

THE RETURNING

By: P.L. Parker

A flash of vertigo assailed her as she stood on the sidewalk staring at the ancient manor. As if to intensify the sinister features of the dilapidated edifice, roiling storm clouds boomed with thunderous rage as angry spears of electric blasted from the mist. Dried leaves brushed her face as swirling gusts of wind robbed the trees of their last remaining adornments.

I hate fall, she thought. 'Tis a time of dying!

She'd come so far and this...this hideous structure was her final destination. Her knees shook, her hands trembled. Drawing a breath, she squared her shoulders. *Now was not the time for weakness!*

She pushed open the wrought-iron gate, wincing as her hands convulsed around the cold metal. Rusted hinges moaned beneath her fingertips as if to deny her intrusion. She took one step...and then another. Chipped and broken cobblestones covered by thick patches of wiry moss paved the way towards the structure.

As she neared the front door, prickles of awareness raced up her spine. She could sense the ancient evil lurking behind the shuttered windows, oozing through the cracks and holes, tainting the air with its putrid emanations.

The edifice was old, three hundred years or more, and decayed beyond repair. The new owners of the property wanted to rebuild—something

modern and fun, and the old building was scheduled for demolition. But whatever was in this place kept the workers from returning.

Why did I agree to this! It was said that the house had once been the residence of a malevolent witch or hoodoo woman who'd practiced her trade with vengeance on the surrounding population. The history of the house seethed with tales of murder and mayhem and few were brave enough to venture too near.

She drew a deep breath, steeling herself for the next step. Her lips twisted in a wry smile. *I'm here to force the entity to leave!* A medium with some following, she'd agreed and took the new owner's money before she'd researched the place. *I needed the money.* And now it was gone and her only recourse was to do the job she'd been paid to do.

Sweat ran in rivulets from her forehead, palms grew slick with moisture. Heart pounding in her breast, she reached for the door handle, twisting it before she had a chance to change her mind.

The door grated open and then caught on the warped floorboards. Stepping into the shadowy interior, she waited as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. The place was a disaster waiting to happen. Dusty spider webs hung from the ceiling fluttering in the slight breeze generated by the open entryway. Dirt and animal feces layered the moldering furnishings of a bygone era. Tattered lengths of rotting lace curtains billowed from the boarded-up windows. Dust motes spiraled up, caught in the puff of circulating air. But it was the knowledge the entity was very near that caused her heart to freeze. Foul secretions permeated the interior.

Her tongue swiped lips suddenly dry. Already afraid, sheer terror surged in a blinding rush.

She felt rather than heard the entity's wicked laughter. *It lives for terror!* She opened her senses, seeking the source of the being. Not upstairs. Not in the rooms leading off from the foyer. Below...in the basement.

I can't do this! Bitter bile rose in her throat causing her to gag. Again, the entity drew from her fear! Hideous howls of pure glee raged through her mind.

It's just stupid stuff made up by lazy workers, the new owners had said. Just a bunch of old wives' tales stirring the pot!

She knew better. She'd been in the presence of evil before, but nothing had prepared her for the malevolence lurking in this dreadful place. Compelled by a force not her own, she stumbled down the long hallway, drawn to a small door at the far end.

This is the entrance to hell! For long moments she stared at the door, every fiber of her being quaking with fright. *I wish Maman were here!* Maman was so much stronger that she would ever be and Maman would not have been so foolish.

With shaking hands, she gripped the handle, gasping as the door banged open. A ragged line of broken and rotted stairs led down into the darkness. She stepped on the first step. It groaned beneath her weight. Then another step.

Don't go down there or you'll never return, the voice of her long dead Maman hissed.

Blood pounded in her veins loud enough to hear. *I have no other choice, Maman!*

You do! Run before you are lost!

She reached the bottom of the stairs. The darkness seethed with the entity's evil presence. *Rage! Hate! Destruction!* The seething emotions hit her with full force, destroying the last reserves of strength and will.

Too long have you been away, the sibilant words slithered through her brain.

She bowed low. "I am here, Master."