

The Bog Bride

Chapter 1

I did not for one thin minute think that Mr. Nicholas Howell was as honest as he was trying to make me believe during our first meeting. He came to my office giving off the aura of wealthy earnestness—the sort of character that fat men in top hats have been trying to pawn off on the working class since profit was first invented. *I'm wealthy but I care*, kind of thing, *now where's my tax receipt?* Howell wasn't wearing a top hat but he was professionally draped in a dark wool suit that I couldn't afford to rent let alone feel that comfortable in. He even had the audacity to drop a light dusting of ash on his pants. I wouldn't have been able to do that if it was my suit. It would have felt like killing a baby condor, back when there were baby condors. Maybe that was all it took to make me distrust him. The fact that he disrespected the very impression he was trying to make.

The result was that my first meeting with Howell was less than inspiring. Every cynical molecule in my body had somehow been agitated into an attack state. It could have been the triple-A hangover I had inherited from Tommy when I'd possessed his body that morning to take the case. I was combating the condition with a steady infusion of horrible black coffee that leaked out of a greasy spoon down the street. It was too early for solid food so my lips whet my appetite scraping over the cigarette clamped between my teeth. The acrid smoke had started a tug

of war with nausea; I was holding one end of the rope with weak fingers. We were broke; Elmo had spent the last of our savings on the coffee and a carton of cigarettes. The rent was due and I was going through the want ads when Howell had called to arrange a meeting in my office at two o'clock.

He was a wealthy man I could tell by the weight of the gold-covered hand he offered me in greeting. Howell wore enough rings to pass for an Egyptian Pharaoh. A guy like that didn't travel in my circles much, unless he needed a tire or his oil changed out. And even then, it was more likely he would have someone else drop the car off.

He quickly name-dropped that he was of the 'Raleigh Howells' that had migrated to Georgia before the American Civil war and were responsible for civilizing that part of the country. If there was such a connection it was many generations ago; there was no sign of it in the way he pronounced his letters—barely any drawling, and only half-open contempt for us northerners. A generation or two later he claimed, some of the Raleigh Howells migrated north in their own version of manifest destiny, and massaged to life certain business concerns in Norfolk: shipping, rail lines. Mr. Howell then taxed my detoxifying nervous system by going down a long list of companies and pre-Change cities his family was responsible for bringing into the world. "Suffice it to say," he said in closing, something ironically, he could have said in opening and saved me a lot of listening. "We had acquired enough in wealth where most of the family proper enjoyed a life of leisure, far from the grind that built Howell Industries." He made a curious smile then before continuing. "Which of course brings me to Howell Manor and the curse."

Now, someone talking curses on a sunny day is one thing, it's another when you're sitting in an office, dressed like a gothic clown, not sure if you're alive or dead, the rain's been falling for over fifty years and you're in business with a corpse. The corpse is my partner Elmo. Not a bad guy as corpses go; I didn't broadcast it, but he had a better work ethic too. If someone drops the word curse into an environment like that, you're bound to perk up a bit. So, Howell tried to explain the basics.

In the mid-1800's, his great-great-grandfather Chester Howell built a grand mansion on the foundation of a Civil War garrison near Suffolk at the edge of The Great Dismal Swamp. It was some twenty-five miles from Norfolk and his business assizes, but it provided a fresh and natural alternative to the coastal city. The Great Dismal Swamp was never as bad as its name sounded, Howell claimed, containing 300,000 acres of North America's finest bog lands, forests and wetlands.

"It all happened there," my potential employer said after a long pause.

“I feel it would be more appropriate to talk about this at Howell Manor.”

“Why do I want to talk about it at all?” I sniffed the air for the smell of a rat.

Nicholas Howell smiled in a toothy way, and ran both of his long-fingered hands over his legs. “I mention the curse in passing only because I know that people will tell you about it. I’m not here about the curse. I simply want to hire you to come to the Manor for the reading of a will. Some among my siblings and their spouses may wish to contest it. I would like to hire you to validate what transpires.” He smiled without humor. “To witness.”

“Why at the Manor?” I growled, thinking of a long trip and buckets of rain.

“It is a central location for the beneficiaries,” Howell snorted. “And fitting, I think.”

“Who died?” I asked, glad to be getting down to business.

“My father.” He looked at his hands, they rested palms up, suddenly vulnerable. “And his death was such that he cannot enjoy the afterlife.” That was a reference to the fact that since the Change, the newly dead get up and go about their business after a short period called Blacktime. They’d retain their personalities, ambitions and desires, barring the destruction of their bodies.

“And the curse.” I flicked ash into an old Styrofoam cup. “Why bother talking about it?”

“The circumstances of my father’s death were provocative in relation to the family curse.” Howell smiled at his hands. “My brother gives it much more credence than it deserves.” He raised his eyes. “I would like to have you along to ground the proceedings in reality.”

“Me? Reality.” I gestured to my face paint. “You’ve got to do better than that.”

Mr. Howell studied his knees now as he nodded his head. “I have heard through associates in Authority that you are capable at your job. I need a witness...”

“A witness who can be discounted if necessary.” I added with only a touch of sarcasm.

“In the event.” Mr. Howell assured me. “That any of this ever needs to see the light of day at all.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “That’s fine.” What did I care? Howell looked like he could pay and getting me to go quietly usually took a few extra yards of green. Things had been quiet for too long and my bank accounts were starting to resemble crime scenes. Any time I visited my bank, I expected to see yellow caution tape around the teller.

“We can discuss the rest at Howell Manor. Or on the train.” Mr. Howell leaned forward and laid an envelope on my desk. “Tickets for you and your partner, and a small cash advance. It’s best to go by train. With the Change the manor is besieged by nature and worse. And the highways have been all but forgotten. You know the trouble the countryside has become.”

“Train.” I nodded looking at the tickets.

“Yes.” Howell smiled. “I will travel with you, to Suffton—my car will meet us there.” He suddenly looked shifty, casting an eye instinctively over first his right shoulder then the left. “Tonight.”

“On the train.” I was too busy chewing up the nub of my cigarette and counting the small cash advance to make much of his body language. “You know I will cost you a hundred and a quarter a day.”

“That’s fine, Mr. Wildclown.” He slipped out like a shadow.