

The Historic Estate Mysteries

BY
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THE HAUNTING OF OCTAVIUS MANOR

Bonus Scene

One Weekend Before South Carolina

The plan had been to spend one night at a campground up the coast.

That was the plan. Bill had used the word *plan*, specifically, and Sally had taken this to mean something organized and deliberate, because that was what Bill's plans generally were. A campground with electrical hookup and water. One night. A systems test before South Carolina.

She revised her understanding of *systems test* somewhere north of Rockland, when Bill turned off Route 1 onto a road that had not been meaningfully maintained since approximately the previous administration, and said, with complete equanimity, "I want to check the suspension on an uneven surface."

Sally looked at the road. She looked at Bill. She looked at Cary Grant, who was in his harness directly behind Bill's seat, where he always rode, and who had already expressed several views about the bus's road handling through the medium of dramatic sighing.

"That's not a road," she said.

"It's a road."

"It has grass growing down the middle."

"That's fine."

"Bill."

"The South Carolina route has unpaved sections," he said, entirely reasonably. "Better to know now."

She looked at him. He looked back at her with the expression he used when he was being completely sincere and also knew she was going to capitulate.

"Fine," she said.

The road was, it turned out, an excellent test of the suspension. It was also an excellent test of the overhead cabinet latches, the stability of the water line connections, and Cary Grant's feelings about unscheduled rural detours, which were negative and vocal.

He contributed a running commentary from his station for the full eight minutes it took to reach the campground. When the bus finally stopped, he drew himself up with the bearing of a maritime judge delivering a sentence and voiced one long, low, aggrieved syllable that somehow contained the entire history of his objections.

"He's fine," Bill said.

"He is filing a formal complaint." Sally said.

"He's fine," Bill said, and went to hook up the water.

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The campground was, Sally had to admit, not what she'd pictured.

She'd pictured a gravel lot with a numbered post and a communal bathroom block. What Bill had booked — because of course he had researched it, of course he had, probably with topographic surveys — was a private site at the end of the access road, on a bluff above a cove she hadn't known existed. There were exactly three other sites in the campground, and all were empty. The hookup post was old but functional. The view was extraordinary.

The water was the particular silver-green of early evening, catching the last flat light. A single lobster boat moved slowly across the far end of the cove, and beyond it, the open Atlantic. The sky was going pink at the edges.

Bill ran the hookups with the focused efficiency of a man who had planned for every contingency and intended to verify each one personally. Water pressure, electrical draw, the exterior

outlet, the tank levels. Sally sat in the passenger seat and watched him through the windshield, moving from connection to connection with a methodical expression, and felt something that was partly amusement and partly something warmer and less nameable.

Cary Grant appeared at her elbow, having apparently completed his own assessment of the bus interior and found it adequate for continued occupation. He rested his chin on her shoulder and looked out at Bill with an expression that was, if she was reading it correctly, grudging approval.

"Don't tell him you like it," Sally said. "He'll be insufferable."

Cary Grant's ear twitched. He said nothing, because he was a dog, but his silence was diplomatic.

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By the time the light started to go, all systems had been tested, and declared satisfactory. Sally made coffee on the kitchen stove – the propane working exactly as intended, he noted, without particular emphasis, which was as close as he got to self-congratulation – and they settled on the sofa.

The sofa ran along the driver's side of the bus, positioned to face the large windows. In the evening light, with the cove below and the sky going amber and then rose, it framed the view like something painted. Sally had her feet tucked up. Bill had his arm along the back of the sofa behind her. Cary Grant had arranged himself across approximately seventy percent of the available cushion, his head on Sally's knee, his general attitude that of a creature who had reconsidered the trip and was now prepared to endorse it.

"The suspension is good," Sally said.

"The suspension is excellent," Bill said.

"The cabinets held."

"I knew they would."

"The water pressure—"

"Better than the Harbor Inn."

She laughed. Cary Grant's ear twitched at the sound. Outside, the lobster boat reached the mouth of the cove and disappeared around the headland.

"Are you scared?" Sally asked.

Bill was quiet for a moment. The bus was very still, just the faint sound of the water and Cary Grant breathing.

"Of South Carolina?"

"Of all of it. The road. Being in each other's pockets for however long this takes. Whatever the Beaufort Land Company turns out to be." She paused. "Us."

He looked at her. The last of the evening light was doing something very good to his face, which she noted and set aside for later.

"No," he said.

"Not even a little?"

"Not even a little." He said it the way he said everything that mattered — quietly, without decoration, as though the truth didn't require presentation. "I've been building toward this for a while. I'm not scared of arriving."

She looked out at the water.

"I'm a little scared," she admitted.

"I know," he said. "That's alright."

Cary Grant shifted his weight, redistributing himself more comprehensively across both their laps with a sigh of theatrical contentment.

She turned and kissed Bill's cheek, "Okay," she said.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Okay," she said. "Let's go to South Carolina."

He smiled. Not the small controlled one. The full one. He knew the "okay" meant more than the upcoming trip.

Cary Grant lifted his head from Sally's knee, looked out the window at the darkening cove with great seriousness, and then put it back down. His tail made one slow, decisive sweep of the sofa cushion.

"He's ready," Bill said.

"He's always ready," said Sally. "He just likes to make you earn it."

Bill looked at her. "I know the feeling," he said, and kissed her temple, and pulled her closer.