

THE HOUSE ON
CEDAR STREET
A Supernatural Thriller

Also by Stefon Mears

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CEDAR STREET
A Supernatural Thriller

Stefon Mears

Thousand Faces Publishing

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For Melissa, as always.

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Prologue

Excerpt from 1996 interview with Barclay “Bones” McElroy

EVERYONE ALWAYS SAID the house was haunted. Far back as I can remember, anyway.

Back in the 70s it was owned by a family named Frank. He was a middle manager and she a housewife minding their two-point-three kids. When they moved in, they were the kind of family that kept their lawn grass trimmed to exactly three inches and washed their own windows, even the little ones they needed a ladder to reach above the long, winding staircase next to the front door.

And a big place like that’s got a lot of windows.

When they moved out, their lawn was patchy and their windows dirty and every one of the Franks jumped at any change in the wind. In their six months in that house they never did invoke the g-word though, not unless they were talking to someone they really trusted. And even then it was hushed and furtive.

When the Franks ran screaming for the state line, they sold off to a young couple named Jenkins, who thought it looked like a fabulous fixer-upper for a rock bottom price.

They didn’t last three weeks.

Didn't talk to anyone before they left, but the neighbors all swore up and down on a stack of bibles that they heard screams coming from that house that didn't sound like they were of the young-couple-trying-to-have-kids variety. Shrill. Painful even. The kind that must have left them hoarse, if it left them with any voice at all.

That was around the time that even the more skeptical neighbors began to have quiet conversations during pauses in trimming the hedges or hanging the laundry. Because not all of the neighbors were of the opinion that the screams came from human throats. And while only a few of the neighbors were saying that at first, well, the ones that weren't were still listening.

The local kids dared each other to open the gate, brave the front yard jungle, and ring the doorbell. Those with the courage swore that someone, or *something*, could be heard walking up to the door. And Murphy used to tell me every chance he got how that yellow lab of his couldn't pass that house without growling.

Anyway, after the Jenkins took off for parts unknown, the realtors had a hell of a time moving the place. Sat empty for a better part of a decade before the Dumas family — all eight of them, just like it said in the paper — tried to make a go of it.

That was the one that made national news. Put our little town of Briar, California, on the map.

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Sunday June 11th, 1989. Moving Day.

THIS HOUSE WAS everything Lex could have asked for.

First, it was big. Two stories, with an attic, modified off of the farmhouse style left-over from when Briar, California, was noted for its almond orchards. Before the town started “growing up” and the orchards moved down closer to the river.

Something like that, anyway. Part of the real estate lady’s spiel when she was showing the place. Honestly, Lex was too struck by the house itself to listen too closely.

Spacious master bedroom on the first floor, in the back, with its own bathroom. Six bedrooms upstairs, enough for each of the kids to have their own room. Two bathrooms upstairs, too, and a spare half-bath on the main floor. So many bedrooms and bathrooms that Lex felt as though he’d doubled his salary moving here, even though he’d taken a small pay cut for the opportunity.

And an attic, where Gina could go back to her painting, or that they could make up as a guest room whenever Lex’s parents wanted to swing by for a weekend.

Or maybe Gina’s parents would even deign to visit them from Jersey. Not that Lex felt any need to encourage them.

Two staircases. One spiral just inside the front door, and a regular set in the back beside the mud room.

An honest-to-God mud room. Lex didn't even know they *made* those in California.

Speaking of things Lex wasn't used to in California, the house had a full, finished basement too. Realtor called it a "rum-pus room," which made Lex waggle his eyebrows at Gina. She was more interested in the laundry hook-ups. Enough space for their industrial size washer and dryer.

All-in-all, this one house had more square footage than all of Lex's college dorm rooms and post-college apartments with Gina combined. Including that condo in Sunnyvale that still hadn't sold.

Full acre lot, too, with monkey bars and a swing set that needed nothing but a coat of paint. Lex grew up playing in parks smaller than that backyard. And to have his own almond, orange and lemon trees just inside the redwood fence?

Practically a dream come true.

The yard though, the playset, even the trees, those were all secondary concerns. All that really mattered when Lex and Gina were looking the house over was that it was big and it was only a ten-minute drive down city streets to the factory.

Lex was now in charge of the newest IQ Printer factory, opening at the end of the month. And if he ran it right, one day it could be the biggest. That was the real goal of taking the job. The whole point of moving away from Sunnyvale and uprooting the kids.

God knew Briar had the room to expand.

And if Lex Dumas managed that IQ Printer factory right, built it up, he had a real shot at making the right kind of waves to move up to a C-level post.

In the long run, his family would thank him for "con-signing" them to "this little nowhere" as their eldest son, Mason, liked to call it. But Mason was newly eighteen, and off to

UCLA in the fall.

Mason didn't get a vote.

Still, Lex had to admit that Mason had a point.

Briar sat in a little, almost forgotten part of California. Not near the megalopolises of L.A. or the Bay Area, nor in what people thought of as proper farm country way to the north or surrounding the highways on the long stretch between megalopolises.

Megalopoli? Lex wasn't sure which was the right plural. He'd just loved the word "megalopolis" since he was a kid. Liked the way it rolled off his tongue.

Either way, Briar was south of Gilroy and east of Monterey. So south of garlic fields and east of a tourist town made famous by its aquarium.

In other words, Briar sat smack in the center of nowhere.

But if this was nowhere, as far as Lex could tell he had the best house in it.

So Lex was laughing and singing bits of *Baba O'Riley* as he drove his family to their new home on moving day. In the back of the minivan, the kids didn't share his enthusiasm for their new home — or maybe they just weren't crazy about hitting the road at the crack of dawn — but he had every intention of getting them caught up in his excitement.

"Cedar Street," he said, turning right off of Main. "We're almost there, kids. Say, you think they have cedar trees down here too? Bet we could get a good price on cedar chests for storing winter clothes."

Sullen silence from the kids. Like little ghosts in shorts and tee shirts. Not even the twins had said a word since polishing off the breakfast toaster waffles, and usually the twins couldn't go five minutes without talking.

Gina shot him a worried look from the front passenger seat, but Lex only smiled back. Gina was easy to smile at, especially wearing a tank top with her shorts.

“Look at all these trees,” he said. Oaks and maples and ashes lined the wide street. Every house had a thick, green lawn. Most of them were one story, but Lex could see a couple that might rival the size of his own house.

He rolled down his window, making a show of inhaling deep that summer air.

“Telling you kids, by the end of the week you’ll be loving this place as much as we do, right, Gina?”

Gina missed her cue, either watching a saggy old man holding a frayed red leash, or the saggy old yellow lab at the other end of that leash, watering somebody’s begonias.

“Maybe we can get a dog,” he said, watching Byron’s eyes grow wide in the rear view mirror. Rail skinny and in the middle of a growth spurt, Byron had Lex’s sandy blonde hair and Gina’s dark hazel eyes. He was thirteen, and he’d been begging for a dog half his life. “No home owners’ association here...”

“Let’s get *us* settled first,” said Gina, over her shoulder to the now-bouncing Byron.

“Time to start then,” said Lex, pulling into the double-wide driveway next to the moving truck. His Mercury Sable was already parked along the curb where he’d left it when they finalized the paperwork last week.

“We’re here.”

GINA WANTED SO badly to love this place, but something about it felt too good to be true. All the realty listings in Briar cost no more than half, maybe a third of what the same house would have cost in Sunnyvale, and Sunnyvale was cheap compared to places like Palo Alto or Atherton. But the house on Cedar Street underpriced them all.

When the inspection reports came back clean, Lex had still pushed and offered thousands below the asking price.

The sellers still said yes that very day and wanted to expedite escrow.

Lex just laughed and said he should have offered less. Gina, well, Gina got nervous.

Lex liked to tease Gina about being an Italian girl from New Jersey, mostly because he knew the truth — her family, the Faranettis, never had anything to do with organized crime. But Gina knew other girls growing up. Boys too. Kids who had an “extra” Atari. Or an “extra” Zenith, with remote control. Kids who sold those “extras” — not to Gina, she was a good girl — for much less than the stores were asking.

Growing up around kids like those at St. Vincent’s, Gina learned early that if anybody offered too good a deal, something had to be wrong.

And the house looked like too good a deal.

Lex had wanted to sign that day and start the process, but Gina got him to wait a week. She wanted two, but Lex worried the sellers would come to their senses, so she had to settle for one. First she went over all the inspection reports with a fine tooth comb, but the house looked to be in good shape. Gina’s own inspector — friend of a cousin who made the move to California decades ago with her Aunt Carmella and Uncle Esteban — said it needed a little work on the drywall, the stairs, and the hardwood floors, but that the bones of the house were sound. And the wiring and pipes were even better.

So it wasn’t the house itself then. That meant only one thing.

Gina spent all her free hours that week down at the courthouse and the library, going through recorded documents and microfiches trying to find out who got murdered in that house.

House was built in the late 1960s, and if anybody every got murdered there, the whole town must have covered it up. Not a peep in the papers, and for a flea-speck town like Briar it should have been front page news.

Changed owners pretty fast a few times, and had sat vacant for near on a decade, but that happened sometimes.

Especially in a small town. Gina's sister Marie had moved to a small town in Pennsylvania five years back, and she complained sometimes about people who would move in across the street, only to discover they couldn't handle small town life and take off inside of six months.

Gina wasn't sure *she* was cut out for small town life. But what choice did she have? Shoot down Lex's dreams?

She'd die first.

So as Lex pulled the minivan into the driveway that moving day morning, she looked up at the big white house and said, "Isn't it beautiful, kids?"

And it was. Lots of windows, with pistachio green shutters (pure ornamentation) and trim. It even had a white picket fence, just like all the houses she'd dreamed of as a little girl.

"Just look at that huge, wraparound front porch. We could get a nice round table for it, maybe some wicker chairs. Perfect for playing cards, or drinking lemonade with the neighbors. You could do either in the pouring rain and stay bone dry under that roof."

One of the twins — probably Diamanta — grunted. Byron was bouncing up and down, squeaking the poor bench seat something fierce, but Gina knew the boy wasn't thinking about cards or lemonade. Why did Lex have to dangle the promise of a dog so soon? Gina'd wanted to wait a week or three first, try to get them to love the new house before adding to their brood.

Besides, as it was the minivan smelled like French fries and corn chips and sweat and teenage experiments with cologne and perfume. The thought of adding *eau de retriever* to the mix didn't do anything to help settle Gina's stomach.

"And the movers are early," she sallied, pointing at the truck, and the men in white overalls who were manhandling her good brown sectional. "Isn't that great? No sleeping bags tonight!"

Nothing.

Lex pulled on the emergency brake hard enough to jerk the minivan to a stop. Lex had such fine, strong features — rugged brow, solid jawline, strong lips and flashing green eyes. She never liked to see them creased with irritation, like they were now.

He leaned around and spoke in his management voice. “Look...” He must have heard Gina suck in her breath because his nostrils flared and he continued in a calmer voice. “This is our home now, guys. It’s not what you’re used to, but it’s big and it’s beautiful, and you’ll have all summer to check out the town before school starts. You’re all acting like this is the worst thing that ever happened to you. But it can be the *best* thing. You’re the one who decides which it is.”

If he hadn’t gotten out of the minivan right then, Gina might have kissed him. But he was already off to talk to the movers.

Pity. She loved it when he spat out bits of fatherly wisdom like that.

“Your Dad’s right, kids,” she teased, then got a little more serious herself. “I know you miss your friends. But you’ll see. We’ve got such a big backyard we can invite them all down and for a private campout.”

“Really?”

Yes! First score for Gina. That was the shaky voice of little Ava, so pretty with her long black hair, but a tomboy through and through.

“I promise. Fourth of July. Your dad and I already agreed. You can each invite up to three friends, and you can all camp out in the backyard. And I hear they get some pretty big fireworks down here...”

That got most of them moving. No doubt Diamanta was missing her boyfriend, but they were getting too serious for Gina’s taste anyway.

Gina got out of the minivan and started ushering her children into their new home.