

The Doctor's Estate

Heather Quinto



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CHAPTER 1 – 4 FREE PREVIEW ONLY



The Doctor's Estate

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Author's Note

Heather Quinto is a Yaqui Native American, and she resides in Fresno, California with her life partner and many cats. 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 *Doctor's Estate* with Jesus Martinez, who was 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 whoever 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 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

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Chapter One

Recurring Events

I saw the woman quickly speed down the steps while lifting up her dress. A loud deafening roar shook the home as a man I could not see set off yet another gunshot. She screamed as she pushed open the front door, and I followed closely behind her, unable to do anything other than watch as everything unfolded. The thin, screen door smacked against the paneled walling of the house. It was as if I, too, could feel the sharp pang radiating to her skull as the man grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled her back.

Her back smacked onto the wet mud. Her now wet frizzy hair laid out in front of her face like string. She slipped on the ends of her dress as she desperately attempted to stand up. “Howard, *please*,” I heard her beg. “What has happened to you? It’s me. It’s Lavinia!” Her boots slipped on the mud, and the thick and hardened sole from the man’s shoe planted itself onto her back, causing her to crash onto the ground again. She flipped over onto her back, exhausted from her fight. “Howard, this isn’t you!”

“Where’s the journal?” he demanded. His once blue eyes had gone black. He pointed a 45-millimeter handgun at her and cocked back the safety. “Where. Is. The journal?”

Tears rained down her cheeks, staining her face with the color of her mascara. “Howard, I know you’re in there. Please, you must fight this!” My heart ached for this woman I did not know.

A sharp clack echoed throughout the air.

Lavinia, with labored breaths, peered down at her core, which was now flowing with a thick red liquid. It soaked up her dress, discoloring the purple. She lay back and coughed. Blood bubbled out as my body, too, vibrated with pain. It was as if she and I were connected as one at this very moment. Howard, a face as cold as stone, stepped over Lavinia’s body and pulled back the trigger one last time right into Lavinia’s head.

“I’ll just find the damn thing myself,” he said. He spat on her motionless body.

I shot awake in bed as I gasped for breath. I gripped onto my soaked sheets and wiped the cold sweat from my eyes. It was the third time this week I had this dream, and I had no idea why.

I flipped the covers off of me and walked towards my bathroom to get ready for work. Ever since I moved into this home, I’ve been haunted by the same nightmare almost every night. Each time I’d wake up in a cold sweat. I wrote down on my pad of paper, that I left on my nightstand, to buy a few pairs of sheets. It was annoying having to wash the same sheets every single morning from the clammy sweat.

Turning on the faucet, I splashed cold water onto my face. It was refreshing, and it opened my pores to wake me

up. I got my comb wet before brushing back my smooth, brown hair. My hair was longer on top than it was on the sides, and I had the barber cut it this way so I could flip back my hair, which was in style. I missed having my beard, but being where I worked, they required you to be clean-shaven.

I got dressed in my purple-colored scrubs. Most men wouldn't wear such feminine colors, but I enjoyed proving other men wrong. You can still wear pink and be manly. My muscles on my arms were proof enough.

As I went downstairs, the groaning of the worn-out wood floors further reminded me that the flooring needed replacing. This home was built in the early nineteenth-hundreds, so it made sense that it was about due for improvements.

Once I got to the kitchen, I whipped up my typical protein shake with some spinach mixed in there. The protein helped with building up my muscles. I made a note on a different notepad that was placed on my refrigerator to set up my home gym. I chugged down my morning shake as I made my way to work. Today would be a good day. At least I told myself that every day. My mother always said to me that your day is what you made of it.

At work, I gripped tightly to the plastic handles of Mr. Walters' wheelchair as I steadily pushed him through the halls of the skilled nursing facility, or what we called SNF. One of its broken wheels squeaked as it glazed over the linoleum floors. I had to hunch over to reach the handles of the wheelchair, which left my shoulders curled at an awkward angle. I wanted to make conversation with my patients like I always did. I found it helped to lift their spirits. "Did you win at today's bingo?" I asked.

Mr. Walter's raspy voice always brought me comfort like a man whose words could give infiltrating advice when you needed it most. "No, Ted. I didn't. That damn Rochelle got me again. I swear she's cheatin'."

I chuckled. He said that every day. It was always someone who was cheating. The fluorescent lighting that hit the newly mopped white-colored flooring made the facility seem well maintained. I am a clean freak myself, as well as a stickler for organization.

"Want me to report her?" I offered jokingly. "I can see if I can find you a winning card."

Mr. Walters wagged his finger. "Yes, yes. Do that." he began to whisper, which made me strain to hear him. "And sneak in another tapioca pudding while you're at it."

I let out another laugh as I pushed Mr. Walters to his room. "I'll make sure to do that, sir." I pressed down on the plastic stubs on the back wheels to keep the wheelchair in place. Turning to face the man, I said, "Ready to give it a go today on your own? Or would you like assistance?"

Mr. Walters smacked his wrinkled lips together. His pointed chin stuck out more after he had gotten his dentures. He waved his hand dismissively. "No, no. I got this." His hands shook as he moved them to the sides of the chair, and he slowly pushed himself up. I always made sure to stand by his side and took a stance ready to catch him at any moment.

The stubborn man shuffled his feet across the floor, and he gripped tightly to the bedding once he reached it. I pulled off the blankets for the man, and he crawled into the bed as I positioned the pillows just the way he always liked it.

“You’re a good kid, son,” he said. His shaky hand patted me on the arm. “They don’t raise ‘em like you anymore.”

I grabbed the tray of food that patiently waited on the nightstand. The muscles in my cheeks tightened even more as my grin grew. “Thank you, sir. It was all my parents.” I positioned the tray on Mr. Walter’s lap.

“How is your Mom?”

I bit down hard and swallowed before forcing a smile. “As good as things can ever be.”

Mr. Walters frowned. “It’s a shame. To end up like that. Not remembering who your children are. I feel for you, my boy.”

“Thank you, sir.” I sighed and pointed at the two cups of tapioca pudding. “Got you an extra.” I winked at him before leaving the room.

I checked the watch on my wrist. It was nearly five o’clock, which meant it’d be time to clock out soon. I headed towards the employee locker room, which was towards the front lobby down the hallway to the left. As I walked through the lobby, I saw the other nurses were preoccupied with the television. My curiosity was piqued, so I walked over to them, passing by the rows of chairs and couches and looked up at the screen, which hung in the corner of the room. “What’s going on?” I asked.

My coworker, Ben, responded, “Another mentally ill homeless man went missing.” He looked up at the television with his hand covering his mouth. “It’s such a shame, you know. I wish we could take in all of them. It will continue to happen. What did they think would happen after they passed that law a few years ago? It caused the release of a bunch of

mentally impaired people that couldn't afford to be in homes."

"I know. It's been goin' on for the past eight years, but now it's gettin' steadily worse. It seems more people are bein' taken just this past year." Christina's southern drawl always made my cheeks warm up, and I tried my best to hide it by rubbing my face. "It's wrong that if ya' don't have insurance, ya' just left out in the streets like that. Some sicko must be pickin' these guys up and doin' God knows what to 'em. And they thought the first few kidnappins' eight years ago weren't connected to the ones today." Christina turned to me, and her face lit up with a smile. "Hey there, Teddy." She reached her arm out and playfully hit me on my arm. "Almost done with your shift there, 'hon?"

I swallowed, and my nerves fluttered in my stomach at the small contact. She always made me feel that way. I nodded while trying not to smile too eagerly. I didn't want to seem desperate to her. "Yeah. I'm just about to clock out and head home." *Now is the time to leave, Ted. Be casual.* I waved at everyone before turning around and heading towards the locker room area.

Right when I clocked out, my cellphone's jingle went off in my blue Jan Sport backpack. The caller ID said it was my Dad. I let out a sharp breath before answering, "What is it, Dad?"

The shaky tone of my father's voice caused me to straighten my posture in alarm. "It is your mother."

My chest constricted, and my feet became lead. "What happened to her? Where is she? Is she okay?" Each question blurted out quicker than the one before it.

"She's alright. She's... okay."

“Dammit, Dad! Where is she? You can’t just start calls like this.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I just...” He paused, and I was about ready to scream through the phone for an answer. “We’re in the hospital.”

I swung my backpack over my shoulder and charged towards the exit. “Which hospital?”

“The one in your town. She escaped again.”

I unlocked my truck, and the rusted metal hinges ground together as it opened. The screeching of the engine made me realize I needed a new car. It wasn’t that I couldn’t afford one, but this was my first vehicle ever. I made sure to take good care of it like I did all things, and I couldn’t get myself to part with it. I sighed as I buckled myself in. “Dad, you have to keep a better eye on her. Especially now that people like her are going missing. She could have gotten picked up by some stranger. I’m on my way.” I slammed the door shut.

“I know. I’m sorry. I just—.”

“I said I’m on my way.” I hung up abruptly before taking off.

Once at the hospital, I raced to my mother’s room and found her tucked under some sheets playing with the remote that controlled the bed. Despite the television being on, she was fully engrossed with the functions of the remote. She’d press up, and her lips curved with excitement. Then she’d press down and look over at her husband in awe. I couldn’t help but smile from both relief and at my mother’s newfound innocence. Her long, graying hair sparkled where the bright silver strands hit the fluorescent lighting above her.

“Mom,” I breathed as I made my way over to her. I dropped my backpack to the floor, knelt at her bedside, and took her hand. “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” she said lightheartedly. The skin around her lips was heavily wrinkled, and there were creases around her eyes from all the years of happiness. “I wish they’d have better food. I want some pizza. I don’t want...” She gestured towards her plate with a flick of her hand. “Whatever *that* is.”

I grimaced. “I heard you went on an adventure today, Mom.”

She continued to push the buttons on the remote. “Oh yeah. Parker needed to go to the store, so I offered to take him.”

My brow furrowed, and I looked to my father who was behind me. All my father did was a shrug. His glasses sunk a bit to the lower part of his nose, and he used his fingers to push them back up. I turned my attention back to my Mom. “Who is Parker, Mom?”

“The young boy who lives down the street from us. Don’t you remember? You used to...” She trailed off and stared at the wall in front of her. “Used to.... Used to.” She blinked, and it was as if she came back to reality. My breath caught in my throat. She looked over at me, and her old smile came back—The one that I grew up knowing. That smile could warm up any room it entered. “My boy,” she said. “You came to see me.”

I tightened my grip on her hand. “That I did, Mom. How are you?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she placed the remote down at the side of the bed. “I was terribly dehydrated when they

found me and quite fatigued, which is why they're keeping me here overnight. They want to make sure I don't get any worse. I just wish I knew why I was out there in those woods. I do, but..." She shook her head. "It seems so unimportant now and far away."

"Dad needs to keep a better eye on you."

My mother's hazel eyes shined brightly. "Oh, Ted. Be easier on him, will you? He's only trying his best." She placed a hand on my cheek, and that smallest touch, no matter how old I got, always brought a rush of comfort. "And it's good enough, okay? You worry about you and your life. Dad and I can handle ourselves."

I pressed my lips tightly together. "Okay, Mom." I knew better than to argue with her.

"Maybe we should move away from the mountains and closer to Saratoga Springs," she beamed. "I'd be closer to you."

I patted her hand before standing up and going over to my father. My father's half dome set of hair always made me apprehensive that I'd one day start losing my hair at forty years old like him. I was only ten years off from that fate. "Have you been giving her the medicine the doctor prescribed?" I whispered sternly.

My father stood there with his hands in the pockets of his windbreaker. "Yes, I have been giving Patricia her daily dosage three times a day, like instructed by the doctor."

I clicked my tongue against my teeth as I looked away from my father's eyes.

"They just don't work," he said.

My voice rose. "What do you mean they don't work?" We both peered over at my Mom. When she didn't

turn her attention towards us and kept it on the television screen, I lowered my tone. Through greeted teeth, I said, “It’s medicine. It is supposed to do what is prescribed.” My father stuck his arms out in defense, but before he could speak, I said, “And if it’s not, then you have to tell the doctor so he can either up the dosage or change the prescription.”

“Son, we are doing all we can.”

I looked over at my mother. “Yeah, well it doesn’t seem like it’s enough.” I faced him again. “If you don’t take better care of her, I will.” I walked over to my mother to say goodbye by bending down to kiss her forehead. My tall stature made it so she could barely reach her arm up to pat my shoulder.

The following day at work, I found it hard to concentrate. I had first forgotten to clock in and lost some work time, and then I slipped up on a patient’s medicine order. I was trudging down the hall when Ben’s voice snapped me back to reality. “You forgot to change out Mrs. Sal’s bedpan like you said you would,” said Ben. “Are you okay?” His brow knit together in concern.

I blinked. “Yeah, of course.” I shook my head to get my brain to function again like when someone hits the television to get a better connection. “I’ll get to that.” I picked up the pace as I made my way across the hallway to Mrs. Sal’s room. I painted on a full smile when I entered to hide my dazed look. “Hey there, miss. How are you doing today?”

Mrs. Sal cackled at me for calling her “miss.” “You are something else, boy.” Mrs. Sal was a heftier woman, and she was rich in spirit too. I always enjoyed seeing her every

day. She finished sipping her orange juice. “Here, take this for me, will ya’?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said eagerly. I picked up Mrs. Sal’s bedpan and carried it out of the room with me along with the empty cup. I made it a point to know all my patients’ schedules like the back of my hand, so I knew Mrs. Sal would be coming out to get her medicine at any moment. She had to take it after every meal, and she was recently bedridden due to her bad hip. Despite having a walker, I could tell by her painful expression how hard it was for her to move. I took it upon myself to deliver her medicine for her.

When I entered her room, she was just about to get out of bed. She moaned in pain, and I raced to her aid. “Mrs. Sal, lay down.”

She huffed as she reluctantly let me sit her back against the pillows. “I need my medicine.”

“I know. I got it for you,” I said as I handed it to her with a cup of water.

“Bless your heart, boy,” she said. Her breath was still labored in pain.

“Want something extra?” I offered

She eyed me. “A handle of rum would be nice.”

That made me laugh. “I was thinking more in the food department. I can swipe you one of your favorite dishes. I know you like the meatloaf.”

“Mmm-hm! That I do.” She took her medicine and handed me the empty plastic cup. “If and when you have the time, of course. Don’t think I don’t see you runnin’ up and down these halls like a mad man.” She pointed at me. “You workin’ too hard. How much they payin’ you, huh?”

I cracked a wide grin. “More than enough.”

“Hm!” She rolled her eyes and turned her attention to the television screen.

Before I left, I asked, “Do you want me to adjust the AC in here, or are you comfortable?”

Mrs. Sal waved me off with her hand. “I’m good, boy. You keep workin’.” Her cackle echoed throughout the halls as I left to go tend to another patient.

After a few minutes of checking on my assigned people and administering medicines, I got into the swing of things once more. However, the deteriorating health of my mother poked at the back of my skull like a never-ending pinprick.

It was this precise reason why I had bought that home in the first place. I had even used the computers at the SNF during my lunch break to find home listings in town. I didn’t believe for one second that my father could take care of my mother. At least not to my standard of care. That wasn’t the first time she was sent to the hospital for running off, and she seemed to be getting worse. A month ago, I took it upon myself to find a home where both my parents could live. This way, I could keep a better eye on her.

The homes in the area were expensive, but I had been saving up for years. I learned from my father’s mistakes while growing up to always have a savings account for emergencies and extra expenditures. Despite having more than enough for a down payment on a decent home, every home in the area was so overpriced.

I began to think that I may have to move out of town as I scanned the listings. That was until I came across a property with a two-story home for only a little over two

hundred thousand dollars. I had reread the price in disbelief. To me, there was no way a five bedroom house with three bathrooms and a basement would cost so little. Especially not in a town so close to New York City.

There had to be something wrong with the property, but I decided to give the real estate agent a call anyway. If there were any problems, I'd find out soon enough.

Chapter Two

The Old Estate

One month ago, I pulled up in my old Toyota Tacoma to view what would soon be my home for the first time. It was an old mansion, but the land had since been sold off to build more homes in the neighborhood. The house now only sat on less than a half-acre luscious green plot, which made for a decent-sized backyard. Green Ash trees covered the side of the house. There was a large front patio with white rocking chairs, and large paned windows that allowed someone to see into the living room on one end and the dining room on the other. I marveled at the plain white paneling of the home. It was a solid color, which meant room for change if I wanted to add it.

A gray-colored roof covered over the patio to provide shade, and white painted wooden beams supported it. Four windows lined the second floor right above. A quaint cemented walkway curved up to the steps that were attached to the porch, and bushes lined the edge of the property.

I sat in my small truck, waiting for the real estate agent when my cell phone alerted me. It was my sister. “Hey Scarlett,” I answered.

“Whatcha’ up to right now?” I could hear her smacking on her gum.

I peered through my car window at the home. “About to look at a house. Why? What are you doing?”

“A house?” Her gum-smacking ceased. “Why? Are you finally ready to move out of that dank ass apartment you’ve been in since your mid-twenties? Big thirty-two got you finally thinking of getting your shit together and pretending to act like an adult?”

I laugh lightly. Scarlett was rough with her words, but she meant well. Growing up with just me as a brother made her that way, I guessed, but I enjoyed our playful banter. She was rough around the edges, but that’s what made her perfect for New York City. “How’s the city going, sis? Work going well?” I asked.

She smacked her gum some more. “Yeah. On my way right now.” I heard honking over the phone, followed by a car honking from further away. “Yeah, you too bastard! Fuck off!” She laughed. “Sorry about that.”

I smirked. “You have to be more careful, Scarlett.”

“Yeah, yeah. So, this house thing. What made you finally want to purchase one? Got a girlfriend I don’t know about?” I could hear the smile in her voice.

“No.” I shrugged as I leaned back in the driver’s seat. “I figured I’d get a house big enough for Mom and Dad to live in.”

“Uh huh...”

“To help Dad take care of Mom,” I added.

“Yeah, sure. To *help* Dad. I gotcha. You sure that’s what this is about?”

A woman in a red Mercedes pulled up beside the house. “The real estate agent is here,” I said.

“You have control issues, dude. You know that, right? You always had to be the one in charge. Dad is doing just fine. It’s Mom that’s not.”

“Okay, okay. I gotta go,” I said as I began to open the door of my truck.

“No! Let me finish dammit.”

I let out a sigh as I sat back in my seat. I knew better than to hang up on her. She’d come barreling down the highway just to smack me for it.

“You should trust Dad more, dude. He is doing all he can.”

I let out a snort. “Yeah.”

“I’m serious, Ted. You need to hear this, and I’m only going to say this once. All this effort you’re putting in is so you can take control over the situation and what’s happening to Mom. You already put so much money towards sprucing up Mom and Dad’s house to make it safer for her. You added in the walkway to the front door to replace the steps and shit like that. You are constantly riding Dad’s ass on how he cares for her because all you see is her getting steadily worse, but it isn’t Dad.”

I was becoming increasingly more uncomfortable, and I breathed heavily into the phone as I fidgeted in my seat.

“You. Can’t. Fix. Mom,” she said.

Silence.

“She’s going to die from this one day, and there is nothing you can do about it. So please try to accept it. I know it’s hard to do, but there is no cure for what she has.”

“Don’t you think I know that!” I snapped. I cleared my throat and lowered my tone. “Uh.... Sorry about that.”

“It’s chill, dude. You’re just pissed about the situation. I get it. Just don’t lose a grip on yourself through all of this, okay? Do me a favor and ask yourself if you’d really want that house even if Mom weren’t sick.”

The real estate agent had gotten out of her car and was standing beside the porch with a clipboard in hand. “I have to go.”

She smacked her gum once more. “Okay. See ya’.”

I stepped out of the truck and slammed it a bit too hard. I took a deep breath before walking across the street to meet with the woman. She smelt heavily of hairspray, and her blonde hair seemed permanently stuck in its style. Not even the wind could move it. She smiled as she reached out her hand, “Hi. You must be Ted Rovers. I’m Cecile Linksy.” After I shook her hand, she handed me her card.

She turned on her heel towards the home. “Well? What do you think?” Her red blazer and matching pencil skirt hugged her body well, but I focused on the house instead.

I didn’t have much to say since I didn’t know anything about the home. Did the electricity work or the plumbing? Did it have air conditioning? I grimaced. “Looks nice,” I said without much emotion.

Cecile didn’t seem to notice. “Wait until you see the inside,” she squealed. She waved with her hand for me to follow her as she went up the porch steps. “The porch was

newly renovated with all new wood flooring. I had a guy come in to fix that right up. The house was built back in the early nineteen-hundreds, and the last time the home was fully renovated was back in the seventies.” She took the keys out of her pocket and unlocked the screen door and then the wooden one. The home smelled of old wood and dust. “It’s been a while since anyone has been in here.”

A flight of stairs greeted me upon entering. To the right was the living room and the dining room. To the left were the kitchen and small breakfast nook. I headed towards the kitchen first. The flooring was made up of orange and brown colored linoleum. The counters matched it along with its dark brown cabinets. The stove was only about five feet away from the sink, and there were only a few feet of counter space. “It’s small,” I noted.

Cecile smiled and let out a nervous laugh. “I know. It was refurbished in the seventies, so the coloring is a bit outdated as you can see. However, there is plenty of room to extend it. You can take out the breakfast nook to add more counter space to the kitchen or the parlor in the back.”

I nodded as I tapped my finger on the counter. At the corner near the garage door was a small basket. Cecile pointed to it. “You can leave your keys there and phone,” she said. “There were some things left behind by the previous owners. I thought the small basket was perfect there for people to put their keys after a long day.”

I indulged Cecile and placed my keys inside the basket. I turned and smiled before walking past her towards the living room. The living room and dining room were combined into one with matching carpet. I figured I could

make this into one big living room until my parents moved in.

There was a door connected to the bottom of the staircase, and inside was another set of stairs that led down to the basement. “Can I go down there? Is there proper lighting?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” said Cecile. There was a light switch against the wall that lit up the way down to the basement.

I held onto the wooden rail, and with each step, the floor creaked with the slightest weight of my foot. Once I reached the bottom, the musky smell of wet cement hit my nostrils. Cecile walked past me to the middle of the basement and pulled on the metal string that was connected to the lightbulb. The light wasn’t nearly enough to cover the entirety of the room. Shadows still lurked in the corners, which made it hard to see. However, I could see a closet in the far back, and that piqued my interest. I walked over to open it, but it was locked.

Cecile gave a nervous smile, “I’ll clear out what’s in that room once the home is purchased. It’s just paperwork and other old things from the previous owners.”

“It doesn’t come with the house? Usually, that does,” I said. I wasn’t too interested in old furniture and knick-knacks from previous owners, but I found it interesting that Cecile hadn’t cleared it out sooner.

“If you wish to keep the items, I can leave them there.” Cecile fumbled with her pen.

Her intake of nervousness made me curious. “Do not trouble yourself with the items. I’ll keep them.” Perhaps I could find something useful in there.

The basement was made entirely of cement, and I was wondering where its dampness originated. I thought of the things I could do with it. Perhaps I could live down there and my parents upstairs. Or maybe I could turn this into a home gym. First, I'd have to put in better lighting.

"There is also a washer and dryer hook up down here in that far-right corner," said Cecile pointing with her pen.

"Electric or gas?" I asked.

"I believe electric."

I nodded as I went up the steps. I didn't own a washer or dryer since my apartment complex had a laundry facility. When I got up to the ground floor, I immediately turned my attention towards the second floor.

The wood groaned with age with each step I took up the stairs. Upon reaching the top floor, the master bedroom was to my immediate left. Another bedroom was beside it. The hallway split in half at the stairs. There was a bathroom to the right along with the three other bedrooms and a bathroom across the hallway on the other side of the stairs.

"The bedrooms are newly carpeted," said Cecile. "I made sure to add that in because I felt it makes it homier."

I nodded my head and put my hands in my pockets. I stepped into the master bedroom and tapped my finger against my pocket jeans. It was smaller than I expected it to be, and there was a bathroom attached to the upper left side of the room. In the middle of the room hung a gold and brown colored ceiling fan, but no lightbulb. I poked my head in each bedroom and made a mental note to buy bulbs.

"Any particular reason why you're interested in buying a home?" asked Cecile as we made our way downstairs.

I focused on heading to the backyard as I spoke. “I want to take better care of my Mom and help my Dad with it,” I said with a sense of aloofness.

“Oh! That’s wonderfully sweet,” said Cecile.

I stepped outside, and the smell of fresh moss filled the air. The same trees from the front yard with the spider-like branches and dangling leaves covered the backyard. The sun was shining just right that the leaves left specks of shadow across the grass. “Plenty of shade,” chirped Cecile. There was an awning made of wood that covered the small cemented area. I thought it would be a perfect place to put a picnic bench. I leaned against one of the wooden beams and noticed it wobbled a bit.

I immediately stepped back to inspect it further. I gently pushed the beam, and the awning quaked in its place. “I will want an inspector to come before I make any kind of offer,” I said.

“Of course,” said Cecile.

“There is something on my mind. Why is the home so cheap?”

Cecile’s smile faltered.

“Homes in this area are never this cheap. At least not a five-bedroom home on such a nice property. Is there something wrong with the home? Mold? Rats?”

Cecile shook her head and fixed her grin. “Nothing like that. You have my word that nothing is damaging to the home. Trust me.” Her lips fit into a tight line, and she stood with perfect posture.

I ignored her touch of apprehensiveness. “Alright. Let me get an inspector out here, and we’ll see about an offer,” I said. Even though I only saw one house, I felt this

home would be good enough for my Mom, but my sister's words echoed in my head. I shook them away, and they scattered. I wanted this home for more than just my Mom. It was for me too. At least that's what I told myself. It was about time I left that small apartment. Plus, there might never be a chance to find such a cheap property in the future. If the home didn't have any serious damage lurking within the walls, I didn't care to find out further why it was so cheap.

"When will be a good time for an inspector to come?" I asked as I headed towards the small basket for my keys.

"This Saturday works," said Cecile.

My brow furrowed as I dug through the small basket looking for my keys. They weren't there. I patted my jean pockets and looked around on the floor.

"What is it?" asked Cecile.

"My keys," I mumbled. "They're missing."

Cecile inspected the basket and came to the same conclusion. I knew I had put them in there. I searched on the countertops and in the cabinets. I hurried up the stairs and checked every bedroom. It was unlike me to lose my things.

I went outside to the backyard and inspected the grass, but I couldn't help but shake the feeling that I left them in that basket. I knew I did. I came back into the kitchen and leaned against the counter with my hand. Tapping my finger tentatively, I thought about where I could have left them. I glanced over at the basket and lying neatly on top of Cecile's keys were mine.

I reached over to grab them. Assuming Cecile had found them and placed them there, I asked, “You found them?”

Cecile was busy in the other room. Her voice echoed against the empty walls. “What was that?”

I raised my voice a little. “My keys. How did you find them?”

“I didn’t. I’m looking in this closet by the stairs.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “I, uh, found them.”

“Oh, good!” I heard one of the aged doors rub against the old hinges as Cecile closed a door. Cecile walked into the kitchen, fixing her red skirt. “Before you hire an inspector, did you want to put a down payment on the home? It’s fully refundable if you decide after the inspection that you no longer wish to purchase the home.”

I juggled the keys in my hand and eyed the basket. “Yes, please.”

As I signed the paperwork, I heard a creak upstairs. Cecile also paused and looked up towards the ceiling. I stopped midway through my signature and gazed upwards. “It’s the old flooring,” said Cecile with a flip of her hand. “Old homes sometimes creak for no reason.”

I nodded hesitantly and signed the form.

The following Saturday, I went back over to the house to be there with the inspector. Cecile showed up as well. It was springtime, so it was a nice breezy day. However, the sun was clouded over from time to time. I zipped up my jacket as the inspector looked over the weak awning in the backyard.

“This is going to be a problem,” said the inspector. “This will need to be fixed, but the good thing is that it

doesn't appear to be attached to the home." He pointed with his pen towards the end of the awning that was closest to the house. "It seems someone built this themselves, and they didn't do a good job at it." He made a note on his metal clipboard.

"Anything else?" I asked. I kept my hands in my pockets and held tightly to my keys that were inside.

The inspector read from his list. "The AC is strong, and the heater works well. The electrical wiring and plumbing all check out. Except in the basement, there seems to be a small leak, but it should be fixable. It appears to be just a loose bolt on one of the pipes, and the leakage is quite small. Come with me." We went into the kitchen, and the inspector flipped on each burner. "There is one burner that won't start. It's a gas stove, so the good news is that it is giving off gas. It's just not igniting. That's an easy fix. Just install a new lighter."

I nodded and noticed Cecile taking notes as well.

"Other than that, the house is in pretty good shape," said the inspector. "Some doors lack proper locks, but again, an easy fix."

After the inspector was paid for and left, Cecile asked a little too giddy, "What do you think? Want to buy? Or do you need a few more days to think it over?"

I couldn't help but be bothered about why the home was so cheap, but everything checked out. I shoved the heavy thought to the back of my head and reached my arm out to shake Cecile's hand. "I'll take it."

Chapter Three

The Haunting Dream

After I checked on Mrs. Sal one last time, I left work and came home to my empty home. I didn't own a whole lot since I lived in an apartment one month prior to this. The house remained bare once everything was put in its place. I had one small round table where I always ate. It was only me, so I didn't own a huge dining table. The couch was something I held ever since I first moved into my apartment, and it was still in decent shape sitting in the middle of the living room. I had the movers' help with positioning my flat screen against the wall. That was probably the only nice thing I owned.

Everything else was passed down to me from relatives: an antique bed frame, a large armoire, and my nightstand. With the home empty of people, I stood there in my bare kitchen feeling small. "It's just an excuse to buy more stuff," I said to myself. "That's a good thing."

I eyed the basket that sat at the corner. Cecile had left it there when I moved in saying it was a welcoming gift. Hesitantly, I took my keys out of my pocket and placed them

there. That's when my phone rang. It was my father. "I heard you moved," he said immediately after I answered.

I kicked at the corner of one of the cabinets. I was hoping to keep this a secret until I was ready to have my parents move in because I knew my father would be upset when he found out. A guess four weeks was if my sister was willing to keep her mouth shut. "Yeah, I decided it was time for a change."

"Scarlett tells me it's because you plan on having us move in with you."

Dammit, Scarlett. I cleared my throat and started to pace around the kitchen. "Yes, Dad. I was hoping to convince you to allow for my help."

"Son, we're doing fine."

"Not by my prognosis."

I heard my father sigh through the receiver. Right about now, he should be pinching the bridge of his nose, causing his glasses to lift. "Son, we don't need all this. Where did you even get the money to buy a house, huh?"

I stood in place as my muscles tensed. "I happen to be more responsible and have a couple of savings accounts, *father*. That's more than you can say."

Silence.

"I didn't have a problem with helping you fix up your house because you couldn't afford to," I said.

"Medical bills cost a lot nowadays, Ted." He sounded tired. There was no fight in his voice.

I ignored my father's comment. "And I won't have a problem with getting my house up to code for Mom's safety so you two can live here. This way, *you* won't have to worry

so much about medical bills. That's all your money will be going to anyway. I can cover the rest."

My father let out another slow breath. "Son, is this really what you want? Use that house to build a family of your own."

I snapped back in anger. "Why don't you want my help, Dad?"

My father matched my tone. "Because it's not your job as our child to worry about things like that!" He calmed his voice. "If I were to be sick as well, that'd be a different story."

"It's your pride."

"And it isn't yours either? You are awfully prideful yourself, son."

I ground my foot into the linoleum and hung up the phone. I shoved it into the small basket with my keys. I trudged over to my couch and slumped into it, rubbing my forehead. Perhaps I was being unreasonable. Maybe I should be easier on my father. Maybe my Mom truly was untreatable. I shook my head as I leaned over and rested my elbows on my knees. Clasp my hands tightly together, I tapped my forefinger against my knuckle. There had to be hope somewhere. Anywhere. Maybe her living with me and being around me more often would keep her from forgetting me.

The night began to fall as I studied the empty living room around me. Other than the few boxes that were scattered around, the house was unpacked. I pressed the sides of my forehead with my thumbs. Maybe I was in over my head, but I had the house now. Either way, I needed to make it work.

A sudden rapping echoed from up the stairs. It sounded like wood scraping on the floor like a chair grinding on the ground.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

I figured it was probably just the old pipes or the house settling.

Still, the sound never ceased. It got increasingly louder and faster. My body heated up as the adrenaline rushed through like a wave. I slowly sat up and perked my ears to listen in more closely. Should I go upstairs to inspect? “No, it’s just the house settling,” I told myself again. Still, though, my heart rate picked up.

Faster. Louder. More violent.

Bang!

The sudden clash vibrated throughout the house. I immediately jumped to my feet. There was no way I could ignore that. Gingerly, I made my way to the stairwell. I gripped onto the handrail while staring up at the second floor. Nothing was there, but I couldn’t help but feel like something or *someone* was indeed standing there staring down at me. The hair at the back of my neck stood on end, and my jaw tightened as I swallowed.

I carefully took the first step, and I tried my best not to apply too much pressure so that no noise would be made from the creaky floorboards. As I made my way up the stairwell, my heartbeat was deafening in my ears. My breath had quickened with each step. Once I reached the top, I studied the area to find any abnormalities. It was probably just the wind. The only thing out of place was the master bedroom door being closed, and I knew I had left it open.

Feeling braver, I made my way over to the door. A louder thump pounded the ground from inside the bedroom. I jumped back and let out a gasp. I took another gulp as I turned the doorknob. It screeched as aged metal on metal ground together. I pushed open the door and braced myself for whatever I may see.

Empty.

There was nothing in the bedroom except for my bed and a couple of boxes. I took a step into the room and scanned it quickly. I checked under the bed and in the bathroom, but there was nothing there. The window was closed, so it couldn't have been the wind. "Maybe there was an air draft of some kind," I said. "Or maybe the door isn't supported enough and closes on its own." I checked the hinges on the door, but they seemed secure.

"Air draft," I concluded. I left the bedroom door open on my way out. I made my way down the stairs shaking my head. Laughing at myself for being spooked by sounds from an old home, I decided to shove the experience to the back of my mind. Instead, I decided to make dinner. Keeping my hands busy was always a sure way of making me forget things.

I realized I wouldn't have enough cabinet space for my parents' things once they moved in because I knew they would need it for sure. I found my notepad on my refrigerator. Every room had a notepad in it just in case I needed to take note of something. I wrote down for myself to remember that I needed to install more cabinet space.

My stomach growled as I checked my fridge for anything. I found some eggs and bacon. I had rice and decided to make fried rice for dinner. As I cooked, I thought

back to the time I spent time with my mother in the kitchen. She would show me how to stir the bowls full of cookie dough or salad properly.

“If there is ever too much of one flavor. Just add more ingredients to even it out,” she’d say. Almost always, she’d add more bacon. “Bacon never hurt anyone,” she’d say with a wink.

To level out the unhealthiness, she’d always put a side of spinach with almost every meal. She’d put bacon in everything because “bacon went with everything.” I chuckled to myself as I chopped up more bacon to add to my rice. In my fridge sat a small bag of spinach, which I threw into the steaming pan.

I eyed my cellphone, which was still in the basket. I decided to pick it up and call my Mom. Leaving it on speaker, I waited as the dial rang off until I heard a click. “Hi, my sweet boy,” said my mother. I breathed a sigh of relief. She was having one of her good days.

“I just called to see how you’re doing. I’m cooking.” I said.

“Ah, and are you maintaining the right bacon to spinach ratio?”

I peered down at my pan and added more spinach. “I am now.”

My mother’s laughter made my smile grow. “How are you? I heard you got a new home. Are you excited to be an official homeowner?”

“Yes, I am. It was high time I got my shit together, isn’t it?”

“It’ll be a good home to start a family in, won’t it?”

I surveyed my nearly vacant home and shrugged. “I suppose so.”

“How are things going with that one girl? What’s her name again?” I could hear her snapping her fingers as she thought. “Chelsea was her name?”

“You mean Christina?”

“Yes! That one! Have you asked her on a date yet?”

I licked my lips and shook my head. My cheeks started to warm up at the thought. “No, not yet Mom.”

“Oh, you need to ask her out on a date, and actually *ask* her. Don’t do that thing nowadays that all the other boys do and ask to ‘hang out.’ Be a man! Say it’s a date.” Her voice was encouraging like that of a coach prepping up the team before the big game.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Yes, Mom. I will.”

“Promise me?”

I turned the stove off once my rice was finished cooking. “Yes, I promise, Mom. I’ll work up the nerve.”

“Good because I won’t be around forever, and your sister isn’t having kids anytime soon. She’s way too young. She’s only twenty! She has her whole career ahead of her. You established your career already as a nurse. Now go get married.” She giggled. “Don’t feel pressured, though.”

I leaned against the counter. “No. No pressure at all,” I said jokingly. My mother fell silent suddenly, and my internal alarm went off. “Mom?”

No answer.

“Mom?”

Still silence.

I decided to be a little louder. “Mom!”

Finally, her voice broke through, but it didn't sound like her anymore. She sounded far away. "Oh... Hi there. Can I help you with something?"

"Mom, it's Ted. We are talking on the phone."

"Are we?" She fell silent again.

"Mom!" I began tapping my finger against the counter.

"You need me to help you find your mother, sweet boy?"

I tried my best to swallow the lump in my throat that began to swell up.

"I don't know what she looks like. Can you give me a description?" she continued.

My voice quivered. "Mom. Have you been taking your medicine?"

"What medicine?" she paused. "Who are you?"

I blinked the tears away before they could fall. I took a deep breath. "Give the phone to Dad, Mom."

"Who is that? Is that the Doctor? He gives me my medicine."

"Yes, I know, Mom. Give me to the Doctor, please."

"Oh okay," she said lightheartedly. I could hear her talking to my father. "It's a young boy looking for his mother."

"Hello?" I heard my father say.

"Dad," I snapped. "Has Mom been taking her medicine?"

My father sighed. "Yes, Ted. She has."

I ground my teeth together as I gripped on tighter to the counter. "She needs an update on her prescription. It obviously isn't working."

“Son, there’s no cure for Alzheimer’s. The medicine is to only help with some of the symptoms.”

I squeezed a little too tight to the phone and said through clenched teeth, “I know.”

“I don’t think you do.” His tone sounded grim with a touch of sympathy. I hated it.

“They’re working on finding cures! They can find one for Mom!”

My father fell silent. After a minute, he let out another breath. “Ted, I know it’s hard. It was hard for me to accept it too.”

I heard a woman moaning in pain. “Is that Mom?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I heard a woman cry in pain. Was that Mom?”

“No, son. She’s right next to me watching the news.”

I heard it again, and this time it was for sure coming from around the corner near the living room. My heart rate picked up. “I think it might be the neighbors,” I said.

My father’s tone had a touch of concern in it. “Does it sound like trouble? If so, call the cops. Don’t go searching.”

The same scraping as earlier filled the home. The rubbing of wood against the floorboards irritated my eardrum. “I have to go, Dad. I think the house may have mice or something,” I said.

“Mice? I have some traps for that here. Swing by tomorrow,” he said.

I was much too fixated on the strange noise to pay attention to what my father was saying. “Yeah, of course, Dad. Bye.” I hung up and placed my phone into my back pocket.

I walked towards the closest wall. The scraping sounded as though it was coming from *inside* the walls. Thinking it may be rats, I placed my ear against it to listen for any scurrying. Again, the loud and deep raking noise returned, but I couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from. I decided to knock on the wall, thinking it'd scare whatever animal was inside and make the incessant noise stop.

Silence.

I stood there with my ear firmly pressed as I waited for any further sounds. A few seconds ticked by. All I could hear were the distant sirens from the town and my wristwatch ticking away. Suddenly, a large slam shook the house. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

It came from upstairs.

I slowly approached the staircase and looked up. This time, however, fear did not make me hesitate. Now I was irritated by the ruckus. I stomped up the steps until I reached the top and saw the master bedroom's door was closed again.

I took a deep breath to calm the racing thoughts in my head. Could this really be the wind? I took large strides over to the door and threw it open. It banged against the wall, and I scanned my empty bedroom. The window was closed, so I checked the air vent above the door. There was no airflow.

The scraping started up again, but it sounded as though it were right behind me. My pulse quickened as my instincts kicked in. I felt as though I were being watched, and someone was right behind me, ready to grab me at any second. The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and my palms sweated. Time froze in place as I slowly turned my head.

My peripheral vision must've been playing tricks on me because I could have sworn, I saw a shadow at the corner of my eye. My cellphone rang off from inside my pocket, and I invited the distraction. "Hello?" I answered.

"Ted! Come down to Parting Glass bar," said my coworker Ben. "I had a rough day at work, man. I need a night out. Frank and Carlos are here with me." Ben took on a teasing tone. "And Christina."

I smiled as I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, sure. I'll be right down." I hurried down the stairs and grabbed my keys out of the basket. I was more in a rush to get out of the home than I was to see my friends. The last thing I needed to be doing was chasing strange sounds and shadows. As I drove to the bar with my windows rolled down, I found the brisk night air calming as it cooled the adrenaline away. It cleared my mind, and I found myself laughing. "It's just all stressed induced," I said to myself. "I need a night out it seems."

Once I arrived at the bar, I found my coworkers all huddled around one of the tall tables. The local Irish pub was always busy on nights like this with other locals who just got off work. The loud banter of the other patrons, live music, and laughter filled the room with a sense of comradery and leisure. One could easily take their shoes off in relax like they were in their own home. Most of the pub was made of wood like over the bar and the lower part of the walls, but everything else was painted dark green and tan. The flooring was colored the same dark green. Black strips ran across the floor leading up to where the dartboards were with lines to show where to stand at the appropriate distance for a proper throw. It was a decent sized place that we enjoyed because of the ambiance, but it was loud since it was such a popular

place. I had a hard time hearing myself sometimes, so we all had to yell at one another.

I went up to the bar first. It was a squared shape bar, with a neatly kept wooden top, that wrapped around to the other wall. I squeezed in between the tall barstools. “A glass of your best IPA, please.”

The bartender nodded his head as he filled my drink. “You got it, sir.”

“Keep my tab open,” I said as I handed the bartender a tip before turning my attention towards Ben and the others. They had taken a couple of the taller barstools to sit at the high-top tables. I took a sip of my beer and slid onto a barstool to join them.

“Ted, my man!” Exclaimed Ben. He hooked his arm around my shoulders and clasped down before letting go. He picked up his drink to clink it against my glass. “Thanks for coming. How is the new home coming along?”

I shrugged. “It’s alright. I’m still slowly unpacking, which shouldn’t take long since I don’t own a lot of stuff. Although I think the house has rats or something in the walls.”

“You should’ve gotten an inspector,” said Carlos as he took a sip.

“I did, which is the strangest thing. Wouldn’t an inspector check for that?”

“I heard it depends,” added Frank. “When I bought my house, I had to hire two different types of inspectors. The real estate agents technically don’t have to tell you shit.”

Christina was the only girl there, and she smiled and winked at me. I swallowed hard before I took a sip of my

drink and set it down on the green and white checkered tablecloth. I gave a shy smile in response.

“How are you enjoying being at the SNF, Frank?” I asked. “You started just last week, am I right?”

Frank placed down his glass. “Yeah, it’s enjoyable. I do prefer the hours there and the benefits. Way better than the last place I was at.”

“Weren’t you at that one facility up the street from here?” asked Ben.

Frank nodded. “That place was a wreck. It was really the management. It was privately owned, so it was more business-like than actually caring for the patients.” Frank curled his shoulders back. “I didn’t like the ethics of the place, so I left. I wanted to work as a nurse because I care, not just because it’s easy money. I do appreciate you all being so welcoming of me and inviting me out.”

“It’s no problem, man,” said Ben. He gripped onto my shoulder again. “Me and Teddy Boy here started off together. Although they have me working weekends now, so I don’t see him as often during the week, but when this boy first started, he was *so* shy. Hardly spoke to anyone. I had to practically drag him out of his home to come with me to the bar to hang.”

Everyone laughed, and I grimaced as I stared down at my drink.

“I don’t believe it for a second,” said Carlos. He looked at Frank while pointing at me. “But you can learn a lot from him about caring for patients.” He looked at me. “I don’t know how you do it with all those extra patients. You volunteered to take on extras, didn’t you? Shoot! I don’t

think I could handle that. I barely can keep up with the ones I have.”

I shrugged. “It’s really all in the timing. Once you get to know their schedules, it works easy. There’s just no time for breaks.”

“Yeah, Carlos,” teased Ben. “You’re constantly stopping by the break room.”

Frank and Ben teased him by throwing a couple of peanuts at him.

Carlos laughed. “What? I need my snacks.” He shook his head, still laughing. “But seriously, I can’t work so much anymore now that my son was diagnosed with leukemia a few months ago. The wife is stressed too.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I’ve been working less nowadays. I need to be home, you know?”

Ben placed a hand on his shoulder and grimaced. “How is the little guy doing?”

Carlos shrugged. “He’s responding to treatment, which is good, but it’s still hard to see him go through it. He’s only four.”

My heart knotted up, and I thought of when I learned of my mother’s diagnosis. They were all there for me, and we are doing the same for Carlos.

Carlos let out a light laugh. “He’s still a kid and shows it. He doesn’t let that disease get to him.”

“How long have you and your wife been together?” asked Christina.

“A little over four years.” he chuckled. “We were dating when she got pregnant, and it was only right I married her, you know?”

Christina nodded. “I understand.”

“It’s been tough on us, but it has really made us grow together rather than drifting us apart.”

Christina got a huge grin on her face, and I couldn’t help but smile in response. “That’s good.”

Wanting to change the subject because the look on Carlos’s face told me he was finished expressing himself, I asked Frank, “What is your story? What got you into nursing? How’s life?”

Frank laughed. “You guys don’t mess around when it comes to conversation.”

We all chuckled. That’s what I liked about my group of friends. We hated small conversation and preferred to jump straight into the deep stuff.

Frank rubbed his hands on his knees. “Well, I started as an assistant nurse in Colorado. I helped take care of my grandmother, who lived with us while I was growing up. Over the years, I came to enjoy it and decided to do it as a living since I knew so much already. Years later, after getting my first job at a nursing home, I went to New York City for vacation and bumped into my future wife at a bar.”

We all got smirks on our faces.

“She lived in New York, so I decided to move there. I was nursing there for a bit and attended nursing school, but then she got into real estate and wanted to move here chasing the money. I was working at SNF up until now.”

“I recently bought a house. What is your wife’s name?”

“Cecile. Why?”

I laughed. “She was my real estate agent when I bought my house.”

Frank burst out into a boisterous laugh. “It is true when they say it’s a small world.”

“Damn right,” I said. We clinked our beer bottles together.

“You bought a house? That is great to hear, Teddy,” said Christina as she smiled at me. Her big smile was enough to make me forget about all the things I’ve been going through. This is what I really needed right now.

Ben turned his attention to her. “So, what got *you* into nursing, Christina? We’ve never asked.”

“I know you haven’t. So rude,” she said with a thick tone of sarcasm. That made us all chuckle. She shrugged. “I don’t know. It sort of happened.” She paused as she picked at the label on her beer. “I’ve been caring for my younger siblings my whole life, and I wanted a job to get me out of the house.”

“Makes sense, so you got into caring for old people now.” Ben’s cheeky grin gave away that he was teasing.

Christina’s cheeks turned pink as she smiled. “Sure does. That about sums it up for Lil’ ol’ me. I wanted to get away, and I did for a little while. Nursing pays well enough.”

“It does,” I said.

“And it’s a respectable career. I just never intended to be doin’ this for as long as I have been.”

I furrowed my brow. “What do you want to do?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t quite figured that out. I don’t know what I want to do when I grow up.” She laughed. Her bubbly laughter was contagious and made us all join her.

Christina leaned over the table towards me as she played with her earlobe in between her two fingers. She always wore her hair in a bun at work, but since she was

clocked off, she let her naturally wavy blonde hair fall perfectly around her face. Her pink shade of lip gloss shined when the light hit it just right. Christina caught me staring at her, and I immediately looked back down at the table. My cheeks warmed, and her giggle made me chuckle in return.

“So, what happened at work, Ben?” I asked. I hoped the change in conversation would distract others from seeing me blush.

Ben sat back in his stool and sighed. His arms fell limp at his side. “Mr. Jacobson died today.”

Everyone jumped at the chance to send their condolences to him. I knew this had to be particularly hard on him because he didn’t deal with death well. When his adoptive father died, he refused to accept it. He didn’t even attend the funeral, which ate at him later. I went with Ben to visit his grave some months later after the fact. Death had always been his boogeyman ever since his biological parents died in a car crash when he was a child. He was in the car too, so there was some survivor’s remorse mixed up in there. He had no other family, so he was placed in an orphanage. This was the first time Ben has dealt with death since his adoptive father’s passing.

I ordered him another drink as my way of sending condolences. He gave a tight-lipped smile when I handed it to him. His sorrow ate at me. I wished I could take it away and feel it instead of him.

Christina reached her arm out to squeeze Ben’s upper arm. “I’m so sorry to hear that,” she said with a visible frown.

Ben shook his head as he stared at his half empty cup. “It just happened in a snap. One minute I was seeing

him and picking up his food, and then the next he died. I had only left his room for maybe an hour.” He paused. “It really makes you think, you know? About mortality and all that. One day that’s going to be me.” He leaned over the table and ran his fingers through his hair. “One day we’ll all end up like that.”

I thought of my mother, and my heart sank low to my stomach. I took a big swig of my beer.

“I mean what happens after that, you know? I know what procedure to do when a patient dies, but what about him?”

I furrowed my brow and looked at Ben. “What do you mean what about him? He’s dead. Nothing happens to him.” I knew that was insensitive, but I found that thinking of it logically made things easier. Perhaps he’d find the same comfort in it.

“Really? You honestly think you close your eyes that last time and then lights out. That’s it?” Ben sat back in his chair again and crossed his arms, biting his lip.

“I think there’s life after death, ‘hon,” piped in Christina.

Ben looked up at her. His eyes wide with hope.

“I watched this special on the Discovery channel,” she said. “And they talked about how energy works. It never dies even after death.” She crossed her arms. “They even say after someone dies; they lose a small amount of weight. It’s very minuscule, but it’s significant enough to take notice. They don’t know why. I believe that’s the soul leavin’ the body.”

Everyone peered down at their glasses in contemplation, and Ben nodded his head slowly. “I believe

that,” said Ben. “I mean, I have to. I must think there’s more to life than just dying. I have to believe there is more for Mr. Jacobson.”

“There is more to life than death,” I chimed in. I pushed my nearly empty glass of beer away. “Life is about experiences and the relationships you make.” My eyes fell onto Christina for a split second. Her smile made my breath uneasy, and I snapped my eyes away quickly. “I believe that’s all there is. I don’t believe in an afterlife or a God who’s going to come and punish you for not believing in him. It doesn’t seem very healthy to me to worship something like that.”

“So, you believe in nothing?” asked Carlos in disbelief.

I shrugged. “I guess so. There’s no substantial evidence to prove it. It’s just not practical. People are making things up to make themselves feel better because they’re scared. I’m not saying for sure there is no afterlife. I’m just saying there isn’t proof for either stance, so I have none.”

“I find that bullshit,” said Ben. “There’s *gotta* be more. There has to.” Ben was deep in thought, and it fell silent around the table.

“Let’s go play some darts, huh?” Offered Frank. Everyone got up to proceed to the side of the bar. I ordered another drink at the bar, and Christina stood next to me as she ordered hers. I noticed how close she was standing. I could feel her body heat on me, and it made my palms sweat.

“For what it’s worth. I think you’re wrong, ‘hon,” she said. She had a playful smirk on her face.

I returned the smile. “Oh yeah? And why is that?”

When she got her beer, she took a sip. “I think you’re just afraid to believe in somethin’ greater than ya’self. You like to keep things where ya’ can see them so you can keep ya’ eye on it.” Her grin reached her eyes, and I made the mistake of staring a little too long into them. Her cheeks turned pink, and she looked down for a brief second before playfully elbowing my side. “Come on, Teddy. Let’s play us a game.”

Ben went first. He had a total of four darts, and when he made a bullseye on his last throw, he bellowed out, “That’s how you do it!” He took a swig of his beer. “The beer helps with your aim.”

“In that case,” I said as I took a big gulp. “Let me see how well I do.” I missed the first throw and didn’t even hit the dartboard. The boys around me chuckled. “Hold on,” I said. “I was just warming up.”

“Sure, sure,” they teased.

The sound of metal sticking into wood made me raise my arms in victory. “See? I made it!”

“Yeah, but nowhere close to the bullseye,” said Ben laughing as he pointed to the farthest red stripe near the twenty number.

I shot my finger in his direction. “But it’s an improvement. It’ll only get better from here.” I heard Christina giggle, which made me lose my focus when I threw the dart. I missed the board again. My friends all clapped their hands slowly in congratulations. The beer was getting to my head and made my face flush. I found myself smiling without a care as I threw the next dart. This time it was mere inches from the bullseye. “Ah, see? Just warming up here.”

“Yeah, yeah, but you’re still further behind me,” said Ben with a flip of his hand.

Christina stepped up to grab the darts from my hand. Her fingers slowly grazed over my palm purposefully as she eyed me. My buzzed smile got the best of me and made it obvious to Christina how much I enjoyed that small contact.

“Y'all mind if I step in?” she asked in her southern accent.

“Not at all,” said the others. They all stepped away from the board.

She made her first throw and got a few inches away from the small red circle. The boys all cooed around her. “Beginner’s luck,” she said as she threw the other and completely missed the board.

Ben and the others looked to me, and Ben motioned with his eyes for me to go over to Christina. Frank and Carlos stood there grinning urging me to make a move. Christina wasn’t paying attention as she went to the board to pull off the dart. Ben mouthed to me, “Go to her. Flirt. Help her.”

I nodded my head before approaching her. “Mind if I show you?” I asked. “I have a few pointers.”

Christina’s cheeks turned bright pink, which made my chest flutter. “Okay.” She placed the darts in my hand. “Show little ol’ me.”

I chewed on my bottom lip as I fought past my racing heart. I guided Christina away from the dartboard and helped her take a proper stance. “You should stand more at this angle, with your body to one side where you want to aim the dart at.” I was unsure of my hands, and I thought better than to touch her without her permission.

Christina gave a wry smile and said, “Guide me with your hands.”

I fought back my shakiness as I placed them on her hips. I moved them to one side and then ran my hand down her arm as I guided them to a throwing position. Ben and the others chuckled, and I glared in their direction. They all looked away with visible smirks on their faces as they drank their beer.

I held her hand in position as she gripped onto the dart. “You will throw it like this.” I moved her arm for her slowly. “But do that faster.” The backside of her body was pressed up against mine. I hoped she wouldn’t be able to feel my heart beating rapidly against my chest. I reluctantly took a step back so she could throw.

She hit a bullseye, and the others cheered her on.

“See? You got yourself a good coach there,” pointed out Ben. “You should come here more often to practice together.”

I snapped a look at Ben, and he lifted his arms questioningly. “What?” Mouthed Ben.

I leaned over towards him and said in hushed tones, “You’re trying too hard.”

“And you’re not trying hard enough,” he whispered.

We finished off another round of beers as we played, and Christina blew us all away by her immaculate win. I was feeling a little buzzed by the end of my fourth beer and found it more difficult to aim correctly at the board.

“Let’s call it a night,” said Ben as he slammed his empty glass onto the table.

Ben, Frank, and Carlos grabbed their jackets before leaving out the door. I stood at the bar, closing my tab when

Christina walked up, holding her wallet. “I can pay for your drinks,” I offered.

Christina’s lips curved, and she said, “Thanks, but I’ve got it. Not that I don’t appreciate you offerin’, but I’m a proud girl.” She held up her wallet and shook it. “I’ve got my own money.”

“I respect that. Will you accept my offer to walk you to your car then?”

Christina’s smile grew. “That I will accept.”

After the tabs were paid, I held open the door for Christina as she walked out. I stood on her right side closest to the street as we walked around the back end of the building. I zipped up my windbreaker and placed my hands inside the front pockets. Warm air breathed out of me evaporating into the cold air as we continued down the wet sidewalk.

“How is your mother?” asked Christina.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “She’s alright. She’s as you’d expect her to be.” I looked down at Christina whose nose was beginning to turn pink. I couldn’t help but smile at that. Her soft blue eyes were so inviting and kind. I could easily open up to her. “I bought that house so I could have her and my father move in.” I paused. “I want to take better care of her.” I felt a weight shift in my chest. It felt good to talk to someone about my problems other than my sister and father.

Christina reached her hand out and gently squeezed my arm. “You’re a sweet man for wantin’ to care of your mama like that. I just hope you don’t take on too much.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have to think about you, ‘hon. You can’t just think about others only. It’s unhealthy.”

I shrugged. “I don’t only think about others. I bought that house for myself too.”

Christina stared up at me with a knowing smile.

“Okay, ‘hon.”

I felt defensive. “I also dedicate my life to my career.”

“Yeah, but why did you decide to become a nurse? Because of your mama’s diagnosis?”

I paused briefly. I became a nurse shortly after my mother began to show signs of her illness, but she didn’t need to know that. “I always wanted to be a nurse,” I said more to myself than to her.

Christina remained silent. All she did was nod her head, which only pierced at my anger more. When we got to Christina’s car, she turned to face me. “Don’t take on too much or you’ll stress out,” she said. She placed a hand on my cheek, and my annoyance immediately melted away. “Stress can lead to all sorts of things like loss of sleep, appetite, and even hallucinations.” She gave a small grin. “I worry about you, not takin’ care of ya’ self. I hope I didn’t overstep my boundaries.”

I shook my head. The alcohol in my system splattered my emotions clearly across my face, which I knew I’d be embarrassed about tomorrow. “Thank you.” My mother’s words echoed in my head, and the alcohol made me feel brave enough to ask. “I was wondering if you would go on a date with me.”

Her lips widened into a huge grin. “I’d love that. How does next Saturday sound?”

I took a breath of relief. “That’s good.”

Christina stepped up onto her tiptoes, and her soft lips gently grazed over my cheek. “Goodnight, darlin’.” She unlocked her car door and got in.

As I watched her drive away, my first thought was to call my mother to tell her. However, I thought better of it considering the state she was in earlier this evening and how late it was.

I decided to use an Uber to get home rather than drive after I had been drinking. I waited a few minutes outside the bar for my ride. A young man pulled up and gave me a wave for me to step inside the vehicle.

“Fun night out?” asked the driver.

I peered out the window as I rubbed my hands on my knees to warm them up. My nerves were numbed a bit from the alcohol. “Yeah, it’s been a tough few weeks.” I furrowed my brow and shook my head. I was *never* this open with others. It must’ve been the alcohol.

The man looked straight ahead at the road. “I get you. Life can weigh you down.” He looked over at his GPS and said, “You live off of Batson avenue?”

“Yeah.”

“So, you live nearby that old mansion, right?”

“I live *in* the old mansion.”

The driver widened his eyes in surprise. “I didn’t think they’d ever sell that house to anyone after what happened.”

I jerked my head towards the direction of the driver. “What happened?”

“The realtor didn’t tell you?” he said dumbfounded. He whistled. “Pretty sure by law she has to, right? Anyway,

the house was where a murder took place about eight years ago.”

My heart sank low, and I blinked in disbelief. “A *murder?*”

“It was some girl who got murdered by her boyfriend there. He just went crazy one day, I guess, and started shooting at her.”

I bit down and lowered my gaze to my knees.

“They never caught the guy.”

I snapped my head back up. “They never caught him?” My voice cracked.

The driver shook his head. “The authorities went searching like crazy, but they never found him. He must’ve left the country or something. I also heard the house was once a mental hospital.”

My heart lurched at what the driver said. A mental facility? I wanted to turn it into a makeshift one for my mother.

“Not sure about that fact, though,” said the driver. “But teens always liked to break into it to find ghosts.” The driver pulled up to my home, and I stared at it with reluctance. The beautiful paneling was now covered in menacing shadows that spread out like hungry arms out towards the street. The windows that were once welcoming took on a far darker and eerie energy.

“Well, have a good night,” said the driver.

I swallowed. “Y-yeah... Thanks.” I slowly stepped out of the car and retreated up the steps to my house. The sound of my front door closing echoed throughout the bare walls of my home. It was a stark reminder of how expansive

and empty it was. I looked around at all the half empty boxes that still needed to be attended to.

I sighed as I ran my fingers through my hair. Placing my keys into the basket by the garage door, I went upstairs to my room. Despite the history of the house, I wouldn't and couldn't believe it was haunted. The home just had a bad history, and the dreams were just a coincidence. That was it.

Later, that night, I rolled over to my side, clenching tightly to the blankets. I tossed to the other side and pulled them up closer, but my teeth still chattered, and my body shook. I opened my eyes and sat up. The piercing feel of the cold air hitting my skin caused a shiver to roll down my spine. I threw off the blankets and walked out of my room to check the AC. I knew I didn't turn it on since it was the middle of spring, and it was still chilly in Saratoga Springs during that time. The snow had barely melted a few weeks ago.

I rubbed my arms as I walked out of my bedroom, but once I stepped out, I noticed a dramatic change in the temperature. The hallway was much warmer than my room. I stepped back into my room, and the chill hit my face like ice.

I checked every window and vent. I double checked the thermostat, but it said my AC was turned off. I decided to turn on my heater to see if that'd help. Afterward, I walked over to one of my boxes to take out two extra blankets. I closed my bedroom door before I laid back down in bed and closed my eyes.

Right then, a raking sound like metal gliding against metal made me open my eyes in alert. The sound was small, but since my room was drenched in absolute silence, this made the squeaking all the louder.

I sat up in bed, and plain as day I saw my doorknob turning. The moonlight from my window hit the gold doorknob just right. I could see my reflection on the knob as it turned slowly to the right and then to the left. The aged metal screeched with every movement.

My heart stopped as I froze in place. I clenched tightly to my sheets before taking a deep breath. “This is ridiculous,” I said to myself. I blinked wishing the hallucination away, but still, the knob turned. I refused to let fear overcome me, so I yanked off the blankets. I grabbed one of the lamps I hadn’t plugged in yet to use as a weapon if needed. Then I charged towards the door, bracing myself for whatever I may see on the other side.

I threw open the door. I had my lamp held up ready to attack, but there was nothing there. While lowering my arm, my brow pinched together in confusion. I looked down the hallway, but there was nobody there. I placed down my lamp onto the floor and shook my head.

“It must be the alcohol,” I said to myself. I went downstairs towards the kitchen to get some water. I gulped down one cup and then the second. “Perhaps the water will stop these drunken delusions,” I thought. I splashed some water onto my face before heading back upstairs.

I decided that if there were any more noises during the night, I’d ignore them at all costs. I wasn’t about to give in to fear and delusions. It was all due to stress, a mixture of alcohol, and that driver telling me about the history of my house. My mind was playing tricks on me. However, it wouldn’t let up, not even as I dreamt.

As I slept, I had the same dream of watching that woman in a purple dress running down the stairs of my home

in a panic. She screamed as she heard a gunshot set off. I wanted to face the attacker to try to help her this time, but I was forced to follow her. My adrenaline rushed throughout my body as I watched the woman struggle against a tall man with a buzzed haircut. He towered over her, and his muscles in his arms flexed as he pulled at her hair and knocked her down to the ground.

“Get up!” I yelled. “Run!” My hands shook with apprehension.

“Where’s the journal?” The man demanded.

I tried to help the woman up, but nothing I did, worked. It was as if I had no strength. It was too late, and the woman got a shot right in the middle of her abdomen. I curled my hands into a fist, ready to fight the man, but as I swung, my arms went right through him.

“You bastard!” I yelled.

The man stepped over the woman’s body and shot at her head, killing her. He said, “I’ll just find the damn thing myself.”

I snapped awake with a fury that pulsed through me, which made my sheets become soaked in my sweat. Despite the dream being over, I could still hear the gunshot ringing in my ears.

Chapter Four

Slipping Sanity

I threw off my blankets and looked out my bedroom window. It was morning already. There was nobody in my backyard or in the neighbors' yards from what I could see. Still, I couldn't get the sound of that gunshot out of my head. I checked all parts of my house, thinking maybe someone had broken in and let off a shot. Finally, I went outside, but there was no disturbance I could see. Everything appeared to be normal, but I couldn't help but think that the shot was real. I shook my head as I went up the steps. I had to get ready for work and stop chasing noises I heard from my dreams.

I called an Uber driver to take me to the bar before work so I could pick up my truck. Afterward, I headed straight to work.

During my shift, I couldn't shake the feeling of how real the sound of that shot was. I was covering for Christina at the front desk during the first part of my shift while she was on her break. I tapped my pencil on the counter as I mulled last night's and this morning's events. I decided to

search online for probable causes for hearing a gunshot from my dream in real life. There *had* to be a logical reason.

I came across a site that spoke of dreams and their possible meanings. I exited out of it while rolling my eyes. Then I came across a website that discussed vivid and lucid dreams. I found that more appealing, especially since the article was about a study done on them rather than dream interpretations. “Sometimes our dreams can seep into our waking lives,” it read. “Especially if a dream is vivid enough, it can take our brain time to readjust to the waking world.”

The article said that when we are waking up from dreams, sometimes our brain is still giving off the Dimethyltryptamine molecule in our brain or DMT, which is the reasoning for why people may hallucinate or hear things that are not there, after just waking up. For me, this was enough to satisfy my uneasiness about the gunshot I heard. I was only in a deep sleep, and when I woke up, I was still half asleep, which caused for the overlapping of the gunshot from my dream state to my awake state.

Christina came back from her break, and I quickly exited out of my search before she could catch me. “Thank you for coverin’ for me,” she said. I stood up, and she took back her seat at the desk.

I put my hands in the pockets of my scrubs. “Anytime,” I said with a shy smile. I opened my mouth to say more but thought better of it.

“Oh, Teddy. Will you give this chart to Monica for me?” asked Christina.

“Monica?” I asked questioningly.

“She’s the new girl. Nurse Brooks gave me the updated chart for one of her patients. She has dark, black hair. You can’t miss her. She works in the same area as you.”

I took the chart and said, “Yeah, sure.”

“Thanks, darlin’.” I immediately left down the hall in search of this new girl. I glanced into every room I passed by, and Christina was right, I couldn’t miss her. She was in the very last room in the hall, and her raven black hair against her alabaster skin was noticeable from even a mile away.

I knocked on the open door, and she turned to me while fluffing a pillow for one of her patients. “Monica?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. Her voice was meek and quiet, and I had to lean in a bit so I could hear her better.

“This is for you,” I said, handing her the chart. “It’s from Christina. It’s updated information on one of your patients.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Ted Rovers... When did you start here?”

Monica turned to her patient, who was an eighty-year-old woman named Camille. She had been assigned to me when I first started, but when they changed my schedule, they also changed my patients. “Camille, is there anything else you need?”

The woman shook her head as she took a bite of her oatmeal.

“I’ll be back to check on you later. Enjoy your breakfast.” Monica walked out of the room, and I followed behind her. “It’s nice to meet you, Ted. I started here last week.”

I accompanied alongside her down the hall. I knew it was tough starting work at a new place and she seemed shy like I was. I decided to engage in conversation with her.

“What made you want to work here?”

“Um...” She was quiet as she thought. “I used to care for my parents. They’re getting older so...”

I nodded my head in understanding.

“But being stuck in that house all day made me stir crazy.”

I knew that feeling all too well since I was raised in the middle of nowhere up in the mountains in California.

“I was pretty good at taking care of them and enjoyed it, so I decided to become a certified nursing assistant,” she said.

“I have a similar story,” I said. “It was my mother’s illness that influenced me to become a CNA. She has Alzheimer’s.”

Monica gave me a crooked smile to show her sympathy. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

I shrugged. “It isn’t easy, but I’m learning to deal with it. It was nice meeting you.”

“Likewise. By the way, who is that?” Monica pointed down the hall to the recreational area where Ben was. He was watching us from behind one of the bookcases, and he quickly shoved a book back onto the shelf before scurrying off.

I chuckled. “That’s Ben. He’s another CNA here.”

“He stares at me a lot but never says anything. I tried talking to him yesterday, and all he said was gibberish and wandered off. Is he okay?”

I couldn't help but laugh. *And Ben says I have no game.* "He is a bit socially awkward when it comes to women."

"Oh," said Monica. She let out a small laugh. "That's so funny, it's sad."

"It is, but he's harmless. If you were to approach him, he'd run away in the other direction. He has zero luck with the ladies."

Monica smirked. "I can see why. Well, I'll try not to scare him by being in the same room as him."

"Please do," I said. "And nice to meet you again."

My next patient was Hank. He was in the farthest room down the hall. The SNF was made up of the main lobby, which was the first room once someone stepped in to upon entering the facility. That was where Christina worked behind the desk. Next to her desk was a hallway for employees only—it was where the break room was. In the lobby, we had chairs, couches, and a television. Across the room was the main hallway that had a line of patients' rooms. The bulk of my patients were in that section near the lobby.

On the other side of that hallway was the recreational area. There were sliding glass doors in the recreational room that led to the outside fenced area. There was a hallway to the left and right of the recreational room. Both were lined with patient rooms. The medical counter and cafeteria were down one of these hallways.

Once I reached Hank's room, I knocked lightly on the door before entering. Hank was sitting there on his bed wearing his veteran's hat as always.

"Alright, Hank," I began. "It's that time of day."

Hank let out a huff before smiling. “We need to switch out my nurses. No offense to you, but I would much rather have a nice young lady for this job.”

I let out a chuckle. “I don’t blame you. I’d feel the same way.”

Hank slowly got out of bed, but he needed my assistance with getting him to his wheelchair. I swept him up by the legs in one arm while using the other to hold up his back, and I carried him to his wheelchair. He was so light I could feel the fragility of his crippled body in my arms. I would carry him over to the tub, but Hank felt more dignified being taken in a wheelchair, which I respected.

I started up the bath and let Hank check the temperature of the water with his hand to judge if it was too warm or cold. Hank could get out of his shirt just fine, but he needed assistance with his pajama bottoms. “Remember I can wipe my own ass still,” said Hank.

“I know, sir.”

“You know the drill.”

“Keep the briefs on. Got it. You do the rest.”

Hank nodded. “Good man. I ain’t no God damn baby. I saved lives Goddammit. I took them too. I don’t need to be bathed by another man.”

I asked, “Are you ready?” Hank let out a huff. I took that as a yes, and I picked him up to place him in the water. I had to stay nearby to make sure he didn’t drown or that he didn’t need any further assistance, but Hank didn’t like me being in the same room. As a compromise, I took a seat outside the bathroom and would talk to him with my back turned.

“How is retired life treating you, Hank?”

“Bah!” Exclaimed Hank, which made me chuckle. “It’s terrible. I want to die already. I’ve been waiting to die for the past twenty or so years. I never wanted to live to an age where I needed to be carried to the damn bathroom.”

I nodded my head. “I completely understand, sir. I’d feel the same.”

It was quiet. I could hear the water splashing as Hank washed himself. “But,” began Hank. “I’m glad to have you as my assigned nurse. My last guy never understood that I was once a man and needed to be treated as such.”

“You’re still a man.”

“That’s real kind of you, but a man who needs help taking a shit ain’t a man anymore. I’m the shriveled-up prune of what I once was, which is why I can’t wait until my last dying breath to end this humiliation for me.”

I truly sympathized with Hank. My heart twisted in pain, and a hollow feeling settled in my stomach. There was silence between us for a while. Suddenly, I heard a large splash, and I sat up in my seat. I called out, “Hank?”

No answer.

“Hank?” I asked again.

I heard him let out a small groan.

I immediately stood up in alert. “Alright. I’m turning around to check on you.” I saw Hank hunched over with his arm dangling off the side of the tub. I raced over to help him up.

Hank shoved me off. “I’m fine, boy! Just got dizzy is all.”

This did little to help ease my concern. My brow remained furrowed as I helped him sit up in the tub. “Why are you having dizzy spells?”

“It’s that damn new medication they gave me. Look the other way!”

I immediately left back to my chair so Hank could finish bathing himself. “How long has this been going on?”

“About a week.”

I raised my eyebrows and crossed my arms. “And you didn’t think to tell me?”

“It was no big deal. Nothing I can’t handle.”

“What other symptoms do you have?”

“Nausea because of the dizzy spells. It makes my stomach hurt, which is shit because I enjoy those blueberry muffins they got. Last night, I threw it up.” Hank grumbled to himself. “Damn old age.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. I was silent for a few moments and then asked, “Are you finished bathing?”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Hank. “Get me out of this damn thing.”

I grabbed some newly washed clothes for him and made my way over to the tub. “Now, here comes the hard part,” I said.

“Bah, get it over with,” said Hank with a flip of his hand.

I looked away at the far wall as I took off Hank’s soaked underwear and put on a fresh, dry pair. In my peripheral view, I could see Hank’s distinct frown. I wasn’t disgusted by changing him. I changed lots of patients, but I knew Hank hated it. Out of respect, I looked away.

After I was finished dressing him and placed him back into his bed, I went to the medicine counter where Frank was posted. “Hey, Frank,” I said. “Can you bring me Mr. Charleston’s chart?”

“Sure! What’s going on?” Frank asked.

“I just want to check something.” I looked over Hank’s assigned medicine intake. “Is there any way we can switch out his meds? It’s making him sick.”

“I can ask, but it’s not in our scope of practice. I can have one of the main nurses look over him.”

Nurse Brooks was never around when I needed him, and even if he were, he’d yell at me for meddling too much in his patients’ affairs. He was a stupid and prideful man, and the thought of Hank’s suffering made me feel inept. I gave Frank my disappointed face.

Frank gave a sympathetic smile. “I get it, you’re frustrated. But it’s your job as a CNA to check on the patient and let the main doctor or registered nurse know what’s going on.”

I nodded my head. My inexperience showing, my frustration only got worse. I tried my best to contain it by clenching my teeth. “He should be off them *now*.”

“As far as I know, they’ve tried nearly every medicine on the market, and it all makes Hank sick. This dosage has given him the least trouble.”

I ran my fingers through my hair and said, “Fine. What should I do to make him feel better?”

Frank hands me a cool washcloth. “Use this to cool him down and give him a massage,” Frank said. “I’ll get him some peppermint tea for the nausea.”

I returned to Hank’s room. I needed to take my lunch break, but instead, I decided to comfort Hank with a massage and washcloth. This way, I could keep my eye on him. The peppermint tea did help, and I was more confident.

After my shift was over, I went straight home. I was far too exhausted to make myself something to eat, and I collapsed onto my couch the second I walked in through the front door.

An hour later, I woke up to my television being on, but I could have sworn I never touched the remote. However, my mind was far too fogged over to begin to question it. I sat up on my elbows as my eyes fluttered open. The news was on, and the anchorwoman was talking about another mentally ill man that went missing. I stood up from the couch and turned off the television.

Since it was Monday, I decided to plan out my week ahead on my planner, which I hung on the fridge. I took the magnet off the planner and sat at my kitchen table with a pen. I planned to finish the rest of my packing by the end of the week. I bit back a smile as I wrote down my date time with Christina on Saturday. Each day I put a small task for me to do: clean the backyard, transfer money into my savings account for home renovations, grocery shopping, call Mom, and clear out whatever was inside the basement.

After I was finished making my list, I decided to eat that fried rice I never got to last night with some fresh vegetables while I finished unpacking my living room.

As I cleared out one of the boxes, at the bottom of it, I stumbled across an old photo of me, my mother, my father, and Scarlett. I had to have been around twelve years old and Scarlett was nearly two. I had always begged for another brother or sister, and when I finally got one, I didn't like the result. Smirking, I stared at my twelve-year-old self-glaring over at my sister. She was playing with one of my old toys and smiling. At the time, I was going to throw out that toy

because I was “too big” for kid stuff. It wasn’t so much my idea as it was my father’s. He decided I was too old for “dolls.” He had gone through my bedroom and threw away all my stuffed animals, saying I had to start acting like a man. That was a hard day for me because my one security blanket, Effy the Elephant, was tossed into the dumpster. I couldn’t sleep for that first week without it.

I thought back on that fight between my mother and father after he had gone through and chucked all my toys out. “He isn’t ready yet! He’s still a boy!” My mother exclaimed.

“Which is precisely why we needed to throw away his little girl toys. He needs to become a man.” My father always had a way of sounding angry, even though he was having a normal conversation.

“He’s only twelve!” My mother practically pleaded with him.

“And it’s high time that he starts acting like it. My father threw away my toys when I was much younger.”

“But he isn’t you, and you are not your father.” I still remember that deafening silence that fell between them after my mother said those words.

We never spoke of my grandfather, and I had no idea why. It wasn’t until I was older that I learned my grandfather was an abusive man when he had too much to drink, which was all the time. My mother bringing him up was like a stake to the heart for my father.

“No more toys,” was all he said.

My parents gave my G.I. Joe to my sister, which made me want it again.

My mind went back to that day in the park with Scarlett sitting on the blanket playing with my old G.I. Joe. “I want my toy back,” I told Scarlett. She stuck her tongue out at me and then laughed.

I screamed before pushing her down. Instead of crying like I wanted her to, she stood up and hit me in the face with the toy. I held my right cheek in my hands. The stinging pain made my cheek throb. I cried out, “Mom! Scarlett hit me!”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have pushed her,” said my Mom as she fixed us sandwiches. “I saw the whole thing.”

That was the last time I was ever violent towards my sister. She punched back.

Later, my mother went to the store to buy a whole new G.I. Joe. She had snuck into my room in the middle of the night, and I pretended to be asleep. She tucked it under my blanket and kissed my cheek before leaving. To this day, I still had that action figure. It was in a box down in the basement with my other memory trinkets.

I chuckled as the memory faded from my mind, and I dug through another box to find a picture frame to put the photo in. Seeing my family all together in one photo made me all too aware of how empty my home was now. The vastness of the house further pricked at the loneliness I felt in my heart. I hadn’t realized it had gotten so dark. I flipped on the light in the living room, and then I gently placed the picture frame on my bookshelf beside the couch.

Drops of water kissed the windows as the rain poured. All I had were the sounds of the weather along with the occasional car that drove by causing water to swish in the distance to keep me company.

As I slowly unpacked my books to place on the shelf, a woman's scream filled the air, making me drop my book, and my heart stops beating. My body shook when a shot rang. I jumped to my feet and raced over to the basket where my cellphone was to call the police. There was no mistaking that sound. I wasn't asleep this time.

"911. What is your emergency?" asked the dispatcher.

I ran to the nearest window, but my view of the world outside was obscured from the rain on my window. My voice shook with each word. "I'd like to report the sounds of gunshots."

"Where are you located?"

"Twenty-one fifty-three Batson Avenue. I heard a woman scream before the shot went off."

"The police are on their way."

My hands shook as I gripped onto the window.

"Please hurry. I think she may be hurt."

"Can you see her?"

I squinted my eyes as I looked out towards the total darkness. "No. I can't see anyone." I ran to the living room to look through the window. "I don't see anyone. I'm a nurse, so I'll go outside to see if she's okay."

"Please stay inside, sir."

I ignored her and ran out the door. The sound of the rain roared around me, making me deaf to anything else. I sped down the porch steps in search of the woman or perhaps someone with a gun. However, the more I walked up and down the street, the more I realized something: nobody was outside — not a single soul.

I was drenched by the time the police arrived. “Sir, are you the one that called?” one of them asked.

I nodded as my eyes still wandered around, looking for the woman. “Go inside. We have it from here,” said the officer. A second officer approached me and helped guide me back to my home.

I sat on my front porch as the cops searched the area using flashlights. Several minutes ticked by. The police called for backup to search the nearby blocks, but still nothing. One of the officers walked up to the porch with his hands hooked to his belt. “We can’t find a woman, sir,” he said. “We even spoke to some of the neighbors, and they said they didn’t hear anything. Are you sure you heard gunshots?”

I stared off towards the edge of my porch. “One. Just one gunshot and a woman screaming.”

“Nothing like that happened here. Maybe your television was on, and you mixed it up.”

I slowly shook my head. “No,” I muttered.

“What was that?” The officer slowly leaned in to hear my voice over the rain.

I gulped. “Perhaps it was my television,” I lied. The last thing I needed was being thought of as crazy, but then again, perhaps I was. The officers left, and I sat there hunched over, running my fingers through my hair. I heard it plain as day. I *heard* it. There was no denying it.

I walked back into the house and put my cellphone back in its place in the kitchen. I sat on the couch and thought about Christina’s words. Perhaps I was overly stressed and was now hallucinating due to it. I didn’t get the best sleep the night before, so that could explain it. That and

it was raining. Perhaps it was lightning and the trick of the wind that made me mistake the sound as a gunshot.

However, that didn't explain the woman, screaming.

I shook my head. "No, no, no," I said. "I am not about to give in to hallucinations. That's what this was, and I need to take better care of myself." Still, I found myself perking my ears at every little sound that croaked within the house.

I needed to distract myself, so I took my time as I got ready for bed. I even tidied up my bathroom before proceeding to floss every tooth twice. As I worked on the last tooth, I caught something purple at the corner of my eye. It fluttered like a wave down my hallway, and I could have sworn I saw the back of a feminine looking leg.

I ignored it as I swished my mouthwash. I spit into the sink, and when I lifted my head, what I saw made me take a step back in utter shock. I slammed my hand against my chest and gave out a loud yelp. It was unlike me to make such a noise, but the ghostly sight made my body freeze over like ice.

Right behind me in the mirror stood a woman who appeared to be in her early thirties. She was tall for a woman and nearly reached up to my height. She wore a purple dress with jagged edges at the end of the skirt like there were many uneven layers attached. Her hair was a rat's nest, but it complemented her face well. Still, the fading color of her nearly transparent skin along with the lifeless look in her eyes made me uneasy. Not only that, but there was a stranger in my home.

I caught my bearings after the first initial shock and yelled out, "What are you doing here?" I turned my head

back to look directly at her, but she had vanished. I slammed my hands onto the counter and gripped tightly as I took a few deep breaths to calm myself. I searched for her in the bedroom by looking through the mirror. My body encased in ice; I couldn't move.

I didn't see anything through the mirror, which made me braver. After I calmed my rapid heartbeat, I searched throughout my bedroom but couldn't find anything. I looked down the hallway and in every other room too. If there was a woman in the home, then she couldn't have gotten far. I scanned every area downstairs, but still, no one could be found.

Before going up to my room, I made sure to lock every door and window. I wasn't about to accept that it may have been a hallucination or, heaven forbid, some kind of ghost. I did what any sane person would do, in my opinion, which was to double-check every possible entrance.

Before heading upstairs, I decided to grab my cell phone so that I could put on my alarm for the morning. However, when I looked in the basket, it wasn't there. My brow pinched together. "I must have left it upstairs," I thought to myself. I trudged up to the second floor fighting to keep my eyes open from my exhaustion as I searched my room for my cell phone. I couldn't find it anywhere. I clenched my teeth as I threw my blankets off from the bed and patted down the sheets. "I don't have time for this!" I exclaimed. I stomped down the stairs thinking I left it in the living room, but I always kept my things in their designated spots. It was rare for me not to. Then again, I had been having a couple of mental slip-ups. I could have easily left my phone somewhere else.

After searching the living room, I decided to retrace my steps of the entire night. Maybe I dropped it outside. If so, the rain would have rendered it useless by now. I went back to the kitchen to double-check if I overlooked something, and right there plain as day was my cell phone in the basket. I chewed on the inside of my cheek, and my hand visibly shook as I picked it up. Heat formed in my chest pressuring me, and I gripped so tightly to the phone that my knuckles turned white. I closed my eyes as I took a deep breath to cool down.

I stomped my way up to my room, crawled into bed, and set my alarm for the morning. I took a few more therapeutic breaths. “I need a night out or something,” I said to myself before closing my eyes.

That night, I had the same nightmare that I always had of that woman in the purple dress being gunned down by the same man. Once again, I woke up in a cold sweat. *This has got to stop.*

As I made my breakfast in the morning, which was just a protein shake with a banana on the side, I laughed at myself over last night’s events. I looked out the kitchen window, and the rising sun lit up the house with a soft orange color that kissed the old linoleum.

I shook the thought of last night from my mind as I blended my breakfast drink. “It was just stress,” I told myself. I just moved into a new home, and I haven’t been eating the best the past couple of days. I also got drunk only a few days ago. I need to take better care of myself. I convinced myself that everything I saw and did last night was due to stress and overwork. Perhaps a few days off would do me some good. I should revisit my mother. Maybe

spend time in the city with my sister or go on a quiet vacation alone.

I went upstairs to my bathroom and looked through my medicine drawer, where I had a variety of vitamins. I took some B12, vitamin D, John's Wort, and Fish Oil with a giant swig of my shake. That should help jumpstart my system.

I remembered when I first got into the "fit" lifestyle as my mother put it. I did nearly every sport while in school, and my mother would tease me by saying, "Are you planning on competing in the Olympics?" All I wanted was a distraction and something to do, considering we lived up in the mountains. There wasn't much to keep us occupied other than work on the property by chopping wood, feeding the chickens, house repairs, and so on. I just wanted to be around people rather than in seclusion. An added bonus was being away from my father and being in sports was the only sure way of accomplishing that.

Plus, I wasn't all that good in the academic area, so I figured I could always fall back on being a PE coach or something one day even though that wasn't really what I wanted to do with my life. I was lost during my twenties, not knowing what to major in. That was until my mother got sick.

I was in a particularly peppy mood during my shift at work. I wanted to be more positive, and I hoped that'd spill out into my mental and emotional health as well. "It all starts with you," I said to myself, as I clocked in. It was something my mother always used to say. Happiness begins from within, not the outside world.

I checked on Hank by knocking at the door, and I waited to be allowed inside. “Come in,” murmured Hank. When I entered, Hank grunted and said, “Now what are you so damn happy about? Wiping my ass fun to you?”

I chuckled. “No, sir. Just a good day is all.”

“You got laid,” Hank said it like it was a fact, and my cheeks burned. Hank nodded. “That’s good for you. Lord knows I don’t get any anymore.”

I cleared my throat. “I came to check on how your meds have been doing for you. I made a note on your chart for your doctor.”

Hank coughed. It sounded like something was trapped in his throat, desperately trying to escape with each breath he took. “Yeah, yeah. I decided to lower the dosage.”

“And?”

“And we’ll see. It’s only been a day.”

I breathed out and nodded. That was good enough for me. “You have a good day, sir.”

“Bah!” Hank waved his hand dismissively.

On my way out, I bumped into Ben. “Oh, hey!” I said.

“Sorry, man,” Ben said with a laugh. “I’m just late getting from my lunch break. I’m hoping to get back to my post before anyone notices.”

“I was wondering if you and the guys wanted to go out for a drink,” I said. I looked over Ben’s shoulder at the new nurse Monica. “I can invite Monica and maybe a few other coworkers as well.”

Ben rubbed the back of his head as he bit his lip. He failed at trying to hide his smile at the mention of Monica. “Yeah, alright man.”

After work, I made myself a quick salad with chicken before heading out to our favorite pub. I was already feeling better, and my lips curved upward as I felt a newfound hope. While at the bar, I ordered a round of drinks for everyone. “Thanks, man,” said Ben as he took a sip. Carlos, Frank, Christina, and Monica all raised their glasses in my direction as a form of thanks.

“You drinking?” asked Carlos.

I shook my head. “Not tonight. I can be the designated driver for anyone if they need it, but I’m trying to take better care of my health lately.”

Ben nearly snorted. “How can you invite us all out for drinks and not drink yourself? That’s madness!”

Christina was sitting next to me and rubbed my arm. “Everything alright?” she asked me in a low tone so others couldn’t overhear.

I looked down at her with a grin. “Yeah, everything is fine.” The way Christina’s eyebrow curved upward told me I didn’t convince her.

“And besides... Like *you* need to eat healthily,” said Ben. “You’re the buffest, guy, I know.” Ben grabbed onto his stomach fat. “*I’m* the one that’s unhealthy.” He and the other boys laughed.

I chuckled nervously and shook my head. I hated being complimented. “Not so much anymore. Ever since I moved out of that apartment complex, I haven’t been able to work out as much. They had a full gym, whereas my house doesn’t.”

Frank took a considerable glug of his beer. “We could all pitch in to build a gym at Ted’s. It’d be nice because that way we don’t have to go to a public one and pay

all those damn extra fees, and we all live nearby one another. I know where Ted lives on Batson street, and I live a few blocks away.”

“Plus, we can all go to the bar afterward. You know, to entice us to work out more,” added Carlos.

“Or just go to the bar,” said Ben. They all burst into laughter.

“I’m already renovating my house for my Mom,” I said. “Adding a gym on top of it wouldn’t be too far of a stretch. I was planning on putting one in the basement anyway,” I said.

Ben slammed his hand on the table. “Perfect! Get my fat ass to Ted’s Gym.”

After the laughter died down, Monica spoke up. Her voice was small. I almost didn’t hear her speak up, “Which house on Batson street?”

“The old mansion,” I said.

Monica’s face turned white, and her jaw muscles visibly tightened as she looked down at her drink.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“My sister lived there,” answered Monica.

“Holy shit? When?” asked Ben. His smile told me that he was unaware of Monica’s grim expression.

Monica’s jet-black hair fell in front of her face, and she tucked it behind her ears. “About eight years ago.” She played with the condensation on her glass.

I drew in a sharp intake of breath. “Was she the one who...” I fell silent, unsure of how to finish that sentence.

Monica nodded. Her pink lips quivered a bit, and her already pale face became even more ashen.

“What happened to your sister?” asked Christina.

Monica stared up at everyone. “She was the one who was killed at the house by her boyfriend.”

Everyone let out a gasp.

“Holy shit, man,” said Ben. “Look, if you don’t wanna talk about it...” Ben gestured to everyone around the table. “We’ll respect that and drop it right now.”

“No, it’s fine,” she said. “I just never thought anyone would be insane enough to live in that house since the incident.” Monica looked to me, and the fear was apparent in her eyes. “Why are you living there?”

I was at a loss for words for a brief second. Maybe it was her question that caught me off guard, but I suddenly felt ashamed for living at that house. I stared at Monica for the longest time. “For my Mom. To help her. It’s just a house,” I finally said.

Monica chugged her beer and wiped her mouth. “She shouldn’t move in there.” Monica got up and swung her purse around her shoulder. “Sorry, guys. I must go. Thanks for the beer.” She immediately left out the door.

“Way to go, Ted!” Said Ben. He sat back in his stool in defeat. “You chased away my date.”

Everyone laughed except Christina and me. I couldn’t shake the horrid feeling that knotted up in my chest. It twisted until it dropped down to my stomach. What Monica said sounded like a warning, but I couldn’t figure out why she’d say that.

After everyone had enough to drink, I drove them home. Christina was the last to be dropped off. We sat in silence for a bit in my truck. I could see through my peripheral view that Christina was looking up at me and chewing on her lip as though she wanted to say something.

“What do you think Monica meant by what she said?” asked Christina.

I adjusted my posture. “I don’t know. Maybe she feels the place is bad luck now or something.”

“Probably,” said Christina. She looked ahead. “How have you been feeling, Ted? I don’t mean to pry, but you seem off today.”

I eyed her questionably. “I’m not off. Today was a good day.”

“If you say so,” she said. “I’m still looking forward to our date.”

That made me grin. “Me too. Do you have anything in mind you want to do, or do you want me to surprise you?”

Christina’s lips curved. “Surprise me.” She let out a light giggle, which made my heart flip. Once we pulled up to Christina’s house, I turned to her, but I made sure to keep ample space in between us in case Christina felt uncomfortable being so close to me. Christina’s hand hung on the car’s door handle. “I will see you this weekend,” she said with a wink. She jumped out of the car, and I waited until she was safely inside before I drove myself home.

That following Saturday, I woke up and felt lighter than I had all week. My positive thinking had done the trick. I stood a bit taller, and there was a skip in my walk. I decided to spend the day unpacking the rest of my home before heading out on my date with Christina. My knees weakened at the mere thought of a date with her. I planned to take her to a nice restaurant and end the night with a walk through the city’s main park. Christmas lights still hung in the trees along the main walkway that ran through the middle of the park, and I thought it’d be perfect.

I played music on my phone and got to work unpacking the rest of my bedroom. It was mostly my clothes that needed to be hung up. I wasn't a man of excess, so there was very little to unpack. I crushed down the boxes and headed downstairs. The last thing for me to do would be to unpack the rest of the bathroom items and organize the basement.

I held all the smashed boxes in one arm as I made my way downstairs to the basement. I threw the boxes into a corner, and dust blew up into the air. I needed to clean this entire place.

Beside my miscellaneous box, which was filled with old memories, photos, high school yearbooks, and my sports trophies, I saw my old metal bat from my days on the high school baseball team. I held the bat in my hand, and the same white tape around the handle brought back a rush of memories.

As I swung the bat slowly, at the corner of my eye, I saw the door to the mysterious closet that was locked. I placed the bat back down against the wall and went upstairs to grab the keys the real estate agent gave to me. I had been so preoccupied with my mother and unpacking that I completely forgot about the mysterious room behind the door.

Then I had to, nearly, jam the small metal key into the misshapen doorknob. I grunted as I shoved the key further in and jiggled it to fix it in place. I turned the knob, and the aged hinges groaned as the door opened to reveal the room. I stood there with my mouth agape. It was a large storage room filled with abandoned hospital beds, blankets, metal handrails, and metal cabinets.

The room was unorganized, and there was a dusty, torn-up bed in the way that blocked me from the rest of the room. The wheels no longer worked on the bed, and it screeched against the cold, hard cemented floor as I shoved it away. I coughed as the dirt in the air filled my lungs. I searched for a window so I could make the room less stuffy, but there was none. It was dark, and the only light that I was supplied with came from the small window in the other room at the other end of the basement.

I took out my phone to light my way through the cramped spaces. The room was rather large, and I found myself thinking of a home gym. I could clear it out and use this room as the workout area. I picked up a dusty metal pipe that laid at my feet. It curved at both ends, and I realized it was a handle to install in a bathtub. It was placed in every bathroom at the SNF. I could use it for my mother.

As I passed by the chairs that had leather straps attached and the box filled with the missing locks to the doors, I couldn't help but wonder why this was all kept here in this room. "Why not throw it out?" I thought to myself.

There were metal cabinets covered in cobwebs that I ignored. I wasn't interested in that, but what *did* interest me were the wooden boards on the floor. I lifted them, and a spider scurried out. I quickly dropped the board and stomped on the bug before it could get far. I lifted the large boards again and a huge grin formed across my face. "I can use these to build a ramp up the porch for my mother," I said aloud to myself. I looked around at the supplies in the room and thought of how I could make good use of them.

My excitement was quickly overshadowed by light whispers that made my stomach curdle. They floated in the

air around me, and my ears perked as I tried to find the source for it. I assumed it was someone talking outside, but then I heard a woman's voice clear as day say, "Listen." I whipped my head around, but nobody was there. The whispers were incoherent, and they all jumbled into one another. I couldn't make out what any of them were saying, but the voices got louder and more persistent. A voice broke out amongst the masses and exclaimed, "Ted!"

My heart nearly lurched out of my chest, and I bolted towards the stairs without a second thought. I raced up to the ground floor, taking two steps at a time before barreling towards my keys in the kitchen. I sprinted down the porch steps towards my car. My hands shook as I struggled to put them in the ignition, and I dropped them before scurrying to pick them up. When I finally turned my engine, I sped off, causing my tires to squeal against the street.

I nearly lost control and barely got a handle on my wheel when I sped past a stop sign. A horn deafened my ears as I drove past a crossing car barely missing it by a few inches. This made me stop momentarily in the middle of the road. I let go of the wheel and closed my eyes. I needed to catch my bearings before I got into an accident. I took several deep breaths until my hands had calmed, and then I gently pushed on the gas pedal.

I didn't know where I was going, but I wanted to put as much distance between me and that house as possible. As I drove into the heart of Saratoga Springs, I saw numerous white tents over plastic tables. These tables had numerous baskets filled with produce on them. Each tent had a different food on it, and dozens of people walked between each table buying items. I pulled over to the side of the street

and got out. I had forgotten all about the town's weekly farmer's market. I took a deep breath of the brisk spring air. I zipped up my windbreaker and headed across the street.

Most of the Farmer's market was held indoors, but I enjoyed the sights of the newly harvested fruits that were displayed out front. Ahead of me was a giant public building that had ample space on the inside for a drove of people to come shopping for food. Most times, it rained, which is why they had held the market inside.

I bypassed every fruit and went inside. Amongst all the fresh vegetables, there was a butcher who was selling newly cut meat. I thought of the lack of food in my fridge at home and approached up to the table. "Are you interested in anything?" asked the man. "I am selling it by the pound."

I inspected every stack of meat displayed in the man's giant fridge. It had a glass top so you could easily see inside. The pack of bacon caught my eye, and I pointed at it. "Give me a pound of bacon, please."

"You got it," said the man. After the bacon was wrapped up in the white butcher paper and paid for, I couldn't help but smile thinking of my mother and her ridiculous cooking techniques. I didn't need a whole pound, but I thought I could go over to my parents' house a few nights out of the week to cook for my Mom.

I took my phone out of my back pocket and pressed the speed dial button to call my mother. It rang far too long for my liking because she usually picked up right away. When it clicked, and I heard my mother's voice, I breathed a sigh of relief. "Hi, Mom," I said. "I'm at the farmer's market, and I just thought about you when—"

"Who is this?" she asked

I began again. “This is your son, Ted. I’m at the farmer’s market, and—”

“Can you pick me up some asparagus?”

I grew confused. “Asparagus?”

Her voice sounded far away like it did when she was having one of her bad days. “You’re the delivery man, right? I need two pounds of asparagus. I have a party to go to tomorrow. Sarah is having another baby, and I said I’d make a dish for her shower.”

I stopped in my tracks. I remembered our old neighbor Sarah, but that was nearly two decades ago. “Mom, Sarah’s party already happened.”

“What?” My mother gasped. “When? I missed it!”

“Mom, it happened twenty years ago.”

“Oh...”

I sighed. “Hand the phone to Dad, please.”

“Who is your Dad?”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “The man who lives with you.”

“Oh! You mean the Doctor?”

I let out a slow breath and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Yes, the Doctor. Give me to the Doctor.”

My mother was quiet, and I could hear fumbling over the phone — a few seconds ticked by before I could make out much of anything. Then I heard my mother humming. “Mom!” I yelled through the phone.

“Huh?” My mother’s voice sounded as though the phone was placed down somewhere far away. I heard pots and pans clanging and water running.

“Mom!”

“Oh shoot,” she said. I could hear the fumbling sounds, and then her voice came in louder. “Who is this?”

I was silent as I tried to calm my frustration. I gripped a little too hard on my phone.

The connection through the phone crackled, and my mother’s voice became broken up in the loose connection.

“Hel...lo?”

“Mom?”

“I... Can’t help....”

“Mom?”

“Can’t... Hear...” Then the line went dead.

A small crack could be heard as I strangled the phone in my hands. I took a deep breath as I found a seat on a nearby bench. I decided to call my father. When he picked up, I immediately said, “You need to get better cell service. The line just went dead between Mom and me.”

My father’s sheer lack of urgency only made my anger flare more. “Sorry, son. You know how... Up in these mountains. The reception gets... Sometimes.”

“I’m coming to see Mom,” I said, and then I hung up.

As I stood up from the bench, I saw that same translucent woman in the purple dress from my mirror. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and I clutched tightly to the package of bacon. Her brown eyes bore into mine, and I felt as if she were silently communicating to me to follow her. She slowly turned and disappeared into the crowd. I walked towards her direction and caught a glimpse of her purple skirt behind a bunch of people. I shoved past the people in an attempt to follow the purple shimmer. Just when I thought I’d gotten close; I’d catch a peek of this

mysterious woman in another large crowd and change directions.

I was so preoccupied with searching for a purple dress that I nearly crashed into a table. “Oh, I’m sorry,” I said as I fixed the tablecloth.

“That’s alright. Accidents happen,” said the woman.

I recognized that voice. I looked up, and it was Monica. Her straight black hair was wrapped in braids, and she wore a red apron that said: “Holland Family Farm” with a sewn-on picture of a field and a sun on it.

“Hey, Monica,” I said. “I had no idea you owned a farm.”

She gave a crooked smile. “It’s my parents’. I help with the farmer’s market sometimes when they’re too tired to come into town. My brothers help with the harvesting nowadays.”

I nodded my head in understanding. “It’s hard watching them get older, isn’t it?”

She grimaced. “The child becomes the parent, and the cycle continues.”

I eyed the table, and every basket was filled with different sizes of radishes. “So... a radish farm?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes. We also sell asparagus during the winter.”

I snorted.

Monica smiled sheepishly and knitted her brow together. “What’s so funny?”

“My Mom is need of some asparagus. She kept going on and on about it for some party that happened over a decade ago.”

Monica joined me in laughing and then it died down. The laughter lifted an immense weight off my chest, and I felt so much lighter. It felt good to laugh it off.

“I’m sorry about your Mom,” said Monica. “Ben told me about it. That must be hard.”

I sighed before I plastered on a grin. “The child becomes the parent, right?”

Monica gave a grim smile. “Right.”

I nervously played with the hem of the tablecloth as I contemplated asking the question that was on my mind. “Can I ask about your... sister?” I made sure to tread lightly.

Monica’s posture straightened, and she nodded.

“I know this is going to sound weird, but what did she look like?”

Monica’s strained face took on a happier expression when she smiled. Her eyes relaxed. “Her name was Lavinia. One thing I remember most about her was how tall she was. She was almost six feet. She had this...” Monica broke off and laughed as she rolled her eyes. “She had the messiest hair a person could have, but she’d brush it every day. No matter what hair products she used, her hair was always permanently curly and poofy. It reminded me of a rat’s nest.”

My heart stopped.

“She had dark brown eyes too like mine. We both got our eyes from our mother.”

My world fell away, and everything became muffled. Without thinking, I asked, “Did she always wear this purple dress with uneven ends on the skirt?”

Monica turned visibly pale, and that moment of joy on her face immediately vanished. “How did you know that?”

I shut my mouth and swallowed. “I don’t know.”

It was silent between us. I could see the erratic rise and fall of Monica’s chest.

“I’m sorry if I overstepped my boundaries,” I said. I turned to go, but Monica reached her arm out to stop me.

“There’s a reason you’re seeing my sister.” Monica let go of me. “Maybe... She needs your help.”

Before I could come up with something to say, I heard Christina’s voice. “Ted? Is that you?”

I quickly turned around, and my heart picked up its pace when my eyes laid on Christina. Right now, it was not a good time for me to be around her, and a bundle of nerves knotted in my stomach. What would she think about me and Monica’s conversation?

“What are you doing here?” I asked, walking her further away from Monica’s table.

She lifted her basket full of purchased vegetables. “I come here every weekend. I prefer to buy locally.” I looked over Christina’s shoulder towards Monica, who was still eyeing me warily. My phone burned in my pocket as I thought about my mother. “Are you okay, Ted?” Christina asked.

I blinked before turning my attention to her. “I’m sorry. I’m just distracted.”

Christina took on a worried tone. “Is it your mother? Do you need to go be with her?”

“I think I do. They live far away, though.” I kept shifting my body back and forth nervously. It made me uncomfortable that I was lying to Christina about why I was skipping out on my date with her tonight, but it wasn’t a total lie. That conversation with my mother earlier had made me

uneasy, but I didn't think it would be a good idea to go out on a date while I was hallucinating about a dead woman. I needed to get myself in order first and talking to Monica set me completely on edge.

"That's okay." Christina put her hand on my arm, and it immediately made my body relax. "Go be with your mother." She stood up on her tiptoes, and her lips gently touched my cheek. "I fully understand. We can reschedule." When she looked into my eyes, I could see her immense worry. I hated that, and I hated how I wasn't being honest with her. There was just too much on my mind to enjoy a simple date. "Do you want me to go with you?" Christina offered.

I shook my head. "Not this time. Maybe next time." I made sure to smile down at her to let her know that everything was okay. "But thank you for offering."

Christina smiled in return, and I caught relief in her eyes. "I'm glad to see you're still with me," she said. "You're finally making eye contact with me."

I grimaced.

"I'm worried about your well-being. You've been so spacey lately."

I rubbed the back of my head. "I know, and I'm sorry. I just..." I looked behind me towards the exit. "I just have to go."

Christina pursed her lips together. Her smile was gone. I didn't like the way she didn't say anything in response, but I didn't have time. I needed to see my mother first and then figure out why I was hallucinating about a woman I don't know. As I walked back to my truck, the

thought of my slipping sanity made me grip tightly to my hair.

END OF FREE PREVIEW
