

HAUNTED



IN FLORIDA, HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD HOUSES HAVE SOLID walls, so I guessed wrong when I heard my friend Birdy Tupplemeyer make a bleating noise downstairs. I figured she'd snuck a man into her room, which was unfair of me, even though Birdy admits to being free-minded when it comes to romance.

On windy October nights my imagination prefers love to spiders, I guess. That is my only excuse.

I was in a hammock on the second floor in what had once been a music room. Birdy, who lacks camping experience, had chosen a downstairs room for her air mattress because it was closer to the front door.

"I'd have to hang off the balcony to pee," she had reasoned, which made sense even before the wind freshened and the moon rose. The house was abandoned; no electricity or water, and the spiral staircase was in bad shape. I myself, after too much tea by

the fire, was debating whether to risk the balcony or those wobbly steps when, through the floor, I heard a thump, another thump, and then a mewling wail that reminded me of a cat that had found companionship.

She's with that archaeologist, I thought, and buried my face in a pillow, but not my ears—a guilty device. My curiosity has always had an indecent streak. I also had a reason. That afternoon we had met Dr. Theo Ivanhoff, an assistant professor with shaggy black hair: late twenties, khakis low on his skinny hips and wearing a Greek fisherman's cap. He was on the property mapping artifacts from a Civil War battle that had taken place before the house was built. Theo had struck me as an aloof know-it-all and a tad strange, but it had been a month since Birdy's last date so her standards had loosened. Later, by the campfire, the two of us sitting with tea and marshmallows, she had shared some bawdy remarks including "hung like a sash weight" and "Professor Boy Toy," referring to a man only a few years younger than us.

Naturally, I felt supportive of my friend, not alarmed. Until I heard: "My god . . . what *is* that?" which could have meant any number of things.

Guilt battled my curiosity. I turned an ear to the floor just to be on the safe side. Then shattering glass and a shattering scream tumbled me out of the hammock and I was on my knees, feeling around for a flashlight that had tumbled with me.

Birdy's voice again, more piercing: "Bastard . . . get off."

Panic, not passion. I ran for the stairs. Thank heavens I was barefoot, so I knew it was a flashlight I kicked it across the room. Bending to grab the thing, I clunked my head, then stubbed my

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toe going out the door. In the hall, the flashlight's white beam bounced among cobwebs and a dusty piano while Birdy screamed my name.

“Hannah . . .”

I hollered back, “I’ve got a gun!” which was true, but the gun was locked in my SUV, not in my hand. Then I put too much weight on the banister as I catapulted down the stairs—a brittle pop; the banister fell. I spiraled down a few steps on my butt, caught myself, then raced the banister to the bottom. The banister won. I shoved it aside and was soon standing outside Birdy’s door, which was locked. That scared me even more.

I yelled, “Birdy . . .?” and pounded.

“Get in here!”

“Open the door.”

“It’s jammed! Oh . . . *shit*, Hannah, hurry.”

I wrenched the knob and used my shoulder. The door gave way on the second try and I fell into the room, which was dark but for moonlight reflecting off broken glass on the floor. I got to my feet and, once again, had to hunt for the flashlight. My friend, dressed in T-shirt and shorts, had her back to me and was dancing around as if fighting cobwebs or in the midst of a seizure. “Get it off, get it off!” she yelled, then winced when she turned, blinded by my arrival.

I lowered the flashlight, relieved. I’d feared an attacker, but she was alone. I rushed across the room and put a hand on Birdy’s arm to stop her contortions. “Hold still,” I had to tell her twice while I scanned her up and down. Finally I stepped back. “I don’t see anything.”

“It was in my hair.”

“*What?*”

“How the hell should I know?” Birdy added some F-bombs and bowed her head for an inspection. I used my free hand, the light close, to comb through her thick ginger hair, which was darker at the roots, Birdy saying, “I was almost asleep when something landed on my face. Something with *legs*. It crawled up my forehead, then stung me on the neck—I’m sure there was more than one. I tried to run, but the damn door wouldn’t open.”

“Where on your neck?”

I moved the light, but Birdy hollered, “Finish with my hair first!” That told me the sting could wait.

“Probably a palmetto bug. They don’t sting, so you probably imagined that.”

“Imagined, my ass.” Birdy pulled her T-shirt up, ribs showing, a petite woman addicted to jogging who didn’t get much sun because of her freckles and red hair.

I checked her back and down her legs. “Where’s your flashlight?”

“Goddamn bugs on my face, I must of dropped it or something. I don’t know. I’d just found the switch when one bit the hell out of me. Anybody would have lost it after that.”

I said, “That explains the broken window.”

“What broken window?”

Birdy Tuppemeyer is a high-strung, energetic woman, but normally steady in her behavior, as you would expect of a deputy sheriff with two years’ experience. I had never seen her so upset. “You didn’t hear the glass break? You must have thrown that light

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pretty hard. I'm glad you weren't waving your gun around when I came through the door."

I bent to check the back of her neck, but first took a look around the room seeing glass on the pine flooring, the shattered window, a moon-frosted oak tree outside, and my friend's air mattress, a double-wide with cotton sheets, her overnight bag open in the corner, clothes folded atop it.

"My pistol's under the pillow," she countered. "Don't worry about getting shot. Worry about the damn bugs—this freaking room is infested." She shuddered and swore.

I pushed my flashlight into her hands. "I'm not a nurse. Check inside your own pants."

Light in hand, Birdy pulled her shorts away from her hips, then disappeared down her baggy T-shirt, the shirt glowing like a tent until she reappeared. "For once, I'm glad to be flat-chested. Those sons of bitches sting. Here . . . look for yourself."

She lifted her head, the light bright on a welt that was fiery red on her freckled throat. My heart had stopped pounding, but now I was concerned.

"Give me that," I said, taking the light. "Does it hurt?"

"Burns like hell."

"Is it throbbing?"

Birdy heard the change in my voice. "Do you think it was a spider? I *hate* spiders. Maybe I should go to the E-R. What time is it?"

"Stop squirming," I said, but that's exactly why I was concerned. I grew up camping, hiking, and fishing in the Florida backcountry with my late uncle, Capt. Jake Smith, who became a

well-known guide after being shot and then retiring as a Tampa detective. More than once, Jake had told me, “People are the most dangerous animals on earth. Everything else, avoid it and it will avoid you.”

Jake’s long list included creatures that scare most newcomers and keep them snug and safe inside their condos: snakes, sharks, alligators, panthers—and poison spiders, too. The only dangerous spiders in Florida are black widows, brown widows, and, possibly, the brown recluse, although I have yet to see a recluse for myself. The widow spiders tend to be shy and seldom bite unless you mess with them or happen to slap at one in your sleep. I’ve seen many, often living in colonies on porches of people who have no idea they are there. Their spiky eggs sacs are unmistakable. Which is why, when camping, I prefer a screened hammock to a tent.

This was something I hadn’t explained to Birdy. She had grown up wealthy in a Boston suburb so was nervous from the start about sleeping in a house that had a dark history and was fifteen miles from the nearest town. Never mind that her Aunt Bunny Tuppelmeier, a Palm Beach socialite, had hired me to spend a night or two in the place and record the comings and goings of strangers. The woman’s reasons had to do with the million dollars she had invested in river frontage that included the old house—a house she wanted torn down. Birdy was along to keep me company and, as mentioned, was currently not dating, so had chosen adventure over depression rather than spend her Friday night off alone.

She started to panic again. “What if it was a poison spider? Shit, I should have slept in my car.” Being from Boston, she pronounced it *kaahr*. She checked the time. “It feels like midnight, but

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it's not even nine-thirty. I know a woman doctor I can call—she's a gyno, but, hell, I'll just lie about where the damn thing bit me."

I touched my finger to a speck of blood on her neck. "It's a sting, not a bite, but you'll be fine. A spider would have left two little fang marks. I've got some first-aid cream upstairs."

"*Fangs?* Jesus Christ, my Beamer, I should've crashed in the backseat. Those bastards are probably in my bed right now, screwing like rats and hatching babies. Smithie"—her nickname for me—"we can't sleep here. My Aunt Bunny, that conniving bitch, is to blame for this."

She was upset, so I discounted her words. "It was a wasp, most likely," I said, and, for the first time, shined the light at the ceiling above the air mattress. Immediately, I pointed the light at the floor, but too late.

"Oh my god," Birdy whispered, "what was that?"

She yanked the light from me. Plaster overhead had broken, showing rafters of hundred-year-old wood so dense with sap that they glowed where it had beaded. But there were also glowing silver eyes. Dozens of eyes attached to black armored bodies with claws and curled tails. They were scorpions, some four inches long. Stunned by the light, one fell with an air-mattress thump, righted itself, and scabbled toward us over clean cotton sheets that were tasteful but not as practical as a sleeping bag.

Birdy screamed so didn't hear me say, "It's okay, this kind isn't dangerous," then nearly knocked me down running for the door.



MY LINEAGE INCLUDES MANY AUNTS AND UNCLES, some noteworthy, most not, but I have yet to refer to a family member with the word Birdy used to blame her aunt for the presence of scorpions in Florida.

The word struck me as unreasonable. On the other hand, it also comforted me regarding my tolerance for a mother and at least one aunt—the third Hannah Smith in our family—whose behaviors have ranged from man-hungry to just plain crazy.

My mother, Loretta, and my late Aunt Hannah, being a mix of both.

It is true, however, that Mrs. Bunny Tupplemeyer, a Palm Beach widow, was the reason we were here.

Birdy, whose actual name is Liberty Grace, had invited me for a weekend at her aunt's beach house, then a cocktail party at a penthouse apartment that was downtown, close to shopping, at

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the corner of Ocean Boulevard and Worth. It was a tenth-floor saffron high-rise not far from the Kennedy compound, I was told. The Opry mansion, with its gate and carved marble fountain, was farther down the beach.

This was two weeks ago.

I grew up on the Gulf Coast of Florida but had never been in downtown Palm Beach. Condos and shops possessed a gilded indifference, the streets edged with royal palms from Prohibition days. Residential areas were screened by towering hedges and a muffled Rolls-Royce hush that warned of money and double standards.

“Relax,” Birdy kept telling me in the car. “Just be yourself. If the Great Dame starts interrogating you—and she will—just smile and compliment her jewelry. Or bring up astrology. She loves guessing people’s signs. While she’s boring you with that, signal the staff for another martini. Dame Bunny likes them icy cold.”

Dame Bunny, that’s how my friend referred to her wealthy, socialite aunt.

There was no need for me to relax because I wasn’t nervous. I’m a light tackle fishing guide who deals with wealthy clients day after day in a small skiff around Sanibel and Captiva Islands, although I live across the bay on the island of Gumbo Limbo. I’ve learned that the rich are no different than the rest of us when it comes tangling lines, or whoops of delight when a big fish jumps, or when their bladder demands a bucket and a moment of privacy.

Birdy was the nervous one, not me.

Odd, I thought. She had summered in Palm Beach as a girl and during college. Her mother, Candice, had been a Palm Beach

debutant prior to graduating from Wellesley, then joined a commune near Aspen, which, I was told, had only solidified the family's Palm Beach–Boston ties.

“To people with money, politics are more of a fashion statement,” Birdy had explained.

But when I'd spent some time with her Aunt Bunny, I understood why my friend was nervous. It was at the cocktail party. I had escaped to the balcony. An Italian banker, after backing me in a corner, had been a little too touchy-feely for comfort. My hostess noticed and followed me outside, a martini in one hand, a cigarette in the other.

“Tired of Victor, the sex-starved poodle?” she asked, sliding the door closed. Then looked me up and down, noting the simple gray shift I wore belted at the waist, my leather flats and a lavender scarf I had bought at Pulitzer's just down the street. “With your legs,” she added, “I'm not surprised he's sniffing around. But you could stand to lose a few pounds, darling.”

I ignored the insult out of respect for my drunken elders. “He said his name is Vittorio,” I replied. “I asked him to spell it because of his accent.”

“Made him spell it,” the woman repeated, fascinated I would bother.

“It's a good way to remember names. He was polite enough, but I wanted see what the ocean looks like from out here. Very nice place you have, Mrs. Tuppemeyer.” On the Gulf Stream, miles away, tankers the size of buildings drifted, the sky blacker, it seemed, than a dark night on Sanibel.

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The woman stood beside me at the marble rail and flicked ashes. “Smart girl.”

“Pardon me?”

“His wife was watching. She’s one drink away from making a scene. You’ve got enough size, I don’t think even Rita would try the slapping, hair-pulling thing. But who knows? She drinks absinthe, the real stuff, and sniffs cocaine to stay thin.” A pause. She blew smoke into the night and pivoted. “My niece says your family has quite a history in Florida. That you know people I wouldn’t know—locals.”

Hicks and rednecks is what she meant.

She continued, “She also told me you shot a man a year or so ago. Damn near killed him. Is that true?”

I pretended not to hear and asked about a bracelet on her wrist that glittered with scarlet stones.

“Don’t change the subject. Any woman who can pull the trigger, I find that damn impressive. But I’m unclear about exactly what it is you do. Are you a fishing guide or do you run a investigation agency?”

I said, “Both, ma’am, but mostly fishing. The shooting incident, I’d prefer not to discuss.” Then looked at the stars and commented, “I didn’t read my horoscope today. What about you?”

The woman fell for it, but only momentarily. “There’s an astrologician I use, she’s excellent. The summaries in newspapers are silly garbage. I have her card, if you want.”

Astrologician? The word had a scientific ring but sounded phony.

She continued, “Back to what I was saying . . . Liberty told me you were on a case when it happened. The shooting—a sexual predator or some such scum—that you shot him in the pelvis. Self-defense, so you weren’t prosecuted. In fact, you got some kind of award from the local police department. I admire a woman with that kind of spunk. I can think of a dozen men I’d love to shoot and that includes my late husband. Abe was his name. In my world, marrying a man for money doesn’t justify verbal abuse.”

She expected a reaction. I looked at the ocean instead.

“You used a pistol, according to Liberty. She said you had no choice. The man would’ve killed you. What I’m hoping is, you shot him in the pelvis because you were aiming at his balls. Am I right or am I right?”

I stepped back and said, “Good lord!”

The aging socialite, her chiffon gown of gold hanging from her shoulders, lowered her voice. “Honey, you can tell me anything. I’ve done things that would curl your hair. Why? Same as you. We’re both survivors.”

My ears were warming. I tried to hold it in but couldn’t quite manage. “I want to get up early to see the Flagler Museum, Mrs. Tupplemeyer. I think I should leave before you confess to any more crimes.”

“That offends you?” She put her hand on my back in a comforting way but also to guarantee I would listen a while longer. “It’s not like I asked if you were sleeping with my niece. I wish you were. But I happen to know she’s totally heterosexual.” The woman paused to smoke. “What about you?”

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I created some space between us. “Are you about done asking nosy questions?”

“No. Can it hurt so much to open up to an old woman? I’m interested. I don’t care if you’re gay or not. Trust me, I’ve had worse things than a firm young breast in my mouth. It’s a matter of personal taste, the way I see it.” She smiled, surprised by the double entendre. “By god, I ought to write that one down.”

“Why don’t you do that?”

“Don’t be snide. There’s a chance we can do business together and I have a particular job in mind. So I’m interested in who you are.”

She reminded me of Loretta, my manipulative mother. I settled down in a sullen way, doomed to participate. I said, “I was dating a marine biologist. We even talked about marriage, but he travels too much. Now I’m dating an airline pilot and an attorney—a special prosecutor—but just for something to do. I enjoy my women friends, but sharing a bathroom or a bed isn’t part of my makeup.”

“Good for you—I’d ride a bus before I’d share my bathroom. You say this biologist, he claims he travels too much?” The socialite’s raspy laugh chided *What a bullshit excuse*. “Good riddance to him, then. You’d be living in a condo that hosts happy hour and allows children. Liberty has god-awful taste in men, too. And, let’s be honest, neither one of you are beauty queens. Can you believe my airheaded sister named her that?”

I said, “Beg your pardon?”

“Her name, dear—Liberty Grace. It sounds like a slogan for

herbal tea.” The woman turned to look through the glass, where, among chatty guests, two men in blazers had cornered Birdy, who was holding a drink and wearing a blue cocktail dress that brightened her ginger hair.

I said, “I think she’s cute. And she certainly has good taste in clothes.” Then took the offensive. “As names go, Bunny is a heck of a lot stranger than Liberty, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t ask. Or are you just being snotty?”

I replied, “I’m *interested*,” mimicking her.

The woman glared for an instant. Then a slow smile. “Yes . . . I can see you doing it—shooting a man right in the balls. Okay, then. Bunny is an old nickname. In Palm Beach, it’s a sign of acceptance, especially for a New Yorker named Eve Katz—that’s me. I got the name Bunny at boarding school”—her smile became sly—“because I enjoyed boys. You know, had fun hopping from one bed to another. Small tits and a hellacious sex drive, those are the only things Liberty inherited from me—so far. There!” Smoky laughter. “That’s something I didn’t even tell Abe—him with his donkey pecker and rooster strut. Can we retract the claws now?”

Her reference to farm animals threw me for an instant, so it took a beat to remember that Abe was the husband she’d wanted to shoot. I said, “You should thank your schoolmates. Your nickname could’ve been a lot worse.”

“Oh, it was, dearie, it was. *Bunny* was for social functions, but it stuck. That’s why I worry about Liberty. She’s been man-crazy her entire life. Which is fine for recreation. But she’s going to inherit my money, which makes her a target.”

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Because Mrs. Tupplemeyer had mentioned business, I said, “I’m a poor choice if you’re looking for a bodyguard. And you’re forgetting that Birdy is a trained law officer. I’d be willing to bet she has a gun in her purse right now.”

“*Really?*” Surprised but hopeful, the woman turned to peer through the sliding doors. “Do you think she’d do it?”

“Shoot a man? She goes to the target range once a week. I doubt if she could miss something that big.”

“No,” the woman said, “I mean pull the trigger. Trust me, every bachelor in that room sees a bull’s-eye on her ass when they look at her. Or what passes for an ass. I own a derringer, but was never able to get drunk enough.”

“Drunk enough to fire,” I said to confirm.

“Of course. On several occasions. And the one time I did drink enough, I spilled the goddamn bullets in the sink and the maid refused to call a plumber.”

I cleared my throat. “My advice to you, ma’am, is give that gun to your niece. She’s too smart to mix alcohol and bullets. What I think is”—I hesitated, wondering if I should say it—“well, I think you’ve got anger issues, Mrs. Tupplemeyer. And you drink too much to own a firearm.”

“Anger issues?” The woman threw her head back and laughed, then noticed her martini glass was empty. “I *like* you, Hannah Smith. How about stopping by in the morning? By *morning*, in Palm Beach, we mean *noon*. There could be a nice retainer if you help me with a certain problem.” A studious pause. “You’re a Gemini, aren’t you? Early in June, with Leo rising. I bet half of

you still feels guilty about that pervert you shot—but your better half wishes his nuts were in your trophy case. Am I right or am I right?”

I didn't know what to say to that. When I finally did respond, it was with caution. “I'm not going to shoot a man for you, Mrs. Tupplemeyer, if that's what's on your mind.”

The woman, opening her cigarette case, said, “Call me Bunny. Oh . . . and would you mind getting me another martini? *Cold*—tell one of the servers. I've got other guests to attend to.”

MRS. TUPPLEMEYER—I couldn't bring myself to call her Bunny—had her slim, handsome attorney explain the details to me. Not at her apartment. His Palm Beach office was at the corner of Hibiscus near the arts center, marble statues and a fountain outside.

Birdy came along. Her Aunt Bunny didn't arrive until we were almost done.

The attorney, his sleeves rolled up, pulled two chairs close to his computer and opened a county tax map that showed land parcels west of Lake Okeechobee, closer to Labelle than Arcadia, in central Florida. He zoomed in.

“Mrs. B—your Aunt Bunny—she's part of an investment consortium that purchased this section of land, a little over six hundred acres. It's north of the Caloosahatchee River between Arcadia and this little town, Labelle.” He touched the screen. “Are you familiar with the area?”

“She is,” Birdy said, deferring to me.

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My friend was correct, but that didn't make me unusual. On a map of Florida, the Caloosahatchee River is difficult to miss. It crosses the state west to east, Fort Myers to St. Lucie or Palm Beach, depending on how a boat chooses to exit Lake Okeechobee on its way to the Atlantic Ocean.

"Why do you ask?" I asked the man.

He talked a while about the complexity of investors combining properties into a single parcel for development. "What it comes down to is," he said, "Mrs. B is on the hook for approximately one hundred acres of mostly cattle and timber that runs along this creek." He touched the screen again. "The creek—actually, it says 'Telegraph River' here—it runs into the Caloosahatchee, which is starting to boom. On the other side of the creek, there are a few small-time ranchers, a fundamentalist church or two, and a mom-and-pop RV park. But development is coming to the area. So far, so good."

He looked to confirm we were following along. "Bunny, she's a damn smart woman. I know she did her homework. Unfortunately, she also let her friends—certain associates as well—talk her into committing to this project before she came to me. A project like this, you need to do a thorough analysis before you write a check."

A country club community with a strict covenant to build million-dollar homes on five-acre lots is what the investors envisioned.

Birdy jumped ahead. "How badly is my aunt getting burned?"

"A quarter million, so far," the man said, "plus a second payment of a million dollars is due next month. *Unless* we can find

away to turn this around. No, actually, Mrs. B needs to bail out because, if this project does happen, it'll be years down the road. And here's why."

The screen changed. Now we were looking at an abandoned two-story house, a roof of rusted tin, windows boarded over, and a strange-looking cupola built higher than the chimney. The chimney was brick, the cupola sided with clapboard. Once upon a time, it might have been the main residence of an elegant estate.

"Is that a water cistern?" I asked, meaning the cupola. I'd never seen anything like it. Or so I thought, until he explained that the place had served as a school after a foreclosure in the 1940s. The belfry had been added to house a bell.

"Mrs. B and the other investors knew from the start this house is protected by Florida Historical Properties laws. That wasn't a problem. They could've thrown a fence around the place or restored it as sort of a community capstone. A communal park—picnics on Fourth of July, like that. The house was built in 1890 by a man from Virginia who raised cattle. Charles Langford Cadence. Which is a very marketable name—Cadence Estates or Cadence Greens—lots of possibilities. Has a nice ring, doesn't it? The previous owner was a Brazilian who planted exotic trees for timber. Now the property has some of the most beautiful mimosas and other hardwoods you've ever seen. The combination made the house well worth saving."

The attorney swiveled to me. "Have you heard of the place?"

I said, "I think so, but I can't remember the context. The Langfords were early Florida cattlemen. But Cadence isn't a common name here . . . Or I could be confusing the two."

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“I meant the house,” he said. “About four years ago, a hack reality show called *Vortex Hunters* did a segment on the place. And the idiotic lien holders played along. Lots of eerie night footage and contrived research about murders and suicides, and negative energy—that sort of thing. It’s true that Charles Cadence was murdered or committed suicide way, way back—the TV show hinted that his wife killed him or hired a Florida gangster. A later owner also died there. But—”

“Was this during Prohibition?” I asked. I was interested because I’d read that mobsters from New York and Chicago had operated out of the area. I mentioned Al Capone, but drew a blank on other names.

The interruption derailed the attorney, but he handled it with patience. “No, I think the TV writers invented their own gangster. He was a Bonnie-and-Clyde type. A guy who’d been raised in the swamps, knew how to live off the land—that was their angle—which is why the cops couldn’t catch him. But, as I was saying—”

“I bet it was John Ashley,” I said.

“John who?”

I repeated the name but didn’t explain that John Ashley had been a real person. He had murdered and robbed and traveled with a girlfriend. I knew about Ashley because he had been born near Sanibel and there were rumors concerning him and one of my great-aunts.

“Ashley . . .” the attorney said, trying to recall, then decided it was unimportant. “The point is, show me a hundred-year-old house where someone *hasn’t* died. That would be unusual. Television cares about ratings; screw the facts. So they staged a

reenactment—the psycho gangster, blood on the walls, children screaming—all that sort of nonsense . . . But we’re getting off topic. Here’s the real problem . . .”

The man clicked open another file while Birdy aimed a sarcastic grin at me. “A haunted house. Let’s do a sleepover. We can make s’mores and sing ‘Kumbaya.’”

From your lips to God’s ears—a favorite expression of an old fisherman friend, Cordial Pallet. Little did we know.

The computer screen changed. Multiple photos: a rusted cannon partially exhumed, a close-up of several clay tobacco pipes, a brass button stamped CSA, chunks of spent lead, a rusted stirrup that appeared too tiny for a man’s foot.

CSA: Confederate States of America.

The attorney explained, “These were found on the property. Mostly near the creek and the house, but some other sites, too. Turns out, they’re all Civil War period. Before the state will issue permits, due diligence requires a long list of surveys—flora and fauna, water quality, that sort of thing. In this case, an archaeological survey turned up the things you’re looking at. From what I’ve read, there were only five or six significant battles in Florida. North Florida, mostly, so I can’t blame Mrs. B for not anticipating the mess she’s now in. But here’s what put the brakes on the whole project.” He reached for the mouse and clicked again.

A human skull, jaw missing. Like the cannon, only partially exhumed. Close-ups of three brass buttons stamped with eagles. Then another excavated spot containing two skulls, a human pelvis, and several femurs, the bones black from age or fire.

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Birdy, who has a master's in law enforcement and a minor in archaeology, sat forward. "Oh my god."

The man, however, was fixed on my reaction. I told him, "So far, this is interesting. Some of my relatives fought in the Civil War—for the North and the South. And John Ashley, he was famous in this area. No, *infamous* would be the word."

"Part of your family is from the North?"

"No. All Floridians, but it wasn't unusual to be on different sides. And one of my great-uncles was a blockade-runner. His papers are stored in my mother's attic. I'll dig them out, if you want."

The attorney said, "I like the way you think," but my friend, Birdy, didn't get it.

I explained. "Back then only a few hundred people lived in this part of Florida. It's possible my great-uncle knew Charles Cadence. The Brazilian, too, maybe. When we get home, I'll see what I can find." I paused, then asked the man, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He knew more about me than he had revealed, that's why. Embarrassed, he glanced down, jotted some notes on a pad, and said, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves," then talked about the photos. "Archaeologists now suspect the acreage owned by Mrs. B was the site of a battle that historians thought took place near Orlando. Brief but very bloody. Or that they've found a battle site that didn't make the history books. More of an extended skirmish than a battle, they think. Their guess is extrapolated from the number of artifacts found over X amount of surface area—some sort of damn

formula they use. Worse, they also suspect the house might have been built on or near a field cemetery.”

The man sighed and said to Birdy, “No way your aunt could’ve seen this coming. They’ve brought in a supposed expert. Until his team’s done, the development project is dead in the water. We’re talking years, not months—possibly never.”

Birdy asked several questions before I said, “I still don’t understand what this has to do with me.”

The man opened a drawer and placed a file on the desk. “Because Mrs. B asked me to, I did a search on you. I’ve confirmed that you’re a state-licensed and -bonded private investigator. But with almost no experience, from the number of reports you filed with the state.”

“I never claimed otherwise,” I replied. “It was my uncle’s agency.”

The man nodded and waited.

“My uncle was a sheriff’s detective before he started chartering. He had wealthy fishing clients who hired new staff every season. They often needed background checks done, so it was a handy license to have. I worked in his office during junior college, which I didn’t finish—as I’m sure you already know.” The last part came out sharper than I intended.

“No need to get defensive,” the attorney said. “You’re a friend of the family. We trust you. So Mrs. B wants you to help with an idea I came up with. It’s a long shot. But the more I think about, maybe not such a long shot after all.” He swiveled around, opened the folder, and handed us each a sheet of paper. “This will help you understand.”

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The document had to do with real estate laws.

Disclosure laws vary from state to state, but Florida does not require sellers or agents to disclose homicide, suicide, deaths, or past diagnosis of communicable diseases to buyers. However, Florida law does forbid Realtors from selling “stigmatized properties” without full disclosure. A stigmatized property is defined as a structure or parcel of land where real or rumored events occurred that do not physically affect the property but can adversely impact its monetary value . . .

Several phrases were highlighted in yellow. The attorney recited them without having to refresh his memory by looking. “*Real or rumored events that can adversely impact a property’s value.* Note the wording. Think about the *Vortex* episode. A lot of people saw it. Presumably, there are potential buyers and neighbors, too, who actually believe the property is *stigmatized*. Haunted, cursed, bad karma—the house scares people, in other words. The seller didn’t disclose that to me or Mrs. B at closing. He also didn’t disclose the fact that a Civil War battle took place there, that it’s possibly even the site of a field cemetery. Did he know or didn’t he? Well, the fact is, it doesn’t matter. The seller sure as hell knew about the TV show. Superstitious baloney or not, I’m convinced this is Mrs. B’s way out.”

Pressing his point, the man scooted closer. “If this gets to court—which it won’t—we don’t have to prove the place is haunted. All we have to prove is there are rumors or events that adversely impact the property’s value. The seller didn’t disclose

those facts at closing. Hannah, that's where you come in. You're from an old-time Florida family. Locals are more likely to talk to someone like you. The small-time ranchers, the mom-and-pop campground people, anyone who lives nearby. I want you to talk to them. See what they have to say. And you're a—I hope you don't mind a bit of chauvinism here—you are a very attractive woman. And the lead archaeologist is a man.”

The attorney saw my expression change so was quick to add, “Don't get the wrong idea. Because of the federal Antiquities Act regarding graves—we're getting into legalese here—I'm *not privy* to what the archaeologist finds. But he might talk to you, even let you take pictures. That would be a nice little addition to the case I'll present. Do you have a good camera?”

“A friend just loaned me a Canon with a good lens,” I said, meaning the biologist.

“Perfect. They don't have to be professional quality, but we need lots of close-ups. A cell phone wouldn't do.”

I glanced at Birdy, who shrugged her approval. “I'd love to see the place. And if it helps Bunny, I can go with Hannah on my days off.”

The attorney nodded. *Good*. “I've already advised your aunt not to pay next month's installment. We'll put it in an escrow account. If need be, she'll write off the quarter million loss, but it saves her a million dollars in cash and further assessments down the road.”

Birdy asked, “You just came up with this?”

“I've been working on it for several weeks. Last night your aunt called me, very excited. Even as smart as she is, she follows her horoscope, as you probably know. She told me *a transecting*

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connection—some type of astrology phrase—was predicted for yesterday. I forget exactly. She believes the connection is you, Hannah. I was dubious until”—the attorney eyes shifted to mine—“well, until I read about your background. Now I see it as a stroke of good luck. We’ll win the case either way, but what you provide could be helpful—if you’re willing.”

I felt uncomfortable being the center of attention but also was unclear about a few things. I asked about the fee and how much time was required and what exactly he and Mrs. Tuppemeyer wanted me to do. Then, “What about the other investors? You said they’re friends of hers. Are they pulling out, too?”

He pursed his lips, cleared his throat. “I’m the one who found a loophole in the real estate laws, but I’m not paid to advise them. We’re much better off keeping everything under the radar.”

The attorney looked at Birdy, then me, to confirm we understood his meaning. “Trust me, in Palm Beach people know the rules when it comes to money. Business is business. They’d do the same to your aunt in a heartbeat.” Then he smiled. A man who could afford to have his teeth capped and wear an expensive silk tie of blue on this Monday morning, the second week of October.

Which is why, a week later, Birdy Tuppemeyer suffered the shock of scorpions falling on her face and ran out the door, screaming.