

CHAPTER

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By the time I graduated high school in 1976, I was convinced I was living with a ghost. It had taken over my bedroom, which was actually a separate, oval-shaped guesthouse perched on a cliff about fifty yards in front of my parents' lakeside 1930s home near Malibu. The lakefront was a small, artsy community made up of actors, musicians, and other quirky professionals who spurned conformity. It was a Tinsel Town, hippie haven where the residents agreed to live and let live. Having a resident ghost was not all that unusual there, and it fit right in with my lifelong fascination with the occult. In the Girl Scouts, we frequently indulged in séances during sleepovers, told ghost stories, and levitated each other. I loved watching spooky TV shows late at night and reading books about ghost towns, haunted houses, and witchcraft, so I was excited to have a ghost of my own—at least in the beginning.

Most times the appearance of the ghost was like the wind. No one could see the actual ghost, but we all saw the effects it had on everything in the room. Lights or the radio would turn on and off at will. A hanging plant would sway in circles without a breeze. Objects, from keys in my purse to entire baskets of clothes, would disappear from the guesthouse and later reappear somewhere else. Unseen fingers rapped on the TV's metal housing one night in an angry tempo to chase away my best friend Sara. The inside curtain of the front door would sometimes pull back when I slipped the key in the lock, as if someone inside wanted to know who was there. The dog sometimes trembled as she looked around the room, though nothing seemed amiss. More than once, I was suddenly accosted by loud pounding on the walls that made the room shake. Worst of all, I suffered nightly attacks when the ghost would startle me awake with paralyzing, vicious strength.

Despite all that, I only saw the ghost twice. The first time was early in the morning. I should have been up, getting ready for summer school.

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Instead, I had slept in. I awoke to the sensation that someone was watching me. I opened my eyes, and a handsome young man with longish brown hair and arresting blue eyes was beside the bed, smiling, with his arm outstretched in invitation. I gazed back, amazed, wondering who he could be. I stretched out a hand, and he took it, gently pulling me up and out of bed. I stood for a second, staring into his captivating eyes. He was enchanting; I couldn't wait to talk with him and get to know him. Then like a cruel mirage, he was instantly gone. I was standing there, staring into the empty space where he had stood just seconds before.

The second time was in the middle of the night. Sara had stayed for a sleepover, and she slept beside me in bed. I woke up suddenly, horrified because this time the ghost was sitting on top of me, holding me down. His blue eyes were dark with rage and stared down into mine, not smiling. I couldn't move or speak. I struggled to wrestle him off, wondering why Sara didn't wake up and help me. Then, in an instant, he was gone. I could move again. Next to me Sara still slept. Terrified, it took me several hours to go back to sleep.

Whether seen or unseen, ghosts rarely come uninvited. My friends and I had greatly encouraged this ghost's presence by playing with an Ouija board; holding séances; experimenting with drugs, such as marijuana and various pills; and drinking alcohol. I often listened to heavy-metal rock music with dark, mystical lyrics. The most tantalizing of all was discovering that Sara lived next door to the actress who played the witch Samantha on *Bewitched*, spurring Sara and I on to explore the mysteries of the spirit realm even more.

At first, it was fun having a ghost around. It didn't take long, though, for things to get crazy, with increasingly terrifying occurrences happening in my room and beyond. I just wanted the ghost to leave, but it wouldn't. Unable to cope, I left home on my eighteenth birthday, returning to the San Fernando Valley where my parents, Chuck and Dorothy, had raised me until we bought the lake house.

In order to afford moving out, I got financial aid, registered for classes at the community college where Mom was the dean of college development, and worked in the campus library. I rented a room from a single mom and her son in a comfortable, newer home that should have been ghost free. Within weeks, the ghost crossed many miles to inhabit that space as well.

At first, only I knew it was there. Then one weekend when I slept at a friend's house, the ghost retaliated by scaring my landlord all night with banging noises outside her bedroom and destroying my room, knocking

things over and tearing keepsakes from the wall.

That first night back, after I cleaned up the mess and went to bed, the room suddenly reverberated with the ghost's hideous laughter, which lasted several minutes and was loud enough to be heard throughout the house. The next day I was told to move.

By Christmas, I was sharing a converted garage with my friend Crystal. The ghost went there, too, and soon chased poor Crystal out.

I couldn't afford to stay there alone, so in the spring of 1977, I moved back to the lake. For fifty dollars a month, I lived with my friend Julie; her mother, Ellie; her younger brother Tim; and her older brother, Kurt, whom I'd dated in high school, in their rambling two-story house. It was a great house, built by film star Clark Gable for his weekend hunting excursions. It sat high on the mountainside above the lake and had a TV studio's back lot on the other side, where *M*A*S*H* was still being filmed.

Like other homes in the area, the Gable house boasted its own ghost, which was famous for scaring people and animals alike. I was curious about this "new" ghost, so the first time I went there as a young teenager, I demanded out loud that it show itself. It took months, but it finally showed up late one night.

Kurt and I were sharing an easy chair in the living room after a party. As he talked, I absently gazed out of one of the room's many windows that looked out on the second-story veranda. Suddenly, a young woman appeared to walk up the outside steps, stopping in front of a window. Her face was clearly visible in the soft glow of the table lamp near the window. She was beautiful, wore an antiquated Spanish dress, and had her long, dark hair swept up in ringlet curls. She slowly turned her head and looked inside; her eyes locked on mine and a slow, intent smile emerged. I stared back, wondering if I knew her. I turned to tell Kurt, who laughed. When I looked back a second later, she was gone. We immediately went outside to investigate. Kurt was quick to point out that the window was so high above the flagstone steps that she would have had to be twelve feet tall in order to look in. Impossible.

Now, almost two years after that strange encounter, I was living in that house. And so, we soon realized, was my ghost. The combination of the two ghosts in one household was too much. When my classes ended for the summer, I moved back home to the guesthouse and back to square one. Nothing had changed. In fact, it only got worse and was about to come to a head.

After a day at the beach, I was driving Julie and myself home in Ellie's

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red Pontiac Firebird. It was nearly nightfall. When we drove past an empty park between the lake and the mountain, we both suddenly saw what appeared to be a severed female head in the middle of the road, with the face turned upward, mouth and eyes wide open, and hair tangled in all directions. It looked as if the person had been killed midscream. Startled, I almost hit a tree when I tried to avoid running over the specter.

By the time I regained control of the car and was past the head, Julie spun around to look out the back. "It's gone!" she yelled, gripping the seat with both hands.

I circled the park to look for traces of the head, including blood on the road or signs of mischievous kids playing a prank. We found nothing. The park and roads were empty, so we gave up and drove on to Julie's house.

Racing up the steps to the veranda, we burst through the front door and told Ellie what we had seen, unaware that we were interrupting her date with Hal. Ellie, dressed casually in jeans, sat on the worn-out sofa looking stunned. Hal sat quietly in a nearby chair but, unlike Ellie, didn't look shocked at all. Instead, he merely brushed back his strawberry-blond hair and listened. When we finally stopped talking, Hal questioned us about using the Ouija board and other occult practices. Julie stayed quiet, letting me answer.

"I can help you, girls, if you want," he said.

Julie's eyes locked on a small Bible in Hal's shirt pocket and vigorously shook her head. "Not me. I'm going to bed. Good night." She walked away, then slammed her bedroom door.

I was suspicious of Hal's Bible, too, but I was desperate. "How?" I asked. "We've tried everything, even a parapsychologist."

Hal remained unfazed. "Ellie, would you mind if Cheryl and I talked privately in the kitchen?"

"Sure," she said, running a hand through her short, red hair. "I'll just do some reading." She reached for a paperback on the coffee table.

I nervously followed Hal to the kitchen and sat across from him at the table. He pulled out the Bible and slid it to me. I had been raised without church or religion by parents who were staunch atheistic evolutionists. My mother, an anthropologist, thought the world was millions of years old. My father saw the world in tangible terms of math and physics, leaving no room for Creation or God. I had never read a Bible. I was an unchurched heathen. Naturally, I eyed the black book skeptically, not knowing anything about God, Evil, the Christmas story, or anything else contained in its sacred text.

Undaunted, Hal pointed to a page near the beginning. “Read it out loud.”

I read from Genesis about Creation and the fall of man. It was in English, but the words were perplexing. They also stirred up an unexpected, unexplainable rage. I felt agitated and uncomfortable, as if plunged into deep waters with no idea of how to swim. There seemed to be no obvious connection between the story I was reading and the severed head in the road.

“What does this have to do with *anything* that happened tonight?” I exploded, slamming the book shut. “This is just a stupid story about a snake. You promised to help me! Julie was right.”

“I *am* helping you,” he said patiently. He explained that the snake was Satan, a supreme angel who was kicked out of heaven with many other angels, resulting in demons that roamed the earth in search of prey. He said demons commonly paraded as the ghosts of dead strangers or loved ones. “So you see, you don’t have a ghost at all! They don’t exist. You have a demon. And if you’ll pray with me and follow some simple instructions, God will make the demon leave.”

Hal’s explanation was shockingly different from others I had heard: I was nuts; the ghost was a murder victim from the turn of the century; or, as the parapsychologist theorized, it was the negative energy of unseen beings. Making matters worse, the irrational anger I had felt while reading had only intensified with Hal’s explanation. And prayer? I didn’t know what that was!

Despite all this, I grudgingly repeated after him, uttering my first prayer, asking Jesus into my heart. Afterward, Hal told me to destroy any occult paraphernalia or drugs in the guesthouse.

“Get sober; drugs are an open invitation to demons,” he said. “Get to know Jesus by reading the Bible and praying. And find a church as soon as possible.”

It was a tall order that sounded bizarre. But because nothing else had worked, I had to try. I left with Hal’s Bible, some instructions, and lots of doubts. I had seen demons with my own eyes, so I figured God had to be real too. I would fake it till I could make it.

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The next day I threw away my marijuana, books on haunted houses, and music by rock groups such as Black Sabbath. Days later, I destroyed the main culprit—the Ouija board—which took hours to burn. I started

and ended each day by reading aloud the prayer Hal had helped me write out. I even slept with the Bible.

Ellie, already a sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), took me to several meetings and tagged along as I tried out various churches. This was a spiritual battle for my life, and I knew it.

In time, the demon's ghostlike antics trickled to a stop. Inanimate objects stayed put, and radios didn't turn on by themselves. But nearly every night I was still attacked while sleeping. Thankfully, I knew how to stop the demonic attacks when they hit; Hal told me to speak the name of Jesus out loud. (Luke 10:17 says demons are subject to His name.) The problem was getting the attacks to stop. The guesthouse was clean. There was nothing left to throw away or burn.

Out of frustration, I asked Carl for advice. We had met at a young people's AA meeting and became good friends. He was tall and thin, with pale skin and dark hair and eyes, and was cute in a boy-next-door kind of way. He was adventurous, fun, and generous to a fault, but I wasn't attracted to him.

"Give me time," he said. "I'll ask around."

Days later he had a plan. "Someone told me about a group in Pasadena. They help people that have evil spirits. They're holding a meeting tonight if you want to go. I'll pay."

"Carl, I don't have *spirits*. It's a demon."

"Whatever. At least give it a shot."

I was reluctant but agreed. I needed my nights back. That evening in the waning August light, we drove through heavy traffic on the Ventura Freeway in his worn-out Pinto, arriving late. We quickly checked in and paid, then a man took us to seats along the back wall of the meeting room.

I sat beside a middle-aged woman who looked at me knowingly.

"Hi," she said, patting my hand. "I'm Madge. I understand you're having ghost troubles."

Surprised, I blinked in confusion. "Sort of," I admitted. "How did you know?"

"Don't worry," Madge said, flashing an encouraging smile. "I'll explain later. We just want to help! You'll see. *Shh*, the speaker is getting ready to start. We'll talk afterward." Madge folded her hands submissively and focused her attention on the speaker at the mic.

I aimed a quizzical look at Carl. He just shrugged and faced the front.

"Hello, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Clarisse. Tonight I'll share with you the secrets to getting everything your heart desires!" Clarisse's

bright eyes scanned the room, then landed on me. She gave me a slow, intimate smile, which conveyed secret delight. She looked over at Madge, who nodded, then gazed at me one more time before turning to the crowd at large and holding up a large white Bible.

“This is the secret. Yes, the Bible! I know you’re thinking this is a meeting, not a revival, right? Let me assure you; this is *not* church! I’m here to introduce you to the ancient art of white magic. What is that, you ask? White magic combines incantations that tap into the enormous, limitless power of nature, the universe, and the spirit realm with Holy Scripture from the Bible. When you put these two powerful things together, watch out! There’s nothing you can’t do or have. Let me explain . . .”

This time I turned to Carl accusingly. The mere mention of magic was raising huge red flags, but he kept his eyes aimed at the speaker and ignored me.

For thirty minutes, Clarisse wrote incantations and Bible verses on a blackboard, explaining which ones worked together best for getting a new car, finding love, being healed from disease, or creating wealth. The crowd seemed excited by this revolutionary information, asking questions and scribbling notes. Meanwhile, I silently wondered if this was a huge mistake. I didn’t understand white magic any more than I did the Bible, but it didn’t sound right. But we had paid, so we stayed.

Clarisse wrapped up the meeting by reminding everyone there would be another one next week with even more powerful information. Stepping back from the podium, she shook several hands, then walked with purpose to the back of the room, straight to us.

“Hi there,” she said, proffering her hand. “I’m Clarisse. What’s your name?”

“Cheryl,” I mumbled, shaking her hand before finding my own jeans pocket.

Clarisse shook Carl’s hand and then turned back to me. “Did you enjoy the meeting? Wouldn’t *you* like to have everything you want, when you want it?”

I shrugged, not knowing what to say.

“Well, never mind. We can talk more about that later. Tonight I think we’d better see about getting rid of those evil spirits that keep bothering you!”

Again I was stunned. Carl hadn’t said anything to the man at the registration table. How did these women know about the demon? More important, could they really get rid of it completely?

As if reading my mind, Madge leaned forward and spoke in quiet,

conspiratorial tones. “Don’t be alarmed that we know. When a person has evil spirits, it shows in her aura.”

“My *what*?”

“Your *aura*. The energy your inner being gives off.” Madge nodded knowingly at Clarisse. “Those gifted with supernatural powers, as Clarisse and I are, can easily read your aura to see what’s going on.”

“Yes,” Clarisse agreed. “But for now, just tell us if you want our help. We can rid you of those spirits tonight. It won’t take long. We have a private room in the back. What do you say? Shall we go?”

I signaled Carl with my eyes to make some excuse to leave immediately. He just offered a weak smile. “I can wait here while you go with them.”

Traitor, I thought. I was trapped. Something told me this was risky business, but I couldn’t think of a single reason to say No. They were being so kind. Ever the people pleaser, I didn’t want to hurt their feelings.

“OK,” I agreed, letting them lead me to a small back room. It had a tall, narrow table with a cushion on top. Next to that a short, square table held a fat candle and a meager lamp, which was the room’s only light. Clarisse lit the candle with a match and switched off the lamp.

Madge shut and locked the door. “We don’t want anyone interrupting!” she said, smiling as she pushed her short, mousy-brown hair out of her eyes. Then she was at my side. “Stretch out on the table, and make yourself comfy,” she instructed, lowering her voice to a whisper. “That’s it. Just lie back and relax.”

When I was settled, Clarisse positioned herself on the other side of the table; her long gray curls swaying as she moved. Both women started mumbling unintelligible words and phrases, and their voices grew in intensity. Clarisse took the candle and, with alternating hands, swept it back and forth mere inches above the length of my body from head to toe, over and over.

Reaching over, Madge gently stroked my forehead. “Close your eyes, dear,” she said with a hushed, intense voice. “That’s right. *Shh*.”

Clarisse continued moving the candle up and down my body; her hands hovered close to my skin but never touched it. Despite the lack of physical contact, I keenly felt each sweep of the candle as my skin and muscles grew warm, then uncomfortably hot. I could feel and hear Madge swaying nearby and moaning. Clarisse’s voice grew louder, but her words remained foreign to me. At the same time, my mind grew fuzzy and I experienced a floating sensation. I felt drugged. Whatever they were doing was powerful, and I’d had enough.

“Are we almost done?” I asked, opening my eyes and searching their

candlelit faces. Their eyes looked wild in the midst of this strange, frightening ritual.

With noticeable effort, Madge refocused her eyes on mine and offered a strange smile. "Of course," she said, "*Shh*. We're almost finished." She reached over and smoothed my arms and legs with soft, intimate touches, even as she ever-so-slightly pushed me downward to keep me on the table. Then she placed both hands gently yet firmly on my right arm and closed her eyes, resuming her swaying and mumbling in a quieter voice.

I looked at Clarisse. Her eyes met mine briefly, then she carefully set down the candle. Closing her eyes halfway, she, too, began rubbing my limbs one by one and smoothing my hair. I had never been comfortable being touched by strangers, and this was no exception. I was ready to bolt.

Clarisse must have felt my body tensing. "Ah," she breathed out a moment later. "Yes, that's it, yes." She opened her eyes all the way and stared down at me intently, almost lovingly, then gently took my hands in hers. "You are cleansed," she said softly. "We have taken all the evil energy out of you. Here, let me help you sit up. That's it; slowly, not too fast or you may faint."

With help, I carefully got down from the table. My skin was starting to cool, but my entire being felt woozy and out of balance, like waking from a deep sleep.

"I feel strange," I admitted.

"It will pass," Madge said.

"Of course, it will," Clarisse cooed, while handing me a packet of white powder. "You'll be fine. Now take this home, and pour it into a cast-iron skillet. Light it and wave it in the air as you walk through your house. Let the smoke fill the space as you repeat these incantations. Here, they're all written out."

"What for?" I asked, taking the paper.

"We cleansed *you*. Now you must cleanse your *house*. And don't wait, do it tonight."

We left the room, and I found Carl waiting in the same chair by the wall. Back in the car, I told him everything that had happened.

"You're going to do it, right?" he asked.

"Only if you do it with me."

"Sure. We've come this far. Might as well finish the job."

An hour later I lit the powder in my mother's skillet and held it out in front of us as we chanted the strange words on the paper Clarisse had given me. They made no sense, so after two trips around the room,

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including the closet and bathroom, we stopped.

“That’s enough,” I said. “Let’s open the windows to let out the smoke.”

“Do you know what those words mean?” he asked.

“No. They just said this would cleanse the house of evil spirits.” I looked at him warily. “Where did you hear about this group?”

“A guy at a meeting. Are you sorry we went?”

“I just think it was weird. But hey, if it works, I won’t complain! It’s late; you’d better go.”

After he left, I got ready for bed and read Hal’s prayer aloud. Turning out the light, I breathed in the warm, pine-laced air and listened to the familiar nocturnal sounds of ducks, frogs, owls, and coyotes as I gradually drifted off to sleep.