Bram Heathcliff smiled at the nervous guests sitting across from him, offered them a reassuring smile, then pressed a button.

“Welcome, spooks and specters! This is Episode 169—hehe, of the Paranormalist’s Podcast, the Paranormal Hunters Society’s special podcast dedicated to discovering the truth out there!” The jackrabbit spoke into the microphone in front of him. “First off, I wanna thank ya’ll for listening in as we’ve spent this past winter discussing the existence of Yetis, Krampus folklore and the like, but now we at the studio have an exclusive interview for today’s episode. And boy, is it a doozy! This story’s got it all: tragedy, Gothic romance, a pair of star-crossed lovers, a bleak English moor, an even bleaker English manor, and what might be actual evidence on the possibility of reincarnation! Before we dive in though, I’d like to introduce ya’ll to our guests, Nate Haynes and Daniel Lierre. Did I pronounce that one right?”

“Uh, you did it just fine there, Mr. Heathcliff,” answered Daniel Lierre, a lean fruit bat sitting beside a well-groomed, nervous Beagle, connected by a reassuring paw.

“Please, call me ‘Bram’. Everyone does,” their host chuckled across from the desk. “So, mind if I ask how the flight went for you two? From what I gather, this is Nate’s first time in the U.S. How’s the Southwest heat faring for you?”

“Correct,” Nate Haynes spoke in a soft English accent, heavily encased in a Cornish dialect. “I shall admit that the…heat, is rather oppressive. Even in February. In any case, it’s great to be here with you and Danny in Nueva Fe. My only complaint was the jet lag.”

“And the ‘oppressive heat’,” Daniel quipped.

“Alrighty, first there’s the jet lag,” Nate corrected for his lover, “and then there’s the heat.”

“Yeah, both of ‘em can be a real bitch, but that’s what I gotta love about New Mexico,” Bram snickered at seeing Daniel exaggeratedly roll his eyes, which Nate caught sight of and flicked his tail at him behind their chairs. “Anyway, I’d like to get us right to the topic: Daniel, you mentioned to me last week that after nearly five months in a long-distance relationship, you and Nate are already planning on not only moving in a house together in Nate’s native Cornwall, but getting a domestic partnership too?”

“Civil partnership, actually,” Nate spoke up, a little more confident and smiling.

“Yeah, you mean civil partnership,” Daniel nodded alongside his boyfriend. “Yes, we’re uh, getting together, and it may seem like a rush at first glance, but…well, it feels like the next big step for our relationship now. And besides, we’ve technically been together for much, much longer than five months. It feels like we’ve known each other not just our entire lives, but…”

“Well, for forever,” Nate finished for the fruit bat. “It’s a long story though.”

“We got time,” Bram offered a genuine, curious smile. “It’s my podcast, so I make the rules about how long each episode is. I bet the listeners wanna hear your tale as well.”

Daniel and Nate exchanged one more glance, smiled softly, and leaned forward to tell their tale, at long last.

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“Daniel?”

“Hm?” I looked up from my phone and smiled at the vulpine barista, holding my morning latte behind the countertop. “Oh, yeah. That’s me.”

I’d carefully grabbed it from her paws when she asked, “By any chance, are you American?”

“Indian-American,” I nodded, then added, “On my mother’s side.”

“That’s pretty cool,” she giggled. “What brings you all the way out here?”

My smile almost faltered, then rebuilt itself as quickly while pulling my winged arms close to take a small sip from the latte.

“Ah, that…I just thought Cornwall would be fun to see,” I half-lied to the vulpine, then waved to her as she worked on another order and I left the coffee shop.

Of all the locations to go during my European vacation, Cornwall had been one of the more scenic. For some unknown reason, I couldn’t help but add the English county as the last place to visit in Great Britain before eventually taking a ferry from Plymouth to the Brittiany coast in France. I’d visited London, Nottingham, Edinburgh, Manchester, followed by a trip to Winchester and Bath to see the Roman ruins, and eventually Cardiff. Yet for some inexplicable reason, I felt myself being drawn to a small town on the edge of the Bodmin Moors, to an English town I’d never even heard of.

As they went, Tuskfield felt…quaint. Its unique, family-owned shopfronts and the ancient hotel resting above a popular pub helped welcome me amongst a plethora of other tourists who wanted to see the moorlands. Tuskfield allowed us to get a sense of the Cornish culture, its townsfolk, the wonderful meals at a local restaurant, its scenic, small but charming town square. However, according to the tourism stand, the most beautiful and historical site happened to be outside Tuskfield’s limits.

“Fangcrest Manor?” I mumbled to myself while reading the pamphlet. The local bus turned left, right, moving up and down due to bumps on the road as the read the pamphlet a guide from the stand had offered me. The latte had been emptied and abandoned on the empty seat next to mine. “‘Built in the late 1760s, Fangcrest Manor is a unique historical site noted for its idyllic location overlooking towards the Bodmin Moors’…”

I didn’t think much of that information during the ride outside of town. Once the bus finally drove past a vine-covered exterior wall surrounding the estate though, I felt my heart suddenly miss two beats. At first, it felt like dying, but then I felt a rush of adrenaline that compelled me to be the first fur to stand up and rush past the other passengers. I certainly earned a few annoyed frowns, but all that didn’t matter when I finally felt the gravel on my shoes.

Being there, staring across the empty pea gravel driveway at the manor itself, felt very…familiar. It felt like a distant memory, despite never even knowing it existed. For several seconds, I stood there, frozen, and unable to do anything so much as breathe while taking in the ancient scenery. The vague scents of fresh flowers, flowing pedals, leather baking under the intense sunlight, and the smell of something akin to lilacs filled my nostrils.

“Young man,” a voice echoed nearby. “Are you feeling quite alright?”

I glanced left to see an elderly vole half my height and wearing bespeckled glasses belonging more to a librarian. Her concerned gaze up at me didn’t waver when the other bus passengers streamed by us like water in a stream.

“I. uh, I’m good,” nodding, my reassuring smile didn’t convince her. “I get a little carsick sometimes, that’s all. Or in this case, bus sick.”

The vole laughed with me, albeit a little more forcefully.

“If you say so then,” she sighed before nodding towards the front of the manor. “If you require the loo, go straight inside and down to the right hallway, and the second door on the left-hand side.” When I looked at the vole confusedly, I noticed the nametag sticking from her polo shirt, and it clicked. She confirmed it by saying, “I work here, by the way. My name is Lily.”

“Nice to meet you, Lily,” I cordially nodded. “Thank you.”

She walked off towards the building, but I remained standing there. Even as the bus roared back to life and gracefully turned around to leave, its driver having taken another group of exhausted tourists back to Tuskfield, I still stood there, gaping at the beautiful Fangcrest Manor.

The property it sat in couldn’t be any better. As I’d seen earlier during the drive over, the surrounding moorland bordered directly near the mossy brick walls surrounding a patch of flat grass, with the old building directly in the center. Overgrown vines blooming from summer drenched the bottom half of the structure, yet none of the many glass windowpanes overlooking the driveway and untouched grass were covered up, while the manor’s architectural style (was it called Georgian?) made me feel as if I’d found myself in a historical drama set in the past.

Speaking of which, that familiar feeling from never went away. It remained at the back of my mind as I finally joined back up with the bus passengers inside the manor’s foyer outfitted into a guest lobby, which was connected to a ballroom packed with other tourists, and a dual staircase as ornate as the walls of the beautiful interior. Each time my eyes glanced at the layout beyond a lobby desk where we purchased the tour tickets, I felt a pang of loss in my chest.

No, it wasn’t loss for something. It felt more like loss for…for…somebody?

I shook my muzzle and reminded myself Juniper didn’t matter anymore. He wouldn’t have even wanted to go on a European trip, let alone join me in one, especially after our grand, epic fight two months back. Ever since then, Mom and Dad had been saddened to hear my college boyfriend and I broke up, mainly because they wanted a grandchild. The species and gender of my future spouse didn’t matter, and neither did the possibility of adoption, if our baby also happened to be a fruit bat like me.

*Parents*, I thought to myself. *Liberal in some ways, but conservative in others.*

Part of me couldn’t help but giggle as I stepped forward. The ticket seller sitting boredly behind the desk offered me a weird look, and I brushed it away by offering a credit card as payment. The seller shrugged and accepted it. Before long, I found myself pulled into the tide of furs crowding around a familiar vole.

“Welcome to the illustrious Fangcrest Manor, ladies and gentlemen,” she greeted us while already having spotted me midway in the back. “I am Lily, and I shall be your tour guide for this afternoon. The main house is rather large, so we mustn’t dawdle if you’re to see all that Fangcrest and its history has to offer you. Right this way then.”

Over the course of fifty minutes, Lilly the Tour Guide gave us an in-depth glimpse into the old tapestry that the manor proudly wore on its sleeve. She told me and the rest of the furs taking pictures or listening in about the Haywood family, a Beagle clan of English nobility who traced their roots all the way back from the Georgian era to the Tudor period not long after the War of the Roses. Each of those phrases alluded me, but I did know about King Henry VIII, whose father Henry VII granted the Haywoods an earldom for assisting His Majesty in quelling one of the Cornish rebellions. The mythical story went that an attentive English Beagle by the name of Thomas Haywood heard talk of a planned uprising, then literally walked the long trek to inform the King of what his people planned to do. Such a warning allowed His Majesty to dispel the rebellion halfway before it could spiral into yet another civil war.

At least, that was how the story went.

Afterward, the First Earl of Haywood emigrated his enriched family from Cornwall to another available country house on the outskirts of London. This allowed the once lower-class clan of talented carpenters the opportunity to integrate into higher society, as well as expand their business. Decades passed as the Earls of Haywood needn’t even involve themselves with the employees that they trained into the best carpenters in all Southern England. They became yet another chain of nobility under The Crown. However, they still enjoyed infrequently travelling to the region of their origins, and after commissioning an architect to build a certain manor overlooking the Bodwin moors, they then had a place to go for holiday, or simply to escape the growing claustrophobia of an ever-expanding London.

“If you will notice there’s quite a plenty of Venetian mirrors lined along the walls of this hallway, as well as the other hallways,” Lily explained with a clear passion for her job. “Large mirrors were not just seen as a luxury, but they served a practical purpose too. Until the electric lightbulb became commonplace in the late nineteenth century, castles, and large mansions such as Fangcrest Manor required candlelight to brighten rooms. The reason you’ll notice each hallway is filled to the brim with ornately decorated mirrors is because they assisted in illumination. Rather than place burning candles all over the main house, several lanterns would be lit, and their reflections bouncing from the mirrors would allow the owner to navigate from room to room without the chance of burning everything to the ground.”

The tour didn’t help my unease in the slightest. In fact, I felt pretty sure it flared up the moment Lily started describing the interesting detail. For an odd reason I couldn’t explain at the time, I already knew it. I pictured myself dressed in old Victorian clothing, calmly walking between embellished hallways. A part of me would marvel at the darkness outside the windows being pushed back by the echoes of light dancing from a single source. I could even picture myself holding another small candle, except…why could I also picture needing to keep the bottom of my wings from dragging along the carpet?

Without even noticing, the group of tourists went ahead without me, hanging onto Lily’s words as I stayed back. My palms sweated. My wings felt heavier than normal. My whiskers drooped with perspiration. The air tasted like bile suddenly. I felt as if my own reflections stared into me. I felt as if the walls themselves began to close around me. Lilly the Tour Guide had already gone around the corner to a room, leaving me alone as I stepped towards the right wall.

Just then, a portrait caught my attention. I slowly turned my head upward. As quickly as the sensation arrived, it left, and the bile in the air dissipated as quickly as my breath. Gazing down at me sat a stern yet handsome Beagle. He looked no older than thirty but far from reaching forty years of age. He had piercing, dark eyes, the kind that I always found attractive in any guy who caught my interest. Typical of any English aristocrat, he appeared well-dressed in a dark-blue jacket and ashen tie, headfur combed back into a presentable tuft.

A soft chuckle somehow erupted from my lips. He looked quite sharp.

His tan and white fur were well-groomed too, but behind the pristine brush strokes, something else caught my attention; the smile. I didn’t know if it had something to do with Victorian attitudes of showing emotions, or if it had to be the genius of the original painter, but the Beagle in the portrait appeared sad. Sad about what?

Whatever the reason, I couldn’t look away from the Beagle. Much like the rest of the manor, he felt…vaguely reminiscent of someone I knew. Or…did know? Used to know? Whichever way it went, seeing the Beagle’s sad smile also made me feel sad. I wanted to pull the portrait down to the floor and hug its subject until it became flesh, fur, and blood in my arms. I wanted to make him feel no longer sad. I wanted to make the pain go away.

*God, what’s happening to me?* I whimpered while leaning my head against the frame of the portrait. *Look at me. I’m going crazy, and I bet when they see the security footage, I’ll be sent to the closest mental ward this side of England.*

“Davy?”

My joint turned frozen stiff, and I glanced up to see the painting unmoved. Yet, when I looked left to spot movement in one of the mirrors. It was a middle-aged vixen in an old-fashioned housekeeper’s uniform. Her kind eyes stared directly at me through the reflection.

“Lord Jonathan requests your presence in the ballroom, Davy,” she said. “You best go tend to him, and fast. He’s quite eager to see you this day.”

“Huh?” I turned around to address the housekeeper, no doubt confused on who I was. “I’m not Davy. My name’s Daniel…L…Lierre…huh?”

Nobody stood in the hallway. It remained as empty as before. The heartbeat in my chest started picking up again, and the thought of visiting the ‘loo’ to wash up/pull myself together suddenly didn’t seem unnecessary. It led me to wandering down a corridor, knowing that it’d lead to the second-floor balcony overlooking the ballroom, and then the foyer where the bathrooms were. During the short journey, I’d glance between the end of the corridor and the rest of the Venetian mirrors. The way I moved down the hallway and looked into them made me feel like a cub trapped in a maze of mirrors.

Except, something happened. Each time I jogged past a mirror, a flickering image caught the corner of my vision. It felt like watching my reflection transform. My form and species never changed, but my clothes did. The tacky Union Jack t-shirt I’d purchased on impulse during the first night in London became a dark-green jacket. The comfortable jean shorts I brought with me from American became matching black trousers, and the sneaker were polished shoes.

Further proof I was losing my mind.

Weird thinks happened through a nervous breakdown though. Sometimes, a crowd of ungrateful onlookers might simply watch it unfold. Sometimes, an onlooker would feel compelled to record it for views from stranger on YouTube. Sometimes, the opposite could occur where an onlooker notices it about to occur and intervenes. Rarely, it might involve a chance meeting that prevents that fur from emotionally falling over the edge.

In my case, it came down to the latter. In my case, that coincidental Samaritan came in the form of a random figure at the foot of the stares, looking up at me the moment we spotted each other. In my case, it was the English Beagle from the portrait. He stood down there, at the foot of the stairs, as if he’d been plucked from the painting and stood in modern clothes like me.

“Huh?”

“What the—”

All noise and thought fell silent. Those piercing, dark eyes stared up at me in confusion, followed by the same familiarity I’d been expressing the previous few hours. Tourists either didn’t care enough to say anything or simply walked by the Beagle and by me. Between us, the only things moving were our trembling fingers clutching onto the marble railing, as well as our hesitant breathing.

Suddenly though, we did move. He smiled. I did too. It felt as if we already knew who the other was, even if we couldn’t say it aloud.

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“Nate Haynes?”

* Go out into the manor’s back garden, sit on the aged stone steps and talk.
* “This is weird, right?” >>>>> “I-I can’t describe it, but…I feel like I already know who you are…”
* Awkward conversation becomes more comfortable.
* Nate brings up how he felt really drawn to the place, but it grew exponentially right around the same time that Daniel came into England. Nate even risked his job by skipping a shift and booking a ticket for Fangcrest. After a dream of seeing a paled fruit bat in his bedside, he’d wake up sobbing and staring in the mirror, with the gut feeling he’d regret it by not doing it.
* I had a similar dream. Except it had been a Beagle I couldn’t remember. I didn’t think much of it at the time, and chalked it up to bad airline food from first class.
* Stop by his hotel room. Sit and continue talking. Fall asleep.
* Have vivid dream of them as their past selves. Know terms and voice.
* Gay smex scene after family has left.
* And his adorable noises make Jonathan hard as a rock!

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Both characters are recounting a dream they shared where their past selves had hot, steamy and Victorian gay smex in a luxurious bed.

Just as they're about to get naked, Nate suddenly interrupts the story to ask Bram if it's okay to go into further detail, and Bram replies that he'll label the interview as [18+], and they suddenly continue without issue.

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* Wake up facing each other exactly as in the dream.
* Kiss and feel invigorated.
* Do further research. Learn that Fangcrest Manor had a housekeeper, a vixen.
* Learn that the first owner and his manservant were secretly homosexual lovers for years, and the scandal was revealed and then covered up.
* Final dream details how it happened. when they were found dead together in bed after the former and eventually the latter succumbed to severe tuberculosis.
* Police report matched how they’d been found?

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Jonathan the Earl of Haywood -> Nate Haynes

Davy -> Daniel Lierre