

The Haunted Mansion

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Inspired by the Haunted Mansion ride at Disneyland, Anaheim CA

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Chapter One

A low-laying fog hung above miles of the waist-high golden grass plains, giving cover to a lone plainsman taking aim with his long-barreled rifle at a buck grazing in the distance. Kneeling and camouflaged among the tall grass in his tan pants, long buckskin leather coat and cedar-brown wide-brimmed hat, the plainsman kept his aim fixed on the twelve-point buck; his dirt-stained callused finger rubbing lightly against his rifle's trigger. A soft drizzle of cool rain drifted down from the grey overcast sky, tapping upon the green and gold leaves of the White Oaks along the edge of the surrounding evergreen-fir forest.

Knowing what he could expect if he were to make the kill, the plainsman hesitated a moment as he watched the buck graze in peace. He closed his eyes, thinking of his two young sisters waiting for him back home in the forest, no doubt becoming increasingly hungry for supper later in the evening. Opening his eyes, he saw the buck still unaware of his presence. The plainsman scowled and grit his teeth behind his pursed lips. Pulling the rifle's trigger, a loud BANG echoed across the golden plains like a thunderclap.

A memory suddenly flashed in his mind from the rifle's sound of impending death. It was a scene when he had fought for the Union army in the war years ago. During the Battle of Gettysburg, he had fired his very first shot at another man. The shot pierced the heart of a soldier, a boy no older than his early teens fighting for the Confederacy. The boy collapsed to his knees, falling face-first into the churned mud and grass. Yet it was not only the impact of his first time killing another human being, let alone someone so young of age, that took him aback but that all of a sudden, he witnessed the boy's very *spirit* rise up from out of his corpse. The boy's transparent grey and white spirit appeared both confused and frightened of his new state of being. He looked desperately around, trying to understand where he was and what was going on around him. The spirit began stepping away from his lifeless body when he instantly vanished like a wisp of fog in a brisk wind.

As the memory of that heart-shattering event faded from his mind, the plainsman's dark brooding eyes watched the buck fall dead, an instant kill to the head. It dropped to the ground beneath the lingering fog as if it had been captured and swallowed-up by the fog's ghostly-ash-

white presence. Closing his eyes the plainsman took a breath, placing the butt of his rifle onto the saturated ground beside him. He leaned heavy-heartedly against the gun. After a moment he finally forced himself to open his eyes once again. As he did, the buck's spirit rose up from out of the fog. It looked towards his direction and began grazing among the tall grass as if nothing had happened. The buck's spirit soon disappeared into the fog as the plainsman slowly stood from his crouched-position. His eyes stared despairingly at the buck's lifeless body revealed in patches among the thick fog blanketing over it. Forcing himself to move his legs, the plainsman trudged slowly over to his kill. He placed his leather gloves back on his ice-cold hands and unsheathed his hunting knife.

He prepared the carcass for travel, removing with care and respect of the animal all that was unnecessary to either store, eat or sell at the trading post. Loading the gutted carcass onto a horse-drawn wagon, the plainsman climbed up onto the driver's seat behind his two faithful horses, who had been waiting for him patiently near the edge of the forest. The plainsman looked behind him, first at the buck's carcass in the cart, then beyond at the low fog shrouding the plains where he had shot it. 'Its spirit is at rest now, long gone from here,' he thought, his thick eyebrows furrowing. 'No need to stay here any longer than you already have. You got two sisters counting on you to return home.' The plainsman's sharp staring eyes remained fixed on the spot where he witnessed the buck's spirit. He slapped the reins, signaling his steeds to make for home with a gruff *YA!* He left the plains behind him, passing under the green and gold leaf-canopies of the White Oaks as he drove deep into the forest of towering firs.

"Bill!" called a familiar voice as the plainsman arrived at his homestead deep in the forest. Removing the horses from the cart, he watched with joy his two young sisters racing out of the cabin.

"Nell," said Bill in a soft, relieved tone as they hugged each other.

"We were starting to get worried about you," said Nell. "You left so early this morning. We didn't even get the chance to see you off."

Bill gave a regretful nod when his youngest sister wrapped her little arms around his knees. "Big Brother!" she said with joy.

"Little Emma," said Bill, smiling thoughtfully down at her. He picked her up, sitting her upon his forearms near his broad chest. "I'm sorry for bein' gone for so long today. My trip wasn't in vain though. Just see for yourselves what I brought for us." He hopped up onto the wagon and lifted up the buck's ten-point racked head.

Nell immediately gasped. "Oh my!"

“It’s huge!” added Emma in amazement.

“It’s been years since I’d seen a mature buck grazing the plains near the forest,” said Bill. “Not since father and I used to hunt together when I was about your age, Nell. Just a year or two before I went to war...” he paused, thinking back to the painful memory of shooting the boy-soldier in Gettysburg. Pushing aside the memory in his mind, he spoke again. “With this kill, it’ll not only help feed us through the winter, but earn us some much-needed money as well. Did you dry out and gather all the pelts like I asked?”

Nell nodded. “They’re stacked and ready for you along the backside of the cabin. But must you leave so soon? You only just arrived back.”

Bill frowned, removing his glove and placing his hand gently upon her soft cheek. “Sorry, Nell. Have to reach the Fort before it gets too dark. We’re nearly out of supplies here, and the sooner I can trade the pelts the better I will feel. For too long we’ve been strugglin’ with what little we have left around here. When I return, we’ll have a supper together that would make the president himself envious of the bounty on our table.”

Bill gathered the beaver and rabbit pelts, along with the hides of three deer and the large grizzly bear he had to trade and loaded them upon his horse. With a final farewell to his sisters, the plainsman rode the nearly five-mile distance through the dense forest. Just as dusk crept over the lands, he reached the western borders of the forest and the banks of the Columbia River. To the north of the salmon-rich River stood the Fort and the Hudson’s Bay Trading Company amid miles of open field bowled by forested hills in the distance.

He passed through the Fort’s tall gate doors, stabled his horse, and took the leather sacks containing the pelts while carrying the hides slung over his shoulders. As he began crossing the grounds towards the trading post near the back of the Fort, Bill heard a heavily-accented voice carry in the chilled-air. “Bill!” The plainsman looked to his side, seeing his old friend approaching and wearing his signature coon-skin cap and chestnut-brown leather coat and pants.

“André,” replied Bill with a faint smile. “Comment vas-tu ce soir, mon amie?”

“Ah, très bien my friend,” replied the French trapper. “I zee you ‘ave been bizzy zeez past weeks zince last we met.”

Bill nodded. “Winter’s comin’. Better prepare now while the leaves begin turnin’ color.”

Helping him carry pelts to the Trading Post, André smiled broadly. “But of course! Az zee little varmitz and zee larger predatorz, zuch az zee bear and zee cougarz zearch for food, we must hunt zem before zay zleep for zee winter, no?”

“Thankfully this year has been better hunting than the previous three,” said Bill.

André looked at him curiously. “Do you ztill zee them? Their zpiritz?”

Bill’s eyes strayed to the ground as they continued walking towards the Trading Post. “Every time,” he said gruffly.

“It trublez you, no? I *zee* it in your eyez,” said André. Bill remained silent as they approached the doors to the Trading Post. “Zee trouble you feel, zee *anxiety* and *pain* you onze told me about of zeeing zpirits, it showz mon amie upon your face like a zcar zat you can no longer hide.”

“I trust you have told nobody about this?” said Bill, looking sternly back at the trapper.

“A promize iz a promize,” replied André. “But I muzt plead to you now, mon amie, face and rezolve zis haunting izzue you ‘ave with zee dead, before it konzumes you entirely.”

Bill gave a curt nod. “One day. For now I need to make sure my sisters are fed and cared for.” The two men then entered the Trading Post and approached the counter.

“That’s all?” said Bill dumbfounded. “For all that I’d brought, *this* is what you can offer me for ‘em?”

“I’m sorry, but yes,” replied the Trading Post’s proprietor. “There have been quite a few more settlers that have come to the area and in turn, have captured and brought more stock than I can sell. It is basic supply and demand.”

“I *know* what that is,” replied Bill gruffly. “Rabbit and beaver pelts I can understand you having enough of, but *deer* hide? Predators like bears and cougars? Surely these skins are worth more than you say.”

The proprietor scowled back at him. “*As* I’ve said, there have been more people who have settled in the area and throughout the Willamette Valley than in previous years. More people are hunting and fewer who are in need of purchasing pelts and hides. Even exporting them to other states has brought my costs down due to the large inventory I have now. You two are not the *only* trappers and plainsmen out there living off the land.”

Bill looked sharply back at the man when André patted his hand upon his friend’s shoulder. “Let us make our leave, mon amie. I zuggest we take zee money he iz willing to trade us before he dezides to lower hiz offer.”

Reluctantly, Bill took the money from the proprietor and stormed out. Taking his own offer of money for his pelts, André gave a grateful nod to the proprietor. “*Merci, monsieur,*” he said then caught up to Bill outside.

“Not the only ones trying to live off the land,” Bill sneered. “So much for the gratitude we always got over the years as loyal traders of this post! How are my sisters and I supposed to live off of this meager amount of money for the next *month*?”

“Mister Garret?” called a voice nearby. Bill looked to his side, discovering in the dim lamp lights a well-dressed gentleman approaching him. The man tipped his top-hat in respect and spoke. “Pardon me, sir, but are you Bill Garret?”

“I am” said Bill, looking suspiciously at the stranger.

“May I speak with you for a moment?” said the gentleman. His deep, baritone-voice carried an odd, noticeable tone sounding to Bill as gleefully-sardonic.

Bill shook his head. “Afraid not, mister. I have no time to speak with strangers right now.”

The gentleman pinched his fingers lightly upon his long, smooth-haired mustache and ran them to its well-groomed pointed end. “I assure you that I will not take much of your time,” he said with a grin. “Allow me to buy you and your friend a drink as a token of appreciation for your attention. There is an offer I come bearing to you from my employer.”

Bill shook his head once again and began walking away. “No thanks. Gotta be on my way.”

“I should mention that for your cooperation, should you choose to accept my employer’s offer, you will be *handsomely* rewarded for your service.”

The plainsman halted, staring hard at the gate doors ahead. He finally turned, seeing that André was looking urgently back at him to at least accept the offer of a free drink. “You came all zis way from...” said André.

“Louisiana,” replied the gentleman. “New Orleans, to be exact.”

“New Orleanz,” said André amused. “Bill, that iz quite a journey just to zee you, no? Why not allow zis man to buy you a drink? He az come zo far to speak with you.”

Bill approached the gentleman, staring hard into his eyes. “Five minutes, that is what time I can give you.”

“Then allow me to buy you and your friend a drink, compliments of my employer,” said the gentleman, staring back at him with a dignified and unbending confidence.

In a small Public House, where the houses of the officers stood alongside each other overlooking the Fort upon a stout hill, the three men sat together at a small table in a quiet and private corner. While the lamps inside and out of the busy pub were lit as night crept over the land, the gentleman from New Orleans returned from the bar to the awaiting Bill and André. He carried three pints of ale, one he handed to Bill and the other two he gave to André upon Bill’s request.

“*Satisfied, mon amie?*” said Bill.

“Absolument!” replied André happily, chugging down the first pint then pushing aside the empty glass.

Bill smiled faintly at his friend, then shifted his eyes over to the gentleman. “You have my attention, sir. So who are you?”

Removing his black top hat from his slick-backed brown hair, the gentleman gave a respectful nod. “My name is Paul Frees, butler of Gracey House and loyal servant to the Gracey family. I have come here at the bidding of my employer to seek you out and request your assistance at the Mansion.”

Bill took a swig of his ale. “Never heard of the Graceys. How do they know me?”

“From the war which nearly divided the country permanently,” said Mister Frees.

“Master Gracey’s eldest child and only son, Claude, was killed in action at Gettysburg. After the family reclaimed his body, a letter was found in his coat pocket. I have brought the letter with me.” He pulled the folded paper from the pocket of his violet waistcoat he wore beneath his dark, emerald-green butler’s jacket with large black lapels and black overcoat. Bill’s deep-blue eyes stared sharply at him as the butler began reading the letter. “May your soul find peace beyond this world of war and hate. *Too* young were we to be forced into marching alongside men who have already seen combat and the dirty business of dealing death. You so more than I, for I suspect and fear you may have just begun your teen years, where I am close to nearing the end of mine. No matter your background, your own thoughts and beliefs of this war and ideals regarding life and liberty, I know in my heart that I have forgiveness to ask regarding my hasty, reactive decision to have fired my weapon rip your soul away from your family and from this world. And as I witnessed your very soul rise from your motionless-body, standing rooted in fear and in disbelief to what my waking eyes were seeing, I saw the fear, the confusion upon your ghostly-face of what had just happened to you. A vision I’m confident shall haunt me for the rest of my life. I pray that you did find your way to the light, to home on the other-side, but that shall never be known to me until death eventually takes me. Farewell, brave boy of the South.” The butler paused, then held the letter out to Bill. “This is your handwriting and your name signed at the bottom, is it not?”

Bill took the message from him, glancing at it briefly then handed it to André who was trying to read it over his shoulder. “I wrote the message. The *private* message I wanted to say to that boy. At the time in my *naive*-mind, I thought it wouldn’t be discovered because he’d be buried with it soon after the battle.”

“The family was insistent that Claude’s body be returned to Gracey House,” said Mister Frees. “A mausoleum was constructed for his corpse and stands among his relatives’ own upon the plantation’s grounds.”

“I see,” said Bill reluctantly. “So I imagine then that the family tracked me down through the Union army?”

The butler nodded. “It took many painstaking years, but my employer had finally convinced and received from the Union army where you could be found.”

“And what do the Graceys want with me?” said Bill. “I don’t have any money to offer them, no compensation that could ever rectify what I did.”

Mister Frees gave a sinister grin. “The Graceys are one of the wealthiest families in the South. *Money* is not what was in mind. Fascination and intrigue quickly sparked and ignited questions among the family over you witnessing Claude’s actual spirit, *if* what you claimed in the letter was true. This was the first question I was to ask you on behalf of my employer.”

Bill looked to his friend, who was drinking quietly beside him when André gave him an urging-look to tell the truth. Scowling, Bill’s attention returned to the butler. “Yeah, I saw him.

For a moment he was there, then his spirit started walking away from his corpse and he disappeared. I never saw him again.”

“Good,” said Mister Frees with a decisive nod. “I was ordered to ask this next question had your claim in the letter of witnessing his spirit been true. Have you seen *other* spirits before or after that fateful day?”

Taking another swig of his ale, Bill finally spoke. “Only after the boy’s death. His spirit was the first I had ever seen before.”

“Excellent,” said Mister Frees. “Now then, I have been told to ask you when and how often you see spirits.”

Bill’s gaze strayed down to his clasped hands upon the table. After a moment of reflection and nervous contemplation over the matter, he finally spoke. “Immediately after a person or animal dies. When their soul lifts themselves out of the flesh. Afterwards, like what happened with Claude, the spirit eventually disappears.” He drank the rest of his ale and set his empty pint glass aside to what looked to be a gleam of satisfaction in the butler’s dark eyes. “Your time with me here is running out, sir. Why are the Graceys looking for me?”

The butler gave a contemplating smile. “You have answered my employer’s questions with answers that had been hoped for. Here is the offer. Gracey House has had numerous claims of being haunting since the war’s end. More and more ghosts, specters, spirits, apparitions and the like have been either felt or sensed by the staff and by some guests staying at the mansion. As of late, there have even been sightings of the paranormal, such as movements of objects flying across rooms and hallways. The haunts have progressively become worse over the years. I have been charged to seek you out to ask that you accompany me to Gracey House so that you may help to remove these spirits once and for all.”

André chugged the last of his second pint of ale and spoke. “Az any guest who vizited zee mansion actually zeen zees ghosts?”

“There have been claims, but no physical proof or evidence,” said Mister Frees. “One of the maids claimed to have seen a candelabra floating in mid-air down a stretch of hallway as she was retiring to her room for the night. Other staff members claimed to have heard voices in the dark when no one was around them at the time. Statue-busts of Gracey relations along the grounds were even said to have smiled back as one passes by. Some of the staff has sworn that the busts have even *talked* to them.”

Bill smirked. “Perhaps these maids and footmen making these claims are trying to convince your employer for a raise.”

The butler frowned, then soon gave a menacing smile back as if forcing himself to entertain his remark. “My employer needs someone who has actually *seen* spirits before. Someone who can be a guide to follow their movements in order to finally be rid of them.”

“Sorry friend,” said Bill gruffly. “You have the wrong man. I don’t just *see* spirits all the time. I’ve told you this already.”

“But perhaps if you were in an environment where high-spiritual activity is occurring, surely you may possibly see *something* then?” said Mister Frees.

Bill glared back at him. “If it’s really spirits, *ghosts* you say that are causing these ‘disturbances’ happening at Gracey House, not some hoax being played by drunk-guests during dinner parties, that’s an evil I *don’t* want to see.” He stood abruptly from his seat at the table, placing his wide-brimmed hat back upon his straw-blond hair cascading down to his broad shoulders. “Please send my regards to the Graceys. I’m sorry for the loss of their son.” He began making his leave with André staggering behind him in tow when suddenly, he heard the butler speak.

“*Five hundred thousand dollars,*” said Mister Frees. All in the Public House fell silent, turning their attention onto the three men. Bill turned, seeing the butler staring back at him again with his mesmerizing-eyes gleaming with unbending confidence. Looking around him and feeling completely exposed to all eyes staring at him, Bill casually walked back to the table and sat down in his seat across from the amused butler. Everyone around them began returning back to their own conversations.

“That’s a lot of money to be throwing around as an offer,” said Bill quietly.

The butler’s eyebrow rose inquisitively. He picked up his large black travel bag, inconspicuously opening it beside Bill beneath the table. Looking inside, Bill’s eyes widened. A large mound of bound one-hundred-dollar bank notes filled the entire bag. “Two hundred fifty thousand is to be given to you now,” said Mister Frees with a creepy grin. “Two hundred fifty thousand once the plantation is deemed no longer haunted.” Bill continued to stare in awe at the amount of money he was being shown, ready to be *given* to him at that very moment should he choose to accompany the gentleman to New Orleans. “Some time to think about it, yes?” said the butler, quickly clasping the bag shut. He stood, pushing in the seat of his chair with care back under the table. “My train leaves tomorrow morning at nine o’clock. My employer thanks you for your attention and she hopes that you do consider coming.”

“*She?*” said André. “If your employer iz not Monsieur Gracey himself, zen who iz it?”

The butler gave a sly grin. “I am staying here for the night. My room upstairs is the first door on the left should you come to a decision. Good evening to you both.” The butler turned on his heel and strode to the stairs, climbing up them to the guest rooms and leaving the bewildered Bill and André behind at the table.

Bill returned home with André, inviting his friend to dinner after the two men left the Fort. After spending the evening feasting and having a pleasant time conversing with his younger sisters and André, Bill took out his pipe and filled its bowl with sweet-scented tobacco as Nell and Emma retired to bed. Lighting a match, he lit the pipe and took a draw of its nutty-flavored smoke. He sat back in his chair when he noticed André staring at him with anticipation gleaming in his eyes.

“*Well?*” blurted out André. “You zaid nothing to your zisterz about zee encounter with Monsieur Paul Frees at zee Fort, nor about zee opportunity zis butler of Gracey House ‘ad offered you.”

“I’m still considering it,” replied Bill casually.

André shook his head and scoffed. “What iz zere to think about? Did I not advise you to face your fearz? What better place to do zo?”

Bill stared sharply back at his friend. “So this Mister Frees *says*. The money could be a bluff.”

“I know money when I zee it, mon amie,” said André. “And what zee butler showed you wuz ovar two hundred thousand dollarz. I would wager my own cabin on it!”

Giving his friend a look of disdain, Bill took another draw from his pipe. “I have two sisters to care for here. Ever since our parents died, I swore that I would look after Nell and Emma.”

“And you ‘*ave* been!” said André. “Just think what five hundred thousand dollarz could do for zem, for zee *three* of you! No longer would you ‘ave to concern yourzelves with not ‘aving enough to eat, not enough money for zuppliez. You could zpoil your zisterz with dressez and makeup, *new shoez*! Zee three of you could even travel firzt-clasz on zee trainz or shipz to placez around zee world that there young mindz could never begin to imagine.”

Bill looked at him sternly. “*If* I were to go to New Orleans and Gracey House, I would not take them with me. If what Mister Frees says is in-fact true about the mansion, I want them as far from such a place as possible.”

“Of courze,” replied André. “Zis plantation zat Monsieur Freez az dezcribed iz no place for children, yez? *But* if you were to go, you travel by zee train with Monsieur Freez, ztay at zee mansion for a few dayz and ‘elp ‘owever you can while conquering your fearz of zee zpirit-realm. You’d be back ‘ere in no more zan a few weekz!”

Bill smirked. “There you go again, saying I need to face my fears over this spirit-business. A mansion filled with ghosts causing mischief to scare snobby, drunk aristocrats and socialites is not something I’d wish to experience, let alone actually *see* these spirits if it were possible.”

“Mon amie,” said André with concern held for him in his dark eyes. “Zat which you fear only empowerz it. Go with Monsieur Frees, ‘elp zee Gracey Family ‘owever you can while you face and conquer your fearz of zeeing zee zpirits.”

Taking a deep breath, Bill took a long draw from his pipe remembering his time in the Union army throughout the war. The staggering amount of spirits he witnessed after Claude’s death, the amount of the dead laying all around him each day on the battlefield. As in life, some of the spirits were calm and kind, leaving their corpses behind peacefully as they disappeared into thin-air. Others he distinctly remembered were *not* so kind. Some had even noticed him watching them, recognizing that he could actually see them as spirits. Their haunting-faces instantly transformed and distorted into skeletal-looking demons and tried to attack him. Yet

when they had moved away from their motionless-bodies of flesh, these enraged spirits instantly disappeared from his sight, like puffs of swirling smoke from his pipe.

Finally, Bill spoke. "You are my good friend, André," he said, patting André's arm. "Loyal and trustworthy you've always been to me. You've never steered me wrong before with your advice. If I were to pay Mister Frees a visit tonight and accept the offer, would you watch over Nell and Emma while I'm gone?"

André smiled thoughtfully back. "You 'ave my word zay shall be well-cared for by moi."

Bill gave a decisive nod. "Then I'll tell Mister Frees that I will go with him, under the condition that I take the two hundred fifty thousand tonight for you and the girls to have while I'm away. For your loyalty and as my good friend, fifty thousand of that money I want you to have." André's eyes widened in pure joy. "Spoil the girls while I'm gone. Take them on trips to Portland, they've never had store-bought dresses, candy, and other luxuries we couldn't afford, until now."

"Très bien, mon amie!" said André. "Your zisterz shall feel and be treated like princezsez!"

"Before I go to see Mister Frees tonight, let's wake 'em up," said Bill as the two men stood from their seats at the table. "I want them to know what's going to happen."

"You're leaving?" said Nell concernedly as Emma's eyes began glazing with tears.

"Only for a few weeks, I swear it won't be long," said Bill.

"But why must you go to Louisiana?" said Nell, clutching her brother's hands in hers.

Smiling warmly back at them both, Bill spoke calmly. "I've been offered a temporary job for a lot of money to help out a family for a short while."

"But *we* need you!" cried Emma.

Bill placed a comforting hand upon both his sisters' cheeks. "This reward I'm bein' offered will provide us with all that we could ever need and more for years to come. We can go on *trips* together, travel in first class to see the world. We can have a life together our parents could only *dream* of. And while I'm away, André will watch over you both."

"But we'll miss you too much," said Emma, wrapping her little arms around his bicep.

Bill looked at Nell, who stared at him with a pleading-look for him to stay. "I'll miss you both too. All the more reason for my stay down there to be brief," said Bill. He embraced them both as they hugged him tightly. "Now, can I trust you two in makin' sure André here doesn't get into any trouble while I'm gone?"

Both girls smiled faintly as Emma gave a slight giggle. "I suppose someone needs to," said Nell. "He's always catching his hand in one of his own traps!" Emma began giggling even more.

“Well now, who’z going to be watching over who?” laughed André.

Nell’s smile slowly faded as she took her brother’s hand in hers again. “Don’t forget about us.”

Bill frowned, clasping his hand over hers. “I won’t.” The three hugged each other together one last time when finally, Bill stood from Nell’s bedside as the two girls sat together upon it. “I got some business to attend to back at the Fort tonight, but I’ll be back shortly. You two go back to sleep. We’ll have breakfast together in the mornin’ before I leave.”

Bill arrived back at the Fort as a downpour of rain fell heavily from the pitch-black night sky. Knocking hard upon the door of the room the butler was staying in for the night, the door creaked open. There in the doorway stood Mister Frees, still dressed in his butler-uniform. “Ah, Mister Garret. I have been expecting you,” said the butler, his cynically-mocking baritone voice was instantly recognizable to Bill. “Please, come inside.”

Stepping inside the quarters illuminated in an intimate light from the candles lit around the room, Bill moved over to the welcoming warmth of a fire burning in the small fireplace. He removed his wide-brimmed hat and spoke. “I accept your employer’s offer. I’ll go with you to New Orleans and Gracey House, under one condition.”

“Yeeees?” said the butler with a sinister smile, his response sounding like a low-sounding creaking door.

“That you hold to your word that you will give me the money that was offered to me earlier tonight.”

“It is a deal then?” asked the butler, gesturing to a nearby table with a lit candelabra upon it standing beside a sheet of paper. Bill stepped over to the table, discovering the paper to be a contract. He read the heading written in large cursive script: ‘Contract of Gracey House’. A decorative fleur-de-lis symbol was printed upon each end of the heading’s text. “Just sign your name on the bottom line, and you shall have the first half of your reward,” said Mister Frees gleefully.

Reading over the brief contract, Bill couldn’t help but notice certain parts of the agreement, such as the Gracey Family having ‘no responsibility of any injury or death should any or all happen’ during his stay. A privacy-clause that he ‘speaks to no one in regards to the haunting occurring at Gracey Plantation’, as well as reading a cryptic agreement that he fulfill all duties required to rid the estate of all ‘unwelcomed visitors’.

Bill reached over, taking a quill-pen from Mister Frees who was watching him carefully, and dipped the quill’s pointed-tip into an ink jar beside the contract. He signed his name upon the line at the bottom of the contract when suddenly, a brilliant flash of lightning blasted

through the window into the room. Following the flash came a rolling thunder pounding like war-drums outside as the rain relentlessly pelted against the roof.

“Outstanding,” said the butler, handing Bill the black bag filled with money. “Meet me at the train station tomorrow morning. Be ready to board at nine o’clock sharp. I shall wait for your arrival at the platform with your ticket.”

Chapter Two

The train whistle blew, deafening the ceaseless noise of chattering passengers boarding the train-cars at the station. Bill removed his wide-brimmed hat, resting it upon his leg after taking his seat beside the window. The butler, Mister Frees, sat directly across from him in his seat facing Bill.

“You look nervous,” said Mister Frees.

Bill turned his gaze away from the window and the view of the station’s bustling platform. “Should I be?” he replied, looking sharply back at him. The train-car shifted, forcing both men to rock in their rouge-cushioned seats for a brief moment as the wheels of the train began to turn. The butler remained silent and gave a malicious smile.

As the train left the station and slowly began picking up speed, Bill opened his coat to reveal his side-arm, a new 1873 Colt SAA revolver holstered at his right side. “Just so that we understand one-another, if I feel a single hair on the back of my neck stand on end from any threat you might pose, I swear the last thing you’ll see is the end of my gun’s barrel.” He watched as the butler uncomfortably adjusted himself in his seat. “I may have had to check my rifle before boardin’ the train, but know that I’m well-protected.”

Mister Frees expelled a low, dark laugh. “*Well protected*...you say. Believe me Mister Garret, it is not *I* who you should be concerned about.”

The train soon reached its optimal speed for cross-country travel. Outside their window, the green-hilled and forested landscape of Bill’s home across the mighty Columbia River sped by them as they entered into the narrow, rocky valley of the Columbia River Gorge. “It perplexes

me why you decided to bring your firearms,” said Mister Frees. “I assure you that where we are going guns will be of no use to you.”

“Maybe not,” replied Bill closing his jacket, “but I certainly feel more comfortable knowin’ they’re available to me. Especially travellin’ with you.”

The butler smirked, crossing his right leg over his left as he pinched and toyed with the pointed-end of his mustache with his fingers. He looked over the plainsman’s garb for a moment then finally spoke. “These ‘frontier’ clothes you wear will not do. You cannot be seen roaming Gracey House and sitting at meals, especially dinner and evening parties, dressed to *hunt*. Once we reach St. Louis, we shall find you some suitable clothes to wear during your stay.”

“*Humph*,” expelled Bill. “I’m here to do a job, to literally *see* if ‘ghosts’ and ‘ghouls’ are hauntin’ the mansion, not to dress and attend parties I have no business bein’ a part of.”

“Oh but you *must*,” replied Mister Frees. “It was insisted by my employer that you do so. The last thing she wishes to happen is for the guests to know anything about the truth of your stay at the mansion.” Bill frowned as the butler continued. “To have it revealed that there is an actual investigation over the alleged haunting would certainly cause concern. Worst of all would be any sprouting of speculation and rumors amongst the public, something my employer wishes to avoid entirely. I remind you, Mister Garret, it is part of your contract that you help in any ways necessary throughout your stay at Gracey House. That means looking the part and blending-in as a well-dressed, well-mannered gentleman of high society.”

Bill stared at him inquisitively. “You told me last night that guests have seen and experienced unexplainable events in the mansion. Hasn’t Gracey House already gained a reputation of bein’ haunted?”

“Certainly,” replied the butler. “*However*, events that the guests have described seeing or experiencing have been far less intense, threatening, and most of all harmful than what the *staff* have seen and experienced. In fact, guests who have experienced any haunted activity at the mansion claim they had drunk too much during dinner, finding it to be the rational explanation of what they experienced. To the guests, and even to the public, it is merely an *amusement* to think of the one hundred-year-old Gracey House as being haunted. If we were to reveal any reason for people to believe the mansion *is* in fact haunted, it would cause a great stir amongst my employer’s frequent guests and social circles. Something she greatly desires to avoid.”

“Just who is your employer?” said Bill. “You still haven’t revealed her identity to me. And what’s the reason for all these dinners and parties she continues holdin’ at the mansion?”

“All in good time,” said Mister Frees with a grin. “Now, I must again insist that we find you some proper clothes to wear during your stay.”

Bill frowned. “Fine, but only for formal events such as dinner. The rest of the time I’m wearin’ my own clothes. You, the Gracey House staff, and especially the Graceys themselves, can just introduce me to guests as some long lost relative from the West.”

“Very well,” said Mister Frees. “Mademoiselle will be pleased for your cooperation. Your wardrobe shall of course be paid for with her compliments.”

Gazing lazily out the train-car window, Bill watched as they passed through Boise, Idaho after making a stop at the train station. Suddenly, his eyes widened in shock. His heart thumped hard as its rhythmic-beating raced beneath his chest. All along the streets he began seeing spirits of the dead appearing out of thin-air; their white and grey transparent figures looking like hazy swirling puffs of smoke, then transforming into the shapes and likenesses of men, women, and children. All looked to Bill as if the dead were simply going about their business along the streets, like they were not dead at all.

“This can’t be real,” whispered Bill in utter disbelief of what his hard-staring eyes were seeing. As if hearing his words, every spirit halted and stood eerily still. Then in unison they all turned their heads, staring coldly back at Bill as the train continued to gain speed and passed by them. Bill’s heart pounded even harder from the swift attention of the countless spirits’ glares. His skin quickly became ice-cold as each breath he took became shorter and more rapid. At the edge of the city, he looked in both fear and confusion as three male spirits appearing as well-dressed gentlemen donning ash-grey top hats on their pale, transparent heads and long overcoats draped over their fog-like bodies. The trio of spirits each gave a broad smile. They held out their thumbs, hitchhiking for a ride out of the city along the side of the tracks. Just as the train passed by the hitchhiking ghosts, Bill breathed a sigh of relief with the spirits of the city now behind him. The vast Idaho frontier was now all that revealed outside his window.

Suddenly, Bill twitched in surprise. Outside his window floating alongside the train car appeared countless spirits from the city. All glared at him as if wishing to cause him harm. Bill let out a frightened shout from their sudden appearance. “*Why Bill,*” spoke the most bone-chilling voice he had ever heard. “*You look as if you’ve seen a ghost!*” The voice, consisting of shifting-pitches of high-notes followed by a much darker, sinister lower-tone, causing Bill to slowly turn his gaze from the spirits pressed against the outside of his window to the seat facing across from him. His eyes widened in sheer terror at who, or what, was sitting across from him. No longer was the butler, Paul Frees, sitting in the cushioned seat but the most terrifying sight Bill had witnessed yet.

Sitting cross-legged in the seat was a spirit unlike any he had seen before. All spirits that he had witnessed from past to present had an ash-grey-hue. This spirit however glowed an ice-blue shade of color and radiated a sickly-green glow about him. He donned a top hat atop his long, stringy hair that draped around his skull-head, their tangled-ends reaching down to his slumped shoulders. A tall-collared overcoat shrouded him from neck to ankle. His large, yellow eyes with long, sharp-tipped narrow pupils like that of a snake stared at him with a crazed, wild-eyed gaze as the ghost gave an evil grin. Atop his knees sat a large hatbox of the same fog-like matter that composed his spiritual body and clothing. The ghost expelled a grim laugh, his yellow eyes disappearing into the large, black voids of his eye sockets. The ghost’s entire head

then disappeared, instantly reappearing and revealing itself inside the transparent hatbox. The laughing head now inside the hatbox was picked up by the long, boney hands of the ghost and thrown hard at Bill's face.

Unable to breathe-in any air from shock, Bill's mouth gaped open in horror. His eyes became fixed upon the laughing skeletal-face of the ghost flying straight at him. Suddenly, he felt his shoulders being shaken hard. In mid-air, the ghost's head in the hatbox halted mere inches away from the end of Bill's nose. In its hollow, shifting-pitch voice, the hatbox ghost's detached head spoke. "*Oh Biiiiill, wake up!*" The ghost's head began laughing hysterically. "Wake up, Bill! *WAKE UP!!! HAHHAHAHA!!!*"

Bill shut his eyes tightly as he grit his teeth. Quickly opening them once again, he discovered that no longer was the ghost sitting across from him. Mister Frees stood over him, grasping Bill's shoulders as he shook him one last time to wake up. He looked up at the butler's face that was staring concernedly down at him. "You were dreaming, Mister Garret," said Mister Frees, trying to calm him down in his seat. Bill suddenly saw a flash beam from Mister Frees' face. The skeletal-face of the hatbox ghost masked that of the butler's. "*Or was it?*" spoke the words out of the ghost's mouth, its face then quickly disappeared.

Standing abruptly from his seat, Bill roughly grasped the butler's jacket lapels and clothing beneath his jacket tightly. Forcing Mister Frees back into his own seat with a strong shove, Bill squeezed his hand around the butler's throat. He drew his revolver, hiding the gun out of plain sight beneath the flap of his open coat, and shoved the end of its barrel into the butler's abdomen. "I *told* you I won't be threatened by you," growled Bill.

Mister Frees began gasping for air as passengers sitting around and near the two men watched them in shock. "You were dreaming, that's all that was. I have done nothing!"

"*I know what I saw!*" exclaimed Bill.

"Please," coughed the butler as Bill continued squeezing his throat tightly in his grasp. "I can explain what happened to you, but you must let me go!"

Bill sneered in disgust over the man's plea, finally shoving the back of the butler's head against the seat. Returning back to his own seat across from him, Bill sat back down as he kept a watchful eye on Mister Frees. "Start talkin'," he said, but before the butler could utter a word, a coach attendant of the train approached them.

"What's all the commotion about over here, gentlemen?" said the attendant.

"Everything is fine, sir," said Mister Frees catching his breath. "Just a minor misunderstanding that we are sorting out."

The attendant looked down at Bill, who had inconspicuously holstered his revolver beneath his jacket. "Any more outbursts or disturbing the other passengers will result in the both of you being thrown off the train. Is that understood?"

Both men nodded. "Apologies, good sir," said the butler. "It shall not happen again." The attendant looked over them one last time. He finally gave a decisive nod and made his way to the adjacent car.

"Well?" said Bill staring hard at the butler. "Go on."

“Madame Leota’s elixir,” said Mister Frees, a faint grin forming along the corner of his mouth.

Bill stared back with a confused look. “Madame who’s what?”

“Madame Leota, Mister Garret,” replied the butler. “Long ago, when Gracey House was built and its first Master, William Gracey, began readying the mansion for he and his fiancée, Emily de Claire, to live and prosper there together on his cotton plantation, Master William encountered a psychic medium in New Orleans’ French Quarter during a routine visit to the city to see his banker. Master William was always forthcoming with friends and family about his belief in spirits and his fascination with the occult. He apparently claimed to Mademoiselle Emily that he had encountered ghosts before, actually *seeing* them with his own eyes. Sound familiar?”

“It does,” said Bill, watching the man closely as he spoke. He continued questioning in his mind whether the ghost he had seen taking the butler’s place in the seat across from him had truly been a dream or real. “So what about his encounter with this Madame Leota?”

Mister Frees gave a nod and continued. “Master William accepted and paid for a psychic-reading from Madame Leota. According to legend through the Gracey family history, Madame Leota told Master William that he was at that moment surrounded by the dead, that they follow his every step each and every day. She revealed to him that his actions throughout his previous career had caused him to be haunted by these ghosts who were unwilling to detach from him. To Master William, it explained why he became ill for long periods of time with no diagnosis from the finest doctors and physicians as to the cause. He also believed that it explained the constant nightmares he experienced since leaving his previous career. On a nightly basis, he would dream of violent ghosts relentlessly attacking him.”

“What did he do before becomin’ a master of a cotton plantation?” said Bill. “How did Master Gracey become so wealthy?”

The butler gave a faint, sinister grin. “A family secret that has long been kept hidden from the public. But perhaps my employer will enlighten you of this mystery should you gain her trust.”

Frowning in disappointment, Bill gave a slight nod. “Go on.”

“Obviously this news of ghosts haunting his every step stirred quite a lot of fear and despair in Master William,” said Mister Frees. “Apparently, Madame Leota also revealed to him many other aspects of his life no other could have possibly known about. This prompted Master William to offer Madame Leota to be his personal psychic and to live with him and his bride to be. The psychic-medium accepted his offer, for not only was there the opportunity of being paid handsomely to provide spiritual protection to him and to his fiancée, Emily, but that she could have a new home by taking residence in a mansion and escape her cramped, bug-infested accommodations above her shop in the French Quarter. It was rumored that during her session with Master William she fell in love with him. To the psychic, Master William was not only a handsome and wealthy man, but was a kind and gentle soul who gave her the respect, gratitude, and most of all his unbending trust in her she long desired to have in her lonely life.”

“So William gave this Madame Leota a job as his personal psychic, along with room and board at Gracey House,” said Bill. “How did his fiancée take to the news of this stranger off the streets comin’ to live with them?”

“Mademoiselle Emily, like Master William at the time, was a kind and gentle soul as well. She welcomed Madame Leota to the mansion, trusting that not only did her fiancée know what he was doing in allowing her to stay with them in the mansion, but also trusting that the psychic could provide *both* of them with spiritual-light and love provided by the divine, creating an even greater positive environment for them and their future children. Mademoiselle de Claire believed Madame Leota would remove and cast away all spiritual dangers that could befall her and her future family with Master William. But what Mademoiselle and Master Gracey did not know about was the psychic’s dangerous love for Master William strengthening with each passing day. It was too late for them both when her love for him was finally revealed.”

Bill smirked. “I had a feelin’ the three of them livin’ happily ever after together would turn sour quick.”

“Yes,” said Mister Frees with a brief low-sounding laugh. “Madame Leota was jealous of Mademoiselle Emily, for she was a lady of pure feminine beauty and grace. The psychic was much older and she quickly realized the moment she had been introduced to Mademoiselle Emily that she was far less attractive than her. Days before the wedding, the angry and jealous psychic called upon the spirits who haunted Master William, somehow discovering a way to control them to do her bidding.”

“Was it ever discovered how she was able to control the spirits?” said Bill.

The butler shrugged. “Some in the family have said that it was her impossible jealousy and seething-hatred of Mademoiselle Emily that helped her achieve such powerful witchcraft.”

Pleased he was finally getting an idea of what he may be up against once he arrived at the plantation, Bill gave a nod. “Go on.”

“On the day of the wedding, Madame Leota once again called upon the spirits who continued to haunt Master William nightly. She unleashed them upon Mademoiselle Emily while she was dressing for the ceremony. Well, not only did they frighten her when she finally sees for herself what Master William had described of them from his nightmares, but the ghosts reveal to her the tragedies and immense suffering her beloved fiancée and the ghosts themselves had caused together throughout Master William’s *previous* career. The revelation of Master William’s actions during his past while acquiring his entire fortune, combined with the sheer terror the ghosts themselves, caused Mademoiselle Emily’s death.”

“Wait, she was ‘scared’ to death?” said Bill. “Sounds to me more like a story told around a campfire than it does actual events, Mister Frees.”

The butler gave a bone-chilling smile. “Believe what you will, Mister Garret, but Madame Leota executed her plan to rid Mademoiselle Emily from her and Master William’s lives for good that day. For with his fiancée out of the way, Madame Leota was certain he would soon fall in love with *her*. She secretly entered Mademoiselle Emily’s chamber where she had been readying herself for the wedding, took her corpse and stuffed it into a trunk in the

mansion's attic. Locking the trunk, she tossed its key into the depths of a vast bayou that borders the plantation. It was only in recent weeks that her remains were finally discovered locked away in the trunk in the mansion's attic."

Bill leaned back in his chair dumbfounded. He had never heard of anyone dying due to being scared to death. A person becoming so frightened by what they heard or saw that their very soul escaped and left the body behind seemed impossible. "What happened to William Gracey and the psychic-medium?"

"According to Gracey family lore, after discovering Mademoiselle Emily had gone missing, Master William was told by Madame Leota that she committed suicide by drowning in the bayou. She told him that his fiancée had prayed to have her soul taken before she was to wed that day, that his beloved did *not* really love him and would rather her soul be taken to hell than be married to him. Madame Leota ended her lie to Master William by explaining that Mademoiselle Emily was visited by demons sent by the Devil himself before the wedding ceremony. They possessed her body, forcing her to drown herself."

"And Gracey believed her?" said Bill.

"He did," replied the butler grimly. "Master William had always trusted Madame Leota's every word since the day they had met in New Orleans. This lie that the psychic spun about his beloved shattered Master William completely. Presently, no one really knows exactly how he died. Yet on what was supposed to be he and his bride-to-be's wedding night, Master William apparently committed suicide somewhere inside the mansion. As she was named second in his Will and Testament to inherit Master William's entire fortune, Madame Leota lived out the rest of her life in Gracey House, dedicating her life on gaining greater power to call upon, manipulate, and control the dead."

Bill raised an eyebrow in suspicion. "How did she die? Old age?" The butler simply grinned, turning his gaze to the window beside him and ignoring the question. "Fine, then maybe you can tell me how the truth about Emily de Claire's death came to light?" said Bill. "How could anyone have known about how she died other than Emily herself or Madame Leota?"

Mister Frees gave a slight nod. "Madame Leota kept her secret to her grave. As I said, it was only in recent weeks that the truth about Mademoiselle de Claire's death was finally revealed. An investigation that soon followed into her cause of death and murder has quickly gone cold. My employer explained to me that one night, after discovering of Mademoiselle Emily's remains, she was told in a vivid night-terror by the ghost of Mademoiselle Emily herself of her death and Madame Leota's responsibility for it."

Bill stared keenly at him. "And do you believe her, your employer?"

The butler laughed. He leaned forward towards Bill with a sharp-stare and disturbing grin. "I believe that *she* believes it happened."

Scowling back, Bill spoke. "You forgot to tell me what I'd originally asked you."

The butler leaned lazily back in his seat. "And what is that, Mister Garret?"

"The *elixir*," said Bill. "The psychic apparently created an elixir, a potion. You made it sound like it had something to do with me after you woke me up. What is it?"

“Before her death, Madame Leota had developed an elixir that gives one the ability to actually *see* and interact with the spirits. Yet those who have drunk it, which only certain members of the Gracey family have and no others, claim the elixir had no effect on them and that accounts of seeing spirits by them had been on rare occasions in their dreams. It was only just before I was sent to find you that newly discovered entries were found in Madame Leota’s diary. She explains that the elixir only works on those who have strong capabilities of ‘seeing’ or ‘hearing’, meaning those who already possess abilities to see ghosts for even a fraction of time, or have the ability to hear spirits speak to them, or both. The elixir *enhances* these capabilities in order to interact with the dead whenever one desires to.”

Suddenly, a thought struck Bill. “The beer you bought me back at the Fort...you *spiked* it with the elixir?!”

The butler nodded. “Consider it a useful tool during your investigation of Gracey House.”

Bill grit his teeth and gave a sharp, cold stare at Mister Frees. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kill you once we get off this train.”

Mister Frees gave a maniacal laugh. “You’re not going to kill me Mister Garret, you can’t! Remember, you signed a contract specifically stating that you would abide to *anything* that could be of any help to rid the ghosts haunting Gracey House.”

“What if I had not signed the contract and refused the job?” growled Bill angrily.

“The elixir would then have been considered a gift, compliments of my employer,” replied the butler. “*Imagine* it, Mister Garret, having the ability to see spirits, to interact with them whenever you desired!”

Shaking his head, Bill spoke. “That’s not a gift, that’s a curse.”

“To you,” replied Mister Frees. “Though I believe in time you will learn to view this ability at a different angle than you do at this moment.”

“I doubt it,” said Bill curtly. “Already I’m regrettin’ this whole situation I’ve gotten myself into.” The howling, urgent sound of the train’s whistle blew, deafening the rumbling of the train chugging along the tracks.

“We have arrived,” said the butler.

“Where?” said Bill.

“St. Louis.”

Bill looked at him in shock. It seemed to him like they had only left Oregon hours ago. “Seems this trip has made me loose all track of time,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “You had mentioned we’d be stopping in St. Louis before, but I didn’t ask you why we were.”

Mister Frees gave a slight nod. “After we find some suitable clothes for you to wear during your stay at the mansion, we will be departing for New Orleans by riverboat down the Mississippi River.” As the train pulled into the station, the butler stood. “Come, we must be on our way if we are to catch our boat this evening.”

As Bill and Gracey's House's peculiar butler, Mister Frees, walked the bustling city streets of St. Louis, shopping at men's fine clothing stores filled with expensive Italian suits and coats, silk and cotton shirts, vests and ties made in Paris and New York suitable for wealthy aristocrats and those of high society, Bill couldn't help but think about his sisters Nell and Emma. Were they all right? Was his trusted friend, André, taking good care of them? Were they enjoying the money he had left for them? Were they still safe without him there? These and countless other questions flooded his mind as Mister Frees led him out of another fine clothing store.

"You seem quiet and a little distant, Mister Garret," said the butler, carrying a tall stack of boxes containing clothes and shoes purchased for Bill. "It's as if you have been in a trance since we disembarked the train."

Hearing his question, Bill finally took notice of where he actually was. Rows of buildings lining the city streets and illuminated by tall oil lamps were clogged with people of all classes coming and going on foot, on horseback, and by horse-drawn coach. Many who passed by him looked with curious stares, seeming to be intrigued by his frontiersman clothing and where he came from. "I'm fine," said Bill, pulling down the front of his wide-brimmed hat closer to his broad eyebrows. "Just haven't been to a place this large and surrounded by so many people at once since the war."

"Very good, sir," said Mister Frees. "We have only one more stop to make and that is to purchase a trunk to carry your new clothes and belongings in."

Bill smirked with amusement as he watched a well-dressed gentleman look up at him wide-eyed. The man started walking by him then quickly stepped away from seeing Bill's long-barreled rifle slung over his shoulder. "Think I'd prefer to keep my guns on me."

"It is the guests of Gracey House that I am concerned about seeing someone so heavily-armed, Mister Garret," said the butler. "I know my employer would also share the same concern. There is no need to cause any more of a stir than there already is at Gracey House."

"I understand," said Bill as the two men continued walking briskly down the intimately-lit streets. Dusk began to cast broad streaks of light pink and brilliant-orange colors across the western skies. "I *also* understand that your 'mystery' employer knew exactly the kind of person she was offerin' the job to. My guns stay on me."

"But Mister Garret, sir," began the butler.

"I said I'm carryin' 'em," interrupted Bill in a harsh-tone.

Mister Frees stopped dead in his tracks. Noticing this, Bill halted his steps and turned to face the man. "You signed a contract, Mister Garret. An obligatory set of rules you yourself agreed to follow to the letter, sir," said the butler, his face beginning to turn red with fury as his dark eyes stared sharply back at him.

Unfazed by the butler's rigid and offensive-posture, Bill spoke. "Don't seem to recall readin' anythin' about the inability to carry my own property, particularly my firearms."

"*DISRUPTION, Sir!*" roared the butler, unleashing what seemed to Bill as pent-up aggression entangled with raw anger. It was a side of Mister Frees Bill had yet seen until now.

“Cause for *any* concern *whatsoever* that may be brought to Gracey House is *strictly* forbidden and is *clearly* stated in the contract you signed by your own hand! Firearms displayed openly for all to see that you carry now would *undoubtedly* raise cause for concern among guests and the Graceys.”

Bill noticed those passing by were staring at them as the butler yelled. Suddenly, he began to see fog-like transparent figures of spirits appearing out of thin-air among the throngs of people. Rooted in both fear and shock in witnessing their sudden appearance, he watched them walk among the living as if going about the early-evening like those of the living.

“*Biiiiiiiiill,*” came the same shift-pitching voice he had heard while asleep on the train. Cautiously turning his attention back to the butler, Bill let out a brief frightened yell. No longer was Mister Frees’ head upon his body but was missing entirely. The butler held out towards him a large, transparent hatbox containing the same skull-like ghostly face with big, snake-like eyes glowing yellow and staring mischievously back at him. Below the top hat it wore, the ghost head’s long and stringy hair floated in mid-air as if the head was submerged in water. “*You can’t kill what is already dead!*” the ghost-head spoke in its high to low-pitch voice. It began laughing hysterically within the confines of its hatbox when it was suddenly thrown straight at Bill’s face. Tripping backwards, Bill fell hard onto his back upon the street. All faded to black as he shut his eyes, feeling the numbing-pain beginning to form and spread along the back of his head after smacking it against the ground.

“Mister Garret!” spoke an urgent, familiar voice from out of the darkness above him. Bill slowly opened his eyes. His vision was hazy as he noticed a dark figure standing over him. “Mister Garret are you all right?!” Once his vision finally cleared and became focused once more, Bill saw Mister Frees staring down at him with deep concern held in his eyes. The butler quickly helped him back up to his feet with the help of two men who had seen him fall and came over to lend a hand. Bill roughly shrugged off all hands that held onto his arms and shoulders as the three pulled him up off the ground.

“*Get off me!*” growled Bill and began searching desperately around him. He found no sign of any spirits among the surrounding crowds of people. He turned to Mister Frees, who was staring at him concernedly and with deep regret revealed in his eyes. “*I saw them!*” he said and lunged at the butler, grabbing hold of his overcoat lapels. “*I saw them among the people out here...and you!*” He grabbed Mister Frees’ throat in his tightening grasp when the two gentlemen who had come to help him off the ground quickly seized and pulled him off of the butler.

“Mister Garret, I am *terribly* sorry!” said Mister Frees in a panic. “*I allowed my frustration to get the better of me. I sincerely apologize, I had no intention of you becoming harmed!*”

Struggling in the men’s grasps, Bill looked hard at the butler and saw sincerity, truth, and innocence of the man staring back at him. He calmed himself enough to relax and not struggle any longer when the two men finally released him. Giving them both a confident nod that all was well again, Mister Frees watched as the gentlemen left them alone and spoke. “Mister

Garret, clearly the elixir is working within you,” he said quietly and out of earshot of all others passing by them. “Now you must begin to learn how to use and control this ability. Again, apologies for my boorish behavior. As you had seen, I am not only passionate about my employer’s wishes, but I am quite protective of Mademoiselle Lillian.”

“Lillian?” said Bill, finally collecting himself over his scare and anger that had followed.

“Correct, Mister Garret,” replied the butler, his gaze straying sadly to the ground. It instantly became clear to Bill that the man had regretted slipping her name. “Lillian Gracey, daughter of Master George Hightower Gracey.” He picked up Bill’s hat off of the street, handing it courteously back to him. “Come, let us make our final purchase of a trunk to pack all of your belongings. We must hurry if we are to catch our riverboat to New Orleans tonight.” Placing his hat back upon his head, Bill watched the butler stride ahead of him, waiting to see if the hatbox-ghost he had now seen twice around Mister Frees would reveal itself again. Yet as the butler walked nearly a block ahead of him, he saw no sign of it. Finally he began following Mister Frees cautiously, watching relentlessly for any sudden appearance of the ghost that utterly terrified him.

Later that evening, as night fell upon the city and the mighty Mississippi River, Bill saw the golden moon high above amid clusters of twinkling stars. He frowned as its wide, sharp-featured crescent-shape instantly reminded him of the hatbox ghost’s menacing smile. Finally they reached the city docks and boarded a three-decked riverboat. Bill read the name of the boat along the side of its paddle box, ‘Cinderella’.

“Ah, Mister Hughes,” said Mister Frees as he and Bill shuffled their way alongside the other passengers across the boat towards their state rooms. Both men approached a stout, balding man wearing small round spectacles and a brown suit. He carried with him a large leather travel bag in one hand and a smoking pipe in the other.

“Mister Frees,” said the gentleman with a smile beneath his thick unkempt mustache. “I was beginning to believe I would never find you!”

The butler grinned. “A detective unable to discover his party? Certainly that could not be you, sir.”

The detective gave a relieved smile, his teeth stained yellow and crooked like disorganized corn kernels, and turned his attention to Bill. “You must be the plainsman Mister Frees was sent to retrieve for our little venture.”

“May I introduce Mister Bill Garret,” said the butler. “The once Union-soldier during the War turned plainsman and settler near the Hudson’s Bay Trading Post in the Washington Territory.”

“So I see,” said the detective, looking over Bill’s tan leather garb as well as Bill’s rifle slung over his shoulder. He held out his hand and both men shook hands. “Marcus Hughes, a local private detective here in St. Louis.”

Bill looked at Mister Frees, who gave him an encouraging nod. Forcing a friendly grin, Bill spoke. “Pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Amid the crowd of passengers shuffling by them through the lavish red and gold-wallpapered and sconce-lined hallway, the butler clasped his hands and spoke. “Well then gentlemen, shall we see to our rooms and settle-in for the evening? Dinner in the dining hall will be in one hour. Afterwards I have reserved a private lounge for us to discuss our investigation at Gracey House.”

“My word,” said Mister Hughes surprised. “That is quite an expense to reserve!”

“Compliments of my employer,” said Mister Frees proudly. “She not only wishes for you to indulge and be comfortable along your journey to New Orleans, but to ensure you are adequately acquainted and ready for what is to come at the mansion.”

Bill smirked. “What’s to *come*? What *is* to come that you haven’t already told me?”

The butler held up his hands. “All in good time, Mister Garret, I assure you. There is much to discuss later this evening once we have adjourned from dinner to the privacy of the lounge. Now, let us find our accommodations. Be ready for dinner and down in the dining hall in one hour.”

“Well then,” said Detective Hughes, trudging alongside Bill down the hallway with the butler following in tow. “I look forward to chatting with you later, Mister Garret.”

“Bill,” said Bill gruffly, his eyes remaining focused on the end of the hallway. “Just call me Bill.”

The detective gave a reactive chuckle of nervousness. “Right then, Bill.”

Throughout dinner in the riverboat’s lavish dining room, the three men ate quietly together at their table among their fellow diners dressed in their fine dining clothes. As the Cinderella made its way down the Mississippi River, its many glowing lamps the only source of light amid the darkness of the night on the River, Bill gazed out the window he sat beside at the table and chewed the last chunk of beef from his plate.

‘No turning back now,’ he thought, seeing from time to time in the lamplight brief, choppy waves along the wide River pass by the boat. Each wave rose up from the water then curled downward and disappearing into the rushing water in rhythmic-fashion. Soon Bill began feeling relaxed, continuing to watch the waves rise and fall, over and over, his mind quieting from his thoughts over the journey which had relentlessly pestered him since he had left home. His eyelids soon felt heavy and slowly lowered halfway down his eyes.

A hand suddenly reached from out of the depths of the water. Seeing this startling action outside, Bill's eyes instantly widened. He stared hard down at the water outside the window. A wave then rose and curled over the hand, leaving no trace of the phantom-hand as the wave flattened back upon the River's surface. Just then, another hand rose from out of the water, then another...and another. Each hand disappeared like the first as individual waves swept over them. Bill's mouth slowly opened in shock. Revealed in the dimness of the lamplights alongside of the boat, countless ghostly-hands reached up out of the depths of the River, then disappeared beneath the rising, curling waves that washed over them. He gazed closely and the water below his window. From out of the dark and murky sediment-filled water, a face slowly rose up to the surface. Its large solid white eyes stared up at Bill, its mouth slowly gaping open like a long black void. The face's jaw extended downward abnormally, appearing to Bill like it was yelling in sheer terror at him.

Bill forced his back hard against the back of his chair, causing him to nearly tip over as he hit his knees beneath the table. The abrupt chiming-sounds of silverware smacking against each other, as well as plates lifting and hitting down against the tabletop, caused everyone in the room to fall silent. All turned their attention to Bill and his companions.

"Sorry 'bout that," said Bill, looking across the sea of faces staring at him with looks of concern and irritation. "Everythin's fine here." With a few smirks while others murmured to each other, the diners all slowly resumed their own conversations at each table.

"Gentlemen, perhaps it is time we adjourn to the lounge," said Mister Frees. Bill looked back out the window at the River below. In the golden-light of the riverboat's lamps, he no longer saw any sign of the ghostly face nor any hands rising up from the River's depths. He then turned his attention back to the butler, who was staring at him sharply. "*Shall we?*" said Mister Frees.

Detective Hughes grinned, wiping the corners of his mouth and long, thick mustache with his napkin. "I believe an intimate talk regarding our plans over a nightcap should do. Bill, would you care for a game of Billiards?"

Mister Frees locked the door behind them as the three men entered the private lounge. A red-felt billiard table stood in the center of the lounge with pairs of large leather high-backed chairs surrounding it along the room's red, green and gold-striped wallpapered walls. Small tables at each set of chairs held neatly-folded napkins and crystal whiskey-tumblers ready for use. At the far end of the lounge was a small bar with shelves of brandy, whiskey, port, and bourbon. Behind the bar stood a servant waiting patiently to serve them. His dark skin was a chocolate-brown, his hair cut short and neatly trimmed.

“Gentlemen, this is Mister Horace Fusselbottom,” said the butler approaching the bar as Horace stared blankly back at Bill and the detective. “Mister Fusselbottom shall be serving you this evening. He is Gracey House’s groundskeeper, but has played an important role of late tending bar during dinner parties at the mansion. Ever since the footmen fled in fear from the recent ‘happenings’ at Gracey House, Horace has truly done a spectacular job in stepping-up to the role outside his normal grounds-keeping duties.”

“Well,” began Detective Hughes optimistically. “I’d say a brandy is in order. How about you, Bill?”

“Whiskey,” replied Bill, looking back at the blank-staring groundskeeper standing professionally at attention behind the bar.

“Very good, gentlemen,” said Horace in a thick Haitian accent. He slapped a white bar towel over his right shoulder and set to work on pouring their drinks. “D’air are cigars available as well, compliments of Madame Constance.”

Mister Frees glared at him. “You mean Mademoiselle *Lillian* do you not, Horace?”

The groundskeeper suddenly stopped pouring the drinks. He gave a horrified look back at the butler. “Oh, yes,” he stammered. “Deepest apologies, Monsieur Frees. What I meant to say was Mademoiselle Lillian.”

Both Bill and Detective Hughes briefly looked at each other uncomfortably when the detective finally spoke. “Well, I think I’ll enjoy a cigar.” He took his brandy from Mister Fusselbottom as the groundskeeper opened the lid of a tall crystal jar and pulled out one of the long, dark-leafed cigars. Placing the cigar in his mouth, Mister Hughes allowed the man to light the end of it for him.

“Think I’ll stick to my pipe,” said Bill, taking his whiskey from the bar and took out his pipe from his dinner-dress coat pocket. He found his tinderbox at the bottom of his other coat pocket and lit his pipe. “So Mister Frees, who’s this Madame Constance?”

Shooting Horace a fierce glare, the butler turned his attention back to Bill and the detective. Yet before he could speak, Detective Hughes answered him. “She is the widow of the late George Hightower Gracey and legal guardian of Master George’s daughter, Lillian. To be honest Constance is an old, dreadful woman. I find her to be the most *frightening* of all in Gracey Manor, if there truly are ghosts and ghouls haunting the halls of Gracey House.”

“Sounds like you already know her and the family,” said Bill, taking a puff from his pipe.

“I’ve been acquainted with the Graceys since George and Constance’s marriage,” said Detective Hughes. “My investigation of the plantation’s haunting began after they returned from their honeymoon. Claims of witnessing dead relatives in the middle of the night, objects moving on their own through the air and the like. Mind you all are completely speculative, but I have documented all claims by each member of the family and of Gracey House’s staff.”

“And have *you* seen anything related to what’s claimed to have been seen or experience at Gracey House?” said Bill.

Detective Hughes shook his head. “Not once in my years of visits to the mansion have I witnessed anything of the ‘paranormal’. Though that’s not to say I don’t believe any of the

claims I have been told. To have three of the mansion's footmen leave Gracey House so abruptly over what they claimed to have seen one night while cleaning up after a dinner party is but *one* of *many* occurrences that has raised my curiosity over what is happening there. It has kept me on this investigation all this time."

Bill raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "And you, Horace, bein' part of the staff at Gracey House, you ever seen or experienced what Detective Hughes calls 'paranormal'?"

The groundskeeper quickly nodded. "Yes sar, on more dan one occasion. Not just inside de mansion, but everywhere on de plantation."

"More to the point, gentlemen," interrupted the butler in an aggravated-tone. "I think it is time that we discuss what we are to do once we arrive at the mansion."

"I must say," came a sensual, feminine voice from out of the far corner of the lounge. "It's about time you got back on point." The swift scratch of a striking match cut through the air. Standing from the high-backed chair facing the lounge's row of windows, concealing its occupant from view, a tall, spindly woman in a long sleek black dress stood. She held in her black velvet-gloved hand a long cigarette holder with a lit cigarette at its end. Her porcelain skin matched that of a pale moonlight contrasting with her black ensemble. Above her breast draped a necklace dripping with sparkling diamonds of various sizes that wrapped gently around her long, smooth neck. Beneath her black pillbox hat, her silky brunette hair was pulled tightly back in a large bun. To Bill, she was both strikingly beautiful and frightening at the same time.

Staring amusingly at the men, the woman spoke. "Well Mister Frees, have you already lost all common courtesy? Aren't you going to introduce me to your acquaintances?"

Forcing a faint smile and giving a gracious nod, the butler spoke. "Gentlemen, may I introduce to you Mademoiselle Annabelle du Bois, a long descendent of the psychic-medium, Madame Leota."

"As well as the *only* descendent still alive today," added Annabelle. "*And* the only one who became well-educated in Madame Leota's work in regards to the spirit world. Perhaps you would care to tell them my role in all this, or shall I?"

Bill noticed the butler glare at Mademoiselle du Bois, then quickly forced a smile to detract his obvious disdain for the fetching, yet terrifying-looking woman. "Mademoiselle Annabelle joins us on our investigation by the insistence of my employer. She will be assisting you with her protection against spirits that have been seen more often than others in the mansion by the staff. Her invaluable knowledge of protection spells, and of Madame Leota's entire work and studies, shall be of great importance I'm sure."

Annabelle's eyes darted to Bill, discovering the look of surprise held in his own. "They say Madame Leota still haunts her old séance room in the mansion, calling upon the dead to do her bidding. Of course all of these sightings of her late at night involve a large shadow-figure, shaped as a large hunched man in a top hat and darker than any shadow cast in the room. It lurks about the room, as if it is controlling the spirit of Madame Leota while she performs her calls upon the dead, commanding them to come to her and to cause havoc upon the mansion."

Gazing back at Annabelle, Bill watched as her thin eyebrows furrowed. Her sharp stare remained on him as her maroon-painted lips slowly parted and smiled, revealing her perfectly-lined teeth looking like smooth, pure white pearls. “That is quite enough, Mademoiselle!” said Mister Frees abruptly. “These ‘sightings’ of Madame Leota have only been from the three footmen who have now left Gracey House. Mind you, they were all intoxicated the night all three claimed to have witnessed together the spirit of the late psychic, as well as this ‘shadow figure’ you speak of.”

“And what about your *employer*, Mister Frees?” said Annabelle. “She’s claimed to have not only *seen* the head of Madame Leota suspended in her crystal ball upon her séance table, but has recently witnessed this lurking ‘shadow-figure’ stalking her in her very bedchamber late at night.”

“*Humph*,” expelled Bill. “Which employer are you referrin’ to? Madame Constance or Mademoiselle Lillian? I’m beginnin’ to wonder, Mister Frees, just how many employers you’re workin’ for at Gracey House.”

The butler gave the groundskeeper a sharp, threatening look that made Horace tremble briefly in fear. “Why Mademoiselle Lillian Gracey of course! Madame Constance is merely her guardian, her step-mother, and though I do work for and obey *all* members of the Gracey family, it is on behalf of Mademoiselle Lillian that I have gathered you all here.”

“Oh *come* now, Mister Frees,” said Annabelle. “Everyone who has worked for that old crow, Madame Constance, knows she has some sinister plot to be rid of the remaining Graceys. That way, *she* alone may inherit the family fortune! Can you honestly say that she hasn’t entrapped you, along with the other house-staff loyal to her, in her vast web of lies and threats? To do her bidding and see that she inevitably *gets* what she greatly desires? Is that not the *real* reason why Lillian asked you to form this ‘team’ of experts? Because she believes her step-mother is somehow gaining ‘power’ from the dead to eventually murder her and her uncle?”

“ENOUGH!” roared Mister Frees. “*You go too far*, Mademoiselle! You speak of conspiracies and ghost stories spoken amongst a drunken-staff during the late hours of the night. Madame Constance has *nothing* to do with this investigation, I *assure* you all. Mademoiselle Lillian requested the three of you to proceed with the investigation Mister Hughes began years ago, an investigation he has yet to have gained sufficient evidence nor an adequate resolution to the Gracey House haunting. She calls for you because of your abilities that Mademoiselle believes can finally help discover a resolve to this matter.”

The detective took a puff from his cigar then gently set it upon a nearby crystal ashtray as he approached Annabelle. “Well, it is encouraging to know that we shall be in good, protective hands of one who understands what haunts the mansion, Mademoiselle du Bois,” he said, taking her gloved-hand in his and kissing the top of it.

Annabelle rolled her eyes beneath her black mascara eyelashes, jerking her hand out of his grasp. She brushed past the stout detective and approached Bill. “I presume Mister Frees dosed you with a certain elixir?”

“Yeah,” replied Bill, glaring at the butler. “Slipped it in my drink while we were negotiatin’ my involvement.”

“And has it worked?” asked Annabelle, her dark chestnut-brown eyes staring keenly at him.

Bill frowned. “Yeah, I think so. Can’t deny what I’ve seen so far on this trip after takin’ the elixir. Things I’ve never seen before outside of witnessin’ spirits leavin’ their physical bodies once they’ve died.”

“Now you see the dead more often, no?” said Annabelle, staring at him with intrigue.

Giving a curt nod, Bill spoke. “More than I would have ever liked to have seen so far.”

“But that is why you have come, is it not? To *see* the dead, to *hear* them and report what they are doing in Gracey House?” Annabelle took a step towards him, her pouty, crimson-painted lips mere inches away from his; her haunting stare penetrating his eyes and touching his very soul to search for an answer. “Will you be ready? When *your* time comes?” she said softly, her sour, stale-cigarette breath breaking against Bill’s lips and crawling up into his nostrils.

“*Mademoiselle!*” said Mister Frees. “By order of my employer, Mademoiselle Lillian Gracey, leave Mister Garret *alone*. I *assure* you both, whether he believes it or not, that Mister Garret will be more than willing to lend his assistance in the investigation once it is underway at the mansion. Until then, please allow him to prepare for it in peace!”

Annabelle gave a mischievous smile, her sharp-staring eyes locked on his as she slowly backed away from Bill. “Your unbending and naive confidence continues to not only influence, but inspire me Mister Frees,” she said.

“Now that we have all pleasantries and introductions out of the way,” began the butler, gesturing for everyone to take a seat in a collection of four leather high-backed chairs in the corner of the lounge where Annabelle had been sitting, “may I offer Mister Fusselbottom to freshen your drinks before we begin discussing our plans once we arrive at Gracey House tomorrow?”

The three sat down together in the chairs, Mister Hughes quickly taking a seat beside Annabelle and positioning himself between her and Bill. Annabelle rolled her eyes and curled her lip in disgust, resting her elbow upon the chair’s armrest as she held her long cigarette holder between her fingers.

“Now then,” began the butler as Horace quickly came over to Bill and Mister Hughes to top-off their drinks. Lighting his pipe once again and drawing slowly from it, Bill sat back in the soft leather-cushioned chair as he listened to the butler. “Tomorrow is the late William Gracey’s birthday. Each year, his birthday is celebrated at the mansion in order to keep up appearances, despite Gracey House’s haunting concern. All of New Orleans and its surrounding parishes’ high society will be there tomorrow night for the celebration’s annual ball. That being said, it is important that we *do not* raise any attention from the guests as to the truth of why you are there. You are *not* to speak to anyone other than the mansion staff unless you are approached by a guest and are spoken to. Now then Mister Garret, I liked the cover that you came up with to explain yourself to the guests earlier, so I now expect both you and Mademoiselle Annabelle to use it. If

either of you are asked why you are staying at Gracey House, you are to respond by saying you are a distant relative of the Graceys, that you have been invited to the plantation in order to learn privately with the family how you are related.” The butler then turned his attention to Detective Hughes, who was becoming distracted while admiring Annabelle sitting uncomfortably in her chair beside him with her arms and legs crossed. “*Detective Hughes,*” said Mister Frees, startling the detective and gaining his undivided attention. “Many of the guests attending the ball will already know who you are. Please respond to any questions that might arise regarding your presence by simply replying you have become a friend of the family. Explain that throughout the many dedicated years of loyal service to the Graceys, you had been simply invited to the ball to enjoy yourself.”

“You mean there are guests who know about Detective Hughes’ ongoing investigation at Gracey House?” said Annabelle.

The detective gazed at her fondly. “Fear not, my dear,” he said, placing his hand upon her chair’s armrest. “Those who are aware of my visits to the plantation have been told that my investigation involves tracking down distant relations of the Graceys, not claims of haunting ghosts.” Annabelle stared sharply at his hand upon her chair’s armrest. Instantly, Mister Hughes removed his hand and looked away in embarrassment from her.

“And I’m guessin’ we’re all attendin’ this ‘ball’,” said Bill.

The butler nodded. “In order to not create any confusion among the guests, you will attend the ball and celebratory dinner hosted by Madame Constance. You will introduce yourselves, if or when asked, as distant relations of the Graceys. Remember, you do not know *how* you’re related, and that is why you have come by invitation.”

Annabelle sighed. “So we are to just *play along* with this charade, acting kindly to these arrogant socialites?”

“Precisely, Mademoiselle,” said the butler. “As you may recall, the contract I explained to you before you willingly signed it, implicitly calls for such actions by you in order to gain the success of resolution through this investigation.” Annabelle shook her head in disgust, taking a drag from her cigarette through her long cigarette holder.

“What happens after the ball?” said Bill.

Mister Frees gave a grim smile. “The investigation begins. At midnight, all guests and house staff will have left or retire to their rooms for the night. You will then begin conducting the investigation.”

“Just how long do you expect this ‘investigation’ of the mansion to take?” said Annabelle.

“As many days and nights it requires to understand what is happening at Gracey House and initiate a resolve to the haunting,” replied the butler.

Annabelle smirked. “An investigation with no definitive timeline. I’m not impressed, Mister Frees.”

“Combining each of your unique and individual skills while you search the mansion and its grounds, both my employer and myself have no cause to doubt that you will devise a solution

to the issue quickly,” said the butler with an odd-looking grin. “I assure you all, your stay at Gracey House will not be as long as you may think.”

Chapter Three

After hours of discussing plans for the investigation, as well as a few games of billiards with Detective Hughes, Bill retired to his room for the night. The First-Class accommodations, particularly its luxurious bed, was a welcoming sight to Bill as he laid his weary body upon the soft mattress and pillows. He began thinking about what he had seen throughout the day. ‘If I’m able now to see spirits if they are around me whenever I want to, how exactly do I do it?’ he thought, turning onto his back and cupping his hands upon the back of his head. ‘Is it a matter of just *thinking* about seeing spirits? Or is there more to it?’

Suddenly, he felt the end of the bed shift, as if someone was now sitting upon it. Bill lifted his head up, peering between his feet at the end of the bed. Sitting upon the blankets was a hatbox that had recently become all too familiar to him. He slowly reached for the nightstand’s drawer, quietly pulling its stubby-round brass knob and opened it. Reaching inside the drawer, he grasped his revolver’s handle. In one swift move, Bill drew out the gun, rolled off of the bed and aimed the gun at the hatbox sitting idly upon the bed. Step by cautious step, he approached the hatbox, holding his gun steadily in his firm grip. He slowly placed his fingertips upon the edge of the box’s lid, feeling as cold as ice. Bill grit his teeth and ripped off the lid.

Staring down at it in confusion, he discovered the hatbox to be empty. Suddenly, a sharp-chill ran down the back of Bill’s neck and began travelling through his entire spine. His hands began shaking uncontrollably when finally, he gazed up from the vacant hatbox. Staring back at him with its large yellow, snake-like eyes suspended in wide, black-void eye-sockets was the hatbox-ghost crouching upon the bed as it leaned closer towards him.

“Looking for something?” spoke the ghost in a fierce, growling-tone. Its phantom skull-face smiled devilishly as it rose over him, its echoing-laughter hollow and maddening. Sinking deep into the ghost’s bottomless eye-sockets, its yellow-glowing eyes disappeared into their voids. The ghost gave a blood-curdling roar, causing Bill’s face to lose all color as he stood petrified in sheer terror. Its face seemed to grow larger in size as it loomed above him when finally, Bill felt himself being sucked-in through the ghost’s left eye socket.

Darkness soon fell all around him, all light quickly diminished. Bill lifted his hand to his face, unable to see it in the pitch-black purgatory he now found himself in. ‘Where am I?’ he thought taking his first step forward, then another, and another. He lifted his hands, trying to feel anything around him with them yet felt nothing but the freezing-air all around him. Soon, the darkness made him feel completely disoriented; he could not tell if he was staring upside down or right-side up. It felt to him as if his entire body begin to slowly spin, like he was falling further down a bottomless pit. No longer was there any surface below his feet to stand upon, only the bitter-cold darkness.

Just as Bill began to wonder if he would ever see the light of day again, a faint glow of a lamp shown far below him. He quickly positioned himself and dived towards the small light. Reaching the lantern suspended in the darkness, he grasped its handle and held the faint glowing lantern out. He looked all around him as he continued to sluggishly fall when he noticed in the lantern’s soft light walls around him covered in a violet-colored wallpaper with black, sharp-pointed patterns. As he examined at the wallpaper’s pattern, he jerked backwards discovering there were watchful eyes riddled all over the black patterns staring back at him.

Farther and farther down he fell through the darkness, now walled in some type of eight-sided tunnel with countless eyes watching him upon the violet wallpaper. Finally, Bill’s feet touched down onto a long maroon carpet stretched out upon a dark-stained hardwood floor. One-by-one, small bronze lamps lit along rouge and gold-patterned wallpapered walls, revealing to him that he now stood in a hallway. Before him the hallway seemed to extend to eternity into the darkness. Behind him the walls ended at the heels of his boots and all was but a black void. He recognized that if he stepped beyond the edge of the walls he would once again fall into the nothingness of the black void. Keeping the lantern lifted at his chest, Bill began walking down the hallway, each step he took seeming to only stretch the hallway further.

Suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks. A table candelabra appeared in the distance floating in mid-air and was slowly coming towards him from down the hallway. Bill watched as it eventually reached where he stood. Appearing out of thin air before him stood the ghost of a bride. She held the candelabra in her feminine, transparent hands. Her long, smooth golden locks beneath her long bridal-veil waved sluggishly in the air, her grey eyes staring at him in both fear and desperation.

“Help me,” spoke the ghost, her voice sounding like a faint echo.

Bill, summoning all the courage he could muster deep within himself, forced a response. “Who are you?”

“...Lillian...,” said the ghost-bride. “...in great danger...must help, *please!*” The ghost vanished, leaving the lit candelabra floating in mid-air before the stunned Bill. As he went to touch it to see if it were actually real, a second ghost suddenly appeared. She was an old woman donning a long, black funeral gown and veil. Her face was long and gaunt, her eyes were missing leaving two large black eye sockets.

Bill stood rooted in fear. The motionless ghost formed an evil grin. Appearing out from behind her, the hatbox-ghost peered over the spirit’s shoulder and smiled menacingly back at him. He then tipped his top hat as a farewell-gesture. All around him, Bill watched as everything suddenly fell into complete darkness once again.

“Mister Garret,” came a voice out from out of the darkness. “Mister Garret? Are you there, sir?”

Bill opened his eyes, finding himself lying in his suite’s bed back aboard the riverboat. He sat up with a start, instantly looking to see if the hatbox was still sitting upon the end of the bed. The box was not there. A series of knocks pounded upon the suite’s door. “*Mister Garret,*” came the voice of the butler again outside in the hall.

“*Yeah,* I’m here,” Bill called out from across the room.

“We have arrived in New Orleans, sir,” said Mister Frees. “We will be disembarking within the hour.” Bill heard the butler’s footsteps stride away from the door and he slowly got out of bed. Looking over at the nightstand, its drawer was closed. Opening it, he discovered his revolver still lying inside it. On top of the nightstand stood a nearly empty bottle of bourbon.

‘That was some dream,’ thought Bill, placing his hand against the side of his aching head. ‘But it all felt so real, like I was actually *there* in that never-ending hallway and being confronted by those spirits.’ He frowned, looking about the suite. ‘That *hatbox*-ghost. Why is he haunting me?’ Stumbling over to the window, he parted the long plum-colored drapes. Outside in the dawn’s golden light was the city of New Orleans and its long, busy harbor. Dressing in his tan leather coat and pants, he placed his wide-brimmed hat upon his straw-blonde haired head and strapped his holstered revolver around his waist.

‘New Orleans,’ he thought, taking one last look at the city skyline across the choppy waters of the Mississippi River and left the suite.

As the riverboat began approaching the harbor, all on board gathered along the side of the boat facing the city, readying themselves to disembark. Bill found Mister Frees along with Detective Hughes and Mademoiselle du Bois along the railing of the boat’s third-level. “Ah, Mister Garret,” began the butler, “so good you could join us this morning. It was as if I was trying to wake the *dead* rousing you out of bed.”

A light breeze blew across the River, bringing with it the smells of boiled oysters and crab being cooked along the harbor. The air itself felt warm and humid to Bill as he soaked-in the sun's gentle rays piercing through the passing clouds upon his face. "Feels nice out here," he said.

"Yes, I imagine it does compare to the frosty air this time of year where you're from," said Detective Hughes, placing his bowler upon his balding head. "I do enjoy it down here in Autumn."

"That may be," said Annabelle, her tall, thin stature looming over the stout detective. She placed her hands inside her large black muff she held against her waist. "Though I imagine you would not last long here during the heat of summer."

The detective shrugged. "Perhaps not, my dear," he said, staring back at her fondly through his thick-lens glasses. Annabelle frowned, turning her gaze away from him to the harbor. Suddenly, shots rang out from along the piers. Screams and shouts all about the riverboat instantly followed as most of the passengers ducked behind the railings. More shots fired, this time a bullet ricocheted off the iron railing near Bill.

"What's going on?!" said Bill, ducking beneath the railing beside the butler.

"This does tend to happen from time to time," said Mister Frees. "Outlaws and drunkards of the city enjoy firing their guns for fun at passing riverboats. Just stay down before we reach the pier."

"That so?" growled Bill. Drawing his revolver he stood abruptly. He immediately discovered a pair of men shouting and hollering over the chaos they were causing along the docks. They began firing at the boat again when Bill took aim at the pair of shooters. He fired back at them, instantly killing the first shooter, then fired again and striking the second in the head. Cautiously, all those around him slowly rose back up upon their feet. Bill stared hard at the shooters' motionless bodies as officers raced across the harbor and swarmed over to them.

"Bill," said the butler, staring at him curiously. "What do you see?"

Bill watched as the spirits of the shooters rose up out of the corpses and began laughing manically. They drifted up the city streets, connecting with other ghosts who were harassing and causing harm to harmless spirits roaming the city. Shifting among these chaotic-specters were large, black shadowed demons with sharp-angled red glowing eyes. "You don't wanna know," grumbled Bill, seeing the growing number of mischievous spirits and demons eventually disappear from his sight.

With the groundskeeper, Mister Fusselbottom, in tow with everyone's luggage, either carrying them or pushing a small hand-cart stacked with trunks and suitcases, Bill, Annabelle, Detective Hughes, and Mister Frees walked down the bustling harbor. Bill watched as a constant flow of passengers boarded and debarked other riverboats along the row of piers. Large brawny men worked along the worn-planked docks loading and unloading wood-planked crates of

various-sizes from transport riverboats. Some of the dock-workers yelled to their fellow workers in a broken-version of French that Bill did not recognize. The smells of raw fish from nearby haggling fishmongers, boiling shellfish from the harbor's bistros, combined with small puddles of fresh vomit along the pier from sick riverboat passengers began to make Bill slightly nauseous when finally, Mister Frees directed them up a street away from the harbor and led them towards the French Quarter. They were soon led by the butler to a horse-drawn coach and a horse-drawn cart along the street waiting for them. Mister Fusselbottom quickly began loading the luggage into the long cart while its driver watched him closely.

"*Hey boy!*" bellowed the driver. "Watch the sides of the cart loadin' that luggage! If any of those trunk-corners scratch the wood it'll be *your* neck that'll get stretched!"

The groundskeeper looked over at the fair-skinned driver. The driver's hawk-like eyes stared hard at him with both anger and hatred from below the brim of his top hat. Bill watched as Mister Fusselbottom's dark eyes flared with anger, then quickly receded into a look of concern. "Yes, s'ah."

"And *hurry up!*" yelled the driver. "You want us to be waiting on you all day?" Bill then saw the detective and Annabelle's heads peering out the coach's back window, looking uncomfortably at the driver and the groundskeeper. Frowning and balling his hands into fists, Bill approached the horse-drawn cart's driver.

"You wanna get goin' sooner than later?" said Bill looking sharply at the man. "Then why don't you get off your ass and help him with the luggage?"

"*Humph,*" expelled the driver. "Why *should* I when there's a slave here to do it?"

Bill instantly reached up, grabbing the man's overcoat lapels roughly in his callused hands and pulled the stunned-driver closer to him. "I think you just misspoke, friend. As I recall, the War's been over for some time now, not to mention slavery in this country."

"What's this?" said the butler quickly approaching them. "Mister Garret, I must ask that you unhand Mister Burr at once!"

Bill glared at Mister Frees, continuing to grasp tightly onto the driver's coat. "Fine," he growled, shoving the driver upwards. Still in shock over Bill's actions, the driver began straightening his coat as Bill strode over to Mister Fusselbottom and helped him load the last of the luggage into the cart. Both he and the groundskeeper exchanged nods then began lifting together a large trunk into the cart.

"*Mister Burr,*" said the butler sharply. "Go and help load the rest of the luggage, as you were *expected* to do in the first place."

"But Mister Frees," began the driver.

The butler's eyes widened as he cocked his head to the side in shock of his protest. "*I* said get down from there and help Mister Fusselbottom with the luggage, or I shall inform Madame Constance of your disobedience! How *dare* you allow one of our guests to load his own luggage into the cart!" The driver frowned and stepped down from his seat at the head of the cart. Without a word spoken, he began helping Bill and Mister Fusselbottom load the last of the luggage.

“*Well,*” said Annabelle as Bill stepped inside the coach behind the butler as the two men took their seats across from her and the detective. “That was quite a row out there.”

Bill shook his head in frustration. “I’ve seen enough hatred towards people no different than you an’ me durin’ the war. I got no tolerance for such ridiculous bigotry.”

Annabelle gave a soft laugh. “Clearly.” Bill shot her a sharp look, then turned his gaze out the coach window beside him as they began to ride up the street.

“Perhaps a small brunch can bring some calm back to our little group,” said the butler. “Mademoiselle Lillian has arranged for us to enjoy some light fare and tea at one of her favorite courtyard cafés in the French Quarter before we embark on our day-long journey to Gracey House.”

“That sounds lovely,” said Detective Hughes. “Lillian has always had such good taste in not only food, but beautiful outdoor surroundings to enjoy it in.” Both Bill and Annabelle looked at him with peculiar looks for the man in their eyes. The detective noticed them and quickly spoke again. “Well she does! I found it quite delightful during my routine-visits to the mansion spending afternoon tea with her in the gardens.”

They soon arrived at the French Quarter, or as Mister Frees referred to it as ‘Vieux Carre’, and came to a block less congested of people and horse drawn carts off of Rue Royale, containing more private and intimate spaces to enjoy a peaceful morning. Like the rest of the French Quarter, the narrow street was lined with tall buildings laced with cast-iron railing balconies and adorned with hanging ferns. Arriving at a French café, the group was escorted to the courtyard where a table among potted palms awaited them beside a wide stone fountain. Bill noticed a few patrons among them enjoying the tranquil atmosphere, away from the Quarter’s bustling streets beyond the café-courtyard’s cast-iron gate entrance.

“Bonjour et bienvenue,” said a waiter as all took their seats around the table. “Herbal tea iz on zee way. May I interest any of you some pastries or fruit?”

“We shall all partake in your signature light brunch,” said the butler.

“Ah, oui monsieur,” said the waiter happily. “You must be zee party journeying to Gracey House. I shall be back momentarily with your tea.” As the waiter left them, Bill suddenly felt a sickening-feeling in his stomach.

“During the days when Mademoiselle Lillian would perform ballet at sold-out shows here in the Quarter, she would come to this cafe the following morning with her father to enjoy a light brunch and tea before departing for home,” said Mister Frees.

“How old was Lillian when she started performing in shows?” asked Annabelle.

“She began at the age of six, out-performing even the most talented of men and women who dedicated their entire lives to ballet. Mademoiselle Lillian was special, a gifted young protégée with her whole life of performing ahead of her.”

As they spoke, Bill continued to feel his stomach churning and had an inescapable sense that they were being watched. He searched around the courtyard from his seat at the table among the other patrons quietly enjoying their tea. “You make it sound as if she stopped performing all together,” said Annabelle.

The butler looked over at Detective Hughes, who then quickly replied to her comment. “Last year, Lillian was performing a tightrope-act over the crocodile-infested bayou along the borders of Gracey Plantation. It was during The George Hightower Gracey Foundation charity ball, I was there as a guest while investigating the latest of ghost-sightings by some of the House staff. Madame Constance insisted on her to perform this dangerous act in order to entice the guests to donate more money to the foundation. In life, George had loved watching dangerous and suspenseful acts. Whether it be circus performances involving men taming wild cats, trapeze acrobats sailing through the air, or men doing solo stunts at fairs such as sword-swallowing and fire-breathing, George had an appreciation for those daring enough to perform such dangerous acts. Constance used this excuse to force Lillian to concede into doing the tightrope act, which before Lillian had refused because of how dangerous it was.

“Suffice it to say Lillian’s balance on the tightrope was absolute perfection. Not to mention absolutely *thrilling* to watch as the bayou’s crocodiles began collecting beneath her. As exceptional of a ballerina she was, I truly believe Lillian could have walked along a thin wire let alone the rope she was crossing. She made it over half-way across the rope when she claimed to have suddenly felt lightheaded and nauseous. Among the sudden gasps and faints of the guests watching from the banks of the bayou, Lillian lost her balance and fell into the placid waters. Everyone at that moment believed her to be dead, for who could survive among so many crocodiles that had been waiting anxiously below her? But there was one man among the shocked and horrified-guests that had the will to act. Mister Frees was overseeing drinks being served when he dropped his tray of champagne, ripped off his jacket and dived into the water, braving the crocodiles hiding beneath the murky surface. Never in my life had I seen anyone face head-on such dangerous circumstances. By some *miracle* he reached Lillian, who was surrounded by the crocs. He took hold of her just as she was beginning to drown and becoming the crocodiles’ next meal and brought her back to safety upon the banks. Lillian *lived* because of Mister Frees’ efforts.” The detective paused, looking at Annabelle concernedly. “To answer your question a little more directly, Lillian has not performed due to her unexplained illness that has plagued her since that fateful day.”

“Good *God!*” said Annabelle in shock. “I had heard Lillian Gracey was involved in a performance accident but did not know just how *severe* it was! Nor was I aware that you had saved her very life, Mister Frees.”

The butler nodded, giving a humble smile. “It is why Mademoiselle Lillian trusts me more than anyone in her life. Before Master George died, I swore to him that I would help keep

his daughter safe. He had already lost his son in the War and Lillian was all that was left in his bloodline.”

Bill continued searching the courtyard, looking up at the surrounding buildings’ balconies and windows overlooking the courtyard. Suddenly, his eyes darted to a curved stairway leading up to a second-floor balcony. There atop the landing was the hatbox-ghost staring at him with an evil smile. “*She’s MINE!*” expelled the ghost in his hollow, various-pitched voice. “*SHE’S MINE!!! All of you are going to die! One thousand ghosts, once we take the host!!!*” The ghost laughed maniacally as the wide-eyed Bill sat petrified in fear. The ghost leaped of the landing and flew swiftly at him. Bill forced himself backwards, flipping over and out of his chair. All in the courtyard abruptly turned their attention to him. The sounds of forks dropping and hitting against porcelain plates combined with murmurs from concerned patrons filled the courtyard.

Bill quickly got back onto his feet. “Are you all right?” said Detective Hughes as he and the butler came to his sides to help with him with his balance.

“*I’m fine!*” roared Bill, shrugging them off him. “I’m fine.”

“You saw something, didn’t you?” said Mister Frees quietly to him.

Turning to the butler Bill gave a slight nod. “Seems we’ve been officially warned about comin’ to Gracey House.”

After brunch and experiencing no other encounters with the hatbox ghost, or any other specters roaming the French Quarter, Bill felt the sickness he had during brunch soon dissipate as he and his travelling companions made their way through the countryside. As he sat staring lazily out the coach window while Detective Hughes, Mademoiselle Annabelle du Bois, and Gracey House’s peculiar butler, Mister Paul Frees, conversed, Bill watched the vast green meadows, orchards, and pastures slowly pass by. It was the most calming experience of the journey he had felt thus far, and much needed after all that he had seen and experienced since leaving his home. Closing his eyes, he felt weary from the rhythmic rocking-motion of the horse-drawn coach traveling along the dirt road. He began imagining what Gracey House looked like and its surrounding grounds. An image soon appeared in his mind of a mansion with four towering columns standing along the front entrance. High above the plantation, twinkling stars dotted the lavender and orange-flame colored sky as the sun dipped beneath the thick-canopied cypress trees of the bordering bayou.

All was calm and still on the plantation when suddenly, he saw a young lady emerge from out of the mansion. She approached the second story’s wrap-around balcony’s moss-green, cast-iron railing and stood above the tall front doors. As Bill moved closer towards the mansion, he saw that this adolescent-girl had what seemed to him a distant look in her half-lidded light-blue eyes. The expression upon her high cheek-boned, fair-skinned face appearing as if it had

been gently kissed by the afternoon sun with a faint tan, was not necessarily revealing disappointment, nor was she frowning or pouting as some could easily label her as being when seeing such an expression, but was of a jaded unawareness; a complacency over the reality of her fragile mortality, simply an *uncaring* of her own state of being and her surrounding world of beauty and luxury. To Bill, it was a gaze consisting of both utter disinterest and exhaustive defeat. Her rich auburn-haired head containing three buns, two rolled and loosely bound that covered her ears, and a smaller bun resting atop her parted locks, was slightly cocked to one side as she gazed in silent ponderance, looking as if she was thinking what there was possibly left to care about, what there was to live for anymore. Suddenly, all around him fell into blinding darkness.

Bill blinked, opening his eyes and quickly finding himself back in the coach as the butler pulled gently on his buckskin coat sleeve. “Mister Garret, we have arrived,” said Mister Frees, pointing out the coach window as they approached the front gate of the Gracey Plantation. Beyond the black wrought-iron gate situated between a lengthy brick wall with a pair of large, gothic-style lanterns glowing on either side were the vast grounds of the estate.

The coachman unlocked the gate then quickly hopped back onto the coach’s driver’s seat. Slapping the reins against the pair of Clydesdales’ backs, they passed through the now open gate and drove down a path lined with over twenty giant oaks leading up to the pearl-white mansion. The worn dirt path finally ended nearly two hundred yards from the gate into a clearing of well-tended gardens and courtyards. Staring out the window of the side window of the coach, Bill stared in awe at Gracey House as they stopped along the side of the cobblestone driving path and parked around several other coaches. Hundreds of guests donning tuxedos and colorful pastel evening gowns were driven up to the mansion’s front steps.

‘It looks *exactly* like it had in my dream,’ thought Bill, gazing up at the mansion’s wrap-around porch and balcony laced with light-green ornate cast-iron railings. Looking up at the second floor between the first two of four tall white pillars standing before the entrance, he noticed the front space of the second-floor balcony jutted outward. It was there that in his dream he saw *her* standing idly at the railing, staring out across the grounds. ‘But was it really Lillian Gracey that I saw in my dream?’ he thought, seeing at that moment no one upon the balcony above the mansion’s entrance.

“Gentlemen, Mademoiselle du Bois,” said the butler. “Welcome to Gracey House. From here we shall walk the remaining way to avoid causing any disruption among the arriving guests to tonight’s celebration.”

Annabelle rolled her eyes in disgust. “*Really* Paul, you truly know how to treat a lady. Forcing her to *walk* to the house.”

“In any other circumstance, Mademoiselle, I would have us driven up to the front steps, but I am under strict orders by Madame Constance for us all to not intermingle with the arriving guests, not yet. We shall walk to the mansion, looking the part to any possible curious onlookers as servants of the household and enter through the servant’s foyer.”

Her eyes suddenly widening in surprise, Annabelle immediately spoke. “You mean we can’t even enter the house through the front door?!”

Mister Frees looked sharply back at her. “*No*, Mademoiselle. Madame Constance does not want to cause any possible stir. You are all invited to this evening’s charitable birthday celebration honoring the late William Gracey, once you have all changed into more appropriate attire, but we must do our best not to cause any distraction or disruption. All must look and seem as though nothing queer is going on at Gracey House, nothing that could possibly raise any suspicions or questions regarding your arrival this evening. You must stick to your cover stories once you are introduced to anyone, with the exception of the Graceys and the house staff.”

“Fear not, my lady,” said Detective Hughes grinning at Annabelle. “I will escort you to the mansion, ensuring that you do not possibly trip or fall along the drive path.” He reached over and took her hand in his when Annabelle instantly jerked her hand away from him.

“I can walk just fine without anyone’s help, thank you,” said Annabelle curtly.

Bill looked over at Mister Frees, noticing the butler’s eyebrows were raised as if wondering if everyone was finally ready. “*Shall we?*” said the butler.

Walking along the driving path with Horace Fusselbottom the groundskeeper in tow, who had eventually caught up to them after locking the front gate, the cobblestone drive path led them past the mansion’s pet cemetery, consisting of a number of small tombstones and statues of pets who had once lived and died inside and out of Gracey House. Dogs, cats, birds, a pig, a frog, and a rabbit were but a few of the beloved animals honored by the Gracey family that Bill noticed as they strolled by.

They then came upon a few mausoleums with the names of many of prominent Gracey family members, as well as the plantation’s cemetery with many tombstones bearing the names of former house staff members and close Gracey family relations.

“Mister Frees,” said Bill as they walked past the tombstones along the driving path in the cool, yet densely-humid evening air. “How many are buried here on the plantation?”

“In total since the mansion’s construction, nine hundred ninety-six souls,” replied the butler. “That includes both people and pets.”

“Hmm,” said Bill, thinking of his last encounter with the hatbox ghost back at the courtyard in the French Quarter. ‘The specter had said ‘One thousand ghosts once we take the host’,’ he thought. ‘What did the hatbox ghost mean by that? What would happen if the number reached a count of one thousand spirits haunting Gracey House and its grounds?’ His eyes suddenly widened. A ghostly-hand suddenly popped-up out of the soil of a grave they passed,

revealing a bare-boned wrist and skin peeling off its palm and crooked fingers, then instantly disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

“Mister Garret?” said Detective Hughes concernedly. “Is everything all right? You look as if you have seen a ghost, and we haven’t even entered the mansion yet!”

Bill frowned, turning his gaze away from the well-tended cemetery alongside them. He looked towards the mansion in the short distance away illuminated by large oil lamps hanging over the porch and balcony. Brilliant colors of orange and pink streaked across the twilight sky behind Gracey House and above the bayou’s cypresses along the far side of the plantation. “No wonder this place is haunted,” mumbled Bill as they continued walking past the edge of the cemetery. “With so many of the dead buried here, this place gives me a strange feeling like the spirits here are somehow imprisoned on the plantation.”

They reached the mansion as guests were continuously being driven up to the front steps before the front porch steps. The powerful and wealthy of Louisiana’s high society from aristocrats to bankers, debutants whose beauty was enhanced through imported makeup from Paris; their hair tied and curled with elegant jeweled clasps and colorful ribbons being escorted by their handsome suitors, heirs to great family fortunes. Mayors from towns all across Louisiana, senators from Baton Rouge, judges and the mob bosses they had cleared of charges against them through bribes and underhanded dealings. All had come to celebrate the late William Gracey’s birthday; to indulge in endless plates of food and bottomless drinks, to socialize and make connections or business deals over brandy and cigars, and to donate what they wished to the William Gracey Foundation. Standing at the open front doors, two of Gracey House’s footmen stood to each side of the entrance greeting all who entered the mansion.

“Over here,” said Mister Frees, gesturing for them to cut across the short cut grass. Along the right side of the lamp-lit exterior of the mansion, Bill noticed a short set of steps leading up to the wrap-around porch and to the servants’ foyer entrance. As they made for the side of the mansion, Bill watched the guests dressed in their best mingling along the front porch around the entrance, others entering into the candle and lamp-lit mansion. One guest casually looked over his way, spotting him along the darkened grounds as the sun completely set. She was a lady who looked to Bill of only a few years younger than him being escorted by a gentleman seeming to him to be her husband. The lady’s porcelain-toned cheeks blushed a faint pink as she gazed at him curiously, noticing in the porch’s amber lamplight his heavy plainsmen buckskin coat and wide-brimmed hat. Smiling in flirtatious amusement, she stared in wonder at him while twirling her thin feminine finger in one of her thick, long-curved locks along the back of her head of honey-blond hair. She soon disappeared with her male companion through the mansion’s front doors.

“Mister Garret,” said the butler, getting Bill’s attention away from the arriving guests. “This way, please.” They approached the side of the mansion and made their way up the short

set of steps to the cast-iron laced porch where a footman, holding a lantern to light their way, and a maid awaited them at the door to the servant's foyer. Both were dressed in the similar black and emerald green servant attire that Mister Frees wore, only the late-adolescent maid wore a dress with a frilly white apron bordered with green lace and headpiece. The tall and lanky footman donned an emerald green cummerbund instead of a vest that the butler wore under his black coat.

"Ah," said Mister Frees as they approached the awaiting footman and maid. "Monsieur Guesclin, Mademoiselle du Lays, you remember both Detective Marcus Hughes and Mademoiselle Annabelle du Bois." The footman bowed and the maid curtsied as both their pale-white faces looked upon them in relief of their arrival. "And this rugged fellow from the northwest corner of the country is Mister Bill Garret. Mister Garret, if there is anything you require, *anything* at all, Monsieur Guesclin will be at your service."

Bill looked at the grim-looking footman and gave a curt nod. He reached out to shake the servant's hand. The footman gave a surprised look from the inappropriate gesture of a guest wishing to shake the hand of a servant as an equal in high culture. Reluctantly, he reached out and shook Bill's hand. "Nice to meet you, Monsieur," said Bill gruffly.

"Et vous, Monsieur," replied the footman in French, sounding bewildered from such a casual, unorthodox introduction.

"Mademoiselle du Lays, would you please see Mademoiselle du Bois to her room?" said the butler.

The maid nodded, "Oui, Monsieur Frees."

Mister Frees gave a decisive nod. "Très bien. Now then Detective Hughes, I imagine you would care to stay in your usual quarters?"

The detective smiled brightly. "Oh yes, the view from that room is quite lovely." The butler gave a decisive nod. "Good, then you wouldn't mind escorting *yourself* to it as you have the last few times you have come to visit. I'm afraid our staff is stretched quite thin this evening to have someone escort you."

"Oh there's no trouble with that at all," replied the detective. "I certainly don't mind."

"Our *luggage*, Paul," said Annabelle irritably. "When can I expect it so that I may finally change and receive a much-needed glass of wine?"

"All of your luggage should arrive at your rooms momentarily," said the butler. "Now then, all of you please find your rooms and get settled in." His gaze turned to Bill. "Please dress appropriately for dinner once your luggage has been brought to you. *Do not* go wandering about the mansion before then. You are all to meet with Madame Constance first, then you may enjoy the party."

Bill looked at him curiously. "And your employer? Is Mademoiselle Lillian going to be joinin' us tonight?"

"I'm afraid she has become too ill in recent days to attend such gatherings as tonights," answered the butler gravely. "But I trust that you shall meet her soon enough, perhaps even tomorrow. Now, please see to your rooms. I shall wait for you all at the bottom of the stairs to

introduce you to Madame Constance.” The footman opened the door, allowing them to enter into the mansion’s dimly-lit servant foyer.

The intimately-lit vestibule was revealed through dim illumination by its decorative iron sconces along the patterned wallpaper, consisting of large silver pairs of fern leaves with fleur de lis’ above them, and a grand flickering-candled chandelier hanging above the center of the foyer. A large oval mirror with an intricately-carved walnut frame hung between the foyer’s single window, covered with thick violet drapes, and a locked door. At the far end of the room stood a pair of tall mahogany doors that were also shut and locked.

“Now then,” said Mister Frees in his deep, resonant voice. “Please follow Monsieur Guesclin and Mademoiselle du Lays and do *not* wander off on your own. You will be taken on a route to the second-floor stairway that will lead you to your rooms away from the guests. I shall meet with you all shortly.” He then turned on his heel and exited the foyer back outside onto the porch, shutting and locking the door behind him.

A second pair of mahogany doors kitty-corner to the first pair at the far end of the foyer were opened by the footman as all were then escorted through into an octagonal room. High above them upon the maroon, emerald, and beige-striped wallpapered walls hung eight wide-eyed gargoyle sconces grasping in their clawed hands pairs of lit candles. They stared down at them as if charged to watch over any who enter. In between each pair of gargoyles hung four large paintings on every other wall of the eight-walled, high-ceilinged room. Each painting depicted a person from the chest up. The first painting Bill noticed was of a bald, middle-aged bearded man holding what looked to be an important document. The second portrait was of a smiling elderly woman clutching a brilliant red-petal rose. The third depicted another middle-aged man wearing a bowler hat. To Bill, the man displayed an overly-confident smirk on his bloated face, matching his posture of arrogant dominance with his thick arms crossed against his chest. And the fourth painting...

‘It’s *her*,’ thought Bill, staring at the painting above him in awe. ‘That girl in my dream standing on the mansion’s balcony...’ The painting was of a beautiful young lady holding a pink parasol over her shoulder. She wore a dark violet bustier and collar with white and pink puffy sleeves. Her half-closed, disinterested blue eyes gazed down upon him as if daydreaming with her head lazily cocked to one side. Her auburn hair was also tied in the same three loosely-tied buns Bill recognized from his dream.

“Bill,” said Detective Hughes looking at him curiously. “Everything all right? Are you *seeing* something right now? Another ghost perhaps?”

Shaking his head, Bill turned his gaze away from the painting and to the nosey detective. “No but I was wonderin’, who’s the girl in the painting?”

“That’s Lillian Gracey,” said the detective. “The painting of the man in the bowler is Lillian’s uncle. *Big* Hobbs he’s called, and the man with the beard is the late Steven Gracey,

father of the late George Hightower Gracey. The old woman in the fourth painting is Madame Constance Hatchaway Gracey.”

“And it’s her that we’re meetin’ with later, Mister Frees’ *other* employer?” said Bill.

“The same,” grinned Detective Hughes.

“Zis way, gentlemen,” said the footman, his words heavily accented. A pair of doors across the gallery-room had opened and the maid was already accompanying Annabelle through them into a lengthy hallway. “Zis way, s’il vous plait.” The two men crossed the gallery, passing through the tall doorway and began walking down the hallway behind the maid and Annabelle as the footman closed the gallery’s doors behind them.

The L-shaped hallway, intimately-lit along its walnut wood-plank wainscoting and burgundy wallpapered walls, had a row of windows covered in thick, heavy drapes along the left-hand side, portraits of members of the Gracey family hung along the right-hand walls. Nearing the end of the hallway, Bill took notice to one in particular painting that caught his eye.

Beneath the oval-shaped portrait was a name etched in a small gold plate: ‘William Gracey’. Bill gazed at the portrait for a moment, observing the late William Gracey’s tautly fleshed face; his bone structure depicted as extremely fine. His grey-blue eyes seemed to Bill as if staring back at him with an arrogance of being wealthy and holding a position of power over others.

“Monsieur?” spoke the footman. Bill turned, seeing that he had broken away from the others.

“Sorry,” replied Bill, taking one last look at the late William Gracey’s portrait. He quickly caught up with Detective Hughes, Annabelle, and the maid as they entered a large, high-ceilinged room with a grand staircase climbing and curving up high along the wall to the second floor. Across the large room, which looked to Bill to be a vacant sitting room but of a much grander scale, he could hear the sounds of the guests conversing and entering the front doors into the mansion’s main foyer.

A large chandelier illuminated the room with a faint light as they climbed up the stairs curving up and along the room’s back wall. They reached a doorway at the top of the wide landing to a long hallway with rows of closed doors on either side of the hall. They passed a few doors down the dark hallway as only a few single candle-sconces illuminated their way between the doors, when the maid presented Annabelle to her quarters. She unlocked the door and showed Mademoiselle du Bois inside.

Bill and Detective Hughes continued walking together behind the footman when the detective halted at a closed-door half-way down the hall. “This is my stop,” said the detective with a friendly smile. He took out a room key Mister Frees had handed to him earlier and unlocked the door. “See you momentarily, Mister Garret.” He then stepped inside the room, shutting the door behind him.

Frowning and instantly irritated that he didn't call him Bill like he had asked, Bill turned to the footman whose blank, expressionless face stared back at him. "Well, monsieur," said Bill. "Where am I stayin' along this dark hallway where natural light seems forbidden?"

The footman pointed at the far end of the hallway. "At zee end, monsieur. At zee request of Mademoiselle Lillian, you are ztaying in zee boudoir next to 'ers."

Bill's eyebrows raised in both surprise and curiosity as to why Lillian Gracey had made such a request. The two men walked down the rest of the dark hallway, finally reaching the second to last door along the right side of the hall. "Monsieur," said the footman, unlocking the door and opening it for Bill. Stepping inside the candlelit boudoir, Bill removed his hat and took a look around the room. There was a large bed, neatly made with white and deep violet blankets, stretching out towards the center of the room from the left wall. An exquisitely-carved mahogany desk and chair filled the far corner beside a large window overlooking the grounds. On the other side of the room, a painting of a three-mast galleon sailing on the high seas hung along the wall opposite the bed. A pair of high-backed chairs and a small table occupied the opposite corner near the door, and at the foot of the bed Bill found his luggage.

"It zeemz your luggage az arrived, monsieur," said the footman. "If you would please dress and be at zee ztairz..."

"No problem," said Bill, assuring the footman he wouldn't lingered around and delay meeting with Madame Constance.

"Très bien, monsieur," replied the footman with a slight bow of his head. He left Bill alone in the room as he shut the door and strode back down the hallway. His footsteps made the nearly one hundred-year-old floorboards creak and crack as Bill heard the man's footsteps until they eventually faded down the hall towards the stairs. He opened his brand-new trunk and rummaged through the clothes that had been picked out by the butler and paid for by Lillian Gracey. Suddenly, he heard a faint coughing through the wall beside the bed. Frowning, Bill slowly approached the wall so not to make a sound and pressed his ear against the light blue and gold wallpapered-wall. He heard more coughing, then two faint voices speaking inside the room beside his. The first was an elderly woman, whose frail, cracking voice sounded both stern and unsympathetic towards the one coughing. The other voice belonged to a man. Both voices were muffled by the wall separating the two rooms, but Bill recognized the words 'fever' and 'dire' spoken by the man.

There was a pause between both the man and the old woman as Bill then heard the faint sound of a third voice speaking, sounding to him like a young lady clearly having trouble speaking as she continued to cough violently.

"*I don't care if you are a Gracey by blood!*" exclaimed the old woman in a frightening, sharp tone. Bill quickly withdrew his ear from the wall, startled by her sudden outburst.

"*Quite the BRAWL happening in there, eh Bill?*" came a voice making Bill jump and turn his attention to across the room. He stared wide-eyed in terror discovering the hatbox ghost sitting casually in one of the two high-backed chairs beside the door. "*It won't be long now!*" the ghost cackled, his head disappearing from on top of his shoulders, instantly reappearing inside

the transparent hatbox he held. “*Soon the Graceys will be LOST in the past, but there is still one soul left that is needed. YOURS shall be the last!!!*” The ghost gave a bone-chilling laugh and threw the hatbox containing his laughing head at him.

Summoning all the courage he could muster within him, Bill quickly reached out his hands. He caught the ice-cold ghostly-hatbox flying at him as the ghost’s head continued laughing hysterically. “*Who are you!*” expelled Bill in a loud yet quivering tone. “*Answer me, devil!*” The hatbox ghost’s body disappeared from the chair, as did the hatbox in Bill’s uncontrollably-shaking hands. All but the ghost’s snake-like eyes glowing like two yellow flames remained suspended between his hands when finally, they too disappeared like snuffed candle flames.

Chapter Four

Bill strode down the dim hallway towards the stairs, feeling both agitated and anxious over his encounter with the hatbox ghost in the boudoir. He had quickly changed into his new tuxedo for the party, wanting nothing more than to leave his room as quickly as possible after the encounter.

Reaching the stairs’ landing, he found Detective Hughes dressed in his own tuxedo and standing idly as he waited patiently for him and Annabelle.

“Ah, Mister Garret,” said the detective amused, looking over Bill from head to toe. “I see Mademoiselle Lillian’s clothing allowance for you did not go to waste. You look quite the gentleman this evening!”

“Thanks,” replied Bill, tugging on his starch-white tuxedo shirt beneath his tailed black coat. “And it’s *Bill*, just call me Bill.”

“Oh yes, Bill, I know you had told me this before,” replied the detective. “Then I suppose it’s only fitting that you call me Marcus.”

Bill gave a slight nod, his eyes darting up and down the dark hallway in suspicion to see if the hatbox ghost was around. “Fine, fine.”

Marcus raised a bushy eyebrow. “Is everything all right, Bill? You seem...distracted.”

Scowling, Bill turned his attention back to the detective. The pudgy little man looked genuinely concerned over his welfare. Finally, Bill began confessing to him what had happened while he was in his boudoir, feeling the need to confide in someone. “Throughout my journey here to Gracey House, I’ve seen random spirits along the way. From St. Louis, to the Mississippi River, and especially back in New Orleans. But there’s been one ghost that’s been hauntin’ me the entire journey and keeps reappearin’ when I least expect it.”

“*Fascinating*,” expelled Marcus in a whisper. He stared keenly back at Bill with his beady eyes through his thick-lens spectacles. “*Who* is it? Has it revealed any identity of itself to you? Perhaps a member of the Gracey family?”

Bill shook his head. “Don’t know. What I do know is that it’s threatened the lives of the remainin’ Graceys as well as you, Annabelle, and myself. Its face had no flesh on it, just a skeletal profile with large snake-like eyes. It was dressed in a top hat and a gentlemen’s overcoat with a large collar. The ghost also carries a hatbox, his head disappears at times from its shoulders, then reappears inside the transparent hatbox. Some sort of intimidation tactic, I think.”

“Hatbox...hatbox,” muttered the detective, beginning to pace along the landing. “Now I don’t seem to recall learning of any member of the Gracey family, alive or dead, having any real significance to hatboxes, or even hats for that matter. What has it wanted from you? Anything in particular?”

“Only to threaten and warn me about bein’ here,” said Bill. Subtly, he stopped himself from revealing what the ghost had said about attempting to reach one thousand souls by claiming the lives of Madame Constance and Mademoiselle Lillian. He needed to gain the detective’s trust before giving any more specific details to him.

“Hmm,” pondered Marcus, tapping his fingers against his chin. “Neither Madame Constance or Mademoiselle Lillian had mentioned to me anything about this ‘hatbox ghost’.” Both men heard a creaking of steps walking down the hallway. They turned to find Annabelle casually approaching them. “Best keep this to yourself for now, Bill,” whispered Marcus, leaning in closer to him so not to be heard by Annabelle. “Until we can officially begin our investigation, the last thing we need is to spread any news of ‘threats of death’.”

Bill frowned, his eyes along with those of Detective Hughes, held on the incoming Annabelle. “No offense, Marcus, but for me the investigation has already begun.”

“All right,” said Annabelle expelling an irritated sigh. She placed her long black gloved hands upon her hips draped beneath her maroon gown. “What are you two talking about?”

“Nothin’,” replied Bill first in a stern, confident tone. “Marcus was just tellin’ me that Lillian’s money didn’t go to waste in regards to my new tuxedo.”

Annabelle’s eyebrow raised inquisitively. “Quite a transformation to say the least,” she said, her deep rouge-painted lips curling slightly along the corner of her mouth. “From frontiersman to gentleman in a matter of minutes.”

“Only in appearance,” replied Bill with a smirk.

Marcus approached Annabelle with a toothy-grin. “Mademoiselle, you look absolutely *ravishing*.” He took her black-gloved hand in his and kissed the top of it.

A look of revolution flashed in Annabelle’s eyes as she tugged her hand from out of his grasp. “Thank you.”

“I don’t know,” said Bill looking at her cockeyed. “Seein’ her right now makes me wonder whether we’re attendin’ a gala ball or a funeral.”

Annabelle scowled at him. “The ‘ladies’, if you wish to call them, attending this gala have *their* style and I have my own, *despite* Mister Frees’ plea for me to wear what all of these empty-headed debutants and judgmental governor-wives are wearing this evening.”

“Gentlemen, Mademoiselle,” came a voice ascending up the stairs. The three turned to find the footman and maid reaching the landing. “Shall we?” said the footman.

Detective Hughes lifted and curved his arm to Annabelle, who rolled her eyes in disgust yet reluctantly hooked her arm around his as they followed Bill down the stairs behind the footman and maid.

Reaching the bottom of the wide, curved staircase they were met by Mister Frees, who escorted them to an adjacent drawing room where an old woman sitting upon a long velvet-cushioned couch awaited them. Bill immediately recognized her as the elderly woman clutching a rose in the portrait he saw in the gallery earlier.

‘Constance Hatchaway Gracey,’ he thought, who to him looked like death itself. Her pale skin clung tightly against her cheekbones and narrow chin as if it were not skin at all, but merely paint upon her skeletal face. Her dark, sullen eyes stared with discontent and a strictness nearly taking him aback as they approached the Madame of Gracey House. She wore a deep violet gown that hung on her body, looking as if the gown was still being hanged in a wardrobe. Her ash-grey hair was tied tightly back into a bun, creating an illusion to Bill that it was stretching and pulling back her entire face.

“Madame Constance,” began the butler as the footman and maid exited the dark, candle-lit room. “May I present to you Detective Marcus Hughes and Mademoiselle Annabelle du Bois, returning to Gracey House to reignite the investigation into the plantation’s haunting. May I also present our special guest all the way from the Northwest, Mister Bill Garret.”

Completely ignoring both Annabelle and Marcus, the old woman stared coldly at Bill, making him wonder if she was really alive or a spirit herself. “So,” began Constance, Bill immediately recognizing her voice as the one he had overheard in Lillian’s boudoir through the wall adjacent to his room. “*This* is the one Lillian insisted on sending for. Tell me, *frontiersman*, just how much of the Gracey family fortune did my naive step-daughter promise to pay for your services here?” Her dark, sharp-staring eyes locked onto his as Bill frowned and made to speak.

“Come now, Madame,” said the butler, interrupting Bill’s chance to respond. “There is no need to place your guest in such an awkward state. He has come to help in the investigation and has already proven to be a valuable member of this group.”

“*Has* he now?” said Constance bitterly. “The letter you wrote, the one you placed in the pocket of my step-son’s corpse after you shot and killed him during the War, you had mentioned in it having the ability to *see* Claude’s spirit leave his body and vanish not long afterwards, like those of many who died alongside him that dreadful day. Do you still claim to see spirits, Mister Garret?”

Bill gave a nod. "Regrettably, yes."

Constance's gaze turned to the butler. "Did you give him the elixir as I requested?"

"I did, Madame," replied Mister Frees, looking hesitantly back at Bill.

Bill frowned. "So, it was *you* who ordered him do this to me."

Madame Constance's eyes bulged, giving a threatening stare back at him. "And just what help would you have been to us in only seeing spirits leaving the body moments after one dies, when all that haunts this plantation are already *dead*?"

Bill glared at the butler. "It wasn't Lillian that had told you to spike my drink with the elixir."

With regret, Mister Frees shook his head. "No, Mister Garret."

"Is Lillian even your real employer in all of this? Or were your strings only bein' pulled by this old crone the whole time?" said Bill, demanding an answer from the man.'

"Oh Lillian was *absolutely* the instigator in your coming here, Mister Garret," said Constance with a sinister grin. "She told Paul in confidence that she wished to bring you here to help with the investigation because of your claim to see spirits. Yet it was *I* who later learned of this secret between them and quickly intervened. I want to make this perfectly clear to you, Mister Garret, and to the two of *you* as well," she said glaring at Annabelle and Marcus, her voice like the cracking of a whip as she spoke. "You work for *me*, not Lillian. You will obey *my* rules and *my* orders while you are here investigating the mansion and the grounds. If I hear of any double-crossing from either of you, any alliances formed with my step-daughter or any disobedience of my will, *none* of you shall be paid for your services here and you will be expelled from the plantation. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Madame," the three replied.

Constance gave a curt nod then turned her full attention onto Bill. "And as for you, Mister Garret, a word of caution. Lillian's request for your presence here has without a doubt some alternative motive I have yet to discover. Know that she is both a liar and a schemer. Do not fall for what inevitable deception and manipulation she has planned for you."

Bill stared hard back at the frightening old woman. "I'll consider it, Madame. Where *is* Lillian this evening may I ask? I understand she's ill, but will she be attendin' this evenin's gala?"

"No, Mister Garret," said Constance, looking and sounding like a house cat growling and tensing-up to attack. "She is in her bed asleep, as she should be in her condition at this time of night."

"Right," replied Bill. "Better to have her restin' in her room than spreadin' lies and deceit among your guests this evenin'."

Constance grit her yellowed teeth, her eyes burning with seething anger. "*Quite* right, Mister Garret. I do look forward to talking with you more at breakfast tomorrow. Until then, remember the contract you all signed. You are *not* to reveal to anyone why you are really here." She gestured for Mister Frees to escort them out and the butler quickly shuffled over to them, showing the three out of the drawing room. "Until tomorrow, *Mister* Garret," said Constance as

Bill followed behind the others out of the room. He looked behind him, seeing the old woman giving him an unnerving-grin as Mister Frees closed the door behind them.

“*What was that all about?!*” said the butler in a harsh whisper as he brought the three back into the large sitting room for a moment of privacy away from the guests.

“What was *what* all about?” replied the detective. Annabelle quickly nudged his arm for him to be quiet.

“I am referring to Mister Garret’s remarks, Detective Hughes,” said the butler sharply. “Were you *trying* to stir trouble with the Madame of the House?”

Bill stared blankly back at the enraged butler. “I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“You know *damn*-well what I mean, sir!” roared Mister Frees. “Your sarcastic ‘*comment*’ about Lillian being better-off locked in her room for the night than being among the guests. It is *not* your place, Mister Garret, to pose judgment or to patronize the Madame of Gracey House!”

“As I recall, Mister Frees,” began Bill, moving in closer to the butler so that he was only a hands-width away from his face. “I’m an investigator durin’ my stay here at Gracey House. Someone who’s supposed to question *everything*, keep an open mind about any and all situations around here. So in that case, I don’t seem to recall Madame Constance mentionin’ *anythin’* about Mademoiselle Lillian bein’ ‘*locked*’ in her room’.”

A stark look of surprise flashed in the butler’s eyes that Bill instantly saw when Mister Frees quickly composed himself. “You are a guest first and foremost, Mister Garret,” he said calmly. “Remember that the next time when speaking to any of the Graceys.” He stepped away from Bill, clasping his hands together and swiftly changing the subject. “Now then, allow me to escort you all to the party so that you may enjoy yourselves this evening.”

“*Finally!*” said Annabelle. “I could use a drink after all of this.”

“This way, Mademoiselle,” said the butler with a relieved smile. He opened the room’s double doors leading to the main foyer where countless guests were passing through from the main entrance. As Bill trailed behind them, there came a creaking coming from the floorboards upstairs near the landing.

He turned and looked up at the top of the wide, curved staircase. The creaking instantly ceased. Seeing no one amid the darkness of the hallway above, Bill grinned. ‘Either a ghost is roaming the hallway, or *someone* has managed to escape from her room,’ he thought as he left the room.

The three were led by the butler through the throngs of mingling guests through the main foyer and towards the back of the mansion. Through a pair of open doors, where two footmen stood to either side greeting the guests, they stepped outside where tables and chairs had been set

up across the long stretch of freshly-cut lawn. Strung over the grounds from tree-to-tree above the hundreds of guests eating, drinking, socializing and laughing at the tables were pastel-colored paper lanterns glowing brilliantly against the clear, star-studded night sky. Maids and footmen carrying trays of champagne in tall flute glasses walked among the tables, serving the eagerly-awaiting guests. Many guests, already seeming to Bill to be completely inebriated, laughed heartily and some accidentally spilling drinks that they held in their animated hands while speaking boisterously. A string quartet played a rendition of Bach's Suite No. 3 in D Major against a thick-trunked oak tree standing beside the corner of the mansion, attempting to create a soothing atmosphere against the loud, intoxicated guests and the incessant chattering of the others.

"Feel free to find a table to sit and enjoy a meal with drink if you wish," said Mister Frees. "I shall see you all at breakfast in the morning."

"Just where are you off to?" said Annabelle, quickly snatching a glass of champagne from a maid passing by them with a tray filled with them.

"I must see to Madame Constance this evening as she hosts an elite group of guests. They are discussing future donations to the William Gracey Foundation."

"*Humph,*" expelled Annabelle with a smirk, taking a swig of her champagne. "Well don't have too much fun at her exclusive 'party'."

The butler smiled faintly back at her. "Please enjoy yourselves this evening and remember, *do not* wander off from the areas designated for tonight's celebration." He then turned and strode back inside the mansion.

For nearly two hours, Bill sat at various tables to converse and blend-in with the guests. He ate a light fair of food, listened to debutants and governors drone on about themselves. The old rambled on as though every word they spoke was utterly important for all to hear. As for the 'young money' as Bill learned they were called, young gentlemen and ladies who had either inherited fortunes earned by their hard-working family, or were about to inherit such fortunes. They separated themselves entirely from all others and mingled, flirted, and began courting each other as debutants were either swooned by the young gentlemen or continued their search for the man of their dreams, one with money, power, and influence over others.

Originally, Bill had hoped to hear amongst the guests anything that might have leaked out of the mansion regarding the increasing haunting. Yet as the night progressed, he realized that this was a night of pure self-indulgence, a *circus* of the wealthy and powerful all come to eat and drink at someone else's expense, in this case the Gracey family. It was an evening to stroke each others' egos, create secret business deals and negotiations with smiling handshakes, and at the

very end of it all *perhaps* donate to the William Gracey Foundation; a foundation Bill had learned throughout the evening that provided food and shelter to the poor of New Orleans.

Earlier, Bill had watched Annabelle and Marcus go their separate ways, weaving through the vast sea of guests as they made their way back inside the mansion to mingle. Finally he too decided to take a break from being among those around him and excused himself from his table. It was astounding to him that no one he encountered seemed to care who he was or where he came from. They merely viewed him as just another wealthy guest from somewhere in Louisiana.

Stepping beneath the balcony filled with mingling guests that stretched across the backside of Gracey House, Bill made his way inside the mansion. He shuffled past the many scattered groups of guests standing with drinks in hand across the main foyer, as well as in adjacent sitting rooms and lounges. As he passed by a room with the door slightly ajar, Bill heard some boisterous laughter inside. Amused by how hard the man behind the door was laughing, he slowly pushed open the door and peered inside. A large round table stood in the center of the dark, smoke-filled room as a group of men sat around it playing cards. One of the men Bill immediately recognized earlier from one of the four paintings in the gallery.

‘Big Hobbs,’ thought Bill seeing the large, portly man with thick mutton-chop sideburns behind the table and wearing his signature bowler hat. His puffy cheeks were beat-red from laughter as he slammed his set of cards on the table before the other players.

“*FULL HOUSE!*” bellowed Big Hobbs and roared with laughter again. He reached towards the center of the table, pulling stacks of coins and bank notes towards him as the other players threw their cards in disgust upon the table. “Another round for my friends, Fusselbottom!” ordered Hobbs. Bill looked beyond the table of gamblers towards the back of the hazy, cigar-smoke filled room. There he saw the groundskeeper, Mister Fusselbottom, behind a small bar serving drinks and preparing to hand out more cigars to those smoking at the card table.

Bill slowly closed the door and strode towards the open front doors of the mansion. Stepping outside upon the wrap-around porch, he was relieved to find only a handful of guests quietly mingling alongside the intricate, cast-iron railings amid the soft glow of the amber-paneled lanterns illuminating the porch.

As he began to stare lazily into the vast darkness beyond the mansion, his eyes suddenly caught sight of something some yards away from the porch. A column of grey mist swirled wildly above the ground. Bill stared hard at it, his heart beginning to pound beneath his chest. The mist soon took the form of an old woman, having a striking resemblance to Madame Constance, yet her eyes were missing and in their place remained two large black eye sockets. The phantom-like image also had no lips as the old woman’s teeth were fully exposed and clenched in raw anger. The ghost faced Bill and slowly began drifting towards him. Bill took a step backwards, his sharp-staring eyes not leaving the approaching specter. At that moment, the hatbox ghost peered over the old woman’s shoulder. His wild-eyed stare locked on Bill as he smiled devilishly. The hatbox ghost grasped the phantom’s arms from behind, forcing her to fly

swiftly through the air at Bill. The old woman let out a terrifying *screech*. Bill stumbled backwards, his mouth gaping wide in shock.

“Monsieur?” a voice suddenly cut through the warm, humid air.

Catching his breath Bill turned, discovering a young lady looking curiously at him. He blinked, quickly turning back to where the spirit of the old woman and the hatbox ghost were coming at him, but both had instantly disappeared. “Are you alright?” spoke the young lady again.

Bill recognized her as the one who had caught his eye earlier as she entered the mansion on the arm of a young gentleman.

“I’m fine,” replied Bill, thinking of an excuse for his odd behavior. “Just had one too many drinks tonight I guess.”

The young lady giggled, twirling her white-gloved finger inside one of her large, thick-curved golden locks. “At a party such as this, that can easily happen, n’est-ce pas?”

Bill, forcing a faint smile, gave a slight nod in embarrassment. The young debutant held out her hand to him. “Jeanette-Marie Laroche,” she said, her eyes smiling back at him.

Reluctantly Bill took her hand in his, kissing the top of it. “Bill Garret,” he replied gruffly.

“So, Bill,” began Jeanette-Marie, giving him a flirtatious smile. “I have not seen you before at any of these social gatherings. What brings you here tonight?”

Bill smirked. “You’re the first person tonight to ask me anything about myself.”

Jeanette-Marie’s thin eyebrow raised. “You are not from around here, are you Bill?”

“It’s my lack of a French accent, isn’t it?” said Bill with an awkward smile.

Both began to laugh at his attempt at a joke when finally, Jeanette-Marie spoke. “Are you here with anyone? Your wife perhaps?”

“No, I’m not married,” said Bill. “I’m a distant relation of the Graceys. I was invited here to learn about how I’m connected to the family.”

“How exciting!” said Jeanette-Marie, grabbing hold of his forearm gently. “You *must* come and meet some friends of mine and tell us all about yourself. I would truly love to know more about you, Bill.”

Bill frowned, feeling uncomfortable about her advances despite how beautiful and innocent she seemed to him. “The gentleman you arrived with this evening, will he also be joining us?”

Jeanette-Marie gave an awkward laugh. “No doubt my ‘loyal’ fiancée is scavenging for lonely chambermaids at this hour to share a bed with in the mansion. With that said, I would much rather spend my evening with an interesting man such as yourself.”

“You two don’t love each other?” said Bill, then suddenly realizing he may have overstepped his bounds.

The young debutant smiled thoughtfully back at him. “Engagements and marriages do not always turn out as those in fairytale books, Bill. A future of financial security and social

status shall be my fulfillment in my marriage to Antoine. In the meantime, I wish to spend my time in the company of a handsome, interesting man like you.”

Bill frowned. “I see.”

“Come with me, mon cher,” said Jeanette-Marie with a reassuring smile. “Let me show you to a far more interesting area of the party.”

Jeanette-Marie led Bill through the mansion, emerging through a doorway onto a walkway stretching along the tall ballroom walls. Below him, Bill watched as guests enjoyed themselves at a long dining table beneath one of the ballroom’s three large crystal chandeliers as they ate, drank and shared in lively conversation. A string quartet played at the far end of the long ballroom beside an ornate yet dilapidated pipe organ; its twelve tarnished brass pipes stretching nearly to the height of the ceiling. Bill noticed that the organ itself was damaged along its sides; its keys mangled in some spots with other keys missing entirely. ‘Wonder when the last time that organ was played at events like this,’ he thought.

Dancing before the quartet and filling the ballroom’s floor, guests waltzed with their wives, courtiers, and mistresses as Bill saw across the long room opposite from him another railing-lined walkway along the walls. The walkway was packed with guests making their way to the stairs to join the rest of the guests.

“This way,” said Jeanette excitedly as she led Bill across the walkway and down a set of stairs to the ballroom floor. They weaved through the thick crowd of dancing guests when they finally reached the dining table.

“*There* you are, Jeanette-Marie!” said a young lady standing abruptly from her seat at the table with her gloved hands upon her hips. “*Where* did you run off to? And *who* is this?” she said looking over Bill with hungry eyes.

“Bridgette, I would like you to meet Monsieur Bill Garret,” said Jeanette-Marie. “I found him outside on the porch all alone and in *desperate* need of some company.”

Bill frowned. “Well, I wouldn’t say I was in need of...”

“Monsieur Garret,” interrupted Jeanette-Marie over the noise of the countless guests and the string quartet. “This is my very best of friends, Bridgette du Lucinone.”

Bridgette grinned as she held out her white-gloved hand for him to take and kiss the top of. “Au chantée, Monsieur Garret.”

Bill reluctantly took the young lady’s hand and gently kissed the top of it. “Pleasure to meet you, mademoiselle,” he grumbled.

“Mister Garret had come to learn about his connection to the Gracey family,” said Jeanette-Marie. “The family had sought him out all the way from the northwest when the Graceys discovered he was a distant relation.”

“How exciting!” said Bridgette. “Please, monsieur, you must sit with us and enjoy some wine as you tell us more about yourself and where you are from.” Bill suddenly noticed many at the table noticing his presence as they were eavesdropping on their conversation. Immediately feeling uncomfortable over the situation he had inadvertently placed himself in, Bill made to excuse himself from the table when Jeanette-Marie took his hand in hers.

“Une moment, mon cher,” said Jeannette-Marie in French mingled with a southern dialect. “Je suis allé danse avec Bill.”

“Ah, d’accord,” replied Bridgette with a sly smile back in the same southern-dialect French. “Have fun you two.”

Jeanette-Marie pulled Bill to the middle of the dance floor among the other guests dancing. She interlocked her fingers with his on his left hand, placing his other hand upon her slender waist. Both began to sway and dance to the music as they soon blended-in with the other guests.

“So,” began Jeanette-Marie with a twinkle in her eye as she gazed at him flirtatiously. “The frontiersman *does* know how to dance.”

Forcing an uncomfortable smile, Bill spoke. “Somethin’ I picked up while in the army.”

“The army?” said Jeanette-Marie in fascination. “Did you fight in the War?”

“For a time,” replied Bill. “After the war ended, I was forced to attend with many of my brothers in arms a few galas around the capital. Learned that if I just silence my mind, the steps to dancin’ come naturally.”

“How marvelous,” said Jeanette-Marie, pulling him closer to her and lightly pressing her waist against his. “Such a kind gentleman you are, Bill. I cannot begin to imagine how a place like this may feel to a man from the frontier.”

“Awkward and uncomfortable,” replied Bill, retracting his body slightly away from hers as they continued dancing.

“Then perhaps I can help you feel more comfortable,” said Jeanette-Marie placing a gentle kiss upon his neck below his earlobe. “Why don’t we leave behind all of this you find uncomfortable and find some privacy in your boudoir. I can help you feel more *relaxed*, more at *home* before the night’s end.”

Just then, Bill happened to look up at a small balcony at the far end of the ballroom. His eyes instantly widened in surprise at the sole figure standing at is railing watching him closely. Looking exactly as she did in his dream, and matching the likeness of the portrait hanging in the gallery, stood Lillian Gracey wearing a pastel-pink gown.

“Well, shall we?” whispered Jeanette-Marie seductively in his ear.

Bill released her hand from his, taking a few steps backwards as his eyes locked on Lillian. “Excuse moi, mademoiselle,” he said. “Somethin’s just come to my attention.” His eyes returned back on Jeanette-Marie, who to him clearly looked upset that he was turning her

down. "It was a pleasure to have met you. Bon soir." He then turned and quickly made for the stairs when he saw that Lillian had disappeared from the balcony. Racing up the stairs, shuffling past guests along the walkway, he finally reached a doorway out of the ballroom.

Racing down a hallway past several guests glancing and looking at him oddly for rushing past when finally, Bill reached the balcony overlooking the ballroom but there was no sign of Lillian.

"Bill!" came a voice from behind. Turning, Bill saw Detective Hughes and Mademoiselle du Bois approaching him. Both had their arms linked together as they helped steady each other. They stumbled and snickered while holding their half-empty glasses of wine. "We've been looking all *over* for you!" slurred the detective.

Annabelle began to giggle. "The detective and I have been exploring the mansion." Marcus immediately began shushing her when she too put her index finger to her lips and joined him. "Oh, oh but don't tell Madame Constance because we weren't *supposed* to."

"Right," replied Bill irritably.

"Oh, but Bill," began the detective placing his hand upon Bill's arm. "There is a *room* that we wanted you to see. Annabelle *swears* that she saw a ghost in it tonight!"

Bill frowned, speaking to the drunken man in a low grumbling tone. "Keep your voice down, Marcus. You want the whole party to know what you two have been doin'?"

Marcus' eyes widened in surprise. "Oh dear, I'm sorry," he whispered as Annabelle began giggling uncontrollably and leaned down to lay her head upon the detective's shoulder. "But *please*, Bill, we *really* want to show you this particular room. Perhaps you may see what Annabelle saw."

"I think the two of you have had enough to drink tonight," said Bill annoyed. "You both need to set down your wine and retire to your rooms for the night."

"But Bill, *please*," said Annabelle, guising her drunken silliness with a more serious tone and demeanor. "It is an important room I have investigated and have become familiar with for *years*. Won't you please come with us for just a *few* minutes and see it for yourself? Perhaps you *too* will see the ghost that I saw moments ago."

Bill looked at her sharply. "Fine, but the two of you need to excuse yourselves from the party right after we've seen the room. The last thing we need is for either of you to slip something out that shouldn't be said to the other guests. I didn't come all the way out here just to have my payment taken away because two drunkards couldn't keep their mouths shut."

"Okay, okay," said Marcus, his hands raising and lowering as he spoke to try and calm him down. "We promise. So will you *now* come with us?"

Looking around them one last time in a last attempt to find Mademoiselle Lillian nearby, Bill still found no sign of her presence anywhere. "All right, let's go."

The three detached from the party and walked quietly down a lengthy hallway, seeming strangely familiar to Bill. ‘I’ve *been* here before,’ thought Bill. ‘That dream I had when I was on the riverboat.’ Suddenly, an image flashed in his mind. It was of the two ghost-brides he encountered in his dream in the exact same hallway, one looking both beautiful and tragic, the other devilish and frightening. ‘The older bride...she looked like the spirit who tried to attack me earlier with the hatbox ghost outside on the porch...’

“Weeee’re heeeeere,” announced Marcus, stealing Bill away from his thoughts as they came to one of the closed doors along the dimly-lit hallway.

Annabelle opened the creaking door and they slowly filed inside the dark room. Marcus struck a match from his tinderbox and lit a small hurricane lamp standing on a table beside the door. Within the lamp’s golden light, small areas of the room were revealed as the detective moved about the small room. A large Persian rug covered the floor beneath a circular table standing in the center of the room beneath a wide Tiffany chandelier. The table held a large crystal ball, a candlestick, and a small stack of books. An ornately-carved high-back chair stood beside the table with a wood-carved and painted raven perched atop its back. Thick, heavy curtains covered the small room’s walls and any window the room may have to shut out all-natural light.

“What’s this room?” said Bill, looking cautiously around them.

“Madame Leota’s *séance* room,” said Annabelle proudly. Her words reverberated in Bill’s mind, causing him to feel that much more uncomfortable.

Marcus shined the lamp’s light onto Annabelle. “What did the ghost you saw in here look like again, my dear?”

Annabelle sipped the last of her wine, then casually dangled the stem of her empty wine glass with her fingers at her side. “I *swear* it looked like Madame Leota.”

“Where did you see it in here?” said Marcus.

Looking at him with a flash of annoyance in her eyes, Annabelle spoke. “I *told* you, I saw her sitting in that chair at the table just as we were leaving the room. The spirit had the same facial features and long, curly hair.”

The detective turned to Bill, shining the lamp’s light at him. “Bill, can you see anything in this room? Do you see the spirit of Madame Leota sitting in that chair?”

Bill, ignoring Marcus’ questions, began searching the dark room with his eyes, ever fearful of what evil spirits or demons might be laying in wait to suddenly appear and attack. “We need to get out of here, now,” said Bill.

“What do you see?” said Annabelle, sounding fearful and watching Bill closely.

“Nothin’...at the moment,” replied Bill. “But I feel like we’re not ready to be in this room yet. I feel like there’s somethin’ in here, waitin’ patiently to harm anyone who disturbs it.”

“But you *see* nothing?” asked Marcus.

Bill turned, looking sharply at the detective in the lamplight. “Did you hear what I just said, Detective?”

“Oh *Bill*,” began Marcus with a bemused smile. “Your imagination has claimed your senses, man! Yes, we are in a dark room, once the séance chamber of the late Madam Leota, but surely you can tell the difference between *reality* and the fears your mind concocts.”

Suddenly, the séance table began shaking, the stacks of books and candlestick floated in the air above it. Only the large crystal ball remained unmoved upon the table that shook violently in the center of the room. “We need to leave, *now*,” said Bill, pushing Marcus and Annabelle out the door. As they exited the room, Bill turned around to see one last time the action taking place inside. His eyes instantly widened in shock. The head of Madame Leota appeared inside the crystal ball glowing brightly amidst the surrounding darkness. The head turned, its eyes opened and looked directly at Bill. Shutting the door behind him, Bill leaned against it when Annabelle pushed him aside and quickly locked the door. She started laughing uncontrollably as she slumped against the now locked door.

“*That was incredible!*” said Marcus excitedly, grinning ear-to-ear as Annabelle continued to laugh. “In all my years of investigating Gracey House, never have I witnessed such heightened spiritual activity as that!”

Bill began walking away from them back down the hallway. “Bill?” called out Marcus. “Where are you going?”

Turning, Bill faced them both in frustration. “I’ve had enough ‘entertainment’ for one evening. I’m retirin’ to my room for the night. The two of you had better hold up your end of our deal and do the same.” He then turned and strode down the hallway back towards the party.

The night was growing late and as Bill returned to the party, many guests were beginning to leave as they passed through the main foyer and out onto the front porch, their coaches awaiting them at the front steps. He made his way to the large sitting room and the wide, curved staircase that led up to the dark hallway of rooms. Shutting the sitting room’s double doors closed behind him, he sighed in relief to finally be alone.

‘Nell, Emma,’ thought Bill, leaning his back against the shut doors of the silent, empty room. ‘My dear sisters, what have I gotten myself into? Was the reward offered to me worth leaving you and home for God knows how long it will be at this point?’

“Monsieur Garret, I presume?” spoke a feminine voice echoing down to him from atop the stairs. Bill looked up, seeing an adolescent girl emerge from out of the darkness of the hallway onto the landing. He looked upon her in her pastel-pink gown as she stared judgmentally down at him. Her light blue eyes held a blasé, opinionated-attitude towards him at that moment, mirroring the likeness of her portrait back in the mansion’s gallery.

“Mademoiselle Lillian,” said Bill, sensing a strange feeling of relief flow through his mind to finally be speaking with her. “I was beginnin’ to wonder if I was ever goin’ to have a chance to speak with you.”

“I’m afraid I must continue to delay our visit,” replied Lillian, casually placing her white-gloved hands upon the banister and leaned upon her slender arms. “There is much that you and I have to discuss, but I must retire for the night.”

“I understand, Mademoiselle,” said Bill, gazing sympathetically up at her. “I was about to do the same.”

Lillian’s pouty lips curved slightly into a smirk. “Well, before you do, I should like to point you to a ‘constructive’ direction to help start your investigation. I would encourage you to speak with our groundskeeper, Mister Fusselbottom. Since you were so motivated to begin exploring the mansion tonight, particularly the séance room, you wouldn’t mind spending just a little more of your night finding answers from a trusted employee of the plantation, no?”

“No, Mademoiselle, I don’t mind,” said Bill, surprised that she knew about him entering the séance room. “But how did you know...”

Lillian smiled faintly. “Très bien,” she interrupted. Turning her back to him, she disappeared into the dark upstairs hallway. “Until tomorrow, Monsieur Garret. Bonne nuit.”

Walking through the mansion’s foyer, shuffling past the remaining guests making their way to their coaches to be driven home for the night, Bill returned to the card table lounge where he had last seen the groundskeeper bartending and serving the boisterous Big Hobbs Gracey and his gambling friends. The stale-cigar filled lounge was now empty and silent with the exception of Mister Fusselbottom, who was busily cleaning and putting items away behind the small bar as he clinked glasses together and set bottles of liquor upon shelves inside the cabinets.

“Mister. Fusselbottom?” said Bill approaching the bar.

Startled, the groundskeeper dropped a wine glass as it shattered upon the floor behind the bar. He turned, smiling at Bill in relief. “Oh, Monsieur Garret,” he said, quickly gathering a small broom and dustpan. “Apologies, monsieur, I was just cleaning up for de night. May I pour you a drink?”

“No thank you,” said Bill, watching the jittery groundskeeper sweep up the broken glass behind the bar. “I was hopin’ to ask you some questions about Gracey House, if you don’t mind.”

Mister Fusselbottom’s head suddenly popped up from behind the bar. “No, monsieur, I do not mind.”

“Good,” replied Bill, taking a seat upon the first of three barstools. “Has Detective Hughes ever interviewed you over claims that the mansion is haunted?”

The groundskeeper stood back up, dumping the shards of glass into a nearby waste bucket. “He did once, around da time he was first called by my late employer, Masta George Hightower Gracey, to investigate da plantation over claims by da staff about da estate bein’

haunted. I told Detective Hughes dat I neva seen anyting *inside* da mansion, but I did see at one time a ghost roamin' de graveyard."

"Just one?" said Bill.

"Oui, monsieur," replied the groundskeeper. "And only dat one time. I told da detective about what I saw dat night, but he did not believe me."

"Why?" said Bill intrigued.

"Well, I told him dat a tik fog 'ad covered da ground, den out pops dis ghost from out of da fog. It looked like da late Masta William Gracey from da portraits I seen of him troughout da mansion."

Bill nodded. "And what was this ghost doing?"

Mister Fusselbottom thought for a moment, then spoke. "Da ghost looked like it was searchin' for sometin' among da fog. It also looked confused, like it didn't know where it was. When it saw me across da field, it vanished back into da fog."

"And what did Detective Hughes have to say about your claim?" said Bill.

The groundskeeper frowned. "He told me it was not much to use as a lead in his investigation. I 'ad no evidence to show him, no physical proof dat da ghost had been in da graveyard. He said dat what I witnessed was da fog creating an 'illusionary-image' of a man, dat my imagination took over and made it look to me like da ghost of Master William Gracey. In da last few months, I 'ave seen more ghosts roamin' da grounds of da plantation and tried to tell Detective Hughes what I 'ave seen, but he does not believe me. He does not want to listen to me."

"He thinks you're unreliable because of your first claim," said Bill, his frustration over the detective rising within him.

"Oui, monsieur," said the groundskeeper. "But I swear it, I 'ave *seen* dem."

"When have you seen them?"

Mister Fusselbottom leaned towards him over the bar, his eyes widening in both fear and seriousness. "*Every* night."

"I see," said Bill, feeling slightly intimidated by the man.

"It is why I was so relieved when I was asked by Monsieur Frees, upon da request of Mademoiselle Lillian, to 'elp wit da work inside Gracey House from time to time such as tonight. It takes me away from what 'aunts da grounds."

Bill gazed back at him sternly. "And what haunts the grounds of Gracey Plantation?"

"*All* of dose who 'ave lived and died 'ere, monsieur," replied the groundskeeper gravely. "From Gracey family members, to da slaves who once worked da cotton fields long before da War." To Bill, the man clearly looked frightened and shook-up from seeing the spirits roaming the grounds at night. He completely understood his fear.

"You have not seen any spirits hauntin' inside the mansion?" asked Bill.

Mister Fusselbottom shook his head. "No monsieur, but I believe dos who 'ave. Footmen and da maids who 'ave seen tings fly trough da air while dey were cleaning, or specters wandering da 'allways at night. Some da detective 'as believed, others like myself he 'as not.

Dat is why many of da staff 'ave fled da mansion and never returned. Da 'aunting continues, and nuting 'as been done to stop it."

Bill gave a decisive nod. "I have just one more question. How close are you to the Graceys?"

"I'm just da groundskeeper, a loyal servant to da Gracey family for employing me wit a fair wage and accommodations," replied Mister Fusselbottom. "My family were once da slaves of dis plantation for generations. After da War my father's former master, da late Steven Gracey, employed any of my family who wished to remain at da estate. Din my late Master, George Hightower Gracey, went a step furter in granting me and my late wife a room *inside* da mansion! She and I were all dat were left of our families who stayed on da plantation. My wife died two years ago from cholera."

"I'm very sorry," said Bill.

Mister Fusselbottom nodded. "She was da light of my life. Since den, Mademoiselle Lillian continues to visit with me in da gardens while I prune and trim da roses and 'edges. As for Madame Constance and Master 'Big' 'obbs, both treat me like I were still a slave and not dare servant. I 'ave remained 'ere for da sake of da ailing Mademoiselle Lillian. She 'as few 'ere in Gracey House dat she can rely on and trust."

Bill frowned and nodded. He reached out his hand over the bar to the groundskeeper. Mister Fusselbottom took it in his own and both shook hands. "Thank you, Mister Fusselbottom. I have a feeling we'll be seeing more of each other throughout my stay here." Bill began to make his leave when Mister Fusselbottom spoke.

"I never did tank you for what you did back in da city, confronting dat other driver da way you did."

Bill turned, staring back at the groundskeeper sharply. "It's what a man with any sense of humanity and common decency would have done." Turning, he exited the lounge and made his way to his room for the night.

Chapter Five

"Emma, zat *dress*! C'est très magnifique!" said André as he and Nell watched her enter the room while they ate the rest of their bountiful meal spread across the table. "You and Nell chose zome fantaztic dressez today."

"Thank you, André," said Emma smiling brightly as she twirled in the middle of the room for them to see the entire dress.

“Your brother iz going to be zo surprized to zee you girlz in zuch lovely garmentz,” said André. He looked over at the pitcher of water on the table and noticed it empty. “I zee we are out of water again.”

Nell stood and took the pitcher. “I’ll get it this time,” she said. She stepped outside the cabin and walked over to the stone well. It was early evening as the grey skies seen through the open patches of the forest’s canopy were darkening. A low laying fog had drifted in through the surrounding firs and White Oaks and veiled the leaf-covered ground. Approaching the well, she glanced down inside it, seeing the grey clouds high above reflecting in the water. She readied the bucket to lower down to fetch some of the water when a foul voice began echoing from inside the well.

“*Neeeeellll, oh Neeeeeellll,*” spoke the voice. Nell frowned, releasing the bucket tied to the rope and placed her hands upon the well’s stone rim. Slowly, she cautiously leaned over the round opening and peered down inside. She suddenly gasped, her eyes widening in terror. Reflected upon the surface of the well-water was a skeletal face with large, yellow snake-like eyes and donning a top hat atop his long, stringy hair. “*Hello, Nell,*” said the large, ghostly face in the water. Nell turned abruptly. Standing before her was a ghost with the same face as that reflected in the well-water holding a large hatbox. She stood petrified with fear and let out a shrill, bone-chilling scream. The hatbox ghost let out a loud, hollow-sounding laugh. “*Come with me, for death has come to thee!*” It grabbed her in his arms as Nell shrieked in terror. The hatbox ghost leaped up into the air with her screaming in its firm grasp and dived deep into the darkness of the well.

“*NELL!*” exclaimed Bill. He found himself sitting up in bed, confused as to where he was. Warm golden rays of the dawn’s light poured through the window into the boudoir, the faint sounds of singing bluebirds echoed outside from across the grounds. He looked around the room, beginning to recognize objects such as his new luggage, his formal dinner wear he had lazily discarded upon the floor, the desk he sat at most of the night writing down notes over people and events that took place during the party.

‘The party,’ thought Bill, realizing that he was in his boudoir at Gracey House in Louisiana. ‘Just a dream.’ He looked over at the nightstand and saw an empty bottle of whiskey and a crystal tumbler laying upon its side. ‘I was afraid to sleep in here last night, so I drank myself to sleep.’

A knock came at the door. “Mister Garret?” spoke the voice of Mister Frees behind the door. “Breakfast will be served in *fifteen* minutes. Kindly be ready to join the rest of the house in the dining room before it is served.” Bill then heard the butler’s footsteps creak back down the hallway.

‘Rich people breakfast,’ thought Bill, feeling his stomach rumble with hunger. ‘Now *that’s* something I can be ready for in less than fifteen minutes.’ He quickly dressed himself in

his new morning-breakfast clothes, gathered his small notebook from the desk, and made for the dining hall.

“Ah, Mister Garret,” said Mister Frees as Bill descended down the wide, curved staircase towards the awaiting butler. “Did you sleep well last night, sir?”

Bill gave a curt nod as he approached him. “Yeah, nothin’ a bottle of whiskey couldn’t handle to help put me to sleep.”

“To settle your *nerves* perhaps?” said the butler in his typical cynical-sounding baritone-voice Bill had grown accustomed to.

“That would be the reason,” grumbled Bill as the two men began making their way to the dining hall. “I feel like I should ask you again, do *you* believe this place is haunted, Mister Frees?”

The butler smiled faintly as they continued walking together through the mansion’s main foyer. “Those who claim to have seen ghosts, heard strange voices in the dark and objects floating about in the air, I believe that *they* believe to have witnessed such paranormal activity.” Bill frowned as the butler saw his unimpressed reaction and smirked. “Speaking of hearing ‘*bumps*’ in the night, Mademoiselle Lillian expressed to me early this morning that she had heard you in your boudoir several times during the night.”

“Heard me?” said Bill. “What did I say?”

“Apparently you were fending-off some *dark* spirit attacking you or someone you knew. Obviously Mademoiselle believed you were dreaming and not in any *real* danger, otherwise she would have called upon me or Detective Hughes for help.”

Bill breathed out, feeling a dull pain throb in his head from his heavy drinking during the night. “Will Lillian be joinin’ us?”

“I’m afraid not, sir,” replied the butler as they entered the dining room. Both Detective Hughes and Mademoiselle Annabelle were already sitting at the long table in the center of the large dining room facing a grand fireplace.

“Mister Garret,” said Madame Constance, sitting at the head of the table before a small group of well-dressed gentlemen, some Bill immediately recognized. The first man sitting kitty-corner to Madame Constance was Big Hobbs, who was reading a newspaper and ignoring everyone at the table. Beside him sat his three poker friends he had played with in the parlor last night, all conversing quietly to each other. Then there were two older men, both of whom Bill did not recognize, sitting on the opposite side of the table beside the detective and Annabelle. Finally, two empty places at the table remained, one beside the detective and the other kitty-corner to Madame Constance.

“Please sit down, Mister Garret,” said Constance, gesturing him to the seat next to her. Bill made his way around the table, seeing the mansion’s footmen and maids standing at attention around the edges of the dining hall.

As he sat down at the table, Bill spoke. "And whose place is this beside mine?"

"That's Lillian's seat," said Big Hobbs, speaking behind his open newspaper as he continued reading. "She takes her meals in bed these days because of her illness. Nonetheless, it's always been Lillian's place at the table and always will be."

"For now," replied Constance as plates of steaming food were then brought into the room by both footmen and maids.

"Come now, dear sister-in-law," spoke Big Hobbs again, his eyes glued to the print of his newspaper. "Must you be so forth-coming over my ill-niece's plight before we even begin breakfast with our guests?"

"*Well,*" expelled Constance, glaring at Big Hobbs. "I beg your pardon, *Hobbs*. I hadn't the slightest inkling that you had regained any concern over Lillian's welfare. I seem to faintly recall the last time you showed your niece *any* attention was around the time your brothers were still alive."

Big Hobbs suddenly slammed his large fist against the tabletop, causing the sets of silverware to shake and chime. Everyone's nervous and awkward-stares turned to Big Hobbs. He neatly folded his newspaper, revealing his large face from behind the paper turning red with fury. "Nothing in this world would please me more than to see *you* expire before my darling niece, you old *crone!*" he said, both he and the old woman now scowling at each other. "Apologies to all, but I feel my appetite has spoiled this morning." He stood from his seat and abruptly left the dining room, his three friends trailing behind him.

"As you can see, Mister Garret," said Madame Constance, eating a forkful of the poached eggs upon her plate. "We are quite the happy family here."

Annabelle sighed, shaking her head in frustration. She lit a new cigarette placed in her long cigarette holder and took a long draw from it. "Madame Constance, was that *really* necessary? We are here to perform an intensive investigation of Gracey House and we need to question Big Hobbs about what he has, or has not, experienced here."

"Calm yourself, you harlot-witch!" sneered Constance. "Hobbs has nothing to contribute to your investigation. His gambling-debts are what haunts him of late, not ghosts."

"Call *me* a harlot, will you?!" exclaimed Annabelle, standing abruptly from her seat. "Since we first met here years ago, I have come to see you as nothing more than a scheming old spider, continuously spinning your webs of lies and deceit. Do *not* tempt me, Madame, in pleasing Big Hobbs by fulfilling who he wishes to see *die* before his niece does!"

Detective Hughes calmly stood beside the enraged Annabelle and took her trembling hands in his. "Come now, Annabelle, there is no need for any of this. Not from anyone," he said, glaring at Constance as both he and Annabelle calmly sat back down in their seats. Annabelle roughly pulled back her hands out of his and gulped-down her flute of champagne.

Constance let out a bitter laugh. "*Oh* Annabelle, you may be a descendant of Madame Leota's and a student of her work, but you do not scare me. Since the first day my late husband gave you access to the mansion to study the late psychic-medium's work, you have *failed* to gain any control over what you claim to have learned! You have been of no use to this family to

relinquish Gracey House from the haunting, which continues to grow and create panic amongst the staff to this day!” She looked over at Detective Hughes and smirked. “And *you*, detective, just what exactly have you provided for this family other than dead-end after dead-end throughout the years? Just what results have you provided to end the haunting here?”

Detective Hughes breathed out, looking back at her regretfully. “There has just not been enough solid evidence to prove what your staff and others have claimed to have seen or heard. More time is required to get to the bottom of all this. That is why I have put my faith in Mademoiselle du Bois and Mister Garret to help me finally resolve what is happening here.”

“You have had nearly a *decade* to resolve this issue, Marcus!” sneered Constance. “Just what exactly am I paying you for?” She then turned her attention to Bill, who looked sharply back at the old woman. “Then there is you, Mister Garret. The man my step-daughter insisted to have brought here to help with the investigation, to bring clarity as to what you saw exactly after you shot and killed my step-son, Claude, during the war. Tell me, and do not dare lie to me, *will* you be of any use to us? Or is Lillian wasting money from the family fortune on you just as she has with these two?”

“With all due respect, Madame,” began Bill, calming himself over the tension at the table, “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t believe I could be of some help. We will do all that we can to find a resolution here.”

Constance searched his eyes, hunting for any doubt or deception in them yet found nothing but pure honesty gleaming back at her. “Well I look forward to what you discover, as well as your plan to be rid of what haunts this mansion and its grounds. But I warn you, Mister Garret, *do not* go seeking truth from my step-daughter, Lillian. She is a cunning liar and a manipulator. You might as well know now that she has only brought you here for the sole purpose to ensure your demise for killing her brother.”

“*Please!*” erupted Annabelle, taking another drag from her long cigarette holder. “The only liar and manipulator in this mansion is *you*, Madame. Why, just ask any of your five previous husbands. Oh, wait, all of them are *dead!*” She stood once again from her seat, tossing her napkin upon the table. “Excuse me, but I have had enough breakfast this morning. Marcus, Bill, I will meet with you later. I have studying to do for the remainder of the morning in the séance room.” She then stormed out of the dining hall, nearly knocking over one of the shorter footmen standing near the open door as she shoved past him.

“How rude that amateur-witch can be,” said Constance, taking a sip of her earl-grey tea. “So, now that leaves just the five of us. Detective Hughes, you have already been acquainted with Doctor Marcelle. Mister Garret, meet Doctor Jacques Marcelle, our family doctor who has been staying with us to oversee Lillian’s illness. The gentleman sitting beside him is Father Francis Desmarais, priest of St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans who has come to help exercise any ‘evil spirits’ that may present themselves during your investigation.”

“How do you do,” said Marcus, shaking the ancient-looking priest’s hand as Bill then did the same with both the doctor and the priest.

“Your investigation begins now, gentlemen,” said Constance. “Mister Frees?” The butler immediately strode over to her side. “You shall accompany and provide anything these men may require throughout their investigation.”

“Of course, Madame,” said Mister Frees with a respectful bow.

Constance returned her attention back to Bill and the detective. “During the nights, you will thoroughly investigate the mansion, as well as the grounds, and report back to me the next morning at breakfast. At the end of each day, the three of you will again report back to me and reveal what you have or have not found from questioning those you come in contact with. You may question anyone you wish, from the staff to members of the family, but *heed* my warning of Lillian. *Do not* take what she may tell you as the truth. As I said, Mister Garret, she has her *own* agenda which is to see to your death.”

After breakfast, Detective Hughes followed Bill out of the dining hall and quickly caught up to him. “Well, that was quite the show in there, wasn’t it?”

Bill shook his head in frustration, keeping his pace through the main foyer. “Has there always been this much dysfunction in the family?”

“For some time now, I’m afraid,” repeated Marcus, trying to keep up with Bill’s pace. “Though Madame Constance had never really fit in with the Gracey Family after her marriage to the late George Hightower Gracey.”

Stopping dead in his tracks, Bill gave the detective a puzzled look. “What do you mean?”

Pleased to have stopped to rest for a moment from keeping up with Bill’s long strides, Marcus gave a relieved smile. “I mean that no blood-related Gracey ever liked Madame Constance. Since the day she met and was courted by Master George Hightower, she treated the family like garbage. From what I’ve overheard throughout the years of investigating Gracey House, no one from the family ever thought she was a good match for Master George.”

“Right,” said Bill, piecing the information together in his mind. “I’ll bet his children were the first to express their distaste for her.”

Marcus laughed. “You would be correct, Bill. Imagine it, your mother who was sweet and kind to you suddenly *dies*. Then your father decides to later remarry and your step-mother is Madame Constance.”

“No wonder Claude Gracey went to war,” grumbled Bill.

“*Ha!* yes,” laughed the detective. “Poor boy, God rest his soul. Claude had the option to remain home during the war. Those grown up in privileged families, such as the Graceys, had the option to remain off the battlefield. Yet he decided to join the South’s struggle for secession not because he believed in the cause, but to finally be free of Madame Constance’s continuous verbal and physical abuse towards him and of his younger sister, Lillian. I remember Lillian telling me once that Claude had written to her days before his death. He wrote that he would come back for her and to free her from Constance’s iron-grip over them and the family fortune.”

“Constance has control over the Gracey Family fortune?” said Bill.

“Well, *mostly*,” replied Marcus. “After George’s death, he left Constance to *oversee* the family fortune while Claude and Lillian were granted three-fourths of it to split between the two of them.”

“And the other one-fourth share?” said Bill.

“Granted to Big Hobbs, who nearly gambled it all away mere months after receiving the inheritance.”

“I see,” said Bill. “And with Claude’s passing, his share of the fortune now belongs to Lillian, the sole surviving blood-relation besides her uncle. So what happens if both Big Hobbs and Lillian die?”

“The entire Gracey Fortune would then be granted to Madame Constance,” said Marcus.

Bill nodded, the answer confirming his suspicions. “Where are you off to first this morning?”

“I thought I would interview the kitchen staff,” said Marcus. “Apparently some knives mysteriously vanished from the cook’s own hand while he was preparing last night’s banquet.” Turning, Bill then began to quickly return to his room. “Where are you off to?”

“I need to speak with Lillian,” said Bill, not slowing his pace. “It’s about time I heard her side of the story here, despite Constance’s warning about her.”

Marcus gave a concerned look. “We’ll catch up later then?” he said, but Bill had turned a corner and disappeared into the sitting room where the great stairs lead up to the hallway of rooms.

Bill quickly peeled off his tight, uncomfortable breakfast-attire and put on his loose, baggy buckskin pants, long cotton shirt and wide-brimmed hat. He also strapped around his waist his holstered revolver and concealed it beneath his un-tucked shirt. Stepping out of his room, he approached the locked door next to his at the end of the dark hallway. “Lillian?” he called out, knocking upon the door. “Lillian, it’s Bill. Sorry to disturb you, but we need to talk.” He knocked on the door again, but there came no answer.

“Mister Garret,” came a voice suddenly, breaking the dead-silence of the empty, dark hallway. Startled, Bill turned to find the butler, Mister Frees, approaching him. “By the looks of you, it would seem you are finally making yourself more comfortable here.”

“Mister Frees,” replied Bill, looking down at the butler’s polished black shoes. “Didn’t hear you comin’ down the hallway,” he said, remembering the floorboards creaked anytime he or anyone else walked across them.

The butler gave a sly grin. “You just have to know where to step, of course. Now then, Mademoiselle Lillian wishes to speak with you.”

“Good,” said Bill. “I was just tryin’ to call for her, but she’s not in her boudoir.”

“No, Mister Garret. Mademoiselle spends her mornings in the gardens after her breakfast. Now if you don’t mind,” said the butler, extending his arm out as a gesture for Bill to accompany him.

“Lead the way then,” said Bill, feeling with his palm the handle of his revolver at his side hidden beneath his loose shirt.

The butler led Bill back down the stairs and through the main foyer out onto the mansion’s front porch. From there, they stepped down the short set of steps at the center of the porch and walked along the path wrapping around Gracey House. The air was comfortably warm and filled with the harmonious-sounds of croaking bullfrogs and singing bluebirds from the bayou surrounding the borders of the plantation. The fully-exposed sun shown its brilliant morning light in the clear blue sky, forcing Bill to pull his wide-brimmed hat further down his forehead to shield his eyes. He continued following the butler around the west-end of the mansion, past the smaller servants’ foyer he, Annabelle, and Detective Hughes had been escorted into last night upon their arrival.

As they reached the mansion’s southwest corner, they approached a walled hedge with a small black cast-iron gate fitted in the center of the long hedge wall. “In there,” said Mister Frees, gesturing for Bill to see himself into the garden. “She is waiting for you.” Bill passed by the butler and approached the gate, crafted and designed to look like roses intertwining along the gate’s vertical bars. He carefully pushed open the gate and stepped inside the garden.

The high-walled hedge created a large rectangular space where inside grew fragrant pink and red roses, violet irises, yellow lilies, and clematis of various sizes, colors, and genus’ that climbed and wrapped their delicate vines around black iron trellises along the garden’s stone path. Stone statues of what Bill could only guess were once prominent members of the Gracey Family stood upon pedestals scattered across the garden, providing singing birds a place to perch atop their stone arms and shoulders. A three-bowled fountain stood at the center of the garden in the middle of a shallow pool of shimmering water. Water spilled down from the small top bowl into the two larger bowls that overflowed and trickled its contents into the shallow pool below.

As Bill took in the sights and fragrant roses he passed along the garden path, he suddenly noticed a short female figure from behind beyond the fountain. A pink parasol shaded the sun from her head and upper-back the young lady held over her shoulder as she slowly walked along the edge of the garden, stopping from time to time to smell a rose that she held up to her nose with her slender, feminine fingers. Her pink dress swayed lazily from side to side as she continued to stroll casually alongside the rose bushes when Bill finally approached her.

“Monsieur Garret,” spoke the young lady, her back still to him. Surprised she knew of his presence, he made to speak when she turned and faced him. “Finally, we have a moment to talk at last.” Bill looked upon her in amazement. Lillian Gracey, she was the spitting-image of how she looked in his dream before arriving at Gracey House, the same daydreaming-blue eyes gazing back at him, the same auburn hair tied loosely in three buns on the top and sides of her

head. She held out her white-gloved hand and Bill gently took it in his own large, calloused hand.

“Pleasure to finally meet and speak with you, Mademoiselle,” said Bill and placed a kiss on the top of her hand.

Lillian blushed, gently pulling her hand back from him. “I have been wanting to ask you something since our brief encounter last night. Did you enjoy yourself at the party last night?”

Bill frowned. “I won’t lie to you, Mademoiselle, I felt uncomfortable throughout the evening.”

“Really?” said Lillian, raising her thin eyebrow in curiosity. “You did not seem to *me* so ‘uncomfortable’ dancing with Jeanette-Marie, or when she kissed you.” She abruptly turned her back to him, her pink parasol nearly smacking his face as she started walking away from him. “Perhaps that was the reason why I saw her sneaking out of the mansion before dawn this morning. It looked to me as if she had found a new affair to indulge. Her hair looked a disastrous *mess*, and her dress seemed as if she had hastily put it back on after it had been in a pile upon your boudoir floor.”

Bill quickly caught up to Lillian, walking alongside her as she began ignoring him. “Nothin’ happened between me and that girl. Besides, doesn’t she have a fiancée and reputation to think about? Where was her fiancée last night?”

Lillian smiled faintly; her gaze fixed straight ahead of them as they walked. “No doubt he and one of the maids spent the night together in her quarters, leaving Jeanette-Marie to her own devices.” She paused and glanced at him. “Your voice, it has an air of desperation in it. Either you are a very *poor* liar, or you are telling me the truth in hopes to perhaps gain something from me.”

“You can trust me, Mademoiselle,” said Bill.

Lillian halted, facing Bill once again. “Do you trust me?”

“I..” yet Bill could not answer her. He barely knew anything about her, so how could he already trust her?

“Do you see now, Monsieur, *why* I am pressing you about what I witnessed last night? I am *not* interested in having someone I need to place my complete trust in by being, or acting, the way much of those in my social-circles tend to treat each other by lying, cheating, or participating in such unfaithful games they play. I am exhaustively searching for honesty, Monsieur Garret. I may be only sixteen years old, but I am certainly not so naive to put my faith and trust into just anyone.”

“I understand, Mademoiselle,” said Bill.

Lillian blinked, staring with a glimmer of hope for him in her wide, almond-shaped eyes. “I pray that you do. Trust in others is a luxury I do not have here. I understand my step-mother spoke to you last night and again this morning at breakfast?”

Bill nodded. “That woman’s frightening.”

Letting out a giggle, Lillian quickly covered her hand over her mouth. “It is refreshing to hear someone who has never met Constance before make such an observation about her.”

“Really?” said Bill. “I’m surprised the old crow hasn’t scared away the ghosts haunting this place already!” Lillian laughed, a sweet and gentle-sounding laughter that brought a smile to Bill’s face. “I’m sorry you couldn’t make it to breakfast earlier,” Bill spoke again. “Your step-mother certainly knows how to make breakfast *brief* among the family.”

Smiling, Lillian’s gaze strayed to the garden path. “I have not sat at that dining room table for a meal for some time now. Over the last year, my illness has kept me from participating in so much, yet I certainly do not miss the constant bickering and fighting between my step-mother and Uncle Big Hobbs.” She looked back up at him with a disheartened look. “No longer is there any peace and harmony in my home. The only comforts I find each day are my morning walks in this garden, fleeting moments when I am asleep in bed and not feeling so nauseous or being haunted in my dreams.”

Bill stared hard at her. “I’m sorry, Mademoiselle. I promise you I’ll do everything I can to get to the bottom of this haunting and put an end to it. You have my word.”

Tears began forming in Lillian’s half-closed eyes. She set her parasol down and took Bill’s hands in hers, interlocking her gloved-fingers with his. “It cannot just be the payment promised to you that has arisen such concern over me. Does it have to do with my dear brother, Claude, which has aroused such chivalry and sensitivity over my welfare? I must know, Monsieur, for no one has shown such genuine kindness to me before.”

Bill gazed back at her thoughtfully. “I have a sister almost your age and one a few years younger back home. To think if they had to go through all that you’re experiencing, whether it be your illness or the haunting of spirits, or *both*, it disturbs me to think about it. They are both so beautiful and full of life, happy and fulfilled with the life we share together. When I heard about you and what you’re having to go through here alone, I gotta admit my heart broke over your plight. Yes, the truth is that the payment was what got me on that train with Mister Frees, but when he spoke about you along the journey here, I knew that I had made the right choice to come here and help however I can.”

Lillian wiped the tears from her eyes using her white lace-bordered handkerchief and smiled faintly back at him. “Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Garret. Thank you for telling me and for agreeing to come all the way here.”

Bill nodded, giving her a comforting smile. “I think you’ve brought together a good team of investigators. Detective Hughes and Mademoiselle Annabelle du Bois seem to know a lot already about what has been going on here.”

“I had hoped that with your inclusion, to have the ability to actually *see* any of the spirits haunting the plantation, that perhaps a resolution could finally be reached.”

“Your step-mother certainly saw to that,” said Bill.

Picking up her parasol and holding it over her left shoulder to shade herself, Lillian looked back at him confused. “What do you mean?”

“She ordered your ‘trusted’ butler to spike my drink with an elixir that the late psychic, Madame Leota, had concocted. Now I see the dead *all* the time!”

“Oh no,” expelled Lillian in shock and disbelief, holding her hands up over her nose and mouth. “She did *not*...how could she have been so malicious and deceptive, so *evil* to have done that to you? And why would Paul not tell me about it?”

Bill shrugged. “I was more surprised that your loyal butler had actually carried out her order to sneak it into my drink.”

Lillian gazed sadly downward. “Paul has been very loyal to me over the years, yet my trust in him has been waning for some time now. More and more, my step-mother has somehow been manipulating him. He used to tell me that he dreaded serving under her, yet lately he has told me he does not mind it as much anymore. It is as if she has placed some spell upon him and is slowly taking him away from me. One by one, those once in my life who were good, decent people from loyal friends, to family doctors turned their backs on me. I do not know if it is because I am nearing death, or if my step-mother is feeding them all lies to scare them away from me.”

Holding his tongue for the moment in telling Lillian about Constance’s claims of her spinning lies and only wishing to see him die, Bill finally spoke. “What about your uncle, Big Hobbs? He seems to care about you, he even expressed it openly at breakfast.”

Lillian smiled in thought. “He and I used to have afternoon tea together. But ever since my illness worsened, I rarely see him even though we live under the same roof. He has his life with his gambling-friends and playing nightly card games in the French Quarter. I no longer fit-in with his life anymore.” She looked back up at him, a gleam of happiness twinkling in her eyes. “Come walk with me through the garden a bit longer, Monsieur Garret. We have much more to talk about.”

“Bill,” said Bill, hooking his arm around hers as they began walking along the garden’s path. “Call me Bill, Mademoiselle.”

“In that case, let us set aside formalities from each other, *Bill*,” said Lillian with a warm smile. “Please, call me Lillian.”

‘That *dreadful* woman,’ thought Annabelle. ‘*Unbelievable!*’ She sat across the table from the late Madam Leota’s high-backed chair in the dim candlelit séance room, an open book of spells the legendary psychic-medium had written open on the table in front of her. Yet Annabelle felt too angry to study the psychic-medium’s work at the moment, nor was she able to keep her focus on finding any clues or spells to be rid of lingering spirits and haunting ghosts. ‘How *dare* that old crone insult me at breakfast, in front of *everyone!*’ She slammed the dusty book shut, leaned back in her chair, and crossed her arms in frustration as she began brooding in the dark silence. ‘If only Madame Leota was here. She would help me put an end to Constance’s tyrannical *rein* over Gracey House.’

“Aaaaannabeeelllle, oh AAAAANNNNABEEEELLLLLE,” a strange, shifting-toned voice called from out of a darkened corner of the room. Startled by the sudden voice, Annabelle’s eyes widened in fear. She remained seated in paralyzing terror. The air grew bone-chilling cold as she began shivering. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck and forearms stand on-end, each shortening-breath she expelled drifting through her chattering teeth and could be seen swirling out her mouth in the now frigid air.

She slowly reached out, grabbing a knife off the table used for ceremonial rituals and held it firmly in her clenched fist. “*Who’s there?*” she said summoning the courage to speak, her eyes not leaving a dark corner across the dimly-lit room.

“*Come to play in the séance room once more?*” came the strange voice again, only this time not sounding as distant but in the very room with her. To Annabelle’s horror, she began trembling in fear as a pair of large, yellow-glowing eyes opened in the darkened corner. A toothy smile then revealed beneath the eyes. “*It would be best that you surrender, for your DEATH is now in store!*”

Letting out a blood-curdling scream, Annabelle threw the knife at the ghostly face hovering in the darkness. The ghost’s eyes and smile instantly disappeared as the knife passed through them and stabbed into the wall. Breathing heavily, Annabelle continued staring at the corner, not daring to look anywhere else when a loud knock came from the door.

“*Mademoiselle?*” spoke a feminine voice as the door creaked open. The maid, Mademoiselle du Lays, stepped inside and stood beside the half-opened door. “*Madame Constance wishez to speak with you.*” Stepping aside, the maid made way for Constance as she casually entered the room. No longer was the room freezing cold, nor was there any sign of the ghost. Throwing up her hand as a gesture to the maid for her dismissal, Constance approached the séance table. “*Merci, Madame,*” spoke the meek-sounding maid with a curtsy and she quickly exited the room.

“*My, don’t we look affright,*” said Constance with a look of amusement.

Calming herself down, Annabelle spoke. “*What are you doing here?*”

“*First,*” said Constance, taking a seat in the late psychic’s chair across from her, causing Annabelle to ball her hands into fists, for it was Madame Leota’s chair and no others to sit in. “*I have come to ask you one last time for your loyalty, Annabelle. George, God rest his soul, loved you like a sister and was always pleased to have you study here, to have an actual descendent of the great Madame Leota continuing her work and fund your research. He treated you good, gave you free rein of the séance room to conduct your studies and spell-casting. In turn you were loyal to him, more loyal to him than he ever was to me.*”

Annabelle frowned, seeing a brief moment of pain reveal in the old woman’s eyes. “*Get to the point, Constance.*”

Constance scowled back at her for the briefest of moments, then returned to a look of calm. “*Your loyalty, Annabelle, or I shall have you removed from Gracey House for good!*”

“*Well,*” said Annabelle, lighting a fresh cigarette in her long, thin cigarette holder and taking a drag from it. “*We have both been over this before. George put in his Will that I was*

allowed to have continued access of this séance room to continue my work, *regardless* of you holding the keys to Gracey House.”

Constance’s eyebrow raised in curiosity. “You still have not given an answer to my question.”

Taking another drag from her sleek, black cigarette holder, Annabelle stared at her sharply. “Let me make this as clear as I can to you. My loyalty cannot be earned through money or threats. You have tried both of these with me in the past after George’s death and failed to gain it.” She leaned over the table closer to the now irritated Constance. “You are nothing more than a *stubborn, frustrated* old *bat* flapping wildly around those who come in contact with you until finally submitting to you, hoping at the very least it will make you stop harassing them!”

Constance’s eyes widened, her brow furrowed and her thin lips pursed as if she had just taken a bite out of a lemon. Finally, she spoke as she arose out of Madame Leota’s chair. “Very well, Annabelle. You had your chance. Your loyalty to me would have risen you to great heights in this family.” She made for the door, halting halfway across the room. “One last thing I wish to mention,” she said, turning her head to glare back at Annabelle. “*Never* insult me in my own house again. You have been warned, Annabelle, for you are not the *only* student and practitioner of the Great Madame Leota’s work.” She approached the door and opened it, discovering the fearful-looking maid greeting her outside in the hallway then slammed the door shut behind her. Staring in shock at the door, Annabelle quickly scribbled down in her notes all that had just occurred.

Chapter Six

Throughout the remainder of the morning, Bill and Lillian walked through the garden together as they talked about Bill’s home. “Your sisters seem so nice,” said Lillian as they rounded the fountain. “It sounds like you have truly taken on the full responsibility of caring for them since your parents’ death.”

Bill smiled faintly, staring in thought at the fountain’s water spilling from the large bowls into the shallow pool. “Makes me wonder sometimes if they’re the ones actually lookin’ after me. Nell and Emma...they’re everythin’ to me.”

“And this ‘André’ fellow, your fur-trapper friend,” said Lillian, “he seems quite the character!”

Bill looked back at her, seeing her amusement gleaming in her light-blue eyes and faint smile. “André’s the only reason I can speak French. The man barely spoke English when we first met, so we had to meet half-way with language. He was a fur trader in Canada who left

France when he was an adolescent. One day after he settled near the Columbia River, he was attacked by a bear he was tryin' to trap. I was in the area huntin' deer at the time when I saw the bear pinnin' André to the ground."

"Oh mon Dieu!" said Lillian concernedly. "What happened?"

"I aimed my rifle at the bear, shot 'em square in the head," said Bill, staring ahead of them. He fell silent, recounting what had happened next in his mind.

Hugging his arm hooked around hers, Lillian calmly spoke. "You saved his life. Yet you did not want to kill that bear, did you?"

Bill shook his head. "I did what had to be done to save André's life. That day, I met my lifelong friend. But to this day I still feel remorse over shootin' that bear."

"I don't understand, mon cher," said Lillian. "You are a hunter of animals, why would one bear make a difference to cause you to feel such regret in killing it?"

Frowning, Bill spoke. "Because it was the first time I had taken a life, man or animal, since the war...since encountering your brother, Claude."

Lillian gasped, squeezing his arm gently. "You saw the bear's soul leave its body, no?"

Bill nodded, "It was like a trigger firing in my mind. I felt all the pain and emotion I experienced after what I had done to your brother, and to many others after him." He paused, halting his steps. Lillian stopped as well in the middle of the stone garden path. She looked up concernedly at him. "I'm cursed, Lillian. Havin' the ability to *see* and *hear* the dead immediately after their deaths. I see their confusion, their fear, even anger entering into the afterlife. It's somethin' no one should ever have to experience seein'. Now, ever since I unknowingly drank Madame Leota's elixir, I see ghosts all the time randomly throughout the day and night. I still don't know how or when I'm able to see them, but I do."

Lillian took his hands in hers, squeezing them gently. "I am so sorry, Bill, but take comfort in knowing you are in good company. You are with someone at this very moment who also sees and experiences the dead around her."

"When did you begin seein' them?" said Bill surprised.

Lillian shrugged. "Since I can remember. Nobody ever believed me when I was a child, so I remained silent about it. It was only in recent years when others in the mansion, mainly the staff, who claimed to have seen objects fly through the air and spirits roaming the halls at night, that Detective Hughes was called on to investigate."

"How often do you see the dead?" said Bill.

Lillian's eyes strayed towards the ground. "More than anyone here, that much I know, and more often than I care to think about right now."

"Sorry," Bill murmured.

"For what?" said Lillian looking back up at him puzzled.

Gazing at his surroundings, Bill smiled faintly as a cool breeze gently swept through the garden. "For talking about such a dark topic in a peaceful, beautiful place like this. I can see how this garden could be a kind of sanctuary for you."

Lillian smiled thoughtfully back at him. “A *romantic* plainsman? Now I have seen everything!” Both began to laugh and continued their walk around the garden.

“It’s warm here,” said Bill, lifting his hat slightly to wipe the beads of sweat from his brow. “I forgot how hot it gets in this part of the country.”

“What is it like where you are from?” asked Lillian.

“Well, right now the days are growin’ colder. There’s frost and fog in the mornings, constant damp and cold-rains in the afternoons, and frigid nights with snow now and again.”

Lillian giggled. “You would have hated it here during the summer. If the heat would not have melted you then the humidity certainly would have!” She hooked her arm around his once more and gently tugged on it. “Come on then, let’s get you inside. I can show you some of the mansion before I rest for the afternoon.”

Lillian led Bill back inside the mansion through the servant’s foyer. They then entered into the gallery where the four portraits he had seen upon his arrival last night hung high above the octagonal-walled room. “So you have already seen this room?” asked Lillian.

“Yeah,” replied Bill, looking up at each of the paintings. “When I saw your portrait, I was stunned. It matched exactly how you looked like in my dream before I came here.”

“You had a dream about me?” said Lillian sounding intrigued. “What was I doing in your dream?”

Bill looked back at her with a smirk. “Nothin’ provocative, I swear. You were standin’ on the balcony above the mansion’s front porch, just gazin’ out across the estate with your daydreamin’ eyes. Just like in your portrait up there.”

“Funny,” said Lillian. “I went out onto that balcony some nights ago for some fresh air before retiring for the night. At that moment, I was praying that you had agreed to come here to help in the investigation. Bill, do you suppose your dream was some type of message sent to you, perhaps to try and persuade you to come here had you decided *not* to?”

Bill shrugged. “Don’t know, but I did feel a bit sorry for you. Seein’ you standin’ there all alone, lookin’ like you had given up hope over somethin’.”

Lillian’s eyebrow raised in curiosity as they both then looked back up at the portraits. “These were painted during more *interesting* moments in our lives to say the least. Obviously you know who all of the portraits are of, but I think one you may not know much about yet is that man up there,” she said, pointing up to the portrait of the balding middle-aged man with a beard and wearing a formal jacket.

“Detective Hughes told me that’s the late Steven Gracey, your Grandfather,” said Bill.

“Yes,” replied Lillian, sounding pleased that he already knew. “He was the only son of my Great Grandfather, William Gracey. Steven had a real love for danger. In fact, he died immediately after this portrait of him was finished by the artist.”

“What happened?” asked Bill.

“A terrible accident involving an explosion. You see, Grandfather decided he wanted his portrait painted of him standing on a barrel of dynamite with a lit candle beside the wick. The idea was to show how brave he could be in the face of danger. Unfortunately, just as the artist was finishing the painting, the candle’s flame kissed the wick of the dynamite barrel and well...”

“I see,” said Bill.

“But my Grandfather’s dying wish was for all Graceys to conquer their fears of the perils and dangers life can bring. So my father, despite having a reputation of being a coward and in-turn not participating, insisted that we all have portraits like my Grandfather’s of us performing dangerous acts to show that we Graceys are courageous and fearless. My three uncles, two of whom you do not see in the portrait with Uncle Big Hobbs, were painted while they sat upon each others’ shoulders in *quicksand*! They made a bet with my step-mother that the portrait would be finished before they would completely sink into the sand. Well, uncles Skinny Hobbs and Hobbs obviously didn’t make it out of the quick-sand. Uncle Big Hobbs still believes it was his own luck that kept him alive. My portrait was of me during my tightrope act while entertaining guests at last year’s William Gracey Foundation Ball...”

Bill nodded, “Yeah, Detective Hughes told me about that evenin’. He said Constance convinced you to perform that act over crocodile-infested waters.”

Lillian smirked. “Yes, the more dangerous the more money we could raise from our guests my step-mother told me. To this day, I am still not convinced that her intention was for me to look fearless for my portrait, nor to help raise more money for the foundation, rather to try to have me killed.”

“You believe she wants you dead?” said Bill.

“Undoubtedly,” replied Lillian. “Since my dear brother, Claude, is no longer with us, that leaves just me and my uncle, who my step-mother attempted to have assassinated multiple times. If she finally succeeds in killing him, I will be the only one left standing in her way of the family fortune.”

Bill nodded, looking back up at the paintings. His eyes strayed to Constance’s portrait. “If all of you were painted while doin’ dangerous acts, why are the portraits only showin’ each person from the chest up? And what did Constance do so dangerously while having her portrait painted?”

“I was told by my step-mother that after father died unexpectedly, before the portraits were completed, she had ordered for them to all be cut-off at the bust because the portraits that *she alone* was allowed to view ‘disturbed’ her. She never did tell us what bold and dangerous act she had done for her portrait.”

“Interesting,” said Bill.

“Come on,” said Lillian, taking his hand and leading him to the exit out of the gallery. She took him into the hallway he and the others had walked through upon their arrival last night, only this time sunlight poured through the windows along the left-hand walls and shined upon the many framed pictures of Gracey family members canvassing the right-hand walls. Finally,

they reached the end of the L-shaped hallway and stood before the large oval-shaped portrait of William Gracey.

“My Great Grandfather, William Gracey,” said Lillian proudly after briefly sharing with Bill other prominent family members’ pictures along the walls. “He was a...”

“A what?” said Bill.

Lillian smiled awkwardly. “Perhaps another time. It is a family secret, but I can tell you that his fiancée, Emily de Claire, had died tragically and soon after my Great Grandfather as well.”

“I’ve heard this story,” said Bill.’

“You have?” said Lillian.

“Yes,” replied Bill. “Mister Frees told me a little about your Great Grandfather, about Emily de Claire’s death, and about Madame Leota. Apparently, Mademoiselle de Claire was ‘scared to death’ by spirits under the jealous psychic-medium’s control on the day of the weddin’. Madame Leota had Emily’s body stuffed in a trunk and placed up in the attic, which I was told the trunk was just discovered a few weeks ago. Everyone believed she had drowned herself in the nearby bayou. After Mademoiselle de Claire’s death, Madame Leota, who was in love with William, had him all to herself. But what she didn’t expect was William’s heart completely shatterin’ over Emily’s death, which the psychic then *lied* to him in sayin’ Emily had prayed to have her soul taken before she was to wed him. Believin’ her lie, William committed suicide somewhere inside the mansion. To this day, no one seems to know exactly how or where he died.”

Lillian nodded, “Yes, I’m so pleased Paul filled you in on some family history. Hopefully it may be of use in your investigation. For I believe Madame Leota’s *spirit* resides here in the mansion.”

“You do?” said Bill.

“Yes. I have seen her face in my nightmares. I have even heard her voice calling upon evil spirits from the séance room. She commands them to harm me. Recently, I have seen in my dreams the most malevolent and frightening spirit of all, one whom I witnessed *controlling* the very spirit of Madame Leota herself. A wild-eyed skeletal faced demon with yellow glowing eyes.”

Bill stared hard at her. “Does this spirit wear a large top hat, an overcoat, and carries with him a hatbox?”

Lillian looked back at him with a frightened stare. “And his head disappears from his body, only to reappear inside the transparent hatbox that he enjoys throwing at his victims?”

Nodding, Bill spoke. “I know this ghost. He’s been hauntin’ me since I left home.”

Lillian’s eyes began tearing-up. “I prayed that he was only a dream,” she said softly.

Bill took her hand in his, squeezing it gently as Lillian began to calm herself and wiped her tears away with her lace-bordered handkerchief. “Don’t worry, Lillian. We’ll get to the bottom of this and put an end to the haunting here. This ghost is not gonna harass you anymore, so long as I’m here.”

Lillian nodded, wiping the final tear from her eye. "I saw him at my bedside in the middle of the night recently. I wanted so badly to believe it was just a dream, but now I know it certainly was not. Now that you say it is haunting *you* too."

Bill frowned. "I'm sorry, Lillian. Seems I've turned our conversation down a dark path once again when all we're tryin' to do is get to know each other."

Shaking her head, Lillian's gaze stayed to the floor. "I am not upset over what we are talking about." She then looked back up at him with a warm smile. "These are tears of relief that *finally*, somebody understands what I am going through." Bill smiled thoughtfully, lifting his elbow up. Lillian hooked her arm around his once again as he escorted her down the last stretch of the hallway towards the main foyer.

"I was wonderin'," said Bill as they arrived at Lillian's boudoir door. "When I first came here and settled in my room, I couldn't help overhearin' voices comin' from your room through the wall separatin' our rooms."

Lillian gave a sly grin. "Now Bill, do not tell me that you were *eaves*-dropping on me."

Bill smirked. "I was concerned about someone yelling at a sick young lady next door to me. What happened before the party, Lillian?"

"My step-mother and her hand-picked doctor for me happened," replied Lillian. "I was readying myself for the party, feeling well enough last night to make an appearance, when Constance barged into my room with the doctor."

"Doctor Marcelle?" said Bill.

"The same," replied Lillian.

Bill gave a nod. "Met the man at breakfast. I wasn't impressed with him. He did seem to me like a loyal follower of Constance's, like a dog to its master."

"You seem more the detective-type than even Detective Hughes, Bill," said Lillian smiling faintly. "Anyway, my step-mother was in quite a rage over me wanting to attend the party. She said I was in no condition to do so. It seemed odd to me right away because she's never shown the slightest concern over my health and welfare in the past. She had the doctor back-up her decision in forbidding me to leave my bed for the night."

"Didn't seem to stop you from showin' up," said Bill.

"*Humph!*" expelled Lillian opening the door to her boudoir. "If Constance thinks she is going to stop me from doing what I wish before death eventually takes me, then she is gravely mistaken. *Especially* trying to stop me from attending my own family's foundation party!"

Bill gave a puzzled look. "What was the *real* reason Constance didn't want you at the party?"

"My guess?" said Lillian stepping inside her boudoir. "She wanted all the attention on herself. She greatly desires to be the new face of the Gracey Family, to be recognized as the one

who is attached to my family's fortune. As of right now however, people in fact think of Uncle Big Hobbs and myself as the true representatives of the family, not her. My step-mother's hatred and jealousy runs deep, Bill. This I know will be revealed to you very soon." She grasped the edge of the door. "Now I must get some rest. I feel my illness taking hold and making me dizzy and drowsy."

Giving a slight nod, Bill spoke. "Thank you, Lillian, for sharing your time with me this morning."

Lillian smiled thoughtfully back at him. "I enjoyed our time together too." She reached out, taking his hand in hers. "I am so grateful that you made the decision to come here."

"Me too, Mademoiselle," said Bill with a friendly grin.

"Perhaps we can visit again soon?" said Lillian.

With a decisive nod, Bill winked. "Count on it. Sleep well, Lillian."

Gazing at him with appreciation and relief held in her eyes, Lillian shut the door when Bill turned to find Annabelle hastily approaching him from down the hallway. Her long legs carried her ever closer to him with each stride she took.

"*There* you are!" Annabelle roared. "I have been looking all over for you! Mister Frees told me you were having a private meeting with Lillian in the garden. When I went looking for you there, the two of you were nowhere to be found."

"What's goin' on, Annabelle?" said Bill calmly.

"*Constance* is 'what's goin' on'!" replied Annabelle in a condescending-tone. "Where is Marcus? We need to regroup *now*."

Gently nudging her to move away from Lillian's boudoir door, Bill led Annabelle back down the dimly-lit hallway. "Last I heard he was goin' to talk with the kitchen staff about strange occurrences they claimed happened last night."

"Well I need to speak with the both of you at once about what happened to *me*!" said Annabelle as they approached the staircase' landing.

"What's this all about? Does it have anything to do with what happened at breakfast?"

"*No*!" said Annabelle curtly as they descended down the stairs. "This has nothing to do with what happened at breakfast. *Constance* confronted me while I was studying in the séance room a few hours ago. But something happened before she came to confront me in the room."

Making it down the staircase, Bill spoke. "Well? What happened?"

"Not until we find Marcus," said Annabelle. "We are a team, Bill, and as a team we need to be sure all information we have is shared with each other."

"Fine," Bill said as they crossed the large sitting room. "You're right. We need to communicate as a team." They reached the door to the main foyer when Mister Frees opened it and stood in the doorway.

"Mister Garret, Mademoiselle du Bois," said the butler with a friendly smile. "So pleased to have found you both. I shall be accompanying you on your next interviews and observations this afternoon."

Annabelle rolled her eyes. “Ugh, *why*? What *possible* interest would you have in doing so? Did Constance order you to spy on us?”

“Certainly not,” said the butler, sounding and looking offended by her question. “I wish to be part of the investigation for the sake of my fellow staff. This haunting has effected them all, many still claiming to have seen and heard ghosts roaming the mansion and grounds.” He looked at Annabelle boldly. “I do wait upon Madame Constance and report to her what she asks of me. Yet the truth has, and always will be, that my loyalty rests with Mademoiselle Lillian.”

“*Does* it?” said Annabelle.

“*Yes*,” replied Mister Frees. “Mademoiselle had asked me just a moment ago to accompany you and help in what ways I could for the remainder of the day.”

“Did she?” said Bill. “That’s strange, because I was just with Lillian ‘a moment ago’ before she retired to her room to rest for the afternoon.”

Annabelle glared back at the butler. “You lying *snake*!”

“I swear it,” replied Mister Frees, his eyes gleaming honesty back at them. “I and her chambermaid, Mademoiselle du Lays, were waiting for Lillian in her room as we do every afternoon. Her maid helps her out of her clothes while I retrieve what Lillian may request before she sleeps, such as a glass of water or more blankets.”

Bill nodded. “Then you wouldn’t mind tellin’ us what Lillian and I had said to each other while she stood in the doorway of her room? After all, you *were* in her boudoir with the maid waiting to serve Lillian and could have easily heard us.”

The butler looked sharply back at Bill. “Mademoiselle Lillian expressed that she enjoyed spending time with you this morning, that she wished to visit with you again soon, and that she was grateful that you had decided to come here to help in the investigation.”

Searching his eyes, Bill finally giving a decisive nod. “Fine, join us if you want. Right now we need to find Marcus. Where is he?”

“I believe Detective Hughes is still in the kitchen speaking with the cook,” replied Mister Frees. The three then hurried through the mansion’s main foyer and downstairs to the kitchen.

“I appreciate you speaking with me, monsieur,” said Detective Hughes to Gracey House’s head chef. “*Merci beaucoup*.” The large, portly chef gave a nod and went back to preparing food for supper. Marcus scribbled more notes down in his small, leather-bound diary and walked out of the kitchen. He was immediately met by Bill, Annabelle and Mister Frees in the hallway of the servants’ quarters.

“Well hello, all,” said the detective happily, stowing his diary in his coat pocket. “What brings you all down here?”

“Marcus, we need to talk,” said Annabelle.

“All right,” replied Marcus hesitantly. “Is anything wrong?”

Annabelle nodded. “Quite a lot, actually. Mister Frees, is there a place where we can talk privately?”

“Of course,” replied the butler. “Let us adjourn to the parlor. It was cleaned hours ago and is currently unoccupied.”

Filing into the parlor where Big Hobbs had hosted his poker game last night, the butler closed and locked the door. Each took a seat around the large table as Mister Frees then tended the bar and poured glasses of water and prepared mint juleps for everyone.

“So what happened, Annabelle?” said Marcus, placing his hand upon hers.

Annabelle quickly withdrew her hand from him in annoyance and spoke. “I was in the séance room, studying as I have a thousand times before when a strange, disturbing voice called my name from out of the darkness. Then, two large yellow eyes appeared out of thin air in the corner of the room. A malicious smile formed under the glowing eyes along with an outline of a skeletal jaw.”

“Snake-like eyes?” said Bill, staring intensely at her.

“Yes,” said Annabelle, taking a sip of the mint julep Mister Frees handed to her from her uncontrollably-shaking hand. “It was a ghost! I saw it with my own eyes!”

The detective placed his arm around her upper-back to comfort her. “Calm down, Annabelle. Everything is going to be all right.”

“I will *not* calm down, Marcus!” exclaimed Annabelle and began to cry. “I *saw* it! It was a ghost and it threatened my life!”

“What did it tell you?” said Bill, intrigued that a student of Madame Leota’s work and of the paranormal was so distraught over such an encounter.

Catching her breath, Annabelle finally spoke. “It said to me, ‘It would be best to surrender your soul now, for your death is now in store!’”

“Are you *sure* that is what you truly heard and saw, my dear?” said Marcus. “After all, you did have quite a few glasses of champagne this morning at breakfast.”

Annabelle scowled back at the detective with a darkness in her eyes that even took Bill aback. “How *dare* you, Marcus,” she hissed in a harsh-whisper, her trembling-voice immediately rising as she continued to speak. “*You* may not believe in ghosts or the spirit realm, but *I* most certainly do!”

“*What?*” said the detective innocently. “Well now I admit, I am skeptical of the existence of *ghosts* and *ghouls*. Yet I continue to keep an open mind about there being solid evidence yet to discover.”

“Oh *stop* it, Marcus!” roared Annabelle, taking another swig of her cocktail. “You revealed to me last night, after having a few whiskeys, that you were confident there was a rational explanation for what people here have claimed to have seen and heard. *Wind* howling through cracked-open windows, *practical jokes* being played upon by the mansion staff, *lies* to

gain attention. *That* is what you said to me! Just how can you explain what we experienced in the séance room last night?! Your passive-attitude that it was simply some footman or maid of the mansion playing a joke on us is not convincing, Marcus! Well *damn you* for your inability to take what I had confided in you about seriously!”

“The hatbox ghost,” said Bill.

The parlor fell silent as all then looked to Bill with confused, puzzled stares. “I beg your pardon?” said Marcus breaking the brief silence.

“It’s a ghost that has been hauntin’ me since I left home to come here,” said Bill. “Your description of what you saw in the séance room, Annabelle, matches the ghost that’s been hauntin’ me.”

“And just when were you going to tell us about this?” said Annabelle.

“I just did,” replied Bill giving her a sharp look. He turned his attention back to the detective. “I misjudged you, Marcus. All this time you played the part of a man believin’ that I can see and hear the dead. Seems you were only patronizin’ me this whole time.”

“Bill,” said Marcus sorrowfully. “I apologize, I did not mean to lead you on into thinking I was a true believer. Rather I *am* fascinated with you believing that you were actually seeing and hearing such compelling, far-out ideas.”

Shaking his head in dismay, Bill spoke. “The groundskeeper Mister Fusselbottom was right. You just refuse to believe.”

Marcus slammed his fists upon the tabletop. “Over the past decade, everything I have heard regarding ghosts, random objects moving about rooms on their own, and queer voices spoken in the dark, *all* of this can be explained in a *rational, realistic* way!” He paused, taking a breath and looked concernedly back at Bill and Annabelle. “I’m sorry Bill, Annabelle, but after years of investigating Gracey House, its staff, and members of the Gracey Family, I have grown irritably *tired* of simply not finding any solid evidence to back up any of their claims.”

Bill turned his attention back to Annabelle. “Never mind him. What happened next?”

Annabelle, shooting another glare at the detective, reluctantly spoke. “The terrifying face disappeared after I threw a knife at it. Then, Constance entered the room to confront me. The ghost was gone as she came to ask for my loyalty. I told her she would not have it. Then she left me with a warning, that I was not the only student of the late Madame Leota’s.”

“Hmmm,” said Bill. “Quite a coincidence that the hatbox ghost suddenly appears in the room with you to threaten your life, then walks-in Constance revealing she too is a student of the late psychic’s work. Do you believe she summoned the hatbox ghost to scare you?”

Annabelle nodded nervously. “Without a doubt. The woman hates me, she always has. She’s been jealous of me since the day George Hightower allowed me access to the séance room to study Madame Leota’s work. It did not matter to Constance that my relationship with George was purely professional. Her jealousy and hatred of me continued over the years, well after poor George’s death.”

“How did he die?” said Bill.

“He was murdered,” said Marcus. “Right here on the plantation near the garden. A hatchet was found buried in his head.” He paused, looking at Annabelle with pleading eyes. “I’m sorry my dear, but are you *positive* you saw what you claim to have seen and heard in the séance room? Pouring over such books as Madame Leota’s diaries and spell books could put such images and ideas in your mind. Perhaps you saw something that was truly not in front of you at all but your own imagination playing tricks on you.”

“You mocked me once and I pray that you do not do it again, Marcus, for your own well-being!” exclaimed Annabelle.

As she seethed at the detective, Bill began wondering more about the death of Emily de Claire, her body being recently discovered stuffed in a trunk in the attic. ‘Among *other* possible secrets buried up there no doubt,’ he thought. Finally he spoke. “Mister Frees, where’s the attic Mademoiselle de Claire’s body was found in?”

“Atop the west-wing of the mansion,” replied the butler, exiting the parlor to retrieve more glasses for the bar. “Above the end of the hallway.”

‘Above Lillian’s boudoir to be exact,’ thought Bill.

“I’m sorry,” began Marcus in an irritated-tone. “But what does that have to do with what we are discussing?”

Suddenly, to everyone’s surprise, streams of an ash white fog-like substance swirled in clouds in-between them at the table. Annabelle jumped out of her chair, taking a step back from the table as her eyes widened in shock. Bill slowly stood, watching intently the fog-like mist forming into transparent images of well-dressed men sitting at the table. Remaining as still as a statue in his chair, Marcus began to whisper. “Are these...are they *actually*...wha...*what is this?*”

The ghosts, seemingly unaware of their presence around them, began playing a game of poker together at the table. When the game finished, the ghosts repeated the same exact game. After watching the ghosts play the same game five times, they disappeared into thin air.

Annabelle stormed over to Marcus, grabbed his jacket’s lapels and lifted the stout man out of his chair. “Was that the *wind*?! Was that a *joke* being played on us by the staff?!”

Marcus shook his head nervously. “No...no that certainly was not.”

“*Now* do you believe us, you *toad!*” yelled Annabelle in the detective’s face, shaking him in her iron-grip. Bill and Mister Frees, who at that moment returned from the kitchen with a tray of glasses for the bar, helped to quickly intervene and pulled her off of Marcus as she began to calm herself.

“Apologies, my dear,” said Marcus, still bewildered by what had happened. “I’m so sorry to have doubted you both.”

Bill nodded. “I’m surprised you two were able to see them as well.”

“See what?” asked Mister Frees behind the bar.

“There were *ghosts* here, Paul, you missed the whole event,” said Annabelle, continuing to calm down.

Mister Frees gave a bemused smile. “Ah, I see.”

“What were the ghosts doing?” said Marcus, ignoring the patronizing butler. “It’s as if they were trapped in some kind of constant loop playing the exact same card game.”

“I have read about this,” said Annabelle. “Madame Leota had written a chapter about this in one of her diaries. She calls it a ‘residual haunting’. The spirits we witnessed were not spirits at all but *images*, reflections like that of a mirror, of a specific event that had taken place in this very room.”

“Well,” said Mister Frees, clasping his hands together. “I think it is time to give Madame Constance an update of our findings thus far. Shall we see if she is available to visit?”

Annabelle grabbed the butler by the back of his jacket’s collar as he began heading for the door. “Not so fast, Paul.”

Bill approached the now nervous-looking butler. “Still have a whole afternoon to investigate before we’re to report to Madame Constance this evening, Mister Frees.” He looked over at Detective Hughes, who was hastily scribbling notes down in his diary. “Marcus, what do you plan to do next?”

“I need to speak to Mister Fusselbottom,” replied Marcus. “I must ask for his forgiveness in not taking his honest account of witnessing ghosts seriously. Perhaps there is more the groundskeeper can reveal about any other recent sightings.”

Bill nodded, shifting his focus to Annabelle. “Annabelle, can you research in Madame Leota’s books any spells that can ward off evil spirits? We need to be prepared for any return of the hatbox ghost.”

“Why do you call it that?” said Annabelle.

“He carries a large transparent hatbox that he likes to throw with his head inside it.”

Annabelle’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “Oh.”

“Have you read about any spells that can ward off evil spirits before?”

Annabelle glared at him. “*Of course* I have! I just need to reread the spell to know what the correct words are to use.”

“Good,” said Bill, finally turning back to the butler. “As for you Mister Frees, you’re goin’ to take me to Big Hobbs so that I can ask him a few questions.”

“But Mister Garret, Master Hobbs is not in at the moment,” said the butler. “Nor is he to be back for a few days.”

“Where is he?” said Bill.

“Master Hobbs is staying in the French Quarter, gambling with his friends.”

Bill gave a nod. “Call for the driver to meet us at the front of the mansion with the coach. I want to speak with Big Hobbs *now*.”

“Sir, I do not think leaving the plantation is a good idea, not while your investigation has only just begun at Gracey House,” said Mister Frees.

Drawing his revolver from under his shirt, Bill aimed it at the butler’s chest. Annabelle gasped as Marcus quickly spoke. “Bill, what in God’s name are you doing? Put the gun down!”

“Enough of your games, Mister Frees,” growled Bill. “If you’re truly loyal to Lillian and not wrapped around Constance’s bony finger, then you’ll accompany me to the French Quarter to find Big Hobbs. “

Straightening his jacket, the butler gave him a dignified-look. “Very well, Mister Garret. I see you give me no choice. Let us be off then.”

Chapter Seven

“*HA!*” expelled Big Hobbs with a wide grin. “I’m on a hot streak today!” With his large thick arms, he scooped up stacks of poker chips and pulled them towards him.

Other players at the Faro gambling table stared at him and the card-dealer in shock and disbelief. “*Ce n’est pas possible!*” yelled one gambler at the table standing abruptly from his seat.

“How can you possibly win that many times in a row?” said another gentleman at the table. “The odds were completely stacked against you!” Eruption of bitterness and rabble arose among the rest of the players at the crowded table as Big Hobbs continued laughing heartily.

“Now, now gentlemen,” began Big Hobbs counting his stacks of poker chips, “no need for any bitterness at this table, *my* table. I was born lucky!” He looked around the table at the threatening-stares of both his friends and the other gamblers. “Tell you what, how about another round of drinks for the table? They’re on me of course, with my sincerest compliments.”

The looks of hatred and bitterness aimed at him quickly melted away as The Palace of Chance Saloon whores, dressed in fine jewel-toned dresses from France that revealed their bulging cleavage, came around the table holding trays of whiskey shots and pints of ale. The whores’ angelic-featured faces wore rouge upon their porcelain-skinned cheeks and black eye-shadow around their doe-like eyes, enhancing their beauty to the men as well as covering earlier bruises from abusive customers. They handed the drinks out to the table of gamblers with flirtatious smiles and alluring winks.

“Monsieur Hobbs?” came a voice from behind Big Hobbs.

Big Hobbs poured a shot of whiskey down his throat then slammed the small shot glass upside down upon the table. “That’s *BIG* Hobbs to you, monsieur!” he roared, turning around in his chair to find his butler and the frontiersman standing before him. “AH! Monsieur Frees, Monsieur Garret, bonjour! What brings you two here?”

“Mister Garret insisted we come find you so that he may ask you some questions in private,” said Mister Frees with an irritated look.

Bill stepped forward, handing Big Hobbs a fresh pint of ale. “For a moment of your time, monsieur. I promise not to take you away from your game and friends for very long.”

Big Hobbs smiled broadly, lifting the pint up in gratitude and took a gulp of the ale. “You certainly know how to persuade me, mon amie.” He lifted his large hand above his head and snapped his thick fingers. “*Marie!*” he bellowed over the incessant noise of the crowded saloon. “Marie, j'ai besoin de vous!”

Standing up from sitting on a gentleman’s lap with her arms casually around his shoulders, the saloon whore kissed the inebriated man on his cheek and whispered flirtatiously in his ear. She began fixing her honey-blonde hair tied at the back of her head with a lace and ribbon bow with her fingers and approached Big Hobbs. “Oui, mon amour?” said Marie.

“I must ask a favor, mon cher,” said Big Hobbs, wrapping his arm around her hourglass, bustier-tightened waist as she stood beside him. “I need you to take my seat at the table. Protect my winnings from the vultures who would try and steal it. I don’t want a single chip missing when I get back, compris?”

“Je comprends,” said Marie, her eyebrow lifting in curiosity. “An’ what iz in it for moi, mon amour?”

Big Hobbs reached over, retrieving five of his poker chips. He then gently slid each of them deep into her cleavage. “Five hundred now, five hundred when I return. I know your time is worth at least *that* much, mon belle Marie.”

The whore gave a faint smile. “D’accord, mon amour.” She kissed his cheek, leaving a red kiss-print from her red-painted lips as Big Hobbs stood and she took his seat at the table.

“Anyone who tries to steal my winnings will have to deal with Marie,” said Big Hobbs. “Understand, gentlemen?” Marie then calmly drew from beneath her sapphire-blue dress a small polished-silver pistol that was holstered in her white-lace garter. She looked around the table, smiling in amusement over the surprised faces of the gamblers.

“Come on,” said Big Hobbs, leading Bill and the butler away from the table and through the throngs of patrons coming and going through the French Quarter saloon. “I already know what this is about, why you want to ask me some questions. Let us adjourn to the courtyard next door. Nobody will bother us there.”

The three men exited the saloon and walked along Bourbon Street until they reached a black cast-iron gate between the saloon and an abandoned biscuit factory.

Big Hobbs opened the gate and led them into a courtyard containing a small pond made of stone. Tall palm plants in large clay pots stood behind and around the pond and in the corners of the courtyard. A small round table and chairs stood in the center of cobblestone courtyard. The three men took their seats around the table and began to talk.

“So,” began Big Hobbs, taking a drink from the ale Bill had bought for him. “I’m sure you’re here to ask me about the haunting at the plantation, no?”

“That’s got somethin’ to do with why I needed to talk to you,” said Bill.

“Well, Monsieur Garret, Detective Hughes already interviewed me months ago when incidents at the mansion began to increase.”

Bill frowned. “What incidents?”

“A footman recently claimed he witnessed a candelabra floating in mid-air down one of the corridors at night. Then there were the two maids who said they had heard the ballroom organ being played late one night about a week ago. Yet the organ has been broken and unplayable for decades.”

“You mentioned a floating candelabra?” said Bill, recounting in his mind the dream he had about being in one of the mansion’s hallways and encountering two different ghost brides, one of them holding a lighted candelabra.

Big Hobbs nodded. “Yes, that was what forced one of our footmen to flee the mansion in fear. We have not seen nor heard from him since.”

“Go on,” said Bill. “Is there anythin’ that you yourself have seen or experienced related to these accounts?”

Big Hobbs thought for a moment, finally shaking his head. “Can’t say that I have. It seems I am the only Gracey who hasn’t. My late brother’s *old bat* of a wife, Constance, believes the plantation and Gracey House to be haunted. Although she’s never explained or elaborated to anyone why she believes it is. Then there’s my niece, Lillian, who swears that she sees ghosts all the time. The doctor says she’s simply experiencing hallucinations caused by her illness, her weary-mind just playing tricks on her.”

“About her illness, monsieur,” said Bill. “Is it really incurable? What was she diagnosed with?”

Big Hobbs shrugged. “You would have to ask Doctor Marcelle about that. Apparently in recent weeks he has given her only months to live. If you ask me, that quack does not know what Lillian has. He just passes off what she suffers from as a ‘deadly, incurable illness.’”

“I see,” said Bill, glancing at Mister Frees, who looked back at him concernedly.

“Madame Constance hired Doctor Marcelle after the previous doctor fled the mansion some months ago,” said the butler. “Apparently he too claimed to have seen something that struck enough fear in him that he would not speak about what he saw to anyone but Madame Constance. To this day, Doctor Penn refuses to return to Gracey House.”

“Much to Constance’s relief to be rid of the man,” scoffed Big Hobbs. He took another gulp of his ale. “Doctor Penn was helping Lillian recover. Breakthroughs in her energy and stamina were happening almost daily for a while. Then, one night when Doctor Penn was staying overnight at the mansion to oversee Lillian’s progress, he witnessed something so terrifying that it forced him to flee and never return.” He paused, chuckling over what he was recounting in his mind. “I don’t think I have ever seen my sister-in-law so happy the following

morning after he left, at least not since after my brother's funeral. But then after five marriages maybe the old bat was just tired of marriage all together."

"Did you say five marriages?" said Bill.

Big Hobbs laughed. "That witch was an absolute gold-digger, marrying rich and prominent socialites from around the south. Unfortunately, she dug her claws into my brother as well."

"What happened to her previous husbands?" said Bill.

"All of them *died*," slurred Big Hobbs.

Bill gave a decisive nod. "Thank you for your time, Monsieur Gracey. You've been very helpful."

The three men then stood as Bill and Big Hobbs shook hands. "I apologize, Monsieur Garret, for my outburst at breakfast this morning. Normally we are not so abrasive towards each other when entertaining guests."

Bill smiled faintly back at him. "It has me lookin' forward to dinner tonight."

Big Hobbs laughed. "I like you, Monsieur Garret. You have a sense of humor that I admire! Are you sure you want to leave so soon? I can have one of Marie's friends show you a really nice time, my treat!"

"Thank you, but no," said Bill. "I need to get back to the mansion. Are you coming back for dinner tonight?"

Big Hobbs gave his question a brief moment of thought, then finally answered him. "Why not! I *refuse* to allow that old hag, Constance, keep me away from my own house."

"Very good, Master Hobbs," said Mister Frees. "I shall send the coachman to pick you up later this evening."

"Fine, fine," said Big Hobbs, waving off the butler as he stumbled past him and out of the courtyard. "Not *too* soon though. I need to spend this afternoon having a little more fun before sharing another meal with that old witch!" He stumbled his way down the street towards the saloon as piano music began playing inside.

"Monsieur Gracey," called out Bill. The inebriated Big Hobbs turned, looking back at him curiously. "It's not my place to say, but I think it's important that you know your niece misses you. Lillian could really use your support right now."

Shaking his head as a heavy sadness veiled his eyes, Big Hobbs spoke. "I love Lillian, *truly* I do, and I miss spending time with her. But to continue watching her slowly decay is something I think neither of us want. These days, it has become just too painful to bear." He turned, making his way inside the lively saloon.

"Shall we be off then, Mister Garret?" said the butler irritably. "This block *reeks* of greed and perversion."

Bill peered over the butler's shoulder, noticing ghosts appearing out of thin air wandering down Bourbon Street. More of the large shadow-like demons, their eyes glowing red like he had seen when they first arrived in New Orleans, suddenly raced out of the nearby alleyways. They began raising havoc and harassing the peaceful-dead strolling down the street. One of the

demons turned, noticing Bill staring at it. Its blank shadow face suddenly transformed, making Bill step backwards in fear. ‘*The hatbox ghost,*’ he thought, seeing its skeletal-face and large yellow eyes staring at him as it gave a malevolent grin.

“*Mister Garret,*” said the butler, immediately redirecting Bill’s focus from the ghost onto him. “*Mister Garret, are you all right sir?*”

Bill’s gaze trailed back to the concerned-looking Mister Frees. “I’m fine.” He peered over the butler’s shoulder once again, seeing nothing but the living walking up and down the street. “Let’s get back to the mansion.”

After returning to Gracey House and changing into his dinner attire, Bill entered the dining room where Marcus, Annabelle, Doctor Marcelle, Father Francis Desmarais, and Madame Constance all sat together at the long, candle-lit dining table. Yet there was one seat at the table that was still vacant, with the exception of Lillian’s empty chair.

‘Where the *hell* is Big Hobbs?’ thought Bill in aggravation, approaching the table as all eyes focused on him.

“Ah, Mister Garret,” began Constance with a stern look. “I see you have decided to return from your little ‘escapade’ in the French Quarter and join us for dinner.”

“Sorry I’m late,” replied Bill gruffly, taking his seat at the table. “Had to speak with Big Hobbs. He’s a hard man to find. By the time I found him, it had to have been the eighth or ninth saloon and brothel Mister Frees and I checked.”

Marcus gave a friendly smile. “Not to worry, Bill. We all just sat down at the table a moment ago.”

The detective looked over at Constance, who fired a sharp glare at the man and he quickly fell silent. “Just what gave you the idea, Mister Garret,” began Constance sternly, “that you had permission to leave the plantation and go gallivanting around the French Quarter?”

“Didn’t think I needed permission, Madame,” replied Bill, casually taking a sip of wine from the filled glass at his place at the table.

Constance glared at him; her wrinkled lips pursed in disapproval. “To simply just pick up and *leave* while you are supposed to be investigating the haunting of this estate is unacceptable! Now tell me, why I should not view this as a breach of contract with the family and have you sent back to the Northwest?”

Bill took another casual sip of his wine. “Needed to speak with your brother-in-law *regardin*’ the investigation. He wasn’t here, so I went to him.”

“Then why did you not *wait* for him here to return?” asked Constance.

“Wasn’t sure he was comin’ back tonight. I had some urgent questions for him that needed answers. After talkin’ with him this afternoon, it sounded to me like he was goin’ to be stayin’ in the city for a few days. I did convince him to have dinner with us tonight though.”

“Fine,” said Constance in an irritable-tone. “In the future, Mister Garret, I would have you consult with me first about leaving the grounds. The investigation over the haunting of this plantation remains *here*, not outside of Gracey Plantation. Is that understood?”

Bill gave a nod. “Yes, Madame.”

“*Honestly*,” huffed Constance, adjusting herself in her chair at the head of the table. “The lack of respect towards me and my wishes has been *quite* alarming of late. Especially with you, Annabelle. Both you and Mister Garret are going to be watched closely henceforth.” She looked towards the door where Mister Frees stood awaiting to help the maids and footmen with the trays of food for the evening’s dinner. “Mister Frees? Can I count on you to keep a close watch on these two, ensuring that I am aware of any more defiant actions they may take during the investigation?”

“Of course, Madame,” replied the butler with a slight bow.

Looking beside him at the empty seat where Lillian had once sat at the table, Bill removed his napkin from his lap and placed it back upon the table. “I think I’ll eat my dinner someplace else. I’m feelin’ a little uncomfortable bein’ in a stressed and irritable environment to fully enjoy a meal.” He stood from his seat, smiling inwardly at the shocked-faces of all at the table, with the exception of Annabelle who began quietly laughing as she lit a cigarette in her long cigarette holder.

“What is this?” said Constance surprised. “Just *where* do you think you are going to eat rather than here in the dining room? You still have much to tell me about your findings today!”

“And I will, *after* dinner,” said Bill calmly. “Mister Frees? I assume you’re comin’ with me to know where I’m goin’ and report it back to Madame Constance later?” The butler gave an uncomfortable nod and approached him. “Fine, let’s go.” Bill strode across the dining room with the butler in-tow. Constance continued glaring at Bill as he disappeared through the doorway.

“I can only assume at this moment where you are going, Mister Garret,” said Mister Frees trailing behind Bill who walked towards the great staircase leading up to the hallway of boudoirs.

“Well then your assumption is probably correct,” said Bill as the men began ascending the stairs.

Mister Frees stepped lively up the steps ahead of Bill then stood facing him, blocking Bill from taking another step higher. “This is *not a game*, Mister Garret,” spoke the butler boldly. “Madame Constance will be very displeased if you begin forming an alliance with Mademoiselle Lillian. She will have you forced out of this house, and you will *not* be granted the rest of your payment agreed upon in your contract.”

Bill stepped up to the butler, glaring at the man and standing only inches from his face. “*What* is it about Madame Constance that has you so *wound-up*, Mister Frees? Since our arrival here you’ve been actin’ like you’re her loyal pet, not a servant of the house.” He paused, searching the butler’s blank, expressionless face, yet the man did not give a reply. Finally, Bill scowled in frustration and spoke. “It’s only dinner, Mister Frees. I’m not interested in formin’ ‘alliances’ with *either* of your employers. But right now, there is one in this mansion who’s started to earn my trust.” Just then, a maid carrying a silver platter containing a glass of water and a silver cloche dish began climbing up the stairs below them. Noticing this, Bill stepped down and approached her. “Excuse moi, Mademoiselle,” said Bill. “Are you bringing this to Mademoiselle Lillian?”

“Oui, monsieur,” replied the maid with a look of confusion.

Bill gave a decisive nod. “I’ll take it to her. Merci.”

The maid looked over Bill’s shoulder at Mister Frees, who eventually gave a begrudging nod behind him. With a slight bow of her head, the maid handed Bill the tray. “Très bien, Monsieur.” She turned and exited the large sitting room.

“I shall see if Mademoiselle Lillian is fit to see you,” said the butler as the two men reached the top of the stairs and made their way down the long, dimly-lit hallway. “She is, after all, resting in her bed. She may not be decent at the moment.”

The two men approached Lillian’s boudoir door and the butler began knocking upon it. “Mademoiselle Lillian? Mademoiselle are you decent? Your supper has arrived as well as Mister Garret, who was kind enough to bring it up to you this evening.”

“Come in,” spoke Lillian from behind the door.

Mister Frees turned to Bill, giving him a stern look of warning to be on good behavior. He opened the door, both men stepping inside the intimately-illuminated boudoir. Wallpapered in broad vertical stripes of cream and light pink, a floral pattern consisting of large blooming roses covered the walls. Two windows, one along the back wall and one along the left were slightly open to allow the occasional outside breeze to cool the warm room. A large potted palm filled the back corner of the bedroom, and opposite of the vibrant plant was Lillian beneath the sheets and blankets of her bed. Her head, slender shoulders and arms revealed above the covers as she sat up against her pillows and the bed’s dark-mahogany headboard. Lillian’s daydreaming eyes seemed to Bill to match that of a portrait hanging on the wall across from the foot of Lillian’s bed. The painting portrayed a woman of high society donning a long violet dress posing at the edge of a cliff overlooking an ocean. Along the opposite wall hung a painting of a basket of brilliant pink and white roses.

“Mister Garret,” said Lillian as both men approached the foot of her bed. “This is quite a surprise! Are you really serving me my dinner?”

Bill smiled faintly, holding onto the silver platter holding her dinner. “Thought maybe you could use some company while you ate.”

“And you, mon amie?” said Lillian. “You obviously have not eaten yet, supper in the dining room is only now being served as I speak,” she said, glancing at her gold-plated clock that sat upon a small nightstand beside her bed. Bill shrugged, his eyes looking back at her with a carefree stare. Lillian smirked, “Paul, would you please send for Mademoiselle du Lays to bring one more tray of tonight’s meal to my room? Bill is to have supper with me this evening.”

Reluctantly, the butler gave a slight bow. “Yes, Mademoiselle.”

“And Paul?” said Lillian as the butler made for the door. “Would you care to join us?”

Mister Frees gave a faint smile. “It is one thing, Mademoiselle, to entertain the idea that a guest of Gracey House is to dine with a physically-ill member of the family in her very boudoir, let alone the mansion’s butler relieving himself of his duties to join them. I am sorry, but I must return to the dining room.”

“*Very well,*” said Lillian with a dismissive wave of her hand, looking away from him as she pretended to be insulted. “Off you go then.”

The butler smiled faintly at her as he reached the door. “I shall send for your maid to bring Mister Garret his supper, and I shall personally bring you your water and hot tea later this evening, Mademoiselle.”

Lillian cracked a smile, unable to continue her façade of being upset with him. “Thank you, Paul.” The butler closed the door, leaving her and Bill alone together.’

“So,” began Lillian as Bill pulled up a chair from the desk, which sat across the room from the foot of Lillian’s bed, and took a seat at her bedside. “This is truly a first for me, having a man alone with me in my boudoir.”

Bill smirked. “Well, to be honest I’m feelin’ a little awkward about it myself, but I think it’s necessary.”

“Oh?” said Lillian with intrigue gleaming in her eyes. “Why is that?”

“Because to me, someone in your ill-stricken position shouldn’t have to eat alone in their room while the rest of the family and guests eat together.”

Lillian grinned. “You look nice by the way in your handsome dining clothes.”

Bill grinned. “Only because it’s required of me to wear this stuff during meals apparently.” He glanced over at the silver platter of covered food beside her bed. “You’re not eatin’. Why?”

“I am waiting for your meal to arrive so we can eat together,” said Lillian. “It is polite to wait until all are served.”

“You’re sick, I consider that an exception to the rule,” grumbled Bill.

Lillian raised her thin eyebrow, “I am not hungry at the moment. Though I do declare that I will be once your meal arrives momentarily.”

Bill gave a half-grin. “Fine, have it your way. Just didn’t want your food to get cold.”

“It will not be much longer,” replied Lillian. “In fact, I believe your meal is being carried up the stairs by my maid right now.”

“That so?” said Bill looking at her in disbelief.

Lillian smiled faintly. “I have timed how long it takes to retrieve something from the kitchen from here. Months of practice from being forced to have meals in bed.”

“Then, the maid should be knocking at your door just about...”

“Mademoiselle Lillian?” came the voice of Mademoiselle du Lays behind the closed door.

“Come in, Sophie,” said Lillian, grinning proudly back at Bill. The maid entered, carrying a second silver platter of covered food and a glass of red wine.

“Pour vous, Monsieur Garret,” said Mademoiselle du Lays, handing the tray to Bill who took in kind.

“Merci,” replied Bill. The maid curtsied then left the room, closing the door behind her. Bill smiled. “She even brought me wine.”

As Lillian and Bill ate together, Lillian began the conversation asking Bill how his first day of investigating Gracey House had gone. Bill revealed to her what had happened to Annabelle in the séance room with both the hatbox ghost and Constance. He told her about the ghosts they witnessed in the lounge, and finally mentioning his trip with Mister Frees to the French Quarter to seek out Big Hobbs.

“I imagine he was gambling at the Palace of Chance,” said Lillian. “He always goes there during the middle of the week.”

Bill gave a nod. “He told me a little more about your step-mother’s history.”

Lillian gazed at him curiously. “What about her history?”

“About the men in her life,” replied Bill. “Past husbands she’s had, five in total including your father, George Hightower.”

“Yes, but that is no secret,” said Lillian. “Constance’s prior husbands were all *murdered*. That is what those in our social circles are unaware of.”

“Who were they? How did they die?”

Lillian tapped her index finger against her cheek as she thought over his question. “Well, first there was Ambrose Harper. He was a wealthy farmer from California. He and Constance married, but then Ambrose was tragically murdered with a hatchet buried in his back shortly after. Constance inherited his entire fortune. Then there was Frank Banks, a respected banker and a prominent member of his community. He married the widowed Constance and on their wedding night, he was found decapitated.”

“Decapitated?” said Bill.

Lillian nodded. “Again, Constance inherited her newly-wedded husband’s wealth. After Frank’s death, she met Monsieur Marquis de Doome only a few years after her second husband’s death. Marquis was a foreign diplomat from Peking, China who crossed paths with Constance and was instantly attracted to her. Yet it was only moments after giving their vows during their

wedding that he was found murdered behind the church. An axe was found buried in his head. A mere *year* later a man by the name of Reginald Caine, a railroad baron, married Constance. Two weeks after their wedding he was found murdered alongside one of his favorite locomotives, his head chopped clean off his shoulders. Again, Constance reaped the benefits of losing her newly-wedded husband and claimed his fortune. Then came my father...”

“Constance’s longest marriage,” said Bill, taking a sip of his wine.

“Yes,” replied Lillian. “Once again, a wealthy man fell victim to Constance’s wiles, and later her curse upon the men who loved her. As you are well aware, the Gracey Family fortune is vast, and to have met and gained the attention of my father, Constance instantly was well on her way to receiving the family fortune after his death.”

“Only, there were his two children and his older brother in the way of the inheritance,” said Bill.

Lillian nodded, “That is why I believe it took longer for my father to be murdered.”

“I’m sorry to mention this, Lillian,” began Bill with caution, “but I heard that your father faced the same fate as Constance’s previous husbands. Is that true?” Lillian nodded, her eyes trailing down to clasped her hands in her lap. “When did this happen?”

“A week after we received word that Claude had been killed in-action during the war,” said Lillian looking back at him with a jaded stare.

“And his murder took place on the plantation?” said Bill.

“Yes,” said Lillian. “Near the garden, he was found with a hatchet buried in his head.”

Bill frowned, “I imagine the ‘murderer’ was never found, just as the other victims’ ‘murderers’ were never discovered.”

Lillian smirked. “No, *she* never was. Nor was she ever suspected.”

“*She*, you say?” said Bill with a slight grin, knowing who Lillian was referring to.

“Even the most thick-headed of people could understand and agree that Constance killed her husbands in order to obtain their fortunes. Yet there has not been a shred of evidence throughout each murder to convict her.”

Bill nodded. “Annabelle mentioned today that Constance told her that she too was a student of Madame Leota’s work. Is there a connection that you know of between your step-mother and the late psychic?”

Lillian raised her eyebrow in curiosity as she continued to eat her dinner in bed. “Do you believe there is one?”

“It’s somethin’ I’m beginnin’ to suspect,” replied Bill. “Constance alludin’ to bein’ a student of Madame Leota’s work makes me wonder if there’s a connection between Constance and the spirit of the late psychic.”

Shrugging her narrow shoulders, Lillian chewed another bite of her food. “It would not surprise me if my step-mother summoned the spirit of Madame Leota and has communicated with the late psychic. It was only after my father died when things became worse around here. This ‘hatbox’ ghost as you call it began appearing in my dreams and soon at my bedside late at night. It threatened to kill me in my sleep. Then, as I told you, I heard the spirit of Madame

Leota herself calling upon the spirits from the séance room around the same late hours at night.” She gave a bitter laugh. “It is no wonder, mon cher, that my uncle does not linger here at the mansion. Week after week, I have seen less of him around. I believe Constance is driving him away not just by her cruel and spiteful ways, but through her spell-casting and summoning spirits and demons to haunt this estate.”

“Surely Constance couldn’t have control over the dead,” said Bill. “Even Annabelle, a demonologist and psychic-medium in training doesn’t hold that much power over spirits.”

“That is true, ma chérie,” said Lillian, looking at him slyly. “But if my theory of Constance having the ability to summon and control the dead to do her bidding is true, then perhaps it is because either Madame Leota has somehow granted her such supernatural powers, or Constance has somehow gained control over the late psychic’s spirit. Both are not so different from each other, no?”

“What do you mean?” said Bill.

Lillian looked surprised back at him. “Think about it. Both are highly jealous of other people, especially over women in the lives of their beaux. They both have gone to great lengths to get what they want, meaning Madame Leota summoned the dead to frighten Emily de Claire to death over her jealousy of her, and Constance murdered those who stand in her way of being a wealthy socialite.”

Bill nodded, his face looking grim as he forced his next question out. “Lillian, how is it that a healthy adolescent-girl like yourself suddenly gets sick from an illness no doctor has been able to diagnose?”

Lillian’s eyes strayed back down to her food tray in her lap. “Why do you ask when we both know the answer?”

Bill stared hard at her. “Do you believe your step-mother is orderin’ spirits to make you sick to eventually kill you?” Remaining silent Lillian continued eating her meal, her eyes locked onto her plate of steamed vegetables and seasoned chicken breast. “I’m sorry,” said Bill, beginning to realize what was happening. “Since the moment I stepped-foot into your room, I’ve been askin’ you questions regardin’ the investigation. My purpose of comin’ up here was to just share a meal with you and be in your company. Seems I’ve overshadowed that by interrogatin’ you. I’m sorry.”

Lillian looked back at him in amusement. “I have an idea,” she grinned. “Why don’t we play a game?”

“A game?” said Bill.

“Yes,” replied Lillian. “The game is called ‘A Secret for a Secret’. It is a game that helps to build trust. Would you care to play with me?”

Bill smirked. “I don’t know.”

“Oh come now Bill, have I not earned even the *slightest* bit of your trust already since our meeting in the garden? There are Gracey Family secrets stemming all the way back to my Great Grandfather, William Gracey, that only I know from conversations with my father that could be of great importance in your investigation.”

Looking back at her puzzled, Bill spoke. “If there is important information you are aware of that can help, why not just tell me?”

“Because,” began Lillian staring flirtatiously back. “This would not only help me to learn more about who *you* are, but be a much more entertaining experience for the both of us than, as you said, interrogating me.”

Bill frowned and finally gave his answer. “All right. What are the rules to this game?”

“No lying,” said Lillian. “Every answer must be an honest one. And I *will* know if you are lying.”

“All right,” replied Bill.

“Excellent!” said Lillian happily. “I shall go first.”

“*Come on, come on!*” bellowed Big Hobbs from inside the coach as he and his driver passed through the front gate. “How long should it take to get to my own house?!” A pair of large oil lamps to either side of the black, cast-iron gate doors illuminated their way in the dark as night fell upon the plantation. The horse-drawn coach slowly made its way towards Gracey House, which was illuminated along the mansion’s wrap-around porch and upper-balcony its amber glass-paneled lamps amidst the surrounding darkness.

‘Constance had better be in a sweeter mood than she had been this morning, or it is *right* back to the Palace for me tonight,’ thought Big Hobbs as the coach finally brought him around to the mansion’s front steps. The driver opened the door and Big Hobbs slowly stepped out of the coach, keeping a steady-hand upon the driver’s shoulder to keep his balance.

“Bonsoir, monsieur,” said the driver, tipping his top-hat to Big Hobbs. He climbed back up onto the coach’s driver seat and slapped the reins upon the brawn-legged horses’ backs. As the coach pulled away out of the glowing lights of Gracey House back into the surrounding dark, Big Hobbs frowned and stumbled slowly towards the front steps.

“All right, *Constance*, dear sister-in-law!” slurred Big Hobbs, climbing the first few steps. “Why my brother George ever desired to marry you is beyond me. But I will *not* be disrespected by you *anymore!* Do you understand?! Do you *hear* me, *CONSTANCE HATCHAWAY!*”

Suddenly, two ghostly figures appeared at the top of the steps. Big Hobbs, steadying himself against the railing, stared in shock at the ash-white transparent figures staring blankly at him. “*Hobbs! Skinny Hobbs!* Do my waking eyes deceive me?!” said Big Hobbs in awe. The two ghosts remained silent and deathly still as Big Hobbs climbed the last of the steps and began approaching his brothers. The two spirits then vanished, like two streams of fog in a swift breeze. Big Hobbs halted his steps, searching for them in his drunken-stupor.

“*Hello, Big Hobbs,*” came a bone-chilling voice behind him. Big Hobbs’ eyes widened and he slowly turned around. Standing before him was a headless ghost. A top-hat hovered

above the void where its head should have been. In its bony fingers grasped a large, transparent hatbox revealing its contents; a head with a skeletal face, yellow snake-like eyes and long, stringy hair smiling devilishly at him as the hatbox was lifted up to Big Hobbs' face. "*Welcome home!*" The hatbox ghost laughed manically as just then, a great host of spirits appeared along the grounds before the mansion. Many of whom the now terrified Big Hobbs recognized as deceased relatives of the family from portraits hanging along the mansion's walls. The hatbox ghost grabbed hold of his thick arms with supernatural strength as Big Hobbs yelled in terror.

"Have you ever fallen in love?" asked Lillian.

Bill looked at her aghast then smiled awkwardly. "We really are divin' right into the deep, personal topics, n'est-ce pas?"

Lillian giggled. "Well, go on. A man who has experienced the brutality and pain of war surely has encountered love as well."

Giving a slight nod, Bill took another sip of his wine. "There was one lady, a long time ago. It was after the war. My men and I were stationed at the nation's capital awaitin' orders when all the officers were invited to attend a celebratory ball held at the White House. There was a fancy dinner, long-winded speeches, and too many toasts to count to honor President Lincoln, General Grant, and the commanding officers. None of it I really cared about. I just wanted to return home to my family."

"My anticipation is overwhelming me, mon amie," said Lillian, placing her hand over his upon the bed. "Who was she?"

Bill smiled faintly, his eyes trailing down to her soft and slender feminine hand placed over his large, calloused hand as he began thinking back to that night. "There was dancin' after dinner, and when I got up from my seat at the table to retire for the night, there was this young lady, a few years older than you, standin' alone near the edge of the dance floor. She wore a light-blue gown that seemed to shimmer and shine as she stood in the surroundin' dark at the edge of the room. Now I've never been one to dance before, nor ever wanted to in my life, but I was completely drawn to this young lady and was ready to ask her for a dance. She was so beautiful with her dark hair tied up around the back of her head. Her milky-skin lookin' smooth like porcelain, and her *eyes*...her large grey eyes had the slightest hint of blue and framed with long, thick-curved lashes. She noticed me almost as soon as I had noticed her and she gave me a look I'll never forget."

"What was held in her eyes when she saw you?" said Lillian softly, enthralled by his story thus far.

"I saw all at once in her eyes an immediate attraction, pure kindness and warmth, as well as a plea for me to come over to her."

Lillian smiled faintly, "Then what happened?"

Bill grinned. "I finally approached her and as I did, she immediately took my hands into hers. They felt so cold and so light, like a pair of feathers with the strength to hold up my hands before our waists. As if she already knew that I was feelin' awkward about dancin', she placed my right hand upon her hip, the other she interlocked her fingers with mine and stretched out our arms, leading us out onto the dance floor among the others' dancin'. Almost immediately, I felt the sharp stares of everyone around us, but it didn't matter because my eyes were locked on hers. Her gaze made me feel like we were soul mates who had lost each other a long time ago. At this point, I felt even more sharp and disapprovin' stares from those dancin' among us. Murmurs from 'em started to fill the room as well, but I didn't care. Whoever this amazin', beautiful young woman was, without even speaking one word to each other, made me feel a love I have yet to experience since that night.

"As we danced, I prayed our time together wouldn't end. I finally looked over at everyone around us, starin' at me like I was dancin' in the nude, when just as I looked back at her, she began to slowly disappear. I watched in complete shock as her angelic-face gazed back at me sadly. She placed her cold fingers on my cheek, began mouthin' the words 'I love...' then vanished into thin air. I stood there completely dazed, realizin' for the first time why everyone was lookin' at me with odd stares, muttering their disapproval to their wives and husbands such things as 'Why is that officer dancing alone?' and 'Who does that officer think he is looking at? Is he mentally ill?'"

Lillian began to giggle. "Oh dear."

"What's so funny?" said Bill, feeling slightly hurt by her reaction to his story.

"It was not your story, mon cher, I swear it. Your story was beautiful and nearly brought tears to my eyes. Did you ever discover who the spirit was?"

Bill nodded. "It was the daughter of a governor attendin' the ball that night. She was found outside on the balcony, died from heart complications just after supper had been served. Her name was Caroline Bower. I never knew or met her in my life, but I *know* what and how I felt when I encountered her spirit that night."

"I believe you, Bill," said Lillian sympathetically and squeezed his hand gently.

"So why did you laugh?"

Lillian smiled faintly. "It was just something that came to mind. I realize now how truly awkward it must have been with Jeanette-Marie last night. When she had taken you out onto the ballroom floor then kissed you in front of everyone. I imagine you must have experienced moments of reflection while this was happening of your experience with the spirit of Mademoiselle Bower."

"Awkward doesn't begin to describe how I was feeling last night with her," grumbled Bill.

"D'accord," said Lillian with a satisfied-grin. She removed her hand from his and began eating more of her supper. "Now, ask me a question and you shall receive a secret."

“All right,” said Bill. “Who *is* William Gracey? Who was he really? There seems to be some mystery around the man that I suspect you know about. And his fiancée, Emily de Claire, her body was recently found locked in a trunk up in the attic, making Madame Leota’s story about Emily committing suicide by drownin’ in the bayou a lie. So, how did she *really* die?”

Lillian breathed a deep sigh. “Understand, mon chéri, that what I am about to tell you can *never* leave the mansion.”

“All right,” replied Bill.

“The history of my family is far darker and sinister than everyone thinks. You see, my Great Grandfather William’s wealth was gained through piracy.”

“*Piracy?*” said Bill stunned.

“He was one of the most feared pirates in the Caribbean,” replied Lillian. “Despite his appearance of looking the part of a gentleman, William was a blood-thirsty pirate with an addiction for wealth. He and his crew attacked dozens of ships, slaughtered hundreds of men, and raided many coastal towns on several islands up and down the Caribbean.”

“How did he become a pirate?” said Bill.

“He was born into it,” said Lillian. “He was a bastard son to the famous French privateer, Jean Lafitte. Lafitte never knew about my great grandfather and died before William began terrorizing the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. But William’s mother told him about Jean Lafitte, and William was so enthralled over his father being the famous privateer that he too wished to become as famous and vastly wealthy. So, William ran away from home, became a cabin boy on a spice-trading ship, and then later-on led a mutiny against his own captain. He killed any of the crew who did not pledge their loyalty to him and soon began attacking ships, stealing their gold, cargo, anything of value. William was so ruthless he became known as Captain Blood.”

Bill nodded, continuing to eat his meal and listening intently to her story. “So, William Gracey was the infamous Captain Blood. He gained all his wealth through piracy, so then how did he meet Emily de Claire?”

“Well,” said Lillian. “After years at sea, William eventually grew tired of murder and pillaging. He had become wealthy enough in his mind to retire as being Captain Blood. However, he did not trust his crew to not reveal who he was to anyone, especially with such a high bounty on his head for his capture or corpse. So, William poisoned his crew’s food and drinks one night, murdering the entire crew. He then set his own ship on fire and rowed a small boat into the bayous where all of his treasure was secretly buried. Later, he received a job as a banker in New Orleans and took back his name, William, adding Gracey as his surname. One day while he was working at the bank, Emily de Claire came in to make a withdrawal. Both William and Emily instantly became infatuated with each other.”

“Right,” said Bill, connecting the story together. “So later they became engaged to marry, Emily having no idea that William was once Captain Blood.”

Lillian nodded. "It was such a well-kept secret that it was only until my grandfather, Steven, was told much later in his life by his mother that he was the son of William Gracey and that before, William was Captain Blood."

"Who was Steven's mother?" asked Bill.

"She was once a prostitute at a brothel in the French Quarter," said Lillian. "Before William met Emily, he frequented the saloons and brothels nightly, much like my Uncle Big Hobbs does today."

"Hmmm," expelled Bill. "Like Grandfather, like Grandson?"

"I suppose so," replied Lillian with a disapproving look.

Bill gave a nod. "Now, movin' on to William and Emily's weddin'. I already know about Madame Leota and her involvement in their lives at this point in the story, but if the late psychic *lied* about Emily committin' suicide by drownin' in the bayou, then what really happened?"

"I can finally answer that mystery question," said Lillian with a grin.

"How?" said Bill perplexed. "No one but Madame Leota was around when Emily died."

"True," said Lillian. "But Emily was there *too*."

Bill stared at her in surprise. "You've spoken to Emily's spirit?"

"Just days before you arrived here," said Lillian.

"What did she say?"

Lillian gave a bemused smile. "She revealed to me how she was murdered. On the day of the wedding, as she readied herself alone in her room in the mansion, the spirits of William's former crew of pirates appeared before her. They revealed to her who William truly was and all of the terrible atrocities he had committed while he had been Captain Blood. After the spirits told her this, Emily was not only so deathly-frightened by them, but pain stricken by what they had revealed about her beloved and who she was truly marrying. She died from a heart attack. After she died, her spirit watched as her corpse was stuffed into a chest by Madame Leota and placed up into the attic. The psychic made her way to the bayou and threw the chest's key into its murky depths. Then she revealed the news of Emily's apparent 'suicide' to William."

"William afterwards committing suicide over Madame Leota's lie," said Bill, continuing to piece together the story.

"Yes," replied Lillian. "Madame Leota's plan had back-fired in trying to have William all to herself."

"What happened to William? Was his body ever found?"

Lillian nodded. "When I encountered Emily's spirit late one night in the hallway, she told me he had hung himself somewhere in the mansion just after hearing of her apparent 'suicide' from Madame Leota. She did not, however, tell me if his body was ever recovered or where exactly he hung himself in the mansion."

Bill drank the last of his wine. "You aware, Lillian, that the attic is right above your boudoir?" Just then, an urgent-knocking came at the door.

"Mademoiselle Lillian? Monsieur Garret?" came the voice of Mister Frees.

“Come in, Paul,” said Lillian with a flare of annoyance in her tone. The butler entered, quickly approaching the foot of her bed.

“Mademoiselle,” began Mister Frees, his face looking gravely at Lillian, “I am so sorry to have to bring you such news...”

“That my step-mother has requested Bill’s return to the dining room?” interrupted Lillian with a grin. “Well, you can tell her that he is enjoying his supper here with me and will not be returning to the dining room this evening.”

The butler shook his head sullenly. “No, mademoiselle. Your uncle, he has died.”

Lillian’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I am sorry, Lillian,” said the butler, his facial-muscles tensing-up as he spoke the words. It was the first time Bill had heard him address her informally. “He was found outside lying at the bottom of the porch steps. Doctor Marselles suspects he had a heart-attack.”

Lillian’s eyes began welling-up with tears. “Oh no,” she uttered quietly, cupping her hands over her nose and mouth. Beginning to cry, she leaned over and embraced Bill wrapping her arms tightly around his broad shoulders and wept. Bill hesitantly embraced her, looking over at the butler and noticing in his gaze at them was a look of jealousy intermingling with pain.

“I’m sorry, Lillian,” whispered Bill in her ear. After a moment, Lillian released him and slowly got out of bed. Bill quickly grabbed her robe and helped her place her arms through its long, wide sleeves and wrapped it over her nightgown.

She approached Mister Frees, her face flushed and her eyes sullen. “*Where* is she?” she said sternly.

“My dear Lillian,” began the butler calmly, “now is not the time for such confrontations. Please, *trust* me when I say that you must try to remain calm. Return to your bed and get some much-needed sleep. You are in no condition to be out of bed at this time.” Lillian made to speak when Mister Frees quickly spoke again, “I know, sweet Lillian, I know. Yet over the course of years, how many times have we discussed the issue of you believing Madame Constance having to do with instances such as this, only to find that they have all either been coincidental or circumstantial?”

Lillian shook her head, staring up at the man in disbelief. “Why do you defend her, Paul? I still remember a time when you *trusted* and *believed* all that I would tell you.”

“I defend you *both*, mademoiselle,” replied the butler. “*All* in this mansion I would protect with my life if I had to. But you cannot continue to blame your mother-in-law for the haunting of this plantation, nor can you accuse her of the murder of your father. There is simply no proof of her having anything to do with it.”

“But I *know* it was her!” exclaimed Lillian. “My uncle’s health has been fine!” She began to cry again as she spoke. “She’s *controlling* them, Paul. Just as Madame Leota had long ago in this very house!”

Mister Frees reached out, hugging Lillian as the two embraced tightly. “I believe you, Lillian,” he said softly as Lillian wept against his stark-black butler jacket. “That is why right now, we must entrust Mister Garret to get to the bottom of all this. It is why he is here, no? He,

along with Detective Hughes and Mademoiselle Annabelle du Bois, will discover the source of what you and others here have seen and heard.”

Releasing the butler Lillian stepped back, her eyes staring down at the floor as she wiped the tears from her eyes and cheeks. She reluctantly nodded in agreement then turned to Bill. “Would you visit with me in the morning, mon cher?”

“Count on it,” said Bill comfortingly.

“I am afraid Paul is right. I am beginning to feel quite dizzy and exhausted at the moment,” said Lillian, lifting her arms slightly from her sides to remain balanced upon her feet. Both the butler and Bill quickly sprung into action and helped her back into bed. As Mister Frees made for the door, Lillian grasped Bill’s arm to hold him back. “Please, Bill,” she said out of earshot of the butler. “You are the only one left I fully trust in this house anymore.”

Bill nodded, placing his hand over hers that held his arm. “I’m going to get to the bottom of this, I promise.” Lillian’s eyes slowly closed as she began to fall into a deep sleep.

“Mister Garret,” said Mister Frees waiting for him at the door. “Shall we?”

Looking sharply back at the man, Bill approached him. “Right.”

Both quietly left the boudoir and shut the door behind them. As they strode down the hallway, Bill finally spoke. “Do you really believe her, Mister Frees?”

The butler smirked. “As I had told you about others who have experienced ‘spirits’ roaming the halls and rooms of Gracey House, I believe that *she* believes to have seen and heard such encounters.”

“And what about today in the parlor? Were the ghosts Detective Hughes, Annabelle and myself witnessed playin’ cards at the table just a figment of our imagination?”

The butler shrugged. “*I* saw no such thing. All I heard about were the three of you claiming to have seen something in empty chairs around the table.”

Bill halted his steps in the middle of the long, dark hallway and quickly grabbed the butler’s arm. “You’re *lyin’*. You really *are* defending Madame Constance, aren’t you?”

Mister Frees stared sharply back at him. “It is a complicated matter, Mister Garret. If I may offer you some advice, all of what you see here at Gracey House may not be what it seems.”

“What the hell does that mean?” growled Bill.

The butler gave a menacing smile. “It means trust with your own eyes and ears, not those of others.”

Staring angrily back at the man, Bill spoke. “You can count on that, and you can also count on *me* keeping my eyes and ears on both you and Madame Constance.”

Chapter Eight

“Mister Garret,” said Constance as Bill and Mister Frees entered the main foyer. “I half-expected you to have retired to your room for the evening.”

Bill gave the old woman a sharp look. “A man has died tonight. Not just a man, but a Gracey who was a beloved member of the family.”

“That promiscuous drunken gambler...*beloved?*” scoffed Constance. “Big Hobbs was nothing more than a scoundrel who was bleeding money from the family fortune.”

Ignoring her words, Bill approached the tall and ancient-looking Doctor Marselles. “Mister Frees tells me you think it was a heart-attack that killed Monsieur Hobbs, is that right?”

“Yes, that is my professional opinion,” replied the doctor. “There were multiple areas on the body where he had sweat profusely. His entire undershirt for instance was completely drenched, as was his face and neck. Combined with his girth, his lengthy history of abusing alcohol and diet of fatty-foods, a heart-attack is the most probable cause of his death.”

Detective Hughes came to Bill’s side. “Bill, I have asked these questions already after Doctor Marselles examined the body. There seems to have been no foul play here, no witnesses outside the mansion when Big Hobbs died. It all seems to point to a heart-attack as the doctor has said.”

Suddenly, Bill watched as a spirit passed through the closed front doors and floated into the main foyer. Bill looked at the others around him, realizing at that moment that only he could see the spirit. As it drew closer to him, the spirit halted and Bill recognized it as Big Hobbs. “What *really* happened outside tonight?” spoke Bill quietly.

“I simply cannot agree with the doctor that he died from *just* a heart-attack,” said Annabelle. “This mansion is haunted as we all know. If Big Hobbs truly died from a heart attack, then his consumption of fatty-foods and liquor are not to blame. It is the *ghosts* here, and I believe they are being controlled by someone.” Bill then watched as the ghost of Big Hobbs stared directly at him and pointed straight at Constance before disappearing from his sight.

“Well,” said Constance. “We all know who is obsessed with the occult here, who has spent her entire life learning spell-casting and pouring over books written by her distant relation. A self-claimed ‘psychic-medium’ among us who has said to have heard the voices of ghosts while studying in the mansion’s séance room!”

“I had nothing to do with this,” said Annabelle boldly. “I never have, nor have I ever *said*, that I can *control* spirits. Besides, why would I have Monsieur Big Hobbs murdered? I rarely spoke to the man, let alone saw him throughout my time here.”

“Maybe someone else called upon the spirits to do their dirty work for them,” said Bill, looking at Constance.

Constance raised her eyebrow in curiosity. “Then who I wonder? No one but Annabelle has invested their time learning how to communicate with the dead.”

“I’m sorry,” began Annabelle, looking sharply at the old woman. “I could have sworn you had told me earlier today that *you* too were a student of Madame Leota’s work.”

“I said no such thing!” huffed Constance in shock. “You are nothing but a lying lush! I *knew* George was wrong to allow you to study the late psychic’s work here. He saw something good in you that clearly is not there at all. You have been trying to get us all killed so that you can claim the Gracey fortune for yourself! These ghosts that you control haunt my house and had murdered my husband, and now my brother-in-law. Clearly it was *you* who ordered your spirit-servants to make Lillian deathly ill. *Well*, you will not take me down like you have the others!”

Smiling faintly, Annabelle spoke as she stared coldly back at Constance. “Believe me when I say to you, Constance, had I wanted you dead it would have happened a *long* time ago.”

Constance’s face turned bright-red with fury. “I want you out of this house *now*,” she sneered.

“That is *enough*, Constance!” yelled a voice at the far end of the foyer. All turned simultaneously to see Lillian slowly walking towards them with the help of her maid.

“Lillian,” said Constance in a more calm, caring tone. “Dear child, what are you doing out of bed at this hour? Return to your room before you make your illness worse.”

“It is *not* Mademoiselle du Bois causing all of this. It is *you*!” exploded Lillian. “It has *always* been you!”

Mister Frees came to Lillian’s side and quietly spoke to her. “Mademoiselle please, let us return you to your boudoir. We can discuss this in the morning.”

“Stay out of this, Paul!” exclaimed Lillian, shoving him aside. The butler stumbled backwards in shock as Lillian continued to speak. “*You* killed my father, *you* were the one who made me ill by having spirits and demons attack me in the middle of the night, haunting my every step during the day! I have no doubt that *you* control the spirits and demons that haunt this mansion and had my uncle killed this evening. You wish to have the family fortune all to yourself?! Then *take it!* Take it all!!! Leave me and Gracey House in peace you evil witch!” Lillian’s eyes suddenly closed, her knees buckling as she fainted and began to collapse to the floor when her maid and Bill quickly caught her and held her up onto her feet.

“Mister Frees, help Mademoiselle du Lays take Lillian back to her room,” said Constance as the butler took Bill’s place in holding up Lillian. He carried her in his arms as he and the maid exited the foyer with the doctor in tow. “*Humph*,” expelled Constance. “The ravings of an ill child. I should have her locked in her boudoir day and night if this is how she is to act henceforth.” Bill stared at her sharply as she turned her attention onto him. “Now then, I expect to see the three of you later this evening before you continue your investigation tonight. You will report to me all that had happened today.” She turned on her heel, leaving the three alone in the main foyer.

“I’m going to go find Mister Fusselbottom,” said Detective Hughes. “Perhaps he saw something outside when Big Hobbs died.”

“I will come with you,” said Annabelle. Bill immediately caught them both smiling warmly at each other as they exited the foyer through the mansion’s front doors.

As Bill began to go his own way, he was suddenly tapped on the shoulder from behind. He turned abruptly, discovering the groundskeeper standing before him. "Mister Fusselbottom," he said surprised. "You look like you've seen a ghost!"

"Not *a* ghost," stuttered the groundskeeper. "*Ghosts.*"

Bill nodded, placing a comforting hand upon the horrified man's shoulder. "Come on, let's go retrieve the detective and Mademoiselle du Bois and talk."

"*NO,*" Mister Fusselbottom forced out. "I only speak to you, sah. Detective Hughes already spoke to me today and apologized for not believing me before. I am still not convinced he would truly believe me."

Looking deep into the terrified man's eyes, Bill then gave a decisive nod. "All right, let's talk privately in the parlor then."

Pouring two glasses of scotch behind the bar, Bill took the drinks over to where the nervous groundskeeper sat at the large round table. He handed him one of the glasses while taking a sip of the caramel-colored liquor from his own glass.

"*Merci,*" said Mister Fusselbottom, taking a generous sip from his glass.

"*Now,*" said Bill, taking a seat across from him at the table. "What happened tonight?"

The groundskeeper took another sip of his scotch, then finally spoke. "I saw what 'appened to Monsieur Big Hobbs. I was lighting de last of de lamps around de porch when I came 'round de corner an' saw 'em standing on de porch steps. He was not alone."

"Who was he with?"

Mister Fusselbottom breathed in, summoning what courage he had left in him and spoke. "Monsieur Big Hobbs began floatin' in de air as if someone, or *something*, was grabbin' hold of 'em. Din, he suddenly flew down de porch steps, as if he was being trown by whatever 'ad 'eld 'em up in da air. As I hid around de corner of de mansion, I saw wit my waking eyes *hundreds* of ghosts appear one-by-one along de grounds! Dey descended upon Monsieur Big Hobbs as he yelled in terror." He paused, taking another long sip of his scotch.

Seeing the man was clearly shaken still by the experience, Bill spoke calmly to him. "Take your time."

Nodding, the groundskeeper took a brief moment to calm himself and collect his thoughts. Finally he spoke again. "De ghosts grabbed and surrounded Master Big Hobbs until I could no longer see 'em among the countless spirits. It was den dat I saw for de briefest of moments an image of one particular ghost standing at de top of de porch steps, watching with an evil smile de ghosts frightening Monsieur Big Hobbs to death! Before he disappeared from my sight, he looked straight at me. He gave a devilish-smile as if knowing I 'ad been standing dare witnessing what was 'appening de whole time."

Bill stared hard at him. "What did this particular ghost look like?"

“He ‘ad large, snake eyes dat bulged wit no eyelids, his entire face was like dat of a skull. He ‘ad long, unkempt hair beneath de top ‘at he wore. But what I thought was most strange was dat he carried a large ‘at-box in his bony hand.”

Frowning, Bill took another drink of his scotch. “I see. Did you recognize the other spirits attackin’ Big Hobbs?”

Mister Fusselbottom nodded. “Most I recognized from de pictures ‘anging along de ‘allway walls. Dey are all Gracey Family relatives.”

“I appreciate your honesty about what you saw,” said Bill.

“About dis ghost dat looked at me on de porch, monsieur,” said the groundskeeper. “I fear dat I may be in danger of it attacking me next since it had caught me watching what was ‘appening. ‘Ave you seen or know anything about dis ghost from your investigation?”

Reluctantly, Bill nodded. “Since you have entrusted me with what you just revealed, I think it’s only fair that I do the same for you. Yes, I’m well-aware of this particular ghost. It’s been hauntin’ me since I left home to come here. From what I understand of it so far, it’s some kinda demon that has control over the other ghosts hauntin’ the plantation. Not only has it attempted to scare and communicate to me, but it has with Mademoiselle du Bois earlier today, as well as Lillian ever since she became deathly ill.”

“My God,” said the groundskeeper in shock. “Poor, Mademoiselle Lillian and Annabelle! What does dis demon want? Why is it causing such fear and death ‘ere?”

“I’ve been thinkin’ a lot about that same question,” said Bill, taking out his notebook and reading over notes he had written when he first arrived at the mansion. “Mister Frees told me that the plantation mausoleum, cemetery, and pet-cemetery contain nine hundred ninety-six bodies, both human and pets.”

“What makes dat important?” said Mister Fusselbottom.

“I gotta hunch that the hatbox ghost has its own agenda aside from Madame Constance, who I believe is trying to rid every last Gracey in order to claim the family fortune. I also believe she’s somehow aligned or controllin’ the hatbox-ghost to do her biddin’ to rid the last of the Graceys. I think this demon however has its own agenda to attain a certain number of ghosts in Gracey House. It’s only a theory, but I need to ask Annabelle if there’s any significance to the number ‘one thousand’ in regards to ghosts.”

“But dis demon,” said the groundskeeper, “it *saw* me. Am I too in danger of it now?”

Bill frowned. “I think at this time we should all be a little more cautious. Will you tell me if comes in contact with you again?”

Mister Fusselbottom nodded. “Of course, sah.”

“Ghosts in the parlor, you say?” said Constance as she heard the accounts of all that had happened during the day’s investigation.

“A residual-haunting,” said Annabelle. “When spirits appear doing the same actions in a repeated cycle...”

“Yes, yes I *know* what it means,” snapped Constance, then noticed Detective Hughes and Bill looking at her suspiciously. “Or so I have heard before.”

“At any rate,” said Bill. “There’s much more to inspect and explore durin’ tonight’s investigation.”

“Indeed,” said Constance, giving him a peculiar look. “Tell me, Mister Garret, how have your conversations been with my step-daughter?”

Bill stared back at her with a blank, expressionless face. “Fine. She’s a brave girl fightin’ this ‘illness’ she acquired.”

“From your tone, I gather Lillian has told you her theory of how she became sick to begin with?”

“Only that she believes it’s not somethin’ her own body produced, like cancer.”

Constance scowled. “I wonder. Just what would cause her to experience consistent chronic fatigue, dizziness, nausea, and pressure against her chest if it is not a known disease or a body anomaly such as cancer?”

Bill stared blankly back at her. “It’s part of why we’re here, Madame. There just may be a possible connection between the hauntin’ here and Lillian’s illness.”

“Mademoiselle Lillian has spoken to me in the past that she claims to have seen ghosts late at night in her bedroom,” said Marcus. “As well as following her in the hallways of the mansion.” Bill looked sharply at the detective and he shrugged. “It is no secret that she has expressed these beliefs. She said it herself tonight in the main foyer only an hour ago.”

Annabelle smirked as she watched Constance’s uncomfortable reaction to Marcus’ words. “Poor Lillian. To lose her last blood-relative, it just breaks your heart.”

“*Humph,*” expelled Constance. “Big Hobbs’ death could not have come at a worse time. He was supposed to be of help to you three regarding Gracey Family history. I am sure it could have been useful to use him as a reference.”

Bill nodded. “Lillian did mention to me that the Gracey Family has a dark past, but wouldn’t tell me any further details about it.”

“I *told* you, Mister Garret,” scolded Constance. “Do *not* believe a word that girl tells you! She is already trying to manipulate you with her lies regarding a ‘dark past’. It is simply not true. The Gracey family has always been a distinguished, well-respected people of the community.”

“If that’s true, Madame,” began Bill, “then why did Master William Gracey allow a psychic-medium to live and conduct séances and spell-casting in his mansion? Why is it that the spirits of dead Gracey family-members are hauntin’ and causin’ trouble on the plantation? And why, Madame, is it that you find yourself once again a widow, each one of your husbands mysteriously murdered by an axe or hatchet to the back or head?”

An uncomfortable silence fell upon the room as awkward-looks were exchanged by the detective and Annabelle. A dark, seething anger burned in Constance’s eyes when finally she spoke. “*Well* Mister Garret, it seems your visit with Big Hobbs today proved to have sealed your

assumptions about me and this family. I imagine *he* was the one who revealed my marriages to you, no?" With a slight hesitation, Bill gave a nod, keeping Lillian's secret to himself. "Then I shall leave you three to your work tonight." Constance stood from her seat on the couch as the three then stood as well. "I do hope you find what you are looking for," she said, staring hard at Bill who in-turn exchanged a sharp look. "Happy hunting."

"So," began Marcus as he, Annabelle and Bill congregated back into the main foyer. "How shall we conduct tonight's investigation?"

"We split-up," said Bill. "We'll cover more of the mansion and grounds in a shorter period of time than if we stay together."

"There is a much better chance in discovering spirits roaming about or trying to make contact if we are alone as well," added Annabelle. "If we truly are dealing with haunting spirits, then they are more likely to show themselves when one is alone and isolated. However, I refuse to be alone at this point in time as we wander about the mansion. I am going with Marcus."

Bill looked at her curiously. "You're not *scared* of ghosts all of a sudden, are you Mademoiselle?"

"It is *not* the spirits haunting this plantation that I am afraid of," snapped Annabelle. "It is wandering the halls of this mansion alone and having Constance sneak-up on me and drive a hatchet into my back."

Marcus smiled thoughtfully at her. "To be fair my dear, you are not a newly-wedded husband of Madame Constance's.

Annabelle smirked, placing her hands upon her hips. "Even so, if she *was* the murderer of her past husbands, which I have always suspected she was, who knows if there may be other victims she may have murdered."

"*Wait*," said Bill in frustration. "All this time, you two knew about Constance's past and didn't tell me about it?"

Annabelle and Marcus looked at each other with confused looks. "We thought you knew already," said Annabelle. "We figured Mister Frees had told you about her past during your trip here."

"No!" roared Bill. "That was information he seemed to have left out."

Rolling her eyes, Annabelle approached Marcus and stood by his side. "At any rate, it is clear to me after my encounter with her today in the séance room that Constance cannot be trusted. So I will go with Marcus.

"Fine," said Bill. "I think that at the top of every hour we meet back here to discuss anything we may have seen, also to be sure that we're all still alive."

"Agreed," said Marcus.

“Very droll, Mister Garret,” said Annabelle looking at him un-amused.

“Shall we begin then?” said Marcus.

As the detective and Annabelle began leaving the main foyer, Bill spoke. “Mademoiselle Annabelle?”

“What is it now, Bill?” said Annabelle.

“I wanted to know if there was any meanin’ or significance spiritually with the number one thousand.”

Thinking over his question for a brief moment, Annabelle spoke. “According to Madame Leota’s writings, it is considered a symbol of multitude and immensity in the spirit realm. It also represents fullness of quantity.”

“Why do you ask, Bill?” asked Marcus. “Does this have something to do with the haunting?”

“Just somethin’ that Mister Frees had told me when we first arrived here,” said Bill. “He said that there were nine hundred ninety-six corpses, both human and pets, buried on the grounds. Seems like as this number has grown, so has the spiritual activity around here.”

Annabelle nodded. “That makes sense. As the soul-count here nears one thousand, it is rational to believe that the haunting could be seen and experienced by more people, such as the staff who claimed to have seen spirits and objects moving in mid-air. Also, the activities, intensity, and strength of the spirits grows stronger as they feed-off the living’s fear, anger, and even weakened states such as illness...” she paused, looking discouragingly at Bill.

“Lillian,” said Bill frowning. “The hatbox-ghost.”

“The who?” said Marcus and Annabelle simultaneously.

“A demon according to some. Seems to be commandin’ this entire hauntin’ here. I believe it’s what murdered Big Hobbs tonight and is also what’s makin’ Lillian sick.”

“You have *seen* this demon?” said Annabelle.

Bill hesitantly nodded. “It’s been hauntin’ me since I left home.”

“Does it have a skull-like face, large snake-like eyes, and carries a hatbox that it throws at its victims with its head inside it?” said Marcus.

“Yeah,” said Bill surprised. “How’d you know?”

Marcus frowned. “Lillian confided in me just before her tight-rope walking accident. She described to me this ‘ghost’ that she claimed to have seen one night while she was asleep in her boudoir. At the time I thought of it as nothing more than a simple nightmare, or night-terror since she claimed to have actually seen this ghost after awaking from a nightmare. There was no physical evidence, no leads whatsoever to prove it had been real. I tried to rationalize the event with her by saying it had been something she had simply conjured-up in her mind.”

“Just a moment,” said Annabelle curtly. “You *knew* about this ‘demon’ and said nothing about it?” Marcus stared back at her with deep regret held in his eyes. “I see. Well, it seems *all* of us are guilty of not telling each other what we know about the haunting here. Quite the ‘team’ we are.” She stormed out of the main foyer with Marcus straggling behind her like a whipped dog. “Come along, Marcus. Let us get this night over with.”

As the large, intricately-carved grandfather clock chimed three o'clock, Bill passed by it holding a lighted hurricane lamp to illuminate his way through the darkened sitting room. During the last seven hours since they began the night's investigation, neither Bill, Annabelle, or Marcus had seen or heard anything suspicious. Each hour they returned to meet in the main foyer only to report nothing out of the ordinary. They searched nearly the entire mansion and grounds while the household slept; not a sound nor any sign of a ghost or objects moving on their own was witnessed.

'Guess we should call it a night soon,' thought Bill, holding out the lamp before him as he exited the lavish sitting room and entered the main foyer. He began to wait patiently for Marcus and Annabelle when suddenly, he felt a bony-finger tap hard upon his shoulder. The tiny hairs along the back of his neck instantly stood on-end. His heart pounded like a war drum when he quickly turned to find Mister Frees standing before him.

"It's you," growled Bill, releasing his grip off the handle of his side-arm holstered at his hip. "What do you think you're doin' sneakin' up on me in the dark?"

The butler gave a broad smile. "Just checking to see if you have heard any 'bumps' in the night, or perhaps have seen the ghost of Big Hobbs or Master William Gracey himself!" he chuckled.

"No," said Bill gruffly. "But with you skulking about the mansion, I bet that's scared away even the most sinister of ghosts lingering around Gracey House."

"Now, now, Mister Garret," said Mister Frees. "There is no need for such a sour attitude. I am here on behalf of Mademoiselle Annabelle and Detective Hughes to deliver a message to you."

"What message?"

"They have retired to their rooms for the night," replied the butler in his typical condescending-tone.

Bill shook his head. "Quitters. It's only the middle of the night. We have until at least sunrise to keep looking around."

"Apparently they had both reached their limit of 'excitement' over not seeing nor hearing any ghosts."

Bill looked at him inquisitively. "And why are you still up and about, Mister Frees?"

"To ensure your safety, of course," replied the butler. "Madame Constance did not wish for the three of you to feel you were being chaperoned or escorted. However, she did desire for you to be observed from afar, in case you were in danger or in some need of aid."

"I'm not buyin' that explanation," said Bill frustrated, beginning to feel weary from the waning-night. "Doesn't she trust us enough to conduct an investigation without bein' watched?"

“Apparently not,” replied Mister Frees. “Three house-guests roaming about the mansion and grounds, suspicion sets in the mind of Madame Constance that some priceless object might be stolen.”

“I see,” said Bill. “So my suspicions about Constance are correct. Not only is she a bitter and angry old woman, but is also so frivolous and untrustworthy that she can’t trust those who she herself agreed to investigate her own house!”

Mister Frees grinned. “Shall I escort you back to your boudoir now?”

“No, I don’t need an escort. I know the way.”

“Very good, sir,” said the butler. “Have a pleasant night.” He turned on his heel and walked out of the main foyer.

Bill shook his head. ‘Just *who* are you loyal to, Paul Frees?’ he thought, watching the butler disappear into a darkened corridor. ‘Constance, or Lillian?’

As Bill began climbing the wide, curved staircase leading to his boudoir he looked up, suddenly seeing someone in his lamplight standing at the top of the stairs. He stood in shock, seeing it’s transparent-form staring down at him.

“Nell?” he spoke the name in disbelief of what he was seeing. Just as soon as he said his sister’s name, the spirit turned and ran down the hallway. Bill’s heart raced as he quickly climbed up the remaining steps and reached the landing. Staring down the dim hallway he searched desperately for any sign of her, yet found nothing but an unsettling silence in the dark. “Nell,” he said in a hushed-tone as he started to slowly walk down the hallway. As he took a few steps forward, it seemed to him as if the hallway was stretching, creating an elaborate illusion of a never-ending hall. He looked behind him, discovering he hadn’t stepped off the landing of the stairs at all, yet at the same time he had progressed forward down the hallway.

Looking back down the hallway, Bill noticed it had suddenly stretched even further to the point where he could no longer see its end. At that moment, a light appeared down the distant hall and was slowly approaching him. As it came closer, he could make out a shape. A candelabra swaying slowly left to right floated in mid-air towards him.

“What is this?” whispered Bill. He began to remember his dream where he stood in a similar hallway and a candelabra had floated towards him. Just as he remembered from his dream who had carried it down the hallway, a ghost appeared before him, stopping mere feet away from him and held the candelabra in her transparent ice-blue hands. She was strikingly-beautiful in Bill’s eyes, wearing a white wedding gown and veil. Her long thick locks draped around her shoulders and back.

“Who are you?” said Bill hesitantly to the ghost-bride.

“Once I was the bride to a man I loved more than life itself,” spoke the ghost, her thin veil shrouding her face. “Then, the truth about who he really was and the terrible acts he had done throughout his life were revealed to me.”

Bill stared at her cock-eyed. “Mademoiselle de Claire?”

Releasing the candelabra from her grasp, it floated in mid-air between them as the spirit lifted her veil from her face. “You are only the second mortal who has ever been able to see me since my death.”

Bill nodded. “Lillian, she said that she had spoken to you before.”

“Lillian is a bright and beautiful girl, much like I was when I was her age. But Lillian’s time is running out. Her soul is in danger of being taken and controlled. *All* who dare stay in this mansion are in great danger. The Demon you call the ‘hatbox ghost’ grows ever stronger. He has dominion over all souls who had been laid to rest upon these grounds.”

“How did this demon come to haunt Gracey House?” said Bill.

“He was summoned from the darkest, hellish dimension of the afterlife. A spell was cast, this demon answered. It came to Gracey House to do the spell-caster’s bidding, but this demon has *other* plans.”

Bill nodded. “Madame Constance, she wants the family fortune all to herself. I think she knew that if she were to murder the remainin’ Graceys who stand to inherit the fortune, that she would look even more suspicious in the public eye after the murders of her previous husbands.”

The spirit stared gravely at him. “She has taken to learning all that Madame Leota, the psychic-medium who had me murdered on my wedding day. After her late husband, George Hightower was murdered, the police tried to put together a case against her for the murders of George and all her previous husbands. Yet despite a lack of evidence, and that she somehow managed to always have an alibi...”

“The *butler*,” interrupted Bill. “Mister Frees hasn’t been the Gracey House butler this whole time, but Constance’s!”

The spirit nodded. “He came with Constance after she married George and moved into the mansion. She was never convicted. With the séance room full of Madame Leota’s resources and spell books, Constance realized she no longer needed to conduct any more murders herself. *Instead*, she discovered the truth about how I died through reading Madame Leota’s secret diaries that were kept hidden in the séance room. She then decided to do the same thing to the remaining Graceys. Now, Lillian is the last one and will soon be next.”

“Not if I can stop Constance,” said Bill.

“You cannot,” replied the spirit. “The demon now threatens *her* soul as well as the rest who are still in this house.”

Bill frowned. “What does the demon want?”

“To have under its control as many souls as possible,” said Emily. “If it attains one thousand souls, it will have gained enough power to physically harm and kill without ever needing to replenish its energy as it must do now.”

“How can I stop him?” said Bill.

The spirit gazed sadly back at him. "There is no stopping it now. You and everyone still alive must leave this place at once and never return!" She then disappeared, her spirit dissipating like a thinning mist in the air as the candelabra dropped to the ground at Bill's feet.

Suddenly, a terrifying scream came from the end of the hallway. "*Lillian,*" said Bill and sprinted to her boudoir.

Hearing Lillian's urgent, horrified screaming again behind the closed boudoir door, Bill hastily turned the brass doorknob, immediately discovering it locked. With all his strength, he tried kicking-in the solid mahogany door, but it did not budge. Bill took a few steps back, giving himself distance for a running-start. He raced up to the door, ramming his broad shoulder into it yet it did not move. Hearing Lillian's screams once again, he drew his pistol, aimed for the keyhole and fired. The shot shattered the locking-mechanism and the door opened ajar.

Bill burst into the boudoir. He stood in paralyzing shock as he saw Lillian hovering above her bed in mid-air. The hatbox ghost was at her bedside laughing wildly as multiple ghosts flew in and out of Lillian's body.

"*You!*" roared Bill, summoning every last ounce of courage he had.

The hatbox ghost turned, his head disappearing from atop his shoulders and reappearing in the large hatbox he held. "*Well well!*" spoke the hatbox ghost. "*What have we here? A mortal sent to be rid of me, yet is **shackled** by fear!*" The demon laughed maniacally, the ghosts moving even faster flying in and out of Lillian's body as she screamed.

"Let her go!" roared Bill and aimed his pistol at the demon. "Leave her alone!"

The hatbox ghost laughed even harder. "*As you command, Bill, but be mindful of what you demand!*" Lillian suddenly dropped onto her bed from being some feet-above it; the ghosts surrounding her hovered above. The demon hurled the hatbox containing its laughing-head at him. Bill reactively fired his pistol at it when suddenly, a powerful voice sounded behind him.

"*STOP!*" exclaimed Annabelle at the door. "Be gone, *demon* of the abyss! You are not welcome here, be gone from this child's room and from this house!"

The ghosts hovering above Lillian disappeared one-by-one, the hatbox ghost also disappeared only to reappear in the darkened corner of the room beside the window. Its bulging, snake-like eyes stared at Bill and gave a crooked grin. Appearing before the demon were the ghostly-images of Bill's younger sisters, Nell and Emma. "*You have not seen the last of me! No life in Gracey House shall I spare. When I am through, I will take the souls of your sisters. Not just one, but the pair!*" Bill lunged violently at the demon when it instantly disappeared along with the images of Nell and Emma.

Coughing and breathing heavily in her bed, Lillian slowly sat up as Bill quickly came to her bedside. "Lillian, are you all right?" he said, taking her now frigid-hand into his. Lillian leaned over to him, wrapping her arms tightly around his shoulders as she began to cry. "It's all right," he said softly. "They're gone."

“For now,” said Annabelle as she, Marcus, and Mister Frees entered the room and approached Bill. “But this mansion is *far* from being cleared of ghosts.”

“I feel so cold,” whimpered Lillian. Bill carefully laid her head back down upon her soft pillow and pulled the sheets and heavy blankets over her. “The room...it feels like it is spinning out of control. I feel so nauseous.”

“Her illness is taking a stronger hold upon her,” said Annabelle. “She needs a great deal of rest.”

“What happened here?” said Marcus. “I heard gunfire and screaming!”

Bill frowned. “Just like what happened to Big Hobbs tonight. The demon hauntin’ this mansion was tryin’ to take Lillian’s life as well.”

“*Someone* must have ordered it to do so this evening,” said Annabelle.

Turning to the butler, who had reached the boudoir moments after the hatbox ghost disappeared, Bill approached him hastily coming within inches of the man’s face. “*Where’s* Constance? I want to speak with her *now!*”

“That was why I had come up here to seek you three,” said Mister Frees gloomily. “It was then that I heard the commotion happening and came straight over. Madame Constance, she is dead.”

Chapter Nine

“All right, Mister Frees,” said Bill as he, the butler, Annabelle, and Detective Hughes congregated in the parlor and sat at the large round card-table. “What happened to Constance?”

“Apparently Madame died of a sudden heart-attack,” said Mister Frees casually. “That is Doctor Marselles diagnosis.”

Bill stared sharply at the man. “Time has come for you to explain your history with Madame Constance, Mister Frees.”

“The *late* Madame Constance you mean,” said Annabelle, crossing her arms beneath her chest with a look of satisfaction gleaming in her eyes.

“Right,” said Bill. “Time to tell us the truth about your work-history with her and exactly where your loyalties lie. Were they with the late Madame, or the Gracey Family?”

The butler breathed out. “Very well. There is no point in trying to hide the past now that Madame Constance has died. I was her butler years before she met and had wedded Master George Hightower. My relationship with Madame Constance began after the murder of her third husband, Monsieur Marquis de Doome. You see, I witnessed Madame Constance murder Monsieur de Doome when I was but a newly-appointed footman of their household. It was the

most horrific act of betrayal and pure-evil I had ever seen. She had lobbed-off his head with one swift stroke of her axe. The unsuspecting Marquis never suspected her presence when she snuck-up behind him.

“There was a look in Madame Constance’s eyes that to this day I have never forgotten. It was a look of desperation, combined with pure greed and madness. Then she saw me, realizing I had seen everything and understanding that I was quickly realizing that she was the murderer of her two previous husbands. I did not run away when she approached me, her blood-stained axe gripped tightly in her uncontrollably-shaking hands. For I was petrified in both fear and disbelief over what had just occurred. Madame Constance had been such a kind and gentle lady, yet it was all a façade to cover her true nature, a cold-blooded killer with an uncontrollable lust for wealth. She told me that if I ever spoke of what happened to anyone that I would be her next victim. I agreed and swore to her I would never speak of what she had done. In sparing my life Madame Constance forced me to become her personal butler and work for free. She threatened my life several times over the years to ensure that I would not speak about her murderous past, and I was forced to resign myself as her slave.”

“Why did you not just simply run away?” said Annabelle.

Mister Frees laughed in his usual mocking-tone. “You did not know the late Madame Constance as I did. She once tracked down a footman who worked in her previous household while briefly married to her first husband, Master Ambrose Harper. She caught him in Georgia after he had stolen a jewelry box of hers filled with precious pearl necklaces and diamond rings. She had proven that if she desires to find someone, she *will* and with whatever means necessary. I was *trapped* with nowhere to go and no one to turn to for help, until I met Mademoiselle Lillian.”

Detective Hughes shook his head in wonder. “This mansion is truly entangled with secrets!”

Bill nodded. “Go on, Mister Frees.”

The butler gave a faint smile then spoke. “My identity and relationship to Madame Constance was kept a secret. By the time she murdered her fourth husband, Master Reginald Cane, once again to obtain an unfortunate man’s fortune, she soon after met Master George Hightower Gracey. Just as she had when she met Master Reginald, she proposed that I be hired as the house butler and pretended to have never seen me before in her life. Master George did not care about who was hired as Gracey House’s butler, so long as his newly-wedded wife was happy. My first day working here, I had the pleasure of meeting Master George’s children from his previous marriage. Claude was a strong, bright young man who had an unprecedented sense of adventure. Yet in the end it was Lillian who I became very close friends with. After Madame Constance murdered George, Lillian and I found comfort and joy in each others’ company as we enjoyed our daily afternoon tea together in the garden.”

“You knew Constance murdered Lillian’s father and never told her?” said Bill.

“I only assumed Madame murdered Master George, not that she told me or that I saw her commit the act,” said the butler. “Although the murder *did* have the same elements as her

previous ones. A hatchet to the back of the head of her unsuspecting husband seemed to me like Madame Constance once again was after her current husband's fortune."

"And you never revealed to Lillian that you had been Constance's butler for years prior to being hired at Gracey House?" added Annabelle.

"Two secrets to this day I regret to have kept from her."

Bill frowned. "But there was one secret that you *did* reveal to Lillian. You told her that Constance had murdered her previous husbands, didn't you?"

Reluctantly, the butler nodded. "Lillian asked me bluntly one afternoon whether I knew her step-mother had been the murderer of her previous husbands. I reluctantly told her that she was. Lillian and I had grown to become very good and trusting friends. But I had to keep some secrets hidden from her, for both of our lives depended on it. If Madame Constance ever learned I had revealed to Mademoiselle Lillian that I was Madame Constance's slave, that she had murdered George Hightower, we would have both certainly been murdered long ago. Lillian once asked me if Madame Constance murdered her father, and I told her I did not know. I never saw her do it, nor did she ever reveal to me that she did it. Trust me when I say that Madame would have told me in confidence just to be able to brag about it."

"And yet for all your protection you tried to provide for Lillian, in the end it seems Constance still was able to harm her through summoning the hatbox-ghost," said Bill. "This demon runnin' amuck in the mansion has made her ill and forcin' her to die slowly."

Mister Frees looked at him suspiciously. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Oh *come on*, Mister Frees!" erupted Bill. "It's been made aware recently that Madame Constance was a student of Madame Leota's work. She summoned the hatbox ghost which now has control and dominion over all the souls buried here at the plantation!"

"Does this demon carry a hatbox in which its head appears inside it?" said the butler.

"The same," said Detective Hughes. "We witnessed it tonight with our very eyes trying to attack poor Lillian."

The butler looked back at him with a puzzled-look. "Lillian spoke in confidence to me about such a strange encounter she had with this 'apparition'."

"Bill," said Detective Hughes. "May I speak with you privately for a moment?"

Both men excused themselves from the table and stepped out of the parlor into the main foyer. "Bill, don't you find it odd that unlike Constance's previous husbands, where they had been murdered not more than a day after being wed to Constance, that George Hightower is found dead over a *year* after his marriage to Constance?"

"I suppose," said Bill.

"And don't you find it odd still that Constance never mentioned to Mister Frees, the only one in her life she had confessed her past murders to, that she had murdered George?"

"I'm not sure," said Bill. "Where are you going with this, Marcus?"

"A typical murderer such as Constance tends to follow a pattern of behavior. She did not tell Mister Frees she murdered George Hightower because she did *not* murder him."

Bill frowned. “Of course *she* didn’t, that’s why she summoned the hatbox ghost to do it for her.”

Marcus shook his head. “That would not follow Constance’s behavior. If she wanted George Hightower dead, she would have done it herself.”

“So what are you trying to say, that Constance never summoned the hatbox ghost to murder George or Big Hobbs?”

Shaking his head again, Marcus spoke. “Who else in this mansion has studied Madame Leota’s work, who is a psychic-medium that can summon the dead?”

Bill stared in confusion at the detective. “Annabelle? But why would she want George, Big Hobbs, and Lillian dead?”

“Don’t forget Constance,” added Marcus.

“It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It *does*, my friend,” said Marcus. “*Think* about it. Annabelle and George were getting along quite well after George agreed to allow her to use the séance room and study Madame Leota’s work. Perhaps they even became *enamored* with each other at some point. By this time, George and Constance had been married for over a year, no attempts of murdering George had happened. *Yet* as we learned from both Constance and Annabelle, there was jealousy in the air over the flirtatious attention George was giving Annabelle. So, Annabelle hatches a plot, a plot to be rid of Constance for good. Then *she* conjures a spell to summon the dead to haunt, scare, perhaps even *murder* Constance so that she and George could live happily ever after together in the mansion.”

“This story sounds strangely familiar,” said Bill, thinking back to Lillian telling him the story of William Gracey, Mademoiselle Emily de Claire, and Madame Leota.

“Who do you think gave Annabelle that idea to begin with?” came a shallow, haunting voice.

Bill turned, seeing the ghost of Mademoiselle Emily de Claire standing near them in her wedding gown, clutching a bouquet of flowers. “Bill?” said Marcus curiously. “What is it? What do you see?”

“Mademoiselle de Claire,” said Bill, his sharp-staring eyes not leaving the ghost. “She’s here with us now.”

“What does she say?” said Marcus.

“Madame Leota came to Annabelle one day while she was studying in the séance room,” spoke Emily. “She told Annabelle that if she summoned the dead, that she could be rid of Constance from her and George’s lives for good. Then Annabelle would not be in any way responsible for her death. For there would be no evidence to prove and convict her in Constance’s murder. Because her love for George had grown strong and that she longed to be with him, Annabelle called upon the spirits that night in the séance room. The same room that Madame Leota summoned William’s crewmen to haunt and scare me to death on my wedding day. Yet it seemed to Annabelle nothing had happened, that her summoning had not been heard

for she received no response or sign from the dead that night. In fact, she *was* heard. This demon that now terrorizes Gracey House has since its summoning grown strong.”

Bill stared at her dumbfounded. “Annabelle unknowingly summoned the hatbox ghost?”

The spirit nodded. “Now, all in this mansion are doomed if you do not leave soon.” She then disappeared from his sight as Bill turned his attention back to Marcus.

“Constance never wanted George Hightower dead. She didn’t intend to murder him at all. Your hunch was right Marcus, Annabelle unknowingly summoned the demon. It can cause a person to feel physically weak or ill, cause emotional distress and anger among its victims. That’s how it’s grown stronger, feedin’ off of these elements. It has taken the lives of George Hightower, Big Hobbs, Constance, and now it’s after Lillian.”

“What should we do now?” said Marcus.

Bill frowned. “We tell the truth about what’s happening here.”

“This cannot be!” said Annabelle, staring in disbelief at Bill and Marcus.

“Did you, or did you not call upon the spirits to have them scare or murder Constance during the first year you began coming to Gracey House?” said Marcus.

Annabelle gazed at him hesitantly as the butler watched the three of them from the opposite-end of the large, round table. “I...I do not seem to recall anything of the sort.”

“Oh, come on Annabelle!” erupted Bill. “It’s about time the truth be told around here. Did you have feelings for Monsieur George Hightower Gracey?”

Closing her eyes as she grit her teeth, Annabelle finally spoke. “*Fine!* You wish to know what happened? Then I will tell you! George and I had an *affair*, all right?!”

Bill gave a satisfied nod. “When did it begin?”

“During my first week here,” said Annabelle. “He was so kind, so understanding of my eagerness to study the work of my long lost relative I had not the chance to ever know. I was not even sure I would be allowed past the front gate of the Gracey Plantation, let alone be allowed daily visits to access Madame Leota’s books and papers in the séance room. But George appreciated my yearning to become a stronger, powerful psychic-medium for the good of humanity. He welcomed me with open arms, then he introduced me to his newly-wedded wife, Constance. She despised me right away without ever getting to know me. She *hated* my very presence in this house.”

“She saw you as a threat,” said Mister Frees. “She mentioned you as ‘younger’ and ‘more attractive and alluring’ than she was. Madame knew George had an eye for younger, beautiful women.”

“That may be,” began Annabelle again, “but I had no attraction towards George. Then one day, he came alone into the séance room while I was studying. He spoke the nicest

compliments to me about how beautiful I was, how bright and intelligent he viewed me, that he was so impressed of how much I was willing to learn and continue Madame Leota's work. I soon became enamored with George and we began spending more time together during my daily visits. One day, he escorted me to his boudoir and made love to me. Throughout our affair, Constance never knew about it, for we kept our love deeply hidden from everyone. Not even the sharp eagle-eyes and fox-ears of Mister Frees could discover our love-affair."

Mister Frees shrugged. "I did find it peculiar that Master George was spending as much time as he was with you, having afternoon teas and late-night discussions with you either in the library or séance room. However it all seemed to me that he was only interested in your medium-work and study of Madame Leota, not that he had loved you."

"So you had an affair with George Hightower without anyone knowing," said Bill, trying to keep the story moving along. "Then what happened?"

"Constance soon became suspicious over the time George and I were spending together. George told me one night after we made love that he only wanted to be with me, that he loved *me* and not Constance. I fell into a panic and went to the séance room before leaving Gracey House for the day. I began searching for memory charms or any spell that could possibly wipe Constance's mind clean of her love and feelings for George. Then, something happened..."

"What?" said Marcus, enthralled with her story as Annabelle took a moment to pause, her eyes straying down to her clasped hands in her lap. "Annabelle please, what happened?"

"A light illuminated inside the large crystal ball upon the séance table. Within the glowing light, a ghostly-head appeared and consumed the insides of the ball. The head turned and revealed its face to me. I immediately recognized it from an old pamphlet I had seen before. It was Madame Leota."

"You had an encounter with the ghost of Madame Leota?" said Detective Hughes. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Because at the time the experience *felt* real, but I later began to wonder if it had really happened at all. I had been drinking that night, and what *did not* happen later made me question the entire encounter."

Bill nodded. "Go on, Annabelle."

"She then spoke to me, her voice deep and powerful. 'You love the new Master of Gracey House, don't you my dear?' she said to me. I nodded nervously in response, unable to speak as I was stunned and in disbelief over what I was seeing and hearing. Before when I was but a novice psychic-medium still learning the craft, I had only expressed witnessing objects such as books or candles moving about the air on their own. Yet never until that moment had I *seen* or *heard* spirits before. She told me, 'Be rid of his wife. Summon the spirits to scare her out of this house and leave you and your beloved in peace.' A parchment I had not seen before among the stacks of Madame Leota's written works appeared beneath my shaking hands upon the table. It was a spell to summon the spirits to target and haunt an individual. And as Madame Leota's head vanished from inside the crystal ball, I spoke the words written upon the parchment. After that night, days went by with nothing happening. Then weeks past, followed by months

when suddenly and without warning, George was found dead along the grounds with a hatchet buried in his head.”

“That is exactly how Constance murdered her past husbands” said Bill.

“I truly believed that she had done the exact same thing to George,” said Annabelle. “Lillian had even told me after his death that she and Big Hobbs together had learned about Constance’s past. All four of her late husbands murdered in the same way while she reaped the rewards of their entire fortunes. Both Lillian and Big Hobbs, along with myself, began believing Constance had murdered George. It was only before dinner this evening that Constance encountered me and said she *knew* about my affair with George. I began trying to deny it, but she then revealed she had seen us ‘in the act’ in her and George’s boudoir before he had died. The day George was murdered, Constance had secretly travelled to New Orleans to begin divorce proceedings at the courthouse.”

Marcus’ eyes brightened. “You mean Constance was nowhere near George when he was murdered?”

“Yes,” replied Annabelle. “His murder was *staged* to look as if he had been murdered, just like Constance’s past husbands had been killed.”

“So,” said Bill, trying to piece the whole story together. “If Constance didn’t kill George Hightower, then who did?”

“It was I,” spoke the shallow, haunting-voice of Emily de Claire. Bill turned abruptly, seeing her spirit standing beside him at the table.

“Bill?” said Marcus. “Are you seeing something again?”

Bill nodded, his eyes not leaving Emily’s. “What happened, Mademoiselle?”

“I was deceived, *manipulated!*” said Emily in distress. “The demon, the ‘hatbox ghost’, tricked me into seeing my sweet William as his former self, Captain Blood, stabbing an innocent man for his pocket book. It was so believable to me that the hatbox ghost provided me with a physical hatchet and empowered me with the energy to wield it. I felt so *angry*, so deceived by William’s great lie about his past. I came up from behind him and buried the hatchet into his skull. The hatbox ghost made me forget that William was already dead and had been for decades! But I *saw* him as clear as day. After it happened, I stood back aghast at what I had done. For it was not William I had murdered but a man I did not know at all! It was the new Master of Gracey House, who had been cutting a rose from the garden to give to Annabelle, not William stabbing an innocent man to rob.”

“I see,” said Bill, taking in her story.

“Annabelle’s summoning the spirit-realm brought forth this demon here! You *must* leave this place, before the hatbox ghost deceives you like he had me, or worse!” Emily’s ghost disappeared and Bill slowly turned his attention back to Marcus and Annabelle, who were anxiously awaiting to hear what he had seen and heard.

“Emily de Claire murdered George Hightower Gracey,” said Bill. “After Annabelle called upon the spirits to haunt Constance, a demon answered her call instead. It found Emily’s spirit roaming the mansion and deceived her into thinking she was seeing her fiancé, William

Gracey, attacking an innocent man. The demon gave her the energy and power to wield a physical hatchet and she, through her manipulated-sight caused by the hatbox ghost, murdered George by mistake.”

Annabelle’s shocked, wide-eyed gaze strayed down to her clasped hands slightly shaking upon the table. “I cannot believe it,” she whispered. “Months go by with no sign of any spirits answering my call, then out of nowhere this tragedy happens?”

Bill simply nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“The hatbox ghost must have laid-low in the mansion after answering your call to come here,” said Marcus. “It began building its strength and energy, *feeding* off of the wandering spirits of those buried here on the plantation.”

“And the living,” added Annabelle sadly. “It all makes sense. Lillian first became ill just days after I had called upon the spirits to drive Constance out of Gracey House. And now...this demon...this hatbox ghost has not only manipulated the spirits here to murder my sweet George, but Big Hobbs and now Constance. *Poor* Lillian! To be a source of energy for this *wretched* demon as it continuously makes her ill and weak, only to attempt to murder her this evening. This is *all* my fault!” She began to cry, burying her face in her hands as Marcus quickly got up from his seat and came to her side, wrapping his arms comfotingly about her shoulders.

“There there, my dear,” said Marcus. “What’s done is done. We need to be strong now and find a way to stop this demon from further torturing the souls of this estate and end the haunting.”

Bill gave a decisive nod. “Marcus is right. What’s done is done. We need to stop this demon before it gets to Lillian again.”

“*How?!*” exclaimed Annabelle through her tears. “I am only a mere amateur demonologist! I am a novice psychic-medium at best! I thought I could be of use in this job by connecting to the spirits haunting Gracey House. Now that a *demon* with great power is involved, what good can I possibly do?”

Frowning, Bill spoke. “You need to try, Annabelle. We all need to, for Lillian’s sake. This demon has also threatened to follow me home and take in its possession the souls of my sisters, Nell and Emma. I’m *not* gonna allow that to happen.”

“Bill again is right,” said Marcus. “We have to try to drive away this demon and send it back to darkness where it came from.”

Annabelle scowled at the detective. “*Again*, just *how* do you suppose we do that?”

“There is no use coming up with a plan right now,” said Bill. “We’ve been awake all night with no rest. Let’s try to get some sleep for a few hours then talk about it later this mornin’.”

“An excellent suggestion, Bill” said Marcus. “We need to go about this refreshed and with renewed vigor.”

“Very good, gentlemen,” said Mister Frees. “I shall inform the staff to leave you undisturbed for the remainder of the morning. Brunch shall be prepared and ready for you when you awake.”

Bill awoke in his room to the sunlight shining through his boudoir window and onto his face. The distant sounds of songbirds perched in the trees along a stretch of the Gracey Plantation's bayou drifted peacefully into the room. He sat up in his bed, noticing on the nightstand beside his half-empty bottle of whiskey the small clock, its black metal hands pointing at eleven-thirty. He breathed out, shutting his eyes tight as he suddenly felt the throbbing-pain consuming his head from drinking too much before falling asleep.

'Another restless night where only liquor could provide me some sleep,' thought Bill. 'How many more haunting nights are there to come?' Realizing Marcus and Annabelle were likely waiting on him for brunch in the dining hall, he rolled out of bed and quickly got dressed. Before he would do anything, however, he had to check on Lillian.

Stepping out of his boudoir into the hallway, Bill discovered Lillian's maid, Mademoiselle du Lays, was at the same time exiting Lillian's boudoir. "Comment va Lillian ce matin?" said Bill.

"Mademoiselle Lillian, she iz feeling better aujourd'hui," replied the maid.

"Très bien," replied Bill. "Tell her that I would like to visit her after brunch." He turned and began walking down the hallway when the maid spoke up.

"Monsieur? Mademoiselle requestz your présence maintenant. Brunch az been prepared for you in le jardin."

Bill turned, looking back at the maid in relief. "The garden? Lillian's out of bed?"

"Oui, monsieur. Mademoiselles, she iz waiting for you."

The maid escorted Bill through the mansion and outside to the garden's gate. "Brunch will be served dans un instant, monsieur," said Mademoiselle de Lays. She then turned and began walking back towards the entrance to the servant's foyer. Bill opened the black cast-iron gate and walked into the garden space. He spotted Lillian sitting patiently at a small table near a wide row of pink roses as she sipped a cup of tea. Mister Frees stood idly behind her holding Lillian's pink parasol above her for shade from the direct sun.

"Well now," said Bill approaching the small cast-iron table. "Someone looks like she's feelin' better."

Lillian smiled faintly at him. Her sharp-angled blue eyes locked on his as she lifted her cup of tea back to her rouge-painted lips and sipped from it. "Please, mon chéri, sit with me,"

she said kindly to him. Bill pulled the second of the pair of chairs out and sat across from her. “Paul, would you please see to our brunch now?”

“Of course, Mademoiselle,” replied the butler and passed to her the parasol into her white laced-gloved hands then strode out of the garden.

Lillian turned her attention back to Bill, pouring him a cup of the mint tea into his tea cup with her free hand. “Thank you, Bill, for coming to my rescue last night.”

Bill smiled faintly back. “No problem.”

“Hmm,” Lillian sighed lazily with a smirk. “Your gallantry last night will not soon be forgotten here at Gracey House, nor Annabelle’s quick thinking and actions to rid the hatbox ghost from my boudoir. I have not slept as good as I did last night for as long as I can remember. Detective Hughes it seems has also been proving his worth I gather. I hear he was the one who deduced that my father was indeed *not* murdered by my step-mother, rather it had been the confused and manipulated spirit of Emily de Claire.”

“Marcus came up with the theory before the spirit of Mademoiselle de Claire confessed to me.”

Lillian’s gaze strayed down to her tea cup sitting before her upon the table. “This whole time I had placed all my hatred, all of my blame upon a woman who in the end *did* love my father. I feel so ashamed, so embarrassed after the display I made last night after my dear uncle’s death.”

Bill placed a comforting hand over hers. “Constance had a murderous past. It was a very elaborate and convincin’ hoax to make your father’s murder look like she had actually committed it.”

Nodding, Lillian gazed back up at him with a forced smile. “Yes...well...as I understand it my step-mother also died last night. An apparent heart-attack Paul tells me.”

“That’s what he told me as well, just after you were attacked last night,” replied Bill.

“Did he mention to you how she looked?”

Bill looked at her puzzled. “What do you mean?”

Lillian’s thin eyebrow raised. “Apparently Doctor Marselles was quite shaken after examining and concluding Constance’s death. He told Paul that never in his decades of practice had he witnessed such a horrified, distorted-look upon a corpse’s face. In his words, ‘she looked as if she had seen something so terrifying, it *scared* her to death’.”

“So it’s true then,” said Bill. “All of us last night came to the conclusion that the hatbox ghost attacked her after the death of Big Hobbs.”

Lillian nodded sadly. “And now, I am all that is left of the Graceys. My brother, my father, my uncles...how am *I* still alive after being so ill for so long?”

Bill grinned. “My guess is that the hatbox ghost realized you’re just too strong for it.”

“Perhaps,” said Lillian smiling faintly back. “I was wondering this morning, mon amie, after both my uncle and step mother’s deaths last night, did you see or were you visited by their spirits at all?”

“I saw Big Hobbs briefly before he disappeared. Never encountered Constance’ spirit though.”

“And why do you suppose that is?” said Lillian.

Bill shrugged. “Probably because durin’ the time of her death, I was confronting the hatbox ghost in your boudoir. I know that if I were a spirit I wouldn’t go anywhere near that demon.”

“Hmm,” sighed Lillian. “It is just...well I swear that while I was being attacked by the hatbox ghost’s minions above my bed, one of them felt to me like it was my step-mother. She was aggressively entering and exiting my body along with the other ghosts, desperately trying to rip my very soul from out of my body. This particular spirit gave me such terrible feelings of dread and anxiety, as my late step-mother always had whenever I was around her.” She paused, taking another sip of her tea. “Do you suppose that the hatbox ghost is already controlling her spirit to do its bidding?”

Bill smirked. “With a murderous past as Constance’s? Wouldn’t surprise me.”

Nodding, Lillian playfully twirled her parasol against her shoulder when the butler returned with their brunch. “Pouched eggs and ham, toast with marmalade,” said Mister Frees, lifting the silver-cloches’ off the plates. “Bon appétit!” Mister Frees then left them alone once again as he exited the garden, making his way back to the mansion.

“So,” began Lillian again, watching Bill take a forkful of eggs. “I understand it was Annabelle who unleashed this demon upon Gracey House. Apparently she had an affair with my father? Then she tried to scare Constance away by performing a séance to call upon the spirits to scare her out of their lives?”

Bill nodded, tasting the lightly-salted eggs. “Yeah, a small but important bit of information she kept to herself this whole time. Annabelle claims she was only tryin’ to summon spirits to *scare* Constance away. That way she and George could have been together. What answered her call instead was this demon we’re faced with now.”

Lillian expressed a look of disappointment. “Just as I suspected after what Paul had told me about Mademoiselle du Bois. Well that certainly makes my decision easier to make. Annabelle has to go.”

Bill accidentally dropped his fork upon his plate, taken aback by her decision. “What are you talking about?”

“Inadvertently or not, Mademoiselle du Bois was the one who caused all of this chaos. I will *not* tolerate her presence here any longer. She has well-overstayed her welcome here and I am having her leave this afternoon.”

“But you *can’t*,” said Bill. “Annabelle is the only one who knows how to protect us against spirits wantin’ to harm us durin’ the investigation!”

“*Really?*” said Lillian, cocking her head slightly to the side as she stared sharply at him. “And just *what* protection has she provided thus far for my family and house-staff?” Bill looked at her ready to fire back a response, yet failed to counter her argument. “You see, ma douce

chérie? Even you understand the pain and suffering she has brought upon my family. She has to go.”

Reluctantly, Bill nodded. “I understand your anger and frustration over learnin’ all of this, mon cher, but please think about reconsiderin’ your decision. If Annabelle is not with me and Marcus durin’ our investigation, the dangers and possible *death* involved with confrontin’ these ghosts, not to mention the hatbox ghost controllin’ them all, will come crashin’ down on us!”

Lillian frowned, finally giving him a slight nod. “Your words are beginning to help me view this situation more clearly through my blinding anger. I *do not* want Mademoiselle du Bois on this property a moment longer. However, I understand her importance to you and Detective Hughes, and the very reason why I had selected her to begin with for this investigation. To keep you safe. But I am beginning to wonder after learning of her deception just *how* safe she can keep you after all.”

“Just take some time, mon cher, and think about it,” said Bill. “*Trust* me when I say that Detective Hughes and I need her.”

Lillian gazed at him for a moment, searching his eyes when finally she gave a warm, faint smile. “Very well, mon chérie. I will think about it.”

After eating a quiet brunch with Annabelle, Doctor Marselles and Father Francis, Marcus excused himself and headed to the mansion’s library. He was delighted to find the large book-lined walled room vacant and sat in one of two cozy leather-cushioned chairs in the open center of the wide, curved-shaped chamber. A small table in-between his high-backed leather chair and the empty one across from him held a stack of books which he began thumbing through.

“Ah,” he said, discovering among the stack a title that grabbed his attention to read. “Pirates of the Caribbean, Legends and Myths,” he read the title aloud. He took out his full-bent stemmed smooth-bowl pipe and lit it, taking a few puffs of the sweet-scented tobacco and began to read. Suddenly, the door opened to the detective’s dismay. A maid stepped into the room, her light-blue eyes instantly locking onto him with a startled-look.

“Excusé moi, monsieur,” spoke the maid meekly. I thought zee library wuz vacant. I shall return later.”

“No, no,” said Detective Hughes in a defeated-tone. “It is quite all right. I can certainly read a book while someone is cleaning *quietly* around me.”

The young maid bowed her golden-locked head. “Oui, monsieur.” As she approached the towering bookshelves, reaching from floor to ceiling and stuffed with books upon each shelf, she began to dust when Marcus then recognized her. “You’re Mademoiselle Lillian’s maid, Mademoiselle du Lays.”

“Oui, monsieur,” replied the maid with a friendly smile, continuing to dust off the spines and tops of the hardcover books.

“Why are you cleaning rooms such as this then? Shouldn’t you be waiting on Lillian?”

“Mademoiselle, she iz ‘aving brunch with Monsieur Garret and doez not need me at zee moment,” said the maid.

“Ah,” said Marcus. “That does explain why Bill did not join us for brunch in the dining hall earlier.”

“Much of zee staff, zay ‘ave left zee plantation after ‘earing about Madame Constance and Big Hobbs’ deathz, az well az zee rumorz over what ‘appened to Mademoiselle Lillian last night. With two funeralz to prepare for, everyone who az remained needz to help out where zey can.”

“I see,” said Marcus. “Well then, carry on my dear.”

“Merci,” replied the maid then continued her work. As she began lightly brushing her feather duster along the bookshelves, Marcus once again began reading and smoking his pipe. To the maid’s surprise, a book began to remove itself from the shelf and floated in mid-air towards the center of the room. “Monsieur,” she whispered to the detective.

Breathing out, Marcus spoke. “Yes, *what* is it mademoiselle?” He turned his attention to her, instantly seeing the floating book hovering beside him in the air.

“Zat, monsieur,” said the maid, staring wide-eyed in fear at the book hovering in the air.

“Oh,” said Marcus quietly, his gaze not leaving the floating-book. Before he could speak again, the library’s countless books flew violently off the shelves at once, aiming themselves at Marcus and the maid. Being pelted again and again by the flying books, Mademoiselle du Lays screamed in terror as Marcus came to her aid, trying to block the books from hitting her with his arms and back. “*Quickly*, outside!” he said and ran out of the library along with the frantic-maid as the books continued flying wildly off the shelves.

Bill made his way back to the front entrance of the mansion after having brunch with Lillian, passing by a horse-drawn hearse parked near the porch steps. He entered the mansion and saw beside the front doors beautiful white rose and lily-arrangements adorning a casket.

“Ah, Mister Garret,” said Mister Frees as he approached. “I trust your brunch with Mademoiselle Lillian was to your liking.”

Bill looked curiously at the man, surprised by his casual-demeanor over the memorial that had been set up beside the front door. “Yeah, it was nice. So, who’s in the casket?”

“Big Hobbs,” replied the butler. “Walt’s Funeral Home in New Orleans was kind enough to act so quickly in bringing a casket and floral arrangements early this morning. Their men will return to place Master Big Hobbs in his crypt tomorrow after the funeral.”

“And Madame Constance?” said Bill. “Where’s her body?”

Mister Frees frowned. “Mademoiselle Lillian insisted that her step-mother not receive the same treatment of memoriam as her uncle. Madame Constance’s corpse remains locked in her boudoir in a much less ‘ceremonious’ casket. She is to be buried in the ground, rather than receiving a place in a mausoleum where prominent members of the Family rest.”

“I see,” said Bill. “Seems Lillian wishes to share the same kindness Constance gave to her while she was alive.”

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, Mister Garret,” replied Mister Frees with a devilish-grin. “Burying Madame Constance in the cemetery, like some ‘servant’ of the plantation, shall forever show any who might someday recognize her headstone as a member of the Gracey Family who had been ‘spurned’.”

Bill smirked. “I wonder. How does this make you feel as Constance’s ‘former’ butler to see your late employer treated as such?”

Mister Frees shrugged. “It is not my decision, nor is it my place, to say whether it is how Madame Constance’s body should be laid to rest. However, I suppose in the end Madame Constance receiving what is deserved after her murderous past and her bitter-cruelty towards others, such as Mademoiselle Lillian.”

“And you of course,” said Bill. “Blackmailin’ you to work for free isn’t exactly kind, is it?”

The butler gave a sinister-grin. “Perhaps not. But loyalty towards one who is deemed cruel and at times evil does have its advantages.”

“Does it?” said Bill, giving the man a sharp, untrusting stare.

“Oh yes,” replied the butler. “For as you can clearly see, I am still alive! As was revealed yesterday by Mademoiselle du Bois, Madame Constance was *also* a student and practitioner of Madame Leota’s work. Just how do you suppose the spirits of those buried on the plantation have been at unrest, *roaming* the halls of this house long before Mademoiselle du Bois accidentally summoned this demon we now face?”

“So *that’s* why Constance decided to allow this investigation after Lillian called for me, Marcus and Annabelle,” said Bill. “She was secretly wantin’ us to clean-up her mess! She was tryin’ to do the same thing Annabelle attempted by summoning spirits to drive those she detested out of the mansion.”

“Correct, Mister Garret,” said the butler. “*All* of Master George’s family in particular. It worked on Claude, for he couldn’t stand another moment in his ‘haunted’ boudoir and joined the Confederate Army. Now, with the reveal of this ‘hatbox ghost’ demon, I fear clearing this estate of the haunting is practically impossible.”

Bill scowled at the man. “We’ll see about that. Where’s Marcus and Annabelle?”

“Detective Hughes adjourned to the library after brunch. Mademoiselle du Bois, who clearly looked distraught all through brunch and said not a word, was seen hastily returning to her boudoir.”

Pushing past him, Bill quickly headed for Annabelle's boudoir. He raced through the main foyer and into the large sitting room, climbing up the wide staircase leading to the hallway of rooms.

"Annabelle?" called Bill gruffly as he knocked upon the door. "Annabelle, it's Bill. We need to talk."

The door flung open as a sobbing Annabelle answered. She then quickly returned to her open luggage cases and trunks upon the bed as she threw more of her clothes into them.

"Annabelle, what are you doing?" said Bill.

"I am *leaving*, can't you tell?" said Annabelle through her sobbing.

"You can't leave," said Bill calmly. "We need you here. Marcus and I can't do this alone. You're our only hope for any protection against what we're about to face in this investigation."

"*Me?* Provide protection for you?! I could not even protect myself last night!" said Annabelle, continuing to stuff her trunks and luggage cases with her belongings.

"What are you talking about?" said Bill.

"I couldn't sleep at all. The hatbox ghost, it returned and came into my room. I tried every spell and incantation I had learned through studying Madame Leota's work, yet nothing drove it away! It is becoming stronger by the hour Bill, and I am becoming less of an important role here."

"What happened in here?" said Bill patiently.

Annabelle wiped the tears from her eyes as she paused for a moment from packing her belongings. "It tried to take my soul," she whimpered. "I can still hear its maniacal laughter echoing in my head as it stood over me. I was completely paralyzed with fear while laying in bed when it penetrated its hands through my ribs! It grabbed hold of my very soul as it tried pulling it out!"

"But it failed to take it," said Bill. "What happened next?"

Annabelle shook her head and began to cry again. "I screamed as loud as I could for what seemed like *hours* on-end, but nobody came to help me! Finally, dawn's light shined through the window and filled the room with its light. The demon instantly disappeared and yelled in agony from the light."

"I didn't hear any screaming when we all turned-in early this morning," said Bill puzzled. "You're only three doors down from me, and only one from Marcus and *he* didn't hear you?"

"*No!*" replied Annabelle curtly. "Bill, why is it that Lillian was heard when she was being attacked last night and not me?"

Bill shook his head. "I don't know. My only guess is that the hatbox ghost has grown stronger since it attacked Lillian. It must have muted your screams somehow so that no one could hear what was goin' on."

"We need to leave this place," said Annabelle. "*I* need to leave this place, before my soul is actually taken and becomes enslaved by this demon."

“What about Lillian?” said Bill, watching her continue to pack her belongings. “My sisters have been threatened by this hatbox ghost as well! Please Annabelle, your knowledge of Madame Leota’s work and protection-spells are important right now. If this thing isn’t stopped, if you leave things the way they are right now, who’s to say it won’t leave the plantation to find you?” Annabelle continued packing, ignoring his words. “*Annabelle,*” said Bill sharply. “I didn’t want to bring this up, but *you* brought this demon to Gracey House. You need to help fix what you have done.”

Annabelle paused, closing her eyes as tears continued to streak down her cheeks. Finally she spoke. “All right, Bill. You have made your point. I will stay.”

Bill breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Annabelle. Tonight, we’ll get rid of these ghosts and their ring-leader once and for all.”

“Come on,” said Bill as he and Annabelle made their way down the staircase to the large sitting room. “We need to find Marcus and start plannin’ tonight’s investigation.” Outside the sitting room doors, they heard the sounds of urgent footsteps passing by in the corridor. Bill opened the doors to discover the entire Gracey House staff hastily making their way to the main foyer, carrying packed bags and suitcases as they shuffled passed him.

“What is going on?” said Annabelle, peering over Bill’s shoulder as she watched the maids, footmen and kitchen staff passing by them.

“They are leaving,” came a voice from behind. Bill and Annabelle turned around to find Mister Frees standing before them. “Apparently there have been multiple unexplained ‘incidents’ that occurred this morning. The remaining staff no longer wish to be here.”

Bill raised his eyebrow. “Incidents?”

“Ah yes,” replied Mister Frees with a smug smile. “There have been claims of ‘supernatural’ activity throughout the mansion. Strange whispers speaking from out of the darkened corners of rooms being cleaned by the maids, all cupboard doors and drawers mysteriously opened after being closed mere seconds after the chief left the kitchen briefly. There was even talk amongst the staff that many had witnessed objects moving on their own in mid-air, others claiming to have actually seen ‘ghosts’ wandering about the mansion.”

Bill looked at him in suspicion. “And *you*, Mister Frees, what do you make of all this? Has your disbelief in ghosts and demons changed as you see the remaining staff hurrying out of Gracey House?”

“As I said before, Mister Garret, I believe that *they* believe to have seen or heard spirits related to this ‘haunting’.”

“Well, you can still count me as a believer,” said Marcus, emerging from out of the crowded hallway of staff members making their way to the front doors. “I was just in the library

when all of a sudden, books began *flying* off the shelves and pelting me and Lillian's maid. It was absolutely terrifying!"

Bill nodded. "With the activity of the spirits increasin' around here, the hatbox ghost is bound to show his face again soon. We need to find a way to somehow capture him and then send him back to wherever he came from."

"Then you will be delighted to hear what news I bring from Mademoiselle Lillian," said Mister Frees. "Mademoiselle du Bois has been allowed to stay. She wishes for you, Mademoiselle, to help rid this demon from the mansion and protect Mister Garret and Detective Hughes from what dangers may lie in wait."

"That is simply *wonderful* news," said Annabelle sarcastically. "How fortunate I *truly am* to be allowed to stay in a place where everyone else is quickly leaving."

"Of course you *shall* be rewarded once the job is done," added the butler.

Annabelle scowled at the man. "I had better be, Paul! I am not exactly staying here for my health and well being!"

"No," began Bill sternly, "but you are here, like myself and Marcus, for Lillian's sake. She needs our help now more than ever. Tonight, let's finally put an end to this haunting."

Throughout the day Bill, Marcus, and Annabelle discussed and planned their final phase of their investigation. They sat around the parlor's large round table while Mister Fusselbottom continued working behind the small bar. He handed the detective another whiskey when Marcus began to relight his cigar.

"And all of the staff have left then?" asked Marcus.

"Everyone except Mister Frees and Lillian's maid, Mademoiselle du Lays," said Bill. "Both said they refuse to leave Lillian's side. Mister Fusselbottom has agreed to stay as well."

Annabelle shook her head in dismay. "First of all, why doesn't Lillian leave with Paul, Mademoiselle du Lays, and Mister Fusselbottom until we deal with the haunting here?"

Bill frowned. "Because Lillian has fallen ill once again. She looked so healthy and strong when we had brunch together this morning. Now she's back in her boudoir, bedridden and physically spent. She couldn't leave this house if she tried."

"Well...we could *move* her," said Annabelle.

"And risk the hatbox ghost following her wherever we might take her?" said Marcus.

Annabelle rolled her eyes. "We do not know if the demon would leave the plantation. In my experience and through reading Madame Leota's work it is *highly* unlikely that spirits, as well as this demon, will leave from the place they haunt."

"I know it would," grumbled Bill. He looked at them both as they stared at him curiously. "Remember? This demon haunted me since I boarded the train in Oregon to get here. It has no issue with leavin' Gracey House, so long as it gets what it wants."

“Fine,” said Annabelle irritated. “Lillian stays here. Then why, Mister Fusselbottom, are you still here?”

The groundskeeper looked up from the bar as he continued cleaning a row of glass tumblers with a clean white towel. “Dis is my ‘ome, Mademoiselle. D’ere is nowhere else for me to go.”

“You’re crazy, you know that?” said Annabelle. “Go find a room to stay in the city and get out of here while you still can!”

“*No*, Mademoiselle,” said Mister Fusselbottom defiantly. “I will stay an ‘elp ‘owever I can.”

Bill smiled faintly. “I admire your courage. You want to stay and help? Then no one’s gonna stop you.”

The groundskeeper gave a decisive nod, his large dark brown eyes lowering back down to the glass tumbler he was polishing in his hands.

Suddenly, the lounge door flung open. “Monsieur! Mademoiselle! *Allez!* Come quickly!” said a terrified Mademoiselle du Lays in the doorway.

“Qu’es que c’est?” said Bill calmly to her.

“Monsieur Frees, he iz *dead!*”

Surrounding the motionless-body of the late butler, Mister Paul Frees, who laid sprawled upon the main foyer floor, Bill, Marcus and Annabelle along with Mister Fusselbottom and Lillian’s maid, Mademoiselle du Lays, watched in disbelief of the man’s sudden death as Doctor Marselles examined the corpse while Father Francis recited the Lord’s Prayer.

“This is bad,” whispered Marcus in Bill’s ear. “Has anyone told Lillian yet?”

Bill shook his head. “Don’t think so. The maid claimed that she came straight to us. I’ll go break the news to Lillian and make sure she’s all right. Give us a few minutes, then I’ll meet you and Annabelle outside along with Mister Fusselbottom.”

“Outside?” said Marcus quietly back. “What for?”

“If we are going to be dealing with what’s inside Gracey House, we’re going to need someone familiar with the grounds in case we need an escape route off the estate.”

Chapter Ten

“Lillian?” said Bill knocking upon her boudoir door. “It’s Bill, may I come in?” Not hearing a reply, he opened the door slightly and peered inside. The late afternoon sunlight filled the room with warm, golden light. Lillian was sleeping peacefully in her bed. Bill crept quietly inside not to disturb her, taking a seat in the desk-chair that was still at her bedside. Smiling in relief to see her at peace, Bill placed his hand gently over hers and she began to stir. Lillian opened her eyes, looking wearily at him and slowly sat up in bed.

“Whoa,” said Bill quietly, instantly seeing her begin to become dizzy as she raised her head from her pillow. “Easy does it, mon cher. You look like you’ve had one too many shots of bourbon.”

Lillian began to laugh when suddenly she started coughing violently. Bill quickly handed her a glass of water from the nightstand and she took a sip of the cool water. “I thought I was beginning to recover earlier this morning,” she said when her coughing subsided. “It seems I was terribly mistaken.”

“Lillian,” began Bill, “I have something to tell you.”

“What is it?” said Lillian, gazing back at him thoughtfully.

“It’s about Mister Frees. I’m so sorry, mon cher, he has passed away.”

Tears instantly welled-up in Lillian’s bright blue eyes, her chin slightly quivering. “So he *did* really die? I...I did not want to believe it. I saw him in my dreams, he said goodbye to me and that one day we will be together again. But then, a pair of frightening bony-hands grasped his shoulders from behind, pulling him backwards into the surrounding darkness and he disappeared.” She paused, reflecting in her mind over the dream. “He is truly gone?”

“I’m afraid so,” replied Bill.

“But how? When did he pass?”

“We don’t know when exactly. Your maid found him lying on the floor in the main foyer. Doctor Marselles looked over his body and found no wounds, no bruises or signs of being attacked.”

“I see,” said Lillian, still holding back from crying. “Just like what happened to my uncle, and my step-mother.”

Bill nodded. “I’m sorry, Lillian. I know Mister Frees meant a great deal to you.”

“He saved my life,” said Lillian, tears streaking down her cheeks. Bill embraced her as she wept upon his shoulder for a moment. Finally, she composed herself as Bill handed her his handkerchief. “I would have been eaten-alive by the crocodiles had it not been for Paul’s actions that evening. I still cannot believe he dove into the crocodile-infested waters and dragged me out to safety after the tightrope snapped.”

Bill nodded. "Marcus told me about that evening. Mister Frees proved to be a true hero that day."

"I tell you now, mon chérie, that *entire* length of rope was checked by myself, and those who had set it up across the waters *several* times before my performance. Ever since I fell ill after the accident, I always suspected it was the hatbox ghost's doing. He began haunting my dreams soon after, and it was then that I became suspicious that he had something to do with the tightrope snapping. The incident nearly took my life, not to mention completely *humiliating* me in front of everyone. My greatest, most death-defying act *foiled* by this miserable demon."

"But that's not how people remember you, Lillian," said Bill. "When I arrived here, I overheard guests at the party talkin' about you not as a victim that day, but as the best, most talented ballerina in Louisiana. Mister Frees even told me about your performances always sellin' out in New Orleans' theaters and saloons."

Lillian smiled faintly. "I truly miss performing for people. Now, I am beginning to cross my final tightrope over placid waters containing not crocodiles, but the hatbox ghost. Either I make it across and recover from this illness, or fall off and loose my soul to this demon."

Bill stared hard back at her. "There's just one difference from when you performed your balancin'-act over the crocodiles. You are not alone on the tightrope you're crossin' now. I'm gonna help you get across it."

Lillian's breathing became shallower as she spoke. "You already have, mon chérie," she said, her eyes slowly closing.

"Lillian?" said Bill hastily. "Lillian, stay with me! *Don't* you leave yet. You still have to get better and show me some of that ballet you're famous for!" Yet as he spoke, Lillian took her final breath as her eyes completely shut. Bill grit his teeth as tears glazed his eyes. He took her cold, pale hand into his and gently kissed the top of it. "Au revoir, belle ballerine. Be at peace and dance in heaven's light." To his surprise as he stood from his chair, he saw Lillian's spirit rise from out of her physical body. She stepped out of bed onto the floor before him. Smiling lovingly at him, Lillian's spirit spoke.

"I see light!" Lillian said, her transparent ash-white face aglow with joy. "Everything is going to be all right." She then reached out to take Bill's hand. Still in shock over witnessing her spirit speaking to him, Bill began to reach out in a daze to take her hand when suddenly, Lillian's eyes widened in surprise. A pair of bony, ghostly hands grabbed her transparent arms from behind. The hatbox ghost's face appeared over her shoulder, smiling maniacally at the petrified Bill.

"*Time to go, Lillian dear,*" spoke the hatbox ghost. "*Tonight your soul is **mine** to help strike fear!*" He yanked her roughly backwards, both of them disappearing before Bill's horrified-staring eyes. Lillian screamed, her voice trailing and sounding distant as her spirit quickly disappeared.

"*LILLIAN!*" exclaimed Bill in the now empty, deathly-silent room.

As the sun set over the bayou's tree-lined horizon, Bill stormed out of the mansion as Annabelle, Marcus, Mister Fusselbottom, and Mademoiselle du Lays were waiting for him below the porch steps beside the horse-drawn hearse. "Bill?" said Marcus looking at him concernedly as Bill abruptly approached him. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"Where are Doctor Marselles and Father Francis?" said Bill sternly.

"They left," said Annabelle. "They were too afraid to stay and fled while you were with Lillian."

The maid approached Bill hesitantly. "Mademoiselle Lillian va bien?"

Bill stood before them in the groundskeeper's lamplight. "Lillian's dead. She passed away while I was talking with her. Then the hatbox ghost..." he paused, his anger continuing to build-up inside him. The maid gasped and quickly held her hands over her mouth, tears immediately welling in her shocked-looking eyes.

"Bill before you go on, *calm yourself*," said Annabelle. "I know this is difficult, but if you allow your anger to take hold, it will only empower and feed the demon's strength. Now tell us, did the hatbox ghost appear after she died?"

With all his strength and willpower, Bill slowly released his anger and began to calm himself. "Yeah. I saw it take Lillian's spirit." His eyes strayed in thought as he recounted in his mind the hatbox ghost pulling her into the darkness, her face looking back at him in horror.

"We *must* resolve this haunting tonight," said Annabelle, taking Bill by surprise by her affirmative-tone. "The reign of this demon over Gracey House and the spirits whose bodies are buried here has reached its end! We must put our plan into action and send the hatbox ghost back to where it came from!"

Marcus gave a decisive nod as he held the weeping-maid in his comforting arms. "Mister Fusselbottom, show us our way off of the plantation should things go astray. Then, let us return back here and begin tonight's investigation." The groundskeeper nodded and began leading the way off of the cobble-stone driving-path. They headed east towards the edge of the plantation to the surrounding woods. When they neared the edge of the woods Bill turned and looked behind, gazing down the hill at the mansion below in the short distance. One by one, each lighted-window was doused until the entire inside of the mansion was starved of light. Only the balcony and porch oil lamps remained lit. Turning back around, he continued to follow the others.

They reached the edge of the plantation, not far from the locked gate where the plantation's outer brick wall, laced with overgrown ivy and tangled vines, was breached. "Here,"

said Horace, shining his lantern's light upon the man-size opening in the wall. "It's bin a family secret fo decades. Dis waz 'ow some of Gracey Plantation's slaves many years ago escaped! Each night, dey would come 'ere and remove a few bricks at a time."

"And with the gate locked shut, this will be the perfect escape route," said Marcus.

"When and why was the gate locked today to begin with?" said Annabelle with a flair of annoyance in her tone.

"After zee remaining ztuff fled Monsieur Frees locked zee gate, az wuz part of 'iz dutiez," said the maid. "But now zee key, it 'az gone missing."

Annabelle sighed. "Of course it has."

"Come on then," said Bill. "Let's start headin' back. Lillian and the spirits of Gracey House need our help."

Darkness crept up upon the estate as night came without a star. A storm was coming as the sky flashed briefly with bolts of lightning striking over the horizon. Making their way back onto the lamp-lit driving path, Bill led the way past the mansion's manicured gardens and courtyards. They soon quietly passed by the pet cemetery and mausoleums, which Bill then noticed the name of 'Big Hobbs' had recently been inscribed onto one mausoleum's stone-side. Walking briskly alongside the cemetery where a fresh grave had been dug earlier in the day, Bill read its tombstone: 'Constance Hatchaway Gracey'. Suddenly, he stopped dead before the white carriage hearse as all behind him stumbled to a halt as well.

"What is it, Bill?" said Marcus.

"Notice anythin' suspicious?" said Bill. "Earlier, I saw the horse that pulls this hearse was not properly tied to the reins. It must have bolted off and died somehow."

"How do you know it died?" said Annabelle.

Suddenly, all began to notice that the reins and saddle were still in place in mid-air before the hearse, as if they were still attached to the horse. All then heard the sound of knickers the horse occasionally made, making them gasp as Bill approached. Only he at that moment could see the spirit of the horse standing by, ready to lead the hearse to its next destination. "This is just the beginning of what I'm sure we're about to see tonight," said Bill.

He continued leading them towards the lamp-lit porch. Climbing up the steps, Bill tried opening the front door, but discovered it locked shut. "I thought this door was left unlocked before we left."

"It wuz," replied the maid confused. "I even left it open ajar."

Annabelle frowned. "Someone doesn't want us to come in."

"Or *something*," added Marcus.

Bill turned his attention to the now nervous-looking groundskeeper. “Mister Fusselbottom, remember your part of the plan. Keep a watch out here and ensure that our escape route, if needed, is clear. Understood?”

The groundskeeper nodded, his amber-glowing lamp shaking uncontrollably in his hand. “Yes sah,” he said in a quivering voice.

“I’m countin’ on you, my friend,” said Bill, placing a comforting hand upon the man’s shoulder. “Stay vigilant and out of sight, and mind your fear. Annabelle says the spirits can sense fear and anger. They’ll feed off of it to gain strength and power. And if the hatbox ghost has the dead under his control, they will be looking for anything they can to feed off of in order to do his bidding.”

Nodding nervously once again, Mister Fusselbottom quickly took off around the side of the mansion. “Mademoiselle du Lays,” began Bill again, “you have a key to the servant’s foyer-entrance?”

“Oui, monsieur,” replied the maid, digging into her apron pocket and pulling out a long brass key. She led them along the right-side of the illuminated porch and unlocked the door.

“Très bien, mademoiselle. Merci,” said Bill.

“Monsieur,” said the maid, clasping her hands against the front of her apron. “I..I cannot go in zere.” Her entire body trembled as she spoke. “I just cannot.”

Bill nodded, smiling thoughtfully back at her. “It’s all right. You don’t have to, mademoiselle. But do us a favor and make sure that we have a way out of the mansion should we need to escape. D’accord?”

“Oui, monsieur,” whispered the maid, looking more freighted by the second. She turned the door’s brass handle and slowly opened the creaking door. “Bonne chance,” she said. Bill gave her a nod and led Marcus and Annabelle inside.

The servant’s foyer was dimly-lit by its flickering-candle chandelier and candelabras standing in the corner of the room. As they cautiously entered, all began to hear the distant sounds of an organ playing a funeral dirge variation. “What is that?” said Annabelle quietly as they gathered beneath the chandelier, listening closely to the eerie-music being played from deep within the mansion. “Is that the organ from the ballroom I hear?”

Bill frowned, “Can’t be. Lillian said that thing’s been broken for decades.”

“‘Grim Grinning Ghosts’,” replied Marcus. “I believe that’s the tune being played.”

“How fitting,” said Annabelle beneath her breath.

Suddenly, a familiar voice began to speak in a deep resonant tone as the distant organ continued to play. “When hinges creak in doorless chambers, and strange and frightening sounds

echo through the halls, whenever candle-lights flicker where the air is deathly still, that is the time when *ghosts* are present, practicing their terror with ghoulish delight...

“Mister Frees?” said Bill surprised, looking about the room for any physical sign of the late butler’s presence.

“*Paul?*” said Annabelle curtly.

“*What* is this, Frees?” Bill said boldly. “What game does the hatbox ghost force you to play at our expense?”

A large pair of sliding doors, opposite of the doors they had entered when they first arrived to Gracey House, as well as during Bill’s tour of the mansion with Lillian, opened and the three cautiously stepped through them, finding themselves in an identical octagon-shaped gallery as the other doors led into. The exact same portraits of Big Hobbs, Madame Constance, Master Steven Gracey, and Lillian hung high above them along the green, rouge, and gold pinstriped wallpapered walls flanked by the same eight leering candle-holding gargoyles illuminating the gallery in an intimate light.

“Welcome, *foolish* mortals, to the Haunted Mansion,” spoke the cynically-mocking baritone voice of the late butler. “I am your host, your *ghost-host*.” The voice began to chuckle then spoke again. “Kindly step all the way in, please. There’s *no* turning back now!”

Bill scowled up at the portraits and at the high ceiling. “Whatever hold the hatbox ghost has you in, whatever lies and threats he’s made to force you into doing his bidding, *fight it* Mister Frees! You’re *nobody’s* pawn, neither living or dead!”

The late butler’s voice simply laughed then spoke again. “Our tour begins here in this gallery, where you see paintings of some of our *residents* as they appeared in their *corruptible, mortal* states.” The doors suddenly slid shut, locking the three inside the gallery. Marcus and Bill quickly approached the dark mahogany-lined walls and began searching for any secret door to open as Annabelle continued to gaze up at the paintings.

“Your cadaverous pallor betrays an aura of foreboding,” continued the late butler’s voice. “Almost as though you sense a disquieting *metamorphosis*...”

“Bill, Marcus,” said Annabelle, not taking her eyes off of the walls and the paintings began to stretch vertically. Both men looked over at her, seeing her eyes glued to the paintings above them and in-turn looked up. They watched in both curiosity and fear as the portraits simultaneously revealed more of the scenes originally painted.

‘So, Constance *didn’t* have the paintings chopped-off from the bust-down,’ thought Bill. ‘They were secretly kept hidden and in-tact all along.’ Bill began remembering Lillian telling him when they had toured the mansion together that the artist had painted her, Big Hobbs, as well as her two other uncles, Hobbs and Skinny Hobbs, in dangerous situations in order to illustrate that the Graceys were fearless.

“Is this haunted room *actually stretching*? Or is it your imagination, *hmmm?*” Mister Frees’ voice continued on. All four paintings began revealing each of the Gracey Family members’ death-defying acts: Big Hobbs, the survivor of quicksand as he was shown sitting proudly on his concerned-looking brothers’ shoulders while they both slowly sank into it. Then

there was Steven Gracey, standing on a lighted powder-keg, Constance sitting upon the headstone of her late-husband, Master George Hightower, revealing a hatchet buried in the stone-bust of George's head.

'Turns out there was much more to *that* story,' thought Bill observing the portrait and noticing Constance's curious smile. Not that she had got away with his particular murder, but that she did indeed love George and innocent of his murder.

Finally, Bill's gaze turned to Lillian's portrait as it stretched and revealed her balancing on the infamous tightrope over the placid bayou waters. A razor-tooth jawed crocodile waited for her to fall as the rope was shown slowly snapping at its end. "And consider *this* dismaying observation," began the haunting voice of Mister Frees again, "this chamber has *no* windows and *no* doors," he chuckled. "Which offers you this *chilling challenge...TO FIND A WAY OUT! HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAAAA!!!*"

"*This isn't funny, Paul!*" snapped Annabelle as the three continued searching about the gallery for a way out.

"Of course, there's always *my* way," said the late butler's voice. Just then, the gallery went completely dark. The gargoyle-sconces' candles were snuffed out as a clap of roaring thunder came from outside the mansion, followed by a short-series of brilliant flashes of lightening. The flashes were revealed high above where the high ceiling had suddenly disappeared. There they discovered the skeletal-remains of a corpse hanging from a noose within a secret attic-space high above the gallery. Seeing the skeleton swaying above them, Annabelle let out a blood-curdling scream as both Marcus and Bill stared up at it in shock. Bill then noticed a blue jacket the skeletal-remains wore, recognizing it from a painting he had seen before in the mansion.

"Who is that?" said Marcus, staring disturbingly up at the hanging skeleton shown in the lightning's continuous flashes.

"It's William Gracey," said Bill. "The rumors were true."

"*Oh*, I didn't mean to frighten you prematurely," laughed the surrounding voice of the butler. "The *real* chills come later. Now, as they say, look alive and we'll continue our little *tour*." A secret door then slid open along the mahogany-lined walls opposite of where they had come in. The three cautiously stepped through the now open doorway and into the same hallway the other gallery connected to. The hallway, lined with Gracey Family portraits along the right-hand walls of the dimly-lit hall, and windows along the left revealing flashes of lightning from the storm raging outside, began to give them the chills as Bill, Marcus, and Annabelle witnessed the portraits transforming from when the Gracey family members were painted in life, to their now decaying forms in the crypt. Each portrait seemed to stare menacingly at them as they passed by. "There are *several* prominent ghosts who have retired here from the creepy old crypts that lie outside along the grounds," spoke the late butler's voice as they walked down the hallway. "Actually, we *now* have nine hundred and ninety-nine happy haunts here, but there's room for a *thousand*...any volunteers, *hmmmm?*" His voice began to laugh maniacally.

“That’s not going to happen, Frees!” said Bill, continuing to walk attentively along with Annabelle and Marcus down the hallway past the leering-paintings.

“If you *do* decide to join us, final arrangements may be made at the end of the tour,” spoke the haunting-voice of the butler.

At the end of the hallway, the three entered into the now dark main foyer. Loud banging-sounds came from inside Big Hobbs’ casket, which still sat beside the front doors. Annabelle jumped in surprise, grabbing Marcus’ arm as the three stood in shock. The casket’s lid, which had been nailed shut, was lifting up at the head’s end. “Somebody help me! Get me out of here!” came a voice from inside the casket. Holding his arm out for Marcus and Annabelle to stay put, Bill slowly approached the casket and peered inside where the lid was forcibly being opened. His eyes suddenly widened. Big Hobbs’s corpse laid dormant inside while his spirit’s face stared up at him in horror. The spirit let out a terrifying yell. It quickly flew out of the casket, disappearing into the main foyer’s surrounding darkness. The casket’s lid slammed back shut, the nails embedding back into the sides.

“Wha...what was that?” Marcus said stumbling his words.

Bill slowly turned, his face looking back at them both spooked and stern. “Big Hobbs,” he said. The sound of a door creaking open from down a corridor to the right broke the silence of the darkened main foyer. Quietly the three approached the dimly-lit corridor, noticing that it stretched into what looked to them as an endless hallway, one that Bill had already experienced. A table candelabra appeared in the distance as it floated towards them. “Emily?” said Bill. The candelabra approached them as the ghost of Mademoiselle de Claire revealed herself to him.

“I *warned* you,” she said sadly to Bill, clutching the candelabra in her pale, transparent hands. “I told you to leave this cursed place. Now, you may never leave.” She disappeared, along with the candelabra.

“What happened?” said Marcus.

Bill turned to face him and Annabelle. “It was the ghost of Emily de Claire. Another warning that we should not be here.” He looked around, discovering an open door down the now normal-length corridor. “Come on, let’s check the library.”

A pair of chandeliers illuminated the library’s bookshelf-lined chamber as books floated casually from one shelf across the room to another. Marble busts of famous authors sat upon the bookshelves among the hundreds of books, their staunder-looking faces began turning and stared at Bill, Marcus and Annabelle as they moved about the kidney-shaped chamber. “Our library is well-stocked with priceless first-editions,” spoke the voice of Mister Frees. “Only *ghost*-stories of course,” he laughed. “And marble-busts of the greatest *ghost* writers the literary world has ever known!”

“Any sign of the hatbox ghost, Bill?” whispered Marcus, looking skeptically at the books hovering and floating about the room.

Bill shook his head. “Nothin’. Not seein’ any other spirits either. Just those strange busts of writers watchin’ us.”

The three exited the library and made their way to a corridor that spurred off the main foyer. Passing by the locked doors, they were suddenly startled when the doors began to bulge-out towards them, as if something behind them was trying to free itself from being locked inside the rooms. “We find it delightfully *unlivable* here in this ghostly retreat,” spoke the voice of the late Paul Frees again. “Every room has wall-to-wall creeps, and hot and cold-running *chills*. *Shhhhhh, listen...*” The three began to hear faint moans and whispers spoken in the dark as they continued onward. “All of our ghosts have been dying to meet you! Unfortunately, they are having trouble getting through.” Bill then noticed the hands of a large grandfather clock standing in the elbowed-corner of the corridor spinning wildly as they passed by it. Suddenly, they halted their steps in heart-pounding surprise. A large, dark-shadowed bony hand with long curved claws swiped over the clock.

“Did anyone else just see that?” said Marcus, his voice quivering as he spoke.

“I did,” Annabelle quickly whispered back, her eyes wide with fear.

Bill scowled at the clock, its hands continuing to spin out of control. “Come on, let’s keep moving.”

They soon arrived at the séance room. All paused before the wide-open door when the invisible butler’s bone-chilling voice spoke once again to them. “Perhaps Madame Leota can establish contact. She has a *remarkable* head for materializing the disembodied.”

‘*Of course!* Materializing!’ thought Bill. “All right, Annabelle,” said Bill quietly. “Time to put your part of the plan into action.”

The three entered the candlelit séance room when to their surprise, the large crystal ball sitting upon the table illuminated with a brilliant, misty aqua-marine blue light. At that moment, Bill’s eyes caught sight of a wispy-green spirit, having an oddly-familiar appearance of Madame Constance, immediately shift off the table beside the crystal ball and streak out the door. The crystal ball rose off its ornate brass rest and floated into the air. All three watched it in awe, petrified in fear as a head formed within the floating crystal ball. The door suddenly slammed shut. Marcus quickly ran to try and open it, but failed to budge the now locked door.

“Madame Leota!” began Annabelle, reaching deep down inside herself for the courage to speak. “I am your distant relation, Annabelle, returning to you with friends to ask of you another favor.” The face of Madame Leota appeared inside the crystal ball, giving a judgmental-stare at both her and Bill. “I seek redemption for what I had unleashed upon this house,” said Annabelle. “It is time that the hatbox ghost be *banished* from this house and return from whence it came! I ask that this night, I may help with my friends to do right over what I had done wrong. Please, Madame Leota, give us the ability to right this wrong!”

The spiritual-head of Madame Leota stared sharply down at her. “Please, Madame Leota,” said Bill. “Don’t allow your own relation to suffer the same purgatory-fate as you. You *too* had

acted on jealousy and had an innocent woman murdered! Don't allow the mistakes of the past to endure to determine the future."

For a moment, the ghostly-head of the legendary psychic-medium remained silent as she continued floating above them with a glowering-stare. Finally she spoke in a bold and powerful voice that filled the room. "*Serpents and spiders, tail of a rat, call in the spirits wherever they're at! Wrap on a table, it's time to respond. Send us a message from somewhere beyond! Goblins and ghoulies from last Halloween, awaken the spirits with your tambourine!*"

Out of the darkened corners of the room, the rattling-sound of a tambourine being shaken sounded throughout the room, causing all to jump slightly from the startling noise. "*Creepies and crawlies, toads in a pond, let there be music from regions beyond!*" A mysterious-sounding melody began playing from an oboe from out of the darkened corners of the room. "*Wizards and witches, wherever you dwell. Give us a hint, by **ringing a bell!***" An immediate response came as the sound of a bell rang, its shrill metal tone deafening the room. Slowly, the crystal ball holding the head of Madame Leota lowered back down to the table, her face disappearing into the blue cloudy mist within it. The room fell deathly silent once more as the door creaked open on its own.

Marcus jumped back from the door in shock that it had suddenly unlocked and opened. "The *happy haunts* have received your sympathetic vibrations, and are beginning to materialize," spoke the voice of Mister Frees, his voice cutting through the room's silence. "They are assembling for you at a *swinging* wake. Soon they'll be expecting *me*. See you all...a little later," he laughed, his voice becoming distant then silencing.

"Do you think Madame Leota helped us?" said Marcus.

Annabelle nodded, looking panicky at Bill. "I think so."

Bill nodded. "I know so. It was exactly what I had hoped would happen. Well done, Annabelle."

Annabelle stared at him confused. "Thank you, I guess."

"A wake?" said Bill puzzling over what the late butler said. "Where did the Graceys usually hold wakes after a funeral in the mansion?"

Marcus snapped his fingers as the answer quickly came to him. "The *ballroom*," he said excitedly.

They sprinted to the second floor and made it to the walkway overlooking the ballroom. Stopping dead in their tracks, they watched as the spirits of former Gracey relations surrounded the long banquet table, eating and drinking as if they were still alive. High above the ballroom floor along the opposite wall from Bill, hung twin portraits of two brothers dueling with pistols, which suddenly came alive with motion as the spirits of both men mimicked their respective painting of themselves in dueling positions. They quickly turned and faced each other, firing their pistols at each other and instantly disappearing afterwards. The large, elegant ballroom

chandeliers illuminated the long room, revealing more spirits from the Gracey Family who had lived nearly a hundred years ago. They filled the ballroom floor as the spirits danced a waltz to the off-key music being played from the broken organ and its phantom player. Bill watched as the tall brass pipes of the organ expelling thin, wispy-ghosts with large black eyes and elongated mouths displaying painful expressions as they streaked upward towards the high ceiling and disappeared.

“*Are you seeing this?*” said Marcus quietly in stunned-amazement to Annabelle as both watched the spirits below in awe. “*This is absolutely incredible!*” Annabelle nodded, her eyes not leaving the spirits dancing below them.

“*Come on, you two,*” whispered Bill. “Help me find the hatbox ghost.”

Snapping out of their shocked-stupors, Annabelle and Marcus inconspicuously with Bill began searching behind the thick railing for any sign of the hatbox ghost. “What do you suppose these specters are doing?” whispered Marcus to Annabelle. “I mean, they seem to be simply enjoying themselves as if they were still alive.”

“These spirits are reliving a moment in time during their past-lives that was enjoyable to them,” replied Annabelle. “The hatbox ghost must have them fooled in having them believe they are still alive and back in this particular moment in time. The demon must be doing this to keep these certain spirits relatively calm in order for them to remain under his control.”

“And it is thanks to Madame Leota’s spell that you and I can now actually *see* them?” asked Marcus.

Annabelle nodded. “Her materialization spell worked. Now we had best not be seen by them.”

“But why? What harm could a spirit physically incapable of harming the living do to us? I mean, if one of these ghosts were to try and strike me, their hand would simply pass through me, yes?”

Bill grabbed Marcus’ arm roughly, pulling the detective close and whispered harshly to him. “Remember what you saw last night when the hatbox ghost commanded those spirits to lift Lillian out of her very bed, then fly in and out of her body to feed off her fear and nearly *killed* her?! Didn’t you *listen* to a word I said to you about what happened to George Hightower, how the hatbox ghost influenced and gave strength to the spirit of Emily de Claire to murder George with a *physical hatchet*?!”

Marcus stared back at him in embarrassment and nodded. “Ah yes, right.”

“The hatbox ghost could be watchin’ us right now as we speak,” said Bill. “Any one of these spirits here could be ready to attack on his command. Stay vigilant and help me find this demon so we can attack him before he does us.”

“But *how*, Bill?” whispered Annabelle. “How do you propose to attack a demon you cannot physically touch?”

Bill looked back at her confidently. “You and Madame Leota have already helped on that front, Mademoiselle.” Annabelle looked back at Marcus with a confused-look. The detective simply shrugged as they both then began following Bill quietly along the rest of the

walkway. As they neared the opposite-end of the ballroom, they looked down below them at the organ and its player. Bill suddenly stopped, staring sharply down at the organ-player and recognizing the ghost's large top hat and overcoat.

"*There,*" whispered Bill, pointing down at the hatbox ghost playing the organ with a skin-crawling grin. The hatbox ghost then turned his head, staring directly up at him as he continued to play, his glowering smile growing wider. He let out a menacing laugh then disappeared as he turned himself into a stream of mist, streaking up into the ceiling. With the organ music stopped, Bill, Marcus, and Annabelle looked down at the spirits below in the now deathly-silent ballroom. The spirits stood as still as statues, staring directly up at them with unsettling looks of shock and fury.

"What do we do now?" whispered Marcus, his words quivering past his lips.

"*RUN!*" exclaimed Bill. The three quickly ran to the exit out of the ballroom and off of the walkway as the spirits expelled terrifying wails and flying furiously up at the walkway.

"Where are we going?!" exclaimed Annabelle to Bill as he led them through the darkened hallway.

"*The attic,*" replied Bill.

Racing up the dark, creaking attic stairs Bill roughly swung-open the door at the top, allowing Annabelle and Marcus to quickly enter first, then quickly slammed the door shut behind him. A pungent musty-smell filled the cramped-attic air as they stepped further inside the attic.

"Are they still coming for us?" said Annabelle nearly out of breath.

"No," said Bill, pressing his ear against the door. "I don't think they even left the ballroom."

"*Curious,*" said Marcus, taking notice of their cramped surroundings. "The attic looks completely differently then when I investigated it yesterday." Just then, all jumped at the sound of a harpsichord beginning to play an off-key rendition of 'Here Comes the Bride'. They began to walk through the cluttered attic containing dust-covered luggage-chests, old furniture mirrors and heavy drapes, as well as a large collection of hatboxes.

One by one, they passed by decorative-framed portraits of Constance posing with her previous husbands. The paintings began to transform before their eyes, revealing how each husband had died as some of the men's heads disappeared, others revealing a ghostly-axe or hatchet to their head or handles of such deadly weapons protruding out from their backs. The final painting was of Constance and Master George Hightower, a hatchet revealing in the portrait buried in the side of George's head.

"How unbearably morbid," muttered Annabelle walking past the haunted painting. They then came upon the harpsichord playing in the attic, discovering no one sitting at its bench

playing it. The stained, yellow keys moved on their own, continuing to play the hauntingly off-key wedding song.

Suddenly, they heard a voice speaking at the far-end of the attic. “What is that?” whispered Marcus stepping towards the voice.

“Marcus, *wait!*” whispered back Annabelle and quickly followed him. The two immediately halted as a dark spirit, dressed in an old wedding gown and veil confronted them. In one hand the ghost-bride held a bouquet of wilted flowers, in the other she grasped firmly onto a hatchet.

“In sickness and in health, until *death* do us part,” said the ghost-bride in a hiss-like tone. Marcus and Annabelle stood wide-eyed at the spirit seeming to loom over them as it continued to speak. “You may now *kiss* the bride,” she said as the spirit revealed her face from beneath the thin veil. Her eyes were missing, leaving only two large black voids on her fine-chiseled, high-cheekbone face. The spirit’s lips were missing too, showing her rotting teeth on full display as she spoke. “We’ll live happily ever after...’till *death* do us part!”

Hearing her words carefully, Marcus blurted out a name. “Madame Constance?”

The spirit lurched towards them expelling a high-pitched, terrifying scream in their faces. Annabelle stood in-between Marcus and the ghost-bride. “You will *not* harm him nor I, Constance! *Be gone* from this house at once!”

The spirit of Constance immediately swung her ghostly hatchet at her; the blade approached Annabelle’s head when it stopped short and could go no further. The ghost-bride expelled a hollow, low-sounding growl. She swung the hatchet a second time at the immovable Annabelle, who continued staring sharply back at her with her palms out facing the ghost as she shielded herself and Marcus from its powers.

Constance leaned towards her and shrieked in her face when suddenly, her spirit stretched up into the air, swiftly charging at Annabelle and Marcus and flew through their bodies. The impact felt like a rushing tidal wave as both Annabelle and Marcus were forced backwards. They crashed through the attic’s window and began tumbling towards the ground.

“*No!*” yelled Bill. The spirit of Constance flew out the now shattered-window, disappearing into the night as Bill raced over to the windowsill. To his great relief, he saw Marcus and Annabelle fall into a large cart filled with a mound of soft grass-clippings and yard debris left over from Mister Fusselbottom’s work along the grounds.

The harpsichord suddenly stopped playing. Bill frowned, hearing the eerily-haunting voice of the hatbox ghost behind him. “*So, you decided to stay. Now we’ll have our time to play!*” He turned, seeing the hatbox ghost standing before him. Behind the demon was the spirit of Lillian, looking as if she were in a trance as she balanced upon a ghostly tightrope on one foot upon the tips of her toes. She donned the same outfit she wore during her final performance captured in her portrait back in the galleries. Below her along the attic floor were ghostly crocodiles bobbing their long, pointed tooth-lined snouts above phantom waves of water, waiting hungrily for her to fall. Bill looked at Lillian’s spirit in horror, seeing the sheer-terror held in her eyes as she remained completely still, clutching onto her parasol with both hands. The hatbox

ghost laughed menacingly as Bill, snapping-out of his shock, began feeling for the handle of his pistol holstered at his side.

Chapter Eleven

“Are you all right, my dear?” said Marcus, helping Annabelle out of the cart.

Annabelle brushed off the grass clippings from her long black dress and nodded. “I think so,” she said.

“That was quite a drop,” said Marcus, looking up at the attic window high above them.

“Come on,” said Annabelle hastily and led Marcus around the side of the mansion. “We have to get back inside and help Bill.

Nearing the mansion’s corner they came upon Mister Fusselbottom who was holding out his lantern. His was staring in complete shock at the sight before him. “Mister Fusselbottom?” said Marcus, waving his hand before the groundskeeper’s wide, unblinking eyes. “What is it man?”

The groundskeeper slowly raised his shaking arm, pointing towards the grounds along the front of the mansion. Annabelle and Marcus looked to where he was pointing at. Annabelle instantly gasped as Marcus’ mouth dropped. Across the dense fog-shrouded grounds, the spirits of the buried-dead of Gracey House including Gracey family relations, former house staff, pets ranging from cats to dogs, rats to frogs, filled the grounds as they mingled together, played games with each other, even sang songs that carried in the chilly breeze.

“What in this cursed place is going on here,” said Marcus quietly as they watched rooted in shock from along the darkened corner of the mansion.

“Let her go,” growled Bill as the hatbox ghost danced and twirled with glee about the attic. Lillian’s spirit continued to remain completely still as the ghostly crocodiles snapped their long jaws up at her.

“Ahhh,” expelled the hatbox ghost. *“I can feel the anger stored inside you! It is exactly what I need!”*

Bill suddenly felt as if the wind was knocked out of him as the hatbox ghost began to form an actual, physical body. After a moment, the demon breathed air into his new lungs and

gave an evil grin. *“Long have I desired over the centuries to feel the air once again enter my body! You should never have asked the psychic for help. Forcing the spirits here, including me, to materialize has only granted me greater power!”* He quickly reached out, grabbing Bill’s throat and pulling him close. *“Now, I can kill you instantly and reign with immortality over a thousand spirits!”*

“Don’t count on it,” replied Bill. Quickly drawing his pistol, he pressed the end of its long barrel against the demon and fired. A look of instant surprise revealed in the demon’s widening-eyes. It released Bill from its grasp and stumbled backwards. The demon felt with his hands where the bullet had entered his body and began gasping desperately for air. The shot punctured his new lung.

The demon held his hands over the wound and collapsed to the floor as he drew his final breath. Bill watched as its spirit rose from out of its corpse, giving him a threatening stare. The hatbox ghost lunged for Bill when suddenly, a ghostly-hearse driven by a hooded and robed-driver at the head of two large white horses rushed through the attic. It captured the demon, locking his spirit within the barred-windowed hearse. The hatbox ghost yelled and wailed as the hearse then disappeared out the broken window and into the night sky.

“Bill!” exclaimed Lillian’s spirit from behind. Bill turned, seeing her twirling and dancing gracefully upon the ghostly tightrope over the snapping crocodiles. *“Look! I am finally performing my act!”* Bill smiled with joy, watching her dance and twirl upon the tightrope when finally, she reached the end of the rope and hopped off of it. The crocodiles and the tightrope instantly disappeared as she approached him. *“The hatbox ghost’s curse is finally over, mon chérie! Now we can all be at rest here at Gracey House.”*

“Lillian,” said Bill quietly as tears began forming in his eyes.

Lillian gazed thoughtfully back at him. “Do not cry for me, Bill. You and Detective Hughes, and of course Mademoiselle du Bois, have succeeded in accomplishing what I had hoped you would come here to do. Now you and your sisters are safe, and I have been reunited with my family!” Just then, the spirits of George Hightower Gracey, the three Hobbs brothers, Lillian’s mother, Jane, and Lillian’s brother, Claude, appeared behind Lillian.

Bill smiled with joy as Lillian took his hand in hers. Despite not feeling her physical touch, the tingling-sensation he felt as she held it resonated across his entire palm and fingers. “Come on,” said Lillian. “Let us join the family reunion outside!”

Marcus, Annabelle and Horace continued to watch from within the darkness along the side of the mansion the spirits happily singing, mingling, and playing games across the grounds before the front steps of the mansion. Suddenly, Mademoiselle du Lays rounded the corner and

found them. “Monsieur, Mademoiselle!” she said with a bright smile. “Zee spiritz, zay are not ‘armful at all!”

“What are you talking about?” whispered Annabelle, pulling the joyful-maid out of sight around the corner to them. “We were nearly *killed* inside the mansion by the spirits of the dead here!”

“Zee spirits, zay found me near zee stablez while I wuz arranging transportation out of ‘ere. I wuz scared for my life at firzt, but zen zay explained to me zat zee curse over zem was lifted! Zey pointed up at zee night sky and a phantom ‘earse wuz taking zee demon, zee ‘hatbox ghozt’, into zee night when it finally disappeared.”

Marcus shook his head in wonder. “Bill...he must have figured out a way to remove the demon from the mansion, but how?”

“By giving a signal for his soul to be taken back to the underworld,” came a voice from behind. All quickly turned to find Bill approaching them, along with the spirits of Lillian, the Hobbs brothers, George Hightower Gracey, George’s first wife Jane Gracey, and Lillian’s older brother, Claude. “I had a hunch earlier this evenin’ while we were plannin’ our investigation. If we were able to convince Madame Leota to help us by gettin’ the spirits to *materialize*, then it would have given the hatbox ghost that much more power to regain a physical body. Once he tapped into my anger I meant for him to feed off of, he indeed regained his physical form. Then, I shot him.”

Annabelle nodded. “His spirit then emerges from out of his physical body, causing a signal for devils of the underworld to discover his location and return him back there! Impressive, Bill. How did you know this plan would work?”

“A little late-night readin’ in the séance room,” answered Bill. “My choices the first night we stayed here were to either continue being haunted in my room, or to research what we were up against. Madame Leota had a secret drawer beneath her séance table that held a diary. I found a passage in it where she describes in detail how she was able to summon a demon. Yet, if a demon regains its physical form, it is as mortal as you and I for a brief moment, until it gains a certain level of spiritual-energy to become immortal. I decided to take advantage of the demon’s moment of vulnerability of being mortal and shot him. His spirit then got instantly collected!”

“Ma oui, monsieur,” said the maid joyously. “I saw it with my own eyez!”

“Now, the spirits of Gracey House may finally be at rest,” said the spirit of George Hightower. “Come, let us join the others in this joyous moment!”

They walked among the front grounds, seeing a group of ghosts playing instruments consisting of horns, tambourines, and violins while others danced merrily around them. Socializing among ghostly tables scattered about the grounds, spirits played games of cards, chess, and backgammon while others roamed about the grounds, socializing with generations of Gracey family-members while the spirits of past pets hopped, walked, crawled and flew among

them. “Well,” said Marcus looking about them as they walked along the cobblestone driving path. “Everyone does seem quite happy, don’t they?”

“*Ahhhh, there you are!*” came the resounding voice of the late butler, Mister Frees, rising above all the surrounding noise of the happy spirits. “And just in time!” The ghost of Mister Frees then revealed himself before them.

“*Paul!*” said Annabelle sternly. “Consider yourself *lucky* to be a ghost right now, or I would be slapping you silly right now for your antics tonight!”

Bill smiled faintly as he approached the butler. “You were servin’ the demon *and* helpin’ us in there at the same time, weren’t you Mister Frees?”

The butler chuckled. “A good butler serves *all* of the household. Those who threaten him, and those whom have been threatened. I knew by guiding you inconspicuously to Madame Leota that you would eventually discover the key to unlocking the mansion’s curse.” He gave Bill a sinister-looking grin. “Well done to you all. May your journey home be safe and restful. *Farewell!*” He then disappeared, his ominous-voice echoing into the darkness of the night.

After spending a short time among the socializing-ghosts along the grounds, Bill watched as Mademoiselle de Lays and Detective Hughes emerged out the front doors of the mansion. They carried the last of everyone’s luggage, packed and ready to be loaded onto the horse-drawn coach Mister Fusselbottom had brought around. As they all helped in storing all of the trunks and cases onto the back of the coach, Bill turned to find Lillian standing before him.

“It is all so *wonderful*, is it not mon cher?” said Lillian, looking happily all around her at her ancestors enjoying themselves in each other’s company along the grounds. Bill frowned, forcing himself to nod. Lillian gazed at him thoughtfully. “I am so happy for you, for you too shall reunite with *your* family in the days to come. Nell and Emma will surely be thrilled to see you!”

Bill smiled faintly. “I have missed them ever since I left.”

Lillian’s transparent hand reached out and held Bill’s. “What’s wrong, mon amie? A happy moment such as this does not deserve such a saddened face.”

Shutting his eyes, Bill kept his emotion at bay. “You died so young, and lived through such an unfair treatment of a life here.”

“*Oh* Bill,” said Lillian, her tone gentle and sweet. “There is no use to dwell and remain saddened over such things. Be happy for me! After living with illness, isolation, and loneliness I am now enveloped with an entire community of family, and with love.” She then placed an object into Bill’s hand, clasping her cold, transparent hands around his as she closed his fingers around the object. “If you ever wish to return and visit me, know that you are *always* welcome

here.” Releasing his hands from her, Bill opened his hand. In it was the long, brass gate key that had gone missing earlier.

“Thank you, Lillian,” said Bill with a faint smile.

“No, ma douce chérie, thank *you* for all that you have done here with Detective Hughes and Mademoiselle Annabelle.”

“Come on, Bill,” said Marcus from the coach as he, Annabelle and the maid waited for him. “We have a long drive ahead of us tonight.”

Bill gave him an acknowledging wave and turned back to Lillian. “Goodbye, dear Lillian.”

“Au revoir, mon gentil Bill,” smiled Lillian, then watched him approach the coach and board it. Mister Fusselbottom slapped the reins and the pair of Clydesdales began pulling the coach around the cobblestone-drive and towards the gate beyond along the lamp-lit path.

Reaching the gate, Bill got out of the coach and took out the key Lillian had given him. He quickly unlocked and opened the black cast-iron gate doors for the groundskeeper to pass the coach through. Once the coach drove through, Bill then closed the gate and took one last look at Gracey House in the distance; its wrap-around porch and balcony lamps illuminating its exterior in golden light. Locking the gate, he suddenly heard the echoing of a sinister-sounding voice carrying in the breeze.

“*Hurry baaaack,*” spoke the feminine voice. “*Hurry baaaaaaaaaack.*” Looking all around him, Bill found no sign of anyone. Finally he walked over to the coach when suddenly, as quick as a flash, the ghost of Constance dressed in her wedding gown and veil appeared before him with a devilish smile. Then, as quickly as she had appeared, she vanished before his eyes. For a moment, Bill searched around the coach looking for any trace or evidence of her presence, yet found nothing. He began wondering if his mind was playing tricks on him. He returned back to the coach, sitting himself inside beside Mademoiselle du Lays and across from Marcus and Annabelle.

“Everything all right there, Bill?” asked Marcus.

Looking outside the coach window as they began moving along the path again, Bill finally nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Everythin’s fine.”

At dawn they reached New Orleans and the bustling port where a riverboat was beginning to board passengers to take north up the Mississippi River. While Marcus arranged

for boarding passes, Bill helped Horace unload the luggage from the back of the coach. “What do you suppose you’ll do now, Mister Fusselbottom?” asked Bill.

“I don’t know, sah” replied the groundskeeper. “Wit no one left at Gracey ‘ouse to serve, I thought along de way ‘ere dat maybe I could remain ‘ere in da city, perhaps be a carriage driver for folks. But Gracey House ‘as always been my ‘ome. Maybe I will continue to live dare and keep de grounds looking nice.”

Bill grinned. “Even with all those ghosts roamin’ about the plantation?”

Horace shrugged. “I’m not so scared of dem anymore. Maybe dey would appreciate someone dere to keep de grass cut and rake de leaves off of de plots in de cemetery, trim de vines from de mausoleums.”

Shaking the man’s hand, Bill spoke. “Whatever you decide to do, I hope you find some peace with it.”

The groundskeeper gave him a proud look. “Tank you, monsieur.”

“And you, Mademoiselle,” said Bill to the maid standing nearby. “I see your bags are packed. Where are you off to?”

“My sizter livez ‘ere in zee city and workz in zee mayor’z mansion,” said the maid. “She az always told me zat if I evar needed a job and place to stay zat zee mayor would hire me too. Monsieur Fusselbottom wuz kind enough to offer me a ride zere after zending you three off.”

“And off we go!” said Marcus approaching them with three tickets in his hand. “Ready, my dear?” he said to Annabelle approaching them from the coach.

“Annabelle, you’re coming to St. Louis with us?” said Bill.

Annabelle smirked. “Well, I thought it would be nice to get out of the area for a while, see someplace different. Marcus offered to show me around St. Louis and stay with him at his home,” she said, looking over at him flirtatiously.

“I see,” said Bill, noticing the detective giving her a goofy-looking smile back.

“Well then, we had best get going before this boat leaves without us!” said Marcus, grabbing some of Annabelle’s luggage to take aboard. “It’s a shame though, seems we never did receive the second-halves of our payments for the investigation, did we?”

At that moment, Bill noticed a green and gold chest unfamiliar to him among the luggage unloaded from the coach. Opening it, his eyes widened. Bundles of one-hundred-dollar bank notes were stacked neatly into three separate sections inside the chest. “Looks like we got paid after all, Marcus,” said Bill. Both the detective and Annabelle approached him and peered inside the chest, their eyes aglow from the stacks of money.

“Quickly now, close the lid!” said Marcus looking nervously around them at those passing by. “No need to draw any attention.” Before Bill closed the chest, he discovered among the stacks of money an envelope with beautiful cursive script written upon it. ‘To Bill, From Lillian,’ Bill read the script. Pocketing the letter as both Marcus and Annabelle kept their eyes sharply on those passing by, Bill closed the chest’s lid and began helping cart the luggage aboard the boat. With final farewells said to Mister Fusselbottom and Mademoiselle du Lays, Bill,

Marcus, and Annabelle boarded the riverboat and soon began making their way up the Mississippi.

Sitting alone upon the bed in his state room, Bill stared at the sealed envelope he had placed upon his state room's desk. 'One of her last letters before she died,' he thought, thinking of Lillian in the moments before she took her final breath. Finally, he went to the desk and carefully opened the envelope. Pulling out a folded letter, he began reading the beautiful feminine-cursive script.

My dear friend Bill,

I do not know how much longer I have to live, so I am writing this letter to you in hopes that if I am deceased before your investigation's end, that not only will you be rewarded for your good work here at Gracey House, but that you also receive my sincerest thanks and gratitude for what you have helped to accomplish. You have been such a wonderful and trusting friend to me, and I shall not soon forget it. I prayed for months for someone like you to come into my life, someone I could truly rely on and to understand my current plight with my step-mother, my growing distrust in my once close, trusted butler and friend Paul Frees, and believe the haunting experiences I have had to endure in this house--the *truth* of how I became ill to begin with.

I will truly miss the morning walks and tea shared in the gardens with you, and shall always remember your warm kindness and the joy you brought me. Most importantly, I will never forget the invaluable gifts you bestowed upon me of your companionship, your trust, and your care. You are truly special to me, mon chérie, and hold a special place deep in my heart.

Know that you are always welcome at Gracey House. If I am still present here, alive or dead, you have a friend for life to come visit anytime you wish. I do pray that in time we meet again in much happier, more peaceful days to come.

With love and gratitude,

Lillian

Bill felt at that moment as if his heart was sinking to his stomach. He carefully folded the letter neatly back up and placed it inside the envelope. It never occurred to him just how much of an impact he had made upon her. After being awake throughout the night, he felt completely exhausted and collapsed upon the bed, falling into a deep peaceful sleep. His dreams instantly took him back to the Gracey House gardens, sitting at his place across the small table from a smiling Lillian pouring him a fresh cup of mint tea.

After a joyous reunion and long-awaited embraces with his sisters, Nell and Emma, who had been eagerly awaiting his return home, Bill thanked his dear friend, André, for watching over them and shared with him his reward money. For nearly the entire day, they all shared stories of what happened while Bill was away. From trips to Portland, to buying new dresses and shoes, to deciding on future trips to take together as a family.

“Perhapz a pint at zee Fort iz in order soon, eh?” said André as he began making his leave from the cabin later that night after supper.

“Count on it, mon amie” replied Bill. “*Your* treat, of course.” André laughed, waving one of the thick bundles of bank-notes at him as the trapper merrily made his way down the dirt path through the dense evergreen-fir forest.

Out in the open plains shrouded in fog, Bill knelt beneath the tall golden grass, taking aim with his long-barreled rifle at an unsuspecting buck in the distance. Amid the stillness and silence, a faint haunting voice suddenly carried in the gentle wind.

“*Biiiiill...Biiiiiiiiill,*” whispered a familiar voice from across the plains. Bill quickly stood, instantly scaring off the deer as he searched desperately around him.

“*Hurry baaaaaack, hurry baaaaaaaaaack!*” came the faint, distant voice once again.

“*Who’s there!*” roared Bill in anger, startling a flock of crows out of the nearby firs. He stood isolated among the tall grass searching desperately around him when suddenly, a ghostly-hand grasped his broad-shoulder from behind. Bill quickly spun around, his eyes widening in surprise at what stared back at him amid the thickening fog.

THE END