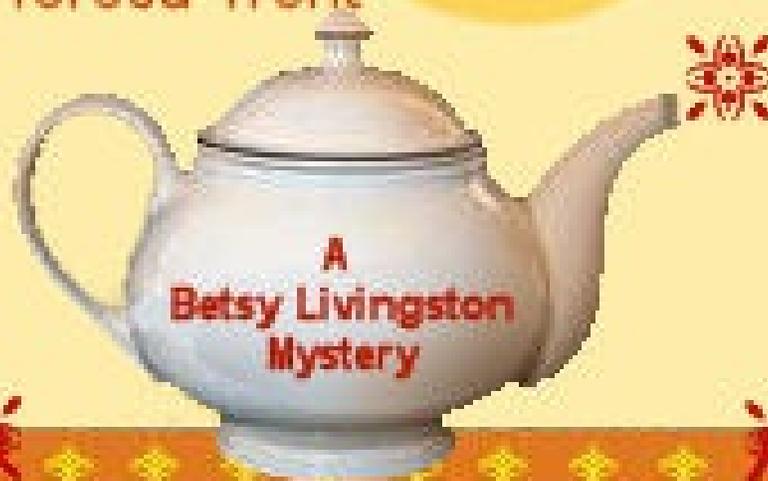


A Dash of Murder

Teresa Trent



CHAPTER ONE

*One need not be a chamber to be haunted;
One need not be a house;
The brain has corridors surpassing
Material place.*

Emily Dickinson

I looked up into the window of the crumbling abandoned hospital, and for just a second, I saw it. It was filmy and fleeting, and it seemed to find me in the midst of the suffocating heat.

“Mom, hurry up. We just need to identify any fungi or lichens, and then I have enough information for my merit badge.” My seven-year-old son, Zach turned his back on me as he searched out in the overgrown field of weeds climbing nearly to his blue-jean clad waist.

The back of my neck prickled even though I was sweating in the afternoon heat of South Texas in late October. My eyes scanned the second story of the dilapidated building, and I felt a strangely unwelcome chill. Was someone up there? The gray windows with the mismatched glass shards somehow resembled razor-sharp teeth. With a second glance, they seemed empty now.

This was the Johnson Tuberculosis Hospital. It had been closed and empty for the last forty years. So many souls had passed through here – it felt as if a part of them lingered. The hospital opened in the 1920s, providing therapies and rest from the ills of tuberculosis. Now the faded brick and shattered windows were just a lonely reminder of the necessity it once was.

An unaccustomed breeze softly meandered in, swirling the heat around us. The chinaberry and oak trees, in the patch of forest next to the hospital, swayed gently and then stopped, returning us to the feeling of being inside a steamy sauna.

“Betsy!” Danny, my twenty-four-year old cousin with Down Syndrome came across the front lawn of the hospital, the weeds swishing at his bug-sprayed ankles. He held a Scout book, the pages now flapping at his side.

“Betsy, at the job, my friend Ellie said it’s cold where her grandma is. Why isn’t it cold here? Why, Betsy?”

Danny’s “job” was general clean-up at our local fast food restaurant. I had picked him up from work today to help out my Aunt Maggie. He had a pleasant aroma of french fries still about him.

“Because we live in Texas, and Ellie’s grandma lives up North somewhere.” I turned around to see Zach, dangerously close to a plant with three leaves, which meant either poison ivy or poison oak. I don’t know why, when my only child decided to work on his plant science merit badge for his Texas Scout Achievement, he chose the required 100 by 100 plot of land right in front of this falling-down, ancient building. No one had cared for the land in years, and now it had become overgrown by prickly poppies, buffalo burrs, pigweed and devil’s horn. I slapped at a mosquito. It was in the 90s today as it had been for the last three months, and it seemed the heat and humidity would never end. We were just a few days from Halloween and still sweating.

“Ooh, Mom. I just found a broom weed.” Zach pointed to a yellow flower in a patch of weeds.

“Good, the witches can use that on Halloween.”

Danny laughed. “There is no such thing as witches, Betsy. No witches, no monsters and no ghosts!”

I nodded in agreement, and I pulled at my blouse to unstick it from my body. Again, I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. I focused back up at the window of the old hospital. Were we not alone? Was someone walking around in there?

“Zach, do you see anybody up in that window?”

Zach looked up, squinting his brown eyes in the ray of sun aimed at us. I waited as he scanned each window in the crumbling building. A bird cried behind us, piercing the quiet. He looked back at me with a scowl. “No.” He returned to his clipboard.

Danny put his hands together around his mouth and shouted at the empty building. “Hello? Hello? Anybody home?”

I blew out an exasperated sigh. “Okay. Must be the heat.” I have to admit I stayed out of the outdoors as much as possible, especially when it felt like this. Why go out and sweat when I could be inside with the air conditioning humming and the computer glowing?

My Aunt Maggie would say the thing in the window was an apparition of some type, or maybe a residual haunting of someone who lived or worked at the hospital. Ghost hunting had become one of her hobbies when my Uncle Jeeter died. She was a card-carrying member of the Pecan Bayou Paranormal Society, which consisted of herself, Howard Gunther and Birdie Bryant. Birdie was a snowbird and would probably show up around Thanksgiving and stay until Memorial Day. It was too bad she wouldn’t be around for the upcoming Halloween weekend. Maggie and Howard sorely needed her for the biggest project their group had ever tackled. I especially would have liked to see her, as I was the one who was volunteered in her place.

“Mom?”

I turned from the building to see Zach, who was holding his clipboard to his chest. He looked up at me with his eyebrow raised up to one side.

“What are you looking at?”

“I don’t know. I thought I saw something.”

“Like what?” He was starting to pick up on my anxiety. I was being silly, and I knew my slight sense of discomfort could turn into a giant fear in Zach. I needed to lighten the mood. A smile spread across my face, reassuring him all was well.

“Like ... ghosts!” I wailed and chased him and Danny around the patch of spindly greenery. They both giggled and shrieked as they ran through the tall weeds and flying insects. The sound seemed to echo against the aging bricks and decaying structure. Zach ran with wild abandon and hoisted himself up to a three-foot high brick wall that had served as an enclosure for a courtyard.

“You can’t get me!” he taunted, standing on the top of the wall.

“Zach you better get down from there!” Danny yelled from the other side of the field.

“You’ll break your ...”

Zach twisted his little body around to see his cousin. It was then that he fell backwards onto the concrete courtyard behind the wall, and I heard a sickening, snapping sound.

Zach sat holding his arm and rocking while Danny sat in the chair next to him repeating, “It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be okay.”

The late afternoon sunlight streamed through the rectangular windows of our family doctor’s office. I stood at a frosted glass window in the reception area feeling ridiculous tapping at it for the third time. The receptionist slid the dividing glass window back. She was wearing blue scrubs with white butterflies on them.

“Have you heard anything from Dr. MacPhee yet?” I asked while glancing over my shoulder at Zach still rocking in pain.

“Yes, Mrs. Livingston. He is on his way.” Her smile was tight, and her dark brown hair coiled at the back of her head. Not a hair would dare fall out of place. She put her red lacquered fingernails back on the glass door and slid it shut with a resounding click.

“It hurts, Mom.” Zach whimpered.

“I know, baby, I know. Dr. Mac will be here in just a moment.” I walked back and sat in one of the matching maroon seats and started to put my arm around him but then thought better of it.

“It’s going to be okay,” Danny echoed.

“Will I have to have a shot?” Zach asked, a tear settling at the rim of his eyelid. It wouldn’t take much to push it down his dirt-streaked face.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “But you might get a cast for everyone to sign.”

“Really?”

“Cool,” Danny said.

The door to the street opened, letting in rushes of hot air. Dr. Mac, flushed from the heat, came directly over to us. He was in his late sixties with silver-gray hair and a rather round middle. With a beard, he could double as Santa Claus and would probably be asked to play him at the hospital Christmas party in a couple of months. He put his car key into his pocket, and I could hear it jangle against change that must have already been there.

“Zachary Livingston, what happened? Have you been living life on the wild side again?” He joked as he bent down tenderly to touch Zach’s arm. His eyes never left his examination of the broken bone.

“I’m so sorry it took me some time to get here. Mrs. MacPhee has me running all over town. Our daughter, Elaina, is getting married right before Thanksgiving, and she is entertaining the future in-laws tonight. I was out picking up tablecloth linens for her. As a matter of fact, I’ll put a cast on Zachary and then I have to be out the door again.

“Thank you so much for making time for us. We could have gone to the emergency room, but I just thought it would be a lot easier with you working on him.”

“Don’t you think a thing about it. For Zachary here, I will gladly interrupt my honey-do list.”

I sighed in relief, feeling comfort in the many years he had done just what he was doing today. Mac was the doctor who had delivered Zach and helped me through that awful time when I had felt so all alone. That was when he asked me to call him Mac instead of Dr. MacPhee. He

told me that if we were going to be spending all this time together we should at least be on a first-name basis. Thanks to him and people like him, that part of my life was all just a bad dream now. It was hard to believe so much time had passed since then. When we started this doctor/patient relationship, I was married, pregnant and about to be conned.