

# The Art of Evil

## Chapter 1

There's something about a naked man seventeen feet tall. Even if he's bronze and pushing one hundred. I eat lunch with him twice a week, thanks to the machinations of my Aunt Hyacinth. More accurately, my great-aunt Hyacinth, the sister of my mother's mother, and the only person in our whole extended family who's never had to work a day in her life.

"Go visit Aunt Hy," my mother told me. "Florida's the perfect place to recuperate." She paused, pondering her next words, an unusual move for my mother who is seldom at a loss on any occasion. "Your Aunt Hy has always been a bit—ah—different," she confided.

As if I didn't know.

"But, lately," she continued, "well . . . I'd feel much better if you were down there keeping an eye on her."

There was more, I knew it. After all, when had Aunt Hyacinth not been strange?

"You know, Aurora"—I winced at my mother's use of the name she had inflicted on me in an excessive burst of romanticism some twenty-nine years ago—"your Aunt Hy is very wealthy and has no children—"

"Mom!" I cut her off, nearly strangling as I repressed a screech unsuitable to my proper New England upbringing. "Aunt Hyacinth lives in a condo at the Ritz. With a housekeeper and a maid. Believe me, she plans to spend it all."

"Nonetheless," my mother decreed, "you have several months of recovery ahead of you and Florida is the ideal place to be. Aunt Hy tells me she'll be delighted to have you, so you

might as well start packing. It's the perfect solution to your problem."

*My problem.* That's as close as we'd ever come to talking about my problem. My "accident." My probable career change. The great red blob in the middle of the white rug that everyone pussyfoots around and no one ever mentions. I guess I should have been grateful my parents recognized I wasn't yet ready to face the monster in the closet. Correction. My particular monster refused to be relegated to a closet. It hovered beside me every minute of every day, hissing in my ear, *Screwed the pooch, didn't you, girl? Messed up big-time. Pay for it the rest of your life, you will, Rory . . . Ro-ry . . . Ror-r-ry . . .*

Mom may have tippy-toed around the crisis in my life, but on the subject of my visit to Aunt Hyacinth she was inexorable. Okay, so I'd go to the land of the has-beens, the cast-offs, the seniors who alleviated boredom with endless rounds of golf and shopping while they longed to be back in the boardrooms and teeming activities of the North.

Or so I thought, while sunk in depression in my parents' Connecticut living room with its great bay windows overlooking Long Island Sound. Connecticut, the land of *real* people—the movers and shakers, from the rich-as-sin to university intellectuals, with a few *dons* and *capos* still clinging to the good old days. Florida, in contrast, was the end of the world. Exile. I'd be falling off the edge of the map, lost in the place that used to be labeled, "Here be dragons!"

*Some dragons!* White-haired seniors with quad canes or walkers, creeping along with oxygen bottles at their sides. And Rory Travis fitting right in. In fact, it was a good bet most of the seniors could outdistance my hobbling steps nine times out of ten.

Of course, I soon discovered my image of senior citizens was pretty far off the mark. Yes, Florida's seniors did play golf. Yes, they were avid shoppers, happily spending their children's inheritance. They also walked the beaches, swam, hiked, biked, enjoyed theater, concerts, sporting events, and put in a rather astonishing number of hours at volunteer jobs—from local hospitals to the sheriff's department, from libraries to museums. Sometimes they even allowed failures like me to join them. Which is how I ended up eating lunch under the watchful

eye of Michelangelo's *David*, who was wearing nothing but his slingshot nonchalantly slung over one shoulder. (Yes, I know the marble original is in Florence, but the Bellman Museum's bronze reproduction is bigger and—um—well, even more startlingly anatomically correct.)

The minute Aunt Hyacinth noticed I was ready to do more than lie on the chaise on her balcony and gaze out over Sarasota Bay, she sent me off to the Bellman, where I promptly became the youngest volunteer on the roster. This, I must tell you, was not exactly a major accomplishment as Aunt Hy is a six-figure contributor to the museum's ever-struggling coffers, not to mention that it was August, a time when all those who could afford it had fled north for the summer. Tram drivers were in such short supply that on the day I reported for training, the Chief of Security was out on the run, driving a tram.

A tram at a museum? you ask. Sensible question. The Richard and Opal Bellman Museum of Art is actually three museums set on sixty-some acres of bay front just north of downtown Sarasota, Florida. Even the grounds are a museum of sorts, being chock full of exotic trees and plants, including a spectacular rose garden, an ear tree (honestly!), a sausage tree (definitely *not* edible), and those strange and mysterious imports from India—banyan trees—which are scattered like giant alien life forms in nearly every direction you look. So, between the Florida heat, monsoon rains, and flocks of visitors from all over the world, a fleet of trams is necessary, constantly moving people from the Art Museum to the Circus Museum to the Casa Bellissima, the Bellmans' spectacular winter home, set in the midst of more than a thousand feet of bay front.

I crumpled the brown paper bag that had held my E.T. bagel with veggie cream cheese and tucked it inside my mini-cooler. I finished my can of ginger ale while savoring the peace of the huge courtyard tucked between the long U-shaped sides of the Art Museum. Peace. That's why I was here. (Occasionally, dear old Aunt Hy displayed remarkably good sense.) Everywhere I looked, my wretched soul was soothed by beauty and serenity. The glory of *David*, the brilliant fuchsia of the bougainvilleas tumbling from enormous terra-cotta jugs, the life-size classical

statues guarding the museum's roofline, the stately banyans putting down their octopus-like roots on the grounds outside, the acres of flowers and exotic greenery. The antique gilded wagons in the Circus Museum, the sparkling blue of Sarasota Bay, the magnificence of the Casa Bellissima—the Most Beautiful House—named in an obvious play on Richard Bellman's name. In short, the Bellman was exactly the oasis I needed at this time in my life.

Once again, my eyes strayed to *David*, my hero, proudly poised on the raised walkway at the west end of the courtyard. All two hundred glorious naked inches of him, looking out over the courtyard and Art Museum with all the casual elegance of an emperor surveying his realm. And, okay, I admit it, I wondered about the then-twenty-six-year-old Michelangelo and the glorious young man who had posed for him. Had they enjoyed each other when the workday was done?

I also wondered if God still made men who looked like that. Not to my personal knowledge, that's for sure. Not when I was working up north, and certainly not now, when I was a semi-invalid living in the land of senior citizens. Though, to be perfectly honest about my wistful fantasies, if I met someone who actually looked like *David*—that noble face, those springing curls, a body to die for—I'd probably turn and run.

But, no, girls with gimpy legs didn't run. Nor would running be necessary in the reincarnated presence of such a man. I could simply slip to the back of the crowd of women (and men) surrounding this phenomenon and fade into obscurity. Rory Travis—a woman of medium height, a figure that would never stand out in a crowd, bland coloring—skin too pale; hair, nondescript brown, medium length; eyes, blue with flecks of green. And a limp that verged on the grotesque.

I sighed, grabbed my cane, and hauled myself to my feet. My view of *David* was abruptly cut off by the roof of the loggia that extended around three sides of the courtyard. There was a time . . . yes, there was a time when all my perfectly ordinary parts came together in an attractive package. It seemed a very long time ago.

I hobbled to the edge of the loggia and took another peek at *David*. *Fool!* A woman of

nearly thirty did not lust after a boy of . . . what? Seventeen? Eighteen? Surely, the model for *David* could not have been more than that. Yet that magnificent hunk of bronze was *safe*; I could lust after him all I wanted. This boy, forever immortalized by Michelangelo, did not mind my sickly complexion, my limp, my heavy heart. I could look my fill and he would still stand there, arrogantly overlooking his kingdom, just as Richard Bellman had placed him some seventy-five years ago.

I picked up my cooler and made my way up the shallow steps to the elevator. I'd already checked in with Security on the lower level, so the only preparations remaining for my tram run were a trip to the Ladies' Room and pouring quarters into the drink machine, which dutifully plopped down an ice-cold bottle of water. It was late September, and September in Florida is exactly like June, July, and August. Blazing hot, with afternoon thunderstorms likely. The only difference from the previous months was that, by September, everyone is thoroughly sick of the unremitting heat alleviated only by total immersion in refrigerated cars and buildings.

My tram, however, was not air-conditioned. And its rain protection consisted of plastic curtains that rolled down and zipped together. But the curtains did not fasten well to the windshield, and I usually ended up soaked. Yet, heaven help me, I actually liked my job—my *volunteer* job—driving round and round the grounds for three and a half hours twice a week. How else would I meet people from every part of the U.S., Canada, and sundry points in Europe? Meeting and greeting, that's what I do now, and quite a change it is from my former occupation.

I waved at Mike, who was behind the Security Desk, pushed open the outside door, quickly closing it behind me to shut out the blast of heat. Slowly, I made my way around the west corner of the museum, crossed behind the courtyard—not failing to examine *David's* anterior portions as I limped by. But the heat was horrendous, and even *David's* nether cheeks could not tempt me to linger. I passed the “tram barn,” the skimpily roofed area where the trams recharged each night, and made my way to the driveway on the north side of the museum. George, who drove Tram 3—“my” tram—on the morning run, would see me and come to pick me up. The

distance, about the length of a football field, was not one of us cared to walk under the blazing Florida sun.

A golf cart bounced toward me over the broken pavement, skidded to a halt beside me. “Rory, what’s up, girl? Been moonin’ over that statue again?”

Mooning. An apt description of my appreciative peek at *David’s* cheeks.

“Billie.” I returned his grin, although I couldn’t help but notice his high-watt personality seemed dimmed this morning, his customary teasing more habit than genuine high spirits. When I first met him, I would swear he said his name was Billie Ball Hamlin, but since that seemed unlikely, perhaps I had misinterpreted his Florida drawl. So I’d settled for first-name only, which was all anyone seemed to use at the Bellman. Billie’s about my age and has that Florida-born look—lean and fit, permanent tan, sun-streaked blond hair, blue eyes with crinkles at the corners, and an easygoing attitude that never seems to mind rendering “service” to the rich and powerful. Or even to the senior volunteers, who were mostly has-beens. Like me.

If you’re thinking I feel sorry for myself, you’re right. I do. If you think I’m suffering from depression, you’re right about that, too. Tough to be Miss Merry Sunshine after losing your man and a promising career in less than thirty seconds. So go easy on the judgment. Spare the kicks ’til I’m out of rehab.

I’d assumed Billie was one of the many groundskeepers at the museum complex, but, truthfully, I wasn’t sure. He was simply a fixture, part of the sixty-acre landscape. The grounds are huge, you see, and a startling variety of people are scooting about in golf carts at any given time. Nubile young ladies, barely out of the art departments of prestigious universities and thrilled to be on staff at the Bellman. Security guards, mostly stalwart men of middle years, wearing the Bellman’s burgundy polo shirts with laminated IDs hanging from a ribbon round their necks (the same uniform worn by tram drivers). The guards tended to return my greetings with solemn nods. The groundskeepers inevitably smiled, waved, and granted the trams precedence. The nubile maidens (I speak classically only, of course) and the security guards did not.

Billie, I was nearly certain, ranked among Those Who Get Paid. Other than that, his role at the Bellman remained a mystery. Some months ago, I had abruptly ceased to be one of Those Who Asked Questions. Undoubtedly, Billie and I had drifted into occasional conversation due to our shared (and rare) age group. We were, nonetheless, still in the tentative early stages of acquaintance.

“Want a ride?” Billie offered. “Save George a trip?”

“Sure.” I climbed into the passenger seat, although I wasn’t sure if George, who was closer to eighty than seventy, would appreciate the gesture. I’d probably have to run him back to his car.

Billie sat, staring at the steering wheel, his foot resting, unmoving, above the pedal. “Bad morning,” he said at last. “I was in early—been up all night—uh, never mind, forget I said that.” He grabbed the steering wheel, pushed back against the uncompromising white vinyl seat. “Anyway . . . I was first out on the grounds, doing a quick check to make sure everything was shipshape before the thundering herds arrived. And down near the House—you know that big old banyan nearest the water?—this kid from the Honors College . . . he’d taken a bed sheet and . . . well, he was just dangling there, turning in the sea breeze, right alongside those damned twisted trunks and hanging roots . . .”

“Oh, Billie, I’m sorry.” I laid my hand on his bare arm, hoping to give comfort, even as my heart ached for the student who had been so desperate and confused that he had taken his own life.

The college next door to the Bellman grounds is the Honors College of the State of Florida, often described as providing an Ivy League education for half the price. But even an unusual amount of brain power couldn’t protect a person from depression. No one knew that better than I. But now, with the low, wrenching creak of cracking open a long-shut lid on an antique chest, something long dormant stirred inside. “How do you know he was a student?” I asked. Curiosity, thy name is Rory.

“Student ID. And he left a note, carefully typed and placed under a broken branch big enough to keep it from blowing away. Very precise. Just like the computer geek he was.”

“You knew him?”

“No, but I hung around long enough to hear what happened when the police came. His name was Tim Mundell. Some cop went over to the campus, and it seemed like half the student body came back with him. It’s a small college, y’know. They all know each other.”

“Did anybody suggest how he managed it? I mean, was there a ladder or a stool—”

“Rory,” Billie interrupted, “you ever take a good look at a banyan? They got trunks going every which way. Any kid that age could climb up high enough to drop a noose off a limb.”

He was right. Banyans were definitely the oddest trees I’d ever seen. Even I, in my present debilitated state, could probably climb a banyan, with a bed sheet already knotted around my neck. Tie the other end to a branch and simply jump . . . “Any motive, or was it simply depression?” I had to ask; couldn’t help myself.

“Note was kinda vague . . . sounded like life had overwhelmed him. Seemed a bit odd, though, y’know. Exam week, I could see it, but when the semester is just starting . . . ?”

“Billie”—prickles surged up my spine—“are you saying it might not be suicide?”

“Don’t know,” he mumbled, putting his foot to the pedal. The electric golf cart moved silently forward. “Just seems a strange time to check out . . . tuition all paid and classes barely begun.”

“But he was hanged with his own bed sheet, right?” I asked.

“Doubt anybody’s checked on that. Y’know, Rory,” Billie added, “you’re the only person I know would’ve said ‘hanged’ instead of ‘hung.’ You Yankees are just so perfect when you talk . . . like some damn news anchor on TV.”

“Sorry.” Only later would I wonder if he’d thrown out a deliberate red herring.

“And you ask a lotta questions. You some kind of cop, Rory?”

“I’m a tram driver,” I told him as he pulled up at the Main Tram Stop, where George was

patiently waiting with Tram 3, fully loaded with passengers for the Casa Bellissima.

Billie volunteered to take George back to his car, I slipped into George's seat, and we were off. Rory Travis and six passengers on their way to view Richard and Opal Bellman's mansion on Sarasota Bay.

Usually, my volunteer job at the Bellman did exactly what it was supposed to do—keep me from thinking about how badly I had messed up my life. For a few hours I could lose myself in being a tour guide, in driving my specified route, smiling, answering questions—at which I had improved considerably in the last two months—while enjoying the Bellman's precious peace and quiet.

But, today, every time I made the circle in front of the Casa Bellissima, I saw yellow tape circling one of the huge banyan trees. Yet all was quiet, the breeze barely stirring the rope-like roots dangling from a tangled multitude of branches. As the student's body had dangled, only hours earlier. Now there was only a single patrol car, as unobtrusively parked among the other cars nearby as it was possible for a clearly marked police car to be. Keeping watch until the ME's report came back? Very likely.

There was a time when I could not have passed by, could not have ignored the tragedy that happened here this morning. But six months ago I'd taken a fall from a third-floor fire escape, shattering my body and shattering my life. I was grounded, big-time. Fit only to drive round and round and round the grounds of an art museum, a peaceful oasis in a world set to the pace of its senior citizens.

And yet, something inside me had begun to stir, quivering faintly to life. Prickles skittered up my spine. Bitter memories, or premonition of disasters to come? Was I about to lose my refuge? Was this beautiful day—filled with happy visitors, lush greenery, colorful flowers, exotic trees, and sun sparkling off the slight chop in the bay—merely the calm before the storm?

Though I hate to admit it, I sometimes have a feel for these things. As it turned out, this fall—instead of the usual hurricane scare—Chaos, Hell, and the Devil were bearing down on the

Richard and Opal Bellman Museum of Art (not necessarily in that order). Our days of paradisiacal serenity were numbered.