

GRIEVOUS  
ANGEL

KEN McGORRY

*A Ghost Hampton Novel*

*No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man  
without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck.*

—Frederick Douglass

# Part One

## ON THE ROCKS



## Chapter 1

### FAT MAN IN THE BATH TUB

The cleaning lady, left hand gripping her cart, peers in the open door of Unit 22 and makes the sign of the cross. In the parking lot the manager, looking defeated in his Atlantic Resort vest, stares into the middle distance, a Town of Southampton cop by his side. An unmarked car bounces over a rut and joins three police cruisers parked akimbo.

If there's a no name motel off Route 27, the main artery leading to Southampton, it's the Atlantic Resort. Built low to the ground on the north side of 27's Southampton Bypass, this generic place, with its 22 one-bedroom units, is nowhere near the Atlantic Ocean. Nor is it a resort. But it did fall in the "clean, comfortable rooms" category. Until now.

Two uniformed police officers are in Unit 22's bathroom. Sergeant Frank Barsotti, blue latex gloves on his hands, takes a few pictures of the bathtub and its contents with his phone. The crime scene photographer has yet to arrive.

He glances up as Detective Hall steps into the cramped space. The cops make room and Georgie Hall's eyes fall on the morbidly obese white body that fills the dry tub. Any bathwater drained out hours ago. A bedsheet covers the man's bulk from the waist down. A nauseating odor cuts her breath short. Death. And what comes with it.

"How long?"

"Sometime last night, Detective," says Frank, his gaze returning to the body. "Checked in alone and checked out. Medical Examiner's on the way. Housekeeper discovered this around eight a.m. She freaked, threw a sheet over the body and ran to the motel manager. He called it in—after some delay. Sudden cardiac arrest, far as I can tell."

Georgie Hall looks out the doorway at the two employees anxiously stealing peeks.

“That’s him?”

“Yeah, a Mr. Seward. He’s the owner, too. Says the deceased checked in last night, paid cash. He takes note of guests who pay cash.”

“He say cash customers are rare?”

“Actually, yes. This place ain’t the Ritz, but still. Fat man was a salesman, according to his business card. Restaurant equipment. We have his wallet and ID. Like a traveling salesman straight out of central casting.”

Frank and Georgie look down at the dead man. In his fifties, easily a hundred pounds overweight, his sickly pale upper body barely fits in the motel tub. His large bald head sports a close-cropped fringe around the ears. Georgie is struck by the expression on his pallid face—a distorted mask of pain. Puffy blue lips seem to be sucking in air. There are deep creases between the eyebrows. Wincing eyes still open, staring blindly at some point in the ceiling.

“Cleaning lady was in here?”

“Yeah. She’s a little spooked.” Big Frank looks out at Seward and the housekeeper standing outside. “Other than covering him with a sheet, she says she didn’t touch anything and went straight to Seward’s office.”

“She knew the man wasn’t sleeping? Or bathing? This *is* a motel.”

“She knew. She knocked, entered and smelled that smell. The bed was not slept in. There’s more...” Sgt. Frank nods upward and Georgie follows his eye to a corner of the ceiling across from the bathtub, where there is what looks like a smoke detector. “If you pay cash, Mr. Seward gives you this room. And he watches you. He already confessed. That’s why he didn’t call this in right away.”

“So he’s one of those. Did he record it?”

“He says no. But at this point Mr. Seward’s really focused on saving his ass.”

“What did he see?”

“He hasn’t been formally questioned yet. You can look for yourself.”

Frank pulls the bedsheet completely away from the body. Georgie winces as an acrid plume of stink hits them in the face. The third cop stifles a gag reflex and exits the bathroom. It's not rare for a body to relax its bowels at the time of death, as happened here in a big way. That's not all. Spattered on the side of the tub near the groin is a congealed slick of sperm.

“According to Mr. Seward, this guest died alone. By his own hand.”

Georgie ignores the pun. She feels a cold shiver ripple down her spine, almost fear. She shakes it off and looks at Frank. “Is cardiac arrest a crime?”

“Voyeurism may be the only crime. But thought you'd want to examine this...”

Frank shines his flashlight under the sink nearby. A smartphone lies on the linoleum floor. Georgie snaps on a pair of latex gloves and picks it up.

“Mr. Seward noted that the deceased was on the phone last night.”

Georgie fiddles with the cell phone. It's not locked. She clicks on “recent” calls and a name pops onscreen. Or maybe it's a title. She holds it up for Frank.

TRAINER

Georgie eyes the gizmo in the ceiling again, taking in its sightline to the tub. She looks out at the so-busted man waiting outside. Her gaze returns to the ceiling. The gizmo is a camera.

“Frank, let's get Mr. Seward back in his office to show us how his surveillance setup works. I want to know if anyone else was watching. Or still is.”



## Chapter 2

### ERASMUS TATE

Turns out the Colonial Inn is closed on Mondays this early in the season. I figure I'll walk down the alley that separates the restored old inn from the marina. The dining deck offers a view of Sag Harbor Bay, silvery and shimmering on this not-nice day in early May. It's not nice because dark clouds are rolling in on a chilly breeze—and because we fought our way, Josie Phillips and me, here to Sag Harbor. She was cool to the idea of this lunch meeting, but as we drove things heated up, primarily because we'd be meeting Silk, the paranormal news reporter. Women take a natural dislike to Silk—maybe it's her revealing black leather outfits. So I can't blame Josie. She and I are now seeing each other, um, *seriously*. As I now understand, meeting Miranda Silkwood, even just for lunch, even with Josie as chaperone, was a bad idea.

Last year, I was so obsessed with Silk and staying in her orbit, I let her interview me live on national TV about very sensitive topics. Me, twenty-five years her senior and in a wheelchair. My strategy was to get very drunk on scotch. On camera, no less. Hilarity ensued.

Given Silk's exotic appearance, many people, particularly her teenage male fan base, see her as an object of desire. But not me anymore. On the drive from Bridgehampton I gave Josie every assurance I was her exclusive boyfriend. A 55-year-old boy with a cane. The cane's a huge improvement over my old wheelchair. This past winter they implanted an experimental neuro-prosthetic device in my lower spine. Amazingly, it worked. The widget bridges the rupture near my L4 vertebra, which, along with a host of other injuries, occurred 18 months ago when I



plowed my Hummer into the kindest old lady in Bridgehampton. That terrible accident ended everything for Elsie Cronk and changed everything for me.

I was standing at the curb when Josie abruptly gunned the engine. The shiny black Subaru Outback lunged up Bay Street at an emotional rate of speed with the passenger door swinging open. Josie can get overheated sometimes, but I kinda like that about her. It's preferable to somebody on a *Stepford Wives* benzodiazepine regimen. The Subaru lurched to a halt and, with a good yank, the passenger door closed.

Josie is real, she's healthy and good-looking and she's been through a lot with me. And, for now, she's pissed. I failed to offer a reasonable excuse for us to have lunch with Silk and a guy named Erasmus Tate. Josie got it in her head I'd somehow be drawn back into Silk's murky world. She imagined bad things, like me flaunting my restored ability to walk. I know this because of my empathic gift, which came with my accident. I sometimes wish I could trade it back for my profligate, pre-accident self.



Erasmus Tate had an interesting proposition that reached me via email. It seems he followed my misadventure with Silk last year, via YouTube and various outlets, which suggests he may be a little nutty. Like a lot of people. He says the Colonial Inn, which has been mightily renovated and is about to reopen for the first time in years, is haunted. Very. As a recovering real estate lawyer and guy who ghosts contact sometimes, I know this could pose a real problem, along with a public relations challenge, to say nothing of the threat to the dollars invested. I know the new owners took care to make every decrepit detail in the old place shiny and new. The question is, does central air and a fresh coat of paint scare off an entrenched ghost population.

This past winter had been long and arduous for me, given that I had to relearn to walk. I now felt ready to get out in the world again and Sag Harbor seemed like a good place to start. The classic old whaling village, overrun in-season with celebrities trying to get away from it all,

is quite calm in the off-season. The summer influx is still a few weeks away. The “real people” who remain are the best kind—they don’t have an “it all” to get away from. The off-season is also when spirits of the departed may make their presence known, as some locals tell it.

But I’m supposed to be off spirits of the departed. I got involved with some last year, when I discovered I was empathic following my car crash and near-death experience. First responders assumed I was dead. So did I. But a few days later, I emerged from a coma in Southampton Hospital with some battle axe nurse glaring at me. Jaw wired shut, legs in casts, tubes coming and going from my abdomen, lots of painkillers percolating, all I could do was grunt and wince. And read her thoughts. What I picked up from Nurse Ratched was, *Lyle Hall killed Elsie Cronk*.

That’s totally inaccurate, but my reputation was such that it was easy to believe the worst. I was Bridgehampton’s Scrooge. Fraser Newton, my Jacob Marley partner, and I made a lot of money buying up old properties and flipping them, usually to McMansion-minded developers. As the lawyer in the partnership, I often wound up in court with innocent preservationists. They would lose; “progress” would win. Once my poor wife Belinda, yet another cancer victim, passed away about 15 years ago, I realized she had been my shield. My reputation curdled, but I started earning ever bigger boatloads of cash. And drinking more.

That’s all behind me now. I’ve calmed down since the debacle I caused last October, a year after my deadly crash. The debacle, spurred on by Silk’s TV reports, was dubbed “Ghost Hampton.” The night of my last TV appearance with Silk, I wound up trapped in a burning barn—in my wheelchair—fighting with a crazed epileptic priest while a drug dealer was shooting at my only daughter, a police detective. The drug dealer did not survive meeting Georgie. Three other people, all innocent paranormal buffs, did not survive meeting me. Somehow, I survived.

So Josie Phillips and I are glad to be settled down. She’s younger and way cuter than me and I’m seriously considering a third marriage. I don’t talk about my second. And now I can walk, sort of. And Josie and I enjoy intimacy I feared I’d never experience again. You could say it’s a new lease on life, kind of a miracle.

I've retired from my legal career and am financially comfortable, perhaps too comfortable. When I received the email from Erasmus Tate, I deleted it. But I felt an itch, went back and opened it. Haunted hotel. An oddly interesting guy who works there as a cook wants my "opinion" of it. And he dangled Silk. I reluctantly admit she's interesting too, as careering femme fatales go.

Josie well knows I was infatuated with Silk, and deposed me during the 20-minute drive up to Sag Harbor. She was unconvinced that I was simply attracted by the prospect of checking out an old hotel, or that the internet said Silk had gained a lot of weight. So we had our first fight. I let Josie do all the fighting and just sat in the passenger seat, taking it like a man. By the time we pulled up at the Colonial Inn my empathic sensitivity kicked in: I could tell she was actually getting madder. Looking into Josie's eyes I saw something was going on. She was pissed for some deeper reason. But she was not about to share it with me.

I screwed up by not remaining seated in the SUV, but people were waiting for me and Josie was making the atmosphere negatively charged. Anything I said or did not say was off-pissing. She accused me, right to my face, of being *a lawyer*. Still, I wasn't expecting her to blast off like that, the passenger door swinging open and all. Josie had mothballed her own Italian sports car for this Subaru Outback—which I purchased—so she could drive me around more easily. Now I'm stranded and she's in a huff.



With the Colonial Inn closed today, maybe Erasmus Tate wanted to get lunch elsewhere. From the curb, the place looks nice, like one of those aging actresses who seem attractive from twelve feet away. Silk, unsurprisingly, is not yet here. I'll admit I was kind of flattered that this Colonial Inn guy chose me to tell his paranormal problems to. Unlike the creepy posts from people trolling me on social media, there was something *sane* about Erasmus Tate's email.

Dear Mr. Hall,

Please forgive my intrusion. I imagine you wish to remain out of the public eye, given your activities last year involving that haunted house.

However, I can only think of you as the man to answer some pressing questions that have come up surrounding certain mysterious apparitions at the newly renovated Colonial Inn in Sag Harbor. As a cook, I work in the kitchen. The sightings, which are frequent and disturbing, occur both in the guest rooms and the employee dormitory.

I'm inviting you to join me for lunch on Monday at 1:00. I've also invited your former colleague, Silk, to meet us at the Inn to discuss, and perhaps probe into, these phenomena. Management is not tolerating any talk of hauntings or spirits so close to the start of the season, and I request that any such conversation stays confidential.

Mr. Hall, I'd very much appreciate your insight, as it's essential I do not terminate my employment here at this time.

Sincerely,

Erasmus Tate

I'm early, thank you, Josie, so I take a look around. Moving along the side of the inn's main building, Sag Harbor Bay opens up before me. On my left is the local marina, just starting to sprout yachts and pleasure craft for the season. On my right is the Colonial Inn's new dining deck with bare tables and bistro chairs, a pergola overhead. Under it stands a Black man, facing out to the bay. He exhales cigarette smoke and turns my way.

"Mr. Hall?"

He knows my name. So do lots of people, though I was more recognizable in my wheelchair days. I make my way onto the deck, trying not to draw attention to my cane. The man pokes his cigarette in a nearby ashtray and heads toward me. He's dressed as a chef.

"Mr. Hall. You've changed." He extends a meaty hand and I shake it, looking him in the eye.

“Erasmus Tate?”

His grip is odd—the way he gently collapses my hand. He smiles.

“People call me Raz.”

“People call me Lyle.”

Erasmus Tate is shorter than me, older than me and stocky. He’s wearing a black hipster porkpie hat that goes with his uniform. His double-breasted chef’s jacket is a dark wine color with black detailing. His eyes, set in a broad face, are big, brown and not unfriendly. There’s a sprinkling of dark freckles across his cheekbones. His smile is big and generous; makes me think of old pictures of Louis Armstrong. The grin forces a crease between his eyebrows. Then it fades.

“I am sorry about Silk.”

“What about her?”

“She cancelled at the last minute.” Not a shock, knowing Silk. “But I’m hoping you’ll stay and talk with me for a bit. About this place.”

A lot of people ask to *talk with me* since my disastrous public adventure last year. Usually oddball paranormal enthusiasts who really need to get a life. This lunch meeting—with no Silk, the restaurant closed, my fight with Josie, and now this guy—has quickly gone sideways.

“The inn is closed, today, huh?”

The crease returns to the man’s brow and he forces a smile. “It is. But that may be a good thing. You like fine wine?” He nods toward a door leading to the kitchen. “C’mon. Follow me.”



Not bad. We pass through a modern kitchen to enter a clubby tasting-room/wine bar, set between the inn’s dining room and lobby. Whoever is partnered in this place decided to spend money. The

theme is updated colonial. The only other person around is a small man vacuuming the new rug in the dining room.

Erasmus Tate moves behind the little wine bar and squints at a few labels while I edge onto one of four stools, hook my cane on the lip of the bar and wonder what I'm getting into. He looks up at me.

“French?”

“How'd you guess?”

It's interesting to watch him examine wine bottles. He grabs one and sets it down in front of me. I check it out. A Margaux. The label says *Pavillon Rouge* and the year is... *25 years ago*. I look up at my host as two delicate wine goblets appear next to it.

“Folks from a yacht had it last night. This was their third bottle, didn't finish it, so it's up for grabs.” Erasmus pops the stopper, pours us each about five ounces. “I'm a cook here, not the executive chef or anything like that, but I worked a half-day on my day off, getting the kitchen ready.” Remaining behind the little bar, he raises his glass and smiles. “My remuneration. See what you think.”

I think it's marvy. “Very nice, Raz. So. No Silk. Why am I here?”

He seems a tad uncomfortable. “I was actually more interested in getting you here than Silk. Unusual as that may sound. I found you on the internet. Under *haunted*.”

Great.

“Just a moment.” With that he vanishes into the kitchen.

I take the moment to text Josie: Silk didn't show. Maybe that'll smooth things.

Then he's back with a platter of smelly cheese and smoky andouille. He places it on the bar between us and smiles, “Lunch.”

It's the good kind of smelly. There's flatbread too, covered with a million seeds, and some red grapes. Raz slices cheese for us both and the musty aroma intensifies. We establish that Raz is originally from New Orleans, and I am from exotic Bridgehampton. I have this ability to

read people—but right now I feel oddly comfortable in the presence of this chef and don't try to read him. As he slices the sausage, I notice his hands.

Erasmus Tate's hands are not black. They're kind of pink. Too pink. My first thought is vitiligo. Then it hits me. His hands are badly scarred. No, burned. A kitchen fire?

The thought of a fire sends a wave of fear, emotion, then sudden pain through me. An empathy attack. I try to maintain control and not react in front of this pleasant man. Stick some cheese on a cracker. Eat. Wash it down.

A few seconds pass and I'm still afraid to look in his eyes. Afraid I'll visualize the cause of his burns. Or learn some intimate detail behind those scars.

"Good pairing?" Raz steers the subject away from his hands.

"Very good." There, I'm back. "Thank you. So. *Why* are we here today?"

A cloud seems to pass over him. His eyes glide out to the small man. Vacuum silenced, he's leaving. Raz flicks him a little salute. His mood darkens as he gives me his full attention.

"Something's very *wrong* here. But maybe you can help... expose it."

"What kind of wrong?"

"Murder. A lot."

Oh boy. Nice wine, pleasant surroundings, and now this. I silently pray Josie's on her way back for me.

"*Oh?* Why not call the police?"

"Too long ago." His eyes seem far away, but dead serious. "I think they were slaves."

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