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# 1

There was an ominous clunk under the Boeing 737. Rebecca Williams stiffened, then glanced nervously at her younger brother, Scott. He sat on her left next to the window. Although he was her “little” brother, he would pass her in height before long. He had a thin frame like Becka’s.

“It’s just the landing gear coming down,” he said, doing his best to sound like an experienced air traveler.

Becka nodded. She took a deep breath and tried to release her sweaty grip on the armrests. It didn’t work. She didn’t like flying. Not at all. Come to think of it, Becka didn’t like the whole purpose of this trip.

Who did Z, the mysterious adviser on the Internet, think she was, anyway? What was he doing sending her and her brother off to Louisiana to help some girl caught up in voodoo? Granted, they’d had lots of experience battling the supernatural lately. First, there was the Ouija board incident at the Ascension Bookshop. Becka could never forget how Scott battled that group of satanists! They wanted revenge after Becka exposed Maxwell Hunter, the reincarnation guru. And let’s not forget the so-called

ghost at Hawthorne mansion, the counterfeit angel, and that last encounter with a phony UFO.

But voodoo in Louisiana? Becka didn't know a thing about voodoo. She barely knew anything about Louisiana.

Fortunately Mom had an aunt who lived in the area, so she'd insisted on coming along with them to visit her. Becka looked forward to seeing her great-aunt once more.

Becka looked to her right, where her mother rested comfortably, her eyes closed. *Good ol' Mom*. Maybe the trip would do her some good. Ever since Dad died she'd been fretting and working nonstop. This trip just might give her the rest she needed.

*Clunk . . . clunk . . . brang!*

Then again . . .

It was the same sound, only louder. Becka looked to Scott, hoping for more reassurance. "What's that clunking?" she asked.

Scott shrugged. "I don't know, but it's the *brang* that bothers me."

So much for reassurance.

Suddenly the intercom came on. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. There seems to be a problem with the landing gear . . ."

The collective gasp from the passengers did little to help Becka relax.

"I've radioed ahead for emergency measures . . ."

Becka felt her mother's hand rest on top of hers. She turned to Mom.

"Don't worry," Mom said. "We'll be all right."

*Don't worry?! Yeah, right.*

The pilot's voice resumed. "The ground crew is going to spray the runway with foam."

"Foam?" Scott exclaimed. "Does he mean like shaving cream?"

*The Curse*

“I’ll advise you as the situation develops,” the pilot continued. “Please try to remain calm.”

CLUNK-CLUNK-BRAAANG!

The sound had grown steadily louder.

Becka looked past Scott out the window. They were flying low over New Orleans and dropping fast. As the plane suddenly banked to the left, she saw the airport and immediately wished she hadn’t. Several large tankers sprayed foam on the runway. Fire trucks and ambulances were everywhere.

Now it was the head flight attendant’s turn to be on the intercom. “Please make sure your seat belts are fastened securely across your lap. Then bend over as far as you can in the seat, keeping your head down. Hold a pillow to your face with one hand, and wrap your other arm around your knees.”

Becka fought the fear down as she glanced at her mother. Mom had her eyes shut. Becka wondered if she was praying. Not a bad idea.

CLUNK-CLUNK-BRAAANG!

Another attendant hurried through the aisle, passing out pillows. She tried to appear calm but failed miserably.

The plane banked back to the right. Becka laid her face down on the pillow in her lap and gave her seat belt another tug.

The intercom buzzed once more with the pilot’s voice. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to land on the foam . . . Please hold on.”

CLUNK-CLUNK-BRAAANG!

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “That’s just the landing gear . . . I’ll keep trying it as we come in.”

Becka remained hunched over with her face on the pillow. She could feel the plane dropping, and still the landing gear was not coming down. They were going to land with no wheels!

CLUNK-CLUNK-BRAAANG!

CLUNK-CLUNK-BRAAANG!

She glanced at Scott, who stared back at her from his pillow.

He tried to force an encouraging grin, but there was no missing the look of concern on his face.

She turned to look at Mom. Her eyes were still closed. Becca hoped that she continued to pray.

CLUNK-CLUNK-BRAAANG!

CLUNK-CLUNK-BRAAANG!

Becca's thoughts shot to Ryan Riordan, her boyfriend back home. If she died, how would he handle the news? And what about her friends—Julie, Krissi, and Philip? How would they handle it? She also thought of Dad—of perhaps seeing him soon. Too soon. It was this final thought that jolted her back to the present and caused her to pray. It wasn't that she didn't want to see Dad again. She just had a few more things to do first.

CLUNK-CLUNK-BRAAANG!

CLUNK-CLUNK-BRAAANG!!

CLUNK-CLUNK-CLUNK-DAARRRRREEEEEEE . . .

Something was different!

The plane veered sharply upward. Becca couldn't resist the temptation to sit up and glance out the window.

The pilot spoke once more. "Ladies and gentlemen, the landing gear has engaged. We are out of danger. I repeat. We are out of danger. We will land on a different runway in just a few moments."

"Thank you, Lord," Mom whispered. She sounded relieved as she sat up, then reached over and hugged both of her children. "Thank you . . ."

Becca breathed a sigh of relief as she joined the applause of the other passengers. They were safe. At least for now. But all the same, she couldn't help wondering if this was some sort of omen—a warning of the dangers that were about to begin.



The three o'clock bell at Sorrento High rang. Throngs of kids poured out of the old, weathered building. One fifteen-year-old

girl slowed her pace as she headed for the bus. No one talked to her. Her clothes were more ragged than most. They were too shabby to be fashionable and too conservative to be alternative.

Sara Thomas had never fit in. She had never felt like she belonged, no matter where she was. As she approached the school bus and stepped inside, she steeled herself, waiting for the taunts.

None came. Just the usual after-school chatter.

Carefully she took a seat, stealing a glance to the rear of the bus. Ronnie Fitzgerald and John Noey were engrossed in a tattoo magazine.

Maybe they'd forget about her today.

With a swoosh and a thud, the door closed. The bus jerked forward.

Maybe today would be different.

Then again, maybe not. They had traveled less than a mile when it began . . .

"Hey, Rags, you shopping at Goodwill or the Salvation Army these days?"

Sara recognized Ronnie's shrill, nasal voice.

"Hey! I'm talking to you."

She didn't turn around.

"I heard Goodwill's got a special on those cruddy, stained sweaters you like so much," John Noey said snidely.

Before she could catch herself, Sara glanced down at the brown chocolate stain on her yellow sweater.

The boys roared.

"Is that from a candy bar or did your dog do a number on it?" Ronnie shouted.

Most of the others on the bus smirked and snickered. A few laughed out loud.

Sara stared out the window as the taunts continued. As always, she tried to block out the voices. And, as always, she failed. But not for long.

Bill Myers

*Soon, she thought. Soon they'll pay. They'll both pay.*

She reached into her purse and clutched the tiny cloth-and-straw doll. Already she was thinking about her revenge.

And already she was starting to smile.



Aunt Myrna's farmhouse was simple but clean. The furniture inside was made mostly of dark wood. The chairs looked like they'd been there a hundred years . . . and could easily last another hundred.

After Becka dropped her bags off in the small attic room that she would be using, she headed down to the kitchen, grabbed an apple out of the fruit basket, and strolled out to the front porch. As the screen door slammed, she vaguely heard Aunt Myrna telling Mom something about a farmhand named John Garrett who was supposed to drop by.

It was hot and humid, which reminded her of her childhood days in South America. Several months had passed since Dad's death and their move from Brazil back to California. But the humidity and the smells of the rich vegetation here in Louisiana sent her mind drifting back to the Brazilian rain forests.

Unlike California, everything in Louisiana was lush and wild. Plant life seemed to explode all around. And the water. There was water everywhere—lakes, ponds, and marshes. Although most of the area around the bayou was swamp, even the dry land never really felt dry. Still, it was beautiful.

Even surrounded by beauty, Becka felt nervous. Very nervous. Z had given them so little information. Just that a young girl named Sara Thomas lived in the area and that she was in serious trouble—caught up in some kind of voodoo. Z had also stressed that Becka and Scott were not to be afraid.

"Your training is complete," he had said. "Go in his authority."

*His authority.* God's authority. Becca had certainly seen God work in the past. There was no denying that. But even now as she looked around, she felt a strange sense of—what? Apprehension? Uncertainty?

During the other adventures, she had always been on her home turf. But being in a strange place, helping somebody she didn't even know ... it all made her nervous. Very nervous.

The late afternoon sun shimmered on the vast sea of sugarcane before her as she sat on the steps. Wind quietly rippled through the cane, making the stalks appear like great scarecrows with arms beckoning her to come closer. Closer. Closer ...

Something grabbed her hand.

Becca let out a gasp and turned to see a small goat eight inches from her face. It gobbled the last of her apple.

"Aunt Myrna!" she shrieked. "There's an animal loose out here!"

"He won't bother you none."

Becca turned, startled at hearing a voice come from the field of sugarcane. She tried to locate the source of the voice while keeping one eye on the goat in case he decided to go for a finger or two.

A young African-American man suddenly walked out of the field. Becca guessed that he was about seventeen. He was tall, lean, and handsome, in a rugged sort of way.

He nodded to the goat. "That's Lukey. He's more pet than farm animal." He entered the yard and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Try scratching his nose. He likes that."

"Oh, that's okay," Rebecca said quickly. "I'd rather not just now." Then, rising to her feet, she said, "You must be John Garrett. Aunt Myrna said you'd be coming."

The young man nodded. "Miss Myrna said I should be showing you and your brother around the place some."

"So let's get started," Scott said, appearing suddenly in the doorway. "Wow. Cool goat. C'mere, boy." He crossed to the

animal. It rubbed its head against his arm. “Hey!” Scott looked up with a broad smile. “He likes me!”

“He likes everybody,” John Garrett said, already turning back toward the field. “We better get started if we’re going. The foreman’s called a meeting of us farmhands. It should be starting pretty soon.”

Scott went to walk beside John. Becka fell in behind.

In seconds the two boys were hitting it off. Becka could only marvel. Her brother got along with everybody. In fact, when they’d moved to California, he fit in like he’d always been there. Unfortunately, it wasn’t so easy for Becka to make friends. She figured that was partly why she felt so uncomfortable about this trip. She didn’t like the idea of barging into a total stranger’s life, even if they were supposed to help her.

But that was only part of the reason. There was something else: a feeling. It felt eerie . . . like something she couldn’t quite explain but couldn’t shake off.

“John,” she called, trying to sound casual, “do you know anything about voodoo?”

He glanced back at her and laughed. “Not much. ’Cept my grandpa used to speak Gumbo all the time.”

“Gumbo?” she asked.

“It’s kind of a mesh of African dialects. A lot of the people into voodoo speak it. But you really got to be careful who you talk to about voodoo around these parts.”

“Why’s that?” Scott asked.

“Lots of folks believe in it, and if you upset them, they’d just as soon drop a curse on you as look at you.”

Becka felt a tiny shiver run across her back. “A curse? Does stuff like that really happen?”

“Oh yeah. I heard about this woman who lived down the road from my father. She made an old *mambo* mad, and the mambo put a curse on her.”

*The Curse*

“*Mambo?*” Scott echoed with a snort. “Sounds like some kind of dance step.”

John shot him a knowing look. “They’re like high priestesses. And they’re nothing to mess with.”

“So what happened to this woman?” Scott asked.

“I heard she suddenly died in horrible pain.”

“That’s awful!” Becka shuddered. “Did you ever see her?”

John shook his head. “My father’s cousin said he did, though. Not only that, I also heard about an old man who refused to pay the *hungan* for helping him get back his wife.” At Scott’s raised eyebrows John explained. “A *hungan* is like the male version of a mambo—the high priest. The man who wouldn’t pay carried a powerful root with him at all times so the *hungan* couldn’t work magic on him while he was alive. The root was like a good-luck charm. But when he died and they took him to the morgue, his body started shaking all over the place. And when they cut him open, they found he was full of scorpions!”

“Come on—scorpions?” Scott scoffed.

But Becka was not scoffing. In fact she felt more uneasy by the moment. “How about him?” she asked. “Did you see him?”

John shook his head again. “No, that happened before I was born. I know it sounds crazy, but some of this curse stuff might be true.”

Scott shook his head, his face filled with skepticism. “I don’t know. Sounds pretty fantastic to me. Like something out of a B movie.”

“Maybe so,” John continued. “But one thing I do know, and that’s to never cross Big Sweet. I’ve heard his magic’s powerful.”

“Who’s Big Sweet?” Scott asked.

“You don’t know who Big Sweet is? He’s Miss Myrna’s foreman. He’s head of the harvest crew. Been picking sugarcane all his life. That’s why they call him Big Sweet.”

“Why’s he so dangerous?” Becka asked.

“He’s the local *hungan*. People say his father was a disciple

of Marie Leveau. She's called the Queen of Conjure. She was a powerful mambo who used to live in the French Quarter of New Orleans."

"And you're afraid of him?" Becka asked.

"Everybody's afraid of Big Sweet." John turned back to Becka. There was something about his look that caused a cold knot to form deep in her stomach. "Everybody's afraid . . . and you'd better be too."

Suddenly a horn bellowed across the fields. John spun toward the sound, looking startled.

"What's that?" Scott asked.

The other boy started moving away from them toward the sound. Becka and Scott exchanged concerned glances. John was clearly very nervous. "That's Big Sweet's horn," he said. "It's his conch shell. The meeting's starting. I gotta go."

"What about showing us the farm?" Scott called as John moved away.

"I can take you into the swamp tomorrow after chores. But I gotta go now."

"Yeah, but —"

"Look, I can't be late. I gotta go." With that he disappeared into the cane.

"John!" Scott called. "Hey, John! Hold on a minute!"

But there was no answer.

Scott turned to Becka. She knew her expression held the same concern she saw in her brother's face. The horn continued to bellow. Finally Becka cleared her throat. "I . . . uh . . . I guess we'd better head back."

"Yeah. I can't wait to get the lowdown on all this stuff from Z tonight. I'll bet he knows about this Big Sweet guy."

"And Sara Thomas," Becka reminded him.

"Right," Scott said. "But the more we learn about Big Sweet, the faster we'll be able to blow him away."

"Blow him away?" Becka felt herself growing impatient with

her brother. “Come on, Scotty. You sound like a Schwarzenegger movie.”

“That’s me!” Scott threw a few mock karate kicks. “Scott Williams, Demon Terminator.”

“Scott, this isn’t a joke.”

“What’s the matter? Afraid Big Sweet may slap a curse on you?”

“Stop it!”

“Afraid he might hatch a lizard in your ear or give you a monkey face? Hmmm, looks like somebody’s already done that.”

“Scotty!”

“Come on, Beck—lighten up!” Then, looking across the field, his face lit up with an idea. “Let’s save ourselves a little time and take a shortcut through the cane.”

Becka began to protest, but her brother had already started out. And there was one thing about Scott—when he made up his mind to do something, there was no stopping him. With a heavy sigh, she followed.

The stalks of cane towered over their heads. Becka knew that Scott was right about one thing. By taking this shortcut they’d get back to the house a lot faster. And with all the uneasiness she had been feeling out there, especially now that they were alone . . . well, the sooner they got home, the better.

Unfortunately, “sooner” was way too long, now that Scott was in his teasing mode. He kept jumping around and darting between the stalks of cane like some ghoul.

*Brothers. What a pain,* Becka thought.

“Oogity-boogity! Me Big Sweet. Me cast a big curse on you.”

“Knock it off!” Becka muttered between clenched teeth. She was going to bean him if he kept it up.

“Big Sweet turn you into little mouse if you’re not careful.”

“Scott, you know you’re not supposed to joke around with—”

Bill Myers

“Oogity-boogity!” He leaped even higher into the air.

“Scotty ...”

“Oogity-boogity! Oogity-boog—OW!”

Suddenly he crumpled to the ground.

Becka’s heart pounded as she raced to his side. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“I twisted my ankle!” he whined. “Owwww!”

Becka knew it served him right. But since he was clearly in pain, now was not the time to bring it up. Instead, she reached out and carefully touched his ankle.

“Ouch!” he yelped. “That hurts!”

“Sorry. Here ...” She tried to help him to his feet. “Lean against me and see if you can—”

“Oww!” he cried even louder. “I can’t. It hurts too much. You’ll have to get somebody to—”

Suddenly there was a low, distant growl. It sounded part animal and part ... well, Becka couldn’t tell. It was mixed with another sound—a silent, whooshing noise.

“What’s that?” Scott said, his eyes wide and suddenly alarmed.

Becka wished she had a good answer. She didn’t. “I—I don’t know.” She rose to her feet and searched the field. “I can’t see anything but sugarcane.”

The sound grew louder. Becka felt her pulse kick into high gear. Whatever it was, it was moving. And by the sound of things, it was moving toward them.

Once again, Scott tried to stand, but it was no use. As soon as he put any weight on his ankle, it gave out. He toppled back to the ground.

The noise grew closer.

“Becka ...” There was no missing the fear in her brother’s voice.

Becka reached for him, fighting off the fear that swept over her. She had no idea what was coming at them, but she knew

lying down, unable to move, was no way for her brother to meet it. She tried pulling him forward, but he was too heavy.

The cane several yards in front of them suddenly splintered.  
“Becka!”

All at once something exploded through the stalks. It was big and red.

It headed directly for them.

“What is it?!” Scott cried.

“I don’t know!”

“Becka!”

She reached under his arms, trying to pull him to the side, to get him out of the way.

And still the thing bore down on them, ripping cane just a few yards in front of them and devouring it with giant, red jaws.

“Run!” Scott shouted at her. “Get out of here!”

The afternoon sun caught a sharp, shiny blade coming directly toward them, slicing through cane only a few feet away.

“Get out of here!” Scott yelled at her.

She pulled harder, but it was no use.

“Beck —”

She finally looked up. The giant blade hovered over her and was coming down fast. She screamed and gave one last tug, moving her brother only a foot before tumbling backward. The blade came down.

“Your leg!” Becka screamed. “Your —”

Scott tucked and rolled just as the blade chomped down, missing his flesh by inches.

The threshing machine roared past them, leaving a great swath of cut sugarcane in its path.

Becka couldn’t see the driver, but as the machine passed, she could read a name crudely painted on the back. It was in big black letters. Originally, it had read *BIG SWEET’S CANE KILLER*. But over the years dirt and grime had covered some of the letters. Now it read *BIG SWEET CAN KILL*.