

HAUNTED BODIES

Zachariah Chamberlin



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Richard Warren leaned against his Cadillac in the ruins of the Salt Creek Elementary School parking lot. The scents of mud, rain, rotting vegetation, and the dust of the country road would normally calm him. Tonight, however, the open country felt cramped.

The Hunter's moon was fullest tonight, bathing the world in a blood-red hue. Warren's imagination flickered with the notion that the shadows of the surrounding hills looked like deep, dark pools of blood in this light. His dark imagination often brought him to places like this decaying parking lot outside the cold husk of Salt Creek Elementary School.

"Detective Warren?" A voice whispered, the consonants tapped his ear lobe and danced down his neck. Electric ice split his spine and raised every hair on his body at once.

"What the f-?!" Warren cursed. In a single, fluid motion, he pulled his pistol and spun a full circle. Nothing. No, not nothing, according to the sheets of sweat on his face.

"Oh no, Detective, please don't shoot," The same voice mocked him now. A pair of gloved hands rose from the shadows of the school entrance. "I am unarmed and come in peace. I swear."

Warren saw the smile next. The images of the Cheshire Cat replayed in his mind. The disembodied smile haunted his nightmares as a child. Warren thought his eyes were absent at first. A pair of shiny black pools were in their place. Sunglasses, held in place by silver rims, with lenses as dark and deep as the night.

Like a vampire from a casket, the slender man pulled himself into the moonlight. The stranger walked with the grace of a ghost in its own haunt. He barely made a sound as he advanced across the gravel lot.

He was well-dressed in a white dress shirt, black vest and long coat, and black trousers. At first glance, Warren thought he looked like some gothic figure from an Edgar Allen Poe story.

"Fucking emo-hipsters," Warren mumbled, his impatience and frustration rolled around the words like unpolished river rocks.

Warren noticed the stranger's approach lacked urgency, almost a meandering pace. His hair was short on the sides of his scalp, the rest fashioned into a mohawk. The hair was such a rich red hue that it competed against the blood-red light of the moon. It reminded Warren of a hellish shark fin drifting aimlessly in the night.

Symbols and runes, inked in something that seemed to shimmer, crawled up the sides of his scalp and neck. The tattoos appeared to almost float off his flesh in this darkness. Warren blinked to adjust his sight, thinking the night was beginning to play tricks on his sight.

Tic, tac, tic, tac. A cane. Warren swore both his hands were empty. There's no way he would've missed that, especially one with a pure silver topper. All of this man's preening was like sand in his underwear. Best to get on with this charade.

"Yeah, I'm Warren. You are?" Richard Warren said venomously.

"The name's Thatch. Phineas Thatch." The pale stranger said, grinning as he took an over-dramatic bow.

Warren noted that the tattoos extended down his back, and there was also a hint of silver studs down his spine.

Warren suppressed a sigh. He'd dealt with eccentrics before, but something about this guy made his skin crawl. He pondered what crime he had committed to pull this duty.

Phineas straightened his stance and extended his hand, which Warren shook, followed by wiping the offending hand off on his pants. Throughout the brief exchange, that manic smile never left Phineas' face.

"Detective Warren, I was told by the local constables that you might have some insight into a series of murders and disappearances that have terrorized this area," Phineas said as he turned and headed back toward the school. "The police were able to apprehend the man committing these acts, but he isn't talking."

"Why call me? He'll crack under the pressure of interrogation or lawyer up," Warren said.

"They can't get him to talk because he's in a coma," Phineas replied with a shrug. "No amount of pressure can fix that. Time is of the essence in this case because there may be a life worth saving in all this."

"Who? A victim?" Warren asked as he lit a cigarette. He blew the blue-grey smoke out in a hateful stream.

God, get on with it! Warren narrowed his eyes. *Why is everything a show with this asshole?*

Warren began walking toward the abandoned school when the stranger extended his hand, cutting him off. With a flick, a palm-sized notepad appeared from within his grasp.

Phineas eyed Warren with that strange grin while his hands flipped through the book until coming to a page with the sketched portrait of a boy's face. Warren had a vague recollection of the child. Details from a pamphlet floated to the surface of Warren's mind.

Black, single mom, Girls and Boys Club. There were several social media posts requesting information, thoughts and prayers, and candlelight vigils.

Phineas interrupted Warren's thoughts as he read scribbled details as if they were stolen directly from a case file. The clinical tone in his voice caused the muscles in Warren's jaw to tense.

"Six years old. Kevin Knowles. Loves to swim. Favorite show? Paw Patrol," Phineas said, pausing to look at Warren as though he were an inattentive schoolboy. "Taken from his bus stop after school. Just happened to be waiting alone for his mother to come pick him up."

"So again, I have to ask- Why me?" Warren asked with a growl. "Surely, there are plenty of investigators on this."

"The police seem to think you may have some insight into this killer's mind," Phineas replied. Warren felt like this was some game of cat-and-mouse to this guy. This kid, really. In his late twenties at best. He was hiding something about this case like it was a secret joke. "I've been hired as a consultant. I've worked with Law enforcement in the past," Phineas replied as if he heard the question on Warren's mind. "I have a gift to see what others can't or won't."

"Are you telling me you're a fucking psychic?" Warren scoffed.

"I suppose you could call me that. It's not something I go around advertising. It is a hard brand to sell," Phineas said, almost apologetically. "Anyway, I thought I would walk around the school where the perp worked."

"Lead on," Warren retorted mockingly.

Phineas walked ahead, the tip of his cane tapping with every step. When he arrived at the double steel doors, he fished around in his coat pockets until he found a large collection of keys. Several rings cradled the keys and were linked together by the *master ring*, which had a single key on its hoop. A skeleton key that, even noticeable in the dim light, was coated with age and rust.

"What did you do? Pull that from the ancient corpse of a janitor?" Warren snarked over Phineas's shoulder as he inserted several keys until he came to the one that turned the lock.

"Something like that," Phineas replied back at Warren, turning just enough to flash a wicked grin. Warren's smirk faded away, replaced by an exasperated sigh.

The school had been closed for quite some time and lacked power. The air was cold and stale, giving off the sense that these halls were more of a mausoleum instead of a place of learning. Phineas pulled two flashlights from his coat and handed one to Warren.

"Our guy was the janitor and groundskeeper here," Phineas said as they walked down the empty halls. Beyond the stale air, there remained scents of paper, crayon, and something tangy.

A bitter-sweet pang stabbed at Warren as memories of his school floated to the surface of his mind. He thought about his childhood and how school was the only place he could be a kid.

At home, away from teachers and kids, his role alternated between caretaker for his fervently religious mother and punching bag for his dad. No matter how tired from praying all night or beat up he was, Warren would go to school, and for that time, he could be a kid.

Warren was shaken from his reverie when he nearly bumped into Phineas, who had stopped before an office. The entryway was crossed in yellow police tape. This deterrent did not prevent graffiti from being scrawled across the wood.

Pervert. Baby Killer. Pig. Other curses were scrawled across the door with permanent black marker or scarred with primitive obscenities. Unconcerned with protocol, Phineas tore the tape away from the door.

The door remained locked, and with a sigh, Phineas pulled the ring of keys from the inner lining of his coat. Hanging the head of his cane over his forearm, he began to sift through the multitude of brass keys.

Warren stared at those strange glasses as Phineas worked each key. The silver rims were ornate, and the lenses nearly covered his field of vision completely, including his peripheral sight. The lenses were so dark that it made Warren curious how the man could see in these dark, empty halls.

"I have a condition that affects my sight," Phineas said as if he was reading Warren's mind. Without looking away from his task, he continued, "My gift of sight came with a price. I see ghosts. More accurately, I see the land of the dead, Gehenna."

"Ok, sure," Warren said incredulously. "So you see dead people. Like the kid in that movie?"

Ignoring Warren's snarky tone, Phineas's smile broadened as he withdrew the key from the door. "Yeah, something like that."

"Sounds awful," Warren said, rolling his eyes and his voice dripping with sarcasm. "You done with that lock yet?"

Phineas opened the door in response and walked into the office without a word. Warren trailed after him slowly. The darkness and air of the room felt thicker, even oppressive. Warren felt a tightness in his chest. There was something about this room that made it feel claustrophobic. He fumbled around the door frame, looking for a light switch.

Tracing his fingertips along the frame, Warren's hand came upon the plastic cover for the light. He suddenly yelped in surprise when a hand grabbed his fingers. Warren pulled his hand back quickly as if he had touched a hot stove.

There was a click from the switch, and Warren was startled again by the broad, evil grin of Phineas. Warren stumbled back into a file cabinet, cursing. Phineas didn't move from his spot and just stared at him in amusement from the cone of his flashlight's beam.

"Jesus fuck!" Warren said as he tried to control his breathing. "Goddammit, you are a creep, you know that?"

"Power's out, remember?" Phineas replied. "Are you okay, Mr. Warren? You look like you saw a ghost."

"Just you asshole!" Warren snapped at the man. "What the hell is your problem? Huh? What the hell are we doing here anyway?"

"This was our killer's office when he worked for the school district. We are looking for clues about the whereabouts of his last kidnapping victim and those he buried."

"And you expect this to happen in the dark?" Warren hissed. Waving his flashlight around the room, he found stacks of boxes filled to overflowing with file folders, discarded cleaning supplies, and bundles of old newspapers. "How exactly are we supposed to find a smoking gun

buried in this shit?" Warren groaned. He felt something twist in his guts as he looked about the space.

"I was told you could think like this man. That you had insight into his thought processes. Let's use that to find anything that can help these victims," Phineas said. "I doubt you have anything else better to do."

Warren began looking around the small office. The walls were painted in neutral tones—oatmeal-looking taupe. There were no posters or photos. The file cabinets once held records, but they had all been cleared except for a single empty folder.

Nothing in the room was extraordinary, no unique furniture piece or artwork. There weren't even pictures of the family on the desk. There was something about the desk, though.

Warren remembered how he had to hide photos of bikini-clad women, photos of girls from school, and his "special drawings" from his parents. That all ended in a month-long of prayer, hard labor, and hands coated in hot sauce. He winced at the shameful sting of the memory.

"Why this desk? What's so special about it?" Warren suddenly nearly yelped when he realized Phineas was asking him the question. Warren looked across the surface carefully.

Warren used his senses to absorb the scene. He could almost feel the memories held within this room. There was a connection between this murderer and Warren's childhood. He understood this man liked working here. He was happiest and safest in this place.

"This was the only place he felt safe and free," Warren finally said. "No one came in here. He could be invisible."

"Well, this is interesting," Phineas replied, sitting on the edge of the desk.

Warren bristled at the careless way he acted, especially in this room. This room was important. Phineas clearly didn't understand how important, and it pissed Warren off.

Regaining his focus on the task at hand, Warren eyed the desk. The memories of his own desk flashed before him. A victorious grin widened across his lips. Glaring at Phineas, Warren walked to the desk and pulled open the center drawer.

It was empty, save for the layer of dust and mouse droppings. Warren probed it with his fingers. In the corners of the drawer, several

scratches were on the metal walls. Some tool had dug into the walls and extended its reach below the base of the drawer.

"There's a false bottom here," Warren noted. "I need a tool, a screwdriver or –"

Warren heard a sharp click, and from the corner of his eye, he caught the flash of a blade. Phineas held a switchblade mere inches from his face. The wicked grin on his face rivaled the stiletto's edge.

Warren glared at Phineas, unamused. He plucked the blade and dug the tip into the pre-worn paths. At each corner, the tip of the blade dug barely a quarter of an inch before meeting the true bottom of the drawer. Warren pried each corner, which lifted with only a little resistance.

Warren lifted the surface while Phineas shown his flashlight into the base of the drawer. As soon as the contents became visible, Warren's innards went cold. Some sort of perverse inspiration board now faced up at Phineas and Warren.

"A journal? Reminders of -" Phineas whispered in disgust. "He kept records and photos. Why, Warren, why?"

"So he can revisit them. Over and over," Warren said, barely able to get the words free from his throat. Sweat, thick and cold, beaded across his forehead, and his shirt was soaked all the way through.

Beneath the perverse collage, a simple drawing of the school grounds, the neighboring cornfield, and a nearby farmhouse. Peppered across the landscape were tiny stickers. Glittery stars, the kind used to reward school kids for good behavior.

"How many, Warren? Twenty? Thirty?" Phineas quizzed.

Warren peered into each clipping and drawing. Some pictures and photos were before-and-after images of the victim. All of them were children, even babies. There was no pattern, except they were all young.

Beneath the simple map was another piece of paper. Warren felt hot and started loosening his tie. His palms were shaking and sweaty as he lifted it into the light. Warren couldn't make out the writing and nearly screamed when Phineas snatched the page from his fingers.

"It's a list - names, addresses, email accounts." Warren felt his throat tighten inexplicably, and something gripped his guts in an icy grasp.

"Do you recognize that place?" Phineas asked, nodding at the farmhouse on the layout.

"I've heard of it, can't remember where though. People joke it's haunted or something," Warren shrugged.

An explosion of pain erupted in Warren's skull. His world tilted, and he had to brace himself against the edge of the desk or risk falling.

"Hey there, Detective, you ok?" Phineas asked with little concern. "Are you going to make it?"

The searing pain began to subside a little, but the episode left Warren weak in his knees and feeling a chill across his body. Something about all this seemed familiar. He did know this man they were hunting, and he was on their way to breaking this wide open.

"I need some air," Warren said.

Phineas agreed and led the man through the school. As they made their way through the dark, Warren hugged the walls to avoid falling. Phineas walked several paces ahead, seemingly unconcerned with his condition.

As he navigated through the spinning halls, Warren swore he heard children laughing. The squeals of mischievous glee echoed between his eyes as well as the brick and mortar. The laughs grew in volume and pitch until they became piercing screams.

Hot tears streamed down Warren's face as panic and pain overwhelmed him. Even with his hands pressed hard over his ears, the screams carved their way into his skull. The adrenaline-fueled his charge so much that Warren didn't register the steel door he forced past.

The cold night air hit his face like ice water. The world righted, and the voices stopped so abruptly that his nausea washed over him like a tidal wave. Warren began heaving and retching violently.

Warren's ragged breaths slowed, and the spasms subsided. Wiping his mouth, he took the time to take in his new surroundings. Bathed in the red light of the moon were the ruins of the school's playground. On the edge of the ground's limits, Phineas leaned on the decaying remains of a jungle gym.

"Don't worry about me asshole, I'm just fucking peachy!" Warren snarled at his obtuse companion.

"I had faith you would make it, Mr. Warren," Phineas replied, unbothered by Warren's venom. "Tell me, does this look familiar to you?"

Warren spat the bitter remains of bile that lingered on his tongue and thought about the diagram hidden in the desk drawer. Beyond the playground, a dense field of grass swayed in the gentle breeze, waving like an ocean of vegetation.

A well-worn path parted the field and led to a hill. From this distance, possibly a half-mile, Warren could make out a farmhouse. The simple structure had a light, its yellow glow announcing the presence of someone inside.

"That's his house," Warren gasped. Something told him that the path before them would lead to all their answers. He felt a chill within him at this revelation.

"And this is the field," Phineas stood and scanned the horizon, "the resting place of all his victims."

Unconcerned with Warren's condition, Phineas began walking toward the house on the hill. Warren stood on shaky legs, testing to see if the vertigo had passed. He had nearly dropped to the ground when cries of pain and terror erupted from within the school.

"Jesus, fuck!" Warren turned, fearing whatever made that horrifying sound would be clawing its way toward him now.

His fears were realized when the screams became howls of rage and grew closer. Humanity melted away to become wolfish. Haunting howls and snarls dripping with hunger swelled from within the dilapidated structure.

"Phineas! Phineas, are you hearing this?" Warren turned to see Phineas had already strolled on, seemingly unaware of their pursuers.

Tic, tac, tic, tac- Went Phineas's cane as it stabbed the path. From behind them, Warren heard claws and padded footfalls growing closer.

Click, clack, click, clack- The sharp claws seemed to fall into rhythm with Phineas.

Warren began to run after Phineas, who must have been moving quicker than Warren thought. The slender man had already crossed half of the distance to the house. Warren turned and immediately went cold when he saw the darkness from within the school billowed out like black smoke.

"Oh, God. Phineas!" Warren's screaming became shrill and desperate, which seemed to further agitate the stalking shadow.

Yellow embers began to float and sway in the roiling darkness. With every scream and desperate breath for air, the lights intensified and paired. Warren's sanity untethered when the realization hit him.

Eyes. They were eyes, hungry and hateful, and staring at him. Warren felt as though his soul was exposed and vulnerable under that gaze. With every hoot, howl, and snarl, that curling darkness grew closer.

Warren dared another glance behind him. His body was no longer able to keep up with his panicked mind. Warren yelped like wounded prey when his feet became tangled, and he fell hard onto the rocky path. Rocks bit into his face and hands, and dust filled his nose and mouth as he skidded to a stop.

Expecting to find the tide of hunger on him, Warren rolled over, bringing his hands up defensively. Gun. Warren cursed when he remembered he had his sidearm. He reached for his holster and moaned when he found it empty. When did he pull the gun out? It wouldn't have fallen out.

In the distant hills and valleys, other howls joined the call. These were not the lonely howls of timber wolves. Warren felt their malice. Felt the need to consume and take everything away from him. He somehow knew this covetous desire.

"Phineas? This is fucking Kansas! How are there wolves here?" Warren exclaimed.

From within the oceanic waves of grass, he saw hungry eyes moving to surround him. He heard their salivating maws smacking as the beasts tasted the air. He low-crawled, moved to his hands and knees, and finally made it to his feet.

By the time he reached the front yard of the old home, his breath was ragged, and he felt a stabbing pain in his head and guts. The beasts that claimed ownership over the angry, yellow eyes had seemingly stopped. He fell to his knees, trying to catch his breath. Warren looked up and saw Phineas staring at the front door to the house.

"So this is where the boy is, huh?" Phineas asked in a relieved voice.

"Please don't go in there." Warren was only able to speak between gulps for air. He said this without thinking, he only knew that there was danger in that house.

"Why detective? Do you know this place?" Phineas replied without turning. "What's so terrifying about this quaint farm home?"

Warren was assaulted by memories of the abuse at his father's hands. The loneliness he felt. The shame when his parents found the pictures stuffed under his bed. He remembered how he screamed when they burned his photos of those girls by the pool.

A chill constricted his chest when he remembered the first kill. The little girl he found walking home after school. He didn't intend to hurt her, but he lost control. He couldn't forget the erection he had when he saw how her blood turned black on his naked body under that pale moonlight.

He had been so careful. How did they find him? Warren suddenly remembered the cop he bumped into at the convenience store. His photos spilled everywhere. The next thing Warren remembered was running, a thunderous explosion, and then searing pain in his head.

"It seems to be coming back to you now," Phineas said with a smile. "Sorry for the theatrics. I needed you to remember the boy and where you buried your victims. I had to tamper with your memories to that end."

"What the fuck? This isn't me!" Warren said desperately. "I'm a cop, not some perverted janitor."

"Look for yourself," Phineas said, kneeling and bringing his face just inches from Warren's own. Pointing to his polished shades, Warren saw a doughy slob, with a pocked-marked face coated in a sheen of sweat. Whisker-like hairs grew from the folds beneath his chin, like weeds breaching a sidewalk.

The blubbing man was nearly bald except for strands of hair slicked down over his pate. Even charged with adrenaline, his eyes were small. They did shine brighter this night thanks to the tears streaming down his face.

"Wha- Who is that?" Warren gasped and sobbed. "I don't understand. How is this happening?"

When he looked down at his hands in an attempt to avoid the image, the revelation bloomed before him. No longer was he wearing the clothes of an undercover cop. A detective hunting down a killer.

He was staring down at filthy, meaty hands, covered in dried blood. Black blood. His jumpsuit replaced the shirt and tie, and it was spattered in dried ichor and chunks of some sort of fatty tissue.

"What the fuck did you do to me, Thatch?" Warren roared at the man, who now smiled that wicked smile in return. Phineas's tattoos glowed brightly now, as did his green eyes. They burned like gaslights, his spectacles glowed ominously like a pair of eclipsed suns. In his right hand, Phineas raised a tear-shaped ruby that fit snugly between a pair of silver hands. "You have no idea what you've done, Thatch!" Warren tried to summon a commanding voice, only to be betrayed by someone's squealing, nasally tones. "I'm a cop, goddammit! I'm not some twisted pedophile freak!"

"No sir, you are not a cop. You are a piece of shit." Phineas's smile never left his face, but his voice dripped with malice. "You have kidnapped, raped, and peddled your exploits to sick and dangerous men on the internet." Phineas stood before Warren as a judge presiding in a court. "When you were done with them, you brought them to this field."

Phineas suddenly chanted in a language unheard by human ears for a millennia. He ended the throaty song by spitting in the direction of the tall grass. The waves of peaceful, lush green, erupted into flames and thick clouds of black smoke.

"No...no...how did you do this?" Warren stammered.

The smoke climbed into the sky and began to choke out the light of the red moon, bathing the landscape in darkness. Soon the only light left came from Phineas's tattoos and the single light from the house. Warren turned away from Phineas and began crawling on all fours.

The sight of hundreds of angry yellow eyes froze him. They swayed like fireflies over the charred earth and piles of ash. Warren could make out their drooling maws, glistening fangs, and oily pelts, even in the dark. The sound of claws raking the dirt and throaty growls began to grow like a rising chorus.

"You are in a coma, Warren." Warren squealed in shock when Phineas' voice wormed its way into his ears and mind. "You are under my care. A spell that creates a whole new reality inside your mind. A reality of my choosing."

"Oh, God. Please no. It's not my fault. I'm sick. I want to be better, I just need help. Please have mercy!" Warren was on his knees, sobbing before Phineas.

"You are right to pray to me, Warren." Phineas's smile grew even more wicked and wild, as his prey's whimpering grew louder, "I am your Omega, after all. I am the chosen hand and voice of Charon on Earth."

The oily tide of fangs and hunger stalked closer to the duo. Warren reached for Phineas' trousers and coat, blubbing and sobbing. Phineas jerked away from the man as if he were covered in excrement.

"The Ferryman doesn't dole out sentences to mortals. What do sins of humans mean to the universal embodiment of entropy?" Phineas knelt again, the emerald eclipses burned into his prey. An expression of relief and gratitude began to sweep across his face.

"So, does that mean I can leave this place?" Warren's eyes filled with hope at this possibility. All hope drained away when Phineas's smile became a snarl.

"I, however, am mortal. I have laid your sins bare during the spell's duration. I witnessed firsthand the pain and suffering you have caused. I felt what you felt." At this, tears streamed down Phineas's cheeks, "I attuned myself to your senses, experienced everything you had. Do you know what I felt?"

"No, oh God no -" Warren knew what Phineas had felt.

Phineas spoke an ancient word and stabbed his thumbs into Warren's beady eyes. All the screams as he gave chase through the abandoned halls of the school. The rush he felt as he caught his victims, his arousal and hunger, the taste of their flesh and blood.

When Phineas abruptly ended the enchantment, Warren's blissful smile betrayed him. Phineas's malicious smile reminded him of those beasts growing ever closer. Despair, desperation, and shame swelled all throughout Warren's chest and bowels, and all rational thought drowned in those cold waters.

The howling of the hounds bellowed so near that Warren felt the soundwaves bathe his flesh. Phineas watched impassively as the squealing man crawled on all fours, searching for a hiding place or escape.

"Those are Hell's furies; come straight from hell for you," Phineas pointed at the wave of shadows. The creeping doom had taken on recognizable features. Legs ending in claws, muzzles armed with sharp canines, pointed ears perked to catch the sounds of their prey. "They hunger for your soul. What could you offer them that would satisfy their blood lust?"

"The boy! The black boy! He's still alive in the root cellar." Warren held out his meaty hand as if offering the information as a token. Phineas gave only a tilt of his head in response, displaying some interest in this. "He's hidden in a safe room behind my mommy's wardrobe. I put the key in her bible!" Warren screamed.

"Thank you, Mr. Warren." Phineas suddenly looked weary, and the ominous glow flickered for a moment. "I am glad for all this to be over. I don't want to spend a moment longer with you."

The fatigue didn't go unnoticed by Warren. Whoever Phineas Thatch was, he was just a man. Warren has spent a lifetime evading police, online sting operations, and his accusers. He just needed to find cover, kill Thatch, and dispose of the evidence.

Warren's meaty hand connected solidly with Phineas's chin, sending the much smaller man stumbling away. Warren tackled him while he tried to regain his balance, sending them both to the ground.

Just as he raised his fist to strike again, two things occurred to Warren. First, Phineas was smiling up at him without a hint of distress. The same all-knowing smile he had worn throughout their encounter. Secondly, Warren felt hot, moist air blowing across the back of his sweaty neck.

Warren reacted on pure animal instinct and bolted, a mere breath away from being mauled by the nearest hound. The only shelter he could see was the farmhouse. His farmhouse. It may be run-down, barely capable of sheltering the squirrels in the attic, but it was still his safe place. It was his fortress.

Warren flung open the flimsy screen door and grabbed the door handle fiercely. Screaming as he turned the handle until he heard the familiar click of the tumblers and bolts sliding away. Phineas spoke just as he was about to enter his home. He turned to regard what this strange man had to say.

"You will not be allowed to die today, Warren." Phineas didn't show any sign of injury or fear as he stood in a sea of oily-black fur, slick teeth, and hungry eyes. "I told you, I am your Omega. I will choose your time of death. Until then, you will be fed upon by the very same pain you have caused."

Phineas waved both arms out in a wide circle, finally coming to a stop facing the farmhouse. Warren shook his head and pressed against the door. The door didn't budge. He twisted and turned the knob and began slamming his body into the chipped paint and rotting wood.

Finally, with a sharp crack, the door began to slide open. Warren felt something pressing on the opposite side, something heavy, but the sight of the hellish hounds infused him with adrenaline. Just as the door gave away, Phineas's voice spoke directly into his ear. He could feel the man's hot breath brush across his ear lobes and the hairs of his neck.

"Welcome home," Phineas's voice said, but when Warren turned to strike or push him away, he was gone. The wolves were gone, too. Only the tall, cool, grassy fields.

Richard Warren turned quickly into his home to find his path was blocked. A wall of oily, black fur roiled before him. Hungry yellow eyes flared within that mass, and sharp white fangs gleamed.

Warren didn't have time to scream as the tidal wave of rage and hunger fell upon him. He fought to free himself of the hellhounds. He cried and begged for mercy as their teeth tore into him, ripping his flesh away and snapping his bones. Just as Warren felt his intestines unspooling, and his skull crushed under a powerful bite, it all ended. He opened his eyes and found himself lying on the cold linoleum floors of Salt Creek.

He recovered himself and went to work finding an exit. The halls had somehow grown longer. Endless. He heard children laughing gleefully in the dark. Warren's mind and body flooded with fresh terror as his victims ran around the corner, chasing after him. They ran alongside pure black wolves, sharing their hungry yellow eyes as they bore down on their prey.

* * * *

Phineas opened his eyes and took a few moments to reacclimate himself to his surroundings. He stood at the foot of a hospital bed. The

occupant was an obese man bound to the bedrails with handcuffs and soft restraints.

The room was dark with the exception of the monitor's digital details of the patient's vitals and respiratory function. The only sound was the soft click and pressurized whooshing of the respirator.

Before him, the bed tray had been positioned to serve as a pedestal to hold a drawing pad, a gold saucer of milk, and a manilla folder. In his right hand, Phineas held the red jewel necklace.

Two people stood at the sliding glass door. The curtain was pulled, and a slender black woman in slacks, dress shirt and tie, and a jacket with the letters FBI printed on the left breast. She nervously kept watch, even though she asked the staff for privacy.

In the opposite corner, an intense Hindu woman stood watch over Phineas. His consummate protector, Mata Dhillon, was short with a long, black braid of hair that nearly reached the back of her knees. She was beautiful with a formidable presence.

"How bad was it?" Mata asked in sign language. She had been born with strength, beauty, and shared Phineas's gift as a medium. Blessings demand an equivalent cost, and for Mata, this was her hearing and speech.

"This is the last time I do a job like this," Phineas replied in sign.

Agent Simmons left her post and approached the pair slowly. She waited expectantly for Phineas's findings. There was desperation behind those eyes, the need to act on anything useful immediately.

"So? Did you get anything?" Simmons asked.

Phineas passed the sketches, the name of the school, and the location of the victims. He also told her where to find the child. Simmons nodded appreciatively until she came across the last drawing.

"What's this? Is this a warning? Are there dogs on the premises?" Simmons held up the drawing visage of a wolf. Its muzzle was awash in red blood, and the eyes were so realistic that Simmons shuddered.

Phineas replied with a shrug and turned away. Time was a currency she couldn't spend here to press him further. Simmons gave the enigmatic pair a nod and left quickly.

"Let's go home," Mata signed. After Phineas nodded and wiped away a tear for those he couldn't save. Mata pulled him in and gave him a hug that nearly cracked his ribs. Mata glanced at the comatose patient.

"*What did you do to him?*" Mata's fingers flashed after they broke free of their embrace.

Phineas chuckled grimly. "I gave his soul a place to call home. He will haunt that body, even after death."

Both collected their things, cleaned up any evidence that they had been there, and moved to exit. Both paused at the door and looked at Richard Warren. Distantly, they heard painful wailing and the howl of the hunt.

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