

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Of

Barbara Alice

My head was throbbing. I gradually opened my eyes and saw a ceiling covered with pink cabbage roses. I turned towards the window. Daylight was streaming through it, bathing the room in a soft white glow.

I was lying sideways on the four-poster in Barbara Alice's bedroom. And I couldn't remember how or why I had come to be here.

I had on a white shirt and gray corduroys, and I was wearing my suede dress shoes. Ah, that's right – I had gone over to Josh and Maggie's place for dessert and coffee. I was feeling tired, and had left for home around ten o'clock.

I looked at my watch. It was 11:30 A.M.

I sat up too quickly, and the throbbing pressure in my head increased. I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. It hurt to think, but I remembered more. Driving home, I had seen a light shining from the window of this room – the Rose Room.

I opened my eyes again. The lights were off now.

I remembered climbing the verandah steps and opening the front doors. Everything after that was a blank. Had I gotten rip-roaring drunk, or what? I'd never had a blackout in my entire life.

I moved to the side of the bed and slowly stood up. Good. No dizziness or wobbly legs. I walked down the hall, and by the time I got to the master bedroom I was shaking. The house felt chilly.

I got out of my rumpled clothing and found a warm sweater and a pair of well-worn jeans to put on. I took some aspirin for my headache and went down the back stairs to the kitchen. I expected to find empty wine bottles all over the place, but the room was exactly the way I had left it. I put on a pot of extra strong coffee and walked around to all the other rooms on the first floor. Nothing was amiss. There were no wine bottles or whiskey bottles or beer cans. But then, I only drank beer when I was desperate.

I roamed the hallways, racking my brains for details of the previous night. The only thing I was able to recall was where I had left the dessert Maggie had given me. I went out to the garage and retrieved it from my car.

Back in the kitchen, I sat at the table with a cup of coffee and devoured the remaining pieces of butterscotch pie.

I felt a little better afterwards, but doubt and worry nagged at me. If I hadn't gotten drunk, then why couldn't I remember anything? I had noticed the light shining in the Rose Room, so I would have gone upstairs to investigate as soon as I arrived home. What had I seen? Did I have another encounter with Babe?

If I had, it must have been traumatic in some way.

The unanswered questions rolled painfully around in my head. Maybe I would never find out what had happened. And, worse, what if the blackouts continued?

It was unacceptable. I was willing to do whatever was necessary to remain in control of my house and my life. One way or another, I was going to get to the bottom of this mystery.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in my library, searching for books on the supernatural. Each time I found a volume that looked interesting, I tossed it over onto the leather sofa. Before long, I had an impressive pile.

I sat down and started leafing through one book after another. "The Supernatural," by Douglas Arthur Hill, "The Realm of Ghosts," by Eric Maple, "Family Ghosts and Ghostly Phenomena," by Elliott O'Donnell, these were just a few. Some had been published as recently as ten years ago. This led me to believe that Nathan had shared my mission. He had probably tried to help his sister somehow. And failed.

The last book in the pile, "The Psychic World," by Hereward Carrington, was of particular interest to me. It had a chapter devoted to the subject of spirit communication. I was anxious to read it, but I needed to take a break first. The musty smell of the old tomes was making my headache worse.

Thirty minutes later I took my tray of snacks into the music room and settled down in front of the television to watch a local news broadcast. It had been another quiet, uneventful day around the viewing area. In other words, no news was bad news.

I was listening to the gloomy weather report when someone began knocking furiously on my front doors. I put my peanut butter and crackers aside and got up quickly to see who it was. The pounding continued until I reached the vestibule.

"Take it easy. I'm coming."

I threw open the doors, and Victor Panzicka stumbled past me into the house. Dressed all in black, with his curly hair in a ponytail and a gold ring in his ear, he looked like a pirate – and a desperate one at that.

He tossed his dirty green duffle bag at my feet.

"Alex, my friend," he said, breathing hard, "we gotta talk."

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I leaned against the kitchen counter and watched Victor pace the floor in front of me. He had a cigarette in one hand and a Budweiser in the other. Knowing I wasn't a beer drinker, he had stopped along the way to buy a six pack.

"Aren't you at least going to explain why you're here?" He had shrugged off all my questions so far.

"Man, I don't know how to tell you this, except to just come right out and say it." He stopped pacing and looked at me. "Maybe you already know. God, I hope so. If we weren't such good friends, I'd keep my mouth shut, 'cause there's probably no way I can prove this."

"Prove WHAT, Victor?"

He swallowed hard. "Your place is haunted – big time."

I scratched my chin. "And how, exactly, did you arrive at this conclusion?" I thought I hid my surprise well.

He took a long drag off his cigarette before answering.

"I had the cabbie drop me off at the end of your driveway. When I got to the bridge, I had this feeling I was being followed." Victor resumed his pacing. "I turned around and saw this beautiful girl in a long white dress running up behind me. I figured she was in trouble, you know? So I waited for her. She never said a word. Before I could do anything, she tripped and fell off the bridge. I was right there, and I swear to you, she disappeared before she hit the water."

Victor couldn't swim. I wondered what he would have done if he hadn't seen Babe's ghost vanish, if he had thought she was real.

"Well, aren't you going to say anything?" He waved his arms around. "Call me a nutcase? Tell me I'm not crazy?"

Ashes from his cigarette skipped across the tiled floor.

"You're not crazy. Let's go sit down." I handed him a tin cup to use as an ashtray, and we both took a seat at the kitchen table.

He remained silent until I reached the end of my tale.

"I don't like it," he said, referring to my blackout.

"I don't like it either, but that fact hasn't helped me remember anything."

"Have you thought about trying hypnosis?" He got up and took another beer out of the refrigerator.

"Not possible. I'm not bringing anybody else into this. Unless they happened to see our ghost, like you did, they would never believe what I was saying. And if you're talking self-hypnosis, I wouldn't know how to do that anyway."

"Oh, ye of little faith." He sat down again and put his feet up on the adjacent chair.

Victor believed in all things paranormal: Karma, ESP, UFOs, life after death, and on and on. But he refused to admit he was religious or superstitious.

"Maybe my coming here wasn't just the impulsive act of a lovesick fool. Maybe Fate threw us together so I could help out an old friend."

I ignored his last comment. "Are you telling me that someone finally broke your heart?" This was incredible news, coming from Victor.

"Angie dumped me." He smiled, but the sadness in his voice told me he was serious. "A week ago Saturday. I've been leaving messages on her answering machine every hour. I told her I was taking some time off work if she wanted to get together and talk. Doesn't look like it's going to happen, though."

"What did you do to her?"

He lowered his beer can to stare at me. "Why does everybody always think it's my fault when these things happen?"

It was my turn to stare at him. He looked away with a shrug.

"This time I'm innocent."

"What are the charges?"

He lit another cigarette. "There's this receptionist at the Tribune who has a thing for me. She's just a kid, really. But she's been playing some dirty tricks. Now Angie thinks I've been cheating on her."

"You need to prove this girl's a liar. Discredit her in some way. And play dirty yourself if you have to."

"Yeah. I haven't been able to come up with a plan yet. I was hoping you might have some ideas. In return, there's something I can do that might help solve part of your mystery."

"What's that?"

"I can hypnotize you."

I threw my head back and laughed like a hyena.

"Go ahead, scoff all you want. But I've had training and every time I've tried to help someone I've gotten results." He leaned forward. "Why do you think I'm so good at getting the scoop on all those crime stories I write about, huh?"

I sobered up and started to listen.

"When I interview witnesses and victims who can't recall important details, hypnosis is always an option. It can work -- if you really want to remember."

I stared at the wall, while he waited expectantly for an answer.

"All right. I'll give it a try, but not until tomorrow. I've had enough intrigue for one day."

He looked satisfied.

"You wouldn't happen to know how to conduct a séance, would you?"

My question made him frown.

"Speaking from experience, I wouldn't recommend having one. And now that you're not a skeptic anymore, I'll tell you why."

This was another surprise. "You mean you've had a brush with the supernatural before?"

"Actually, it was more like a head-on collision." He snuffed out his cigarette and settled back in his chair. "When I was twelve my parents divorced, and me and my mother moved into The Roanoke, a building on the west side of Chicago. Some developers tore it down a long time ago, thank God.

"But anyhow, we rented this apartment on the fourth floor, and the first night we were there, I woke up and saw an old man in my room. At first, I thought he was a

real person. He was standing at the foot of my bed, in the moonlight, and he was staring at me with this hateful expression on his face." He paused. "I'll never forget that look as long as I live. I covered my head up and started screaming, but when my mother came into the room, he was already gone.

"That was just the beginning. He came back almost every night. Sometimes he would pull the blankets right off me and pile them up in a corner. And when he wasn't bothering me, he was terrorizing my mother. I think the old bastard was attracted to her. She finally got so desperate that she called in a psychic to help us, and we ended up having a séance." He was silent for a moment, remembering. "An exorcism would have been a better idea."

"How come?"

"Things got even worse after that. The séance seemed to stir him up. He became more active – and nastier. There was no getting rid of him, so we gave up and moved out."

He took a swig from his beer can.

"Maybe that's what you and Pamela will have to do."

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Heavy raindrops drummed a steady beat against the library windows, drowning out the sound of the organ clock's rhythmic ticking. I lay down on the leather sofa, my stomach full from the substantial lunch Victor had made for us.

We were about to begin the hypnosis experiment. At my feet, on a table next to the sofa, was a frosted glass lamp. Victor turned it on and pulled the drapes shut.

"How do you feel?" He sat down in an armchair, just out of my range of vision.

"A little sleepy."

"Perfect. I want you to close your eyes and count backwards from thirty. When you're finished, look at the lamp, and stay focused on the light. You'll be so relaxed you'll feel as though you're asleep, but you'll still be able to hear my voice and respond to my questions. Understand?"

I pretended to snore.

"Yeah, yeah, real funny. Are we gonna be serious about this or not?"

"Sorry. Can I count out loud?"

"Sure." I heard him open the notebook I had given him to write in. "You ready?"

I nodded, closing my eyes.

"Begin now."

I spoke the numbers rather quickly at first, but my speech slowed as I began to relax more.

"...sixteen, fifteen, fourteen..."

My body soon felt light enough to float.

"...three, two, one."

I opened my eyes and stared at the glowing white lamp.

"Think back now, Alex," Victor said softly, "back to last Sunday night, when you visited your neighbors. Think about the things that went on over there, and tell me all about it."

Once again I was inside Josh and Maggie's antebellum mansion, in a room that smelled like butterscotch. I could hear the clink of silver spoons against china, and Phoebe snoring by the fireplace.

The details of our conversation flowed out of me easily.

"It's late," said Victor, when I fell silent. "You're tired. It's time to go. Tell me what you see when you arrive home."

"There's a light shining in one of the windows."

"Did you forget and leave it on?"

"No. It's in Barbara Alice's room. She's there. I know it."

"You're standing in front of the house now. I want you to go inside, but no matter what happens, stay calm. You don't have to be afraid to remember. It's all in the past. Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"It's time, then." Victor paused as I took a deep breath. "Open the doors, Alex."

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I switched the light on in the entrance hall and stood still, listening. The house was quiet.

Ghosts didn't have to make noise.

I approached the staircase. My footsteps echoed through the grand foyer so loudly that I began to walk on tiptoe.

Why was I so apprehensive? I'd had unsettling encounters with Babe before, and I'd survived all those.

I stood on the bottom step and looked up. Pale beams of light shot through the darkness of the hallway. I climbed the stairs to the middle landing, and it was there that the first wave of dizziness overcame me. I had to grab the newel post to keep from falling.

The first attack passed quickly, but before I could continue up the steps, another wave struck hard, blurring my vision and forcing me to my knees. My heart thundered between my ears, making me nauseous. I couldn't seem to get enough air. It was like I was sitting in a hot vacuum.

Panic seized me by the throat as I lay back on the stairs, struggling to breathe. The lights were fading. Was I going blind?

I tried to sit up again, but the inky blackness zoomed in around me.

Then I didn't care anymore. I was floating in a gentle sea of darkness. No pain. No worries. Just the strange sensation of being in my body and out of it at the same time.

Maybe I was dying. Funny how the thought didn't terrify me.

A pinpoint of light appeared, and began moving rapidly closer. It got bigger and brighter with each passing moment.

The cold light became so brilliant I had to shut my eyes.

Once again I could feel my heart thumping loudly in my chest. The ball of light surrounded me. I was inside of it, and we became one entity, spinning through time and space.

We flew faster and faster towards oblivion, until our direction abruptly changed. We were falling. Minutes passed. Hours?

The landing jarred me.

I opened my eyes, gasping for air, and found myself on the stairs. I was conscious. I was weak, but I could breathe.

I had fainted for the first time in my life.

I sat there, listening to the crazy beat of my heart. As it slowed to its normal rhythm, my head and my vision began to clear. I took hold of the banister and pulled myself up.

The light in Babe's bedroom was still shining. It was now or never.

The grandfather clock began striking the hour as I climbed the remaining steps. I counted.

"...seven, eight, nine..." The clock fell silent. I reached the upper landing and looked up, puzzled. It should have struck eleven times.

I glanced down at my watch. It had stopped at 10:35 P.M.

"Stay calm, Alex." I was talking to myself, a sure sign that I was about to panic again. "The clock is slow. The watch needs a new battery. Big deal."

Then I noticed the curio cabinet filled with music boxes. Where had it come from? And the hall carpet was bright and new – and different. I stared down at the unfamiliar paisley pattern.

A woman started to sing – a soprano. Clear and strong, the sound of her happiness reached out to me, pulling me closer. There was a faint scent of rosewater in the air. I followed it to the door of Barbara Alice's bedroom.

And there she was, seated at the secretary with her back to me. Singing softly now, words I couldn't quite hear, with her head bent over her papers. She was writing something down.

I stood quietly in the doorway, my stomach churning. This episode was different, even stranger than all the others. The house wasn't the same. Barbara Alice wasn't the same.

Her brown hair cascaded down her back, its golden highlights gleaming in the soft lamplight. I wanted to reach out and touch it. The heavy folds of her green silk dress made a whispering sound as she shifted in her chair.

I took a few tentative steps forward. Would she hear me? Could she see me?

I felt as though I were in a dream world, where I was the ghost and she was the living, breathing creature I had chosen to haunt.

She stopped singing, and I froze in the center of the room. She lay down her pen with a little sigh and then rose, moving the chair aside.

She turned quickly, and I held my breath for a moment as she stared in my direction, the direction of the doorway. Emerald eyes looked right through me. I was invisible.

She tilted her head slightly, as though she were listening for someone, or something. After several seconds she turned back to the desk with a satisfied look and scooped up the sheets of paper she had been scribbling on.

She knelt in front of the secretary. I moved closer to see what she intended to do.

The roll-top desk had a row of three drawers on the left and right sides. Beneath each row of drawers was a panel of decorative trim.

I watched curiously as Barbara Alice took hold of the trim underneath the left row of drawers and tugged sharply.

A portion of the three inch panel moved towards her. She continued to pull until the secret drawer was completely revealed.

There were other objects inside. She moved these around and placed the sheets of letter-sized paper underneath them. After pushing the drawer in carefully, she stood and moved the chair back to its usual place.

Barbara Alice turned once more to face me. I thought she was going to leave, but she lifted her arms above her head and stretched luxuriously, smiling all the while.

I smiled back. She was so real to me now, this Irish-skinned beauty.

Humming to herself, she headed for the bedroom closet. I was in her way, and I automatically jumped aside to avoid a possible collision.

She opened the closet door and took out a lacy white robe and nightgown.

My vision blurred. The pounding headache had suddenly returned – the dizziness along with it. I grabbed the bedpost to steady myself as Barbara Alice left the room.

Then I slipped once more into the gentle sea of darkness.