



ALAN GRATZ

something

A Horatio Wilkes Mystery

wicked



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CHAPTER ONE



History is full of guys who did stupid things for women. Paris started the Trojan War over Helen. Mark Antony abandoned Rome for Cleopatra. John Lennon gave up the Beatles for Yoko Ono. You can say I'm a dreamer, but they're not the only ones. Like my friend Joe Mackenzie: He was about to jump off a five-story building just to impress a girl.

"Come on, you wuss!" Mac's girlfriend Beth yelled. "If you don't jump off that tower, you're not getting any more of this!" She lifted her sweater up over her head, showing her bra and her extraordinary breasts to Mac, me, Banks, and the five or six other people milling around Kangaroo Kevin's Bungee Jump-O-Rama in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. They actually inspired a small round of applause. I won't say what they did to me, but Beth's fun cushions certainly inspired Mac. With a Scottish war cry he charged the end of the platform and jumped headfirst, screaming all the way down. His kilt opened like a daisy as he fell, and everyone saw his stamen.

"Wooooohooooo!" Beth called.

"Oh, for the love of Dirk Diggler," I muttered. "Only Mac would go bungee jumping in a kilt without any underwear

on.” I chose to look at Beth instead. She had covered herself back up, but the image of those perfect breasts was burned into my retinas, like when you look into a lightbulb too long and all you see for the next five minutes is the blinding afterglow of the filament.

“Get a good look, Horatio?” Beth asked.

“Of *Mac*, yes. If you could do that sweater thing again, though, I would very much appreciate it.”

Bashful Banks looked away in case Beth took me up on it, which wasn’t likely. Behind us, Mac’s screams turned to laughter as he and all his dangling parts bounded into the air on the bungee cord. Beth proved she could multitask, watching Mac bounce and giving me the finger at the same time.

“Not even if every other boy in the world was covered from head to toe in zits and back hair,” she told me.

Beth *was* out of my league. She was so far out of my league, in fact, that she was the New York Yankees and I was the Weehawken five- and six-year-old tee-ball B team. She was built like the top half of a lingerie model grafted onto the bottom half of a ballet dancer. She was also a freshman in college, and she suffered us high school juniors like a goddess among the muck-farmers. Beth’s dad and Mac’s dad were business partners, which was how they’d met, but beyond his male model good looks I’d never understood why she dated beneath herself.

Mac bungeed to a stop, and Beth ran to give him his earthly reward.

“Man, would you ever do that?” Banks asked.

“Not even for those marvelous Dolly Partons,” I told him. “That boy is seriously whipped.”

Banks sighed, and I wondered if he wasn’t thinking right now that he’d be happy to be whipped if it meant having a

girlfriend. Don't get me wrong—Wallace Banks was a great guy. He was also some distant relative of Mac's, which automatically let him run around with the king and queen of the Highland Games. But no amount of being nice or being Mac's second cousin once removed or whatever could ever really overcome wearing a white button-down short-sleeve shirt with a pen-filled pocket protector. He was also wearing a red tartan kilt and matching pom-pom beret, and just below his pasty knees he had on white woolen hose held up with ribbons. That we were in town to attend the Mount Birnam Scottish Highland Games made the getup somewhat excusable; that Banks wore this outfit on a daily basis made him a total geek—but a lovable one.

Mac came wobbling up with Beth wrapped around him. She was breathing harder than he was.

"I can't feel my legs!" he said.

"I think you've lost feeling in your brain too," I told him.

"There is a *cushion*," Mac said. We'd had this argument twenty minutes ago. "It was completely safe. They wouldn't let you do it if you could get hurt!"

"Mac, you signed a waiver that said you wouldn't sue them if you *died*. Does that sound completely safe to you? And a four-foot-tall inflatable bag wasn't going to do a whole lot of good if that cord snapped."

"You're just jealous, Horatio. You've got to try it! Wool! What a rush!"

Mac's knees went out from under him and Beth couldn't hold him up. I caught him, and Banks and I steered him toward a bench while Beth bounced away to buy him a bottle of water.

"The next time you go bungee jumping in a kilt, wear some underwear, will you?" I told him.

Mac grinned. "A real Scot wears naught beneath his kilt but a draught, Horatio."

"You're not a real Scot. You were born in Chattanooga."

"I'm *Scottish*. Besides," Mac said, flicking the end of Banks's kilt, "Beth likes me freeballing. Better access, you know?"

I held up my hands. "Too much information."

Where Banks's kilt was a fashion disaster, Mac managed to look studly in his skirt. It was blue and red and he wore it with a T-shirt that had the blue and white Scottish flag with the words "X Marks the Scot" underneath. And Mac would have eaten haggis before wearing the dorky white socks and ribbons Banks wore; instead he showed off his tan, muscular legs in nothing more than a worn pair of hiking boots. But for a short mop of brown hair instead of long flowing locks he could have doubled for one of those beefcakes on the covers of romance novels.

"Your dagger's showing," I told him.

Mac frowned and adjusted himself under his kilt.

"Not your metaphorical dagger, Spartacus. Your literal one." I pointed at his shoe. The little dagger he wore in his sock had come loose during the bungee jump. It was a Scottish thing; Banks had one tucked into his sock too.

"Your *sgian dubh*," Banks told him.

"Yeah. What he said."

Mac stuck the thing back in his sock. "Oh man, was Beth all *over* me when they unstrapped me. Just wait 'til tonight at the campground."

"Mac, you're always letting her make you do stupid things," I said.

"She's not making me do anything I don't already want to do."

"He's hooked on Beth Amphetamine," Banks said.

“Yeah. You need to kick the habit.”

Beth came prancing up with a bottle of water. “What I need is a little more Beth,” Mac said for her benefit. And his. She sat on his lap with a twirl of her skirt.

Of the four of us, I was the only one wearing pants.

“Gee,” I said, “maybe someday I’ll have a girlfriend who makes me jump off buildings too.”

Beth played with Mac’s hair. “One of those people who follows you around is talking again, Mac. Make him go away, will you?”

Mac lifted Beth off his lap and he stood, ignoring our sniping like always. “We’ve only got an hour before we need to be up the mountain. What else do we want to do?”

“There’s a Tartan Museum we could go see,” said Banks.

Beth looked at him like he had just grown a third eyeball.

“We could maybe set fire to the Gooder than Grits restaurant and hope it spreads to the rest of this tourist trap hell,” I offered.

Beth started hopping up and down. “I want to go back to that fortune-teller’s! The one we passed. What was it called?”

“Madame Hecate’s?” I said.

“I want Mac to have his palm read!” Beth sang.

“Here, hold it out and I’ll slap it,” I told him. He held out his hands and I tried to smack them and make them red, but he pulled away in time.

“I don’t want to go to some stupid psychic,” Mac said. “Let’s go get funnel cakes.”

Beth pressed her boobs into Mac. “But I *want* you to have your fortune read, Mac.”

“Okay, okay. We can come down the mountain and hit the Tartan Museum later,” he told Banks. “And maybe we’ll have

time for a funnel cake before we go back. Right now we'll do Madame Hoodoo or whatever."

Beth took Mac by the arm and pulled him away.

"*Meow*," Banks said.

I made a sound like a whip cracking and we followed along down the strip.

Pigeon Forge sits like a scar in the earth, a gaping, brightly colored wound festering in the Smoky Mountain sun. It's not a town; it's an eight-lane abomination of go-cart tracks, mini-golf courses, and comedy barns, peopled with Elvis impersonators and neon orange fiberglass gorillas. The dappled green mountains in the background occasionally threaten to reclaim Pigeon Forge and engulf it like kudzu, but at the last minute some new developer will add another outlet mall or country music theater or pancake house and beat back the horrible darkness.

We found Madame Hecate's Psychic Readings wedged in between a funnel cake stall and an airbrush T-shirt hut. A sign in the window said: "Palms Read While You Wait."

Mac pushed his way inside and a bell tinkled, I suppose so Madame Hecate wouldn't have to waste any of her considerable psychic talents on predicting our arrival. The little room was decorated in a combination of Late Victorian and Pier 1. The walls were covered with old black-and-white portraits in gilded frames, and funky beaded lampshades draped with red handkerchiefs did what little they could to give the place some atmosphere. A plug-in fountain spewing clouds of dry ice bubbled in the corner, and in the center of the room stood a small table where it looked like someone had been playing solitaire with tarot cards.

"Excellent!" said Beth.

Something brushed my leg and I nearly jumped.

"That is Graymalkin, my, how you say? Familiar," said a voice.

The gray cat certainly was getting familiar with my black Converse. Meanwhile Madame Hecate, the source of the creepy accent, ran a hand up the wooden door frame on the other side of the room. I think she was trying to be mysterious. The fortune-teller was round like a crystal ball, and had her black hair tied back in a yellow bandana. She wore a long flowing gown that *shushed* as she shifted, and in the strange light I could see she had whiskers on her chin. It wasn't so much disgusting as embarrassing: Madame Hecate could grow a better beard than I could.

She slid her hand back down the door frame, then suddenly jerked it away.

"Ach!"

"What's wrong?" Beth asked.

The woman sucked a finger. "It is nothing. A splinter. I prick my thumb."

"Too bad she didn't see that coming," I muttered.

"Who comes to see Madame Hecate?"

At her invitation we sat in folding chairs around the table, and Mac gave her our names.

"*Horatio* your name is?" she said after I'd been introduced.

"Seriously," I told her, "you of all people do not want to go there."

"I want you to read Mac's palm," Beth told her.

"Is twenty dollars for full reading," said Madame Hecate. I snorted, but Beth already had a twenty out on the table. I shook my head. P. T. Barnum was still right.

In the only real magic she was going to perform that day, Madame Hecate palmed the twenty and made it disappear. Then she took Mac's hand in her own and began tracing the lines on his palm.

"Ah, yes, your fate line is strong," she said. "Very strong. But here—the heart and head line are fused. You think and act at same time, yes?"

"That's true!" said Beth. "He's very impulsive."

"Ah," she said. "And I see you are here for . . . some kind of festival. A competition."

"Well, kind of, yeah," Mac said.

"The . . . Highland Games?" she asked.

"What gave it away," I asked, "the kilts or the funny hat?"

"Hey," Banks said.

"A festival, yes, but you are not competing?"

"I didn't make the clan team," Mac confessed.

I had to admit, the woman's act was good. She certainly had Mac, Beth, and Banks snowed. They watched her work Mac's palm like she was revealing the hidden secrets of the universe.

"But make the team you will," she told him. "And not only will you compete, you will win!"

"You mean the Highland decathlon? I win it?"

"You're not even in it," I reminded him. To Hecate I said, "He missed the cut."

"For you, fate is sealed. You will compete, and you will win," Hecate said, ignoring me again. "And you will be king of the mountain!"

Beth gasped in delight and hugged Mac around his shoulders.

Mac nodded, happy with his fate. "King of the mountain. I could get used to that."

"What about me?" asked Banks. He reached into his sporran—a traditional Scottish waist pouch that was the ancestor of the fanny pack—and pulled out another twenty.

"Oh, not you too," I said.

Banks blushed and shrugged, but he still handed over an Andy Jackson.

Madame Hecate took his palm and gave it the same treatment.

"You, your life line is strong, but you are not athlete," she said. I huffed at her mastery of the obvious, but apparently no one was listening to me now. "For you, there is other competition? Music, perhaps?"

Oh, she was good all right. That had been a complete guess, but it was spot on.

"The bagpipes," Banks offered. "I play the bagpipes. There's this really important tournament, and the winner gets—"

"You are lesser than your friend, but greater," Madame Hecate told him. "I see you not so happy, yet much happier."

Banks frowned. "I don't—"

"While that one will be king of mountain, it is you who will *own* mountain."

"Me?" Banks asked. "Own Mount Birnam you mean?"

For all the laughing they'd done about coming here, Mac and Banks were deadly serious now. Beth crossed her arms and frowned.

"Is all I see." She turned to me. "I read your fortune, Horatio?"

I loaded up a short laugh with derision and disbelief and let her have it.

"Right," I said. "Let me guess. You see a crease bisecting my life line, which means I'll soon have some kind of big test or trial. And when I get to this great, vague, unnamed challenge, I should just listen to my heart, right?"

She took my palm in her hand and I rolled my eyes. I got a cold shiver, though, like the temperature in the room had

just dropped ten degrees. I tried not to let anybody see me shake.

"Heart line is strong, yes, but head line is stronger. You think, think, think, which is good," she told me. "But this time you will listen *too much* to heart. It is head you must learn to hear again."

She was right about me thinking too much. I almost started to believe she had some kind of power, then shook it off. *Of course* she knew I used my head more than my heart—I'd been the only one playing the skeptic. As for the cold shiver, she'd probably turned up the air-conditioning when she heard us come in.

"I hope you're not expecting to get paid for that one," I told her.

"No. That one is free," she told me. "But you will be back. Then you will pay me."

"Right," I said. "Don't bet on it."

We sat through Beth's fortune—something vague about having gall for milk and a snake under a flower—and the mystic rose from the table. "Madame Hecate is tired now. Must, how you say? Recharge batteries."

"Wait, how do you know I'll—" Mac started to ask, but Madame Hecate disappeared into the next room.

"Happy now?" I asked them. "Sixty bucks for five minutes of flimflam. The next time you jokers want somebody to blow hot air up your kilts, let me know. I'll be happy to take your money."

Nobody was listening. Mac and Banks had fortune and glory in their eyes, and Beth was no doubt lost in some fantasy where she was wearing a tiara. We filed back outside and made for Mac's SUV. For a time, everyone was lost in their own daydreams.

Mac gave Banks a punch in the arm. "Hey cousin, you're going to own the mountain!"

It woke Banks up and he smiled. "And you're going to be king of the games!"

"And I'm going to be queen," Beth said.

"Right," I said. "Which is all just about as likely as me wearing a kilt."

They chuckled, but I could tell they didn't think it was funny. As we climbed into the car for the trip up the mountain, I saw Beth squeeze Mac's hand and pull him down to whisper in his ear.

If I'd been paying attention then, really listening with my head and not my heart, I might have heard it. It was the whisper of something coming.

Something wicked.

CHAPTER TWO



Mount Birnam stood 5,964 feet high, which isn't much for a Rocky Mountain, but for a peak east of the Mississippi, that put it right up there with the best of them. I tuned out the conversation from the front seat of the SUV and watched the lesser mountains roll by through the breaks in the trees as we climbed.

On a clear day where I lived in Knoxville you could see the mountains in the distance, but every now and then the Smokies would call to me and like some pilgrim I'd take a Saturday and make the hour-long *hajj* to the high country. The thing that impressed me most about the mountains wasn't their sheer size. What really awed me was the thought of the incredible forces of nature it took to push a million tons of earth and rock six thousand feet into the sky, and then the millions of years it took to smooth them out again. The high country made me feel small and powerless, and I think sometimes it's good to be reminded just how small and powerless we really are.

"I am so totally going to kick ass at the Highland decathlon," Mac said.

"You're not *in* the decathlon," I reminded him.

"Madame Hecate said he will be," Beth reminded me.

I let it go. Arguing with Beth was like debating philosophy with a See 'n Say.

Mac parked his car with a bunch of others in a large grassy field near the fairgrounds, about four-fifths of the way up Mount Birnam. A huge round rock rose from the ground in the center of the lot, defiantly reminding the 4x4s and trucks that grazed around it that this was a parking lot for stones long before it was a parking lot for cars. Another thousand feet or so above us, the top of Mount Birnam was hidden in the clouds. It was unseasonably cool and humidity-free up here for late July in the South and I took a deep, appreciative breath.

Mac honked the car locked and I jumped. Mac laughed. "I think Horatio's fallen in love with your mountain, Banks."

Beth pranced on ahead, her skirt flouncing in a way that made her impossible to ignore—and she knew it. I did my best not to think about how hot she was and focused instead on how *cold* it was.

"It's like ten degrees cooler up here than down in Pigeon Forge," I said.

"The mountain makes its own weather," Mac told me.

Banks did a 360, taking in the scenery. "It is pretty amazing, isn't it?"

"It's got a lot of potential," Mac said. He put an arm around my shoulder and gave me a manly side-hug. "So, who'd have thought we'd get Horatio to a Scottish festival?"

"Now all we need to do is get him into a kilt," said Banks.

"I'll eat haggis first," I told them.

Mac clapped me on the chest. "That can be arranged,

chum.” Mac let me go, and we walked into the campground with Banks behind us.

“Chum?” I asked.

“I think *chum* is an underused word, so I’m bringing it back,” Mac told us.

“You mean *chum* as in the bloody pieces of meat and bones they use to attract sharks?”

“No, no, no—like buddy. Pal. Amigo. What do you think, chum?”

“I think I wish Hamilton had come instead of me.”

“Where is the artist formerly known as Prince, anyway?” Mac asked.

“At home in Denmark spending some QT with his GF,” I told him.

Mac waved him off. “Screw the Dane. He doesn’t know what he’s missing, chums. This is going to be the best weekend ever.”

I had known Mac and Banks forever, it seemed. Mac and I had grown up on the same street, once upon a time, and Banks would come and stay with him almost every summer when we were kids. That was before my parents had gotten divorced and my dad moved to St. Louis and my mom sold our house and moved us into smaller digs closer to the university where she worked. After that I hadn’t seen Mac until the day we re-met in Freshman English at Wittenberg Academy and realized we had played Harry Potter in the backyard together when we were nine. Little Banks I hadn’t seen since we made him be our house elf and carry all our spell books around. As we walked together toward the campground I had a strange sense of nostalgia for Batman action figures, Super Soaker water guns, and Nintendo video games.

The campground soon overrode my reverie with the smell