

[PDF] Unhallowed Ground (Center Point Platinum Fiction (Large Print))

Heather Graham - pdf download free book

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Description:

About the Author New York Times bestselling author Heather Graham has written more than a hundred novels, many of which have been featured by the Doubleday Book Club and the Literary Guild. An avid scuba diver, ballroom dancer and mother of five, she still enjoys her south Florida home, but loves to travel as well.

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Now

The area near the nature preserve was overgrown. Salt flats and marsh met Matanzas Bay and the Intra-coastal, and the water went from shallow to deep, from sloping sand to a sudden drop-off

leading to a misty and strange world of fish, tangled plant growth and, despite the best efforts of local and federal lawmakers, de facto garbage dumps.

Caleb Anderson had been drawn to a shopping cart down at about twenty feet, then on to a tire rim beneath a tangle of seaweed at thirty-five, but neither one turned out to be hiding what they were looking for.

The problem was, the authorities were searching blindly. A girl named Winona Hart had disappeared. She had been at a party, but none of her underage drunken friends—half of them potheads to boot—seemed to know when she had left, where she had gone, or with whom.

He looked at his compass, then up through the filter of light to the cable from the police cruiser serving as their dive boat. In his mind, if anything was going to be found, it was going to be closer to the shore. Unless, of course, she'd been kidnapped by a boater and dumped somewhere beyond the bay and out in the Atlantic. If that was the case, their chances of finding her were almost nonexistent. The ocean was huge. True, if caught in a current or an undertow, a body might wash up on land. And if they came up with a suspect who regularly followed a certain route, even a weighted body might somehow be discovered.

But at the moment they were searching blindly. Still, he hadn't wanted to miss the opportunity to be in on the search, not when he had promised he would do everything humanly possible to find Jennie Lawson. Admittedly, this grim attempt was not to find Jennie but a local teen who had now been missing for nearly forty-eight hours, a case that might or might not be connected to Jennie's. No one knew if Jennie Lawson had actually made it to the beach in St. Augustine, her intended destination. They only knew that she had landed in Jacksonville, gotten off the plane and picked up a rental car. Neither she nor the car had been seen since.

He didn't have much hope of finding Jennie alive. Her mother had told him that she knew Jennie was gone, because her daughter had come to her in a dream the night before her disappearance was reported and said goodbye. Caleb wasn't sure what to believe, because Mr. Lawson seemed to think that Mrs. Lawson had lost her mind when their daughter had disappeared, and he had, in fact, made a motion behind his wife's back to indicate as much.

Caleb had heard of stranger things than ghostly midnight visits, however, so he had simply smiled and vowed to Jennie's mother that he would do everything he could to find out the truth, even if he couldn't return her daughter to her. That had comforted her. Closure was something people needed. Perhaps it was too painful to live with eternal hope.

So Caleb was also looking for Jennie, or any sign of her, even if he was officially on the trail of another young woman for whom many were still holding out hope. But this dive was important for other reasons, too; it was giving him a chance to get to know the local authorities and the local expert on the surrounding waters.

As he moved toward the marshy shore, he couldn't see more than a few feet in front of him, but he was accustomed to such conditions. His dive light illuminated the surrounding area as he searched, and he was methodical in covering his assigned section of the bay. He had seen the grid, and he meant to search his assigned area thoroughly, leaving no possibility that anything had been overlooked. As an out-of-stater, he was the odd man out here. If he did anything to make the other men—and the one woman—on the local forensic dive team resent his presence, he would end up ostracized, and that would be a real problem in his search for Jennie. For that reason, getting along with the police lieutenant in charge of the case, Tim Jamison, and Will Perkins, the dive master, was

crucial. Caleb was there mainly as a courtesy. He worked for a private agency, Harrison Investigations. The cases they took generally had an unusual twist, something inexplicable, even supernatural, that required their very specific professional services, but in this instance it was Adam Harrison's personal friendship with Jennie Lawson's father that had brought Caleb here.

He noted a glitter of light, just this side of the dropoff. He focused his dive light, and headed toward the glint, knowing full well that it might be just another shopping basket.

But as he neared the object in the water, he knew that this was no shopping cart.

It was far too large, for one thing. The full size of it became clear as he drew closer. It was an automobile.

All too often, people intentionally discarded cars in the water. Sometimes they were just junkers and nothing more.

Sometimes they held human remains.

And as he approached the Chevy mired in the mucky, seaweed-laden sand, he saw that this car was not empty. A solid kick with his flippers brought him to the driver-side window.

A face stared out at him, the mouth widened in a giant *O*, as if in a desperate quest for breath.

The eyes...

Did not exist. Already, the creatures of the deep had started to feed.

"Maybe Osceola *was* a hero, but they still tricked him and caught him and cut his head off. They chopped it right off!" a young boy said. He was about ten, cute and normal-looking in a T-shirt that had clearly just been purchased at the local alligator farm, jeans and sneakers. But he spoke with a relish that unsettled Sarah McKinley. Caroline Roth, seated at the computer and running the audiovisual end of the Heritage House presentation, let out a soft laugh, stared at Sarah, then grinned wickedly and shrugged.

"No," Sarah said firmly, and smoothed down the skirt of her period outfit. She was a good storyteller and knew how to handle a large—and diverse—group like the one in the lecture hall that day, which was a mix of kids and adults, tourists and locals, couples, groups and singles. They were into the tail end of summer, so she was getting classes from schools that started early and teachers from schools that started late. There was a Harley event down in Daytona that week, so she was getting a lot of bikers, too.

One man in the crowd, though, seemed to stand out. He was tall, but not inordinately so, maybe six-three. He was dressed as casually as the next tourist in blue jeans and a polo shirt, but he didn't look like the usual tourist. He wore sunglasses throughout her lecture—not an odd thing, lots of people didn't take them off when they came in. He was built as if he were in the service and worked out heavily on a daily basis, or as if he were an athlete. He was tanned and rugged, the way a man who spent his day sailing might be, tawny-haired and attractive. What was odd about him, though, was that he was alone. He seemed the type who should be with a beautiful woman, one who was as lithe and athletic as he was himself.

"Decapitated!" another kid called out.

Sarah's attention was drawn back to her lecture. She had been talking about Osceola, the most famous leader of the Seminole people, who had galvanized friend and foe alike when he had struck a knife into a treaty that would have been a death knell for his people. Like so many others, he had been imprisoned at the Castillo de San Marcos, the coquina shell bastion built by the Spanish that was the most imposing architectural feature of the city.

Leave it to a kid to dwell on the most gruesome fact he could think of—not to mention that he had it wrong.

"History records lots of terrible things that were done, but that wasn't one of them," she said.

"Hey, I heard he was decapitated, too," a grown man interrupted.

Sarah took a deep breath. She couldn't really blame the guy—who had a sunburn identifying him as out-of-state—when even Florida schoolchildren often had the story wrong. "Osceola was a great leader, and respected even by his enemies. The treachery that led to his capture was deplorable, and despite the Indian wars raging across the country at the time, people despised General Jesup for the way he treated Osceola, who came in peace, with his safety guaranteed, and was taken anyway. But he wasn't decapitated by the U.S. Army. He was held for a while at Fort Marion, originally known as the Castillo de San Marcos, but he died of malaria up at Fort Moultrie, in South Carolina. He was attended by a shaman from his own clan, and an American doctor, a man named Frederick Wheedon, who did have his head removed and embalmed, but only after he was already dead. And," she said, unable to resist, "legend has it that Dr. Wheedon used the head to punish his children. If they behaved badly, he would leave the head on their bedposts at night. In fact, he bequeathed the head to his son-in-law—just in case his grandchildren misbehaved. His son-in-law passed it on to a man named Valentine Mott, another doctor, who kept it in a pathology museum, but the museum burned down, and the head was lost."

She had gained the silent stares of everyone in the room, of every age, and she offered them a broad smile. "You can learn a lot about Osceola and Florida's Native Americans over at Fort Marion, and we have wonderful books on Osceola and the history of the area in our bookstore. Remember, St. Augustine is over four hundred years old." She grinned at the boy who had first brought up the subject of decapitation. "All kinds of gruesome things have happened here."

She announced that her speech was over and was given a nice round of applause, and a number of people thanked her as they walked out of the lecture hall. A few lingered to examine the artifacts in the cases that lined the walls, but she noticed that the tall stranger who had drawn her attention wasn't among them.

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