

A Betsy Livingston Mystery

# 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 at the window of the crumbling abandoned hospital, and for just a second, I saw it. Filmy and fleeting, 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 waded through 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. Late October may designate fall in many parts of the country, but in South Texas, it’s still summer. 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 mismatched glass shards resembled razor-sharp teeth. At second glance, they seemed empty now.

We were standing in front of the Johnson Tuberculosis Hospital, empty and shuttered 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 therapy and rest from the ills of tuberculosis. Now the faded brick and shattered windows were merely a lonely reminder of its importance long ago.

“Betsy!”

At the sound of my name, I looked around to see Danny, my twenty-four-year-old cousin with Down syndrome, running across the front lawn of the hospital, the weeds swishing at his ankles. He held a Scout book, the pages now flapping at his side.

“Betsy,” Danny said, “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 doing general clean-up work at our local fast food restaurant. I picked him up from work today to help my Aunt Maggie. A pleasant aroma of French fries was still about him.

“Because we live in Texas, and Ellie’s grandma lives up north somewhere.”

I turned around to see Zach standing dangerously close to a plant with three leaves, which meant either poison ivy or poison oak. When my only child decided to work on his plant science merit badge for his Texas Scout Achievement, he could have chosen the required 100’ x 100’ plot of land anywhere. I don’t know why we had to look at weeds in front of this falling-down, ancient building.

This property had been neglected for years, and was now overgrown by prickly poppies, buffalo burrs, pigweed and devil’s horn. I slapped at a mosquito. The temperature was in the 90s, 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 broomweed.” Zach pointed to a yellow flower in a patch of weeds.

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

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

I nodded in agreement and pulled at my blouse to unstick it from my body. Again, I caught 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 squawked behind us, piercing the quiet. Zach 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 indoors as much as possible during the summer months, 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 a residual haunting of someone who lived or worked at the hospital. Ghost hunting had become one of her hobbies after my uncle Jeeter died. She was a card-carrying member of the Pecan Bayou Paranormal Society, which consisted of Maggie, Howard Gunther and Birdie Bryant.

Birdie was a snowbird and would probably show up around Thanksgiving and stay in Pecan Bayou 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 to take her place.

“Mom?”

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

“What are you looking at?”

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

“Like what?” He was beginning to pick up on my anxiety. I was being silly, and I knew my slight 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.

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

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 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 was 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 sat back down next to Zach and started to put my arm around him, but then thought better of it.

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

“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 dropped his car key into his pocket, and I heard it jangle against some change.

“Zachary Livingston, what happened? Have you been living life on the wild side again?” He smiled as he bent down and tenderly touched Zach’s arm. Dr. Mac’s eyes never left 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, Ellen is getting married right before Thanksgiving, and she is entertaining the future in-laws tonight. I was out picking up table 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 grateful for the many days like today. Mac was the doctor who had delivered Zach and helped me through that awful time when I had felt so 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 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.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Seven Years Earlier*

I stretched out my arms to my husband as he walked up the broken concrete we called a sidewalk.

Barry came through the squeaky screen door of the rental house. “I’m home,” he said, the tiredness creeping into his voice. His greeting was followed by a hacking cough that sounded deep in his chest. I was hoping he felt better tonight.

Barry had been expecting me to rush out the door to my own job at the Alamo Grand Theater, but instead I had squeezed my balloon-shaped body into a black sleeveless dress. Hoping he wouldn’t notice how little room there was in the dress, I flounced my long brown hair to give it fullness. I had seen this in a movie while I had been walking up and down the aisles looking for people with their feet on the seats. I even practiced it in the mirror earlier that day. I leaned against the doorway of our tiny kitchen and put on my best Marlena Dietrich voice.

“Hello.” Sexiness was practically oozing out of my vocal cords.

Barry loosened the tie on his white shirt and smiled. His light blue eyes crinkled at the corners. “Well ... hello. Listen, I don’t know who you are, but I’ll bet my wife will be back any moment.” He sighed and I walked over, taking him into my arms. He pulled back slightly, his eyes taking in my ever-so-seductive outfit.

“That dress just barely fits you. I wonder if it will even fit after the baby’s here.”

He was right. It was too tight, but so was our budget. He lowered his lips onto mine and kissed me. Maestro cue the violins. A warmth spread through me. We were finding the same old wonderful us. I reveled in the moment, and then he pulled his face back and looked at me, not moving, not progressing.

“Barry?”

“Yes?” His eyes drifted towards the closed closet door to the left of me. I chose to ignore it. We were on our way to being fine, and I wasn’t stopping.

“Barry, I don’t have to go to the theater tonight.”

His crystal-blue eyes pulled back to mine. “Um, yes I gathered that.”

“I thought that maybe we could ...”

His face took on a scowl as he shook his head. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? I mean with all that the doctor said.”

The violins in my romantic fantasy came to a screeching halt.

“The doctor said that there was a chance of a disability. These tests aren’t foolproof, you know.”

“I know. A chance of a disability.”

I reached up and pushed a stray hair out of his face. He must have left his suit jacket in the car again. When he was showing property, he always dressed in a full suit no matter how hot the weather.

Barry’s partner was the same way. Barry had been a part of Canfield Investments for almost two years now. In that time, he had brought home exactly four commission checks. It was a

wonder how we made the money stretch. Once the baby arrived, I knew money would be extremely tight.

“So?” My voice led upward.

“So, well ... I can't stop thinking about Danny. Your aunt and uncle had to give up their lives to take care of him. If something like that should happen ... well, I'm just not sure I'm up for it.”

“They wouldn't say they've given up their lives. If anything, they would say he made their lives better, richer and happier. Besides that, it's not going to happen.” His grip tightened on my arms as if he were fighting off a wave of aggravation.

My own anger began to rise in my throat. “And what good does it do to go there, Barry? Why are we stressing out about a situation that may never happen to us? Why?”

He let go of me and backed up, yanking at his unfastened tie. “I don't know. You're probably right.”

He gazed at the floor and then back up at me, seeming to gain control of his emotions. His voice was strained but tender. “Listen, why don't you take this evening to get off your feet and rest, and keep that baby healthy? I ran out of cough drops at work, and I won't sleep tonight if I can't get this hacking to stop. I'll be right back, okay?”

Even though it wasn't the evening I wanted, he did, at least, seem to be trying to find some peace with his fears. Worrying about something that may or may not happen could make anybody crazy. Maybe we could get back on track and restart this evening, just not in the way I had planned.

“Okay. I guess I'll put our romantic evening on hold.”

He took my hand in his. I loved the feeling of his hand surrounding mine. “Good. I hope you can understand I don't want to take any chances with our baby. I'm trying to believe everything will be okay, but I have to at least know I did all I could to ensure the baby's safety.” He looked at the feast I had prepared for our anniversary dinner. “Oh, and I already ate. You should probably go ahead and eat.”

He kissed me on the forehead, lingering just a little too long, and with that, Barry was out the door and on his way.

I kicked off my black heels, blew out the candles I'd lit and started putting the dinner into plastic containers. Barry was always right about things concerning me. He had big dreams of success in his world of investing. He told me how he planned to start here in Pecan Bayou, then as the company grew, we would move to Dallas or Houston where he and Canfield would have offices. We would be a part of a country club and associate with the wealthiest people in the state. It seemed he was training to be a somebody, and I loved that about him. I was more of a tomboy than the Junior League material he had no doubt envisioned, but he was always there to guide me, and I was thankful.

I changed out of my stretched-out little black dress and into my pink cotton maternity gown, then stretched out on the couch to wait for Barry. That was just the beginning of a long, long wait.

It wasn't until later I found out he had a bag already packed in the trunk of his car. In the closet, he had stowed another bag and his golf clubs. I would have loved to wrap at least one of those clubs around his neck. I guess he was planning to slip out while I was at work. No divorce, no child support, no shared custody. Life's too hard – see you later. His plan would have worked perfectly if I hadn't planned my little surprise. How did I not see this coming? Fairytale endings may happen to other women, but not to me. Somehow, I had failed.

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