

# THE GETAWAY



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# CHAPTER 1

“No one has ever died in Karloff Country.”

That’s what Zeke told us his dad told him. Mr. Johnson told Zeke a lot of wild things about our home.

“That’s ridiculous,” I said, forcing my voice to stay even so this remained a debate instead of a fight. When it came to Zeke’s conspiracy theories, I’d gone from amused to over them a while ago.

“I’m telling you, Franklin Karloff made a pact with the Virginia tourism board back in the day.”

“A pact? With a tourism board? Why?”

“Jay.” He looked as incredulous as a math prodigy explaining two plus two. “Money.”

All of Zeke’s sinister deductions about the world had foundations built on coin.

Continuing this nonsense, he said, “If someone has a heart attack or falls down some stairs wrong anywhere in Karloff Country, the paramedics gotta wait until the body’s *outside* the wall to pronounce them dead.”

“How can that possibly affect the resort’s money?” I said.

“Do paramedics pronounce people dead?” Connie asked, tugging a hunk of meat off the saucy rib staining her fingers before popping it in her mouth like a pork nugget. She often challenged Zeke’s mess, but softer, like maybe we should spend more time digging deeper into his paranoia. “I can see your point about why the resort wouldn’t want bad press if there were *a lot of deaths* on-site. No one, though? *Ever?*”

Zeke inhaled for a rebuttal. There was always a rebuttal. But I

didn't want to keep giving this nonsense air. "Bro," I said, "this is like the secret prison for rowdy guests you told us about before. Or how all the birds are really surveillance drones. Or how the animatronic puppets in PatriotScape 'watch you back.'"

Connie spoke through half-chewed food. "Them puppets do be creepy."

Zeke's attention was 100 percent on me when he dropped his half-eaten burger on his overloaded paper plate. It landed on a french fry mound and almost toppled to the ground. My insides cinched tight as shoelaces and only relaxed when I knew his food wasn't going to be lost to the grass and ants. I still remembered what real hunger felt like.

He was really on one, though, so he didn't care. "Whatever, haters. No one's died here. It's never happened. Facts!"

"Raising your voice and yelling *facts* don't make it true," I said.

"You being a Karloff superfan don't make you right all the time either," he replied.

Air whistled through my nose, and I held on to the question that was becoming more aggressive and slippery each time we went down conspiracy road. Zeke might be my best friend, but the thing I wanted to ask, that would definitely shift us into fight mode, was simple: How could he be so ungrateful?

Zeke kept going, talking with his hands, breaking down more players and motives for the No Deaths scheme. My attention drifted to movement on the stage erected fifty yards or so from our pavilion. There was plenty going on between here and there, so saying the *movement* onstage drew my attention and not the *person* was, well, a lie. I forced my focus elsewhere.

Closer to us, my dad was among the adults working a line of

sweltering grills, serving up hot dogs, burgers, ribs, and chicken with no food-ration concerns—something that still hadn't sunk in completely, even after three years of safely living inside the Karloff Country walls. When Dad talked about *his* dad barbecuing meat every summer weekend when he was a kid, it sounded as wild as Zeke's no-one-ever-died-here story. Too unbelievable to be true.

Closer to the stage, Mom hung with a bunch of ladies. Some—like her best friend, DeeDee—I knew; others were likely getting recruited for Mom's book club. Off to the side, younger kids played a lawless game of football in the big field that made up most of the Treat (short for *Retreat*, which was short for the *Jubilee Residents' Association Neighborhood Retreat*, which was long for what could've been called a park), while some of the older crews dispatched to semi-exclusive areas in the bordering forest. None strayed too far. Because that stage was there for a reason.

A DJ blasted playlist tracks that ranged from ancient times to . . . slightly *less* ancient times. Up-tempo R&B and the kind of hip-hop Dad rolled his eyes at before Mom got on him about “not appreciating happy rap.” The music was all Black everything for today's event, clean edits only. Because while the Karloff Country Resort embraced all the world's diverse cultures, vulgar music was not on brand for Karloff Entertainment Company proper. Facts!

A roving video crew that'd been capturing B-roll of the festivities during the previous hour was now set up near the foot of the stage, ready for their real job. They documented our benefactor's generosity as they did at every big sponsored diversity/inclusion celebration here at the Treat. From Passover in early spring to the start of Pride Month a couple of weeks ago, to today's Juneteenth party.

The blond, tanned woman the cameras tracked was Blythe Karloff. She signaled the DJ, and Montell Jordan's "This Is How We Do It" cut off abruptly. Blythe slipped a wireless mic from its stand, thump-THUMPED it, then did a dramatic spin that made her flowery dress fan out like a parasol for a second. She had everyone's attention, except ours.

That was reserved for her partner onstage. Her daughter. Seychelle.

"Good afternoon," Blythe boomed into the mic, her voice smoky and crisp like on TV. She doubled her volume and shouted, "And happy Juneteenth!"

Joyous applause followed, then tapered off. Connie put down her rib. Zeke twisted on his bench for a better view. We all watched Chelle to see if she'd actually do the thing she claimed she would.

"She. Looks. Miserable," Connie said.

She did. Her face was expressionless, her hazel eyes on her mom's shoes.

I said, "I don't think she's going to do it."

Blythe grasped the mic with two hands, a solemn and caring kind of grip. "On this day, we celebrate the liberation of those subjected to the horrors of chattel slavery in the United States. When I was growing up, I attended the best prep schools in the country and never had a single lesson about the significance of June 19, 1865. When I went to Princeton, I didn't learn about it there either. I'm ashamed to say I was well into adulthood, and the mother of a Black child, before I became *aware*."

Blythe cast a meaningful look Chelle's way. What the meaning was, I didn't know, but it was full of something. Chelle did not look back.

Reciprocating the gaze wasn't even a speed bump for Blythe's delivery. "I say *aware* because me knowing about a thing is not the same as *understanding* it. Even a basic white girl like me knows that."

She paused for laughter. Got it. Never looked directly at the camera capturing the charming self-deprecating moment.

"Let me tell you what's not basic," Blythe said, transitioning from the comedy portion of her speech. "The desire of the Karloff Entertainment Company to recognize how Black people have made this country better despite the pain and suffering caused by white Americans. And while I celebrate this wonderful occasion with my daughter and my whole heart, I also recognize it's not *my* place to be front and center today. So, I'm handing the mic over to Seychelle so she can speak directly to you. Her people. Come on, baby."

Chelle loathed this—and really any of the various public duties—that were required of her as a member of the Karloff family. None of us could ever comprehend the burdens of being a billionaire heiress, but we still felt for her being dragged in front of the world by her wealthy family. Was any amount of money worth being a living, breathing prop? This was the one area where I allowed myself some disdain for the Karloffs. They didn't appreciate what they had in her.

Chelle shuffled to the mic. "Thanks, Mom," then, to the crowd, "Thank you for having us, Jubilee."

Jubilee was us. Our neighborhood. Where everyone who lived in Karloff Country, except the Karloffs, of course, resided. The utterance of the name elicited more applause for the same reason Zeke never actually condemned Karloff Country for supposedly throwing dead bodies over the wall or whatever. He knew no matter what he

believed the company did or didn't do for money, we were all lucky to be here.

Chelle said, "It really warms my heart to see so much of Jubilee come out to celebrate Juneteenth. Being Black, and being a Karloff, has always endowed me with a sense of responsibility, and extra drive to—"

Chelle stopped talking.

Connie, Zeke, and I leaned forward.

"Y'all didn't really come to hear me give a speech. As my mom said, she doesn't understand what this particular moment in time requires. But I do." She brought the mic closer to her lips, cupped her free hand over it, and began to beatbox.

*Bom-bom-ba-ba-ba-tah! Bom-bom-ba-ba-ba-tah!*

Oh. My. God.

She did it.

We hopped from our seats, cheering her on. "Ohhhhhh!"

Because Chelle was actually good at beatboxing—don't ask me why—and the song she was performing, another classic from a long, long time ago, sounded like it should sound, the crowd had no trouble giving up those cheers too.

Chelle ended her assault on the mic and told the DJ, "Hit it!"

Music resumed, the real track she'd been performing. She crouched at the end of the stage and said, "*When they say calm down . . .*"

She extended the mic to her audience, and the crowd responded, "*WE. TURN. UP!*"

Turn up we did.

The residents of Jubilee were shaking and grooving and celebrating a holiday that represented a spark of hope in a horrid national



history. I caught Chelle's eye while she swayed onstage, killing it. Then my gaze slipped past her, to her mother.

I knew the Karloffs had impeccable public training, but I was still beyond impressed. Chelle's mom's smile remained fixed. Like she wasn't pissed at all.