

CHAPTER ONE

Rory O'Brian couldn't move. The pressure on his chest made breathing impossible. Every inch of his immovable frame was in a cold sweat. How could he be conscious, but unable to move? He willed his fingers to make the slightest shift. Nothing.

There was no reason for his lack of mobility. With extraordinary effort, he was able to open his eyes. He tried to move something else—even wiggling a toe—without success. The rest of his body refused his relentless appeals for movement. All he could do was watch and listen, a witness to whatever caused him to wake up in the first place.

His eyes, which could only stare forward, caught the subtle motion of his bedroom door closing. Sweat beaded on his forehead as dread settled deep in his belly. The door closed so slowly that it was almost that like a childish prank. Like something his brother would have done years ago.

When the door reached inches from the frame, it slammed shut so powerfully the framed photos on his bureau fell to the ground in clatter.

Rory exploded out of bed.

He looked around his room, breathing heavily, his T-shirt wet with perspiration. A cursory scan around the space found nothing out of place save for the fallen photos. Was this a nightmare?

More importantly, was it over? His body pulsed with adrenaline as if it still perceived danger, yet he couldn't determine whether it was a real threat or the echoes of a dream.

A muffled yowl shifted his attention to his tiny Chihuahua, Pierre, who was agitated by the noise. He was also shivering. What a terrific parent Rory was turning out to be! The poor dog had never entered his mind. As he walked over to soothe his grumpy pup, he glanced around and frowned. The scent of patchouli oil clung to the chilled air a clear sign that despite normal appearances, something was different, almost foreign.

Pierre settled into the rattling dog version of a purr as he stroked the dog's back soothing himself and his pet. The normalcy of his snoring dog helped relax his nerves and he took his first deep breath since waking up in the Twilight Zone. Rory tried to put the pieces of this weird late-night puzzle together. His priority was the peculiar cold that seemed to cling to the air as much as the smelly hippie oil. It was a warm night. He recalled turning the A/C down because he loved to burrow under blankets in bed.

He blew out a deep breath and started in shock as a puff of air formed into a mini-cloud near his mouth. As out of sorts as he was, he should not be able to see his breath in July, especially not in Virginia.

Crossing the room to his chest of drawers, he put socks on his icy feet. He would bet he had distractedly put the air-conditioning on fifty instead of sixty-eight. He wasn't the most focused when it came to the mundane. Ignoring the hair prickling on the back of his neck, he made his way to the old steamer trunk where he stored his winter blankets.

"Come on, bud, I'll grab another comforter and check the damn thermostat. We've got to get some sleep. Some of us work for a living."

As Rory opened the trunk, the hair on the back of his neck stood up as he felt two icy hands press against his back. Dread like he had never experienced shimmied up from his roiling stomach to well up in his throat. He began a pleading whisper to whatever god was out there that he would turn to find the room empty. Before he turned he knew his plea had fallen on deaf ears, because he was far from alone. A girl of maybe thirteen stared at him, a concert T-shirt from his old band, Cairo, covered her slim body. Her eyes radiated anger and fear as she pointed at him. She appeared to be floating a few inches above the ground, her toes almost grazing the floor. Her eyes were so stark that despite his considerable trepidation, his protective instincts kicked in,

“Are you lost, sweetie?” he asked, in an attempt to sound relaxed. “You shouldn’t be in someone else’s home late at night, even if you are a fan of my band.”

She regarded him sadly.

He found himself walking toward her, “I’m not mad it’s just . . .”

She shook her head, disappointment etched on her face, and vanished.

Rory’s legs gave out and he collapsed onto the edge of his bed. As he sat there in stunned silence, he scrambled to come up with a rational explanation for what he had seen. Since his best friend Andy’s death, he’d sworn off illicit drugs and drank only the occasional beer. He was not in any way impaired. Had he just seen a fucking ghost in his bedroom? He tried to digest this disturbing thought, and watched somewhat bemused as Pierre jumped off the bed and peed on the floor.

“Shit,” he growled. Drawing in a deep breath to release the lingering pressure, he grabbed a rag made from an old Mötley Crüe T-shirt and began to clean the floor. Using the faces of the ’80s heavy-metal band to wipe pee off the floor would typically have raised his spirits, but it didn’t help tonight. Not even pee dribbling down Vince Neil’s face could distract him from this waking nightmare.

Rory scrubbed the floor and contemplated the little ghost-girl with the Cairo T-shirt. The logical side of his brain cataloged the event as a bad dream with its roots in the death of his dear friend and fellow bandmate, Andy Kinney. Before this evening, nothing had been more disturbing than watching his best friend slowly die before his eyes. The naïve and charismatic lead singer for the band had become a soulless shell of a man whose only desire was the next fix. His creativity and love for life had been no match for heroin. Andy’s death was the most soul-crushing event in

Rory's life. But what did a pre-teen ghost-girl have to do with Andy? Despite his strong desire to discount tonight's episode of the totally bizarre, he was pretty sure he was living in a haunted house.

Pierre, for one, had not been the same dog since their move three weeks ago. For himself, relocating back home to get away from a bad divorce had been the right decision; his entire family had supported him. Buying a house right away, however, may not have been the best idea. From the moment he had first seen this house, it beckoned him: He could imagine himself living there. But since his arrival in his new home, Pierre was always shaking, gazing at Rory with sad, dark eyes. While some of the behavior was the pup's manipulative nature, Rory was sure the house had made the dog's conduct worse by several degrees.

Pee-cleansing task completed, Rory stretched up and went on to phase two of the night's reclaiming of his room—the A/C. Crossing to the wall, he checked the thermostat. Sixty-eight. So the air conditioning was not broken. Ignoring his goose bumps, he scooped up Pierre, and climbed back into bed. His body thrummed with alarm that proclaimed all was still not well in his home. Truth be told, all hadn't been well in his home since he moved in. He had ignored the whispered voices in vacant rooms, keys going missing and the dog peeing because he didn't want to acknowledge something was wrong. He admitted the house was strange, sure. It was an old house. Houses had character, and this one apparently had the personality of a Goth rocker. "If you are a ghost, do me a favor and let me sleep, all right? We can get back to all the spooky shit tomorrow." He smiled to himself, feeling brave in the face of paranormal phenomenon. As he was drifting back to sleep, his nose began to itch like it did when he could feel someone staring at him. He opened his eyes, prepared to give Pierre hell for the disruption. What he saw

made his blood run cold. The same little girl was floating above his head, inches from his face, screaming soundlessly. And then his sheets and comforter were ripped away from him.

CHAPTER TWO

Sometimes it sucked to be a psychic, Mina Johnson grouched, as she maneuvered her vehicle through Charlottesville morning traffic. The last two nights she received unnerving visions of a family trapped behind a wall. The dreams were symbolic in some way but like most of her gifts, the images were challenging to interpret. She couldn't remove the impression of claustrophobia out of her mind. What was the point of her gift if all she received was an ambiguous "something bad is going to happen" message? To top it off, in exactly five minutes she would be late for work, and she was never late.

Alleviating haunting images by binge-watching shows on the True Crime channel probably had not been the wisest of choices. The disturbing context of her dreams and the shows, had given her a morning headache to rival those of her college hangover days.

She felt uncomfortable in her own skin, and she craved a drive-through cup of double-shot kick-ass latte STAT. While she waited in the line of other caffeine-desperate drivers, she grabbed her cell and pressed the center "Siri" button. She was a psychic and she could communicate via

telepathy with other likeminded psychics, but her concentration on driving would be extremely diminished. Calling was safer for everyone. Plus it was hard carrying on internal conversations while ordering coffee.

“Call Matt,” she said crisply.

“Calling The Brat,” the phone’s robotic voice answered.

“No!” She almost rear-ended the car in front of her. So much for these devices being “smarter.”

The last person she wanted to talk to before coffee was grumpy Sage.

“Call Matt!” she bellowed.

“Calling Matt.”

“That’s right you’re calling Matt. Stupid machine.”

“Good morning, Mina. Shit is going down,” Matt said by way of greeting.

He wasn’t what anyone would call a stereotypical assistant. Tall, bordering on skinny, and covered in tattoos, Matt, like everyone on her team, had paranormal gifts. Four years ago, however, he thought he was crazy, not psychic. Over some good whiskey, Mina convinced Matt he was not insane, merely psychically gifted. Ever since that night, Matt was devoted to her. As her newest team member he was assigned the grunt work, but he handled it all with a grin and an occasional droll comment.

“Sorry, sorry, I know I’m running late.”

“Mina, you’re the boss. You can be late if you want. I don’t know why I have to keep reminding you.” The underlying judgment in his words was clear.

She smirked. He was adorable when he felt superior.

“Anyway,” he continued, “you know you have a meeting today with the lady whose kids are getting, like, supernaturally sick.”

“Yes . . .”

“Well, I gave the case to Sebastian because we just got a call. Pretty fascinating case and the home happens to be on Angus Street near your place.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The brother of the guy who owns the house called. Said his brother was hysterical.”

“Wow. Hold on,” she beamed at the barista and requested her coffee. “I’m back.”

“Well, this guy, Riley, told me his brother saw a little spirit girl floating over his bed.”

“Oh. My. God. That is awesome.”

“Right?”

“Text me the address to the floating-spirit job, okay? It’s probably something toxic from the house causing him to hallucinate, but I can always hope.” She handed a second barista her card and received her steaming hot latte. Ah, bliss.

Matt snickered, and said, “Fingers crossed. Hey, there is one more thing.”

“What?” she asked distractedly, trying to make a left.

“You know the band you loved when you were in college—Cairo?”

She did have a Cairo poster from the early 2000s in her office. It was a reminder of a special night at The Jefferson when she had decided to be a bad girl and sleep with the drummer of her favorite band. Matt’s love of Cairo and covetous glances at her poster aside, what did it have to do with a floating spirit?

“You can’t have my poster, Matt. It’s practically an antique now, and I love it.”

“The hysterical guy? Riley’s brother? He was the drummer for Cairo.”

“Are you friggin’ kidding me? The haunting is at Rory O’Brian’s house?” Oh, shit! She internally wailed. How could she get out of this? The one-night stand with Rory had been the

best sex of her life but, for Rock Star Rory, it had probably been a typical Friday night with a random fan. His hasty exit while she dozed after their third bout of vigorous love making made it clear he viewed her like any other fan who wanted a night with a star. Wam Bam, thank you Ma'am. Ugh.

She had experienced a soul connection with him so profound that it was unsettling. It was like they had known each other in another lifetime. For someone who had always wanted to belong, her night with him was like being welcomed home, and it was evident he hadn't felt the same way. How could he? He was a rock star. She was just a girl. After he snuck out she had picked up her clothes and gone home – walk-of-shame style.