

A BOTANIC HILL DETECTIVES MYSTERY | BOOK 6

Upas Street: Shocking Specter

BY

SHERRILL JOSEPH





PLANTING IDEAS TO GROW YOUNG MINDS

This is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity and are used fictitiously. All other characters, and all incidents and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

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AWARDS FOR THE BOTANIC HILL DETECTIVES MYSTERIES

Mom's Choice Book Awards

Gold Awards for Juvenile Fiction (2)—General

Moonbeam Children's Book Awards

Gold Awards for Pre-Teen Fiction (2)—Mystery

Story Monsters Approved

2020 Winner, First Place in Tween Novels Fiction, Ages 10-14

First Place in Making a Difference

Third Place in Middle Grade Fiction, Ages 8-12

Royal Dragonfly Book Awards

Second Place (tie) in Historical Fiction

Second Place in Mystery

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2021 Winner, Honorable Mention in Charity—Making a Difference

2021 Winner, Honorable Mention in Mystery

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2021 Middle Grade Book of the Year

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2021 Best Book Award Finalist in Children's Fiction

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2021 Winner, Pre-Teen Fiction

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2021 Winner, Finalist in Children's Fiction

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Phoenix Award for Best New Voice—Fiction, Middle Grade, Ages 8-12

Speak Up Talk Radio

Firebird Book Award for Juvenile Fiction

The Wishing Shelf Book Awards

2020 Finalist

Independent Audiobook Awards

Finalist, Young Adult for Tom Jordan, Narrator

Dedicated to

Boris Karloff,

Master actor of Universal Pictures horror films,
Television star, gentleman, and philanthropist, who
Brought to life his iconic Frankenstein Monster.

Kenneth Strickfaden,

Inventor, technical wizard, science teacher, and
Special electrical, sound, and visual effects pioneer,
Known as “Dr. Frankenstein’s Electrician.”

Jack Pierce,

Makeup artist pioneer, who created the iconic makeup
For many Universal Pictures Golden Era horror stars.

And

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley,

Author of the horror, sci-fi novel *Frankenstein; or,
The Modern Prometheus*, published in 1818.

(This PDF's chapters are in 12-point font and spacing tightened to save printer paper and ink. The final PDF will be in its usual 13-point font and normal spacing for easier reading.)

Chapter One

A Mystery from Upas Street

Lanny Wyatt's whistle was ear-piercing as he grasped the top of his head with both hands. His dark-blond curls were a tangled mess. No matter. His hair was nothing compared to what his blue-violet eyes spotted.

As the leader of the Botanic Hill Detectives Agency that aimed to right wrongs and bring criminals to justice, Lanny had witnessed extraordinary sights in his thirteen years. They were mostly people sharing acts of kindness and generosity. Unfortunately, he had also seen far too much selfishness, cruelty, and disregard for the law.

He and his three sleuth partners were not new to their favorite pastime, tackling serious mysteries that no one else could solve. In fact, the four resourceful teens were famous! They had just finished their fifth case, *Jacaranda Street: Gravestone Image*, a challenging and dangerous assignment, set in a spooky Victorian mansion. Using gravestone symbols and an image, the detectives exposed many secrets and truths to the world about the late, great American Gothic horror writer Edgar Allan Poe.

But at this moment, what stared back at Lanny from the living room wall in Mr. and Mrs. Llewellyn's cozy apartment on Upas [YOU-pus] Street was a perfect example of one of those magnificent, welcome sights—one of the best he had ever seen! The increasing winds rattling an old, nearby window, and an electrical storm forecasted within the hour in his Botanic Hill neighborhood in the coastal town of Las Palmitas, California, could not distract him.

Ruddy-complexioned, middle-aged Mr. James Llewellyn, with his eyeglasses resting on the end of his bulbous nose, smiled as he strolled from the dining room toward Lanny. Gesturing with a pudgy hand to the object that captivated the boy, he said, "I knew that would grab your attention. That's why Mrs. Llewellyn and I invited all of you here."

A grinning Lanny spun to face the man. "Is that what I think it is, Mr. Llewellyn? An authentic piece of memorabilia from The Golden Age of Hollywood? Where did you get it?"

Mr. Llewellyn gently grasped the boy's shoulder and chuckled. "I'm proud to say, yes, it is. The photo is a family heirloom now. More about that later. You know, I was certain you'd spot it within five minutes of arriving."

"Boy, did I!" the observant, brainiac Lanny replied. "And I've been wanting to meet you for ages. Next to my favorite fictional detective hero Sherlock Holmes, classic movies are the most awesome things in the world to me."

Mr. Llewellyn was a long-time film historian and preservationist who worked remotely from home Mondays through Thursdays for Universal Pictures.

Lanny's three partners—twin sister, Lexi Wyatt, and their two best friends, Moki Kalani and Rani Kumar—were present and had heard the boy's loud whistle.

Next to them stood tall, laughing Mrs. Sara Llewellyn, balancing a tray of refreshments in her hands. Four days a week, she bicycled a mile away to her job on Lotus Street as an image authenticator and documentary filmmaker at the ARC—the Antiquities Research Collective—where Lanny and Lexi's parents worked.

What enthralled Lanny and the rest of the squad was a unique, glossy black-and-white photograph! Its large, gilded frame emphasized how much the Llewellyns valued the object it protected.

Lexi clicked her tongue as she brushed her shoulder-length brown hair from her face. "You bet he'd spot it, Mr. Llewellyn. Lanny zeroes in on everything vintage Hollywood, especially films and movie objects from the 1930s and '40s." She leaned closer and squinted. "Is that really what it is?"

Lanny did not need to wait for Mr. Llewellyn to answer. "That's exactly what it is, sis."

Moki Kalani's eyebrows furrowed. "But bro, what is it a photo *of*?" He and Lanny had been best friends since Moki and his policeman father moved to Las Palmitas five years ago. Moki's mother had died in a car accident on the Hawaiian island of O'ahu, Moki's birthplace. Father and son made a fresh start in California.

"Dude, it's an amazing aerial photo—that means taken from high overhead—of Dr. Henry Frankenstein's laboratory from the 1931 Universal Pictures classic horror movie *Frankenstein*. It's where the mad scientist created and brought to life his monster by harnessing energy from lightning. The doc made more monsters—in the cool 1935 sequel, *Bride of Frankenstein*, and in 1939's *Son of Frankenstein*."

Moki rolled his eyes. “Thanks, bro, and, uh, I already knew what ‘aerial’ meant.”

Another of Lanny’s passions was words. Helping others build their vocabulary brought out his inner teacher, often to the dismay of his fellow detectives. They nicknamed him “Lanny the Lexicon” and “Professor Lanny.”

Lexi winked at Rani, her best friend for eight years since Rani, her parents, and grandmother had moved from India. “Moki, I’m sure you know that Dr. Frankenstein made his monster by stitching together bloody parts from freshly dead bodies he’d stolen from graveyards and dissecting labs. He took the bodies back to his dark, spooky *la-BOR-uh-tree*,”—rolling her r’s—“laid them out on his experimentation table, cut out the organs, and—”

Moki shivered. “I don’t focus on that part—uh, *parts*. I haven’t seen the movie, but I’ve heard about it.”

Lexi and Rani high-fived and snickered. They often enjoyed making big, strong Moki squirm. Next to Hawai‘i, his favorite place was Disneyland, not cemeteries. And he was no fan of his or anyone’s spurting blood, real or fake.

But then, Rani’s eyebrows furrowed. “Lanny, how can you be so sure that’s what the photograph shows?”

“Because I’ve watched that movie at least 100 times—and not only on Halloween. It’s been rated one of the best motion pictures ever made,” giving a fist pump.

Lexi pointed to some squiggly marks on the photo. “What’re those?”

“*Those* are what make this photo even more golden.” Lanny sighed deeply, then continued. “Those are the autographs of Boris Karloff, Kenneth Strickfaden, and Jack Pierce!”

“Wow,” said Rani. “I know who Boris Karloff was. He was a great actor, especially famous for portraying Dr. Frankenstein’s monster, and the Mummy, among other ghouls. I think many people still admire and prefer his version of the Frankenstein creature. For me, and probably for others, it’s *his* image of the monster that pops into mind haunting us, way beyond Halloween.”

Lanny nodded. “Yep! It’s iconic—which means famous and forever memorable. Mr. Karloff could also act with his hands, but especially with his eyes. They could send chills down your spine one second, then turn soft and make you feel sorry for him the next. He created *pathos* [pronounced PAY-thaas], an emotional response, in moviegoers so they’d connect with the monster and take his side out of pity. It’s sad that Mr. Karloff walked with a lurch from back

injuries he got from acting, but he had an amazing velvety, lisping voice that made you want to listen to him forever. Watch *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. The Grinch *and* the narrator are voiced by Boris Karloff!”

Lanny then turned to Mr. Llewellyn. “I know who Jack Pierce was—the incredible makeup artist pioneer who used actual makeup, not masks, to turn Boris Karloff and other actors into monsters. He’s still respected by makeup artists today. But who was Kenneth Strickfaden?”

“Ah, Ken Strickfaden,” Mr. Llewellyn replied. “He was an inventor, science educator, electrical genius, and one of Hollywood’s first special effects experts. He worked on over 100 films and television shows, many at Universal Pictures, from the 1920s to the 1980s!

“He loved his work at movie studios, usually appearing behind the scenes, and was very humble. He preferred crediting the actors and directors, not himself, with a movie’s success. So, he was often forgotten and not listed in the credits. He had many nicknames due to his craft and skill, one of which was ‘Dr. Frankenstein’s electrician’! He designed, built, and controlled the laboratory’s amazing electrical whiz-bang machinery we see spitting all those electrical charges, flashes, sparks, and lightning bolts in *real time*—not computer generated—that brought the creature to life one dark night. In fact, Strickfaden even designed Dr. Frankenstein’s laboratory.”

Lexi placed her hands on her hips. “Wowzers. I can see why that photo is so valuable. You know, I’ve read Mary Shelley’s book *Frankenstein*, so I’m wondering why I’ve never seen any of those movies. I mean, Lanny, we live in the same house, after all.”

Lanny copied his sister’s hands-on-hips gesture. “I can tell you why. First, sis, you always say books are better than their movies. And second, you claim not to like ‘old movies’ and leave the room whenever one comes on.”

Rani cocked her head at Lexi. “Wow. I’ve known you for eight years, but I didn’t know that. Those vintage movies are the best! Unlike so many movies today, the oldies show when life was simpler. That can be fun and refreshing. Plus, they tend to take more time building a story and revealing the characters than movies now.”

“Right, Rani,” Lanny replied. “But did you also know that those films are really like most films today because, well, people are still people! We share many of the same feelings and values—like the need for friends, love, family, respect, fun, and success. Some things don’t change over time. In fact, they endure.”

He added, “And people today are still making the same kinds of mistakes people made years ago. Those are some reasons why we go to movies, so we can learn from the actors how to become our best selves and get out of a jam, or problem, we or others put on us.”

“Well spoken, Lanny,” Mr. Llewellyn replied. “And movies can be a fun way to learn history—”

“Yeah!” shouted Rani. “I love looking back at the clothes, hairstyles, cars, and what kids did before cellphones and social media. And I agree with Lanny about our basic values being mostly the same, then and now.”

“True, Rani and Lanny,” Mr. Llewellyn replied. “Sometimes, we must dive into the past to understand the present and where we’re headed. For example, we can learn from those pioneers of the film industry and appreciate how they paved the way. Many of us in the movie business talk about them fondly every day.”

Mrs. Llewellyn nodded. “And, you know, it’s important not to limit ourselves. You never know what you might learn or enjoy when you keep an open mind. And when we watch vintage movies, we can honor the creativity and diversity of styles from those screenwriters, directors, actors, cinematographers—the people behind the cameras—and the other artists. Their efforts were groundbreaking in their day, worthy of our appreciation. Without vintage movies from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we wouldn’t have the movies or special effects we enjoy in the twenty-first!”

Mr. Llewellyn said, “Speaking of *Frankenstein* and that photo, how perfect is it that a big storm is brewing right now? Mwah-ha-ha!” He rubbed his palms together.

Lanny laughed. “Yeah. Very cool!”

“Mrs. Llewellyn, don’t you and Mr. Llewellyn live somewhere else sometimes, away from Las Palmitas, where the weather can get colder?” Lexi asked.

The woman smiled. “Yes, Lexi. We spend most weekends at our other home about one hundred miles north of here in the old Welsh village of Llanfair.”

Moki shook his head. “*Welsh? Llanfair?*”

Mrs. Llewellyn chuckled. “How about if first, all of you grab some refreshments? Then, come join Mr. Llewellyn and me in the living room by the fire where it’s cozy. We’ll tell you all about the village.”

Everyone filled their plates with yummy-looking brownies, juggled cups of hot tea, and sat in the living room. The detectives' eyes were trained on their hosts.

"Now, to Moki's questions," Mrs. Llewellyn said. "*Welsh* refers to the country of Wales, which borders England on the west. Wales and England are part of the United Kingdom, the 'U.K.'"

She continued. "*Llanfair* is a village settled in California by the Welsh in 1900. The population has held steady all these years. We grew up there and love it."

"Right," Mr. Llewellyn added. "Llanfair is in a valley. Settlers once mined for iron and copper in the mountains. There are also fields and meadows with grazing sheep and apple orchards. Llanfair is still quite isolated—except for weekend tourists, mainly from Los Angeles."

Lexi sighed. "It sounds so peaceful there. Is that why tourists visit Llanfair—for relaxation and fresh air?"

Mr. Llewellyn looked down at the carpet, then back at the girl. "Not entirely, Lexi. They used to come to be frightened! But now, well . . . tourism has taken a huge plunge in the last couple of months."

"Frightened?" Lanny asked. "What's that about? And why the big drop in tourism?"

Mr. Llewellyn replied, "Apparently, someone's been setting fire to tourists' cars, the meadows, and some village buildings. Weekend tourism has slowed to a trickle in the past few months. That's hurt businesses that depend on visitors' money. In fact, our museum attendance has fallen dramatically, so our charity is losing out."

Moki cringed. "What about the 'frightened' part?"

"The tourists used to come to get frightened on purpose," Mrs. Llewellyn replied. "It has to do with the history of the place as well as the museum we own and operate—The Frankenstein Laboratory Museum."

Lanny sat up. "Frankenstein! So, there's a horror movie tie-in to the village, your business, and tourism?"

"A *huge* tie-in," Mr. Llewellyn replied.

Lanny's face could have lit up the room.

Mr. Llewellyn said, "You see, on a hill in Llanfair are the remains of an old watchtower. Universal Pictures used it in 1931 to film part of its first *Frankenstein* movie. Now, it's a

museum that Mrs. Llewellyn and I own and operate. That photo here on our wall shows the interior.”

Now, Lanny was on his feet. “OMG! Do you mean inside that Llanfair tower is the *original laboratory* of Dr. Frankenstein, the one in the movie? With all the lab equipment and machines, too?”

“Yes, to both questions,” James Llewellyn replied. “But it isn’t so much the tower that frightens people.”

“What is it, then, Mr. Llewellyn?” Lexi asked.

“On moonless nights, some . . . *thing* . . . glowing bright green has been spotted roaming the countryside! Locals call it the ‘Shocking Specter.’”

“Whoa!” Lanny replied. “I’d say we have a *bunch* of mysteries there. Mr. and Mrs. Llewellyn, how would you like it if we Botanic Hill detectives investigate?”

Chapter Two

Electrifying and Shocking!

The group huddled together, appreciating the fireplace’s glowing embers. The warmth was in sharp contrast to the “Frankenstorm” growling outside. Torrents of rain, tree-bending winds, booming thunder, and freaky lightning arrived as the sleuths snagged their sixth case.

Lanny would have volunteered for *any* mystery that involved an old Universal classic horror picture! And this mystery promised the squad a chance to step inside movie history, namely, the watchtower laboratory of the fictional Dr. Frankenstein—where the real Boris Karloff, Kenneth Strickfaden, and Jack Pierce had performed their magic.

Lanny’s eyebrows furrowed. “So, did I understand you correctly, Mr. Llewellyn? You believe a green ghost is haunting the fields and meadows of Llanfair on some moonless nights — Wait! *Moonless*? Not a *full* moon? . . . Hmm. . . . So, I think our tasks will be to find out who or what the specter is, and why they’re prowling in the area.”

“Sounds great, Lanny,” the man replied. “But unlike many residents of Llanfair, Mrs. Llewellyn and I don’t believe in ghosts or superstitions. We don’t know who or what the

glowing thing is, but someone or something is roaming around out there, likely setting fires on random moonless nights. We don't have a clue why.”

Rani swept her long, thick black braid off her shoulder. “Setting fires! Yikes! Why do you call the green thing the ‘Shocking Specter’?”

“And when did it start appearing?” Lexi asked.

Sara Llewellyn chuckled. “You detectives are certainly enthusiastic! We can answer most of your questions by telling you the ‘Legend of Scotty Roberts.’”

“Wait for me!” Moki yelled from the dining room where he had dashed to restock his plate with brownies. The foodie quickly returned to eye rolls from Lexi and Rani, who were embarrassed but not surprised by his overflowing plate. If Moki noticed, he did not care.

Everyone leaned closer. Lexi loved a good story, especially when a storm was raging, which gave a tale more atmosphere. Rani set her hot, brimming teacup down with a clink on its dainty, flowered saucer so as not to miss a word. Lanny, ignoring the refreshments, was always attentive when a new case's information was to be shared. But Moki could easily listen with his mouth full.

Mrs. Llewellyn began. “First, though—and because what I'm about to tell you ties in with the legend—you should understand something about the Welsh people and their homeland. Wales is a beautiful land of songs, myths, monsters, mountains, folklore, and heroic legends. It's where some of the *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table* stories originated. In the ‘Otherworld,’ as the Welsh call the Land of Make-Believe, dwell giants, fairies, dragons, kings, queens, and enchanters.

“The Tylwyth Teg [TULL-wooth TAGUE, rhymes with “vague”] are the fairy folk who hide in the valleys, fields, and oak trees. Some Welsh people believe those little creatures come out at night for human offerings of bread and milk left by kitchen doors. The Tylwyth Teg are good and helpful if fed. But watch out if you forget!”

“Wowzers!” Lexi said. “I'd love to read some of those tales.”

Sara Llewellyn replied, “You can, in the collection of Welsh stories called *The Mabinogion*. It inspired J.R.R. Tolkien—author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*—to write his book *The Silmarillion*.

“And now, Mr. Llewellyn will share the sad legend of Scotty Roberts,” the woman said.

James Llewellyn cleared his throat. “What I’m about to tell you is only part legend. Most of it is *true*. It involves the Roberts family, some of the original Welsh settlers of Llanfair in 1900. Shortly after settling there, Dylan and Gwendolyn Roberts had a son, whom they named Scott, called ‘Scotty.’ He wasn’t content to be a miner or farmer. He was curious about the motion pictures being made in Hollywood. So, on his eighteenth birthday in 1920, Scotty packed a bag and left Llanfair by horse and buggy, heading west to Los Angeles.

“It didn’t take Scotty long before the magic of Hollywood, ‘Tinseltown,’ overtook him—still called that today because of the glitz and glamour its movies make life out to seem, and where celebrities are called ‘stars.’ Anyway, the movie industry was booming, and Hollywood was the place to be. Silent pictures—films without sound—captivated Scotty. Universal Pictures Corporation had been founded in 1912 by Carl Laemmle [pronounced LEM-lee] and eight other men. The studio was always looking for good stagehands, so Scotty applied and was hired. Over the next ten years, he became highly skilled and one of the most in-demand stagehands at Universal.”

“What exactly do stagehands do?” Moki asked between brownies.

“They set up scenery, lights, props, and riggings, and help with special effects, mostly from behind the scenes, on stages and film sets. It’s hard but important work to a good show or movie—and it can be dangerous.”

Lexi sighed. “Oh no. I think the sad part about Scotty Roberts is coming up.” She stared at her shoes.

Supportive Rani scooted closer to her emotional BFF.

“I’m afraid so, Lexi,” Mr. Llewellyn replied. “By 1929, talking pictures—*talkies*, those with sound—had replaced most silent films. Universal Pictures needed money. Carl Laemmle’s son, Carl Laemmle, Jr., convinced his father to make another talking horror picture since the studio’s 1931 vampire movie, *Dracula*, had been a box office success. Junior proposed making a movie from Mary Shelley’s book, *Frankenstein*. And so, it was set. Scotty, still in demand at Universal, was about to get a chance to return to Llanfair in 1931, with the movie cast and crew.”

Moki grimaced. “Uh, Mr. L, we’re not going to talk about Count Dracula, are we?” All bloodsuckers, whether vampires or snakes, were “fangs of death” to Moki.

“No, Moki. Just *Frankenstein*. Universal had previously scouted out Llanfair’s tall, abandoned shepherds’ watchtower and paid the villagers well to let the studio take it over. The

crew turned the tower into Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory and filmed certain scenes inside it and around the village. In fact, some of the villagers became paid *extras*—people with small parts who don't get screen credit at the end of movies.”

Lanny was sitting bolt upright. “Did Boris Karloff and the rest of the cast and crew like working in the tower and meeting the villagers?”

“Early reports in Hollywood newspapers from 1931 stated that most of the stars and crew did,” Mr. Llewellyn replied. “Kenneth Strickfaden was one of the first to arrive in Llanfair. He had to assemble his wondrous electrical machines, test their special effects' magic, and set up the rest of Dr. Frankenstein's high-voltage laboratory.”

Rani smiled. “I bet the villagers were thrilled to have the stars and crew strolling around, visiting their shops, and eating in their cafés.”

“I understand they were, Rani, until one day . . .” Mr. Llewellyn replied. “On the last day of filming in the tower, when Dr. Frankenstein's monster was shocked to life by Strickfaden's Hollywood lightning, a terrible accident occurred. Scotty Roberts was on the set, assisting in the effects. Remember, special effects back then were real, *not* computer generated, and were zipping around real people. Sparks were flying as manmade lightning bolts and loops of fire were jumping across the laboratory from machine to machine. Some of Strickfaden's devices emitted up to one million volts of electricity!

“That's when it happened. Apparently, there was a puddle of water on the floor near some of the highly charged machines. Scotty Roberts was in the wrong place at the wrong time. His foot touched the puddle that had encountered a machine's live wire. He was electrocuted and died on the spot.”

“How tragic!” Lexi said, dabbing at her already tearing eyes. “One shocked to life. One shocked to death. Scotty Roberts's parents must have been beyond upset.”

Mrs. Llewellyn replied, “They were, dear, along with the villagers *and* the movie's entire cast and crew. Filming stopped that day, and the Hollywood people, out of respect, returned home. But not before handing Mr. and Mrs. Roberts a large envelope stuffed with 5,000 dollars they had collected in memory of their friend and amazing stagehand. In today's money, that was over 90,000 dollars!

“Wowzers!” Lexi shouted. “But deserved.”

Sara Llewellyn continued. “Scotty’s funeral, held a few days later, was bittersweet, with his parents and friends sharing stories from his childhood. They praised his adventurous spirit that took him to Hollywood where he mastered his craft and became a celebrity in his own right. But, of course, they grieved his resulting, senseless death.

“Universal Pictures sent a large wreath of yellow roses to honor Scotty. It was laid on his grave in Llanfair’s cemetery. His plaque, also paid for by the studio, is affixed to the wall inside the tower’s Frankenstein Laboratory Museum. You’ll get to see it soon.”

James Llewellyn took over for his wife, who went to make fresh, hot tea. “But now, to the legend. Soon after Scotty’s death and burial, some villagers reported seeing a green, glowing object near Llanwelly’s Pond. On moonless nights, whenever the frogs in the pond stopped croaking, the nightbirds stopped singing, and the fog closed in, it was reported that the mysterious object rose from the pond and glided across the field toward the watchtower before disappearing into the cemetery, then the woods.”

Lanny asked, “Wait! Did you say ‘Llanwelly’? Hmm. . . . That’s cool. . . . But how did the villagers react to that sight? It sounds supernatural to me.”

Mr. Llewellyn continued. “Many villagers, being superstitious in 1931, thought it was surely the ghost of Scotty Roberts returning to avenge his death. Since he had died by electrical shock, they called the fuzzy green blob the Shocking Specter. Local scientists said it was swamp gas from the pond. The villagers didn’t believe it but were too afraid to investigate, so the legend took hold.”

“You mentioned before that the Shocking Specter set fires,” Rani said. “When did those start, and why?”

“About a month after Scotty died in 1931, the first of three fires broke out in the middle of a meadow. Luckily, it was small and quickly extinguished. On the next month’s new moon, a tree at the edge of the forest caught fire. But the third time, a barn burned to the ground! To this day, no one knows why those fires were set.”

Mrs. Llewellyn had returned with steaming teapots. “The legend says that the Tylwyth Teg had abandoned the villagers and were helping the Shocking Specter.”

“What made them think that?” Moki asked, waiting for his tea to cool.

She replied, “Because no matter how much bread and milk the people put out by their kitchen doors for the fairy folk, the Shocking Specter kept haunting the countryside. And its fires continued to blaze.”

“Have *you* seen the Shocking Specter?” Lexi asked.

“Yes!” Mr. Llewellyn replied. “We both have. But the strangest part of this legend is that the ghost, or whatever it was, vanished after that third fire in 1931, as mysteriously as it had arrived. . . .

“Until two months ago.”

THREE

Post-Storm Defusing

The monster storm that drenched Botanic Hill had fizzled and slunk away by nightfall. The detectives called their parents from Upas Street to report that they had a new case. They asked for permission to go with Mr. and Mrs. Llewellyn to Llanfair late Friday afternoon. Their return date was uncertain. No one knew how long it would take to solve the mystery of the recent return of the green-glowing Shocking Specter. Their parents said they could go.

“Thanks for the ride home, Mr. Llewellyn, and for hiring us!” Lanny said a while later as the kids stepped out into the wind at the twins’ front door on Quince Street.

“Thanks for suggesting it,” the man replied. “See all of you in two days.” He waved and drove away.

Once inside, the four detectives did a high five. Lexi said, “Wowzers! A new mystery to solve.”

“Which means Rani and I can skip school, have fun on our case, and be Bruce’s students again.” Moki was referring to the twins’ live-in tutor, Bruce Wilding.

Then, the detectives followed their noses to the bright, warm kitchen where tall, barrel-chested Uncle Rocky was preparing a garlicky Italian dinner. Rocky Donovan was not actually related to the family. He had worked as a cook for the twins’ archaeologist father, Dr. Ian Wyatt, at one of the ARC’s excavation sites many years ago. The two men became friends. Thirteen

years back, Uncle Rocky was hired to live and work on Quince Street, where he assisted the archaeologist and his wife with household chores and their newborn twins.

Lexi grasped the cook's forearm with both hands, pivoted on her heels, and looked at him with big, sparkling green eyes. "Hey, Uncle Rocky. Dinner smells heavenly, but guess what? We're on a new case!"

Uncle Rocky had had a soft spot in his heart for Lexi ever since she was a baby. "I already heard that news, but yay and congratulations. That's exciting. You can tell me all about it at the dinner table, which needs setting."

"Another yay!" Lexi said. She and Rani loved setting tables. It gave them an opportunity to bring the candlesticks and holders in from the dining room to make dinner in the kitchen a bit 'ritzier'—expensively stylish. Tonight, they would add some cut-crystal water glasses, a milky-white vase displaying feathery ferns and seven stalks of exotic bird-of-paradise blossoms from the twins' garden, and large linen napkin folded into triangles that Rani said, "Smelled like company coming."

Lanny and Moki moved two more chairs around the large table that often saw guests at mealtimes. Tonight, Rani and Moki were staying for dinner.

All four detectives helped Uncle Rocky by placing large bowls of spaghetti, pasta sauce, and a green salad on the table. A basket of warm garlic bread, more butter, and grated Parmesan cheese followed. In no time, eight people were seated and eager to dig into the aromatic feast.

The four detectives shared with the twins' parents, Uncle Rocky, and twenty-five-year-old Bruce all about their new case as plates were heaped with food.

Lexi said, "There was some . . . green-glowing . . . *thing* . . . running around the meadows and forests back in 1931—"

"And what's weird is that almost 100 years after it appeared, then disappeared, it's returned!" Lanny added.

Moki swallowed a big bite of thick, buttery bread. "We don't know why yet, or who or what it is—"

"But we're gonna find out!" Rani nodded.

Lexi raised her arms, touchdown style. "And Lanny's beyond excited because the mystery involves the actors and crew from the 1931 movie *Frankenstein*."

Lanny and Lexi's petite mother, art historian Dr. Rebecca Marlton, set her fork down. "That sounds so intriguing! Mrs. Llewellyn told your dad and me at work yesterday about the autographed photo. We didn't suspect it would turn into a new mystery," she said, "though we should have known."

"That's right," replied Ian Wyatt. "You four are like magnets for mysteries. I almost wish I was going along to help. Lanny knows I love those classic, vintage horror movies, too. At any rate, your mother and I are sure all of you will be careful." He eyed each detective.

"We will, Dad," Lanny said with the rest of the squad nodding.

The detectives knew that all their parents trusted them and gave them room to explore and learn from their successes and mistakes. But the thirteen-year-olds were also aware that with each new case, they had to continue to balance the demands of their work with caution to maintain that trust.

Still, Uncle Rocky shook his fork at the teens. "Just so you four stay safe and don't take any unnecessary chances." He was overly protective of them, and his gravely, New York accent assisted his serious, gruff tone.

"But Uncle Rocky," Lanny said, "detectives have to take risks, or they'll miss important clues—"

Lexi shot a warning look at her brother, then turned toward the cook. "Now, don't *worry*, Uncle Rocky! You know we always watch out for each other." And they always did.

Lanny had noticed a familiar look on Bruce's face earlier in the meal. The wheels were already turning in the tutor's head, as they often did whenever he was listening to the squad's new cases. Bruce was crafting relevant lessons on the spot to make learning fun and meaningful while also fulfilling grade-level requirements. He was an expert.

As if hearing Lanny's thoughts, Bruce said, "Then, I'll expect you four to watch that each of you does your schoolwork, too, while you're in Llanfair. I can't go with you this time since I'll be in Northern California on family business, but you can bet I'll send lots of work with you."

The squad groaned.

Dr. Wyatt's smile faded. "I believe all of you know better than that. But if not, you'll skip the mystery, stay home, and go to the local school. I hope each of you knows how lucky you are to have Bruce. He deserves your respect and enthusiasm daily."

Lexi's face glowed red. "You're right, Dad. We do know, and we're sorry." Then, she turned to Bruce. "And we take back every groan you heard. You're the best, Bruce. You plan great lessons for us that help us get more out of our cases and life. . . Plus, you have a way-cool car that we like our friends to see us in."

All four detectives grinned, nodded, and gave their tutor two thumbs up.

Bruce smiled. "Well, thanks. And I appreciate knowing *all* your reasons, sneaky or otherwise."

*

The detectives shivered and grabbed their sweatshirts off hooks as they entered their agency office in the twins' attic after dinner. Popping the hoodies over their heads, they collapsed onto the floor's threadbare Persian rug. The room was chilly and dampish after the hammering the roof had taken from that afternoon's storm.

Moki's tablet was open, ready for notetaking since he was the agency's secretary. He reached for the plate of tiramisu squares from Uncle Rocky. They had permission to eat their Italian dessert away from the kitchen table.

Lanny got comfortable on one of the large, squishy floor pillows and leaned into the center of the circle, bypassing the sweet treat. "Okay, guys. I'm sure all of us have questions and ideas about our new case, so let's begin."

Lexi sighed loudly. "Well, the most obvious one to me is who or what is the Shocking Specter?"

"And why has it returned to Llanfair?" Rani added.

"But has it returned, or is it swamp gas as scientists originally speculated in 1931?" Lanny asked.

Moki swallowed a large bite of dessert. "Well, someone or something started fires back in the day, and those have returned, too."

"Good point," Lexi said. "Maybe there was and still is swamp gas at Llanwelly's Pond. But given the fires, and if they're related to the specter's appearances, I think there's got to be a human being that somehow glows in the dark, running around the area, who's up to no good."

“Right, sis. We can’t rule anything out yet though you know me. I’m not one to think it’s supernatural. And I like your glow-in-the-dark idea. We’ll have to figure out how that happens.”

“But one thing’s for sure,” Rani added. “Whoever or whatever it was that terrified the villagers in 1931 couldn’t still be alive almost 100 years later! Which means someone else has likely taken over the role.”

Everyone’s eyes got big as they nodded.

Moki’s arms formed a W. “Why does it glow? And how? Where does it hang out? And why does the Shocking Specter come out only during the new moon—when there’s no moonlight?”

Rani looked deep in thought. “Well . . . maybe because . . . things that glow can . . . glow more brightly when . . . it’s pitch-black outside?”

“Right, BFF,” replied Lexi. “That answers ‘how,’ but to Moki’s other questions, I also want to know what’s its reason for glowing? Is it starting the fires? And where does it go after making its nighttime run?”

Moki polished off his third piece of tiramisu and said, “Well, whatever it is, the Shocking Specter better watch out because here come the Botanic Hill detectives to pull the plug on its not-so-glowing plans!”

The squad could always depend on Moki to be positive while he ate dessert.

FOUR

Not-So-Current Events

Botanic Hill was a bejeweled landscape the next morning, enchanting its residents after the previous day’s Frankenstorm. Leaves and lawns glittered in the bright sunshine.

Rani and Moki wisely chose to arrive at the twins’ front door, knowing the backyard would be a swamp. They parked their damp, grassy sneakers on the front porch, exchanged waves with Uncle Rocky, thanked him for the heaping plate of freshly cut orange slices that he handed them, and tromped up the backstairs in their sock feet.

Both detectives usually arrived and left through the backyard and kitchen door. Moki and his dad lived on Palm Street, one block south, but their house and the twins’ were back to back.

The two families happily shared a wooden fence and a big, hinged gate. Rani and her family lived on Oleander Street, two blocks south. She knew some secret shortcuts that came in handy, especially when the squad was solving a mystery, and she had to get to Quince Street quickly.

“Welcome to Paradise,” Bruce said as his last two students entered their third-floor classroom. Before they could comment, he continued. “Listen, Rani and Moki. As you know, I got you excused from classes at Las Palmitas Middle School today so you could prepare for your case. I’ll be there most of the day getting your assignments from your teachers. But now, all of you must work on a project for at least one hour while I’m gone. And twins, finish any old work.”

“Will do,” Lanny replied as the detectives took their seats on floor cushions at the low round table and divvied up the orange slices before giving Bruce their attention.

The tutor sat on the edge of a table, feet dangling, ankles crossed, facing the teens. “Let’s begin. One of the earliest twentieth-century color films was *A Trip to the Moon*, a silent, French sci-fi adventure, released in 1902. It took an entire crew to color every frame of film! What’s important is that color movies aren’t new. They’ve existed for over 120 years. And the interest in color movies as a filming option spurred on the development of the technology that could make that possible. So, we have those early color-film pioneers to thank for the movies we enjoy and, perhaps, expect and take for granted today.

“As you probably know, most movies at the time of *Frankenstein* in 1931 were talking pictures—movies with sound—but were filmed in black and white. Why? Color film wasn’t used much until the 1950s because even though it was cutting-edge, it was still too expensive for most studios. Also, it required a lot of work to achieve top quality and was a very different filming technology in general from black and white—”

Lexi held up her hand. “Except for most of *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy lands in Oz and steps out of her house that fell on the Wicked Witch of the East. Everything suddenly turns from yucky black and white to dazzling color, which was cool! That was in 1939.”

“Yes, that movie was filmed in color with the Kansas scenes at the beginning and end and the credits filmed in black and white but colored in with sepia tones.”

Moki leaned over to Lanny. “Bro, what *doesn’t* this guy know?” The teens often commented on how smart Bruce was and had nicknamed him “The Computer on Legs,” though they kept that mostly to themselves.

“I take it, Lexi, you’re not a fan of black-and-white movies,” the tutor replied.

She rolled her eyes. “You got that right, Bruce.”

“Well, as it turns out, that’s today’s work—“Black-and-White Movies, Yea or Nay?”

“Cool!” Everyone fist-pumped.

“I’m curious. Give me a thumbs up if you like black-and-white films, and a thumbs down if you don’t.”

Rani and Lanny were on the yea side with Lexi and Moki definite nays.

“Perfect,” Bruce said. “It should be a lively, balanced discussion. Okay, I want you to research and note some relevant information on black-and-white films, and color, too, if you like, to add authoritative voices to your discussion. Be sure to include your own opinions and reasons politely as well. When you finish, send me your important discussion points and summaries, a list of the sources you used, and any questions you might have. I’ll review your work and comment. You’ll need a discussion leader and a notetaker. Who wants to volunteer?”

Rani’s hand shot up first to be the leader. Moki, as detective agency secretary, volunteered to take notes.

Bruce stood. “Okay. I think you’re set. Any last-minute questions? . . . No? Then, go to it. I look forward to reading your work.” Bruce gathered up a few items and headed to the classroom door.

Lexi turned and waved good-bye to him. “Bruce, have fun cruising around town in your cool blue vintage 1967 Mustang convertible!”

“Thanks for the suggestion. I will,” he replied. Then, he smiled broadly and disappeared out the door.

In no time, the teens pulled out their tablets, googled topics relevant to black-and-white and color films, and were reading and taking notes.

When everyone had finished, Rani opened the discussion. “I think we should begin by sharing, in one or two words, what comes to mind when you hear the term, ‘black-and-white films.’ And remember our rule about being respectful of each other’s ideas so everyone feels comfortable sharing. Let’s go around the table. Moki?”

“*Boring and weird.*”

“Lanny?”

“*Atmospheric and powerful.*”

“Lexi?”

“*Quirky snoozers.*”

“And I say, *artistic* and *thought-provoking*,” Rani replied. “That was interesting. Now, I’m curious. How many black-and-white films has each of you watched?”

Moki replied, “Maybe five or so, but none of the Universal horror pictures.”

“Hundreds!” Lanny shouted. “I especially enjoy those Universal horror movies from the 1930s and ’40s. And, of course, the early Sherlock Holmes movies.”

“Two or three,” Lexi said. “And like Moki, none of those horror pictures. Obviously, I’ve avoided them—and no, I’m not a scaredy-cat. It’s that there are a lot of current movies to see, and they’re all in beautiful color.”

Rani replied, “Not as many as Lanny, but lots. I especially enjoy *The Thin Man* series that was made from 1934 to 1947. They’re detective movies with Nick and Nora Charles, played by William Powell and Myrna Loy, and their cute but rascally wire fox terrier, Asta. They get into the coolest scrapes and devise amazing ways of figuring out whodunit—with the dog’s help, of course!”

Rani continued. “Well, I think one thing we can all agree on is, color or black and white, current or past, movies can be works of art.”

Everyone nodded.

“Can we also all agree they can be a fun way to learn history as Mr. Llewellyn said?”

Again, everyone nodded.

Lanny added, “And I also like what Mrs. Llewellyn said about not limiting ourselves: ‘You never know what you might learn or enjoy when you keep an open mind.’”

“Let’s turn to what our research taught us about why movies were filmed in black-and-white. Who’s first?”

Lanny said, “I just read an article written by a film department curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City who said that black-and-white—for movies, drawings, and photographs—can create atmosphere and attitude with its moody tones. I agree. In fact, those are some of the reasons why I love black-and-white movies like *Citizen Kane* and *Casablanca*, voted two of the best movies ever made, even today. Without color, you can notice huge, sharp contrasts between light and dark.”

“I read that same article!” Rani said. “It stated that ‘shadows and edges of light and dark are more *pronounced*,’ or obvious, in black and white. That can make us focus on all the shades of gray in between, see things that we might not catch if we viewed them in color, and activate our creativity. Black and white can produce artistic *complexity*, which means twists and turns, kicking a movie up a notch.”

“So,” Moki asked, “are you saying that black-and-white films, more than color ones, make us rely on our imaginations to fill in gaps and determine meaning?”

“They do for me!” Rani replied. “We get to decide what colors things are, making them our own creations in a way. I’ve done that many times— for example, deciding what color an actress’s dress or eyes are, or figuring out what the director or the cinematographer is trying to help us see. According to another article, Josef von Sternberg, one of the earliest masters of black-and-white filmmaking almost 100 years ago, ‘used light and dark to reveal men’s souls in his inky velvety, shadowy films.’ I wonder if he would appreciate our color movies today?”

Lanny said, “The term *chiaroscuro* [key-ah-ruh-SKOO-row] has been applied to movies, and other works of art like Rembrandt’s. It means capitalizing on the contrasts when light and shadow fall unevenly on faces and clothing. Like in the cool 1927, popular silent movie *Metropolis*.” No one minded Lanny’s definition this time.

“Wowzers,” said Lexi. “I didn’t know there was so much art and meaning to black-and-white films! And I must admit I was surprised to learn from an article I read that about 140 movies have been made in black and white since 1966. Even being able to film in color, they filmed in black and white on purpose, an artistic choice by some directors and cinematographers.”

“And still is,” Lanny added. “Several movies in the last few years have intentionally been made in black and white, according to an article I read: *Werewolf by Night*, and *Emancipation*, both in 2022, and *The Lighthouse* in 2019, to name a few. The directors chose a ‘retro’ style, meaning from the past, to take us back to those moody, atmospheric, vintage Universal horror pictures. Or to make a movie match its historical past when films were mostly made in the purity and awesomeness of black and white.”

Moki laughed. “Well, Lexi. I guess we can’t call black-and-white movies ‘boring’ or ‘snoozers’ anymore! Listen to this list of black-and-white movies I found: Mel Brooks’s comedy *Young Frankenstein* in 1974; Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* in 1980; my favorite actor, Johnny

Depp, in Tim Burton's 1994 film *Ed Wood*; and Burton's 2012 animated movie *Frankenweenie*. He said it had to be in black and white because it made it 'more emotional.'"

Lanny added. "An American movie director and screenwriter named Sam Fuller famously said, 'Life is in color, but black and white is more realistic.'"

Rani grabbed Lexi's arm. "Hey, BFF! I'll loan you a very cool picture book I got eight years ago called *Young Charlotte, Filmmaker*, by Frank Viva. Charlotte loves *everything* black and white and even makes her own home movie about Smudge, her black cat, in that style. In fact, color gives her a headache! I love it when in the book, it says, 'Black and white clear away the clutter.'"

Lexi laughed. "Okay, okay, you guys! I'm convinced. So, let's go make some popcorn and watch Boris Karloff in *Frankenstein*."

FIVE

Charging Off to Llanfair

"I can't believe I never knew those *Frankenstein* laboratory scenes were filmed in Llanfair's watchtower," Lanny said late Friday afternoon as he, the Llewellyns, and the rest of the squad headed out of town in the couple's SUV. They were on their way to a new case, vintage movie history, and Welsh-American culture, two hours north.

"Back then, most villagers preferred keeping that news a secret, mainly out of respect for Scotty Roberts and his family," Mr. Llewellyn said as he watched the road.

"Does any of his family still live in Llanfair?" Lexi asked.

"No. They left about a year after the accident."

From the front passenger seat, Mrs. Llewellyn turned toward the detectives. "It's difficult to keep anything a secret for 100 years, but few villagers think about the accident anymore. Fortunately, our Frankenstein Laboratory Museum is no secret! It's a fascinating, educational experience for people. We promote it online and advertise the local inns, cafés, and shops, too. As I said before, those weekend-tourist dollars help keep many villagers' businesses thriving. Otherwise, Llanfair could become a ghost town. That's why we're so thrilled that you detectives came up with the idea to solve the mystery of the Shocking Specter before it scares away any more business. As it is now, tourism in Llanfair had dropped off a lot."

Mr. Llewellyn added, “Right. Those tourist dollars are especially important to us personally because we donate the museum proceeds after expenses to the Motion Picture and Television Fund Foundation. That’s a Los Angeles charity for needy entertainment industry seniors and their families.”

Lanny smiled. “Cool! We’ll do our best to solve the mystery. And I’m excited to get to experience the tower.”

“Speaking of experiencing new things,” Rani beamed, “Lexi and Moki now like black-and-white films!”

“That’s right!” Moki replied, “Thanks to our home-school lesson yesterday and great discussion.”

“Right,” Lexi added. “We read and discussed some wonderful articles about that film style. Then, we watched 1931’s *Frankenstein*. Moki and I had never seen it.”

Mrs. Llewellyn faced the squad again. “That’s great news! I’m eager to hear your impressions of black-and-white films, but first, what did you think of the movie?”

“Lanny’s right,” Moki replied. “Boris Karloff sure could act, even with his hands and eyes. After he was brought to life, it was spooky the way he backed into the room. Then, he slowly turned around and, wham! You see that pale, sunken face, and his dark, sad, watery eyes.”

Lexi nodded. “I’m a huge Karloff fan now! He had me from the start because I felt sorry for him. He was like a baby in a man’s body—well, many men’s body *parts* stitched together!—who only wanted to be loved. But he was rejected and mistreated by most people, including his creator. It wasn’t his fault he was brought to life. Makes you wonder who the real villain was—the monster or Dr. Frankenstein? It’s like that in Mary Shelley’s book, too. Both mad scientists—Victor Frankenstein in the book, renamed Henry Frankenstein for the movie—didn’t think ahead to the possible consequences of their experiments.”

“And,” Rani added, “you have to appreciate Jack Pierce’s makeup artistry to create the monster’s famous, frightening face and body—not done with masks.” “Right,” Lanny replied. “Boris Karloff was in the studio’s makeup chair by 3:30 every morning. He was a professional who always went the extra distance for his craft. His monster faces were made with smelly spirit gum, cotton wads, layer after layer of a highly flammable liquid plastic called collodion, plus greasepaint, and metal. Mr. Karloff spent four hours daily in that makeup chair

and another four hours for Pierce to remove it. But he never complained! In fact, he and Jack Pierce became friends.”

Mrs. Llewellyn continued. “I can guarantee you four are really going to enjoy the museum. But now, Moki and Lexi, I want to know what you two newbies to black-and-white films appreciate about them now?”

Lexi gave an exaggerated shiver. “I love the moody, dreamy, spooky atmospheres that are created when you remove the color. Rani reminded me that it’s like looking around your bedroom in the dark at night. All the colors are washed away, and you see things in neat, new ways.”

Moki raked his fingers through his thick, longish black hair. “I like that I’ve discovered—with a little help from my friends—a whole new-to-me bunch of movies!”

Lanny returned from gazing out the window. “Um, Mr. L? I love vintage movies, but there’s something that’s always angered me about some of them. Most of the characters in the 1930s and 1940s films are White and in powerful positions. People of color, including those like our Rani and Moki, are usually portrayed as servants, butlers, slaves, outlaws, and uneducated misfits—*if* they’re in the films at all! That reinforces racial stereotyping and makes the movies and some of those associated with them outdated and downright cruel, in my opinion.”

“Glad you brought that up,” the film historian replied. “We could avoid those movies from the past. But they can become tools for learning history, which is a reason they should be preserved. Don’t ignore the racism and stereotyping you see in them. Recognize those aspects for what they are. Say they’re wrong! Then, use those films as springboards to create positive conversations and actions with friends and family. You can embrace the parts you feel are all right to enjoy—and there are many! That’s powerful learning and wise navigating inside any movie.”

Lanny nodded. “So, turn a negative into a positive.”

“Right!” Mr. Llewellyn continued. “You can turn those movies into opportunities to question why certain elements are in those films. Basically, most of the old-time moviemakers were White men making movies for mostly White audiences. Due to much less cultural diversity in the United States back then compared with today, too many people feared other ethnicities and races. So, some American filmmakers depicted people of color or immigrants in ways that we

don't accept, or condone, today. Those films can become windows into history as to how some Americans thought and responded back then."

Lanny sighed. "Yes. Those racial stereotypes were wrong then, and they are now."

"That's so true," Mr. Llewellyn replied. "Acknowledging their harmful impact is the first step to

learning from them. Then, you can have meaningful conversations with your family, friends, and teachers to prevent that kind of history from repeating itself."

Rani added, "Yeah. Those conversations can help create a better future for everyone."

"Absolutely," Mr. Llewellyn replied. "And remember. There were often unsung heroes, namely, immigrants and people of color, behind the scenes back then who worked on those films."

"So, we should watch the credits at the end of the movies and do some research to get to know and appreciate those artists' contributions, too," Moki said.

"Sound like a great idea to me," Mr. Llewellyn replied. "And you can go one step further toward finding positives in the old films: It's important to applaud movie pioneers by recognizing and celebrating the good things they did—like the advances they made in filmmaking. Those achievements laid the groundwork for today's moviemakers, who continue to build on that legacy for the future of the industry."

Mrs. Llewellyn said, "That's why it's important to honor the *good things* you find in vintage films, even if they sometimes seem old-fashioned, amateurish, or tame to us now. Pioneers like Kenneth Strickfaden and Jack Pierce had innovative machines and daring makeup techniques that paved the way for today's visual, sound, and artistic special effects."

"Right," replied Mr. Llewellyn. "*Frankenstein* was the *Star Wars* of 1931. People came from miles around to watch Mr. Strickfaden perform his magic during those laboratory scenes. There had never been anything like it."

"That's a cool way to think about it," Rani replied. "Without those pioneers, we wouldn't have what we enjoy now. Artists create, and millions benefit from their art—forever. We should celebrate what they did right but not forget to call out the bad stuff, like racism."

Lanny said, "Thanks, everyone, for helping me see that I can still love many elements of those vintage movies if I think of them as powerful history lessons, too. And speaking of

Kenneth Strickfaden and his machines—which I can't wait to see—can you please tell us more about him, Mr. Llewellyn?"

"Sure thing. Ken Strickfaden was an electronics wizard, movie industry trailblazer, and science educator. He was involved behind the scenes in over 100 film and television productions between the 1920s and the 1980s. He worked on silent movies in the 1920s, then moved to sound films, including 1939's *The Wizard of Oz*, 1981's *The Empire Strikes Back*, and finally *The Terminator* in 1984, right before he passed away."

Lexi's eyes bulged. "Wowzers. Mr. Strickfaden experienced so much movie history and changes during those sixty years. Just imagine all the new technology he and other moviemakers had to learn to shift from silent to sound movies."

"And most moviemakers shifted by 1929 since that's the year talking pictures took off," the man said.

"As a teenager, Strickfaden was already fearless of and knowledgeable about high-voltage electricity. It was his passion, and he was busy building some of his amazing machines in his home's basement workshop in Montana.

"He moved to Los Angeles and, in 1926, got a job at several Hollywood movie studios as an electrical repairman. After work, he built machines in his home garage, purely for the joy of creating. But then, Universal Pictures came calling to use his inventions!

"And throughout his life, Strickfaden traveled the country with his machines to present whiz-bang science demonstrations at schools, fairs, and expos."

Lanny whistled. "He must have amazed thousands of people. I zeroed in on those machines yesterday when we were watching *Frankenstein*. I can see why Mr. Strickfaden was called 'Dr. Frankenstein's Electrician.'"

"Yeah," said Lexi. "And I loved how lightning was flashing all over the spooky laboratory, up and down some rods, and inside glass balls. That was beyond cool."

"Yes," replied Mr. Llewellyn. "Mr. Strickfaden's inventions were used to create early special visual and sound effects. Everything he created was done with *real machines in real time with real people*, not computer-generated images—CGI—used today, which are added after filming. And he was a bit of a jokester and gave his machines interesting names, like his favorite, the 'Megavolt Senior,' a Tesla coil, which brought lightning and life to the monster. His 'Lightning Bridge' allowed lightning to jump from machine to machine around the lab. He had a

‘Jacob’s Ladder,’ a high-voltage arc of traveling electrical sparks that climbed between two rabbit-ear rods before disappearing with a zap off the top. And his amazing ‘Nebularium,’ a clear-plastic, concave dish with a mirror and central light, pointed at the monster’s head as its stitched-together body lay on Dr. Frankenstein’s experimentation table, awaiting life’s spark.”

Moki swallowed hard. “Did Mr. Strickfaden ever get zapped—shocked by his own machines?”

Mr. Llewellyn chuckled. “A few times, mildly, but he was a careful professional who knew the power of electricity and respected it.”

“But *one time*, he did suffer a serious jolt from his own machinery,” Mrs. Llewellyn said. “It was while the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio was filming *The Mask of Fu Manchu* in 1932. Boris Karloff as the evil Fu Manchu tries to keep ancient, powerful relics—a mask and a sword—from thieving archaeologists for his own use. Streams of sparks are supposed to shoot from his copper-painted fingernails to the sword. Karloff knew the danger of electricity and was voltage-shy, so Strickfaden stood in for the actor’s hands! It was his only movie appearance.

“Despite all the safety precautions Strickfaden built into each machine, he receives a powerful shock during the fingernails’ scene due to a wire coming loose. Reportedly, it caused him to do a back flip! Otherwise, he was fine—if you don’t count a nasty blister it gave him on his big toe.”

Rani’s eyebrows raised. “Wow. Mr. Karloff must have been glad he passed on doing that trick!”

“I’m sure he was,” a laughing Mrs. Llewellyn replied. . . . “But, as we know, poor Scotty Roberts wasn’t so lucky during the filming of *Frankenstein*. Of course, Mr. Strickfaden wasn’t to blame. It was a tragic accident.”

Lanny asked, “Mr. Llewellyn, yesterday, you said *most* members of *Frankenstein*’s cast and crew enjoyed working in the tower. Did you mean Boris Karloff was one who didn’t always enjoy it, maybe because he was nervous around Mr. Strickfaden’s electric machines?”

“Exactly, Lanny. Karloff reportedly said that as the monster, shortly before he was hoisted to the roof of the lab tower to receive the sparks of life, he looked at the prop crew high up there ‘dueling with electrically charged carbon rods and hoped they knew what they were doing.’”

Moki nodded. “Hey! Those sound like *Star Wars*’ lightsabers! So, Boris Karloff probably would have preferred the crew to use CGI in the *Frankenstein* movies.”

“Quite possibly, if he could have envisioned that futuristic technology,” Mr. Llewellyn replied. “In all fairness to Mr. Karloff, he admired Mr. Strickfaden’s ingenuity and how the man’s work enhanced movies.”

Mrs. Llewellyn said, “You might be pleased to know that tomorrow night, we’re showing 1935’s *Bride of Frankenstein* in the museum’s little theater!”

Four loud “yays” blasted from the back seats.

She added, “If you can believe it, Mr. Strickfaden created a grander, more dazzling display of electrical magic for that sequel. But don’t take my word for it. See what you think when you watch *Bride*.”

Lexi nodded. “I will. And . . . is there a gift shop?”

“Of course!”

“How about a snack bar?” Moki asked.