

# The Disinheritors

A Novel



# THE DISINHERITORS

## *Part 1*

"Colors seen by candle-light  
Will not look the same by day."

– Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Lady's Yes*.

## *Chapter 1*

IT WAS WELL AFTER MIDNIGHT, and Sue Baxter was still reading *The Dream Book of Irina Palazzo*. In her antiquarian fervor, she was using the light of a single candle, which made it slow going. However, she needed to concentrate, and the candle assisted in this, as it only illuminated a few lines at once.

Her old friend Jack Foley had recommended the book to her. Actually, he hadn't risen to the level of "friend," though she'd known him for several years. Even the word "known" wasn't right, as she knew so little about him – his sibling count, status of parents,

address, telephone number (she could look that up, but she never had), what he liked for dinner. And that left out the deeper things, which she didn't know either – had he ever committed a crime (she always liked to know this about male acquaintances), how many times had he been married, was he a Republican? None of these things had come up, and she hadn't asked them. Though she could guess, given his writing; but she had only one article to go on.

Her speculations were cut short by a movement outside the window. She put a finger in the middle of the book, and, clutching it, listened. The usual rush of distant traffic, with the Doppler of the occasional truck, could be heard.

The movement came again; her skin prickled and she held her breath. She made herself get up, and, stiff-legged, approach the window. After some time, she determined that it was the sliding of car headlights across the pane. What had seemed like a dark figure creeping past, possibly holding a flashlight, was only an optical illusion.

Unnerved, she went to the kitchenette to make herself a cup of tea. There was no use trying to go back to sleep right away.

Jack was not a friend, though she had seen him hundreds of times. He could be handsome, with a bit of effort, she thought, running water for the tea into her old Revere ware saucepan. The handle was cracked, and had long been so. She hadn't even bothered to investigate the price of a replacement. It didn't bother her hand much; at least, she had never cut herself against its mild sharpness. It was more a thing that she noticed, each time that she made tea or boiled water for frozen beans or instant Thai noodles.

She knew Jack had money, enough at least to keep his red Miata running. Of course, that wasn't considered "having money" by the people she'd known. Such a phrase was reserved for people who had investments, or had "old money" in the form of history and land.

And nice houses. She lived in one; but it wasn't hers. Where did Jack live? The tea water was boiling, and she poured it into her mug, on a peppermint tea bag. Leaving this on the counter to steep, she hunted up her old-fashioned telephone directory. There were a number of Foleys; one had "J" in front of it. That was usually a woman's strategy, shield against the advancing world. Ridiculous really, as it signaled a single woman more than it shielded her. Best to list one's full name; best to proclaim oneself boldly, instead of wasting money as she did on an unlisted number.

The phone book was inconclusive; Jack might have a cell phone only, like so many people these days. The idea of a "landline" was a turn-off for those on the go, implying some terrestrial tie. Better to zip through the air at thought-speed.

Irina Palazzo was an eighteenth-century Neapolitan noblewoman whose life had been much in the news lately due to the recovery of a fortune in lost diamonds. It was absurd to think that diamonds were more valuable than well-wrought glass, thought Sue; absurd that so much mystery and lore had accrued over these bits of compressed carbon.

Jack was writing a book on Palazzo, a mixture of fact and speculation, which would expand on his well-received article in *Trend* magazine; but *The Dream Book of Irina Palazzo* was a novel which had just come out and was already on the *New York Times*

bestseller list. Normally Sue didn't read bestsellers, considering it a mark against them, but Jack had been so insistent she read it that she'd caved in and accepted the loan of his copy. The premise of the novel was that Donna Palazzo had written a new version of the famous Neapolitan dream book *La Smorfia*, and a cadre of corrupt monks were plotting to kill her for this affront, claiming that they possessed the one true book. It was not this plot which had held Sue's interest, however, but the idea of the *Smorfia* itself. She was reading the book in hopes of understanding that. Tomorrow she would research it at the university library.

Sue loved the university library. She'd been a freelance copy editor for the past ten years, and she found the atmosphere in the back of the third-floor reading room wonderfully conducive to such work. When she needed a break, there were the floor-to-ceiling windows to gaze through, and if she wanted a longer break, it was a pleasant stroll to the student union building for tea and a pastry. She didn't even have to buy her own *Chicago Manual of Style*; the latest version was always there in the reference section. Apparently none of the students ever used it.

She'd planned to be working tomorrow – technically, today, since it was now after midnight. Sundays meant nothing to her but wasted time otherwise – childless and religionless as she was, there had been no claims on her weekends since the death of her mother ten years ago. Her father had died long before that, having walked out of her mother's life and into second and third marriages after the birth of Sue's younger sister, Laura. She could barely remember him, and he'd not kept in touch. His name was forbidden in her house growing up. After college, she'd had an urge to discover her

"roots," but had dropped the idea after phoning up several false leads. Soon after her father's death, she'd received a letter from his third wife asking for money to help cover the funeral expenses. She'd sent a small check to the Florida address, but heard no more from the woman, and by now, at age fifty, had forgotten the usurper's name.

Who could tell what her father might have become had he stayed with his original family? It was true that her mother was narrow and joyless, at least in her late years; she had never remarried. But who could say what her mother would have become, had Sue's father not left?

Sue took a sip of her tea, which was now lukewarm. She brought it back to her bedroom and sat up in bed thinking. The candle was guttering in its glass holder, almost spent. It made her shadow enormous on the right-hand wall, projecting a colossus of a woman with Sue's sharp nose and chin.

Perhaps it was wanting to know more about Jack Foley that had made her read the Palazzo novel so eagerly. She pictured what her no-nonsense friend Faith Hull would have said to this: "Wouldn't it be easier to just ask him?"

Again, it might be a misnomer to call Faith Hull a "friend"; she was the reference librarian in charge of the third floor at the university library, and, as such, could hardly have helped becoming acquainted with Sue over her tenure there for the past five years. As with Jack, Sue knew next to nothing of Faith's personal life, except the fact that she was married to an ex-FBI agent. But it was not as if they had tea together, much less dinner at each other's houses.

Could people make each other better or worse? One often heard of "good" or "bad" influences; life seemed to shade toward the bad, with people "dragging each other down." How, for instance, account for the corrupt monks in *The Dream Book of Irina Palazzo*? They'd been a fictional staple for centuries; she supposed it was a mixture of truth and anti-Catholicism. Also, it made for an exciting read, men acting in opposition to their claim of a special vocation. Possibly, though, some religious entered that life not due to vocation, but in an effort to reverse what they were – fallible humans who had already committed sins, even crimes. A cell was a good place for penance, whether in monastery or prison. How much difference was there really in the two populations' daily round? Their status was opposite, that is, if one admired Catholicism; but their actual lives were equally constrained. Could such constraint in and of itself produce human "monsters" – not rehabilitate, not purify, but destroy?

But Frank Brand, the author of *Dream Book*, had not chosen to explore such questions; he was after a "good read," he was after a plot that whipped along with brief pauses for atmosphere. She wondered if he'd traveled to Naples, or if he'd simply relied on the use of research assistants, or the obvious Internet. Since she knew nothing of that distant city, she could only assume that he knew what he was talking about.

Yes, it was a mix of *La Smorfia* and the idea of getting to see what made Jack Foley tick which had made her stay up till 12:45. She'd see if she could obtain a copy of the actual dream book, instead of relying on the secondary source of the novel. Faith Hull

could help her if the book weren't available through the usual channels.



## *Chapter 2*

**J**ACK FOLEY COULD TELL from a distance that something was wrong; the crowd in front of the library had a stalled, angry look, and as he drew near to investigate, he saw yellow police tape and uniformed officers stationed at the entrance.

Scanning the crowd briefly, he spotted Sue Baxter, and went to talk to her. Sue was always good for information.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Oh, it's awful, Jack!" She put out her hand as if to touch his arm. He melted subtly backward, and her gesture froze awkwardly in the air between them. She looked down. "There was a bomb scare. They're not letting people back in till they figure it out."

"Bomb scare?" And he was on deadline to be writing his book proposal and sample chapter!

"Yes, the security guards came through suddenly with the police and herded everybody out. I hadn't even gotten online yet."

A whole Sunday wasted! His home connection was too slow to make Internet research efficient, especially when reading PDFs or downloading images. He could go downtown to the city library, but they had far fewer computers, with older systems, and many students would be having the same idea right now. He thought fast.

"Well, I've got to get started, bomb scare or no bomb scare." He paused. She looked so vulnerable and helpless standing there against the backdrop of milling students. "I'm going downtown to the Fairmont Library, if you want a ride. You can tell me the details of the scare on the way."

She agreed with alacrity, and he wondered if he were being too friendly. They had never driven anywhere together before; he knew she had no car, so had wanted to avoid establishing any obligations.

In the car she sat huddled, clutching her thin sweater around her.

"Didn't you have a coat?" he asked, glancing sideways at her.

"I thought it would be warmer," she said, sounding forlorn,

She was thin, but not in a way he found attractive. The word "gaunt" could have been used to describe her, except that implied a much taller form. Sue Baxter was small without being petite; sharp-featured without being delicate; and crop-coiffed without being gamine. Yet there was something about her which intrigued him, or, rather, made him curious; he had never pinned it down, though. She was handy for stray bits of information, but it went beyond that. How did such women survive, he wondered, and what for?

"So when did this happen?" he asked.

"I don't know, I guess it was about ten minutes ago. Actually, I was surprised not to see you there."

So she looked for him? Expected to see him? But of course she'd noticed he was there most Sundays as soon as the library opened; they'd chaffed each other about it uneasily, in that self-disparaging way people had.

"I know, I was late today. I was writing at home. Good thing, too, I guess." He turned up Gingko Crescent to Ridgeview Avenue, saying, "Might as well take the scenic route. Less traffic." She was fiddling with the strap of her purse, and he said, "You look kind of shook up. Would you rather I just took you home?"

"Maybe that would be better." Her voice was colorless.

There were still some late trees showing gorgeous red and gold foliage along Ridgeview, and the steep lawns were still green. A few dog walkers were out, but traffic, as he'd guessed, was practically nonexistent up here.

"I don't even know where you live," he said.

"It's not too far away. I rent a room."

"Around here?"

"Yes; when you get to Covert Street, it's on the corner."

She was usually so talkative when he saw her in the mornings; he wondered if it were the constraint of being in the car with him or the reaction to the bomb threat.

"So do they know who called in this threat? Was it for real?" he asked.

"They don't know yet. They hadn't found anything when you got there."

"This is some student prank, right? Some fraternity hazing? I can't believe we'd have a school-shooting-type thing here, can you?"

"I don't know."

"I mean," he continued, "it couldn't be anything more than that, could it?"

He felt her eyes on him. "You mean, like on a national level?"

He laughed uneasily. "Yeah, why would anyone target Fairmont University? I mean, it's a big place for around here, but it's not New York City."

"They have some very distinguished faculty."

"Oh, I'm not knocking Fairmont, I couldn't do my job without it. But, in the grand scheme of things ... OK, is that Covert Street?"

"Yes, that's it. On the corner."

"Right or left?"

"It's this one." She indicated a house on the right, a gray stone late-Victorian with an octagonal tower and black iron fencing.

"You live here?" He could not suppress the surprise in his voice, and he colored slightly as she shot a sharp glance at him.

"I have two rooms. On the third floor," she said.

They sat for a moment, and his gaze flicked to his watch.

"Well, this has been nice of you. Damsel in distress, and all that," she said, fumbling with the door handle.

"Are you going to be all right? Do you want me to come up for a second?" he found himself saying.

"No, no, that's OK. Unless you want to. I have some juice." She smiled faintly. "And some conversation."

It took a beat, but this sank in. He looked at his watch. "I can stay for a minute or two, just to make sure you're all right. Then I really have to get downtown."

"Oh yes. To work on your book," she said brightly, getting out of the car.

"That's right. I have a deadline at the end of the month."

"You have to write the whole thing in one month?"

"No, no, just finish the proposal. But it's not really enough time. I know nothing about Italy, much less eighteenth-century Naples."

She led him past the main entrance, a carved portico flanked by stone urns, to a side door of lesser magnificence.

"For the tradesmen, I suppose," he let out, then regretted it; but no sharp glance from her followed, and he relaxed. But why did he care what she thought of him? he wondered, as he followed her into a dark-paneled hallway with worn Persian carpet underfoot.

"I know nothing about Naples either," she said as they went up the stairs to the first landing. "But I'm dying to know more about *La Smorfia*."

"Oh, so you're reading *Dream Book*? I thought you didn't read modern fiction."

"Well, you spoke of it with such enthusiasm, I was curious. So I read it last night."

"You read the whole thing in one night?"

"No, just the first hundred pages. His style wore me down after that."

Jack chuckled. "I know, Brand can get pretty dense."

An elaborate mural faced them as they reached the third landing, and he stopped to examine it. She switched on the sconces which flanked it, and he said, "Wow. You must love going past this every morning!"

"It's supposed to be Oberon and Titania," she said, indicating the two central figures. "Over here you can see the lovers, with Puck leading them astray."

"Where's Bottom?" he asked, to show he knew his Shakespeare.

"Oh, he's over on the right, behind this big tree. See him?"

He could just make out the long-eared figure lurking in shadow. "Why's he so obscure? You'd think he'd be next to Titania."

"I think the painter found him unaesthetic."

"Ah."

She turned from the glowing scene, and led him down a dusty corridor past crammed bookshelves, old trunks and draped furniture.

"Luckily, I have a sitting room," she said, opening a tall, narrow door onto a long, narrow room with many windows at one end. Several floor-to-ceiling bookcases towered in the opposite corner, near a maroon plush sofa and a spindle-legged black horsehair chair. A threadbare Oriental rug shared floor space with sisal matting.

He went over to the books. "You have a great collection here."

"Oh, most of them are my mother's."

"She has good taste."

"She did."

He turned at that, and noted her pinched expression. "I'm sorry. Did she –"

"She died ten years ago." Sue's voice was flat.

"I'm sorry," Jack repeated. "Were you close?"

"Close to what?" Sue said.

She was baiting him again. He didn't like it, but it challenged him. People he knew had stopped coming to that open edge long ago, unless maybe they were drunk.

"Is there someone you can call?" he said. "I'd like to stay and talk about *Dream Book*, but I really have to get to work."

"You could work here," Sue said. "I have an encyclopedia."

For a moment he was almost tempted. He was sure there were some first editions among the many leather-bound, gilt-stamped volumes ranged along the walls; some might even be eighteenth-century.

"Sorry, I really have to go," he said.

### *Chapter 3*

**A**FTER JACK LEFT, Sue stood for a long time looking out her front window.

Life, she thought, was a mixture of free will and chance. It was certainly chance that she'd still been at the edge of the crowd when Jack came to the library, since she'd been ready to leave well before that. Had she walked away five minutes earlier, their paths would never have crossed, and he would never have set foot in her rooms. There would have been no pretext for it.

People came up with pretexts through efforts of will; but perhaps, for such people, it wasn't an effort? The decision, she meant; that was what, for her, was the insurmountable wall. Not even a wall, because walls had tops, and one could see over them, or at least what was above.

Some women might have asked him to lunch, or placed themselves purposely in his path. She had never done that, would never have put herself forward in that way.

And if she had, what did she have to offer? What did she have to offer a man now?

But this was absurd, was reflexive thinking; she wasn't attracted to Jack in that way, only curious about him. For all she knew, he might have a wife tucked away whom he never mentioned;



she'd lived through such experiences, back when it mattered. Probably he just had a girlfriend, some long-suffering soul who knit his sweaters, cooked his meals and put up with the fact that they'd never get married. He might have several girlfriends, rotating them as did Ted Turner or Hugh Hefner, giving each one her due.

That was silly too. Turner and Hefner had media empires; Jack had nothing but a car and some sort of writing career. However, men could always attract women, even if they had nothing. Even prisoners had women who wrote to them, remained faithful to the man inside prison walls.

He'd looked at her books with desire, with interest, it had seemed; or was he just being polite? She'd been almost impolite several times; why? Was she trying to drive him away?

How could one drive someone away who hadn't come near in the first place? But he had been near; he'd been standing right there, in front of the bookshelves, not five minutes ago. And she hadn't known how to keep him, not even for half an hour's chat. Only the bomb scare had brought him here in the first place.

The bomb scare. It was hard to think about; it was hard *not* to think about. There was no real place for it in her mind – no place of rest. She had felt it, through her body, the whole time he had been here, the whole time since it had happened. She felt it now. After all, it had not been an hour since then. Should she try to think of it, or try not to think of it?

She felt rooted to the spot in front of her window, paralyzed. The early mist of November had turned transparent, and the sky was a delicate gray-blue with long rafts of rumpling cloud. She could walk downtown to the library; it would be good for her, and

she could see Jack, to apologize; because now she was sure she'd been rude, had been unpleasant when he'd asked about her mother. He was being polite, asking, and she'd struck out at him, with a small blow; it was what her mother would have labeled "uncalled-for." She could hear the voice now, level, measured: "That was uncalled for, Susan. You may go to your room. When you're ready to apologize, you may come out." Hardly child abuse, even by today's higher standards ...

She would not think of that, or the bomb scare. They were doing what they could, investigating; they would find out sooner or later who'd done it. It must have been only a prank, although one in very bad taste, considering today's political climate. When the student was found, he would face criminal charges. In the meantime, she had work to do. Her current deadline, oddly, was the end of the month, just like Jack's; she couldn't think why she hadn't noticed this coincidence before. He wasn't the only one with important pressures to face. Life had to be lived, bills to be paid. It all took so much effort of will ...

She made herself go to the closet and pick out a light flowered jacket, pale pink and spring green on white. It was one she seldom wore, and she supposed it was inappropriate for the season, but she liked it. It was shaped like a denim jacket, but the fabric was soft, stretchy cotton sateen. Rummaging in the back of the top shelf, behind shoeboxes, she pulled out a small chiffon scarf. It was crumpled, and she smoothed it a few times ineffectually before swathing it round her neck. Its color was a warm golden buff, and she hesitated in front of the hall mirror, wondering if it "went" with her outfit or not. The sight of her mother's closet flashed into her

mind, shoes ranked for occasion, suits and blouses by color, pale gray garment bags toward the far right shrouding brocade cocktail dresses, hostess gowns, silver fox and mink coats.

Maybe she should work at home today. Though nothing had physically harmed her at the library, she had had a bad scare. She might be in shock. How did one know this, if one were alone? Jack had suggested she call someone. Perhaps Mrs. Hull? No, she would have been evacuated with the others, and Sue could not imagine looking up her home number and calling her there. Besides, what would she say? "I don't know if I'm in shock or not. Could you help me find out?"

People went to emergency rooms for such things, she supposed, or their "family doctor." She had none, and had had no medical insurance since her last fulltime job ten years ago. An ER bill would be large, and what could they do for her there?

She wondered how the students were doing, those who'd been in the library too. They were the eager ones, the people who weren't there to "party" but to get something done. Through an effort of will.

She felt as though she were made of metal parts, arches and springs counterbalanced, as she slung her purse over her shoulder and grasped her hard black leather briefcase by its brass handles.

This was how it was done. People put one foot in front of the other, and kept on till it formed a pattern. They didn't notice each step while walking, not unless something were wrong.

It was three miles to the city library. As she walked along Ridgeview Avenue, with its tall oaks and maples, its tulip trees, lindens and beeches, her mind opened out, clarified, and thoughts

came with more ease. It was the policemen who had bothered her – not that they'd done something wrong, it was just the sight of their dark uniforms with the silver touches, and the crackling of their two-way radios. They'd herded the crowd out efficiently, with no one looking at each other. The room had emptied before she'd had a chance to switch gears from concentration to action. The policeman nearest her had called her "ma'am," and touched her shoulder briefly while saying she would have to leave. As he'd leaned over her, she'd scented aftershave and sweat, and a nasal voice had come through static on his radio, speaking in numbers. Then came the quick, speechless clattering down back stairs she never used, the man's hand at her elbow, and she was on the plaza with the others.

She'd spoken to no one, but had heard, of course, their conversations; they were not so much frightened as annoyed. No one had seemed to think the scare was real, no one had seemed to fear the building would explode. They acted as though it were a fire drill. Two senior officers had been trying to disperse the crowd when Jack arrived.

She would take Ridgeview the whole way out, though it was more direct to walk down River Road. Jack had called Ridgeview Avenue "the scenic route," and he was certainly correct in that, though she seldom noticed it consciously, its quiet spaciousness serving only as a backdrop to her thoughts.

The inner world had always to be defended; probably it had always been so, though people complained of the modern world's unprecedented noise and intensity. Her briefcase weighed heavy in her right hand; she switched it to her left. She was passing the stretch of Ridgeview with the real mansions – the Japanese-style

fantasia designed by a disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright; the half-timbered Tudor with its carriage house; the old Reinhardt place, practically a castle with its towers and extensive walled gardens ...

Thought was a kind of garden, requiring walls. She kept people out, but no one complained of it anymore. Her few boyfriends had once, especially Marquis, the philosophy major, when they'd both been undergraduates. "You're so remote," he'd say. "I never know what you're really thinking."

Her briefcase was really too heavy, with this manuscript, to carry all this way; she should take the bus, Sue thought, but she didn't want to bother going down to River Road, with its constant traffic. She hefted the case into her arms, and held it like a baby. The manuscript inside was a dull biography of an obscure English philosopher who'd studied with Wittgenstein at Cambridge. In an effort to pin down his subject's early influences, the author had gone into excruciating genealogical and historical detail, taking up almost half the book. Still, guided by her master's in English literature, the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Chicago Manual of Style*, she would whittle him down to readability, if she possibly could.

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