



CHAPTER TWO

The Boy with Haunting Eyes

The moon was full and high but the evening seemed darker than usual. After fifteen minutes with only the sound of my footsteps as company, the turrets of the old Priestly house climbed into the sky ahead of me, peering over the neighboring houses like watchtowers.

Beautiful as it was, the mansion had always reminded me of a child's dollhouse that had crumpled in on itself. Its whitewashed wooden exterior caved in at strange angles while corners jutted out like knives, piercing the overgrown masses of ivy. A stone wall covered in leaves snaked around the exterior; it was the only house in Cedar Hill that could boast such privacy, but its gothic aura did more to repel intruders than its boundary.

People who knew the house spoke of it with equal amounts trepidation and wonder, and often, to pass the time, would imagine their own stories about it.

When I was seven years old, my mother told me of a beautiful princess who would spend her days high up in the turrets of the old house, hiding herself away from an arranged marriage with a miserable and boring prince. By the time I turned ten, kids in the

neighborhood had decided it was the spellbound home of a wily old witch. She would fill the sprawling rooms with cats and frogs, cauldrons and brooms, and, deep in the night, she would fly out into the sky and scour the neighborhood for stray children who should have been fast asleep in bed. When I met Millie, she told me about the vampires, who stood just inside the cracked windowpanes, peering out with glistening crimson eyes.

Then, at fourteen, when I was completing a school history project about Cedar Hill, I stumbled across the chilling reality of the mansion. There were no witches, no princesses, and no vampires — just a story about a young woman named Violet Priestly, a frontline nurse during World War II who had come out the other side as a drastically different version of herself. Traumatic memories haunted her like ghosts until her hallucinations became too strong to ignore. Not long after poisoning her husband and their young son, she hanged herself in the foyer of the old mansion.

Of course, no one wanted to buy it after that.

Nothing could sweep away the darkness that huddled around the Priestly corner. Even during the hottest summer days, when the streets shone with mirages, there was an unmistakable iciness shrouding the mansion. And so it endured for decades, as a beacon from another time and place, resolutely empty, and utterly unconquerable.

That was, until tonight.

As I drew closer to the mansion, rubbing the warmth back into my suddenly chilly arms and second-guessing my decision to

come this way in the first place, I realized with a start that the house had changed entirely since the last time I had seen it. Someone had finally done it — *really* done it. The abandoned Priestly mansion had been dragged into the twenty-first century, and now, it was alive again.

I stopped walking.

The rusted wrought iron gates were wrenched open and pushed against hedges that no longer languished across the garden wall. The weeping willows had been pruned to an almost unnatural neatness, revealing windows on the second story that I didn't know existed. The ivy had been cut away to reveal sturdy wooden boards and a newly painted red door lit up by a teardrop lantern on either side.

And in the light of the lanterns were two black SUVs parked side by side on freshly strewn gravel.

My phone buzzed against my hip — a text from Millie letting me know she had made it home safe, and an inadvertent reminder that I hadn't. Reluctantly, I moved to continue on my way, but something inside was stopping me. The Priestly mansion, the frozen heart of Cedar Hill, was beating again, and lateness be damned, I had to know more about it.

And that's when I sensed something. I shifted my gaze up past the trees and caught sight of a flickering figure in an upstairs window. It was a boy. I couldn't be sure of his age, but even from a distance his bright eyes were unmistakable. They were too big for his delicate face and as they watched me from what seemed like another world, they rounded into discs that

grew unnaturally. He leaned forward and pressed his palms against the glass, like he was about to push the pane from the window frame. Was he waving? Or telling me to go?

I raised my hand to him but it stalled, clammy and unsteady, in midair. And then, as quickly as I had noticed him, the strange boy was gone, vanished into the darkness behind him until the house, with its brand-new face, was still again.

Frowning, I let my eyes slide down from the empty window-pane across the driveway as the darkness ahead of me came alive. The faint sound of rustling wafted through the air, and I squinted until I could make out another figure behind one of the SUVs. He was hunched over, searching for something inside.

I tried to fight the desire to investigate, but my palms grew shaky at my sides as curiosity overwhelmed me, pushing me toward the house. I shuffled forward from the sidewalk, creeping just inside the open gates, and the rustling stopped. A car door shut and the sound of loose gravel shifted in the darkness. The figure straightened, his head appearing from behind the vehicle, moving in tandem with the noisy gravel until he stood between the house and the gates, watching me watch him.

Even beneath the lanterns, he was just an outline: a tall shadow with broad shoulders and sure movements. He paused and lowered his arm, easing a duffel bag toward the ground with deliberate slowness until it was settled at his feet. He stepped to the side and pushed it with the force of his boot until it disappeared behind the closest SUV and away from my prying eyes. But I had already seen it, whatever *it* was, and we both knew it.

He tilted his head to one side and stepped closer, one purposeful stride and then another, as he closed the space between us. With each step, my heart thumped harder in my chest. My curiosity evaporated, leaving reality in its place: I had been caught trespassing, and now this shadowed figure was stalking toward me.

I turned and stumbled back out onto the deserted street. As the sound of heavy footsteps split the silence behind me apart, I broke into a run, completely unprepared for the cat that hurtled out in front of me with a shrill meow. As I skidded to a halt, my arms flailing at my sides, he crashed into my back, silencing me midscream by jolting the wind from my lungs, and sending me flying through the air. I dropped my bag and landed on the sidewalk with a thud, my hands and knees scraping the pavement. Dizziness flooded me, sloshing the contents of my dinner back and forth in my stomach.

Before I could piece together what had happened or just how exactly I was going to be murdered, I was lifted out of my bubble of pain, away from the asphalt and onto my feet again, to where I had been standing seconds before, like someone had pressed REWIND.

Only this time, something was different. There was the feeling of strong hands on my waist. They held me upright as I wobbled back and forth, trying to find my balance.

“Stai tranquillo, sei al sicuro.” The words were so strange and unexpected, I thought I had imagined them.

I dropped my gaze and found his hands around me and suddenly I saw myself, as if from above, relaxing into the arms of a

complete stranger on a deserted street in the middle of the night, in front of the most notorious house in Cedar Hill.

A stranger who had just caught me trespassing and then knocked me to the ground.

I had seen enough romantic movies to appreciate a swoon-worthy moment — but I had also watched a lot of *CSI*. With a start, I pushed the unfamiliar hands away from my body and leapt forward. I crouched and grabbed my bag from the ground, catching a glimpse of the thick silver buckle on his leather boot before springing back up and hitching my bag onto my shoulder hastily. I looked up at him, wishing I had something weapon-worthy in my handbag, just in case. But he stood still, his face a collection of shadows in the darkness. He didn't make another attempt to attack me, and I didn't wait around to give him the chance.

“Don't follow me.” My voice sounded stronger than I felt.

I turned and started to run.

I heard him call out, but I was already gone.

I didn't turn around, but I was sure I could feel the shadow's eyes — *his* eyes — on the back of my neck as I ran. The distant sound of laughter followed me through the darkness.

I got home in record time. After depositing the pot of honey on the kitchen windowsill and trudging upstairs, I rubbed some ointment on my stinging knees and crawled into bed. After what felt like hours of staring wide-eyed at my ceiling and listening to the urgent thrumming in my chest, I fell into an uneasy sleep during which dreams of boys in windows dissolved into nightmares about shadowed figures and black-ribboned pots of honey.