

GARY LEE PULLMAN



SECRETS
OF SEA
ISLAND

BOOK 1 OF A CHARLOTTE HASTINGS EXPOSÉ

ALSO BY GARY LEE PULLMAN

A Charlotte Hastings Exposé series

(Urban Fantasy/Paranormal Suspense)

Monsters of New York (Book 2)

Carnage at Chesapeake Bay (Book 3)

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A Whole World Full of

Hurt(featuring Raven Westbrook)

(Urban Fantasy)

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An Adventure of the Old West series
(Westerns)

Bane Messenger, Bounty Hunter
(prequel)

Good with a Gun (Book 1)

The Valley of the Shadow (Book 2)

Blood Mountain (Book 3)

On the Track of Vengeance (Book 4)

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SECRETS OF SEA ISLAND

GARY LEE PULLMAN

CAMPBELL AND ROGERS PRESS

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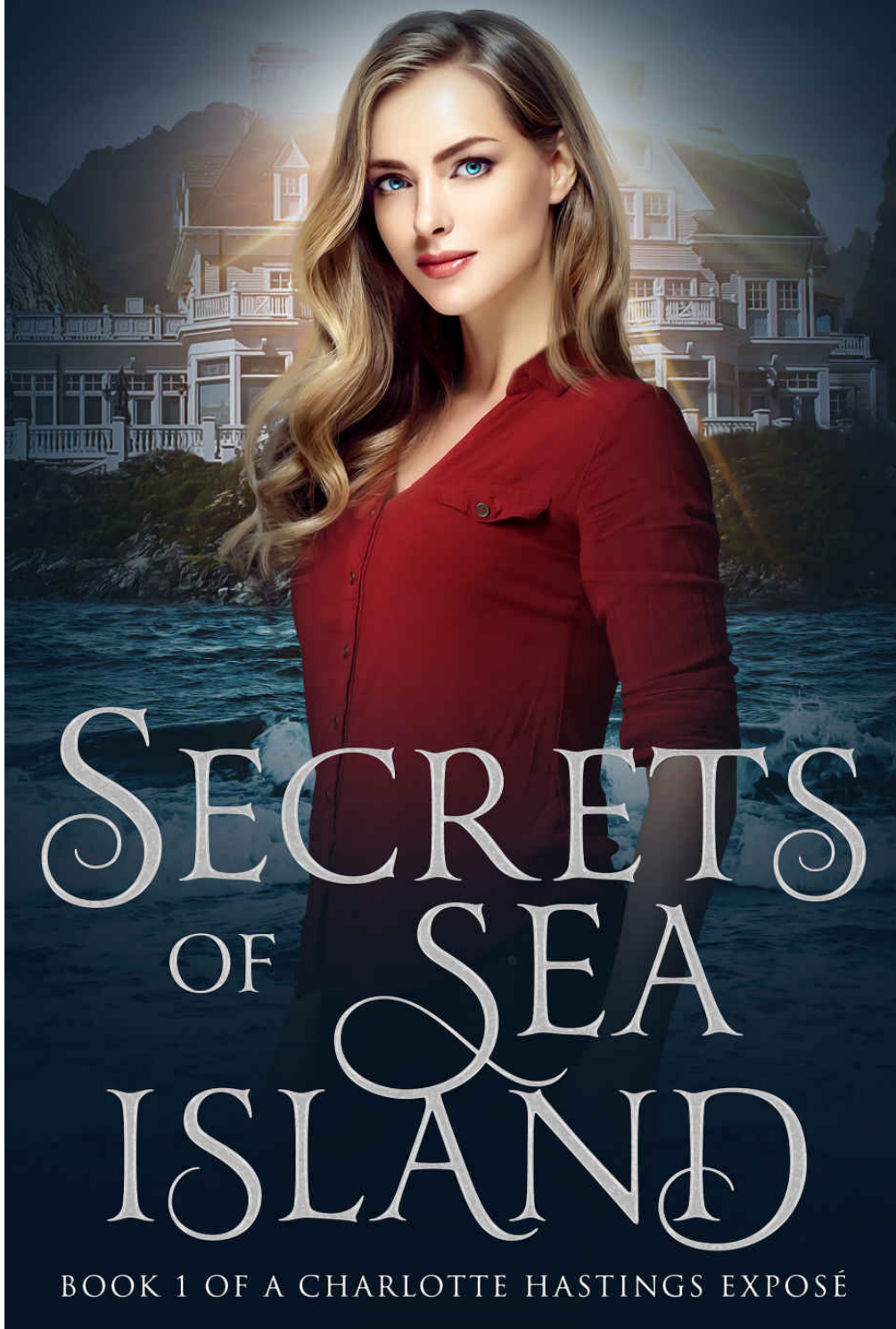
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GARY LEE PULLMAN



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CHAPTER 1

IN “THE PHILOSOPHY OF Composition,” Edgar Allan Poe states that an author shouldn’t put pen to paper (or fingerprint to keyboard, I’m sure he’d add, if he’d written his essay today), until the end of the tale is known. Then, he argues, every element of the developing tale should add to the single effect that the story, as a whole, produces.

That’s not exactly the approach I learned at Columbia, but it works for me. Like Poe, before I can write a single installment of a series of articles for my column, I have to write the *whole* story, beginning, middle, and end, as if I were writing a novel.

Otherwise, I can’t see the structure or discern a theme, and my writing’s unfocused and meanders. That’s why, before I begin to write about the revenant of Sea Island Resort, I’m writing this full account, just as it happened, exactly as I myself experienced it.

As I recall the eerie, often horrific incidents that befell me and other guests of the island resort, several strike me again, just as they had then, when they’d actually occurred. I feel the

same dreadful, the same terror, but one of the incidents, more than any other, haunts me.

Try as I may—and I have, I *have*—I can't banish the terrible image of the burning man. He stands before me yet, in my mind, as he stands in that hideous photograph, leering at me, hatred and rage on his flickering features, fire all around him, as if he were peering at me across fields of fire, amid the molten terrain of hell.

The image and the memory it recalls, like the incident itself, haunts me, even now, as I type. Perhaps, *it* is the end of my story, if not of my torment, the theme of my ordeal, in the form of a man consumed, not by the flames of hell, but by the hatred and rage of his own vile, wicked soul

His smoldering eyes, like burning coals; the madness in his eyes, glinting like firelight; the raging inferno of his wrath, an all-consuming furnace—every aspect of him is like that of a fiend
damned by his every thought, his every deed, to an eternity in hell.

Somehow, he embodies the evil of that place. Yes! He's the one who brought evil upon the island, for it, like the mansion, was his. *He* fed souls to the great fires of hell. *His* dark ambitions
stoked the wrath of heaven, his and those of the witch. His poor wife, his unfortunate daughter, and his wretched son were more sinned against than sinning.

Yes, the tale that I tell ends with him, as it begins with him.

Ever

Now, I am ready to start.

* * *

“Charlotte?”

Curb the puppy dog eagerness to please, I told myself. Act professional.

I smiled—a smile couldn’t hurt, right? “Yes, Mr. Cullen?”

“Mr. Reynolds wants to see you.”

Why would the managing editor want to see me, a lowly intern? I tried to read my supervisor’s face for a clue. There was none. His expression was as impassive as ever.

“Now might be a good time,” Mr. Cullen suggested.

Flustered, I blushed, which made me *more* flustered. “Yes, sir.” I scurried on my way.

The elevator took forever to descend, of course, although, usually, it’s fast enough. When it reached my floor, the doors slid silently apart, and a man in a business suit and tie and a woman in the female equivalent of his attire stepped out, sharing a chuckle. They walked past me without so much as a nod. They’d probably seen the “Intern” badge on my jacket’s lapel—if they’d noticed me at all.

Thankful to have the car to myself, I hastily stepped inside and pushed the button for the top floor.

Again, I wondered why the managing editor wanted to see me. As far as I'd known just a few minutes ago, Mr. Reynolds didn't even know I existed. Had I made a terrible mistake? I couldn't see how. I'd been trusted with nothing more than checking facts and proofreading. Had I missed a false statement? A comma that should have been a semi-colon? A necessary, but omitted, word?

I recalled Mr. Cullen's caution the day I'd begun my internship: "We hold ourselves to the highest standards of journalism, both in reporting facts, instead of fake news, and in printing perfect prose." Looking rather stern, he'd added, "Every phrase and clause, every paragraph and article, otherwise, is potential fodder for libel and lawsuits, and Mr. Reynolds does not like either."

Mr. Cullen had made his point, and I'd been careful to check every fact. I saw to it, both literally and figuratively, that every "t" was crossed and every "i" was dotted.

The elevator stopped.

So did my heart.

At least, it *felt* like it did.

I was sweating, too, despite the air conditioning.

Great, I told myself, I'll look guilty before I say a word.

I started to step out, then checked myself.

I was at the tenth floor, not the top.

Two men stepped past me, into the car. Neither paid me any mind.

“Steer clear of Caesar,” the taller of the two, a wavy-haired blond in a gray suit with a tie a shade or two darker, advised his colleague. “I hear he’s mad at the world again—or *his* world, anyway, which, unfortunately, includes us.”

“Would that I were his Brutus,” the other, dark-haired man joked.

The blond held his hand over his heart, as if in agony. “*Et tu, Brutus? Then fall Caesar!*” he croaked.

“I doubt a dagger would faze Reynolds,” the would-be assassin pointed out. “He doesn’t *have* a heart.”

The elevator stopped, and the suits exited, laughing.

I saw nothing funny about their skit. In fact, I was *more* nervous now that I knew Mr. Reynolds was in a bad mood. Why had he sent for me, I wondered again? What had I done?

Nothing, as far as I knew. I hadn’t even had a chance *to* do anything wrong. What would the managing editor want to see me about, then? I mean, executives don’t call interns onto the carpet just to chat. I had to have done *something* awful.

The elevator stopped again, this time at the top floor.

The hallway was empty.

The doors along either side of the corridor were closed.

It was kind of creepy. The floor seemed abandoned. I felt like the last person alive.

"Alive"? *That* was a weird choice of words.

I gulped. Might as well face the music.

What was the worst that could happen? I could be fired. I might have to repeat my internship. Despite my grades, which were, well, fantastic, I might have trouble getting work after graduating next week. An unsuccessful internship could hurt my career before it got started.

"May I help you?"

The stern-looking woman behind the desk in Mr. Reynolds's outer office, his personal secretary, I guessed, looked at me, over her glasses, as if inspecting a loathsome insect.

"Mr. Reynolds sent for me."

The woman, Ms. Johnson, according to the nameplate on her barge-size desk, didn't look convinced. "Name?"

"Charlotte Hastings."

She performed a few keystrokes. "Have a seat. I'll let him know you're here."

"Thank you."

In my mind, I went over my time as an intern. Again, I couldn't think of anything that called for a reprimand—wait! The articles I'd written for my hometown newspaper, a series about my internship! Had I written something that could be seen as unflattering about my sponsor?

I couldn't recall anything. In fact, I'd gone out of my way to be positive about my experience. The editor, Mr. Billings, had published readers' responses about my articles. They were all positive. Most of them rooted for me, the hometown girl making her way in the world. If anything, Mr. Reynolds should appreciate the publicity, what there was of it. I mean, my hometown newspaper can't compare to New York's dailies, and it's an even longer way from Mr. Reynolds's publication.

I'd find out what my mistake was soon enough—and the penalty I'd have to pay for committing it.

The outer office was huge. Expensively furnished and tastefully decorated, it oozed confidence, authority, and success. Framed front-page, Pulitzer Prize-winning articles indicated the quality and professionalism of the paper's staff.

One day, I might be lucky enough to have one of my framed articles on the same walls with them.

Right, I told myself.

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CHAPTER 2

The intercom on Ms. Johnson's desk buzzed. "Mr. Reynolds will see you now," she said, not bothering even to glance in my direction.

Dwarfed by the tall, paneled walls, the giant chandelier in the center of the room, and the weight of prestige and authority that the grandeur of the office imposed, I focused on making my way across the room in a dignified manner. With a bit of effort, I managed to ease open the heavy, ornately carved door to Mr. Reynolds's inner sanctum.

Inside, "Caesar" sat behind a desk twice the size of his secretary's.

"Ms. Hastings." Nodding at the chair across the desk from his own, he said, "Have a seat, please."

I sat, my back straight. Should I keep my knees together or cross my legs? Did it matter? Probably not. On the other hand, maybe *everything* mattered at a time like this.

I decided to keep my knees together. That way, they wouldn't knock. Smiling (and feeling like a clown), I waited for him to tell me why I was here.

He came right to the point. "Your professors regard you as an exemplary student," he said.

What was the proper response? A thank you? A nod? A smile? I chose the last possibility.

If he noticed, he didn't let on. "They agree, unanimously, that you are likely to have a bright future, whatever pathway you follow." He studied me.

What was he looking for? Appreciation? Agreement? Surprise? Not knowing, I stayed silent.

"Mr. Cullen, with whom you have been working during your internship with us, is also highly impressed with the quality of your work, your enthusiasm, your knowledge, your initiative, your drive, your discretion, your commitment, and your professionalism."

"It has been a privilege working for him, sir."

"The editor of your hometown newspaper, Mr. Billings, is also quite complimentary concerning a series of recent articles you have written for him about your internship."

Here it comes! I thought, bracing myself.

Holding up a thick folder on his desk, he announced, "Graciously, he sent me copies."

I gulped.

“They are excellent.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Just what I have been looking for, Ms. Hastings. My father founded this newspaper in 1980, as a daily. None of his rivals gave it any hope of survival. It was doomed from the beginning, they said, predicting it would fold within a year.

“Today, it not only remains a daily, but it is also printed at numerous sites across this nation and at several others in foreign countries. Its printed edition enjoys a daily circulation of over one million; an additional million subscribe to its daily digital version; and it is read by well over three million people every day.”

“That's *beyond* impressive, sir.”

“It is also in danger of a decline which, unchecked, could spell its death, albeit some decades after its detractors' joyous predictions. I don't need to remind you of the threats that newspapers face from the explosion of media, including the Internet, and from the public's increasing expectation to pay for nothing, despite the costs in time, labor, equipment, overhead, taxes, and other expenses that this newspaper, like all businesses, incurs every second of its existence.”

“No, sir.”

“The fact of the matter, Ms. Hastings, is that, if we do not secure future subscribers among young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, our existence as a newspaper

and, someday, perhaps, as a profession, is doomed.” He paused. “That’s where *you* come in, Ms. Hastings.”

“Me, sir?”

He nodded. “I want to hire you full-time, immediately after you graduate. Your charge will be to write the type of stories that young people want to read, but, most importantly, will *pay* to read. I want you to capture the hearts and minds of the people in your age group, demographically speaking; to excite them, captivate them, hook them, and deliver them as regular subscribers. They are the lifeblood of our profession and of this newspaper. We cannot survive without them.”

It felt as if Mr. Reynolds had just settled the weight of the world—or of *The World Today*—squarely on my shoulders. As a petite twenty-two-year-old woman, I’m no Atlas, but, like Helen Reddy, I *am* Woman, not that I felt much, at the moment, like roaring.

“You will be paid well,” he said, “with bonuses tied to increased circulation levels among your readers’ demographics. You will also have a full-time photographer at your disposal. What do you say?”

“What topic would I write about?”

He smiled for the first time, and I saw that “Caesar” was human, after all. “You tell me.”

“How about paranormal phenomena?”

He frowned. “Why that topic, Charlotte?”

“My mentor, Professor Palmer, mentioned that recent research sponsored by news media to identify readers’ interests on the basis of demographic analysis showed shows that, regardless of sex, marital status, education level, employment status, occupation, geographic location, language, religion, nationality, ethnicity, or citizenship, people between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five were most interested in paranormal, supernatural, and otherworldly phenomena. I have to admit, such experiences and incidents certainly interest me, too—a lot—not that I’m a true believer.”

Mr. Reynolds nodded. “Just get me the subscribers we need to keep *The World Today* alive and thriving,” he said.

When he approved my topic, I was over the moon. After he reminded me of my responsibility, though, the weight of the world definitely settled onto my shoulders again.

I smiled back at him. “I’m happy to accept your offer, sir,” I said. In fact, I was overjoyed.

“Welcome to *The World Today*, Ms. Hastings. I will notify Mr. Cullen that your internship is over; go home, graduate, and come back a week after your commencement.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Leaving his office, I was walking on a cloud.

By the time I reached the elevator, though, I felt like staggering. The weight of *The World Today* seemed back on my shoulders.

I stepped inside, pushed the button for the lobby, and slumped against the back wall of the descending car.

Most people my age didn't read much. Well, some young women read romance novels or mysteries. Most *guys* wouldn't even read instructions for products needing assembly.

Foolishly, I'd accepted an impossible challenge. It would have been bad enough if I'd only promised to capture the hearts and minds of the people in my age group, but I had also promised to turn them into new and regular subscribers.

I shook my head, feeling doomed from the beginning.

What in the world could I, a girl from Grand Island, Nebraska, possibly write about that, all over the world, people my age would *pay* to read?

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CHAPTER 3

AN EARLY RISER, I had plenty of time before I got on the road so, while sipping a cup of tea, I switched on a VidShare channel a friend had recommended.

“By popular demand,” the host, influencer Luna Moon, told her fans, “I’m taping myself as I prepare for a routine morning’s work in my studio, just to give you a behind-the-scenes look at the ordeal I go through to make myself look presentable to all of you, my adoring fans.”

I smiled, rolling my eyes.

Luna studied her reflection in her seven-drawer, cherry wood Victorian vanity’s mirror. Without the looking-glass, the dressing table looked much like an ornate desk. *With* the polished glass in its intricately carved frame atop the vanity’s burnished surface, bedecked with red roses, decorated with crystal pendants, and flanked by amber lamps, the article of furniture was transformed. It not only brought elegance to her studio, but also transported it—or this corner of it, at least—to a romantic time in history, when horse-drawn carriages

conveyed ladies and gentlemen through gas-lit streets to elegant dinner parties and amorous assignations.

“This vanity cost me a bundle, but it was worth every cent,” Luna told the camera at the end of her selfie stick, while she smiled at her image in the mirror’s glass.

I agreed; the contrast between her studio’s elegant Victorian appearance and her own Gothic makeup and purple wig streaked with black was appealing in its avant-garde effect.

“Putting on my face took me most of an hour, not to mention primer, medium-brown eyebrow pencil, clear brow gel, carbon eyeshadow, black matte eyeliner, three coats of black mascara, foundation—nude, of course—concealer—nude, again—and black matte lipstick to match the eyeliner, which I penciled in, brushed on, rubbed in, sponged on, and set, blended, and accentuated. At least I didn’t have to apply blush!

“My makeup and wigs are my greatest expenses, after my video cameras, graphics editing program, sound editing equipment, and, of course, my *fabulous* wardrobe, but it takes money to create an appearance, and it takes an appearance to make a career as a VidShare influencer. Besides, I *like* turning heads when I walk down the street, selfie stick in hand.”

Although she seemed more than a bit narcissistic, Luna was honest about her purpose in creating a show business persona, I thought.

Sighing, she rose, blew a kiss to her image, which seemed to stand, out of respect to her, as she stood, and crossed the

studio to the bank of equipment she'd use to edit the latest footage of her VidShare channel's series, which, my friend had told me, concerned apparitions, demons, monsters, vampires, and assorted other things that go bump in the night and, together with hard work, long hours, and a lot of sleight-of-hand and chicanery, had brought her the mixed blessings of fame and fortune.

"I can't put off the task any longer; it's time to edit some video before I depart for my latest destination!"

* * *

Like Luna, I appraised myself in my full-length mirror as I considered the practical matter of dressing for work.

Even for the office, a lot of young women my age might dress as if they were preparing for a night on the town, but attire appropriate for clubbing isn't suitable for a career in journalism or any other profession, for that matter. Personal presentation is especially important in business, and I wanted to look professional, confident, and capable. After all, clothes might not make the woman, but appearance definitely matters.

I decided on navy slacks with a white button-down blouse and low-heeled pumps. Light makeup and a simple tanzanite pendant necklace with matching earrings completed my look. I'd take my purse, too, of course, and a black-leather briefcase, along with my luggage, which I'd kept as minimal as possible for the extended trip I'd be undertaking.

Regarding my outfit with a critical eye, I turned this way and that, stepping backward and forward.

I was ready to face the world, I decided—unless, at the last minute, I changed my mind about my outfit.

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CHAPTER 4

THE DRIVE FROM NEW York to St. Anne's, Georgia, was approximately nine-hundred-and-fifteen miles (as the crow flies) and would take about thirteen-and-a-half hours. Luckily, the new SUV Mom and Dad had bought me as my college graduation present a couple of weeks ago was up to the task.

David Edwards, my photographer, was “riding shotgun,” as he put it. He'd offered to split the driving time with me, but I'd declined. Guys and cars don't always mix, and if he wrecked my SUV, neither Mom and Dad nor I would be happy campers.

We could have flown, but there was enough time to make the trip by car, and I enjoy driving—on the open road, at least, where other motorists aren't ordinarily as rude as those who commute back and forth in cities (not that many do in New York, where they prefer taxis and the subway). I like the sense of freedom driving brings; it's way better than therapy (not that I've ever had any therapy—at least, not *yet*.) The change of scenery is part of the fun, too, for me.

We started our adventure at six a.m. Saturday morning. (I wanted plenty of time to drive through the pretty-much-continuous urban areas extending from New York to Philadelphia and from Baltimore to Washington, D. C., as well as the larger metropolitan areas along I-95 to the south. I also wanted to get to our destination ahead of check-in time, if I could, so we'd be able to see some of the local sights before my journalism career began in earnest.

Dave fell asleep just outside New York (he was a great traveling companion!), leaving me alone with my thoughts.

He was *still* asleep (and *snoring*, if you can believe it) when I stopped in Twin Rivers, just northeast of Trenton.

Finding a place to eat wasn't hard; there weren't but a couple of choices. I selected Abbie's, which resembled what it probably was, a pre-fab house converted into an eatery. It rested on stilts, among a stand of trees in an otherwise vacant lot, and a ramp and steps ran up, onto the balcony, where outdoor seating was available. An American flag flying overhead completed the picture.

Our server Susan brought our orders, and Dave sipped his coffee while I sampled my tea. He'd ordered steak and eggs (we were charging our meals to my expense account, after all), and I opted for a short stack of walnut pancakes served with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on the side.

“Glad you're awake enough to eat,” I told him.

“Maybe I wouldn't be so sleepy if you'd let me drive—”

“I might, if you weren't a guy.”

“Sexist much?”

“Has nothing to do with sexism. Statistics show, quite clearly, that women are *way* better drivers than men.”

“Ever heard of an exception to the rule?”

I smiled at him. “Meaning you, I take it?”

“I think that you will find, Ms. Hastings, that I am truly exceptional in *every* way.”

I blushed at his double-entendre (if it *was* a double-entendre). Not sure what to say to his bold declaration, I asked, “How are your steak and eggs?”

“Exceptional, of course.”

I'd brought the hand-painted map that I'd received after booking Dave and me rooms at the mansion in which we'd be staying and smoothed it out on the table. Fortunately, it wasn't a windy day, so I didn't have to use the salt and pepper shakers as paperweights. “Have you had a chance to look over your map?”

“A little.”

“As in not at all, you mean?”

“As in a little.”

“Read any of the captions or descriptions keyed to the map's locations?”

“A couple.”

“Which ones?”

He shrugged. “I don't remember.” He frowned. “Why the third degree?”

“Some of the points of interest are actually interesting.” I pointed to the forest that occupied most of the eastern edge of the island. “For instance, the forest, like the Hawkes' home, is supposedly haunted.”

He looked skeptical. “You believe in ghosts?”

“Maybe,” I told him. “Maybe not.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are the mansion and the forest supposedly haunted?”

“Don't know; the map doesn't say, and I couldn't find anything about it on the Internet.”

“What else is interesting about our destination?”

“Pretty much the whole place. Why don't you take a look for yourself, while I'm driving? Might keep you awake.”

He looked doubtful.

“You know, so you can avoid having nightmares.”

He scoffed. “Right.”

I gave him an appraising look. “Do you speed?”

He appeared puzzled but adapted quickly to the abrupt change in conversation. “I might go five miles over occasionally.”

I frowned. “Do you signal before changing lanes or turning?”

“Every time.”

“Tailgate?”

“Never.”

“Cut in and out of traffic?”

“Nope.”

Giving him a narrow look, I asked, “Are you now, or have you ever been, subject to any of the following: driving while intoxicated, reckless driving, or road rage?”

“No, no, and no.”

“You ready?”

He popped the last forkful of steak into his mouth, chewed, swallowed, and nodded. “Do I pass your test?”

“I’ll think about it.”

After we’d charged our breakfasts and our tip, Susan returned with my card, and Dave and I were on our way.

“Hello?” our server called.

Turning, I waited.

“You left your map.”

“Oops!” Dave said.

Turning, I met Susan halfway. As she extended the forgotten item, I said, “Thank you.”

She smiled. “It would make a nice placemat,” she quipped, “if Abbie's was in St. Anne's, Georgia, instead of Twin Rivers, New Jersey.”

“I guess it would, at that.”

“Those hand-painted maps always make places look so charming.”

“I hope this one is.”

“Drive carefully,” Susan said.

Returning to Dave, I said, “Hold out your hand.”

When he obliged, I plopped my key chain with its pink Valentine's heart-shaped fob onto his palm. “You heard the lady: drive carefully, and don't make me regret my moment of temporary insanity.”

He frowned at the pink heart, but accepted the keys without a word, offered me his arm, and escorted me to the steps. Once we'd descended them, he gave me his arm again, accompanying me to the passenger's side of my SUV, where he opened the door for me.

Then, he rounded the front of the vehicle and climbed behind the wheel, buckled up, started the engine, released the parking brake, and shifted into drive.

A few seconds later, Dave was my chauffeur.

We had only about eight-hundred-and-seventy miles to go, according to Monica (my GPS), before we reached our final destination.

I wondered whether ghosts would meet us when we arrived.

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CHAPTER 5

IN NEW YORK, INTERSTATE 95 had been mostly concrete, bridges, overpasses, underpasses, walls, lampposts, traffic cones, and occasional glimpses of high-rise buildings.

The rest of the day offered more varied scenery. New Jersey's initially flat, open country yielded to tall, thick pines. Snatches of the Delaware River presented themselves as we skirted Philly's eastern edge. Picturesque Maryland included a trip through the long Harbor Tunnel. Virginia's blue sky, rolling hills, and walls of towering green trees brought us as far as the Old Dominion's capital.

By the time we reached Richmond, Dave had been driving about six hours straight, minus a couple of ten-minute pit stops.

“Let's stop for lunch,” I suggested.

“Really?”

“Aren't you hungry?”

“I don't know why, but I don't get all that hungry when I'm on the road.”

“Well, *I* do. In fact, I'm famished.”

“Where do you want to stop?” “Right here!”

“Let's clear the Richmond metropolitan area, at least.”

I frowned. “All right, but *then* we stop.”

“You're the boss, boss.”

Carson, the nearest town beyond the Old Dominion's capital was rustic, but scenic. Unable to locate an eatery, we stopped at the library, whose librarian confirmed our suspicion: no restaurants existed in the tiny hamlet.

“*That* was a waste of fifteen minutes,” Dave complained, as we resumed our journey.

“How can you call seeing that delightful little town a 'waste'?”

“How can you not?”

“We did get the name of a restaurant in Dinwiddie,” I pointed out.

“Okay, Carson wasn't a *complete* waste of time, *if* the restaurant the librarian recommended serves edible food.”

“We'll see soon enough.”

“Soon enough” turned out to be about fifteen minutes, but the Mexican restaurant, located among the storefronts of a strip mall, didn't seem promising. The food, though, was much better than I'd anticipated—at least, my burrito ruleta, refried

beans, flan, and margarita were. Dave didn't comment on his meal, but he sure *ate* it with gusto.

“Newcomers or passing through?” our server (Jose) asked when he brought the bill.

“Passing through,” I said.

He grinned. “That's what a hundred-percent of our visitors say, other than the regulars. Where you headed?”

I told him.

Jose's eyes widened, and he actually took a step back from us. “Whoa!”

“You've heard of the place?” Dave asked.

“I've been there.” He made the sign of the cross. “*¡Dios me proteja!* Take my advice, amigos: stay *away* from that place!”

Dave and I exchanged frowns.

“Why's that?” Dave asked.

“It is full of devils!”

I waited, expecting Jose to break into laughter, but he didn't. He looked as somber as he had when I'd first mentioned our destination. Not knowing what else to say, I thanked him for his warning.

I paid the bill, adding a tip, and asked, “Can you recommend a hotel?”

“Sunrise Inn,” he said, “is clean and comfortable.” He gave us directions. “It's right next door.”

Outside, Dave protested. “We're not stopping already?”

“You've been driving for hours, Dave; you must be exhausted.”

“Just getting started.”

I hesitated. “You're not going to fall asleep at the wheel?”

“Of course not. I slept eight hours last night and had a long nap this morning, remember?”

I wanted to get to St. Anne's, Georgia, as soon as possible, so I agreed. “We'll stop in Rocky Mount, North Carolina,” I compromised, “no matter how fresh you feel.”

“Feeling frisky, are we?”

I gave him the evil eye, and he actually blushed.

“I'll take that as a maybe,” he said, opening the passenger-side door for me. He grinned. “You know, we could save *The World Today* a few bucks if we shared a room.”

“Very funny.” He *was* kidding, right? I asked myself. A glance told me that he was—*maybe*.

“You do remember I'm your boss””

“I don't have a problem with that, ma'am; in fact, I *like* strong, assertive women, especially when they're beautiful.”

I should have been annoyed, angry, maybe. Instead, feeling flattered, I blushed. Strong? Assertive? Beautiful? What was *not* to like in his compliments. Still, his remark verged on sexism. “We're colleagues, Dave,” I told him. “Nothing more.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

I ignored him, as we made our way to our rooms.

I checked for a connecting door. There was none. I felt both relieved and disappointed at the same time. Colleagues, I reminded myself. Somehow, the word seemed cold and aloof, rather than professional, although it never had before.

The next morning, after a continental breakfast at our Rocky Mount hotel and a late lunch (pizza, salad, and soft drinks) in Richmond Hill, Georgia, we pressed on to St. Anne's, arriving just at 4:45 p.m. Since we weren't due at our final destination until 10:30 a.m. the next day, we had plenty of time to scout out the seaside town before catching the ferry.

St. Anne's was an altogether delightful town. At each turn, something charming and beautiful met the eye: palm trees, fountains, gardens, parks, nineteenth-century mansions, bright shops and restaurants painted pink and blue and yellow and green.

The city hosted several festivals, too, but we'd either missed them or they weren't scheduled during the time we'd be here. Unfortunately, we arrived too late to tour the town's historic old houses and the maritime museum, which closed at 5:00 p.m.

We made a point to visit the ferry site, though, so we'd know where to go in the morning. The first boat left at 9:00 a.m., but passengers had to arrive an hour before departure. The only other vessel "sailed" two hours and forty-five minutes later, so we didn't want to miss the first one!

I was surprised to see what, at first glance, looked like a parking meter in front of the railing running the length of the back of the platform on which the ferry's ticket office stood. Past a gap, closed at present by a gate, a broad flight of wooden steps led down to the beach and the dock off which we and the other passengers would board the boat tomorrow morning.

The “parking meter” was actually a coin-operated set of binoculars mounted on a metal pole. A deposit of fifty cents allowed the operator the use of the instrument, for how long, the metal plate bearing the instructions didn't say.

I searched my pockets but came up empty. I'd paid for most of our purchases with the credit card tied to my expense account, and all I had in the way of loose change was thirty-two cents. “Have any quarters?”

Dave came up with a couple, and I inserted them into the coin slots. As I pulled the binoculars up, a metal bar over the lens slid away, and I saw the waters of the sound sparkling blue in the late-afternoon sun.

It took a few seconds to focus and find the object I was looking for. When I did, my lower jaw dropped. I stared wide-eyed at the dark clouds of the storm raging above the island. It had come out of nowhere. One minute, the entire sky had been clear; it still was, even now, except over the island. Lightning lashed the beach, the rocks, and the forest along the stretch of land, and the sea, agitated in the vicinity of the isle, churned and tossed, frothing like mad.

Towering cumulonimbus clouds, much darker than usual, formed mesas of vapor, one column topped by an anvil shape. Amid a deluge of rain, lightning flashed, electric lashes thrashing the island, as if God were punishing the place. Moments later, thunder boomed, startlingly loud, like an explosion, the rumbling seeming to rend the very heavens themselves.

The stationary storm was more than amazing; it was eerie. Never had I seen a storm hover in place, but this one did. Severe weather, possibly including tornadoes, threatened. The anvil top indicated that the cloud mass reached to the top of the stratosphere, and I remembered from a course in meteorology I'd taken that the taller the cumulonimbus cloud, the more likely a storm would be intense.

I was about to suggest to Dave that we take cover, because such a storm, I knew, wouldn't remain in one place long—it should already have moved on—and a storm this powerful could be catastrophic. At the next phenomenon I sighted through the binoculars, however, I froze, my warning forgotten. I couldn't believe what I was seeing!

Sunlight appeared among the dark bluffs and banks of the massive, shifting clouds. Amid thick, swirling columns of vapor, I saw something altogether impossible: the faces of gigantic fiends, complete with horns, grinning with a malevolence surpassed only by the intensity of the extremely localized storm.

Before my eyes, the demonic faces, like the storm itself, vanished, and the water of the sound, like the air of the sky, was instantly calm.

The island, I remembered our server Jose had warned, was “full of devils!”

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CHAPTER 6

“*WOW!* What did I ever do to deserve *this?*” Dave Edwards cried, as we stepped off the ferryboat onto the sea island off Georgia’s coast.

Did he mean his new assignment, the fabulous Sea Island Estate, or me?

There was one way to find out. “What do you mean?” I asked.

He turned his palms up, spreading his arms to indicate the four-story, fifty-nine-room, Queen Anne-style mansion. Just by itself, it took up enough land to build an entire housing complex.

Even from a distance, it was a majestic piece of real estate. I couldn’t help feeling a bit disappointed, though, that the mansion, not me, had caught his gaze.

It was too bad our relationship would be strictly professional. Dave was a living cliché: “tall, dark, and handsome.” It would have been fun to mix a little pleasure

with business, even if the “fun” involved nothing more than good-natured flirting and an occasional *double entendre*.

“It *is* impressive,” I conceded.

It was expensive, too. The time we’d spend here set *The World Today* back a few thousand dollars, but Mr. Reynolds wanted new subscribers in “my” age group badly enough to hire me, assign me a full-time photographer, and rent us rooms at this resort’s palatial estate

My parents, as always generous, had bought me an SUV, just for finishing the schooling they’d paid for. I guess I’d really impressed them by landing a job before graduating. Maybe they thought their investment in my college education would pay off, despite the crisis of journalism—well, *print* journalism, anyway.

According to the Sea Island Estate website, the mansion, built in 1880, was only one among a number of other buildings on the island. There was also a garden house, a greenhouse, a dairy barn, a feed barn, a laundry, and a pool house. All these buildings and others were “points of interest,” the website observed, “for devotees of paranormal phenomena.”

When the newspaper rented our rooms, Sea Island Estate sent Dave and me each a hand-painted map of the resort and a copy of the mansion’s floor plans.

I studied my map frequently during our drive down from New York, excitedly reading out loud anecdotes about sites of alleged paranormal activity. “Guests have seen shadow people peering down from the windows of the garden house! Once,

overnight, fleshly vines with claws and fangs among their thorns grew from bizarre plants in the greenhouse!

“There hadn’t been cows in the dairy barn for decades, but one night they appeared, out of nowhere, with distended udders, bawling for relief; when employees accommodated them, the cows produced blood, instead of milk!

“The feed barn overflowed with rats that hadn’t been seen before and haven’t been seen since!

“Washers and driers in the laundry operated on their own, machines rocking and ‘walking’ and colliding against each other!

“A woman’s body appeared in the swimming pool, among fountains of blood that came from no mechanical or physical source!”

Now, as the island resort's bellhops carried our luggage to the motorized baggage carts standing by on shore, I shook my head. “We’ve either booked rooms in a mansion from hell or Sea Island Estate’s copywriter sure has a vivid imagination.”

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CHAPTER 7

OUR MAPS OF SEA Island Estate weren't to scale, but their depictions of the placements of the resort's various locations were reliable, in their own way. Dave and I could use the maps to orient ourselves. However, if paranormal phenomena actually were occurring here, I, for one, wanted to tour the island and actually *see* the lay of the land for myself.

Fortunately, the resort offered a tour of the island. Frank McGruder, an "engineer," who doubled as our guide, drove a miniature train along a network of tracks that went pretty much everywhere along the island's coast and inland area. The tour made me more confident about the railway's route and the island's terrain. Dave accompanied me, so he could see the resort firsthand and note the locations he wanted to photograph.

We might still get lost, but it would be less likely. If Dave and I became disoriented, we should be able (I hoped) to find our way back to the mansion. The size of a large hotel, it tended to stand out.

Mr. McGruder was also helpful, pointing out architectural and terrain features during our journey.

“When the island became a resort fifteen years ago, this railway was constructed,” he informed us. “The tracks replaced the island’s old roads, except the main one.”

“How interesting,” I told him, not that such information was likely to be all that thrilling to the resort’s other guests who’d joined Dave and me on the tour. “Could you give us a general idea of the railway’s layout?”

“Glad to, but I warn you: it’s a bit circuitous.”

Fortunately, Dave had brought his map of the resort with him, and we traced the route as our guide described it.

Looking over Dave’s shoulder, a young, pretty, freckle-faced redhead with rings in her eyebrows and nose and stud earrings in her pierced earlobes, wearing a large, floppy hat and a green sundress followed our progress. She was holding a stick-mounted camera at arm’s length, filming us. Surprised by her presence, I recognized her at once: Luna Moon, the Vidshare influencer with the paranormal channel!

During an empty stretch of landscape, she piped up: “This place is so cool! I was here once before, but this visit is just as exciting as my first. I’m Luna Moon, by the way. Maybe you’ve seen my VidShare channel, *Paranormal Paradise*?”

“I have, Luna, It's nice to meet you,” I said, returning her smile. “I’m Charlotte Hastings.” I twisted round to shake hands with her.

“And I’m Dave Edwards, her photographer,” Dave said, extending his hand.

“That’s some camera you have there!” Luna marveled, sounding a tad envious.

“Thanks.”

Although she shook hands with him, Luna frowned. “You’re not VidShare influencers, too, are you?”

Apparently, she didn’t like competition. “No, I’m a reporter. Dave and I work for *The World Today*.”

Her blank look verified Mr. Reynolds’s concern that my age group wasn’t into newspapers. “I’m writing a column for people our age. My first series is on Sea Island Estate.”

“Wow! That’s great! Maybe we can collaborate.”

“Maybe.” I had no intention of working with anyone else but Dave, but why offend her? It seemed more diplomatic to be non-committal.

As buildings appeared once again alongside the track, Mr. McGruder said, “The southernmost leg runs mostly parallel to the island’s southern coast, but inland. The island’s southern cemetery is along this route. It’s reserved for the Hawkes family’s servants and now, for the employees of the island’s current owners.”

Dave and I looked at each other. The island had a cemetery? I didn’t remember seeing it on the map. The news, for me, at least, was a little unsettling.

“Then, there’s the kennel, now defunct; the old carriage house, also defunct; the gas pump—”

“Gas pump?” Dave asked.

Luna turned left and right, taking in each of the sights.

“Henry Hawkes, the original owner of the island, built the mansion and most of the other buildings over a period of years, beginning in 1880,” Mr. McGruder explained. “The family’s fortune enabled them to pursue their passion for spiritualism without interruption.”

That statement got Luna’s attention—mine, too.

“After Henry’s death and those of his wife Louise and their adult daughter Margaret, in 1890, during the worldwide influenza pandemic, the estate was sold several times, eventually to its present owner.

“Henry kept horses and a carriage for the family’s occasional guests, but the present owner added the gas pump for modern-day vehicles.”

Dave nodded. “I see.”

“The pool house and the swimming pool are about halfway along this leg of the railway. Both are in good repair, of course.”

“The pool in which ‘a woman’s body’ appeared in the swimming pool, among fountains of blood from no mechanical or physical source?” Dave asked, quoting the text on the hand-painted map word for word.

Mr. McGruder frowned, looking puzzled.

“That’s what the map the resort sent us says,” I explained, “after we booked our rooms.”

“Oh!” he said as if remembering. “Yes, that’s right.”

“That really *happened*, then?” Dave asked.

“Sea Island Estate wouldn’t have printed that on the map if it hadn’t.”

The mansion, by far the largest building on the island, was ahead, and our guide pointed it out. “As you can see, the railway branches at the mansion. The left fork passes the garden house and the greenhouse on its way to the end of the east coast’s peninsula.

“The right fork, the main track, is crossed by an east-west leg that goes past the northern cemetery, which is the final resting place of the original family, to the island’s northwest coast.”

Dave and I exchanged looks. The island had *two* cemeteries?

I’d been disconcerted to hear that it had *one* burial ground; I was surprised to learn that it had two.

As we passed the northern cemetery, at some distance, Luna made sure she filmed it. “This footage might make a nice intro to my next video,” she said. “I’ve never seen or shown the island’s layout before, just some of its major points of interest.”

“Are there other graveyards as well?” Dave whispered to me.

“There’d better not be!” I murmured back.

We’d missed some of our guide’s information, but it was clear that he was now talking about a diagonal northwest-to-southeast line that crossed the railway’s main track. The latter had been laid alongside the island’s main road. It connected the shore of the western peninsula, where the island’s medical clinic and a dock were located, to the north coast of the island.

“The northwestern part of the line ends at the main dock. The other end of the line eventually curves south, passing the laundry, the recreation hall, and the library on the left and the commissary on the right before connecting with the railway’s southernmost leg.

His mention of a library caught my attention. I checked Dave’s map, but it didn’t provide any information, just a number that corresponded to the same number on the list identifying the map’s buildings and other sites. “What kind of library?” I asked.

Mr. McGruder shrugged. “Personal, I guess you’d say. It belonged to Henry Hawkes and his family. It’s open to guests now; part of the package. Not much in it but books on the occult, though, or so I hear.”

“The *occult*?” Luna repeated, her own interest obviously piqued.

“You know, supernatural stuff. What they call ‘paranormal’ nowadays, I guess.”

“Not quite,” Luna corrected him. “There’s a difference.”

“If you say so.” Then, he was back to his original subject, the railway. “Two other short lines run parallel to both the first southern switch-off from the southeastern part of the line and to each other, connecting with the railway’s southernmost line. They provide access to the lumber shed, the feed barn, and the dairy barn.”

“Does anything else besides forest lie to the east of the railway and the buildings?” I asked.

“Nope. Just the forest.”

“Is there a tour of it?”

“No, but Sea Island Estate *does* offer an overnight camping trip to the site in the forest where, a century ago, a camper—a poacher, it’s believed—disappeared.”

“*Disappeared?*” I repeated.

“Disappeared,” our guide confirmed, offering me an over-the-shoulder grin, “never to be seen again.”

CHAPTER 8

UNINVITED, LUNA TOOK A chair at our table. Apparently, she thought her celebrity status as a VidShare influencer entitled her to the seat, whether Dave and I wanted to share a meal with her or not.

This morning, her hair was green, and she wore a pleated skirt that didn't exactly complement her faded jean jacket. She'd changed the rings in her eyebrows from silver to brass. They matched the six bracelets adorning her left wrist—well, her wrist and her lower forearm.

Luna was sitting at another table, chatting with an animated fortyish, sandy-haired woman in distressed jeans and a purple tunic top when Dave and I entered the mansion's dining room. The woman she'd abandoned in favor of Dave and me (mostly Dave, judging by the way she fawned over him) pointed Luna out to the server who'd earlier taken the influencer's order, and he brought Luna's stack of pancakes to our table, along with a small pitcher of syrup and a cup of coffee.

“Would you like anything else?” he asked.

With a dismissive wave of her hand, she said, “That’s all.”

Dutifully, the server withdrew.

Activating her camera, which she then held at shoulder’s length, Luna beamed at us. Speaking to Dave, she said, “So, have the two of you given any thought to us collaborating?”

Dave looked at me.

Caught unexpectedly on camera for Luna’s hundred-thousand followers to see, many of whom were probably in the age group to whom my own column was directed, I said, “We’re headed to the southern cemetery; I doubt you’d want —”

“Oh, but I would!” She moved her stick so the attached camera’s lens focused on her, instead of us. “I’ve been wanting to visit the island’s cemeteries since we heard of them during the train tour we took yesterday, but” —she shivered, probably for her fans—“I’m too scared to go by myself.”

By including us in her mention of yesterday’s train tour, she’d made it sound like Dave and I were already collaborating with her.

“We may be there a while,” I said, hoping to deter her.

“All the better! What time do we leave?”

“Dave and I are heading out as soon as we finish breakfast,” I said, emphasizing “Dave and I.”

Her camera stick focused on her stack of pancakes. “Time to dig in, then.” She turned the stick, and her camera faced her,

as she smiled. “See you at the cemetery, *Paranormal Paradise Angels!*”

There was no way to stop her from coming along. She was a paying guest of the resort, just like Dave and me. I wanted to tell her she wasn't welcome, but I bit my tongue. She had lots of fans she could mobilize against my column. Such a campaign seemed unlikely, but why take a chance?

A half-hour later, we'd trekked through the rough terrain between the mansion and the southern cemetery.

As we entered the burial ground, I said, “We're here to photograph headstones,” pretending, for Luna's followers, that Dave and I were collaborating with her.

Luna frowned. “Why's that, Charlotte?”

I'd already explained the reason to Luna but, obviously, she wanted her fans to know.

I played along. “So I can research them.”

“Why not just jot down the names and dates?”

“The stones themselves may offer more information useful in researching the deceased. That one, for example.” I pointed toward a headstone. “See that odd mark inscribed at the bottom?” I pointed to an ornate design that incorporated crosses, circles, and a stylized trumpet.

Both Dave and Luna swiveled their cameras toward the marker.

“That's a sigil!” Luna cried, delighted at my discovery.

“That’s right,” I said. “Essentially, the signature of a deity or a spirit.”

“Used in magic,” Luna added.

“It could help me pin down a few facts, if there’s a book on magic or demonology in the original family’s private library.”

Apparently, Dave decided to play along, too. “Why demonology?” he asked, sounding alarmed.

“The spirit may be a ghost, but it could also be a demon,” Luna blurted.

“Sounds dangerous,” Dave said, making it actually sound that way.

“What can I do to help?” Luna asked.

She had me there.

“Maybe film us,” Dave suggested. “We could share footage, ours of the headstones, yours of us shooting them.”

“You didn’t bring a gun, did you?” Luna asked, sounding alarmed, as she mugged for her fans.

Dave humored her with a laugh. “Guns don’t work on demons.”

“Demons!” Luna sounded frightened.

“We don’t know if there are any here,” I said, “but the sigil suggests there might be, right?”

“Almost certainly,” Luna agreed.

I pointed to a headstone. “Let’s start with that one, Dave.”

He pointed his camera at the stone.

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CHAPTER 9

CAREFULLY, DAVE AND I made our way across the uneven ground of the nearly abandoned cemetery, Luna trailing behind to shoot footage of monuments, statues, and crypts. She'd probably use them as the introductory segment of one of her vlog posts, I thought.

Occasionally, I'd point out a headstone for Dave to photograph. Mostly, I based my choices on the markers' dates.

The distance at which Luna trailed us had increased, as she wandered among the headstones, rather than film us as we photographed inscriptions.

"I know you offered to swap some of the pictures you take for footage Luna records, but any more collaboration than that might be a mistake," I whispered.

"Maybe not," he suggested. "We can give her credit for stills from her footage, and she can credit *us* for photos we let her post to her vlog. The credit might help when you launch your column. It's up to you, of course; you're the boss."

“You have a point, Dave.”

He frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

“Does it seem darker all of a sudden?”

I nodded. “I thought I was imagining it. Cemeteries give me the creeps.”

Behind us, Luna called, “Look at that!”

We looked back at her.

“What’s up?” Dave asked.

Luna pointed to the sea. Over the choppy waves, the sky was white. A thick haze had begun to obscure the water, the distant mainland, and any boats that might be present in the ocean. “Fog’s coming our way.”

“That explains the darkness,” Dave said.

“Can you continue taking pictures?” I asked him.

“For now.”

I asked our tag-a-long the same question.

Her answer was the same as Dave’s.

“Let’s continue, then,” I decided.

“Way more bodies are buried here than I’d have thought,” Dave observed.

“The owner and his family must have had a lot of servants,” I agreed.

Overhearing me, Luna said, “Someone’s been doing her homework.”

The fog swept over the island much more quickly than any of us expected. In the few minutes since we’d become aware of it spreading across the water, the thick white haze had obscured the cemetery and the surrounding terrain.

I gulped. Although it was foolish, I felt uneasy among the monuments of the dead. I knew no bodies would come crawling out of their graves or break down the doors of their tombs, but I was apprehensive, anyway. The sigils on some of the headstones didn’t help, nor did the thought that the servants, or some of them, seemed to have been into magic and demon worship.

As dense fog covered more and more of the burial ground, cutting off sight in every direction, my anxiety increased. “Let’s go,” I said. “We can come back tomorrow.”

“I can’t,” Luna declared. “I’m here for only a few days. I need to get as much footage as I can now. During the editing process, most of what I shoot will get cut; it always does.”

She had a point. Dave and I would be here longer than Luna, but we had a lot to see and do, including research, before the first article of my column’s initial series appeared. “Okay, as long as you and Dave can still work, we’ll stay. Maybe the fog will thin out before long.”

“I doubt it,” Dave said. “If anything, it seems to be getting thicker.”

“Watch your step, both of you,” I cautioned, as we continued our mission.

The temperature dropped considerably, and I could feel moisture in the air. Moving inland, the fog brought vapor from the sea. The cold and the humidity seemed to seep into my bones.

To read the inscriptions on the headstones and the tombs, I had to get within a foot of them. More than once, I stumbled. If not for Dave’s quick reflexes, I probably would have fallen.

Even up close, some of the letters in the names and the numbers of the dates were difficult to read on the fog-enshrouded stones.

“I don’t know how you and Luna can photograph anything under these conditions,” I said.

“That’s because you’re a reporter, not a videographer,” Luna replied.

“Or a photographer,” I added, thinking of Dave.

I was about to call it quits again when Luna called attention to another headstone inscription.

Dave and I walked to her location.

“Here,” Luna said, indicating the grave’s location.

In the fog, she was just a vague, shadowy shape all but lost in the darkness.

I peered through the murky haze, my face inches from the headstone. It took me more than a few moments but, letter by

letter, I made out a name, the date of birth, and the date of death.

The inscription sent a chill up my spine.

I turned to Dave.

Swallowed by the fog, he was nowhere in sight.

Neither was Luna.

How could they have vanished, just like that?

The fog!

They'd become disoriented and stumbled off in the wrong direction.

They were lost in the thick white mist.

So was I.

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CHAPTER 10

“DAVE!” I YELLED. “LUNA!”

I waited in place, hoping they might find me. When they didn't, I stumbled about in the fog. My search failed to place them.

Calling out my location was pointless in fog this thick, but I couldn't think of any other way to guide them.

“Charlotte?”

My heart leaped at Dave's response!

But he sounded far away.

Luna called me. Her voice also suggested we'd drifted quite a ways apart after getting separated in the fog.

We were lost, cut off from each other, and alone. I felt vulnerable, frightened.

A statue to my left towered above me, but I could make out only an unclear impression of a figure atop its base.

Eerily, faint, blurred lines were all I could see of tree trunks and limbs, and leaves seemed to hang, unsupported clusters in midair, amid drifting plumes of fog.

The uncertainty of my surroundings heightened the sense of uneasiness that had descended upon me.

I stood still, thinking it best not to wander farther. Walking in such gloom was precarious. Besides, it might put even more distance between David, Luna, and me.

“Dave! Luna!” My cries sounded as anxious as I felt.

I was shaking.

Stop it! I ordered myself. There was no cause for such alarm.

But there was, I knew. There could be *plenty* of cause.

“Over here!” I yelled.

The wind rose. Among the headstones, crypts, mausoleums, and statues carved of stone, I heard fluttering sounds.

Just leaves, I told myself.

I searched the whiteness but saw only the indistinct shapes of objects unseen.

Before my eyes, but at a distance, the fog seemed to shift, to bulge and part slightly, and I saw a sort of blurring in the haze, as if the white mist moved against or upon itself, moved and opened, and another whiteness, an outline in the shape of a figure, strode toward me, in and of the fog, but also separate from it—a human figure.

A ghost!

“Charlotte?” Dave’s voice!

“Here!” I called back, watching the phantom approach me, through the thick veil of the fog.

“Charlotte?”

“Luna!” I answered.

They would find me! I told myself. We’d been separated by the fog; that’s all.

Running footsteps.

The apparition seemed to pause, the haze swirling and shifting around it, as the mist covered and uncovered the insubstantial, white contours of the indistinct shape.

“Be careful!” I yelled, remembering how I’d stumbled over the cemetery’s rough terrain. There were plenty of other obstacles besides the uneven ground, of course, including headstones, crypts, and an occasional mausoleum. Even the bigger monuments to the dead were all but lost in thick murkiness until they were just feet away.

I strained to see, to hear.

Although the white haze prevented me from perceiving more than vague shadows, I heard quick footfalls.

Finally, a shape emerged from the gloom.

The vague outline of the phantom figure was gone, swallowed up by the dense vapor from the sea, if it had, in

fact, ever been present at all, except in my own imagination, an invention of my fear.

“Dave!” I cried, instinctively hugging him to me.

His presence comforted me, as did his arms, which I realized, were around me.

“You okay?” he asked.

I leaned into him, rested against him, thankful that he was with me, not only here, in this dreadful, fog-enshrouded graveyard, but on our trip to the island. Either Mr. Cullen or Mr. Richards could have chosen a different photographer to accompany me, but I’d been lucky; they’d assigned Dave.

Although we hadn’t been together long, he’d never challenged my authority. He’d supported me from the first. He’d offered advice, but he’d never defied me. Confident in himself, he was happy to assist and support me.

Until this moment, I hadn’t realized I’d given him so much thought. Obviously, I had. Dave had been a lot more on my mind than I’d realized.

Drawing strength from his strength, I said, “Thank you. I’m okay now.”

He released me. Immediately, I missed his embrace.

A moment later, Luna appeared, a ghost, it seemed, stepping out of the drifting whiteness of our surroundings.

I hugged her, too.

To my chagrin, so did Dave.

We linked hands and retraced our steps, finding the headstone again after a search.

Together, we approached the marker.

Side by side, we bent and read the inscription again.

“Impossible!” Dave insisted.

My heart quickened, as I stared in horror at the inscription Luna had called to our attention.

The fog seemed to enter my brain, obscuring my thoughts.

Frank McGruder, the name on the headstone read.

The date of his death was today’s!

“It’s a prank,” Dave suggested. “It has to be.”

Luna agreed. “How else would Frank McGruder’s name be on there—or mine.” She sounded close to tears.

Reaching into the white haze, I put my arm around her. “What do you mean, Luna?”

“A few minutes before you started calling Dave and me, I saw my own name, birth date, and today’s date on another headstone not far from here.” Her voice quavered as she asked, “Does that mean Frank McGruder and I are going to *die* today?”

“Of course not!” I declared with a lot more certainty than I felt.

The wind, rising, howled among the graves and the tombs.

CHAPTER 11

THE FOG DISSIPATED AS we made our way through the southern cemetery, the thick white haze drifting apart and rolling away on the wind from the sea.

As it did, I felt sheepish. My vision degraded by the dense cloud that had come to ground on the island, I'd become disoriented. Lost and alone, I'd felt vulnerable. I'd been afraid.

Now, as the fog lifted and the wind's intensity decreased, I could see where I was and where I was going. Although it wouldn't be my choice of a setting for a picnic, the cemetery didn't look threatening. Instead of anxiety, I felt only an abstract sense of sadness on behalf of those whose lives had been lived and who lay now, for all eternity, underground or entombed.

Had Dave sensed my anxiety? I blushed at the thought. I, who was supposed to be a fearless investigative reporter, had been alarmed by fog. I, the intrepid journalist who would dare to face down the paranormal, the supernatural, the occult, and

the mystical, had been afraid of monuments and markers in a remote island cemetery!

Had Luna also noticed my uneasiness? Would she report the fears of *The World Today's* reporter during her maiden voyage into the world of the unknown?

There'd been reason for concern, if not fear, I reminded myself, recalling the headstone with Frank McGruder's name inscribed on it, along with the dates of his birth and death, despite the fact that the miniature train's engineer and tour guide was still very much alive.

“What could possibly explain such an incident—besides ghosts, I mean?” I asked, as we trudged along the uneven ground between the cemetery and the railway.

“A prank,” Dave suggested, as he had before, in the cemetery.

“Maybe,” I conceded, “but, if so, who would pull such a stunt, and why?”

“A teenage guest, maybe?” Luna proposed.

“But why would a prankster, even a teenager, choose Frank McGruder as his target?” I asked.

“Maybe the vandal had been a passenger aboard the train, either when we were aboard or at a different time, and had heard him mention his name,” Dave suggested.

“But what could a prankster hope to gain? Few guests, are likely even to know Mr. McGruder's name. Even fewer, if any, are likely to waste their time at the resort, wandering a

cemetery. The chance of a guest seeing the headstone seems remote at best.”

“You have a point there,” Dave admitted.

Luna said, “Maybe you’re right.”

But she didn’t seem convinced, I thought.

She was quiet as we finished our hike back to the mansion—until we saw the ambulance parked out front.

“Wonder what happened,” Luna said.

Like Dave and me, she was shocked.

As we advanced along the broad walkway leading through the manicured lawn in front of the imposing mansion flanked with palms, I heard snatches of conversation.

“What happened?” an elderly man in a yellow shirt displaying colorful prints of wild parrots asked.

“Heart attack,” a woman in a Hawaiian shirt and bright-red Capri pants answered.

“I heard it was a stroke,” a man in a windbreaker and khaki cargo shorts declared.

“Really?” A young woman in a blue sundress asked, sounding surprised. “I was under the impression he'd had a fall, poor man.”

As we approached the edifice, a medic pushed a gurney past a knot of onlookers. A few minutes later, we learned that, inside the black body bag strapped to the stretcher, was the corpse of Frank McGruder.

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CHAPTER 12

“NO ONE SEEMS TO know *what* happened to him,” Luna said. She seemed amazed that the cause of Mr. McGruder's death should be unknown.

“Gossips,” Dave charged.

“I wonder where they're taking him,” Luna said.

I reminded her of Mr. McGruder's mention of the medical facility at the edge of the island's western peninsula. “Probably to a freezer at the clinic, where, presumably, a corpse would be stored until it could be sent to the mainland, probably by ferryboat.”

“Makes sense,” Dave agreed.

Looking at the group of guests milling about the grounds near the front of the mansion, Luna shook her head. “Vultures.”

“Human nature,” I suggested.

“You really think the inscription on the headstone was just a prank?” Luna asked.

“I don't know what to think,” I admitted.

“That's my guess,” Dave said.

“What if it *was* a warning,” Luna ventured.

“A warning by whom?” I asked.

She shrugged. “One of Mr. McGruder's coworkers?”

“It seems unlikely anybody would go to such trouble when a verbal warning would be enough,” I suggested.

Dave added another objection. “It's unlikely anyone would even *see* the perpetrator's warning.”

“Unless the person who set up the headstone planned to lure Mr. McGruder to the spot,” Luna reasoned.

Unconvinced, I shook my head. “That's possible, I guess, but it sure seems like a lot of trouble just to warn somebody about something if there *was* any reason for someone to warn Mr. McGruder of anything.”

“Besides,” Dave added, “if the headstone we saw in the southern cemetery *had* been intended as a warning, it was one that Mr. McGruder either never saw or one that he defied. The first alternative might be plausible but, if Mr. McGruder really was superstitious, he'd have heeded the message. I mean, the threat may have been implied, but it was impossible to miss.”

“Let's say Mr. McGruder was a superstitious type, and the person who set up the headstone knew that, and that's why he

—”

“He?” Dave said.

“He or she,” Luna corrected herself. “That's why the person, whoever it was, went to the time and trouble to set up a bogus headstone with Mr. McGruder's name on it and today's date as the date of his death. Mr. McGruder would be likely to take such a warning way more seriously than he might a verbal warning.”

Dave mulled over the possibility. “Could be,” he decided.

“What do you think, Charlotte?” Luna asked me.

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“I think I just solved *The Mystery of the Macabre Marker*,” she said, looking pleased with herself. “I think that's what I'll call one of my *Paranormal Paradise* segments.”

“Maybe the inscription *was* a warning,” I conceded, although I didn't believe it myself. “If it was, though, its implied threat was a hollow one. Mr. McGruder doesn't appear to have been murdered. We've overheard several different causes of his death, but none of them was homicide. If murder was suspected, the island's medics would have alerted the authorities, and the Georgia state police would be investigating, but there's not a detective or a police officer in sight.”

Luna looked as if she didn't know what to make of my refutation. “I can tell you *one* thing for sure, though: I'm glad the fog lifted and we got out of that cemetery!”

“What do we do next?” Luna asked.

“Go to the northern cemetery,” I said.

“But you just said you’re glad we got out of the other cemetery,” Luna reminded me.

“There’s no fog now,” I said.

“What if we see a ghost—or something worse,” Luna cautioned.

I remembered the faint outline of the figure that had disturbed the fog in the southern cemetery. Repressing the urge to shiver, I said, “Ghosts don’t exist.”

“And, even if they do exist,” Dave joked, “what’s worse than the walking, talking spirit of a dead person?”

“Demons, maybe,” Luna suggested.

“Demons don’t exist either,” I declared.

“How do you know, Charlotte? How does *anyone* know something like that?”

Luna had me there. “I guess nobody can prove they don’t exist, but have you ever seen one?”

“Watch the ‘Demonic Entities’ episode of my *Paranormal Paradise* vlog.”

“Tomorrow, after you’ve photographed the headstones, we’ll visit the Hawkeses’ private library. Maybe we can find out about the bodies buried in the family’s cemetery.” I looked at Luna. “You know, that reminds me: Dave and I never saw the headstone with your name on it.”

She looked taken aback. “We were separated by the fog when I saw it. Say, are you guys going on the camping trip scheduled for later this week?”

“Let's take one thing at a time,” I suggested. “Anyone need to freshen up?”

“I'm good,” Dave said.

“Give me a few minutes,” Luna requested.

I nodded at a bench in a garden on one side of the mansion. “We'll meet you there.”

“I won't be long.”

As she hastened to the mansion, Dave and I made our way to the bench. The garden was bright, the flowers sweet and, as I settled against the back of the white wrought-iron bench, I was thankful for the beauty and the relative peace and quiet that our out-of-the-way spot offered.

“I've been thinking,” I said. “Does it strike you as odd that Luna's the one who called my attention to the headstone bearing Mr. McGruder's name?”

“Not really. Should it?”

“Maybe. I mean, she didn't see just the headstone with his name on it; she also saw one with her *own* name on it, together with her birthdate and the date of her death.”

“So?”

“Such a coincidence seems suspicious. We agree that it's unlikely anyone would ever have seen Mr. McGruder's

headstone, especially since he'll probably be buried somewhere other than on this island. It's even *more* improbable to think his marker was meant as a threat.

“Add Luna's marker, and the unlikelihood doubles. How would anyone know her birthrate, and why would anyone want to threaten her in such a bizarre manner?”

“Then, just a moment ago, when I reminded Luna that you and I never saw her name on a headstone, she changed the subject. It's odd, too, that, at the cemetery, she seemed really worried that she might die today. She hasn't voiced any more concerns since, even after I brought up the incident and she'd seen Mr. McGruder's body.”

“You have a point, Charlotte. In fact, you have several points. But why would she pull such a stunt?”

“I don't know,” I admitted. “We just met her yesterday; we don't really know her.”

“Another point well made. Heads up; here she comes.”

Luna had touched up her makeup and changed her top. She'd also donned a backpack.

“Looks like you're planning to take a cross-country hike,” Dave joked.

“Just like to be prepared,” Luna said, “especially after what happened in the southern cemetery.”

“Ready?” he asked.

“Willing and able,” Luna declared.

“Let’s go shoot some headstones,” Dave said.

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CHAPTER 13

“YOU GUYS GO WITHOUT me,” I said. I closed my eyes, holding a hand to my forehead.

“What's wrong, Charlotte?” Luna asked.

“Migraine,” I answered, grimacing. “I get them from time to time. This one's a doozy.”

Luna frowned. “Maybe we should get you to the clinic.”

I winced. “No need. I've been examined and examined, and I've never had any of the symptoms that signal a medical emergency. I just need to lie down for a while, out of the light, and rest.”

“You're sure?” Dave asked.

Gritting my teeth, I nodded. “I'll be fine, really. Go, both of you; take your pictures. Here are the names on the headstones—or, more likely, mausoleums—to photograph.” Unzipping a pocket of my jacket, I reached inside, extracted a folded sheet of paper, and handed it to Dave. “Shouldn't take long,” I said.

“You're sure you don't need to see a doc?” he asked.

I stared at him. “Go. By the time you get back, I'll be fine.”

“Call me if you need me,” Dave said.

“I won't.”

“You'd better.”

“Need you, I mean.”

“I'm going,” he relented, “under protest.”

“Noted.” I managed a smile. “And appreciated.”

“Get better, Charlotte,” Luna said.

“Thanks. You and Dave be careful.”

She smiled. “We will.”

After they left, I returned to my room in the mansion and donned an empty backpack.

My trek across the terrain between the mansion and the southern cemetery, rugged in some areas, was uneven almost everywhere, but I followed the pathway that Dave, Luna, and I had taken, as best I could remember it, since it had been the path of least resistance, so to speak.

In fifteen minutes, I was back at the burial yard.

I gulped.

Although, without fog, in the brightness of the late morning, under blue skies, the graveyard didn't seem especially eerie, I recalled how it had looked—how it had *been*—obscured on every side by thick, impenetrable fog. The memory was

enough to make me hesitate a moment before again setting foot on the premises.

I didn't plan to dawdle, but I didn't need to rush, either. I didn't want to miss anything.

What the fog had concealed was now revealed, and I saw the headstones, crypts, mausoleums, statues, and fountains clearly. They reflected the cemetery's age and a large degree of neglect, which I found sad.

I wondered whether the northern cemetery, where the original family had been interred, was in as poor a condition as this graveyard, where their servants were buried.

Another thought occurred to me as well: why had some servants merited a mausoleum, rather than a grave or a crypt? Obviously, they enjoyed a higher status, but why? I decided to visit these more elaborate burial places and note the names and dates assigned to them.

Without the fog to disorient me, I found Frank McGruder's grave site without much difficulty, and I hunkered down to study the marker's inscription.

Not surprisingly, it read the same as it had the last time I'd seen it: Frank McGruder, his birth date, and today's date, as his day of death.

I still had no idea why the stone bore such an inscription. What type of stone was the marker made of? I had no idea, but maybe I could find out from one of the photographs Dave had taken of it.

It felt cool to my touch, and smooth, rather than coarse. Impulsively, I traced the contours of the letters spelling out Mr. McGruder's name.

Frowning, I felt the shapes of the letters and numbers of the dates.

Something was wrong!

The alphanumeric characters were smooth, but not in the way that a stone is smooth.

I felt the stone again. Yes, it was cool to the touch, all right, but it lacked the coldness—and the density—of any rock I'd ever felt.

On an impulse, I grasped the sides of the stone and pulled. To my shock, the front of the headstone came away in my hands.

It was false!

And lightweight.

It wasn't stone; it was Styrofoam!

Beneath the false front I held in my hands was the headstone's true surface. I touched it. The difference between the counterfeit I held and the surface I touched was unmistakable. Unlike the imitation, the actual headstone had the cold, hard density of rock. I pushed against it, as hard as I could. There was no give, no movement. It was rock-solid. I pushed my fingertip into the fake front, and my nail sank into its surface, leaving a crescent mark.

There was another difference, too, between the actual headstone and the false front that had been fitted over it. The real marker bore a different name and different dates than those inscribed in its Styrofoam imitation.

Noting them, I set the false front aside to take back to the mansion with me.

After copying the names and dates on the cemetery's three mausoleums, I searched for the marker Luna said she'd found bearing her own name, birth date, and date of death. It was near the marker with the false front, Luna had said. After a half-hour's hunt, I'd found nothing.

Maybe, I thought, because there'd never been anything like the stone Luna had mentioned.

Why would she lie about something like that? I wondered. There was more to Luna Moon than she'd let on, it seemed.

Departing the graveyard, I left the dead to rest in peace.

Whatever Dave and Luna might have found in the northern cemetery couldn't top my own discovery, I thought, still amazed at the audacity of the outrageous deception I'd uncovered, quite literally.

CHAPTER 14

“I’M GLAD YOU FEEL better, Charlotte.”

“Thanks, Luna.”

“Me, too,” Dave said.

I smiled. “Thanks, Dave.”

“Think I’ll go to my room and rest,” Luna told Dave and me. “I’m a little tired.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Dave declared. “We’ve done a lot of walking lately. A little rest sounds good.”

“See you in the morning?”

“We’ll probably have breakfast about eight. Sound good, Dave?”

“I should be rested by then.”

Luna left.

“So, what’s next on the agenda?” Dave asked.

“Give her a few minutes; then, we'll pay a visit to the library.”

“Something happened at the cemetery,” he told me, looking pensive.

“Something paranormal?” “Maybe.”

“Tell me.”

“It might be better if I show you.”

“Okay.”

Taking a seat at the room's desk, he plugged his camera into my laptop and imported the photographs of the northern cemetery he'd saved on his camera. When the process completed, he opened one of the files.

I studied the high-density photograph. The image was eerily similar to the ghostly figure I'd seen in the fog at the southern cemetery, a blurred outline of a transparent, faceless human form. I could see the cemetery through the figure, blotches of foliage, twigs, and patches of the blue sky in the head; tree trunks across the abdomen; a stone cross through the left leg and lower back; leafy plants through the right leg and hip.

“Is that what it appears to be?”

“I don't know, Charlotte, but seeing it sure freaked me out. I took a half-dozen pictures of it. The figure itself, outlined in a blurry white aura—maybe it's not an aura; I'm just trying to describe it—walked, or glided—it's hard to put into words—and the background changed as it moved, sort of like the

figure was a human-shaped window or lens held between me and the cemetery.”

He clicked the mouse, showing me the changes he'd described. As the figure half-walked, half-glided, various trees and shrubs appeared inside its outline, clouds came into view for a moment before being replaced by other darker or lighter clouds of various types, and the blue of the sky brightened or darkened slightly.

“Creepy! Did Luna see it?”

“No, she was checking out the mausoleum.”

“Do you have any idea why it was there?”

“No. It didn't stay long before it—” he gave me a believe-it-or-not shrug—”faded away.”

“Disappeared, you mean?”

“Not all at once; more slowly.”

He clicked my mouse. A picture showed what he'd seen. Much of the figure seemed to melt into the background.

“I see. Anything else—about the—figure?” I'd almost said “ghost.”

“Just that it seemed disoriented and, I don't know—I can't explain it.”

“You're doing fine, Dave.”

He shrugged. “Like it didn't belong here.”

“On the island, you mean?”

“No, like it didn't seem to belong to our time. It seemed to be from the past. I know it sounds weird, but it seemed displaced. Weirder yet, when I met Luna at the mausoleum—I'd wanted to check out the cemetery, and she wanted to shoot some footage of the family tomb, so we'd agreed to meet there—I saw something—” Dave looked frightened, and his face went pale.

I gripped his hand. “What did you see, Dave?”

“The statue of the estate's founder, Henry Hawkes—his body, his stature, his height, his weight—looked the same as the size of the ghost, or whatever I saw. The transparent figure I'd seen earlier was Henry's ghost, Charlotte. I don't know how I knew it, but I did.”

“But the ghost, or whatever, didn't have a face, did it?”

“No.” He seemed unsure. “No, it didn't.”

“Then how could it have looked like the statue of Henry Hawkes?”

“It couldn't,” he admitted, “but it did. Somehow, I knew it; I'm sure of it.”

“What was Luna doing when you arrived at the mausoleum?”

“She was staring at the statue. There were three of them: his and two women's.”

“His wife Louise,” I said, “and their daughter Margaret.”

“Yes, that’s right; those are the names carved into the statues’ pedestals.”

“You must have been scared to death.”

“It was eerie, no doubt about it.”

“Do you think you saw a ghost, Dave, a real, actual ghost?”

“I don't know what it was, Charlotte. I mean, I'm a natural-born skeptic when it comes to paranormal and supernatural phenomena. For me, it's hard to believe in things that go bump in the night. But I have never seen anything like what I saw at that cemetery today.”

“I'm skeptical, too, Dave, but as journalists, we have to keep an open mind.”

“Right now, my mind's so open its nearly blown.”

“Maybe a trip to the library will help us figure out what we're dealing with,” I said.

“Do you think Luna is really taking a nap?”

I chuckled. “More likely, she's editing her video.”

“Let's hope. If she is, she isn't likely to follow us.” He sighed. “I'm not looking forward to the walk from here to the library, though. It looks a good distance on the map.”

“It's not to scale,” I reminded him.

“It would be just our luck that it's even farther than it looks.”

“We're fortunate you're in such good shape, then.” I smiled. “We're lucky, too, that the miniature railroad is also a taxi of

sorts.”

“It makes stops?”“It does.”

“I didn't know that.”

“I didn't, either, until I checked at the front desk.”

“I wish I'd thought of that before Luna and I hoofed it to the northern cemetery. It's not all that close to the mansion, either.”

“We'd better bring our backpacks, on the chance that the library allows checkouts. Many of the books are probably first editions from the nineteenth century, nice and thick with leather bindings.”

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CHAPTER 15

WHEN THE MINIATURE TRAIN stopped near the mansion, I said, “Let's see how much the new engineer and tour guide knows about the island. Maybe he can add some facts we haven't learned.”

Between the mansion and the first site along the southeastern branch of the railway lay several miles of empty landscape during which we could carry on a conversation uninterrupted by the driver's need to describe the island's points of interest.

It was sad, and a little spooky, to ride the miniature train that Mr. McGruder had driven before his death, I thought, as Dave and I snagged a seat in the car behind the late driver's replacement.

“I'm Charlotte Hastings,” I introduced myself.

“Welcome aboard.”

“And I'm Dave Edwards.”

“Nice to meet you,” the young man said.

Dave chuckled. “We haven't really met yet, have we?”

The driver looked perplexed.

“We don't know your name,” Charlotte said.

“Oh. Sorry. I'm Tim Leeds. Most of our guests aren't all that interested in knowing associates' names.”

“How do you like driving the train?” I asked.

He laughed. “It's a job, you know.”

“You live here, on the island?” Dave asked.

“No. I commute by ferryboat.”

As the train followed the rails, I asked Tim about the contents of the library. “Mr. McGruder said it contains mostly books on the occult.”

“Never been there myself,” Tim said. “I hear the Hawkes family—the ones who built this place—were on the eccentric side, though.”

“Eccentric? How so?”

“Spiritualists. I guess their library could have books along those lines.”

“Do you know anything else about the history of this place?” Dave inquired.

“Just the standard, official overview all associates receive when we're hired, the same info you received after booking your rooms, stories about the places on the island where paranormal stuff is supposed to happen—or to *have* happened.”

“The rats in the feed barn and the cows that gave blood instead of milk?” Dave asked.

“Yeah.”

“Seen anything like that yourself?”

He scoffed. “No, and I don't expect to.”

“You sound like a skeptic,” I suggested.

“Guilty as charged. The only unusual thing that's happened on this island since I've worked here are the mysterious deaths of two women.”

“Who were they?” Dave asked.

“Associates. Emily Birmingham and Julia Harris. Didn't know them myself. They're buried in the southern cemetery.”

Again, Dave and I exchanged glances.

“They're buried *here*, on the island, rather than in their hometowns?”

“One of the perks of the job, if you can call it that,” Tim explained. “After ten years of service, full-timers receive burial benefits, provided they're buried here, on the island, in the former servants' cemetery, the southern graveyard.” He laughed. “I'm part-time myself.”

I was about to ask him what had been so mysterious about the deaths of Emily Birmingham and Julia Harris when he picked up the microphone attached to the train's intercom system.

“Sorry; I have to do my spiel.” He switched on the mic and started delivering the canned lecture about the laundry, recreation hall, and library. He hadn't come to the commissary and feed barn when we reached our stop.

As we disembarked at the library, Tim said, “Watch out for ghosts and goblins,” before continuing his route.

“He seemed like a man of few words at first, but Tim sure turned out to be a talker,” Dave observed.

“We learned something interesting from him, too.”

“You mean the associates' burial benefit?”

I nodded. “I'd say that's an unusual perk.”

The library was straight ahead. According to a nearby sign at the corner of the lot, the library was a block square, three-story edifice in the Gothic Revival style. Surrounded by trees and hedges, it was built of bricks, and the exterior walls were adorned with columns, white marble trim, and ornamental gables. The building also featured the steeply pitched roofs, tower, and tall windows with Gothic arches characteristic of its style.

“Built to last,” Dave observed.

“It doesn't look as foreboding as I'd imagined,” I said.

“We haven't been inside,” he reminded me. “If it has the kind of books it's rumored to have, it might turn out to be *plenty* ominous.”

CHAPTER 16

I HAVE TO ADMIT, I was expecting a cavernous space with flaming torches set in wall sconces, spiders' webs across shelves and doorways, human skulls for decoration, and bloody, decapitated heads as bookends. I've been told I have a vivid imagination.

The Hawkes Library didn't look anything like I'd envisioned it. The walls contained recessed, twelve-foot-tall shelving units, side by side. Mahogany panels framed each unit, the tops of which formed framed, arched niches displaying urns, busts, or vases of fresh-cut flowers. Over the niches, a rail, curved at the corners of the room, connected to a wheeled ladder, providing access to books on higher shelves.

In the center of the immense ground-floor chamber, matching divans, sofas, wing-backed chairs, and armchairs, each upholstered in pale blue and gold fabric, awaited readers on area rugs, among small tables of geometric shapes, all of mahogany, like the bookshelves.

Statues graced alcoves and corners, and, overhead, a huge dome reached into the upper floor, where more shelves, forming an immense circle around the dome, offered thousands of additional books.

The architectural splendor of the Hawkes Library, inside and out, astounded me with its elegance and beauty. The magnificent building gave no impression of a collection dedicated entirely to books concerning the occult, the supernatural, the paranormal, and the mystical. Instead, a visitor was likely to expect Homer, Virgil, Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Voltaire, Hugo, and Dostoevsky.

Dave, observing my awestruck stare, asked, “So, what do you think of the place, Charlotte?”

“Unbelievable.”

“Let's have a look at the books,” he suggested.

A survey of the volumes turned up books on the afterlife, reincarnation, the spirit world, spirit guides, ghosts, mediums, mesmerism, clairvoyance, faith healing, witchcraft, demonology, theosophy, syncretism, and mysticism.

Authors included Emanuel Swedenborg, Allan Kardec, Franz Mesmer, Andrew Jackson Davis, Cora L. V. Scott, and Gerald Massey. There was also a collection of essays by members of the Ghost Club, whose number had included Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Charles Dickens, and, of course, Madame Blavatsky.

Perusing one of the thinner volumes, Dave discovered that not all the scientists of the day were as skeptical of such phenomena as he'd thought. The chemist and physicist William Crookes had converted from skeptic to true believer, as had evolutionary biologist Alfred Russell Wallace and physicist William Crookes.

Others who may not have been believers but who appeared to have kept open minds about the possible reality of extrasensory, psychic, and similar phenomena included Pierre Curie and First Lady Mary Lincoln, whose husband attended White House seances with her on occasion.

“The Hawkes family invested a fortune just in building and stocking this library,” Dave said, shaking his head. “To say they took this stuff seriously would be the understatement of the century.”

“I don't know how we'll ever find what we're looking for among so much material,” I declared, overwhelmed before our research had begun. “In fact, I'm not even sure what we're looking for.”

“There's only one way I know of: start reading.”

The room went black.

I tensed, taking a breath, my fight-or-flight instinct kicking in, as my mind flooded with images of the demons, witches, and the zombies. Such fancies were ludicrous, I told myself, but they persisted. Again, without realizing it, I'd become tense.

Since we'd entered this library, my imagination had been concocting all kinds of wild, incredible notions concerning possible paranormal activity and supernatural beings. Now, my mind had apparently conjured up an otherworldly menace out of shadows and darkness.

Reaching for my cell phone, I found nothing. My fear doubled, until I remembered I'd tucked my phone away in my backpack for safekeeping.

"Charlotte?" Dave called.

Thankfully, his voice sounded close.

"Here!" I answered. "I'm here!"

Something touched me.

Fingers.

I jumped, screamed.

Arms wrapped around me, drew me close. "I'm here, too," Dave assured me.

My arms encircled him. "I'm glad," I cried.

It was the second time he'd held me. His embrace was tight, reassuring, comforting. I hugged him back.

"I'll see if I can find the light switch."

"I'm coming with you!"

"Okay; but stay close to me and be careful."

We released one another, and he took my hand in his.

In the darkness, we stepped carefully, unsure of the location of furniture and uncertain that we were alone.

The lights flashed on again, blinding us.

“Oh, I am sorry,” an elderly woman’s voice said. “I did not realize that I had visitors.”

Dave let go of my hand.

As my eyes adjusted to the sudden change from darkness to light, I made out the figure of a thin, elderly woman, her gray-hair in a neat bun at the nape of her neck. Standing near a wall, she turned toward us, her dark-purple silk brocade Victorian dress and her eyeglasses’ large square black frames giving her a studious and sedate look.

“Who are you?” Dave demanded.

“I am Victoria Wells.”

“Why are you here?”

“I am the librarian.”

“Why did you turn out the lights on us?” I asked.

“I did not realize that I had guests. I realized that you were here only afterward,—” she looked at me—“when you screamed.” For a moment, she looked like she might reprimand us. Then she said, “There are not many visitors among tourists.”

“Do you always dress that way?” David asked.

I turned to him. “David!”

Ms. Wells ignored the impertinence of both his question and his tone. “I wear the costume of the family’s original librarian. It is a tradition at Sea Island Estate.” She smiled. “It has become my preferred manner of dress. Now that we have made our introductions, may I be of assistance to you?”

“The library has so many volumes devoted to the Hawkes family’s interest in—” I searched for a term I hoped wouldn’t sound offensive—“uh, esoteric studies. I wonder if you could point us toward a good introductory volume or two on spiritualism.”

“And magic,” Dave added, “and maybe demonology.”

Ms. Wells looked taken aback by our requests, but she quickly recovered her dignified demeanor. “Have a seat,” she invited us, gesturing toward a nearby group of chairs and tables. “I will bring you a few volumes. They must be read here, though, I am afraid; none of the collection may be checked out.”

She left us, returning a minute later with a wheeled library cart, and began pushing it across the room.

“Let me get that for you,” Dave offered.

“Thank you, young man, but I require no assistance.”

She crossed the room, took a thick, gilt-edged, leather-bound volume from a shelf and placed it on the cart. Making her way to another unit of shelves, she added another, equally thick gilt-edged volume to the pushcart. Then, she brought the books to us. “The third volume is on the second floor,” she

informed us. “I thought that you might wish to start becoming acquainted with these tomes while I retrieve the other.”

“Thank you,” I said, accepting the heavy book she offered me.

Dave repeated my words as he took the second volume from Ms. Wells, who, despite her petite size, her slender build, and her advanced years, seemed surprisingly strong. “I don’t mind lending a hand, if you need help,” he advised her.

“Thank you, but an elevator provides easy access to the upper floors. I should not be more than a few minutes.”

When Dave judged her to be out of earshot, he said, “Her speech doesn’t sound affected, but I don’t know anyone, young or old, who speaks in such a formal way. Do you?”

“Just Ms. Wells.” I opened the book the librarian had handed me, Madame Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*.”

“Did you notice that she said ‘upper floors,’ not ‘upper floor’?”

I nodded.

“From outside, the library looks like it’s three stories tall but, now that we’ve seen its interior, I don’t see how there can be more than two stories. This floor doesn’t have a ceiling; it extends into the floor above. I guess the second story might have a partial floor or walkways, but there isn’t anything above it but the building’s dome.”

“There’s a tower, too; I saw it from outside. Maybe she considers it a third floor.”

“Maybe.”

“What book did she give you?”

Dave frowned. “It’s title is in Latin: *Malleus Maleficarum*, whatever *that* means.” He opened the cover. “Whoa! Check this out!”

I blushed at the illustration of “skyclad” witches dancing in the clearing of a forest under a full moon, in the presence of the devil, who looked much like the pictures of the satyrs of ancient Greek mythology.

A rattle interrupted us.

“What was that?” I asked, eyes wide.

“That,” Dave said, pointing across the room.

The wheeled ladder secured to the rail along the top of the recessed units of bookshelves was moving—of its own accord!

We’d both seen it, but we couldn’t believe it—or, at least, *I* couldn’t.

“Unbelievable!” Dave said.

Then, as we watched, a thick volume in one of the higher shelves slid out from the others and hung over the edge of the shelf.

“Where are you going?” Dave asked.

“To get it, of course.”

I was plenty scared, but I wasn't about to let a book that the library—or someone or something *in* the library—wanted me to read badly enough to go to the trouble of moving a ladder to provide access for me to retrieve a book it had clearly indicated I should read.

I came back with the volume, stashing it inside my book bag just before Ms. Wells returned from upstairs. She extended her own book to Dave. “*Key of Solomon*,” she identified the title. “It will acquaint you with the grimoires of the sorcerers and witches of the Renaissance and with the sigils of seventy-two demons captured by King Solomon. The library closes at eight p.m. sharp.”

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CHAPTER 17

AFTER BOARDING THE MINIATURE train at the station near the library, choosing the last car this time, which, like the four before it, was empty, Dave and I discussed our respective readings.

“*Malleus Maleficarum* is totally weird,” Dave said. “As far as I can tell from what I was able to read at the library, it’s a handbook for Inquisitors, mostly about how to conduct trials and convict women charged with practicing witchcraft, by any means necessary, including torture.”

“Sounds lovely,” I said, letting my face show my disgust.

“Let’s just say it could have been written by the Marquis de Sade. The parts of succubae and incubi were, uh, rather stimulating, though, and, by ‘stimulating,’ I mean—”

“I know what you mean,” I said, remembering the illustrations of the skylad witches dancing in the forest for the devil’s enjoyment.

“What about your book?”

“I didn’t have time to read the whole text, and what I did read wasn’t easy to understand, not only because of the ideas, which were stranger than strange, but also because the style was more Victorian than those of Dickens or Thackeray—or those of Hawthorne or Melville, for that matter.”

“Whoever they are,” Dave said.

“Were,” I corrected him.

“Were what?”

“They were, not are; they’re dead.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, it’s kind of a jumble of Eastern and Western religion, Hermetic philosophy, the evolution of human consciousness, psychic phenomena, *prisca theologia*, and perennial philosophy.”

“Which means?”

“I had to look up a few words,” I admitted. “I bookmarked the website of a dictionary of the occult, metaphysical, mystical, and New Age, by the way, if you find yourself in need any definitions.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Meanwhile, what is, one, *prisca theologia* and, two, perennial philosophy?” “The first refers to the teaching that God gave us one true theology, which is the basis, often in somewhat corrupted form, of all religions. The second regards all religions as sharing the same metaphysical truth from which all esoteric lore and teaching stems or flows.”

“I see,” Dave said. “Well, not really, not totally, but partially, as through a glass eye, darkly. What’s Hermetic philosophy?”

“Basically, a sort of pantheism—God is all things, so all things are God—that is allegedly the basis for all religions. Hermetic philosophy also involves the belief and practices reflected in alchemy, and its followers also accept the truth of *prisca theologia* and such concepts as ‘as above, so below,’ which states that there is some correspondence among all things transcendent and immanent.”

“Whatever *that* means.”

“Exactly.”

“In reading *Isis Unveiled*, did you get the same feeling I did when reading *Malleus Maleficarum* that the writer was just going round and round without a beginning, middle, or end to, well, anything?”

I laughed. “Pretty much.”

“Maybe we would do better reading an analysis or a commentary on these works than we would actually reading the originals themselves,” Dave suggested.

“It’s worth a try,” I agreed. Patting my backpack, I added, “I’m hoping that book that the library—or whatever it was *in* the library—recommended will shed more light on the deep, dark mysteries of mysticism.”

“What book did the spirit or whatever recommend?”

“I haven’t had a chance to look.” She opened her backpack and extracted the volume.

Dave leaned over, reading the title aloud: “*Diary of Margaret Hawkes.*” His eyes widened. “*The Margaret Hawkes?*”

I nodded. “Henry Hawkes’s daughter.”

As the train approached the station near the mansion, Dave yawned. “It’s early, but I think I’ll turn in. It’s been a long and, I think you’d agree, eventful day.”

“I’m going to watch a couple of Luna’s videos,” I said.

Dave looked surprised.

“I’m pretty sure that, instead of taking a nap after you and she returned from the northern cemetery, Luna edited her video footage. Most VidShare influencers post a new video at least weekly, and it must be about time she added a new clip. If she finished editing, she may have added an episode today. She has to keep her followers happy, right?”

“Right.”

“I’d like to see what her take on our adventures is, wouldn’t you?”

“Would there be popcorn?”

I laughed. “If it’s on the room service menu.”

“I’m in, then. Give me a few minutes, and I’ll join you.” He grinned. “Your place or mine?”

I shrugged. “All guests have Internet access.”

“Yours, then; it’s probably way neater.”

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CHAPTER 18

THE *Paranormal Paradise* influencer certainly knew how to look the part, I thought. Luna's Gothic attire and makeup were concessions to marketing, and her attire certainly enhanced her role as a paranormal investigator. To sell creepy, it helped to look creepy—but in a *sexy* way, of course, the way Luna looked in her black short-sleeve Lolita dress.

A border of tightly gathered pleats outlined the bust, and bands of black ruffles encircled the waist, the mid-thigh, and the hem of her skirt. A pair of black leather straps with buckles near their tops hung from the bodice's border, with a third suspended at the center of her back and each falling to the hem of her skirt. In addition, black crepe streamers dangled from her waist to the floor.

Black pads covered her wrists, accentuating the black nail polish she wore to match the heavy black eyeliner and mascara highlighting her wide, dark eyes, the dark eye makeup contrasting sharply with her milk-white complexion, framed

by her straight, shocking pink, asymmetrical hairstyle, and her ruby lips.

Beneath her dress, tight black lace leggings descended, over her well-turned legs, into a pair of knee-high, high-heeled boots bristling with pairs of straps that buckled at the opposite sides of her legs. Her attire made a bold and saucy statement.

As she sat at her desk, Luna gazed into the camera for a moment, her expression one of fear. “As you know, Angels, I have returned to the haunted Sea Island Estate off the coast of Georgia, after my first visit to the resort a year ago, and I am disturbed by what I've witnessed during the few days I've been here. Let me show you a clip of one of the phenomena I observed just last night.”

“While we were at the library,” Dave said.

As lights flashed in Luna's room at the mansion, vaguely human shapes moved, quivering and writhing in the light and vanishing in the darkness, creating a strange strobe effect.

At the same time, moans, whispers, and eerie whooshing sounds, like wind, rose and fell.

A lamp levitated.

A blanket rose, flapped, and covered the bed.

The camera showed Luna, close up; she looked terrified.

Then, the footage was replaced with Luna at her desk. Looking pale, she shook her head. “Is Sea Island Estate really haunted? I think it's safe to say we know the answer to *that* question!”

“What do you think?” I asked Dave.

“Good special effects.”

“Could you create them?”

He nodded. “With some preparation, sure.”

“So her room wasn't haunted?”

Dave chuckled. “Did you think it really was?”

“No,” I said, but, even to my own ears, I didn't sound too sure. “Of course not,” I added.

“What's equally disturbing,” Luna told her *Paranormal Paradise* Angels, “is that, when I visited the island's southern cemetery—as you know, there are *two* on this small island—I saw—” She stopped, looking terrified. “I saw,” she repeated, halting again, as if the memory were too horrible for words. “I saw my name and birth date on a headstone!” she blurted, tears in her eyes.

“Great theater,” Dave commented. “She's quite an actress.”

“Along with the date of my death!” Luna added.

“She doesn't *look* like she's acting,” I said.

“That's why she's a good actress,” Dave countered.

Footage replaced her image, and her audience saw Frank McGruder' headstone with its recent date of death or, rather, the Styrofoam false front that had covered the actual marker of another person's grave on the day Dave and I had visited the cemetery with Luna.

An inset window showing Luna, at the desk in her room at the mansion, appeared in a corner of my computer screen. I looked back and forth at the headstone in the fog-shrouded cemetery and at Luna in her room, as she continued her narrative. “During the same visit, I also saw this very headstone, the marker of a resort employee. The marker included his own date of death, which was the same day as mine!”

The mansion faded in as a picture of the cemetery faded out. In the inset window, Luna commented, “Later, returning from the cemetery, I saw his body—his *dead* body—being wheeled out of the mansion on a gurney.”

The inset window vanished, and Luna's image filled my computer screen. “I'm still here, alive and well,” she said, with a faint, seemingly forced, smile, “for now.”

She shuddered, tears spilling from her eyes. A moment later, she managed to pull herself together in a convincing display of inner strength. “I'm going camping next, at a spot where a person disappeared a century ago. If I'm still here next week, not on the island, but *here*, in this world, I'll post the next installment of *Paranormal Paradise*. See you then, Angels—I hope.”

As another channel's video appeared in place of Luna's *Paranormal Paradise* series, Dave said, “I can see why her channel is so popular. She's good.”

“She is.”

“I noticed something else, though. Although she agreed to collaborate with us and showed some of the footage I shot, she made no mention of you, me, or *The World Today*.”

I nodded. “You're right. I noticed something, too. She talked about, but never showed, the headstone bearing her name, birth date, and date of death. That's so dramatic you'd think she'd show it, if nothing else.”

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CHAPTER 19

“IT SEEMS CLEAR THAT Luna isn’t exactly who she pretends to be,” Dave said.

“She certainly appears to be more out for herself than she is interested in collaborating with us,” I agreed. “Her reference to Mr. McGruder’s headstone reminds me: we haven’t been able to find out anything about the person whose name appears on the genuine marker that the Styrofoam false front covered or, for that matter, who put the false front in place.”

“I guess the Internet can’t answer everything,” Dave observed. After a moment, he added, “Luna was here, at the resort, a year ago. Could she have put the false front in place then?”

I considered his question. “She might have,” I replied, “but it seems unlikely she’d have thought that far ahead in setting up a connection with his death and the inscription she supposedly saw on the marker bearing her name, birth date, and date of death, and it’s much *more* unlikely that the false front wouldn’t be discovered over such a period of time.”

“It also seems way too much of a coincidence that the date of Mr. McGruder’s death, on the false front, matched hers on the headstone she claims to have seen.”

“Agreed. It’s also unlikely that Luna could have known, before the fact, that Mr. McGruder would die on the same day that she was supposed to die—according to her headstone, that is. Our Ms. Moon becomes more mysterious by the minute. One thing seems clear, though. If Luna didn’t put the false front in place when she was here a year ago, which appears unlikely, she either did it during this trip, before we went to the southern cemetery, which also seems doubtful, or she has an accomplice here, on the island.”

“That possibility ties in with another. An accomplice put the false front over ‘Mr. McGruder’s’ headstone *and* Luna never saw her own marker, as she claims to have done.”

“Feel like watching another installment of *Paranormal Paradise*?”

“I don’t know.”

“Too tired?”

“No, but you promised me popcorn.”

I smiled. “I said, and I quote, ‘If it’s on the room service menu.’”

“I’m guessing it isn’t, but, okay, I’m in. Do you have a particular episode in mind?”

I nodded. “The one Luna suggested when I asked her if she’d ever seen a demon: ‘Demonic Entities.’”

“The things I do for you.”

I clicked the link produced by my search for the episode’s title and, after a word from one of Luna’s sponsors, “Demonic Entities” began to play.

Luna appeared, in darkness, dressed in black. Her face, lit from below, seemed eerie in a cute kind of way, her eyes defined by outlines of mascara and eyeliner, and her black lips dark against her pale flesh. “Hello, Angels!” she said to her followers. “In this segment, we’re going to investigate demonic entities!” As she spoke, a flashing demonic face intermittently covered her own, the way the skull flashes off and on over Norman Bates’s face at the end of *Psycho*.

“Creepy,” I said.

“She is definitely adept at special effects.”

Cuts from several sources showed alleged demonic activity, exorcisms, and illustrations of demons, a few of which I recognized: the incubus squatting on the sleeping form of a supine woman in *The Nightmare* by Henry Fuseli; skyclad witches, astride broomsticks, flying among gigantic bats and monstrous figures in *Faust’s Vision* by Luis Ricardo Falero; the demonic denizens of hell in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch. As the images shifted on the screen, darting forward or receding, spinning or flexing, bulging or crumpling, Luna peered out of the darkness, into her camera, offering her followers a highly condensed summary of demonology.

Then, a grid of squares filled the screen. Each square was occupied by a bizarre sign. “These are sigils,” Luna explained, “seals, or signatures, of demons and other spirits. They appear in S. L. MacGregory Mathers’s and Aleister Crowley’s 1904 publication *The Book of the Goetia of Solomon the King*.”

The sigils were signs composed, for the most part, of circles; crosses; curved and straight lines; and stylized shapes of swords, keys, tridents, horns, shields, and banners.

An arrow appeared on the screen, pointing out the names of the demons associated with the seals. “As you can see,” Luna informed her viewers, each sigil is the mark of a specific demon: Bael, Marbas, Forneus, Zagan—seventy-two, in all.”

Dave shook his head. “Crazy.”

I didn’t reply.

“Right?”

“Maybe.”

He frowned. “You’re taking this stuff seriously?”

“There is also a modern, secular interpretation of sigils’ significance,” Luna declared.

“I can hardly wait to hear it,” Dave said.

Listening intently, I made no reply.

“According to chaos magic, a sigil represents the effect that a witch or a sorcerer wants to achieve.”

Luna’s face filled the screen. Her eyes sparkled—literally.

Special effects? Dave would say so. At the moment, I wasn't all that sure.

“Intrigued, Angels?” Luna asked, a slow smile appearing on her pale face. “Check out the next installment of *Paranormal Paradise*. I'll bring you up to speed on the technique used to create sigils, which translates, in magic, to making your dreams come true!”

A puff of smoke filled the screen.

“So, what did you think of Luna's demon show?” Dave asked.

I shook my head.

Dave frowned, studying me carefully. “Charlotte, you're not suggesting you actually believe all that mumbo jumbo?”

“No, but I wonder how much of it Luna believes and how much of it her Angels believe.”

“Luna, very little, I'd say,” Dave declared. “Remember the special effects show she put on in her room—and filmed—for her vlog? If she believed demons are the real deal, she wouldn't have to go all theatrical.”

“True. But how many of her vlog's followers are true believers, and how many of them might live in Georgia? How many of them might be right here, on Sea Island Estate, with Luna? Maybe one of her followers is the accomplice we discussed.”

CHAPTER 20

SEA ISLAND ESTATE MAY not be all that big compared to Greenland, but it seemed plenty big enough when Dave and I—and Luna—made our way along the trail leading into the forest that occupied most of the eastern half of the resort, as we headed to the campsite where we'd spend the night.

Luna appeared to have suddenly become our best friend again, despite her having made no reference to us or to *The World Today* during her VidShare episode that Dave and I watched yesterday.

“I wish I had one of those,” I said, nodding toward the three all-terrain vehicles accompanying our trek to the campground.

“They're along in case of an emergency,” our guide, Eric Wheeling, informed us, “not that it's likely there'll be one.”

Eric was a tall, handsome blond with dimples and a casual smile and, I couldn't help but noticing, a robust build and a captivating tan. In other words, an Adonis.

As we trekked through what was, for me, challenging terrain with lots of slopes, dips and twists, he filled us in on a bit of local lore. “There are two types of forests on Sea Island Resort, pond pine, or pocosin,” he informed us, “and old-growth longleaf and slash pine. We're in the pocosin timberland.”

The sparsely spaced trees looked scrawny.

“Creepy,” Luna said, swinging her camera toward them.

Was her comment directed at us or her *Paranormal Paradise* followers?

Eric chuckled. “They're stunted and scattered because they're infected with red heart rot, due to the hardpan in the topsoil; it makes the soil acidic.”

“What's red heart rot?” I asked.

“*Stereum sanguinolentum*, a crusty white rot formed by fruiting bodies, but it looks brown, until rubbed; then, it turns red, due to the fungus's reddish secretions.”

Luna looked disgusted. “Sounds gross.”

“It causes extensive heart rot in mature pines, spruces, and true firs.”

“Like I said,” Luna declared, “creepy and gross.”

“Mother Nature,” Dave added. “Gotta love her.”

“There's another theory about what causes the stunted trees,” Eric informed us. “Some say they're rooted in unholy ground.”

Luna stared. “What do you mean by 'unholy ground'?”

“In a word, evil. Often, in the past, unholy ground was associated in some way with horrific crimes, massacres or blood sacrifices, profane rituals, or burials of malevolent objects or beings.”

“Beings? You mean like demons or witches?” Luna blurted.

“Maybe.”

Feeling a bit foolish, I asked, “What about stuff like spiritualism, reincarnation, magic, and demonic activity? Could they be associated with curses or unholy ground?”

“Maybe; I don't really know,” Eric admitted. “Anyway, whatever the cause, the ground becomes cursed as a result of the past dark events that happened on it.” He smiled. “At least, that's the non-scientific theory for the stunted trees and their sparsity.”

“Whatever went down here,” Dave ventured, “must have been Bad with a capital 'B.'”

I remembered something Mr. McGruder had mentioned during the miniature train tour of Sea Island Estate, when he'd said something about a camper—a poacher, it was believed—who'd simply vanished a century before. I asked Eric about the disappearance.

“I've heard the stories. They differ somewhat in their details but, essentially, poachers, probably from the mainland, sometimes came ashore to hunt the forest's game—there were

a lot more game animals then, than now—and, sometimes, to vandalize the owners' property.”

“The Hawkeses?” I asked.

He nodded. “Henry, his wife Louise, and their daughter Margaret. Anyway, Henry apparently had had enough, and he organized a hunt of his own, with his son and a few of the family's visiting guests.”

“Sounds like something out of a *Frankenstein* movie: locals hunting the monster with pitchforks, minus the pitchforks,” Dave interjected.

“No one was caught or even seen—” Eric resumed.

Luna looked at me, wide-eyed, and I gulped.

“—but, a few days later, the Hawkeses' mansion caught fire, much of it burning. The flames could be seen along most of the mainland's coast. Fortunately, the Hawkeses had the money to rebuild.”

As we fell back so other guests could talk to Eric, Luna whispered, “Have you noticed that some of the portraits of the resort's Employees of the Year in the mansion's entrance hall are—I don't know—*changing*?”

I frowned. “What do you mean by 'changing/?'”

She gulped. “They look different.”

“How so?” Dave asked.

“Like their features are in the process of changing.”

“Into other people's faces, you mean?” I inquired.

She shrugged. “Yes. No. Maybe. I don't know, but changing.”

I shook my head. “I haven't noticed.”

“Have you?” Luna asked Dave.

He considered her question. “Maybe.”

Sounding scared, Luna said, “*Really?*”

“Maybe,” he repeated.

“How? In what way?”

Dave seemed uneasy. “Like there's another portrait under them, emerging or blending.”

I shivered. Dave might play along with Luna for the sake of her vlog to some extent, but it wasn't like him to go along with her to such a degree as this. I hadn't noticed any such metamorphoses, but that didn't mean *they* hadn't. I hadn't paid all that much attention to the portraits after noticing them on our arrival; apparently, Dave and Luna had.

“When did you first notice these, uh, changes, Luna?” I asked.

Her brow furrowed. “Yesterday? The day before?”

“How about you, Dave?” I questioned.

He looked as unsure as Luna had sounded. “I don't know, maybe about the same time Luna did,” he hazarded a guess.

“Now that you've pointed it out, I'll have to take a look, too,” I said.

As we continued our trek, the trees became thicker, their shadows lengthening in the sun. I checked the time. We'd been hiking for a few hours. How far had we come into the forest of pines? Four miles? Five?

We fell silent, and I realized I felt fatigued. I glanced at Dave and Luna. They looked tired, too. The hike through the undulating terrain along a hardscrabble trail seemed to be taking its toll on us. Again, I wished I had one of the resort associates' ATVs.

By day, the forest was beautiful if, at times, a bit disconcerting. The seemingly endless timberland was a world unto itself, remote and wild. When night came and darkness descended, the trees would appear ominous, the susurrations of their branches and leaves eerie and disturbing.

Prior to our hike into the island's wilderness, I'd done a little Internet research. It wasn't reassuring that the island's wildlife included alligators, not that it was likely we'd encounter any in the forest (I hoped). Sea Island Estate was also home to feral hogs. They looked intimidating to me, and I had no desire to encounter one. There had also been efforts to reintroduce endangered animals, including red wolves and bobcats. Fortunately, these recommendations hadn't been put into practice and, as far as I could determine, the island's present fauna didn't include these predators.

Still, the forest was spooky enough, even in daylight. If I hadn't been with Dave and the rest of the campers, it would have been even scarier. Alone in the forest, I'd be sure that the

timberland hid all kinds of monsters and fiends. Every horror movie I'd seen that featured a forest as its setting would contribute to my fear-fueled imagination. Among the trees, I would see zombies, apparitions, cannibals, changelings, stalkers, and witches. In a forest at night, there is no limit to what the imagination—especially mine—might conjure.

A shadow flashed over the trail. I looked up, into the empty blue sky.

A pelican, I told myself, a stork, or a bald eagle.

But the shadow was huge.

An optical illusion? Yes, that would explain it, I told myself.

But I didn't feel reassured.

I shuddered at the thoughts of what might have cast that flash of a shadow big enough to be—what?

Something out of a nightmare.

I quickened my pace, Dave, Luna, and I catching up with our guide again.

Finally, after what seemed forever, our hike brought us to the edge of the other type of forest Eric had mentioned.

“What became of the poacher?” I asked.

“If there ever was one,” Dave whispered.

Eric shrugged. “No one knows. He just—disappeared.”

“Never to be seen again,” I guessed.

“Oh, he's been seen,” Eric corrected me. “Every year, when we host this camping trip, someone sees him—or his ghost.” He grinned at us. “You may even see him yourselves.”

Playing to her vlog's followers, Luna cried, “I hope not!”

Something about her told me that, in fact, she was *hoping* to see him.”

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CHAPTER 21

“WOW!” I SAID, MARVELING at our accommodations. “I sure never expected anything like *this!*”

The campground's lodge, which was huge, boasted high ceilings, wood beams, and a massive wall full of thirty-foot windows. It was built on an outcropping of rock hemmed in on all sides by old-growth longleaf and slash pines. Despite their towering heights, the former were stately, almost delicate-looking, their reddish-brown trunks rising to eighty feet before branching into tufts of foliage consisting of dark-green needles.

“Wonder how old they are,” Dave said.

I opened my backpack. “Let's find out.”

“You didn't.”

“I did.” Extracting my tablet computer, I flipped its lid, turned it on, and launched my browser. After typing a search term, I accessed a website, and reported, “They don't reach

their full height of ninety-eight to a hundred-and-fifteen feet for a hundred to a hundred-and-fifty years.”

“That's old.”“But they live up to five-hundred years.”

Dave looked impressed. “Correction: that's old. How about the slash pines?”

“Aren't you glad I brought my tablet?” I teased.

He rolled his eyes.

I typed another search term, and *viola!* Everything I'd ever wanted to know about slash pines was available at my fingertips.

The website's picture of the slash pine matched those outside the windows of the lodge. Tall, with a thick, gnarly trunk, it was crowned with a tuft of bristly leaves and twisted branches which began much farther down the trunk than those of the looseleaf pines.

“As both the eye and the Internet confirm, they're shorter than the looseleaf, attaining heights from fifty-nine to ninety-eight feet. They also live two-hundred years, max.” I closed my tablet's lid. “They're beautiful trees,” I said.

Dave nodded. “They're nice,” he agreed, which, I'd discovered years ago was boy talk for everything from “pleasant” to “gorgeous.”

Although the lodge was spectacular, including a balcony on all four walls, an “I”-shaped swimming pool, green lawns, and lampposts to light up the night (at least around the lodge), its

remote location, surrounded by a forest of dense, towering trees, seemed a bit ominous.

“Speak of gorgeous,” a familiar voice said, “and I appear.”

Repressing the urge to roll my eyes, I said, “Hello, Luna.”

“Where you been?” Dave asked.

“Talking to Eric.”

“About?”

“The poacher.”

“The dude who performed the disappearing act?”

“Yep.”

“What'd he say?” I inquired.

She shrugged. “Said he'd fill us in tonight, around the campfire.”

“What's an overnight camping trip without a few fireside ghost stories, right?”

I smiled. Weakly.

Half an hour later, I was watching flames flickering on Eric's face as he sat with me and other guests around a campfire, shadows of trunks, branches, and foliage looming over us or shifting on the ground beyond the fire.

Luna, who, of course, had joined us, pointed her camera at Dave. Then, sweeping it past the fire and the dark shadows of the surrounding trees' foliage and trunks, she aimed it at me. “I hope they don't give me nightmares!” she declared.

“You're so brave, I doubt they will,” I told her. Unless, I added to myself, she thought her recounting a few “nightmares” would please her followers or gain a few more subscribers to her VidShare channel.

“In medieval days, people believed nightmares were caused by female spirits who afflicted men and horses,” Luna said.

To inform her followers, I thought. I had to give it to Luna; she always kept her audience foremost in mind.

“Spirits?” Dave asked, playing along.

“Goblins, by some accounts; incubi, by others,” Luna explained. “It wasn't until the beginning of the 1800s that the word started to refer to scary dreams.”

“Interesting,” Dave said.

He didn't look much intrigued, but Luna's camera wasn't on him when he'd commented. Even if it had been, I had no doubt she'd have edited out his less-than-enthusiastic expression.

While we chatted, the circle around the campfire expanded as more tourists joined us. There were thirty or so now, by my count, which was more than I'd anticipated. I'd assumed that only a few of the resort's guests would be likely to leave the comforts of their rooms to bed down in a forest.

Of course, we weren't going to be slumbering inside sleeping bags on air mattresses under pup tents, the way soldiers and Marines did but, as splendid as the resort's lodge was, it couldn't compete with the luxury of the mansion we'd left behind.

But if spending a couple of nights in the deep woods of Sea Island Estate was the price I had to pay for getting the full story of the resort's allegedly haunted past—and present—for my column's articles, it would be worth it—I hoped.

Eric's voice sounded ominous, and his eyes shone, feral, in the firelight. Unless I'd imagined it.

“It's about time you heard the story of the disappearing poacher and the reason you're here—the *real* reason—on Sea Island Estate,” he declared.

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CHAPTER 22

“ACCORDING TO THE HAWKESES—THE original owners of the island and the other buildings, including the mansion you're staying in as guests of the resort—the poacher was just that, a poacher who stole ashore in the dead of night to illegally hunt the island's game animals.”

“That's not what happened?” Dave asked.

Eric's glare let him—and the rest of us—know that interruptions weren't welcome. Without answering Dave's question, he continued. “There were several game animals at the time—this was in the nineteenth century, The Era of Great Estates, as it's been called. Wild pigs, deer, especially, but also fowl—grouse, quail, and turkey.” He paused, his face agleam in the flames of the campfire. With a grin, he added, “Although they aren't typical entrees on most people's menus, bobcats and alligators made things interesting, too.”

I shivered, fearing Dave and I might encounter one of these predators during our visit. Despite the frosty stare Eric had

directed at Dave for interrupting, I had to ask, “Are alligators and bobcats still on the island today?”

Instead of scowling, he smiled at me.

Answer the question! I wanted to cry.

Just when I was sure he'd ignore me, as he had Dave, Eric gave me a reassuring smile. “No bobcats to speak of, other than a stray or two, but there are plenty of gators, so watch your step.”

I was surprised he didn't add “young lady” to the end of his warning.

“It's best to stay on the trail.”

“The poacher,” Luna interjected. “What really happened to him?”

“I'm getting to that,” Eric said, “or trying to.”

I made a mental note to complain about Eric's rudeness. Certainly, the resort manager, whoever that might be, wouldn't be pleased to hear about how one of their employees had treated their guests.

“Sorry,” Luna said.

He waited, looking back and forth at Dave, Luna, and me, as if daring one of us to interrupt him again.

“And would you get that damn camera out of my face?” he demanded, glowering at Luna.

“I will not,” Luna replied.

I had to give the VidShare influencer credit; Luna had even more moxy than I'd thought. It wasn't likely Eric would do anything about her defiance; after all, she was a guest and, despite the fact that we were miles from the mansion, surrounded by tall pines, she wasn't exactly alone. Still, the girl had spunk; that was for sure.

Ignoring her, Eric resumed his story. "Supposedly, Henry Hawkes, the billionaire patriarch of the of the family and, of course, the owner of this island at the time, gathered a few of his buddies and pretended to hunt the poacher, just to scare him off the island." He paused.

Despite the light and heat of the crackling campfire, the fullness of the night's darkness seemed to press upon us. The lodge wasn't all that far, but it was around a curve in the trail, among the dense stands of the trees, and couldn't be seen from here. There was only a crescent moon and even its light, and that of the stars in the sky, was obliterated by the treetop foliage of the towering pines.

"The hunt wasn't a pretense," Eric told us, letting the implication of his statement sink in.

"You mean—" Luna started to put the horror into words.

"It was real," Eric declared. "Henry and his buddies were truly hunting the trespassing thief."

I looked at Dave. He looked as aghast as I felt. So did Luna, I observed, as I gazed at her. I couldn't help but shake my head, though, when I saw her camera remained on Eric,

despite her understandably shaky hand. Whatever else she might be, Ms. Moon was definitely a trouper!

Reaching into a pocket of his camouflage hunting jacket, Eric produced a flashlight, flicked it on, and directed its beam at a trail through the forest. “They caught up with him,” he told us, “right down that path.”

“They killed him?” I couldn't help asking.

This time, Eric didn't object to the interruption. He just grinned. “Not then,” he said. “Not there.”

I wasn't sure I wanted to hear any more of his story. No, I was sure—sure I didn't.

Judging by the expressions of horror on the faces of the other resort guests who'd joined us for the camping trip, they didn't want to hear anymore, either. If it weren't so dark, many of them might have gone back to the lodge. I might myself, except that it seemed safer here, even in the darkness, hemmed in on all sides by the forest, than it might be trekking back without a guide.

“When, then, and where?” Luna prompted, her camera pointing at our guide.

“Half an hour or so later, right here, where we're sitting,” Eric said. In the firelight, the man I'd thought so handsome looked as disturbed as Norman Bates, Hannibal Lecter, and Jack Torrance, all rolled into one.

“What happened to him?” Luna whispered.

“The same thing,” Eric said, his voice equally low, “as might happen to you.” He pointed the forefinger of each hand, sweeping them outward to indicate all of us who sat around the fire, “or any of you.”

I gulped, involuntarily scooting back.

When Dave slipped his arm around me, I didn't protest. In fact, I leaned against him, finding reassurance in his presence, his warmth, his strength. Together, we were more than a match for Eric, especially with the other campers gathered here.

I was letting my imagination get the better of me, I told myself. Eric wasn't some psychotic killer. He was a resort employee, our guide. He was just playing things up to enhance his story. Maybe his rude behavior had also been part of his act, making him seem obnoxious so he'd appear less trustworthy. If so, he ought to be on Broadway or in Hollywood.

Feeling reassured, I relaxed.

I wasn't especially into tales of horror, but I'd do my best to enjoy his little ghost story, or whatever it was, I told myself.

Eric looked from one of us to the next, studying each of the listeners seated before him. “Don't say I didn't warn you,” he cautioned us. Twisting first one way and then the next, he looked over his shoulders at the guests behind him. “Before the night's over, what happened to the poacher could just as easily happen to any one of you!”

CHAPTER 23

I NOTICED THAT ERIC didn't need to check; he could probably feel that all our eyes were on him, as Dave, Luna, the rest of the guests, and I, gathered round the campfire, listened, awaited the rest of his story.

“It was on a night much like this one,” he began.

Did he start each retelling of the story the same way, rain or shine, year in and year out, I wondered, to emphasize the anniversary's link to the original incident that had happened on this spot (according to him) in the nineteenth century, or did he customize the opening line of each reiteration of his narrative to accommodate the actual weather and other conditions of the nights on which he retold the tale?

It didn't matter, I supposed.

Or did it?

If he did fit the details of the stories to the conditions of the nights on which he repeated it, might he also change other details of the story, as he saw fit, to best frighten his listeners?

He seemed a natural storyteller, knowing how to captivate his listeners and hold their attention. The rapt expressions of the waiting guests showed his narrative skill.

“Henry and his friends, armed with rifles and shotguns, followed the trail of their quarry here, to this very spot of the forest.”

Eric's listeners looked the way I felt: scared. He was good, I thought. He might have been an actor in his hometown's community theater before he'd come to work for Sea Island Estate.

Now, he looked at us, first into one listener's eyes, then into another's. When his gaze met mine, I looked away—so did most of the others gathered around the fire, I noticed. There was a quality about him that was mesmerizing.

“They had pursued him for most of the day, and it was dark when they finally caught up with him.”

Like now, I thought.

“The poacher had started a campfire,” our guide continued, “in the very spot on which our own now burns.”

I swallowed.

“When Henry and his friends came out of the woods, their rifles and scatterguns pointed toward him, his gaunt face must have paled as he stared in horror at the unexpected approach of armed strangers.”

I imagined myself in the same situation. It was easy to do since, according to Eric, at least, we now sat in the same spot

that the poacher had occupied on a night eerily similar in weather, temperature, and time of day to tonight.

I could almost see the shadowy shapes of the men in their Victorian attire, weapons pointed toward me—I mean, the poacher. Their faces, I imagined, were hard, their eyes cold, their intent murderous.

“Their quarry scrambled to his feet and ran,” Eric told us, “like a rabbit, toward the thickness of the trees and the cover of darkness.”

Run! I encouraged their terrified quarry.

He wasn't there, of course; I knew that well enough, but I imagined him, here, now, surprised by Henry and his merciless friends who'd sought him out only to do him harm.

“A shot rang out, and the poacher hunched over, fell, and struggled to rise. Before he could, Henry was upon him, the heel of his boot across the man's neck.

“How could Henry see him well enough in the dark to shoot him?” a tall, lean man asked.

Eric only smiled. “I have you now, you thieving, poaching bastard!” the island's owner cried.

“The thief begged and pleaded for his freedom, vowing never to return to the island, but Henry was resolute. ‘Bind him!’ he ordered, and one of his posse tied the poacher's wrists together, behind his back, and hobbled him, tying each end of a stick to either of his ankles so the poacher had just enough leeway to shuffle along, a bullet in his right calf.

“In the darkness, it must have been just dumb luck he'd been struck there; he could just as easily been shot anywhere; he could just as well have been killed.”

I felt sick. I never should have come along on this camping trip, I told myself. But, as an investigative reporter, it was my duty to get all the details of the story I was pursuing, so here I was, regretting my decision, although it was the right one, the only one, really, to make. I felt so, even now.

I glanced at Dave. His face was expressionless, stoical.

Luna stared, wide-eyed, looking entranced.

I was glad I couldn't see my own face. If I could, it would have been the face of fear, I had no doubt.

“Nobody knew it, but his own family—his wife and daughter—but Henry was a spiritualist, and it was his belief—or beliefs, I should say—that brought him here that night, on the pretense of finding the poacher and evicting him from the island, once and for all.” Eric paused. The gleam of the firelight in our storyteller's eyes, he said, “But the true reason Henry hunted that man down had more to do with knives than it did with guns.”

The way he spoke those last words filled me with horror. I didn't know what Eric would say next, of course, but the way he'd accented the word “knives” suggested something horrid.

“When they'd walked him back here, bound and hobbled, from where he'd run when Henry's shot had brought him down, they flung him down, onto the ground, and Henry built

a large fire. The men sat the poacher up, between them, and Henry started in on him.”

“With the knives?” Luna blurted.

Eric looked at her, his gaze cold. He smiled, and his eyes became intense, like those of a wolf or a cougar, wild and fierce. Maybe it was my imagination or maybe the firelight and the shadows, but he looked savage, inhuman, fiendish, but for a second only. The light shifted, the shadows of the trees and the branches overhead moved, and he looked himself again, almost, handsome and powerful, but somehow a little off, a little twisted.

“Their captive said he didn't know anything about witches or demons,” Eric told us. “He swore he knew nothing about anything supernatural or otherworldly, but Henry didn't believe him.” Eric stared at Luna. “And that's when the cutting began.”

“Dave!” I hissed.

“What?” he didn't turn toward me, didn't look at me.

It was as if he were spellbound by the strange and terrible tale Eric told.

He holds him with his glittering eye, I thought.

The line from Coleridge's disturbing poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, had come unbidden to my mind, and it distressed me. I felt as if I had no control over my own thoughts.

“What?” Dave repeated.

His voice, seeming to come from far away, didn't sound like him, but as if someone were speaking through him.

Stop it! I ordered myself. Of course, it was Dave! Who else could it be? I shuddered, not wanting to consider my own question.

“I want to go back,” I told him.

“Back?” His voice, soft, seemed tentative. “Back where?”

“To the lodge,” I whispered.

“To the lodge?” he repeated in a ghost of his regular voice. Then, his head seemed to clear, for the moment at least, and he said, “We can't do that, Charlotte; we'll miss the rest of Eric's story.”

I realized that we had missed some of our guide's tale. Looking round the half-circle of guests who sat before him, Eric looked from one to the next of them, including Dave, Luna, and me, and I wondered whether they'd felt the same chill as I had when Eric's wild-eyed gaze had swept over them.

“Are any of you familiar with the death of a thousand cuts?” he asked.

I wasn't, but the very phrase made me shudder. I definitely did not want to stay here any longer listening to Eric's mad, terrifying tale, but I wasn't about to walk back to the lodge alone.

I leaned into Dave, but he didn't put his arm around me or lean back against me. He simply sat there, stiff and motionless,

his attention held by Eric's eye, which really did glitter, or seemed to, in the flickering light of the campfire.

When no one answered, Eric grinned. "In Chinese, it is lingchi," he enlightened us, "meaning 'lingering death' or 'slow slicing.'"

"Dave!" I hissed again, wanting to leave.

My photographer seemed deaf to anyone's voice but Eric's. A glance at Luna suggested that she, too, had ears only for our guide.

Creepy, I thought, shivering.

"They stripped their captive, and Henry himself wielded the blade, cutting slabs from the poacher's chest, then from his arms, legs, and buttocks. Between each carving, the interrogation continued. The captive's refusals to answer were taken as defiance, and another excision of the poacher's flesh was made." Eric smiled. "As you might imagine, screams filled the night, and blood puddled on the ground."

I heard retching from people doubled-over, and I thought I might be sick myself. I felt faint, too. Had Dave not been beside me, I would surely have fallen. Luna, I saw, leaned into him from his other side.

How Dave managed to resist the physiological effects of Eric's horrific tale was beyond me. Maybe he abstracted the account of the Henry's mad butchering alive of the poacher, something neither I nor, it seemed, Luna was able to do. For

me, the images of the captive's agony and terror were all too real, emotionally, if not physically.

“He kept carving him,” Eric said, and he actually laughed. “He cut him and cut him until there was nothing left to cut. Then, Henry started dismembering him.”

I couldn't help myself; shoving backward, I turned, leaned out, and vomited. Others had done the same, and the smell of bile, strong and disgusting, filled the air.

It was as if Eric were waiting for me to finish; when I turned back, rejoining the others in our group, he continued his unspeakable tale.

“Somewhere during the process,” he resumed, “I feel certain, the poacher, bastard son that he was, called out to his father, Henry, to spare him, but, obviously, his plea fell on deaf ears.

“When Henry had cut off the bastard's arms and legs, he decapitated him, and tossed him, piece by piece, into the fire.”

At last, Eric had reached the end of his vile tale. I turned back, toward the fire, scowling at our guide.

“Afterward, seated right here, around a fire of their own,” Eric said, “they ate his cooked flesh, and the poacher became the first of the many annual sacrifices to the dark gods Henry worshiped.” His gaze swept over us again. “We are seated, here tonight, on soil that the original patriarch of the Hawkes family saw as holy ground and as what others—maybe you yourselves, among them—might reckon to be unholy ground.”

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CHAPTER 24

AS THE CIRCLE BROKE, guests rose slowly, their knees, if they were like mine, stiff, and their backs sore. Several, like me, stretched, shrugged their shoulders, or twisted their upper bodies, working out the kinks.

“That was some story, mister,” a short, rotund man told Eric.

“Yes,” our guide agreed, “it is.”

“How did you know all those details?” I managed to ask.

“It's in the family's private collection at the library.”

“Private collection?” Luna asked.

Eric shrugged. “Margaret, the daughter, kept a diary,” he explained. “So did her mother Louise.”

Now that the ghastly story had been told and we were on our way back to the safety of the lodge, Eric didn't appear as strange or threatening as he had around the campfire in the middle of the dark forest.

Maybe he had seemed so only because of the horrific tale he'd been telling. The imagination can be a powerful thing. Under the right circumstances, my own was quite capable of transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary and the mundane into the macabre. No doubt, it had changed the way I'd perceived Eric, the same way it had turned shadows into potential threats and the darkness of the forest into a landscape of horror.

It seemed unlikely to me, though, that either of the Hawkes women would have described whatever had actually happened in the forest in such horrifying detail as Eric had done. In the case of Margaret, though, I could find out easily enough. I still had her diary in my room at the mansion. As yet, I hadn't perused more than a few entries, but I intended to read it in its entirety once we returned to the mansion.

I kept close to Dave as we made our way along the trail leading back to the lodge. I wasn't worried about my footing. The trail was even and well-maintained, and the terrain was flat, for the most part, between the site of the sacrifice—I mean, the site of the campfire—and the lodge. I walked by his side because I was frightened.

Eric's rude manner, his maniacal grins, and his tale of violence, torture, human sacrifice, and cannibalism, true or not, had both disgusted and terrified me. I'd probably have nightmares, thanks to his story. The images of blood and what amounted to vivisection, of murder and dismemberment, of agony and decapitation, culminating in the roasting and

devouring of the victim's remains, would haunt me for many and many a night, if not forever.

The site of the fire around which we'd listened, mesmerized by Eric's eerie story, was not all that far from the lodge, but it seemed to take more time to hike back than it had required to trek to the site. As we followed Eric's lead, his flashlight guiding our way, its beam occasionally illuminated the dark edges of the forest on either side of the trail. I imagined all sorts of threats hiding behind the trunks of the trees and the brush alongside the trail. We might be ambushed by demons, vampires, werewolves, zombies, or monsters never encountered before.

It was silly, yes, but, at the moment, such impossibilities seemed not only conceivable but probable. Any moment, horns might be glimpsed. Shining red eyes might peer from a dark clump of brush or a stand of pines. Fangs might snap at my neck or at Dave's or another guest's throat. A wolf that had once been a man might spring from the darkness. The shuffling forms of brain-hungry zombies might lurch toward us.

I frowned. "Dave? Have you seen Luna?"

"Now that you mention it, no, not for a while, anyway. I've been so caught up in my own thoughts that I hadn't noticed she wasn't with us."

"Me, too," I admitted.

"She must have dropped back."

Finally, as we rounded a bend in the trail, the lodge was revealed. Although some distance from us, it was as big as a fortress and brightly lit. I wished Eric would pick up his pace. I wanted to be indoors, behind locked windows and doors, safe inside a redoubtable refuge.

Already, the “spell” Eric seemed to have cast on us, like the trance in which the Ancient Mariner's glittering eye had held his listeners, faded, now that we'd seen the lodge and had begun to feel safer and more secure.

David chuckled. “Eric may not be an expert on etiquette, but he certainly knows how to tell a story; I'll give him that.”

“You sure it was just a story?”

He laughed. “Of course. You didn't really believe all that nonsense, did you, Charlotte?”

In fact, I had, if only for a moment. Dave sure seemed to be a believer himself, too, at the time. “No,” I said. “Of course not.”

“He's told it fairly often, probably improving on it every time, adding a detail here, an emphasis there, but, yeah, he's definitely an accomplished storyteller.”

“Dave, I'm worried about Luna.” She and I might never be besties, but I didn't want her to get lost or worse.

Or worse? I frowned. Why had those words entered my mind?

Suddenly, her absence seemed ominous.

“You want to wait for her?” Dave asked. “We could step off the trail, and—”

“No!” Images of shining red eyes, fangs, a snarling wolf, and clumsy, shambling forms filled my mind. “Let's walk slower, though; let her catch up.”

“Okay, Charlotte.”

We reduced our pace considerably, hearing more than seeing the dark shapes of other guests filing past.

In a couple of minutes, the last of our group had passed us. We lingered.

A minute passed. No Luna.

“Let's go,” Dave suggested.

“Not yet.”

“A moment ago, you didn't want to step off the path; now —”

“I'm worried about her, Dave.”

“Me, too, but if she's lost, we'll do her more good by returning to the lodge and reporting her missing than we would waiting here.”

He was right, but I hated to leave. Heading back without her somehow seemed to be writing her off, to be giving up on her. “One more minute,” I insisted.

“All right.”

We waited.

I strained to hear, to see, failing at both.

Even with the lodge's lights ahead, the forest seemed thicker, darker. Malice, evil, and danger seemed present, waiting to strike like the monsters I'd imagined earlier. Instead, maybe the ghosts of the poacher and his killers would appear.

Tonight, Eric had said, was the anniversary of the human sacrifice that had occurred on this island well over a hundred years ago, an act that, he'd said, had become a practice, an annual ritual.

I jumped, almost screaming, as someone gripped my hand.

It's Dave, I told myself.

His touch was welcome. I squeezed his hand in mine, and he returned the gesture.

“We need to get back, Charlotte,” he declared. “If Luna were coming, she'd have been here by now.”

I didn't resist. He was right. We'd do Luna more good by reporting her disappearance—that was an ominous word!—than we would standing here, doing nothing.

I stopped, feeling a hard tug as Dave, not having expected me to halt, had kept walking.

“What's wrong, Charlotte?” he asked.

“Remember how Luna found her name on a stranger's headstone in the southern cemetery?”

“I remember how she said she did.”

“What if she really did see her name there, the same way we found Mr. McGruder's?” I recalled how “coincidentally” the miniature train's engineer had died, from what no one, even now, seemed to know, shortly after our discovery of his bogus headstone, as if the two incidents were somehow linked. “What if Luna has been kidnapped, Dave? What if someone—or something—took her, as the victim for this year's sacrifice?”

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CHAPTER 25

LUNA'S DISAPPEARANCE LEFT ME devastated.

All right, she and I weren't the best of friends. Maybe we weren't friends at all, really. Despite her casually amiable manner, she seemed more interested in using Dave and me for her own purposes than she seemed interested in friendship. She'd obtained free footage of our cemetery visits from Dave and maybe she hoped to cash in on any publicity my mention of her in my series of articles in *The World Today* might bring her, not that I'd ever agreed to “puffing” her, as they used to say in the trade.

Still, Luna's irrepressible enthusiasm, whether real or feigned, made her hard to resist and, in spite of my doubts and concerns about the true depth of her “friendship,” I was afraid for her. If she'd been kidnapped, why? As far as I knew, her only real acquaintances on the island were Dave and me. Sure, she'd interacted with some of the staff, including Eric, but the idea that she'd been snatched to become a victim of human

sacrifice was as absurd as the sacrifice's context involving ghosts, demons, and witches.

Or was it?

I recalled, with a shudder, the thunderstorm that had hung over the resort, lashing it with lightning and torrential rains, as earsplitting peals of thunder boomed across the sky. Under ideal conditions, maybe, just maybe, such a stationary storm might be possible, but what about the demons' faces I'd seen with my own eyes, glowering and glaring at me among the dark clouds. Certainly, the storm hadn't caused them, nor, I was quite certain, had my imagination. They hadn't been simply optical illusions or hallucinations.

Demons.

I smiled.

They don't exist.

Or do they?

“There are more things in heaven and earth ... than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” Hamlet had instructed Horatio.

A search of the forest expanded into a search of the island, conducted by volunteers and police from the mainland. Although extensive and detailed, the hunt failed to turn up Luna.

It did turn up something interesting, though.

The searchers found a few six-inch glow sticks along a side trail leading to the eastern edge of the island, where there used

to be a dock. Although the pier was long ago destroyed, the site could still be used to receive or launch a small boat, although no one had put it to such use as long as anyone at the resort could remember.

Had Luna's kidnappers planted the glow sticks shortly before nightfall, as a way to mark their trail back to the water after they'd snatched Luna? It was a theory police were investigating. As yet, there was no outcome.

Meanwhile, Luna might be in the hands of desperate criminals, or even former guests of the resort, who may or not be deranged enough to sacrifice her to the demons they worshiped in continuation of the centuries-old annual ritual Eric had told us about, which itself may or may not have actually happened.

Since our return from the camping trip, I'd had my nose in Margaret Hawkes's diary, a chilling account of the events that had transpired on this island during the final decade of the nineteenth century.

In short, the entries recounted the devil worship, witchcraft, and spiritualism in which, according to Margaret, her father Henry was involved, along with certain members of his staff. A few samples indicate the horror Margaret felt in observing the unspeakable acts.

October 1, 1892

It is with disbelief, yet, that I recall, now, the wickedness of the vile acts in which Father participates, acts which I have observed, at times, with my own eyes—acts which haunt me daily, especially at night, when sleep will not come, acts which I fear I shall never be able to forget.

He speaks of a visitor to our island as a “poacher,” despite Mother's—and my own—knowledge that this person is none other than his own illegitimate son, whom I shall call, as Father does, by the anonym “Walter.” Turned out with his mother, shortly after the unfortunate babe's birth, the “bastard,” as father called the boy, returned to the island as a young man, hoping for a relationship with the man who sired him. Instead, the lad was ejected from the mansion—or from its porch; “Walter” was never admitted—and expelled from the island.

Despite Father's ill treatment of him, the poor young man harbored the hope of someday obtaining Father's consent to a relationship between them, if not as father and son, as friends, at least. He returned, only to be cast away again, an embarrassment and a shame. Not dissuaded even yet, “Walter” visited the island again and again, always with the same results.

Meanwhile, Father, loathe to lose the fortune, estate, luxury, and power he had acquired during the first forty years of his life and, at age sixty, spotting his eventual demise on the horizon, had taken up a study of the occult, which led, finally, to his utter devotion to spiritualism, devil worship, and witchcraft.

No, Father was not himself a practitioner of the dark arts, but he retained in his employ, on the island, the widowed Mrs. Masters, who was herself a witch, a devil worshiper, and a medium. It was she, under the tutelage of “spirit guides” and demons, who hatched the plan by which, in return for his fealty and obedience to the demons she worshiped, Father would obtain the fiends' promise of eternal life.

There were other costs, too, including human sacrifice. Father, it shames and horrifies me to confess, was agreeable to all that was required of him.

The sacrifices were of two types. First, each year, a victim must be killed, dismembered, decapitated, roasted upon an open fire in the midst of the island's forest of pines, before being devoured by those in attendance. Second, three

servants must also be slain periodically, so that their deaths might give rise to Father and the “legitimate” members of his family, meaning Mother and me.

Of course, when I learned of this diabolical plan, I wanted no part of it, none whatsoever!

My wishes, however, as usual, mattered naught. Father had made his decision, and he was determined. Thus, the annual sacrifices began. Initially, Mrs. Masters performed the dark rite that returned poor “Walter” to life, as hale and healthy as ever. Upon her own demise, her surrogates, handpicked servants and their descendants, each year performed the ceremony. Each time, Walter, reborn, was hunted down again and murdered, to be dismembered, beheaded, cooked, and cannibalized anew, all to please the dark ones whom Father had sworn to serve.

I stopped reading, at once horrified and relieved. If Walter, returned from the dead, was the victim, year after year, of the dreadful sacrifice, Luna was not—or, at least, she need not have been—the sacrifice. The hideous rite occurred, as always, on the anniversary of “Walter's” death, or his initial death, and it was always he, and no one else, who must be the victim.

What, then, had become of Luna?

That was the question on my mind when I was startled by a knock.

A vase in hand, I crossed the room. “Who's there?” I called, sounding, to my own ears, more frightened than challenging.

“Dave.”

I let out my breath, not realizing, until then, that I'd been holding it. Tears of relief gathering in my eyes, I set down my “weapon,” unlocked the door, and admitted my colleague and friend.

“You look like you've seen a ghost,” he said, hugging me.

Returning his embrace, I said, “We both have!”

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CHAPTER 26

DAVE LOOKED PUZZLED. “WHAT do you mean, Charlotte?”

I summarized what I'd learned so far from Margaret's diary.

He shook his head. “*Unbelievable.*”

“I know.”

“But you believe it?”

I shrugged. “I'm not sure.”

“I'm not, either, anymore,” he admitted. “When we arrived back at the mansion,” he said, looking uneasy, “I checked the resort's Employees of the Year paintings in the lobby again. They've changed further.” He looked as if he were waiting for me to laugh.

“Changed further?” I prompted. “In what way?”

“Have you been to Disneyland, Charlotte?”

“Once or twice,” I replied, not wanting him to know I'd gone every year since turning twelve, including this year.

“You've been to the Haunted Mansion?”

“It's one of my favorites.”

“Then you've seen the portraits in the entrance hall, after you step out of the elevator?”

“The ones that change?”

He nodded. “Robert, a friend of mine, is an illusionist.”

“A magician?”

“*No, he invents* illusions—what people usually call 'tricks'—for the magicians who perform them. He clued me in on how the changing portraits work, or how *he* would have designed them to work, anyway.”

“Oooh! Spill! I've always wanted to know how the Imagineers pulled that one off!”

He explained.

“Wow!”

He smiled. “If you understood all that, you did better than I did the first dozen times Robert explained it to me.”

“I didn't,” I confessed, “but I think I got the general idea. Two images are used. The front one, painted on perforated scrim material, doesn't change. The image behind it produces the special effect when it's backlit, showing through the perforations in the scrim material on which the normal image is painted and making it look as though the normal painting has transformed into the other one.”

Dave grinned. “There's obviously a lot more to you than just another pretty face.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks, I think.”

“My pleasure.”

“Do you think the mansion's management could have rigged something similar to make the Employees of the Year portraits change?”

“Maybe, but I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Even at Disneyland, the changes look artificial—not in a bad way, but in a fantasyland sense—which is deliberate, I think. The Imagineers want to scare visitors, but they don't want to terrify them, so the images are cartoon-like, not realistic. The cutesy portraits clue visitors that the transformations, eerie though they may be, are all in fun. A young woman who looks like a Disney princess turns into a werecat; an armored knight and his horse become skeletons—you know the drill; you've seen them.”

“The portraits I saw downstairs don't look invented at all; they're realistic oil paintings of actual people, the resort's Employees of the Year. I doubt the procedure Robert explained would work on such paintings. Besides, I examined them closely. There's no sign of perforated canvases or other tampering.”

“So, you're saying the paintings really did change?”

“I'm saying they're in the process of changing. The transformation is underway, but it's not complete.”

“What are the portraits changing into?”

“I can't say for sure, but they resemble the likenesses of Henry Hawkes, his wife Louise, and their daughter Margaret as they might look today.”

A chill ran along my spine. “Maybe this place really is haunted, Dave.”

He hesitated. “Maybe it is,” he agreed.

“The paintings may be tied in with the Hawkes family's return to life.” I felt silly, even as I said the words, but it was the only explanation I could think of.

“But only one person has died since we arrived: Mr. McGruder. Didn't Margaret's diary say that each return results from the death of someone else, as a sort of twisted quid pro quo, a life-for-a-death exchange?”

“Remember what Tim Leeds, Mr. McGruder's replacement, said? Two of the resort's female employees—Tim called them 'associates'—suffered mysterious deaths: Emily Birmingham and Julia Harris. Like Mr. McGruder, they were Employees of the Year, and they were buried here, on the island, in the southern cemetery.”

“Your memory is incredible, Charlotte.”

“Taking notes during or right after an interview always helps.”

“But you weren't interviewing Tim.”

I smiled. “A journalist is always interviewing the people she talks to, Dave.”

“According to Margaret's diary, the southern cemetery was established as a means of bringing her and her parents back to life by replacing the family's bodies with those of the living servants they'd murdered. As revenants—”

“What's a revenant?”

“Someone who returns from the dead.”

“Like a ghost?”

“Yes, or like the Hawkeses. It seems that, after the family died and the island was sold, the Hawkeses were later brought back to life by the resort's employees instead of the family's servants who, of course, were, by then, long gone themselves.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Margaret's diary explains that, too, I think. Originally, Mrs. Masters performed the dark rites that returned poor Henry's illegitimate son to life, to be hunted down, killed, and sacrificed to appease the demons Henry serves. When she died, her surrogates, handpicked servants and their descendants, each year performed the ceremony. I think the same trusted servants and their descendants, who became employees of the resort after the island was sold, continue to perform the same service on behalf of the Hawkes family members.”

“Now that we've figured out what's going on, what are we going to do about it?”

“We haven't figured out anything yet, Dave. We have a theory; that's all.”

“Touché. Let me rephrase: now that we have a theory, what are we going to do about it?”

“I'm going to read more of Margaret's diary.”

“And I'll see if there have been any further developments in the investigation of Luna's disappearance.”

“Come back right after.”

“I doubt I'll have to leave the mansion. Plenty of guests like to gossip.”

“I meant back here, to my room.”

Dave studied me. “You're scared?”

“Aren't you?”

“I'm wary.”

“I'd feel better if you were here,” I admitted.

He smiled. “I would, too.”

I hesitated. “Would you mind spending the night with me?”

For all his previous bravado, Dave looked shocked, but he recovered quickly. “It would be my pleasure, Charlotte!”

“No,” I corrected him. “It definitely won't be that.”

He pouted.

He was so cute I had trouble maintaining a serious facade.
“I just want to be clear.”

He smiled, his pout an obvious pretense. “Understood.”

I locked the door behind him and returned to Margaret's diary, but I had a hard time focusing. Despite my anxiety, images of Dave came unbidden to my thoughts, all of them conflicting with my somber dismissal, just a few minutes ago, of any notion he might entertain of “extracurricular activities” unrelated to the guard duty I'd assigned him.

Dave shirtless, kissing me.

Concentrate! I told myself.

Dave and I were colleagues, nothing more.

And we had a centuries-old mystery to explore and an alleged haunting to investigate.

With an effort, I managed to resume reading poor, distraught Margaret's account of the bizarre incidents she'd experienced, much to her horror, torment, and disgust.

CHAPTER 27

October 14, 1892

Nearly two weeks have passed since last I could bear to write of the atrocities committed by my own father for no other purpose but to ensure his own immortality at the cost of the taking of other people's lives, one of whose is that of his own son "Walter," born, through no fault of his own, out of wedlock.

Without this annual sacrifice—and the other acts attendant upon it, so cruel and hideous that it beggars the mind to understand how anyone, especially a father, could perpetuate them against his own flesh and blood—the demons would not respond to the witchery that Mrs. Masters and,

after her, her daughter Gladys and Gladys's descendants, down through the years, work or shall work on Father's behalf.

None but the victims of madness or of depression want to die, but only monstrous men would murder others so that they themselves might return from the dead to live again, through metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls, a phenomenon said to take many forms, whether of reincarnation; of the soul's inhabiting the body of an animal; or of some other means known only among the demons themselves who accomplish this infernal deed.

A lifetime is short, and life is sweet, but the murder of others to extend one's own existence is never justifiable; it is an abomination and a damnable offense. Father is a monster. I shudder at the thought—and at his ultimate fate. Nevertheless, I cannot suggest otherwise, however much I wish I might.

It is “Walter,” poor soul, who feeds the demons, but it is the other victims, Father's servants, who, at the cost of their own lives, nurture his continued existence, as they do Mother's, and, God help me, my own.

But, before God, I declare my determination to stop this madness. I *will* end this grotesque depravity!

For I am confident that, in the last days, Father's fiendish mockery of life and, indeed, of all things holy, shall, at last, come, finally, to its everlasting end.

I STARTED AT THE sound of four quick knocks.

Rising, I swallowed my fear, crossed the room, and called, “Who is it?”

“Dave.”

Relieved, I admitted him, immediately locking the door before turning toward him. “I'm really, really glad to see you!”

“Likewise.”

We embraced, and, again, I felt safer, if not altogether protected, in his presence, even though there wasn't much he could do against demons or, for that matter, even the Hawkes family revenants, Henry, his wife Louise, or their unfortunate daughter Margaret, whose diary had succeeded in communicating both the horror of the incidents that had caused her such fright and revulsion.

The last page I'd read, before Dave's return, had suggested that her diary also held the answer, or the “solution,” as Margaret had phrased it, to the haunting or the demonic

possession or whatever was happening here. I'd return to her diary momentarily, but first, I needed to know what Dave had learned.

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CHAPTER 28

“SO, WHAT’S NEW?” I asked.

“You won’t believe me.”

“At the moment, I’m ready to believe almost anything.”

Eyes wide, Dave tilted his head and drew a breath, as if he doubted my declaration. “Okay, try this on for size: I saw them. Actually saw them!!”

“Saw whom?”

“Them. The family.”

I frowned. Then, I stared. “You don’t mean—?”

“Oh, but I do. Henry Hawkes, his wife Louise, and their daughter Margaret—in the flesh and looking exactly the way they did in the changing portraits of the Estate's Employees of the Year.”

“But that’s impossible,” I objected. “They’re dead. They’ve been dead for well over a hundred years.”

“They died over a century ago, Charlotte; there’s a difference.”

“The dead don’t come back.”

Dave jiggled his ear. “Am I hearing right? Before I left, just a half-hour ago, weren’t you talking about witchery and devil worship and human sacrifice and dark rites and *revenants*?”

“I was or, rather, *we* were.”

“And now that I’ve told you I’ve actually seen the return of the dead, you go all skeptical?”

“Yes,” I admitted, “and no.”

“You can’t be both, Charlotte.”

“You saw them? It wasn’t an illusion, a misinterpretation, your eyes playing tricks on you?”

“I saw them, as plainly as I’m seeing you now. They weren’t ghosts, either. They’re flesh and blood, the same as you and me.”

“The same as you, maybe, but they’re definitely not the same as me.”

“Ha.”

“I once wrote an article about why people see—or think they see—ghosts. There are a number of reasons: suggestibility, drafts that cause cold spots, stress, brain damage or malfunctions, flying insects or dust or pollen caught on camera and mistaken for ghostly orbs, sleep paralysis, exploding head syndrome, carbon dioxide leaks, toxic mold,

super low-frequency sounds, and the desire to believe in ghosts and interpret everything accordingly.”

Dave listened to me with a look of impatience bordering on exasperation. When I finished, he said, “Which of those possible causes applies to you, me, or our present circumstances?”

I considered his question, wanting nothing so much as to be able to refute the idea that Sea Island Estate really and truly was haunted and that the Hawkes family, like “Walter,” were actual ghosts. I couldn’t. The possibilities I’d mentioned didn’t explain the things Dave and I had seen and experienced on the island. “None,” I admitted.

“Then, it seems, the actual existence of ghosts—specifically, those of Henry Hawkes, Louise Hawkes, Margaret Hawkes, and Henry’s illegitimate son—remains a possibility. Agree?”

Reluctantly, I nodded.

“Dave!”

He frowned. “What?”

“Look!” I pointed.

His eyes widened as he saw the smoke. It had appeared, as though from nowhere, gathering with alarming quickness and drifting, like dark clouds, across the room.

I stared, puzzled. There was no sign of fire.

Dave rushed toward the door. Grasping the doorknob, he released it at once, grimacing. "Ow! It's hot!" He shook his hand.

The smoke continued to thicken, becoming a haze that obscured the furniture. "The mansion!" I cried. "It's on fire!"

"We have to get out!"

"How?" He looked as lost as he was for words.

Dashing across the room, I grabbed my purse and Margaret's diary, which, fortunately, sat on the desk beside it. "The door's the only way out," I called to Dave.

He ran to the bathroom, doused a towel with water, and returned. The wet towel over his hand, he twisted the doorknob, but it wouldn't move. He tried again with the same result. "It's locked!"

"But I didn't lock it after you returned." In horror, I stared at the thick, dark smoke, realizing that our perilous situation was deliberate. My door had been locked from the outside. Desperately, I rummaged through my purse.

My key! It was gone! I'd lost it.

No, I hadn't. I remembered tucking it into the pocket inside my purse just before leaving to go on our camping trip, but it wasn't there now. I didn't find it anywhere else inside my bag, either.

Turning to Dave, I delivered the bad news. "They've stranded us here, by ourselves, without assistance; we're helpless." I blubbered more than spoke the last word.

Dave tried the door again, but the knob refused to turn. “Beyond the wall,” he announced, “in the hallway—tremendous heat.”

Weeping, I opened my arms to him. “Dave!” If we were to be incinerated, we might as well be burned alive together.

He rushed toward me.

Amid the choking smoke, a blinding flash of light and heat exploded into the room, and a massive body of flames burned, like a fiery ghost, against the wall and ceiling.

The heat was extreme!

It ends in fire, I thought, hugging Dave close, my purse in one hand and Margaret's diary in the other, as I closed my eyes and waited.

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CHAPTER 29

“FOLLOW ME!”

Shocked, I stared at Dave.

He stared back at me.

“Who's there?” I demanded. All I could tell is that the person who'd called out to us was a woman. The smoke had become so thick I could see nothing more than suggestions of furniture.

“Follow my voice!”

Whoever the woman was, she was authoritative.

“This way,” she said.

“How did you get into my room?” I asked. “The door's locked.”

Perhaps, I thought, frightened by the idea, my unlikely visitor was the same person who'd locked Dave and me in my room. Her having a key would explain how she'd entered—or, actually, I realized, it wouldn't. The hallway beyond what

remained of the door was on fire, just as was my room, now that the flames had breached the wall protecting us.

“Follow me!” she repeated. “Come! Before it is too late!”

Dave took my hand. “Let's go! We don't have a choice!”

Reluctantly, I stepped toward the voice.

“Hurry!” our invisible guide urged. “We don't have much time!”

As we hastened our pace, I collided with a heavy piece of furniture. “Ooof!” My knees faltered.

Dave's grip tightened, as he tugged, drawing me forward through the thick, acrid smoke. The heavy fumes all but smothered me, as I gasped for air. I bumped into something else, hurting my shin, but, as before, Dave kept me upright, then pulled me along. The dense haze went misty as my eyes watered in response to the acrid vapor.

After a few more steps, the vague image of the woman who'd urged us on began to emerge from the smoke. I stared, trying to make out her features.

“Only a few more feet,” she advised us.

To where? I wondered. The only exit was the door, which was a portal to the fire that consumed walls, ceiling, furniture, and carpet and would, in seconds, devour us as well with its thousands of fiery tongues.

As her features became clear, I started, instinctively trying to bolt, but Dave held onto me, restrained me, pulled me

forward. Had he not made out the face of our supposed rescuer?

Did he not know that the mysterious woman who'd appeared, as if by magic, in my room, amid the smoke of the terrible fire raging about us, was none other than Margaret Hawkes herself, returned from the grave?

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CHAPTER 30

SHE REACHED FOR ME; I felt her hand around my wrist, and I screamed.

“We have seconds,” Margaret declared, her voice as intense as her grip. “Follow me, or you will burn!”

I let her draw me toward her, although her touch revolted me. I couldn't help but imagine the woman who clutched my wrist as she must have looked before the dark witchery that had returned her to life. In her present form, she was attractive enough, even beautiful but, in the grave, withered and rotten, her face decayed or gone altogether, her body skeletonized, she—or what remained of her—would have been absolutely abhorrent.

Vaguely, I made out the shape of an open doorway, but where had it come from? Had it somehow materialized out of thin air? As I passed through it, into a dimly lit, narrow corridor of sorts, I realized that Margaret had ushered us into a hidden passageway. The door, when closed, must have seamlessly matched the wall so that its presence was hidden. I

had occupied the room for some time, but not once had I noticed the door to the concealed passage behind the wall, nor had Dave. Why was it here? For what dark purpose had it been installed? I dared not think of the possibilities.

Instead, I followed Margaret, after making sure that Dave was behind me.

The walls of the secret corridor were warm, even hot, but the fire had not burned through them. Obviously, they were fireproof. Otherwise, they would be in flames, as were my room and, no doubt, the rest of the mansion. I couldn't imagine whether Margaret had rescued us for good or ill but, at the moment, I did not care; it was enough that she had freed us from certain, horrendous death.

“Dave?”

“I'm here.”

“Talk to me.” The narrow confines of the dim passage had become more than unsettling. I felt anxious. No, I was more than afraid. Panic threatened to seize me, drown me. “I'm really, really scared!”

“Me, too, Charlotte, me, too, but we're going to be okay.”

I wanted to believe him, but he didn't sound too sure of himself, and the horror of our predicament, trapped, as it seemed, in a narrow, faintly lit pathway, between burning walls, nearly drove me out of my mind with terror. I'd never experienced claustrophobia before, but I was sure feeling it

now, and the intense anxiety felt horrible. “I feel like I can't breathe.”

“I know the feeling, but you can—you *are*—*we* are,” Dave assured me.

Taking deep breaths, I focused on my footsteps, on the reassuring firmness of the flooring beneath my feet.

“Ahead, we will turn to the left,” Margaret announced, “and descend steps. Beware, for they are many and steep.”

“Where are we going?” My voice sounded weak, strangled.

“To safety,” Margaret replied.

My panic subsided a little, but I still felt anxious, trapped between the walls of the burning mansion, with a revenant, as far as I could tell, leading Dave and me to a destination only she knew.

“We're there,” our guide informed us, “at the steps. I will advance slowly, for, as I said, they are both numerous and precipitous. Stay close.”

The thought of “staying close” to a woman who had returned from the dead appalled me, but I had no alternative; it was follow her or burn to death.

Fighting the dread that rose within me, I did as she'd decreed.

She was right, too, I found, as I stumbled, tripping on the riser of the first step; the steps were terribly steep but, fortunately, I caught myself, jamming my shoulder against the

wall. My balance regained, I walked with greater care. I didn't have to worry about losing Margaret. Just as she'd promised, she went slowly, picking her way cautiously down the stairs.

“Focus on the steps,” Margaret said. “First one, then the next. Trust me.”

Trust her? How could I?

But she *had* come for us, hadn't she?

At her own peril, she had led us out of my burning room, as she was now leading us from the blazing ruins of the mansion. I had no idea where she was taking us, but wherever it was had to be safer than the inferno that the mansion had become—or did it?

The weight of her diary, clutched in my hand, reminded me of her resistance to her father Henry. She was not at all sympathetic to his views or his practices. She abhorred how he treated “Walter,” detested Henry's willingness to murder innocent men and women to sustain an existence that amounted to immortality, loathed his worship of demons and his alliance with witches. She'd wanted no part in his diabolical affairs and had taken measures to end them, even if opposing him subjected her to danger, or even to death.

I remembered my admiration for her courage, her righteousness, and her humanity. It could not have been easy for her, in the nineteenth century or the present one, to stand against a man as wealthy, powerful, and influential as he, especially since he was allied with forces and beings of unimaginable might and unfathomable evil.

She had risked her life to bring her father's hideous practices to an end, to halt his murders, his sacrifices, his torture, his cannibalism, his vile involvement in witchery and the demonic.

I had more reason to trust Margaret than I had to doubt her.

“At the bottom of the steps, we shall leave the mansion and enter a tunnel. Stay close; stay focused.”

Just as I was feeling better, the lights went out, and someone screamed, loud and long, in the darkness.

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CHAPTER 31

IT WAS I WHO'D screamed, I realized.

The brilliance of the light, after the darkness of the narrow, hidden passageway inside the mansion, surprised me. Uncertain of what had happened, and unable to see more than the dazzling luminescence, I stopped.

Dave bumped into me from behind.

Ahead of us, Margaret urged us on. "Hurry!"

"The light's back, but how?" I asked.

"I switched it on when we entered the tunnel. The lights here are on a different system than the ones in the mansion."

After my eyes adapted to the sudden burst of light, I saw that the tunnel was wider, if only slightly, than the confines of the constrictive passageway had been. I sighed with relief. The cooler temperature and the moisture on the stone walls from which the subterranean passageway had been excavated indicated that we were below ground. I was surprised, but I didn't feel trapped—or not *as* trapped.

The narrowness of the mansion's passageway, together with the darkness that occurred after we'd lost the lights to the raging fire, had seemed to weigh on me physically, to suffocate me, to bury me, to crush me.

Now, free of the tight corridor between the building's fiery walls and of the darkness, I felt somehow liberated, despite the fact that we were underground. Claustrophobia's effects are hard to convey to anyone who has not been overwhelmed by them. It is difficult to understand even to those who themselves are claustrophobic, as I had only a few minutes ago discovered that I am.

Although the tunnel was quite long, it had been well constructed. It kept the seeping water mostly at bay, and we made good progress.

I wondered, though, where Margaret was leading us. Now that we'd escaped the mansion and the fire that consumed it, it seemed that we no longer needed to hike through the tunnel, unless to conceal ourselves. Of course, the only means of exit might be at the end of the passageway. Maybe that's why we remained underground.

Margaret said little, even when prompted, so I decided to conserve my own strength until we'd reached wherever she was taking us.

After close to an hour's travel, it took us only a few more minutes before we arrived at the tunnels' end. Ascending a flight of concrete steps, we emerged, again in darkness.

My eyes struggled to adapt. Before they did so, they were affected again by the sudden flare of light.

Margaret, standing beside an empty sconce fixed to a wall of stone, held a flaming torch in her hand.

Now that the room was lit, I saw that we stood inside a mausoleum. Set in the rear wall, three vaults, one above the next, were empty except for dust and specks of smooth, crumbled white stone, which might have been marble.

The coffins that had occupied these vaults lay on the floor of the burial chamber, their lids removed.

They were empty.

“Where are we?” I asked Margaret.

“The island's northern cemetery.”

Mr. McGruder had referred to this graveyard as “the final resting place of the original family.”

“Your family's mausoleum?” I guessed.

She nodded.

I couldn't help but shiver. The cemetery might have been her family's burial place, but it certainly had never been their “final resting place.” The horror of Margaret's presence—the fact that she was here, now, alive, when she had been here, earlier, dead, was a fact—unbelievable, perhaps—but a fact, nevertheless, and one too horrible and uncanny to dwell on. At the same time, though, I found it impossible to dismiss: her family's “final resting place” had become their birthplace.

“Why did you bring us here?” Dave asked.

“To escape the fire—and *him*.”

“Your father?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“He intends to harm us?”

“Yes, all of us.”

By “all of us” she meant to include herself, I surmised.
“Why?”

“We have no time to talk,” Margaret replied. “We must hasten to the dock on the western peninsula.”

“Why?” Despite her warning that we had no time to waste, I wanted to know the reason for setting off on such a trek before I stepped foot in that direction or any other.

“You will see soon enough,” she said, hastening from the mausoleum, “if we are not already too late.”

I looked at Dave.

He shrugged.

Reluctantly, I followed Margaret, stepping through the open doors of the burial chamber, between the marble statues of the mausoleum's guardian angels, which had not stopped the demonic witchery that brought the dead back to life.

Margaret ran through the cemetery, with Dave and me on her heels.

The island's western shore was some distance from the cemetery but, after a mile's run, we spied a drove of people fleeing toward the sea.

The resort's fellow guests, I thought. But they weren't in the mansion now. They'd escaped. They were no longer in danger. Why, then, were they literally running for their lives? Why, indeed, were *we* running for our own?

I glanced behind me. In the tunnel and the mausoleum, we hadn't spotted the peril, nor had we seen it as we'd fled through the cemetery, toward the western shore, but now I did spy the threat from which we ran, the threat that Margaret obviously had seen.

The fire had spread from the mansion. It now swept across the open terrain, toward the western shore!

The wavering wall of flames, brilliant even against the sky, was in hot pursuit of us!

CHAPTER 32

WHERE WAS THE MINIATURE train? It wouldn't have been big enough to hold all the people who rushed toward the dock on the western shore, and it wouldn't have been a lot faster than running, but it definitely would have made our mad dash to the sea a lot less demanding and stressful.

The thought of the train made me think of poor Frank McGruder, whose death had been both untimely and mysterious. After finding the false front bearing Mr. McGruder's name and the dates of his birth and death on the headstone of someone else's grave in the southern cemetery, his demise on the same date of death as the one on the headstone had been eerie. It still was.

I don't know why, as I ran for my life, the thought of the train and its late engineer occurred to me but, if my trip to this accursed island had taught me anything, it had taught me that the strangest ideas are apt to pop into a person's head during times of stress.

I dismissed the notion of the miniature train coming to our rescue and focused on running. The terrain was rough, and I could easily trip on a rock, a root, or a dip and take a fall or turn an ankle, and I wanted to avoid such an injury, especially on this island, which, despite its being a resort, had become a hell on earth.

A stitch of pain in my side made me wince.

I was out of breath, as I was out of strength. My stamina was about gone. I was running on sheer willpower, desperate to get to the dock and catch the boat I saw waiting there.

The fire, although still some distance away, had closed much of the gap between us. It was close enough, now, that I could feel its heat.

I couldn't go on!

But I had to!

I gritted my teeth and ran.

The dock looked as far away as ever, although we must have covered more than a mile.

I glanced at Dave.

His scowl wasn't of anger, I guessed, but of concentration. His focus was on continuing our flight. Like me, he seemed to be running on nothing more than willpower.

Margaret continued running ahead of us. How she could endure the pace she set was beyond me, but she managed.

If she can do it, I can, I told myself.

Ignoring the pain in my side, my faintness of breath, and my desire to quit the race, I continued.

Running on empty, I thought.

“How are you doing?” Dave asked.

“Okay,” I lied. You?”

“Dandy.”

From the looks of him, he was lying, too.

Margaret, who'd actually increased the distance between us, glanced over her shoulder. “Hurry!”

Right, I thought.

In the distance, the crowd at the dock had thinned, many of them having crowded onto the boat.

When the vessel was full of passengers, would it leave, even if its departure left us behind?

Had any of the passengers or crew or those waiting to board noticed us, three tiny figures running across the rugged landscape, among large rocks and towering trees?

I hazarded a glance back. The fire was closer!

In an instant, I saw Henry Hawkes, standing on a balcony that had somehow escaped the fury of the fire, which had all but burned itself out, before spreading from the mansion's charred remnants to its lawn and the land beyond the estate.

He was watching, a pair of field glasses to his eyes, looking for us—or for Margaret, more likely!

Intuitively, I understood his motive, just as I knew that I couldn't possibly see him clearly, in detail, from the distance between us and the mansion. I did see him, nevertheless, quite distinctly, and I had no doubt that what I observed was true, that it was really happening. Henry Hawkes *was* watching us.

Had I had a vision? I couldn't say; I knew only that I was seeing, clearly and accurately, what was impossible to see from the distance between him and me.

What was he thinking? That, I did *not* know and didn't want to know!

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CHAPTER 33

STUMBLING, I NEARLY FELL.

The accident refocused me. I redirected my attention to my headlong flight across the tract of land separating us from fiery death and the salvation that the water offered us, if we could reach the boat before it departed.

We had to!

If we didn't, either the fire would consume us or, I had no doubt, the family's monstrous patriarch would do so. I would put nothing past a man who murdered innocent people; who inflicted mutilation, dismemberment, and other tortures on his own son before killing, butchering, and eating his offspring's roasted remains; and who had given himself over to the diabolical forces of demons and witches for an immortality not worth even *his* miserable, infernal soul.

“No! Oh, no!” Dave cried.

“It can't be!” I lamented.

Margaret had stopped running, as had Dave and I.

There was no longer any point.

The boat, full of passengers, had left the dock. Already, although its departure had occurred only moments ago, it seemed as far away as the mainland itself to which it journeyed.

We were stranded.

Alone.

Helpless.

On an island of death and destruction.

On an island of revenants and demons.

The fire, much closer, continued to burn, its flames ravenous for our flesh.

No one and nothing could save us now.

The fire, rearing above us, pouring smoke into the sky, and the ruins of the mansion, smoking in the distance, suggested the same truth: our time was up, our deaths certain.

All the strength seemed to spill from me, my body going limp. Dave caught me as I fell and lowered me to the ground.

He sat beside me and put his arm around me. Together, we watched the bright flames and the dark smoke approach us.

Margaret sat with us. "I am sorry," she said.

"You've nothing to be sorry about," I replied.

"You tried to save us," Dave reminded her.

"And failed."

“This is your father's doing, not yours,” I pointed out.

She shook her head. “I am sorry,” she repeated.

The fire, only a few hundred yards away, seemed to loom over us.

I looked to heaven; it was laden with smoke.

The boat, headed toward the mainland, was small in the distance.

The island, which had seemed large, appeared smaller by the second.

We were trapped.

Soon, we would die, and our deaths would be excruciating.

I hardly noticed the tears coursing down my cheeks.

Dave's eyes, I saw, were also wet.

“I love you, Charlotte,” he said.

Surprised and not knowing what to say, I leaned toward him, and he held me tight.

I joined hands with Margaret, who appeared to be in a daze.

It ends in fire, after all, I thought.

Henry Hawkes had won.

CHAPTER 34

WITHIN MINUTES, OUR SITUATION became more precarious.

Both ends of the great wall of flames moved forward, flanking us, even as the line itself advanced. Even worse, the flanks formed a boundary parallel to our line of advance. Surrounded on all sides, we were cut off from the land leading to the western dock and from any retreat north, east, or south.

The sight of the fire, hemming us in, was horrifying. We had nowhere to run and could not so much as seek shelter on rocks or in the ocean itself.

We were doomed.

I closed my eyes, preferring darkness to the sight of the smoke and flames, wishing I could block the stench of the fire as easily.

How long would it take, I wondered, to succumb to the flames?

Once, for an article I was writing, I'd researched spontaneous human combustion (which does *not* occur, by the way—or, at least, there's no *scientific* evidence that it does, any more than there is for the existence of demons and witches and life after death). To my regret, I still remembered the most garish facts.

Human flesh develops second-degree burns at a hundred-and-thirty-one degrees. Pain receptors overload at a hundred-and-forty degrees. Tissue is destroyed at a hundred-and-sixty-two degrees.

I'd also learned that the stench of burning hair and clothing is the first smell produced. Then, the odor of burning fat, which is similar to that of fat cooked in a deep-fat fryer, asserts itself. Next, the smell of burning flesh and muscle occurs, which is similar to the scent of bloody steak. Oh, yes! Burning cerebrospinal fluid, I recalled, produces a smell not unlike a sweet, but musky, perfume. Finally, all that's left are the odors of smoke and burned flesh.

That's what we had to look forward to—at least until the moment of death. *Then*, we'd have nothing to anticipate, ever again—well, unless there's a hereafter thereafter.

Something wet touched the back of my neck. Then, water sprinkled over my hands.

I looked up, into the dark underbelly of stacked clouds.

As had been the case with the storm I'd witnessed over the resort as I'd scanned the island from the ferry site on St.

Anne's eastern shore, this storm poured rain from an otherwise clear sky.

The tempest had come out of nowhere. I looked upon it with a sense of uneasiness bordering on fear.

Bright flashes of atmospheric electricity lit the great columns of clouds. As had been the case with the storm that had hovered above the mansion the day I'd witnessed the earlier cloudburst, the present, seemingly otherworldly spectacle was also stationary, rain falling on the fire all around us, including the flames to our west, which prevented our continued advance to the sea.

Under the relentless downpour, the blaze quickly dwindled, hissing steam increasingly replacing the once-billowing smoke of the suppressed flames.

Only once before, when I'd observed the thunderstorm over the mansion, had I seen a tempest hover in place. I sensed, as I had the time before, that something supernatural was taking place. Storms like this weren't normal—especially not two that occurred only days apart.

On every side of us, the great fire that had boxed us in was now all but extinguished, although the rain had fallen for only a few minutes. Among the thick, dark smoke that, with white, hissing steam, continued to rise into the otherwise clear sky, I saw, much to my horror, a phenomenon that was all-but-inconceivable and impossible to explain.

As before, during the previous storm, faces of demons, monstrous in size, horned, and malevolent, with expressions

full of hatred, scowled down at the island that was—or had been—their domain. Again, I remembered the declaration of Jose, who'd served Dave and me in the Mexican restaurant in Dinwiddie, Virginia: Sea Island Estate, he'd warned us, was “full of devils!”

The fire was out, and the smoke, reduced to thin wisps, dispersed, scattering in the wind. The faces of the fiends likewise stretched and thinned until, torn apart and spread into thinner and thinner bands and streaks, they vanished altogether.

Whatever stranglehold Henry Hawkes had established, through the aid of demon worship and witchery, appeared to have been lost.

Margaret's hope of ending her father's monstrous power over Sea Island Estate and his family, including poor “Walter,” seemed, at last, to have come true.

Had her father's reign of terror ended, centuries after it had begun?

“Look!” Dave cried, pointing.

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CHAPTER 35

ANOTHER BOAT WAS APPROACHING the western dock!

I stared, disbelieving my eyes. We were going to be rescued, after all!

Excited, I turned toward Dave. Before I realized what I was doing, I'd kissed him.

Taken unaware, he'd had no chance to return my kiss, and he looked more than a bit surprised.

“Wow! *That* was unexpected.”

I blushed. “Sorry.”

“I'm not.”

He clasped my hand and we stood, with Margaret, looking out to sea, watching the boat approach from the mainland.

It took forty-five minutes for a ferry to reach the island from St. Anne's, but this vessel moved much faster, quickly diminishing the distance between its position and ours, at the dock. “It has a more powerful engine,” I observed.

“We should be back to St. Anne's before long,” Dave agreed.

Margaret looked both uncertain and elated. Learning to fit in with the modern world would be difficult for her, I imagined. After all, she'd been dead for well over a century and alive for only a day.

As it turned out, the boat belonged to St. Anne's Fire Department. The smoke and the flames of the fire, first at the mansion and then on the land between it and the island's western peninsula, had been seen from the mainland, and firefighters had been dispatched to subdue the fire and rescue anyone who might have been stranded on Sea Island Estate. Although the storm had extinguished the fire, Dave, Margaret, and I had been left behind, and we were grateful that the city had sent a boat to look for stranded survivors.

The return to the mainland seemed to take much longer than the half hour it actually consumed but, at last, we were back on the mainland.

As we walked through town, on our way to the parking garage where Dave and I had left my SUV, I asked Margaret what she planned to do now that she was free of her father.

“There is a town upstate, just south of Savannah, near a secluded bay. Small, quiet, and rather quaint, it is beautiful and serene. Mother and I would summer there sometimes. I loved it as a child.”

“What about money?” Dave blurted.

She held up her hand, her fingers spread, to show us the array of diamond-studded rings she wore. “I will sell these. The money will allow me to live well for the rest of my days. I will buy a place near the sea and take up painting and sculpture again. I used to dabble in the arts before—well, *before*. Now that I have the opportunity to do so again, I would enjoy indulging these hobbies full-time.”

“Maybe you'll become a famous artist,” Dave suggested.

“Wouldn't *that* be something!” She laughed.

It was a pleasant sound, I thought, musical and pure. “We're going north,” I told her. “Why don't you ride with us?”

Margaret seemed surprised by my offer. “Really?”

“Sure.”

“What about you two? What will you do?”

“Return to New York,” I said, “where we work.”

“You work? But you're so *young*—and a *woman*!”

“Not all *that* young, and many women work nowadays.”

The thought seemed to take her aback. “What do you do?”

“I'm a columnist for a national newspaper, *The World Today*. Dave works there, too, as a photographer.”

“As *her* photographer,” Dave clarified.

She shook her head, as if having trouble conceiving of a man working for a woman. “Times have changed!” Then, she smiled. “How nice!”

I chuckled. "Sometimes it is."

Dave scowled. "Only sometimes?"

"Okay," I conceded, "*most* of the time."

When we reached my vehicle, I invited Margaret to sit up front with me. I expected Dave to object, but he didn't. I guess he agreed with me that Margaret, new to automobile travel as it occurred today, should enjoy the ride.

For me, the return trip always seems to take less time than the initial trip, maybe because the route is familiar the second time around.

For Margaret, however, the ride seemed marvelous. She glanced left and right almost continuously, amazement evident in her expressions. "This is wonderful!" she exclaimed.

"I guess it is," I replied, seeing the experience from her point of view.

On this leg of our journey, clouds like tufts of cotton drifted slowly across the blue sky, and tall trees, green with leaves, seemed to march past us on both sides of the interstate.

Ahead of us, an impatient motorist sped in and out of traffic, switching lanes back and forth with reckless disregard for the possible consequences of his actions.

"That looks dangerous!" Margaret cried.

"It is." I looked at my photographer in the rear-view mirror. "Almost as dangerous as when Dave drives."

He rolled his eyes, and I laughed.

It felt good to be back in our world, the *real* world.

Already, what Dave and I had seen on Sea Island Estate seemed impossible. Demons? Witches? Human sacrifice? Cannibalism? Revenants? What had appeared genuine and factual only a couple of hours ago now seemed simply incredible. Still, the presence of Margaret beside me suggested that what had occurred—or some of it, at least—was genuine.

“Oh!” Margaret leaned toward me, away from her window, as a flat-bed tractor trailer rumbled past, carrying huge, bright-yellow earth-moving equipment. “My!”

“An excavator,” I explained, “on its way to a job site.” After my experience at Sea Island Resort, the solidity and weight of the huge excavator and the tractor trailer conveying it, both of which seemed to bear witness to the authenticity of the “real world,” were welcome and reassuring.

She shook her head, too astonished, it appeared, to speak.

Whether demons and witches or gargantuan earth-moving equipment, what someone considered incredible, I guessed, depended on their personal experience, knowledge, and perspective.

To Margaret, such equipment was utterly fantastic and must have challenged her nineteenth-century assumptions about reality, if not the mystical marvels she'd experienced, or believed she'd experienced, firsthand.

For me, Margaret's presence notwithstanding, the supernatural beings and forces I had believed I'd encountered

on the island already had begun to strike me as imaginary and preposterous, which gave me an idea.

My series of columns on Sea Island Resort should include a skeptical consideration of the events that had transpired there—or had been made to seem to transpire. I made a mental note to contact Dave's friend Robert, the illusionist. Maybe he could explain how the apparently supernatural phenomena I'd witnessed—or had supposed I'd witnessed—had been accomplished, not by witchery, but by the “magic” of careful planning, special effects, and illusion. A possible refutation of the supernatural events would make a nice counterpoint to the rest of the series.

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CHAPTER 36

THE REST OF THE way to Margaret's destination was much the same: blue sky, sometimes flecked with bits of cottony clouds, sometimes clear, and tall trees, green with foliage, standing by the shoulder of the highway, as if attending the constant parade of vehicles streaking past them to the north and south.

“Hey!” Dave called. “Isn't that the resort's weirdo librarian, Victoria Wells?”

I shot a glimpse at the woman standing by the side of the road. It was! And she was attired in the elaborate Victorian costume she'd been wearing the first time Dave and I had encountered her. Although she now wore a different dress, it was of the same style. Long-sleeved, the floor-length, striped bustle gown with the ridiculously high neckline was completed by the delicate parasol she waved at approaching vehicles as she solicited a ride.

“She's hitchhiking!” My voice sounded as incredulous to my own ears as the sight of her doing so was to my eyes.

Braking, I slowed.

Margaret's lower jaw actually dropped. "It is she, indeed!" She turned toward me in her seat, her eyes full of fright. "*Do not stop, Charlotte!* Whatever you do, *do not stop!* She is a witch! Victoria is a descendant of Mrs. Masters, the same devil-worshiping medium whose spirit guides and demons allied with Father in his mad, evil quest for eternal life at the cost of murder, horror, suffering, and grief."

"But she gave Dave and me the resort's library books about spiritualism, witchcraft, and demons."

"To confuse and mislead you. If you had not found my diary, you would not, even now, know what dark powers are truly behind the terrible events you have witnessed and, indeed, suffered."

I remembered the tome that seemed to have been pulled, by some invisible force, outward, from the others with which it had shared a library shelf. "But I didn't *find* your diary," I told Margaret. "Someone—or *something*—drew my attention to it."

"Not all angels are demons," Margaret declared.

"No need to worry, Charlotte," Dave assured me, watching the shoulder of the highway behind us. "Someone else stopped to offer Victoria a ride; she's getting into the car now."

"Unfortunately," Margaret said, "there is now *every* reason to worry."

* * *

“I miss her,” I told Dave, who'd joined me up front after we'd dropped Margaret off.

“Me, too,” he admitted.

“What do you think happened on the island?”

“It's pretty clear: Henry Hawkes made a pact with the demons he worshiped, and they brought him and his family back from the dead, through witchcraft.”

“I mean, what do you *really* believe happened?”

“Now that it's over, you're Ms. Skeptic again? As I recall, you were ready to believe all that and more just a few hours ago.”

“And you weren't?”

“I was. Maybe I still am.”

I glanced at him. “Really.”

“Watch the road! I'm not ready to be a ghost quite yet.”

I shook my head. “Seriously. What do you think *did* happen on that island?”

“Put me in the 'undecided' category.”

“Along with ghosts and mediums and spirit guides?”

“Lots of people believe in just such things. A poll, admittedly a bit out of date now, determined that as many as seventy-five percent of its respondents, all Americans, believe

in at least some aspects of the supernatural.” He gave me an over-the-glasses look, although he wasn't wearing glasses. “You yourself were believing in demons and witches and revenants and human sacrifice and cannibalism only a few hours ago,” he reminded me.

“As a journalist, I strive to be open-minded, but skeptical.”

“But now you're just skeptical?”

I considered his question, as images flashed in my mind: the cemeteries and headstones; the phantom figures Dave and I had seen, his in the northern, mine in the southern, cemetery; Mr. McGruder's mysterious death; rumors of witches and demons; the library's ladder, moving by itself; Margaret's diary sliding out, of its own accord, from the other books on its library shelf; Eric's mad story of human sacrifice, dismemberment, and cannibalism; the mansion's changing portraits; the strange storms that hovered over the island before we arrived and as we tried to leave, the latter storm's extinguishing the fire that had prevented our escape; my seeing Henry Hawkes watching us from the mansion, despite the great distance between us; the sighting of Victoria, the “witch,” just a while ago, dressed in her Victorian gown and hitchhiking along Interstate 95. Admittedly, it was all stranger than strange, extremely eerie, and terrifying—especially when it was happening or seemed to be happening. But this was now. “I don't know,” I said. “I just don't know.”

CHAPTER 37

“ROBERT, I'D LIKE YOU to meet my girlfriend Charlotte Hastings. Charlotte, Robert Lloyd,” Dave said.

Robert extended his hand, and I gave it a shake.

“I'm Charlotte, but I am *not* Dave's girlfriend.”

Robert smiled. “I see.”

“Not *yet*,” Dave said.

I looked at my photographer but spoke to Robert. “In fact, I'm his *boss*.”

“This is Toni Evans,” Robert introduced us to his companion, “and she really *is* my girlfriend. She's also a special effects wizard.”

“Oh.” I was surprised that Dave's friend had brought a friend of his own to our meeting, but I understood why her expertise would benefit the occasion. “Nice to meet you, Toni.”

We exchanged smiles and handshakes.

“There are refreshments on the table,” I said. “Please help yourselves.”

After we'd chosen our hors d'oeuvres and drinks, Dave and I filled Robert and Toni in on our strange adventures.

They listened carefully, asking only a few questions. When we finished our bizarre story, Robert and Toni conferred briefly, speaking mostly single words to each other, each of which was met with a nod, a shake of the head, or a stroke of the chin.

“I think we know how it was done,” Robert announced.

“Or, at least, how it *could* have been done,” Toni clarified.

“Mind if I take notes?” I asked.

“Not at all,” Robert said.

“Please do,” Toni agreed.

“Let's start from the beginning,” Robert suggested. “Shortly after your arrival in St. Anne's, you saw an extremely localized thunderstorm. It seemed to hover over the island's mansion.”

I nodded. “That's right.”

“While rare, such a phenomenon does happen on occasion. Rain has reportedly fallen on only one car in a parking lot, on one side of a street but not the other, and on the front end of a bicycle but not the back. Vidshare footage even shows a column of rain pouring onto a field alongside a highway, focusing on an area of only a few yards.”

“What about the faces of the demons Charlotte saw in the clouds and, again, later, in the smoke from the fire that burned down the mansion?” Dave asked.

“Pareidolia.”

“Which is?”

“The tendency to make sense out of ambiguous stimuli, as in, for example, seeing faces in clouds or smoke.”

“But the faces in the clouds looked malevolent, while those in the smoke looked—I don't know—defeated?” I said.

“Your interpretation of the images you saw was probably influenced by your own emotions at the time,” Robert elaborated. “Before visiting the island, you had misgivings about the place, based, probably on the server's warning that the island was 'full of devils,' so you saw the faces as malevolent. When the rain extinguished the fire that had cut you off from the dock on the western shore of the island, you were less frightened and more hopeful. Consequently, the fiends you imagined in the smoke looked defeated, rather than malicious.”

I nodded. “Makes sense.”

“You figured out the headstone trick yourselves,” Toni reminded Dave and me. “It was a facade, a false front, made of Styrofoam, placed over someone else's headstone. The phantom you saw, Charlotte, in the southern cemetery, during the fog, was, like the one you saw, Dave, in the northern cemetery, probably a holographic projection.”

“But what about Mr. McGruder's mysterious death on the *same day* as the date of death on the false headstone?” Dave asked.

“*Was* Mr. McGruder's death mysterious?” Robert countered. “You said there were many rumors about what caused his demise, but only the coroner would be able to declare the actual cause, and his body hadn't been autopsied at the time. As for the date of his death and his apparently predicted date of death being the same—well, coincidence explains that well enough. There were rumors, too, of demons and witches, but rumors are just that: rumors. They aren't evidence.”

“Margaret's diary, sliding out on the shelf by itself probably looked spooky,” Toni said, “but such a trick is actually easily accomplished. The typical way to perform this illusion is to attach a thin wire or a string to the book. When someone or something—”

“Something like a ghost?” Dave interjected.

Toni smiled. “Or like an automated drum that's activated by an electric eye.” She looked at me. “The sight of the gag probably startled you. You were so focused on the 'supernatural phenomenon' you were witnessing that you never noticed the string, which was not only thin but clear, making it even more difficult to perceive. In the process of your taking hold of the book and removing it from the shelf, you broke the string. A similar type of setup was probably used to move the ladder.”

“Wow. That explains it,” I said.

“Eric's story of human sacrifice and cannibalism was nothing more than that—a story,” Robert declared.

“The changing portraits could have been done the way the Disneyland Imagineers did the illusion,” Toni admitted, “but, like you, Dave, I doubt it was. The process is expensive and time-consuming, and it would be difficult to control if someone wanted the apparent metamorphoses to occur gradually, rather than fairly quickly.

“I think the way they accomplished the trick took much less time, technology, and money. An artist had probably drawn a number of portraits of the Hawkeses on some sort of transparent overlays, each showing a change in appearance. At intervals, these were inserted over the photographs of the Employees of the Year, so it appeared that, slowly, the employees' pictures were turning into portraits of the Hawkes family members.”

Dave looked impressed. “I hadn't thought of that,” he said.

“The woman you saw in the Victorian dress, the librarian —”

“Victoria Wells,” I said.

Toni nodded. “She was just what she appeared to be: a librarian in a Victorian dress. She, too, managed to get off the island, probably by the boat that you, Dave, and Margaret missed, and she was hitchhiking home or wherever.”

“That pretty well explains everything,” Dave observed, “except the Hawkeses themselves. How did Henry, Louise,

and Margaret return from the dead?”

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CHAPTER 38

“THEY DIDN’T,” TONI REPLIED. “They were actors, most likely, who impersonated the dead family members.”

“But they looked just like them!” I objected. “And the way Margaret speaks sounds just like the purple prose of her diary, which writers of the Victorian Age used.”

“Many actors are adept at learning to speak in various dialects and speech patterns, including antiquated ones. Speaking like a woman from the nineteenth century wouldn’t be difficult for an accomplished actor, any more than mimicking the literary and rhetorical styles of the Victorian Age would be for a skilled writer.”

“Their faces, though,” I insisted, “can’t be copied.”

“Actually, they can, and fairly easily nowadays. High-quality, hyper-realistic silicone masks can create a foolproof likeness of anyone, human, demonic, or otherwise, and they’re available for as little as seven-hundred dollars each. According to one study, only one in a hundred people were able to detect

that such a mask was not an actual human face. The masks are so effective in altering a person's appearance that bank robbers are using them to fool authorities. These masks could certainly make an actor indistinguishable from Henry, Louise, or Margaret Hawkes."

I blushed. "You and Robert make everything sound so simple and unremarkable."

"'Magic' isn't always simple, but it is always unremarkable, once its secrets are known," Toni said.

"But why would anyone at a resort want to go to all the trouble of producing so many illusions? I mean, the place is popular. Such elaborate tricks don't seem to be necessary," I pointed out.

"Sorry," Robert said. "We're experts in illusions, not the mysteries of the mind. That's a question for a mental health professional."

After Robert and Toni left, Dave asked, "So, how will you conclude your series of columns? Did we witness the supernatural or just an elaborate hoax for which there's no apparent motive?"

"I'll follow the lesson I learned in journalism school: report the facts, and let the readers decide."

CHAPTER 39

“WHEN THE FIRE SURROUNDED us, cutting us off from the dock, and we thought we were going to die, you said ‘I love you,’” I reminded Dave as we were approaching Washington, DC, on Interstate-95.

He frowned. “Did I?”

“You know you did.”

“I don’t recall, Charlotte. Honest.”

“*Right.*”

“I do recall *you* kissing *me*, though.”

“In which of your fantasies did *that* happen?”

“When the firefighters’ boat was approaching the island.”

“You seem to have a rather selective memory,” I pointed out.

“Actually, I remember both,” he admitted. “I’ll never forget either one.”

“Did you mean what you said?”

“I love you?”

“Yes.”

“I did. I do.”

“In the moment or—”

“Always.”

I smiled. “Maybe we’ll give the expense account a rest and get one room tonight—if I can trust you to be discreet, that is.”

“Discretion is my middle name.”

“I have a lot to lose—we both do—starting with our jobs. I *am* your boss, you know.”

“You never let me forget.”

* * *

Side by side in the king-size bed, pillows fluffed, we found Luna’s VidShare channel and watched her latest video.

Looking Goth and, I had to admit, good, the influencer appeared frightened as eerie music played. “Welcome to this week’s installment of *Paranormal Paradise, Angels*,” she whispered into her microphone, as she darted gazes back and forth across her studio, as if she feared that someone or *something* might be advancing on her from the shadows of her dimly lit studio. She admitted, “I don’t feel completely safe. Maybe I never will again, after my visit to that horrid island. But I feel more secure now than I did there, and I did promise to tell you why I left that creepy resort.”

“This ought to be good,” Dave said, snuggling against me.

I met the kiss of his lips with mine, then shushed him. “I want to hear this.”

He grinned. “Don’t we all?”

Luna stared into her camera, looking anxious. “I’ve told you about the eerie story of human sacrifice and dismemberment, and the roasting of the victim’s arms and legs, torso, entrails —” she shuddered—”and head.”

She appeared to believe her own story but, as Dave and I had learned, she was a convincing actress. She’d certainly fooled *us* on a few occasions, and she was speaking, now, to devoted fans who’d more than likely be willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, especially since most of them were apt to be true believers themselves.

Luna paused, looking sick. “I kept telling myself that it was just a story, but it didn’t *feel* like a story. It felt *real*, as if the employee who was telling it was recalling an event that had actually happened and, according to him, *continues* to happen, each year, as it had for decades. The sacrifice, he said, fed the demons who empowered the witches who returned the Hawkes family to life through their dark rites.”

Dave scoffed. “Yes, indeed, she is *quite* the actress.”

“Shhh!”

“She’s stopped talking, in case you didn’t notice. Wants to build suspense, I guess.”

I rolled my eyes.

“When I heard that the same sacrifice is committed every year, on the very night we sat around that campfire in the middle of a forest, far from the mansion, I just knew I was the intended victim.” She shuddered. “I saw the look in the eyes of the storyteller. I was sitting directly across from him, and he stared at me the whole time he told us about the sacrifice and the cannibalism that had followed the victim’s murder. It was like he was talking to me alone.”

She paused, sipping from her cup of tea. “The more he gazed into my eyes with his empty stare, the more disturbed he looked. I realized that he was a madman, as he stared at me, frowning, his teeth gritted, his eyes cold. It was as if he looked *through* me, not *at* me, and saw someone other than a guest of the resort. I knew, somehow, in my heart, that he saw *me* as the sacrificial victim of the rite that must be performed that night.”

“The girl is wasting her talent; she’s way better than most Hollywood scream queens,” Dave declared.

“I’m beginning to think I should have gotten separate rooms, after all.”

“Shhh! Charlotte! I’m *trying* to watch Luna.”

“Knowing I had to do something to save myself, I ditched the others when we started back to the lodge. Then, I called a VidShare fan who, I knew from comments he’d made on earlier installments of my vlog, lived in St. Anne’s and had a boat. He’d been to the island and knew its layout, including a place on the eastern shore, not far from the campsite, where boats could launch or land.

“He was waiting for me there, and he’d left a trail of glow-in-the-dark pellets along the branch of the main trail I was on to guide me to the site of the launch. I followed the pellets, picking them up as I went, so no one could follow.

“Apparently, in my haste, I missed a few of the pellets, because police later found them as they were searching for the person they believed had abducted me.

“My fan was waiting for me, just as he’d promised, and we made our escape to the mainland. Now, Angels, you know how and why I left Sea Island Estate and the horrible danger I was in that final night of my visit.”

In a shaky voice, she added, “I want to thank my rescuer, but I won’t name him. His life could be in danger, if the island’s dark forces learned his identity, so I will say only ‘Thank you, my heroic knight! I owe you my life!’” Luna paused, then said, her voice still quivering, “Please subscribe to my channel and don’t forget to request notifications so you don’t miss any future installments of *Paranormal Paradise!*”

Dave laughed. “What a charmer.”

“You’re pretty charming yourself,” I told him and turned out the lights.

CHAPTER 40

MR. CULLEN STOPPED BY my cubicle. “Mr. Reynolds wants to see you, Charlotte, and he wants you to bring Dave with you.”

“Thanks.” I’d written half a dozen installments of my column and word was that it had been well-received by the young adults it targeted, so I wasn’t especially worried about the managing editor’s summons. If anything, maybe he intended to congratulate me.

I walked across the bullpen to Dave’s desk. Fortunately, he wasn’t on a break. “Mr. Reynolds wants to see us.”

Dave looked concerned.

I frowned. “What’s wrong?” I whispered.

He gulped. “Nothing, I hope.”

“You look worried,” I persisted.

“Not here,” he whispered.

Now, I was more than worried.

Dave followed me across the huge room full of junior-level reporters, photographers, and other personnel to the elevator in the corridor beyond our collective work area.

Inside, I poked the button for the Mr. Reynolds's floor, and the doors closed.

At the moment, Dave and I were alone.

"Spill," I said.

"Do you think he knows?"

I frowned. "Knows what?"

"About us."

"That we're a couple?"

"That, yes, but also about our sharing a hotel room?"

I felt the blood drain from my face. "How could he?" Horrified, I said, "You didn't *tell* anyone, did you?"

"Of course not, but maybe somebody in Accounting noticed you rented only one room, instead of two."

"You're being paranoid, Dave. You could have spent the night with a friend who lives in the vicinity."

"I could have, but he might want to know which friend."

I felt worse, thinking Dave might be right. Mr. Reynolds might well want to know the identity of Dave's "friend" so he could check Dave's story. Of course, Mr. Reynolds would learn that Dave's "friend" was nothing more than an invention.

"Would Mr. Reynolds care?"

“I think he might.”

“Why?”

Dave and I voiced the answer at the same time: “The company’s anti-fraternization policy!”

I felt doomed.

If Mr. Reynolds even suspected that Dave and I had spent the night together in a hotel room on our way back to New York in my private vehicle, he might lower the boom on either or both of us. Even if, for legal reasons, he didn’t opt to fire us for fraternization, he could find some other excuse to do so. All our hard work would be for naught, and I was certain that Mom and Dad wouldn’t be happy I’d lost my first professional job because I’d suddenly found my subordinate irresistible.

“Maybe he *doesn’t know*,” I suggested.

“Maybe not,” Dave agreed.

He didn’t look too convinced, though.

At the very least, I should have rented two hotel rooms! But it was too late now.

I wanted to talk further about this horrible state of affairs, but the elevator began to fill up as it stopped at additional floors, and I concentrated on maintaining a stoic persona.

The trip to Mr. Reynolds’s floor seemed to take forever but, at last, we arrived.

I stepped into the hallway, Dave behind me, and we marched down the corridor to the managing editor’s office.

With every step, I felt like I was marching to my execution. From the look of him, so did Dave.

“We need to put on our chipper faces and pretend nothing’s wrong,” Dave advised.

Ms. Johnson, Mr. Reynolds’s secretary, looked up from her desktop as we entered the outer office. She seemed to regard us coldly, and her voice conveyed no warmth as she announced, “You may go in; Mr. Reynolds is expecting you.”

She sounded as if she’ just read a verdict regarding our offense: guilty as charged.

But Ms. Johnson wasn’t an especially cordial person.

There was still a chance that Mr. Reynolds knew nothing of the tryst that Dave and I had enjoyed.

Enjoyed?

At the time, yes.

Now? Not so much.

Outside Mr. Reynolds’s inner office, Dave stepped aside, holding the door for me.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped entered the managing editor’s inner sanctum.

“Close the door,” Mr. Reynolds ordered.

Behind me, I heard a soft click as Dave complied.

I felt faint, and I hoped I didn’t look pale or, worse, guilty.

I smiled, hoping it didn’t look as fake as it felt.

”Ms. Hastings, Mr. Edwards, come in, come in.”

We approached his massive desk.

“Sit.”

As before, the enormous room’s rich furnishings and elegant décor signaled Mr. Reynolds’s prestige and authority, and I sank into the deep upholstery of the leather armchair before his desk with relief. I’d made it without fainting—at least, so far.

As Dave seated himself in the matching chair beside me, I wondered whether he felt the same.

Mr. Reynolds studied us, looking back and forth between Dave and me, and I thought *he knows, he knows!* Feeling my lower lip tremble, I bit it, discreetly I hoped. *Don’t cry!* I ordered myself.

“Charlotte.”

I almost jumped. “Yes, sir?”

He smiled. “I want to congratulate you on the work you’ve done. Your columns concerning your trip to Sea Island Estate have been a huge success. Our subscriptions among young adults have increased dramatically.”

“Thank you, sir.” I almost sobbed, so great was the alleviation of my anxiety.

“You’re the one who deserves the thanks, Charlotte, and you also deserve a salary increase. As of today, you will receive a ten-percent pay raise.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Wow! Thank you, sir!”

He smiled again. “Keep up the good work, and this raise will be only your first.”

“Yes, sir.”

The managing editor turned his attention to Dave. “The photographs and videos you took are truly amazing, Mr. Edwards.”

Dave’s eyes closed, and he sighed. “Thank you, sir.”

“At first, I concentrated exclusively on the copy, thinking that Ms. Hastings’s considerable talent for reporting was the key to increasing our subscriptions among young adults, but I have learned, from the letters we’ve received about Charlotte’s column, that your contributions are also vital. Therefore, you will also receive an appropriate salary increase.”

“Thank you, sir. I really appreciate it.”

“Not half as much as *The World Today* appreciates the excellent work that you and Ms. Hastings have done and which, I have no doubt, you will continue to do. Now, let’s get back to it, shall we?”

I felt as if I were floating as Dave and I left Mr. Reynolds’s office, and even Ms. Johnson’s Medusa stare didn’t faze me.

Dave and I had the elevator to ourselves.

He leaned toward me, but I stopped him.

He frowned. “What?”

“I like you—”

His frown deepened. “*Like me?*”

“But I’m not taking any more chances. We’re friends, Dave, just friends.”

“Charlotte! We’ll be careful.”

I reflected. “Well ... we’ll see.”

Dave smiled before returning to his cubicle.

At my own workstation, a manila envelope awaited me on my desk.

It was addressed to me, care of The World Today, New York City. There was no return address.

Intrigued, but wary, I slit open the top of the envelope with the letter opener on my desk and extracted the photograph inside.

As I looked at the picture, a wave of intense horror passed over me, and my knees went weak. Quickly, I swiveled my chair and sank into the seat. My heart beat wildly, and I felt faint.

I also felt terrified.

Standing among the headstones of Sea Island Estate’s southern cemetery, a fiendish grin on his face, the look of madness in his eyes, Henry Hawkes stared at me.

At the bottom of the picture, beside my own bloody, decapitated head was written, in a frenzied script, “*Wish you were here!*”

GARY LEE PULLMAN

The book cover features a woman with long brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a red button-down shirt, looking off to the side. In the background, a large, dark dinosaur with its mouth open is walking through a dimly lit, industrial tunnel. The title 'MONSTERS OF NEW YORK' is written in a large, white, serif font across the bottom half of the cover.

MONSTERS
OF NEW
YORK

BOOK 2 OF A CHARLOTTE HASTINGS EXPOSÉ

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CHAPTER 1

“I don’t see any monsters,” Dave Edwards remarked.

“We’re not looking for monsters.”

“From what you told me, they sure *sound* like monsters.”

“Most likely, they’re dogs or alligators, maybe.”

“Because dogs and alligators look so much alike, right?”

“No, because dogs are known to explore abandoned subway tunnels and people sometimes toss pet alligators into tunnels when they’re big and bad instead of cute and cuddly.”

“I’ve never thought of baby gators as ‘cute and cuddly.’”

“That’s because you’re a guy, Dave.”

“We’ll have to go to the zoo. That way, you can see how ‘cute and cuddly’ baby gators are when you’re nose to nose with them—and their mamas.”

I smiled. “Could be a story in that.”

“Reporters.” He scoffed. “You’re so journalistic.”

“And you photographers are so—”

“Photogenic?”

In the dark tunnel, our surroundings weren’t very clear or detailed, even with our lights.

“I had something else in mind,” I admitted. “Now, *please*: no more talking. If there *is* something down here, talk could scare it off.”

“Okay,” Dave agreed, whispering, “but it’s hard to imagine *anything* would frighten away the monsters you’ve described.”

“No talking includes whispering.”

Together our headlamps and flashlights lit the tunnel ahead of us to a distance of a hundred yards or so. The problem was that we could see only straight ahead. To see wider, lower, or higher portions of the passageway, we had to sweep our flashlights up or down or from side to side as we moved our heads the same way. The constant movement was disorienting. It also made it hard to focus my vision.

We were here, in the abandoned sections of the city’s subway, to investigate an anonymous tip. Supposedly, alongside homeless people, otherworldly creatures also lived in these tunnels.

I had my doubts about the existence of any such beasts. Nevertheless, as an investigative journalist who writes a feature column aimed at eighteen-to-thirty-five-year-old readers interested in paranormal phenomena, I felt I should

follow up on the lead. I'd brought Dave along because, if we *did* come across such "monsters," photos would be indispensable.

I almost hoped we *would* encounter such a phenomenon. The tunnels Dave photographed made a fantastic setting for a series on paranormal monsters. The abandoned, isolated passageways seemed to go on forever, often straight ahead. Only once in a while did a few turn left or right. Not having entered any other tunnels, I didn't know if the one we now explored was typical. It was a completely different environment than I was used to. Its darkness, emptiness, scope, and remoteness made the passageway seem sinister to me.

A few hundred yards ahead, the tunnel turned left. Beyond the bend, we came face to face with a band of homeless people camped near a fire burning inside a barrel.

I stopped short, startled by their presence.

They regarded us warily.

"Hello," I greeted them.

Their silence made me gulp.

"I'm interested in these old, abandoned tunnels," I announced. "Can you tell me anything about them?"

None of them seemed eager to do so.

The few women among them hung back. They appeared frightened by our intrusion. The men, who were mostly older, held their ground, studying us. They seemed to be trying to

determine if we were threats. They probably didn't get many visitors.

I smiled. "I'm Charlotte, and this is Dave."

"Get those lights out of our faces!" a tall, pale, thin man demanded, squinting into the radiance of our headlamps and flashlights.

"Oh! Sorry!" I switched off my headlamp and swept my flashlight aside. Dave followed suit.

"I'm Ned."

He was the group's leader, I guessed. "Nice to meet you, Ned. I'm a reporter; Dave's my photographer."

"How nice *is* it to meet us?"

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You say you're a reporter. I take it you want to interview us."

I smiled. "I sure would."

"How much are you willing to pay?"

"It's against *The World Today's* policy to—"

"Best be on your way, then." Ned's voice sounded ominous.

"It's a free country," Dave declared, "even down here."

What was my photographer thinking? The group we faced included a few men our own age, and they looked fit. Surviving in these tunnels had to be challenging, and the young men probably did most of the group's hard, physical

work. They'd be strong and agile, with great stamina. Dave, comparable in build to them, was in superb shape himself, but there was only one of him.

“Ten bucks,” Dave declared.

Ned's smile showed stained—and missing—teeth. “Deal.” He extended a bony hand.

As Dave handed him the money, he told me, “Make sure you put that on your expense account, Charlotte. I expect to be reimbursed.”

Ned was all smiles now. “Your photog just bought you ten minutes. You got questions, ask away.”

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CHAPTER 2

“Have you seen anything, uh, different or strange down here?”

I inquired.

Ned laughed. “Living in abandoned subway tunnels? It’s about all you *ever* see.”

“How about strange creatures?”

Ned gazed at me closely, as if he suspected I was playing him. “Strange creatures?”

“I received an anonymous tip—”

“An anonymous tip? You base stories on hearsay?”

Blushing, I was glad, for the moment, that the tunnel was so dark. With our headlamps off and our flashlights directed away from Ned and his group, the only source of illumination were the flickering flames in the barrel. “Of course not,” I replied, “but tips pan out.”

“What kind of strange creatures?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.”

“Like the shaggy thing?” a woman in the shadows asked.

Without turning to look at her, Ned said, “Quiet, Velma! I’ll do the talking.”

As if she hadn’t heard his reprimand, another woman, lean with unkempt blonde hair, interjected, “Don’t forget them shadow-shapes.”

“You shush your mouth, Barb!” Ned ordered.

“I’d like to hear about them,” I declared.

Ned hesitated. “We don’t want visitors,” he said. “We tell you stories about shaggies and shadow-shapes, this tunnel’s likely to be *flooded* with lookie-loos.”

“Sooner or later, the word’s likely to get out.”

“You might as well get something out of the story for yourselves,” Dave suggested.

His proposition got Ned’s attention. “Like what?”

Dave offered the homeless band’s leader a twenty-dollar bill.

Pocketing the money, Ned said, “Tell them about the shaggies, Velma.”

The thin, elderly woman stepped into the firelight. She was older—or looked older—than I’d supposed. Her hair, past her shoulders, was gray. Her face was heavily wrinkled. Her skin sagged, and her turkey neck was prominent. Living

underground had made her skin as pale as paper. She seemed timid and wary.

I smiled at her. "Please, Velma; I'd like to hear your story."

"We both would," Dave said.

"No pictures," Ned warned.

Dave nodded. "Right."

"We all have our chores. One of mine is foraging. I look for coins, bottles and cans, copper wire, anything that might have cash value." She smiled tentatively. "Most of the time, it's slim pickings."

"Get on with it," Ned ordered.

Velma winced.

I shot him a frosty glare. "I'd like Velma to tell it in her own way, Ned."

His face hardened, but he said, "Tell it your way, then, Vel."

"Usually, Barb or Judy go with me. We don't travel alone if we can help it. But they was both sick that day, so I went by myself."

Ned took a deep breath, and I thought he was going to hurry Velma along, but he didn't say anything.

"About a mile from the campsite, I saw some shaggies. They was *big*."

"Bigger than a man?"

She nodded. “Taller and more *bigger*, like one of them weightlifters, but shaggy.”

“You mean furry?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know; I didn’t get close enough to tell, but they was shaggy, all right.”

“What did they do?”

“Nothing. They just stood there, looking at me. Leastways, I *think* they was. It was hard to tell in the darkness. I only had this to see by.” She fished a penlight from her pocket. “I couldn’t see they faces, couldn’t see nothing but that they was shaggy—and big. I didn’t like the looks of them, so I skedaddled back here, to the camp, and told the others about them.”

“What did the rest of you do?” I asked Ned.

“Nothing.”

I frowned. “Velma tells you about hulking, hairy figures in these tunnels, where you live, and you don’t *do* anything?”

“What *could* we do?”

“Investigate, at the very least.”

He laughed. “There’s all of nine of us, and only three of us are young enough and strong enough to put up a fight, yet you expect us to ‘investigate’ huge, hairy monsters?” He scoffed.

“We’re on our *own* down here. Ain’t no cops, nor medics, nor soldiers.”

“I guess you’re right,” I admitted.

“Damn straight.”

“Have you seen them since? Any of you?”

“No,” Velma replied. “At least, *I* haven’t.”

“Anyone else?”

No one else answered.

“What can you tell me, Barb, about the ‘shadow-thing.’”

“Ain’t much *to* tell, I reckon. They’re shadows, but they look like people—well, deformed people. Leastways, *some* of them do. Others look like nightmares come to life, crawling, slithering, bounding, floating, running, flying nightmares.”

“Monsters,” Velma remarked.

“Any attack you or anyone else?”

Barb grinned. In the firelight, her face, haggard and wasted, looked like that of a horror movie victim. “Not *yet*,” she said.

It seemed clear we’d learned all we could from Ned’s “family.” I thanked Velma, Barb, and Ned.

“You want more information, come back,” Ned invited. “We might have learned more. Of course, if you do, bring money.”

“Thank you,” I said, and Dave and I took our leave, turning on our headlamps again.

There was no way I wanted to walk these dark, damp subterranean tunnels without as much light as we could generate.

When he thought we were out of earshot, Dave said, “I don’t think we got our—or *my*—thirty dollars’ worth.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “We learned a few things.”

“Such as?”

“It’s likely there are several creatures down here, if there are any at all. The fact that both Velma and Barb, on separate occasions, saw different things—”

“‘Things’ is right—if they actually saw ‘monsters.’”

“If they saw different things, there may be more than one kind of creature down here. We also learned that the creatures never attacked even a lone woman when they had the chance to.”

“So we’re dealing with *friendly* fiends?”

“I didn’t say *that*.”

CHAPTER 3

“SO IS THERE ENOUGH for a series of columns?” Dave asked.

“I’m not sure. There may not be even enough to warrant even a fuller investigation.”

I tensed, a cry nearly escaping my lips, as the ferocious roar of the big, powerful animal continued to reverberate through the tunnel. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, making the sound even *more* frightening.

“What was *that*?” I shrieked.

“I don’t know,” Dave admitted. He sounded as scared as I felt. “But I sure hope we don’t hear it again.”

The cavernous passageway was quiet again. Somehow, after the bestial bellow, the silence itself seemed somehow horrific. Desperately, I followed the beam of my headlamp. Burrowing through the darkness, it exposed the concrete floor and the tracks of trains long gone. The left rail was bent at one point,

curving outward from its counterpart, which ran straight ahead, until both were lost in the distant gloom.

Along this stretch of the tunnel, cables ran along ribbed walls that stretched away into darkness. At intervals, the passageway sometimes also contained thick, concrete doors. Seemingly built for giants, they occupied recessed access points.

Some opened onto storage rooms, utility rooms, or other chambers. However, none were evident in this particular part of the tunnel, nor could I discern junctures or intersections indicating that Dave or I had missed spotting any. We hadn't noticed any on our way into this area of the abandoned subway tunnels, either.

Of course, that didn't mean such rooms *didn't* exist. Perhaps whatever beast had roared a few seconds ago occupied a hidden chamber or a concealed avenue of approach. The thought was by no means comforting.

"See anything?" Dave whispered.

Now that we'd gotten over our initial shock at hearing the roar, instinct had kicked in, and both Dave and I whispered automatically.

"No."

"Do you think it was them, playing a tape or something?"

"Ned and his 'family'? I doubt it. I didn't see any equipment or speakers."

“That doesn’t mean they don’t have them.”

“Why would they do such a thing, even if they could?”

“Maybe Ned’s a prankster, or maybe he really *doesn’t* like company and he’s making sure we don’t come back and hopes we’ll also warn others not to come.” “Maybe.” Dave’s suggestions

weren’t unreasonable, but they didn’t seem likely.

He tried again. “Maybe they scare away *everybody* who comes into this part of the system.”

“Could be.”

“But you don’t think so?”

“No,” I admitted.

“Why not?”

“For one thing, that roar sounded much too real—and too *different*. I mean, it didn’t sound like a lion or a tiger or a bear.”

“Ugh!” Dave made a disgusted face.

I felt sick to my stomach. The hideous stench that filled the tunnel was *beyond* gross. With my free hand, I pinched my nostrils, breathing through my mouth.”

Dave gagged. “Let’s get out of here!” he cried, forgetting to whisper.

Whatever the terrible smell was, it had been produced by an animal, I thought, but, like the roar, the stench was unfamiliar. It was also revolting. I retched.

Dave's hand caught mine, and we hastened through the tunnel, along a narrow path beside the rails.

Another roar was answered by a similar cry—or, at least, it seemed to be. Among the echoes of the sound in the tunnels, it was impossible to say whether the beast had a mate, or even a family, or was alone. The animal, if it *was* an animal, or the *animals*, if they numbered more than one, seemed to have gotten in *front* of us. Had they cut off the only avenue of escape we knew?

Afraid to go on, I nevertheless followed my instincts as an investigative journalist. Continuing down the dark tunnel, flashlight in hand, I stopped, staring, when I saw a strange creature dash into a side tunnel. A shaggy! I thought.

“It's luring us!” Dave warned.

He might be right, but I followed the beast, anyway, hoping to find evidence that the monster was real.

We dared not run at full speed. Despite both our headlamps and flashlights, the place was too dark to see all that well. We'd risked twisting an ankle or stumbling and falling. If we struck our heads on the side of the concrete wall or one of its massive supports, on the concrete floor, or on a steel rail of the track, we could knock ourselves senseless, injure ourselves severely, or be killed. We might lie helpless in this dark, cold tunnel, deep beneath the earth, until the monsters found us, and, then—I refused to think about what might happen then.

At the mouth of the tunnel, water had accumulated, forming mud. There, I saw the deep impression of a footprint like none I'd ever seen before. It might belong to an undiscovered species!

I pointed it out to Dave, and he photographed it. "Let's get out of here!" he insisted.

I had no problem with that but, as I hurried, I slid. Struggling for balance, I almost fell. I'd stepped in something slick. I frowned, disgusted at the foul smell. "Scat!"

Dave didn't look any too eager to photograph the fecal matter. It appeared to be the droppings of one of the bizarre beasts we'd heard and seen here, deep in the bowels of the earth. Nevertheless, he snapped a few shots. "Think we should collect a, uh, specimen?"

I'd already doffed my backpack. Removing a small jar, I screwed off its lid and handed Dave an ice cream stick from a set I'd bought for a craft project. Wrinkling my nose, I said, "You do the honors."

I expected an argument, but Dave apparently decided to let his chivalry shine forth. He accepted the stick—and the task.

After he deposited some of the scat into the jar, I screwed the lid back on as tightly as I could and returned the jar to my backpack and my pack to my back. "We might have found all the preliminary evidence we need to justify a full-scale investigation of the tip I received about this place. All I need to do now is persuade Mr. Cullen to fund the quest."

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* * *

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* * *

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A U. S. Army veteran and a former English instructor at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, Gary Lee Pullman lives in Sin City with his lovely wife, award-winning Paula Darnell, author of the series A DIY Diva Mystery (*Death by Association*, *Death by Design*, and *Death by Proxy*) and A Fine Art Mystery (*Artistic License to Kill*, *Vanished Into Plein Air*, and *Hemlock for the Holidays*). Like her stand-alone historical mystery *The Six-Week Solution*, they are available at your favorite online store.

In addition to his series A Charlotte Hastings Paranormal Exposé, Gary has written five Westerns for his An Adventure of the Old West series: *Bane Messenger*, *Bounty Hunter*, *Good with a Gun*, *The Valley of the Shadow*, *Blood Mountain*, and *On the Track of Vengeance*). They, too, await readers at Amazon Books.

Gary's many [Listverse](#) articles exhibit his interest in history, the arts, pop culture, true crime, books, music, movies and TV,

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