

sample chapter from

# THE MYSTERY OF HILLIARD'S CASTLE

by

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## CHAPTER ONE IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

Maine, 1982

It was March, and drizzling. Everything Kerry Odell could see through the car window looked brown and dingy, even the few remaining patches of snow in the fields. Her mother drove past a roadside turnoff, grandly labeled "scenic overlook," but they didn't stop. Although they were in the mountains, peaks and valleys alike were made invisible by a gloomy mist.

Kerry squinted, trying to pick out what little could be seen. She'd started to count barns and gas stations, but she'd given up some time ago and the notepad on her lap had fewer than a dozen tally marks. The game was supposed to keep her from thinking so much about why they were here, in the middle of nowhere, instead of back home. It was not working.

A green station wagon passed them, going the other way, and from the back seat her brother Lyle, who was eight, reported his newest totals: "Thirteen bridges, forty-one cars, all from this state, since we left New Hampshire."

Forty-one license plates had said "Maine Vacationland" but Kerry was convinced that she wouldn't have any fun at all while they were here. She couldn't think of a drearier, less promising place. She stared hard at an ugly blue mobile home with a tarpaper-covered shed attached, wondering how anyone could stand to live in such a dwelling.

The winding, bumpy, roller coaster road had taken them past few houses in the last hour, let alone barns or gas stations. There were no billboards, which Lyle usually counted, and hardly any road signs. Worse, the only channel their car radio seemed able to bring in played country-western music. As Kerry listened, the disc jockey put on a depressing song about unrequited love.

She glanced at her mother. For the past week she'd had an alarming tendency to get teary-eyed when sentimental tunes were played. Almost as if they were thinking the same thought, they reached for the knob together, touching hands halfway there. Kerry giggled and pulled back while her mother, Patricia Marcus-Odell, squelched the mournful singer with a deft twist of the dial. When she failed to locate another station, she switched off the radio.

Sudden silence engulfed them, broken only by the hum of the engine, the sound of their tires against the rough, wet, road surface, and the creak and swish of determined windshield wipers doing their best to keep rain off the glass. The drops were falling faster now, as they moved into the storm.

Patricia gave her daughter a quick, understanding smile, but Kerry knew that in bad weather she paid extra attention to her driving. This was not the time for them to talk things out.

Kerry thought her mother was beautiful, and wished she could be more like her, but Patricia was a small, angular woman. Kerry was going to be much taller, and already outweighed her mother. Patricia said she took after her father instead, a father Kerry could barely remember. He had died when she was four. It was her mother she wanted to imitate, and the only physical characteristic they shared was their hair color, a delicate

shade of auburn. If it hadn't been for that, a stranger might never have guessed that they were related to each other.

"I'm hungry," Lyle piped up from the back seat. He was finding it difficult to sit still. They had been on the road for many hours.

"It isn't much farther."

"We haven't seen a sign for miles," Kerry protested. "Are you sure we aren't lost?"

She hadn't complained when her mother announced they were going to live in Maine for six months, even though it meant changing schools and leaving her friends behind. She'd even put off asking questions about Roger, because it was plain that Patricia got upset when his name came up. But she hadn't been happy about any of it, and she wasn't happy now. For the first time in her life, Kerry wasn't sure her mother knew what she was doing.

"We're fine, Kerry. This is the right road, and we'll be there in less than an hour."

Kerry was quiet for a little while, but she could feel resentment building up inside her. She just couldn't keep back the question any longer. Not all her good intentions, nor the knowledge that Patricia had to concentrate on driving, prevented her from blurting it out.

"Why did you and Roger break up?"

She saw her mother's hands tighten on the wheel. They were slender hands, with long, tapering fingers. Until last week there had been a diamond on one of them.

"That subject is not open for discussion," was the terse answer.

Kerry felt as though she had been slapped. That was the voice Patricia used on students who were trying to turn term papers in after the due date. The rebuff hurt her all the more because she and Patricia had always had a close relationship, much closer than any of her friends had with their mothers. It had been the one thing she could brag about, the thing that made up for not having a father.

She felt her mother's hand grip hers where it rested on the car seat between them.

"I'm sorry I snapped, Kerry. It's just something I can't talk about yet. Forgive me?"

Kerry nodded, but she didn't really understand. The wedding date had been set, and even though Roger was not ideal father material, she had been looking forward to having two parents.

She stared at her lap and tried to convince herself that Roger Annesley was no great loss. He was a college professor, as Patricia was, and the head of the English department at the college where they both taught. He'd been part of their lives for more than two years, although he'd usually been too wrapped up in his own projects to care much about the things that interested Lyle and Kerry.

She remembered once when she and Lyle had decided to test him, to see if he really listened when they talked to him. They'd long been aware that his attention drifted away from them if they went on about school, or some new diversion, for too long. So, on a prearranged signal, they'd both started spouting gibberish. To their delight, he'd answered this with the same noncommittal "uh-huh"s and "Sounds good"s he offered when they made sense.

The more she tried to think negative things about Roger, the easier it was, and Kerry suddenly realized that the only selling point he'd ever had was his deep affection for their mother. He'd always made it clear that he thought her an exceptional woman, and of course Kerry agreed with that.

She hadn't been old enough for school yet, and Lyle had been a baby, when their father, an Air Force pilot, was killed in a plane crash during training exercises. Left to raise them alone, their mother could have stayed home and felt sorry for herself. There had been insurance policies to provide an income, and money from the government too. Instead she'd gone back to school and gotten a degree in English literature and after that a job in a small central New York college. She'd started calling herself Ms. Marcus-Odell, linking her maiden name with Kerry's father's. The hyphen, she'd explained to them, was very important. It established her identity as a person.

The girl stole another glance at her mother. She was very pretty, and not really old. She'd turned thirty-three on her last birthday, and everyone said she looked younger. Whatever had happened between Patricia and Roger, Kerry knew it was his loss. Still, she couldn't help wishing her mother was just a little more like other mothers. She wanted Patricia to fall in love and get married.

Kerry thought back to the day, two weeks ago, when her mother had announced her plans. Patricia hadn't let any tears show then. Kerry hadn't suspected a thing. Inspired by her newest idea, Patricia had come home that afternoon, right in the middle of winter-quarter finals, to tell them she'd been granted a sabbatical, a leave of absence, for the spring quarter. She was going to do research and write a book. Then she'd sprung the real bombshell. They weren't going to stay home, near libraries and her office at the college. Instead they were going to Maine, where she'd already rented a house.

"Why Maine?" Kerry had asked. "We don't know anyone in Maine."

"Exactly," her mother had answered. "I want peace and quiet so I can work. If we knew people, they'd be forever distracting us."

With a sigh, Kerry came back to the present. Well, here they were in Maine, and it was quiet all right. Too quiet. There was nothing here at all.

She peered out at the gray fields and gray trees, blurred by raindrops on the glass. This didn't even resemble civilization as she knew it. After their small, densely populated city, rural Maine seemed uninhabited and desolate.

"Are your seat belts fastened?" Patricia asked. "It feels very slick under the tires."

They were. Kerry fingered the shoulder strap idly as the car came up to an intersection. There weren't any stop lights or stop signs, just a dim streetlight. If she squinted, Kerry could make out a few houses in the distance, down the road to their right, and a car.

Patricia Marcus-Odell was slowing down, but by the time she saw the other car it was too late. It seemed to jump in front of them, and when she tried to use her brakes, nothing happened. It was too wet.

There was a crash, a sickening sound that seemed to echo around them as the car shuddered. Kerry didn't even have time to cry out. She threw her hands up in front of her face and closed her eyes. She felt the car spin, and then lurch to a sudden stop as the back end bumped up against an embankment. Her upper body bounced forward, but not very far, for the seat belt held her safely in place.

Cautiously, Kerry peeked through her fingers. She was unhurt, but she was shaking. A quick look around assured her that Lyle and her mother were all right too, and their car, miraculously, was still right-side-up. It had come to rest facing backward.

As she sat there, trying to take in what had happened, Kerry heard the engine cough and die, but the windshield wipers continued to swish back and forth

unconcernedly across a long, ugly crack in the glass. Patricia reached forward automatically to switch them off.

They had a misty view through the rain of the other car. It had hit the light pole after the collision and then bounced back into the road. It was full of people, and the first one out was a boy Kerry guessed to be not much older than she was. She began to count as the others piled out of the car, but didn't get very far before Lyle started to howl.

He wasn't hurt, just scared enough to forget he was a big boy of eight and the man of the family. Their mother made sure he wasn't bleeding or bruised and then ignored him.

"Are you all right?" she asked Kerry.

When her daughter's nod assured her both her children were safe, she abruptly put her head down on the steering wheel. While Kerry watched in amazement, she took a series of deep breaths. Kerry wasn't sure if she was crying, or having hysterics, or just trying to keep from throwing up.

"Are you okay, lady?"

It was the first boy, mouthing the words through the glass of the driver's side window. He was towheaded, with blue eyes and a worried look on his face.

Patricia lifted her head and nodded. Kerry expected her to say something, to yell at the boy for causing the accident, or at least demand his name, but she didn't say a word. After a moment, he went back to his friends.

"Are you hurt, Mom?" Kerry heard her voice go up almost to a squeak with sudden fear. Patricia's strange behavior scared her more than the crash had.

"I'm fine. Just shaken up."

Lyle, whose sobs had subsided with the appearance of the strange boy, was surprisingly quiet in the back of the car. An eerie stillness descended upon them, made more complete by the sudden end of the rainstorm.

Kerry rolled down her window and looked for the boy. He was just getting back into the other car. None of his companions, who were clustered on the far side of it, came near, but their voices carried well in the damp air.

"My dad's gonna kill me!" one boy, a redhead, moaned loudly.

"Your own fault," another said. "Hey, Ricky, what're you doin'? Don't call the cops!"

Ricky, the one in the car, stuck his head out the window. "We've got to, you jerk. Look at the cars. Besides, I was only calling my father on the C.B."

"And he'll call them," grumbled the redhead. "Big difference."

"They monitor the C.B. anyway," a fourth voice reminded them.

"Nobody seems to be hurt," Kerry reported. "The cars are a mess though."

The three of them got out, all on Kerry's side because Patricia's door wouldn't open. They stood staring at the wreck of what had once been their car. There wasn't much hope it would ever run again. The front end, which had hit the side of the other car, was pushed in so that the hood had almost folded in half. The headlights were gone. The bumper was bent. The sides bowed out. Even the tires stuck out at odd angles.

Kerry started to shake again, as it was brought home to her how narrow their escape had been. They were lucky to be alive. If their car had rolled over . . . ! If they hadn't had seat belts on . . . ! She couldn't bear to think about it. Her stomach gave an unpleasant lurch, and she was glad she had nothing in it to come up.

Her mother took another deep breath to steady herself, and Kerry knew she was thinking the same thing. Then Patricia turned to look at the other car. It was a Cadillac, a new one. Kerry didn't know much about cars, but even she knew a Caddy was expensive. She also sensed something else: its passengers were up to no good.

There were five of them, all teenagers, and they were in a huddle. If she'd still been in New York, Kerry would have labeled them a gang. They were even wearing the same coats, but they were ski parkas instead of leather jackets. As a group, they started to advance, which was a little frightening. Two of them towered above Kerry and her mother, who was barely five feet tall. Even the one called Ricky, the towhead, who was clearly the youngest of the group, stood as high. But before they could meet, a white pickup truck with a cap on the back pulled up out of the fog.

Ricky ran to it, and before anyone else could say anything, he blurted out a lie: "She didn't have any lights, Dad! We didn't see the car until it was right on top of us!"

Kerry wasn't surprised by his words, but her mother was. Patricia stiffened, and a grim expression came over her face, masking the mobile features that created her youthful look.

"Cecil saw it," the redheaded boy said.

Kerry guessed he was the driver. At most he was eighteen.

"He was in back, and when he yelled, I punched it. I tried to avoid being hit, Mr. York. I swear I did."

Kerry fought back an impulse to run up to the boy and hit him. It wouldn't do any good. She knew that. It didn't even help to get mad, but she was angry anyway. She grew more furious still when the man glanced at the New York plates on their car, then gave her mother a look that told them, as plainly as if he'd said it aloud, that he believed his son and the other boy and blamed her.

"I've called the sheriff's office," he said coldly.

"Thank you."

Patricia's voice was calm, which seemed to puzzle him. He glared, and she glared back. As they sized each other up, she put a protective arm around each of her children and drew them close to her.

Kerry glowered at Ricky's father too, though he took no notice of her. He was heavy-set and rugged looking, with sandy hair and brown eyes. He was wearing a wool hunting jacket and blue jeans, which made him look as if he belonged in the last century. She wondered if he was a lumberjack.

Patricia stood at least eight inches shorter, but she didn't back down. She glared up at him, daring him with her steady gaze to disbelieve her. Kerry watched the battle of wills, intrigued, but although Patricia's eyes never wavered, her daughter could tell that Mr. York's equally steady stare made her nervous. She reached up, without even being aware of it, and pushed a strand of her long auburn hair back behind her ear. Kerry had the same straight hair and the same habit.

The movement broke their concentration. Mr. York turned away first, stalking back to his truck. He opened the back, took out some flares, and began to set them out along the roadway to warn other motorists of the accident.

Kerry looked at her watch. It was just 3:30 in the afternoon. It seemed much later, mostly because of the fog, but partly because they had left home so early that morning.

Mr. York finished with the flares and came back to look at the damage to the Caddy. The hood was bent sideways and the trunk had been sprung.

"She hit the rear door and in back of it," Ricky said. "The rest of the damage was done by the telephone pole."

"I'm cold," Lyle said loudly.

"Me too," Kerry echoed. "And it's starting to rain again."

"Get back in the car, children."

"The cab of my truck is warmer," Mr. York cut in.

Without waiting for permission he grabbed Lyle by the shoulders and steered him gently in that direction. When they were close enough he lifted him up inside. Kerry followed after her mother nodded her consent, but refused his help. When she felt the warmth, she was momentarily grateful Ricky's father had come along, but the sensation did not last. As soon as he closed the door, he turned on her mother.

"What the hell were you trying to prove, lady? You could've killed all these kids, and yourself. Don't you have sense enough to turn your headlights on in weather like this?"

"I don't suppose it occurs to you that your son is lying?" Her voice was calm but her eyes blazed.

Too angry to speak, he stalked off again, this time toward Kerry's car. Patricia followed him, but only to get her umbrella, which she kept on the floor in back. Once it was up, Kerry couldn't see her face, but she suspected that her mother was crying. She started to get out of the cab, but before she could open the door, the patrol car arrived.

"The cops," she whispered to Lyle.

"Can't be," he whispered back. "No sirens."

He was disappointed when he realized she was right. They could see two revolving blue lights on top of a brown car and hear the faint sounds of voices from the police radio inside.

Kerry watched as her mother, who now stood next to the truck containing her children, wiped her eyes and stood up straighter. Ricky's father motioned for the brown-uniformed lawman to join him, and pointed to something at the front of Patricia's car. Kerry hated to let in the cold and wet, but her curiosity got the better of her and she rolled down the window.

She still couldn't see very well, and the men spoke in voices too low for her to catch their words, except when Mr. York called to Ricky to come over and join them. There was more whispering before the deputy went to look at the Caddy and Mr. York, his son in tow, approached Patricia. The three of them met right in front of the truck, so that Kerry at last could hear what was going on.

"My name is Alex York," he told her mother. "My boy, Ricky, has something to say to you."

It took a none too gentle push forward to get Ricky started, and he looked sulky, but he did as he was told.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You did have lights. We all saw them. I lied to keep my friend out of trouble. He was trying to beat you through the intersection."

"Thank you for telling the truth, Ricky."

Patricia sounded forgiving, Kerry thought with annoyance. The boy deserved a good smack, and she hoped his father would give it to him when he got him home.

"Go see if Harlan needs to talk to you again," Ricky's father said, gesturing toward the deputy and the other boys.

"He's talking to the guys."

"Go on. If he doesn't want you, you can come back."

He waited until his son was out of earshot before he said more. Then he explained what had changed his mind. "I checked the filaments in your headlights. They were blackened, which means they were hot when the glass in the lights broke. There's no question that they were working until the crash. No question but that I owe you an apology too."

"You were upset. It's understandable. But what will happen to the boys?"

"For playing chicken and losing? Harlan will have to charge Freddy with something, but it could be as mild as 'Failure to Yield the Right of Way' unless you push it. Your car is a total loss."

"So is theirs. And I gather it belongs to Freddy's father."

For the first time, Kerry saw a smile on Alex York's craggy face. It made quite a difference, changing him from a villain into a hero, maybe. She wished she could see her mother's expression, but Patricia's back was to her.

"A classic T-bone crash," a new voice said. It was the deputy. "When you hit the brakes, you must have hydroplaned. Not able to stop?"

Patricia nodded, and holding out her hand, introduced herself.

"Well, Ms. Marcus-Odell, let's sit in the patrol car and keep out of the rain. I need some information from you. Just a few formalities. Hi, kids. You both okay?"

Kerry nodded, but Lyle suddenly found his voice and climbed over her lap to lean out the open window. "Can I sit in the patrol car too?"

"Sure. Come on."

There wasn't a lot of room, but while the deputy wrote up his accident report, Lyle happily explored. He discovered a radar gun, and a cowboy-style deputy's hat, which he promptly tried on. The moving lights on the police radio, scanning for transmissions over a half dozen channels, fascinated him.

Kerry found herself wishing she could be more like her little brother. He had already forgotten why they were sitting in the police car, and had no idea how many problems a wrecked car could create. For one thing, they now had no way to reach their destination. And no one had opened the trunk yet. What if all their things were smashed?

It was Mr. York who came to their rescue. While Harlan stayed on the scene to wait for Freddy's father and the tow trucks, Alex York put their luggage—which wasn't even dented—in the back of his truck and announced he would drive them wherever they wanted.

"It can't be too far," Patricia told him. "At least it didn't look as if we had much farther to go before we had the accident. I've rented a house for six months. It's in what the owner called an unorganized township."

"Whose house?"

"It belongs to a woman named Mabel Hilliard. Do you know her?"

Alex York looked startled, but he didn't explain why. After a moment he shrugged his shoulders and smiled again.

"I know her. I'd be glad to drive you there. It should take us about twenty minutes, unless the road's washed out again."