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PRESTWICK MANOR

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CONTENTS

1	The House	1
2	Whispers in the Dark	8
3	At Breakfast	13
4	In the Study	21
5	The Calm of Night	27
6	A Name	33
7	Ben Fairfield	40
8	Searching for Nothing	47
9	Writings	55
10	To the Library	61
11	Too Much	71
12	Secrets and Lies	76
13	In the Forest	81
14	In the Writing	86
15	The Marker	92
16	Announcement	97
17	Leave or Die	102
18	The Special Dinner	112
19	The Conversation	116
20	The Phone Call	121
21	Madness	127
22	Run Away	133
23	Darkness	140
24	Fall	144
25	White Light	149
26	Again	160

PRESTWICK MANOR

THE TRUTH WILL HAUNT YOU

1

THE HOUSE

IT WAS A STORIED old house, grand in appearance, yet it still had a quaint, temperate value to it. It was built by the standards common at the time, but it was unique in its own right. The house was constructed between 1791 and 1795, a very expensive, very difficult four year project that consumed the lives of those involved.

It was a two-story home with eight identical Greek columns lining the front of the house. The front door was placed precisely in the middle of the columns, with another door directly above it on the second floor that led out to a large balcony that spanned the length of the porch and continued along the sides and across the back of the house. There were two windows on either side of both the first and second floor doorways for a total of eight windows, all spaced evenly between the columns. The house was symmetrical all the way around with special emphasis on the symmetry in the front, as precise detail went into the windows, doorways, and columns. The house was built of stone with a stucco overcoat. The stucco itself was a mixture of lime, water, and sand. The stucco surface, combined with the whitewashing added to it, gave the house a very prominent, noble look.

Though it was a splendid sight to see, the house still reflected the traditional, conservative manner of post revolutionary America—which is not at all what he had in mind.

When Frederick Prestwick decided to build this home, he intended for it to be the most magnificent construction in all of America. It would, he said, be more impressive than all the capitols in the colonies, all the trade houses of the major cities, and

all the estates of the King of England himself. It would be the envy of all others.

The son of a poor farmer from South Carolina, Frederick Prestwick was born into a turbulent and troubled time. From a very early age, he learned about the injustice of a cruel and evil tyrant, from the exorbitant taxes of the Stamp Act to the murderous rampage of Thomas Preston and his troops in Boston. Some people said he had a strange way about him, pensive and serious, devoid of all emotion, as if he knew war was inevitable from the day he was born. On occasions when he was asked his feelings on war, he would calmly reply, "If it comes to that, I will be ready."

At the age of fifteen, he, along with his father, joined the Sons of Liberty. Support for the group was mixed, for though anger and tension whirled through the north like a mighty storm, many in the south still had their doubts. While the Sons in the north were hailed for their bravery and defiance, their brethren in the south were obscure, their duties trivial, very mundane tasks such as organizing secret meetings, distributing pamphlets calling for war, and taking place in the occasional act of rebellion. For Frederick, it was nothing important, not yet at least, though his day would come. Everyone's day would come.

In 1775, four years later, he and a handful of others volunteered to represent South Carolina at the onset of war, as it was evident war could start at any moment. He was dispatched to Massachusetts, a place of long suppressed rage just waiting to explode into war. While the others spoke nervously as they left South Carolina, he calmly said, "If it comes to that, I will be ready."

Frederick was stationed at Lexington with the local militia, referred to as the Minutemen, where they anxiously awaited an encounter with a far superior enemy. On April 19, 1775, Frederick stood in the green fields of Lexington across from hundreds of British Redcoats, staring into the face of death, the symbol of an empire, the power and honor that dominated the world for nearly two centuries since the defeat of the Spanish in 1588. A mighty army stood against a meager battalion. Great will challenged great arrogance. Men with nothing, willing to die for everything faced men with everything, willing to die for nothing. Peace was gone, only war remained.

Chaos erupted when a single report pierced the silence, breaking the stalemate that had been building for over a decade. To this day, historians still consider it the greatest mystery of the

revolution. In actuality, however, there was no mystery about it. Frederick Prestwick fired that shot. And it was neither a misfire nor a nervous twitch, as most had speculated. In contrast, Frederick calmly took aim and fired, wounding an enemy soldier.

With clear eyes and a steady hand, he started the conflict many had hoped for, dreamed of, and feared all at once. He had been anticipating war for so long, he wanted it—needed it. His main priority was not, however, building a free nation, though he was an ardent patriot until his death. No, he wanted this war for himself, for he saw it as his chance to break free from poverty and debt. This was his ticket to fame and fortune, prominent status in society. It was for this reason that Frederick Prestwick fired the first shot at Lexington, the shot heard round the world, the shot that officially started the American Revolutionary War. He never told a single soul the truth about that day.

After the retreat at Lexington, Frederick remained in Massachusetts and was later dispatched to Breed's Hill where, on June 17, he again met the British forces. He killed nearly ten Redcoats during the three advances they made and was the very last man to abandon the hill when the retreat was ordered. Soon after, his name began to circulate among colonial leaders across the land, as word of his heroism spread throughout Massachusetts, Virginia, and the Carolinas. He was a rising star, a hero for a country in desperate need of one.

Frederick was sent back to South Carolina and commissioned as a colonel in charge of training the South Carolina militia. The average man was a mean, hardened criminal twice Frederick's age. Militiamen feared neither punishment nor death. And they followed their young leader to any place, to any fate.

The war surged into South Carolina in late 1775. The British forces advanced deep into the state, cutting through the depleted American forces, as casualties increased. In 1776, the British intended to lay waste to Charleston, the symbol of greatness in South Carolina. By rank, Rutledge led the militiamen, but in action, Frederick Prestwick commanded the forces, demonstrating time and time again how to fight with the utmost severity. Victory was theirs, the British held at bay.

Frederick spent the next four years fighting throughout the region, amassing fame and honor as he did so. Ultimately, however, he would return to Charleston, for the enemy was not ready to concede. In 1780, Cornwallis—the terrifying commander of the British campaign—led an unstoppable force into South Carolina, intent on sacking Charleston. Though he tried bravely, Frederick

could not defend the city from the most powerful army in the world, not this time. He gave his blood for his people but to no avail, for the British were quick and ruthless in subduing the city. Losses were great, hearts heavy, spirits crushed. Frederick's own father was killed in the battle for Charleston. Still, he would not give up the fight. He had to win this war—his very life depended on it. If the Americans were successful, he would be hailed as a patriot who killed many an enemy. If they failed, he would be put to death as a traitor who killed many a King's men.

The British moved farther south, and Frederick was dispatched to defend the area around Columbia in the center of the state. En route to their destination, he and a small group of his militia were ambushed by nearly fifty Indians loyal to the British. At the onset of war, several British generals promised certain Native chiefs that their lands would be returned provided they help defeat the American forces. These were silent treaties, ones that never made their way into the pages of history. Even the King himself knew nothing about it.

In what came to be known as the Battle of the Dead Forest—undoubtedly the bloodiest, most savage battle ever fought on American soil—the Natives overwhelmed the militiamen in a calculated attack. The fight quickly turned to close quarter combat, as all civility and honor of modern warfare was lost to the revulsion and anarchy of real life. The barbaric confrontation waged for nearly an hour. Nothing was too brutal for this fight, no act too atrocious. Skulls were smashed in, arms chopped off, eyes torn out, throats slashed. Weaponry was anything that could be found, including rifles for clubbing, swords, spears, knives, sticks, stones, even teeth and fingernails.

The Americans fought bravely, but it was not enough. Frederick fell after being stabbed, and his men surrendered soon after. Though alive, he was barely conscious, paralyzed for a time, with a spear broken off deep in his stomach. He could only watch as the Indian Chief ordered the barbaric execution of his captured men. After the enemy moved out to search for the rest of his men, Frederick tried to crawl, though he could hardly move. He wanted only the strength to stand, for he would not dishonor his men by fleeing. He would fight to the death. But as he struggled to rise, his eyes caught hold of a familiar sight growing nearby, and an idea came to him. He took hold of it, carefully mixing it into the water his men had been carrying, and crawled off to hide in the forest. When the Indians came back, they took provisions off the disgraced bodies—including their water.

Frederick followed closely but quietly until dusk, a silent hunter stalking his prey. He waited in the shadows not far from their campsite. After several hours, he made his way toward them. When he saw the manner in which they were acting, he knew they had tasted the water.

The water contained traces of Jimson weed, one his father had warned him about as a child because it causes hallucinations and extreme sickness. The Indians were dancing around a fire, laughing and crying. Some ran around like madmen, others were too sick to stand. One brave had stumbled into the fire and fallen asleep. His burning flesh was in the air, a scent the animals would soon find. The last of the Indians lost consciousness just before dawn. Frederick, who had not moved the entire night, watched as he did so. When he was certain all were asleep, he moved in.

The Chief awoke to a splitting headache, though it was the least of his concerns at the time. He had a bizarre taste in his mouth, sweet yet bitter at the same time. After a few moments, his eyes focused enough for him to realize what had happened. The taste in his mouth came from a mixture of two things—honey and blood. The blood was his own, spewing forth from a gash across his chest, which hurt all the more because it was covered in honey. He tried to move but couldn't. Panicked, he looked around and saw the severity of the situation. His braves were lying around him, dead, while he was tied to a tree. Two blood trails led away from the camp, for animals dragged away two of the bodies. And they would soon return.

THREE DAYS LATER, the Continentals found the Natives. The Chief was there as well, still tied to a tree, half eaten by insects and animals. His eyes were open and wide with fear, mouth twisted in the most shocking expression of horror. Two things were clearly evident: animals had eaten him, and he was still alive when it happened. The Americans searched the area and found Frederick lying on the ground, exhausted, surrounded by nearly two-dozen freshly made graves.

The battle remained a closely guarded secret, for such gruesome details would have damaged morale even further. No one dared ask Frederick about the battle, for no one wanted to hear the horrors of that day. Everyone believed Frederick was insane, that this battle had pushed him into madness. This much, at least, was true: the man who led his troops into that forest was

not the man who emerged from it only days later.

Frederick fell from prominence soon after the Battle of the Dead Forest. Though he had been unofficially appointed commander of the southern forces only weeks before, the title was revoked and given to Nathaniel Greene. After the horrors that took place, he was no longer deemed a worthy candidate.

Frederick was sent north as the tides began to turn, though he remained in obscurity. He was at Yorktown the day the British surrendered. After the war—when the Battle of the Dead Forest was but a legend of early American mythology—he became a prominent figure and successful businessman in South Carolina. He, like many others, wanted to be the new upper class of America. While others tried to accomplish this through political office, he looked to financial worth and material possessions. He wanted his home to be a symbol of his new status. In 1791, he hired Diego Pasitos Covas, a renowned Spanish architect, to undertake the construction. The spot would be on a seventy-five acre plot of land just outside Columbia. Careful planning and consideration went into every detail. The house was like none other when it was completed. Architects used it as a model for important federal buildings throughout the country. It sparked a new style of architecture, one that would become popular in the early 19th century.

AFTER FREDERICK DIED in 1815, generations of Prestwicks continued to live in the house, enjoying its fine qualities. The deed was always passed on to the oldest male, who may or may not have allowed his siblings to live on the estate. For over 100 years, a majority of his descendents stayed, content to live their entire lives in that house, or so it seemed.

How could they be content? Their whole world consisted of a mere seventy-five acres of land. They were separated from the rest of the world, isolated, cut off from civilization. It would not last much longer, though. In 1917, the patriarch of the household went for a walk late one night and was never seen or heard from again. No one ever knew what happened, but there were rumors, whispers. It left his family feeling vulnerable—and utterly terrified. A short time later, the eldest male, who was not even twenty years old at the time, moved the family to Chicago where he founded and operated a successful meat packing plant. They did not sell the home or the land. They simply left one day, never to return. Not a single person ever went near the house again. That

is, until now.

Nine years ago, the latest generation of Prestwicks—a father and his daughter—returned to the house. It was much the same as it had been when it was abandoned nearly eighty years prior. Though left unattended, only minor damages occurred, a true testament to the quality and skill with which it was built. The new inhabitants could not simply move in, however. Six months and a substantial amount of money were needed to make the house inhabitable. The most extensive project was installing running water and plumbing, though they were able to take advantage of the freshwater pond on the property. An oven, refrigerator, and dishwasher were also brought in. Most other things, however, were left untouched. They kept the wallpaper and floorboards that had been in place when they moved in. They left much of the old furniture in tact. It was as if they fell back in time, like they were now living in the past, during the days in which the house was first built.

There is life once again in this storied old home. After more than seventy-five years, the family has returned home to Prestwick Manor. It is here, at this junction of time and place, where our story shall begin.

2

WHISPERS IN THE DARK

IT WAS A COLD summer's night. The wind howled through the darkness—it was a violent howl, one that could chill the soul of any who heard it. Tree branches brushed against the window, scratching the pane with a menacing scream. The room was dark. Looking in from the window, it appeared to be a normal room containing all the usual commodities—dresser, oak desk, an old, wooden bed frame with a relatively newer looking mattress, and a shelf with stuffed animals on the side and large, wooden letters spelling out a name in the middle. Next to the bed stood an end table with two distinct items on top of it: a small lamp and a frame with a picture of a young girl and a middle-aged man. The girl from the picture was lying in the bed.

She lay motionless, appearing to be sound asleep, in a very happy, carefree sleep in which children are meant to dream. It was, however, not so, none of that was true. She was not asleep, she was not happy, and she most certainly was not carefree. She had a problem. A problem few people would believe. A problem even fewer people would understand. A problem even fewer still could relate to. A problem no one could help her with. This was a problem no ten-year-old should have to suffer.

Her name was Ellie Marie Prestwick. She had shoulder length brown hair that matched her brown eyes. She had a fair complexion, which paralleled her smooth skin—except, that is, for the single blemish. On her right arm, slightly above her wrist in the middle of her forearm, was a long, deep scar. It was not a birthmark but a cut, one she felt not so long ago, one that changed her life significantly, just as it had changed her skin so drasti-

cally. It was the only rough spot on her skin, the only cut in her heart, the only darkness from her past. She lay silently in her bed with her eyes closed, afraid to move, afraid to be detected. She only listened, waiting for the sound she heard many nights before while alone in her bed.

It was not just the wind or the rustling of leaves or the sounds of the old house or her imagination. It couldn't be, for none of that could leave her stricken with such terror. No, this sound was deeper, darker. It was voices she heard. For the past few weeks she heard them, mostly at night, sometimes during the day, only when she was alone. There were two voices: a man's voice and a woman's voice. She heard the woman's voice most often, hearing the man's voice on only one single occasion. Ellie never saw them, but she always knew when they were near, whispering in the shadows from some hidden corner of the old house. The woman talked to herself, or to the man—or, sometimes, to Ellie. She never dared answer. She did not know who they were or what they wanted. However, she knew exactly what they were.

They were ghosts. Ellie knew that from the moment she first heard their voices, their hoarse, choked whispers echoing in the darkness. The ghosts talked to her when she tried to sleep, whispered to her when she tried to study her schoolwork, followed her wherever she went, and watched her every move, her every step. The ghosts, however, were not the cause of her troubles, not the reason she was unhappy. They were not the problem in her life no ten-year-old should have to deal with. Unfortunately, her problem was much worse. Her problem was the house.

Ellie had not lived in the house her entire life, but it was the only place she could remember. She was born in the suburbs of Illinois, about an hour outside of Chicago. Her father was a successful writer, a somewhat well known author, though not quite a household name. His famous supernatural thriller, *Krilogy*, sold half a million copies and was a national bestseller for many months. His successes, however, ended the day his daughter was born—the day his wife died of complications during the delivery. Her father fell into severe depression during the weeks and months that followed his wife's death. After two years of constant pressure from the media and his inability to write another bestseller, he opted for change—a drastic change. He moved to the house, which he inherited after his father died some years earlier. A dark and mysterious place that remained uninhabited since his father's father left at the age of nineteen,

this was the only home she ever truly knew.

Ellie hated the house. Physically, it had no faults—it was an impressive structure to behold, especially considering its age. But she was isolated inside of it—isolated, alone, and afraid. The ghosts were part of this place, their presence inexplicably tied to the house. She was sure of it, for they never followed her to school. She never noticed them when she went away, but any time she was at home, the ghosts were always there, waiting, watching. More than anything, though, she hated this house because her mother had never been there.

Though Ellie never knew her mother, she still missed her always. She had never even seen a picture of her mother. Not a single one could be found anywhere in the house, though she knew they were hidden somewhere. But she never dared ask about them. Her father, she believed, blamed her for her mother's death, held her responsible for the tragedy that befell him, for somewhere deep in his heart, he resented her, hated her. And whenever his heart became troubled, the feeling would escape from within, break free from the place it was contained—like it did that one time.

She was so scared of him that day. It was a side of him that never existed before, or so she thought. She sat on the floor of the bathroom, shaking with fear, praying for God to help her daddy be well again. Mostly, though, she was praying that the door would hold...

Her thoughts were interrupted by a noise in the darkness—a sound that was now very familiar to her, one she could easily detect, one that filled her with dread. The floor creaked and moaned as pressure was exerted on it—the sound of footsteps could not be denied. Ellie lay motionless with her eyes closed, trying not to move, think, or even breathe. She listened intently to the noises around her—the whispers in the dark—as she lay there, alone and helpless. The footsteps moved back and forth near the foot of her bed, until they stopped very suddenly. Ellie knew the ghost was staring at her. She felt that burning sensation you feel inside when you know someone is staring at you intently, watching your every move, your every motion, your every expression. Ellie felt it as the ghost studied her closely, watching for any signs of movement. Then, Ellie heard it—a woman's voice, speaking in a very hoarse whisper.

“Ellie,” the voice said.

Ellie concentrated on not moving an inch, focused all her energy on remaining perfectly still. She did not want to give any

sign of consciousness. She tried to remain calm, but she felt her heart begin to beat faster. The voice came to her again, a little harsher and more demanding this time.

“Ellie. Ellie, wake up. Wake up.”

The voice chilled every bone in her body. She felt herself beginning to tremble, but she was able to control it, at least for the moment. She heard footsteps again, as the ghost grew restless. The woman walked faster, her steps harder than before. Her breathing—or at least what Ellie assumed was breathing—grew faster and stronger with every step. Then, after a time, there was nothing. As quickly as the sounds had come, they were gone. Ellie was again left with the dead silence of a dark night spent in isolation.

She listened for a few moments but still heard nothing, unable to tell for certain if the ghost was still in the room. Then, she resolved to open her eyes and look around, for she was tired of hiding behind her eyelids, hiding in the shadows. She had to make a stand, once and for all. Either way, it would be beneficial. If the ghost was gone, she might be able to calm herself enough to sleep. If the ghost was still there, Ellie might finally see her at last. She took a breath in hopes of finding courage, but there was none to be found. Still, she pressed on, slowly counting down in her head to the moment she would face her fears at last: 3...2...1...

She thrust upright with a violent motion as her eyes searched across the room, scanning back and forth, back and forth so quickly that everything was a blur. Her motions were fast and irregular, like those of a wild animal searching for the dangerous predator lurking in the shadows. Her dresser, desk, and shelf all blurred together. She saw nothing. After a sufficient and thorough search, she stopped and sat silent for a moment. Not a sound could be heard. She sighed in relief, for the ghost was gone.

Then, suddenly and without warning, a figure moved out of a dark corner of the room. It was the woman, moving toward her with great speed and severity. Ellie quickly threw the covers over her head just before the woman reached her bed. In the brief instant Ellie laid eyes on the woman, she was able to capture her appearance in great detail. The woman had a commanding presence, which seared itself in Ellie’s mind. The woman looked about thirty years old, with curly brown hair and a fair complexion. She wore a long, white dress. Her skin looked very pale, her demeanor was very solemn, and her eyes were as cold as

death.

Ellie held the covers over her head tightly, certain the woman was standing right in front of her. Then, to her utter shock and horror, she felt a slight tugging on her blanket—the ghost was trying to pull her covers off. Ellie was frantic, trembling with fear as she struggled to breathe. She held on to the covers with all her might, as if her life depended on it. And it did.

In desperation, Ellie spoke.

“Leave me alone,” she pleaded. “Please, leave me alone.”

The woman did not respond, and Ellie felt the force of the pulling steadily increase, the blankets beginning to slip away. Her head was nearly exposed from beneath them. Again, she cried out in despair.

“Stop! Please stop!”

Ellie could not breathe. She felt as if she was suffocating, as if she would lose consciousness at any time. Still, the woman pulled with tremendous force, never responding to Ellie’s desperate cries. Then, Ellie spoke again, one final time.

“What do you want from me?”

The tugging stopped abruptly and without explanation. Ellie was still trembling as she held on to her blanket, the room spinning fast around her. Just before she lost consciousness, she heard something. Though she could not be sure, she thought she heard the woman speak, for she recognized the cold, quiet voice. It was a very simple, short response to Ellie’s question.

“Leave,” the voice said.

3

AT BREAKFAST

GOOD MORNING, DADDY,” Ellie said, as she walked into the kitchen. There were two entrances to the kitchen. The one Ellie entered from connected to the back hallway and led to the spiral staircase. The other entrance led down the front hallway, past the front door, into the living room.

“Good morning, Princess,” the tall, handsome man replied. Charles Prestwick was in his mid-thirties, with a fair complexion that suited his light brown hair and brown eyes very well. He wore a bright smile as he spoke to his daughter, but he was not happy. For something existed beneath his smile and his pleasant demeanor. It was like the one wrinkle on his forehead: small, almost unnoticeable, but there nonetheless.

There was sadness inside him. Such terrible sadness would come over him suddenly, without warning. It was an overpowering feeling, one he could not stop. It made him think things he didn’t want to think, say things he didn’t want to say, and do things he didn’t want to do. At its worst, this sickness brought him to the edge of insanity, the brink of madness—like that one time. The sadness was stronger than ever before, taking hold of him with such fervor, like a plague that left him powerless to resist. It was a day he wanted to deny, to pass off as a nightmare. But he couldn’t, for he knew it was true—and so did she. The only thing that had stopped him from unspeakable regret was the bathroom door. What would have happened if that door had given way, only God—or Satan—knows for sure.

“How did you sleep?” he asked in feigned cheerfulness.

“I slept very well, Daddy,” she lied. “Just like a baby.” Truly,

she did not sleep well at all. It had been a terrible, horrible night, but one of great importance as well.

“That’s good,” he said, as he opened the refrigerator and poured a glass of orange juice. Before he took a drink, he reached into his front pocket and pulled out a very small pill. His eyes wandered momentarily as he held it between his fingers, for the significance of its presence was lasting. A look of pain moved across his face, overshadowing his smile with darkness and despair. After a brief pause, he carefully placed it in his mouth and washed it down, pushing his thoughts aside for the time being—though they would inevitably return.

Ellie had not noticed his momentary reflection, for she was deeply disturbed in her own right. Once, when it first began several weeks ago, she told her father about the ghost. He merely laughed and told her it was just her imagination. Never again did she try to tell him. He still made jokes about it from time to time, but that was the only time such things were ever mentioned.

Having to shoulder this burden alone never bothered her before, for she could handle this by herself. Now, however, things were different. The ghost had never come near her before, not like last night, when the phantom attacked her and told her to leave. It was an act done with malicious intent—Ellie was sure of it. What could she do now? Clearly, she could no longer play along and pretend that this situation was not serious. She had to take action, for the ghost would not just go away. From all that she had ever learned about ghosts in her life, there were only two things she actually believed. One, they will never leave you alone until they get what they want. Two, they become more violent as time goes on.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of her father’s voice. Not hearing his words, she looked up to find him staring at her with a concerned expression on his face.

“What?”

“I said what are you going to do with your summer vacation?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Just relax I guess.” Ellie had to be the only kid in the whole world who truly hated summer vacation. Not because she liked going to school, but because in the summer, she could never leave. The house was her dungeon, a prison from which she could not escape. The dense forest surrounding the house made sure of that.

“You can always walk down to the pond,” her father suggested. “You always love walking through the forest in summer-