

Chapter 1

Taye

Taye Jennings steered the pickup down the freeway although his mind was not on the traffic as it should have been. Instead, he was silently wondering if he had done the right thing in sending in his application. For that matter, had he really been that smart in answering the advertisement in the first place? What was he getting himself into?

He first laid eyes on the ad a week ago on a particularly rainy Monday. It had simply read:

FACE YOUR FEARS: *Have you got what it takes? Spend one night in an authentic haunted castle in Scotland. Call for details. 555-1200.*

That was it — nothing more, nothing less. Taye did not have the slightest idea why the prospect of coming face to face with a ghost in an old castle had suddenly become so appealing, but it had. He had not mentioned a word to his lover of two years, Arlo Waters, but instead had mulled it over on his own. His partner was blissfully unaware, therefore, of the mounting excitement and torment Taye had been feeling.

On the third day, Taye had pulled the ad out of his top desk drawer at the office, where it lay hidden under a stack of papers and a plastic container filled with paper clips. After reading it over ten more times, he finally summoned up his nerve and reached for the telephone. There was no area code, so it had to be a local call, but he did not recognize the prefix. After several busy signals, he had finally gotten through to a pleasant-sounding gentleman with no regional accent who identified himself simply as Grant.

Judging by the voice, Taye decided Grant was in his fifties or at least middle-aged. The man stated that he was glad Taye had answered the ad, and then very briefly explained that he was in the process of taking applications to spend a single night in a haunted castle. If qualified candidates could be found, there would be a total of five participants. They would be driven to the castle grounds as a group just after dusk, dropped off for the night, and then picked up the following morning at sunrise.

When Taye had asked what they were to do while in the castle, the man had merely replied, “Explore.”

The cost, he told Taye without hesitation, was \$2,000. This included airfare, a hotel room for the night before the one spent in the castle, and all ground transportation. With excitement of the prospect of a new adventure raging through him, Taye had anxiously asked Grant to fax an application to his office. He received the application, filled it out, and faxed it back to Grant within the hour.

Nobody knew about the ad or his interest in it — with the sole exception of Sam, the co-worker who had shown him the ad in the first place. Taye was not quite ready to tell his colleague that he had actually applied since Sam had presented it to him as more of a joke rather than something to be taken seriously.

Once the paperwork and the selection process were out of his hands, all Taye could do was sit back and wait. This was even worse than waiting for credit approval, because the longer he pondered it, the more he realized that he really wanted this thing to pan out. Amidst mounting excitement, he pictured some grand stone and brick fortress with green ivy all around the towering walls, inside of which would be a courtyard filled with professionally manicured lawns bordered by neat hedges and colorful flowers. Inside the castle, he imagined, there would be polished floors and tapestries hanging on the walls depicting battles and warriors long past. Perhaps even family crests of wood and iron, beautifully restored to their original splendor. The thought of warm fires in the ornately etched fireplaces in each occupied room flickered in his mind's eye, the ever-changing light from the flames sparkling from highly-polished suits of armor like points on a diamond. Quite possibly, he believed, there might even be a house-servant or two to tend to the guests' every desire.

The more Taye had pictured these images, the more he pined for his acceptance into the elite group that was being chosen. Having not heard from Grant after three days, Taye considered calling the man to inquire about his chances, but he held himself back lest he become more of a pest than a consideration. Besides, there was no telling how many calls and applications the man had received; it would definitely take time to sort through them all.

All Taye could do, then, was wait and wonder if he had filled out the application in a manner that would make it stand out among all the others. As it was, there was not much that could stand out considering the application asked for mostly inane information — name, address, and phone number and the like. Surprisingly, sexual orientation had headed the next section — which dealt with religion, race, and such. Taye had answered honestly that he was white, atheist, and gay.

While this last revelation probably was bound to relegate his application to the “No Go” file, Taye had figured the very least he could do was answer honestly. Besides, if he were disqualified for stating the truth, then at least he could say that he had been true to himself and not put up a false front for somebody else. Just the same, his eagerness to participate had caused him to second guess his candor, making him wish occasionally that he had either left that portion blank or lied. It was a discriminatory world out there, he knew, and it would not be the first or last time that he had missed out on an opportunity because he was an out gay man.

At the bottom of the application he found a small text box that asked him to explain why he wanted to be a part of this adventure, and as far as Taye was concerned, this offered him the chance to really shine. Unfortunately, he had had a difficult time trying to figure out what he thought would be the prudent and wise thing to say — as opposed to the statement he really wanted to make. In the end, he scribbled something about needing to step outside the boundaries of his life and experience something new, come to grips with his fragility, and find answers to questions in his life that had never been posed to him. The “knowns” in his life were a comfortable barrier that guarded him from the “unknowns”, and yet it was the latter that now intrigued him, a curiosity sparked suddenly by the ad in the paper.

Taye had read over his response several times. He realized that he hated the wording, but he was happy with the content, so lacking a more eloquent way of stating his reason he left it as it was.

In order to ensure that Arlo would not accidentally intercept any correspondence concerning the application before he had a chance to think about (and rehearse) his reasons for applying, Taye used his office address for return mail. This proved to be a wise choice. He had still not worked up the nerve to divulge his secret to his lover when the registered letter from Grant arrived, congratulating him on being one of the five people who had been accepted. Making a return call, Taye gave Grant a credit card number and was told to expect his airline tickets in the mail soon. This was followed by a fax that listed all of the items that he would need to bring on the trip.

Naturally, this had put Taye in a buoyant mood, but his good humor was soon repressed by the fact that he could no longer delay in telling Arlo about the trip. His planned departure was a scant two weeks away. That startling thought brought Taye back to the present and the confession he needed to make, one that he predicted would be ill-received.

“Scotland? You’re kidding, right?” Arlo asked as Taye drove home after picking him up at work.

Taye glanced to his right, catching a glare from his partner that felt as if it was about to bore a hole right through his head. “No, I’m dead serious,” he replied.

“That’s what I was afraid of. And the driving force behind this is...?”

Taye dug down inside himself and attempted to pull up a reason that he could give Arlo, even tried to remember what he had written in the little box at the bottom of the application. “I guess because I’ve never had to do what the ad said: to ‘face my fears’.”

“Like your fear of losing control?” Arlo asked sourly.

“For the last time, I am not a control freak,” Taye told him, frowning.

“Oh, please.”

“So I like a certain amount of order in my life. That’s not a control issue; it’s organization.”

“Taye, if you don’t have control of a situation you go into nuclear meltdown. Major control freak.”

“Look, let’s just drop it. Okay?”

“I rest my case,” Arlo said under his breath but loud enough for Taye to hear.

“Excuse me?” he asked, the heat of anger building inside him.

“Nothing, nothing.” Arlo was silent a moment. “So, what’s the big draw to this thing?”

Taye took a deep breath to diffuse his anger. “I guess it just sounded like the thing I needed to kick-start my life again.”

"Excuse me? I wasn't aware that I was causing your life to stagnate," Arlo said, sounding suddenly bitter. Taye's misspoken statement had obviously stung, making it sound as if he were solely at fault for Taye being stuck in a rut.

"No, I didn't mean it that way," Taye explained, putting a hand on Arlo's knee. "I dunno, I guess it's just a challenge that my life is missing right now."

"I see. Going through your midlife crisis at forty-one? Shouldn't you be holding off until you're, say, forty-five or fifty?"

"I wouldn't say it's a midlife crisis, Arl. This thing sounded, well, like something that I just need to do."

"Then I'll go, too."

"Alone," Taye added reluctantly, purposely not looking at the man in the passenger seat. "We do everything together, and..."

"And that's bad?"

"No, let me finish. I've been in relationships since I was sixteen and never done anything really daring, and when I saw that ad it was like a light went on inside my head. I need to exert myself a little, meet some sort of challenge. I've gotten into such a rut in my life, and the routine is kind of boring."

"Back to me making your life boring, huh?" Arlo grumbled, playing with a piece of paper he had folded into a cootie-catcher while on their way home from work. "Why can't I go along with you? I need excitement, too."

"Please try to understand, Arl. I need to do this on my own."

Taye continued to direct their blue Toyota pickup smoothly down the five-lane freeway, passing cars that were traveling in the slower right lanes. A bright shaft of sunlight shone into the rearview mirror, hitting Taye's face but missing direct contact with his eyes. He and Arlo were quiet for a few minutes. Taye did not know how else to explain his need to go away for a couple days alone, and Arlo's continued silence displayed his obvious pain at being excluded.

In the ensuing quiet, Taye now realized that what he had thought was merely curiosity when he initially faxed in his application was, in reality, a lot more complex than his initial, more superficial thoughts and reactions to the ad. In fact, everything had changed when he sent the application. He found something inside, a need to break out of his boundaries and live dangerously for once, to maybe sample life in the fast lane and taste what few others had tasted before. In his two years with Arlo he had remained faithful and in-step with the man every inch of the way, but now it was time to step outside of the box of his relationship and expand himself. He needed to grow, personally; to prime his potential and try something new. To bring excitement back into his own life, something which he hoped would rejuvenate his relationship with Arlo.

"So, can I see the acceptance letter?" Arlo asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"It's...I left it at the office," Taye said reluctantly, having honestly forgotten it in his worry about explaining the whole mess to Arlo as he was leaving work that evening.

"Uh huh," Arlo said, his disbelief clear. "What'd it say?"

"It said that mine was one of the five applications chosen to do this thing and to pack for one night in a hotel and one in the castle." Taye dug into the pocket inside his suit jacket and pulled out a piece of paper, passing it over to Arlo. "This is the list of things Grant faxed me, stuff he said I'd need to have once we were inside the castle."

Placing the cootie-catcher on the seat beside him, Arlo took the paper. "You bring the list but you forget the acceptance letter," he growled softly, skimming over the printed lines. "Backpack, flashlight, warm clothing, snacks, compass...a compass?"

"Yeah, I guess it'll be easy to get turned around inside the place and lose our way."

"You'll be inside a building, for crying out loud! How difficult can it be to find your way back outside?" Arlo asked, his eyebrows lowering dramatically.

"I can only go by what the list says. I don't know anything other than that."

"I don't get it," Arlo said, handing the paper back to him. "What's this whole thing with Grant and the castle and everything about in the first place?"

"Not sure, but I suspect it's some sort of publicity stunt. Maybe he's going to turn the place into a bed and breakfast and wanted to get the word out. I mean, what greater draw can there be than to advertise through word of mouth that it's haunted? I suspect it's probably very beautiful: furnished and heated and..."

"Then why the warm clothing?"

"Maybe because the grounds will be cold. I understand they get a lot of fog over there."

"I dunno, the whole thing's a little too suspicious for me — watch out for that car up there on the left, I think they're gonna pull into our lane."

"Yeah, I see him. Thanks."

"What do you know about this guy or his castle? Is he the owner of the place? And if not, does he have the owner's permission to do this sort of thing? You should be asking him these things."

"The letter..." Taye said, hesitating briefly under the glare he received from Arlo for having left it back at the office, "said that Grant would explain everything on our ride from the hotel to the castle."

"Yeah, once you're in a foreign country when it's too late to back out."

Taye ignored this remark and slowed the pickup down just in time for the car Arlo had indicated to merge into his lane suddenly and without signaling. He went on, "The letter did say that we'd have to sign some sort of waiver absolving the estate and anybody associated with it of any blame in the event of death or injury."

"Death or injury? Oh yeah, this is sounding *better* by the second! So let me get this straight...you want to go see a ghost castle, you don't know who owns it, don't know exactly where the castle is..."

"He said it's out in the country about an hour from Edinburgh."

"Is it in a town?"

"I'm sure it is, but I don't recall him mentioning which one when I talked with him. Come to think of it, no, he didn't mention anything about that. Who knows, it could be out in the middle of nowhere."

"Mmm. So who is this 'Grant' guy that's arranging all this? What's his last name?"

"He didn't say."

"Well, are you certain he has the right to do this?"

"I'm assuming so."

"Uh huh. So, to a total stranger without a last name you give your credit card number? Great. That's just...and what's this about the possibility of death or injury? Not to mention them having you sign off any rights to compensation from anybody should something happen? Taye, aren't there any bells or alarms going off in your head? Because they're sure playing a symphony in mine!"

"I admit that it's a little mysterious..." Taye said as Arlo's more-than-warranted questions floated around inside his head like the ghosts he was hoping to encounter at the castle. Having jumped into this thing headfirst without questioning the finer points, he had not considered these arguments before. Now that reality had reared its head, Taye had to admit to himself a growing sense of apprehension.

Arlo was right, he thought, quietly condemning his partner for sprinkling a generous portion of doubt over his anticipation that now clouded his excitement. There was, indeed, a truckload of questions that probably should have been asked and answered prior to his signing-on to take this trip. And yet, he reasoned, that was the beauty of the entire thing. In fact, that was the very reason he had decided to do it in the first place. He wanted to experience something in which every single detail was not planned out beforehand. The prospect of having to rely on his own wits and creativity without the luxury of a security blanket — that was the reason. It was why obvious questions had eluded him when they most certainly should have been of paramount importance. The delicious uncertainty of it all had overridden his accustomed logic and attention to detail.

"*A little mysterious?*" Arlo blurted.

"But that's half the intrigue of this whole thing," Taye explained patiently as he dismissed the wisps of doubt from his brain and reconstructed his thought processes. "I'll be alone in this 11th-century castle with four total strangers and, allegedly, a ghost of some sort for one night. I know you don't find it at all appealing, but I'm totally charged about it."

Arlo mumbled something unintelligible under his breath before continuing, "When does this all take place?"

"My flight leaves in two weeks."

"That soon?"

"Yeah."

"For how long?"

"I'll fly out of LAX Saturday evening, get there Sunday and spend a night in a hotel. Then we'll stay in the castle Monday night and fly out on Tuesday. I'll be home Wednesday. Just a quick trip."

"Where are you flying to?"

"Edinburgh Airport. Grant's taking care of all the travel arrangements for us. He said I should receive my ticket by the middle of next week."

"How will you get to your hotel from the airport?"

"I'm assuming I'll have to rent a car, I don't know."

"And drive it where?"

"To the hotel."

"Which hotel?"

Taye smiled. "I'm sure the whole itinerary will be in with the tickets when he sends them."

"Uh huh. Does this castle even have a name?"

"Probably, but he didn't say. Like I told you, he said he'd give us all the details on the drive to the castle."

"I'm not believing this. Sounds like you've been scammed royally, Taye."

"No," Taye said, remaining calm. "There was something genuine in Grant's voice. I dunno, I trust him."

"Well, if you ask me I think you've just been taken big time. Why don't you call the credit card company and stop payment? It's all just too..."

"No. I want to see if it's legitimate. Something tells me that it is."

"Two grand, eh? There goes our down payment on the new car," Arlo said, folding his arms across his chest, a grumpy expression on his face. "Okay, say this does turn out to be legitimate and you do go over there and everything, how will anybody find you if you should turn up missing? I have no idea who to contact or exactly where you're going."

"I'm assuming that all that information will be in the itinerary that will come with the tickets," Taye explained confidently.

"Uh huh," Arlo groaned. "And what do you win if you stay the entire night?"

"The satisfaction of knowing that I made it, I guess." After a quick glance at the worried man beside him, Taye sighed. "Don't think I don't know how this sounds, Arl? I do. But it's just something I know I have to do. I think all my life I've been waiting for an opportunity like this to come along, some dark mystery that doesn't have every second planned out ahead of time, every meal, every hour, every step."

"But why do you have to leave the country to do this? There's plenty of haunted houses here in America. Visit one of *them*. Hell, we can take a trip across the country and visit them all, I don't care. Just don't do *this*. Something is telling me it's just plain wrong. There's too many holes, too many missing pieces. You have to admit that with the lack of information and everything you'd be telling *me* not to go if I were the one planning on this."

"Maybe, but I'd also understand your curiosity and need to do something you'd never done before."

"I don't think so. You're too much of a worrier. Too methodical. This wouldn't sit right with you just like it doesn't with me, and you know it." Arlo picked up his folded paper again but did not immediately slip his fingers inside to play with it. "Besides, think about what could happen to you over there. How would I know if something went wrong? Say you're not at the airport on the return flight? What do I do? Who do I call?"

"I told you, it should all be in the itinerary. Stop worrying."

"Yeah, like that's gonna happen. I can't help but worry about you, Taye; I love you and I'm really apprehensive about this 'death or injury' waiver you mentioned. If there's the slightest chance of you hurting yourself or, worse, losing your life then I have every right to worry. And, I might add, so do you!"

"Look, if it makes you feel any better I'll take out an insurance policy before I leave."

"I don't want some insurance policy, I want *you!*"

Taye smiled and patted Arlo on the knee. "I know you do. It'll be okay. Nothing's gonna go wrong..."

"Famous last words."

Taye ignored the remark. "It's an old castle, not a deep jungle safari. Anyway, I'm sure they have to have us sign off because of legal reasons."

“Obviously,” Arlo moaned and returned his attention to his cootie-catcher.

This exchange effectively ended the conversation for the rest of the drive home. Following dinner and an hour of television, Taye and Arlo retired to the bedroom without either one having brought up the subject of the castle again.

That night in bed, however, Taye was again assaulted by insecurity, likely the result of Arlo having planted the seeds of doubt earlier. On the trip home, everything had been satisfactorily filed away in the drawers of Taye’s mental filing cabinet and he had felt very much at ease with his decision to take the trip, but now in the darkness of their bedroom, the doubts rose once again. He hated it. The mental struggle for resolution hampered his ability to fall asleep, and the longer he was kept awake, the angrier he became, which, in turn, kept him awake that much longer. Making matters worse was the fact that upon awakening the following morning, he remembered having had some very disturbing dreams. Dreams about cold dark castles and blood-thirsty dragons and himself being put on the dinner menu for one such monster.

Another part of the dream surfaced as he glanced briefly at the bedside clock without registering the time. In this segment he remembered himself and others riding through a grassy countryside in a van that was being driven by a man whose face Taye could not see. The driver wore a black veil that revealed only bright green, serpent-like eyes whose vertical pupils held his own fascinated gaze in spite of his attempts to look away.

Yet another dream scene briefly flickered in Taye’s mind. The full details remained vague, but he remembered it being very scary and having something to do with a deep, dark pit somewhere within the castle. Like all dreams, though, this one was soon forgotten as morning sunlight swelled in the bedroom and Taye enjoyed the feel of Arlo’s warm body beside him. He lay there for several minutes overcoming the unsettling effects of the nightmares, the feelings eventually pushed aside by the mounting excitement of the upcoming trip.

After showering and dressing, Taye waited impatiently downstairs for Arlo to get ready for the day. Laying the list of supplies out on the kitchen counter, Taye began retrieving the items and placing them in a neat row on the nearby table.

“Morning,” Arlo said, slipping into the room behind Taye.

“Oh, ’morning,” Taye replied, turning to give his partner a hug and a kiss.

“What’s all this?” Arlo asked, eyeing each item upon the table suspiciously. “Starting a little early, aren’t we?”

“Yeah. I’m a little anxious to get ready.”

“So you’re still planning on going through with this nonsense?”

“Of course. Have you seen the flashlight anywhere? I could have sworn it was in the drawer beside the sink, but I couldn’t find it.”

“It’s in the hall closet, remember? We moved it more toward the middle of the house so we could get to it easier from anywhere.”

“That’s right,” Taye acknowledged, nodding. “I completely forgot. Thanks. You want some ham and eggs this morning?”

“What I want is for you to give this craziness up.”

Taye merely gave Arlo a smile and another peck on the cheek as he passed the man on his way out of the kitchen. When he returned with the missing flashlight, he found Arlo seated at the table emitting a heavy sigh as he opened the backpack in front of him.

“Sleep well?” Taye asked, not liking the look on his partner’s face. He figured that the second part of their battle was about to begin.

“Taye?” Arlo began, his eyes huge, filled with a hurt puppy expression. “Isn’t there any way I can talk you out of this? I’m so scared that if this thing does turn out to be the real thing, I’ll never see you again.”

“I’ll be fine,” Taye said softly, feeling humbled by Arlo’s genuine concerns, yet also angered somewhat by Arlo’s obvious doubt over his ability to take care of himself. “You’ve got to stop thinking of the negative aspect of the trip. It’s not like I’ll be going alone, you know. There’ll be four other people going with me, so if anything does happen at least there will be somebody there.”

Raising his hands in the air as if surrendering, Arlo shook his head. “All right, fine. End of discussion. At least do one thing for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Call me when you get there so I’ll know you landed safely. And let me know the name of the castle so I can know where to send the undertaker to pick up what’s left of your bloody body. Oh, and take along some glue, too, so you can glue back the pieces that’ve been ripped from your body until they can sew them back on later.”

“Nothing’s gonna happen to me. Stop worrying, Arl.” Going to stand behind the seated man, Taye rested his hands on Arlo’s shoulders and began massaging the tense muscles there.

“Mmm. I’m gonna miss that,” Arlo murmured.

“Only until I get back home.”

“Hard to do from a coffin six feet under.”

“Would you stop it?” Taye said, losing the battle with a playful smile he had been trying to subdue.

Arlo glanced up at him and grinned, “Or without arms.”

Taye moved around the table and sat down, hitching his chair closer to Arlo. “Look, if it’s scaring you this much, if it’s that important to you, I’ll call it off. Ultimately, you mean more to me than any trip.”

“Good.”

“But you have to understand how much I really want to do this.”

“Then go,” Arlo said, pouting.

“I won’t go without you feeling comfortable about it,” Taye said, his heart heavy with disappointment. He knew that Arlo’s next exclamation could effectively end his trip, and for the briefest of moments he silently chastised himself for relinquishing the reins of his life to another.

Arlo sat in silence for a couple moments before his gaze rose to meet Taye’s, the corners of his mouth tightening. “Sure, pile the guilt at my feet. If you need to go, then go. Pay no attention to the man at home who’s crying in his pillow every night you’re gone, wondering if you’ll ever come back alive,” Arlo said, his face showing the strain of the spreading smile, “or in one piece.” He glanced up suddenly and went on, “Hey, who’s to say that this clown — Grant? — isn’t trying to hook his ghosts up to you and the others so they’ll follow you guys home and he can open his B&B ghost-free? We barely have enough room for ourselves let alone another former-person coming in and taking up space. The sleeping arrangements alone could be a little dicey!” Arlo was really smiling now.

“I promise not to come home with extra luggage,” Taye assured him, ecstatic over Arlo’s unexpected change of mind. “I don’t think Customs allows it, anyway.”

“Yeah, well, they better not. You know where your passport is?”

“Yeah, I already got it.”

“Aren’t you even a little bit afraid?”

“I think I’m more intrigued than afraid.”

“Seeing a ghost wouldn’t scare you?” Arlo asked, his disbelief plain.

“No, I don’t think so,” Taye replied.

“Ah,” Arlo said, shaking his head. “I forgot, you’re not afraid of anything. My big, brave husband.”

“Okay, maybe I am a little afraid,” Taye admitted, “but not of a ghost.”

Arlo’s eyes widened, knowingly. “Oh, that’s right. You do have that one phobia, don’t you? Isolophobia, as I recall.”

“That was a long time ago. I’ve gotten over that,” Taye said. “Besides, I won’t be alone. There will be others there with me.”

“Uh huh,” Arlo scoffed. “And what if you get separated from the group inside this castle?”

“I told you, I’m over that fear.”

“And if you find that you’re not over it?”

“Then I’ll deal with it,” Taye said indignantly, tiring of this attack on his character. “You know,” he said after a pause, attempting to steer the conversation in a different direction, “I didn’t even think about this, but it’s entirely possible the ghost thing is just a ruse to get people to sign up.”

“Sign up? I thought you had to fill out an application.”

“I did, but how do I know that everybody that applies doesn’t get to go? Maybe just at different times to make it look like you’ve been selected.”

“Yeah, the old sot could be raking in the dough left and right at two thousand bucks a head!” Arlo said, giving Taye a knowing nod.

“But out of that comes the plane fare and the hotel stay the day before, so that eats into the profit.”

“Just the same...”

“There probably won’t be anything but a nice comfortable room at the castle. I’ll get an uneventful night’s rest and be back home two days later. If I see a ghost, I’ll deal with it. If not, no great loss, except...”

“Except what?”

Taye grinned, feeling a touch foolish. “Except that I *really* want to see a ghost.”

“All right, so go see your ghost, but don’t mess with it or piss it off, and then get back home where you belong, right here with me.”

“It’s a deal. There’s just one little thing that we need to talk about before I go over there.”

“Uh-oh. I knew it. What is it?”

Taye paused a moment to clear his throat, which doubled for a stall while he carefully chose his words. He did not know exactly how Arlo was going to take his next sentence, but if yesterday and today were any indication, he knew that his words would not get a favorable response. Bracing himself for a possible explosion, he began, “If — and I’m saying *if* — something should happen to me over there, my will is in the...”

“I know where your will is, and that’s it; you’re not going! If you’re even considering something like that, then I’m not letting you out of my sight for a single minute!”

“Come on, Arl, you never know,” Taye said, just then realizing the lament in his voice. “The plane could be shot down, a bomb could go off at the airport, a piece of glass could fall out of a window at the castle and slice my head open — any number of things could go wrong. It’s best that we’re prepared in case the unexpected should happen.”

“First you’re telling me that nothing’s gonna happen and that I shouldn’t worry about it. Next you’re telling me where to find your will. Make up your mind!”

“Arl...” Taye whined.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Arlo said indignantly. He stood and walked over to the counter to pour himself a cup of coffee.

“I know you don’t,” Taye said, speaking to Arlo’s back. “Nobody wants to talk about things like that, but we’re all gonna go eventually.”

“Nope, you’re never gonna die and leave me,” Arlo said in a defiant voice, turning to face Taye. “I forbid it. I have the power to make that decision. I have connections in high places.”

Taye stood and went to his lover, giving the man a hug. “And I won’t, not if I have anything to say about it. Now, everything of mine goes to you, except for my grandmother’s silver, and that...”

“Goes to your mom, I know all that. Speaking of whom, she’ll never forgive me for letting you go on this ghost hunt of yours if you come back in a box.”

“With a ghost attached,” Taye chuckled, hoping to inject some humor and dispel the dark cloud that hovered over them.

Arlo pulled back abruptly, his glare so ferocious that Taye flinched. “Would you be serious?” Arlo spat. “I’m trying to be.”

“All right, all right. Sorry. Just trying to lighten the mood a little. Anyway,” Taye said, glancing at his watch, “I suppose we’d better eat and get ready for work. We’re running behind as it is.”

“Have you talked this over with your friend, Sam, at work?”

“He was the one who showed me the ad in the first place.”

“Finally, somebody I can pin the blame on. So Sam endorses this foolishness, does he?”

“He thought it might be interesting, yeah. Come to think of it, he may have applied as well, but if he did he didn’t tell me about it. Then again, I didn’t tell him that I sent in my application. Wouldn’t it be funny to find him standing in the airport along with me and the others?”

“I wonder how many will be bringing their significant others?” Arlo chided.

“That I don’t know.”

“How many would you suspect?”

Taye purposely said nothing since he did not want to be forced to explain — again — why he wanted to go alone.

“All right, fine, I’m dropping the subject. My lips are sealed,” Arlo said, making a gesture as if to zip his mouth closed. Forty minutes later, however, Arlo’s lips became unzipped as he and Taye

were going down the freeway along with what seemed to be every other commuter on the planet. “And another thing, why wouldn’t he tell you the name of the hotel you’ll be staying at?” Arlo asked. “I mean if this Grant person is taking care of all your travel and accommodations, and you’re responsible for getting from the airport to the hotel, how are you supposed to know where to go?”

“I thought the subject was dropped,” Taye said, feeling his neck muscles tightening from his own annoyance over the relentless interrogation. Even though the answers remained unchanged, the questions continued to repeat themselves in an endless loop. He was growing weary of the repetition. Still, in the interest of harmony he swallowed his anger and forced a smile.

“I un-dropped it,” Arlo said. “So, come on, how will you know where to go when you get off the plane?”

“How many times do I have to explain to you that all the details will probably be in the itinerary with the airline tickets.”

“But why the big secret? Why couldn’t he tell you all this over the phone when he called you?”

“Well, first off I didn’t ask. Besides, not knowing everything enhances the excitement of it all. You know that ninety-five percent of fear is in the built-up anticipation. If he can keep us in the dark and try to freak us out before we even *get* to the castle, we’ll be seeing and hearing things that aren’t actually there just from our own fears and imaginations.”

“And what if it’s all a sham? What if he’s got cold air piped into certain rooms and taped noises and holographic images and stuff? That’s hardly worth the two grand it cost to go over there. Right?”

“But it’ll be fun to stay in an authentic Scottish castle even if it is all a big hoax. Besides, it’s always exciting to travel and see different parts of the world.”

“I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t invited. Remember?” Arlo sniped.

“Okay, sorry. I got a little carried away — shouldn’t have said that. But, anyway, the point I’m trying to make is that even if it’s all done with mirrors it’ll still be exhilarating. Everybody loves a good scare now and then. Why do you think slasher films are so popular?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...whatever. So there’s absolutely no way I can talk you out of it, is there?”

“Come on, Arl, be happy for me. I won’t be gone but a couple days. Hey, you’ll have the house all to yourself. Invite some friends over. Have an orgy,” Taye teased.

“Right, that’s my biggest goal in life.” Shaking his head, Arlo gazed out of the side window. Taye flicked a glance in that direction, noting a passing motorcycle with its two occupants going down the divider strip between two lanes. “I’m really gonna miss you,” Arlo finally said, sounding timid.

With his gaze following the motorcycle as it surged ahead of them — and more specifically, the way the passenger was tightly hugging the driver — Taye felt the tug of impending absence at his heart. Arlo’s last words added more power to that pull. Taye briefly experienced a tinge of regret over not having invited Arlo along to the castle. Since the journey was cast in stone at this point, though, it was far too late to change his mind or his plans. He loved Arlo and would miss the man as much as Arlo would miss him, but Taye quickly reminded himself that he had to do this by himself, for himself. He smiled and patted Arlo’s knee. “And I’m really gonna miss you, too. I’ll be back before you know it. Wait, I know...how about if when I get back we go to New York or something together? We’ve both got plenty of vacation time accrued, and you’ve never been over to the eastern part of the country. Maybe New England or Florida or wherever. That’ll be our little adventure, just the two of us.”

Arlo sat in silence for a moment. “Well, okay. That does sound like fun, actually.”

“All right, then it’s settled,” Taye said, giving Arlo’s knee another pat before returning his hand to the wheel. He smiled to himself, dismissing the guilt he had felt moments before, while congratulating himself for having manipulated the conversation in such a way that Arlo could look forward to something other than Taye’s absence. “Let’s both put in for vacation time today and go the week after I get back home from this thing.”

“Sure, okay. You want me to make all the arrangements?”

“Absolutely,” Taye said, grinning from ear to ear. “Don’t forget about Disney World and Busch Gardens,” he said, glancing at his partner.

Arlo was again smiling, and Taye finally felt a sense of absolution. Whether or not Arlo was still dubious of the castle trip remained unspoken, but the smile told Taye that he had finally gotten through to the man.

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