

Sleep No More

by Susan Crandall

Prologue

The house where Abby Whitman's family lived wasn't like the plantation houses in the movies. There was no sweeping staircase and grand foyer. The house did have two sets of stairs. The second was at the back of the house -- it was for servants "back in the day," as Abby's daddy said. The foyer stairs was fancier, sure, but it was no Tara.

It was at the bottom of the foyer stairs that Abby's mother stopped her and held her by the shoulders.

Confused and disoriented, Abby tried to pull away. She didn't know why panic was squeezing the breath from her lungs. She shouldn't be afraid of Momma.

"Abby. Abby, stop," her mother's voice was quiet, but Abby heard something underneath; a dark whisper of fear.

Abby's eyes began to focus. Her mother was smiling, but her eyes looked scared. Momma was never scared.

Abby's stomach took a roller coaster plunge.

"You're sleepwalking again, sweetie," Momma said. "Let's get you back to bed."

That was when Abby saw the heavy front door standing open and understood why Momma was so upset. Abby had been outside in the dark.

Outside where there were gators and snakes and a river to drown in. Outside where there was quicksand and woods to get lost in.

Every night when she went to bed, Abby promised herself she wouldn't sleepwalk. And then she prayed that God would fix her. Promises and prayers weren't doing any good. This was the second time in a week Abby had wandered in the night. The last time she'd woken up in the hayloft in the barn.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Great Gran Girault was there waiting.

Abby had been hoping now that she was eleven she'd grown out of being scared of Gran Girault. But sure as the moon, she hadn't. Gran had to be a hundred; tall and thin with weathered skin sagging on her bones. Her white hair was always in a bun – even in her nightgown.

She lived in Louisiana, where they believed in things like evil spells and devil's curses. One time when she was visiting, Abby had found a little pouch under her pillow one morning. When she'd opened it, it had tiny bones and some dried weeds and a rock in it. It smelled funny. Momma had been really mad when she found out.

Almost always when Gran looked at Abby, it was with a frown.

Now Gran looked at Abby with a frown so intense it made the hair on the back of her neck prickle.

“I tell you, Betsy,” Gran said, her voice like sandpaper on rocks, “you need to do somethin’. It ain't natural, her creepin' 'round here in the night like she does. Starin' eyes like she's possessed.”

“Shush, Gran!” Momma kept them walking right past Gran.

Abby's room was next to her sister Courtney's. She was six and everybody always said she's “cute as a button.” Court never went sleepwalking. And Gran Girault never looked at her with a frown.

Momma tucked Abby into bed and kissed her on the forehead.

Abby pulled the sheet up to her chin, clutching it like it was a rope that might keep her tied in bed. “Gran hates me.”

Her mother ran a hand over Abby’s hair. “Gran is old and confused. You mustn’t pay attention to her. Besides, she’s going home tomorrow.”

The smile on Momma’s face said she was happy about it. That made Abby feel just a little better.

“Good night.” Her mother left the room, closing the door behind her.

Abby rolled onto her side, determined to stay awake all night, that way she couldn’t sleepwalk. At first she didn’t even blink. But soon her eyelids grew heavy. She tried counting the flowers on her wallpaper. But they started to run together.

She closed her eyes – just for a minute....

When Abby opened her eyes. It was daylight.

A car door slammed outside. Daddy was taking Gran Girault to the train station. Abby got up and watched the car pull down the lane, feeling like a dark and dangerous storm had finally blown away.

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Always at Sunday evening dinner, right before grace, Abby’s family lit the oil lamp that was as old as their house. It was tradition, her daddy told her it was in honor of those Whitmans who’d gone off to war and never come home. It had been a custom he was passing along, just like he would pass this house to Abby someday.

Today was Abby’s first time to light the oil lamp. Naturally, Courtney had a hissy over it. She never liked it when Abby got to do something she didn’t – which wasn’t often.

At bedtime, Court was still pouting. And Abby climbed into bed with a smile on her face. She could hear Momma in the next room, telling Courtney that when she turned eleven, she’d get to light the lamp every other Sunday.

Courtney whined that it wasn't fair. Abby hoped Momma and Daddy wouldn't give in like they usually do. Abby had had to wait until after her eleventh birthday. Court should have to too.

Abby drifted off to sleep feeling really good; not only did she get the special privilege of lighting the lamp, but Gran Girault wasn't here to give her the stink-eye if she happened to go sleepwalking again. It was a good day.

Abby opened her eyes. Stinging smoke caused her to close them again. An orange glow flickered in the smoke. There was heat at her back -- and the sound of crackling dragon breath.

She opened her eyes in tiny blinking slits to see where she was. Darkness and smoke blotted out everything.

For a second she stood there, panic squeezing her chest. Then she remembered. She dropped to her knees. The smoke wasn't as bad here. She even recognized the living room rug.

She'd been sleepwalking.

The fire was in the dining room.

She had to get everyone out!

She opened her mouth to yell for her parents, but breathing in felt like a cat was clawing her lungs. She coughed until she nearly threw up.

Suddenly she heard Courtney screaming. In the back of the house. On the other side of the dining room.

Abby tried to crawl through the dining room, feeling her way along, but it was too hot. She turned around and started crawling back the way she'd come, but she bumped into a piece of furniture. It was hot. So hot. So painful.

In a panic she got to her feet and tried to feel her way to the door. The smoke tore at her lungs. She smelled her hair being singed.

She had to get out.

Courtney was still screaming.

Abby thrashed forward, flailing her arms. She heard china break.

And then she found the door.

Help Court. Wake Daddy.

Dizziness made her stumble. She felt like she was trying to breathe under water.

She tripped over something and fell face first onto the living room rug.

The crackling was getting louder.

She heard Daddy calling her name, over and over, until she couldn't hear anything at all.

Chapter 1

Life can so often be divided into before and after. Not by the little wrinkles and frays of daily wear, but by monumental events that rip cruelly through the fabric of a finely-woven existence. It happened to everyone. Abby Whitman understood that. But she also felt she'd had more than her fair share of before and afters; before and afters that had thrust her onto unforeseen roads leading to generally uninvited futures.

Some called it fate. Some called it luck. Great-gran Girault had gone so far as to call her cursed. The first time it happened Abby's mother had called Gran Girault a superstitious old kook from the backwater Louisiana swamp. And man, had that set off fireworks between Abby's parents. At least the argument had taken Great-Gran's condemning eye off of Abby long enough for her to slip out of the house to the refuge of the old, overgrown rice fields where she could live in a world of her imagination; one where little girls did not do things in the night that they couldn't recall the next morning.

Now Abby was a grown woman -- and she realized that curse still clung with a tenacious grip. As she stood in the muted gray dawn that cast her small kitchen in gloom and shadow, she once again felt as if the jaundiced eye of Gran Girault was on her and her stomach did a slow, nauseating roll in her belly.

Muddy prints left by bare feet trailed across the white kitchen tile like dirty accusations. They began at the dead-bolted back door and moved toward the living area.

Abby knew what she would find even before she kicked off the slippers she'd absently slipped on as she'd gotten out of bed. Even so, the dark smears between her toes and the grime following the crevices of her skin set her heart into a thoroughbred-out-of-the-gate gallop.

In a panic that was far too late to be of any value, she sniffed the air for smoke. Then she took off on a frantic circuit of her tiny house. All doors and windows were locked. She found no ignited stove burners, lit candles, overheating curling irons, or overflowing plumbing fixtures. Nothing unusual except those muddy footprints that became fainter as they went up the stairs to the half-story that housed her bedroom.

She followed them. Reaching her bed, Abby stared at it for a moment. Then she flipped back the covers. Her breath left her lungs in a rush as she looked at the mud-smearred sheets.

Straightening her spine and ignoring the trembling in her hands, she slowly lowered the blanket, pulling it up to the head of the bed, as if she could tuck this nightmare in and drive it back into sleep.

With slow and heavy footsteps, she retraced her previously panicked path through her tiny house; a converted brick summer kitchen that had been spared when her family home for generations had burned.

At some point over the past few years her reason for living out here had slipped from front and center, shifting so slowly into her peripheral vision that

she'd barely noticed. She'd allowed herself to be diverted with the pleasure of restoring the old gardens of the plantation. Here in this secluded place of atonement, she'd somehow found peace.

But this morning the branches of gnarled oaks against the gray skies outside her windows looked menacing and the isolation had an air of desperation.

The dark realization settled upon her. Fate had just doled out another before and after:

Before I started sleepwalking -- again.

She'd been free of the disorder for her entire adult life. It was a demon that had been exorcised at puberty; gone and yet never fully forgotten.

As Abby stood in the early morning silence, she realized that this particular demon's reappearance did not feel wholly unexpected. The fear of the disorder's return had been a dark shadow that lurked in the fog every night when she closed her eyes; the real boogeyman under the bed. And it was the reason she would always live alone.

An isolated incident, she assured herself.

Why now?

Stress and hormones; Dr. Samuel's had listed both as likely triggers for sleepwalking. There was only so much a person could do to insulate a life from such things; and Abby had employed them all. Still, stress had come crashing into her carefully constructed life with the unexpected death of her mother a few weeks ago.

Her gaze was drawn back to the footprints.

Vulnerability raced up her spine on spider's legs. She'd been outside. In the dark. Alone. Unaware.

Doing what?

It was a question she wasn't sure she wanted to answer.

She opened the back door and stepped onto the small back stoop. The early April wind plucked loose hairs from her ponytail and snaked beneath her robe, drawing goosebumps on her bare legs. The marsh grasses leaned in unison and the distant surface of the Edisto River ruffled like tide-sculpted sand. Clouds boiled overhead, blotting out the rising sun, promising a storm before the day concluded.

The garden hose normally hung on a decorative hook near the back steps. It was unwound, the end disappearing into squared boxwood hedge that bordered the main garden.

She crossed the coarse grass, the dew of early morning turning the dirt between her toes once again to mud.

Water cascaded over the lip of the birdbath like a fountain. The slap and splatter of it hitting the soggy ground reminded her of the way rain used to roll off the gutterless roof of the old plantation house that had been her family's home for generations – the house she'd burned to the ground. It was a sound that conjured both comfort and regret.

She returned to the stoop and shut off the spigot with a firm hand, just as if this was a normal morning and she'd just finished watering. Then she marched back inside, refusing to look back at the hose winding like a snake into the hedge.

An isolated incident. That's what she had to believe.

As she closed the door behind her, she looked at the footprints on the tile, then at her dirty feet, both grating reminders of a raw vulnerability she'd hoped never again to experience.

Gran had been right. There was something unnatural about Abby – and she hadn't grown out of it at all. She couldn't let her father know. He thought she'd been cured years ago. In fact, she couldn't let anyone know. Everyone in Preston already looked at her as the girl who'd burned down an irreplaceable

historic treasure; the girl who'd nearly killed her own sister. The looks would return. Old ladies would once again shy away from her. Mother's would keep their children out of her path.

She went into the bathroom and started the shower. If only she could wash away the stain of fear as easily as she did the mud on her feet.