

HELL HOUSE

RICHARD MATHESON



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HELL HOUSE

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With love, for my daughters
Bettina and Alison
who have haunted my life so sweetly

HEL HOUS

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3:17 P.M.

It had been raining hard since five o'clock that morning. Brontean weather, Dr. Barrett thought. He repressed a smile. He felt rather like a character in some latter-day Gothic romance. The driving rain, the cold, the two-hour ride from Manhattan in one of Deutsch's long black leather upholstered limousines. The interminable wait in this corridor while disconcerted-looking men and women hurried in and out of Deutsch's bedroom, glancing at him occasionally.

He drew his watch from its vest pocket and raised the lid. He'd been here more than an hour now. What did Deutsch want of him? Something to do with parapsychology, most likely. The old man's chain of newspapers and magazines were forever printing articles on the subject. "Return from the Grave"; "The Girl Who Wouldn't Die"—always sensational, rarely factual.

Wincing at the effort, Dr. Barrett lifted his right leg over his left. He was a tall, slightly overweight man in his middle fifties, his thinning blond hair unchanged in color, though his trimmed beard showed traces of white. He sat erect on the straight-back chair, staring at the door to Deutsch's bedroom. Edith must be getting restless downstairs. He was sorry she'd come. Still, he'd had no way of knowing it would take this long.

The door to Deutsch's bedroom opened, and his male secretary, Hanley, came out. "Doctor," he said.

Barrett reached for his cane and, standing, limped across the hallway, stopping in front of the shorter man. He waited while the secretary leaned in through the doorway and announced, "Doctor Barrett, sir." Then he stepped past Hanley, entering the room. The secretary closed the door behind him.

The darkly paneled bedroom was immense. Sanctum of the monarch, Barrett thought as he moved across the rug. Stopping by the massive bed, he looked at the old man sitting in it. Rolf Rudolph Deutsch was eighty-seven, bald, and skeletal, his dark eyes peering out from bony cavities. Barrett smiled. "Good afternoon." Intriguing that this wasted creature ruled an empire, he was thinking.

"You're crippled." Deutsch's voice was rasping. "No one told me that."

"I beg your pardon?" Barrett had stiffened.

"Never mind." Deutsch cut him off. "It's not that vital, I suppose. My people have recommended you. They say you're one of the five best in your field." He drew in laboring breath. "Your fee will be one hundred thousand dollars."

Barrett started.

"Your assignment is to establish the facts."

"Regarding what?" asked Barrett.

Deutsch seemed hesitant about replying, as though he felt it was beneath him. Finally he said, "Survival."

"You want me—?"

"—to tell me if it's factual or not."

Barrett's heart sank. That amount of money would make all the difference in the world to him. Still, how could he in conscience accept it on such grounds?

"It isn't lies I want," Deutsch told him. "I'll buy the answer, either way. So long as it's definitive."

Barrett felt a roil of despair. "How can I convince you, either way?" He was compelled to say it.

"By giving me *facts*," Deutsch answered irritably.

"Where am I to find them? I'm a physicist. In the twenty years I've studied parapsychology, I've yet to—"

"If they exist," Deutsch interrupted, "you'll find them in the only place on earth I know of where survival has yet to be refuted. The Belasco house in Maine."

"*Hell House*?"

Something glittered in the old man's eyes.

"Hell House," he said.

Barrett felt a tingling of excitement. "I thought Belasco's heirs had it sealed off after what happened—"

"That was thirty years ago," Deutsch cut him off again. "They need the money now; I've bought the place. Can you be there by Monday?"

Barrett hesitated, then, seeing Deutsch begin to frown, nodded once. "Yes." He couldn't let the chance go by.

"There'll be two others with you," Deutsch said.

"May I ask who—?"

"Florence Tanner and Benjamin Franklin Fischer."

Barrett tried not to show the disappointment he felt. An over-emotive Spiritualist medium, and the lone survivor of the 1940 debacle? He wondered if he dared object. He had his own group of sensitives and didn't see how Florence Tanner or Fischer could be of any help to him. Fischer had shown incredible abilities as a boy, but after his breakdown had obviously lost his gift, been caught in fraud a number of times, finally disappearing from the field entirely. He listened, half-attentive, as Deutsch told him that Florence Tanner would fly north with him, while Fischer would meet them in Maine.

The old man noted his expression. "Don't worry, you'll be in charge," he said; "Tanner's only going because my people tell me she's a first-class medium—"

"But a mental medium," said Barrett.

"—and I want that line of approach employed, as well as yours," Deutsch went on, as though Barrett hadn't spoken. "Fischer's presence is obvious."

Barrett nodded. There was no way out of it, he saw. He'd have to bring up one of his own people after the project was under way. "As to costs—" he started.

The old man waved him off. "Take that up with Hanley. You have unlimited funds."

"And time?"

"That you don't have," Deutsch replied. "I want the answer in a week."

Barrett looked appalled.

"Take it or leave it!" the old man snapped, sudden, naked rage in his expression. Barrett knew he

had to accede or lose the opportunity—and there was a chance if he could get his machine constructed in time.

He nodded once. “A week,” he said.

3:50 P.M.

“Anything else?” asked Hanley.

Barrett reviewed the items in his mind again. A list of all phenomena observed in the Belasco house. Restoration of its electrical system. Installation of telephone service. The swimming pool and steam room made available to him. Barrett had ignored the small man’s frown at the fourth item. Daily swim and steam bath were mandatory for him.

“One more item,” he said. He tried to sound casual but felt that his excitement showed. “I need a machine. I have the blueprints for it at my apartment.”

“How soon will you need it?” Hanley asked.

“As soon as possible.”

“Is it large?”

Twelve years, Barrett thought. “Quite large,” he said.

“That’s it?”

“All I can think of at the moment. I haven’t mentioned living facilities, of course.”

“Enough rooms have been renovated for your use. A couple from Caribou Falls will prepare and deliver your meals.” Hanley seemed about to smile. “They’ve refused to sleep in the house.”

Barrett stood. “It’s just as well. They’d only be in the way.”

Hanley walked him toward the library door. Before they reached it, it was opened sharply by a stout man, who glared at Barrett. Although he was forty years younger and a hundred pounds heavier, William Reinhardt Deutsch bore an unmistakable resemblance to his father.

He shut the door. “I’m warning you right now,” he said, “I’m going to block this thing.”

Barrett stared at him.

“The truth,” Deutsch said. “This is a waste of time, isn’t it? Put it in writing, and I’ll make you out a check for a thousand dollars right now.”

Barrett tightened. “I’m afraid—”

“There’s no such thing as the supernatural, is there?” Deutsch’s neck was reddening.

“Correct,” said Barrett. Deutsch began to smile in triumph. “The word is ‘*supernormal*. ‘Nature cannot be transcended—”

“What the hell’s the difference?” interrupted Deutsch. “It’s superstition, all of it!”

“I’m sorry, but it isn’t.” Barrett started past him. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Deutsch caught his arm. “Now, *look*, you better drop this thing. I’ll see you never get that money—”

Barrett pulled his arm free. “Do what you will,” he said. “I’ll proceed until I hear otherwise from your father.”

He closed the door and started down the corridor. In light of present knowledge, his mind addressed Deutsch, anyone who chooses to refer to psychic phenomena as superstition simply isn’t aware of what’s going on in the world. The documentation is immense—

Barrett stopped and leaned against the wall. His leg was starting to ache again. For the first time, he

allowed himself to recognize what a strain on his condition it might be to spend a week in the Belasco house.

What if it was really as bad as the two accounts claimed it was?

4:37 P.M.

The Rolls-Royce sped along the highway toward Manhattan.

“That’s an awful lot of money.” Edith still sounded incredulous.

“Not to him,” said Barrett. “Especially when you consider that what he’s paying for is an assurance of immortality.”

“But he must know that you don’t believe—”

“I’m sure he does,” Barrett interrupted. He didn’t want to consider the possibility that Deutscher hadn’t been told. “He’s not the sort of man who goes into anything without being totally informed.”

“But a hundred thousand dollars.”

Barrett smiled. “I can scarcely believe it myself,” he said. “If I were like my mother, I would undoubtedly consider this a miracle from God. The two things I’ve failed to accomplish both supplied at once—an opportunity to prove my theory, and provision for our later years. Really, I could ask for no more.”

Edith returned his smile. “I’m happy for you, Lionel,” she said.

“Thank you, my dear.” He patted her hand.

“Monday afternoon, though.” Edith looked concerned. “That doesn’t give us too much time.”

Barrett said, “I’m wondering if I shouldn’t go alone on this one.”

She stared at him.

“Well, not alone, of course,” he said. “There are the two others.”

“What about your meals?”

“They’ll be provided. All I’ll have to do is work.”

“I’ve always helped you, though,” she said.

“I know. It’s just that—”

“What?”

He hesitated. “I’d rather you weren’t along this time, that’s all.”

“Why, Lionel?” She looked uneasy when he didn’t answer. “Is it me?”

“Of course not.” Barrett’s smile was quick, distracted. “It’s the house.”

“Isn’t it just another so-called haunted house?” she asked, using his phrase.

“I’m afraid it isn’t,” he admitted. “It’s the Mount Everest of haunted houses, you might say. There were two attempts to investigate it, one in 1931, the other in 1940. Both were disasters. Eight people involved in those attempts were killed, committed suicide, or went insane. Only one survived, and I have no idea how sound he is—Benjamin Fischer, one of the two who’ll be with me.

“It’s not that I fear the ultimate effect of the house,” he continued, trying to ameliorate his words. “I have confidence in what I know. It’s simply that the details of the investigation may be”—he shrugged—“a little nasty.”

“And yet you want me to let you go there alone?”

“My dear—”

“What if something happens to you?”

“Nothing will.”

“What if it does? With me in New York, and you in Maine?”

“Edith, nothing’s going to happen.”

“Then there’s no reason I can’t go.” She tried to smile. “I’m not afraid, Lionel.”

“I know you’re not.”

“I won’t get in your way.”

Barrett sighed.

“I know I don’t understand much of what you’re doing, but there are always things I can do to help. Pack and unload your equipment, for instance. Help you set up your experiments. Type the rest of your manuscript; you said you wanted to have it ready by the first of the year. And I want to be with you when you prove your theory.”

Barrett nodded. “Let me think about it.”

“I won’t be in your way,” she promised. “And I know there are any number of things I can do to help.”

He nodded again, trying to think. It was obvious she didn’t want to stay behind. He could appreciate that. Except for his three weeks in London in 1962, they’d never been separated since their marriage. Would it really hurt that much to take her? Certainly, she’d experienced enough psychic phenomena by now to be accustomed to it.

Still, that house was such an unknown factor. It hadn’t been called Hell House without reason. There was a power there strong enough to physically and/or mentally demolish eight people, three of whom had been scientists like himself.

Even believing that he knew exactly what that power was, dare he expose Edith to it?

DECEMBER 20, 1970

10:39 P.M.

Florence Tanner crossed the yard which separated her small house from the church and walked along the alley to the street. She stood on the sidewalk and gazed at her church. It was only a converted store, but it had been everything to her these past six years. She looked at the sign in the painted window: TEMPLE OF SPIRITUAL HARMONY. She smiled. It was indeed. Those six years had been the most spiritually harmonious of her life.

She walked to the door, unlocked it, and went inside. The warmth felt good. Shivering, she turned on the wall lamp in the vestibule. Her eye was caught by the bulletin board:

Sunday Services—11:00 a.m., 8:00 p.m.

Healing and Prophecy—Tuesdays, 7:45 p.m.

Lectures and Spirit Greetings—Wednesdays, 7:45 p.m.

Messages and Revelations—Thursdays, 7:45 p.m.

Holy Communion—1st Sunday of Month

She turned and gazed at her photograph tacked to the wall, the printed words above it: *The Reverend Florence Tanner*. For several moments she was pleased to be reminded of her beauty. Forty-three, she still retained it unimpaired, her long red hair untouched by grayness, her tall, Junoesque figure almost as trim as it had been in her twenties. She smiled in self-depreciation then. Vanity and vanities, she thought.

She went into the church, walked along the carpeted aisle, and stepped onto the platform, taking her familiar pose behind the lectern. She looked at the rows of chairs, the hymnals set on every third one. She visualized her congregation sitting before her. "My dears," she murmured.

She had told them at the morning and evening services. Told them of the need for her to be away from them for the next week. Told them of the answer to their prayers—the means to build a true church on their own property. Asked them to pray for her while she was gone.

Florence clasped her hands on the lectern and closed her eyes. Her lips moved slightly as she prayed for the strength to cleanse the Belasco house. It had such a dreadful history of death and suicide and madness. It was a house most horribly defiled. She prayed to end its curse.

The prayer completed, Florence lifted her head and gazed at her church. She loved it deeply. Still to be able to build a real church for her congregation was truly a gift from heaven. And Christmastime ... She smiled, eyes glistening with tears.

God was good.

11:17 P.M.

Edith finished brushing her teeth and gazed at her reflection in the mirror—at her short-corned auburn hair, her strong, almost masculine features. Her expression was a worried one. Disturbed by the sight of it, she switched off the bathroom light and returned to the bedroom.

Lionel was asleep. She sat on her bed and looked at him, listening to the sound of his heavy breathing. Poor dear, she thought. There had been so much to do. By ten o'clock he'd been exhausted and she'd made him go to bed.

Edith lay on her side and continued looking at him. She'd never seen him so concerned before. He'd made her promise that she'd never leave his side once they'd entered the Belasco house. Could it be that bad? She'd been to haunted houses with Lionel and never been frightened. He was always so calm, so confident; it was impossible to be afraid when he was near.

Yet, he was disturbed enough about the Belasco house to make an issue of her staying by his side at all times. Edith shivered. Would her presence harm him? Would looking after her use up so much of his limited energy that his work would suffer? She didn't want that. She knew how much his work meant to him.

Still, she had to go. She'd face anything rather than be alone. She'd never told Lionel how close she'd come to a mental breakdown during those three weeks he'd been gone in 1962. It would only have distressed him, and he'd needed all his concentration for the work he was doing. So she'd lied and sounded cheerful on the telephone the three times he'd called—and, alone, she'd wept and shaken. She'd taken tranquilizers, hadn't slept or eaten, lost thirteen pounds, fought off compulsions to end it all. She'd met him at the airport finally, pale and smiling, told him that she'd had the flu.

Edith closed her eyes and drew her legs up. She couldn't face that again. The worst haunted house in the world threatened her less than being alone.

11:41 P.M.

He couldn't sleep. Fischer opened his eyes and looked around the cabin of Deutsch's private plane. Strange to be sitting in an armchair in an airplane, he thought. Strange to be sitting in an airplane at all. He'd never flown in his life.

Fischer reached for the coffeepot and poured himself another cupful. He rubbed a hand across his eyes and picked up one of the magazines lying on the coffee table in front of him. It was one of Deutsch's. What else? he thought.

After a while his eyes went out of focus, and the words on the page began to blur together. Going back, he thought. The only one of nine people still walking around, and he was going back for more.

They'd found him lying on the front porch of the house that morning in September 1940, naked and curled up like a fetus, shivering and staring into space. When they'd put him on a stretcher, he'd begun to scream and vomit blood, his muscles knotting, rocklike. He'd lain in a coma three months at the Caribou Falls Hospital. When he'd opened his eyes, he'd looked like a haggard man of thirty, a month short of his sixteenth birthday. Now he was forty-five, a lean, gray-haired man with dark eyes and his expression one of hard, suspicious readiness.

Fischer straightened in the chair. Never mind; it's time, he thought. He wasn't fifteen anymore, wasn't naïve or gullible, wasn't the credulous prey he'd been in 1940. Things would be different this time.

He'd never dreamed in his wildest fancies that he'd be given a second chance at the house. After his mother had died, he'd traveled to the West Coast. Probably, he later realized, to get as far away as possible from Maine. He'd committed clumsy fraud in Los Angeles and San Francisco, deliberately alienating Spiritualists and scientists alike in order to be free of them. He'd existed barely for thirty years, washing dishes, doing farmwork, selling door to door, janitoring, anything to earn money without using his mind.

Yet, somehow, he'd protected his ability and nurtured it. It was still there, maybe not as spectacular as it had been when he was fifteen, but very much intact—and backed now by the thoughtful caution of a man rather than the suicidal arrogance of a teenager. He was ready to shake loose the dormant psychic muscles, exercise and strengthen them, use them once more. Against that pesthole up in Maine.

Against Hell House.

DECEMBER 21, 1970

11:19 A.M.

The two black Cadillacs moved along the road, which twisted through dense forest. In the lead car was Deutsch's representative. Dr. Barrett, Edith, Florence Tanner, and Fischer rode in the second, chauffeur-driven limousine, Fischer sitting on the pull-down seat, facing the other three.

Florence put her hand on Edith's. "I hope you didn't think me unfriendly before," she said. "It was only that I felt concern for you, going into that house."

"I understand," said Edith. She drew her hand away.

"I'd appreciate it, Miss Tanner," Barrett told her, "if you wouldn't alarm my wife prematurely."

"I had no intention of doing that, Doctor. Still—" Florence hesitated, then went on. "You have prepared Mrs. Barrett, I trust."

"My wife has been advised that there will be occurrences."

Fischer grunted. "One way of putting it," he said. It was the first time he'd spoken in an hour.

Barrett turned to him. "She has also been advised," he said, "that these occurrences will not, in any way, signify the presence of the dead."

Fischer nodded, taking out a pack of cigarettes. "All right if I smoke?" he asked. His gaze flicked across their faces. Seeing no objection, he lit one.

Florence was about to say something more to Barrett, then changed her mind. "Odd that a project such as this should be financed by a man like Deutsch," she said. "I would never have thought him genuinely interested in these matters."

"He's an old man," Barrett said. "He's thinking about dying, and wants to believe it isn't the end."

"It isn't, of course."

Barrett smiled.

"You look familiar," Edith said to Florence. "Why is that?"

"I used to be an actress years ago. Television mostly, an occasional film. My acting name was Florence Michaels."

Edith nodded.

Florence looked at Barrett, then at Fischer. "Well, this is exciting," she said. "To work with two such giants. How can that house not fall before us?"

"Why is it called Hell House?" Edith asked.

"Because its owner, Emeric Belasco, created a private hell there," Barrett told her.

"Is he supposed to be the one who haunts the house?"

"Among many," Florence said. "The phenomena are too complex to be the work of one surviving spirit. It's obviously a case of multiple haunting."

"Let's just say there's something there," said Barrett.

Florence smiled. "Agreed."

“Will you get rid of it with your machine?” asked Edith.

Florence and Fischer looked at Barrett. “I’ll explain it presently,” he said.

They all looked toward the windows as the car angled downward, “We’re almost there,” Barrett said. He looked at Edith. “The house is in the Matawaskie Valley.”

All of them gazed at the hill-ringed valley lying ahead, its floor obscured by fog. Fischer stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray, blowing out smoke. Looking forward again, he winced. “We’re going in.”

The car was suddenly immersed in greenish mist. Its speed was decreased by the driver, and they saw him leaning forward, peering through the windshield. After several moments he switched on the fog lights and wipers.

“How could anyone want to build a house in such a place?” asked Florence.

“This was sunshine to Belasco,” Fischer said.

They all stared through the windows at the curling fog. It was as though they rode inside a submarine, slowly navigating downward through a sea of curdled milk. At various moments, trees or bushes or boulder formations would appear beside the car, then disappear. The only sound was the hum of the engine.

At last the car was braked. They all looked forward to see the other Cadillac in front of them. There was a faint sound as its door was closed. Then the figure of Deutsch’s representative loomed from the mist. Barrett depressed a button, and the window by his side slid down. He grimaced at the fetid odor of the mist.

The man leaned over. “We’re at the turnoff,” he said. “Your chauffeur is going into Caribou Falls with us, so one of you will have to drive to the house—it’s just a little way. The telephone has been connected, the electricity is on, and your rooms are ready.” He glanced at the floor. “The food in the basket should see you through the afternoon. Supper will be delivered at six. Any questions?”

“Will we need a key for the front door?” Barrett asked.

“No, it’s unlocked.”

“Get one anyway,” Fischer said.

Barrett looked at him, then back at the man. “Perhaps we’d better.”

The man withdrew a ring of keys from his overcoat pocket and disconnected one of them, handing it to Barrett. “Anything else?”

“We’ll phone if there is.”

The man smiled briefly. “Good-bye, then,” he said. He turned away.

“I trust he meant *au revoir*,” said Edith.

Barrett smiled as he raised the window.

“I’ll drive,” Fischer said. He clambered over the seat and got in front. Starting the motor, he turned left onto the rutted blacktop road.

Edith drew in sudden breath. “I wish I knew what to expect.”

Fischer answered without looking back. “Expect anything,” he said.

11:47 A.M.

For the past five minutes Fischer had been inching the Cadillac along the narrow, fog-bound road. Now he braked and stopped the engine. “We’re here,” he said. He wrenched up the door handle and ducked outside, buttoning his Navy pea coat.

Edith turned as Lionel opened the door beside him. She waited as he struggled out, then edged across the seat after him. She shivered as she got out. “Cold,” she said, “and that *smell.*”

“Probably a swamp around here somewhere.”

Florence joined them, and the four stood silent for a few moments, looking around.

“That way,” Fischer said then. He was gazing across the hood of the car.

“Let’s take a look,” said Barrett. “We can get our luggage afterward.” He turned to Fischer. “Would you lead?”

Fischer moved off.

They had gone only a few yards when they reached a narrow concrete bridge. As they walked across it, Edith looked over the edge. If there was water below, the mist obscured it from sight. She glanced back. Already the limousine was swallowed by fog.

“Don’t fall in the tarn.” Fischer’s voice drifted back. Edith turned and saw a body of water ahead, a gravel path curving to its left. The surface of the water looked like clouded gelatin sprinkled with thin debris of leaves and grass. A miasma of decay hovered above it, and the stones which lined its shore were green with slime.

“Now we know where the odor comes from,” Barrett said. He shook his head. “Belasco *would* have a tarn.”

“Bastard Bog,” said Fischer.

“Why do you call it that?”

Fischer didn’t answer. Finally he said, “I’ll tell you later.”

They walked in silence now, the only sound the crunching of gravel underneath their shoes. The cold was numbing, a clammy chill that seemed to dew itself around their bones. Edith drew up the collar of her coat and stayed close to Lionel, holding on to his arm and looking at the ground. Just behind them walked Florence Tanner.

When Lionel stopped at last, Edith looked up quickly.

It stood before them in the fog, a massive, looming specter of a house.

“*Hideous,*” said Florence, sounding almost angry. Edith looked at her. “We haven’t even gone inside, Miss Tanner,” Barrett said.

“I don’t have to go inside.” Florence turned to Fischer, who was staring at the house. As she looked at him, he shuddered. Reaching out, she put her hand in his. He gripped it so hard it made her wince.

Barrett and Edith gazed up at the shrouded edifice. In the mist, it resembled some ghostly escarpment blocking their path. Edith leaned forward suddenly. “*It has no windows,*” she said.

“He had them bricked up,” Barrett said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps—”

“We’re wasting time,” Fischer cut him off. He let go of Florence’s hand and lurched forward.

They walked the final yards along the gravel path, then started up the wide porch steps. Edith saw that all the steps were cracked, fungus and frosted yellow grass sprouting from the fissures.

They stopped before the massive double doors.

“If they open by themselves, I’m going home,” Edith said, trying to sound amused. Barrett gripped the handle on the door and depressed its thumb plate. The door held fast. He glanced at Fischer. “What happen to you?”

“More than once.”

“Good we have the key, then.” Barrett removed it from his overcoat pocket and slid it into the lock. It wouldn’t turn. He wiggled the key back and forth, attempting to loosen the bolt.

Abruptly the key turned over, and the heavy door began to swing in. Edith twitched as Florence caught her breath. "What is it?" she asked. Florence shook her head. "No cause for alarm," Barrett said. Edith glanced at him in surprise.

"It's just reaction, Mrs. Barrett," Florence explained. "Your husband is quite right. It's nothing to be alarmed about."

Fischer had been reaching in to locate the light switch. Now he found it, and they heard him flick it up and down without result. "So much for restored electrical service," he said.

"Obviously the generator is too old," Barrett said.

"Generator?" Edith looked surprised again. "There's no electrical service here?"

"There aren't enough houses in the valley to make it worth the effort," Barrett answered.

"How could they put in a telephone, then?"

"It's a field telephone," Barrett said. He looked into the house. "Well, Mr. Deutsch will have to provide us with a new generator, that's all."

"You think that's the answer, do you?" Fischer sounded dubious.

"Of course," said Barrett. "The breakdown of an antique generator can scarcely be classified as a psychic phenomenon."

"What are we going to do?" asked Edith. "Stay in Caribou Falls until the new generator is installed?"

"That might take days," said Barrett. "We'll use candles until it arrives."

"Candles," Edith said.

Barrett smiled at her expression. "Just for a day or so."

She nodded, her returned smile wan. Barrett looked inside the house. "The question now," he said, "is how do we find some candles? I assume there must be some inside—" He broke off, looking at the flashlight Fischer had taken out of his coat pocket. "Ah," he said.

Fischer switched on the flashlight, pointed the beam inside, then, bracing himself, stepped across the threshold.

Barrett went in next. He stepped through the doorway, seemed to listen briefly. Turning then, he extended his hand to Edith. She entered the house, clutching at his hand. "That *smell*," she said. "It's even worse than outside."

"It's a very old house with no aeration," Barrett said. "It could also be the furnace, which hasn't been used in more than twenty-nine years." He turned to Florence. "Coming, Miss Tanner?" he asked.

She nodded, smiling faintly. "Yes." She took a deep breath, held herself erect, and stepped inside. She looked around. "The *atmosphere* in here—" She sounded queasy.

"An atmosphere of this world, not the next," said Barrett dryly.

Fischer played the flashlight beam around the dark immensity of the entry hall. The narrow cone of light jumped fitfully from place to place, freezing momentarily on hulking groups of furniture; huge leaden-colored paintings; giant tapestries filmed with dust; a staircase, broad and curving, leading upward into blackness; a second-story corridor overlooking the entry hall; and far above, engulfed by shadows, a vast expanse of paneled ceiling.

"Be it ever so humble," Barrett said.

"It isn't humble at all," said Florence. "It reeks of arrogance."

Barrett sighed. "It reeks, at any rate." He looked to his right. "According to the floor plan, the kitchen should be that way."

Edith walked beside him as they started across the entry hall, the sound of their footsteps loud on the hardwood floor.

Florence looked around. "It knows we're here," she said.

"Miss Tanner—" Barrett frowned. "Please don't think I'm trying to restrict you—"

"Sorry." Florence said. "I'll try to keep my observations to myself."

They reached a corridor and walked along it, Fischer in the lead, Barrett and Edith behind him, Florence last. At the end of the corridor stood a pair of metal-faced swinging doors. Fischer pushed one of them open and stepped into the kitchen, holding the door ajar for the others. When all of the others had gone inside, he let the door swing back and turned.

"Good Lord." Edith's eyes moved with the flashlight beam as Fischer shifted it around the room.

The kitchen was twenty-five by fifty feet, its perimeter rimmed by steel counters and dark-paneled cupboards, a long, double-basin sink, a gigantic stove with three ovens, and a massive walk-in refrigerator. In the center of the room, like a giant's steel-topped casket, stood a huge steam table.

"He must have entertained a good deal," Edith said.

Fischer pointed the flashlight at the large electric wall clock above the stove. Its hands were stopped at 7:31. A.M. or P.M., and on what day? Barrett wondered as he limped along the wall to his right, pulling open drawers. Edith and Florence stood together, watching him. Barrett pulled open one of the cupboard doors and grunted as Fischer shone the light over. "Genuine spirits," he said, looking at the shelves of dust-filmed bottles. "Perhaps we'll raise some after supper."

Fischer pulled a sheet of yellow-edged cardboard from one of the drawers and pointed the flashlight at it.

"What's that?" Barrett asked.

"One of their menus, dated March 27, 1928. Shrimp bisque. Sweetbreads in gravy. Stewed capon. Bread sauce in gravy. Creamed cauliflower. For dessert, *amandes en crème*: crushed almonds and whipped egg whites and heavy cream."

Barrett chuckled. "His guests must have all had heartburn."

"The food wasn't aimed at their hearts," said Fischer, taking a box of candles from the drawer.

12:19 P.M.

They started back across the entry hall, each carrying a candle in a holder. As they moved, the flickering illumination made their shadows billow on the walls and ceiling.

"This must be the great hall over here," said Barrett.

They moved beneath an archway six feet deep and stopped, Edith and Florence gasping almost simultaneously. Barrett whistled softly as he raised his candle for a maximum of light.

The great hall measured ninety-five by forty-seven feet, its walls two stories high, paneled with walnut to a height of eight feet, rough-hewn blocks of stone above. Across from where they stood was a mammoth fireplace, its mantel constructed of antique carved stone.

The furnishings were all antique except for scattered chairs and sofas upholstered in the fashion of the twenties. Marble statues stood on pedestals in various locations. In the northwest corner was an ebony concert grand piano, and in the center of the hall stood a circular table, more than twenty feet across, with sixteen high-backed chairs around it and a large chandelier suspended over it. Good place to set up my equipment, Barrett thought; the hall had obviously been cleaned. He lowered his candle. "Let's push on," he said.

They left the great hall, moved across the entry hall, beneath the overhanging staircase, and turned right into another corridor. Several yards along its length, they reached a pair of swinging walnut doors set to their left. Barrett pushed one in and peered inside. "The theater," he said.

They went inside, reacting to the musty smell. The theater was designed to seat a hundred people; its walls covered with an antique red brocade, its sloping, three-aisled floor with thick red carpeting. On the stage, gilded Renaissance columns flanked the screen, and spaced along the walls were silver candelabra wired for electricity. The seats were custom-made, upholstered with wine-red velvet.

"Just how wealthy was Belasco?" Edith asked.

"I believe he left in excess of seven million dollars when he died," Barrett answered.

"Died?" said Fischer. He held open one of the doors.

"If there's anything you care to tell us ..." Barrett said as he stepped into the corridor.

"What's to tell? The house tried to kill me; it almost succeeded."

Barrett looked as though he meant to speak. Then he changed his mind and peered down the corridor. "I think that staircase leads down to the pool and steam room," he said. "No point in going there until the electricity's on." He limped across the corridor and opened a heavy wooden door.

"What is it?" Edith asked.

"Looks like a chapel."

"A chapel?" Florence looked appalled. As she neared the door, she started making sounds of apprehension in her throat. Edith glanced at her uneasily.

"Miss Tanner?" Barrett said.

She didn't answer. Almost to the door, she held back.

"Better not," said Fischer.

Florence shook her head. "I must." She began to enter.

With a faint, involuntary cry, she shrank back. Edith started. "What is it?" Florence was unable to reply. She sucked in breath and shook her head with tiny movements. Barrett put his hand on Edith's arm. She looked at him and saw his lips frame the words, "It's all right."

"I can't go in," Florence said, as though apologizing. "Not now, anyway." She swallowed. "The atmosphere is more than I can bear."

"We'll only be a moment," Barrett told her.

Florence nodded, turning away.

As she went inside the chapel, Edith braced herself, expecting a shock of some kind. Feeling nothing, she turned to Lionel in confusion, started to speak, then waited until they were apart from Fischer. "Why couldn't she come in?" she whispered then.

"Her system is attuned to psychic energy," Barrett explained. "Obviously it's very strong in here."

"Why here?"

"Contrast, perhaps. A church in hell; that sort of thing."

Edith nodded, glancing back at Fischer. "Why doesn't it bother him?" she asked.

"Perhaps he knows how to protect himself better than she does."

Edith nodded again, stopping as Lionel did to look around the low-ceilinged chapel. There were wooden pews for fifty people. In front was an altar; above it, glinting in the candlelight, a life-sized flesh-colored figure of Jesus on the cross.

"It looks like a chapel," she started to say, breaking off in shock as she saw that the figure of Jesus was naked, an enormous phallus jutting upward from between the legs. She made a sound of revulsion, staring at the obscene crucifix. The air seemed suddenly thick, coagulating in her throat.

Now she noticed that the walls were covered with pornographic murals. Her eye was caught by one

on her right, depicting a mass orgy involving half-clothed nuns and priests. The faces on the figures were demented—leering, slavering, darkly flushed, distorted by maniacal lust.

“Profanation of the sacred,” Barrett said. “A venerable sickness.”

“He *was* sick,” Edith murmured.

“Yes, he was.” Barrett took her arm. As he escorted her along the aisle, Edith saw that Fischer had already left.

They found him in the corridor.

“*She’s gone,*” he said.

Edith stared at him. “How can she—?” She broke off, looking around.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Barrett said.

“*Are you?*” Fischer sounded angry.

“I’m sure she’s all right,” said Barrett firmly. “Miss Tanner!” he called. “Come along, my dear.” He started down the corridor. “Miss Tanner!” Fischer followed him without making a sound.

“Lionel, why would she—?”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Barrett said. He called again. “Miss Tanner! Can you hear me?”

As they reached the entry hall, Edith pointed. There was candlelight inside the great hall.

“Miss Tanner!” Barrett called.

“Yes!”

Barrett smiled at Edith, then glanced over at Fischer. Fischer’s expression had not relaxed.

She was standing on the far side of the hall. Their footsteps clicked in broken rhythm on the floor as they crossed to her. “You shouldn’t have done that, Miss Tanner,” Barrett said. “You caused undue alarm.”

“I’m sorry,” Florence said, but it was only a token apology. “I heard a voice in here.”

Edith shuddered.

Florence gestured toward the piece of furniture she was standing beside, a phonograph installed inside a walnut Spanish cabinet. Reaching down to its turntable, she lifted off a record and showed it to them. “It was this.”

Edith didn’t understand. “How could it play without electricity?”

“You forget they used to wind up phonographs.” Barrett set his candle holder on top of the cabinet and took the record from Florence. “Homemade,” he said.

“Belasco.”

Barrett looked at her, intrigued. “His voice?” She nodded, and he turned to put it back on the turntable. Florence looked at Fischer, who was standing several yards away, staring at the phonograph.

Barrett wound the crank tight, ran a fingertip across the end of the steel needle, and set it on the record edge. There was a crackling noise through the speaker, then a voice.

“Welcome to my house,” said Emeric Belasco. “I’m delighted you could come.”

Edith crossed her arms and shivered.

“I am certain you will find your stay here most illuminating.” Belasco’s voice was soft and mellow yet terrifying—the voice of a carefully disciplined madman. “It is regrettable I cannot be with you,” he said, “but I had to leave before your arrival.”

Bastard, Fischer thought.

“Do not let my physical absence disturb you, however. Think of me as your unseen host and believe

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