

THE DUKE

By
Todd Nunes

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Edited

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Dedicated to Barbara Hayes

My aunt, my godmother, and someone who always believed in me—even when I struggled to believe in myself...

PROLOGUE

THE CHILD

The boy's mother had traded things before, but never him.

The dusty crossroads simmered under the vicious noon sun, the heat so fierce it warped the world into something liquid and uneasy. The dirt road shimmered like a feverish mirage, breathing beneath wave after wave of scorched heat.

Beside the boy, an ancient truck idled, sputtering black smoke into the stifling surroundings. Its engine coughed and growled like an angry animal, vibrating deep in the child's small chest. The truck was as worn out as his teddy bear, which he clutched tight, its fur long-matted and coarse, stitching frayed, eyes scratched and dull. It hadn't comforted him in a very long time, but maybe that would change soon.

It was July of 1942, and the world felt cracked open and mean. But, his mother had promised him magic. A place where toys came alive and sweets lay scattered, just for the picking. His belly cramped at the thought of chocolates and taffy, aching from hunger and feeling hollow for too long. Maybe the big, scary-looking man in

front of them had food. Real food. Something that could fill him, if even for just one day.

His mother stood several feet away from the truck, thin and trembling, her arms crossed like she was holding herself together. Needle marks climbed her skin in ragged ladders from wrist to elbow in various shades of red, pink, and ghostly white. Her eyes, shadowed and sunken, stared at the enormous figure before them.

The Farmer loomed large, his shoulders broad enough to block out the sun. An unruly beard twisted like dried roots across his weathered face, wild and tangled. Dust clung to the hem of his overalls, as if the soot and grit had found their rightful place. In his huge, calloused hand, he carried a burlap sack that shifted and sagged, heavy with promise.

The boy didn't need to look inside the bag. He'd seen his mother trade things before—had watched her pale, shaking fingers clutch secretive parcels as she disappeared behind closed doors only to emerge relaxed, hollow-eyed, and lost. But today was different. Today, she wasn't bargaining money or jewelry or even herself.

Today, she had bargained him.

The Farmer opened the sack just enough to tease her. Sweet, acrid fumes spilled out, mingling the sting of bootleg liquor with something bitter and metallic.

"The finest moonshine around," he growled. "And enough heroin to silence your demons for weeks." His eyes glittered cruelly. "We got a deal?"

The boy clutched the bear so tightly his fingers went numb. He held his breath, his heart hammering so loud he was sure they could hear it echoing through the still air. His mother hesitated, and for a brief second, something flickered in her haunted gaze—regret, shame, a flit of feeling that almost looked like love.

But it vanished, extinguished as swiftly as it came. Her trembling hands seized the bag.

She never looked back at him. Not once.

A heavy hand dropped onto the boy's head, fingers threading through his fair hair, gripping tight. The Farmer knelt in front of him, his face close, breath sour with stale whiskey and rotting teeth.

"You listen real good, boy," he whispered, "and we'll get along just fine."

Before he could protest, those enormous fingers seized his arm, squeezing as he was yanked off his feet. His stomach lurched, the world spinning around him until—
SLAM!

The truck door closed, behind him, trapping him inside.

He pressed himself against the cracked vinyl seat, heart pounding so hard it hurt.

The farmer slid behind the wheel and then something heavy landed in the boy's lap, making him jump. A dog collar, stiff and cracked with age, stained dark and greasy with old blood. Deep into the leather, carved letters spelled out a single word:

DUKE.

"Put it on," came the Farmer's voice, flat and cruel.

The collar stank of old sweat and decay. His trembling fingers fumbled with the buckle, icy dread climbing up his spine as it tightened around his throat.

The Farmer's smile spread in the rear-view mirror. "Dogs don't cry, boy. Soon enough, neither will you."

Blinking back tears, the boy pressed his face into the worn fur of his bear, desperate for comfort that refused to come. He folded his legs beneath him, when something caught his eye sticking out from under the seat—

A shoe.

He froze, staring.

It wasn't just any shoe.

It was a child's.

Too small. Too silent.

And he realized then, with a coldness worse than any hunger, that maybe he wasn't the first to wear this collar.

His thoughts flashed instantly to his little sister, Jeanne. He always took care of her. Gave her his food when there was little to nothing. Covered her with his own blankets during the cold. And he was always able to make her giggle with his funny faces whenever they were left alone and frightened for days.

The truck growled as it lurched forward. In the side mirror, a flash of movement: his mother, swallowed by swirling clouds of dust, fading until she was just a smudge in his vision. Then gone completely. Vanished into the earth itself.

A sharp, suffocating twist inside him.

A feeling.

A knowing.

One he refused to acknowledge, yet it gnawed at him, relentlessly.

He will never see her again. Nor his sister.

The Farmer didn't look at him. He just kept his hands on the wheel, his thick fingers tapping out some slow, mindless rhythm.

"The collar makes you mine." The Farmer laughed. "I'm gonna turn you into a nightmare, kid."

The boy squeezed his eyes shut, burying his face deeper into the bear's brittle fur, wishing he could magically disappear.

As the truck drove forward, dragging him toward whatever fate waited down the road, one awful truth settled in his chest. Even at his young age, he understood:

His mother hadn't just given him away.

She'd traded his soul.

CHAPTER 1

THE NOOSE TIGHTENS

Kami is going to hate me. But hey, she cheated first.
Angela stumbled through shadowed underbrush, bare feet slipping on mossy rocks and crunching through wet leaves. Ryder's lazy, smoky laughter drifted behind her. Midnight had long since passed, and the moon kept trying to break through the trees, casting brief glimmers on the slow-moving river.

It was 1973, a new era for women and Angela could do whatever—or whoever—she wanted. Ryder had it all—the looks, the abs, and... well, that was good enough for now. Plus, Kami had already confided that he was a good lover. And, besides, it wasn't like she was planning to marry the dork.

This was what she wanted—no, what she deserved. She had spent years invisible, hiding under shapeless clothes and cheap makeup. Always the outsider looking in. Longing twisting inside her.

But between sophomore and junior year, everything changed. Angela hadn't noticed it at first, but the boys sure did.

Their whispers were intoxicating. But the jealous sneers from the mean girls at school kept growing sharp-

er—more calculating. She wasn't invisible anymore and she relished her newfound power.

Ryder was the perfect target—handsome, carefree, arrogant. He followed close, stumbling a bit but steady enough, his guitar thumping against his back. He dropped onto a smooth boulder by the river, eyes half-closed but still mischievously alert.

"You good up there?" His voice floated up like smoke.

Angela swayed, brushing the flower wreath perched on her head. Her smile was dreamy, detached. "Oh, man, I'm touching the sky."

Ryder plucked at the strings, singing off-key.

"With every puff, we start to fly," he slurred. *"Turning into pretty butterflies..."*

"That's heavy," she whispered, dropping to her knees before him. "I can feel your words, Ryder. On so many levels."

"Yeah," he murmured, drawing a baggie of mushrooms from his pocket and offering it. "More shrooms?"

Angela hesitated just a heartbeat. She'd heard Ryder sing before—usually off-key, drunken, fueled by shallow cheers. But tonight, in this surreal, dreamlike state, he sounded beautiful, like a secret child of David Cassidy and Donny Osmond.

She opened her mouth, and Ryder placed a mushroom on her tongue. It was bitter, earthy, but she barely noticed as his lips found hers—warm and sloppy.

Then, in an instant—

The crickets fell silent.

Angela jerked back, heart skittering.

SPLASH.

The noise tore through the quiet. Angela tensed, eyes straining through the darkness toward the river.

"What the hell?" she whispered. "Think that was a gator?"

Ryder smirked. “Damn, babe. Love that tiny brain of yours. No gators here. Just rocks... or maybe a hippo.”

Angela pouted. “Damn. I wanted to swim.”

Ryder reclined, grinning. “Nothing to fear. I’m here.”

She smiled seductively. This was her chance. Without hesitation, she pulled off her tank top, moonlight tracing the delicate curves of her bare back and shoulders. She stepped into the water in nothing but her cut-off Levis—cold and shocking—but she waded deeper, compelled by something unseen.

“You should join me,” she called teasingly, glancing back over her shoulder. “We can play catch the kitty.”

Angela dove under. The cold darkness swallowed her whole—muddy and obscured. She could barely see her own fingers. Beneath the surface, it felt like anything could be lurking.

A muffled sound reached her through the water—Ryder? It almost sounded like a scream.

Panic sliced through her. She surged upward, gasping. Her eyes scanned wildly—Ryder was gone.

“Ryder?” Her voice trembled. Fear coiled tightly in her chest.

Nothing. Just the distant, mocking echo of party music from the campfire they’d slipped away from.

Then—a rustle behind her. Close. Too close.

She whirled. “Come on, Ryder,” she whispered, frightened now. “Please?”

The trees said nothing. The dark pressed closer.

She swam back to the edge and reached urgently for her discarded shirt, fingers brushing the damp fabric—
—when something snatched her wrist. She was immediately yanked from the river and slammed into the ground.

A rope cinched around her wrists with the precision of a professional wrangler. “Ryder!” she screamed as the rope tightened... and yanked her forward again. She was

ripped from the river's edge, her heels carving trenches in the mud as she was dragged towards the trees. The motion was savage, unnatural—like something hungry pulling her into the dark.

Her eyes locked on the rope disappearing into the void, her body jerking with every brutal pull.

Then, the rope went slack.

Angela collapsed, gasping. She tore the rope from her wrists.

The hum of the camp music now felt like a ghost—faint, far away.

A rustle. Movement.

The bushes exploded.

Ryder staggered out, wild-eyed, drenched in blood. It slickened his hands and chest, running in thick rivers over his abs. His face was frozen in disbelief.

He opened his mouth, but no words came—just a silent, terrified stare, locked on Angela.

Behind him—a flash of steel.

The axe flew from the shadows. No warning. No sound. It moved fast, precise—like it had a mind of its own.

Steel bit into Ryder's spine.

The blade buried deep with a wet crack. Bones split. Ryder's legs buckled. He crumpled in front of her.

Angela screamed! Her feet moved before her brain could catch up. Trees blurred past. Branches lashed her arms, raked her legs, scratched at her face.

She barely felt it. All she could think about was the party—the flickering firelight, the laughter, the music. That illusion of safety felt a hundred miles away.

Through the trees, the bonfire flickered, its pulsing orange glow slicing through the dark.

She was getting closer.

"Help me!" she screamed. Raw. Desperate. But the night swallowed her cries.

She ran harder, faster, every step pounding in her chest. Her arms reached. Her eyes locked on those dancing shadows. That warmth. That safety.

Then—something snapped around her throat.

The rough noose yanked her back. Her feet left the ground. Her body whipped through the air and crashed down hard. Her skull cracked against packed earth.

She clawed at the rope. Nails split, tore. She kicked. Thrashed.

The noose tightened. She was dragged—away from her friends, away from the light.

Something massive grabbed her by the hair.

She was yanked up, her scalp screaming. The unseen figure dragged her upright, her toes barely skimming the dirt.

The unseen figure turned her sharply to face a tree.

A branch waited like a spear, jagged and cruel.

She knew what was coming. And she couldn't stop it.

She wondered what kind of monster was doing this—what it looked like, where it came from.

But the hands... the hands were human.

Before she could think again, the shove came—fast and final.

Pain detonated through her brain.

The splintered wood pierced her eye socket with a sickening pop. Bone cracked. The eye burst. Yellow-white gunk splattered the tree bark. Blood streamed down her face, thick and syrupy.

A gurgling shriek tore from her throat as her legs spasmed.

The attacker grabbed her neck, shoved harder. The branch drove deeper—until it burst through the back of her skull.

He stepped back, watching as she twitched and writhed, still impaled.

His breath was slow. Deep. Entertained.

He waited for her to go still.

Then—with a crack—the branch snapped, and Angela's body collapsed in the dirt.

He seized her by the hair and dragged her into the void.

The bonfire burned on, oblivious—voices laughing, music pounding, flames crackling.

Deep in the woods, he strung the bodies like broken puppets—Angela and Ryder—dangling from branches, nooses digging into their necks, stretched long by coarse rope. Their feet barely brushed the ground, as if they were still trying to run.

He liked them like that.

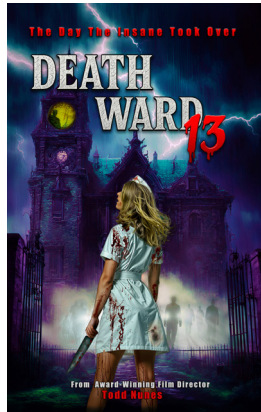
Silent. Still.

Waiting to be found.

KEEP READING

Check out other books in the Slasher Universe series.

DEATH WARD 13



In 1973, amid a relentless storm in the treacherous mountains, the infamous Stephens Sanitarium for the Criminally Insane is about to be shuttered forever. Four rookie nursing students, lured into a night shift, must supervise the remaining inmates, deemed “harmless” by authorities. However, as night falls, they find themselves trapped with deranged psychopaths, notorious for failed lobotomies, serial killings, and unchecked madness.

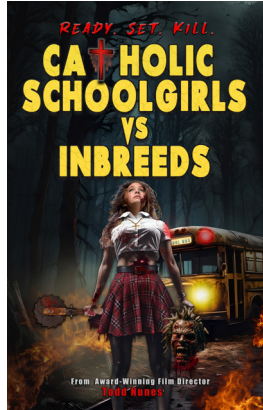
In a desperate fight for survival, the nurses’ sanity teeters on the edge in a sinister game of cat and mouse. At the heart of the terror is Nurse Charlotte, tormented by her twin sister’s suicide in a similar institution. Driven by guilt and a sincere commitment to aiding the mentally disturbed, she faces a haunting question: did her parents commit the wrong daughter?

“Death Ward 13” combines the atmospheric mystery of “Shutter Island” with the engaging narrative of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether,” offering a contemporary twist and escalating suspense. Prepare for a harrowing journey through the darkest corridors of the human mind.

KEEP READING

Check out other books in the Slasher Universe series.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLGIRLS VS INBREEDS



In 1972, deep in the Appalachian wilderness, a bus carrying Catholic schoolgirls and their nun chaperone, Sister Lucy, is lost and stranded in the foreboding woods of West Virginia. The travelers are cut off from civilization, isolated in hostile terrain. The forest harbors dark secrets, and they are not alone.

A clan of cannibalistic mountain men, grotesquely disfigured by generations of inbreeding, lurk in the shadows. Driven to the brink of extinction by their own sterility, they hunt for outsiders to sustain their bloodline, focusing on the busload of young women they believe can save them.

The girls, unprepared and terrified, must rely on Sister Lucy's guidance to survive. As the clan launches a brutal attack, the girls are transformed from helpless innocents into fierce survivors. With the relentless cannibals closing in, the battle for survival turns the forest into a blood-soaked battleground where the line between prey and predator blurs as each side fights desperately for their family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Todd Nunes



Originally from the San Francisco Bay Area, Todd Nunes began writing and directing at an early age. While still in high school, he produced and directed his own horror-related stage and video productions, and immediately after graduating, founded the theatrical production company Benicia Stage Productions. In Los Angeles, Todd studied screenwriting at UCLA's Writers' Program and produced an original two-act play at UCLA's Theater Underground.

After graduating with honors from The Los Angeles Film School, his thesis film, *Two Brothers*, was accepted by The Short Film Festival of Los Angeles and chosen as the festival's Official Selection. An avid and lifelong fan of horror films, Todd's impressive collection and deep knowledge of the genre inspired him to write more than six feature-length horror screenplays.

For six years, Todd wrote a Halloween Haunted House attraction in the Los Angeles area, and in 2013, he completed his first horror feature, *Scary Larry*, as writer, director, and editor. In 2015, Todd wrote and directed the award-winning Santa slasher *All Through the House*. The film received 21 festival nominations and six awards, including Best Director (Hardcore Horror Fest, Chi-

cago, IL); Audience Choice Award, Best Editing, and Best Slasher (RIP Film Festival, Hollywood, CA); and Best Local Feature (Another Hole in the Head Film Festival, San Francisco, CA).

Todd is also the author of the Slasher Universe book series, including *Death Ward 13*, *Catholic Schoolgirls vs. Inbreeds*, and *The Duke*, which showcases his love for the horror genre. His commitment to horror storytelling continues to inspire fear and thrill in audiences around the world.

Todd has also been a featured guest at San Diego Comic-Con, where he showcased his Slasher Universe books, connected with fans, and celebrated independent horror alongside the genre's most passionate creators and readers.

Most recently, Todd's screenplay for *Catholic Schoolgirls vs. Inbreeds* has received widespread acclaim on the festival circuit, winning top honors at seven competitions: The Film Basement Horror Film Awards; Diabolical Horror Film Festival; Frights! Camera! Action! Horror Screenplay Contest; Hollywood Horrorfest; and the Hollywood Blood Horror Festival, where it also earned Best Action/Horror Screenplay. Additionally, his writing was awarded Best Unproduced Screenplay at the prestigious Crimson Screen Horror Film Fest.

