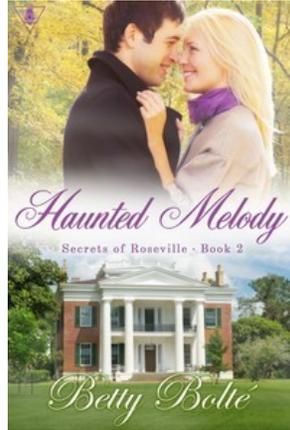


Excerpt
Haunted Melody
(Secrets of Roseville Book 2)
By
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Chapter 1

The enormous orange jack-o-lantern faced the long driveway, challenging visitors to Twin Oaks with its glowing toothy grin. Paulette O’Connell propped her fists on her hips and assessed the rest of the decorations gathered on the wide front porch of her younger sister Meredith’s antebellum plantation home. Gratitude and disquiet filled her chest along with the crisp fall air. Standing at the bottom of the three brick steps, she scanned the clusters of corn stalks propped against the two center columns, the gourds and pumpkins scattered about, and the wisps of fake spiderweb stretched between two of the large white columns. A forbidding black spider waited among the gossamer strands. A white sheet ghost danced in the brisk breeze, rattling the dried corn stalk leaves. With a chuckle, she clapped her hands together. “Perfect. Mer will love it.”

Their next B&B guests might include several young children who would love the spooky yet fun décor as much as she did. If only trick-or-treaters in town came out to the country. But of course, the trek to Twin Oaks wouldn’t yield enough return on investment for the children’s parents to make such a journey. The memory of Halloween parties from her childhood made her smile. Costumes. Games. Telling tales and singing songs about monsters and spooky things. They needed a reason to venture so far from town. Perhaps she could lure them to the plantation with some form of entertainment. Hmmm.

Halloween remained her favorite holiday, at least for the fun props. Ever since discovering she possessed the ability to see ghosts a few months before, the approaching holiday had taken

on new meaning. She had grown up with “dreams” about a lady in a blue gown. Who knew she was actually a ghost, her Great-great-great-aunt Grace. Later, she learned from Meredith that Grace’s brother, Great-great-great-grandfather Joe, also hung around the family cemetery, apparently waiting for his sister’s return. Meredith had figured out the identities of the ghosts, but the sisters realized they possessed the ability to see ghosts at the same time.

Thankfully, the ghosts weren’t scary so much as sad and a little spooky. After burying Grace’s remains beside Joe’s, the house held no more spirits, as they finally rested in peace. Knowing the plantation no longer hosted spooks made enjoying the tricks and treats of the season more fun. Although she rather missed Grace’s friendly presence in a gorgeous blue dress replete with sparkling sequins, a dress which had inspired Paulette’s own childhood designs.

Rubbing a hand over her protruding belly, she lingered in the fading afternoon light. She surveyed the expanse of pale grass reaching toward the distant road winding past. The glittering water of the fenced lake where ducks paddled about. Low clouds covered the sky, obscuring the sun. Several trees sported jagged trunks, remnants of the tornado they’d survived six months ago. Hunkered in the storm shelter within the stone foundation of Twin Oaks, she’d feared the destruction of the plantation once and for all. Thankfully, they’d suffered only minor damage, except for the old gazebo. Rebuilding it had been Meredith’s first priority. Its new design proved very popular with the guests, who frequently enjoyed its shady quiet on a hot summer afternoon, or the soft lighting in the evening.

The baby shifted, a tiny foot or perhaps a fist bopping her hand where it rested. “Soon, little one. Another six weeks, give or take, and we’ll meet properly.”

Tires crunched on gravel and she recognized her sister’s glaring yellow Camaro approaching. The sports car shouted its owner’s status. Successful. Independent. Confident. All the attributes Paulette wished she could ascribe to herself. She waved as Meredith drove behind the house to park, and then Paulette hurried up the front steps and inside as fast as her bulk allowed.

Pregnancy increased her weight significantly from her normal slender build and made keeping her balance difficult. The baby couldn’t come soon enough for her liking. Uncertainty spider crawled down her back. If she and Meredith had not made peace between them, she’d be on the street without any means of providing for her child. Good ole Johnny had fled to Alaska rather than face his fatherly duties. Alone and lonely, she’d had no choice but to come begging to her sister. The timing worked out for both of them, as did their renewed relationship. Otherwise, where would she have turned? She squared her shoulders and pulled open the heavy wooden door. No matter. Her baby would know love and laughter and never, ever be alone.

Pausing inside the closed door, she let out a breath. The grand entrance never failed to bring her pleasure. Hardwood floors reached across the space, inviting visitors to its interior rooms. As their grandmother, Mary O’Connell, had done before them, Paulette and Meredith utilized the small room toward the back of the house as a sitting and sewing room while the parlor at her immediate right served as a more formal place to greet guests. To the left, the double parlor waited for after-dinner gatherings, with their pipes and conversations. A flight of stairs, dressed

up in dark brown treads with white fronts, led to the second floor and its rabbit's warren of bedrooms and baths. The distant rustling of paper bags and cabinet doors closing summoned her down the hallway and through the swinging door into the kitchen.

"Hey, Meredith, I was thinking..." Paulette hesitated to share her idea with her business oriented sister. How should she phrase her vision in such a way as to be convincing?

Meredith snagged a bunch of celery from the brown paper bag, sidestepping Grizabella as the calico twined about her ankles, to drop it into the crisper bin in the refrigerator. Dressed in tan jeans and a mulberry sweater, Meredith appeared ready to settle down to work in her home office despite the late afternoon hour. Paulette glanced out the small kitchen window. Sunshine stretched across the yard, creating long shadows in preparation for nightfall. Her gaze lit upon the gazebo with its white spindled railing and wooden posts supporting the peaked shaker shingled roof. A collection of metal chairs with colorful cushions surrounded the matching round table in the center. The rebuilt gazebo caught the light and threw it down as a lacy silhouette of the wrought iron gingerbread edging the roof. Beyond the gazebo the family cemetery lay under towering magnolia trees, safe within the confines of a metal fence. She dragged her attention back to smile at her sister.

"Yes?" Meredith shut the fridge and blinked at Paulette. "You were saying?"

"Sorry." Paulette shook her head, a grin curving her lips as she sifted through possible phrases. "Is Griz helping you with the groceries?"

"Always." Meredith cocked her head. "She's hoping I'll take pity on her and feed her early tonight."

"Any word from Max?" Anything to stall for time until she could land upon the right way to approach the subject. Meredith balked at large group activities, and the party she had in mind definitely qualified. "Will he be back from Atlanta soon?"

"He texted me that the preservation case will be heard tomorrow, then he'll know how much longer he needs to be in court." She lifted items from the bag and set them on the counter before dropping the bag on the floor. "I had no idea when I met him that lawyers traveled so much."

Grizabella hunkered on the floor, her tail twitching, before lunging into the open bag and pouncing on an imaginary mouse with a clatter of brown paper.

"I don't suppose there are very many lawyers who specialize in preservation law." Paulette folded her arms over her tummy and hiked one hip. "I'm glad you two found each other. You're good together."

Meredith flicked a glance at her, then shook her long strawberry-blonde ponytail. "Thanks. It still amazes me how things worked out."

"Unlike for me." Paulette laid her hands on her belly, her baby. "But we'll be fine now that I have you to back me up."

"And one day, you may find a man worthy to be your husband." Meredith scooted around the island counter and hugged Paulette in a quick encouraging movement. "But you'll always have a place to call home."

Paulette considered Meredith's words as her sister strode back to the other side of the island.

“You may be right, but somehow I doubt I’ll ever find anyone who’d want to take on responsibility for another man’s child.”

Meredith paused in the act of emptying another bag. “Blended families happen all the time. I’m sure if you want to have a husband who will be a father to your child, you’ll find the right man.”

Paulette shrugged and shifted her weight to the other hip. “Anyway, a husband is not in the cards right now. But tell me, what did you think of my jack-o-lantern? And the other decorations out front?”

Surely her sister had noticed the effort she’d made to enliven the house for the season. Her decorating skills had to be good for something. Since moving in, Paulette had tried to employ her limited creative talents wherever possible. She’d secured several clients, designing and creating authentic period costumes for them to wear in battle reenactments and ghost walk tours around the nearby cities of Nashville and Huntsville. She’d also redecorated several rooms to use as guest quarters for hire. Meredith hadn’t wanted strangers around all the time, so they’d compromised. The six bedrooms stayed occupied most weekends, which helped with Paulette’s efforts to build and promote her costume business. Currently, they only had two rooms not rented out for the coming weekend, but she remained confident they’d fill soon.

“No, sorry.” Meredith reached for a box of orzo and strode to the pantry to put it on a shelf. “I was thinking about the challenge of tying together the various elements of the estate east of Roseville. The Bancroft’s place.”

“Oh. Well, I—” Disappointment swept across her shoulders, weighing them down, at Meredith’s dismissal of her efforts. But then, she did have a lot of irons in the fire what with planning her wedding to Max, and the many clients with demanding particulars, as well as supervising the repairs around Twin Oaks. “What’s the matter with the Bancroft place?”

“They expect me to work magic, pure and simple. Three buildings, and they want one common porch to unite them.” Meredith shook her head and grabbed two cans of soup, moving them in time with the motion of her strawberry-blonde ponytail. “What the heck are they thinking?”

“You’ll figure it out.” Paulette smiled. Her sister’s renown as an architect stretched around the world. She designed multi-million dollar mansions and other showcase buildings. Which proved more comforting than her previous desire to destroy things after the horrific deaths of her husband and unborn child. Twin Oaks’ very existence had been threatened by her grief. After Max entered her life, her despair and anger had morphed into hope and love. “You always manage to beautify the jobs you take on. Anyway...”

Meredith placed the cans in the pantry and pushed the door closed. “Yes?”

She took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. “We should throw a party. Our guests will love it!” Her words spilled from her mouth. “A costume party, with masks and everything. We’d have to do it the weekend before Halloween, since the actual holiday is on a Friday. We could advertise it as a special event, with a special price, and...”

“Wait. A party? Are you kidding?” Meredith folded up the paper bags, leaving the cat’s on

the floor with Grizabella's calico tail sticking out and slowly swishing from side to side, and shoved them into a cabinet. "Your hormones must be out of whack."

"No, I—" Paulette searched for a compelling reason in the face of her sister's frown.

"We don't have time for a party. We've finally finished rebuilding the gazebo, and I have this Bancroft wizardry to complete before the winter weather interferes. And, more importantly, you're due soon. You don't need stress and worry. No parties. Not now."

"I thought I'd design some new costumes for us, show off my abilities. And..." She snapped her fingers as an idea popped into her head. She envisioned a grand affair, the house filled with pirates, ghosts, witches, princesses, even Barack Obama and George Bush look-alikes. "We could promote our planned Civil War encampment reenactment at the same time. Invite folks to attend in period costumes and uniforms. You could dress as Grace, if you'd like, even wear the jewelry she gave you. Come on. It'll be great!"

Meredith swiped a hand across her forehead. Grizabella had tired of her hiding place and now munched on her dinner. "I don't know. Seems like a lot of work. All to dress up and playact for an audience. What will Meg say? Just because she's the housekeeper and cook doesn't mean she'll be willing to do this."

"I think she'll love the idea of seeing Twin Oaks glowing with light and echoing with laughter. Put some life back into the old place." She gripped the back of a chair situated at the small glass-topped table tucked into the bay window overlooking the rear of the property. Urgency unexpectedly flowed through her, creating an increasing tension in her shoulders. "It'll be fun. I really want to. Please?"

Meredith sank onto a chair, propped her elbows on the table, and rested her chin in her palms. Her scrutiny made Paulette squirm. "Will there be music? Perhaps you could sing something? I used to love to hear you practice the tunes for the high school choir."

Not a chance. "I'm really not in the mood to sing, but we can have a DJ and dancing for the guests to enjoy."

Meredith frowned and tapped a forefinger on her cheek, regarding Paulette. "That's a good point. But why haven't you been singing? You used to all the time."

Why indeed. She shrugged. "Too much on my mind with the baby about due and me trying to feel like I'm contributing to the household finances. A litany of thoughts, tasks, reminders loop in my head to the point I think of nothing else. Maybe after the baby is born, I'll feel happy enough to want to share music again. But not until then."

"If you say so. Where would we find a DJ?"

"I'll figure it out. Come on. Let's have a party. Please?"

She held her breath, waiting for Meredith to say something. Anything. A shrug sparked hope.

"Meredith?"

"I'm going to regret this." Meredith shrugged again and sat up straight. A grin eased onto her lips. "The weekend before, you said?"

Paulette clapped her hands and grinned. "Yes, we'll kick off the festivities leading up to the

holiday.”

“Is two weeks enough time to plan a shindig?” Meredith pushed back to her feet and slid the chair in place under the table. “An awful lot will have to be accomplished in a short period of time.”

“Don’t you worry. I can pull it off. You’ll see.” She hugged her baby. “As long as someone doesn’t decide to make an early entrance into the world.”

The pale blue flame licked the bottom of the clear beaker. Zak Markel leaned closer, the gas-fueled heat warming his stubbly jaw. He sniffed, wrinkling his nose at the hint of sulfur. Using rubber-tipped tongs, he lifted the glass, flat-bottomed bulb by its slender neck and swirled the red mixture. *Perfect*. He’d succeeded in advancing another step in the process. He returned the beaker to the heat, picked up a pen, and jotted his observations into a lab notebook as his dad had taught him. Be precise and meticulous and success follows. Failure was for losers.

Most of his experiments worked flawlessly. Of course, his father’s advice probably had been an attempt to encourage his son. Instead, Zak ended up choosing the safe route in order to appear successful in his father’s eyes. Thus he experienced few challenges or obstacles in his work. Some days, he longed to risk experimenting with cutting-edge compounds. Until he’d recall the look on his dad’s face when his teenage attempt to make his own soda machine fizzled. The censure and disappointment he’d detected in his father’s countenance prompted him to shelve his ambitions.

But then he’d discovered those damn alchemical puzzles he desperately wanted to unravel but had as yet failed to do so. Failure frustrated him even more than his father. Made him want to hit something. He had failed to replicate seventeenth-century chemical processes, which called into question his high-priced education. He didn’t want to transmute metal into gold. What he most hoped for was finding the secret to unlock the mysterious formula for the Elixir of Life. His little brother’s future rested on whether a cure could be found. The legend surrounding the Philosopher’s Stone, one of many aliases for the elixir, suggested the fine, red powder the formula purportedly created could heal all forms of illness. If only he could replicate the formula, perhaps he could save his brother’s eyesight. Grant wasn’t in any pressing danger from the slow-growing meningioma tumors, so Zak had time to work on solving the puzzle. His brother had demonstrated his uniqueness by managing to contract a disease rarely afflicting men, and almost never someone thirty-five. Zak would do *anything* to erase the headaches and pain lines etched on his younger brother’s face. While the doctors stewed about proper medical treatments to slow or stop the growths, Zak had to do *something*, even if it ultimately proved futile, to help Grant fight the inoperable tumors wrapped around his optic nerves, threatening his eyesight and his future as a geologist.

Memories of their childhood together flitted through his brain. He pictured the two of them roaming the mountainside in search of exposed layers of earth, revealing the stratification of the land, the equivalent of tree rings showing the age and diversity of the climate over time. Grant

had collected rocks and gems until his closet had no room to hang his clothes without draping over the boxes and tubs. During their search, they shared more than lunch. They shared their hopes for the future. They cemented their brotherhood in a deep and loving friendship.

He couldn't sit by and wait. Hope couldn't be the only strategy. He'd promised his mother he'd watch over his brother, and he always kept his word. But all he'd managed to prove so far was that he'd missed some key step or nuance to the precisely penned instructions. But what? He'd followed the directions to the letter. Though maybe some ingredient's physical properties had changed over the centuries. A thought worth pursuing.

Zak slid off the high stool and made his way across the room, heading for the bookcase situated by the back window of his basement laboratory. Outside, identical houses lined the sleepy street. The small ranch house in the quiet suburb surrounding Battle Creek, Michigan, had been his mother's idea so he'd live close by. The place remained a house, not a home. He never felt comfortable driving down the wide street with young trees scattered along the way, pulling into the concrete driveway, walking into the brick building. Truth be told, he hated living in the neighborhood. Hell, he hated living in the town. Although he loved his parents, he craved something different. In a new place with new opportunities. No chance of that, though. His life and work as a professor waited for him, a treadmill of boredom. No change in sight.

Scanning the room, a sense of claustrophobia settled about his shoulders like a jacket sized for a child. He'd fitted the lab with everything necessary to pursue his own experiments, even if he rarely chose to do so. He paused and mentally inventoried the room's accoutrements: work table with array of beakers, Bunsen burner, tongs, long handled spoons, sharp knife, acids and bases. Running water and a propane gas supply flowed to either end of the work space. Beside the window sat a square white table holding his closed laptop, carafe of water, and a half-filled tumbler, flanked by white wooden chairs. Everything right where it belonged. Combined, the lab and its contents did nothing to satisfy his longing for something out of his reach. Nor did any of the items assuage his fear of his brother succumbing to the illness, possibly even dying.

On a sigh, he strode to the bookcase. The case held few books, but those he possessed he'd chosen for specific purposes. He pulled a metal box containing the ancient yellowed journal from its place on the top shelf of the cedar bookcase. Laying it reverently on the table, he eased onto a chair, wiggled the tight-fitting lid off, and regarded the alchemist's journal housed within.

Fortune had led him to an out of the way antiques mall in Massachusetts the year before. He'd wandered through the menagerie of stalls, searching out old books and papers. Reading about past lives and experiences made his own better by comparison. The contents of ancient tomes and pages typically led to new insights into old problems, or at least a fresh perspective on how to approach solutions to them. He'd spotted the water-stained binding and a shot of anticipation, a thrill of expectation, lanced through him.

The cover revealed he'd struck figurative gold from a historic perspective. Scrawled across the battered front were the words LABORATORY NOTES OF XAVIER STARLING. He had resisted the urge to flip through the fragile pages. Instead, he gently opened the cover and read the first dated entry from 1676. The ancient alchemist's notes proved to contain a host of what

had been groundbreaking formulas for everything from cleaning fluids, to wrinkle creams, rich dyes, forgotten recipes for delicacies, and even medicine created from herbs and metals. One specific formula Starling had labeled as the elusive Elixir of Life, something too valuable and notoriously difficult to create and definitely not to be trusted to just anyone. Zak's hands had trembled until he nearly dropped the volume. He inhaled to steady himself, releasing the breath on a count of five. Closing the book, he'd sauntered to the register at the front of the building, paid for his purchase, and emerged into the winter sunlight. He'd forced himself to remain calm, to not release a whoop of joy, but he couldn't stop the ear-to-ear grin.

Ever since buying the book, he'd tried to recreate the transmutations and formulas, but the directions employed mysterious symbols. Over time, he'd figured out some of the cipher elements, but most of the secrets remained obscured. Some key to the cipher must exist, but it eluded him. After Grant had been diagnosed with the tumors, the contents had become even more valuable to Zak as potentially holding the secret to a possible cure.

He opened the lab notes to the one recipe he thought he'd figured out, but had yet to achieve the results listed by the alchemist. Instead of a dry red powder, the elusive Elixir, he created a lump of doughy mass. Something went wrong with either his ingredients or his process, but damn if he knew what.

Considering how faint the spidery writing appeared on the page, he retrieved a handheld magnifying glass from the drawer in the table and hovered it over each ingredient. As he read through the list for what seemed the hundredth time, he noticed a faded symbol he'd missed in the margin. *Fascinating*. What could it be? Holding the book up to the light with one hand, he examined it, angling the page first one way and then another for a better look through the glass. He discerned a tiny sketch of what appeared to be an owl, with pointed ear tufts, perched on crossed sticks or branches inside a downward pointing triangle. A thin bar ran along the inside of the shape the width of the hypotenuse at the top. Zak sat back, gazing at the ceiling as he pondered the symbol's purpose.

The triangle could mean a triad or trinity of some kind. But three what? Days? Years? Owls? Since it pointed downward, might it represent a female or something feminine? Or nothing, simply a random occurrence by the alchemist? He linked his fingers behind his head. The other notations indicated the man who had kept the journal did nothing randomly. He also needed to decipher the presence of the bird, or more specifically, the owl. He'd have to research owl symbolism in order to determine the true significance.

Perhaps an Internet search would yield the answer. At least, a place to start. He replaced the cover on the silver box and slid it aside. Opening the laptop lid, he waited for the security facial scan to give him access to the desktop. He launched the browser and then typed in "triangle" and "symbolism" as the key words and hit the Enter key. Thousands of results. A long list of links popped onto the browser screen. Selecting one which looked promising, he scanned the content, then started over slowly. Pay dirt.

As he thought, a triangle pointing down suggested the feminine; pointing up, masculine. The ability to mean opposites depending on the position of the shape made the triangle popular as a

magical symbol. Mystic teachings referred to the power of three, the joining of the “one” and “two” to create the child of “three.” A trinity able to embody many historical and cultural concepts, such as the religious one of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. But also more generic triads of past, present, future, or creation, destruction, sustenance, and even mind, body, spirit.

Then he spotted what he searched for, the five symbols used by Aristotle to represent the five natural elements of air, earth, fire, water, and unity. The triangle drawn in the journal was what the great philosopher used to represent earth. But what did that mean to the mysterious and mystical Starling?

He searched on “owl” and “symbolism” and found tons of unhelpful information. In several ancient cultures, the owl served as guardian of the underworlds and a protector of the dead. Essentially, the keeper of spirits who passed from one plane to another. Native Americans revered it as the keeper of sacred and secret knowledge. He chuckled when he read that in medieval times owls were thought to be witches and wizards in disguise.

He added “triangle” to his key words and hit Enter. Another long list of links filled the screen. Intrigued, he skimmed them, searching for the likeliest candidate to contain the information he sought. He needed to narrow down the search. He added “image” to his search criteria and hit Enter again. He blinked and stared incredulously at one of the many images including owls on the screen. The very symbol in the book, or nearly the same since it didn’t include the bar inside the triangle, stared back at him. He clicked the image, taking him to the website of the Golden Owl Books and Brews. What chance existed that the two symbols were unrelated and yet so closely aligned? Coincidence? He shook his head. No such thing in his experience. He’d bet on a connection.

He searched for the contact information and discovered the store was located in some Podunk town in Tennessee. Roseville. Curious. Maybe the history of the store would include an explanation for the symbol. Selecting the link, he waited for the site to appear on the screen.

Behind him, hissing reached his ears, distracting him from his search. He turned to investigate the sound but ended up thrown from his chair when the beaker of solution exploded.