



**FEAR ON THE  
PHANTOM SPECIAL**

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# CHAPTER ONE

*Hallowe'en, 1861*

It was dark as they clambered aboard the train, laughing and joking as if they didn't have a care in the world. Hampers filled with food and champagne were loaded into the carriages. It was to be a riotous party on a very special night and they intended to enjoy it to the full. In the gloomy interior of the train, there was a mood of exhilaration. The moment that the gentle puffing of the engine disappeared, however, it changed abruptly. They were jolted by the sudden explosion of noise and movement. Pleasantly drunk when they'd arrived, they were instantly sobered. The ride on the Phantom Special was no longer the prelude to a midnight picnic in a haunted wood. It was a source of real fear. It was as if they realised for the first time the risk that they were taking. A couple of the women screamed involuntarily, and one demanded to be let

off the train. But it was too late now. Their fate was sealed.

Everyone suddenly felt the cold and shivered. They were cowed, rueful and quietly terrified. The one exception was Alexander Piper, the handsome young man responsible for hiring the train and filling it with his friends. Tall, lean and commanding, he jumped to his feet and tried to raise the spirits of those in his compartment.

‘Cheer up, everyone!’ he shouted, arm aloft. ‘There’s nothing to be afraid of. We’ve set off on a great adventure. It’s something to relish. There’s safety in numbers, remember. We’re not in any danger.’

Most of them were rallied by his bravado and shook off their doubts and anxieties, but one or two remained in the grip of a deep unease. They were going to a place notorious for a series of supernatural events and they needed more than a few brave words from Piper. All they could do was to grit their teeth and pray that they’d come through the excursion unscathed.

Gathering speed all the time, the train clanked, rattled and swayed on through the darkness. The flickering lamps inside the carriages gave little reassurance. Having departed from Kendal, they had less than ten miles to go to Windermere where horse-drawn transport would take them on to their destination. That, at least, had been the plan. But there were passengers who were already thinking of ending their journey at the railway station and waiting there until the train took the entire party back to their point of departure.

‘I knew this would happen,’ said Piper, scornfully. ‘You’re losing your nerve. There’s no need. Ignore all that nonsense about weird events and mysterious deaths at Hallowe’en. None

of it is true. They're just tales devised to frighten credulous, weak-minded people. You'll meet no witches. You'll see no black magic. There are no grotesque creatures waiting to devour you alive. We're having a midnight party to show our defiance of Hallowe'en myths. Eat, drink and be merry, my friends.'

He carried on in the same vein for minutes, putting heart into them while not entirely banishing their fears. Then something unexpected occurred.

Squealing and shaking, the train slowed down.

'What's going on?' asked Piper. 'We can't be there yet.'

Unsettled by the sudden loss of speed, the passengers in his compartment were even more upset when one of the lamps went out, deepening the gloom until they could hardly see the people sitting opposite them. It caused fevered speculation. Piper was unable to reassure them this time. They were about to stop and he didn't know why. When the train finally shuddered to a halt, Piper opened the door and looked out.

'Why the hell have you pulled up here?' he shouted.

But the only sound he could hear was the hissing of steam. It was pitch-dark outside, so he had no idea where they were. He was seething with anger.

'I'll sort this out,' he said and jumped down beside the track. 'The rest of you can wait there.'

Men in other compartments had also opened doors to see what was going on. A few of them joined Piper as he strode towards the locomotive. Standing beside it was the burly figure of the driver.

'I'm Alex Piper,' he yelled, 'and I hired this train to get us to Windermere. Don't you understand that we have

a timetable to keep to? It's imperative that we reach our destination before midnight.'

'It's no use bellowing at me, sir,' said the driver.

'I'll do more than bellow if you don't do as you're told. Drive us on, man! That's an order.'

The driver shrugged. 'We can't go anywhere as long as *that's* in our way.'

He pointed a finger at the track ahead of them. Piper pushed him aside and walked past the locomotive. What he saw brought him to a dead halt. Fifty yards or more ahead of them, a fire was blocking the line. Red flames were climbing up into the air. The sound of mocking laughter was carried on the wind. It frightened the other passengers who'd alighted, but it only served to increase Piper's fury.

'Leave this to me,' he called out, using an arm to wave everyone back. 'Nobody is going to stop my excursion.'

And he went sprinting off along the track while the others watched in trepidation. More people had now climbed out of the train and rushed to join the audience beside the locomotive. They were absolutely horrified. To their eyes, the blaze seemed momentarily to take on human shape. Piper ran on regardless, as if ready to confront any danger but, when he actually reached the fire, it flared up into a solid wall of flame and he disappeared completely from view.

The excursion was over.

## CHAPTER TWO

Robert Colbeck was seated at the desk in his office when he heard a polite tap on the door. It opened to reveal a young detective with a nervous manner.

‘The superintendent requests that you visit him at your earliest convenience, sir,’ he said.

Colbeck was surprised. ‘Are you sure that it was a request and not a demand?’ he asked.

‘I’m only repeating what I was told, Inspector.’

‘What sort of a mood is he in?’

‘He was very pleasant to me.’

‘We *are* talking about Superintendent Tallis, aren’t we?’ said Colbeck, mystified. ‘He’s never been remotely pleasant towards anyone of your rank before. In fact, he enjoys being prickly towards everyone but the commissioner. Very well,’

he went on, rising to his feet. ‘Thank you for the message. I’ll go at once. I’ve always wanted to witness a miracle.’

Colbeck walked along the corridor to the appropriate office, wondering what he’d find on the other side of the door. Ordinarily, it was an angry, brooding superintendent, wreathed in cigar smoke and ready to issue orders as if he were addressing soldiers on a parade ground. Could the man *really* have changed so much? Colbeck refused to believe it.

After knocking on the door, he opened it and went into the room. Three surprises greeted him. There was no hint of cigar smoke, the window was slightly open to admit an invigorating blast of cold air and – the biggest shock of all – Tallis actually smiled at him.

‘Good morning, Inspector,’ he said. ‘It’s good of you to come so promptly. Do please sit down.’

Colbeck couldn’t believe what he was hearing. As a rule, Tallis deliberately kept him standing while he himself remained in his high-backed chair. Offering the inspector a seat was an act of consideration that he rarely showed, and he’d never before done so with a friendly smile on his face.

‘You’ll have to make allowances for me,’ said Tallis, apologetically. ‘I’ve only been back in harness for a few hours and it may take time for me to . . . settle into my old routine.’

Colbeck sat down. ‘Welcome back, sir,’ he said. ‘We were delighted to hear that you’d made a full recovery.’

‘It was in no small way aided by the reports I got of your successes. Yes, I know that I was supposed to forget all about Scotland Yard during my convalescence, but old habits die hard. I just *had* to know what was going on here. I kept a



close eye on all your investigations,’ said Tallis, ‘and I was delighted to see that you managed so well without me.’

‘It’s kind of you to say so, sir.’

‘To be honest, it was exactly what I’d expected.’

It was the superintendent’s first day back at work and he looked alert and healthy. The previous December, he’d been abducted by a former soldier from his old regiment who nursed a grudge against him. Tallis was cruelly treated and deeply shaken by the experience, yet he wouldn’t take time off to recover from the ordeal. As a result, he succumbed to the multiple pressures on him and was hopelessly unable to do his job. This time, he’d bowed to medical opinion and had a break for several months. Evidently, it had been productive.

‘Let’s not waste time in idle conversation,’ said Tallis, briskly. ‘A telegraph has just arrived and it asks – nay, it demands – that you leave for the Lake District immediately.’

‘Was there a murder on the railway there?’

‘There might well have been, though it’s still in doubt.’

‘What did the telegraph say?’

‘Read it for yourself, Inspector.’ Stretching out a hand, he gave it to Colbeck and allowed him time to read it. ‘Puzzling, isn’t it?’

‘It’s both puzzling and bizarre, sir. A crime was certainly committed – there’s clear damage to railway property – but was this young man actually burnt to death?’

‘Who knows?’

‘He can’t simply have vanished into thin air.’

‘Strange things happen at Hallowe’en.’

‘They don’t always have such dire consequences,’ said Colbeck. ‘There’s a peremptory tone to this telegraph. It’s obviously sent by a man who expects his orders to be obeyed. Have you ever heard of Lord Culverhouse before, sir?’

‘The name is vaguely familiar. I’m told that he’s Lord Lieutenant of the county. That probably means he’s one of those spiky, disagreeable individuals who doesn’t suffer fools gladly and who loves throwing his weight about.’ Tallis grinned, wolfishly. ‘In the course of your work here, I daresay you’ve met someone exactly like that.’

In the census taken that year, Kendal was discovered to have a total of 12,029 inhabitants. None was more important and assertive than Lord Culverhouse, a man whose influence ran well beyond the boundaries of Cumberland. Tall, rotund and gimlet-eyed, he wore a full beard peppered with white hairs. Like most people who had dealings with him, Geoffrey Hedley was slightly intimidated. A lawyer by trade, he was a fleshy man in his early thirties, with dimpled cheeks more suited to a small child. Hedley spread his arms in a gesture of despair.

‘I feel so guilty,’ he admitted.

‘It wasn’t your fault, man.’

‘To some extent it was, I fear. I was responsible for putting the idea into Alex’s head. We were in our cups at the time and it’s always fatal to make decisions in such a condition. I said – jokingly, as it happens – that we ought to do something very special for Hallowe’en and Alex seized on the idea at once. The next thing I knew,’ said Hedley, ‘was that he’d hired a

train and named it the Phantom Special because it was going to take us on a journey into the unknown.'

'My nephew has always been rather headstrong,' said Culverhouse. 'There are no half-measures with Alex.'

'He was fearless. Most of us were shaking in our shoes, especially when the train ground to a halt in the middle of nowhere. Alex jumped out of our compartment in a flash. By the time I caught up with him,' recalled Hedley, 'he was pulsing with rage at the interruption to our outing. Before we could stop him, he went haring off in the direction of that blaze.'

'Why didn't you go after him?'

'Alex didn't give us the chance. He charged off as if he was in some kind of race. We'd never have caught up. The last we saw of him was when he disappeared in a wall of flame.'

'Then why was there no body?' asked Culverhouse. 'An untimely death presupposes a corpse. None was found and, though we searched high and low all day yesterday, there was no trace of Alex.'

'I know. I joined in the search party.'

They were standing in front of the fireplace in the library of Culverhouse Court, a magnificent country house just outside the town. On the wall behind the older man was a striking portrait of him in the dress uniform of a Lord Lieutenant. He looked proud, dignified and soldierly. Hedley tried to keep his gaze off the portrait. One Lord Culverhouse was more than enough to cope with. Two were overwhelming.

'There *was* one suggestion,' said Hedley, tentatively.

'What was that?'

‘Someone wondered if the whole thing might be an elaborate prank devised by Alex.’

‘That’s arrant nonsense!’

‘He does have a weird sense of humour, Lord Culverhouse.’

‘Why did he hire this Phantom Special, then prevent it from reaching its destination? It doesn’t make sense. Besides,’ said Culverhouse, ‘there’s the small matter of Miss Haslam. I accept that my nephew is prone to moments of madness but even Alex wouldn’t cause deliberate distress to his betrothed. The poor woman is distraught.’

‘In retrospect, it’s as well that she refused to take part in the excursion. The very notion frightened her.’

‘Miss Haslam deserves peace of mind – as do we all. And the only way to achieve that is by calling in someone with the expertise to unravel this mystery.’

‘That’s well beyond the abilities of the local constabulary. They’re as baffled as the rest of us.’

‘I’ve gone above their heads and sent a telegraph to Scotland Yard, asking for the assistance of Inspector Colbeck, the famous Railway Detective.’

Hedley was impressed. ‘Even *I* have heard of him.’

‘We need the best man for the task.’

‘But will he be available? A man with his reputation will be in constant demand. What makes you think you’ll get a positive response to your request?’

‘I took no chances,’ said the other. ‘As it happens, I’m well acquainted with the commissioner. To ensure success, I sent my telegraph directly to him.’

‘In short, you pulled strings.’

‘That’s a deplorable expression. I merely adopted the right tactics to get the desired end.’ He struck a pose. ‘I have every confidence that Colbeck will be on his way here right now.’

Victor Leeming was frustrated. He disliked leaving London and he hated doing so by means of rail. He was a man who loved his home comforts and knew that an unwelcome summons from Cumberland would be an inadequate replacement for the joy of sleeping with his wife and waking to see his children in the morning. There was a secondary cause of his frustration. He still had no real idea why they were suddenly rushing north. During the cab ride to Euston Station, Colbeck had only been able to give him the briefest details. The sergeant still had several questions to put to him but, when they’d bought their tickets and boarded the train, they discovered that they were sharing the compartment with six other passengers and a yapping dog. There was simply no chance of having a private conversation.

Colbeck had bought a copy of *The Times* and was soon engrossed in it. All that Leeming could do was to listen to the dog and watch the London suburbs scud past through the window. He braced himself for a long, tedious, uncomfortable trip. His fears, however, were unfounded. At a series of stops, their companions left the train one by one. Last to go was the woman with the irritating little creature who’d sat in her lap for the entire journey and kept up a positive fusillade of barks. As they set off yet again, Leeming had his first question ready, but he was too slow to stop Colbeck from seizing the initiative.

‘There’s a most interesting article in here, Victor,’ he said.

‘I’m not a reading man, sir,’ grumbled the other.

‘You ought to be. It’s quite uncanny. This article might have been written specifically for you – and for those, like you, with a dislike of rail transport.’

‘It’s more than a dislike. I *loathe* trains.’

‘You have an irrational fear of them.’

‘Call it what you want, Inspector. Every time I get into one, my heart sinks and my stomach rumbles.’

‘What about your mind?’

‘I feel as if I’m on the verge of panic.’

‘Exactly!’ said Colbeck, folding the newspaper. ‘That’s what the article was about – the mental torment suffered by those who feel unsafe on the railway. Oddly enough, men are more likely to suffer than women. Some have even been driven insane and had to be confined in asylums.’

‘I’m not that bad,’ said Leeming in alarm. ‘I just prefer to travel by coach. You know where you are when you’ve got a team of horses pulling you along.’

‘Well, I won’t bore you by reciting the advantages of travelling by rail. You’ve heard me do so many times. Just take a glance at this,’ said Colbeck, handing him the newspaper. ‘Read it at your leisure.’

‘*What* leisure?’

Colbeck laughed. ‘That’s a fair comment. Anyway, I’m sorry that we were unable to talk until now. I can see that you’re bursting to say something.’

‘Why are we going all the way to Cumberland?’

‘We have a crime to solve.’

‘But we don’t even know that a crime has been committed. From what you told me in the cab, we’re being dragged out of London simply because a Hallowe’een excursion was cancelled.’

‘There’s more to it than that, Victor.’

‘You said the telegraph gave very few details.’

‘That’s true.’

‘Then why are we paying the slightest attention to it? More to the point, why did the superintendent take any notice of it? You know how much he dislikes sending us to a distant part of the country when there’s so much crime to solve in London.’

‘It was not Superintendent Tallis’s decision. What I didn’t know was that the man who dispatched the telegraph was a friend of the commissioner and the request first went to him. So you needn’t blame the superintendent,’ said Colbeck. ‘The person you need to thank for sending us on this little jaunt is Sir Richard Mayne.’

Leeming was surly. ‘It’s going to be a lot more than a little jaunt,’ he complained.

‘Try to show some compassion, Victor. Instead of worrying about your own discomfort, think of other people. A mysterious fire appeared on a railway track, an excursion was summarily abandoned, and a man has unaccountably vanished. He’ll have a family,’ Colbeck pointed out. ‘They’ll be consumed by grief.’

Melissa Haslam lay stretched out on her bed and dabbed at her red-rimmed eyes with an already damp handkerchief. She

was an astonishingly beautiful young woman but her face was now distorted by anguish and her mind was clouded by despair. All hope of happiness had been abruptly stolen away from her. She was quite inconsolable. Two days earlier she'd been thinking about her forthcoming marriage, but there was no longer a future husband. Her beloved Alex Piper had gone.