

SIMON'S MANSION

William Poe

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You'll get back to where you came from.

—William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*

CHAPTER ONE

Growing up in the small town of Sibley, Arkansas, living in the timber mansion his family built prior to the Civil War, Simon Powell felt out of place and out of time. It is said that culture takes root early in a child's life, but that didn't apply to Simon; he claimed allegiance to a home planet orbiting a distant star, an idea that occurred to him after watching *Forbidden Planet* on a Friday night when his mother allowed him to stay up late. So impressed was Simon with the movie that he said to himself, Always remember, you were eight years old when you saw this. That was the age when Simon realized that he felt different from other boys, an awareness that scared him. *Forbidden Planet* taught Simon that what dwells inside us can destroy us.

Secluded in his bedroom, Simon wondered about life on his home

planet of Zenon, recognizing Zenon culture in the paintings of Jackson Pollock and Emile Nolde, which he first saw on the pages of a Funk & Wagnalls yearbook. Pollock and Nolde spoke to Simon's alienation, and he began emulating their style, working with finger paints to explore Pollock's sense of ordered chaos, drawing family members in a child's version of Nolde, applying vibrant colors from the box of Crayola crayons that his mother, always attentive to Simon's loneliness, gave him as a present on his birthday, never commenting on his strange images and always defending Simon against his father, a man quick to ridicule his peculiar son.

"Why paint his face red? And why's that tree purple?" Lenny had once asked about a rendering of Simon's uncle Jared, identified by the title *Jared of Magnolia* scrawled at the bottom of the page. "That's something a crazy person would do."

"Leave the boy be." Vivian glared at Lenny. Then she turned to Simon and offered, "You enjoy yourself, son." She pointed at a wobbly planet orbiting in a hazy solar system drawn above the red-hued cousin and visible through the leaves of the purple tree. "That's your

world, isn't it, Simon?"

Simon nodded.

In the evenings, Simon occupied himself by sketching scenes of flying saucers piloted by bug-eyed monsters and attacking neighborhoods on Earth as he sat on a TV pillow shaped like a cocker spaniel. Lenny would be watching his favorite television programs, half-asleep from a long day of work as a plumber, fighting to stay awake in order to catch the ending of *Gunsmoke* if it were a Wednesday. Vivian, who didn't share Lenny's affection for television, spent her evenings reading Harlequin Romances, dutifully seated on a sofa next to Lenny's La-Z-Boy recliner. When not engaged in drawing monsters, Simon rested on the cocker spaniel pillow, hugging its neck. Vivian periodically lowered her reading glasses and gazed upon Simon; then, believing him content with his pillow friend and drawings, she would return to her fiction.

Upstairs in the timber-hewn mansion, outside the door of Simon's bedroom, hung a gallery of charcoal images, portraits of gloomy ancestors rendered in their Sunday best, framed in oak that had aged dark

as ebony through years of being treated with Old English furniture oil. Placing his art alongside those stern faces would have affronted the ancient gods, which was how Simon's young mind perceived the characters in those portraits, none allowing Simon to walk by without telegraphing their displeasure. Simon's art only made sense in his bedroom, where his drawings crowded the spaces between his paintings like fanciful wallpaper.

Lenny's mother, whom everyone called Mandy, had been a woman well into her seventies when Simon was born, and she had cared for him as a baby and sat with him at the mansion during his pre-school days, since both Lenny and Vivian worked full-time. It was she who had instilled in Simon an appreciation for family heritage, bringing the gallery of ancestors to life through tales as vivid as if she had witnessed them herself. Mandy had conveyed stories of actual people, not the ephemeral beings with the voyeuristic eyes that peered from the portraits, nor the apparitions known from carvings on the grave markers across the road in the family cemetery—a plot of land within sight of Simon's bedroom window and denoted by an elaborately molded

wrought-iron archway as rusted as the gate it supported.

Simon's favorite among Mandy's tales was the story of his ancestor James Thomas Powell, "JT" as he was known, the family patriarch, the man who had lived in the mansion during the Civil War and who had met his end when marauders strung him up because he dared to harbor a wounded Union soldier after the nearby battle of Jenkins Ferry.

"Hanged him from that limb right there," Mandy would say. "That old tree stands as proud as the day JT's body swung in the wind."

Mandy would point an arthritic finger at the red oak dominating the front yard, the limb that once secured the hangman's rope now supporting a tire swing, and under the swing, a sandbox, favorite playground of Simon's oldest niece, Cheryl, and her younger sister, Victoria. They would play there when Simon's only sister, Connie, ten years his senior, and her husband, Derek, came for visits from the town of Tulip, where they'd moved to be closer to Derek's parents.

According to JT's will, the oldest child in each generation inherited responsibility for the property—the *mansion*, as everyone called it,

qualifying for such a grand name due to its size, not for any hint of elegance. Responsibility fell to Lenny upon the death of Aunt Opal, sister to Lenny's father, a woman who'd spent her final years as caretaker and lone resident and who now guarded the property from a prominent position in the family cemetery, her grave marked by a delicately carved angel, its marble head bowed with graceful hands placed over a sorrowful face, the less-than-life-sized statue sitting on a granite platform, now marred by vandals who sometime in recent years had spray-painted block letters on its edge that read, if one were to look closely enough, *witch*.

Sibley residents had long accused Simon's great-aunt of ungodly behavior, commenting on the fact that she hung talismans from trees around the property, even though many of the area's residents performed a similar act of superstition, placing colored bottles on the ends of dead branches in the belief they captured evil spirits and prevented misfortune. On Halloween, Aunt Opal strung an effigy of JT on the red oak to ward off trick-or-treaters. Aunt Opal knew the good people of Sibley were more likely to leave her alone if they feared being cursed

for walking across the property, and Opal valued privacy, finding solace in her life as a recluse.

Lenny had once confided to Simon that if he had been JT, the Union soldier would have become garden fertilizer. In later years, Lenny claimed he had moved the family from Little Rock to Sibley following Opal's death because his older brother didn't want to move into the mansion. Lenny portrayed the move as a noble act of family duty when in fact a darker truth underpinned the decision.

Following the integration of Little Rock High School in 1957, Lenny couldn't tolerate the idea of Simon and Connie attending mixed-race schools. Moving to Sibley all but guaranteed the continuation of segregation, given the makeup of the population at the time. If descendants of the men and women enslaved by Sibley's founders had stayed behind after the Civil War, they were long gone, chased away by Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan, prevented from reentry by the imposing statue of General Marmaduke that stood in front of the county courthouse, a monument to the battle fought for preservation of the South at Jenkin's Ferry on the Saline River, a conflict symbolizing the

dangers of slave rebellion in the eyes of Sibley's residents, since it was well known that former slaves had fought and died alongside Northern soldiers.

When Simon came home from school during the second grade and announced that he had made a new friend, a boy with brown skin and eyes different from his, Lenny flew into a rage and stormed off to speak to the principal, who told Lenny that Simon's newfound friend had recently moved with his family from Hawaii to work in a local company analyzing defunct bauxite strip mines that threatened Sibley's groundwater. Flummoxed, Lenny informed Simon that if a classmate wasn't white, he wasn't to play with them. Simon refused to take the order to heart and never shunned a girl or boy for not looking the same as him. Simon knew what it was like to be different, and a boy from Zenon must always be on guard.

Racism wasn't the only source of Lenny's rage. He especially disliked people who failed to behave the way they should. That Lenny despised homosexuals became evident whenever Liberace appeared on television. "Damn faggot's queer as a three-dollar bill," Lenny would

rail, wagging a finger at the sequined performer, outbursts that instilled fear in Simon's young heart, for Simon identified with the showmanship of the pianist. Those were the earliest stirrings of what later became apparent: if Simon wasn't from Zenon, then he was a stranger to his friends, because his desires were different from theirs. Words from *Forbidden Planet* echoed in his thoughts: "My evil self is at that door, and I have no power to stop it!"

Just as Vivian had supported Simon's art, she recognized Simon's love of music, allowing him to take piano lessons from a woman who lived farther down the unpaved road that led from Sibley's town center to the mansion. The teacher's home was within sight of Simon's front porch, where Vivian would stand as she watched him leave for his lessons, her confidence that Simon would find his way heightened by the prominence of the neighbor's white gravel driveway, causing it to stand out against the orange dust of the road.

After a few lessons, the woman told Vivian that if Simon kept practicing, he might become a professional, so quick was the boy to associate the notes on the page with the piano's black and white keys.

Lenny heard about the neighbor's praise at dinner one night and said, "No son of mine's going to be a goddamn sissy pianist."

And so ended Simon's potential career as a future Liberace.

CHAPTER TWO

God is a judgmental being, always ready to punish his children. Such was the viewpoint Simon internalized as a boy, beliefs reinforced each Sunday by the pastor of the Southern Baptist church his family attended, roots going back to its very founding. The pastor, an admirer of the colonial theologian Jonathan Edwards, who articulated the belief that all people are sinners in the hands of an angry God, claimed that God demonstrated his concern for humanity through judgment, which he described as an act of love toward disobedient children.

Lifting his head from the scribbles of flying saucers and space aliens he'd drawn in pencil on the margins of the church bulletin, Simon began to understand from the pastor's sermons how Lenny justified his

prejudices. On a succession of Sundays, the pastor made it clear that some people were better than others, quoting Ephesians: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ,” and, adding his own touch, explained that slaves were in bondage because their skin color indicated a curse from Genesis: the mark of Cain.

Lenny declaimed against all sorts of people of whom he disapproved, using the words *queer* and *faggot* to identify any male who wasn’t masculine enough or any woman who wore pants, at least until the invention of culottes, which confounded his arguments and led to Lenny’s use of new terms for women who wore them. Vivian, in a rare moment of defiance, stood up to Lenny and said that culottes were not pants and that she planned to wear them whether Lenny approved or not.

In young Simon’s mind, God and Lenny merged—one in heaven, all aware, observing every action, listening to every thought; the other on earth, limited, unaware, avoidable. If God knew what Simon did with his friend Ernie during sleepovers, he would make an exception

(Simon was from Zenon, after all), but Lenny must never find out.

Though the word *homosexual* had not entered Simon's vocabulary, he understood what the pastor meant when preaching about Sodom and Gomorrah. Nothing put fire in the man's eyes like rage against sex between men. The sermons began to sink in, and Simon soon began to doubt that God would continue to excuse his behavior. After all, Ernie was a human from Earth, even if Simon was from Zenon. Simon began paying closer attention to the pastor's infrequent sermons about God's compassion, explaining that sin is forgiven through the blood of Christ. Simon learned the words to the congregation's favorite hymns, "Are You Washed in the Blood?" and "White as Snow." Simon began to feel the need for salvation, moved by the choir's singing and the pastor's weekly call to confession:

Come home, come home

Ye who are weary, come home

Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling

Calling, "O sinner, come home."

Simon needed to confess the sin taught as a secret game by Ernie's older brother and conveyed to Simon when Ernie explored his body in a secluded spot deep in the woods. Simon knew that what he and Ernie did was wrong, and he hoped that being washed in the blood would provide forgiveness; but even more urgently, he hoped to wash away the desire that increased each time they played their games. Simon enjoyed the intimate acts with his friend, acts that created a profound sense of guilt.

Hoping that he might be wrong about God's expectations, Simon questioned his Sunday School teacher when she explained that God is love. "If God is love," Simon asked, "how can some love be wrong?" Simon had recently learned that the two men who lived next door to Ernie were together because they loved each other. At least, that was the answer one of them had given when Ernie asked why they didn't have wives. Ernie mentioned the neighbor's response to his mother, who made sure he understood that men were not allowed to love in that way, that the neighbors were committing sin, and that God would judge them in his own time. The Sunday School teacher answered Si-

mon's question by explaining that the devil corrupts God's love by giving people lustful thoughts.

Simon remembered the message of *Forbidden Planet*—that what is within us can destroy us—and decided that what really mattered was what people found out about us. If only Professor Mobius had not learned of his daughter's attraction to the captain, all might have been well on planet Krell. Simon would never mention his desires to Lenny or Vivian. But what about the all-knowing God? Simon could no longer sustain the fantasy that he was a boy from Zenon. The rules applied to him, just as they did to others.

On a Sunday morning, as the choir sang, “Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, ‘O sinner, come home,’” the pressure became too great. All of Simon’s Sunday School friends had made the journey down the aisle to salvation, and now it was his turn. Breaking free of Vivian’s hand, Simon left the pew and walked toward the pulpit, toward the pastor, who met him with a reassuring embrace, whispering into his ear, “Do you accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal lord and savior?” Simon burst into tears, sure that the devil would

leave his heart as Jesus entered. God knew what Simon had done, but he would forgive. Upon his salvation, Simon would be free from unhol- ly desires, as innocent as they were at his young age—he had not yet celebrated his tenth birthday.

Congregants came from all over central Arkansas to attend the church Simon's family attended, not least because of its famous sanc- tuary, illuminated by brilliant hues filtering through twenty-foot stained glass windows imported from Germany, each panel depicting stories from the Bible. The windows proceeded chronologically, start- ing with Eve taking fruit from a serpent, then moving to Noah adrift in a sea of darkness, releasing a raven to test for land; Joseph parading his multicolored coat before jealous brothers; Daniel praying heaven- ward, surrounded by lions as tame as lambs; Ezekiel riding to heaven on a vehicle not unlike a flying saucer; and a pregnant Mary aglow in the presence of Gabriel. From there the windows progressed to an an- gry Jesus overturning moneylenders' tables, smiting an olive tree, and telling his chosen that one of them would betray him, then ending in the largest panel, filling an entire window: Jesus nailed to a cross. Ac-

cording to what Simon understood, the church believed in the cleansing ablution of Christ's blood, though resurrection seldom factored into Sunday sermons, other than to mention, in passing, that Jesus had conquered death, and those who believed in him would be carried to heaven after his return to judge humanity.

A choir loft, spacious enough to seat fifty choristers, rose behind an alabaster pulpit framed by green velvet curtains, which remained closed, except during baptisms, when they opened to reveal a four-foot wall of glass holding back sacred waters depicted on a painted diorama of the river Jordan, the image complete with desert sands and waving palm trees, as if the minister in his hip boots and white baptismal gown, weighted at the bottom edge to keep the material from floating, stood in at the midst of a blossoming oasis.

Twelve boys awaited redemption the Sunday evening Simon's name appeared on the schedule—the church's tradition required boys and girls to participate on alternate Sundays. A middle-aged man, handsome and fit, dressed in dark slacks with a crisp seam and a white shirt with French cuffs (Simon noticed the brilliant opal settings of the

cufflinks) escorted Simon into a changing room, similar to the fitting rooms at the J. C. Penney where Vivian bought his school clothes. The man shut the door for privacy as Simon began to undress.

“You won’t be naked under the gown,” the man assured, as Simon stood before him in his underpants. The man took a pair of boy-sized jockey shorts from his back pocket. “Let’s slip you into these so yours will be dry when you return.”

Before Simon had a chance to comply, the man hooked his thumbs through the elastic waistband of his shorts and tugged them to the floor. Simon ground his teeth to resist the feel of the man’s hairy arm raking across his body as he reached around his waist to insert each foot through the shorts. Simon feared for his salvation as his body reacted, and the man pinched the front of his shorts through the white gown. He had just slipped the gauzy material over Simon’s head and made sure the hem fell evenly around the ankles. “This will go away as soon as you step into the cold water,” the man said with a nervous laugh. “Anyway, the gown will keep it hidden.”

Boys had begun to queue near an antechamber outside the baptis-

mal font. As each boy received the go-ahead, indicated by a hand signal from the attendant, the next boy in line passed through a door, having been instructed beforehand to carefully descend the font's three steps into the water—steps representing acceptance of the Trinity. As Simon left the dressing room to take his place in line, frightened the other boys would see evidence of his sinful heart, the man bent down and whispered, “Come back after you’re baptized, and I’ll dry you off.” Simon nodded weakly and joined the procession. Contrary to what the man had said about the gown, Simon clearly saw that each boy wore shorts similar to his and wondered if their attendants had also helped them change out of their clothes.

The moment of his salvation approaching, Simon found himself tainted by the thoughts he hoped to escape, desires he knew were wrong, inflamed by the touch of the man in the dressing room. Simon struggled with his feelings until he concluded that the man was Satan; the devil had made a last attempt to sway him from salvation.

The boy in front of Simon in the procession climbed from the waters on the other side of the baptismal font with the help of an attendant. Si-

mon began his descent down the treacherous steps, finding himself in water almost as deep as he was tall; his gown, puffed with air, caused him to float toward the pastor, anchored by his hip boots and weighted garment. Simon fought to keep the fabric of his gown from rising around him, frantically chopping the cold water. In a quick motion, the minister pulled Simon forward, placed a rough hand over his nose and mouth, and dipped him backward, invoking the names of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The minister raised Simon's head from the water and set him in the direction of the exit. The attendant grabbed Simon's arm and pulled him from the water, the gown quickly deflating into a second skin.

"Is it done?" Simon asked, to a slight chuckle from the attendant. Simon had forgotten to repent during the minister's appeal to the tri-une God. Remembering instructions given by his Sunday School teacher that salvation depended upon repentance at that moment of submersion, Simon wondered if salvation had taken effect. He barely recalled the sequence of events that had just occurred, his focus remaining on the gown that adhered so tightly to his flesh.

The attendant provided an arm for balance, placing sandals at Simon's feet and pointing toward the dressing room, down a corridor of linoleum tiles with rubber footprints to provide traction and lead the way. Simon spotted the man from the dressing room assisting another boy and scurried as fast as he could to reach his clothes, finding them folded on a bench, except for the promised dry shorts. Simon scrambled from his wet garments, dried off with the flimsy towel provided, and slipped into his suit pants—rough against his body—tucked in his shirt, slipped on his socks, and stepped into his black loafers, his heart racing as he joined the other boys in the room where the parents had been told to wait.

“It’s a blessing your boy found Jesus at such a young age,” the man from the dressing room said to Vivian. The man parted his lips slightly as he looked down at Simon, patting his coat pocket where the underpants made a slight bulge.

Vivian smiled, taking Simon by the hand and leading him into the sanctuary, too briskly for Simon to keep up easily due to the roughness of the chafing suit. If Jesus had entered Simon’s heart during submer-

sion, he'd left just as quickly, recognizing an unrepentant soul—or so Simon surmised. An overwhelming sense of disappointment clouded Simon's mind.

Vivian never understood why Simon threw tantrums at the mere suggestion that he attend church services following his baptism, flying into fits of rage that no threat of punishment would quieten. But Simon could not bear the thought of sitting in the sanctuary, pondering the miracle of salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ as he scanned every face for the man from the dressing room, damnable hoping that if they met again, the man would wrap his muscular arms around his waist, and Simon again would know the touch of a caressing hand.

CHAPTER THREE

Vivian never used the word *boyfriend* when referring to the relationship between Simon and Thad after they arrived (Simon used the word *escaped*) from Hollywood, Simon having lost to addiction everything except the contents of his house, belongings that Thad, Simon's tall and spritely boyfriend, transported to Sibley in a rental truck, volunteering to help in the hope that Simon would take him back after a period of estrangement that saw Thad go into rehab for dependence on cocaine, followed by Simon. Vivian preferred to think of Thad as Simon's companion. A relationship as close as *companion* allowed Vivian, when she saw a certain look in their eyes and knew they were about to sneak a kiss, to divert her gaze and pretend it was merely a *companionable* gesture.

Connie and Derek never visited the mansion without asking Thad when he planned to go back to Hollywood. Only gradually did Simon's sister and brother-in-law realize the nature of their relationship. Connie's first thought was one of gratitude that Lenny had not lived to see it. Lenny and Vivian had suffered enough during Simon's involvement with a fringe religious group—the Moonies, people called them—listening as relatives condemned Simon, enduring the pity of friends horrified that an Antichrist, and an Asian one at that, had stolen Simon's young adult life. Connie blamed Simon's rejection of his Christian heritage for his later descent into cocaine use and, now, homosexuality. Lenny's heart surely would have given out sooner if he had known the truth about Simon.

Derek avoided thinking about the relationship between Simon and Thad because it contradicted his belief that his work with Connie, opposing Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church by traveling a lecture circuit to conservative church groups, would result in Simon's rescue and his return to Christ, never acknowledging that Simon seemed to have left the church long before his teenage years. Further confound-

ing Derek, Simon had been married to a Japanese woman while a member of the Unification Church. Simon and Masako had visited after their marriage, and they seemed happy. Masako played dolls with Cheryl and Victoria, instantly winning them over and leading to Simon's nieces calling her Aunt Masako. She similarly charmed everyone else in the family, even disarming Lenny, who had responded with a racial slur from World War II when Simon announced his betrothal. Masako, who had been a nurse before joining the church, gave Lenny advice about changing to a healthier diet, suggesting foods Lenny actually liked and that Vivian could prepare, followed by what Lenny described as the best shoulder rub he had ever received—shiatsu, which Masako had studied as an apprentice in Japan. Masako won over Vivian by helping her prepare dinner the night Simon and Masako stayed at the mansion.

Derek concluded that Simon's drug use, and then his decision to divorce Masako after leaving the apostate church, were steps along Simon's path to godlessness. Derek would never give up hope that Simon might again return to Christ. Until then, he would refrain from

further condemnation and accept Thad as Simon's friend, but no more than that.

Since leaving rehab, Simon had begun to think about the lucrative business he had established in Los Angeles after working for an Italian entrepreneur introduced to him by his friends from a law firm he had hired while still in the church. What opportunities he had let slip, and what a disaster at the end when he'd entrusted daily affairs to his secretary, Charlotte, who, while Simon was en route from Hollywood to Sibley, had stolen over \$200,000 when it arrived from a deal Simon had concluded with a company in Spain. Charlotte could have had no idea she was taking money the Spaniards wanted Simon to use for procurement of new films to release on the Spanish video market. Though Simon had hoped to keep his own involvement legal, he knew the Spaniards intended to use the movies to launder profits from drug smuggling and distribution of pornography into countries where such films were banned. Simon didn't know where Charlotte had gone after the theft, but he knew that Rudy, the mutual friend who'd introduced them, had helped her.

During rehab, Simon's counselor had advised him to reflect on his life and learn to accept the many experiences that had led him to depend on cocaine. Worry about Charlotte's theft and the dread of being pursued once the Spaniards realized he had disappeared threatened to derail Simon's path of recovery, but as much as possible, Simon tried to follow his counselor's advice and continue to examine his life, as he had done during rehab. He realized how the prospect of living a celibate life as a follower of Sun Myung Moon had given him permission to set aside his personal struggles, celibacy being the sacrifice required of members until Moon chose a spouse for them. Because the group emphasized the importance of marriage, Simon came to believe that anything interfering with the union of a husband and wife, especially homosexuality, was Satanic by definition, and he wholeheartedly believed that on the day Sun Myung Moon joined him to his betrothed in holy marriage, the oppression of his feelings for other men would be lifted, and the salvation promised in youth through baptism would find realization through the rituals of the new messiah. When nothing changed following the church's ceremonies—communion wine spiked

with a drop of Sun Myung Moon's blood, caning in an act reminiscent of Jacob wrestling God's angel at the Ford of Jabbok, the mass wedding ceremony itself, when the messiah and his wife sprinkled holy water on the participants—Simon never lost hope for the realization of his long-awaited miracle. But after he went back to his work helping lawyers prepare an appeal to Sun Myung Moon's conviction on charges of income tax evasion and conspiracy to defraud the IRA, affections for his own sex grew even stronger. Simon descended into despair and, within months, left the church, choosing to party with his newfound friends from the law firm—Scott Mansfield, a young gay lawyer, and Sandra Banks, the firm's ribald secretary, introduced him to the dangerous comfort of cocaine—and male hustlers.

Vivian knew nothing of Simon's struggles—with faith, drugs, or sexuality—but she recognized the deep loneliness Simon experienced when the thousands of church members he had called brothers and sisters turned their backs on him after he left the group. She was happy that Simon and Thad were together, though she could never have comprehended their ordeal with cocaine or the near-murderous fights in which they

engaged along the way. Vivian wished Lenny were alive now that Simon had come home, unaffiliated with the strange religion that had torn the family apart; she thought Lenny would have understood Simon's struggle with addiction, and she would have helped Lenny find a way to accept Thad.

Vivian understood how desperately Lenny's death had affected Simon, happening so soon after he'd abandoned his faith. Reconciliation might not have been possible, but Simon mourned the fact he would never have the chance to try.