

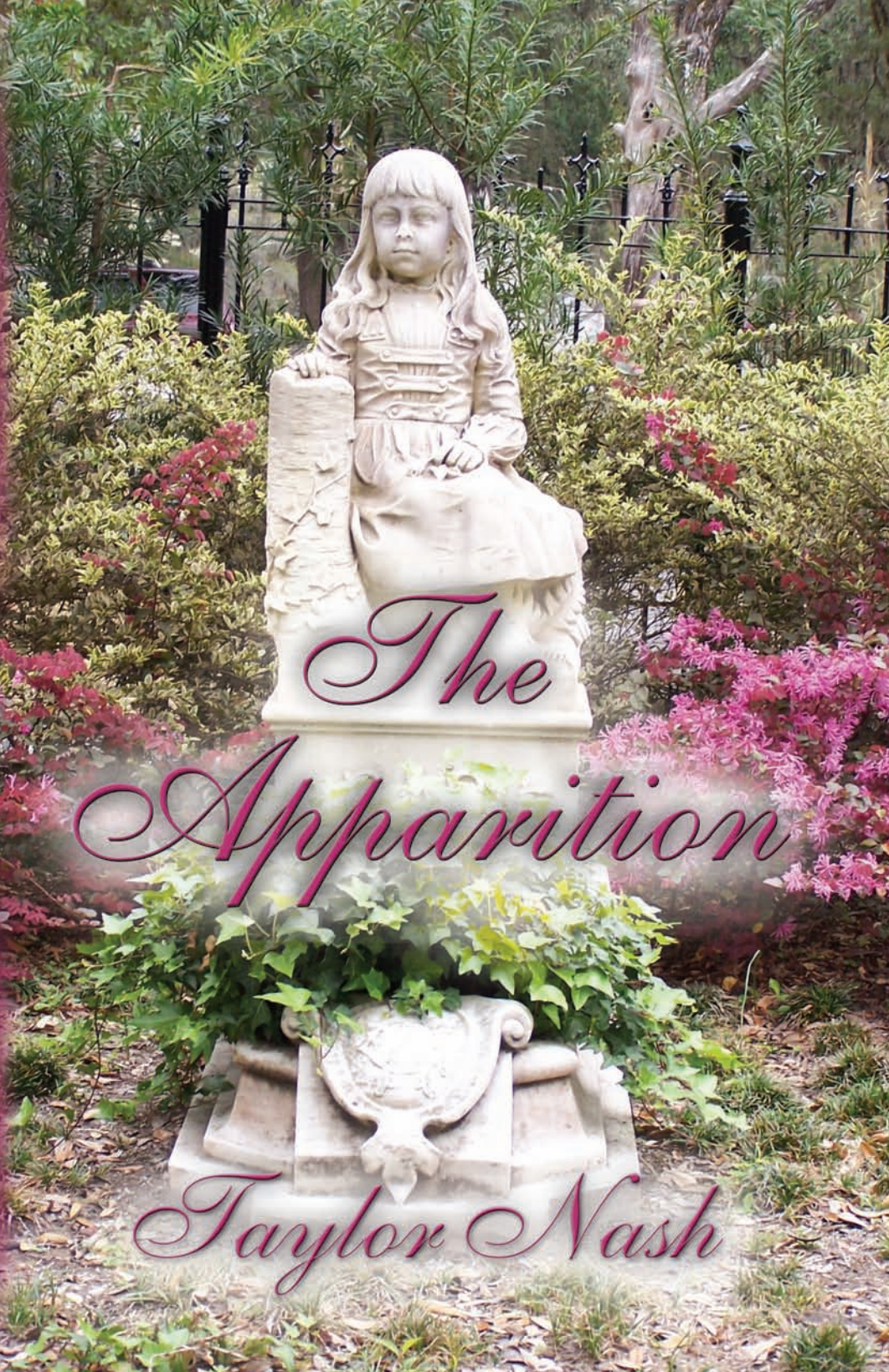
A spine chilling contemporary romantic suspense with paranormal flair. Abbey moved to a Midwestern town to escape painful memories of her husband's betrayal, and open an antique/craft store in an old home. A financially desperate contractor, Mac, is hired to do renovations. He has his own issues dealing with the death of his wife during childbirth. Personalities clash. The spirit of a child murdered twenty years ago seeks Abbey's help. Deadly secrets threaten their lives.

The Apparition

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*The
Apparition*

Taylor Nash

Taylor Nash is a master of mystery and intrigue.

*Be ready for a spine chilling read amidst a wonderful romance in *The Apparition**

-Terri Valentine, Romance Author

THE APPARITION

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CHAPTER 1

Broward, Illinois

The juniper scent of bubble bath filled Abigail Carron's nostrils. It had been a long day. She sighed as she soaked her aching body in the chipped porcelain tub with rusted claw legs. Creaks echoed throughout the old two-story house, but she kept her eyes closed as the silky bubbles swirled around her body. Then she remembered the Lambrusco. She momentarily opened one eye, long enough to reach for the wine glass. Sipping the red wine, she savored the first sip which made her throat glands tingle from its bitter sweet taste.

The familiar patter of toenails hitting hardwood gave warning her four-legged friend, Bogey, a forty pound Shar-Pei, was about to enter the bathroom. She purposely left the door open and knew she was standing next to the tub by her bad breath and whines.

Her eyes remained closed and she chuckled as she sipped the wine, dribbling some down her chin. Yep, she'd made a real fool of herself yesterday. She had embarrassed herself not only in front of Mr. MacKenzie but the nosey neighbor across the street. So, she had to set Mr. MacKenzie straight – she was not a Mrs. – she was a Ms. with no explanation to follow. But, she didn't have to be so rough on him with the curious neighbor overhearing their conversation.

When she sat the glass on the small wicker table next to the tub, she opened her eyes, soon mesmerized by the flame on the candle flickering erratically. Bogey jumped up on the tub and whined. The brown hair on the back of

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her neck bristled. Bogey licked her cheek with her blue-black tongue.

A sudden swirl of cold air encircled her extended wet arm and face, dropping the temperature in the room by at least fifteen degrees. The wet hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Bogey's whines became cries as she jumped down and ran out, the door slamming behind the retreating dog. Her pulse raced through her body.

Chilled to the bone, even though the water in the tub was steaming hot, she stepped out of the tub, grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her breasts. The cold linoleum stung her feet and made her shift her stance. She gazed in the mirror, but couldn't see herself due to the steam. When she wiped the mirror with her palm, the shock of the cold caused her to withdraw her hand quickly. She ran her finger down the mirror. Goose bumps caressed her spine. It wasn't steam. It was frost.

Her heart pounded; her imagination kicked into overdrive. There had to be a logical explanation. When she turned the round metal doorknob, it didn't budge. She shoved the door with her right shoulder so hard it knocked the breath out of her and stung her shoulder, but it still didn't open. She yanked back and forth on the doorknob with all her strength. Panic set in. Bile rose in her throat. Why didn't it move? She was locked in a bathroom the size of a closet with no windows. No way out. Alone.

She slowly slid down the door as she cried from frustration until her wet buttocks hit the cold tile floor.

Everything happens for a reason, Abbey. You're overreacting, again. Remember what Karen said in the sessions. If you're afraid of something and don't face it, how can you ever know if your fear is real?

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She took deep breaths to slow her rapid breathing and kept repeating, "If you're afraid of something, face it. Face it, Abbey."

Without warning, the exposed dangling lightbulb shattered with an explosion that pierced the frigid air. Fragments of glass stung her body like tiny needles as they pierced her skin. Now she was trapped in the dark with only the wild flicker of the candle.

When the violent swirl of cold air returned, she inhaled deeply, filling her lungs, which chilled every inch of her body. Her teeth chattered while the rest of her body shivered. Her knuckles turned white and ached from clenching the wet towel so tightly. Her worst nightmare was realized when the cold air blew out the candle.

Deathly afraid of the dark and small spaces, she sat in total darkness as her heart pounded so hard each beat swished loudly in her ears. Minutes passed like hours.

Without warning, the bathroom door opened, and she fell into the dark hallway.

"Bogey...come here, Bogey," she whispered, her voice echoing down the long hallway.

When the wrinkled ball of fur didn't come, she stood up, lost her balance, and fell into the hallway wall. She clutched the towel to her chest with her left hand while she used her right hand to guide her forward. She fumbled until she found the railing and staggered down the stairs, stubbing her cold toes.

When she stepped off the landing and onto the last step, she had just enough time to see a large figure lunge at her, knocking her down on the hardwood floor and into the rolled-up worsted wool rug. The blow forced every ounce of air out of her lungs. Dazed, she couldn't scream. Her head throbbed with dizziness.

Bogey barked and growled, but Abbey couldn't focus in the dark. Motivated by fear and pumped with adrenaline, she filled her lungs with air and her scream echoed throughout the house. She dug her long fingernails into the attacker's skin and flesh and hair accumulated under her nails as she ran them down the person's arm. The huge mass quickly rolled off her. She continued to kick with unknown strength as she was freed.

"Stop it. Stop it, dammit. It's me. Trevor MacKenzie," the attacker yelled out.

The voice was hard to recognize between the loud beats in her eardrums and Bogey barking.

"Call your damn dog off. Get the hell away from me, you stupid mutt," he ordered.

Without warning, the lights flickered back on. She recognized her attacker as the contractor who stopped by yesterday to discuss an estimate on the renovations. He sat on the floor as he ran his large hands through his ruffled hair and surveyed the blood trickling down his arm.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing coming into my house?" She scooted away from him on the hardwood floor. "You stay the hell away from me. Don't come any closer or I'm calling the cops." She searched the room filled with antique furniture and boxes and couldn't remember if there was a telephone.

"Hey, lady. Back off a minute here. And call off your damn guard dog. Hell, I think he's put a hole in my leg and look what you did to my arm."

"Well, that's what you get for breaking and entering. If you come any closer, I swear I'll kill you. Since when do contractors break into other people's houses? Is this how you get business, attacking innocent women?"

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The large man staggered as he got up and sat on the landing on the stairs.

She quickly stood up and lost her balance as she rubbed the knot on the back of her throbbing head.

“Breaking and entering? Give me a break, lady. I was dropping by some forms for you to fill out regarding the estimate we discussed. When I rang the doorbell, you didn’t answer, so I knocked and the door opened. Then the lights went out and I yelled, but you didn’t answer.” He continued to run his hand through his thick brown hair and arched his back. “I thought maybe something was wrong. I heard you scream and thought someone else was in the house and maybe you needed help...”

When he stopped in mid-sentence, she looked at his eyes and realized they were fixed on her breasts. The towel, that had once wrapped around them, had fallen and they were now exposed. She covered herself and avoided eye contact as heat filled her face.

“Well, I appreciate your concern, Mr. MacKenzie, but I’m quite capable of taking care of myself, thank you. I don’t need a man to come to my rescue,” she answered as she stroked Bogey’s thick fur to calm the shaking dog – and herself.

“Oh yes, Ms. Carron. You made that perfectly clear yesterday. Guess I’m a sucker for wanting to help women. Sure glad you’ve got a killer dog to protect you. But you better keep it in a pen or leashed. Locals might take it for a wild animal. I sure as hell hope it’s had rabies shots.”

He brushed off his jeans and surveyed the bloody bite mark on his hairy calf. Unsteady on his feet, he picked up the papers strewn over the floor.

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“Bogey’s a she, and you better leave before I call the cops. And don’t ever enter my house uninvited again.” She walked over and stood by the open door.

“No problem, ma’am.” Trevor handed her the papers. He was so close his wintergreen breath and musky aftershave drifted around her.

“And by the way, I’m not interested in this job. Find yourself another contractor.”

“No problem, Mr. MacKenzie. You aren’t the only contractor in town.”

At that, he merely laughed and turned to leave.

She hated men. All men. They weren’t to be trusted. She’d learned the hard way with her ex-husband. She flipped on the porch light and slammed the door, rattling the oval glass. She glared at his back as he swiftly walked down the stairs and disappeared into the dark.

Her finger followed the etched outline of the deer in the glass, and suddenly she felt guilty. But why? She hadn’t overreacted. Good Lord, she had just been attacked in her own home. How was she supposed to act? Her nerves and patience were frayed. She definitely was going to take her sleeping pills tonight for good measure.

~ TN ~

Unable to sleep after yesterday’s events, Abigail watched the sun rise over the cornfields while sipping her much needed caffeine. She didn’t want to waste one minute today; she had to get organized and unpack. Boxes were stacked around the house and she especially wanted to open the ones containing her antique glassware, cherished vinegar jar collection, and old vases.

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She was afraid to unwrap her collectible artwork for fear of finding damage from the careless movers.

“Hello, dear,” a meek voice yelled as she unpacked wicker baskets on the wrap-around front porch.

A hunched-over frail woman with a crooked cane tottered up the worn, wooden steps. Each step appeared as though it might be her last. In Abbey’s weakened frame of mind, her first thought was this poor old lady might fall on her property. That’s all she needed was a liability suit to add to everything else now. She wondered if Mr. MacKenzie had already contacted an attorney to sue for the dog bite last night. She instinctively reached over and assisted the feeble woman up the last step.

“Hi. Abigail Carron. May I help you, ma’am?” She leaned down to her visitor’s eye level.

“Excuse me while I catch my breath. I jus’ don’t do stairs well anymore, sweetie.” Breathless, the old woman leaned against the peeling railing.

“Can I get you a glass of water or something?”

“Oh, no. I’ll be fine in jus’ a minute.” The visitor placed the cane at her side and extended her paper thin skinned hand. Purple and blue veins protruded and reminded Abbey of a road map.

“Beatrice Weatherspoon, everyone calls me Betty. Saw the moving truck and was going to stop by yesterday, but saw Mac, so thought I’d wait until today to introduce myself.”

“Thanks for stopping by. So, you live across the street?” She placed her hand on the woman’s shoulder as a friendly gesture and was shocked by the bony frame.

“Yep, I’m the little green house right over there,” the fragile woman responded, nodding her head over her right shoulder. “Lived here all my life. Raised my three boys

there. Ernie passed away a few years back. Jus' can't part with my cats and move into those damn old folks homes like my sons want."

"I'm sorry to hear about your husband," she responded politely, but wasn't interested in her past or future for that matter.

Uninvited, Mrs. Weatherspoon sat in the white wicker rocker and used a crumpled newspaper to fan herself as though to relieve the humid summer air.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Weatherspoon, but I'm quite busy. Maybe we could visit another day when..."

"Betty, please, sweetie. Everyone calls me Betty."

Unsure how to rid herself of this unwanted company, she dropped in the matching rocker and nervously picked at the hard straw. She was in no mood to entertain today. As a matter of fact, she wanted everyone to go away and leave her to her own misery. But, she didn't want to appear rude to her new neighbor. Only knowing a handful of people in this small Midwestern town, she better not burn her bridges – yet.

"So, dear. What brings you to Broward?"

Didn't she just tell the woman she was busy? She wasn't mentally prepared to tell anyone her real reason for moving here.

"Wanted a quiet, rural area to start my antique and craft business. I lived here briefly in high school and felt drawn to come back for some odd reason."

"Well, aren't we the lucky ones. Don't get many new people or businesses here lately. Town has kinda gone downhill. Everyone wants to move to big cities these days. Can't imagine why with the smog and crime." Mrs. Weatherspoon's eyes were glassy, old, and red.

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She was uncomfortable as the woman looked her over and when Mrs. Weatherspoon placed her hand on her knee, she jumped from the shock of the cold even though it was seventy-five degrees out.

“Well, I’m so glad someone has moved into the Bane house again. Ever since little Samantha was killed, they can’t seem to keep anyone in it. Some say it’s haunted and I think I’ve seen...”

Mrs. Weatherspoon’s mouth moved, but the only word her right brain heard was haunted. Her imagination raced. She regained composure and responded as though convincing herself.

“I don’t believe in haunted houses, Mrs. Weather...I mean Betty. I chose this house because it has character and charm, even though it needs major repairs. Speaking of repairs, do you have anyone you would recommend?”

“Why, Trevor MacKenzie. He’s the only carpenter left in town. Think he needs the business from what I hear. Guess he’s kinda in a bad financial way since his wife died and now he’s got that baby to raise.” Mrs. Weatherspoon stopped long enough to take a deep breath before she continued. “Saw him over here when you moved in. Thought maybe that’s what you two were doing or maybe he’d come courting?”

“Yes, he stopped by to look at the house, but we won’t be doing business.” Irritation crept into her voice. Had Mrs. Weatherspoon heard her screams last night? If so, it would probably be all over town by noon.

“Well, what a shame. He’s a great carpenter and he’d be quite a catch, you know. Oh, that’s terribly presumptuous of me. You are single, aren’t you, sweetie? I heard you were.”

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“My, I’ve only lived here for a couple of days and everyone in town knows I’m single?” The annoyance in her voice was obvious; she didn’t care.

“Well, now. You’ve got to remember you’re in a little town, and there’s not much that doesn’t pass by us long timers. Didn’t mean anything by it, sweetie.”

Why was she feeling guilty again? All she did was express her true feelings. That shouldn’t make her a bitch, should it? Why did she continue to let people put her on a guilt trip?

“I’m sorry if I’ve upset you. Guess I’ve stepped out of line with my mouth again. I shouldn’t have said anything about the house being haunted with you jus’ moving in. How inconsiderate of me.”

“How did the little girl die?” She asked the nagging question rumbling through her head.

Mrs. Weatherspoon shifted her delicate body and cleared her raspy throat. “She was murdered. Rumors have it Samantha haunts everyone that moves into this house. They say her favorite place is the upstairs bathroom.”

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