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1:36 a.m. WEDNESDAY

The cloaked figure stood outside the house. Slowly, reluctantly, she started to climb the porch stairs. At the top she reached for the doorbell, then hesitated.

“No,” she whispered, her voice hoarse and pleading. “It is too late, it is—”

Suddenly she convulsed, doubling over as though someone had punched her in the gut. She leaned against the wall, gasping. Carefully, almost defiantly, she rose. She was a handsome woman, in her late fifties. Strands of salt-and-pepper hair poked out from under her hood. There was a distinct air of sophistication about her, though her face was filled with pain . . . and fear.

Another convulsion hit. Harder, more painful.

She rose again. More slowly, less steadily. This time she would obey.

She stretched her thin, trembling hand toward the doorbell and pressed it. There was no response. She tried again. Nothing. The doorbell didn't work. Not surprising in this neighborhood.

She opened the screen door, which groaned in protest, then rapped on the door.

Knock-knock-knock-knock.

Rebecca was the first to hear it. She stirred slightly in bed, thinking it was still part of a dream.

The knocking repeated itself, louder, more urgent.

Her eyes opened.

Knock-knock-knock-knock.

She threw off her covers, then staggered out of bed and into the hallway. Scotty's door was shut. No surprise there. He was the world's soundest sleeper (that's the beauty of not having a care in the world). She glanced toward Mom's room, then remembered. Her mother was off at a funeral of some third aunt twice removed.

"I'll only be gone three days," she'd assured them. "I've asked that nice Susan Murdock from church to check in on you. You think you'll be okay for three days?"

Seventeen-year-old Becka and her fifteen-year-old brother figured they'd be okay for three weeks, let alone three days. They tried their best to convince Mom that they didn't need some semistranger from church checking up on them. Of course, it hadn't worked.

"Well, I'll have her drop by, just in case," Mom had said.

Becka reached the stairs and started down, hanging on to the banister for support. The cast had only been off her leg a few days, and she was still a little shaky. Then there was Muttly, her pup. His bouncing and leaping around her feet didn't help.

"Muttly, get down," she whispered. "Get down."

Knock-knock-knock-knock.

Becka reached the bottom of the stairs and crossed to the front door. She snapped on the porch light and looked through the peephole. An older, frail woman stood there. Becka hesitated. The visitor certainly looked harmless enough. And there was something very sad and frightened in her eyes.

Knock-knock-knock—

Becka unbolted the door and opened it. It stuck slightly, and

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she had to give it an extra yank. But even then she only opened it a crack.

“Rebecca Williams?”

“Yes.”

“I am sorry to bother you at this time of evening, but there is someone . . .” She trailed off, pulling her cloak tighter as if fighting off a chill. “There is someone who needs your help.”

Becka fidgeted, eyeing the woman carefully.

“Please,” the woman insisted. “If I may come in for just a moment? It is most urgent.”

Becka’s mind raced. The woman hardly looked like a robber or a mugger. If worse came to worst, Becka could always scream and bring Scotty running downstairs. Besides, she couldn’t shake the image of those eyes: tired, sad, frightened. It was against her better judgment, but—

Becka opened the door. The woman nodded a grateful thank-you and stepped into the entry hall. “You won’t regret this, I assure you. My name is—” She broke off at the sound of a harsh little growl.

Becka looked down. Muttly had his hackles up and was doing his best imitation of being ferocious. “Muttly!” she scolded. “Stop that!”

The puppy growled again until Becka reached down and gave him a little thwack on the nose. He looked up at her and whined feebly.

“I’m sorry,” Becka said as she turned back to the woman. “That’s not like him at all. He’s usually so friendly.”

“It does not surprise me,” the woman answered, keeping a wary eye on the animal. “I am afraid he senses it too.”

“Senses it?” Becka asked. Normally she would have invited the stranger to have a seat, but at 1:30 in the morning the woman had a little more explaining to do. “What exactly does my dog sense?”

The woman pulled back her hood and shook out her hair.

It fell past her shoulders, long and beautiful. She extended her hand. “My name is Priscilla Bantini. We have not met officially, but we have many friends in common. I am the owner of the Ascension Bookshop.”

Becka sucked in her breath. The Ascension Lady! The woman who owned the New Age bookstore, who made the charms for her friends . . . who sponsored the kids in the Society. Becka swallowed hard. She wasn’t sure how to respond.

The woman watched her carefully. “I know what you must think; however, I assure you I had nothing to do with the pranks the children have been playing on you.”

Pranks! Becka thought. *I almost get hit by a train, and then I’m kidnapped by satanists. Some pranks!*

The woman continued. “Someone desperately needs our help. They have been calling upon me, begging for my assistance, but I have neither the strength nor the power.”

“I’m sorry . . .” Becka shook her head. “What are you talking about?”

“Someone needs help.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“You have the strength and the power they need.”

Becka blinked. “What?”

The woman spoke calmly and evenly. “As a Christian, as a disciple of Christ, you have both the strength and the power to help this . . . person.”

Becka closed her eyes a moment. She’d heard the Ascension Lady was weird—but she didn’t know she was a total fruitcake. “You’re going to have to run that past me again,” she said.

“There is a spirit—the soul of a deceased human—that is trapped in a mansion across town. It desperately wants to be free, to reach its resting place, but it cannot do so on its own. It needs your help.”

Becka scowled. “I’m not sure what you’re—”

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“I know you disapprove of the source of my power, but this poor creature needs to be set free. Together you and I can —”

“What creature are you talking about?”

“The one inhabiting the Hawthorne mansion across town. It is the spirit of a human, a victim of a tragic murder, that is trapped there by negative energy. It desperately wants to be free.” The woman’s voice grew more urgent, her eyes more pleading. “The anniversary of its death will be here in just three days, and it is begging me, pleading with me to seek your help.”

Becka shook her head. “I still don’t understand. How am I supposed to be able to help?”

“According to my charts, the anniversary of the murder is in conjunction with a unique alignment of planets. This Friday, April twenty-one, is when the spirit can make its escape. This is when we can join forces—bringing it forth in a séance and helping it reach its eternal resting—”

Suddenly a voice boomed, “*What are you doing here?*”

Becka and the woman spun around to see Scott, Becka’s younger brother, towering above them on the stairway. Although he was only a ninth grader, his height and position above them gave him a commanding presence.

Priscilla cleared her throat. “You must be Scott Williams. My name is —”

“I know exactly who you are.” He started down the steps toward her.

Priscilla forced a smile. “Yes, well, I was just telling your sister that —”

“No one invited you here.”

Becka looked on, shocked at her brother’s manners. “Scott.”

He continued down the stairs toward the woman, and there was no missing his anger. “Haven’t you caused us enough trouble?”

Priscilla backed half a step toward the door. “I am not here to cause trouble. I am here to help. According to my astrological charts —”

“I don’t give a rip about your astrological charts.” He reached the bottom of the steps, but he didn’t stop. He walked directly, purposefully, toward her.

“Scotty!” Rebecca exclaimed.

He turned toward Becka. “This woman brings in that channeler creep, nearly gets you killed, helps those cruds who snatched you, and you expect me to be polite?” Before Becka could answer, Scott turned back to Priscilla. “Get out of here.”

The Ascension Lady reached behind her, fumbling for the door handle.

“Scotty—”

“Get out.”

The woman pulled the door open and backed outside. “I apologize for the intrusion. I was expecting more Christian love, but I can certainly understand.” She stumbled over the threshold as she backed out onto the porch.

Scott continued toward her. “Get off our property before I throw you off.”

“I did not come for myself.”

Scott reached for the door.

“As I told Becka, the spirit of a deceased human desperately needs our—”

He slammed the door shut.

Becka stood in the silence, staring at her little brother. She was both shocked and a bit in awe. Then, for the first time, she noticed he was trembling.

He turned to her. “They won’t hurt you again,” he said, his voice quivering. “I promise you, sis. I won’t let them hurt you again.”



2:45 a.m.

An hour later Scott lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling. No way

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would he be able to get back to sleep. Not after tonight. He was too steamed. How *dare* the Ascension Lady show up at their door. How dare she ask for a favor. After all her people had done to them? No way!

As for that cheap line she threw in about “Christian love” ... give me a break!

Normally Scott was pretty much a happy-go-lucky guy. “Live and let live,” “Be everybody’s bud” — those were his mottoes. And if things ever got too tense, there were always his wisecracks. But there were no jokes tonight. And for good reason.

He turned on his side, his thoughts still broiling. They had moved to this town three months ago, after Dad had died. And for three months, he and Mom and Becka had been constantly hassled by the Society and all their hocus-pocus.

Why? Why did those creeps have to keep bothering them? Weren’t he and Mom and Becka the good guys? Why were they always the ones put on the defensive?

He knew Becka wouldn’t fall for the woman’s line about helping some deceased spirit. Becka’s heart might be soft, but her brain wasn’t. Still, there had to be some way to stop these guys from their constant harassment. Better yet, there had to be some way to get even.

To get even ... His eyes lit up with interest. Now there was an idea.

But even as he thought it, a still, small voice whispered that he might be stepping out-of-bounds — that getting even wasn’t exactly the right plan of attack.

Scott ignored the voice. Enough was enough, and he and Becka had had enough. Again the thought of evening the score tugged at him. He toyed with contacting Z, his mysterious friend in the computer chat room. Maybe Z would know of some weakness in the Society that Scotty could use against them. But he already knew what Z’s response would be. He’d heard it before.

He'd even used it before: "These people are not your enemy; they're only prisoners of your enemy."

Yeah, right. Well, prisoners or not, Scott was going to find a way to protect his sister. And it being the middle of Spring Break, he'd have plenty of time to think of something.



11:50 a.m.

Becka turned from the front seat of the car to her friends. "You sure this is the right house?"

"Oh yeah." Julie, one of her best pals — a super jock with perfect clothes and a figure to match — grinned at her. "Everyone in town knows this place, right, guys?"

The others agreed: Ryan, the driver with the killer smile; Krissi, the airhead beauty; and Krissi's part-time boyfriend and full-time intellectual, Philip.

When Rebecca had called Julie to tell her about the visit from the Ascension Lady and the invitation to participate in a séance, Julie thought it would be fun to grab the rest of the guys and go for a drive. So here they were, driving up a steep hill and slowly approaching the Hawthorne mansion.

Becka looked out her window. For a haunted house, it was a little disappointing. She'd expected something covered in weeds, unpainted, and overflowing with cobwebs and banging shutters. Granted, the place was two-and-a-half stories high and had pitched roofs sloping every which direction, but instead of looking like a home for the Addams Family, it looked more like it belonged to the Brady Bunch.

As if reading her thoughts, Julie explained. "They pay a gardener and housekeeper to keep it spruced up, just in case someone ever wants to buy it."

"It's been vacant all these years?" Becka asked.

Philip answered. "My dad's a real estate agent. They get offers all the time, but they always fall through."

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Krissi giggled, “Right after they spend a few minutes alone in there.”

“You’re going to help, aren’t you?” Julie asked. “You know, take part in that séance?”

“You’re going to a séance?” Krissi asked nervously.

Philip joined in. “Hey, maybe we can all go.”

After all Rebecca had been through, attending a séance was not at the top of her “Things I Gotta Do” list. Ryan, on the other hand, was silent and noncommittal.

“Pull over here,” Philip said, pointing to the curb. “Let Becka get out and take a look.”

Ryan brought his white vintage Mustang to a stop directly across the street from the mansion. Everyone piled out except Krissi.

“Aren’t you coming?” Philip asked.

“I’m not feeling so great. I think I’ll sit this one out.”

“Come on,” Philip insisted. The others joined in until Krissi finally gave in. “All right, all right,” she whined as she crawled out of the car, “but if we die, you’re all going to live to regret it.”

No one was quite sure what she meant, but that was nothing unusual when it came to Krissi.

As they crossed the street, Ryan fell in beside Becka. Although he wasn’t officially her boyfriend, he was definitely a boy and he was definitely a friend—maybe her best. She liked everything about Ryan Riordan. But it wasn’t just his thick, black hair, his sparkling blue eyes, or that heartbreaker smile of his. It was the fact that he was always there for her. And if she needed proof, all she had to do was look at the scar on his forehead—a memento from their last encounter with the Society.

The group had just crossed the street and was standing on the walk in front of the house when Julie came to a stop. “Listen ... do you hear that?”

Everyone grew quiet. It was faint, but there was no missing

the low, quiet whistling—like wind blowing through a screen window, but deeper. It almost sounded like moaning.

“Guys ...” Krissi sounded uneasy. “I don’t think this is such a—”

“Shhh!” Philip scowled.

Julie took a step or two closer. “It’s coming from over there.” She pointed at the massive brick chimney that ran the height of the house.

“Maybe it’s just the wind,” Krissi offered feebly. “You know, blowing down the chimney or something.”

Becka looked at the oak trees towering over their heads. There wasn’t a single leaf stirring. She glanced back at the house—and then she saw it. In the second-story window. “Look!”

But by the time they’d turned, it was gone.

“What was it?” Ryan asked.

“A person. At least, I think it was. I only saw her for a second.”

“Probably just the housekeeper,” Julie said, not sounding all that convinced.

“I don’t think so. It looked like—like a child. A little girl with long black hair.”

The group exchanged nervous glances. Becka frowned. “Why? What’s that mean?”

“Guys ...” It was Krissi again. She was leaning on Philip, slightly stooped. “I don’t feel so good.”

“What’s going on?” Becka repeated. She looked at Ryan, but he gave no answer.

Krissi was clutching her stomach now, breathing deeply. Julie crossed to her. “You going to be okay? Kris, are you—”

Krissi shook her head and suddenly convulsed, once, twice—until she dropped her head and vomited.

Becka stood, staring.

Krissi caught her breath, then retched again.

“Come on,” Ryan said when Krissi had finally finished. “Let’s get out of here.”

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Krissi looked up and nodded in gratitude as Julie handed her a tissue to wipe her mouth. With Philip on one side and Julie on the other, they helped Krissi back to the car. Ryan turned and followed.

“Ryan . . .” Becka tugged at his arm as they walked. “There’s a little girl up there—I’m sure of it. Don’t we want to see if she needs help?” They arrived at the car, and Julie and Philip helped Krissi into the back.

“Ryan?” Becka repeated. “What’s wrong? What’s going on?”

He opened the passenger door for her, then finally answered. He was clearly unnerved. “You know the person that was murdered there? The one who’s supposed to be haunting the place?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s a little girl.”