



"A haunted rockstar and a savvy paranormal investigator have more than a ghostly connection in this exciting new story. Katie Baldwin expertly weaves the paranormal into a rock 'n' roll romance."

Marie Johnston, Author of The Sigma Menace

Chapter One

Rory O’Brian couldn’t move. The pressure on his chest made breathing impossible. A cold sweat covered every inch of his immovable frame. How could he be conscious, but unable to move? He willed his fingers to make the slightest shift. Nothing.

There was no reason for his lack of mobility. With extraordinary effort, he was able to open his eyes. He tried to move something else—even wiggling a toe—without success. The rest of his body refused his relentless appeals for movement. All he could do was watch and listen, a witness to whatever woke him in the first place.

His eyes, which could only stare forward, caught the subtle motion of his bedroom door. Sweat beaded on his forehead as dread settled deep in his belly. The door closed so slowly that it reminded him of a childish prank. Like something his brother would have done years ago. When the door reached inches from the frame, it slammed shut so powerfully the framed photos on his bureau clattered to the ground.

Rory exploded out of bed.

He looked around his room, breathing heavily, his T-shirt wet with perspiration. A cursory scan around the space found nothing out of place save for the fallen photos. Had it been a nightmare? More importantly, was it over? His body pulsed with adrenaline as if it still perceived danger, yet he couldn’t determine whether it was a real threat or the echoes of a dream.

A muffled yowl shifted his attention to his tiny Chihuahua, Pierre, who was agitated by the noise. He was also shivering. What a terrific parent Rory was turning out to be. The poor dog had never entered his mind. As he walked over to soothe his grumpy pup, he glanced around and frowned. The scent of patchouli oil clung to the chilled air a clear sign, despite normal appearances, something was different, almost foreign.

Pierre settled into the rattling dog version of a purr as he stroked the dog’s back soothing himself and his pet. The normalcy of his snoring dog helped relax his nerves, and he took his first deep breath since waking up in the Twilight Zone. Rory tried to put the pieces of the weird late-night puzzle together. His priority was the peculiar cold that seemed to cling to the air as much as

the smelly hippie oil. It was a warm night. He recalled turning the air-conditioning down because he loved to burrow under the blankets.

He blew out a deep breath and started in shock as a puff of air formed into a mini-cloud near his mouth. As out of sorts as he was, he shouldn't have been able to see his breath in July, especially not in Virginia.

Crossing the room to his chest of drawers, he put socks on his icy feet. He would bet he had distractedly put the air-conditioning on fifty instead of sixty-eight. He wasn't the most focused when it came to the mundane. Ignoring the hair prickling on the back of his neck, he made his way to the old steamer trunk where he stored his winter blankets.

“Come on, bud, I'll grab another comforter and check the damn thermostat. We've got to get some sleep. Some of us work for a living.”

As Rory opened the trunk, the hair on the back of his neck stood up. Two icy hands pressed against his back. Dread like he had never experienced shimmied up from his roiling stomach to well up in his throat. He began a pleading whisper to whatever god was out there that he would turn and find the room empty. But his plea had fallen on deaf ears, because he was far from alone. A girl of maybe thirteen stared at him, a concert T-shirt from his old band, Cairo, covered her slim body. Her eyes radiated anger and fear as she pointed at him. She appeared to be floating a few inches above the ground, her toes almost grazing the floor. Her eyes were so stark that despite his considerable trepidation, his protective instincts kicked in, “Are you lost, sweetie?” he asked, in an attempt to sound relaxed. “You shouldn't be in someone else's home late at night, even if you are a fan of my band.”

She regarded him sadly.

He found himself walking toward her, “I'm not mad, it's just...”

She shook her head, disappointment etched on her face, and vanished.

Rory's legs gave out, and he collapsed onto the edge of his bed. As he sat there in stunned silence, he scrambled to come up with a rational explanation for what he had seen. Since his best friend Andy's death, he'd sworn off illicit drugs and drank only the occasional beer. He was not in any way impaired. Had he just seen a fucking ghost in his bedroom? He tried to digest that disturbing thought and watched somewhat bemused as Pierre jumped off the bed and peed on the floor.

“Shit,” he growled. Drawing in a deep breath to release the lingering pressure, he grabbed a rag made from an old Mötley Crüe T-shirt and began to clean the floor. Using the faces of the ’80s heavy-metal band to wipe pee off the floor would typically have raised his spirits, but it didn’t help tonight. Not even pee dribbling down Vince Neil’s face could distract him from the waking nightmare.

Rory scrubbed the floor and contemplated the little ghost-girl with the Cairo T-shirt. The logical side of his brain cataloged the event as a bad dream with its roots in the death of his dear friend and fellow bandmate, Andy Kinney. Before his current nightmare, nothing had been more disturbing than watching his best friend slowly die before his eyes. The naïve and charismatic lead singer for the band had become a soulless shell of a man whose only desire was the next fix. His creativity and love for life had been no match for heroin. Andy’s death was the most soul-crushing event in Rory’s life. But what did a pre-teen ghost-girl have to do with Andy? Despite his strong desire to discount tonight’s episode of the totally bizarre, he was pretty sure he was living in a haunted house.

Pierre, for one, had not been the same dog since their move three weeks ago. For himself, relocating back home to get away from a bad divorce had been the right decision; his entire family had supported him. Buying a house right away, however, may not have been the best idea. From the moment he had first seen this house, it beckoned him. He could imagine himself living there. But since his arrival in his new home, Pierre was always shaking, gazing at Rory with sad, dark eyes. While some of the behavior was the pup’s manipulative nature, Rory was sure the house had made the dog’s conduct worse by several degrees.

Pee-cleansing task completed, Rory stretched up and went on to phase two of the night’s reclaiming of his room—the air-conditioning. Crossing to the wall, he checked the thermostat. Sixty-eight. So the air-conditioning was not broken. Ignoring his goose bumps, he scooped up Pierre, and climbed back into bed. His body thrummed with alarm that proclaimed all was still not well in his home. Truth be told, all hadn’t been well in his home since he moved in. He had ignored the whispered voices in vacant rooms, keys going missing, and the dog peeing because he didn’t want to acknowledge something was wrong. He admitted the house was strange, sure. It was an old house. Houses had character, and this one apparently had the personality of a goth rocker.

“If you are a ghost, do me a favor and let me sleep, all right? We can get back to all the spooky shit tomorrow.” He smiled to himself, feeling brave in the face of paranormal phenomenon.

As he was drifting back to sleep, his nose began to itch like it did when he could feel someone staring at him. He opened his eyes, prepared to give Pierre hell for the disruption. What he saw made his blood run cold. The same little girl was floating above his head, inches from his face, screaming soundlessly. And then his sheets and comforter were ripped away from him.

Chapter Two

Sometimes it sucked to be a psychic, Mina Johnson grouched, as she maneuvered her vehicle through Charlottesville morning traffic. The last two nights she received unnerving visions of a family trapped behind a wall. The dreams were symbolic in some way but like most of her gifts, the images were challenging to interpret. She couldn't shake the impression of claustrophobia from her mind. What was the point of her gift if all she received was an ambiguous *something bad is going to happen* message? To top it off, in exactly five minutes she would be late for work, and she was never late.

Alleviating haunting images by binge-watching shows on the True Crime channel probably had not been the wisest of choices. The disturbing context of her dreams, and the shows, had given her a morning headache to rival those of her college hangover days.

She felt uncomfortable in her own skin, and she craved a drive-through cup of double-shot kick-ass latte, *stat*. While she waited in the line of other caffeine-desperate drivers, she grabbed her cell and pressed the center "Siri" button. She was a psychic and could communicate via telepathy with other likeminded psychics, but her concentration on driving would be extremely diminished. Calling was safer for everyone. Plus it was hard carrying on internal conversations while ordering coffee.

"Call Matt," she said crisply.

"Calling The Brat," the phone's robotic voice answered.

"No!" She almost rear-ended the car in front of her. So much for these devices being *smarter*. The last person she wanted to talk to before coffee was grumpy Sage.

"Call Matt!" she bellowed.

"Calling Matt."

"That's right you're calling Matt. Stupid machine."

"Good morning, Mina. Shit is going down," Matt said by way of greeting.

He wasn't what anyone would call a stereotypical assistant. Tall, bordering on skinny, and covered in tattoos, Matt, like everyone on her team, had paranormal gifts. Four years ago, however, he thought he was crazy, not psychic. Over some good whiskey, Mina convinced Matt he was not

insane, merely psychically gifted. Ever since that night, Matt was devoted to her. As her newest team member he was assigned the grunt work, but he handled it all with a grin and an occasional droll comment.

“Sorry, sorry, I know I’m running late.”

“Mina, you’re the boss. You can be late if you want. I don’t know why I have to keep reminding you.” The underlying judgment in his words was clear.

She smirked. He was adorable when he felt superior.

“Anyway,” he continued, “you know you have a meeting today with the lady whose kids are getting, like, supernaturally sick.”

“Yes…”

“Well, I gave the case to Sebastian because we just got a call. Pretty fascinating case and the home happens to be on Angus Street near your place.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The brother of the guy who owns the house called. Said his brother was hysterical.”

“Wow. Hold on”—she beamed at the barista and requested her coffee—“I’m back.”

“Well, this guy, Riley, told me his brother saw a little spirit girl floating over his bed.”

“Oh. My. God. That is awesome.”

“Right?”

“Text me the address to the floating-spirit job, okay? It’s probably something toxic from the house causing him to hallucinate, but I can always hope.” She handed a second barista her card and received her steaming hot latte. Ah, bliss.

Matt snickered, and said, “Fingers crossed. Hey, there is one more thing.”

“What?” she asked distractedly, trying to make a left.

“You know the band you loved when you were in college…Cairo?”

She did have a Cairo poster from the early 2000s in her office. It was a reminder of a special night at The Jefferson when she had decided to be a bad girl and sleep with the drummer of her favorite band. Matt’s love of Cairo and covetous glances at her poster aside, what did it have to do with a floating spirit?

“You can’t have my poster, Matt. It’s practically an antique now, and I love it.”

“The hysterical guy? Riley’s brother? He was the drummer for Cairo.”

“Are you friggin’ kidding me? The haunting is at Rory O’Brian’s house?” Oh, shit! She internally wailed. How could she get out of this? The one-night stand with Rory had been the best sex of her life, but for Rock Star Rory, it had probably been a typical Friday night with a random fan. His hasty exit while she dozed after their third bout of vigorous lovemaking made it clear he viewed her like any other fan who wanted a night with a star. Wham Bam, thank you, ma’am. Ugh!

She had experienced a soul connection with him so profound that it was unsettling. It was like they had known each other in another lifetime. For someone who had always wanted to belong, her night with him was like being welcomed home, and it was evident he hadn’t felt the same way. How could he? He was a rock star! She was just a girl. After he snuck out, she had picked up her clothes and gone home—walk-of-shame style.

The Devil’s Harlot.

The words, echoes of her childhood, slid down her back like ice. She willed herself to ignore the voice that haunted her memories and focused on her present dilemma. Rory.

Despite his painful rejection years ago, she couldn’t help but hungrily read any news items on the band after that night. She had gone to the site of Cairo’s first venue along with many other fans and left flowers in Andy’s memory when he passed. Her face had heated with jealousy that slowly morphed into grudging happiness for Rory when he got married. When he divorced the tall delicate woman, she was secretly relieved. For ten years she had watched wistfully as he lived his life in the limelight while she clung to the shadows.

“Yes,” Matt affirmed unaware of Mina’s visit down memory lane. “He recently moved back here from Northern Virginia after his divorce, apparently he wanted to make a change...”

“He told you all that? Most people are too upset or freaked out by the actual haunting to talk about anything else,” Mina asked.

“No...I didn’t speak to the little drummer boy,” he said his voice droll as usual. “His brother, Riley, told me those details and lots of other stuff I didn’t want to know. Like, Rory is a new adjunct professor of music at the university.”

“Really? Don’t you have to have a Ph.D. to be a professor?”

“How do I know? Maybe he does. That *rock-star* thing was a long time ago. Plus, their singer died in, like, 2010. He’s had plenty of time. But wait, there’s more!” Matt said. “The brother then

told me Rory was crying like a little bitch about the haunting. Isn't it hilarious? A big rock star is crying like a pu—baby?"

"Matt?"

"What?"

"Put a dollar in the jar for that misogynistic comment."

"Aw, Mina!" Matt protested, sounding much younger than his age.

"Saying someone cried like a little bitch, or the other word that I will not say out loud, is flat-out inappropriate. You understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am," he grumbled.

She could picture him rolling his eyes.

Mina rang off, curbing her desire to go to the office and paddle her tattooed assistant's ass for his behavior. As she headed toward home, she groaned. She didn't need this kind of stress. Working with a former lover who, more than likely, had no recollection of their night together? No, thank you.

She tried to call Sebastian and the other team member, Linda, but neither of them answered.

"Wear your big-girl panties, Mina! You're a grownup!" she said, loudly chastising herself. She could face Rory and pretend she'd never met him. She was a professional! She was a grown-ass woman! And a grown-ass woman should go home and find her push-up bra. *For confidence. Yeah.*

An hour later, Mina parked her car outside Rory's house and took a deep breath. With a quick glance at the girls, she smiled at what a good underwire bra could do for a busty girl's attitude. Mina stepped out of her car. She felt almost pretty in the cornflower-blue baby-doll shirt and black jeans she had chosen to wear. Mina put aside her personal demons to focus on the house and the intense energy emanating from its frame. It was a charming Colonial Revival, with green shutters, lovely side gables, and a well-kept lawn. Despite the quaint picture it presented, the place practically hummed with paranormal activity. "Oh, boy, this could be really good," she murmured.

A male voice bellowed, "Get out!"

"What the...?" The front door opened, and three men hustled out of the house, equipment flying in their wake.

"Run!" shouted the chubby one, as he made his way to a van bearing the silly title, *Ghosts R Us*.

“Why do people ever call those ridiculous ghost-hunting teams? Damn it!” she muttered, as she hitched her leather bag onto her shoulder. She carefully made her way up the stairs toward the house. She was about to knock on the door when it flew open. There stood the rock god of her dreams—Rory O’Brian. Unfortunately, he was looking less god-like as it was obvious the little dog he held had relieved himself on his shirt.

“What do you want?” he asked, in a voice that clearly suggested she take a flying leap off a tall building. He stood there, his muscular body radiating ill humor. If she hadn’t known him, his scowl and size alone would be enough to convince her to turn tail and run.

He hadn’t even looked at her. He was so focused on his dog and the pee that it was evident he was in no mood for a visitor. Despite his pique, his voice was intoxicating—it was as deep and rich as a strong shot of bourbon. He was six feet tall with black hair and amber eyes that could shift almost to green when he was turned on. Not that she remembered that night with crystal clarity or anything. *Oh, boy.*

“My name is Mina Johnson,” she said, shaking off inappropriate thoughts. “My company is Spiriod. You called me?”

“Spir—what?” And then he focused on her, his eyes widening. Something—recognition?

His scowl deepened. “I’m not sure my house can stand any more *help* from you people.”

Wow. Rude. She didn’t remember that personality aberration from their one night together. Mina swallowed a nasty response and said, “I’m not like *those people*, Mr. O’Brian.”

“And I would know that because...” The discourteous pee-stained diva said in full snark as he leaned against the door frame.

“Because I will fix what they started and figure out what created the haunting in the first place,” Mina retorted, her hands fisted at her side.

“Well, by all means, Miss...Johnson was it? By all means, go into my house and save the day! His mouth twisted wryly.

What a jerk face! “I will!”

“Be careful in there,” he taunted.

To add emphasis to his mocking tone, every door in Rory’s house slammed shut in cacophony.

Rory paled. “Look Mina,” he said, his voice completely void of the previous censure, “I’m in a pissy mood after what those assholes did in my house, but that doesn’t mean I want you to go in

there and get hurt. I'm going to call my brother and go stay there. We can talk tomorrow or something."

Squaring her shoulders, Mina said, "I'm not going to get hurt. I need you to let me into your house right now so I can calm it down before you start to lose furniture. Those TV *detectives* activated a poltergeist."

Something that might have been respect shimmered in his eyes for a brief moment but quickly turned to concern as he eyed his house apprehensively. "You can fix this?"

"Yes," she replied with confidence.

"Seriously?"

Mina reached out to comfort him and hesitated; the only thing left of the man she knew from ten years ago was a ghost in her memory. Instead, she gave him a firm nod and advised, "Stay out here," and walked inside the home, uncertain as to what she would face.

