

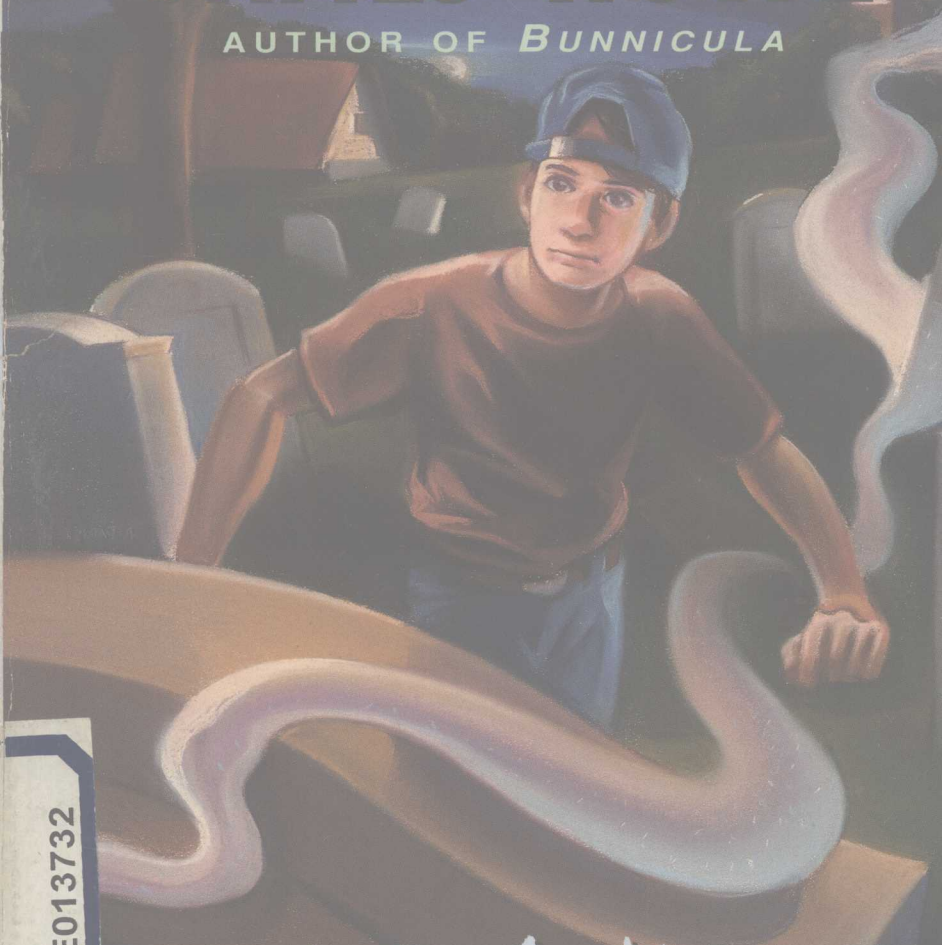


A SEBASTIAN BARTH MYSTERY

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JAMES HOWE

AUTHOR OF *BUNNICULA*



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What Eric Knew

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WHAT

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KNEW

A Sebastian Barth Mystery by

JAMES

HOWE

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Stage Fright

Eat Your Poison, Dear

Morgan's Zoo

A Night without Stars

To
Melissa Whitcraft
&
Steven Mintz

What Eric Knew

What Eric Knew

1 THE FIRST THING Sebastian Barth heard when he woke that summer morning was mail being pushed through the slot in the front door and landing with a soft thud inside. From the sound, it was a two-magazine day, he decided. He yawned and rolled over in bed. The clock read ten past nine. Sebastian smiled at the luxury of sleeping so late.

Stretching, he reached for his robe and headed downstairs. The house was still. His father had probably left for the radio station at least an hour before. And his mother would be at the farmers' market buying fresh vegetables for her restaurant. As for Gram, he couldn't guess where she was this morning. Sebastian's grandmother had so many "worthy causes," as she called them, that "there weren't enough hours in the day."

When he entered the kitchen, his two cats, Boo and Chopped Liver, attacked his ankles and purred loudly.

"Give me a break, you guys," he said. "You've been fed already."

Chopped Liver flashed him a we-won't-tell-anybody-if-you-feed-us-again sort of look, but Sebastian

just shook his head and poured himself a bowl of cereal.

A newspaper lay open on the kitchen table. He noticed a story about some rare books being stolen from a library in New Haven, read about half of it, and turned to the comics.

The phone rang.

"Hey, it's you."

Sebastian recognized the voice of his best friend, David, who lived across the street. "Were you expecting a wrong number?" he asked.

"I didn't think you'd be back from your route yet. You coming over?"

"I didn't have to do my route today. And sure I'm coming over. How was the game?"

"Good. What do you want to do today?"

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. You want to do some biking?"

"Maybe. But right now I want to rescue my cereal from terminal soggianness. I'll be over in a half hour."

"Okay," David said. And then, as Sebastian was about to hang up, he added, "It's been kind of quiet around here since Eric moved, hasn't it?"

"Yeah," Sebastian said. "Eric did have a way of keeping things lively. At least he did before . . . you know."

"Yeah. Well, see you later."

"See you later."

After he hung up the phone, Sebastian remembered the mail. He'd been right. There were two magazines. There was also something for him. The thin envelope showed no return address, just a Boston postmark. And inside was the strangest letter he had ever received.

2 SEBASTIAN showed the letter to David. It read, "S.I.S."
"That's it?"

Sebastian nodded.

"Who's it from? Wait, don't tell me—Eric, of course."

The two boys were walking down Chestnut Street, toward the house where Eric used to live.

"But what's it mean?" David asked, when Sebastian remained silent. "Hey, look. Someone's moved in."

"I know. I met them yesterday when you were at the game. There's a kid our age."

David regarded Eric's old house with new interest. "What's he like?" he asked.

"You'll see."

A slim woman with short, gray hair stood on the front porch of the house calling, "Buster! Buster!"

"Buster!" David snorted. "What kind of name is that? Gee, Sebastian, that's not the kid, is it? Buster?"

"Don't worry," said Sebastian, as a child ran past them and into the yard, "you won't become the laughingstock of Pembroke because you've got a friend named Buster. That's the kid's little brother. *That's* the kid."

Sebastian pointed toward the garage next to the house. Someone in shorts and a halter top was hosing down a garbage pail.

"A girl?" David said incredulously. The new kid waved and ran toward them. "You didn't tell me... oh, great. Just what we need, a *girl*." He made a fist and said, "Curse you, Eric Mather."

"Hi," said the girl, as her sneakers brought her to a squeaky halt. She had a thicket of red hair and a face busy with freckles. When she smiled at Sebastian, her braces sparkled.

"Hi," said Sebastian. "This is my friend, David Lepinsky."

David mumbled something.

"And this is Corrie..."

"Wingate," said Corrie. "Hi, David. What are you guys up to?"

"Well, actually," said Sebastian, "we've got a mystery on our hands. Or sort of a mystery, anyway." Sebastian gave Corrie Eric's letter.

"What are you *doing*?" David hissed.

"Relax. She's okay."

"What's it mean?" Corrie asked, handing the letter back to Sebastian.

"I'm not sure, but I have a hunch."

"Sebastian always has a hunch," David said.

"I think it has something to do with the way Eric was acting before he left."

"Eric? Oh yeah, the kid who used to live here." Corrie picked at a mosquito bite on her leg. "How was he acting?"

"Weird," said Sebastian.

David nodded. "Definitely weird," he said.

Sebastian went on, "Eric was always . . . well, adventurous, I guess you could say. He liked . . ."

"Getting into trouble," David said.

"Something like that. He liked having a good time, goofing around, nosing into other people's business. You know?"

"I think so. But what's weird about that?"

"Nothing. It's just that he changed a few weeks before he moved. All of a sudden, he got kind of quiet and kept to himself. When we asked him what was going on, he didn't want to talk about it. Said he *couldn't* talk about it. And then, about three days before he moved, he fell down a flight of stairs and broke his leg."

"Wow," said Corrie, as her picking drew blood. "How come?"

"How come what?" asked David.

"How come he fell down the stairs?"

"We don't know," Sebastian said. "He wouldn't tell us. But he hinted that he'd been pushed."

"Wow," Corrie said again.

"And now this," said Sebastian, holding up Eric's letter. "S.I.S."

"Are they somebody's initials?"

"Seems like it," Sebastian said.

"But we don't know anybody with those initials," said David.

"Well, I can think of one person." Sebastian paused and then said, "Susan Iris Siddons."

David looked at him as if he'd gone nuts.

"And you think maybe it was Susan Siddons who pushed Eric down the stairs?" asked Corrie.

"I have a hunch that's what Eric's trying to tell us," Sebastian said. "There's just one little problem."

"Definitely," said David.

"What?" Corrie asked.

Sebastian looked past Corrie's house to the cemetery in its shadow. "Susan Siddons died in 1902," he said.

3

SUSAN IRIS SIDDONS

DIED

AUGUST 10. 1902.

AGED 49 YEARS.

*In life did I reap much pain,
In death greater pain I sow.
'Tis a garden of poison'd ivy,
And the roots lie here below.*

"SHE WASN'T a very happy woman," Corrie Wingate said.

"Sharp observation," said Sebastian.

"Well, for starters," David said, "she couldn't have been too thrilled to kick the bucket at forty-nine."

"She probably didn't *know* she was going to die," Corrie said.

"Oh, but she did," said Sebastian. "She'd been sick a long time."

Corrie shuddered and walked away from the gravestone with its odd epitaph. "This place is creepy," she said. Then, over her shoulder, she asked, "How do you know so much about somebody who died in 1902, anyway?"

"Susan Siddons is a Pembroke legend," said David. "Her ghost is still around, you know."

Corrie turned to face the boys. "Great," she said, "not only do I get to live next door to a cemetery, but I have ghosts for neighbors. I should have stayed in Troy."

"It's not just that. The Siddons family is famous. Didn't you ever hear of Siddons College?"

"Of course," Corrie replied, in a way that made Sebastian fairly certain she never had.

"Well, Siddons College was founded by Cornelius Siddons. Susan was his wife. It's hard to live in Pembroke and *not* know about the Siddons family. Besides, they still live here."

"So you told me," Corrie said, with a nod back to Susan Siddons's grave.

Sebastian smiled. "Not just ghosts," he said. "*Real* people, too. Ricky Siddons is a friend of ours."

"He was Eric's best friend," said David.

"His brother Danny rings the bell."

"What bell?"

Sebastian indicated the steeple of the church the other side of the cemetery. "That one. Every night at nine a member of the Siddons family rings it."

David said, "Another legend."

"And the legend of the ghost?" Corrie asked.

"I don't know the whole story," Sebastian said. "Something to do with a ring she left behind. I know someone we can ask if you want to know more. Someone who swears he's seen the ghost."

"Well, don't *you* want to know more?" asked Corrie. "I mean, isn't this ghost supposed to have something to do with your friend Eric?"

Sebastian nodded. "Let's go up to the station and talk to Uncle Harry," he said. "It's kind of a long walk. We could take our bikes."

"Let's walk," said Corrie.

As they passed through the cemetery, Corrie said, almost in a whisper, "Did you ever notice how cemeteries squish?"

David and Sebastian looked at her.

"I mean, the ground's all soft and bumpy. It makes me feel like I'm walking on bones and rotting flesh."

David and Sebastian looked at each other.

"Listen to this one," Corrie called suddenly. She read from a tipped gravestone, "'Captain Joseph Piper.' Gee, he was only twenty-seven when he died. 'Stop, careless stranger, pass not by. Pause and reflect