

**Porcelain Skin:
Mental Break**

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Chapter One: Empty

Screams echoed around the girl from all directions. Soon, the cries of a woman joined the cacophony of wails. The girl sat hunched over with her arms wrapped around her, and her fingers tangled within her fiery red hair. With each new cry, her grip got tighter. "What's going on?" she thought, uncertain of where she was.

Then, her thoughts were scrambled once more, this time by the deafening shrieks of a young boy.

"Help me!" cried the boy.

The girl freed her hands from her hair to cover her ears from the disarray of everyone around her, but before she could do so, there was a loud bang. The boy's screaming sobs disappeared. Then one by one, each crying soul around her met the same fate. She froze in fear, unable to move and cover her ears from the horror that now surrounded her. The smell of gunpowder was overwhelming. With eyes widened in fear, she didn't see anything happening near her; yet the lights in the room began to slowly flash as each loud sound, some booming like fireworks, grew closer.

It was all becoming too much for her to handle. Within seconds, the white walls flooded into red, and she was lying on the ground. Her stomach began to twist and turn within her in excruciating pain, and her head was aching. A powerful force had thrown her to the moist floor, taking away her breath and creating an eerie ringing in her ears. She felt cold.

Humming could be heard floating across the air. It sounded familiar, but no solid memories could come to mind. The only things the girl could remember of the humming was heartbreak, betrayal, and loss. It felt as if the poor girl's heart was about to explode. She slowly turned her head to see a cloaked woman approaching her. The humming was coming from this

mysterious woman, and the sight of her made the excruciating pain in the girl's stomach worse. It was at this moment the girl realized that the cloaked woman was holding a gun. The sight of the gun compelled the red-haired girl to touch her stomach. As she did so, the humming quietly began to fade into the same eerie ringing that had filled her ears before. The girl lifted her hand to see what was coming from her stomach. To her horror, a crimson red covered her hand. Her eyes widened at the realization of her blood. She tried to scream to no avail. She suddenly looked down at her stomach. Her breathing completely stopped at the sight of blood bubbling profusely out of her like a spring. No air was coming out nor going into her lungs. The girl could feel herself drowning as she lay there. Soon, a grin slowly formed on the cloaked woman's face. Gradually the girl's vision began to fade away, and now only the ear-splitting ringing remained.

Ring, ring, ring.

The girl's eyes shot open as she gasped for air. Her body had not realized she had just been dreaming. She sat up in haste as she began coughing uncontrollably. As she coughed, she fought through her tears of fear and looked around. She was sitting on her bed in her compact apartment. This filled her with relief. She was beginning to feel safe. As she calmed down, so did her coughing. She was soon able to control her breathing better, taking in deep breaths to relax herself. She reached over and grabbed her cup of water and took a drink.

I'm safe. It was all just a dream. She told herself; however, she still felt on edge ready to break down and cry, as she usually did in the morning. She had the same nightmare for as far back as she could remember, never certain why or how it came into being. All she knew was she wanted it to go away. She wanted at least one real night of sleep, but that felt impossible. No prescription ever worked. No "old tricks" like drinking a glass of warm milk worked either. Nothing worked. She hoped that after all this time that maybe she would grow numb to it all, but

she never did. The only thing that gave her comfort after her nightmare was the annoying ringing that her alarm would send-off. It always worked to snap her out. As she reached over and shut it off, finally comfortable to do so, read 8:45am.

She got to her feet, staggered over to the window, and pulled aside the curtains. The sun was beginning to show from behind the towering buildings that surrounded her home. She shut her golden chestnut eyes, feeling what little heat she could get from it. The warmth touching her freckled silky face gave her comfort. It was the little things like this that would aid her in calming down, yet it was the same little things that would set her off, making her cry. She had become frail after the loss of her father. He was always there for her when she needed someone. He was her hero, but he wasn't there anymore. He was gone, forever. She knew, at one point, she was normal. She didn't always have repetitive nightmares. She used to be just like everyone else, once, but that now felt like some make-believe dream.

The girl's name was Samantha Winely, better known as Sam. She was in her mid-twenties, and she lived alone. Every week, twice a week, she would have to go and meet with her therapist. These appointments had been a part of her life as long as the nightmares. She couldn't remember a time when she didn't have to go.

As Sam sat in the lobby waiting for her therapist to come to get her; she watched the Mollies, Swordtails, and Guppies swim around happily in their small tank. Something about the colorful fish calmed her and made her feel balanced. Her thoughts finally felt as if they could think of something else.

That tank seems too small for all those fish... I honestly don't think they'll all live by the next time I come back... I feel like those fish. In a small space with too much going on, and not getting any better. Will I end up like those fish? Will I die soon?

Sam's thoughts were broken by the receptionist.

"Samantha Winely, Mrs. Jacob is ready for you." said the lady at the front desk.

Sam looked at the receptionist and thanked her for informing her; nonetheless, Sam found her quite annoying. Maybe it was how the receptionist spoke to her like she was beneath her, even when Sam saw her outside the office, or how she held herself. Sam couldn't help but feel as if the receptionist was fake. That she was not the pretty lady who sat behind that desk and cared for her job, but a cruel woman who only thought of herself and no one else.

Sam's attention changed from the receptionist to a small boy walking out of Mrs. Jacob's office holding a very odd stuffed toy. It had long bunny ears, as long as the body, and its body had the appearance of a beanbag with no arm but had stubby pointed legs. The eyes were each about the size of a golf ball. They looked alive and moving. It appeared as if the doll looked right at Sam and was watching her.

It's just the lighting making them move. It's an optical illusion. It isn't really alive. Sam thought to herself.

The sight of that doll sent shivers down her spine, but as she watched the boy, she noticed how tightly he was holding onto it. He held it as if it was the most vital thing in the world. Next to the boy was a young woman, possibly 14 to 15 of age, who was now walking with the boy. She must have been in the room with him. The two looked to be siblings or cousins.

They look familiar... isn't that the boy who was attacked in the woods a few weeks back?

Sam felt an urgency to keep her eyes on them. Last she had heard there were still no leads to who

had attacked the boy, or how the incident had occurred. All the media was able to share was the missing boy had been found at the bottom of a well, somehow, still alive.

“Strange...” she whispered as she watched them leave through the front door with a peculiar man who looked exhausted.

There have been a lot of mysterious things going on in Trenton lately. Yes, bad things happen to people all the time, but something about it all doesn't feel right. It feels like someone is wanting it all to happen. As if someone is trying to put a mask over everyone's face.

Sam stared at the front door as if waiting for the boy and his doll to come back when Mrs. Jacob stepped out of her office holding a file. “Write in for next week Vincent and Vivian Whittington to come in for an appointment at 10:00 am, Tuesday,” said Mrs. Jacob to her receptionist.

“Yes, ma’am,” answered the receptionist as she took note. Then she began to plug it into her computer.

“Sam,” said Mrs. Jacob, “you can come in now.”

It took Sam a moment, but she broke herself from watching the door walk into Mrs. Jacob's office. As Sam did Mrs. Jacob followed behind her and shut the door, now holding Sam's file in her hands.

Mrs. Jacob sat in her dark brown armchair on the left side of the coffee table. As Sam took a seat in a comfortable blue chair across from Mrs. Jacob.

"So, Sam, tell me how you've been for the last three days. Anything new?"

Sam looked at Mrs. Jacob with a blank face. "Nothing new," she said as she looked out the window. "Everything is still the same. Even the nightmares."

"Well, do you feel worse compared to last time? Have you noticed anything that seems different to you, whether it's about you or not?"

"Everything is still the same. No new shows, no new clothes, no new job, no new nothing! Nothing has changed!" snapped Sam as her mood quickly shifted to anger.

Mrs. Jacob began to jot on the yellow notebook in Sam's file, "Maybe we can try to change something. Like starting up a new hobby or going on a walk at a certain time of day. Something different but routine"

"Maybe I can look for a new TV show," Sam suggested to show compliance, but her mind wondered more honestly, *"You don't care about me. You just want my money. You have grown sick of me! I can see it. Not only that, but you're also hoping for me to snap, so you can finally send me away to the nuthouse, just like you did to my mother."*

Sam got up and began to leave the room. Mrs. Jacob's voice halted her beeline, "Sam, have you called your mother? I think she might be worried sick about you."

"It's hard to worry about someone who doesn't care about you anymore. My mother only cares about her other daughter, her dead daughter. Not me!" barked Sam as she left the room.

She hastily made her way through the front doors of the building and went to her car. She was angry with her therapist again. Sam never felt as if she was getting the help she needed. She felt like she was a Guinea pig to Mrs. Jacob. Nowadays, being in the same room as Mrs. Jacob made Sam feel like she wasn't even human. She hated it. She wanted to feel normal again, but then again, she, herself, couldn't quite remember what normal felt like. It had been so long.

An uncomfortable feeling, almost like a sickness, came over her as she sat in the driver's seat. Something wasn't right. She took a deep breath and started her car.

Sam pushed the feeling aside, not wanting to think about it right now. "I better get to work." she said in a tired voice.

She got out of her car and walked up to the doors to her job. She didn't really like working at the bank, but she needed the paycheck and according to Mrs. Jacob stability was "good for her". Sam had put thought into why she didn't like her job, and her conclusion of it all was seeing happy people. Something about people with a positive outlook on life made her sick. How they seemed to have the answer, no matter how horrible things seem to become. She hated them. Despite her hate for them, she still wore a smile on her face and would pretend to care about what they were saying or doing with their lives.

It was 7:20 pm when she finally clocked out. Another boring day of doing nothing but sitting behind a desk doing paperwork and making sure everything was balanced.

As she walked to her car, she felt a tap on her shoulder, and was stopped by a coworker.

Ugh, I almost escaped.

"Hey, Sam," Marco said with a smile, "you want to go and get a drink with me and some of the others?"

She didn't like how happy he always looked. He always had a smile on his face, and something about that seemed creepy to her. "No," she answered, "I need to go visit my mom."

"Okay, well, tell her I say Hi," Marco's smile faded in disappointment. It was clear he was hoping she would come along.

"I will." Sam began to walk back to the car again. "Bye, Marco."

“Bye.” He slowly walked backward. Once he saw her get into her car, he turned around and started his way back to the bank where everyone else was outside waiting for him.

Sam let out a sigh. She wanted friends and a life, but she didn't want them either. What she really wanted was to be loved and protected by the family she had left. Even that seemed impossible to her now. She hated it. No one at work knew about her mother, and she didn't want them to know. She wanted it all to remain a secret forever, which, even that, didn't seem long enough.

Sam started her car and drove off. She drove to the place where her mother was being kept. It was a lovely place, well taken care of with impeccable curb appeal. Trees surrounded the manicured front lawn and flower beds giving a welcoming vibe to passers, but it also had a history, a dark one. Not all things are as beautiful on the inside; looks can be very deceiving. Being there always made her feel uncomfortable and upset, but she still went to see her mother. The hospital where her mother was looked quite similar to the Metropolitan State Hospital in Waltham, Massachusetts. Simply looking at a place like this made Samantha's skin crawl. It didn't give her any feeling of safety or serenity, but the feeling of danger and fear.

Sam forced herself up the stairs and through the front doors. As she passed over the threshold, a wave of freezing air and a feeling of dread washed over her. The halls had an unsettling aura about them. She watched doctors, nurses, and a few visitors walking around like drones.

Continuing on, she pushed herself to keep walking down the corridor leading to the front desk. She spoke to the nurse about visiting her mother. The nurse recognized her and led Sam up two sets of stairs to the visiting room where a black piano was being played by one of the patients and a doctor. The song was calm and peaceful. The walls of this room were sky blue.

There were a few spots on the walls where murals were painted long ago, and a few photographs hung of previous employees. There were tall windows where some patients sat and watched the outside world work like nothing was ever wrong.

Sam looked over and saw her mother sitting with the group of others watching out the windows, but her mother, unlike the others, was watching a bird bouncing from side to side of the windowsill, trying to find a place to make its home. Her mother looked absent-minded and lost. She was only a shell of her previous self. It hurt Sam to see her mother like this. She remembered how beautiful she used to be until that day. Now, nothing was the same.

Slowly taking a step toward her mother, she stopped. She couldn't go near her. She felt unwanted and unwelcome. Just as she was about to take a step back and leave, a nurse came up from behind her. "Miss Winely," spoke the nurse, causing Sam to jump as the nurse placed her hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," said the nurse, quickly pulling her hand away from Sam. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's fine," sighed Sam, trying not to show how badly spooked she was by the nurse.

"Well, your mother has been doing wonderful lately, but she woke up from her nap after lunch today in a panic. We had no choice but to give her something to calm her down," said the nurse, being polite and calm.

Sam gave her a nod in response. She didn't want to talk.

"Would you like me to walk over and tell her you're here?" asked the nurse.

"Yes, please. That would be lovely." answered Sam as she forced the words out of her mouth.

The nurse walked up to Sam's mother and slowly gained her attention. She knew that if she moved too quickly, she was going to make Mrs. Winely panic as she had done earlier. "Mrs. Winely," said the nurse.

No answer.

"Mrs. Winely?" she said again.

Sam's mother slowly looked over to the nurse as if confused with why she was here.

"Your daughter is here to visit," said the nurse with a kind smile.

Sam's mother ignored the nurse's comment and turned back looking out the window as if she had said nothing. The nurse turned to Sam and nodded and walked away. Sam then slowly walked up to her mother and placed her mother's hand on her hand.

"Hey, Momma," whispered Sam.

Her mother just kept looking out the window as if she wasn't there.

"I came to see how you were doing. I know it has been a while since I last visited but work hasn't given me a break lately," lied Sam. She didn't want to tell her mother the truth. She didn't want to tell her that she was terrified of the building or that she never felt welcome when she came to visit. "Momma, I was thinking of buying a house, so we can live there together. How does that sound?"

No answer.

"We'll be able to grow a big garden in the backyard like we did when I was little, and..." She stopped. Sam knew her mother wasn't listening. She felt as if she was only wasting her breath. Her phone buzzed. A text: it was a reminder of what to get from the store. She lied, telling her mother that it was work texting her to come in and help right away. She got up and walked out. In a way, deep down, she felt bad for leaving her mother there. Really, though, she

felt more hate than anything. She blamed Mrs. Jacob for her mother being trapped in a place like this.

When Sam got home, she felt tears beginning to fall on her already cold cheeks. She wanted to help her mother somehow, but, just like the doctors, she couldn't do anything but talk to her even though she wasn't listening.