

## Chapter One

Scott loved renovating old houses, and could hardly believe his luck when he got to supervise the renovation of one small brick building in Trustees' Garden. Who knew a Historic Preservation major at the art college would end up with such a task?

When he'd discussed the project with Professor Beets, it had seemed to be a wonderful opportunity and an easy assignment. But, as he surveyed the restoration project from a safe distance, his earlier thrill seemed to slowly drain away. Something definitely sinister and eerie emanated from the old building and made him hesitant to approach.

It wasn't the busted front windows, the warped roof, cracked brick, or even the weather-beaten front door that bothered him, but rather the foreboding ambience of the place. *Seriously creepy*. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled instinctively in agreement.

The structure had been built in the mid-1700's as part of a botany farm that proved unsuccessful. As the years passed, Trustees' Garden had been abandoned, fell into disrepair, and no longer looked like a garden. Now, it resembled a collection of dilapidated buildings and drifting trash, and a perfect hide-out for would-be-robbers.

The building had looked better in a photograph he'd found in the historical archives. In the doorway arch, there had been a pretty, stained-glass image of a palm tree. Now the glass was gone and had been replaced with a dead-bug web guarded by a huge, menacing banana spider.

It might, perhaps, be an omen of something, but Scott didn't want to think about what that might be. Just looking at the building from ten feet away creeped him out.

He wondered what sort of botany experiments had taken place in there. Were there deadly mutant seeds growing in the walls, giant mummified insects hidden in old cabinets, or perhaps toxic soil samples festering in wooden crates?

He worried there might be a rat or two—or three thousand—nibbling on noxious botany seeds behind the splintered door. The rats, after generations of eating toxic seeds, could've transformed into huge, mutant, people-eating rodents. If he dared open the front door, would ravenous predators escape to feast on the blood of innocent humans?

Scott's imagination was getting the best of him, and he sighed his relief when a battered pickup truck with *Anything Painted* displayed on the side turned into the parking lot. It stopped, and two men got out. They stood next to Scott to survey the rundown brick building.

Scott had his renovation plans rolled up under his right arm. He held his pencil at-the-ready in his left hand and tucked his overactive imagination away into the back of his mind. Even if he had to battle mutant rats, he was determined to be a Historic Preservation hero and do an accurate renovation.

The hired workmen didn't care much about being heroes. They were prepared to just fix things up a bit and get paid.

"You guys sent here by Dolittle Design?" Scott asked.

The men exchanged amused glances. The 'you guys' gave the college kid away—he was a northerner,

otherwise he would've asked, 'y'all come to help?'

"Yep, Dolittle hired us. I'm Darrel, and this is Thomas." They shook hands real friendly like.

"I'm Scott. I'm the consultant to make sure the renovations on this building are historically accurate. Come on in, and I'll show you my building plans."

Darrel and Thomas, unafraid and unaware of Scott's imaginary mutant rodents, followed him to the front door.

Scott took out the key and shoved it in the rusty keyhole. He tried to turn the key, but it wouldn't move. He pushed on the door with his shoulder, but it didn't budge. Finally, he gave the door a hard kick at the bottom and, with a loud bang, it crashed open.

They coughed and wheezed as a thick cloud of ancient, mummified, toxic, botany dust particles engulfed them. It stank like rot and it smelled like death.

A disturbing, odorous cloud rose into the air and hung over Trustees' Garden. Gradually, many thousands of minuscule, evil, contaminated, primordial spores dissipated into the breeze and drifted into the peaceful streets of Savannah.

## Chapter Two

To avoid inhaling the disgusting odor, Scott held his breath until his face turned red, but eventually, he had to let the air out. He coughed, gagged and burped.

The ancient grit irritated Darrel's eyes. He rubbed and blinked them to make the sting go away. Thomas waved his hand in front of his face to shift the musty smell from himself toward Scott.

For a fleeting moment, Scott wondered what kind of trouble he'd gotten himself into. Perhaps being a Historic Preservation Hero wouldn't be as easy as he'd thought.

Determined to rise above his uncertainties, he led the way into the building of creepy weirdness where a person's imagination might make anything possible.

Once inside, he rolled out his design plans on top of a cracked counter top. He'd spent a lot of time on the artwork. He'd used fancy paper and added detailed writing and colored highlights. Just looking at it made him quite proud.

By the look on the workmen's faces, he knew they didn't give a mutant rat's hairy butt about his drawings, but he politely asked, "What do you think of my design?" He'd lived in Savannah long enough to know that rule number one for getting things done was 'be polite.'

"The drawings are nice," Darrel said, and Thomas agreed. They were also being polite.

"I'll leave the plans right here for reference. I'm going to make a stained-glass piece to be installed in the front door arch." Scott pointed to his detailed drawing of the door. "I saw an old photo of this place, and it showed a

stained-glass window there. The photo was black and white, but I'm pretty sure I can match the palm tree design and guess on the color."

"You can get some really nice stained glass kits at the Handyman Depot," Darrel informed him.

Scott's blood pressure rose quickly. The veins in his neck started to throb. His eyes took on a glassed-over appearance.

Everything at the Handyman Depot came off the shelf, out of a box, or from a plastic, injection-sealed package. Everything was tacky-tacky, and everything looked the same.

Being a Historic Preservationist, Scott hated the Handyman Depot. To him, the Handyman Depot equaled the devil.

With a firm voice, he said, "This place will be characteristic of regional craftsmanship. Everything will be made by hand using old building methods from the eighteen-hundreds. I will begin by making the stained-glass artwork for the front door. I don't want anything in the building from the Handyman Depot."

Darrel smiled because he was in partnership with the devil. He loved the Handyman Depot. That's where a person went to get the stuff to 'get 'er done.'

The battle lines were drawn. Both sides were determined and dedicated to their cause—Scott's historically accurate renovation plan versus Darrel's wham-bam-alakazam plan. If neither side wanted to compromise, this would make the Civil War Battle of Kennesaw Mountain look like a Sunday school picnic.

"When do ya want us to start work?" Darrel asked.

"Don't do anything until I tell you to. Right now, I just

want you to take a look around and write down what you think needs to be done. I will look over your recommendation, figure the cost, and make a presentation to Dolittle Design. The design company will discuss it with the owner and, with the owner's approval, we can get started."

"Whewee!" Darrel reached into his shirt pocket for a pack of cigarettes, took one out, lit it, took a puff, and looked around the ruined space. "That sure does seem like a lot of nothing and not a lot of doing."

"That's how it needs to be done if everyone is to get paid."

"We certainly want to get paid, and it seems to me, the sooner we get started, the sooner we get paid."

"Don't worry, you'll get paid, and you'll have plenty of money to get the job done. You can use the Dolittle Design's accounts to pay for materials. Just say you're buying it for The Savannah Trustees' Garden Eco-Friendly Organic Coffee Shop."

"That's the name of this place? The name is bigger than this whole building." Thomas laughed.

"Yes, that's the name—and by the way, Darrel, please put out your cigarette. This is a smoke free environment."

"So maybe you should call this place The Savannah Trustees' Garden Eco-Friendly *Smoke-free* Organic Coffee Shop," Darrel said and stepped outside to finish his cigarette.

Scott followed Thomas out. It felt good to be outside and away from his nightmarish mutant rats. He took a final peek through the cracked door window and, once again, wondered what kind of botany experiments had been performed inside.

He struggled to get the key into the keyhole to lock the door, and after three attempts, he finally sealed away any imaginary or possibly real venomous critters. He was unaware that the door remained ajar.

"Do you have a key to the building?" Scott asked.

"Nope, and we don't need one. When you kicked in the door, ya busted it off the hinges," Darrel answered and climbed into his truck. "We'll start work tomorrow morning."

Thomas hopped into the truck beside Darrel.

"We're not ready to start. Don't do anything yet!"

"Yeah, that's right. Okay, we'll be here at nine o'clock to make up our to-do list. See ya."

A cold fear crossed Scott's heart as he watched Darrel and Thomas drive away. He had an unsettling feeling he'd just made a pact with the devil. And then he sensed a coolness to his right and thought he heard a raspy, ghostly cough. He looked around furtively, nerves tingling and his breath oddly tight. He was alone. There wasn't anyone in sight, and he shook his head at his foolish imaginings.

Scott briefly wondered if, when he'd opened the old building, he'd disturbed one of Savannah's many restless spirits. Ghosts in Savannah were not that uncommon, but what if these ghosts were enormous, mutant, people-eating ghouls with a taste for human blood? What then?

## Chapter Three

By the time Scott got to his apartment, he was no longer thinking of the devil, people-eating mutant rodents, ghosts or Handyman Depot tacky-tacky. He directed his creative thoughts to designing a perfect stained-glass palm tree piece for the front door to replace the banana spider's bug graveyard in the archway.

Scott's self-appointed mission was to make the depilated building in Trustees' Garden a shining example of how old fashioned materials and construction methods could be applied in a modern-day urban environment.

He sat hunched over his computer and checked and double checked his drawing measurements. It was easy to ignore the irony that he used high-tech, 3-D design computer software instead of a ruler like they did in the eighteen-hundreds.

His roommate came by and leaned on the door frame. "I'm fix'n to get a pizza. You in on it?" he asked. Scott's roommate came from South Carolina and people up there were always 'fix'n' to do something.

"Yeah, sure. I'd eat a pizza." Scott knew his roommate would order the food from the retro pizza place on West Liberty, and he also knew the pizza would be the Meat Lovers Dream Pie. Scott's roommate had been rather aptly nicknamed Derek-the-hog-killer.

While studying to be an Industrial Designer, Derek also worked part time as a Licensed Nuisance Critter Hunter, killing wild hogs on Wassaw Island. He killed things and he ate meat. He was, after all, Derek-the-hog-killer.

Scott dug in his pocket and handed over some money.

Derek took the money and, like a hunter on the trail of a pepperoni, ham, and sausage pizza, quietly disappeared.

Scott began to bring his drawing to life with color and detail. It would be his signature piece, and it needed to be perfect. The palm tree represented the true essence of the renovation project—a *rebirth*.

To ensure he would receive a good grade, he decided to dazzle his professor with artful deception. He would make a stained-glass model using colored plastics and present it to Professor Beets. Inspired by his idea, he began a materials search on the Internet.

He typed in 'plastic for models,' and a list of possible web sites came up. He clicked through a few companies, estimating cost, thickness and shipping rates.

An interesting web address caught his attention, and he clicked on it. The web site's home page blasted onto his monitor: *Buy-U Plastics*. The company was located in the Louisiana Bayou. Scott figured shipping from southern Louisiana to Savannah, Georgia, might not be too expensive.

He laughed at the play on words for the names of the plastic sheets.

Buy-U Plastics from the Louisiana Bayou offered:

U-C-Zombies In-da-glow Purple

I-C-U-Dead Red

U-2-R-Running Yellow

4-C-DA-Ghost Green

U-B-Sorry Cyan

Haint Blue

## U-R-Craz-E Mixed Colors

Just for fun, he clicked on 'U-C-Zombies In-da-glow.' A nice sheet of purple plastic came on the screen. It was offered in a variety of sizes and thickness. He selected twelve twenty-four by forty-eight, one-eighth-inch thick sheets.

He clicked on 'get quote' and, to estimate shipping, he filled out the address information. When the total price came up it seemed reasonable. But he'd been wasting his time looking at Buy-U Plastics because he didn't want indigo-colored plastic for his model. He'd started to go to a different web site when Derek called him to come get some pizza.

Scott turned to leave, and in doing so, his finger touched the click button. He accidentally ordered twelve plastic sheets of U-C-Zombies In-da-glow Purple.

Buy-U Plastics didn't require a credit card or a debit card to complete the order. They obviously figured if someone bought something from them, it was payment enough.