

A lit candle is the central focus, set against a dark, textured background that resembles stone or aged parchment. The candle's flame is bright, casting a warm glow. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

THE
DOCTOR'S
CURSE

Heather Quinto

The Doctor's Curse

Heather Quinto

PREVIEW EDITION
FIRST TWO CHAPTERS
ONLY



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The Doctor's Curse

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This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, places, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The text of this book is initially set in Saratoga Springs, NY

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Author's Note

With sequels, it can be nerve-wracking because people usually seem to enjoy the original better. With the second installment of this series, I was excited and honored to be able to bring Ted alive again. With any book, I strive to be as unique as possible. I like to call myself a 'genre bender' because I tend to combine more than one genre to create a truly original novel, which is exactly what I did here. This won't be your typical horror novel because it's not meant to be. This is an adventure into the life of Ted, which doesn't fit into a neat little box. I do hope you enjoy this ride and learn something new along the way.

-Heather Marie Quinto

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I'd like to thank my roommates Jasmine, Emily, Shayne, and Sam for the support and help with inspiration. I'd also like to thank my partner, Josh, for being supportive of my career and always being there for me.

About The Author

Heather Quinto is a Yaqui Native American, and she resides in Fresno, California with her life partner and many animals. She has a BA in Creative Writing/English with a minor in Marketing from Southern New Hampshire University. She is the author of the paranormal/fantasy novel, *Inhuman*, and a spiritual/romance short story titled *In Love and Death*. She helped write *The Doctor's Estate* and *The Doctor's Curse* with Jesus Martinez, who is the creator of the story.

Heather always had a strong urge to write and create imaginative stories ever since she could pick up a pencil. She started off by drawing picture books when she was four, and began writing short stories when she was eight years old. Heather's main inspiration behind writing is to be able to leave the greatest impact on whomever picks up one of her books by challenging her readers to think differently. As a writer, Heather strives to add hidden themes within her books and layers of symbolism in the plot and characters to add a more flavorful storytelling. You can read and reread one of her novels and find a whole new perspective of the story each time.

"Writing is a powerful tool. All I need is a pen and paper, and I can change the world." -Heather Quinto

Chapter One

Ted's New Awakening

I stared straight ahead at the wooden hand rest of the chair in my doctor's office. Focusing on my breaths, I tried to steady my anxious thoughts. I rubbed my eyes, fighting sleep.

"Are the nightmares still happening?" asked the doctor in front of me.

I fidgeted in my seat. "Yeah."

"What was it this time?"

Running my fingers through my hair, I let out a slow breath. "It's the same as always. I'm in the house in the basement, and something happens."

"How are you feeling now that we bring up the house?"

My eyes snapped up from the chair to my doctor who sat cross-legged in front of me. I continued with clenching my jaw. His wispy hair stood up on end from running his fingers through it. His thick-rimmed glasses made his eyes bigger through the lenses. I shrugged at his question. "I'd rather just forget about it," I said.

"That does not tell me how you feel."

Letting out an agitated sigh, I peered out the window before eyeing the digital clock, which sat on the desk below it. I had ten more minutes of this crap. Ten more minutes and I was free.

“Can I take a guess at how you may be feeling?”

“Fine,” I breathed.

“You’re nervous. I can tell by the way you immediately started shaking your knee when I mentioned the house.”

Peering down at my leg, I stopped. I hadn’t noticed.

“Your jaw muscles are tightening, which tells me either agitation or nervousness. Perhaps both. You are refusing to meet my eyes and you keep staring at the clock, which tells me you don’t want to be here.”

The only reason I was here talking to Dr. Whitaker was because my sister and Christina insisted on it after the incident with my father.

Dr. Whitaker took off his glasses and sighed. “We won’t make any progress if you refuse to engage with me.”

“But I’m fine,” I said, more to convince myself than him.

Whitaker licked his lips and nodded. He sat up in his chair and said, “I think you should see a psychiatrist. You display symptoms of anxiety, depression, and you have PTSD from that house.”

I shook my head, refusing to accept this man’s words. How could he tell all that from my just sitting here?

His tone implored me. “Something significant happened there, and it’s okay to need some healing from that.”

My phone’s alarm went off, which meant it was time for me to go. I set it because I wanted to spend as little time here as possible. I managed a short smile. “Okay. Thanks for your time.” Quickly grabbing my jacket, I headed out the door. I couldn’t wait to get home so I could workout and get ready for work. All I needed was more time to grieve my mother’s death and get over what happened at the house. I didn’t need meds for that.

Sitting in my small truck, I sighed before resting my head on the steering wheel. It had been a couple of years since my mother's death and three years since I left the damn house. Still, my mother's death wasn't getting any easier. I willed myself to sit back up and started the engine. The crisp morning air turned my breath to fog as I willed myself to sit up and start the engine. Still cold, I rubbed my hands together before cranking the head and then the radio.

My favorite radio station's DJ spoke, *So in other news, they are reportedly demolishing the infamous Saratoga Springs mansion.*

My heart constricted, and I swallowed to try and rid myself of the tightness which formed in my chest.

Finally, they are getting rid of that eyesore. The house has a long history of being haunted and became even more famous after the hostage situation that took place there only three years ago.

I turned off the radio. There was no way I could bring myself to listen to the broadcast anymore. Then again, I couldn't bring myself to get over my mother's passing either.

Each time I thought of her, it was like a tiny needle poked at my heart, leaving a burning sensation in its wake. Seeing the mansion, which I had intended to renovate for her, in line to be demolished was like the final nail in the coffin. It cemented her being gone from this world for good. It was unreasonable to think of the mansion like that, but a part of me was attached to the property along with part of my mother's memory. The house being destroyed also destroyed a part of her and me.

That's in the past, Ted. Let it go. The house doesn't matter. You have moved on, remember?

I shifted to drive and made my way back to my apartment. It was a small and quant place in a good part of town. The building was relatively old, and the walls were thin, so you could hear what was going on with the neighbors from time to time. It was a two-story brick building that sat right at the corner, making the building curve at the front. Parking across the street, I walked over to the entrance. My apartment was located on the upper level, and the metal staircase shook a bit underneath my weight. They needed to replace the damn steps. The smell of aged mildew infiltrated my nostrils. They also needed to add air fresheners.

Once inside my apartment, I looked over my shoulder at Christina, who was sipping on her coffee as she stuffed her wallet and phone into her purse. “Hey, you’re back already,” she said. “Just in time to see me off to work.” She looked up at me and smiled. “How was it today?” Her hair was extra curly this morning, and it complemented her face well as it cascaded down her shoulders. Her bright eyes peered up at me in that loving way that made me feel like everything was going to be okay. She was downright beautiful.

Shrugging off my jacket, I hung it on the hook attached to the door. I placed my keys into our designated basket that sat on a small table by the entrance. “Same as always.”

Christina let out a breath through her nose which told me she was a bit frustrated. “Ya never gonna get anywhere if ya don’t open up to the doctor.” She took out her Chapstick and applied it to her lips. “I’m on medication for my chronic anxiety, and there ain’t no shame in it, hon.”

Walking over to the coffee pot, I poured myself a drink. “I’m not that bad off.” Meds were for people who were sick. Not for people like me that’d had a bad experience. I just had to shake it off.

Christina got up. “Try one of my meds and see how it makes ya feel.” She made her way over to me and kissed me on the cheek. “Nothing permanent, but just see if ya feel better. Have a great day, hon. I’ll bring home something nice for dinner.”

I couldn’t help but smile as I looked down at her. “You have a good day too.”

She made her way to the door, putting on her purple beanie and scarf, which complemented her light-brown skin well. She blew me a kiss and winked before shutting the door behind her.

I sat at the kitchen table, sipping my coffee. Peering down, I saw my pocket-sized notepad, which I used it to help keep track of how I was healing. Christina insisted on me doing that every night before bed. She refused to turn off the lights unless I filled it in. She was determined to help me, even if I didn’t want her to. Moving in with her had made me learn a few things about her. One, she was a neat freak like me. Two, she loved to craft whenever she was nervous. And three, she was always nervous, which made her want to have control over things.

I picked up the notepad and flipped through the past several weeks. Each day started the same, and each day ended with irritability. Not wanting to take it out on Christina, I’d often say I was tired and pretend to go to bed. So far, I had done an excellent job of keeping myself from lashing out at her. I couldn’t say the same for my friends.

After I finished my coffee, I grabbed my workout towel and headed downstairs to the workout room of the apartment complex. I had to sell all my gym equipment because I wouldn’t have space in the apartment, plus it was pointless since the complex had its tiny gym. It wasn’t much, but it worked. Selling the house made me a little wealthier than before, and it enabled me to be able to pay off the mortgage. In the end, I had twenty

thousand left over. The legend of what happened there with me made the home a haunted attraction. The new owner tried to salvage the house by making it into a historical monument since it had a long history, but that plan fell under. It was a bed and breakfast for a short bit, but the owner couldn't keep up with it, and now it sat abandoned, waiting for its next victim.

Stop thinking about the house. I stepped into the workout room. The air was moist from its last visitor, which the foam mats soaked up and made the room feel damp. Setting my towel down on the side of the power rack, I put the weight plates on the sides of the bar. Working out was a sure-fire way to put my mind at ease. It was my therapy. My knuckles whitened as I gripped the Olympic bar, and I took a deep breath in and out as I lifted the bar off of the resting place and up above my chest. Breathing in deep, I lifted the bar before gradually allowing it to come closer to my chest. Pushing out an exhalation, I pushed the bar up once more. I did three sets of ten before putting the bar back on the resting spot. Sitting up, I grabbed the towel to wipe my face. Resting my face in the soft fabric, I breathed in the fresh scent of linen.

One of the many good things about Christina being in my life was now I had the softest towels on the planet. We both had our own household essentials, but according to Christina, my towels and blankets were not salvageable in the move. Back when we had packed up my home during the move to the apartment, she had picked up one of my towels and asked with a hand on her hip, “What in the heck is this monstrosity?” She had waved the towel in the air.

At the time, I had been packing up a box from my bedroom. “Uh... A towel?”

“No, it’s a piece of sandpaper. Are all your linens like this?” She had rifled through the cabinet where I had kept my

towels and extra blankets. Her hand had felt up all the pieces of fabric, and with each one she had touched, she had thrown them over her shoulder. “These all hafta go, Teddy. I’ll be getting ya real towels.”

““Real towels’?” I had smirked, my shoulders shook as I had chuckled. “Are those not real enough? They do a pretty decent job to me. I always came out of the bathroom dry afterward.”

She had clicked her tongue and had rolled her eyes. “No, Teddy. It ain’t. These are rough-as-rocks towels. You’re livin’ with me now, and I’ll be getting ya real towels. Ones that are soft like a baby...” She had lifted another towel, which was crinkled and stuck to its lazy folded position I had put it in. She had scowled in disgust. “And fabric softener.” On that day a year ago, seeing her all worked up about the towels had made me fall for her a little more. She had left down the stairs. “New, fresh towels!” she had yelled. Quieter to herself, though, I heard her mumble, “This boy, I cannot believe he has been livin’ like some caveman...”

Looking back on that memory made me laugh as I continued with my workout. Today was my first time lifting a hundred pounds. I had been working my way up to that weight, and it was not easy. By the final set, my arms were shaking as I struggled to push the bar up. Afterward, I did pull ups, and after the twentieth one, my upper arms burned. When I finished working out my arms, I focused on my upper back by using the dumbbells to build up the muscle.

Now done with weights, I ran on the treadmill for fifteen minutes, followed by two minutes of a slow jog. Sweat trickled down the side of my temples. After my workout, I headed back to my apartment to shower and get ready for work.

Taking off my workout shirt, I managed to ring out the sweat into the sink. Working out was a nasty business, but already

I felt better. I rested my head against the tiled wall in the shower as the cool water beat onto my neck and back. My body heat lowered, and I breathed out in relief.

Once I finished, I decided to eat a light lunch before work. To the right of the bathroom was the kitchen and living room that was connected. The apartment was decent sized, but still no comparison to the house from a year ago. I opened our fridge to take out some spinach. Above our stove was a cabinet where I kept some hemp seeds and protein powder. Mixing up the ingredients with some water, I put it in the blender. I grabbed an apple from the basket on our round kitchen table and took a seat to eat my lunch before heading off to work.

Being alone at the table gave me time to think, which wasn't good. Often, my thoughts went straight to my nightmares which were centered around the house. Last night's dream was of me running in the mountains trying to look for my mom. In the dream, I was in the same mountains where my parents' cabin was. In the same woods where my mother first got taken by Dr. Ransteen two years ago. I couldn't find her anywhere in the dream, but in the middle of the street stood Dr. Ransteen. He was covered in blood, and for some reason I knew it had to be my mother's blood.

And that's what I woke up to on this fine morning—in a cold sweat and trying to catch my breath.

Enough eating. I have to go before my mind continues to think. On days like this I looked forward to clocking in for work because it served as a distraction. Once I clocked in, I checked on my first patient, Mr. Foster. As a certified nursing assistant at a skilled nursing facility, it was my job to help oversee a number of patients. Mr. Foster was new to the program, and he wasn't too happy about being here. He and I had that in common. Each day, I

made sure to bring him a peach from the cafeteria to cheer him up. “Thanks, Ted,” he said as he took hold of my small gift. “It’d be nice if they had a tennis court here for us,” said Mr. Foster in his shaky voice. His hand wobbled uncontrollably as he lifted the peach towards his mouth. He bit into it and took a while to chew it.

“How are you today?” I asked as I fluffed the pillow behind him.

He sighed as he stared at his peach. “I grew the best peaches in town. Better than this, in fact. I should have my granddaughter come by to give you a bundle of them.”

I grimaced at the kind gesture. “She still running the farm for you?”

“Yeah,” he said with a somewhat disappointed tone. He pursed his lips. “I miss it there, but I also miss tennis.”

“Tennis could be dangerous. Especially with your recent hip injury.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “My children worry too much.”

I stood in front of him and eyed him up and down. “You fell while working on the farm. That’s serious.”

He scowled. “Feels like a punishment to be old since I’m stuck in here now.” His voice rose. “Why am I being punished?”

I grimaced. “They are just trying to do what’s best for you.”

He took another bite and spoke with his mouth full. Juice seeped from his lips. “No, it’s so they don’t have to keep an eye on me so they can go about their lives.” He pointed at me and said, “Don’t you ever do that to your folks. Ya hear me?”

I sighed as I thought of my mother, and I blinked away the tears that threatened to seep out. “No, sir. I would never think of it.”

He sat back against the now fluffed pillows on his bed.
“Good.”

After checking in with Mr. Foster, I left to check on the next patient. Working half days was all I could muster, and to be honest, it wasn't just the grief. My sneakers squeaked against the shiny tile in the hallway. I looked down at the floor as the light from the ceiling reflected off the ground. The retirement home had a way of smelling like antiseptic mixed with Bengay, and it was my first time noticing. It was also beginning to bother me.

My coworker, Ben, came by with a hand raised, and I lifted mine for the high-five we always gave one another. “How goes it, Ted?” he asked. He clicked his pen nonstop as he chewed his gum. On the left pocket of his scrubs was Monica's pen with a black ribbon tied around it. Seeing it always sent a stir through me because I was there to find her charred body in the firepit Dr. Ransteen burned her in. Ben carries his grief well, but I knew under all that charisma and humor was someone hurting.

I shrugged. “It's been an alright morning.”

“Okay, good.” He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. His smile hasn't been the same since Monica's funeral. At the time, I had no idea how close he and Monica had become. They dated when she was alive, but Ben apparently fell in love with her. “I thought with the news of the demolishment you'd be a little bit out of sorts.”

Ben didn't know much about what took place. Christina was the only one that knew every detail of the incident. Ben only knew what the cops knew, which was that Howard tried to kill my mother and me, minus the spirit possession and occult stuff.

I shook my head.

Keep it in the box.

“No, I'm good. The past is the past,” I said.

Ben smiled real big as he clasped a hand onto my shoulder. His eyes still dead inside. “Good! Well, I’m off on my rounds. Catch up with you soon.” As he walked away, he turned around and said, “I thought you’d be interested in that secret room they found, at least.”

I stopped in my tracks. My stomach dropped as I turned to face him. “Secret room?”

Ben stopped walking backward. “Yeah, man. The construction workers found some secret room in the basement. It’s all over the news. After they took down part of the cemented wall in the basement, it revealed a sealed room. It’s got a bunch of crap in it, apparently.” He tilted his head to one side. “You okay?”

I swallowed before realizing I had stopped breathing. “Y-yeah.”

Ben sounded suspicious. “Ooo-kay, ‘cause you’re pale as fuck right now.”

I tried to calm my heartrate by taking big, slow breaths. “I-is the house demolished yet?”

He shook his head. “I drove by it on my way to work this morning; they are still just taking out the windows and some of the walls. They paused since they found the secret room. They are waiting until some historian can come by to get the stuff.”

I managed a nod. “Thanks.”

“I mean it, Ted. You good?” He furrowed his brow.

I swallowed and straightened my posture. “Yeah. S-sure. Talk to you later.”

Ben didn’t seem convinced, but he didn’t dig any further and instead waved at me before turning around and heading down the hall. When nobody was looking, Ben would hang his head low, but I saw.

The box, Ted. Remember the box.

I went about my day as usual and tried to push the thoughts of the secret room to the back of my mind. However, no matter how hard I tried, it poked at me relentlessly like an annoying pinprick. By the end of my shift, I had developed a headache. I took my last ten-minute break in the employee lounge where Christina was. Plopping down on a chair, I hung my head against the backrest. Christina had just ended her shift an hour before mine was over. She dug through her huge purse for her keys as she spoke. “Hey, Teddy. I’m gonna pick up some dinner. I feel like Italian, so I wanted to ask ya what you wanted.” She peered up at me, and her brow creased. “What’s the matter, Teddy? You look whiter than a sheet.” She put her hand to my forehead. “Ya feel clammy. Don’t tell me you’re catchin’ a cold.”

I took a breath out. “They found a hidden room.”

“What?” she asked, confused.

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. “The construction workers were doing the demolishment. They found a hidden room.” I opened my eyes to see Christina had put a hand to her mouth.

It was silent for a moment.

Christina gave a nod. “Okay.” She said “okay” again with more determination. “Do you want to go there to see it?” She put her hand on top of mine. “Is that something you need?”

I looked away from her. “I don’t know. I just want to forget.”

“I think...” Christina paused, “ya should go and take a look. You never got closure, Teddy. Ya owe yourself that much, hon.” She smoothed her hand over mine and up my arm. I closed my eyes again as I let her touch soothe me.

I disagreed with her. There was nothing at that house I needed closure on. I’d had a traumatic event happen there and that

was it. Why revisit it? Shaking my head some more, I said, “No. It’ll just open old wounds.”

I could tell Christina wanted to say more by how she pressed her lips tightly together. She sighed. “Fine. Okay. We won’t go, but if you eva’ change ya mind, that’s okay.”

Grounding my teeth together, my chest became hot from anger. It wasn’t like me to get so agitated by someone’s concern, but I just took it as pity from her, which squashed my pride.

After the residents ate their dinner, I made my rounds in each room, delivering their medication. “Here you go, Mr. Foster,” I said as I handed him the small paper cup that had his pain medication.

“Thanks,” he said.

Putting my hands in my scrubs’ pockets, I asked, “You need anything else before I head out?”

“No book this time for me?” he asked.

My eyes widened in surprise. “I forgot. I’m sorry. Do you want me to go grab it?”

He flipped his hand dismissively. “Nah, go home.”

I would have insisted before, but I was tired today. At this point, I just wanted to go home. Once I clocked out, I sat in my truck, waiting for the heater to kick on some more as I rubbed my hands together. My phone vibrated in my pocket. When I checked the caller ID, it was my sister. My chest tightened, and I hesitated as I clicked to accept the call.

“Hey, Scarlett,” I said with a sigh.

“Okay, where have you been?” Right to business, as always. Her tone was short.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I’ve been busy.”

“What the hell is wrong with *you*? You sound like shit.”

Usually, her rough demeanor would make me laugh, but not today. “Nothing,” I snapped.

My tone didn’t falter her. “It sure doesn’t sound like nothin’,” she said. She sighed. “What’s going on? Seriously. I’ve hardly heard from you since last year’s Thanksgiving brawl.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Brawl?”

“Yeah! That’s what *I’m* calling it.”

That heat bubbled to the surface again, and I ground my teeth together. “I only hit him once,” I said.

“He’s still your dad, though. You don’t punch your parents.”

“He isn’t my dad,” I paused. “Not anymore.”

“Oh. My. God. You are being overdramatic, and I thought *I* was the girl.”

Putting my hand into a fist, I said quickly, “I gotta go.”

“I miss you,” she said quietly in a softer tone.

“Yeah. Bye.” Hanging up, I slammed my phone into the passenger seat. I let out a sharp sigh and rested my head on the steering wheel. My head reeled back to that Thanksgiving evening with my now alcoholic father. Just thinking about his face made me punch the steering wheel. I drove for a while to cool off before heading home.

Once I got to the apartment, Christina was setting out the to-go boxes from the Italian restaurant, along with some forks. I walked over to greet her with a kiss. “What’ll ya be drinking, hon?” she asked me.

“Water is fine,” I said taking a seat at our small round table. It wasn’t made out of real wood. It was some kind of synthetic material with a painted-on wood design. The paint was beginning to fade. There were stab marks from a fork on one end which were done by me.

After the house three years ago, I was a nervous wreck. At the time, I hadn't even noticed I had been stabbing at the table with my fork during dinner until Christina had pointed it out to me. We had just moved in together, and the nightmares had been constant. Any sudden noise had set me on edge. I hadn't told her entirely what had happened until that first night after moving into the apartment. I'd needed to get it off my chest or I'd explode. That and she'd deserved to know what she was getting herself into.

As reluctant as I had been, I had been so emotionally depleted I didn't care if she had left me or not. I had begun the sentence with, "This is going to sound crazy, and you are going to leave right out that door once I say it, which is fine."

Her brow had furrowed, and she had said softly, "Ted—" "Let me finish." I had let out a breath. "Please."

She had sat up straight and nodded.

My mouth had stayed open as I had thought of what to say. "I... It's..." I'd sighed. "Okay, so everything that happened to me wasn't normal. At first, I didn't believe what was going on with me, and I wanted more than anything to make sense of it. Remember how I told you I had dreams about Monica's sister Lavinia? And we were investigating her murder, and then her killer, Howard, took the evidence from my home and started stalking Monica?"

Christina had nodded. "And he..." she'd swallowed, "killed Monica."

I had nodded. "Well, there is more to the story than that. Much more." I had taken a deep breath. "Okay, here it goes... I saw ghosts and got attacked by things I didn't even believe existed, and I assumed it was stress or some kind of mental illness. I swear, the last thing I believed was it was all real, but when Monica got involved, it became too much for me to keep denying. Howard

was..." I had chewed on the inside of my cheek as I had debated telling her. "Howard wasn't Howard anymore. He didn't kill Lavinia. It was some spirit who possessed him and who had previously owned that house. The spirit's name was Dr. Ransteen." I had eyed Christina warily to see her reaction.

Instead of meeting me with suspicion or judgment, her whole body had leaned over the table, and she had grabbed ahold of my hand. Her eyes, wide with enthrallment, had bored into mine. Her reaction had helped to push me to continue.

I had continued to chew on the inside of my cheek. "There was some kind of occult thing Dr. Ransteen had involved himself in when he was alive because he wanted to be immortal. I would get visions in dreams about his rituals, and he would take possession of someone who was alive to continue the work he had started."

"What work?" Christina had scooted her seat closer. It was as if she had been told some kind of entertaining, spooky story. I hadn't been sure if I liked that reaction.

"He was doing illegal experiments on his patients in order to cure mental illnesses that were otherwise permanent. He ran a mental hospital in that mansion when he was alive, and nobody else had lived there until Lavinia and Howard moved in, and..." I had reeled off knowing Christina had now connected the dots starting from Lavinia and Howard, moving into the eventual possession of Howard.

Christina had furrowed her brow. "So you were trying to stop Howard from...?"

"We were trying to solve the murder, but that's when we learned Howard was involved, and he was killing all those mentally ill homeless people that were on the streets and doing

experiments on them to continue his work. He didn't want us to stop him."

Christina had sat back in her chair.

"And my mother got picked up by him when she ventured away from the cabin up in the mountains. The possessed Howard took her to the mansion. I fought him, and the house got burned. Howard was arrested, but..."

Christina had crossed her arms as she blinked numerous times. I had learned she did that when she was thinking. "Howard wasn't the actual killer. It was Dr. Ransteen who had possessed him."

"Yeah," I had said slowly. "I know it's hard to believe, and I was going to just leave it alone and let you only know what the cops knew, but with us having moved in together, I figured it was time to tell you the whole truth. You deserve to know what you're getting yourself into." I had laughed lightly as I had run my fingers through my hair. "A crazy man who... may or may not believe in ghosts."

It had been silent, and I had refused to meet Christina's eyes in fear of what I'd see there. Judgment? Fear? Acceptance? It had taken the touch of Christina's hand on my arm to get me to finally gaze up at her. "Teddy," she had said softly. The look in her eyes was something I had not recognized. "I know that must have been hard to tell me, so thank you. I believe..." She had gone quiet for a minute and did that blinking thing she did. "I believe you experienced what ya did, because you are not someone to make somethin' up like that. I know you. I may not understand it fully, but I'm willin' to accept your experience as yours."

Well, that wasn't the response I had wanted. I hadn't been sure what I had wanted, to be honest. Her to believe me wholeheartedly? Then again, I hadn't thought I'd like to be with

someone who'd believe in this crap right off the bat. I had preferred someone with some sense of grounded thinking. We had left it at that. Christina had known about the nightmares, so she knew how the event had affected me. She had been supportive of my healing process.

I blinked away the memory of that night when we first moved into our apartment and looked up from the tiny craters the fork had left behind on our table.

Christina was right: I might need to go to the house to check out that secret room, but there was this wave of fear that swam through my gut. It twisted and churned, which made me lose my appetite for dinner. What if something happened to me by revisiting the house? What if somehow there was some spirit there that would attack me?

I let out a big breath and shook my head. "Let's eat," I said, wanting to distract myself. Despite my appetite being gone, I forced the spaghetti into my mouth to not worry Christina. She always worried whenever I didn't eat or whenever I didn't shower, brush my teeth, or do anything to take care of myself. It was endearing but annoying when she felt the need to care for me. I was so used to taking care of others, it was new being on the receiving end of it.

After dinner, we cuddled on the couch as we watched television. I wasn't looking forward to sleeping because that's when the dreams came.

They always came.

Twirling Christina's hair with my fingers, she looked up at me with a small smile. "Don't be nervous," she said, grabbing at my fingers. "I'm here. I'll wake you up if anything happens, okay?"

I gnawed at the inside of my cheek.

“Do you want to take some of my anxiety meds before bed?”

I shook my head. “I don’t need it. I just need to relax, is all.”

Christina grimaced before kissing my cheek. “Okay, hon.”

When we finally went to bed, I lay there staring up at the ceiling as I clutched at the sheets hoping for at least one night of some good rest. I reluctantly did some deep breathing exercises to calm my nerves.

Take a deep breath in. Hold for three seconds. Then breathe out and hold for three seconds.

I felt foolish for having to do this. A man should be able to sleep just fine without the need for a meditation, but here I was—in bed, unable to do the simplest of tasks without having a damn heart attack. Despite my efforts, a nightmare came as always.

*

My mother sat tied to a wooden chair in the damp, cemented basement of the mansion. It was dark and murky as always. The sound of a loose pipe dripped in the back. “Ted!” she called out. “Ted! Where am I? Help me! Where are you?” I was standing right there, but she couldn’t see me. Her eyes darted around the room in search of me.

“I’m right here, Mom!” I yelled as I got closer to her right in front of her face. I could see the sweat that dripped down her face. The wrinkles that lined her mouth and eyes were constricted with fear.

“Ted!” she yelled. “Where are you?”

“I’m right here!” I wanted to grab her, but I had no arms. It was as if my body wasn’t there at all, despite me being able to see and hear. I spoke in hushed tones, “Mom, relax. I’ll find some way to get to you. Just stay quiet so he doesn’t find you.”

“Where are you? Where am I? Ted! Ted!” she kept yelling. I implored her to stay quiet, but it was as if she couldn’t hear me. The sound of footsteps crunching at each step told me he was here. Dr. Ransteen always appeared the same in my dreams: mid-forties with graying hair along the side of his brown hair. His menacing face was long and square shaped. He was clean-shaven with bright blue eyes this time, though. He wore a white lab coat that reached to his ankles.

Adrenaline shot through my body making my feet tingle. Quickly, I turned to my mother and screamed, “Mom! Get out now!” Right then, a bright blaze appeared to the right. It exploded across the room, making everything turn bright orange as my mother’s hair singed and her face melted from the flames.

I shot awake in bed with a gasp. A cool sweat beat down my face and chest. Christina stirred awake. “Mm... Hey,” she mumbled. She groaned as she turned over. Her curly hair had this way of becoming a rat’s nest full of frizz and knots, and the hilarious sight of it helped to ease my tense mood a bit. She sat herself up and put a hand on my shoulder. “You okay? Another nightmare, hon?”

I took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

She kissed my shoulder and then my cheek before wrapping her arms around me. Leaning her head against one of my shoulders, she said, “Need a cup of water or something?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine.” Getting up, I walked out of our bedroom to the bathroom. I splashed water on my face; the cold water helped shock the fear out of me. Drying my face with a towel, I took a deep breath. In the mirror, I saw my bloodshot eyes debating whether I should just watch television or attempt to sleep again. The bed won, and I crawled back under the covers.

I chewed on my bottom lip as I closed my eyes and tried to force myself asleep. After several minutes, I shot them open again and let out an exasperated sigh. Turning over, I counted the clock's hand on my nightstand before my eyelids got heavy and I eventually fell asleep.

Another day at work was like a blur. As much as I enjoyed seeing my patients' smiles, the job itself was grueling. By grueling, I meant not fulfilling. At least not like it used to be, but I refused to quit and give up on my patients. "I love my job. I love my job. I love my job," I mumbled under my breath as I made my way to the cafeteria to pick up Mr. Foster's lunch. Some days he couldn't bring himself to get up because of his sore hip, so I did it for him. The cafeteria was large and smelt of ketchup and waffles with burnt syrup. We had about twelve round tables with enough seats to fit about half of our residents. It was more than enough since half of the residents couldn't make their way to the cafeteria at all. Near the cafeteria's entrance was the opening to the kitchen where the lunch trays were handed out over a metal counter. Large windows on one side of the wall allowed you to look out towards the outside patio area with a sliding glass door. I sighed as I picked up the tray of food. "You good?" asked my coworker, Carlos. He stood next to me, picking up a fresh apple from the produce basket at the end of the metal counter.

"Just tired," I said as I grabbed some utensils. Today's lunch was soup with half a sandwich. The soup itself appeared to be made of mostly water with a few carrot chunks.

"You're always tired," said Carlos with worry in his voice, which made my irritation spike. "You haven't gone out to the bar or nothin' for a while now. We were planning on heading out tonight." Carlos smiled to appear more inviting. "Bring Christina along."

I licked my lips and let out a heavy breath. “Can’t. I have a thing to do.”

Carlos clicked his tongue. “Yeah. I get it.” His tone seemed short.

My muscles tensed as I gripped onto the food tray. “No, you don’t,” I said as I shoved past him out of the cafeteria. Letting Carlos get to me like that was unlike me, and I knew it was only because he missed his friend, but it was like I couldn’t control my anger at that moment.

Storming off, I passed the employee restroom and could hear someone crying.

I paused.

The clear sound of Ben’s cries melted away the unwarranted fury. He always cried during his break, and it hadn’t let up. Softly, I knocked on the door. “Hey, Ben...”

He sniffed before opening the door and said, “Hey, man!” Smiling, he tried to hide the pain in his soaked eyes. “Can’t a guy go to the bathroom in peace around here?” He patted my shoulder, and before I could speak, he hurried past me and down the hall.

Part of me wanted to be there for Ben more, but I was far too preoccupied dealing with my own demons.

After work, I came home to the fresh scent of bacon. Christina was busying herself with preparing dinner. “I thought of making a cobb salad tonight with bacon.” The sight of the bag of spinach in her hands sparked memories of my mother. She’d say, “Ain’t nothing wrong with a little bacon. Just as long as you balance it out with something healthy like spinach.” We’d have spinach and bacon all the time. It was her way of “cheating” a diet.

The remembrance of my mother further fueled my agitation from earlier. “I’m not hungry,” I growled before stomping off to our bedroom and slamming the door shut. Sitting on the edge of

the bed, I yanked at the ends of my hair. I hated more than anything how angry I was for no reason, but it was as if I couldn't control it. It made me frustrated on top of that, so I punched at the mattress to help relieve my tension.

On days like these, I spent the evening in the bedroom watching YouTube videos because I didn't want to lash out at Christina. A phone call interrupted one of my videos. It was my therapist. Chewing on my tongue, I debated whether or not I wanted to answer it. I let it go to voicemail, but he called again soon after.

I decided to answer. "What?" I breathed out.

"How are you doing today?" asked Dr. Whitaker.

"Fine."

"Are you sure about that?"

I heard the television from the living room had been turned off suddenly. Peering down at the bottom of the bedroom door, I saw shadows of feet. Christina was listening in. She must've called. Having been caught, I decided to fess up. "Today was rough. I had another nightmare."

"What was it this time?"

"My mother was stuck in the basement, and then it caught on fire. I saw *him* again."

"Uh-huh... Have you been doing your relaxation exercises before bed like I've asked you to?"

I rubbed my eyes and shoved down the annoyance that knotted in my chest. "No."

"What about your journal where I asked you to document your feelings and the triggers? Have you been doing that?"

I let out an exasperated sigh. "No."

“You’ll never get better unless you heed my advice.” He sounded like a father disciplining his son for breaking grandma’s expensive vase.

“I know,” I said through gritted teeth.

“I’m going to refer you to a psychiatrist. Your moods seem to be getting worse, and you refuse to accept help from me. You don’t have to take anything prescribed by the psychiatrist, but I encourage you to listen to what he or she has to say,” said Dr. Whitaker.

“I’m not crazy,” I exclaimed.

“I didn’t say you were,” Dr. Whitaker said in an all-too-calm tone.

“I don’t need meds,” I defended.

“Medicine helps facilitate an easier healing process. It doesn’t have to be a permanent solution. Therapy accompanied by medicine can help you better and faster.”

I was silent as I chewed on my tongue, not wanting to yell at him. How many times did I need to put my foot down about this?

“I’ll have someone call you. Just listen to what the doctor has to say and then decide. All I ask is that you listen.”

Rubbing my face, I said in a short tone, “Fine.”

“Okay. You take care. I’ll see you at our next appointment.”

Once our call was done, I threw my phone onto the bed. I felt like such a child throwing a temper tantrum, but I couldn’t help myself. It made my stomach twist in anger at how pathetic I was acting, but it was as if I was a puppet on a string. There was no control on my end. All I had was this beast called anger.

That night, another dream came; this time, it was an aerial view of the plot of land on which the house once stood.

It was gone.

The only thing that remained was the cemented basement. It was perfectly intact except for one side of it. I flew in closer and saw a rusty red door made of metal behind the broken wall. Voices whispered through the air, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. After a while, one voice broke out amongst the others. She sounded familiar, but I couldn't place her. "The papers. There are books," the voice said.

"More is to come," the voice whispered close to my ear.

"More is coming. *It* is coming. You need the books."

The rest of the voices got louder and louder, shrouding over the woman's, before I felt a shove towards the door. The shock of my body being slammed into the door woke me up yet again.

Panting, I ran fingers through my hair. Hearing about the secret room was now causing a whole new set of dreams, apparently. Christina was right. I had to go back to the house. I thought of what the mysterious woman had said, and a chill ran down my spine. Who and what was "it"? Maybe going would make the nightmares disappear somehow. It seemed like a stretch, but I was desperate as I let out a sharp breath. I didn't want to do this, but there was this unknown force that gnawed at the back of my brain, which told me I had to go.

Thankful I didn't wake Christina this time, I carefully pulled the covers off of me and steadily got out of the bed, making sure I didn't make any sudden movements so as not to wake her. I tiptoed out of the room and closed the door behind me before making my way to the couch to distract myself with some television.

I didn't even notice how much time had passed until a soft orange color from the sun broke through the living room area's curtains and painted across the carpet. The sweet aroma of the

beans filled my nostrils and helped ease the exhaustion a bit as I made myself a cup of coffee. I made sure to leave some left over for Christina when she eventually woke up.

Closer to Christina's alarm going off, I decided to begin making breakfast— omelets filled with spinach, bell pepper, onion, cheese, and bacon. I smirked as I remembered my mother's old saying, "A little bit of bacon never hurt." Immediately, a heavy ache weighed down on my chest, and I let out a sigh to shove away the grief.

Christina's alarm blared behind the bedroom door, and moments later the door squeaked open. She came out while putting on her robe. Her hair was in disarray as she shuffled to the coffee pot. "Good morning, babe," I said.

"Ugh," she groaned in return.

She was adorable in the morning. Chuckling, I patted my hand on her rat's nest to fix some of the knots. "I have breakfast ready for you," I said, flipping over the omelet.

Christina took a sip of her coffee, and her eyes opened up a little more. "Mm-hmm."

She sat down at the kitchen table and laid her head on it. A minute later, she lifted her head to take a sip from her mug before slamming her forehead on the table. I brought over her plate along with mine. The smell of the food lifted her head once more, and she grabbed the fork in her fist.

Figuring now was as good a time as any to tell her my mind had changed, I cleared my throat. "I decided to go to the house."

Christina had a slight pause after she took a bite of her food. She nodded. "Good," she grumbled.

I eyed her carefully to see her reaction, but it seemed neutral despite her grumpy morning mood. "I'll go tonight by myself."

Christina shook her head. She rubbed her hands over her face, which made her eyes wake up fully. “No, I’m comin’ with.” She patted my hand. “And we gotta dress in all black and sneak over that fence like undercover cops.” Her lazy morning smile made a grin spread across my face.

I reached out to kiss her hand. “Kids have been breaking onto the property and vandalizing it. I’m pretty sure a couple of thirty-somethings can manage a slick break-in,” I smirked.

Christina giggled. “And we’d be better at it.” She pointed her fork at me. “More experience.”

I chuckled. “True.”

After breakfast, Christina got ready for work. Again, she had the morning shift while I had the afternoon one. Making myself busy, I cleaned up the kitchen and got our dirty clothes ready for a load of laundry before heading off to work. I needed to keep myself busy because the consecutive nightmares were weighing heavily on my mind.

Before heading out the door, Christina kissed my cheek. She held my face in her hands and stared me straight in the eye. “Don’t forget to breathe. It’s gon’ all be okay. I promise.” Her smile instilled trust in me. Nodding my head, I let out a slow breath. Being vulnerable around Christina was still fresh, but I felt safe around her. It was a new concept for me to feel safe around someone emotionally because I didn’t exactly have that as a child. My father instilled in me the need to be strong and “like a man,” which meant not crying. No emotions. However, I was growing to like the sheltered bubble Christina had made for me. For the first time in my life, I could breathe. She gave me my breath.

At work, I saw Carlos leisurely pushing one of our metal carts along, which had books stacked on them. One of the nursing

assistants did a book run every day to see if any of the residents wanted to read something.

Remorse yanked at my heart, so I made my way over to him. “Hey,” I said with a grimace.

Carlos stopped in his tracks and lifted his eyebrows in surprise. “Hi.”

I chewed on my lip as I tried to find the right words to say. “I’m sorry about yesterday. I…” I trailed off, trying to find the words. “There’s no excuse.”

Carlos nodded his head. “I’m just worried about you. We all are.”

I peered down at the ground for a moment. “I know.” I kicked at the linoleum flooring, which made my sneakers squeak. “I’m trying.”

“I’ve been where you are before.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Carlos shrugged. “When my father was killed, I was angry for a long time. There was no justice for him either, and I was there to watch him die.”

I stood there with my eyes widened in dismay. “I had no idea.”

Carlos sighed. “Yeah, well, I don’t like talking about it much. It took years of therapy to get where I’m at today, but I first had to accept the fact I needed the help.” His eyes studied mine. “Refusing the help will only make it worse. There’s nothing wrong with a little help now and again.”

Looking away, I sucked in a breath. “They want me on meds.”

“Then you should take them. I did.”

“Seriously?”

Carlos shrugged again. “Yeah. It was only for a year, and now I don’t need them. Some people need it permanently, but I was lucky enough to be okay without it. Sometimes we fall. It’s okay to fall. It’s okay to be human,” Carlos grimaced. “You’re a man. Not an invincible creature without emotions.” Carlos continued to roll past me. He patted my shoulder as he did so. “You’ll get there.” His eyes were sincere. “I’m here if you need me.”

His understanding and honesty released a heaviness within me I didn’t notice I had. It allowed me to swallow my pride and be willing to accept help. Maybe it was something I could tell Ben too, but I didn’t see him at all that day. During my break, I tried calling him, but it all went straight to voicemail.

I hope he’s okay.

After my shift was over, I left to the apartment where Christina was busying herself with putting together our supplies for the night: two backpacks, flashlights, gloves, and a first aid kit. I couldn’t help but smile. “A first aid kit, Christina?” I asked her playfully.

She looked at me as if she didn’t find it silly at all that she was overprepared. “Yes. Ya never know what’ll happen.”

I put my keys and wallet on the side table near the front door. “Heaven forbid I scrape a knee.” I turned over my shoulder to let her see my grin so she’d know I was only teasing.

She sighed before laughing. “Yeah, yeah. One day you will thank me for it... Since it isn’t sundown yet, we can eat dinner or somethin’.”

I shrugged. My appetite still hadn’t returned, but I didn’t want to worry her. “I had a big lunch,” I lied. “I’m not hungry just yet.”

Christina nodded. She fit her lips into a tight line and said, “Carlos told me about your talk today and what happened yesterday.”

Grounding my teeth together, I bit back the sudden fury that burned in my chest. Why it made me so upset Carlos and Christina were speaking about me, I had no idea. I crossed my arms.

Christina was quiet as she studied me with her eyes.

“We’re worried. That’s all,” she said softly.

I stared up at her. “Drop it,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’m fine.”

Christina’s brow furrowed. She swallowed as she looked me up and down. “Okay,” she said in a sassy tone. We got ready to take off to the old house in silence.

I didn’t think I’d be nervous about going back to the property, but as the sunlight along our carpet began to turn a faint pink color, I couldn’t ignore the churning in my stomach. I told myself it was because of our adventure’s breaking-and-entering component, but deep down, I knew it was more than that. Chewing on the inside of my cheek, my knee shook as I sat at the table. Every few minutes, I’d get up and pace around.

Christina peered up from the lounge chair in the living room where she sat crocheting. “Teddy, hon?”

I paused. “Yeah?”

“You ‘kay?” She tilted her head to one side.

Nodding, I took a deep breath to help shovel down the emotions. “Yeah. I’m good.”

Christina raised her eyebrows as if she didn’t believe me. “Mm-hmm.”

By nightfall, we were dressed and ready to go. Drumming my fingers against my thighs, I stood there waiting for Christina to

lock our apartment door. We made our way downstairs to the bottom floor and out the wooden door that had a glass window attached to the top of it. Christina was parked across the way. She had an electric car, and it still threw me off how silent it was whenever she turned it on.

I played with my sweatshirt hood once we'd made our way across town to the old house. I hadn't been back to that place since I sold it. It seemed strange to be back there suddenly.

They had ripped out the bushes and flowers that used to sit out along the front entrance. A chain-link fence now circled the property. They had placed that up after the last owner left. He wasn't able to sell it, so the bank took over. Nobody dared buy the property; despite being on the market for almost a year now, not one person came to look at it.

The windows that used to be boarded up were now gone, having been bashed in by the construction workers. I could see through the empty window frames that some of the walls had been torn down. The home used to have every window and door boarded up in order to deter the teens from breaking and entering at night. Graffiti sat on one side of the house, and I could see from the moonlight there was more graffiti inside the kitchen.

In the dark, with part of the house having been stripped away, it didn't seem as menacing as my mind had made it out to be.

"Ready, Teddy?" Christina asked. She placed a hand on my knee, which I didn't even notice was shaking.

I took a deep breath. *Get yourself together, Ted. This isn't a big deal. It's just a house at night.* There was a sense of frustration with myself for being so unmanly by fearing an inanimate object such as this building. I fear only the idea of it and what took place here and nothing else. I'd faced death there. Anyone would be

frightened to face their mortality again. That's what I told myself as I stepped out of the car. All I needed was to go in and out. If kids could break in and do God-knows-what there, then I could come in to check out a measly room.

Christina put her hood on over her head and gave me a backpack. "Don't turn on the flashlight until we get in," she said. I helped her hop the fence first by letting her jump off my hands, and then I climbed over. The metal clanked and shook as my weight made it unsteady. Once I reached the top, I leaped down to the ground. Christina and I walked up the porch, half of which had been dismantled. The wood steps groaned with each step we took. The previous owner took out the railway Christina and I had built together. It made my heart sink that I never realized my dream of caring for my mother in this home.

Christina leaped onto the windowsill that led to the living room before crawling inside through the exposed window frame. I did the same. Once inside, we turned on the flashlights to see. "We have to hurry just in case the patrol car comes by to check," said Christina.

Dust and crumbles of what once was a wall were sprinkled across the cemented floor. They had taken out the linoleum, floorboards, and staircase. The inside of the home seemed to have aged more from the outside elements' exposure after the windows were taken out. Our feet shuffled across the living room, and something from the upper floor creaked loudly, making us halt in our tracks.

Christina eyed me as we both paused to listen for another sound. When nothing happened after several seconds, we continued our pursuit. We made our way to the basement entrance, where the stairs used to be. The door to the basement had been taken out, so all that was left was the doorframe. The black abyss

greeted us at the opening was threatening. My heart rate sped up a bit, but I managed to push it back.

It's just a house. It's just the memory you are afraid of.

Christina grabbed ahold of my hand and squeezed lovingly. That small contact was enough to make everything melt away. With some newfound bravery, I used my flashlight to guide my way down the steps. The air was silent. Not even the wind broke through. The world outside seemed to cease to exist as total silence enveloped our ears. Not even a car could be heard. It was as if being in the basement transported us to another dimension.

With my ears ringing, we scuffled across the cemented floor of the basement. My heart stopped, and a cold sweat ran down my spine. In front of me was a big gash where a wall once stood. Chunks of the cemented wall lay on the floor beside it. Behind the hole was a rusty red door.

Just like in my dream.

I clenched my teeth, saying the same lie over and over in my head: *It's just a house. It was just a dream. It is just a coincidence.*

Christina decided to climb over the side of the hole in the wall with me frozen in place. She managed to get one leg over but needed my help with the other. My feet were like jelly as I made my way over the open cavity in the wall. Nearly tripping over the rubble, it caused a spike in my adrenaline to shoot up my spine. I took a deep breath to collect myself. Christina turned the rectangular handle, and the metal door screeched as it opened.

Our flashlights revealed a small room the size of a closet, which had two shelves filled with leather-bound books and loose papers.

"More is coming. It is coming. You need the books."

My breath caught in my throat. We walked into the room, and a musty scent bombarded my nostrils. I gingerly touched one of the books. Dust coated my fingertips, and I picked up the book and gently blew the dust off of it, which caused me to sneeze. The leather was soft and feeble with age. Christina and I eyed one another. We didn't need to say a word because she knew already we needed to take these. Christina went to work, shoving as much as she could into her backpack. She managed to fit two of the books into her backpack, and I grabbed the rest.

Christina had the flashlight in her mouth as she tried to speak, but everything came out a gargled mess. After filling up her backpack, she held the flashlight in her hand. "We need to get in and out as soon as possible."

"I know." I grabbed one of the red leather-bound books. The edge of its cover was fading, and some of its papers hung out loosely. Putting the yellow-colored papers and the last of the books into my backpack, we raced out of there. Despite the dream and everything I had experienced thus far, part of me, deep down, hoped nothing came of these papers and books. I knew we'd find something, but that only made me want to dig my head deeper into the ground rather than open that door to find out. I'd thought this part of my life was over. I *needed* it to be over; however, something gnawed at my heart. It made my stomach drop. There was something still there, and it cast a dark shadow around me at all times.

Chapter Two

Christina's Search

“I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight,” Ted said as he slammed open the apartment door. “We shouldn't have stolen those papers. It doesn't even matter what it says on them.” I knew that was lie, but I knew he was just scared. He ran his fingers through his hair as he chewed on the inside of his cheek, which told me he was getting agitated.

“Teddy, hon,” I implored, “it may be able to help with closure.” I only wanted what was best for him and to help him let the past go. His nightmares happened every single night, and sometimes I pretended not to be woken up by them so as not to embarrass him. “I know ya hate how much I worry, but I only want to help,” I said.

He ground his teeth together and paced back and forth in the living room. “I know!”

The rise in his voice made me take a step back.

Immediately, he sighed and closed his eyes. After a moment, he said in a calmer voice, “I'm sorry. The drive home from the house made me second guess our decision. I just...” He trailed off.

I knew he was on edge, but part of me wanted to settle this argument before doing anything else. “I’m worried about ya, Teddy. That’s all, and I know there is more going on here because you are gettin’ more irritated by the day. Don’t close the door on unanswered questions that may haunt you.”

He paused outside the bedroom door and banged his fist against the wall. Adrenaline rushed through me like a massive wave, and I took a big step back without thinking about it. “Just. Leave. It. Alone,” he demanded through gritted teeth and slammed the bedroom door shut behind him. His words were garbled as he spoke, and the change in his voice made me frightened. His demand made me confused as well. Leave it alone? Leave what alone? It was as if a second person had jumped out to tell me this.

This wasn’t like him. This wasn’t my Teddy. It was like night and day. There was this thick air of anger that had surrounded him since we left that house earlier this evening. A part of me couldn’t let this go. This needed to be resolved before anything else could happen, but he seemed to be at his limit. Pushing him any further would inevitably lead to an immense outburst.

I closed my eyes and took a deep and slow breath in and out in order to calm my pounding heart. Wanting to wait before I went back into the bedroom, I cleaned the kitchen for an hour. Keeping my hands busy helped to calm my nerves further. As I cleaned, I played the night over and over in my head. Slowly, as the night reeled in my mind, my concern turned into annoyance. My gut became hot with anger. Clenching my teeth together, I shook my head. I did *not* deserve to be treated like that. PTSD or not. Pushing the mop back and forth against the linoleum flooring, I continued to grind my teeth.

With the kitchen clean, I got myself ready for bed. I crawled into bed, making sure to be extra careful about not waking him. He turned over as I got under the covers and put an arm around my waist. The burning in my chest flared as I was reminded of how upset I was with him. “I’m sorry about how I was tonight,” he mumbled.

That caught me off guard, and I didn’t know what to say. “It wasn’t okay, Teddy. I deserve better.”

Ted smoothed his hand over my arm. “I know. You’re right. There is no excuse.” He was quiet for a second and then sighed. “Maybe the meds would help, but I don’t want my suggesting that to suddenly make it okay for my behavior tonight. I’m not normally like this. I’ve been counting the number of days I’ve been irritable and on edge. It’s every single day.”

I thought for a moment. Irritability could be a number of things, but he was right he needed a psychiatrist at this point. “We’ll make an appointment tomorrow,” I suggested. “Seeing someone for medication doesn’t mean what happened to you wasn’t real. It doesn’t mean you are crazy.” Pausing, I mulled over if I should say this next or not. “As much as I love you,” I began, unsure if I should continue, “I won’t put up with abuse. I’ve been through that already, and—”

Ted pulled me closer to him, and my heart melted a little more. His face scrunched up in pain and sorrow. It made my heart drop. “I know,” he whispered back. “I know, and I will do better. Just...” He paused as he gnawed on his lip. “If I say I have to leave and be alone, then don’t ask any questions. Just let me go so I can decompress.”

I nodded. “Okay. That’s fair.”

“At least until I get a hang on these mood swings.”

Shaking my head, I said, “This isn’t you, Teddy. I know you. This isn’t it. What’s happening?”

Ted swallowed, and a visible frown formed. His eyes widened in sudden fear, and his face became ashen. His expression sent a chill down my spine. “I don’t know,” he said with a shaky voice.

That night, I was woken up suddenly by the sounds of scratching. The time on my phone said it was one in the morning. I groaned, annoyed at the loud neighbors. Turning onto my back, I focused on the scraping. After a moment, I realized it didn’t sound like the neighbors at all. Where was that coming from? Closing my eyes, I tried to get back to sleep. However, the scratching, like that of deep, heavy claws, kept going. The more it scratched, the heavier and louder it got. I shot open my eyes and sat up in bed.

What is that?

It sounded as though, whatever it was, was digging into a hard surface like wood. Ted was still fast asleep, so I got out of bed in search of its source. Nowhere in our apartment could I locate the sound. I opened our front door, and once I stepped out into the hallway, the sound ceased. Once back inside, the scraping continued.

We lived on the top floor, and there was no attic to my knowledge. Perhaps there was someone on the roof making this noise. I went back into bed but still sat up awake from the mysterious sound. At this point, I was becoming nervous. Was I imagining this? Picking at the hem of my blanket, I tried to take deep breaths in order to calm my rapid, beating heart.

The noise kept getting louder, and my nerves were so shot I decided to wake Ted up. “Teddy, hon,” I whispered. He didn’t stir awake, so I bent down lower towards his ear and called out his name.

Still no answer.

I grabbed his shoulder and shook him more aggressively. Right then, a menacing and deep growl reverberated in my ears. It was so close; I felt the heat of the unknown beast's breath on the back of my neck. I jumped out of bed with a scream. My stomach ached as it twisted and churned from my nerves. "Ted!" I screamed. "Wake up!" I ran over to his side of the bed and grabbed his arm as I started to shake him.

It was so unlike him to not wake up. Usually, he was such a light sleeper. "Ted!" I yelled.

Finally, he stirred awake. The second his eyes opened, and he saw mine, he sat up and grabbed my hand. "What's wrong? What happened?" he asked with clear panic in his voice. "You look so scared." He stroked the side of my face. The touch helped to calm me, but only a little.

"Th-there was..." I didn't know how to go about sharing what I experienced. "I heard scratchin'... I heard... a-a growl..." I fumbled with my fingers.

Ted looked into my eyes before grabbing me and holding me close to his chest. I wrapped my arms around him. The longer we embraced, the less my stomach felt acidic with nervousness.

I let out a sigh. "I don't know what that was. I want to say it was just a dream, but I was awake!" Blinking profusely, I thought back to what just happened. "I-I I know what I heard." I wanted him to believe me, but I was afraid he wouldn't. My eyes implored him.

Ted ran his fingers through my hair and said softly, "I know. I've experienced it too." He let out a sigh, which sounded like a relief. "This is how it started with me in that house before everything else started."

Swallowing hard, my eyes widened as my heart shot up to my throat. Now, this was happening to *me*? Ted was telling the truth. The thought of ghosts and goblins being real made my heart drop. I wasn't sure I wanted to live in a world where I knew this kind of evil existed. As Ted ran his hand up and down my back, I thought of the fear he must have lived with. No wonder he was on edge and short-tempered. I didn't care Ted didn't want closure. All I needed was this one experience to tell me things would only worsen if we didn't figure something out. Ted may not want the help, but I did.

I took the following day off from work. Last night's incident left me so exhausted, and my nerves were shot. I was mentally spent by sunrise, having spent the entire night staring up at the ceiling, too frightened to close my eyes. "Want me to stay home with you?" Ted asked as he stood near the front door, ready to leave.

Shaking my head, I faked a smile. Going over to him, I patted my hands on his chest. "No, hon. We both can't take the day off. We need the money."

Ted's strained face told me he disagreed with me, but before he could say anything, I turned him around and gently shoved him out the door. "Have a wonderful day, sweetie," I said. "I will be fine, dear. You'll be home before ya know it."

Being alone in that apartment was not something I wanted to do, but we had bills to pay, so one of us had to go to work. Besides, I had some homework to do on the house and needed to contact a friend I thought could help Ted. I turned on the television and raised the volume. The noise helped to soothe my apprehension, and I was finally able to breathe. In the bathroom, I dug through the cabinet beside the sink for my antidepressants. They also helped with anxiety symptoms.

Afterward, I got myself ready for the day to pass the time, since I knew my friend was probably still asleep at this hour. Busy hands always helped my anxiety. My hair was such a constant mess to deal with. It was curly, and the only thing I could use to tame it was an expensive leave-in conditioner. My mama always said good hair meant finding a good man. I pursed my lips at the silly thought of a woman's entire life being about finding some guy to marry.

Since it took me nearly two hours to get ready, it was late enough to give that old friend of mine a call by the time I was finished. I searched through my contacts on my phone until I found Jacob's name.

He picked up by the third ring. "Christina! Is that you? It has been too long," he said in his usual cheerful tone. Jacob's voice had a way of making you feel warm on the inside, and my frown quickly dissipated.

"Hey there, hon," I said. "I hope all is well with you and Deidre."

I could hear the smile in his voice. "It sure is. She and I just got back from a cruise to celebrate our anniversary."

"That must have been lovely. How long have y'all been together now? A century?" I giggled.

Jacob chuckled. "More like ten years. Not quite there yet, but here's to hopin'."

"Well, you got *me* to thank for introducing y'all. I knew her for those first few years in undergrad."

Jacob continued to laugh. "Yeah. I fell for her hard within seconds."

I had never believed in love at first sight until the moment when I'd witnessed that. Jacob had always been a hopeless romantic, though.

“I know you didn’t call me to discuss my cruise,” he said. “What’s up?”

Gnawing on my lip, I paced back and forth in the kitchen. “I have a favor to ask, and I need your detective skills to help me solve somethin’.”

Jacob cooed. “Shoot!”

His excitement made me a little braver. “As a history professor, I could use your expertise and finesse when it comes to an old case. Specifically in regards to the old mansion in town.”

“You mean the one they are trying to demolish?”

“Yes. My boyfriend used to live there, and we got our hands on some old documents from the house I’d like for you to take a look at.”

Jacob whistled. “That sounds just up my alley. Is it a cold case or something? I do love doing those in my spare time.”

Shaking my head, I said, “I’m not sure if it is, but let’s see if there is something there, okay?” I thought of last night’s incident and Ted’s story. “I have more to share, but I’d prefer to share it in person rather than over the phone.”

“Sounds good. Are you able to meet for lunch today?”

“That works perfectly. Let’s meet up at the Country Corner Café.”

“And don’t forget those documents! I can’t wait to sink my teeth into them!” He chuckled.

The thought of potentially resolving whatever was going on with Ted and stopping the nightmares made my anxiety a whole lot better. I clutched my phone in my hands and let out a calming breath. We could fix this. After that, I could relax.

Arriving early at the café, I got Jacob and me a table. I asked for the curtains across my booth to be pulled down since the sun’s orange gaze blinded my eyes. The restaurant always had that

familiar smell of syrup mixed with sweet meats like bacon. My mouth watered as I anticipated the food. Southern food was always a comfort and reminded me of home, and their biscuits and gravy here were my favorite. I wished more restaurants here had fried steak and gravy or places with better fried chicken and creamed corn, but a girl sometimes had to make do with what she had.

Jacob entered through the doors of the café. Standing up, I hugged him before he took a seat across from me at the table. “How are you, Christina?” he asked.

I thought of Ted and how happy I was we were living together, but then that joy was quickly overshadowed by my worry about his mood swings and the experience I’d had last night. “I’m alright,” I finally answered.

“That’s good,” he said.

The waitress came by, and we ordered coffee to start with.

“To be honest,” I began. “I don’t know if I’m allowed to have these papers and books.”

Jacob smirked and rubbed his hands together. “I love it! It’s like back in college when we stole those flyers around campus that were promoting an event hosted by our least favorite professor.”

I laughed. “He was *so* mean!”

“He hated on my dyed ‘fro.”

Laughing so hard, I snorted. “Everyone hated on that. Toner colored hair went out of style in the ’90s, kid. Nobody told you? Your hair looked like gold.”

Jacob smiled. “Yeah, ‘cause I was fly.”

I rolled my eyes playfully. After looking over the menu and making our order, I took out my bag full of the documents from the house. I plopped down two heavy, leather-bound books, and a few papers came flying out onto the tiled floor. Jacob picked up the

stray yellow pieces of aged paper and studied them. “How far back do these go?”

“To the early 1900s, I believe,” I said as I put the last of the books onto the table.

Jacob rifled through one of the books, careful not to rip the fragile sheets as he sped through. “It appears to me these books are big notebooks filled with personal notes.” He turned his attention to the stray pieces of paper and picked them up to read. “These lone papers are travel papers and...” He picked up another piece and furrowed his brow as he studied it, “and information about the house, like construction costs and all that.” Stacking the four books on top of one another, he pushed them to the corner and focused on the stray papers instead. “I want to organize these in order of when they occurred. This way, I can follow a timeline.” He paused. “What exactly am I looking for here?”

I opened my mouth as I thought of what to say. “The previous owner tried to kill Ted, and now he’s having nightmares.”

Jacob widened his eyes, and he opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

“And I want to help him find closure, so I’m hoping these papers may help to find out if they belong to the previous owner in any way. If so, maybe we can help ease Ted’s mind knowing there is nothing the previous owner can do...” I had to think of a lie and quick. “To possibly end his time early in prison.”

“How old was his killer?” Jacob sounded like he was in disbelief. “These papers are so old.”

I sighed and reached my hand out to grab Jacob’s arm. “Please, just look through them for me. Please.” I didn’t want to explain what was truly going on because I feared Jacob would leave.

Jacob's eyes burrowed into mine as I pleaded silently. He slowly nodded. "Okay," he whispered with concern, "I'll help." He continued to scour over the documents when he leaned over the table and focused his attention on one document in particular. "This looks sketchy."

My heart leaped in my chest in both excitement and nervousness. "What is it?"

"The first owner of this land was a man named Charles Winterford. He owned the land itself originally. Not sure if the house was on the property yet or not, but there was an overlap of ownership between Winterford and a man named Dr. Ransteen." Jacob grabbed one of the thick books. He carefully opened it, but the cover seemed only to be held together by two thin strings, and it flopped onto the table. "These are some big notebooks."

"Maybe it was for documenting patients or budgeting. Dr. Ransteen ran a hospital on the property."

The waitress came by with our food and filled up our coffee cups. "Anything else I can get you?" she asked.

"No thanks, hon," I said with a smile.

Jacob was far too busy buried in one of the books to pay attention. "What is all this?" He closed up the book and then grabbed to open the second one, then the third, and finally the fourth. "These notebooks are filled with strange symbols and scribbles of notes in English." His eyes narrowed as he studied the books further. "I'm going to need more time to look over all of this, but this is an amazing find." He was silent as he continued to read over everything. I knew better than to disturb Jacob when he was in the zone. He always loved history, so his being a professor for the subject was a no-brainer. In his spare time, he worked on cold cases and even helped to reopen some cases. He was good, so I knew I could trust him to research anything about this house.

“I think...” Jacob paused as he read.

I leaned in.

“I think Dr. Ransteen was into some *dark* stuff.” Jacob’s tone sounded more enthralled than fearful. “I think he killed Waterford to take his land.”

I perked up. “What? That’s a fast assumption.” My eyes widened as I tried to read over the book, but everything was a mess of scribbles: English mixed with strange symbols followed by Latin. Seeing it made me curl a bit inwards.

“Yeah, right here,” said Jacob as he pointed at the notebook. “This book serves as a sort of diary of this guy, and he said he got ‘rid’ of the owner. I’m not sure what he meant by that, but the land was just gifted to Dr. Ransteen by Waterford after Waterford had put up some of his lands for sale. Why put it up for sale and then give it away for free to a total stranger?”

My knee shook, and I blinked several times. “Maybe we can look up who this Charles Waterford is and see if there is any further documentation of him.”

“I’m sorry to cut our lunch short, but I want to get to the bottom of this. I’ll have to take my food to-go. This is a great find, Christina,” said Jacob.

His praise made me grimace.

The waitress came by and asked, “How are we doing here, folks?”

“We need a box,” said Jacob.

“Make that two,” I added.

Once the waitress was gone, Jacob turned his attention to me. “I love mysteries like these, and if Dr. Ransteen did kill Waterford, there is a murder he got away with. We’ll figure this out. Give me more time. I know someone I can contact that can look into any information about Waterford. If there is any.”

The waitress came by with a couple of to-go boxes, and we put our untouched food inside. Jacob put a piece of toast in his mouth. With the bread hanging out, he said, “I’ll get back to you in a few days. Promise.” He gathered up the books and papers in a rush and put his box of food on top of the stack. “This is good stuff. Good stuff,” he said to himself as he left out the door.

Jacob always got real nerdy about things like this and seeing that excitement always made me giggle. Jacob rushed back into the café and said, “Oh! And bye, Christina. I’ll talk to you soon!”

By the time I got home from our breakfast-for-lunch, Ted was sitting on the couch flipping through different Netflix titles.

“Hi, Teddy,” I said. “How was work?”

Ted shrugged as he continued to search through different shows. “Same as always.”

I grimaced. He no longer enjoyed his job or much of anything anymore. It was concerning. Walking over towards him, I ran my fingers through his hair. “Do ya want to go out today?”

Ted sat silently as he clicked the remote over and over.

I rubbed my hands up and down his back. “Teddy, hon. You should go out. Goin’ straight to work and home isn’t exactly the best.” Ted shoved his shoulder away from me to show he wanted me to stop talking to him. I froze as my heart dropped to my stomach. Sighing, I walked away.

The rest of the day was spent mostly in silence. I busied myself with crocheting another scarf I’d probably give away as a gift for Christmas. Crocheting was relatively easy at this point, and I could finish a scarf in one day if I committed to it. Halfway through my project, I put it away into my crochet basket and looked over at Ted. He sat like a stoic robot on the couch. I decided to sit with him and attempt some cuddle time, but it was as

if he was a zombie. While on the couch, I leaned over and kissed his cheek and then his nose. Instead of kissing me back or smiling like he used to, he stared blankly at the screen.

“Teddy,” I said.

“Hm,” he grunted.

Sucking in my lower lip, concern twisted at my chest.

“What’s going on in your head?”

He finally looked at me, but his eyes were glossed over.

“Nothing.”

I put my hand to his cheek, and my forehead creased. “Are you okay?”

Ted let out a huff before yanking his head out of my grasp.

“I’m fine,” he said through gritted teeth.

I dropped my hand. My heart sank low to my stomach once again.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Sorry. I’m just tired. I’m going to bed.” He squeezed my hand softly before getting up and going to the bedroom.

Sighing, I sat back against the couch. I ran my hands down my face. At this point, he *had* to go on meds. This couldn’t go on. Ted being in the bedroom told me he wanted to be alone, so I warmed up my food from the restaurant and ate the leftovers. Bundling up under my heavy-weight blanket, I watched some mindless feel-good shows. When things got too severe in any show, I’d get stressed out. Shows without too big of a plot were a safe bet. Even romantic comedies made my stress levels soar.

When my eyelids got heavy, I turned off the television and debated whether or not I should go into the bedroom to sleep. My chest twisted at the thought of facing Ted’s silent anger. Taking in a deep breath, I willed myself into the bedroom. I relaxed when I saw he was fast asleep.

That night, the shaking of the bed stirred me awake. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Ted kicking and flailing his arms against the mattress. I put my hands onto his arm. “Teddy,” I said. “Wake up. Ted.” He didn’t wake up, but the moving suddenly stopped.

I laid back down and tried to fall back asleep. Right as I was deep enough asleep, the bed began to shake again from Ted’s jolting.

I got up out of bed and grabbed my pillow before huffing over to the couch to plop down. I sighed as I stared up at the ceiling. My eyelids were heavy as I yawned. Our mattress squeaked and rustled as Ted continued to shake, punch, and kick in his sleep. Getting any sleep in that room was futile at this point. Good thing it was the weekend for me because I don’t think I would’ve had the energy for work. It was already two in the morning by the time I finally was able to fall back asleep in the living room.

The smell of coffee woke me up in the morning. The orange light from the morning sun shined through our purple curtains by the front door, blanketing over me on the couch. Ted sat at the kitchen table, sipping on his coffee as he scrolled through his phone. “Hey, Teddy,” I said as I yawned.

He looked up at me. “Good morning,” he said in a kind tone. “I have coffee made.”

I studied his face to judge how he felt today. He seemed to be more alive this morning, and more cheerful, which relaxed my anxiety.

“Going to bed early last night was a good idea. I feel great,” he said. He grinned.

I gave a soft smile. “Good.” I got up and groaned as my heavy eyes struggled to stay open. Trudging over to the kitchen

table, I sat down holding the fresh cup of coffee Ted got for me. “You were kicking and punching in your sleep again.”

His smile diminished a bit. “I’m sorry that you had to move to the couch. It’s been a while since you had to do that.”

I smiled real big to show it was okay because I didn’t want him to feel bad. “I know, hon.” I yawned. “I’m so happy I have no work today.”

“You’re lucky,” he said with a smile. “Maybe I can take work off so we can spend the day together or something.”

I perked up a bit. My heart fluttered. “Really?” I was delighted he wanted to do something. That meant he was doing better mentally today.

He shrugged. “Sure! Why not?”

“Thanks, hon,” I said taking a sip of my coffee.

He leaned over the table and gave me a small peck on the lips.

“I’m glad you are doing so well today,” I said. “I was a bit worried.”

“I know, and I’m sorry about my mood lately.” He grabbed ahold of my hand. His lips fit into a tight line. “I’m sorry that you had to move to the couch. It’s been a while since you’ve had to do that again.”

I smiled to show him I wasn’t bothered by it. “I know, hon.”

“It’s strange, though, because, for me, I had a good night’s rest.” He chuckled as he shook his head. “Odd.”

Kissing his cheek, I said, “Maybe you were working through something and got through it.”

Ted let out a sigh. “Yeah...” He went quiet, and the strained look in his eyes told me he was holding something back.

Worry seeped into my heart, causing my chest to constrict as always. “What is it?”

Ted was silent, but after a moment, he shook his head. “Nothing.” He plastered on a smile. “Nothing, I promise.”

I eyed him warily, but I decided to let it go just this once. Usually, I tried to appease my anxiety, but I didn’t want to make his good day turn bad, not with Ted’s recent mood swings.

Ted opened his phone and looked at the time. “I should get going. I’ll ask if I can get off early today,” he said.

I leaned over and kissed him. He kissed me back softly. “Okay, hon.” I rested my head on his shoulder for a minute, soaking in this rare, peaceful moment before he had to leave for work.

After he left, I continued to sip my coffee as I sat in our quiet apartment. My heavy eyelids told me to ditch the coffee and head back to bed. The sound of my cell phone going off stirred me awake. Fumbling with my blanket, I managed to dig my head and arms out. I rolled over towards the nightstand and blinked a few times before grabbing my phone.

It was Jacob.

My adrenaline shot through my body, waking me up entirely. Maybe he finally found something we could use to help us. Quickly, I pressed to accept the call. “Jacob! What do you got for me?”

Jacob sighed before laughing. “I cannot believe the case you gave me.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah? Is it everything you’d hoped it’d be?”

“This is probably one of the best cold cases I have ever worked on. I dug up some history on this house, and it seems the original owner, Charles Waterford, disappeared after he had

contact with Dr. Ransteen. Why nobody suspected foul play, I have no clue. They ended up finding his body years later, and the only reason why they knew it was Waterford was because his engraved pocket watch was found with his remains.”

I sat up. “Are you serious?”

“Yes! I don’t know how to prove it was Dr. Ransteen, but here’s another spin to the story. Remember how I said the doctor was involved in some dark stuff?”

I yawned. “Yes.”

“I went through his notebooks and travel papers, and I found some letters between him and someone named H.H. In one of the letters, both Ransteen and this mystery person planned to meet in Chicago where this person lived. I think it might have been H.H. Holmes.”

My forehead creased in confusion. “What? Like the serial killer H.H. Holmes?”

“Yes! H.H. mentioned he was a doctor, and Ransteen was interested in his work. Ransteen traveled to Chicago to visit him, and that’s where H.H. Holmes lived.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise and was somewhat dismayed. “Wow. That’s crazy if it’s true, but there’s no guarantee it’s the infamous serial killer.”

“Think of it this way: what are the chances of there being another doctor in Chicago around that time that also went by the name H.H. and who also had a sketchy past?”

I swayed my head side to side as I took in the theory. “It is very coincidental.” I ran my fingers through my hair, and they got stuck in the knots. After yanking my fingers free, I said, “but this is strange and interesting at the same time. Thanks for letting me know what you have so far.”

“No problem. There’s still more I want to research here. When I learn more, I’ll give you a call. Perhaps we should meet up with Ted, and we can really dive into this.”

I blinked several times. Ted would not like that. In fact, he’d be upset I reached out to Jacob in the first place. “Um... We’ll see.”

“Okay. Well, let’s have brunch again soon anyway. Take care.”

My arms fell limp at my side after I hung up. I swallowed hard after a moment when the realization hit me of what this meant: Ted was in danger.

END OF PREVIEW
