

THE
BUTTERFLY
HOUSE

Christopher Renna

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to my husband, Paul
for always telling our children "monsters aren't real"

CHAPTER ONE

The residents of Bishop Hills, Georgia had long known that the house located at 313 Rodale Drive tormented its occupants. Those who did not know, soon learned to avoid the enchanting, three-story Renaissance Revival home set behind a cluster of purple wisteria trees. The flowery strands of lilac, mauve, and lavender drooped to the ground as if sagging under the weight of the disquietude within the walls of the home. Yet the burst of colors drew in the admiration of new, unsuspecting, and undisturbed sets of eyes. Educated by history, the house knew how to use its beauty to ensnare a family in its unyielding grip.

While the house sat vacant, its power stretched outward like a sticky, silky spider's web clinging to limbs and branches. The vibration of its influence infected neighboring homes and families like tangled electric wires on the fritz. Then, when new occupants moved into the home, its dominance over the town retreated into the cozy womb of The House—generating strength for its otherworldly activity.

The last occupants, a family of six, had fled twenty-seven days prior as the rising sun appeared on the horizon like the flames of an approaching wildfire. They loaded two cars with their suitcases, a cache of important documents, and the family pets. No one looked out the back window as they sped away from the house they had abandoned.

As required, volunteers around town cleaned the house and shipped boxes and furniture to the departed family. More often than not, fleeing occupants opted not to reclaim any item that might be tainted with the negative and terrifying energy of the home. What the family no longer wanted, the city sold, and the funds were deposited into an account for municipal purposes. Over the years, the municipal fund had swelled to a large amount—*phantom money*, the city council called it.

As the current trustee of 313 Rodale Drive, Debra Hobbs followed a strict routine preparing the house for potential buyers. She had learned a lot from her predecessor, John Holden. The list of dos and don'ts had seemed daunting in the beginning. Yet he assured her that if she followed the process of cleansing the home properly, everything could be accomplished in two or three days. "Take care of the house in a caring manner," he had said, "and the house will take care of you." Soon after, he and his family quietly moved out of town—never to be seen or heard from again.

During her several years as trustee, Debra had grown accustomed to the bangs and thuds, the whispers and laughter, and the cold spots and gusts of hot air. The strange feeling of being followed or watched took time to adjust to and ignore. Still, the one thing Debra didn't like: the sensation of being touched by unseen hands. However, she had a ten-year-term to fulfill as trustee. With only three years remaining of her obligation, she had no intention of quitting before it was time to pass along the role of trustee to the next individual. Then perhaps she too could quietly move out of town, never to return.

She had recently told herself *I survived the worst two years ago. I can carry on for a few more years.*

That incident troubled her every time she stepped foot into the house. Whenever she walked through the double front door of distressed oak, her mind wrestled with the memory she felt powerless to forget.

Don't think about it. Don't entice it with fear. Don't be a victim.

That day two years ago, she had spun around on her stilettos and ran home to the arms of her fiancé, Richard. He dried her tears and calmed her nerves. Together, they returned to 313 Rodale Drive and completed the cleansing as expected. Following that day, neither ever mentioned the shadow beast again.

After that frightening encounter on a summer day of 2017, she implemented a new step to her process: talking to the house.

On a warm April morning, weeks after the last family had fled, she unlocked the doors and walked in with a smile on her face and a stubborn determination in her mind. "Good morning. I'm here to cleanse the house for the new occupants."

She vocalized each chore throughout the day. "I'm going to dust this room." "I need to call in a painter to cover this stain on the wall *again*." "I have to look in the closet for personal items of the previous owners." "Luring these stray animals and rodents into the house isn't making my job any easier." "I need to open the windows to air out the stench of death." "I'm going to get a brand-new shiny doorknob for the front door. It'll look lovely. You'll see."

Once the house had been appropriately cleaned and staged, she concentrated on enticing home buyers to 313 Rodale Drive. No one in town would ever buy The House and live in it. She needed to wait for an out-of-towner with a sizable bank account and the need for a large home for their family in charming Bishop Hills, Georgia.

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The House behind the cluster of wisteria trees waited impatiently for a family. In the meantime, its many withered fingers extended outward, clutching every house it contacted. Turing lights off and on. Closing and

opening doors. Banging on the walls and floorboards. Throwing objects and casting shadows across a room or down a hall. It mumbled and groaned. Sometimes it spoke: *We will consume you.*