Chapter 5

Charlotte shifted uncomfortably again, in the back seat. A look of dissatisfaction and mild unease tinged her expression.

"We could have taken my Audi, you know ? No offense Ronnie, but it smells like an ashtray in here."

"If we showed up in your car, they'd think we were here to sell them Mary Kay. No offense."

"This is it," interrupted Charles. "Theatre-By-The-Sea."

"Hope there's a bar. It's nearly noon," Veronica muttered, easing the black Range Rover into a parking space across from the building. "So, is it *behind* the barn ?"

"No, Veronica. That's it," said Charles. "It actually used to be a barn. Please, reserve judgment till you see inside."

Veronica remained dubious as they mounted the steps to the front entrance. "I think your father is having one more joke at our expense. This looks like one of those Cracker Barrel places where poor people eat before they go to the tractor pull."

Charlotte giggled. "Oh, Ronnie. Don't be so snotty." She gave her daughter-in-law a swat on the butt as she stepped forward to peer through the glass. The place was locked up, but a man in coveralls could be seen vacuuming in the lobby, so she rapped on the window to get his attention. He turned to see them, and rushed over to unlock the doors.

Charlotte spoke first. "How do you do, sir ? I'm Charlotte Livingston Blackthorne. This is my son Charles and his wife Veronica.

"Oh, yes ma'am. Everyone knows the Blackthornes. I'm Dennis, by the way. Please, do come in," he stepping aside, and holding the door for them. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. I wasn't informed you were coming."

Charlotte smiled. "That's perfectly alright, dear. This was a sort of spur-of-the-moment thing. We were wondering if we might be able to take a bit of a look around."

Dennis looked slightly amused. " Of course, ma'am. It's your theatre, after all."

"I beg your pardon."

"Yes ma'am. Mr. Blackthorne bought this place years ago."

The three visitor shared a look of surprise.

"How many years would you say, exactly ?", asked Veronica, pushing her way to the front.

"Well...It was 2011. I remember because my daughter graduated that spring."

"Fascinating. Thank You. Were gonna go have a little nose around, then. Lovely to meet you."

"Certainly, ma'am. Please, let me know if there is any way I can be of assistance." He smiled and returned to his vacuuming.

Charlotte led them hurriedly across the lobby. "Come along, children," she giggled, thoroughly enjoying her little adventure.

They stopped abruptly as they entered the main auditorium. It wasn't Radio City Music Hall, but it certainly didn't look like the inside of a barn either. All the house lights were up, and two more men were busily cleaning in the aisles, and in the rows of red velvet seats. A young woman worked in the balcony, cursing whoever had stuck gum under the arm rest of AA7.

The traditional atmosphere of the little playhouse sat in stark contrast to what was happening on stage. Garishly painted scenery with gleaming steel catwalks, razor wire, and a pole obviously meant for a stripper, or at least a very slutty fireman. The sets were for the theatre's upcoming production. A terpsichorean nightmare called Jailhouse Dykes: The Musical. A scrawny young man in an X men t-shirt labored to revive a broken video monitor at stage right.

"Cheap Korean bullshit. Julian can just come fix it himself."

"Excuse me, young man," called Charlotte, as they climbed the steps at the edge of the stage. "I need access to the upstairs area...or whatever you call it."

The disinterested technician turned to face her. "It's that way, lady," he said, gesturing to his right with a soldering gun. "Past the ropes. Turn right at the electrical panel. Third door. You can't miss it. I'll tell you now, though; they don't let you smoke up there."

The Blackthornes were already walking away, in the direction he'd indicated. "Thank you...dude," called Veronica, looking back, over her shoulder, as they disappeared into the shadows. They quickly found the door, next to an autographed photo of the actor who played Klinger on M.A.S.H. He apparently quite enjoyed his time in a production of "Cat On A Hot Tin Roof", and wanted to express his gratitude and best wishes to all involved.

The stairway was narrow and poorly lit. Finally reaching the top landing, they were greeted by near, total darkness. They each turned on the lights of their cell phones and surveyed the area, revealing several fixtures with burned out bulbs. The safety rail around the stairs was crafted from unfinished 2x4s, and only came up to mid thigh. The first door was unlabeled. The sign had been removed, leaving two empty screw holes. With trepidation, Charles pushed it open, cringing at the harsh scraping of the ancient hinges. He found a switch, and the florescent tubes overhead came to life, filling the room with yellowish light, and a low, irritating hum.

The ladies followed him in, and began searching, but there was precious little to see. A few cardboard boxes sat on the scarred worn floorboards, which were otherwise festooned with plaster dust, cigarette butts, and one used condom. The boxes offered nothing that felt like a clue. Musty, old costumes from shows long forgotten. A few props.

The second door said, "Production Office." At least this room was cleaner, but it didn't appear to be more than another storage area. More costumes, but hung neatly, in garment bags, and labeled as to production and size. The two grey filing cabinets proved to be empty, aside from mouse droppings.

The book shelves lining the back wall, however, heaved under the weight of tattered, yellowing scripts. Tennessee Williams, Chekov, Becket, Neal Simon. And William Shakespeare. Their breathing quickened as they dug. Finally, there it was. One lone, ragged copy of "Macbeth". They poured over the tattered book, searching desperately for anything that could be a message. On the one dog-eared page, a passage was circled in blood red.

"Oh, Edward. How common. No invisible ink ? No Egyptian hieroglyphics ? I confess; I'm a bit disappointed."

"Mother. Don't be a sore winner. What the hell does it say ?"

Charlotte read aloud with all the drama and gravitas she could muster:

"*Naught's had, all's spent,*

*Where our desire is had without content,*

*'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,*

*Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy."*

"WTF, bitch ?" Veronica lit up a cigarette.