

THE HAUNTED HILLERMAN HOUSE

EXCERPT

The trio headed east on 2nd Street toward Steele Avenue, and in silence, they walked along the damp, leaf-blanketed sidewalks that were busy with trick-or-treaters; weaving in between and around kids and their parents until they came to the end of the Avenue, where the cemetery's north entrance was located.

Oakwood Cemetery was Dixon's oldest and largest graveyard. Its sixty rolling acres housed only a handful of mausoleums, but over seventeen thousand individual grave sites and family plots that were marked with every kind and size of tombstone; from traditional stone crosses and rounded-topped headstones, to flat marble slabs at ground level, to towering marble and limestone monuments engraved the vital statistics of all those who rested there.

Gathering in a tight circle, James laid out the plan in a hushed voice. "Okay, the road forks just on the other side of the gate and we'll go left. It's the long way there, but it's more hidden from view."

When Sela and Danny nodded that they understood and agreed the trio passed through the opened iron gates.

Looming ancient oak and pine trees pitched the cemetery into a deeper darkness, which made the street they had just walked down, look as bright as a Broadway night.

For Sela it was hard to determine real objects from the shadows and her steps faltered. "I can't see a

thing." She whispered frantically. "I hope I don't trip over a, ah, *something* and twist my ankle. Can't we use the flashlight?"

Assuring her it was better if they didn't, James took her hand, and with a peck on her cheek, he led her further into the graveyard, along the rolling, winding pathway. Within minutes they stopped, and when he finally flipped the flashlight on, the Whitley family mausoleum stood before them.

It was an eight by ten, limestone box that resembled a miniature Greek mansion, complete with fluted columns, topped with Corinthian capitals of acanthus leaves and volutes, and double, raised-paneled iron doors.

They all stood frozen in silence, as if they were suddenly reluctant to carry out their macabre mission.

With a clearing of his throat, James asked Sela if she wanted him to open the padlock. When she didn't reply, he repeated himself and she eagerly exchanged the key for the flashlight.

When the key turned, the top of the padlock popped up and as James pulled the chain through the door handles, it made an eerie metallic rumble that sent spasms of fear shooting down Sela's spine. Jumping back, she bumped into Danny, who, in turn, took advantage of the opportunity and whispered *boo* in her ear.

Letting out a shriek, Sela whirled on him. Using the flashlight as a weapon, she swung wildly at him as he danced away, out of striking range, his painted face grinning eerily in the dark. "You dork!" She hissed in exasperation to which he only chuckled harder.

Shushing them both with authority, James tugged at the heavy doors. With screeching hinges they opened outward, and the unmistakable odor of aged

mildew poured out from within. Coughing against the smell, he whispered, "C'mon, let's get this over with."

"Well, c'mon," Danny muttered, shoving Sela forward, "you heard him. Let's go." He said, sounding far less gun-ho than a moment before.

Forcing herself to move, Sela inched closer, and with breath held, she stepped up inside the mausoleum.

With a shaky hand, she scanned the flashlight about the interior of the crypt, which was made entirely of white and gray marble.

On opposite walls, to their left and right, were tiers of three, four by five foot long bronze name plates. Engraved in the plates to their left, were the names, birth and death dates of George A. Whitley, Mildred Whitley below him and baby, Caleb J. Whitley, beneath her. To the right, the top and bottom tier nameplates remained unmarked, but the middle tier displayed the name, Rachel Elizabeth Landsford-Whitley-Hillerman.

"Well, there she is." James whispered somberly.

"Aah cool," Danny commented as he reached out and touched the brass nameplate.

Equally disgusted by his actions and words, Sela snorted angrily. "It's not cool, it's sad, you twisted little freak."

Before the siblings could start squabbling again, James said, "Sela, babe, please shine the light over here on this corner. Danny, would you put the screw gun down, hand me the crowbar, and get down there? Well, I don't see any screws, so I'm guessing we just have to pry the plate off. When I do, get ready to catch it, and Danny, don't let it hit the floor or it'll break."

Shimmying the teeth of the crowbar beneath the left corner of the thin brass plate, James pried it loose, unleashing an overpowering, sickening stench.

Sela's stomach lurched, and with a cough, she clamped her hand over her mouth and nose.

"Aah, geez!" Danny cried, trying not to gag. "What is that?!"

Groaning in disgust, James said, "Well, I'll give you one good guess, dude."

The plate was heavy and James felt it slipping from his grasp, so adjusted his hold, accidentally dropping the crowbar in the process.

The loud clatter startled Sela so badly that she dropped the flashlight. Its beam of light ricocheted about the small space and then went out, plunging them into total darkness.

"Oh, great! Real graceful, *Gracey!*" Danny ground out angrily.

"Like I meant to!" Sela cried back defensively.

"It's all right." James snapped, and with an audible strain in his voice, said, "Sela, stay where you are, babe. Danny, let's just lower this thing to the floor."

Sela heard the men grunt and groan as they strained to set the plate down gingerly and then she heard them both sigh with relief when it was done.

"Good gravy that reeks!" James expounded somewhere to her right.

"No doubt, dude," Danny agreed with a gagging cough.

The darkness, combined with the stomach turning stench and the men's complaints were beginning to take their toll on Sela. She felt like she was going to be sick, and that was the last thing she wanted to do in front of James. "I need some air," she said in a strangled voice. "I think I'll wait outside."

"Yeah, all right. We'll be right out," James told her.

As Sela cautiously inched her way backward toward the door, she heard scuffling noises and Danny exclaim that he found the flashlight.

Once outside, she tossed back her hood and stared up at the uncovered moon between the bare tree limbs. With each desperate breath she took, tiny puffs of silver clouds escaped from her mouth and dissipated into the dark.

From inside, she heard the sound of the flashlight being slapped against a palm and then Danny's griping that it was broken.

"It's all right. I got my penlight." She heard James say.

"Aah sweet! Dude, you went *all out* for your costume." Danny said, sounding envious of James' neat spy-like toy.

Their voices dropped to low mumbling and she heard some scrapping and shuffling noises, followed by a brief silence, and then James utter, "Oh my God!" And Danny cry out, "No way!"

The men's disturbing exclamations evoked a gruesome picture in Sela's mind. She envisioned poor Rachel Hillerman's skeleton, dressed in an elegant, blue gown of yesteryear, with clumps of long, black hair clinging to a whitened skull with empty sockets and grinning teeth. Although she knew her thoughts were irrational and impossible, she was horrified and terrified anyway and she backed away from the mausoleum.