

**Dragonflies:
Journeys into the Paranormal**

by

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Dragonflies: Journeys into the Paranormal

A Cornerstone Book
Published by Cornerstone Book Publishers
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Cornerstone Book Publishers
New Orleans, LA
USA.

First Cornerstone Edition - 2006

www.cornerstonepublishers.com

ISBN: 1-887560-72-6

MADE IN THE USA

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The Wizard

The late night thunderstorm swirled and rocked the car on the winding mountain road without mercy. It was nearly impossible to see through the blinding sheets of rain. And to complicate matters the car that she had rented at the airport was an unusual model, having a dashboard layout with which she was wholly unfamiliar. It had taken her several minutes just to get the windshield wipers at full throttle. But she plunged on doggedly. It was much too late for second thoughts. The inn that she sought, according to her map, was practically hidden deep in the Appalachian Mountains. The last time that she had stopped for gas, the cashier at the station had warned her that it was foolish to try to reach her destination tonight. The wall of storms moving into the area was not far behind her. But she had thanked her and filled up the car, unwilling to be dissuaded from her goal.

Aurora didn't consider for a moment that anything disastrous would befall her; the whispers in her mind told her differently. *All would be well.* She was protected. It was imperative that she reach the inn tonight. Pressing tentatively on the break, she tried to further slow the car to avoid any skidding. She watched for the marker, the sign that signaled the road she would turn on. And then thankfully, through the torrents of rain, she spotted it – Black Hollow Road. Cautiously steering the car, she began the slow ascent up the side of the mountain.

“Are you sure Mr. Halstrom, that you don't want me to stay tonight?”

“No Clara, I'm sure in this storm we won't be having any more patrons.”

She smiled at her employer, still feeling a bit befuddled by his sudden appearance earlier in the day. It was a rare occurrence for him to visit here. For Steven Halstrom the rustic inn near the pinnacle of Black Hollow mountain had been no more than a hobby that he paid little mind to. He had managed it from long distance phonelines and faxes, maintaining a modest staff, which kept the rarely frequented establishment in tip-top working order. It was actually only during the summer months when the Black Hollow even remotely approached a busy season. Now, it was the middle of October, Halloween just around the corner. As her employer had just expressed to sixty-seven year old Clara Mercer, it was extraordinarily unlikely that anyone would be looking for lodging tonight.

"I could just close everything down Mr. Halstrom if you like, just so you wouldn't be bothered."

The aristocratic looking man smiled warmly at Clara, "No that's all right. I'm absent enough from this business. I think that I could manage things for one night. Go home, be with your family." She nodded struck again by that tinge of weariness or rather, she suspected indulgently, sadness around his blue-grey eyes. In truth she didn't know much about him, except that he came from an old family in the area, which with the exception of him, had all but died out. From his looks, although she couldn't be certain, he appeared to be in his early to mid forties and not married. This fact she gathered from gossip in the nearby town in the valley where she often did her shopping. Of course all in all he was a bit of a mystery; no one really knew much about him, only that he spent most of his time out of the country.

"Can you make it home all right Clara?"

"Yes Mr. Halstrom. Thank you for asking. My house is just down the road and I sincerely hope that my husband has dinner ready on a night like tonight."

"Why don't you take some desert home out of one of the freezers. There's bound to be something worth while there."

"Yes well that's very kind of you sir to suggest it." She ambled back to the kitchen, her ankle swollen from the discor-

dant weather. There was no need to let him know that this wasn't the first time she'd fed her family from the well-stocked pantries of the Black Hollow Inn. It would never be missed and she had put in enough years here to warrant it.

Distantly, he heard the door slam as Clara Mercer left. He breathed a sigh of relief as he lit up a cigarette and watched the flickering embers in the fireplace of the lobby. He was surprised the storm hadn't blacked out the electricity. He inhaled the smoke and cleared his mind, preparing it for the coming onslaught. Yes, it was best there were no innocents about when the assassin arrived. He wondered with tremendous focus of thought who would be sent this time.

She had parked the car on the side of the sprawling structure. The sign at the entrance gate had designated it as the Black Hollow Inn. Here, she sat quietly, watching the barrage of rain pour onto her windshield. There was no point in doing anything now but waiting it out. But she was not even close to calm. Her breathing was coming rapidly in painful, panicked gasps. Even if the building had not been identified, she would have known. She had sensed it, a powerful presence as soon as her car approached the structure. But it was confusing. She thought for sure that its evil nature would be readily obvious, but it was not – instead just incredibly distinct and powerful. She closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind, but her guiding voices were silent. "Please," she whispered in the darkness of her car, "please help me."

And finally, after what seemed like an eternity there was only the barest murmur, *It is your time to seek Aurora. You must find your own way.* Then, it was all silence as dark and heavy as the night engulfing her. She'd been sent here and now was alone, utterly alone. She opened her eyes and tried again to peer through the rain.

Near the building, in the distance, she suddenly saw some activity. A series of lights fluttered on at the entranceway, and then she could make out movement. Her heart clutched in a

momentary panic as it became clear quickly that this activity was headed in her direction. Through the downpour, she could discern a figure in a raincoat making slow but steady progress toward the car. Instinctively she thought about the small pistol that she kept for protection, but then remembered that it hadn't traveled with her on this journey. She was completely vulnerable.

In what seemed like a span of seconds the figure was standing right outside of her window. Shakily she unrolled it and was met by an onslaught of rain that immediately hit the side of her face. The man standing there leaned in more closely, but her eyes being hit by mist and wind could not see him clearly. A deep, rough voice spoke to her, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I got caught in the weather. I thought there was a hotel or something around here."

She wasn't sure, but she thought she saw a smile, "Well you've found one. Where's your luggage?"

"In the trunk."

He paused standing in the rain, smiling again she thought perhaps. "Can you open the trunk from in there?"

"Oh," her face flushed as she quickly scanned the unfamiliar dashboard. She pressed a promising-looking button and heard a click.

He nodded, "Sounds like it." And then quickly moved around to the back of the car. Aurora grabbed her purse and jacket, which she pulled over her head like a tent following the man to the back of the car. He had pulled out her suitcase and was just closing the trunk. She tried to speak through the downpour, "Do you work at the hotel?"

He turned to her, and she heard the words, "Sort of, let's get in before we drown." She nodded and followed him toward the building, locking the car from the key ring as they approached the entrance. Already her clothes were completely drenched and her skin deeply chilled. She was on her own; they'd told her, and boy did she feel it already. The feeling of desolation was profound, soaking into her as thoroughly as the weather had.

As they reached the impressive doorway of the Inn, he opened it crossing the threshold first. For a moment she hesitated, but then with no reasonable alternative followed him, closing the door behind them.

Sluggishly she followed him up a heavy oak staircase on the far end of a massively, rustic looking lobby. The walls were of varying shades of natural woods and the huge fireplace seemed to be cut from stone that came from the very mountains the hotel was built upon. If Aurora hadn't been so terribly wet and chilled she would have taken more time to appreciate her surroundings. But as it was the man walked her quickly up the staircase, evidently being kindly cognizant of her distress. In actuality she had only momentarily caught sight of his face, a flash of bluish eyes and a well-clipped dark brown beard. Before they'd left the lobby he'd reached behind what was evidently the registration counter and grabbed a key after which he'd indicated for her to follow him. Aurora hadn't spoken, just nodded. She was ridiculously drenched and her senses were being assaulted by a symphony of conflicting emotions. He moved smoothly and heaved her solidly packed suitcase with the ease of one lifting a pillow. Obviously he was strong. She shivered; the dampness of her clothing was wearing on her.

As they climbed the stairs, it dimly registered with her that she hadn't seen another person in the hotel. Was it just be the two of them – she and whoever the man was? He stopped at a doorway ahead of her, and she heard clicking of a key connecting with a lock. The door swung open as he stepped back waving her inside. "I hope this will do."

She was immediately struck by the airiness of the room as she stepped inside. Everything felt light and comfortable. There was a brass bed on one side of the room, lace curtains fluttering near the window, and a large cherry wood dresser – actually it was very homey, and much finer than ordinary hotel fare. The man crossed the room depositing her suitcase near the bed and in a smooth motion swiftly closed the window as he

remarked, "This must have been left open." He turned around pulling down the hood of his raincoat, facing her completely for the first time since she'd first encountered him.

For a moment it felt as though her breath stopped as their eyes met in direct contact. All thought seemed to cease as the instant stretched on. In her mind she thought she heard him speak to her; *Be still, it is well*, but instinctively dismissed it, deciding quickly that she was mistaken. No doubt it was a product of her jangled nerves. His face molded into a pleasing smile, almost a curious one. She couldn't decide if she thought him handsome or not. He appeared older than her, at least by ten to fifteen years and his eyes sparkled with layers of consideration. Then he spoke or was it in her mind? No, it was with his voice this time, "You must be freezing."

Another shiver, was it from the cold? "Yes, I'm soaked."

"Why don't you get changed then you can come downstairs and get all the registration taken care of."

She nodded shakily feeling quite overwhelmed in the moment, "Yes, all right." And then she added attempting a smile that she felt sure came off as half-hearted. "I'm sorry I didn't get your name."

He nodded, "Stephen will do, Miss?"

"Um Finn, Aurora Finn."

"Welcome to Black Hollow Inn Miss Finn. I'm glad you made it safely. Do you like tea?"

The question was simple, but it felt odd to her, "Yes, I do."

He nodded, "I'll have some waiting for you downstairs."

"Thank you." He crossed the room lingering just for a fraction of a second as he shot her a final glance before he closed the door behind him.

She stood quietly in the middle of the room trembling, feeling utterly incapable of movement. But then forcing herself, she shakily moved to the bed, pulling her suitcase on top of it. Her hands shook almost uncontrollably as she unzipped it, rummaging deep beneath the pile of clothing until her hand came

into contact with metal. It was still there, but she didn't know if that came as a relief or not. Slowly, she pulled out the ancient weapon, the black iron three-tiered dagger. A chill passed through her as she recalled checking in at the airport, watching her suitcase being tagged, then disappearing along a conveyor belt. She felt certain that it would be discovered, but her Aunt had reassured her that it was shielded by ancient magic, that it would be undetected.

She ran her fingers lightly along its edge. It felt colder than her skin, colder than the rain, colder than death itself she imagined – after all it was death.

This is your weapon Aurora. When it is time, you will know how to proceed. Her eyes hesitatingly flickered to the closed doorway. It couldn't possibly be. She would know it, wouldn't she?

She let the hot shower beat on her numb skin, but all it did was make her feel more languid. Flashes of the past swept across her mind – the phantom-like images that were left of her parents – her dark-haired, stern Aunt with piercing green eyes that had taken her into her care when they were killed. Aurora had feared her so much at first, and then came to love her more than anyone else in her life. It was Aunt Monique that had introduced her to the craft, to her talents, and to the ancient order where those of her bloodline had been trained for aeons. Then there was that day when her mentor, the red-haired Madame Callista and her Aunt Monique had brought her into the library of Monique's house for their special meeting. Was that only last week? It seemed like so much longer now. They informed her that she had advanced in her studies so rapidly that she had reached a new level and would be awarded with a mission, one that she might not return from. It was then that she'd been given the dagger and the instruction to seek him out.

The information they gave her was sketchy at best. He was a powerful wizard who flagrantly ignored the ancient ways and acted in accordance with the whims of his passions. To prove her loyalty that she was deserving of their trust, she had been

sent to deal with him. On this trek she had set forth with little guidance and now found herself here alone and somewhat baffled. It was not at all what she had expected to encounter. She expected clarity, but all so far was confusion.

She closed her eyes again and tried to reach a calm place, *Still*. She opened her eyes, the words had been spoken in her mind, but they weren't the ordinary guidance she'd received. It was so much stronger, more powerful. She closed her eyes again and opened her mind to it, allowing the vulnerability. She breathed deeply and it came as a whisper that wrapped around her mind. *Yes, be still. No need for upset, not here.*

He opened his eyes. He was staring through one of the large scenic windows in the lobby, watching the rain. It continued to beat down with a fury. Fortunately, they still had electricity. He sipped the glass of scotch that he held in his hand. He was somewhat surprised, but pleasantly so. He supposed that he should put on her tea, but he still had a little time. Closing his eyes he allowed his mind to travel upstairs. He breathed in deeply, feeling the steam of the hot water filling her nostrils. It was warm, soothing, relaxing, as was her mind, strangely so. She was so frightened, not very informed this one. But a wonderfully powerful mind and she was actually letting him in, sift through her memories – her pain. He smiled somewhat amazed at the contradictions – very innocent, no lovers – purely dedicated to learning, growing, and being of service to people.

He sighed and rubbed his bearded chin with his hand. Why did they send her to him? Surely she was too tender for his influence. But then he did sense great strength. He opened his eyes and took another sip of scotch. He hoped he could find where Clara kept the teakettle. As he headed toward the kitchen, he sensed her rubbing dry with one of the hotel's towels; apparently Clara had laundered it only that morning.

Cautiously she walked down the heavy oak staircase and headed back toward the lobby. She passed a large nautical-look-

ing wall clock hanging on the paneled walls. The decorations in the Inn were a bit of a mish-mash of styles all geared more toward comfort than anything formal. She could see that across the room a large fireplace was still flickering, and there were several comfortable-looking chairs positioned around it. Approaching rather tentatively she moved toward the back of a rather large, leather wing-backed chair. She couldn't see around the front but knew from a strange fluttering in her stomach that it was occupied. Beside it was a small round, cherry-wood table with a mug on it. She slowly walked around in front it not surprised to find Stephen waiting there for her. There was a short glass in his hand that she felt certain wasn't tea. She smiled. He'd changed his shirt; evidently the weather had wreaked havoc with him also, although at the moment she couldn't quite recall what he'd worn before.

"You look better."

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long. I felt the need for a hot shower." She'd pulled on a pair of jeans and a beige turtleneck, not bothering with make-up, just pulling her long dark hair into a ponytail.

"No," his eyes flickered to the mug on the table, "Your tea. It should still be hot."

She picked it up and sipped it. It was quite warm, nearly scorching her lips, "I sweetened it with sugar," he mentioned.

She smiled hesitantly, "Thank you it's fine." Her eyes scanned the huge room. "I gather you're the only one here tonight."

"Yes, well to be honest, I didn't expect any travelers tonight so I sent the rest of the staff home."

"Oh, I guess I should be grateful that you didn't close up altogether. Then you manage this place."

"Well in a fashion. I actually own it."

Her eyes widened and she could tell her surprise was not lost on him, "I see."

"And I've been away for awhile, so you'll forgive me if I don't quite know where everything is."

“All I was looking for was a little shelter from the rain.” His eyes locked on hers again in that compelling way that was extraordinarily unsettling.

“Well I suppose I better sign you in. Will you follow me Miss Finn?”

“Of course.” She grasped the hot mug more tightly in her hands as she trailed behind him. It must be him. It was only logical, but she didn’t feel it. What she was feeling was most confusing.

He sighed as he flipped through the huge book that Clara Mercer used as a guest register at the Inn. He couldn’t count the number of times that she told him everything would be transferred to computer. How in the world did she keep any decent records? Then again he knew business at this place hadn’t been overwhelming to say the least. He’d been pouring money into it more as a distraction and to maintain the self-delusion that there was a stable point of reference in this world for him. He glanced up at the young woman standing on the other side of the registration desk. She was calmly watching him without expression. He estimated that she was in her late twenties. She was very refined, intelligent-looking, and he had to admit remarkably beautiful; it was the kind of beauty that was untouched as though she had spent most of her life kept away in a glass cabinet somewhere. Everything about her seemed that way except those wide brown eyes that kept watching, absorbing every nuance of movement, every detail around her. He had a gut feeling she wasn’t nearly as delicate as one might think on first observation. How interesting it will be to find out if he was right.

“Well Aurora Finn,” he murmured. “I’m going to need a little information. Home address?”

He waited then glanced up, she seemed to be contemplating, perhaps whether to tell him the truth or not, “It’s 310 Prytania Street, New Orleans, Louisiana.”

He raised an eyebrow, “Really? You’ve come a long way from home. Do you have family out here?”

She shook her head without smiling, "No, just a vacation of sorts. Taking some time to myself."

He nodded. He flipped the book around and pushed it toward her. "There are a few other things. Maybe you could fill them in." He held the pen out for her and as she reached to take it her fingertips briefly brushed his skin. Another hesitation and then she bent her head over the register as she scribbled in the necessary information. His eyes watched her calmly, but the effect of their contact still resonated within him. It had told him much, and now he had to consider carefully how best to proceed.

Her eyes rose to meet his, "I think that's it," and then "Oh you must need a credit card. I left my purse upstairs. I can go get it."

"It's all right," he said without inflection. "I can get it when you check out. How long will you be staying?"

"Just the night."

He nodded, and looked toward a nearby window that indicated the storm continued to rage outside.

He closed the book and stood up from his chair behind the desk, "That should do I think."

"Well, that was easy. These days hotels usually want every kind of identification they can get a hold of short of a birth certificate," she was rambling, trying to fill in the awkwardness. But he seemed quite at ease, as though he didn't feel it at all. She had no idea what to say to him and felt increasingly uncomfortable the more he looked at her. He was a handsome man, tall, slender but also somehow strong-looking. She noticed that he was conservative with his movements, not flamboyant as many of the people that were in Aurora's circle of acquaintance. Her Aunt's house had always been filled with flamboyant characters very appreciative of their own talents. They had even given her a nickname, the mouse, because she was so shy and so unlike any of them. She had kept to herself, going to school, and then college, learning the secret mysteries that as her Aunt had

said were her true calling. She had closed herself off to the point that there had never been any relationships. But the fast thumping of her heart was telling her something new. She couldn't deny it; she was drawn to this stranger, drawn fiercely like a magnet. But she was here for another purpose, to stop an evil—how could all of this reconcile?

"Did you finish your tea?" She looked back into his warm, bluish-grey eyes.

She'd forgotten all about it. She was still grasping the mug tightly in her hands, "No," she sipped it. It was just barely warm now, but it felt good on her throat.

"If you're hungry I could see if I could find anything in the kitchen." He'd moved from behind the desk and was standing in front of her now. "I have to confess that I haven't spent much time there, but maybe between the two of us we could find something there."

His voice felt relaxing to her now, soothing. She had to try to stay in a clear mind, "No thank you. I'm all right. I think I might just need some sleep." Maybe that was it. She would just go upstairs, and go to sleep and leave in the morning—forgetting about her mission. Was it so bad to fail? This was all too unclear to her now.

"You do seem tired."

"I am. It's been an incredibly long day."

"Can I ask you something before you go Miss Finn?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

He had taken a step even closer to her, she thought, but wasn't sure. "Do you go by Aurora, your name, or do people call you something else?"

She was hearing something in her mind, something distant like the wind whipping around her, "Um," what had he asked?

"Your name?" he said it softly.

"My Aunt, she calls me Rory."

Was he smiling? It was an odd expression, almost curiously triumphant. "Then I shall call you Rory." The sound was

growing louder, increasing almost to a dull roar. "And you will call me Stephen."

She opened her mouth to speak, but all words seemed stuck in her throat. The last thing she heard was his voice in her mind. *Now we shall begin.*