
The Last Juror

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Chapter 2

Rhoda Kassellaw lived in the Beech Hill community, twelve miles north of Clanton, in a modest gray brick house on a narrow, paved country road. The flower beds along the front of the house were weedless and received daily care, and between them and the road the long wide lawn was thick and well cut. The driveway was crushed white rock. Scattered down both sides of it was a collection of scooters and balls and bikes. Her two small children were always outdoors, playing hard, sometimes stopping to watch a passing car.

It was a pleasant little country house, a stone's throw from Mr. And Mrs. Deece next door. The young man who bought it was killed in a trucking accident somewhere in Texas, and, at the age of twenty-eight, Rhoda became a widow. The insurance on his life paid off the house and the car. The balance was invested to provide a modest monthly income that allowed her to remain home and dote on the children. She spent hours outside, tending her vegetable garden, potting flowers, pulling weeds, mulching the beds along the front of the house.

She kept to herself. The old ladies in Beech Hill considered her a model widow, staying home, looking sad, limiting her social appearances to an occasional visit to church. She should attend more regularly, they whispered.

Shortly after the death of her husband, Rhoda planned to return to her family in Missouri. She was not from Ford County, nor was her husband. A job took them there. But the house was paid for, the kids were happy, the neighbours were nice, and her family was much too concerned about how much life insurance she'd collected. So she stayed, always thinking of leaving but never doing so.

Rhoda Kassellaw was a beautiful woman when she wanted to be, which was not very often. Her shapely, thin figure was usually camouflaged under a loose cotton drip-dry dress, or a bulky chambray workshirt, which she preferred when gardening. She wore little makeup and kept her long flaxen-colored hair pulled back and stuck together on top of her head. Most of what she ate came from her organic garden, and her skin had a soft healthy glow to it. Such an attractive young widow would normally have been a hot property in the county, but she kept to herself.

After three years of mourning, however, Rhoda became restless. She was not getting younger; the years were slipping by. She was too young and too pretty to sit at home every Saturday and read bedtime stories. There had to be some action out there, though there was certainly none in Beech Hill.

She hired a young black girl from down the road to baby-sit, and Rhoda drove north for an hour to the Tennessee line, where she'd heard there were some respectable lounges and dance clubs. Maybe no one would know her there. She enjoyed the dancing and the flirting, but she never drank and always came home early. It became a routine, two or three times a month.

Then the jeans got tighter, the dancing faster, the hours longer and longer. She was getting noticed and talked about in the bars and clubs along the state line.

He followed her home twice before he killed her. It was March, and a warm front had brought a premature hope of spring. It was a dark night, with no moon. Bear, the family mutt, sniffed him first as he crept behind a tree in the backyard. Bear was primed to growl and bark when he was forever silenced.

Rhoda's son Michael was five and her daughter Teresa was three. They wore matching Disney cartoon pajamas, neatly pressed, and watched their mother's glowing eyes as she read them the story of Jonah and the whale. She tucked them in and kissed them good night, and when Rhoda turned off the light to their bedroom, he was already in the house.

An hour later she turned off the television, locked the doors, and waited for Bear, who did not appear. That was no surprise because he often chased rabbits and squirrels into the woods and came home late. Bear would sleep on the back porch and wake her howling at dawn. In her bedroom, she slipped out of her light cotton dress and opened the closet door. He was waiting in there, in the dark.

He snatched her from behind, covered her mouth with a thick and sweaty hand, and said, "I have a knife. I'll cut you and your kids." With the other hand he held up a shiny blade and waved it before her eyes.

"Understand?" he hissed into her ear.

She trembled and managed to shake her head. She couldn't see what he looked like. He threw her to the floor of the cluttered closet, face down, and yanked her hands behind her. He took a brown wool scarf an old aunt had given her and wrapped it roughly around her face. "Not one sound," he kept growling at her. "Or I'll cut your kids." When the blindfold was finished he grabbed her hair, snatched her to her feet, and dragged her to her bed. He poked the tip of the blade into her chin and said, "Don't fight me. The knife's right here." He cut off her panties and the rape began.

He wanted to see her eyes, those beautiful eyes he'd seen in the clubs. And the long hair. He'd bought her drinks and danced with her twice, and when he'd finally made a move she had stiff-armed him. Try these moves, baby, he mumbled just loud enough for her to hear.

He and the Jack Daniel's had been building courage for three hours, and now the whiskey numbed him. He moved slowly above her, not rushing things, enjoying every second of it. He mumbled in the self-satisfying grunts of a real man taking and getting what he wanted.

The smell of the whiskey and his sweat nauseated her, but she was too frightened to throw up. It might anger him, cause him to use the knife. As she started to accept the horror of the moment, she began to think. Keep it quiet. Don't wake up the kids. And what will he do with the knife when he's finished?

His movements were faster, he was mumbling louder. "Quiet, baby," he hissed again and again. "I'll use the knife." The wrought-iron bed was squeaking; didn't get used enough, he told himself. Too much noise, but he didn't care.

The rattling of the bed woke Michael, who then got Teresa up. They eased from their room and crept down the dark hall to see what was happening. Michael opened the door to his mother's bedroom, saw the strange man on top of her, and said, "Mommy!" For a second the man stopped and jerked his head toward the children.

The sound of the boy's voice horrified Rhoda, who bolted upward and thrust both hands at her assailant, grabbing whatever she could. One small fist caught him in the left eye, a solid shot that stunned him. Then she yanked off her blindfold while kicking with both legs. He slapped her and tried to pin her down again. "Danny Padgitt!" she shouted, still clawing. He hit her once more.

"Mommy!" Michael cried.

"Run, kids!" Rhoda tried to scream, but she was struck dumb by her assailant's blows.

"Shut up!" Padgitt yelled.

"Run!" Rhoda shouted again, and the children backed away, then darted down the hallway, into the kitchen, and outside to safety.

In the split second after she shouted his name, Padgitt realized he had no choice but to silence her. He took the knife and hacked twice, then scrambled from the bed and grabbed his clothing.

Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Deece were watching late television from Memphis when they heard Michael's voice calling and getting closer. Mr. Deece met the boy at the front door. His pajamas were soaked with sweat and dew and his teeth were chattering so violently he had trouble speaking.

"He hurt my mommy!" he kept saying. "He hurt my mommy!"

Through the darkness between the two houses, Mr. Deece saw Teresa running after her brother. She was almost running in place, as if she wanted to get to one place without leaving the other. When Mrs. Deece finally got to her by the Deece garage, she was sucking her thumb

and unable to speak.

Mr. Deece raced into his den and grabbed two shotguns, one for him, one for his wife. The children were in the kitchen, shocked to the point of being paralyzed. "He hurt Mommy," Michael kept saying. Mrs. Deece cuddled them, told them everything would be fine. She looked at her shotgun when her husband laid it on the table. "Stay here," he said as he rushed out of the house.

He did not go far. Rhoda almost made it to the Deece home before she collapsed in the wet grass. She was completely naked, and from the neck down covered in blood. He picked her up and carried her to the front porch, then shouted at his wife to move the children toward the back

of the house and lock them in a bedroom. He could not allow them to see their mother in her last moments.

As he placed her in the swing, Rhoda whispered, "Danny Padgitt. It was Danny Padgitt."

He covered her with a quilt, then called an ambulance.

Danny Padgitt kept his pickup in the center of the road and drove ninety miles an hour. He was half-drunk and scared as hell but unwilling to admit it. He'd be home in ten minutes, secure in the family's little kingdom known as Padgitt Island.

Those little faces had ruined everything. He'd think about it tomorrow. He took a long pull on the fifth of Jack Daniel's and felt better.

It was a rabbit or a small dog or some varmint, and when it darted from the shoulder he caught a glimpse of it and reacted badly. He instinctively hit the brake pedal, just for a split second because he really didn't care what he hit and rather enjoyed the sport of roadkilling, but he'd punched too hard. The rear tires locked and the pickup fishtailed. Before he realized it Danny was in serious trouble. He jerked the wheel one way, the wrong way, and the truck hit the gravel shoulder where it began to spin like a stock car on the backstretch. It slid into the ditch, flipped twice, then crashed into a row of pine trees. If he'd been sober he would've been killed, but drunks walk away.

He crawled out through a shattered window, and for a long while leaned on the truck, counting his cuts and scratches and considering his options. A leg was suddenly stiff, and as he climbed up the bank to the road he realized he could not walk far. Not that he would need to.

The blue lights were on him before he realized it. The deputy was out of the car, surveying the scene with a long black flashlight. More flashing lights appeared down the road.

The deputy saw the blood, smelled the whiskey, and reached for the handcuffs.