

Chapter 3: Madame Griselda's House

The lion yawned slowly, then fixed its gaze on them. Gabrielle didn't like the way it was staring at them, as if they were a pair of jackrabbits that would be perfect for breakfast. It began running its tongue over the upper pair of what she thought were excessively long, very white canine teeth.

She had seen a real mountain lion once, but only off in the distance. Up close, it looked very similar to the pictures, a tawny golden head with a broad snout. The front of the muzzle was white, and it had a pink nose shaped rather like that of a house cat, except, of course, much magnified. There was also a short white beard. Its eyes were a deep honey color, the pupils half hidden under thick brows.

Curiously, the head seemed disproportionately small compared to the thick neck, elongated body, and muscular limbs. The paws were enormous, the claws retracted (thank God), and the tail again about a third the length of the body. As it looked at them, the black tip of the tail swished back and forth rhythmically.

Gabrielle nudged Trevor. "What do we do?" she whispered nervously.

"I think we move very, very slowly. Remember, it's as scared of us as we are of it."

She gave Trevor one of those expressions, the one that said she wasn't buying any of it.

“Keep watching its eyes,” Trevor said, “I read online that you're not supposed to turn your back on them.”

Getting out of a waterbed under the best of circumstances isn't easy. Trying to get out of a waterbed without making waves which would disturb a hungry mountain lion is a near impossibility. The previous night Gabrielle and Trevor had sloshed together in the middle of the bed; now they needed to separate and get out on opposite edges. Trevor slid over and sat up, putting his feet on the floor. The lion's body undulated with the water he displaced. It growled, a deep vibration from the pit of its stomach. Gabrielle gasped.

“Slowly, Sweetheart,” Trevor whispered as she repeated his action on the other side of the bed. Gabrielle inched around the arc of the bed and sidled toward the door. She turned the knob and eased it open. At the squeak of the hinges, the animal jerked its head in her direction. She had gained the hallway and was waiting for Trevor to follow; he edged along the runner beside the bed and slipped out behind her, slamming the door to. A terrifying roar emanated from inside the room, but there was no thud or clawing at the door as if the animal had reared up and tried to chase them. The door was thin, and Gabrielle was pretty sure the lion could reduce it to splinters by throwing itself against it.

They raced into the kitchen. Waters was busy frying eggs at the stove, a striped apron on and his sleeves gartered up. He didn't seem surprised to see Trevor in his pajama bottoms and T-shirt, or Gabrielle in the dress shirt of Trevor's that she always wore to sleep in.

“Good morning, Dr. Mochizuki, Mr. Atherton. I hope you slept well.”

“Waters!” Gabrielle cried, “There's a huge mountain lion in our room!”

“Ah,” he said, looking unflustered. He turned back to the stove and flipped the sizzling eggs with a thin bladed spatula. “It was most remiss of me; I should have warned you last night.

Mercury likes to sleep on that bed. I do apologize; it must have given you a considerable shock.”

“Mercury?” Gabrielle asked.

“Madame's cat.”

She wasn't sure if he was being serious or not. “You mean that thing is a pet?”

“Yes, Madame. He is intimidating, but quite harmless.”

“Waters,” said Trevor, “that thing's a wild animal! It must be eight feet from nose to tail. It's got sharp teeth and a nasty look. How can it be harmless?”

“He is a Cheshire lion, Sir,” he explained matter-of-factly, “Though he may look formidable, he only drinks cream and consumes the occasional tin of tuna fish. He is really quite docile, but it takes him awhile to warm up to strangers.”

“Cheshire?” Gabrielle said. “You mean like Alice in Wonderland? He can disappear?”

“Yes, Madame. And walk through closed doors. In fact, here he is now.”

Trevor jumped. Gabrielle jerked her head around and was astonished to see the tip of the mountain lion's tail swishing back and forth as it had been on the bed, but there was no sign of its body. Gradually, the rest of the tail materialized, then, on the floor, the animal's haunches. Within thirty seconds, the remainder of Mercury appeared, sitting and grooming his right forepaw with his tongue. Waters opened the refrigerator and took out a glass bottle of cream. A portion of this he poured into a clean bowl. The lion got to its feet, stretched lazily, and padded over to lap up the liquid.

“He doesn't seem particularly dangerous,” Gabrielle ventured.

“No,” Waters agreed. “And he doesn't have the odor usually associated with wild mountain lions. Madame is quite particular about not allowing him to wander around the neighborhood, however; there have been one or two incidents where the police were summoned

after neighbors saw him strolling along the sidewalk. Unless she has a use for him on one of her expeditions, he stays on the property, generally invisible.”

“Well, I have seen a cat without much of a tail, but never a tail without a cat,” Trevor said.

Gabrielle frowned at him, still not quite in the mood for joking after the scare she had had.

“Why does Madame Griselda call him Mercury?” she asked. “Is he fast?”

“Actually, he's rather lazy. But to answer your first question, Madame once had an automobile, which, she says, she bought under the sign of the cat, the double entendre being intentional, I believe. It was a Mercury Cougar, of course; Madame felt the purring of the engine was rather akin to her cat's, hence the name.”

“What happened to the car?” Gabrielle asked. She was visualizing yet another heliotrope vehicle with the medium's logo on its doors.

“As Madame's practice expanded, it no longer suited her needs. I believe the present owner is quite pleased that the car's radio continues to have excellent reception of a now defunct local jazz station.”

“Does Madame Griselda have any more surprises that we should be aware of?” Trevor asked. “So I don't have a heart attack?”

“Your trepidation is understandable, Sir. As Madame pointed out on our way down, there are several spirits that came with the house, operating independently of Madame's sittings. One of them is a gardener named Toshiro, who rakes the sand in the front yard and feeds Mercury while Madame is away. He is really something in the line of a caretaker. You may see him in the grounds. My own apartment, a renovated artist's studio in the back of the house, is occupied by a

painter by the name of Monet. It is not his real name, of course, but he evidently made rather a good living selling modern Impressionist paintings of local scenery in the town square. He plays the role rather well, and does indeed look like M. Monet, but I believe his first name is Joe. He provides Madame with an almost endless supply of oil paintings, so many, in fact, that she has been compelled to lease a storage unit to keep them in. The smell of turpentine can be a little overpowering from time to time, but our interactions have been most cordial.”

Waters removed the eggs expertly to a plate and added a pair of kippers. He explained that Madame Griselda had them specially imported from a smokehouse in southern Scotland. Mercury, finished with his meal, wandered into the dining room.

“Perhaps you would care to dress before breakfast,” Waters said, and Gabrielle imagined he would have used the same unflappable tone if they were stark naked in front of him. “How would you like your eggs? If you do not prefer kippers, I can easily arrange for bacon.”

“Sunny side up, and kippers would be fine,” Gabrielle said.

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Through the front picture window, Gabrielle saw a rake shifting the sand around a large rock that projected from the ground like a craggy thumb. But there was no sign of anyone operating the tool except for a *sugegasa* conical hat which bobbed up and down to the rake's repetitive movements. Gabrielle caught Trevor's eye and motioned with her fork toward the window. His eyebrows raised at the sight, but he said nothing, watching the apparition silently for a time before returning to his kippers.

“How's Herman?” Gabrielle asked, turning to Madame Griselda. She noted the medium was wearing a deep green version of her usual shimmery blouse. Her closet must have been full of such shirts in various hues.

“Your goldfish would appear to be on the mend,” Madame Griselda said from the head of the table. “He is no longer upside down, though he is still circling the bowl in a languid fashion.”

“Can I see him?”

“Of course. Finish your breakfast, and we shall repair to my sitting room.”

Madame Griselda filled a briar pipe from her tobacco pouch. She lit it, took a couple of puffs, then applied her lighter to it again, exhaling great clouds of smoke as she stoked it. The enormous cat had curled up on the pouffe and gone to sleep, disappearing and leaving only a deep indentation in the stuffing, one that shifted slightly with the steady breathing of the animal's snores.

“The news is filled with talk of extraterrestrials,” she sighed, glancing down at her copy of *The Daily Medium*, folded neatly at the side of her plate. “Why people jump to the conclusion that the unusual is caused by space aliens quite staggers me. I begin to question the intelligence of the average professional psychic.”

“You don't believe in aliens?” Trevor asked, removing the bones from a kipper.

“Indeed I do, Mr. Atherton. However, I do not believe they play a major role in paranormal activities. They mostly involve themselves in politics; you would be surprised at the number of elected officials who are not what they seem.”

“Maybe we should take a look at Herman,” Gabrielle said, pushing away her plate. She suspected that Madame Griselda was about to expand on the subject, and she was more worried about her fish than the members of the city council.

“As you wish.” The medium set her pipe down in an ashtray with a cork knocker in the center and pushed her chair back, rising effortlessly despite her great bulk.

The floorboards creaked under Madame Griselda's heavy tread as she led them down the narrow hall and opened a paneled oaken door. She squeezed through the doorway and motioned Trevor and Gabrielle inside. More Persian carpets, primarily in red tones, and heavy red velvet curtains drawn back from the windows allowing the weak fall sunlight to vaguely illuminate the room. Lots of old fashioned oil lamps with frosted shades and fluted chimneys. In the center of the room was a circular table covered in a deep scarlet plush cloth.

Madame Griselda pointed to a large bookshelf built against the far wall. A rosewood bar projected at waist height from the shelves, with several closed doors underneath it. Herman's bowl was on the bar. Gabrielle put her hands on her thighs and leaned in to get a closer look at him, making encouraging chirping noises as if she were talking to a bird. The fish was indeed circling around the bowl, but had righted himself. He stopped his circuit for a moment, facing his owner. He gulped a couple of times, then turned and continued round the bowl. Gabrielle straightened up and studied the rest of the case.

Only one shelf was occupied by books, the top one, crammed with dusty old tomes in leather and with writing on the spines in an alphabet that looked like geometric shapes and algebraic symbols—Greek perhaps? The center shelf contained labeled jars of dried leaves and powders: sage, lavender, ox-blood, cochineal, lapis lazuli, charcoal, several large bottles of salt-- sea salt, iodized salt, pink salt--and incongruously, a container of McCormick spice rub.

"He does seem a lot better," she said, looking again at Herman. "What did you do?"

"A simple health charm," the medium replied. "Specifically geared toward bloating. There was a considerable expulsion of gas, and then he flipped over. I do not know the nature of the circling, but I still sense a transformative aspect to this."

"I hope he doesn't turn into an electric eel—Esmond would have a field day with that!"

Trevor said with a grin.

Gabrielle scowled at him.

“Sorry,” he added meekly, turning and casting his eye across the other items on the bar. A neat row of bell jars containing bones and fossils—and a ghostly transparent head. Gabrielle stared at the mustachioed, wavy haired gentleman with his sharp nose and long eyelashes. He seemed inert, but when his eyes suddenly popped open, Gabrielle screamed and leapt back. She regained control of herself quickly, and approached him again. He winked and gave her a devilish leer. She stuck her tongue out at him, then whirled to face Madame Griselda. “Who the heck is that?”

“That is Joaquin. I am afraid he is a bit flirtatious.”

“I suppose I would be too,” Trevor said, “if I were stuck in a bell jar with nothing better to do.”

“Joaquin? As in Joaquin Murrieta?” Gabrielle asked.

“Indeed,” Madame Griselda said. “The famous bandito’s head was preserved in alcohol after it was severed from his body. Unfortunately, it was lost during the 1906 fire in San Francisco. Only this spirit head remains. Luckily I was able to obtain it in a poker game. He is a veritable mine of information on the Mexican War and Gold Rush eras.”

“He speaks?”

“*¡Dame un beso, Chiquita!*” a gravelly voice responded.

Gabrielle jumped. “Get stuffed!”

The head laughed and winked at her again, then closed its eyes and appeared to go back into its original slumber.

“This is a spirit cabinet, isn’t it, Madame Griselda?” Trevor asked, examining a tall

freestanding wooden cupboard. Its doors were open, revealing a slat-backed chair and two pairs of rubber boots inside.

“Quite so,” the medium said. “Only charlatans use such a device. If you cannot facilitate manifestations in the open, you are not a true medium.”

Gabrielle eyed Madame Griselda's generous proportions, guessing that part of her vehemence against the cabinet's use might rest with her bulk.

“Why do you have one then?” Trevor asked.

“A curiosity. That is a particularly valuable cabinet that belonged to the well-known sham Eva Carrière. It is also, as you see, useful for storing items of clothing. In fact, the boots are for you. You will need something for sloshing about in the mud.”

Trevor grimaced. “I suppose so. Will they fit?”

“But of course. They are specially manufactured by the Seven Leagues Company of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. They will mold to your feet. Try them.”

“I'm not so sure I like that idea.”

But Gabrielle had already unlaced her cross trainers and was sliding one of the red boots on. Immediately, it began to shrink until it fit comfortably and snugly around her foot and calves. “Trevor, this is wonderful,” she said, pulling on the other boot and walking around the room. “It's like the best fitting pair of shoes I've ever worn!”

Trevor removed his own shoes and gingerly slipped on one of the green boots. “Weird,” he said. “But how do we get them off?”

“There is a small button on the inside cuff of each boot. Press that and they will enlarge again.”

Gabrielle fingered the top of the boot and quickly found a raised area. Pushing it, she felt

the boot expand. While she put her own shoes back on, she said, "I want to get a pair of these for the garden."

"They are my gift to you and your husband, Dr. Mochizuki," the medium smiled. "It is the least I can do for your assistance."

"Thank you. But I'm sure this won't be so difficult. Is this the automatic writing?" She pointed at a spiral notebook on the central table, next to which lay a pencil, a kneaded eraser, and the molar.

"Yes. I was in contact with Juanita Graham last night. You will see that the writing is in Spanish, her native language. And even my excellent handwriting suffers from the extremely rapid outflow of thought. You will also notice that it is not in any logical order, random thoughts for the most part which I have to piece together later."

"Why the eraser?" Trevor asked. "Does Juanita misspell words?"

"Indeed no, Mr. Atherton. Her spelling is excellent. However, there are times when I must revise, ever so slightly, what she has said."

"How do you know when she's misspoken?"

"Call it intuition. Rest assured, the substance of what she has said remains the same. There are merely a few details which require my assistance for clarity."

"This is pretty clear," Gabrielle piped in. She had her finger at the end of a line of writing.

Trevor stepped across so he could see over her shoulder. "*¡Ten Cuidado! Hay mucho peligro.* What does that mean?"

Gabrielle glanced back at him and then over at Madame Griselda, whose normal unflappable demeanor appeared slightly ruffled, as if she had been caught in the act of some

deception.

Gabrielle said, continuing to stare at the medium, "It means, 'Be careful! There is much danger.'"

"I thought you said this was safe," Trevor said.

"Señora Graham has a tendency to exaggerate," Madame Griselda said. "I am sure you will find any difficulties to be of the most minor variety."

"Why do I think I've heard that before?" Gabrielle said, under her breath.