

## Chapter Four, “The Castle Ghost”

### 1

Lily Allbright had occupied Creutzfeldt Castle for a few weeks now and was well settled in, even though there was still no sign of her husband, Paul. If she were being completely honest with herself, she didn't really miss him.

Did that make her a bad wife? Their marriage was one of convenience so, in the end, did it really even matter?

One day, soon, they would have a child together, of course, for no other reason than to produce an heir to inherit their – hers, really – wealth. But that would most likely be the only intimacy between them for the foreseeable future.

In the meantime, she preferred to be on her own. There were books in the castle – many of them – and that was enough. Their servant – his servant, really – provided her with whatever she needed, which wasn't much.

His huge form and large, exaggerated features scared most people but Lily was used to them by now. She had to admit that, when Paul introduced her to him, Lily was frightened of him, like the rest.

The servant's name was Roderick. If he had a family name then Lily didn't know it. It was just Roderick and that was enough. The big man spent most of his time in the servant's quarters, far out of sight.

Spending most of her time alone was a change of pace for Lily. In America, she was used to hosting parties in her large New York estate, welcoming the nouveau riche of the city with open arms. This was in contrast to most of the old money of New York and it put her and her family legacy at odds with the old guard.

This was also one of the reasons that Paul suggested they move – temporarily, he insisted – to Europe, to this relative's estate. Reluctantly, Lily had agreed. And now here she was with Paul nowhere to be found.

On one particularly stormy evening, as she got ready for bed, the big castle didn't feel so empty. To Lily, it felt like she was sharing the big hallways with someone. Or something.

She couldn't quite put her finger on the why but it was there, regardless. The air felt wrong. Her hair stood up on the back of her neck, like someone was staring at her. Someone she couldn't see.

As she walked down a long corridor towards her set of rooms – her inner sanctum, as she thought of them – she was convinced that someone was following her. Someone was walking in step with her, concealing their presence, masking their movements.

Perhaps it was a ghost. Old castles were supposed to be haunted, weren't they?

But she didn't believe in ghosts. She was a grown woman and had given up all those imaginings of little girls behind. So the idea was absurd. Wasn't it?

Here, tonight, in this part of the world, it didn't seem so unbelievable. She was in a much older, much more ancient, part of the world than America. Suddenly ghosts didn't seem so far-fetched.

She picked up her pace and by the time she reached the door to her inner sanctum, she was almost running. Closing the door behind her, she pushed her back against it, eyes closed, breathing heavy. She was scared. There was no use denying it.

But it was over now. No ghost came floating through the wall beside her. It was all in her mind. She laughed to herself as she began to undress and run a hot bath. One thing she had insisted on before moving in was making sure the castle had running hot and cold water. Good, modern plumbing.

She took her time in the bath, almost falling asleep. When she was finished, she put on a robe and headed into her bedroom. Forgetting something in the bathroom, she went back inside and stopped cold.

There was an old, ornate mirror mounted in the bathroom, near the tub. It had fogged over due to her bath and now she could see that something had been written on the mirror, etched out in the condensation. It was one word, writ large on the mirror and underlined in a deft hand:

BOO!

## 2

The caravan had stopped for the evening. Being between villages, there were no visitors to the camp so the travelers were free to be themselves. They spent their time singing and relaxing, cooking and eating.

The Bride sat on the stoop of her wagon, just watching the others singing around the campfire, a small smile on her face. Eva came running up to her, a handmade doll in her hands.

“Want to play?” the girl asked.

The Bride looked down at the girl. Eva often wanted to play and, though the Bride never knew the rules of play – or whether there were any rules at all – she often obliged the girl. She just couldn't say no to that face.

Nodding, she got off the stoop and joined the girl, taking hold of Eva's free hand and letting her lead the way. They wandered to the edge of camp to the treeline.

Another couple of weeks had passed since the waterfall and the strange feelings that had been unearthed in the Bride. Ever since then, she had been both drawn to and had tried to avoid Christina. There was something both appealing and scary about the young woman. The Bride didn't understand any of this. It was all new to her.

But all of her troubles dissipated as she played with Eva, the simple girl's games sending her far away from herself and into fantasy realms full of princesses and dragons, mermaids and vast

sailing ships. The Bride enjoyed her time with Eva more than just about anything else in her short, strange life.

They had been playing for some time when the Bride caught sight of the Impresario watching them from the other side of the camp. He was standing on the stoop of his own wagon, in the dark. She could see the dim light of his pipe as he smoked. Every time he took a drag the embers illuminated his face in the dark. His eyes were cold and calculating and he watched the Bride and Eva like a shark eyeing a raw piece of meat.

The Bride found herself thinking of the Mummy, Kharis. Had the Impresario brought the ancient corpse to life? Did the Mummy walk at night?

The Bride idly looked into the dark woods. Was he out there now? Stalking the night, looking for victims?

It was too easy to imagine. Too easy to picture his large form choking the life out of some poor soul lost in the woods. She looked back at the Impresario and narrowed her eyes. What was he up to? She wished that she were smarter. Her brain was like a sponge, soaking up everything she encountered. But her experience was limited, her world relatively small. She couldn't piece together what the man was doing. It was like a puzzle with pieces missing. None of it made any sense.

It took her some time to return to Eva's child games. The dark eyes of the Impresario wouldn't leave her mind.

### 3

Another week passed. On a day of travel, the Bride sat in her wagon looking out the window as the countryside passed by. She preferred to remain inside the wagon, in shadow. The world still scared her and she still didn't understand it.

There was a knock on the wagon door and she turned towards the sound. Frowned. The wagon was still moving. Was someone standing on the back stoop of the trailer?

Cautiously, she crossed the wagon and opened the door. Sure enough, standing on the stoop was Christina, her eyes big and wide, smile wider still. She must have jumped up onto the back of the wagon, leaving her own to visit.

"Hello, stranger," the young woman said.

The Bride nodded in response but didn't speak. She didn't know what to say.

"Can I come in?" Christina said, gesturing to the interior of the wagon.

The Bride moved aside to let the young woman in. Christina sidled her way in and made a show of sitting down in an old, comfortable chair that the Bride liked to sit in. The Bride, herself, remained standing. Remained silent. Christina smiled up at her and was also silent. She seemed to be challenging the other woman, playing a game with her, a game in which the winner was the last one to talk.

But if this was some kind of game - like one of Eva's games - that it was one that Christina was destined to lose. The Bride could remain silent for the rest of her life if she had to.

"I've been thinking of you," Christina said, losing the game.

The Bride was still silent. She turned away from Christina and wandered about the small wagon. This was her's - she had been promised it, gifted it by her fellow travelers. It was her home, her house. So why did she feel so uncomfortable now? Why did she feel intimidated by this strange, beautiful woman that shared her small space?

The Bride found a doll that Eva had given her, picked it up from a rickety shelf along the wall of the wagon. She clutched it, cradled it to her chest and sat down in an equally rickety chair opposite Christina.

Christina smiled at the doll. It was a devilish smile, and a gorgeous one. "One of Eva's." She shook her head. "That girl is off in her own world. Always conjuring up strange fantasy lands and princesses." Christina seemed to consider it and her smile faltered. "Is it good for her, do you think?"

The Bride nodded.

"You think so?" Christina said. She cocked her head to one side. Her expression told the Bride that she wouldn't take a non-verbal response as a legitimate answer.

"Yes," the Bride croaked out. Sometimes it still hurt to talk.

Christina seemed satisfied and lapsed into a moment of silence. She looked about the wagon, seeming to pick out details, her gaze lingering on trinkets that the Bride had collected since she had been with the travelers.

"I'm told that you bring in good coin," Christina said. "The elders seem pleased with that." She fixed the Bride with a stern look. "Don't know how much they're pleased with *you*, but that hardly matters. We're all outcasts around here, wouldn't you say?"

The question seemed to require an answer - another verbal one - so the Bride nodded and repeated herself. "Yes."

Another devilish smile from Christina. "There are other words, you know? You can say, 'No.' The world won't end if you do."

The Bride cleared her throat before speaking. "I know."

"There," Christina said. "See? Not so difficult, was it?"

Actually, it was rather difficult. Her throat still seemed to not be working the way it should. But it was getting better, slowly but surely. "No," she lied.

Christina got up from her chair and closed the distance between them in one elegant, predatory movement. Before the Bride had a chance to react, Christina reached out and made to touch the other woman's face. The Bride drew back. Christina smiled and withdrew her hand.

"Your scars," she said.

The Bride looked away, embarrassed.

"They're beautiful," Christina said. "Just like you. I want to touch them - just one of them. May I?"

The Bride looked at Christina, perplexed but curious. She met her gaze and found only questions. There seemed to be a hunger in Christina's eyes - the hunger of a wild, untamed animal. It was scary. It was alluring. It was exciting. The Bride felt her unwillingly-donated heart beat faster. She found herself nodding. Found herself speaking. "Yes."

Christina's smile deepened, her eyes shined brighter. She reached out once again and ran the tips of two fingers down the edge of the Bride's chin, tracing the line of one surgical scar.

The Bride closed her eyes as Christina traced the scar up and down several times. She leaned back against the rocking wall of the wagon as the other woman inched up the side of her face and rubbed her temple, her thumb just brushing against the Bride's lips.

"They say that your body was put together piece-by-piece," Christina whispered, "using the corpses of beautiful young women. But that your mind was created by alchemy. Science and black magic." She paused. When she spoke again, her voice was closer than ever, as if she were a fraction of an inch from the Bride's ear. "I've never heard anything so wonderful. You are the most alluring creature I've ever encountered."

The thumb caressed the Bride's lips once again. The Bride found herself excited and terrified. Her heart felt like it was going to burst out of her chest. She could now feel Christina's other hand caressing her shoulder. It was all too much - too much stimulation all at once.

The Bride opened her eyes and stood up, untangling herself from Christina's grasp and pulling away, back pressed up against the wall and sliding away from the other woman. Christina stayed where she was, crouching on the floor, and watched the Bride move, a small smile on her face.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You..." the Bride said, choking out the words, "scare me."

Christina laughed. It was a lovely, horrible sound. She stood up. "I know when to make an exit. I didn't mean to disturb you."

She headed for the door, opened it. As she stood in the doorway, she turned back to regard the Bride. Smiled wide. "When you're ready." A wink and she was gone, hopping off the back of the moving wagon deftly and heading for her own.

The Bride rushed to the door to watch her move. Christina bounded elegantly, like an animal, and jumped onto the stoop of her own trailer a ways back. She hung onto the trailer for a moment, leaning out and feeling the wind on her face, eyes closed. She opened them and their gazes met one last time before the woman was gone, disappearing into the wagon that she shared with two of the other dancers in their caravan. The Bride was both disappointed and relieved to see her go.

Lily Allbright wasn't sleeping most nights. Occasionally, she would get some rest during the day but this was rare. She felt exhausted most of the time.

On a stormswept evening, lightning and thunder doing eternal battle in the heavens above, Lily sat in the library of the castle reading an old tome she had found among the stacks. By her side, she had lit a candle which was already halfway spent. Its flame swayed this way and that, as if an unnatural draft were present.

Lily's eyes were wide as she read from the old book. It told tales of ghosts and haunted places in the world and, though she found no mention of Creutzfeldt Castle, she had become convinced that this was such a place.

At a late hour - far after nightfall - there came a knock at the front door. It was loud and jarring and Lily jumped in shock. The candle next to her was violently disturbed and almost fell over. She caught it before it could tumble off the edge of the table and sighed.

She called for Roderick but got no reply. Nor could she hear his footsteps approaching the front door.

"Do I have to do everything myself?" she asked no one and got up, taking the candle with her and making her way through the castle to the entrance hall. It was quite a walk and the knock came twice more before she reached the door.

She opened the massive doors to a flurry of wind and rain. It whipped her nightclothes up about her. As she made to cover herself, the candle went out, making it difficult to see who was on the front steps. She could just make out two shapes. As her eyes narrowed, lightning flashed and she could see that they were two men - one who she knew.

"Paul!" she said.

One of the men was, indeed, Paul Allbright, Lily's husband.

Lily withdrew a match from the pocket of her robes and lit the candle once again. Now that she could properly see him, Paul looked bad. In fact, he looked exhausted. There were dark circles around his eyes like he hadn't slept for days. Normally he was cheery and sunny, his light hair bringing out the brightness in his eyes. Tonight was a notable exception.

"Are you well, Paul?" she asked.

He nodded briskly and pushed past her into the relative warmth of the castle. The second figure stepped forward into the flickering candlelight, allowing Lily a better look at him.

He was tall and appeared to be somewhere in later middle age. He was impeccably dressed in black. A top hat adorned his head and he took it off and bowed slightly to her. His hair was as black as his clothes and slicked back. He had a high forehead that climaxed in a widow's peak. His eyes were penetrating. Lily found herself becoming lost in them.

Lily turned to her husband, who was shaking off the rain.

"Won't you introduce me to your friend?" she asked him.

Paul gestured to the stranger but couldn't seem to get any words out. The stranger spoke for him, bowing once again.

"I am Dr. Lejos," he said in a thick Eastern European accent. "May I enter?"

To Be Continued...

*Copyright 2024 Brian Flynn*

