

Chapter One

Wilhelmina Quimbly paddled her kayak in the murky water that flowed next to the marsh grass on the south side of the Wilmington River. It was late morning and the rising tide was bringing her toward Skidaway Narrows. This small part of the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) was one of the most treacherous, poorly maintained and unsafe sections. It was downright deadly and she knew to be extra careful when entering the narrows.

Wilhelmina was on a photography expedition taking pictures of marsh critters, unusual landscapes and any weirdness she might encounter on her voyage. She slowed down to watch a tugboat pushing another tugboat down the ICW. The process was interesting and a bit odd, but not necessarily weird or unusual.

She'd seen tugs pushing boats around many times, but what caught her attention was the tug doing the pushing shined with its newness, but the aged tug being shoved forward was a rusty, corroded, ugly, used-up old boat. There wasn't even a captain at the helm or any crew. It was empty, gloomy, and cold; it was dead cold; it was a dead ship.

The big red 'X' spray painted on the portside, and the southerly direction meant only one thing; the forsaken ship was destined for the Ship Graveyard.

The scene made Wilhelmina sad. It was if she were watching a funeral coming toward her. It wasn't a happy New Orleans' funeral procession with dancing and music like in the French Quarter, but instead it was a mournful passing of something finished and deceased. It was the end of a purpose; it was something being tossed out with the garbage. The sight of the broken tug being pushed to the graveyard was heartbreaking.

As the two tugboats came closer Wilhelmina gently paddled her kayak close enough to get a good look-over at the abandoned ship.

On the right side, near the ship's bow, was the tugboat's name. It was faded and

scratched, but she could read it well enough; *Claire Buoyant*.

There were plenty of good photo shots for Wilhelmina, but she didn't think it proper or kindly to pick up her camera. To snap a photo of the dead ship seemed as morbid as old west photos of deceased cowboys with silver dollars on their eyeballs.

The death ship was silent in its passing. It was a ghost ship and so she wasn't at all surprised to see a ghost on-board.

Wilhelmina, being an apprentice shaman, knew a little about supernatural paranormal stuff. She wasn't a witch, but she was gifted with a sixth sense which, upon special occasions, gave her the ability to see spirits. And that's how she was able to see the apparition of a young woman standing on the ship's deck.

The people on the tugboat pushing *Claire Buoyant* couldn't hear or see what was happening, but Wilhelmina watched in amazement as the spirit stomped around madder than a hooked shark. The ghost waved her head, shook her fist, and howled like a Cat 5 Hurricane.

The ghost ship was pushed into Skidaway Narrows and passed by Wilhelmina without incident.

"Whoowee imaginary that!" Wilhelmina said to nobody but herself. She often talked to herself because that's how she came up with *Willie's Witticisms* that she shared with people whether they cared to hear them or not.

Wilhelmina decided she was going to share some of her wisdom with the US Coast Guard. She turned on her VHF (Very High Frequency) radio, pressed the voice button, and called the Tybee Station. "There's gonna be some big mean trouble off the Georgia coast," she said.

A quick reply came back. "What's the name of your vessel?"

"Solstice."

"What's your vessel's number?"

"No number, it's a kayak."

"What's the color of your vessel?"

"Red."

"How many souls on-board?"

Wilhelmina looked around and didn't see anyone except for herself. "One."

“Does everyone have a life vest?”

She always wore a life vest and answered a definite, 'yes'.

“Are there any EP's?”

“What?”

“EP, emergency provisions.”

She checked her waterproof pack and saw a backup battery for her camera. “Yep all covered.”

“What's the nature of your distress?”

“I'm not in trouble, you are!”

“Is this Willie?”

“Yes. Is that you Bert?”

“Yes. Willie get off channel sixteen. This channel is for emergencies only.”

“This is an emergency, I'm warning ya, there's some awful trouble coming in a big way and it's gonna be something of the likes that's never been seen before off the Georgia coast.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Paranormal.”

“Willie get off the emergency channel.”

“This is an emergency. Claire Buoyant ain't too happy about being dragged off to the Ship Graveyard. She ain't go'en down to the bottom of the sea all peaceful like.”

“Claire Buoyant? Is this one of your Willie Witticism? Claire Buoyant like being clairvoyant? Can you see into the future now Willie?”

“All I know is that trouble's coming.”

“Channel sixteen is for emergencies only. Switch to another channel or call us back when you're *really* in danger.”

Willie had irritated Bert. It wasn't good to have the US Coast Guard mad at ya. “No emergency Bert, at least no emergency *yet*. Sorry to bother y'all.” She clicked off the VHF and picked up her camera. She adjusted the lens to get a final view of the rusty tugboat and peered through the lens. With a minor camera adjustment she received a peaceful vision of herself guiding an educational workshop; *Way of the Shaman For Beginners*. She'd always thought that would be a fun thing to do.

Willie clicked a photo of *Claire Buoyant* being pushed down the ICW to the Ship Graveyard. A distant howl rose up from Skidaway Narrows. “Claaaaiirreeeeeee Buuuuuooooooyyyyaaaannntttt.”

An eerie shiver raced up Willie’s spine. It was like she’d done something really bad and her momma was coming after her with a wooden kitchen spoon.

She didn’t need to be clairvoyant to see the future; *Claire Buoyant* was going to come back from the dead.

Chapter Two

Earl didn’t know he was headed for disaster. He thought he was going to his favorite fishing spot up Red Bank Creek. He stood at the helm of his Carolina Skiff wearing his favorite orange fishing T-shirt, his baggy-butt shorts, five-dollar Wal-mart flip-flops and his lucky Atlanta Braves baseball cap. He had a bunch of shrimp in the live-well to use for bait and he had a ham sandwich for his lunch.

He was an experienced low country fisherman. All the fish east of Savannah trembled at the sound of his name, because they knew Earl was the biggest baddest meanest fisherman on the water.

He zipped past Turner Creek, passed the entry to Skidaway Narrows and headed past The Landings Harbor Marina. It was his last chance for fuel before he ventured out to his secret fishing hole, but Earl didn’t need fuel. He’d filled up at Thunderbolt Marina.

He was a fishing expert and knew all about tides, water currents, hidden shoals, unmarked sunken boats, and of course he knew exactly where the lost WWII Hydrogen Bomb was stuck in the mud off Tybee Island.

Earl was not looking for the Tybee Bomb today. He was looking for fish. He was determined to fish’em up, clean’em up, and fry’em up.

He slowed down as he entered his favorite marsh creek. He wasn’t worried about the

low tide because he was in a Carolina Skiff and that was just about the best boat ever. It had a flat hull and, when he tilted up the four-stroke 150 Mercury motor, he could maneuver easily in less than two feet of water.

Earl loved his boat. He loved it so much that he named it *Miss Darcy*, after the woman he loved, his wife. His boat was just as fine and as sweet as his wife. The motor purred as soft as her loving voice. It glided through the tidal creeks with as much grace and ease as Darcy did when she sashayed across Tubby's Tank House.

That's how they'd met. Darcy was a waitress there and she'd sauntered to his table, flipped open her tablet, clicked her pen, smiled and asked with the sweetest voice he'd ever heard, "What can I get ya handsome?"

At first all he wanted was the shrimp basket and a beer, then he wanted her phone number and a date, and then he wanted her to marry him. After that he wanted a cute little house in Thunderbolt, a washer, dryer, and a baby.

Earl arrived at his secret spot in Red Bank Creek. He turned off the motor and dropped anchor. He reached into the live well and put a squirming shrimp on each one of his three fishing lines. He cast them into the water and then sat back, relaxed and watched the sea gulls fly overhead as he waited for the first bite.

Earl didn't have to wait long for that first bite because, after all, this was his secret fishing hole and the fish were always biting.

At noon Earl's arms were tired from pulling up so many fish. At one o'clock he took his ham sandwich out of his lunch cooler.

He gazed over the horizon and frowned at the storm cloud headed his way. He was annoyed that a bit of rain might interfere with his perfect fishing day, but he didn't see any dangerous lightening and decided to ride out the approaching squall.

The slow-moving cloud had an unusual shape, and the more he studied it, the more it appeared to be a strange organized fog. The sinister mist was twenty-five feet high, thirty feet wide, and seventy-five feet long. It faded in and out of itself, and just when it appeared to form into something solid, the particles shifted and the mist changed. It hovered three feet over the water and morphed into weird eerie spooky shapes.

At first it looked like a huge crab with a foaming shifting evil mouth and nasty pincher claws. And then it became the dark shape of a nasty shark with sharp white teeth.

It changed into an angry slippery twisting eel and then into a big mouthed sting ray. And then it took on the huge shape of a tugboat.

The old rusted tug was dented and the paint chipped. It looked crashed and trashed.

The eerie ghostly tugboat's movement seemed to have a mind of its own. It had a mission and a purpose. And it was headed up Red Bank Creek directly at him.

The water around Earl's boat suddenly became a turmoil of rushing fish trying to escape the approaching evil fog. After the fish passed, harsh 70mph winds engulfed Earl, and he was trapped in a raging swirl of sinister darkness.

To keep from being blown overboard, he held on to his steering wheel. His lucky Braves hat was the first thing to go, followed by fishing poles number one, two, and three. His cooler whipped around like a Disney ride, and then his ham sandwich vanished upwards.

The box, where he kept all the fish he'd caught, sprung open and the fish were sucked up into the fog with a loud vacuum blast. All the bait shrimp were slurped out of live well and vanished into the mist.

His cherished tackle box, full of fishing line, hooks, weights, lures, and an assortment of secret fishing accessories broke open and blew away in the wind.

Earl's boat rocked back and forth and tilted from side to side. It spun around in the screaming winds. Shards of rust pelted Earl. The tiny pieces stuck in his face, arms, and legs. "Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!" he hollered. The wind squealed like a plugged bilge pump. Thunder rolled like a loud diesel engine.

A loud screeching noise, like fingernails on a chalkboard, cut the air. And then an angry wailing woman screamed out mournfully, "Claaaaire, Claaaaire, Buuuoooooyyaaaannntttt."

Chapter Three

Earl held on for dear life. He gripped the steering wheel so tight his fingers went numb. It felt like an eternity, but it only took five minutes until the sinister mist faded into nothingness and once again it was a beautiful sunny day.

The fishing cooler dropped out of nowhere and hit the deck with a dead-body thud. All the fish Earl had caught fell from the sky and littered the boat. The fish had eyeless heads and were bare white bones. Bait shrimp, cooked to a nice pink color and seasoned perfectly for a low county boil, showered down on Earl.

His lunch, the delicious ham sandwich, plopped on to the top of the 150 Mercury. Earl leaned over the motor, looked at his sandwich, and frowned to see a huge bite taken out. "What the heck?" he complained.

Fishing poles number one, two, and three crashed to the deck. The poles were broken, the lines tangled, and the reels jammed with twisted up fishing hooks. The tackle from his tackle box rained down on his head, and then the busted box bounced off his right shoulder.

Finally, Earl's lucky Braves hat drifted out of the sky and landed on his right foot. "What the heck." he mumbled in disbelief. And then with sudden realization that his precious Carolina Skiff might be wrecked he took a quick assessment of his boat. Other than rust specks on the windshield and deck, his boat appeared unharmed. He leaned over the side to see if there was any hull damage, and that's when he saw the most horrible face in the water looking at him!

"Ahhhhhh!" Earl screamed and jumped back. He shook his head to get the frightening image out of his mind, but the repulsive wretched face was something he'd never forget.

Beady bloodshot eyes bulged like dead fish eyeballs in the eerie pale white face. The teeth were huge and yellow stained against the bleached facial skin. The monster's hair was straight up in the air and as white as white could be. Whoever it was, whatever it

was, it was uglier than ugly, it was butt ugly!

Earl wasn't in the mood to fish anymore. He hauled up the anchor, turned the motor on, and got the hell out of Red Bank Creek.

He wasn't quite sure what had happened when the fog engulfed him, but he knew one thing, whatever it was, it wasn't good.

He sped back to Thunderbolt Marina. He got out of his boat, tied it to the dock, got into his truck and drove straight to Tubby's Tank House.

Earl's entrance to the seafood restaurant did not go unnoticed by the patrons. He was a regular. His wife was a waitress and almost everyone knew them both.

The people seated at the bar, in the booths, and at the tables stared at him as he crossed the dining room. They gawked wide-mouthed as he took a seat at the bar.

The bartender looked up from cleaning glasses in the sink. He nodded to Earl, looked back at the sink, and then, with concern, took a second look at Earl.

"Hey Nick, I want a whiskey straight up," Earl barked. He was not his usual friendly self. He was still shaken by the unusual events he'd experienced in Red Bank Creek.

Nick, the bartender, moved slowly and carefully. He kept a cautious eye on Earl as he poured a shot of whisky and, with one finger, pushed the glass close. He watched Earl drink and when Earl motioned for a refill, he obliged and then stepped back.

Earl drank it down and gasped in relief. It had been an unusually rough day.

Darcy came out of the kitchen carrying four meals balanced preciously on a flat platter. She saw Earl and let out a yelp. She missed a step, but did not drop her order for table six.

She leaned over to Earl as she passed and whispered, "What happened to you?"

"I don't know. It was really freaky."

"Stay right here. Don't you dare go anywhere!" Darcy warned. She hurried to table six, deposited the order, and then rushed back to Earl. "You look horrible."

"I feel okay."

"You look sick."

"I do?"

"Yes. Have you looked at yourself lately?"

“I have all these darn rust specks on me that I can’t brush off,” Earl said and showed her his speckled arms.

“Just go in the men’s room and try to clean up a bit will ya?” Darcy scolded and pointed to the men’s room.

Earl did as he was instructed and went to the men’s room. He washed his arms, but the speckles would not go away. He suddenly wondered if he had speckles on his face and looked in the mirror.

That was a big mistake.

Earl jumped back and screamed!

The horrible repulsive monster he’d seen in Red Bank Creek was in the mirror staring at him! He had bloodshot bulging dead fish eyeballs, a deathly white face, huge yellow stained teeth, and white stick-up hair.

And then, he heard a gentle amused laugh behind him. A woman’s voice softly whispered, “Claaaire Buuuoooyyyyaaaannnt.”

Earl screamed again!

Darcy ran in and found her husband in front of the mirror frantically trying to press down his bleached white stick-up hair.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh! She tried to kill me!” Earl yelled in a crazed high-pitched moan.

“Who? Who tried to kill you?” Darcy asked, doubtful anyone would want to kill Earl. He was a nice guy, a bit ugly and crazy at the moment, but a nice guy.

“Claire Buoyant,” he miserably whimpered. “Claire Buoyant tried to kill me.”