

## CHAPTER ONE

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The dapper young man stopped at the top of the gangplank, savoring the moment. Kingsport, USA. To a man, everyone who had disembarked before him had done the exact same thing. It was a unique moment; the first time they'd set foot on foreign soil. Dennis Wheatley fully intended to remember it. It wasn't every day you braved a new frontier.

"*Wheatley!*" came a cry from the crowded quayside.

It was one voice amongst hundreds, but it carried all the way up the gangplank.

He scanned the mass of waving arms—there were pretty girls and grinning grandparents and expectant friends down there, their smiles infectious, and amid all of that happiness, the man he was looking for: the Great Houdini. "Dennis! Over here, man!"

Despite the fact they had only corresponded by letter—well, many letters, actually—Wheatley was utterly fascinated by the man, by the deceptions around him and the persona he presented the world. Face-to-face for the first time, there was no mistaking the man, even in a crowd of thousands.

Wheatley waved in his direction and started down the plank. *So this is it, he thought. America.*

It didn't look so different. The fashions of those waiting on the quayside were a little stiffer, but people were people the world over no matter what they wore.

At the bottom of the plank he presented his passport to the Immigration officer.

The man took it, bent open the card cover, and unfolded the single page document inside. It was still crisp, unused before this trip. Wheatley knew every word written on it. The personal description detailing his height, weight, age, and coloration, sections including his name, nationality, and a grainy photograph along with orders that the bearer be afforded the same rights and privileges that would be offered to His Majesty the King. It was his life reduced to a few words.

The Immigration officer said, "Everything seems to be in order. Welcome to America, Mr. Wheatley. Enjoy your visit," and folded the document up before handing it back.

"Thank you."

Slipping the passport back inside his pocket, he took his first step on American soil. The next passenger was already on his way down the gangplank and the waiting crowd jostled around him.

He pushed and wriggled his way through the crowd toward the piles of luggage trunks and the waiting Houdini. "Mr. Houdini," he said, holding out a hand. Close up, the magician looked considerably older than he had in the movie reels Wheatley had seen, but still physically imposing all the same. He smiled, thinking of all of the hours he had spent watching those great escapes, building a dossier on the tricks, trying to predict what wondrous deception Houdini might conjure next. He loved the theatricality of it all. But looking at him now, he seemed...*reduced*.

"Harry," the man replied, matching his smile. "Harry, Harry, Harry." He seemed intent on repeating the name until it stopped making sense. "Houdini's a character. A piece of theater for the great unwashed." A character he lived and breathed. He *was* the character he'd created, and the world was in awe of him. "Besides, you made the damned journey without drowning, that's got to be enough to earn you the right to call me Harry hasn't it? I figure we'll head straight to the set. Ulysses

is like a kid on Christmas morning, he can't wait to meet you. It's all Wheatley this, England that. I warn you, he can be a little...intense. That's a good word for it. Odd, even. You know what the artistic temperament can be like, but still, he's a likable enough sort. And he's paying the bills."

"Is this when I'm meant to wonder what I've gotten myself into?"

"Oh, we're well past that point, my friend," Houdini grinned. "But we will have fun. And that's what life is all about. Come on, let's get your luggage and get out of here."

Wheatley followed Houdini through the crowd to the waiting bags.

He had his reasons for making the trip—and meeting Houdini was only one of them. Another one was simply to be anywhere but home right now. The last twelve months had been hell. Not only had he lost his best friend, Eric Tombe, brutally murdered by his pet thug, he'd found himself blackmailed into giving the killer an alibi. Everyone knew he was lying, but no one could prove it. That didn't stop things from being uncomfortable. Questions he did not want to answer were being asked far too often. On every corner he was sure he saw policemen shadowing him, in every doorway he was sure he saw private investigators dogging his trail.

The timing of Houdini's invitation could not have been better, no matter how curious the offer it contained.

It had given Wheatley the justification he needed to make his excuses and move on without seeming to be running away; two birds with one metaphorical stone.

The offer?

Houdini had finagled a deal with the young filmmaker Ulysses Monk that saw them employed as consultants on his new project which had just begun shooting in Dunwich. Though what, exactly, they were supposed to be consulting on was sketchy to say the least.

He grabbed his suitcases.

"The car's this way."

Wheatley followed Houdini as he wove a path through the crowd people, always two steps behind him. As they reached the car he asked the question he'd been wanting to ask ever since the invitation arrived: "Why me?"

"Ah," Houdini said with a mischievous grin. "What can I say? Personally, I find there is nothing quite like exposing fakers and charlatans. Call it an obsession with the truth, but in my defense, I ask you: How can anyone willingly live in a world of lies?" Before he could answer, Houdini answered for him. "They can't. Obviously. No one can. That is why the world of the motion pictures is so fascinating. It is all about painting lies on a moving canvas. Selling the drama. Our stories are always melodrama, deliberately manipulating the heartstrings instead of working the mind." He tapped two fingers against his temple. "It's all up here. The mind. It's a beautiful thing. Monk wants to show the truth in his film, or at least as much as he is able to. We're here to make sure he can."

"The truth about freaks?"

"A harsh word, I know, but yes."

And if he was being honest with himself, he was looking forward to seeing some of these people in the flesh. It wasn't just morbid curiosity. There was something eerily fascinating about the underside of society, the notion of disfigurement versus beauty, and the perceptions around it. He could see why Monk was drawn towards it. In Wheatley's experience, people were willfully superficial when it came to valuing others. They would talk to someone with physical abnormalities as though it was their brain that was twisted, not their bones.

Even so, he wasn't sure how either of them were supposed to know just by looking at them if they were the genuine article, honest-to-God freaks, or if their disfigurement was the result of accident, or worse, tricksters using prosthetics and stage makeup to alter their appearance.

But that was the job he'd traveled four thousand miles for. Monk wanted everything in his picture to be *real*.

Of course, none of that really explained why Houdini had reached out to him.

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"The strangest thing happened last night," Wheatley said, somewhere between Kingsport and Dunwich.



"Oh?" that caught Houdini's attention, as he knew it would. "Just how strange is the strangest thing?"

"I'll let you decide," Wheatley said, baiting the hook of the story. "There was a passenger in the cabin next to mine. He kept to himself, but I heard him moving about often enough. Only caught a glimpse of him once when his door was open as I walked past. A most peculiar chap. Gaunt, like one of the walking dead, without a trace of a hair on his head."

"Well, he does indeed sound strange," Houdini laughed. He signaled to take the next turn toward the outskirts of the town even though there was no other vehicle on the road.

"And that's before we get to the interesting part: he *disappeared* last night."

"Ah, a mystery. Excellent."

"We were caught in a terrible fog. As far as I can tell he either fell overboard...or *jumped*."

"It happens."

"Ah, but this was the *first* time he had left his cabin in the whole trip!"

"So he was either damned unfortunate, or the victim of something more sinister, is that what you're suggesting?"

Wheatley nodded beside him. "It makes no sense that he'd choose the one night to venture on deck when the passengers had been instructed to stay below."

"Okay, *now* you have my interest, Wheatley. Ask yourself this: Why on earth would the passengers be told to stay inside? It isn't all that likely they'd fall overboard just because of some fog, is it?"

"I've got no proof, but I listened and watched. I got the distinct impression the crew was afraid that there was *something* out there..."

Houdini looked across at him for a moment, not watching the road. He stared at Wheatley without so much as blinking. He didn't seem remotely surprised by the notion. Quite the reverse, in fact. It was almost as if he *expected* it.

"All right, you asked 'why me?' I owe you the truth," Houdini said, finally. "It was no coincidence, I'll admit that. You were recommended to me by a mutual friend. It was suggested you were a man with an open mind and an understanding of the

*peculiar*. To be frank, weird things happen in this part of the world. And by weird I mean things that are not easy to explain.”

“Like sailors being terrified that there is something out in the ocean deep?”

“Precisely like that, yes. There are more things in heaven and earth and all that malarkey. I was assured you were open to the uncanny, where others would be inclined to simply deny the possibility of it.”

“I’m flattered. I think. ‘Uncanny’? Does that mean you suspect something of a *supernatural* nature is going on here?” It was the obvious conclusion to draw; it was, after all, the one thing they had in common—an almost unhealthy interest in things that did not belong and could not easily be explained.

“I’m suggesting nothing of the sort—*yet*—but I will go so far as to say I believe there are things that science isn’t in a position to rationalize, and those things seem to happen more frequently here than anywhere else I’ve been. But, and this is the crux of the matter, events don’t need to be supernatural to be weird. Take this picture of Monk’s. It is beset by tragedy almost daily. The latest may even have put the whole enterprise at risk, but Monk is relentless. People are calling it cursed; yet he refuses to be stopped. He will carry on through hell and high water as long as he has the coin to do so.”

Wheatley was about to ask what he meant by “latest tragedy,” because it sounded like there was a story to tell there, too, but before he could the sky was lit by a sudden fork of lightning that hung in the road in front of them. It was followed by an ear-splitting crash of thunder.

The rain came from nowhere. It was just suddenly there, a solid sheet that divided the road in two.

The deluge transformed the road ahead of them into a river in a matter of seconds, too much water for the canted surface to drain away before it flooded. The wipers couldn’t keep the windshield clear for more than half a second. It was incredible. Biblical.

“Now I understand what they mean when they say the heavens opened,” Wheatley said. It was a lame joke. The ferocity of the storm was frightening. He made poor jokes when

he was frightened. "Unbelievable." He shook his head. He had to shout to be heard over the fury of the breaking storm.

The rain drummed on the roof of the car.

He could smell the tang of electricity in the air.

"Should we sit this out?"

"If we wait there's every chance we'll be stuck here for the night, and as much as I like you, I don't particularly fancy sleeping with you on a first date, no offense old chap, but Bess is more my type." Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner—Bess Houdini to the rest of the world—was Harry's wife and the center of his universe. The pair were inseparable. She'd been his beautiful assistant for as long as he'd been the lord of illusions, up on the stage beside him night after night.

"Speaking of Bess, is she in town? I'm looking forward to meeting her."

"Ah, alas, no. She and Monk don't exactly see eye-to-eye. As I said, he's a little...*odd*. She thinks he's using me, trading on my reputation to add notoriety to his 'little film' as she calls it. We're meeting in a week for rehearsals. So until then it's just you and me."

Wheatley nodded. "This is *ridiculous*," he said, peering into the storm. "Is it normally like this?" The sky had turned black in the time it had taken them to cover three hundred yards. He could barely see two feet beyond the hood of the car, even with the headlights on full beam.

The rain drummed against the hood, bouncing back six inches high.

"Depends on your definition of normal. I've seen storms like this bring half a hillside down and block a road for weeks. I've seen floods grow so deep that they become impassable without a rowboat."

"I'll take your word for it," Wheatley said. "Maybe staying at home, warm by the fire, wouldn't have been a bad way to spend the autumn after all."

Houdini laughed—and then stopped laughing abruptly as the car slipped and slewed in mud and rain.

Panic gripped Wheatley. He felt for something secure to cling onto. Anything. Beside him, Houdini seemed to take perverse pleasure in it all; man and machine versus the elements.

"This guy that went overboard?" Houdini said, bringing them back to his story. "Anything else worth knowing about him?" He fought with the wheel, eyes straight ahead, somehow able to make small talk.

Wheatley had no idea how the man could do it. It was as though by distracting himself he was leaving less space in his brain to worry about driving. However it worked, it *was* working. If he'd been in the driver's seat they would have ended up in a ditch long ago.

Lightning flashed again. Within it he saw the road, and just how close they were to the grassy verge. He saw the rainwater cascading down the side, bringing mud and debris with it. And then the darkness returned. But not soon enough for him to miss the roots of the trees exposed as the mud slipped, or the bare stone where the foundations of the bank had been ruthlessly exposed. To take his mind off it, he tried to think about *The Dunwich Ghost's* peculiar passenger. "I'm not sure that there's that much to tell. I only saw him once."

"But an observant man can see a lot without *thinking* he is seeing anything. For instance, what about his meals?"

"They were all served in his cabin. Always by the same steward."

"See then, that is something. A detail. There must have been talk about him. A mysterious passenger who never ventured out of his cabin, who only accepted food delivered by the same steward, day or night? People talk. It is human nature. They gossip. And with someone behaving so oddly, that gossip must have been rife? So think: did you happen to overhear the crew talking about their mysterious passenger? Did you hear the steward complaining about having to work all hours just to be sure the gaunt man with no hair didn't go hungry?"

"Well," Wheatley said, drawing it out slowly so the word seemed to last one, two, three heartbeats, building the anticipation. He smiled, knowing this was the detail that would reel Houdini in. How could it not? "I did happen to overhear one of them saying that he had a *coffin* in his cabin."

"A coffin?" Houdini barked out a laugh. "And that didn't strike you as peculiar? That, my friend, is what newspaper men call burying the lead."

"I did say he was a most peculiar guest," Wheatley grinned, almost managing to forget about the storm for a moment. "I thought given his appearance he may have been suffering some affliction, and with his days numbered, intended to be buried here, hence bringing his coffin with him."

"How very practical, and *English*. So, the sixty-four thousand dollar question: Was it still in his room after he had disappeared over the side?"

Wheatley had no idea. He hadn't even thought to look. "No idea," he admitted, cursing himself for ruining the end of a good story. It would have been perfect to say that no, in fact, it was gone and that the man had been thrown over the side in his coffin. That sort of detail had a delicious quality to it. The door of the cabin had been left open when the search began, and he'd walked past it several times during the search, but hadn't thought to look inside the room.

"It couldn't have been there," he said eventually, trying to think it through. It was useless. He was inventing memories. Wheatley rubbed at the stubble on his chin. "Do you think I should tell the police?"

"Why ever would you want to do that? I'm sure that they will interview the stewards and, if as you say, there was a coffin and then there wasn't, then one of them will mention it. So I don't think you need to worry about getting involved."

"Technically I'm already involved; they questioned me this morning before we docked."

"Oh?"

"Officers from Kingsport came on board in a launch before we dropped anchor. They wanted to be sure our details logged with the captain were correct and establish that I hadn't seen anything. Which I hadn't, of course. I gave them your name as point-of-contact; I hope that was all right?"

"Of course."

"They didn't believe me at first," Wheatley admitted. Houdini laughed again; it was an easy laugh with no sign of nervousness being created by the storm. "Actually, I'm not entirely convinced they believed me at all."

"I am sure you're not the first to offer my name as their sponsor when arriving in the country. They must think I'm

assembling my own little pool of slave labor. Ah," he said, affecting a thick brogue, "Tis a mercy you weren't Irish or I'm sure they'd have sent you back where ya came from." It was an awful impersonation.

In the distance Wheatley could just make out the lights of a town fighting to make themselves seen through the deluge.

"Well, here we are." Houdini brought the car to a halt in front of a boarding house a few minutes later. He pulled up on the handbrake, hard. "Ma Mocata has a full house, but I used my charms to convince her to let you have the last room."

"Then I owe you one."

"Don't be so sure," he chuckled. "She's not a fan of the 'movie people' but I promised her you weren't one of those, so you better be a good boy and not be causing her any problems now, Wheatley."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Good man."

Wheatley peered out through the rain at the big old clapboard house. The place had seen better days. A hand-painted sign in the front window declared "no vacancies" in an awkward scrawl.

"You're not staying here then?"

"Heavens, no. Monk *insisted* that I stay with him in the house he's rented. It's just outside of town. I could hardly say no, now could I? Not that he has room for me up there. He's sleeping on the sofa so I can have his bed. But, between you, me, and the steering wheel, it's never easy for me to get any peace in a boarding house. There's always someone who wants to have their 'Houdini moment' so they can go back home and tell the folks all about it. Not that I begrudge them, it is the price of fame, and if I'm honest, it's one I rather like paying most of the time. But sometimes it's nice to just rest, you know?"

Wheatley could only begin to imagine what it must be like for his companion, who was surely one of the most famous men in the world. There could be no privacy—no anonymity—he would always be the Great Houdini, never just Harry.