

Darke Paranormal Investigations

DARKE PASSION

Rosanna Leo

Book one in the Darke Paranormal Investigations series

Ghosts can't hurt the living? The Darke sisters know otherwise.

Edwina Darke is one of a trio of ghost-hunting sisters who rid clients of their unwanted supernatural visitors. A badass by nature, Edwina doesn't run from haunted houses—she runs into them. Yet no matter how many “ghosts” she debunks, she remains troubled by a demon from her own past.

Simon Teal is the co-owner of a historic B&B in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, a town famous for its connection to the 1812 War. Simon doesn't believe in the spirit world, but something is chasing his customers away, so he reluctantly allows the Darke sisters to investigate.

As the team uncovers the star-crossed love behind the B&B haunting, Edwina and Simon's attraction flares. It's the last thing either of them needs. The dedicated Edwina refuses to lose herself in another relationship, and Simon is still reeling from a terrible betrayal.

When a darker presence reveals itself, triggering their protective instincts, Edwina and Simon succumb to temptation. But the evil entity has taken an interest in them, and if they don't solve the mystery, someone new could end up going “into the light.”

And it could be one of them.

Prologue

Newark (Niagara), Province of Upper Canada, 1812

Ann Forbes padded through the dark house, clinging to the shadows. She hoped to avoid disturbing her father and sisters. They had all retired for the night, but it wasn't uncommon for her father to awaken in need of relief. The girls, at least, would be asleep. Grace and Amelia had long since ceased their giggling and gossiping, and although Fanny would have stayed up late into the night reading by tallow candlelight, she would be in bed by now.

As Ann passed through the kitchen, the various smells from their earlier labors triggered her senses. She and her sisters had had a busy day. Her body still ached from retrieving the last of the garden's herbs. Sweet basil, thyme and sage now hung from a rack, drying for the approaching winter. They'd also done some baking today, and the house still smelled like buttery apple cake and the dying embers in the fire.

She slipped out of the house and into the night, where October's chill greeted her. It draped a cloak of coldness about her shoulders as she took her first steps outside. Her skin tingled and froze at once, as if touched by a heartless lover. The sun was setting so much earlier these days, and the garden bore no memory of its beams. Instead, it was dark and somehow foreboding. Dry leaves crunched underfoot and a stale sweetness permeated the garden, a mere memory of the roses that had grown there in the summer. Even now, a lone rose trailed on the ground, the last bloom of the season. Soon, it would die too and the snow would come, blanketing the bush in frost. Ann pulled her shawl tighter, but it was no match for the fierce wind. It whipped through her, lifting and tangling her unbound hair.

She hadn't bothered to change back into her muslin, but wore her nightdress so that her father wouldn't suspect anything. After telling him she would retire early, she'd waited for him to fall asleep in his chair. Thankfully, he was a deep sleeper. He slept so much more lately, now that the illness was making him forget himself and those he loved.

Ann swallowed past the scratch in her throat. Father had insisted on calling her by Grace's name several times today, and he'd looked astonished when she'd gently reminded him of her own.

At least he found peace in his slumber. If only Ann could find such rest. When she closed her eyes, terrors appeared, so she kept them open every night as long as she could. Her nightmares, frightening and disjointed, tinted in garish red, all centered on James.

Stop it. There was no reason to allow fantasy to overwhelm her. James was fine and on his way to meet her now. A messenger from the fort had assured her of that.

How she yearned for a time when she could meet James without having to resort to such subterfuge. She shivered as the wind cut through her again, but she dismissed her discomfort.

If her dear James could endure the horrors of battle, she could endure a breeze.

Passing through the vegetable garden at the back of the house, she continued toward the forested area that bordered their land. Father had always warned her not to linger in the "wilderness" beyond their home, but Ann loved sitting amongst the mature sycamores and maples. Father had no idea that this wilderness was her sanctuary.

But that sanctuary was transformed by night. Although the thick line of trees shielded her from prying eyes, it created frightening shadows where there normally were none. With each step that she took, the shadows seemed to follow.

"Be sensible," she murmured. She clutched her shawl even harder, needing to hold onto something.

James would be there soon. That was, as long as he could get away. Major-General Brock kept his aides busy. James had often remarked about his commander's tendency to work into the early morning hours, and he expected such stamina of his men.

A rustling in the trees made Ann bristle, but her eyes had already adjusted to the night. She peered between the tree trunks, hungry for a glimpse of the man she loved. Although she could not make out the familiar scarlet of his uniform, almost black in the darkness, she knew the curves of his strong shoulders. James appeared

beneath the branches of an overhanging willow, their usual rendezvous. He brushed aside the drooping branches and called her name.

She flew to him. "You came."

"Nothing could keep me away, my dearest Ann." Captain James Kingston of the 49th Foot Regiment cut a dashing figure. Ann had never considered herself prone to romantic notions, but every time she spotted him in his uniform, his blue eyes twinkling, he took her breath away.

Sheltered in her wilderness, they embraced. She lay a hand on the Field Officers Gold Medal at his chest, awarded to him after the capture of Detroit, only two months ago. He held her close, stroking her hair as if it might be the last time.

Would it be? She never knew.

This was the only way they could meet—under cover of darkness. When they did see each other in public, such as at the recent church tea and banner presentation to the regiment, they could not acknowledge each other with anything other than banal niceties. Ann's father, when he was lucid, would not listen to talk about the regiment. He didn't care that James was a lawyer by trade, and an honorable man. Her father had come from humble Yorkshire stock, but had made his wealth as a wine merchant after settling in Newark. He always said he remembered how it felt to go hungry, and he was determined to see her marry a man who would keep her in pretty ribbons and bows, her pantry stocked with good food and her table set with fine silverware and pewter.

Her father didn't trust Major-General Brock, or anyone in uniform. He didn't trust the Americans either, for all their bluster. His distrust extended to anyone who presented a threat to his livelihood, and his opinion was shared by many in Newark. The townspeople wanted to be able to go about their lives unmolested. Ann understood the sentiment, but she trusted James.

As the eldest of four daughters, it was important for Ann to make a good match. Her father would have her marry a man with initiative, a man with a head for business.

In fact, he had chosen someone for her. Unfortunately, that man made her stomach turn.

Reginald Perry was her father's assistant, and he planned to open his own shop one day. Father had recognized a ruthless streak in Mr. Perry's dealings, and he respected his calculating ways. Not a day went by that her father didn't thrust them together in some way. He often brought him home for the evening meal, and Mr. Perry's presence never failed to sour the occasion.

Ann had glimpsed a coldness in Mr. Perry's eyes. She'd heard the rumors of how he drank himself into stupors at the local tavern, maligning those in power in his drunken rants. She'd heard a great deal, in particular, of his dealings with women and of the brute force he'd sometimes employed to have his way with them. Ann knew of two servant girls in Newark who had been turned out into the cold for having babes in their bellies, and everyone knew who'd put them there.

Lately, Reginald Perry had turned his eye toward Ann. She despised his covetous glare and his curled lip. In all honesty, she wasn't sure why she fascinated him so. At one-and-twenty, she was already a few years older than the girls who normally received his attentions.

That didn't stop her skin from pricking whenever he turned his horrid gaze upon her.

James stroked her cheek. "So quiet, my love?"

Something rustled in the bushes. "Did you hear that?"

"It's nothing. Just an animal in the undergrowth."

Then why did she feel eyes upon her, even now?

She'd never told James about Mr. Perry, and the knowledge festered in her stomach. He had enough to worry about, and she didn't want to add to his troubles. She prayed that she'd somehow convince her father that Mr. Perry was the last man on earth for her, but Father's illness had made him stubborn.

"I don't have much time," said James. "The general believes an attack from the Americans is imminent."

"James, no!"

"We've received word from Major Evans this evening. He was sent to reconnoiter with the enemy about releasing prisoners, and caught wind of their plans. I was in the officers' dining room when he told the general, and heard it all myself. He's been ordered to make all the necessary preparations for an assault."

The hand that covered her mouth trembled. Surely it couldn't be her own?

James pried her hand from her face and kissed it. "We'll be ready for them. General Brock has positioned over a thousand men at Fort George. We are allied with the Mohawk chiefs John Norton and John Brant. Our numbers are strong. Mark my words. I shall return to you in no time, and we'll make our engagement public. I'll speak to your father. Surely, he'll see sense."

"But..." She couldn't find the right words, and her eyes filled with tears as he spoke. *Foolish creature! You must be strong for him.*

"Ann. Do not cry, my love."

She was trying to be brave, but the most horrid sensation gripped her. A ball of discomfort churned in her stomach, and bile climbed up her throat.

Somewhere along her peripheral vision, shadows gathered and lengthened, taking the shape of clawed wraiths. The figures crept into her forest sanctuary, defiling it. They skulked and threatened, their shoulders hunched in warning. By degrees, they slithered toward her and James.

No!

It had been years since she'd seen the shadow people. In fact, she hadn't seen them since right before her mother died, but there had been a time when their appearance was a common occurrence. Frankly, she'd hoped she'd grown out of them.

Ever since she was a little girl, she'd been able to see the troubling specters. Her mother used to tell Ann she had the "sight." It was a trait she apparently shared with her grandmother. She, too, had been full of strange tales, none of which had given Ann any sort of comfort.

Only, in Ann's case, the figures only ever appeared before someone was about to die.

"James." She gripped his coatee so hard that one of the shiny buttons fell off in her hand. "Don't go."

"I must. I need you to be brave, my love."

"Come back to me, James. I will not rest until you come back to me. I swear it." She bit her lip, trying not to cry, and tasted blood.

The shadows teased, pulling at her hair. She twitched, trying to shake them off. Did he not see them? No, of course not. She was the only one who ever did. They clawed at her, scratching her skin. One of the creatures clutched at James' shoulders in an attempt to separate them. But if he felt anything, he did not show it.

"I will always come for you, my darling Ann, whether in this life or the next. I am yours, and you are mine, and no one shall ever part us."

They clung to one another, until James finally pulled away. "I must leave." His tender smile was meant to encourage, but she felt no such consolation. "Go back to the house, my sweet. You'll catch a chill."

She wanted to shout, to scream, '*Stay with me!*' And yet, her tongue would not form the words. They were stuck in her throat, frozen like the last of the summer's roses, trapped in a flash of ice.

With a last kiss, James walked away from their willow. He then slipped into the shadows and became one with them. There was some rustling beyond the line of trees as he headed back to the spot where he would have tied up his horse. Within minutes, he would be back at Fort George.

Ann was all alone with the shadow wraiths now, but their torment ceased. One by one, forming a terrible parade, they followed James out of the ravine and into the night.

They didn't want her.

"Dear God," she whispered into the wind. "Keep him safe, I beg of you."

Then, clutching the 49th Regiment button, she hurried back toward the house.