now, I'm afraid, so I will leave you folks alone. Once again, I am sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, Detective," said Elizabeth.

"Yeah, just...let us know," said Roderick.

Wiping his tears on his sleeve, he rose to his feet with a heavy sigh and opened the door for the detective.

"Try to get a good night's rest," Detective Yost recommended.

Roderick began to close the door behind her when something caught his eye. The porch lights poured their luminescence onto the police cruiser, which bounced the light back from its passenger door in a vivid white shine. And there, within that reflection, were what appeared to be three little girls standing in the driveway, right next to the police car, as though peering into the house. Their

features were blurred by darkness from the white light behind them, their faces completely black; by contrast, their hair was fiery red. The girls wore identical skirts and striped socks, as though on their way to Catholic school; but in the middle of the night?

“Hey!” he yelled with the wave of his hand. “Get outta here!”

“Excuse me?” Detective’s Yost’s voice took a high pitch as she spun around, her eyebrows kinked

“No, no, not you, I was talking to the...” he said, realizing that the little girls were gone when he pointed his finger, “kids.”

“What kids?”

“I, uh, never mind. I must be seeing things,” he said glumly as he closed the door and went back inside.

Elizabeth and Roderick stood silently for several minutes, she with her arms crossed. Her husband wouldn’t look her in the eye. There was no need to play the pretense of civility anymore now that the company was gone. He walked over to the fridge and grabbed a beer along with a plate of leftovers that he put in the microwave. Elizabeth tapped her foot.

“I think you should go talk to your daughter,” she told him after watching him eat bite after bite without looking at her.

“I will, just let me finish this, okay? I’m starving, and I just need to get my bearings. Did you already talk to her?”

“Of course, I did, Rod. As best I could with the detective hanging around waiting for you to finally come home. He’s *your* father-I just think you should talk to her. I’ll go in with you if you want.”

“That’s okay,” he said, shoveling a fork full of heated green beans into his mouth.

“And considering the circumstances...let’s just put all of our other shit on hold right now,” his wife suggested. “I’m not even going to ask you where you’ve been all night...but I am here for you, you know that?”

“Thanks,” he said, finishing his food.

Elizabeth could remember a time when she and Roderick used to carry on full conversations face to face. They used to talk about little things like how her day was and how his new job ventures were going and where would she like to go for supper. Those small courtesies began to gradually slow down after they were married. They stopped altogether after Samantha was born only seven months later. Even though his wife received less and less of his attention, she didn’t complain too much since he was still a good provider to Samantha. But he was acting more and more distant lately. Elizabeth knew he was concerned, but he refused to show it. She was sure he was worried that the more regrettable aspects of his family history were expressing themselves within their daughter, and this whole business with his father would simply compound those worries.

Roderick stood up, left the dirty plate and empty beer can on the table, and proceeded to Samantha’s room. He knocked three times on the door.

There was no answer.

“It’s Daddy, Sweetheart. Can I come in?”

Still, no answer.

He opened her door that was covered with construction paper artwork. His entrance startled her, and her whole body jerked. He saw her drop the doll she was working on. She was given a Raggedy Ann stitching kit by her mother for Christmas and had since stitched together, with large plastic needles, two Raggedy Ann dolls. This was her third. The first two she had sitting in a little chair together by the closet. He entered the room, closing the door behind him, and Samantha dropped the needles, motionless. She never turned to look at him as he ran his finger across the wall examining the

paint job again.

~~“I really wish you’d let us paint this room a different color, Sam.”~~

“I like gold,” she said, not gracing him with a glance. Roderick had come home one day after work and found Elizabeth and Samantha in spotty trousers painting her room this bright and gaudy color. He was appalled, demanding they paint it something different, but his wife was defiant, claiming that their daughter had picked it out herself.

“It looks yellow to me. Yellow is too boyish. How about pink instead?”

“I hate pink. I like gold.”

“It’s ugly.”

“I like it.”

He knelt beside her. She still didn’t take her eyes from the floor. “Your mom told you about Grandpa?”

“He had an accident.”

“Yeah, yeah he did. How are you feeling? Do you have any questions or...”

“Is Grampa in Heaven now?”

“I’m...sure he is.”

“Then no, he’ll be okay.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re right,” he went to give the top of her head a kiss, and she quickly pulled away. She’d been doing that a lot lately, not letting him or her mother touch her. “You want some ice cream?”

“No thanks.”

“Okay, well, you just tell me if you want to talk, okay? Or better yet, tell Mommy.”

“Okay.”

“I love you.”

There was no response.

He glowered one final time at the color of the walls as he closed her door behind him.

* * * *

“It’s called a suburb.”

“Filled with sub-humans, it seems. Creatures wishing to rise up to a higher status, aspire to claim beyond their reach.”

“They are called upper middle-class.”

“That is a contradiction.”

“Nevertheless, he’s a man with much to lose.”

“Certainly. You can see how his mistress’s interference could ruin our fun. She could take it all away before we could. Those who have more to lose have more to fear.”

“It’s decided then.”

Chapter Four

It's night in the suburbs. Occasionally a dog barks, perhaps the hum of a few cars can be heard traveling down the street, and music escapes an open window. The Whithers' home had a different aura at night. Its seclusion, size, and routine silence might suggest a house of dark secrets.

Sometimes the wind blowing through their open attic windows even resembled the wails of a madwoman. But the moans coming from the premises this night were from no madwoman but from Roderick, who struggled with his sleep.

As he lay in the comfort-fitted, king-size bed he shared with his wife, he struggled to let the tragic events of the day drift from his mind. He wanted to sleep and dream so badly, but Roderick's dreams had never been fantastic. They had never been dreams of wish fulfillment since he was in want of very little. He wasn't a man with a great deal of imagination, so no soaring in the air or enjoying fanciful adventures during *his* slumber. Yet a man who possesses much has a great deal to lose, and his dreams often played out in embarrassing situations—even worse than showing up naked to class—or loss. Sometimes he wished he could just dream of wealth and comfort like normal people, but he already had both.

There was one dream that frequently haunted him, and this night was no exception: He is walking through his childhood home, his father's home, but it is completely empty. No furniture, no color, and no one else but him. He is calling for his mother, hands cupped over his mouth to direct the sound that echoes through the large house.

He stops in the hallway at the front door. His mother appears there, standing in the doorway, her back to him. She is wearing the shirt she always wore when jogging in the winter, the sweatshirt with Bugs Bunny on the back holding a partially chewed carrot. He calls to her, but she does not turn. He calls again, and she turns her head just enough to peer behind her. She spots her son in her peripheral vision through her dark hair, which blows in the wind, partially covering her eyes.

She steps through the door. Roderick begins running for her, begging her not to leave but she continues descending down the hallway.

The hallway extends as he runs, preventing him from catching her, from telling her that she doesn't have to leave. He'll be a good son if she stays. Suddenly, he is stopped cold by the sound of screams, an onslaught, like the chorus of a thousand shrieking voices.

Roderick awoke, his ears ringing, and sweat seeped from his skin. He then felt Elizabeth's gentle touch on his back. He felt the tips of her fingers move up and down and then begin to sensually stroke his upper arm. He sighed and reached to touch her hand, to wrap his fingers around hers.

"Sweet," he whispered, "yeah, this is just what Daddy needs. It's been a while, Liz."

He found her hand, intending to immediately guide it towards his hard cock, but something didn't feel quite right. Her hand felt very wrong, in fact, it felt powdery and crusty. Had she been washing too many dishes and gotten dry skin? That wouldn't explain the strange, prickly hairs. Nor the skin that moved loose to his touch, skin that was barely attached. His eyes registered the sight of a skeletal hand covered in grey rotted flesh that belonged to a decaying corpse lying in his wife's place. But the corpse was not still and lifeless. Just as he began to gasp in fear, it moved thin strands of hair away from its lipless face, the face of his father. Its eyes were cloudy white with no pupils or retinas, and there was a perforation on each side of its head where rotting skin dangled by threads.

"Sins of the Father, Roddy," its dusty voice grated, sprinkles of dry skin flecking off of its chin as

it spoke. "Give your old man a kiss goodbye."

~~As Roderick convulsed in alarm and disgust he hit the animated corpse in its sternum and pushed away. He fell over the edge of the bed and, when he got to his feet, turned to see if the thing was still there. He saw nothing in the bed but suddenly felt a set of knuckles pound him in the cheek. He fell onto the nightstand. When he looked up, he saw the culprit was his wife standing by the side of the bed, glaring down at him.~~

"What the fuck?" she yelled at him.

"Jesus, what? What the hell?" he faltered, disoriented.

"Why did you fucking hit me? You could've seriously hurt me, you prick!"

"You just punched me! Damn, I think you split my cheek open!"

"You hit me first, asshole!"

"I was having a goddamn nightmare! You shouldn't touch me when I'm sleeping."

"Well," she raised her hands up into the air as if surrendering and then bent down to get closer to his face, "excuse me for trying to show you some physical fucking affection during these trying time I was just trying to cuddle, you jerk." She stomped over to the door, grabbing her favorite pillow on the way. "Believe it or not, I still care about you. I'm still your wife, and I still want to love you despite all the bullshit, but you make it really difficult. I'm sleeping in the guest room. I'll get you some ice for that."

The door slammed, and Roderick, a man always concerned with appearances, turned on the light and examined his cheek in the mirror, inspecting the damage and trying to come up with a good story for how it happened.

* * * *

"Ashes to ashes."

Chapter Five

“I tripped-hit the coffee table,” Roderick told his friend and co-worker Bob at the funeral. His cheek had already healed for the most part, but there was still the slight shade of a bruise.

In their black suits and dresses, the only familiar faces that Roderick could see gathered around the open grave were the employees of his father’s company. Now this company was *his* company. Robert Whithers had owned and operated the largest construction company in the state, and he also owned properties, lots of properties. A well-known developer, he owned everything from office buildings to housing complexes, making fortunes off of rent alone. The properties were acquired through the Whithers’ family, and now they would all belong to him. The only family members that remained, besides his wife and daughter, were estranged, long gone. Except for the one person he tried to keep far from his thoughts.

The weather had called for sunny skies, but they were bleak, grey. As the minister began to speak, Roderick stared at the mahogany coffin and thought about his father. He thought about the day he had graduated from college with a degree in business. Everything had seemed so bright then, open doors all around. For his graduation gift, Robert gave his son a letter opener of pure silver inscribed with his initials.

“Live right, Son,” he had advised. “You’ve got a good girl there, and you’ve got to keep her safe. Protect your family. That’s what’s most important. The world will try to take what’s yours. People will be jealous of what you have, and they’ll try to take it from you, but you can’t let them. You understand, Son? You’ve got to tell them all to fuck off and mind their own business. Your family is *your* family and your money is *your* money. Take care of ‘em.”

After he married, a wide gap grew between him and his father, one that was growing for years. In the end, it had spread them so far apart that the only time the two ever communicated was for business purposes. There were no family visits, no friendly phone calls, and only a few hours were provided for get-togethers on holidays. The old man had barely even known his granddaughter.

And now, here he was, standing over his father’s grave, waiting for him to be put into the ground. Robert Whithers, after all his talk of living right and having dignity, had gone crazy and blown his brains out. Roderick wondered what his mother would have thought about all of this. He also wondered what his sister would have thought. Then he immediately tried to push her from his mind.

“She should be here, you know,” Elizabeth stated, as if sensing what he was thinking, her eyes still on the coffin.

“Who?” asked Roderick, knowing perfectly well whom she meant.

“Your sister. She should be here for this.”

“She wouldn’t even know what was going on.”

“Maybe not, but she’s still your sister. She’s still family. She’s not just some *thing* you can just shove into a closet and forget about.”

“I know that,” he declared sternly. “For chrissakes, I’ll go see her this week, okay?”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“No thanks. I can handle it myself.”

* * * *

* * * *

Elizabeth took off her black dress in front of her vanity mirror. It was an old mirror from the nineteenth century that was passed down to her from her mother. She intended to give it to Samantha someday. She had such concern for her little girl. Elizabeth was trapped in a loveless marriage, and she often questioned how that affected Samantha. She knew the uncanny intuition of children. She knew of their ability to absorb the ambient emotions around them, whether positive or negative.

Roderick told her about his sister. He told her about how she'd begun to act strangely as a child and gradually worsened. The story seemed frighteningly similar to what was happening to Samantha. What if there were madness in the Withers family genes, and what if it was passed to her daughter? Roderick was more worried about this than he let on too. Elizabeth was certain of this.

Why did Robert Withers have to do this now, of all times? Why did he choose to now to go nuts and shoot himself? The first time she'd met the old man was the night of her and Roderick's forty-sixth date. She was in awe of the house, and it astonished her to think Roderick was raised in such luxury. It was the house after which their current home was later modeled. The furniture was elaborate, costly, and had names that she'd never heard before like Settee and Hassock. Were they *th* cultured?

Robert had greeted her cordially, taking her hand. He asked about her life, he told her about his, and the entire time they spoke his eyes moved up and down her frame like she were being examined, scrutinized. She would later overhear some of his remarks to his son after she was married, something about being, “plain”, “short hair is no fun”, “why is she wearing that?”

In the early days of their marriage, she once heard Roderick defend her, “I still think she's pretty, Dad. Isn't that all that matters?”

Robert Withers responded, “Sure it is, Roddy. At least take her shopping, for chrissakes.”

She looked in the mirror. She had gained weight, but she didn't mind. She had earned some new wrinkles, but she was still a young woman. She could even meet someone new. She thought of leaving this place, leaving her husband. There was still plenty of life ahead of her, plenty of opportunities, and plenty of world to explore.

Chapter Six

The Thornfield Institute of Living always smelled of too much disinfectant for Roderick. It made him wonder what kind of unsanitary acts were happening in a place that apparently needed so much decontamination.

He could visualize the nurses on their hands and knees rigorously scrubbing the floors or spraying down the walls to clean all of the flung feces before any more guests arrived and it made him chuckle. Despite the white and cool-blue color schemes designed to have a calming effect, he could not remove from his mind's eye the dark and Gothic picture of a mental asylum with lightning flashing and thunder roaring in the night.

His shoes knocked against the floor, echoing through the hallway as he looked at each room number. If he visited more often, he might have memorized her room's location, but there was no worrying about that now. He reached room number 230 and heard a voice behind him. He turned to see Doctor Flint approaching with an electronic tablet in his hands.

"I'm glad to see you, Mister Whithers. It's been quite some time since your last visit," he commented in a thick Kentucky accent. "I have some good news for you."

"Really?" he asked, surprised. "I could use some."

"What happened to your face?"

"Huh? Oh, I fell. What's this good news?"

"Rebecca has made a great deal of improvement lately. She's showing signs of increased awareness of her environment. She's been much more reactive to external stimuli. She's also become more physically active and..."

"Has she started speaking?"

"No, no, she hasn't, but the progress she's made is, well, simply astonishing."

Roderick didn't share, nor care for Doctor Flint's enthusiasm. "Well, I'm glad she's not totally coherent, since I have bad news for her. I was counting on her not comprehending it."

Roderick had resolved years ago that his sister would never return as a full human being,

"Well, there's only one way to find out," stated Doctor Flint.

"You're not going to tell me that bad news is *bad* for her right now?"

"Well, considering the circumstances, any type of emotional reaction would be a big plus. Maybe it can trigger just a little more progress. I'm sorry to hear about your father by the way. I read it in the paper."

"Thanks."

Doctor Flint unlocked the door and they both entered the tiny white room. A small desk was added for Rebecca since Roderick's last visit. She sat with her back to them. She was coloring rigorously with crayons on white paper like a toddler, and did not pause or acknowledge the presence of anyone else in the room. Doctor Flint was correct. Roderick hadn't seen his sister active like this in years.

"Hey, Sis," he said as he stood over her, peering over the back of her head to see the artwork she had created.

There were about a dozen pictures of various animals such as dogs, birds, snakes, bats and amalgamations thereof. The illustrations were those of a preschooler. There were several of these pictures hung about the walls.

"I hear you've been getting better, huh? Well, that's great, but when're you gonna start talkin'? I'

just kidding, there's no rush. These pictures are really cool."

She continued to color without response, her broken crayons lying all over the desk. Roderick picked up one of the pictures and looked at Doctor Flint. "You call this an improvement?" he asked.

"Yes," Doctor Flint replied with agitation. "I would call it a *vast* improvement. I know that it's been a *while* since you've visited your sister, but I'm sure you can remember on your previous trips here that she's come a long way from just sitting in a chair without saying a word, or only moving to yank her hair out by twisting it around her fingers. She even seems to have broken that habit, and she was doing *that* since she was admitted here. We're even thinking about letting her hair grow, since we're confident that she won't pull it out now."

"I was just expecting more, I guess. She's still not looking at me."

"No, and you should give it some time. She may make even more improvements or she may do a complete reversal tomorrow. So don't let your expectations get too high. The one person she responds to very well to is Helena down the hall. I even saw her smile once when Helena walked into the room."

As if on cue, a golden-locked young woman, short and doughy, bounced into the room with her face beaming. Like an oversized Shirley Temple, she looked like something that had just sprung out of the 1930s. Her rosy cheeks and big blue eyes landed right in front of Roderick, her face catapulted up to him, nearly bashing their noses together. He took an awkward step back as the young woman stood, unblinking, with a smile from ear to ear.

"Hi!" she exclaimed, "I'm Helena! Helena E. Cate! You must be Rod!"

"Um, hi." Roderick winced.

Doctor Flint put his hand on Helena's shoulder, and gently pushed her down from her tippy-toes.

"Helena, what have I said about respecting another's personal space?"

"Golly, I'm sorry, Doctor Flint. I'm just ever so excited to meet Becky's brother! I've heard so much about you!" she blurted without blinking.

"Uh, yeah, I bet you have," Roderick shrugged, remembering that the girl would not be here if she weren't mentally unstable. He also noticed that his sister had stopped coloring and was now sitting completely still.

"Well, I guess I ought to be going!" Helena sang. "It's almost lunch time, and I sure do like pudding! I like it bunches! Nice meeting you, Mister Rod!" With that, she skipped out of the room like a spastic pixie.

"Good to see you're hanging with a decent crowd, Sis," Roderick said as she began her arduous coloring again.

Doctor Flint adjusted his glasses and took advantage of the vapor-trail of excitability left in the room from Helena's presence to speak openly with Roderick.

"If I may be blunt, you should come and visit Becky more often, especially if there's a potential for improvement. Your father never visited her much either, although I have seen your wife here quite a few times, so at least that's something. I'll leave you two alone now," he said as he closed the door behind him.

Roderick sat down on the bed behind his sister. He still hadn't seen her face since he walked in and she was still coloring away. Even after all these years, Rebecca hadn't been diagnosed with anything officially. The doctors had ruled out everything from autism to post-traumatic stress. Up until her early teen years, she had been relatively normal, although her deterioration was first noticed when she was seven years old.

Her condition worsened when their mother left, becoming a further embarrassment to their father. He would cringe at the thought of taking her anywhere public and eventually pulled her out of school.

and just started leaving her at home all by herself. She gradually stopped all normative human action showing virtually no emotion, as if she had slipped into a daze and never came out. Then she seemed to lose herself completely. No speaking, barely moving unless picked up and guided by someone else and even then she would often struggle. Robert Whithers had his daughter institutionalized at the age of fifteen.

“Well, Becky, I don’t know if you can understand me or if this will sink in. I’m really glad that you’re doing better. I have bad news, though. Ummm, Dad...he passed. He died. I’m real sorry to come visit you with bad news like this, and I promise I’ll visit you more. I’ll come by soon, okay? See you later. You keep up the pretty pictures.”

As he left, Roderick heard a crayon snap in two. At least he thought he did. He didn’t look back to find out.

Chapter Seven

“I tripped-hit the coffee table,” Roderick explained to the employees who hadn’t made it to the funeral.

“Ouch. Must’ve been a nasty fall,” they would say.

He sighed. “It was.”

The Mound site didn’t have as many protestors this morning as it had the past few weeks. Lately a crowd of them had begun to grow larger, day-by-day, demanding the Withers’ company stay away from the Mound. Most of these people were students and a few local tribe members. Roderick decided that they were just bored and wanted, maybe needed, something to complain about. The cause of this vexation, the only reason why anyone was galvanizing at all to protect this Mound, was Doctor Amanda Jones. She was a professor of religion and mythology at the local college.

He rolled his eyes when he saw a woman in a grey business suit approaching him across the grass.

“Goddamnit, Bob,” Roderick whispered, “who let her in the fences?”

“Don’t know, Rod,” he answered. “She keeps sneaking onto the perimeter, and we’re not sure how she’s getting past us. Every time we’ve busted her she said she wanted to talk to you or your dad.”

“Pain the ass, that’s all she is,” grumbled Roderick. “Just an over-educated elitist, has to take up causes out of boredom.”

Ever since his late father had acquired this land that just so happened to have the Mound on it, she had sent angry letters to them both. Upon receiving no response, she resorted to calling news stations and newspapers and organized the protests. It was clear she wouldn’t rest until she had an audience with one of the Withers men.

“Mister Withers, I’m Doctor Jones,” she said, extending her hand firmly as she approached.

Roderick took her hand, gently and daintily. “I know who you are, Miss Jones. You’ve caused quite a stir here, haven’t you?”

“It’s *Doctor* Jones. I also wanted to say that I heard about your father, and you have my condolences for you and your family,” she stated sympathetically.

“Thanks,” Roderick uttered, crossing his arms. “Now, what is it that you have to say?”

“Well, for starters, you realize that this *stir* could’ve been avoided if you had agreed to meet with me earlier,” she explained.

“My father acquired this land legally years ago. There was nothing to discuss with you. The contracts have already been drawn up, and there are at least a dozen different retailers and even a coffee shop ready to build here. Just because you bring a class out here for a field trip every once in a while doesn’t give you a claim to the place.”

Doctor Jones’ face twisted.

“I bring my students here because it’s a learning experience. This place has a lot of history and knowledge to offer about our state and our city and the people who used to live here.”

“‘People who *used* to live here’,” he mimicked. “Until you went running around with your agenda no one cared about this place or even knew that it existed. It’s a single Indian Mound, and it’s not even a big one. It just looks like a hill...a zit on the ground. It’s just a lump of dirt from an extinct tribe.”

Doctor Jones’ hands went to her hips.

“For your information, the tribe didn’t go extinct. They were defeated in war with another tribe and were assimilated, a tribe which I happen to be a descendant of.”

“You?”

“Yes, me. Me and my family. I’ve been campaigning for years to have this Mound declared a historical site.”

“But you’re black.”

“And you’re ignorant.”

A sly sneer stretched across Roderick’s face. “Well, you obviously didn’t fight very hard for it, did you?”

“I’ve been trying to get this area under government protection for a long time, Sir.”

“And as I recall, my father already owned it, and it wasn’t difficult for him to get it. I’ve heard what you had to say. Now, get off the property immediately, or I’ll have you removed. And if I see your face anywhere around here again, you’ll regret it.”

“You’re threatening me?”

“I’m just sayin’.”

“Very well, I’ll get off the property, but you can’t stop me from protesting. This is still America,” she proclaimed.

“What do you know about America?” he snapped as she walked away.

Roderick remembered what his father had taught him years ago about America. The little people, the inferior people, the ones with accents and colors, would keep complaining and complaining, protesting and marching, until they turned the country into a state of sniveling weaklings and pushovers who are cursed to forever walk on eggshells.

He recalled when he was in high school; Robert Whithers had become irate about the fact that his son was being forced to read “that stupid-ass book. You know, the one with Scout and Pickle and that girl gets raped, and the colored guy goes to jail for it, and we’re all supposed to feel guilty and bad about it, because the world wasn’t fair to him. If this story was in the *real* world, then he sure as hell *would’ve* raped her! Son, the world isn’t fair to anyone, but if the blacks and the Mexicans and even the women had their way, they’d all get special treatment. That’s the road this country’s headed down. Roddy, so you just make sure you stand in the way any chance you get and mow them down if they stand in yours.”

Roderick had no intention of dignifying Doctor Jones’ complaints, or dignifying Doctor Jones herself, for that matter. His father’s company had bought the land to build condos and a golf course, and since the responsibilities of the company were now falling into his lap, he had every intention of seeing his father’s wishes come to fruition. He did, however, decide that if any artifacts or remains were uncovered within the Mound, he wouldn’t destroy them or toss them away. He’d donate them to the museum and would negotiate whatever tax write-off was most appropriate for doing so. After all, he wasn’t a total monster.

The concept reminded him of the time when he and his sister built a sand castle together. He was six and she was four. She was pretending to be the princess of the castle, and he was pretending to be the noble knight until their father commanded Roderick not to act like a sissy. He then became the dragon that stepped on the castle, obliterating it, relishing as it crumbled while his sister began to cry.

Chapter Eight

Roderick is walking along a green cliff side, when clouds begin to gather. Just ahead, standing on the edge of the cliff, is his mother, her back turned to him once again. He calls for her, but she does not respond. He runs to her, but can't prevent her from spreading her arms and letting herself fall. He bellows her name, cries for her, his hand outstretched over the canyon as though he can somehow catch her. When she disappears into the fog below, he hears something to his left, and can see not that far from him along the cliff's edge, his sister who is holding his daughter by her shoulders. His sister looks at him and grins. As Roderick reaches out, his sister falls backwards over the cliff, taking his daughter with her.

His eyes opened. He had tossed and turned in the bed and realized Elizabeth was sleeping in the guest room. As he lazily watched the shadows dancing along the bedroom walls, he thought he heard something laugh. No, it was more like a cackle from outside. He got out of bed and peered out the window. In the distance he saw a light coming from the trees behind his house. He realized that it must be yet another group of teenagers using the field for a bon fire.

He thought he heard something else too, a word sizzling into his ears from the trees.

"Sinner..."

He decided to deal with the situation himself rather than call the police. He threw on his robe and slippers, walked downstairs, and proceeded into the cool night air. If he had realized it would be so wet out this evening, he wouldn't have worn his slippers, which were now covered in mud. He tightened his robe and folded his arms. His breath was smoke in the chill. It was a warm day with a contrastingly cold night, but he was nearly there. He could see the fire ahead, and he squinted as he tried to make out the shapes around it. However, as he got closer, his eyes widened, and he briskly trounced through the mud.

Atop the fire was a large black cauldron around which were three hooded figures in dark cloaks.

Lit torches were sticking in the ground around them, and the figures were holding themselves up with twisted wooden canes. The light of the fire flickered across their cloaks with cavorting shadows. What truly caught Roderick's attention and what made his heart race was the fourth figure that was bound to a large wooden fixture at an angle, like a prisoner on the rack, dangling above the cauldron. It was Chelsea, the woman he had been with just recently. Her hands, feet and mouth were bound with red silk, and streams of tears flowed down her cheeks.

"Sinner..." the three figures breathed in unison, their backs turned.

"What the fuck is going on out here?" he shouted, and the figures then faced him.

Under the blackness of their hoods, he could see strands of thin red hair. They were three old women, one tall, one short and one in-between. Their skin was like the bark of an aged tree. Like villains from a fairy tale, their hooked noses and long chins were covered in warts. Their sickly eyes were faded, a pale greenish color with yellow pupils, and they peered from the center of dark circles on their faces. Their eyeballs seemed to hover unsupported in their skulls.

Roderick stopped in his tracks at the site of the beldams. He saw the victim's eyes turn towards him, desperate and pleading for a rescue.

"What do you think you're doing? What is this?" he demanded.

The three hags pointed their spindly wart-covered fingers at him.

"Let's just...just let the girl go. Let her down. I won't call the cops."

Just then, from under her cloak, one of the hags pulled out a large and rusty crescent sickle.

~~“What are you doing with that?” he asked, as the young victim went into hysterics, and the hag stepped under her with the instrument, raising it to her belly.~~

Roderick shouted, “No, wait, let’s talk about this!”

The hag obeyed. The sickle stopped in the air, shaking in her wobbly, feeble grip. She slowly turned towards him, and Roderick could hear the snaps and crackles and pops of her tauged muscles and brittle bones. She then hobbled over to him, presenting the blade, grip first.

“I’m calling the cops!” he threatened.

“Do you realize what she intended to do?” the hag hacked, revealing a mouth of yellow putrid teeth. “She was going to betray you.”

“She was prying into your past,” the taller hag said.

“She heard you say things. Things you said in intoxicated states,” said the short one. “She recorded them. She recorded you together.”

“Your intoxicated mutterings—she will put all the pieces together. When she does she will reveal your sins to the world,” said the tall one again.

“Your deepest, darkest secrets,” added the hag handing him the blade.

“Your infidelities will become public. As well as your other transgressions.”

“Blackmail.”

“You will lose it all.”

“Everything.”

Roderick paused, looking at all three and then looking at Chelsea, her eyes begged. He slowly wrapped his fingers around the sickle’s grip. He held it up and moved towards the helpless woman, slowly, as though he were in a trance. When the blade entered the young woman’s sternum and was dragged all the way down to her groin, it left a crimson trail like a bloody zipper. Her muffled voice was barely even able to let out a whimper.

As the hags cackled maniacally, the victim’s teary face swung back and forth frantically in pain as the red trail left by the blade suddenly split, the flesh parting, and her steamy innards spilled into the bubbling cauldron. The hags stirred the contents in the boiling water, as teardrops rolled down Chelsea’s cheeks before her head went limp, hanging inanimate from her neck.

Roderick backed away, and dropped the bloody blade. He stepped backwards through the mud as the hags released the large ladles from their hands and hobbled towards him, still cackling. They pointed at him, and their laughter ceased. As he turned to run, they let out a horrendous scream, like a thousand voices screaming at once, so loud and screeching that Roderick had to cover his ears. It was so powerful it knocked him over. He couldn’t organize his thoughts, his senses scrambled by the noise. He was incapable of escaping, unable to get off the ground. He began to scream himself in an attempt to block out theirs, and that’s when he fell out of bed, covered in sweat.

Though his heart raced, he was safe in his bedroom wearing nothing but his underwear. Elizabeth came through the door with concern on her face, rubbing his back and helping him off the floor. “What the hell, Rod, are you alright?”

“Is Daddy okay?” asked Sam’s little voice as she stood in the doorway with one of her dolls. Though she posed the question, her voice and face were void of concern.

Elizabeth assured, “Daddy’s fine, you go back to sleep, okay?”

As Samantha returned to her room, Elizabeth sat on the bed next to her husband, her hands on his shoulders. She was used to his unusual sleeping patterns, whether it be tossing and turning or getting up in the middle of the night for a few hours or so, apparently being unable to sleep, but she had never

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