

Fright House

By
Fred Wiehe

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Chapter One

Penny Winters was blinded by the bright, fluorescent lights. Disinfectant assaulted her nostrils, brought tears to her eyes. Even through the dizzying effect of the disinfectant and the prism of tears, she could see that her surroundings were at once bizarre, yet eerily familiar. She stood in the hallway of what was apparently a hospital. Surprisingly, one she had never been in before. She didn't understand how she had gotten there. She didn't even understand why she was there. Not only that, but the doctors, nurses, orderlies, and patients who walked the hallway didn't notice her or pay her much mind, as if she were invisible.

Something else wasn't right either. Everyone, other than herself, looked and dressed as if they had stepped out of the distant past: the hairstyles on both the men and women, the style of glasses some of them wore, the nurses' uniforms, the doctors' clothes under their open lab coats. Nothing looked right. Everything and everybody reminded her of some old black and white movie on late-night TV.

An uneasy feeling suddenly churned her stomach. Hot bile erupted into her throat.

Without fully understanding why, she dared not move nor make a sound. Instead, she watched, listened.

That's when she noticed that no one spoke or acknowledged each other as they moved along the hallway. The few patients there silently shuffled up and down the hallway in robes and slippers. Their eyes blank, lifeless, as if they'd been lobotomized.

Another eruption of bile burned the back of her throat. A chill blew through her like a frigid wind. Goose flesh crept along her skin and scalp.

That's even before she heard the electrical whine that set her teeth on edge. Followed by a scream. A little girl's scream. One that reminded her of her own.

Penny spun in circles, trying to determine the origins of the whine, and the screams. To her amazement, no one else in the hallway reacted to either sound, even though the electrical whine remained constant, and the little girl's screams grew louder.

Without understanding, she stopped spinning. Instead, she began running down the hallway, dodging staff and patients alike, toward the elevator. Somehow, she felt certain that the elevator held some sort of answer.

Once at the elevator doors, she pushed the *down* button. The light above the elevator blinked on. A chime rang out, announcing its arrival. The doors swished open. She hurried onto the empty elevator, pushing the button for the basement as she did so. Breathing hard, heart racing, she listened to soft, piped-in music while waiting with urgency for the elevator to reach the basement. It jolted to a stop after what felt like an eternity, but was probably only a few seconds. Again, the chime sounded.

She ran into an empty hallway. The whine of the electrical instrument heightened, reminding her of a dentist's drill. The little girl's scream rose to a fevered pitch. She raced toward an imposing iron door at the end of the hallway. She didn't know how but she was sure the sounds came from there. As she reached the door, the electrical instrument whined on, but the girl's screams died.

"No," Penny shrieked.

She slammed into the iron door, surprised that it wasn't locked, that it opened so easily. Once inside, though, she wished she hadn't gained access. Inside, a doctor held a rotating saw, bloody blade spinning, cutting at the air. The headless body of a little girl was strapped to an operating table. Blood spurted from her neck. Her lifeless body still spasmed as if it didn't know death had already come. The girl's head lay on the floor next to the table. Her pigtails flopped backward into an ever-growing pool of blood.

"No," Penny shrieked again.

With that, as if being called back from the dead, the girl's eyes opened. A macabre smile crept across her blood-splashed face.

"Welcome," the little girl's severed head croaked. "We've been waiting for you. Won't you come and play with us?"

Penny screamed.

The scream was still on Penny's lips when she bolted upright in bed. Seconds later, she hacked up her undigested Big Mac and fries onto her lap.

She sat in darkness. Blankets drenched in her own vomit. She choked on disgorged matter. Spittle hung from her mouth. Sweat plastered hair to her head, nightgown to her skin.

Trembling and breathing hard, she gasped, "God, help me."

Chapter Two

Penny had taken the bus to Fright House. Unlike other seventeen-year-olds, she didn't have a driver's license and never learned to drive. Since the nearest bus stop was a mile down the road, she walked from there.

Once she entered Fright House's parking lot, she stopped to take in the monstrous building. She stared wide-eyed at it, awestruck by her new place of employment.

At the first sight of the place, a gasp escaped her lips. Goose flesh crept along her skin and scalp, much like in her nightmare last night.

Not only was the sheer size of the building monstrous, but the look of it was, as well. Yellow lights on and around the building and parking lot cast a sickly, eerie glow in the darkening gloom. The lighted sign on the front depicted maniacal, screaming faces and read *Fright House: California's Largest and Scariest Halloween Attraction*. Except for that, the grey, institutional building looked every bit the hospital it had once been. She noticed the iron bars on all the windows. That was odd. Maybe they were added for effect after the hospital became a Halloween attraction.

Taking it all in, she thought, *this is the last place I should be. Considering everything, the last place...*

She had no choice, though. She knew that.

Against all odds, she had finally escaped. Her physical prison anyway. Her past, however, wasn't about to let go of her without a fight. People were surely looking for her. If found, she would just as surely be taken back. She couldn't allow that. She wouldn't go back for anything.

Being underage and having no identity, she'd discovered that finding a place to live and finding employment was difficult to nearly impossible. Most places that rented rooms were way too expensive, wanting first and last month's rent, plus a security deposit. She couldn't come close to affording anything like that or much of anything, for that matter. Besides, even if she could afford a nice place, no one would even consider renting to her without her first being employed. Prospective employers wanted background checks, social security numbers, references. She had no references. She couldn't allow background checks. She couldn't use her real social security number. She couldn't use her real name.

Luckily, she had found a small market run by a Vietnamese family that was willing to hire her. They paid her off the books, under the table, as they said it. They didn't pay much, but it had been a start. They also rented her a small room, above the store, for very little. They never asked questions either. Never wanted to know why she found herself on the streets, with no money, no place to live. Maybe they understood. Maybe they had been where she was now.

The problem with this arrangement was she couldn't save enough money to get out of California. She desperately wanted to get out of California and go somewhere no one knew her. That's why she lied about her name, her age, and her past when she started looking for another, better paying job. She even made up a

phony social security number, hoping no one would check. At least not for a while. At least not until she made the money she needed. At least not before she could move on and again disappear.

She found the job to manage Fright House on Craigslist and dared to answer the ad. It was perfect, a dream come true. At least she had thought so at the time.

Now, eyeing the monstrosity before her, she shivered. Goose flesh again attacked her scalp, her skin.

Finally seeing the place, she understood why Mister Peabody was willing to hire her on the spot, at a great salary too. Probably no one else was willing to take the position, to work every day in such frightening surroundings, no matter how much money. It was, however, an offer *she* couldn't turn down. It truly was perfect. Mister Peabody was desperate because the Halloween season was already in full swing. The job was temporary too, a holiday position, which was probably another reason her new employer was a bit lax about doing background checks. She'd have her money. She'd be gone before Mister Peabody, or anyone else, was the wiser.

Still, perfect opportunity or not, Fright House riveted her gaze. Finally, she looked away.

Opening her purse, she took out a small mirror and checked her reflection. Haunted, brown eyes stared back at her. She ignored them, checking her makeup, running fingers through her shoulder-length brown hair. She looked twenty-something, she guessed, she hoped. Anyway, Mister Peabody hadn't questioned it at the time of her interview. She hoped he wouldn't now.

The faraway, frightened look in her eyes again caught her attention. It was a look she hadn't seen staring back at her for some time. She didn't like it.

She threw the mirror back inside her purse.

She had put off her first night at work long enough. Mister Peabody was waiting for her. Soon the crowd would show up for a night of scares and thrills.

She took another deep breath to settle her nerves, then set off across the gloomy parking lot. Unknowingly, she hurried toward a destiny in which this time she couldn't possibly escape.

No matter what.

Chapter Three

A man in his fifties, looking like a funeral-parlor salesman, waited for Penny outside the front doors of Fright House.

The heels of Penny's shoes clicked rapidly against the pavement as she approached. "Mister Peabody," she said in a breathless hush, "I'm sorry I'm late."

Cyrus Peabody fumbled with a set of keys. "I saw you standing out in the parking lot," he said. He gave Penny a tight smile. "I hope everything is okay. It took you awhile to come forward."

Penny didn't answer. Instead, she concentrated on catching her breath, slowing her heart rate.

Mister Peabody continued with that tight smile. He waved off his suggestion that it took Penny some time to get up her nerve. "It's okay, Miss Winters. Fright House has that effect on some people the first time they see it. Wouldn't be a great Halloween attraction if it didn't." Finally managing to find the right key, he unlocked the iron doors. "I'm really quite glad I found you," he continued, speaking over his shoulder at Penny, who stood silently behind him. "You're a gift from heaven."

Penny brushed brown hair away from her face with a nervous hand. She felt the heat of a blush on her face. "Thank you, I guess."

"Oh, I'm being quite sincere. My manager quit—" Mister Peabody snapped his fingers. "—just like that. No explanation. Just a week after opening. Just a few weeks before Halloween too. I was desperate."

She had been right. The person who had the job before had abruptly quit, and no one else wanted it for any price. That's why Mister Peabody had hired her so readily, without checking her background—at least so far—or asking for references.

Penney snickered. "Desperate enough to hire *me*?"

That's why he had offered such a high salary too. Good for her. At the money she was making, she'd be able to leave California and start a new life in no time.

Mister Peabody turned around, a pained look of embarrassment on his face. "I didn't mean it quite that way. I just meant you came to me at the right time. I think you'll make the perfect manager for this place."

Penny thoughtfully scanned her morbid surroundings. "I'm not sure how to take that."

Mister Peabody waved the remark off, ignoring Penny's obvious reservations. Turning back to the iron doors, he opened them, the rusted hinges squealing in protest. He turned back to Penny with that tight-lipped smile. "Come, let me show you Fright House."

Forcing her own smile, Penny nodded.

Not for the first time she thought, *This is the last place I should be...*

Reluctantly, she followed her new boss across the threshold.

Chapter Four

Mister Peabody and Penny stood in a large, hospital reception area, full of dark corners, gloom, and despair. Penny's new boss switched on the lights, but they—like the lights around the building and in the parking lot—only succeeded in casting a sickly, yellow glow across the room, giving everything a jaundiced look.

Penny took in her surroundings. Like in her nightmare last night, the scene was both bizarre and eerily familiar.

The ceiling was low, giving the rather large room an unusual claustrophobic feel. A multitude of cracks and chipped paint covered the walls. They stood on a tiled floor—chipped, cracked, bloodstained. A television was mounted on one wall, up by the low ceiling. A few metal folding chairs, along with a couple of old wooden benches, were arranged for optimal TV viewing. A reception counter stood in front of the far interior wall. An imposing iron door stood behind it. A thick layer of dust clung to every surface. Genuine cobwebs hung in every corner.

Mister Peabody and Penny's footsteps echoed against the tiled floor as they walked around the reception counter to the iron door. Mister Peabody pressed a button on the wall. A buzz answered. The iron door clicked when it unlocked. As he pulled the door open, it squealed just like the front doors did moments ago.

Mister Peabody led the way, crossing the threshold. He said, "This place was actually an insane asylum at one time, you know."

"Oh?" Penny gasped.

She froze, desperately wanting to turn away, desperately wanting to run from the place. She knew it had been a hospital of some sort, but she hadn't known *that* dark tidbit of important information. It not only explained the iron bars on all the windows but many other things as well. Apparently, her boss had forgotten to mention important facts when he interviewed her in his lush, downtown office.

She had only herself to blame, though. She had acted like the three monkeys—see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. Thinking only of the money to aid her in her flight, she had covered her eyes, ears, and mouth. She hadn't asked to see the place, hadn't really listened to what Mister Peabody had told her about the place, hadn't asked any questions about its background before accepting the job.

She guessed they both had something to hide.

Well, there was no turning back now. Reluctantly, she followed her boss across the threshold. They stood in a long, dark hallway. Cold air blew down it like the breaths of a thousand ghosts.

"We've tried to maintain the asylum theme throughout," Mister Peabody prattled on. "On the main floor, as patrons are escorted inside, the lobby is full of medical staff and mental patients being admitted or watching TV. Sometimes these bizarre patients get up close and personal. Very fun stuff."

"Sounds awesome," Penny muttered, barely able to hide her sarcasm.

If Mister Peabody heard the sarcasm, he ignored it. "We then buzz them through the locked iron door and slam it closed behind them." He chuckled.

“That always gives them a start.”

“Sure it does.”

Behind them, the iron door slammed shut.

Penny spun toward the sound letting out a squeal.

Mister Peabody laughed. “See what I mean.” He switched on the lights.

The hallway instantly turned red, as if Hell's fire awaited them at the other end.

Penny almost choked on her own spittle.

Mister Peabody chuckled again. “Red light bulbs,” he said. “Great effect, huh?”

Penny swallowed hard. “Awesome,” she mumbled, “just awesome.”

The macabre glow lit up old, cracked walls made of cinderblocks. Rusty, exposed water pipes zigzagged across and down a low cement ceiling from which rusty, metal light fixtures dangled. Padded cells with iron bars lined the walls on both sides of the hallway. Old cots without mattresses occupied the empty cells.

Mister Peabody turned. He began walking down the hallway. “Follow me.”

Penny followed a step or two behind. Again, she thought, *This is the last place I should be...*

Their footsteps echoed throughout the hallway.

Mister Peabody continued, “During performances, actors playing mental patients occupy each cell. They reach through the bars at the patrons. They scream. That sort of thing.”

“Fun stuff,” Penny responded.

Apparently, again, missing her dripping sarcasm, Mister Peabody responded, “Exactly.” Not skipping a beat, he continued, “In the basement we have rooms where mad scientists conduct unsettling experiments on their patients. Electric shock treatment and the like, you know.”

As they continued down the hallway, a faint but steady heartbeat began.

Penny stopped cold, listening intently. Her own heart felt as though it had stopped. Her breath choked her throat.

Mister Peabody stopped too, apparently realizing that Penny no longer followed. He turned around, a perplexed look on his face. “Miss Winters?” he called. “Is there something wrong?”

Penny didn't move or breathe. “Do you hear that?” she whispered.

The heartbeat stopped.

Mister Peabody cocked his head, listened. “I don't hear anything.”

“It sounded like something beating.”

“I think you're letting your imagination run wild. This place can do that to a person.”

Penny could've sworn she heard the heartbeat, but her boss was surely right. Her imagination had taken control. She was hearing things not there. Even that realization, however, caused her heart to skip a beat and her hands to tremble. She squared her shoulders. With renewed determination, she gathered herself. “You're probably right,” she relented.

Concern etched itself across Mister Peabody's face. "Shall we continue?"

In the red light, Penny couldn't help seeing Mister Peabody's face as demonic. She couldn't help feeling as though he were leading her toward eternal damnation. Still, she nodded her affirmation to continue.

The two started walking again, footsteps echoing.

"We'll take the elevator to the basement to look at the torture rooms," Mister Peabody said.

Oh great, Penny thought, torture rooms. Maybe this hallway does lead to Hell.

Mister Peabody continued, "We also have a Cemetery Room down there. It's really quite a scary..."

Penny stopped again. She no longer listened to Mister Peabody's chatter.

The faint but steady heartbeat was back. This time joined by another heartbeat. Another...then another...and another. Each additional heartbeat grew louder until sounding like a hundred simultaneously beating hearts.

Penny covered her ears.

Mister Peabody stopped. He turned. "Miss Winters," he called, "are you coming?"

The beating hearts grew louder, her hands unable to muffle the sound. The ghosts' breath blew hard down the hallway, planting cold kisses on her face, rustling her long, brown hair. Everything around her began to ripple as if coming alive.

Soon the ripples in the walls and ceiling began to take shape, began to form. Faces and hands pressed outward as if the surrounding walls and ceiling were made of nothing more than latex, with people stuck behind them, trying to push their way through. The faces wore expressions of pain and agony, like grotesque Halloween masks.

Penny clamped her eyes shut. She screamed.

"Miss Winters," Mister Peabody yelled.

The echo of his footsteps as he hurried back down the hallway mixed with the steady heartbeats. Suddenly, Penny felt someone grab her by the shoulders and gently shake her.

"Miss Winters."

It was Mister Peabody.

"You must get a hold of yourself."

Penny opened her eyes. Mister Peabody's red, frightened face loomed before her. The walls and ceiling had returned to normal. The cold gust of air was again just a soft current from the air conditioning vents. The heartbeats stopped. She frantically searched Mister Peabody's shaken expression for any indication that he may have seen or heard anything out of the ordinary except her scream.

There was none.

"Maybe you being the manager of this place isn't such a good idea—"

"No," Penny quickly interrupted, "I'll be fine."

No I won't. I won't be fine. This is the last place I should be.

Penny steadied herself, caught her breath. With false bravado, she said, “Just my imagination running wild, like you said.” She smiled, hard and thin. “Really, I’m fine now.”

Mister Peabody gave her a doubtful, but resigned stare. “Very well,” he said. “Shall we continue then?” He turned abruptly away, continuing down the hallway, footsteps echoing.

Penny scanned the hallway. Everything remained normal. She willed it to be so. She wasn't about to let sanity slip through her fingers, not without a fight.

“Miss Winters?” Mister Peabody called. “Coming?”

Behind Penny, a human form pushed out from the ceiling. The face contorted with evil intent. Arms reached out to grab her, but just missed as she raced off to join Mister Peabody for the rest of the tour.

Unaware.

Continued in Fright House
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