

# **Barnum's Ghosts**

A Novel by **Warren Cook**

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**WEDNESDAY**

**Chapter One**

On a gray San Francisco morning in December 1977, Ted Cassidy walked the perimeter of Brooks Hall. He paused at intervals in the chilly, unheated exposition center to jot down revisions on the festival floor plan he held.

From the side entrance, a man stepped into view, his presence impossible to ignore. He looked as if he'd stepped straight from the pages of a Charles Dickens novel. About fifty, he wore a collared shirt, cravat, and a fitted coat with a watch chain gleaming across his vest.

As the man approached, Ted caught a faint whiff of tobacco and cologne.

“You’re Mr. Cassidy, the show producer, right?”

Ted nodded. “Right, I am. I see you’re already in costume for the festival.”

“These are my everyday clothes. Barnum’s the name. You may have heard of me.” He winked as if relishing the moment.

Ted masked a smile. He now took in the man’s features—his prominent nose, potbelly, and thinning hair retreating from a balding scalp. “Well, you do resemble the photos I’ve seen of him. Congratulations on your impressive getup. You must be exhibiting at our show this weekend. What’s your craft?”

The man’s expression sobered. “Do you believe in spirits, in ghosts?” he asked, changing the subject with an unsettling directness.

Ted took a step back. "I'm skeptical, though I've heard tales of haunted places, and plenty of folks say they've seen ghosts," he said, trying to keep the conversation light.

"Indeed, I am Phineas Taylor Barnum, a spirit bound—if but for a time—to the land of the living. But my good sir, I do not haunt! I come bearing an offer, an opportunity of incomparable worth for your grand enterprise. Partner with me, and I promise you an alliance that will bring both spectacle and fortune in its wake."

Ted's mind raced as he tried to make sense of the situation. "I don't think I need a partner at the moment." Yet, his aim aroused Ted's curiosity. "What are you proposing?"

Grinning, the man declared, "I have examined your newspaper notices—and, I must say, these miraculous television advertisements of yours! The billing declares: 'Enter a 19th Century Village Fair.' Worthy impresario, such a claim demands authenticity. With my expertise, I shall promise—and deliver. Your patrons will step into yesteryear, as if plucked from the present and set down into an age of wonders and grand achievements long past."

Ted wasn't sure whether to laugh or question it—but he played along. "Great, you've seen our ads. I wanted to distinguish my event from all the other art and craft fairs popping up. I added the 19th-century theme this year and asked my artists to dress in 1800s outfits."

"Capital! Permit me to elucidate—by means most extraordinary, I have summoned forth, from beyond the veil, the spirits of renowned actors, artists, and inventors of the bygone century. These illustrious souls, ever eager to grace the stage anew or unveil their masterworks once more, stand ready to astonish and delight.

"Your grand exhibition and my spectral performers—why, sir, the match is nothing short of providential!"

He's some kind of screwball, Ted thought. *How did he get through the locked doors?*

“I read the disbelief on your face, Mr. Cassidy. Very understandable. When I was alive, if a being told me he was a ghost, I’d have laughed and said *prove it*.”

Ted folded his arms across his chest, scrutinizing the man. “Can you?”

"Indeed, I can, sir! If not incontrovertible proof, then at the very least, a most compelling curiosity. I'll bring by Mark Twain and Vincent van Gogh. You are doubtless familiar with their likenesses. Well, they've chosen to manifest in the very forms they favored in their heyday, those they wish to *relive*, which is not the word for it, but you catch my drift.”

Ted nodded.

"I shall return within the hour. In the meantime, I entreat you—ponder well how these most distinguished spirits might grace your stage or exhibit their marvels before your audience this very weekend. The opportunity, I assure you, is unparalleled!"

With that, the man turned and glided across the cement floor—his polished shoes making no sound—and vanished through the side entrance.

Ted checked his watch, realizing the morning was slipping away. Soon the decorator would arrive to install pipe and drape and power for the booths of the Fifth Annual San Francisco *Autumnfest*. Shaking off the odd encounter, Ted continued his rounds through the subterranean exhibition hall, stopping now and then to pencil additional modifications to his festival floor plan.

He frowned as he reflected on why his shows weren't as successful this year as he'd hoped. Despite incorporating the 19th-century theme into his fairs, attendance the last three weekends—in San Diego, Sacramento, and Seattle—showed little improvement from last year.

Committed to boosting the sales of the artists and craftspeople at his festival, Ted wondered what else he could do. *Hell, I'm spending thousands of dollars on advertising. And I don't begin to believe this Barnum crackpot and his offer of 'ghosts from the spirit world.'*

Ted finished crossing the hall and climbed the stairs to his show office—a functional space with minimal furnishings: two old steel desks and a few folding chairs on one side, and three Formica-top tables on the other. Adjacent to it, a compact room with a modest desk and chair served as Ted's ticket manager's workspace. The linoleum underfoot, yellowed with age, released a musty smell that clung to the air.

Rachel Williams, his assistant, had arrived and was showing a man from Pacific Bell where she wanted the office phone installed. She wore a San Francisco State sweatshirt, Levi's, and Birkenstocks—the outfit of a twenty-year-old college student. She looked up and smiled at Ted.

"I'm glad you're here," he said. "I met the strangest fellow in the hall."

"I only got here a few minutes ago. So, you met someone?"

"Yeah—he introduced himself as P. T. Barnum, the famous showman from a century ago. The weirdest thing was he looked just like the old photos we've seen of him—tall, balding, down to the collared shirt, tie, vest, coat, and watch chain. And he spoke in an old-fashioned, flamboyant way, turning every sentence into a promotion for himself."

"Must be one of our new exhibitors in the San Francisco show."

"That's what I asked him. But he claimed he was the ghost of Barnum. And that he wanted to be my partner this weekend."

"Far out! Having Barnum's ghost as your partner would be great PR. What else did he say?"

Ted rubbed his forehead, trying to make sense of it all. “He said he could bring together spirits of famous performers and artists from the 1800s; that they longed to perform again or show off their paintings or other artworks. And he said he’ll return with the ghosts of Vincent van Gogh and Mark Twain.”

Rachel’s eyes widened. “Can’t wait to meet them!”

“I know you’re joking,” Ted said, then grinned. “I guess we’ll find out later who he really is.”

Having set up the phone, the installer left. Rachel began unpacking boxes filled with show supplies she’d brought from the festival’s central office.

“Here, let me help you with that,” Ted said.

On show days at *Autumnfest*, exhibitors were offered a complimentary breakfast of coffee and donuts. Ted unpacked a crate holding coffee essentials: two large urns, cans of coffee, styrene cups, sugar packets, creamers, and stir sticks. He laid them out on a table near the office entrance.

Ted glanced at Rachel, memories drifting back to their first meeting two years ago. He had contacted the placement office at San Francisco State, searching for a temporary assistant. Rachel—petite, pretty, and Black—was the first to respond.

He couldn’t quite recall whether he hired her because of her sharp mind, her effortless charm, or because something in him knew he needed a voice and face unlike his own in his office. But one thing stood out in his memory—he had offered her the job on the spot.

At 8:00, Ted heard the rumble of the decorator’s truck rolling down the ramp and into the hall. He grabbed his revised floor plan, descended the stairs, and walked across to the entrance at the foot of the ramp. He shook hands with Chuck Parker, the owner of Bay-Area Expo Services.

Chuck looked in his early forties and was trim—*likely the result of all the walking and hauling he does setting up and taking down trade and consumer show*, Ted thought.

The decorator and his crew would spend the rest of Wednesday erecting pipes and drapes and laying out electrical lines for the 300 festival booths. Ted spread the plan on the truck's hood, showing Chuck where he wanted the booths set. He asked him to leave extra pipe, drape, and power cords for last-minute sign-ups.

Another man dressed in past-century costume appeared midway down the ramp. He wore a wool suit, a vest, a high-collared shirt, a tie, and a derby hat—complete with a styled mustache. As he approached, covering the last stretch of the incline, Ted felt a sudden drop in temperature and an immediate sense of unease.

"Hello, Mr. Cassidy! Word reaches me that you are the promoter of this weekend's grand festival. Permit me an introduction: I am the spirit of Dr. Henry Gordon, once of Chicago, where I plied my trade during the famed World's Fair of 1893. There, I devised a most remarkable remedy—*Dr. Gordon's All-Pain-Relief Elixir*. I would be most pleased to offer it to your patrons. Alas, I can only mix it in ghost form, which would be useless to your people. But providence has led me to a capable pharmacist in San Francisco who can follow my formula to the letter. If you might grant me a modest space, sir, I should be forever in your debt."

Ted blinked, trying to process the man's words. *How am I attracting these kooks?*

"Whoa, you've said a mouthful." "I think you and your friend P. T. Barnum have come here to play a prank on me—pretending to be spirits and asking to join the show. Is this some kind of joke? Or a dare?"

"I never had the honor of making Mr. Barnum's acquaintance, yet he was the foremost showman of my era. Word reached me through spirit channels he was assembling artists and

actors of distinction for your grand *Autumnfest*. I petitioned him at once, but alas, he declined—insisting he sought no vendors of wares. And so, Mr. Cassidy, I turn to you in hopes that you might grant me a place within your most illustrious gathering."

Ted's gaze sharpened, suspecting that there was something deeper at play. "I haven't discussed with the Barnum lookalike how his "spirits" could take part this weekend. Plus, I can't have an exhibitor selling an *elixir* here. I won't risk customers getting sick and suing me because I allowed an unproven patent medicine into the show. No, I'm afraid not."

Dr. Gordon sighed. "I am much obliged to you for granting me this audience. I shall endeavor to find another means by which to partake in your festival. It is my earnest wish to make myself known to your modern-day exhibitors and patrons and to share with them my tale."

Ted noted that the man's eyes would not meet his. "Very well, Dr. Gordon," he said.

Gordon tipped his hat, turned, and ambled up the ramp until he vanished from sight. A cold haze and a slight medicinal scent lingered in his wake.

Ted shook his head over these two "19th-century" personalities. *If it's a practical joke, I can't see the point. And I don't want to consider they're spirits.* "Humbug!" *Barnum would say.*

He made his way back to the show office, his mind buzzing with the morning's strange events. As he neared the stairway, the sound of Hope Wolcott's voice floated toward him—and brought a smile to his face.

Last year, he and Hope—a talented 24-year-old potter in his festivals—had gone from casual dating to a full-blown relationship. After the 1976 San Francisco show, he'd proposed, and she'd answered without hesitation: "Of course!" They planned to marry in the spring of 1978.

Ted had left his rental in Kings Beach and moved with his Labrador, Clyde, into Hope's house in Point Reyes Station. It had everything they needed for now, including her pottery studio and kiln. They hoped to find a new place soon, closer to Ted's San Francisco office, but still with space for her work.

With those thoughts swirling, he stepped into the workspace. His bride-to-be wore bell-bottom jeans, Hush Puppies, and a bright green-and-white striped blouse. She'd tied her strawberry blond hair in a ponytail with a red ribbon.

*Boy, she looks terrific. And here's me—old jeans, old sneakers, and a faded-out flannel shirt. Well, they say opposites attract.*

Hope looked up and beamed at him. "I just arrived," she said in her usual cheery voice. "Rachel and I are talking about how the *Autumnfest* shows the past three weekends went well for some artists, but not so great for others."

Ted jumped in. "Even though my 19th-century theme so far hasn't brought in as many customers as I'd hoped for, here in San Francisco we'll benefit from the following we've built over the past four years. And we're on the first weekend in December—perfect timing for Christmas shopping."

"No one can accuse you of losing your confidence," Hope said.

Ted shrugged. *I am worried. But I'll keep that to myself.*

He turned to his assistant. "Did you tell Hope about the man I met—the guy who says he's P. T. Barnum's ghost?"

"No. I didn't get a chance to bring it up."

"I will then. But now another character has appeared." He repeated to Hope what he'd shared with Rachel. To both, he related his strange encounter with Dr. Gordon.

“Wow, you’ve met two ghosts in one morning!” Hope exclaimed.

“I’m so lucky. And remember, this Barnum said he’d be back here with more.”

Right on cue, the man who claimed to be Barnum swept into the show office, accompanied by two others. “As promised, I present to you the illustrious spirits of none other than Mr. Samuel Clemens, whom the world knows as Mark Twain, and the esteemed Vincent van Gogh. Call them ghosts if you wish, but I assure you, gentlemen of their caliber transcend such a mundane label.”

Ted wiped at his eyes, wondering if his mind was playing tricks on him.

But whatever this was, it felt real enough to stir something deep—and Ted sensed his world beginning to shift. *Autumnfest* might yet become the spectacle he’d always dreamed of.

## Chapter Two

Ted took in the sight before him. The resemblance between these *ghostly* characters and their historical counterparts was uncanny. They looked like the photographs he'd seen of Mark Twain—white suit, flowing white hair, mustache—and the self-portraits of van Gogh—thin body, angular face, red hair and beard.

Barnum gestured toward his companions with a proud smile. "My friend, I am delighted to inform you that the esteemed Mr. Mark Twain is eager to regale your guests with a lecture of his own devising, after which he shall entertain their inquiries with his usual wit and wisdom. Meanwhile, the gifted Mr. Vincent van Gogh desires a space in which to exhibit his paintings, keen to see how your patrons respond to his work. And speaking of Vincent—have you observed? He still possesses both ears! "

To Ted, the two "spirits" appeared more like robots. In sync, they bowed, smiled, and said, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Cassidy," without offering a hand to shake.

Nodding in disbelief, trying to process the bizarre situation, Ted said, "I don't have any idea how you found these dead ringers—heck, even yourself. We're set for this weekend's festival, but they might add something *next year*. How much money are you asking?"

Barnum chuckled with a conspiratorial tone. "Ah, but sir, you mistake our intentions! We ghosts have no need for earthly coin—what use is money to those who dwell beyond the veil? No, as I've said, what we seek is far more precious: a grand stage upon which to dazzle, booths from which to display our finest works, and—most importantly—your audience, their eyes wide with wonder! And mind you, thus far, you've made the acquaintance of but three among us. There are more. Oh, indeed, there are many more!"

"Four. I met a Dr. Gordon a while ago. He said you were refusing anyone who wanted to sell products."

"I have communicated with a great many spirits, all eager to lend their talents to your grand festival! Some, I must admit, I've had to turn away for fear they might not suit the occasion. But as for this Dr. Gordon you mention? I must confess, his name rings no bell."

Ted frowned, recalling the strange encounter. "No problem. I told him he couldn't sell his elixir here."

"Splendid! Now, if you'll indulge me, allow me to announce the most illustrious spirits I had hoped you might welcome to *this year's* spectacle.

"For your grand stage: the legendary Buffalo Bill, thundering in on horseback! Sarah Bernhardt, swooning as Camille! Harry Houdini—escaping the inescapable" One by one, he unveiled a parade of illustrious 19th-century performers. "And rest assured, my friend—the roster is far from complete!"

"I must admit, you've impressed me," Ted said. "But I still doubt the existence of ghosts."

Barnum grinned. “Wait. In due time, you shall come to believe in all of us.” Barnum began counting on his fingers. “We’ll also need booths—one for Vincent, naturally, and several more for my other renowned painters.

“And room for my sculptors, inventors, and visionaries of every sort.” As he spoke, Barnum rattled off one celebrated 19th-century figure after another with theatrical flair.

The images of these celebrities flickered through Ted's mind like a rapid slideshow, each one distinct yet fleeting.

“Amazing! But they’d be competing with my artists for customer sales.”

Barnum shook his head. “Ah, but no, my good man, they shall not! The masterpieces your audience knows—the celebrated works of these famed artists—reside in museums and private collections, their earthly forms long claimed. What we present here are but *phantasms* of those originals! Even the pieces they create anew during the festival—why, those too shall be *ghostly* works of art, shimmering echoes of genius past.”

“That’s better.”

Barnum spread his arms. “We’ll also honor the literary greats, the makers of beauty, the champions of craft. As for myself—I shall require a booth to honor the splendor of the *1893 Columbian Exposition*—a world’s fair like no other. Though," he added with a mischievous grin, "I may see fit to include a few curiosities from my own *American Museum*, just to keep things lively.”

Ted held up a hand, overwhelmed by the sheer scope of Barnum’s plan. “Enough already! This sounds intriguing. And you and I will have an *entire* year to prepare.”

Barnum's eyes gleamed with anticipation. "A year? My dear fellow, why wait? I aim to present you with these celebrity spirits *this weekend!* Just imagine the media frenzy they would stir!

"I'm not sure if newspaper and TV editors would believe all that."

Barnum waved off the concern. "Believe me, we need only lure in one or two—once they witness this, the story will spread like wildfire. I assure you, I know how the game is played. Did I not command every paper in town to sing the praises of my acts? General Tom Thumb, the smallest marvel of his time! Jenny Lind, the divine Swedish Nightingale! Jumbo the Elephant, the grandest beast to walk the earth! Millions flocked to them because I made certain they *had to see for themselves*. And, my dear Ted, I promise you—we shall do the same."

Ted couldn't deny the appeal of the idea, but remained cautious. "I'm counting on my own publicity bringing in crowds this weekend."

"And how is that going?"

"It's only Wednesday. I should have a good read on it by tomorrow."

Barnum chuckled. "Ah! Then I shall remain ever the optimist. I daresay you may come around yet. In fact, I've already told my spirits to be at the ready—just in case fortune smiles upon them *here!*"

"Understood. Back to your entertainers—you said you wanted your acts to perform on *our stage?*"

"I ask but for a single day—Saturday, if you please, owing to its longer hours. Your regular performers shall have their time on Friday and Sunday, undisturbed. And let us not forget—our grand spectacle shall cost you *not a penny!* No wages lost—merely a shift in

schedule. A single day's stage surrendered in the name of *history, mystery, and marvel*. Now tell me, my friend, is that not a most *profitable* bargain?"

Throughout their exchange, Hope had stood shaking her head. She leaned to Ted and whispered, "It sounds exciting."

"Too good to be true."

"With the stage, maybe you should bring Nick into this," she said.

Ted agreed, his mind already racing ahead. "Right."

Rachel wore a huge grin; she'd caught the showman's enthusiasm. "Ted, like Barnum said, if he produced all these personalities, you'd have terrific PR opportunities."

Before Ted could respond, the sound of gunshots reverberated through the hall, sending a shock of adrenaline through him. Ted bolted from the office, his heart pounding. With only a few rows of drapes installed by the decorator so far, he had a clear view across the vast hall.

At the rear, he spotted a man dressed in fringed buckskin, his cowboy hat pulled low. Ted saw that the leather of his attire hung loosely on his sturdy frame, and his boots reached up to mid-thigh. Beside him stood a woman clad in a vintage dress and a wide-brimmed hat, holding a rifle. Ted watched as the man tossed up objects. The woman, looking focused and poised, raised her rifle, and with each shot the airborne targets shattered mid-flight, displaying her impressive marksmanship.

It took Ted several moments to grasp what was unfolding. Hope and Rachel stepped onto the landing beside him, their faces etched with fear. Then, shaking off his shock, Ted straightened, found his voice, and bellowed, "Stop!" Without hesitation, he rushed down the stairway and ran toward the two.

The woman lowered her rifle and smiled at Ted's approach. "Just keepin' my aim sharp for the fair. Name's Annie Oakley, and this here's a piece of my act."

The man beside her gave a sweeping tip of his hat. "And I'm Buffalo Bill. Pleased to make your acquaintance. This little lady's the finest shot in the world—and the brightest star of my Wild West show!"

Ted was still reeling from the gunfire. Yet, he felt a rush of excitement about these "ghostly characters." Despite his doubts about their authenticity, the possibility of presenting 19th-century celebrities hinted at something extraordinary on the horizon.

"You folks are doing a great job acting as personalities from the past," Ted said to the pair who mirrored the photos he'd seen of them in books.

"We're not actors, my friend," replied the Buffalo Bill look-alike. "We're genuine spirits from the last century. Mr. Barnum himself reached out to us—along with a host of other entertainers and artists—inquiring whether we might wish to journey forward in time, to take part in a grand fair for a weekend in the year 1977. Well now, Annie and I needed no persuadin'—we told Barnum right then and there that we would be delighted to oblige!"

Ted smiled, though his mind whirred with uncertainty. "I'll play along with your story for the sheer novelty of it. Heck, for the excitement of it."

Yet, doubt lingered and he felt compelled to add, "But we're talking about next year. Everything is in place for this weekend. But even for next December, we'd need some sort of agreement. For one, we'd have to find a way for you, Annie, to show off your sharpshooting skills without endangering anyone."

Annie gave him a confident grin. "Bill and I guarantee it won't be a problem."

“Follow me to our show office. The actors playing Barnum, Mark Twain, and Vincent van Gogh are already there.”

When he arrived back at the office, Ted noticed that the “ghosts” Barnum had brought earlier had loosened up and were now chatting with Hope and Rachel. Bill and Annie greeted the women and the other “spirits.” No handshakes. *I guess ghosts—or at least those portraying them—can choose to appear with physical attributes, but not shaking hands must be part of their act.*

As Ted glanced at Mark Twain’s ‘spirit,’ his mind wandered to his favorite of the author’s works: *Huckleberry Finn*. He had read it twice—once as a teenager, around 15 or 16, and then again just a few months ago at 34. It seemed like two different books. The first time, it was simply a fun adventure with Huck and Jim; now, he saw it as a powerful critique of the way people lived and thought in the South before the Civil War.

"I'm phoning Nick DeMartini, our master of ceremonies," Ted said to Barnum, pulling himself back to the present. "I'll see if he can come meet you."

Ted dialed the number. "Nick, it's me. We've had quite the fascinating turn of events over here." He then launched into a recounting of the morning's extraordinary occurrences.

For a moment, silence hung on the other end of the line. Then Nick spoke. "Ted... what on earth are you smoking? That's the wildest tale you've ever tried to sell me."

"I'm not making it up. Hey, I can put Hope and Rachel on the phone to confirm it."

"Okay. Debbie is in school until 3:00. It's 10:00 now. I'll be there as quick as I can."

Nick arrived at 10:30 dressed in a Golden State Warriors T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. In his early thirties, Nick, with his new TV series role, was taking care of himself; his beer belly

had disappeared. Today, he wore glasses instead of the contacts he used when acting or emceeing at *Autumnfest*.

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Barnum approached Nick with a flourish, offering a slight bow. “Ah, a pleasure indeed, Mr. DeMartini!”

“Just Nick, please. You must be Phineas T. Barnum. Your costume and makeup are impressive—as are your friends here.”

Barnum let out a hearty chuckle. “Costume? Makeup? My good man, I assure you, neither paint nor powder has touched our faces, and these garments are what people of my era would wear in the course of the day. But come, let me introduce you to my esteemed companions!”

After making the introductions, Barnum clasped his hands together with enthusiasm. “Now then, I told Ted I aimed to be his partner for the weekend—though, if I’m to be honest, I may have let my flair for exaggeration run away with me yet again. Thus far, he has not granted us leave to appear this year, insisting we wait until the next.”

“That’s what he mentioned to me. Still, it’s great to talk now.”

Barnum leaned in. “Nick, here’s what I propose—one grand day, a full spectacle on your stage! You, of course, would remain the master of ceremonies, but I should like to take a turn introducing each act, lending it that *certain something* only I can provide.”

Nick crossed his arms. “That’s asking a hell of a lot.”

Barnum grinned. “Yes, indeed it is! But in return, I promise you and your audience a spectacle like no other! A day of marvels, of legends come to life!” With that, Barnum launched into his grand pitch, recounting for Nick the dazzling all-star lineup he had shared with Ted.

As they spoke, Barnum heard piano music coming from the hall. His expression brightened, and he stepped outside the office onto the landing above the stairway leading to the exhibition floor. Nick followed.

From their vantage point, they had a clear view of the festival's Main Stage—a wooden platform, large enough to host a variety of performances, elevated a few feet for visibility. Tall curtains spanned the rear.

On the stage, a Black man in a navy blue suit, white dress shirt, and bow tie was playing an upright piano. He performed a familiar tune, “The Entertainer”.

Barnum gestured toward the stage. “Behold, the spirit of Scott Joplin himself—a true genius of his time. And lest we forget, *that* very melody sprang from *his* fingertips!”

Nick walked down the stairs and leaned against the wall. Barnum smiled as he noticed Nick absorbed in Joplin’s performance. After playing three more ragtime pieces, Scott stood up from the piano and departed.

Another spirit—a woman dressed in a white satin bodice and skirt—stepped onto the stage, accompanied by a gentleman in formal attire who took a seat at the piano.

Barnum descended the stairs and joined Nick. “And now, my friend, prepare yourself for the voice that once enchanted all of Europe—none other than the great Jenny Lind.”

“My turn,” Jenny said. She sang a set of scales and then delivered a song in a beautiful soprano voice. Lind went on to sing two more numbers.

“I don’t know these songs,” Nick said to Barnum. “But I have to admit, she makes each thrilling to listen to.”

Lind transitioned to a song Nick said he did recognize: “Evergreen”, the popular Barbra Streisand song from the 1977 movie *A Star Is Born*.

Barnum turned to Nick. “Well now, tell me—what do you make of my performers from the past? My *spirit* entertainers?”

“Unbelievable. The woman’s voice is out of this world. And the man before her played the best ragtime I’ve ever heard. I admit to being fascinated with these actors of yours playing entertainers from another time.”

“Actors? Oh no, my good fellow! I have proclaimed them—and my exhibitors as well—*Barnum’s 19th Century Celebrity Spirits!* A fitting title, wouldn’t you agree? Rolls off the tongue quite nicely.”

Nick smiled at Barnum. “Catchy—you’re playing the showman famous for coining slogans. But I’m not enthusiastic about giving your performers a full day on stage at the expense of ours. I’ll talk with Ted about it, but I’m glad it won’t happen until next year.”

Barnum tipped his hat. “Much obliged, Nick. I’ve given this matter great thought, and I daresay, it’s the course that shall serve *all* interests best.”

With that, Barnum hopped up the stairs and into the show office. A moment later, he and his four “spirits” exited the room and vanished through a door into the Plaza above.

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Nick walked back into the office and shared with Ted the performances of ‘Scott Joplin’ and ‘Jenny Lind’ he’d just witnessed.

“I heard them. So, how did your conversation with ‘Barnum’ go?”

“Good. He almost has me believing in his ghosts, or spirits, as he calls them.”

“I can’t say that I do. But it doesn’t matter. Next year, we can promote them as ‘spirits from the past.’” *And they might be the key to attracting the larger audience I’ve been aiming for.*

“He’s calling them *Barnum’s 19th Century Celebrity Spirits.*”

“Sounds kinda sexy. I guess we could work with that.”

Hope and Rachel joined the conversation.

“Whether or not they’re ghosts, I’d love to meet all the artists and inventors Barnum mentioned,” Hope said. “I wonder if Vincent van Gogh and Mary Cassatt would paint in their booths? And if Thomas Edison would bring his original creations?”

“You’d need to call the papers and TV stations and let them know about your spectacular additions,” Rachel added.

“You’re absolutely right,” Ted said. “You’re always thinking of the publicity angle.” *But all of Barnum’s actors playing ghosts would need to show up. If not, the media could turn around and bite us in the ass.*

Nick left at 2:30 to pick up his daughter from school. Hope remained to help Rachel. Later, the two women walked the show aisles distributing sheets of paper—each marked with an exhibitor’s name and booth number—to help artists find their spaces on move-in the next day, Thursday.

By 5:00, Chuck Parker and his crew had finished installing pipe and drape and laying out the electrical cables for the booths. Chuck told Ted he’d return at 7:00 the next morning to fill special orders from exhibitors for carpeting, extra drapes, or additional lighting.

“I’m heading home,” Rachel said to Ted. “I have homework due tomorrow.”

“Can’t believe you’re working full blast with the show—and taking classes at SF State,” he remarked.

Rachel grabbed her coat, exited the office and the hall, and headed toward the BART train station.

“Let’s you and me go too. I’m starving,” Ted said to Hope. They pulled on their jackets, locked the office, and stepped out into a cloudy twilight. The streets still hummed with activity.

The couple walked a block to the San Franciscan on Market Street. They made their way through the lobby of the old hotel, with its spacious, high ceilings and polished marble floors, then took the elevator to the third floor and headed to their room. It was simple, with a double bed, a wooden dresser, two upholstered armchairs, and a patterned carpet that had seen better days. Each took a shower and changed into nicer clothes for the evening—Hope, a dress, and Ted, slacks and a sports shirt.

“Where do you want to eat?” Ted asked as they exited the hotel.

“How about Tommy’s Joynt? We haven’t been there in a while. They have great food, and we don’t need a reservation.”

“Perfect,” Ted agreed, slipping his arm around her as they set off.

The two crossed Market, walked along Grove Street past Civic Center Plaza and City Hall, then turned up Van Ness Avenue for several blocks past the opera house, car dealerships and small shops to Geary Boulevard and Tommy’s Joynt.

Inside, it was as if Ted and Hope had stepped back several decades. The Hofbrau-style restaurant featured old neon signs, Tiffany lamps hanging from the ceiling, checkered red and white tablecloths, shelves filled with quirky knick-knacks, and a well-stocked bar. The air was rich with the comforting aroma of roast meats, pickles, warm bread, and decades of beer-soaked wood.

The couple lined up at the cafeteria-style counter, and when it came their turn, Ted ordered buffalo stew and a Heineken, while Hope opted for a corned beef sandwich and a

cappuccino. They found a cozy corner to sit, the surrounding atmosphere lively with the chatter of other diners.

Ted took a sip of his beer, stirred his stew, and let out a quiet sigh.

“You’re rather quiet tonight,” Hope said.

He looked up. “I know. I’ve had something on my mind—it’s my mom’s birthday.”

“That explains it. How old would she have been today?”

“Fifty-eight,” Ted said. “She died way too young.”

“Yes. It’s only been a couple of years since that awful car accident.”

Ted’s thoughts drifted back to that devastating day—the call informing him that his mother had been killed when a drunk driver veered across the center line on Highway 287 and struck her car head-on. She was just minutes from home in Lander, Wyoming. Tears welled in his eyes.

Hope reached over, took his hand in hers, and kissed the tears from his cheek.

Ted gave a small shake of his head and smiled at her. “At least I’ve got a boatload of wonderful memories.”

He finished the last of his stew and drained his beer.

After dinner, they strolled along Polk Street toward their hotel. Even though it was a Wednesday evening, the street was bustling with people. Dive bars, cafes, delis, and upscale restaurants each attracted their distinct customers. Bookstores, record shops and thrift stores were still open at this hour, which added to the bohemian vibe of the neighborhood.

As they weaved through the crowd on the sidewalk, Ted turned to Hope and said, “I have to admit, I’m worried about our attendance this weekend.”

“You haven’t had much media attention, have you?”

“Nope, lots of advertising, but no newspaper stories. Just mentions in their event listings. We’ve got our ads running on Channel 12, but I haven’t had success getting them to commit to covering the festival on Friday.”

“That was Barnum’s biggest pitch—adding PR for your show.”

“Exactly,” Ted agreed, his mind racing with possibilities. “In fact, if there aren’t any articles about us in tomorrow’s papers, I’m considering adding in Barnum’s artists but not his entertainers.”

Hope slipped her hand into his as they walked. “You know best, honey.”

Ted fell silent, lost in thought. The quiet between them was comfortable, filled with the unspoken understanding of a couple who knew each other well.

They continued on to the hotel and headed up to their room. Once inside, the mood changed. The stress of the day melted away as they embraced and kissed, their touches becoming more intense as they undressed one another. Even after a year together, their passion hadn't dimmed, and they made love with the same intensity as if it were the first time, their connection deep and undeniable.

Ted drifted off to sleep thinking about his mother and their home in Lander

But hours later, he was jolted awake by a nightmare. In it, crowds of people wandered aimlessly across Civic Center Plaza—the park above Brooks Hall. The crucial ramp that connected the Plaza to the expo hall had vanished. Below, all his artists sat patiently in their booths, waiting for customers who never came.

Ted’s heart pounded as he lay there, hoping this unsettling vision wouldn’t come true.

## THURSDAY

### Chapter Three

Ted and Hope rose at 6:00 on Thursday morning and pulled on work clothes: jeans, flannel shirts, and sneakers. Next stop, the lobby, where the hotel gift stand was open and selling the day's local newspapers. Ted bought the San Francisco Chronicle, Oakland Tribune, and San Jose Mercury. They made their way to the hotel restaurant, the aroma of brewing coffee greeting them as they entered.

The couple sat down for breakfast, and Ted began thumbing through the papers.

"I can't find articles on *Autumnfest* in either the Tribune or the Mercury, only our ads. But here's an item in the entertainment section of the Chronicle."

"Well, that's something," Hope said.

"Damn! Not something good. It reads:

"Autumnfest returns to Brooks Hall, Civic Center, San Francisco, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. This year, it's billed: Enter a 19th-Century Village Fair. This sounds rather silly for an arts and crafts event with modern-day artisans. What will they add—pony rides, sheep and pig judging, a carousel, some old-time carnival acts?"

"Then it gives the times and admission prices, and that's it."

"That's discouraging. What's your next step, Ted?"

Ted pushed his plate aside, no longer interested in finishing his breakfast. “I have to do what’s best for my artists and customers. I need to save the show!”

“You’re being overdramatic,” Hope said.

“It’s time for high drama. I’m going to find Barnum.”

They stepped outside the hotel, greeted by the moment between first light and sunrise, where fading stars marked the edge of night and day. The air was cool, prompting them to pull on their jackets.

Hope left to get her van from the parking lot behind the hotel.

Ted crossed the street and made his way through Civic Center Plaza. Its walkways, lawns, and symmetrical rows of trees were only faintly visible, bathed in soft grays and pale pinks. At the far end, City Hall stood tall, its iconic dome casting a long shadow over the park.

He reached the broad ramp that led to the loading area in front of the hall entrance and hurried down. Designed to accommodate dozens of vehicles during exhibitor move-ins and move-outs, the area offered an abundance of space.

It was already 7:00, and some fifteen artists in their trucks, vans, and cars greeted Ted, eager to unload and set up their booths. Though their engines were off, the air still carried the oily musk of lingering exhaust fumes. He requested hall staff to retract the sliding glass doors at the entrance, creating an expansive eighty-foot entryway for easy access.

Barnum appeared. *Out of nowhere*. He was dressed in the same sharp clothes he’d worn yesterday.

“A fine morning to you, Ted! I had a notion you might be seeking me out.”

Ted, momentarily startled, nodded. “Yes, I am. After much thought, I’d love to have your actors portraying artists, inventors, and writers participate in Autumnfest this weekend.”

“Splendid! You have my gratitude! But tell me—what of my *extraordinary* performers?”

“As outstanding as they are, we’re completely set. I’ll try to fit in at least some of them next year.”

Barnum sighed, placing a hand over his heart. “Ah, a disappointment, to be sure—but a gentleman knows when to take a gracious step back. Very well, then! I shall rally my exhibitors at once. Now, tell me, will you be ringing up the newspapers and television stations to herald the arrival of *Barnum’s Spirits*?”

Ted glanced around, already imagining the impact this would have on the event. “I will once I’ve seen they’re set up.”

“Excellent! And where, pray tell, shall you be placing us?”

Chuck Parker had arrived with one of his crew. “We have spare space at the back of the hall. I’ll ask our decorator to add twelve extra booths for your exhibitors.”

Ted approached Chuck and explained where to place the booths. The decorator, his assistant, and Barnum headed out.

Hope arrived and drove her 1970 Ford Econoline down the ramp and parked. She exited the van, swung open its rear doors, and removed her cart. With Ted lending a hand, they loaded it with shelves, folding tables, and several wooden crates packed with her ceramics. Together, they made their way toward her booth in the festival’s first aisle—Hope leading the way, Ted pushing the cart close behind.

Ted shared his recent conversation with Barnum. “He seemed to know I was going to take his invitation.”

Hope smiled. “I think he was confident he could convince you from the beginning.”

They arrived at Hope’s booth. “I’ll take it from here,” she said.

“Great. I’m off to see how Barnum’s setting up his space and roam the show to make sure move-in goes smoothly.”

Ted walked to the rear of the hall and saw that the decorator had added Barnum’s booths and was laying down their electrical cords. A dozen booths branched out from the opening Ted had asked Chuck to create in the back row of his regular exhibitors’ spaces: six on each side, with a fifteen-foot aisle down the middle in a cul-de-sac arrangement.

Ted turned to Barnum, who was surveying the scene. “Should I call you Phineas or P.T.?”

Barnum let out a hearty chuckle. “P.T. will do just fine, my friend.”

“You decide where you want to place your exhibitors. Rachel can mark out sheets of paper with their booth numbers and names.”

“I believe I’ll arrange my six painters along one side. On the other, I’ll set up Rodin, Edison, Bell, Tiffany, William Morris of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and, of course, my grand display honoring the 1893 Columbian Exposition.

“My literary luminaries will want to set up racks and tables for their books,” Barnum continued. “I’ve summoned twenty of them, though they’re a restless bunch—they’ll drift in and out as the mood strikes. Where might they fit best?”

“How about in an Authors’ Corner at the rear of your dozen booths?” Ted said. “They’ll need extra space with so many of them. I’ll have our decorator lay out a ten-foot-deep by forty-foot-wide area at the end of the aisle.”

“First-rate!” Barnum exclaimed.

“Imagine it—your guests will witness my painters recreating their masterpieces before their very eyes! Vincent at work on *Sunflowers*, Edvard Munch capturing *The Scream!* Edison

and Bell demonstrating their revolutionary inventions! Rodin and Tiffany showcasing their artistic marvels! And your patrons shall have the rarest of opportunities—to *speak* with my authors, discussing *The Innocents Abroad* with Mark Twain himself, or *Little Women* with none other than Louisa May Alcott!”

“Impressive! I can’t wait to see them in place and, hell, I want to meet them myself.”

Van Gogh materialized as if conjured from thin air. Ted jolted backward in surprise.

“Where should I set up?” he asked P.T.

“You, my dear Vincent, shall claim the booth at the very entrance to our *Celebrity Spirits!*” He then pointed out to Ted where he envisioned the other five painters.

“I’ll have our decorator hang a big banner above the aisle at the entrance to your addition,” Ted said. “It can read: *Meet Barnum’s 19<sup>th</sup> Century Celebrity Spirits.*”

Barnum clapped his hands together. “Splendid! Now, there is much to be done to bring this spectacle to life.” With that, he and Vincent strolled into the addition.

Ted made his way back to the loading area, his mind buzzing with thoughts of what was to come. As he walked along, he regarded the show site.

Brooks Hall was constructed in the late 1950s to hold trade and consumer shows. It had its original advantages: it was 90,000 square feet of exhibit space—vast for the time—and was located in Civic Center in downtown San Francisco, easily accessible via public transportation and surrounded by ample parking.

Ted frowned as he also regarded the hall’s disadvantages: it had a low ceiling and dozens of fat, load-bearing columns that either restricted booth placements or obstructed crowd flow. And worst of all—the facility *was completely underground*.

Exhibitors referred to the site as “Mole Hall” or “Gopher Palace.” Still, artists and

craftspeople loved having *Autumnfest* here because of the loyal customers who returned every year to buy their creations.

Ted found himself back at the hall entrance. He spotted Bart and Betty Zonka, his good friends from Kings Beach on Lake Tahoe, unloading boxes of their wooden toys from their 1950s-vintage Volkswagen cargo van. They stacked train sets, jack-in-the-boxes, and merry-go-rounds onto their hand truck.

Bart, rail-thin, wore Farmer John coveralls, while Betty's Mother Hubbard dress concealed her plump figure.

Ted recounted the series of events that had unfolded since yesterday morning.

"Come on, Ted," Bart said. "What are you smoking?"

"I know, I know—it's the same thing Nick asked. It sounds like a pipe dream out of *Alice in Wonderland*. "But all of Barnum's ghosts resemble the real people."

Betty smiled, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "Heck, you're advertising the show as a 19th-century fair. I guess they'd fit right in."

"Precisely what Barnum said; he told me he could offer a *genuine* 19th-century atmosphere to our customers. I asked how much money he wanted."

"That's it. He wants real dough for his pretend ghosts," Bart said.

"No, he said money wasn't any use to ghosts. He said he wanted booths for his spirit exhibitors to display their works, and—and most important—our audience."

Bart and Betty finished loading their cart and left for their space.

Rachel appeared. "I took BART over and went straight to the show office," she said, her tone brisk. "Artists are asking the usual questions about getting badges for the weekend and

where they can store extra stock. So, I need to get back. But Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill just appeared on our stage and began tossing and shooting objects out of the air.”

“Not again!” Ted exclaimed.

“I told them they were endangering people. But Buffalo Bill assured me they were using *ghost bullets*—realistic to onlookers, but not made of lead or any physical substance.”

“Like the *ghost paintings* Barnum told us would be in his *Celebrity Spirits* painters’ booths.”

Rachel gave him a serious look. “You sound like you’re beginning to believe Barnum and his people are authentic ghosts.”

“I’m getting there—now that the story’s about to break in the papers and on TV news, it’s bound to boost our crowds this weekend.”

He recounted to Rachel what had transpired between him and Barnum. Ted then took a small tablet from his pocket and sketched a diagram of how Barnum wanted his *Celebrity Spirits* situated. He handed it to Rachel, instructing her to make name sheets and place these in their corresponding booths.

Hope returned to the entrance and her van to get more pottery just as Cindy Harris arrived with her own vehicle. Cindy jumped out and hugged both Hope and Ted. “Great to be back here in Brooks Caverns!” she said.

“Yeah, it’s like coming home—now that it’s our fifth year of *Autumnfest* here,” Hope answered.

“And I get to wear my vintage-style costumes again this weekend.”

“Your style always stands out. Customers notice your outfits, and you’re selling even more of your work this year.”

“Yep, it’s working for me.” Cindy began unloading her van and placing clothes racks and her work on a dolly.

Ted helped both women. He then saw Dr. Gordon leaning against a column near the glass doors into the hall, his hands balled into fists, and his gaze fixed on Hope and Cindy.

Ted approached him. “Since you’re not part of the festival and these artists need to concentrate on setting up, would you mind leaving?”

“Mr. Cassidy, my only intention this morning was to see if there might be a place for me in your magnificent event.” With that, Gordon melted into the air, leaving behind an eerie swoosh and a whisper of cold.

Hope stepped to Ted. “I can’t believe what I just saw. Poof, he was gone. That was the fellow you met yesterday, right? The one who wanted to sell his medicine?”

“Yes, that’s him. Did you see how he was staring at you and Cindy?”

“I couldn’t help but notice. Kind of spooky. But I guess ghosts *can be spooky*, can’t they?”

~ ~ ~

“Follow me,” Hope said to Cindy. “I’ll show you where your booth is—it’s next to mine, of course.” Along the way, Hope told her friend about the weekend’s ghost exhibitors.

“They’re probably new artists wearing better-than-usual costumes,” Cindy suggested.

“That’s what I thought at first, too. But you have to see them to believe it. And there are *lots* of them!”

Hope arranged her booth. First, she covered the ten-foot-square space with a rug, its colors adding warmth to the area. Next, she bolted together three sets of four-level wooden shelves and placed them along the sides and at the back.

She unpacked her ceramic wares from the crates. She laid out: stoneware mugs, cups, soup bowls, and plates on one set of shelves; teapots, serving dishes, and fruit bowls on the second set; and on the third, the one at the rear, positioned her vases, candleholders, and soap dishes.

Hope moved to the front of her booth and peeked around at Cindy, who was also setting up her display. With her red hair in a pageboy and freckles dotting her face, Cindy at 25—the same age as herself—she still looked girlishly cute.

Cindy placed her knit jackets on two freestanding metal racks down the middle of her booth and hung samples of her sweaters and shawls on wooden pegboards at the back and two sides.

Across the aisle, Hope glanced at Bart and Betty organizing their wooden toys on shelving and tables. Betty waved hello, and Hope walked over.

“Did Ted tell you about our *guest* artists this weekend?”

“You mean our *ghost* artists,” Bart said, grinning.

Barnum passed down the aisle. “My dear Hope, would you be so kind as to introduce me to your companions?”

Cindy bounded over to join Hope.

“Meet my close friend Cindy Harris, a talented clothing designer who sells her own creations, and Bart and Betty Zonka, outstanding toy-makers. Cindy, Bart, and Betty, I present to you P.T. Barnum himself.”

“Golly, you sure look like Barnum,” Bart said. He reached out his hand to shake.

Barnum kept his hands at his sides. “Ah, best not attempt that, my good fellow. I’d hate to startle you when your hand goes clean through mine, leaving you grasping at nothing.”

Bart laughed. “C’mon. I can’t believe that.”

Barnum chuckled. “Very well, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He lifted his hand to meet Bart’s—only for it to pass straight through, as if he were made of mist.

Bart jumped back. Cindy let out a startled gasp, clapping a hand over her mouth, while Betty’s face paled, her breath catching. “Dear God,” she whispered. “That’s impossible.” Hope inhaled, then exhaled with a nervous laugh.

“Wow, how do you do that?” Bart asked. “You a magician?”

Barnum grinned. “Of sorts, one might say. After all, pulling this together feels like a touch of magic.”

Turning to Hope, he continued, “I’m on the hunt for Ted. I’d like him to see how we’ve arranged our spirits’ stands.”

“I saw him at the show entrance. I’ll walk there with you.” They strolled down the aisle. “That was something else—your handshake, or sleight of hand, I should say. Maybe you are a ghost, maybe the spirit of P.T. Barnum.”

“Doubt is natural, my dear, but I must say, I’m pleased to see you warming to the idea. Now, tell me—what’s your story? That accent of yours has the ring of New England about it.”

“I grew up in Maine. Yes, I guess I do have a Down East accent.”

“Ah, a fellow Easterner! And what led you from the rocky shores of Maine all the way to California?”

“I left home at seventeen, ran away with a boyfriend. But that affair soon ended.”

“A bold choice! And yet, you didn’t return home?”

“No, California is great. It never rains in the summer, and winter here is much warmer.”

“A fair argument! I can’t say I blame you—California has long held a certain charm for

those seeking a fresh start. And tell me, how did you come to the art of pottery?”

“I had taken ceramic classes in Maine, which I enjoyed. I apprenticed myself to a potter, a woman here in Marin County. After two years of learning and practicing, I headed out on my own. I started selling to galleries and at craft fairs. I’ve exhibited at *Autumnfest* since its beginning.”

Barnum nodded. “A fine journey indeed! From apprentice to artisan, carving out a name for yourself in the world of craft and trade. That, my dear Hope, is the kind of story I admire—an artist forging her own destiny!”

Hope spied Ted talking with artists as she and Barnum arrived at the entrance.

She waved at him and shouted, “P.T. here is looking for you.”

Hope looked at her future husband thoughtfully. *He’s not that handsome, but his constant smile more than makes up for it. His hair is already thinning, but he takes good care of himself.*

She turned and headed back to her booth.

~ ~ ~

Ted approached Barnum. “Rachel told me that Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley are back on our stage again.”

Barnum grinned. “Ah, but of course! Bill’s a true showman through and through—he spent decades touring with his *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* and can’t resist the call of the stage. The thrill of the crowd never leaves a man like that. Say, do you have a moment to walk back to the *Spirits* section?”

“Sure. Let’s go.” The two headed through the hall.

Barnum clasped his hands behind his back as they walked. “I had the pleasure of hearing Hope’s story earlier—fascinating woman. Now, Ted, tell me about *you*. Where did you spend your early years?”

“In Lander Wyoming, near the Wind River Mountains.”

“Wyoming, eh? A land of grand, sweeping vistas! Do you still have family there?”

Ted spoke of his mother and how she’d died in an auto accident. “Her birthday was just yesterday,” he said quietly.

“And from Wyoming, you made your way to California?”

“I attended the University of Oregon, as it happens. I graduated with a degree in chemistry and a teaching certificate and got hired at a high school in Concord, California, where I taught science courses.”

“A scholar of the sciences! And yet, here you are, not in a classroom, but at the helm of a grand festival. Quite the leap, my friend! How did you find your way from education to the world of art shows?”

Ted laughed. “It was simple. I’d put together parties and small events in college. During one summer vacation, I organized a little outdoor craft fair to make some extra money. And guess what—I enjoyed producing the fair more than teaching and decided I’d try it full time. Within a year, I presented the first *Autumnfest*.”

Barnum clapped his hands together. “Marvelous! A man who follows his passion. There’s nothing quite like discovering one’s true calling and having the courage to pursue it. And look where it’s brought you—hosting a festival where even the *spirits* of the past are eager to take part. Now *that* is a legacy in the making, my good man!”

Along their walk, Ted couldn't help but notice artists casting curious glances, perhaps wondering, "Who is this splendidly costumed man with Ted?" They reached the new section. It already had the banner raised above the aisle:

### **Meet Barnum's 19th-Century Celebrity Spirits**

Ted encountered a breathtaking scene. With Barnum having communicated his good news to his exhibitors, many spirits had materialized and begun constructing their booths with *otherworldly* precision.

Down the left-hand side, Ted saw the artists setting up. Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, Mary Cassatt, Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch, and Winslow Homer were hanging well-known works on panels or screens in their booths, and each had also set up an easel and canvas.

Ted delighted in the sight before him, recognizing some of the finest painters of the 19th century. His doubts about their authenticity seemed unimportant; he realized that he now wanted to believe in ghosts.

Barnum led Ted to one painter, a woman hanging her works in her booth.

"Ted, allow me to introduce you to the incomparable Mary Cassatt—a true master of her craft and, in my opinion, the finest female painter of the past century!"

The artist's spirit appeared to be in her mid-thirties. She wore a floor-length black-and-white striped dress, and a hat trimmed with artificial flowers.

"Hello, Mary," Ted said. "Welcome to our festival. Your work is beautiful."

Mary smiled. "Much obliged, Mr. Cassidy. And I must extend my gratitude to you for welcoming us to your exhibition. I'm eager to share my finished pieces with your guests this weekend and to see their reactions—nothing delights me more than witnessing how my work

speaks to others. I also intend to create a new painting right here during the event, capturing the spirit of the festival as it unfolds.”

"Like Mary," Barnum said, "all of my exhibitors are eager to see how your patrons will respond to their work and whether their creations will be appreciated."

Across the aisle, Barnum’s sculptors and inventors occupied the next five booths. The last space on that side showcased Barnum’s *1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition*.

Barnum turned to Ted with a knowing grin. “I’ll give you a proper tour of my own booth later.

Bart walked through the entrance of *Celebrity Spirits*. He began shaking his head, but then laughed. “Incredible! I’m having to see it to accept it.”

“Yes, maybe that’s what it takes—seeing all these spirits at one time,” Ted said.

“But I’m not *completely* convinced. I wonder if Barnum is one terrific magician and has brought these actors together as part of his illusion. Maybe he’s looking for you to give him status and publicity.”

“I’m sure he wants status and publicity. But I don’t think he’d be able to get all these *actors*, as we’ve been calling them, together in one place; all these beings who look *exactly* like their photos or portraits. That would be *Mission Impossible* makeup jobs, not on one or two people like in the TV show, but on dozens. Look at all the painters and inventors here.”

“Okay, I hear what you’re saying. Maybe we’ve entered a fantasy world?”

“That’s a way to look at it, I suppose, that we’ve all entered the *same* illusion. Since it seems to only be happening here, maybe Brooks Hall is fantasy land—at least for this weekend.”

“Well, it’s spooky but also cool. Hell, I guess I can suspend my disbelief for a few days for the fun of it.”

“There you go. Somehow, I’m hoping most of our artists here will join you and me in suspending their disbelief—like you said, for the fun of it.”

Barnum approached Bart. “Tell me, my good man, what do you make of my esteemed companions?”

“They’re amazing. Can I talk to them?”

Barnum spread his arms. “But of course! That is the purpose—to have you, the other artists, and this weekend’s visitors engage with the remarkable spirits I’ve gathered here. They are eager to share their works, their stories, and their genius with you!”

Bart didn’t need further encouragement. He walked up the aisle and spoke with the spirit of Thomas Edison. Ted overheard Bart say, “Mr. Edison, you’re one of the most recognizable ghosts here. Your mind and your inventions have always fascinated me.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Edison replied. “As you see, I’ve set out several of my inventions. For instance, here’s my original phonograph. It records and plays back sound using a tinfoil-covered drum. Sound waves are captured through a diaphragm and needle, which etch grooves into the rotating cylinder. To play back the recording, the needle retraces the grooves, vibrating the diaphragm to reproduce the sound. It could play for all of two minutes.”

“Can I pick it up?”

“Unfortunately, no. It is a *ghost* machine, like me,” he laughed. “You can try to touch it, but your fingers will pass right through.”

“I know how that goes!”

Ted watched Alexander Graham Bell come around into Edison’s booth.

“Come and see the improvements I made to Tom’s original phonograph,” he said to Bart. “And you’ll want to see how I developed the telephone.”

“Hold on, Alexander!” Edison exclaimed. “I hope you won’t be stealing my visitors this weekend. This gentleman will make his way around to you in due time.”

“I see there’s a little rivalry here,” Bart said. “I need to help Betty finish setting up our booth. But I’ll find time to return and visit *both* of you.”

Barnum turned to Ted with a knowing grin. “My dear fellow, you’ll note that while these remarkable beings may be spirits, they are still lively! Once the crowds arrive, the magic will take hold. Every inventor, painter, and writer here will draw their own admirers—eager souls ready to be dazzled by their genius and inspired by their achievements.”

Rachel appeared. “Hey, Ted. Clem and Mitzi are here. They want to talk to you about this weekend. They’re at the stage watching Scott Joplin play his piano.” With that, she strode beneath Barnum’s banner and into Celebrity Spirits.

Ted walked through the hall toward the stage. Halfway there, he again saw Dr. Gordon. He stood in the aisle staring at Jill Bankhead as she set up her booth. Jill, a slender woman in her early thirties, sold black-and-white photographs featuring tombstones and graveyard settings.

Ted frowned at Gordon, but before he could say a word, Gordon met his gaze with a knowing nod. Then, in an instant, he vanished—dissolving like a wisp of smoke, leaving behind only an eerie lingering chill where he had stood.

*Damn, he keeps reappearing and then disappearing. But I don’t see how I can keep him out of the hall.* “I’ll ask Barnum what I should do about him,” he said aloud.

Ted arrived at the stage as Joplin finished playing “Felicity Rag” and then vanished along with his piano.

Clem and Mitzi both wore puzzled expressions. Clem had shown up in his usual green overalls and yellow sneakers. Mitzi, Clem’s wife and partner, sported red slacks and a white

jumper.

“Nick called and told us what was happening at the hall this weekend,” Clem said. “I had my doubts, but now I'm getting curious. Who was that guy, and how did he disappear?”

“That’s Scott Joplin, one of Barnum’s ghost entertainers. I think he misses playing to an audience, so he keeps appearing. Some of P.T.’s other performers have also passed through, even though I told Barnum we couldn’t put them on stage until next year.”

“Good,” Clem replied. “I’m glad to hear we don’t have to worry about *that* this weekend!”

“We want to set up and test our sound system,” Mitzi said. “Is Tim coming today?”

“I don’t know. We’ll ask Nick. I see he just got here.”

Ted observed Nick had changed into a San Francisco Giants T-shirt, visible through his unzipped jacket.

“Clem and Mitzi are asking if Tim is coming to help adjust the sound system.”

“He should be here anytime,” Nick said.

Barnum arrived at the stage. He greeted Nick with a "Good morning!"

Mitzi turned to the two. “Nick, you mentioned that an actor portraying P.T. Barnum was gathering a group of exhibitors for the weekend. This must be the man himself.”

“Let me introduce you,” Nick said. “Clem and Mitzi, along with Jim and Andy, play the best bluegrass you’ll ever hear.”

Barnum, ever the showman, did not extend his hand but instead offered a warm nod. “It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance! I’ve had the delight of listening to your record, and I must say, your music is marvelous! It reminds me of the lively fiddle tunes I used to hear among dear

friends in the Appalachian Mountains—melodies that filled the air as they gathered on Sunday afternoons.

“Rest assured, I shall be here tomorrow, front and center, to applaud your performance with the enthusiasm it deserves!”

“We’re happy to meet you too,” Mitzi said.

“Thanks for picking up our album,” Clem added.

Ted took his chance to speak with Barnum about his concern. “The spirit I told you about yesterday, Dr. Gordon, keeps appearing. He says he’s here looking for a way to join the festival. But I caught him staring at Hope and Cindy earlier and at Jill Bankhead—a photographer in our show—a short time ago while she was setting up her booth. Can you get him to disappear?”

Barnum stroked his chin. “I’ll have a word with him, but understand—I cannot command him to vanish into the ether. However, if he senses he’s unwelcome, he may choose to move along on his own.”

Ted pressed on. “And maybe you can figure out what he’s all about? He mentioned being in Chicago during the World’s Fair, if that helps.”

“Ah, that explains why his name escapes me! You see, I departed this world two years *before* the grand spectacle of the 1893 World’s Fair. But fear not! I shall inquire among those who were there—Annie Oakley, Buffalo Bill, and a few others might recall his presence.”

“Thanks, P.T. Say, it’s time for me to announce *Celebrity Spirits* to the world!”