

# Breach Point

A SUPERNATURAL THRILLER



STEVE SPATUCCI

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FIVE CHAPTER PREVIEW



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# CHAPTER 1



*“So this is what a real bus smells like,”* thought Clara as she mentally untangled the rat’s nest of hair dangling from the girl in front of her. She looked a little older – seventeen, maybe eighteen – and she was the only other non-adult on the bus. The girl had on an especially pungent type of patchouli, which Clara knew from Jerilyn and her parties. Jerilyn – how many times per hour did that name pop into her head? The aroma gave Clara a flashback that only lasted until the body odor of a skinny older man passing by in the aisle assaulted her. *“Patchouli, b.o., and gas fumes are the scent palette of the day? Lovely.”*

As she watched the passing landscapes – suburbs changing

to highways changing to farmlands changing to coastal roadways – Clara remembered a diatribe she’d launched against school buses and buses in general during her Freshman year. It got her laughs from her friends, but that ended when a boy sitting nearby told her she was too judgmental and called her “The Debutante”. Even two years later, remembering that moment stung. She tried on the idea for the first time. “*Maybe I am too judgmental,*” she thought, and stopped herself before the next thought could come along to soften the blow. She went back to the promise she’d made herself before leaving – to be open to new things this summer, and to let the experience change her for the better. No more looking down on buses – school or otherwise.

The bus slowed to a stop. Up front, the driver paid the toll before bringing it onto a bridge that didn’t look like it could possibly hold all the vehicles crossing it. “*We’ve got to be close now,*” Clara thought. Then she realized that she’d actually *know* how close she was to Breach Point if she still had her phone. She thought back to her mother taking her phone away before she left on the trip, and the reason she did it – which led back to Jerilyn.

Clara pulled out her camera for distraction. She smiled as she looked over the familiar scratches on its case and the big ding in the aluminum body. The minor damage made her wonder what her grandfather had been doing when the scrapes first appeared. Clara let herself daydream about him rushing to

get an amazing shot of a skydiver, or maybe an avalanche. She knew it couldn't be anything near as dramatic as those things – he was a department store employee who took photos on the side, not a world-traveling photojournalist – but she still liked fantasizing about him having exciting adventures. Clara dragged the tip of her pinkie along the crease of the big ding, happy to have some physical evidence of his existence.

“Is that an AE-1 Programmable?” The man across the aisle was her father's age – maybe even older. He leaned over the sleeping woman between them. Clara hoped it was his wife, seeing the way he nudged her aside and spoke loud enough to wake her.

“Uh...” she stumbled, embarrassed that she had forgotten the exact model. She turned it around and saw “AE-1” etched into the camera's body.

“Yes it is,” she said.

“Great camera! I had one of those in college,” the man said.

Clara smiled. “I love it.”

The man nodded. “I have to say, it's great to see someone your age using a real film camera. You got black and white or color in there?”

“Just black and white,” she said.

“You're better off that way,” the man said. “It'll take a while to get it processed, though – unless you're doing it yourself...”

The man looked at Clara, pausing for an answer.

“No,” she said. “I don't have a darkroom. I'll be sending it out.”

The man nodded. Clara thought, “*I’m having a conversation with a grown man who’s not a relative, teacher, or store employee,*” before chiding herself for being so sheltered that she’d even give that any notice. She gave the man a polite smile before turning away.

Outside the window, the road began showing the first signs of the island. Sand dunes at the edge of the bay. Rocky shoreline. A miniature lighthouse on a roundabout where a quaint “Welcome to Breach Point” sign was perched. Then a couple quick turns – the island wasn’t wide enough to allow East-West travel for long – and the bus headed south on Central Avenue, the main street.

The *slow* main street. Pedestrians and bikers on beach cruisers owned this road, crossing or spilling into the car lanes without so much as a glance toward the crawling traffic. Clara’s mother had reminisced with her about the trips they’d taken to Breach Point when she was younger. She couldn’t remember them at all, though she found herself trying harder now.

When the bus stopped at a red light, Clara got a long whiff of something sweet – something fried. Finally – a *good* smell. She turned to see a funnel cake cart right there on the street. The cart’s lone employee poured batter into a fryer while simultaneously applying powdered sugar to a finished cake in the waiting hand of a customer. Clara had tasted the treat only once before, at a school carnival – but her father had insisted, “This isn’t *real* funnel cake!” after a single bite. She knew that

what she was smelling now was the authentic stuff and immediately resolved to eat lots of funnel cake during her stay.

The bus began moving again without so much as a lurch. Clara pretended she was following an invisible person up and down the side streets of Breach Point. She saw clusters of younger kids, with no adults in sight, heading into an amusement area called The Phun Place. Clara wondered why they went with the “PH” – maybe a play on words that she wasn’t getting. Or just laziness. It looked like the kind of classic 1980s-style video arcade that her Uncle Scott would always go on about – loud and dark, with lots of old games that people played alone. Somehow this one seemed to survive the decades intact.

The bus drove past a miniature golf course that seemed out of place on such a busy road. Clothes shops hawked the floppy hats and day-glo t-shirts that everyone in town seemed to be wearing – or were they all tourists like her? On a street light, a colorful poster proclaimed “Remember the Castle” and listed a date just a few weeks away. On the opposite side of the street, Clara could just barely make out a roller coaster and ferris wheel on a distant amusement pier. *“That’ll be fun to explore,”* she thought. *“Maybe I can get Aunt Maureen to come with me.”*

Aunt Maureen. Clara hadn’t seen her since the Tuffneys hosted Thanksgiving two years ago – a day made horrible by her mother’s manic tirade over the guests not wanting to eat in the dining room. Stupid. Now Aunt Maureen was older and had

something wrong with her heart. Clara's mother might have told her what it was, but she couldn't remember. "*She's probably not allowed to go on roller coasters,*" Clara thought.

Family lore said that Clara's mother was the serious one and Maureen was the fun one. Isn't that the way it always is with siblings? Aunt Maureen never got married or had kids. Clara wondered if becoming a parent makes a person less fun, or if people who are naturally more childlike just tend not to procreate. Probably a little of both.

The bus pulled into a tiny station on a side street. Clara watched the man who'd asked her about the camera give the woman next to him a gentle arm rub. "*She's definitely his wife,*" Clara thought. She stood up and walked toward the front along with the rest of the passengers.

Outside, the bus smell faded and more of Breach Point's scents enveloped Clara. She loved it. Even the bad smells – like the oily sand that lined some of the properties – had a pleasant effect. Clara watched as the driver pulled her mother's lilac suitcase from the compartment under the bus.

"That one's mine," she said.

He handed Clara the suitcase. She wished she'd borrowed one from her father instead.

"Big bag," the driver said. "You're visiting the island for some time, I take it?"

"Yes," Clara said. "I'll be here all summer."

He smiled at her. "Well, you make sure to enjoy your stay."



“Oh, she certainly will!” a voice cackled from a few feet away. Clara turned, but she was only able to snatch a quick glimpse of Aunt Maureen before the older woman’s frail arms grabbed her and hugged her – almost to the point of crushing.



# CHAPTER 2



Aunt Maureen grabbed Clara's suitcase before she could even reach for it.

"I had to park a few streets away," Aunt Maureen said. "I hope you don't mind a little stroll."

"Not at all," Clara said. "I really want to see more of Breach Point anyway. But Aunt Maureen, you *have* to let me carry that."

Clara reached for the suitcase, but her aunt tugged it away.

"Nonsense!" Aunt Maureen said. "You're my guest and I'm perfectly capable of carrying one dinky little piece of luggage a few blocks."

Aunt Maureen smiled mischievously. Clara couldn't think of

any warmer image than the face of a person who was this happy to see you after such a long time. Aunt Maureen didn't look sick, as Clara had imagined. She actually looked a little younger and healthier than Clara had remembered from the Thanksgiving visit, which put her mind at ease about the summer – and about letting her carry the suitcase.

“You travel light, Clara,” Aunt Maureen said. “I admire that in a modern young woman.”

“Only the necessities,” Clara said. “I remembered you saying that whatever I needed that I didn't bring, I can pick up here in town.”

“I said that?” Aunt Maureen asked. “Hmm... I'm pretty smart.”

They crossed a side street, passing a guitarist who played happy strummy music under the awning of a sidewalk café. His wavy blondish-brown hair was long enough to kiss his even stubble. Clara admired his face – especially the defined planes of his cheeks and jaw. The surfaces looked almost completely flat when he turned toward the streaming sunlight. She remembered reading how most people's faces were really asymmetrical and thought, “*He's got to be the exception.*” Clara imagined how bad a portrait subject the guitarist would make.

Aunt Maureen caught Clara's gaze. “Now that is one beautiful man,” she said, making no attempt to hide her delight.

One corner of Clara's mouth pulled to the side – something she did when she was teetering on the edge of embarrassment.

“He is... classically beautiful,” Clara said.

“I’d say so,” Aunt Maureen said. “Let’s face it – the man is perfect!”

Clara gave the guitarist another look and said, “Sorry, Aunt Maureen, but I didn’t mean it as a compliment. Perfection is boring!”

Aunt Maureen sighed in commiseration. “Oh is it now? So wise you are, Clara dear. I think we’re both going to have some adventures while you’re here.”

They walked another block and a half before reaching Aunt Maureen’s tiny green hatchback. Clara studied the kitschy stickers on the windows – one of them was a cute male hula dancer strumming a ukulele. She also noticed little hand-painted flourishes above the rear wheel wells. The bit of yellow filigree had been done in a fairly neat style, but it was still a little messy around the edges. Clara knew without question that Aunt Maureen had painted the decoration herself. The car perfectly fit her quirky personality.

“Hop in, girl,” Aunt Maureen said. “I’m *starving*.”

Clara dumped her suitcase in the back seat and got into the passenger seat. Aunt Maureen gave a careful look over her shoulder before pulling out.

The drive to Aunt Maureen’s house didn’t even take ten minutes. “*And with all this traffic*,” Clara thought, “*we’d have made it faster by walking*.” But Aunt Maureen seemed to enjoy chauffeuring Clara around in the hatchback. Clara enjoyed her

aunt's bursts of local color that lasted until she pulled into her heavily-patched driveway. They both stepped out of the car.

The only thing Clara had remembered about Aunt Maureen's house was its rock wall. It was made from pieces of jagged stone roughly cemented together. The corners and front entrance had additional extensions that made them look like turrets.

Clara ran a finger across the top of the wall as Aunt Maureen grabbed the bag from her car. She smiled at the sight of Clara's discovery.

"When you were a little girl," Aunt Maureen said, "you told me my house looked like a castle because of that wall." Clara noticed her sneaking the suitcase from the back of the car.

Clara smiled back. "I remember." She didn't tell Aunt Maureen that she felt let down at seeing how much smaller and less impressive the real wall was than the image that had been stored in her head.

Aunt Maureen pulled a beaded keychain from her pocket.

"Let's go have some tea and catch up," she said. "The inside of the house hasn't changed much since the last time you were here."

Aunt Maureen unlocked the door and used the suitcase to push it open. Clara walked in behind her. She remembered her father calling the house a bungalow, and her mother calling it a cottage. "*It's definitely a bungalow,*" she thought. "*Mom's wrong – again.*"

But as much as she tried, Clara couldn't remember a single detail from the house's interior. Not the decor, though it may have changed since her last visit. Not the layout, either. She'd been here before, but her brain had only retained the rock wall.

Aunt Maureen walked into the kitchen and rooted around in the cupboard.

"Oh rats," she said. "I only have Earl Grey. I know that's the most boring kind of tea, but we can still pretend we're English."

Clara chuckled. "That's fine, Aunt Maureen," she said. "I actually love Earl Grey."

"You know," Aunt Maureen half-shouted as she filled the teapot, "you're going to be with me all summer... you can drop the 'Aunt' if you'd like. I wouldn't be hurt – I promise!"

Clara thought about it as she took a seat on a tall stool in the open kitchen. Aunt Maureen was never as formal as her mother, but Clara didn't want to push the situation.

"That's really nice of you to offer," Clara said, "but after all these years, I think it would kind of freak me out to call you just plain old 'Maureen'."

"Darn it," said Aunt Maureen with a snap of her fingers. "Another plan to make myself feel younger has been foiled." She put the teapot on the stove and turned on the burner.

As Clara laughed, Aunt Maureen stood up. "Let's take a look at your room," she said. "I tried to make it all comfy cozy for you."

Clara followed her aunt down the hall, past a powder room

and the master bedroom, to a little guest room in the back. She didn't remember any of this either. Like the rest of the house, the room Aunt Maureen had prepared for her was on the small size, but the vintage furniture and pastel linens made it seem perfect for a summer stay.

"Think you'll be in okay in here?" Aunt Maureen asked.

Clara continued taking in the room as she replied, "Of course. It has your style."

"It had better," Aunt Maureen said. "I try not to leave any corner of this place untouched by my hand."

The teapot whistled from the kitchen. "Tea's on," Aunt Maureen said in a questionable English accent. She walked back down the hall. Clara took one last look around her room before following her aunt back to the kitchen.



As she and Aunt Maureen sipped their tea at the kitchen breakfast bar, Clara realized she was already feeling more at ease in her home for the summer.

"So tell me more about this job," Aunt Maureen said. "Your mother said it was at some sort of--"

Clara cut her off. "My mother doesn't understand anything about the job. She just *thinks* she does."

Aunt Maureen pulled back, and Clara felt terrible about jumping on her question. She'd have to watch herself with that.

"I'm sorry," Clara said. "I cut you off."



“No, it’s okay,” Aunt Maureen said, not sounding hurt. “I only know...” she looked up, searching for the thought, “...it’s some kind of an architectural firm on the island?”

“An engineering firm, actually,” Clara said in a softer tone. “But they work with a lot of architects in the area.”

“Well that sounds wonderful,” Aunt Maureen said. “I already know you’re going to have a great time here. There’s so much to do on the island, even just within walking distance.”

Clara took a long sip of her Earl Grey. “Speaking of that – would you mind if I took a walk around now? I wanted to find a film processing place in town.”

“Oh, not at all,” Aunt Maureen said. “You *should* look around. There’s a drug store just a few blocks down on the ocean side where I get my prints made. Go out, Clara. Explore!”



# CHAPTER 3



Summer was coming but it hadn't quite arrived yet. Clara walked down the narrow side streets of Breach Point toward the ocean, camera case in hand. She passed little shops selling cheeses and chocolates, a stationery store, and an oral surgeon's office. "*Who would get their mouth operated on in a little tiny place like that?*" she thought as she remembered the pain she'd felt when her wisdom teeth were removed last year.

The ocean smell grew stronger as she crossed the next block. She could hear the waves, too. It was nice. Very different from her town, where the few big businesses were more industrial, and clustered in areas that you'd never just wander past.

Clara passed a small alcove with a sign that read “Funeral Arrangements” and wondered where people were buried on the island – if they were buried here at all. They probably had to send them to cemeteries on the mainland where the ground was less saturated with water.

The entrance to Brumbaugh’s Drug Store stood just past the Funeral Arrangements place. Clara pushed open the stubborn door. A rusty chain of jingle bells nearly hit her, but she ducked out of the way before it could make contact.

“Watch yer head,” said a miserable-looking cashier behind the counter.

*“A little late with the warning,”* Clara thought as the woman rang up two kids buying sour candy.

Clara turned slowly, taking in the drug store. It must have been there for fifty years. *At least* fifty. Items in the center aisles were laid out on flimsy card tables, making the store feel more like a flea market than an actual retail shop.

She made her way into one of the aisles, eyeing up the saddest toy selection she’d ever seen. The action figures, paddle ball sets, and lawn games reminded her of products she used to see advertised in the back of her father’s old magazines. *“And they were already old then,”* she thought.

Clara heard the bells jingle again and headed back toward the front of the store. Miserable cashier gave her the minimum obligatory eye contact.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Yes. I was wondering if you develop film here?” Clara tapped on her camera case for emphasis.

Miserable held one gnarled finger toward Clara and cocked her head to the back of the store.

“Phil! We still send out rolls of film to get developed?” she asked.

An equally unpleasant voice from the back answered: “Yeah. I do it when the old people ask.”

Miserable turned back to Clara, who noticed that one seemingly-missing tooth had actually just migrated over to its right, nearly covering its neighboring incisor. “*And an oral surgeon just down the street,*” Clara thought.

“Yeah. We can do it for you if you want,” Miserable snarled.

“Oh great,” Clara said.

Miserable wrinkled her mouth. She seemed annoyed – permanently annoyed.

“Well? Ya got ‘em?” she asked.

“Oh, no. Sorry, I haven’t taken them yet.” Clara chastised herself for the apology – she hadn’t given the cashier any reason to think that she had film to develop now. The misunderstanding was her own fault, not Clara’s.

“Awright. Bring ‘em in when they’re ready,” Miserable said. “Should take a week and a half to get the prints back – if yer lucky.”

Clara faked a smile. “Thank you. I will.”

She gave a little nod and walked toward the front door when

something on the bulletin board at the end of the counter caught her eye.

Amidst the tattered “musician wanted” requests, local high school production posters, and cheap business cards was a retro-looking flyer printed on flecked red paper, peeking out from the bottom. Clara pulled it free.

It read “Breach Point Castle – Festival Reunion” and gave information about a nighttime party on the beach with food and live entertainment by “Original Cast Members”. The black-and-white illustration at the flyer’s center showed a creepy fortress-like structure with its front gate drawn to look like a fanged mouth. Clara was intrigued.

“That wasn’t a nice place,” Miserable piped up.

“Oh really?” Clara went against her instincts and didn’t turn toward the woman. She didn’t make any effort to sound interested, either. This was her version of rudeness – vague disinterest.

“Nah,” Miserable continued. “The whole pier was a block north at the end of this street. Brought in busloads of out-of-towners who liked gettin’ scared by freaks in rubber masks. Then they’d get drunk and piss on our lawns. It was hell.”

“*You are hell,*” Clara wished she’d said.

“I haven’t even heard of it,” Clara actually said. “So it was a haunted ride?”

“Not a ride,” Miserable said. “It was a big spookhouse. You had to walk through it.” Her neck fat continued jiggling after

she stopped speaking. “Best thing that ever happened to this town was that rat trap burnin’ down. The city council brought marshmallows when they heard it caught on fire!”

Clara turned to Miserable now, squinting to show her displeasure at the comment. She knew that if this horrible woman hated the Castle, it must have been an amazing place.

Without saying anything more to Miserable, Clara swung the front door open. The sleighbells slammed against a dark spot they’d worn in the wall. She stepped out of Brumbaugh’s and quickly felt better.

Clara aimed herself toward the sound of the waves. She couldn’t see them yet, but she knew they were close.

As she crossed the last block of buildings on the island, the shops thinned out. These were really just the sides of stores now – stone and wood beaten down by years of brutal weather variations. Clara found it comforting. Even the dingier parts of this town had their charm.

At the end of the block, she started up a long concrete ramp. No one else was around, making it feel like her own private moment. As she climbed, Clara finally saw the Atlantic Ocean – and it was magnificent. She stood at the top of the ramp and took in the endless expanse.

She moved further toward the ocean, noting the stores on each corner of the street’s end for future reference – a pizza place and a trinket shop. Clara remembered Miserable’s directions and headed left.

She'd seen the boardwalks of the Jersey shore in so many movies and reality shows that it felt unreal to actually walk on one of them. Clara wondered if the people walking past could tell that she wasn't a local. After a jogger caught her staring at the sand dunes in the distance, she decided that it must be obvious.

She noticed that the stores quickly began repeating themselves and wondered how many t-shirt shops and ice cream parlors one town really needed. *"But they wouldn't still be here unless they had customers,"* she thought.

At the end of the next block, Clara reached a point where the street parallel to the boardwalk ended and the rest of the town angled inward, away from the ocean. She climbed a few stairs that led to an elevated sidewalk. The buildings to her right ended and she was staring at pure sand.

There was no one on the beach, though she could see fresh tread marks from a few trucks. She was surprised that vehicles were allowed on the sand.

The sidewalk came to an abrupt stop. Nothing left but shoreline. Clara pulled off her shoes and carried them as she crossed over the dunes and tall grass. The ocean filled nearly all of her vision now. And as her eyes scanned the few details of the pristine shoreline, one thing stood out, not far off: pilings. Wood pilings from an old pier, going from dry sand to wet sand before fading into the ocean.

Clara pulled her camera up to her eyes and looked through



its viewfinder. That motion always felt so comfortable. She aimed her lens at the shoreline, hunting for the best angle of the pilings. She knelt and turned her head until she'd found a satisfying composition.

Clara focused, imagining the Breach Point Castle sitting atop those pilings, as families from the past made their way from the boardwalk onto its pier. She had a strong vision of herself running between the pilings, straight into the surging ocean – a vision that came on its own.

As those images washed over her, Clara became aware of soft footsteps in the sand behind her. She stumbled up from her knees, barely catching the camera before it hit the sand. And as she rolled onto her back and steadied herself, she looked up to the figure above her, trying to make out his face as her eyes adjusted to the blazing sun behind him.



# CHAPTER 4



It was a few seconds before the sun glare faded and Clara was able to fully discern the eyes and mouth of the male figure in front of her. He looked young.

“Oh no,” the boy said. “I am *so* sorry.”

He offered his hand, but Clara didn’t notice until she’d pulled herself up on her own. Little piles of caked sand broke apart and trickled down her legs.

“It’s no problem,” she said. She tried not to sound as jarred as she was, but she realized that the crackle in her voice probably gave her away. Clara looked over the boy. He seemed a little older than her, with some burgeoning stubble on his chin

and cheeks. The tips of his hair had blue and purple tints – no doubt the remnants of a cheesy month-old dye job.

The boy, looking genuinely regretful, slowly brought his hand back down to his side. As Clara brushed herself off, she noticed a small spiral-bound sketchbook and pencil in his other hand.

“I’m such an idiot,” he said. “I was just on the dunes over there when you walked past...”

He pointed to a sandy hill in the tall grass, though Clara couldn’t understand how she’d missed him earlier.

“I’m Nicholas, by the way,” he said.

“Clara. Nice to meet you,” she said. Pointing to Nicholas’ sketchbook, she added, “Are you an artist?”

Nicholas looked down at the drawing tools in his hand. He seemed to forget that he was even holding them.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “I was just working on my crosshatching.”

“I see,” Clara said, remembering the shading lessons from her sixth grade art class. She noticed that when Nicholas spoke, the tip of his nose moved down a bit each time his mouth opened. She wondered if that was something that everyone’s nose did and she’d just never picked up on it before, or if it was his body’s peculiar idiosyncrasy.

“Were you looking for the Castle?” Nicholas asked.

“I was, actually,” Clara said. “What made you ask that?”

He pointed to the Castle reunion flyer in her open camera case.

“Oh. Right,” she said, letting out a little laugh. “There don’t seem to be many other picture-taking opportunities here, anyway.”

“Yeah. I guess not,” Nicholas said. “Are you new here? You look... new.” His nose did the thing again.

“I am,” Clara said. “I just got into town today. I’m staying with my aunt for the summer.”

Clara watched as Nicholas’ lips spread wide and curled upward. “Cool,” he said. She smiled back, though more cautiously.

“Hey... you wanna see the Castle?” Nicholas asked with unconcealed slyness.

“Are you tricking me?” Clara asked.

“Ah... kind of...” he said.

Nicholas opened his sketchbook and spread it across the span of his arms.

Clara looked at its pages and saw detailed pencil studies of broken tree branches, rocks and shells, seagulls, and other objects found in nature. She was impressed with the efficient way that the drawings revealed their subjects, in many places defining a complex edge with one wiggly line and often leaving sun bleached highlights out completely.

“Wow,” she said, meaning it. “But you said--”

Nicholas smiled and flipped to a double-page spread of a dark gothic structure. Clara recognized Breach Point Castle from the flyer, but Nicholas’ drawing managed to show the attraction

as a much more intimate place, with excited customers milling about its front gate. His drawing even made it appear like the imitation it was – the simple illustration on the flyer looked more like a real castle. Clara didn't understand how Nicholas had given the imposing place such charm.

“That’s amazing, Nicholas,” she said, still looking over the artwork.

“Thanks,” he said back.

“How did you get all these details?” Clara asked. “I thought the Castle burned down a long time ago. This looks like it was drawn by someone who’s actually been there.”

“My Uncle Kevin,” he answered. “He and his buddies worked there in the seventies. They have tons of pictures that they let me use for reference. All kinds of behind-the-scenes stuff.”

“Ah,” she said. “That explains it. The more people tell me about the Castle, the more I wish I could have seen it for myself.”

Nicholas’ eyes hung on her, considering her words. He shut the sketchbook and gave Clara a funny look.

“Hey,” he asked, “are you hungry?”

# CHAPTER 5



The Giant Brine was a typical shore hangout. Thirty years of nautical tchotchkes covered the walls. It wasn't a particularly clean restaurant, but that didn't seem to matter to the customers who congregated inside.

When Clara walked in with Nicholas, the first thing she noticed was how comfortable everyone looked – like they'd set up shop years earlier and never bothered to leave. Aside from two kids eating with their parents, she and Nicholas were the youngest people there.

"They're back here," Nicholas said as he pointed past a weathered sign featuring the restaurant's cheerful mascot

holding a plate of stacked burgers. “A *brine shrimp with a mustache?*” Clara thought. “*Not cute.*”

Clara followed Nicholas toward the rear of the Giant Brine. She felt eyes on her and assumed the locals could tell, just as Nicholas had, that she wasn’t one of them. She made sure to keep a smile on her face, thinking it would help her to look less alien-like.

Nicholas pulled back a dangling curtain that partially hid the back room from the rest of the Giant Brine. Before Clara could fully see in, she heard deep laughter – the kind of laughter that only family or old friends shared.

Sitting around two pushed-together tables was a group of six men and women. They all looked to be in their thirties or early forties. Script pages were all over – in hands, strewn across the tables, resting on chairs. Clara could hear the group running lines from a comedy play, which stopped when Nicholas ushered her into their view.

“What’s up, bud?” The biggest guy at the table smiled and gave Nicholas a tap on the shoulder. When his eyes fell on Clara, though, the smile went flat.

“Hey, Uncle Kevin,” Nicholas said. He turned to the rest of the group and added, “Hey everyone. This is Clara.”

Clara gave the group a little wave and deadpanned, “Hello, large group of people.”

She got some genuine laughs. Kevin laughed, too, but it sounded forced.



One of the women gave a squinty glance and asked, “Where’d you find her, Nicholas? She wash up on the beach?”

“No,” Nicholas answered. “Clara’s new in town. She just moved in with her aunt for the summer.”

The woman nodded. Clara felt strange just standing there in front of them. She gave Nicholas a gentle nudge. He got the hint.

“Oh yeah,” Nicholas said, “let me introduce you. I hope I get all the roles right.” He gestured to each person in turn. “That’s Corine, the Swamp Hag. Greg, the Mad Doctor. Darlene, the Apparition. Howie, the Headless Jester. My Uncle Kevin, the Hatchetman and special effects tech extraordinaire. And Genevieve, the... uh...”

Genevieve, the most sophisticated-looking member of the group, gave Nicholas a sideways glance. She wasn’t going to help him.

“Aw, crap. I give up,” Nicholas said, shaking his head. “What were you again?”

“Stoned, mostly,” Genevieve answered. The group laughed.

“Right,” Nicholas said, nodding. “Genevieve the Pothead Zombie with munchies for brains. Got it.”

More laughter. Except from Kevin, who looked Clara straight in the eye while asking Nicholas, “So what made you decide to bring her to our secret lair?”

The others appeared uneasy as Kevin spoke. Clara made sure not to break his gaze. She guessed that Kevin was good at

sensing when someone was afraid of him.

“She was curious about the Castle so I thought I’d introduce her to you guys,” Nicholas said. “Nothing like going straight to the source, huh?”

Kevin folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Curious about the Breach Point Castle, huh?”

“I am,” said Clara. “I haven’t visited town since I was little, but I never made it to the Castle before...”

Clara trailed off. Somehow it didn’t seem right to mention the fire that destroyed the Castle in front of this group. Greg stepped in and saved her.

“Here, sit,” said Greg, pulling two chairs over from an empty table nearby. He was bookish in glasses and a sweater vest. Clara thought he’d look like the perfect author bio photo if only he were in black and white.

“Well, there will never be anything like the Castle again,” Greg said. “*But* – you’re in luck because right now we’re working on our first-ever Castle-inspired play for the reunion this summer.”

“Oh really?” Clara said, sliding into the chair. Nicholas took the seat next to her.

Darlene, tight at Greg’s side, nodded. “Yep. And we’re each reprising our signature roles. It’s as close to a Castle visit as anyone’s ever going to get.”

The group – except for Kevin – seemed lighter and looser now. Clara relaxed in her chair, feeling more comfortable.

“That sounds like a lot of fun,” she said. “So why haven’t you done this before?”

Howie, the beefiest member of the group, turned to Clara. He didn’t bother to stop eating his cheesesteak as he answered. “Not sure. They put together a town festival every year and most of us have been part of it in one way or another, but for whatever reason, people are starting to get interested in the Castle again. Nostalgia, I guess. We’re all old farts now.” Howie reminded Clara of her father – kind of a slob, but a fun guy to be around.

“We’re what’s left of that place,” Greg added. “We spent so much time there when we were your age that it’s impossible for us to stay away.”

Clara wondered if the memory of the Castle was really as strong as this group made it out to be. But before she could respond to Greg, Corine leaned forward and asked, “So who’s your aunt?”

Clara was caught off guard. “Who... you mean, what’s her name?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Corine said. “We’ve lived here all our lives. It’s a small place. Chances are, we know her.”

That made sense. Clara said, “Maureen Gavernish.”

“Maureen...” Howie said, tapping his temple. “...oh, that nice lady from the bank?”

“Yes,” Clara said. “Wow – that’s impressive.”

“Ah, not really,” Howie answered. “The town only has a few

banks and your aunt works at the good one. The one that doesn't screw you with their fees – at least, not too bad.”

“Well she'll be happy to hear that,” Clara said, “though she isn't working there anymore.”

“Oh, that's right,” Darlene added. “She had some kind of a heart condition, right?”

It stung Clara to hear strangers talk about her aunt's health so casually. She started to speak but felt her throat closing up, so she kept quiet and nodded instead, looking away.

“She's a real nice lady,” Darlene said in a lighter tone. “Fastest teller around! I hope she's doing well and I'm sure she's happy to have you around.”

“Thank you,” Clara said. It was all she could manage.

Howie passed his fries to Clara and Nicholas. Clara grabbed a handful and popped one into her mouth. Aside from being a nice distraction from the sensitive conversation topic, the Giant Brine's fries were crispy and delicious.

“So you gonna come?” Howie asked.

“Come?” Clara asked back.

“To the reunion!” he said. “Come on! You just moved here and you met Nicholas, the coolest guy in town – you know us original Castle cast members now – *and* you're interested in our former workplace. You've gotta come!”

Clara thought about it. “Oh, well... you know, I have to make sure it's okay with my aunt, but if she doesn't have a problem--”

Greg cut her off, “So you’re in! Yes!” he said, satisfied.

She laughed. “I will do my best to be there.” She caught Howie giving Nicholas a semi-secret thumbs up.

Kevin broke the mood. “You’re a bold girl,” he said.

Clara took a moment to finish her last fry, then looked up at him.

“Why do you say that, Kevin?” she asked. The others, including Nicholas, fidgeted quietly – which annoyed the hell out of her.

Kevin’s tone was ominous. “Moving into a town where you don’t know anyone. Meeting my nephew on the beach and getting him to bring you here. Ingratiating yourself with a group of people who’ve known each other for decades. That’s real bold, Clara.” He didn’t seem to blink when he spoke.

She took a moment to consider her response. Nicholas reached an arm forward, but Clara stood up, stared right at Kevin, and said, “Well, I suppose I’ve never shied away from new experiences. And besides...”

Clara pushed her chair in and let the tension build for a moment. She grabbed the bound script closest to her and held it up.

“I love a good scary story,” she said, tossing the script back onto the table.

Kevin flinched – then grinned. Clara knew she’d gotten him good, but she’d had enough.

“Thank you all for letting me interrupt your rehearsal,” she

said, turning away, “but I have to get going now.”

She gave another little wave behind her and walked toward the front of the restaurant, trying not to look back or even to turn her head as the group called out their goodbyes. She didn’t want Kevin to know that he was successful in intimidating her.

Clara had made it to the Giant Brine’s front alcove and almost out the door when she heard someone running up behind her.

END OF PREVIEW

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