

DRAFT

The Haunted Hillerman House

By Shannon Bailey

Mindless of those she brushed passed; Rachel Hillerman sailed across the wide, back porch of the Rock River Assembly Park Hotel. Lifting the hem of her bold, blue and white striped skirt, she hurried down the stairs and onto the thick emerald lawn. She squeezed her eyes shut against the bright afternoon sun and took several deep breaths to control her seething anger.

Rachel wondered why she had bothered to luncheon with Lynette Jameson and Lucinda Henry at all. She had nothing in common with them and if it were not for the ties they had to her husband, Jonas, she would not associate with either one. But as it were, Lynette was married to Byron Jameson, who was Vice President of the real estate and insurance companies Jonas and he owned. Lucinda was the wife of Frederick Henry, Jonas=s childhood friend and accountant.

Just moments earlier Rachel had pleaded a headache and excused herself from their company. She hadn't lied. Her head did ache. It ached from their incessant chatter and not-so-innocent gossip. She suspected Lucinda Henry knew full well of

whom she was speaking when she mentioned the name of a certain woman and her newborn son.

Collecting her wits about her, she smoothed a hand over the front of her long jacket of sky blue faille and made sure the white and black feathered bonnet atop her dark curls was properly in place. Tugging on her white cotton gloves firmly, she popped open her parasol of ivory English lace and rested the bamboo handle at her right shoulder. With a lift of her chin, she strode away from the hotel.

Unconsciously, she headed toward the river, stopping well before the lawn's edge, and she stared out across the water toward Van Arnam's Island. It was an oval landmass of sixty to eighty acres, depending on the water level, that rose up from the middle of the wide river.

From behind it, there appeared a small steamer boat, with a red and white striped canopy. It sat low in the water, which meant it was filled to capacity with passengers, and it appeared to be struggling as it plowed through the rushing blue water toward the dock, some fifteen feet below her.

Behind Van Arnam's tree line, loomed the smokestack of the C.H. Fargo & CO. Shoe Factory, which was located on the south river bank, not far from her father's home.

As Rachel's thoughts jumped from her current unpleasant circumstances to her father, she smiled. He was a great comfort. He had always been so. Ever since that day, when he pulled her from this very river . . . Brushing aside those dark thoughts before they took hold, she turned from the water and followed the tree-lined path that meandered away from the shoreline.

As she walked, she found herself reluctant to return the polite smiles and nods from the ladies, garbed in dresses of soft colors and fabrics of the spring season and their finely suited gentlemen escorts, and so she wandered from the path, back toward the river.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spied a canvas cradled in an easel in the tall grass between two shady oak trees. Curious, she lifted her skirt hem and headed toward it, startling a trio of sparrows out of the grass and into flight.

Careful not to trip over the box of oil paints and wet brushes, or to step on a gentleman's discarded brown homburg and coat, she approached the canvas where she discovered that the artist had captured the sparkling blue water and the lush shoreline of Van Arnam's Island perfectly.

To her left, snapping twigs alerted her to someone's approach and with a startled gasp, she turned to find herself facing the gentleman artist.

He was tall. Taller than Jonas by several inches and was much leaner than her husband. His tousled hair was the color of a polished chestnut, but his thick eyebrows were black as coal. His handsome face had strong chiseled features and his eyes were a bright blue, like the sky on a sunny winter day. He wore a vest and trousers of brown broadcloth, with the collar of his white shirt opened and the sleeves rolled up revealing dark muscled forearms that were crossed over his wide chest.

"Good afternoon," he said in a smooth, deep voice that sent a shiver racing down her spine. "I see you have happened upon my novice attempt at the finer art. May I solicit your honest opinion about it?"

Realizing she had been staring, Rachel's face flamed and she averted her eyes to the painting. "Well, it's lovely. Perfectly lovely. Your colors are so crisp and true," she murmured.

Levi Stuart couldn't stop himself from staring at the beautiful lady in front of him. She was tall and her willowy figure was accentuated by the cut of her fine clothes. Thick ringlets of ink black hair dangled at her shoulders and tiny wisps of unruly, ebony strands feathered about a face of perfection. When she turned to face him again, her deep blue eyes seemed to pierce right through him. Through his heart and into his very soul.

"I do beg your pardon, I didn't mean to disturb you," she said at last, dropping her gaze.

"Please," he began, lowering his arms to his sides. "Let me assure you, Miss, I welcome such a lovely interruption," he said, bowing slightly. "I am honored by your visit and your praise. In fact, I would very much like for you to have it."

Her eyes snapped back to his. "Oh, no! No. I could not possibly accept it."

"Please," he insisted charmingly. "It would give me great pleasure to know that you would have it your home and would enjoy looking at it," he said, with a slight nod and a wide smile.

Even though Rachel's palms had grown clammy in her gloves and her heart was pounding like mad in her chest, she responded with practiced decorum. "Well, it is lovely," she said glancing back at the painting. "And I do not believe I could refuse such a kind offer from such a generous gentleman," she said, beaming widely.

The brilliance of her perfect smile had him nearly tripping over his tongue as he spoke. "The paint, the picture's paint, the *painting* is still wet. I could have it delivered to you, once it has dried," he offered with an embarrassed grin.

She dropped her gaze and chin demurely. "You are too kind, sir. However could I thank you, Mr. . . ." she said as she raised her eyes to his and extended her gloved hand.

He stepped closer and grasped her fingers gently. "Levi Stuart," he supplied as he bent and politely kissed the back of her hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Stuart. Shall I leave my card at the front desk before I leave of the hotel grounds today," she properly proposed.

With a shake of his head, he replied, "I am not a guest of this hotel. I've taken a room at the Nachusa House Hotel in town, until I am able to find a suitable house to let."

Rachel knew Mr. Stuart was, for her benefit, purposely divulging more information than what polite conversation dictated and she, treading dangerously close to impropriety, inquired further. "Oh I see. So, you will be staying in our lovely little city for some time then?"

"Yes. Several months, perhaps even a year. I'm to begin a new project tomorrow. I am an architect, you see."

"An architect? How exciting," she remarked sincerely. "May I ask what sort of project it is to be?"

Encouraged by her interest, Levi responded enthusiastically. "It is a home. One of a grand design," he said and then leaned forward and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial level. "I have been told it is to be a surprise for my client's wife," he confided. "I understand that today is their

seventh year wedding anniversary and he will be announcing the surprise this evening."

As his words sunk in, Rachel's heart halted in her chest. It was an unlikely coincidence that another couple would be sharing the very same date and year wedding anniversary as she and Jonas. Instinctively, she knew Mr. Stuart was referring to them and the chilling reality came crashing in around her. Air rushed from her lungs, her strength vanished, and his face faded from her sight.

Levi noticed the color drain from her face and he reached out and grasped her at both elbows to keep her from collapsing to the ground. "Miss, are you all right? Is it the heat?"

Jolted back to consciousness by his vice and his touch, Rachel shook her head weakly and pulled away. "No. I'm fine," she assured him. "Please excuse me," she mumbled, and turned, stumbling over her skirt in her haste.

Concerned by her near fainting spell, he followed after her. "Wait! Please, Miss, allow me to escort you back to the hotel."

She hesitated and looked back at him with such pain and sorry in her lovely face that Levi stopped in his tracks. "No. Please, Mr. Stuart, leave me be," she begged.

Bewildered by her changed demeanor, he held up his hands in a calming gesture and said, "As you wish, but where then, shall I send the painting?"

She shook her head and whispered sadly. "I am sorry. I cannot accept it after all."

Knowing full well that he was overstepping the boundaries of propriety, he replied. "So be it. And go, if you must," he said, desperately holding onto her gaze. "But, please, not before you tell me your name. Please leave me with that."

Tears pooled in her eyes and without another word, she turned away and rushed forward blindly, nearly colliding with a young boy that was passing by on his bicycle.

It took every bit of restraint Levi had not to chase after her and he watched helplessly as the beautiful mystery woman, the woman of his dreams, slipped further and further from him.