

The Hunchback Killer

By

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She was being followed.

Neha felt something twist in her stomach as she came to the realization; and the helplessness of her situation dawned. She'd refused her friends' offer to call a cab as she left the party, pointing out that she lived less than a kilometre away and laughing off their concern, but the roads were deserted at this time of the night and there was some kind of a power outage, plunging most of the streets into eerie darkness – her apartment might as well be on the other side of the earth, for all the safety it offered. And, beyond any doubt, a dark shape was slumping along the lane, far behind her.

She plunged an arm into her bag, feeling the handle of her pocket knife, and the feel of solid steel in her hand reassured her somewhat, though she did not slow down.

I should've listened, she thought, berating herself, better safe than sorry, isn't that what her mother had always taught her? And with the Hunchbacked Killer all over the news and still at large – "sorry" was a situation no woman wanted to be caught in. Why hadn't she listened? She'd dismissed everyone's worry, and it had been easy to shrug off the news, thinking that would never happen to her. But that wasn't true, was it? Clearly. It could be her face on the television tomorrow morning.

Neha tightened her grip on the knife and turned as she walked, and, sure enough, the shadowy silhouette was still there, barely visible under the light of the full moon. For one mad moment, she felt like stopping there and confronting whoever it was, brandishing her knife and threatening them to go away. Neha pushed the idea out of her mind as soon as it manifested. It was foolhardy – what if he was innocent? Worse yet, what if he really *was* the Hunchbacked Killer, and was armed with something worse, like a gun? She quickened her steps. And then a distant rumble reached her ears.

She paused. No, it certainly wasn't her imagination. Definitely an engine, going fast, coming closer.

She turned again, and this time, felt her heart give a leap of relief as a bright headlight cornered around a faraway crossroad. The rumbling grew steadily closer as it approached. The man on foot following her slunk back into the shadows as it went past, and as it came close she held out her hand with the thumb stuck out in the universal hitchhiker's sign.

There was a loud grinding of brakes, and a sleek, red-and-blue motorcycle came to a halt in front of her. Its rider was wearing a t-shirt, jacket and helmet, and he surveyed her through it for a moment before raising the visor.

"Are you all right?"

"Can I get a lift? I live nearby, it's not too far."

"Sure, I guess... what're you doing out here all alone?"

"I was walking home, like I said, I live close by, but..." She approached the bike and looked past him, frowning. He followed her gaze.

"What is it?"

"Someone was there, just a minute ago. They were behind me for a while."

"Someone was following you?" She saw his eyes narrow behind the helmet.

"I don't know. Nobody's there now."

He twisted in his seat to take a good look, but he, too, apparently, could see nothing. "All right," He said eventually, leaning forward and taking hold of the handlebars again, "Wait here a moment." The motorcycle turned on a dime as he pointed it back the way he had come.

"No, wait," she said, getting a sudden vision of him getting murdered and then her getting chased down by a monstrous figure, "Don't... can you just... get me out of here? Please?"

He must have noticed the panic in her voice, because he studied her face for a moment, and said, "All right. Hop on." The bike turned again and she mounted, a little awkwardly because of her skirt.

"I'm Jai." He said, closing his visor with a snap, muffling his voice.

"Neha."

"Well, hold on, Neha."

She could sense his warmth as she put her arms around him, and as the bike took off and the cold night air whipped up her hair, she felt herself calming down. It was difficult to feel afraid of a stupid dark shape when she was seated on a powerful engine, zipping through the streets.

"Where'd you say you lived?" He yelled over the roar of the bike.

"City Central Apartments. Take a left off of M.S. Road," She called back.

"I know that place. Get you there in a flash, don't worry."

As if on cue, the power came back on, and the streets lit up with the buzz of electricity. "Oh, thank God," She breathed. He chuckled, and the bike slowed down in front of a 24-hour diner.

"Coffee?" He asked. "I need one, I'm cold as hell."

She looked behind them apprehensively and he said, "They have a security guard, come on."

This was certainly true, and she sighed and nodded. Jai pulled his helmet off, revealing long hair that came down to his shoulders, and shook his head like a lion shaking its mane. She was relieved to see that he had a kind, handsome face.

The diner was empty except for an old man working on his laptop in a corner table. The waiter came over and they both ordered coffee.

"Not altogether safe, you know." He said as they waited for him to come back, "Walking around like that on your own."

"I know." She smiled apologetically.

"Especially with this Hunchbacked Killer thing going on... didn't that make you hesitate, going out by yourself?"

"A bit. But I've been saying for weeks that the Hunchbacked Killer isn't real. And I didn't want to seem worried in front of my friends."

"That's a silly reason to put yourself at risk."

"I know that now."

"What makes you think he isn't real?"

"I think it's mass hysteria. You realize nobody's actually *seen* him?"

"But there *has* been a rash of disappearances in the city. All young women, according to the papers. You should be more careful. Better safe than sorry."

"That's what I was thinking to myself back there. Lesson learned. Thanks for being all manly and protective, though."

His lips twitched, but he managed to refrain from smiling.

The coffee wasn't good, but it was hot, and she sipped it gratefully. Jai, who seemed unconcerned by such trivial things like the boiling heat of the liquid, finished his in a few gulps.

She yawned and stretched as they stepped back outside into the night air. She was sleepy. The rumble of the bike felt comforting, as did the feel of his strong muscles against her as she slipped her arms around his waist. She rested her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes...

When she opened her eyes, it took her a few seconds to be sure that she was even awake. It was pitch dark; she blinked and realized that she was blindfolded.

And bound.

To a cold, metal bed.

She tried to scream, only to find out that her face and lips felt numb; she had been injected with something. Only a feeble noise came out.

"Ah," a voice said, "I had a feeling that would wake you up."

Footsteps. A pair of strong, muscular arms. The blindfold was slipped off.

Jai smiled his kind smile. She looked at him, horror-struck.

"You know, you were right about one thing." He said, explaining things as though he were answering a question about the weather, "Mass hysteria. The whole 'Hunchbacked Killer' headline – I mean, you understand I didn't coin the term, right? The press did. Out of thin air, too; it's not like anyone who meets this side of me ever lives to tell the tale. Do I look like an ugly hunchback to you?"

She could not move her lips to answer.

"I suppose you're wondering what's next. Well, we start with this."

He had taken a seat at a chair next to her and pulled a small coffee table towards him. She saw a plate with a fork and knife, and some kind of pink fruit on it.

"Well," He said again, "It's best to show you."

His hand reached out for something on the side of the bed, and Neha felt herself straightening up. It was a hospital-style bed, which could be elevated according to the patient's needs. As her upper body was pushed up, she came face to face with a mirror. She tried to scream, but no voice came out.

Staring back at her was her own reflection – but if it hadn't been for her outfit, Neha would not have recognized herself. There was a giant hole below her nose. Her lips were missing. They had been expertly carved out of her face and the wound sewn up, leaving her teeth bared in a permanent grin like a ghoul.

Somewhere in the back of her head, something dawned, and she turned back to the plate with the pink fruit on it.

Jai picked up the fork and skewered a piece with it, raising his hand and popping it into his mouth.

"Cranberry-flavoured lipstick," He said, chewing thoughtfully. "Delicious. And the rest of you will be too, I'm sure."