

SHORT



NOVEL



Wiliiddest
WDrreams

A
HORROR
NOVEL

NORMAN PARTRIDGE

WILDEST DREAMS

by

Norman Partridge

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For Ron Ezell,
a book about the bad guys for one of the good guys....

“But you want me to desecrate the grave!”

“Don’t give me that crap. There’s nothing sacred about a hole in the ground. Or a man that’s in it. Or you, or me.”

—Warren Oates answers Isela Vega in Sam Peckinpah’s *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*

PART ONE:

A COLD & LONELY EVIL

The time has been
That when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; but now they rise again.
With twenty mortal murders on their crown.

—Shakespeare

Macbeth

Act III, Scene II

I see ghosts.

This one was a little girl with long blonde hair and a black dress. She sat on a footbridge that arched across a rushing creek, her little girl legs dangling over the side as she gazed down at the cold water rushing below.

I moved toward her, following a fern-choked path through old redwoods, but the little girl didn't notice me. Sometimes it's like that. Sometimes the dead don't see the living at all. Often, in fact. Often ghosts are no more threatening than old movie clips. They're helpless specters fixed in time and place, forever repeating some action whose significance was lost long ago, perhaps even before they were born.

Of course, my footsteps were light. Maybe that was why I went unnoticed. A rusty blanket of dead redwood needles covered the path, but it wouldn't have mattered if the forest floor was salted with gravel—I can be quiet when I want to. So the sounds I made were hardly sounds at all, and what the little girl would have heard had she been listening was masked by the hollow sigh of clear creek water flowing to the sea.

Masked, until I stepped onto the wooden bridge and my boot heel rang down like a judge's gavel.

The ghost looked up with startled blue eyes that were as clear as the October sky.

"I'm sorry I scared you," I said.

She smiled. "Oh, I wasn't scared. Not truly. I just didn't see you coming. Not many people come here, you know."

"I know."

"You'll be glad you did, though." She nodded toward the creek. "It's a nice place. Sometimes you see fish."

I unslung my backpack and sat down beside her. She moved closer. The nearness of her made me shiver, but I masked my unease with a smile. I didn't want her to think that anything might be wrong.

We sat there in silence. A bower of heavy redwood branches hid the creek, and the bridge, and the living and the dead from the sun. The shadows did not bother me, and neither did the little girl—there was nothing in her clear October eyes to make me wary, or afraid.

I knew the girl could not say the same of my eyes. But even though I'd frightened her, she hadn't looked away from me. She had studied my eyes as if she were searching for everything that lay behind them, and she hadn't even blinked.

I hadn't looked away, either. Strange. I'd seen ghosts since childhood. Maybe because I was born with a caul—that's the occultist's favorite explanation, anyway. I'd learned to ignore the dead a long time ago. First the dull ones with their endless pantomimes, and later those whose actions were less predictable. By the time I was a teenager, I could spend a night in a room with a wailing spirit and sleep like a baby.

But there was something very different about the little girl. I can't say it any plainer than that.

There was a depth to her, an intelligence that was rare in the dead.

An innocence, as well.

It was something I'd never seen before.

Somehow, she seemed very much alive.

And very, very lonely.

I knew what it was like to be lonely.

"Look!" she said suddenly, and her little hand brushed through mine with icy, transparent fingers as she pointed at the creek.

A steelhead shot through the water like a bullet, fighting the current every inch of the way. A flash of scale like living sunshine, a splash of the steelhead's dark and powerful tail, and then it was gone.

The little ghost leaned forward, straining after the fish. "Careful," I said automatically, realizing too late that my concern was ridiculous.

"Don't worry," she said. "I won't fall."

I didn't say anything.

The girl stared upstream and sighed. "Wasn't he beautiful?"

I nodded.

"He's going upstream. They go upstream to spawn."

I nodded again, and she looked at me with those clear, innocent eyes. I wondered if she knew what happened to steelheads after they spawned. I wasn't going to tell her. If she didn't know now, she didn't ever need to know.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Clay Saunders."

"What's in your backpack, Clay Saunders?"

Watching the fish, I'd actually forgotten about the backpack. Just for a moment. It was black and it was canvas, and you couldn't see the bloodstains on it unless you looked really hard.

I'd bought the pack in Baja six days before. It sat between us on the bridge. Already, flies were circling it.

I swallowed hard. I'd made a mistake. I didn't have time for distractions. I should have ignored the little ghost, and taken care of business the way I'd planned, and gone on.

But instead I'd stopped, and now there were questions.

That's the way it always is.

Anytime you stop, there are questions.

Questions are never good.

Without a word, I rose and slung the pack over one shoulder. I had to laugh at myself. Still, getting nervous like that. Way past paranoid. After all, it wouldn't matter if I told the girl what was inside the backpack. She was dead. She wasn't going to tell anyone.

Still, I didn't want her to know.

I'd already scared her once, and once was enough.

A fly buzzed around her head. She swatted at it, not noticing as the insect passed through her hand. "You can trust me," she said. "I know how to keep a secret."

"So do I, and I promised I'd keep this one all to myself."

My words weren't meant to sound harsh, but they did to the little girl. She apologized quickly, and I could tell that she was both embarrassed and ashamed.

"Maybe you can help me," I said, hoping to smooth things over. "There's someone I'd

supposed to meet, and I think I might have missed them.”

“A boy or a girl?”

“A girl.”

She giggled, at ease now. “Clay’s got a girlfriend.”

“Not quite.” I laughed, but I didn’t like the blush that warmed my face. Even if I was talking a ghost, I was talking too much.

The girl didn’t notice my discomfort. She stared into the creek, pretending to watch for another fish. But I knew that she was only pretending now. She hadn’t forgotten me, or my backpack, at all.

She couldn’t keep quiet for long. “I’ve been here all day,” she said finally, “and I haven’t seen any girl. Only you.”

“We’re not supposed to meet here, exactly.” I glanced up at the redwood boughs that hid the sky from view. “I think I’m on the right trail, but I’m a city boy. Put me in the woods and I’m lost.”

“I’m lost, too. At least I think I am. My mom said Daddy would meet me here, but he hasn’t come. It’s been a long time, too. But I just keep waiting, because that’s what my mom told me to do. She paused, staring at the water. “I don’t mind waiting. Not really. It’s nice here.”

She reached out for my hand.

“We’re alone, just like Hansel and Gretel,” she said, and her voice whispered through the forest like a lonely wind that touches no one. But her fingers were like the wind, too, and though they passed through mine I knew that she had touched me, even if she could not hold my hand.

She kept on trying, though. Without a word. She didn’t give up.

I tried, too. It was like trying to hold a five-fingered breeze. And while I tried, I wondered how long the little girl had been here. Her clothes were hard to place. That little black dress, simple and severe, like something out of *The Addams Family*, but timeless in its way.

Maybe she’d been here a hundred years, or maybe a hundred days. I couldn’t decide. I only knew that as long as she’d been here, she’d been all alone.

I wondered how long it had been since someone had spoken to her. How long since she had shared a smile or a laugh, or tried to hold someone’s hand.

I didn’t want to ask those questions. Questions are never good.

But there was one question I had to ask. “I’m looking for the bottle house,” I began. “Do you know where it is?”

“Sure.” Her fingers drifted away from mine. “It’s not far.” She seemed to float away. “Follow me.”

I did.

“There it is,” the little girl said.

I didn’t see the bottle house at first. There was the ocean to look at, so different from the blue waters that washed the golden beaches of Mexico. Two thousand miles north of Los Cabos, the Pacific was wild and cruel. The coast here was framed by arthritic knots of cypress, gray limbs crippled by winds that were as cold as they were relentless. Iron-colored combers crashed against a beach shaped like a reaper’s scythe. The sand was as dark as freshly poured concrete, and the sound of each wave shook me to the bone.

Just like an ordinary little girl, the ghost scrambled over a fallen redwood. I followed. We threaded our way through knots of bleached driftwood as we crossed the concrete beach. My boots compacted damp sand, but the little girl’s shoes left no mark at all.

A splash of sunlight washed the shoreline and I spotted the bottle house, nestled on the cresting cliff that dropped cleanly into the ocean at the south end of the beach.

I wondered why I’d had trouble finding it. After all, it was exactly where Circe Whistler had said it would be.

The sand slowed me down, but there was no slowing the girl. She started up a narrow trail that climbed the cliff, cutting through heavy underbrush. For a while I lost track of her. I hurried to the trail, picking my way through tall stands of beach grass that hid the girl and the house from view.

I was afraid that she would be gone by the time I reached the house. Sometimes it happens that way. Some ghosts have territories which bind them to a plot of ground the same way fear binds an agoraphobic.

But that’s not the way it was. Not this time. When I reached a set of concrete steps and a twisted wrought iron railing, there she was, waiting on the patio above.

The patio was concrete, too. Beach grass knifed through wide cracks that brought California earthquakes to mind, and I suddenly found myself wondering if we were anywhere close to a fault line.

Another look at the bottle house and I stopped wondering. If this were earthquake country, the place wouldn’t be here at all. Composed almost entirely of old bottles set in concrete, the abandoned structure looked about as stable as a sand castle.

But looks could be deceiving. I knew that the house had stood for nearly forty years, since Circe Whistler’s father had cemented the crowning bottle with his own two hands.

Several PRIVATE PROPERTY and NO TRESPASSING signs flapped in the wind, but the house wasn’t exactly secure—there was no door at all, only a battered wooden jam with rusting hinges that held nothing but air. The concrete walls were golden brown with white flecks that caught the afternoon light and added to the sand castle impression. The bottles were of every color, their bases facing out from the walls like startled eyes.

A passing cloud eclipsed the sun. A hundred glass eyes closed all at once, and the wind whipped through the open doorway and played in as many glass throats, the sound a terminal inhalation.

“Some people think this place is haunted,” the girl whispered.

“People believe a lot of strange things.”

She hesitated, drawing close. “I don’t want to go inside.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I will.” She looked up at me, a trembling smile on her face. “If you come with me.”

* * *

“Do you suppose your girlfriend is late?”

“Anything’s possible.” We were inside now, and I wasn’t surprised to find that the house’s interior was just as unusual as the exterior. The flagstone floor rose and fell at funhouse angles, throwing off my sense of balance. There was no furniture at all, only a pile of dry tinder heaped near an empty fireplace as if a group of kids had decided to have a party in the ruin only to think better of it as night closed around them.

It seemed a reasonable explanation. Even in the daylight, there was no escaping the spectral wind that played in the open bottles. It sounded like a dying man wheezing through glass lungs. If that kind of thing got to you, it would certainly get to you here. And good.

“No one ever lived here,” the girl said. “Not truly.”

“I can see why.”

The child nodded, staying close to the door. “My mom said this place was like a church. She said there were always people here. Even when it was empty.”

I smiled. “You mean ghosts?”

“I don’t know. I only know that what my mom said scared me. I don’t like creepy places, and I don’t like creepy stories. I guess I’m just a scaredy cat.”

“Stories are just stories,” I said. “They can’t hurt you.”

I might have said more, but that was when I heard the flies.

Trapped inside the bottles, buzzing to be free.

I stared at the wall of glass. A few corked bottles, but most were open. Narrow throats and wide throats. Lips polished and dirty, cracked and smooth...but no flies.

Not yet.

But soon. That was a certainty. Because I had what the flies wanted. They had scented that bloody thing in my backpack.

I couldn’t wait to be rid of that thing, and all that came with it, and all that it attracted.

Flies...and a woman named Circe Whistler.

The woman I’d come to meet. But I wouldn’t wait for Circe here. I’d wait outside, and I’d take the little girl with me.

“Let’s go,” I said, and that was when I noticed that the little girl was already gone.

I took a step back and my heel struck an uneven stone in the floor. It seemed to wobble underfoot, or maybe it was me who wobbled, but the end result was the same. I nearly lost my balance.

The first fly brushed past my cheek.

If I waited another minute, I’d be crawling with the things.

I turned, a chill of disgust capering up my spine.

A woman blocked my way.

* * *

I only knew two things about the woman: she wasn't afraid of flies, and she wasn't Circe Whistler.

"I was expecting someone else," I said.

"Plans change," she said. "Life is fluid."

"Life is clockwork. Or it should be."

"Maybe where you come from, but things are different here. Anyway, I didn't mean to give you such a start."

She smiled. Blonde and slight, but she didn't look at all weak. And the way she held onto her amused expression reminded me of some smartass kid who'd just spotted a zipper on Godzilla's back.

We stood outside, away from the flies. The little girl was nowhere in sight, and I was surprised to find that I was worried about her. I couldn't help wondering if she'd seen the woman, if the stranger had scared her off—

"What's wrong?" the blonde asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I stared at her. Maybe she'd seen the little girl and was being coy with me. Maybe she hadn't. I couldn't decide—her eyes were flat and cold, like the ocean.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" I asked.

"I believe in many things. For instance, I believe that the bottle house is a place of intense energies. Both positive and negative. Souls dwell here. I've spoken to them."

"Really," I said, doing my best to sound diplomatic. But my new age radar was going up, and going up fast. The last thing I needed was a lecture on energies, or dynamics or—

"Faith is the key, of course," she said. "This place was a temple, you know. A place of intense faith. And faith is power. *Intense* power. Don't you agree?"

"I'm getting the all-over heebie-jeebies just thinking about it." I bit off the remark as fast as I could and held out my hand, one last stab at diplomacy. "Clay Saunders."

She looked at my hand like I'd offered her a bug on a silver platter. "Forgive me if I don't shake."

"I'm sure you have your reasons. Energies, dynamics...like that."

"My name is Janice Ravenwood," she said, ignoring the jab. "I'm a medium. Perhaps you know my books."

"No. But then, I stick mostly to nonfiction."

"I think I'm full up with sarcasm now."

"I'm not being sarcastic. It's just the way I am. I only believe what I see."

"You see what you choose to see." She raised her hand. "It's all a matter of energies." Her fingers did a little dance, and the silver bracelets encircling her thin wrists provided the music. "If you had a sensitive nature—I'm speaking psychically, of course—you'd understand. You'd see beyond the physical, as I do."

"The physical suits me just fine," I said, nudging the backpack with my shoulder. "Let's stick with it."

"As you wish."

"Run down the plan for me."

"You bring your backpack. I bring you. We go to the Whistler estate. You meet a few people. From there on out, you're on your own."

"Sounds familiar," I said. I looked around, searching for spectral company, but the little girl was nowhere in sight. "Seems like I'm always on my own."

Janice Ravenwood stared at the backpack. She didn't say a word, but her smile knifed into

smirk.

~~—And then she slipped a pair of dark glasses over her gray eyes, and the sun broke through the clouds behind her, and light caught the bottles and a dozen colors were reflected in the polished lenses of her shades.~~

She turned and started down the trail before I could say another word.

I followed in silence.

* * *

The medium's Ford Explorer was parked on the beach. "Give me your pack," she said. "I'll toss it in the back."

"I'll hold onto it, if that's okay."

Janice sighed disapprovingly. "Have it your way."

"Sorry. I have issues. Trust is one of them."

She laughed, but a wave broke behind her and I hardly heard the laugh at all.

In a moment, nothing remained of the wave but a crust of foam sizzling high on the beach.

"Let's go," Janice said.

I got in and buckled my seat belt. The beach was empty—still no sign of the little girl. I sat there with the pack at my feet. Janice Ravenwood got behind the wheel and slammed the door. She keyed the engine, slipped the Explorer into gear, and drove down the beach. Waves broke, but we were sealed in tight and I couldn't hear them anymore. Just an annoying whisper of new age music coming from the stereo, and the sound of our breathing.

And a fly.

The insect must have followed us inside. It buzzed around the cab and lighted just where I knew it would, on the backpack.

I stared at it. Crawling, fat and black and shiny. Stopping. Rubbing its legs together. Janice Ravenwood saw it too.

She stopped the car and leaned toward me so that her hair brushed my shoulder. In close, I could smell her perfume.

Vanilla-sweet, with a hint of jasmine. It went just fine with the new age music.

Her fingers neared the backpack, but didn't quite touch it.

Our eyes met. Just for a moment. Janice gave a little sigh, only vaguely theatrical.

Energies, I thought, considering the backpack's contents. *They must be thermonuclear.*

It seemed like Janice knew that too. Though her fingers were close, she didn't touch the backpack.

She was a very patient woman. She turned her hand palm upward, ever so slowly, so that her silver bracelets didn't make the slightest sound.

We sat there. We sat there a good long time.

Until the fly crawled across Janice Ravenwood's fingers, into her open palm.

Just that fast, her hand became a fist.

She rolled down her window and released the fly.

"Your good deed for the day?" I asked.

She said, "A wise soul understands the dynamics of mercy."

For a few seconds we sat there, listening to the waves and the music, smelling the salt air. I guess she thought I needed a little downtime for processing.

Finally, Janice Ravenwood rolled up her window.

She glared at my backpack.

“We really should have put that thing in the back,” she said. “It stinks.”

* * *

The beach gave way to a dirt road that snaked through the redwood forest. We followed the road awhile, past the clearing where I’d parked my truck, and then the dirt road intersected with a two-lane highway that clung to the ragged coastline the same way the bottle house did, as if it might tumble into the sea at any moment.

Janice was right about the backpack. It did stink. I cracked my window and breathed the scent of redwood and fern and sea and earth.

Occasionally, another road led inland through the trees. Occasionally, I glimpsed a house set back among the redwoods, but more often than not there was only the forest itself, as impenetrable as the walls of a fortress.

Maybe it was the presence of Janice Ravenwood, girl medium, but I suddenly considered the possibility that anything could happen in a place like this.

Anything, in the dark shadows cast by trees that were centuries old. Anything, in the black places where no one could see.

Anything. It was quite a concept for a guy like me.

A guy like me didn’t do too well with *anything*. I did better with *nothing*. That was a concept I could sink my teeth into.

Nothing in the shadows but blackness.

Nothing in the light but what you could see.

Yeah. I could get a hold of that one. After all, I could see more than most. And what I saw didn’t stretch halfway to the boundless possibilities of *anything*.

Janice pulled off the highway. Tires shushed along a cobbled drive that wound toward the sea. We descended into the trees, and the shadows. As we left the light, Janice flicked on her headlights.

And we saw what there was to see.

A hundred yards of security fencing flashed by on the left. A spiked iron gate. A guard dog.

The dog had three heads, and three open mouths filled with gleaming fangs.

But the dog was bronze. It didn’t move.

“There’s a security box to the left of the gate,” Janice said. “The code is *666*. Circe said she’d trust you with it, but I can’t imagine why.”

“Thanks.”

“One other thing.”

“What’s that?”

She smiled. “Watch out for dogs.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said, shooting a glance at the bronze statue. “But to tell the truth, I don’t have much of an imagination.”

“Hang around a while,” Janice said. “We’ll make a believer of you yet.”

I closed the door and watched the medium drive away. Then I punched in the security code and waited for the gate to open.

A fly buzzed by me.

Another one, or the same one.

It flew between spiked iron bars, and into the darkness. And beyond.

The security gate swung closed behind me.

A narrow brick path curved to the right, leading to another gate and another keypad. Janice hadn't mentioned the added security, but it didn't surprise me. After all, this was Circe Whistler's home. I imagined she'd made some pretty formidable enemies in her time. To be sure, there was a fine line between careful and paranoid. But if I were Circe Whistler, I probably would have jumped across it a long time ago.

I reached for the keypad and a Doberman sprang from the shadows on the other side of the gate, raking its teeth across the bars and barking up a storm.

Three other dogs joined it in the time it took me to draw a breath. Squinting into the shadows, I saw that the gate led to a large enclosed pen. I shook my head—right about now, Janice Ravenwood was probably having a good laugh at my expense.

I looked for another way to go, and that was when I noticed a brick staircase half-hidden by braided vines. Brushing them to one side like tattered draperies, I descended through a lush jungle of ferns and orchids and hanging fuchsias to a swimming pool with a black bottom.

Black, to trap the heat of the sun and warm the water. But the sun was weak here. A ring of ancient redwoods snared the pool, transforming the day to muted twilight, and the water was as dark as the mythic Styx.

Something flashed beneath the water's surface and caught my eye. Silver ripples broke at the opposite end of the pool, parting the water in a sculpted wake behind armored ridges of blue scale, sharp teeth parted over hellish smiles, and bright red gouts of blood that never flowed. All of it there on the surface for just a moment, and then came the slightest splash and the silver water closed around the thing as it submerged, moving as swift and strong as the steelhead in the little girl's creek.

Whatever it was, it was coming in my direction. Coming very fast.

The water parted at the edge of the pool. White hands with painted black nails slapped the coping and a woman thrust palm down and carried her weight up and out of the water in one smooth motion, her arms straight now, silver water rolling down tattooed tapestries on her bare shoulders—armored ridges of blue scale, sharp teeth parted over hellish smiles, and bright red gouts of blood that never flowed.

The tattoos must have cost a lot. I figured that was the reason Circe Whistler didn't want to cover them with a swimming suit.

Circe's lips pulled back in a smile as she noticed me. She slicked long, too-black hair against her skull and twisted a final splash of water from it.

Like the payoff scare in a monster movie, another splash chopped the silence. Another pair of black-nailed hands on the coping, but but this time it was a man who came out of the water. At least I thought Circe's companion was a man. I had my doubts—I'd never seen another like him. With a shaved bullet-head and long muscled arms he rose from the depths...with crude brands burned on his pale skin like souvenirs of hell...and it seemed he just kept coming, naked and grub white and breathing like a bellows.

Circe teased the tall freak. "You need to work on your stamina."

~~"Try me on land next time." He panted. "Exclusively—no more of this amphibian shit."~~

Circe moved in and kissed the Egyptian ankh branded on his chest. Then she strained high on tiptoes and he bent down, and at last her lips found his. They embraced, and when they came apart I found myself thinking of the steelhead swimming upstream to spawn in the little girl's creek.

But that was ridiculous. Circe Whistler was a beauty scaled with tattoos, but her companion didn't much resemble a graceful creature of the water. I didn't know exactly where he belonged, but the biped act he was attempting definitely seemed an evolutionary challenge. Awkward and insect-like and at least seven feet tall, he carried a lean gym-sculpted torso on a pair of skinny legs that looked like they should collapse under the weight. As far as I was concerned, the ugly bastard broke about a dozen laws of nature. He looked like he belonged under a rock.

He gave me the once-over as he dried off. "This the guy?" he asked, and I could tell by his tone that he was almost as impressed as I was.

"Yes. This is the guy." Circe snatched a towel from a chaise lounge and dried herself, but her eyes never left me. Not the bright blue pair set in the savage angles of her face, not the others that stared out from the faces of demons and children and monsters etched on her flesh.

"Toss me my robe?" she asked.

It hung over a railing at the bottom of the staircase. The freak headed for it. His legs were longer, but I was closer. Besides, he was still panting like a sled dog heading for the Iditarod finish line. By the time he got to the railing, I was holding the robe in my left hand.

Empty-handed, the bugman looked way past distressed.

"You can always take this," I said, extending the backpack.

"Get that fucking thing away from me."

He said it too quickly. I had him on the run, and I knew it. I jammed the backpack against the Egyptian ankh branded on his chest.

Wasn't that a laugh—the Egyptian symbol of eternal life. "Do you really think you're going to live forever?" I asked. The bugman's upper lip started to twitch.

"Now boys," Circe said. "Play nice, or I won't let you play at all."

The whole thing was a joke now. I grinned and slung the backpack over my shoulder, and the freak grabbed a fistful of my right hand, his big hand swallowing mine like an albino spider.

He shook my hand like he wanted to break it. I let him have his fun. "Spider Ripley," he said.

"Clay Saunders."

Ripley eyed me hard. But when he released my hand, he didn't have anything. I still had the backpack, and Circe's robe.

The robe was silk. I liked touching it. It hardly weighed a thing. I turned my back on Spider Ripley, and Circe turned her back on me when I came near. Another horror movie scare—scales and tentacles and more eyes tattooed on the sleek, muscled plain of her back.

Circe held out her arms and I blinded the monsters, covering her in black silk. She looked better in silk. Her pool time had bought her strong swimmer's shoulders that tapered to a narrow waist. The hem of the robe fell just under her ass, and the long legs that carried her were white and pure, as surprising as an unmarked canvas hanging in a museum. She wore no tattoos from heel to thigh, but her legs held my attention just the same.

Circe knotted the sash around her waist. "Did everything go all right?"

"I finished the job," I said.

"Wonderful," she said.

It wasn't like we were talking about murder at all.

* * *

We entered the house. Spider Ripley went to dress. Circe didn't. She seemed perfectly comfortable in her silk robe, and I was perfectly comfortable with her in it.

She led me to a large living room. A peaked wall of windows faced west. The view was beyond spectacular, only slightly marred by the barred security fence that surrounded the entire property.

Beyond the fence, the Pacific gleamed like a mirror under the setting sun. Jagged cliffs carved by wind and rain dropped to a beach hidden from view by the twisted skeletons of stunted cypress trees, but I had no feeling for the wind that had maimed them. All was still within the house.

There was no wind here at all. Still, the room was as tortured as the trees outside, the difference being that the room had been twisted by man. A circular staircase rose in one corner, writhing with barbed wrought iron railings. Lights grew on spiked steel stems. The walls and furniture were fashioned from carved redwood that was as dead as coffin wood, its live, earthy smell now more than a faded rumor.

But there was life here, if you were willing to look for it. A bonsai tree sat on a low glass table, its limbs tortured by cunning twists of wire, harnessed just as brutally as the dead things.

The house exuded male pheromones, and I was willing to bet that they didn't belong to Spider Ripley. Circe Whistler was the owner here, but her father had put his mark on this place and it was indelible as the mark of the beast. Diabolos Whistler's daughter could not erase it or cover it over with her own mark, try as she might. Circe's father had claimed to be Satan's successor, had built a cult with temples spread as far as Paris and Hong Kong and Rio de Janeiro, and even in death his presence was as unavoidable as the ripe black stench of decay.

I could feel it.

And I could smell it.

I opened the backpack and placed Diabolos Whistler's severed head on the glass table, next to the bonsai tree. The cult leader's face wore a twisted expression frozen somewhere between a sneer and a smile, but no length of cunning wire had trained it.

I had trained Whistler's death grin.

I had done the job with a seven-inch U.S. Army K-bar knife.

"Fucking hell." Circe's nose wrinkled. "Couldn't you have kept it on ice or something?"

It was the wrong thing to say. I took a deep breath, and the stink of death burned in my lungs. Circe smiled as if she'd made a joke, but I wasn't laughing. Not after what I'd gone through. I wasn't laughing at all.

I should have kept my mouth shut. I should have held that stinking breath in my lungs and not said a word. But I couldn't do that.

"I didn't much notice the stink," I said. "Maybe because I stink, too. The last shower I had was at a hotel in Baja. That was four days ago. I drove straight through. I would have made it back sooner but that would have meant flying, and I don't think the folks at AeroMexico would have allowed me to carry-on luggage. I bought a Toyota truck off some surf bum for the trip back. Paid way too much for it. It didn't even have air-conditioning.

"Your father had it tougher, though. When I crossed the border, I duct-taped his head to the differential. That's how he got the grease spot on his forehead and the burn mark on his cheek. But don't figure it bothered him much. He was already dead."

“Okay,” Circe said. “Okay—”

“I just wanted you to know that I earned my money.”

“It appears that you did.” Circe knelt and stared into her father’s eyes. Her expressions were completely clinical, almost as serious as the one she’d worn on the cover of *Newsweek*.

“We’ll be running tests, you understand,” she said. “My father loved going to the doctor. The dentist, too. His medical records are nauseatingly detailed.”

“You act like I made this thing out of papier-mâché or something.”

“My father started using doubles after he received his first death threats back in the Haigh Ashbury days. That was thirty years ago. Some of them were nearly identical, right down to the tattoos.” She leaned closer to the head, staring into those dead eyes. “All I’m saying is that I have to be sure. You can understand that. After all, we’re talking about a lot of money.”

“You never said anything about doubles. As far as I’m concerned, I fulfilled my contract. I killed the man who lived in Diabolos Whistler’s mansion in Los Cabos. I returned with his head, per your instructions. Apart from the transportation problem, it was a fairly easy job. Your father was right where you said he’d be. He was all alone, unless you want to count those mummies stacked like so much cordwood in his library. If you want to know the details, he went pretty easy. I came up from behind and stabbed him just above the first vertebra. He gasped a little bit. Then he started mewling. It didn’t last more than a second or two, but it was enough to make an impression. To tell you the truth, he sounded more like a newborn babe than a seventy-three-year-old master of occult sciences.”

Circe didn’t say a word. I took a deep breath. “After I cut off your father’s head, I stacked his body on top of the mummy collection in the library. That’s where the Mexican police found him. According to the papers, they’re investigating a number of leads. If you ask me, they’re investigating how quickly they can sweep the whole matter under the carpet. The last thing they want is to find your father’s head, let alone his killer. Mexico is a very religious country. Diabolos Whistler’s death has generated a shitload of negative publicity. The politicians who facilitated your father’s move south of the border aren’t eager to be exposed to their countrymen. I’m sure the little weasels are already in touch with your father’s lawyers. Matters will be settled in short order, and soon enough you’ll have your big fat inheritance to squander any way you please—”

“That’s enough.”

“It might be for you, but it’s not for me. If you don’t want to hear about it, pay me.” I grinned. “That’ll shut me up.”

“Tests first. Money later.”

“I guess you like the sound of my voice.”

“Really, it won’t take long. Spider will take the head to San Francisco this afternoon—”

“Ripley’s taking it? Looked to me like he didn’t want any part of that thing.”

“Spider is a true believer.” Circe smiled. “But he does what he’s told.”

“He’s an idiot.”

“Draw your own conclusions.”

“It’s just that I’m a strong believer in first impressions.”

She cocked an eyebrow and waited.

“If you’re waiting to hear my first impression of you,” I said, “I think I’ll keep that to myself.”

“As you wish.” She returned her attention to the head. “At any rate, the preliminary dental exam should be completed by midnight. There are a few other formalities that you don’t need to worry about. But if all goes well, you’ll have your money by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Tomorrow afternoon I wanted to be on a beach.”

“There are beaches here.”

“I was thinking of the tropics.”

“Believe me, I can understand your impatience.” She shrugged. “But the tropics will have to wait.”

“And in the meantime?”

“At the top of the stairs, you’ll find a guest room. There’s a shower. I suggest you make use of it. There’s a bed, too. It’s comfortable. You can have a nap. Later we’ll have dinner. Just the two of us.”

I thought it over. A shower...a nap...dinner...it didn’t sound so bad.

She laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Saunders. But I’ve never had this much trouble convincing a man to spend time with me.”

“It’s not you.” I nodded at Diabolos Whistler’s severed head. “It’s him. I’m a little tired of his company.”

“I know the feeling,” she said.

I started up the circular staircase. A shower would be good. Really long. Really hot. I wanted to be clean.

I wondered what Circe Whistler wanted. I’d struck a nerve when I mentioned her inheritance, but I knew that she was after more than a few extra zeros at the end of her bank balance. One look at the house and I knew that she already had more than enough money.

I could see right through Spider Ripley. Just like he was a window. A first impression was all that took with a guy like that. Spider Ripley was all slot A in tab B, until he fit together like a kid’s toy. But Circe Whistler was something else. A puzzle box. The kind the Japanese made. The kind you couldn’t open unless someone showed you how.

I watched her through spiked wrought iron bars as I walked along the landing above the living room. Watched her black nails rake Diabolos Whistler’s long white mane. Watched her fingers curl into a fist. Watched her raise her father’s severed head, and watched it sway at her side as she disappeared down a dark corridor of redwood and stone, leaving only the sound of Diabolos Whistler’s bristling goatee brushing her naked thigh with every step she took.

“We’re alone, just like Hansel and Gretel.”

That voice again, like a lonely wind that touches no one.

I jerked awake, but there was no little girl ghost with long blonde hair and a black dress. On Circe, her raven hair spilling over shoulders inked with scales and blood, demons’ leers and children’s tears.

“You were dreaming,” she said.

She sat on the edge of the bed, and just as I realized that her hand was on top of mine whispered away over black satin sheets and was gone.

I’d slept away the afternoon. Outside, stars salted the black sky, but there was no moon. In the bedroom, spears of feeble yellow light fought a losing battle with the shadows, abandoning us to the dark.

Somewhere in the house, someone was crying. Very, very softly. Fragile, feminine sobs that were somehow out of place, like a sliver of dream under the skin of reality.

Circe didn’t seem to hear the crying at all. Or maybe I had imagined it—another moment and the sound was gone.

I looked into Circe’s eyes, twin chips of cold blue ice. Certainly no tears gleamed there. I wondered if she ever cried.

I doubted it. Crying would redden her eyes, and red eyes didn’t have anything to do with the image Circe Whistler wanted to project. Red eyes were for demons and monsters. But blue eyes could be many things—cool and intelligent, alluring and hypnotic, enticing as they were mysterious. Maybe that was the secret of Circe’s gaze. Not the destructive power of a Medusa, but a vampire’s stare that reflected its victim’s deepest desires.

What you wanted to see in those eyes, you could. And yet I wondered how it was for Circe living behind those eyes, staring out from a place deep inside herself.

I didn’t know for sure. Not yet. There was no way I could know. But I thought it was as cold as it was dark, and very quiet, that place inside.

Circe rose from the bed and followed a slim shaft of light that spilled through the bedroom doorway.

“Dinner’s waiting,” she said. “Don’t be long.”

* * *

Dinner was rack of lamb. If Circe wanted to gauge my sense of irony, it was a little much. Still, I restrained myself. I left it to her to joke about the meat coming off an altar in a catacomb of hell in her own kitchen, conveniently located just below the dining room.

The line was more Elvira than Oscar Wilde, but she played it all right. But if Diabolus Whistler’s daughter was trying to sell self-deprecation, I wasn’t buying. This woman knew what she wanted and how to get it. One look at her and any idiot could see that.

There was more to it than a pair of alluring blue eyes. Circe wore a dress scooped low in the back that might have been revealing on anyone else. On Circe, the dress was a threat. Snake-skin material clung to her like a second skin, but what the dress didn't cover was more dangerous than any reptile. The tattooed creature on Circe's back was her father's most fearsome demigod—Korthe's h, a tentacles and teeth, a servant of Satan crowned with a dozen eyes gleaming with soulless fire.

The tattoo was just the kind of thing that could ruin a man's appetite, but I didn't have to look at it while I ate. We faced each other across a long dining table. Spiked wrought-iron candlesticks stood under a chandelier that looked like a torture device looted from Torquemada's dungeon.

The lamb was good, and so was the wine. We finished a bottle of Merlot, and Circe opened Cabernet Sauvignon. The sound of wine splashing crystal was pleasant, almost as pleasant as Circe's voice. She was trying so hard to be something she wasn't, and it was real work for her. I could tell she wasn't used to it.

"Do you like the wine?" she asked solicitously.

I tried it. "It's a little sharp, but I like it. Especially since you're paying for it."

"What you really like is money. Am I right?"

"Not the money so much. I like what it can do for me."

"These days it goes pretty fast, doesn't it? There never seems to be enough."

"I do all right," I said. "Of course, I'm not running the world's largest satanic church. I've got it a little easier than you do. I've got my own tools, and my business is low overhead."

"Mine isn't. The more you have, the more you need. Unexpected problems come up. It's hard to find motivated people to deal with them."

"I had the impression you weren't hurting in that department."

"Oh?"

"Spider Ripley. The way he puts it on, he's the man when it comes to bad business hereabouts."

Circe laughed. "Spider's all right. I found him through my sister, Lethe. She met Spider at a club in San Francisco. One of those places where people take to the dance floor armed with broken bottles and razor blades. Spider saved her ass, and she hired him on the spot. First he was her bodyguard, and now he's mine."

She paused, as if I needed time to read between the lines. I only shrugged. "I must have missed the *Enquirer* that week," I said. "But I think I follow you."

"Beyond matters of sibling rivalry, Spider is very good at what he does. In fact, he rarely has to do much at all. Physical size tends to intimidate most people."

"So do scars. The guy looks like fifty miles of bad road. I especially like that ankh branded on his chest."

"Before we met him, Spider belonged to an Egyptian revival cult. So it really wasn't much of a stretch to get him to convert to the gospel according to Diabolos Whistler—my father hijacked a good bit of his theology from the Egyptians."

"Well, I know the old man had a thing for mummies. He kind of looked like one, too. Your big bad bodyguard certainly could have handled him easily. You'd have saved some money, if nothing else."

Circe sipped Cabernet Sauvignon. "Looks can be deceiving. I considered Spider for the Mexico job. The idea flitted through my head for a full five seconds. And then I realized that he wouldn't have the stones for it."

"Why not?"

“Like I said—Spider is a true believer. Alive, my father frightened him. Dead, he terrifies the poor boy.”

I had to laugh at that.

“That’s why I hired you, Mr. Saunders. You’re not afraid.”

“Not of anything I can’t see.”

“Neither am I. And I see things pretty clearly. Take the future. Mine is an organization on the move. With my father out of the way and me at the helm, we’ll be more than just another cult. We’ll be an accepted religion.”

“That’s the buzz, all right. You’re definitely in the news. You looked good on the cover of *Newsweek*, by the way. Not as good as you look tonight, but more professional. Corporate goth girl, and the way.”

“They wanted leather. Crushed velvet was a compromise. More feminine. I didn’t want to scare off my target audience.

“*The New Hedonism.*” I chuckled. “That should nail the sofa set right between the eyes. And that sidebar on Anton Lavey and Jayne Mansfield. Wow.”

“It’s a start.

“And I’m sure you’ll go far with it. L. Ron Hubbard meets Vampira. It’s gotta sell.”

Circe blinked a couple times and tried for a smile, but her lips trembled and she lost it.

I swallowed my laughter.

She said, “You can be very cruel, you know.”

She was right about that. I could be cruel. But I was a lot rougher with a K-bar than I was with my mouth.

I had my reasons, sure. Everyone has reasons for the things they do. But in my opinion I was an amateur in the cruelty department compared to the people who hired me. Not that I gave myself a pass for the things I did. Not that it mattered to me. To tell the truth, I didn’t think about it much. Morality was just one of life’s little intangibles as far as I was concerned. Everyone had a different view on it, a result of the traps life had thrown their way.

Life had set a trap or two for me. As a result, I had a view that was different than most.

Remember, I see things differently.

I see ghosts.

I, of all people, knew exactly what I was doing with my knife. Shorn of a pulse, most of my victims didn’t seem that much different. They didn’t sprout wings, and they didn’t grow horns. They simply endured.

But I’ll tell you this—without the money, I wouldn’t have killed anyone. I wouldn’t have had a reason.

Circe Whistler had hired me to cut off the head of an old man who happened to be her father. But unlike so many others, she didn’t dismiss me when the job was done. She invited me into her home. Sat down to dinner with me. Poured me a glass of wine.

She stared into my eyes, and she didn’t blink first. One thing I was sure about—trembling smiles weren’t her style. Not this corporate goth girl. I didn’t buy it for a second.

I said, “You don’t believe any of it, do you?”

“What?”

“The things your old man preached. All that stuff about a new satanic age coming on the heels of his death. *And the ruin of Whistler’s corpse shall be Satan’s cradle, and Satan will be reborn in flesh and blood to walk the earth once more—*”

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