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***THE DISAPPEARANCE
OF ANNE SHAW***

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EAN 8596547183679

DigiCat, 2022

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CHAPTER I

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TWILIGHT IN WINDY HOLLOW

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“RE you quite sure this is the right road, Ken? It looks perfectly awful to me!”

A “Sure as I can be of anything, Mercy, that I haven’t seen in four or five years. But it’s got to be the road, for there absolutely *isn’t* any other from Orrstown down to the Coast Guard Station.”

The little roadster plowed on through the heartbreaking sand ruts that cut a winding swath between the undergrowth of bay bushes and scrub in the hollow back of the sand dunes. The clash of the shifting gears and the throb of the protesting motor almost drowned the steady boom of the surf off to the east, invisible behind the green-capped dunes. To the west, the blue waters of Barnegat Bay were melting into the wine tints of sunset.

The two in the car were silent—Kenneth Haynes too busy with steering wheel and shifting gears for speech, his sister Mercedes too breathless from being bounced and bumped and jolted from side to side for even an attempt at it. Suddenly the car came to a stubborn halt, the tires revolving helplessly without an inch of progress in the deep, dry, shifting sand of the road.

“ ‘The time has come, the Walrus said,’ ” moaned Ken, “ ‘to talk of many things!’—mainly getting out and jacking

up the rear wheels, or finding some board to lay down for them to run over. Out you go, Mercy, and take a hand, or we'll never reach the C. G. Station in time for supper—unless Captain Matson has the sense to send out a rescue party for us!”

Mercedes scrambled out on her own side at the same time that Kenneth left the car on his, and they began a fruitless search both behind and in front of the car for boards or stray scraps of wood. They could not penetrate far into the brush on the sides of the road, as it was much too thick and thorny and non-negotiable. Disgusted at last, Ken elected to give it up and try the motor once more before laboriously extracting the jack from the depths of their luggage and trying to set it up in the shifting sand.

“The engine’s cooled a bit by this time—perhaps she’ll do the trick after all,” he muttered hopefully and climbed back to “step on it.” And, to their joy, the cooled motor really did take hold, the tires found a grip in the unstable surface of the road, and, with a mighty heave, the roadster extricated itself and slid to more solid ground.

“This was always the worst patch,” remarked Ken, as his sister scrambled in once more and they resumed the journey. “From this point on it’s pretty clear sailing, if I remember right. Look—over to your left is the Coast Guard Station lookout—you can just see it over the dunes—and on the right toward the Bay is the tower of the old Shaw place. Queer old dump, that! Only house in this vicinity for miles and miles around. Coast Guard fellows and fishermen always declare it’s haunted. Even Captain Matson seems to be kind of leery of it, at times.”

“A haunted house?” cried Mercedes, shivering with half-delightful terrors. “How perfectly thrilling!—And in this lonely spot, too! Why didn’t you tell me there was going to be a haunted house around, Ken? Did you ever go in it? Who lives there? What’s it like, anyway?”

“Hot snakes! Expect me to answer all those questions at once—and in this racket?” shouted Ken, over the roar of the grinding motor. “Have a heart!” The little roadster plowed on, silent as far as further conversation was concerned, and Mercedes had to content herself with staring at the roof and cupola of the old Shaw place, gradually looming nearer through the cedars that surrounded it, and speculating on the nature of its particular “haunted” qualities. The possibility lent a certain zest and flavor to an expedition that she had thought was to be devoted only to her brother’s fishing interests.

It was a curious combination of circumstances that had led to her being where she was at all. Her plans had all been made to accompany her mother on a European trip for the summer as soon as her school had closed for the season. She had been wildly excited over the prospect, as it would have been her first trip of the kind. Then, suddenly, her mother had been called away to Chicago by the illness of an aunt who lived there. And later had come the word that the European trip was off because the illness threatened to be severe and long and her mother felt that she could not leave while it lasted. It was at this crisis that her brother Ken had come to the rescue, proposing that, since she was now at “loose ends,” she accompany him on a fishing trip he had long been planning.

“But, Ken,” she had demurred, “how can I stay at that wild beach on the Jersey coast? Why, there’s nothing there but the Coast Guard Station, you’ve said. It’s no place for a *girl*, is it?”

“There’s a perfectly good cottage there belonging to Captain Matson,” Ken had asserted. “He lives there with his wife and one son, about your age. Mrs. Matson’s a fine woman and a gorgeous cook. I’ve boarded there with them, and I know. I’m certain they’ll take you, too. I’ll write the Captain to-day. And you’ll see something of a side of wild life you’ve never seen before and learn a few things about surf fishing and squids and making a decent cast, or I’ll eat my new fishing outfit! Do you heaps more good than any old traipsing about Europe!”

So it had been arranged. And Mercedes, secretly pleased and flattered beyond words to be wanted on such an expedition by her twenty-year-old brother in his second year at Yale, prepared for a season of complete roughing it. And now they were nearing their destination.

The Shaw house disappeared in a dense clump of cedar trees, and the Coast Guard Station loomed large and clean and imposing at the end of the sandy road where the dunes met the beach. And at its foot nestled a comfortable little cottage, its tiny screened porch opening directly out onto the sand. And in its doorway stood the welcome figure of Captain Matson.

“Heard you coming ’bout a mile off!” he grinned, advancing to the car, his spare erect figure and tanned face under the peaked cap lighted by the blaze of the setting sun over the Bay. “How are you, Ken, boy? My, but you’ve grown

a yard since I saw you last! So this is your sister. How do, miss? Come right in. Ma's waitin' with fried clams and baked shad and I dunno what-all!"

In the flurry of arrival and welcome, Mercedes had little time to notice anything except that Mrs. Matson was a cheery, spry little wisp of a woman, comfortable and welcoming and hospitable; that her tiny box of a bedroom was immaculately neat and cosy, and that its one window looked out over the dunes with a glimpse of the tossing ocean between two of them; that the supper table in the one combined living room, dining room, and kitchen was set forth with every manner of inviting sea food, and that she was going to be tremendously comfortable and well cared for.

When the meal was about half through, the young Matson boy came in and shyly took his place at the table. He responded only in monosyllables to Ken's hearty, "'Lo, Skinny!" and further efforts at conversation, and was completely speechless on being introduced to Mercedes by his father as, "Here's Sanford—always known as Skinny! Lives up to his nickname, too. But he can't help it. Takes after his Dad!" She noticed only that he could blush like a girl and that his blue eyes had a positively agonized expression in them under his father's teasing. She thought that, for a boy of seventeen, he was the shyest thing she had ever encountered. He disappeared from the table abruptly after a hastily bolted meal.

Later she came upon him again as she was strolling along the beach after supper. Ken had gone over to the Station with the Captain, and she had been left to her own

devices. She encountered the Matson boy picking up a great armful of driftwood, presumably for his mother's kitchen fire, and determined to break the ice of his shyness, if possible.

"Hello, Sanford. Can't I help you gather some of that?" she began offhandedly, and stooped to pick up some driftwood that lay at her feet.

"Oh, don't do that!" he cried. "It ain't—isn't necessary. Ma has all she'll need for morning with just what I've got."

Mercedes did not insist. "All right, then," she agreed. "But after you've taken in the wood, won't you come out and talk with me awhile and show me around?—that is, if you haven't anything else to do. Ken's gone over to the Station and probably forgotten that I exist by this time, and I'm kind of lonesome."

The boy nodded, plainly pleased by her invitation but, as usual, too shy to express it, and later hurried out to where she sat atop of the nearest dune. Toward the west the sky was a bright pageant of gold and crimson barred with purple belts of cloud. To the east the sea lay, a delicate floor of mauve and lavender, with crested breakers booming in on the sand. Mercedes thought it the loneliest beach she had ever seen, with its broken dunes stretching away, mile after endless mile, to the north and south, with never a vestige of human habitation in sight. She was distinctly glad when the boy joined her and timidly suggested:

"Do you want to walk about a bit? I can show you around some before dark."

"Please do," she assented, jumping up. "And let's get off this beach for a while. It makes me kind of lonesome and

half afraid to-night—there's so much of it, and it's so wild. To-morrow, in broad daylight, I'll begin to get used to it better. What's over beyond the dunes?"

"Mostly just woods. There isn't any other house but that Anne Shaw place," he informed her as they made their way through a sandy lane between high bay bushes, beach-plum, and scrub cedar toward the interior. Suddenly Ken's remarks about the Shaw place came back to her. She had forgotten them during the excitement of arrival.

"Oh, tell me about that house!" she demanded. "Ken said something about its being thought haunted—anyhow, there must be something queer about it. I never saw a stranger or more lonely looking place."

Mercedes was distinctly conscious, as she made these comments, of a curious change in expression that passed over the face of the Matson boy. His big gray eyes were wide open and straightforward in gaze, his usual expression honest and direct, even if shy. But now she was aware of the sudden entry of something that seemed almost like fear—a shrinking expression in his candid look. And, as if unconsciously, too, his voice lowered as he replied:

"Don't you know about the Shaw place? Thought probably Ken would have told you. I don't know if it's haunted or not—they say nowadays there isn't any such thing—but it's a straight fact that old Anne Shaw's queer, and that house is full of queer things that happen—things no one can explain." He suddenly became confidential. "Do you know, I'm going to tell you something. I was over there to-night—just before supper. Ma wanted me to see if Mrs. Shaw would sell her three chickens for to-morrow. I found

the old lady wandering round the chicken yard with a telescope in her hand, and she didn't pay the slightest attention to what I was trying to say, and right in the middle of it rambled off into the house and left me standing in the chicken yard."

"How very singular!" marveled Mercedes. "What's the matter with her—is she crazy?"

"Well, it isn't exactly that," said Sanford. "She's sensible enough about a whole lot of things. And she's a mighty bright talker, too. But there's something about her that none of us have ever been able to make out. You see, she's always lived here, and the Coast Guard people come and go. Even Dad's only been here fifteen years, so we don't know all there is to know about her. She calls her place here Windy Hollow, and I'll tell the world it's a good name for it! If you could hear the breeze howling around there on a windy night—and all those old shutters of hers banging! But I didn't tell you what else happened to-night."

They had approached nearer to the old house while they were talking. Mercedes noticed, even in the failing light, its weatherworn gray shingles, the battered shutters to its many windows, some of them hanging by one hinge, the curious cupola high up over the third story, looking out to the four points of the compass through as many windowed sides. Did she imagine it, or was there really the fleeting glimpse, for just one brief instant, of a face at one of those cupola windows—a wild, staring face, framed in white hair, peering out toward the sea?

"Look! Was that——" she began, but Sanford interrupted her to call out:

“Look there!—her cow’s got loose and is trampling up the garden. Cricky! but she’ll be mad. Excuse me for just a minute while I go chase her out.” And, yelling, “Hey, Dolly! Get out of that!” he shot off through the twilight to chase a rather lean and hungry-looking cow round and round in a fenced space, leaving the girl temporarily to her own devices.

Mercedes could never explain just what it was that drew her nearer and nearer to the eerie old mansion. Half afraid, half curious, she approached the wide veranda, and, as the mosquitoes were beginning to be troublesome, she decided to wait for Sanford on a seat well out of reach of the pests, the rickety veranda railings. She had just ascended the steps and was about to perch herself on a portion of the railing that seemed least tumbledown when she was arrested by a curious sound, apparently coming from within the house itself. Did somebody call? She couldn’t be sure. The sound had been so vague, so indefinite in location. And yet a distinct feeling that it had been meant as a call drew her toward the front door, which stood partially open. She could see nothing within except the vague outline of a staircase ascending from the blackness of the lower hall. Outside she could hear Sanford still noisily chasing the cow. Inside a deathlike stillness prevailed.

Suddenly she went cold to her finger tips, and her scalp prickled as if every separate hair had risen in sheer terror, for the deathlike silence within the house had been broken by a long, keen, piercing shriek that froze her blood and set her knees shaking under her in helpless terror.

CHAPTER II

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MERCEDES ENTERS THE HOUSE

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THERE was dead silence after that uncanny sound. When Mercedes had recovered from the immobility of sheer terror, she stood for a moment undecided whether to rush off to the garden to find Sanford or go forward into the house to see what was the matter. That desperate shriek could only mean that someone was badly in need of help. Somehow it seemed cowardly to rush off, and she heard the boy chasing wildly down the path toward the Bay in pursuit of the cow, which had bolted out of the garden and was plunging away to freedom. Someone in that house needed her help. Taking her courage in both hands she entered the open hall door.

"Is anybody here?" she called up the dark staircase. There was no reply. The silence and the darkness pressed on her like a leaden weight. She felt as if she could hardly breathe, but, having entered upon the undertaking, she vowed to herself that she would not back out now. After all, what was there that could hurt her? A poor, forlorn, helpless old lady might be in dire need of assistance in this deserted place, and she, Mercedes Haynes, was not going to be the one to forsake her in a possible hour of need.

"I know that sound came from upstairs," she muttered to herself. "Perhaps I'd better go up and see where she is. She

must be ill or have fallen down and injured herself or something.”

Slowly and cautiously she proceeded up the stairs, her eyes gradually becoming accustomed to the dimness. A window at the head of the stairs showed her faintly the direction of the upper hall, and she followed this hall along its entire length, peering into all of a number of rooms that opened into it, and calling at intervals, “Is anyone here? Is anything the matter?” In the fast-waning twilight she could just perceive that every room was empty of human occupation. Then a sudden idea struck her.

“She must be up in that cupola,” she decided. “I’m just certain I saw a face up there. I wonder how I could get up?” There was a third floor, she realized, over the one she was now on, and the cupola was above that. But where were the stairs? Retracing her steps to the head of the first flight, she found a partly open door which she discovered led to another stairway. Hurrying up this one, she spied at last the ladderlike steps that led undoubtedly to the cupola, and questioning or calling no further, she scrambled up them and found herself at last enclosed in the tiny space that formed the cupola. One glance sufficed her to ascertain that there was no one else there.

“Well, this *is* a mystery!” she muttered. “I’d better go right down and find Sanford—or somebody.” But before she went she stood a moment looking out through the open windows at the magnificent view from the four sides of the cupola—the darkening ocean with the Coast Guard Station looming up not far away, the long stretch of dunes to north and south, the wild reach of dense woodland carpeting the

narrow belt of land as far as eye could see, the last faint glow of sunset over the Bay. "I don't wonder anyone likes to come up here," she thought. "That view just takes your breath!"

She turned to go down the ladder and, as she did so, she stumbled over something on the floor at her feet. Stooping mechanically to find out what it was, she discovered it to be a long, old-fashioned telescope or brass spyglass.

"She must have dropped this in a hurry," thought Mercedes. "That means she went down from here after I saw the face—if it *was* she! Now I'm going straight to find Sanford. He must be wondering where I went." Hurrying down the next two flights and out the front door, she found Sanford walking round the house and peering up at it and calling her name, and he met her with obvious wonder written large on his countenance.

"Where—where"—he stuttered—"how come you've been inside that house—alone? I—I'm sorry I had to leave you. Just got that contrary beast, Dolly, shut up in her barnyard. She led me clear down to the Bay. But why did you go in there? Weren't you afraid?"

"There's something the matter in there, Sanford," she panted breathlessly. "Just as you started to chase the cow, I saw a face up there in the cupola and heard a perfectly blood-curdling shriek. And I was afraid the old lady was hurt, or something was the matter; and you were 'way off and couldn't hear me call, so I just went in to see if I could be of any help. I couldn't do anything else—could I?" The boy looked at her with real admiration.

“Gee! But you’re braver than I’d have been,” he acknowledged. “I’d have hated to go in there after hearing—that.”

“Yes, but you *would* have gone just the same,” insisted Mercedes. “I hated it too, but I didn’t dare not to. But, Sanford, I can’t find anyone there. There’s absolutely no one in the house, I think. I even went up to the cupola, where I thought I’d seen a face, and that was empty too. Only the old telescope was lying on the floor.”

“Did you look in the kitchen and other rooms downstairs?” inquired the boy. “She spends a lot of time there. Let’s go look now. She may have got hurt or something. But she’s so queer—there’s no telling.”

They both went in through the front door to the now absolutely dark hall, and Sanford produced a small electric torch from his pocket, which was a welcome addition to their quest. Through a deserted and long-unused dining room they passed to the big, dark panelled kitchen beyond. The place was absolutely void of any human being. Half a dozen cats scampered off the back steps at their approach and disappeared under the house.

“She keeps ’em by the dozens,” Sanford announced. “Seems to be crazy about ’em. I guess she must have about fifteen around here now. Well, she isn’t here. I took a squint into the parlor as we went by, and that was empty too. Now the only thing to do is look out in the chicken yard or the barn. Though how she could have got out there without either of us seeing her, I don’t quite understand.”

They ran out through the kitchen door, down the steps, and out through a rather ill-kept chicken yard to the

tumbledown barn where the flashlight revealed only a time-worn, battered surrey and some rusty farming implements. No living being was within its walls. They stood and looked at each other, baffled.

“There’s only one other place,” Sanford finally declared, “and that’s the old pump over in the bushes where she gets her drinking water. She won’t drink the water from that pump in the kitchen. You stay here a minute while I run over and see.”

He left her standing by the veranda near the front steps and darted into the thick shrubbery just south of the house. While he was gone, Mercedes stood there listening to the faint wood sounds, the creaking and crackling and chirpings—and had time to marvel at the queer muddle into which she had been so unceremoniously plunged. Was it possible that she only a few hours ago arrived in this totally unfamiliar location, become acquainted with these new people, strolled along the beach feeling lonesome and a little resentful that Ken had gone off and left her to her own devices so soon? And here she was, not half an hour later, hunting frantically for a hitherto totally unknown and as yet unseen old lady, and had been alone through a dark house reputed to be haunted! Life was certainly a strange affair!

Sanford came back at this point, preceded by the flash of his torch, and announced no luck at the pump in the bushes. “Though there’s one of her pails standing by it,” he added. “But I don’t somehow think she could have got out there after you heard that noise. She’d have had to pass right by you, and you’d surely have seen her. There’ve been funny things happen in that house, but we never heard any

shrieking before. Something must be the matter with her, but where she could have got to beats me. I think we'd better go over now and get some of the Coast Guard fellows on the job hunting for her. It's kind of up to them, anyway, to see that everybody's safe around here. Let's go right away."

Lighted by his electric torch, they found their way back through the lane to the Matson cottage, and at the door Sanford paused to say, "I'll go into the Station and tell the fellows. They'll get up a search party and go through the woods, and we'll hunt all over the house again, too. She might have fallen down somewhere and be lying where you couldn't see her upstairs."

"And please send Ken out to me, won't you?" begged Mercedes. "Unless he wants to join the search party. But I'm kind of anxious to see him now."

Sanford agreed and disappeared into the Station, while she went to sit on the little screened porch alone and stare over at the Coast Guard Station, whose lighted windows made the darkness more cheerful. Presently a number of young Coast Guardsmen came out, headed by Sanford Matson and hurried off in the direction of the old Shaw place, while her brother Ken strolled over to join her.

"What's all the row about?" he demanded. "Seems to me you got into a powerful mix-up the minute I left you alone. Couldn't make it all out from Skinny's rather disjointed tale, but I gather that there's something the matter with old lady Shaw."

Carefully and with considerable detail his sister gave him a history of the evening's adventure, to which he listened