

# Free of Malice



Liz Lazarus



## Thursday, July 6

Run. Run faster. As much as I strained my legs to move, they were immobile, like I was waist deep in quicksand.

*Why can't I move?*

I tried to scream for help but my mouth was full, like it was stuffed with cotton—no sound would escape.

I felt something clutching my shoulder. No, it was someone. He was pushing me forward and then yanking me back. I tried to jerk away but he had a tight grip, like a vice.

*I have to break free.*

The tugging got harder, more forceful. He was calling my name—over and over. He knew my name.

“Laura, Laura.”

I jolted awake—my husband’s hand still on my shoulder.

“Honey, wake up. You’re having another bad dream.”

Slowly, I turned over in bed and looked at him—his dark brown eyes were fixated on me. I could see them clearly as the light from the bathroom brightened our bedroom.

For a month now, we had slept with this light on.

I could see the small wrinkle on his forehead. I loved that wrinkle though wished he didn’t have good reason to be so concerned. I was enduring the nightmares, but he had to deal with my tossing and mumbling in terror.

I remember when we first met—ten years ago in chemistry lab at Georgia Tech. He had walked up to me with those warm eyes and a charming, confident smile and asked, “Want to be partners?”

Two years later he took me to Stone Mountain Park, rented a small rowboat and, in the moonlight, he pulled out a diamond ring and asked me again, “Want to be partners?”

Life had seemed just about perfect.

Until now.

We looked at each other for a moment. Then he propped himself up on his elbow and said softly, “Laura, I feel so helpless. I know it’s only been a month, but...”

He hesitated.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s just as bad as that first night. After it happened. Look, I want to make you feel safe again, but I don’t know how.”

He rubbed his eyes and looked away. I waited, staring at him.

*What isn’t he saying?*

“I know you don’t want to see a therapist, but seeing someone doesn’t mean you’re crazy. Therapists don’t treat just crazy people. They help people who have been through traumas and you have. Hell, no one even has to know.”

He paused for a second.

“Don’t be mad at me, but yesterday I made an appointment for you. I was going to talk to you about it in the morning if you had another bad dream. I found a woman who is downtown by my office. She’s been practicing for about twenty years, got her doctorate from Emory and comes with really good patient reviews.”

He looked for my reaction and continued. “I made the appointment for you at 4:00 so we can go to dinner afterward. You know what you always say. You’ll try anything once, right?”

“I told you I don’t want to see a psychiatrist,” I pushed back. “I just need more time. I’ll bounce back. You know I almost came in the house on my own today. Besides, if I see a psychiatrist, on every job application I complete in the future, I’ll have to check the ‘Yes’ box when they ask if I’ve had mental health treatment.”

“Jesus. No you don’t. You’re too innocent sometimes.”

He gently tapped me on the nose.

“You can check the box ‘No.’ Besides, if that’s the only thing stopping you, I think you should give it a try. Her name is Barbara Cole. I’ll take you to Houston’s afterward,” he added.

I ignored the bribe. “But what can she do that you can’t? All she’ll do is listen and you do that for me already. Psychiatrists are for people who don’t have friends or husbands to talk to.”

Chris shook his head.

“Please? Do it for me.”

The tone in his voice was different—more helpless than normal. Chris had been so understanding, so comforting this past month, especially considering I had been waking him every night. How could I refuse his request?

I sighed. “Okay,” I relented. “I’ll go.”

“One visit. That’s all I’m asking. If you don’t like it, you don’t have

to go back. She's a psychologist, by the way, not a psychiatrist. She does therapy, not drugs."

He glanced at the clock. It was 3:30 a.m.

Chris grabbed Konk, my stuffed animal gorilla that I won at the state fair by outshooting him at the basketball game. He had sworn the scum running the game couldn't take his eyes off my butt and let me win.

"Here's Konk," he said. "I'm going to finish my presentation since I'm up. I'll just be in the office. Want the door open?"

"Yes," I said as I wrapped my arms tightly around Konk.

"Hey, we'll celebrate your first therapy visit and my signed contract, I hope, this evening."

"You mean you *hope* my first visit?" I said with a playful smile.

He gave me a look—he was in no mood for jokes.

"Fine. Fine. I'll go," I assured.

"If you're asleep when I leave, just come by my office after the appointment and we'll head to dinner. Try to get some sleep. I love you."

"I love you, too."



## Friday, July 7 morning

I awoke to a ray of sunlight beaming in my eyes. It streamed through the tiny spaces between the blinds and window trim, brightening the bedroom. Konk was still snuggled between my breasts.

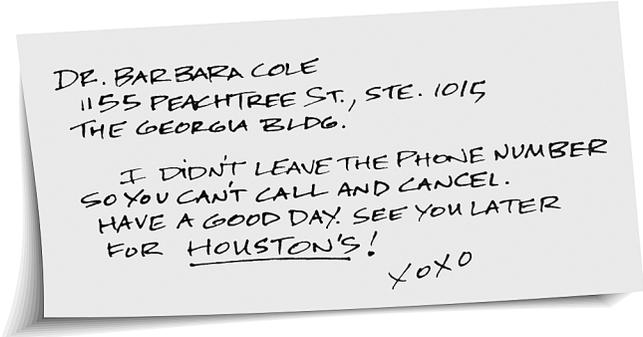
I thought about Chris and felt a pang of guilt that he had to get up early while I could sleep in. I hadn't even heard him leave. I checked the time. He was probably standing at the head of a plush conference room right now, presenting the advantages of his company's medical equipment to a bunch of radiologists and hospital administrators. He would be impressive—tall, handsome, impeccably dressed, an articulate salesman with an engineer's technical background. He was great on stage.

Then again, maybe they would see how tired he was. Maybe he'd be off his game and lose the sale because he wasn't getting any rest.

I tried to brush the thought away as I climbed out of bed. I walked to the kitchen to get some orange juice, impulsively glancing at the red light on the alarm system.

We had installed the system a month ago. Chris had insisted on using the money he was saving for his new wide screen TV to get the best system available. We could have afforded both, but then he refused to buy the TV. I suspected it was because he felt guilty for being out of town that night. He was punishing himself.

When I turned the corner to the kitchen, I saw a post-it note, in Chris' handwriting, on the refrigerator.



DR. BARBARA COLE  
1155 PEACHTREE ST., STE. 1015  
THE GEORGIA BLDG.

I DIDN'T LEAVE THE PHONE NUMBER  
SO YOU CAN'T CALL AND CANCEL.  
HAVE A GOOD DAY. SEE YOU LATER  
FOR HOUSTON'S!

XOXO

I drank some orange juice, put on my workout clothes and then turned on my exercise DVD. I hadn't really felt much like working out lately. Today was no different. About halfway through the DVD, I turned it off.

I walked to the bathroom, locking the door behind me and looked at the frameless glass shower. I didn't like being naked and vulnerable. I undressed and stepped under the hot beads of water, keeping my eyes on the bathroom door the entire time. I barely shut them to wash my hair. I thought about cutting my long, brunette hair so it wouldn't take so long to wash. Though I knew the alarm was on, I could still envision him bursting through the bathroom door and grabbing my wet, naked body.

"Be rational," I said out loud to myself. "That's not going to happen. Stop scaring yourself."

When would I ever feel normal again? When would I ever be able to take my long, steamy showers, shut my eyes and not watch the damn door?

I turned off the water, toweled off quickly and put on navy pants with an ocean-blue top. I liked that top—it brought out the blue in my eyes.

Feeling better dressed, I sat down at my desk to work. Admittedly, I had been procrastinating finishing my story for *The Atlanta Magazine*. My deadline was next week and I had already asked for an extension—an embarrassing first for me.

*Maybe I should cut back on assignments after this one?*

I thought back to that morning, a month ago. The police had arrived, dusted for prints, and questioned me extensively. In the chaos, I had almost forgotten that I had scheduled an interview for my article that day.

Troy, our next door neighbor, had come over and offered to cancel the interview. Instead of cancelling, I finished with the police and had Troy stay with me in the house while I got ready. Then I drove to the meeting and conducted the interview as if nothing had happened, even though my voice was hoarse from the screaming. It wasn't until Chris came home—he had cut his Raleigh trip short—that I even cried.

After aimlessly pecking at my article, I walked back to the kitchen, glancing at the red alarm light. I picked up Chris' note.

"Like I couldn't find the good doctor's number if I wanted to," I said out loud.

I walked back to the office, checking for the red light, and typed *Barbara Cole, Atlanta, Georgia*, into my Google toolbar. I found a link to her office with the address, phone number and a short biography indicating that Dr. Cole had done her undergrad at the University of Virginia and her master's and doctorate at Emory. From the graduation dates, I guessed that Dr. Cole was in her early fifties, but there was no picture to confirm. Her specialties were in anxiety, depression, grief and trauma, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I wasn't sure how Chris had chosen her, but there was nothing that could be used as an excuse for canceling the appointment.

When 3:00 p.m. drew near, I left the house, reactivated the alarm and got into my car to head downtown. I gave myself some extra time to find the office—the old me would have dashed out of the house to be just in time.

Dr. Cole's building was easy to spot with its pink marble exterior and blue glass windows. As I entered the building, I noticed the immaculate lobby's huge ceilings and ornate chandeliers. The pink marble floors matched the outside décor and there was a small coffee shop with tables in the corner. The lobby was empty except for a few people sipping their drinks and chatting. A chubby security guard manned the front entrance in a blue uniform.

I walked to the elevators and pushed the button for the tenth floor, riding in solitude except for the Muzak playing. I turned to the right as the sign indicated for Dr. Cole's office. As I passed each office, there were doorplates for lawyers, financial planners and a few doctors.

On door 1015 was gold lettering, *Barbara M. Cole, PhD*.

I slowly entered and was relieved to see that the waiting room was empty except for a pretty blonde receptionist.

"I'm Laura Holland. I have an appointment at four."

"Yes, Mrs. Holland. Dr. Cole is expecting you. Could I get your insurance card and photo ID please? Also, would you mind filling out this new patient form and the informed consent form for us?" the young receptionist said in a high-pitched, perky voice.

I took the clipboard and completed the usual questionnaire for a new patient. I checked the box 'No' for past mental illnesses and wondered if I would ever be able to do that again.

After returning the clipboard to the receptionist, I sat down on a maroon leather chair and looked around the waiting room. There was

an old issue of *Pink* magazine on the end table. I could tell by the cover that it was the one with my article on the best business books for executive women.

The lobby décor was quite masculine; the dark bookcases and heavy framed pictures of waterfowl reminded me of a men's lodge. It was entirely different from what I had envisioned, but it was surprisingly peaceful.

After a few minutes, the door next to the receptionist opened. There stood a woman with silver wire-rimmed glasses seated on a sharp nose, graying hair pulled back in a bun, and soft grayish-blue eyes. She was stout, but hid it well with a jacket and long, flowing skirt.

"Mrs. Holland," she said, as I stood and shook her hand, "I'm Barbara Cole. Please come in."

I followed Dr. Cole into her office. A desk and chair sat apart from a pastel living room suite, the soft, feminine colors contrasting with the dark waiting room.

"Please have a seat," she said, indicating the couch.

I sat down on the couch to prove it didn't bother me to 'sit on a therapist's couch,' and Dr. Cole sat in the peach floral chair next to me.

"How are you today?" she asked pleasantly.

"Fine, thank you," I said, automatically. Obviously, I wasn't fine.

We chatted briefly about the weather and if I had trouble finding the office. The couch was deep; I adjusted a pillow behind my lower back to get more comfortable.

"Mrs. Holland—may I call you Laura?"

I nodded.

"Could you tell me how I may be of help to you?"

"You don't know?" I asked, surprised that Chris had not given her any background on this visit.

"No. Right now all that I know is that you are a new client and, hopefully, our time together will be a positive experience for you."

I paused for a moment.

*Where do I start?*

"Well, my husband made this appointment for me. To be honest, I'm here more to appease him than anything else."

Dr. Cole's eyes squinted briefly, like she was troubled, but the expression was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

"Is there a particular reason your husband wanted you to see me?" she asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

We sat in silence for a moment.

“Well, Laura, you’re here, which tells me that at least a part of you wants to tell me why your husband—and maybe a little of you too—wants you to be here.”

I looked down. “I suppose so.”

More silence. I took a deep breath. I hadn’t realized it would be this hard to get started. Finally, I looked up at her, eye to eye.

“About a month ago, I was attacked in my home.”

She nodded. “Are you comfortable telling me what happened?”

“I guess,” I replied. “I’ve told so many other people already—my husband, my mom, my sister, my brother-in-law.”

For an instant, I thought of my father. He had died of a heart attack seven years ago. I never liked leaving him out when I talked about my family, but I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to qualify that he was dead in the first five minutes of meeting someone—especially a shrink.

Dr. Cole was watching me. Slowly, I began recounting the events of that night. I told her how the intruder had kicked open my locked bedroom door and attacked me when Chris was out of town. I recalled how I tried to fight him off, how much I had screamed, and then, much to my surprise, how he had fled, leaving me physically unharmed except for bite marks on my left hand. Telling her felt different, not like telling my family. My voice was shaking. Today, in this office, I didn’t have to be strong.

“Thank you for sharing that with me. I’m sure it is not easy to relive even if you have told the story repeatedly,” said Dr. Cole. “And what happened after he ran away?”

“Well, I ran to the porch after him. I tried screaming so someone would wake up and catch him but he got away. Then, I ran back into the house and called my neighbor, Troy. I was pretty frantic, I guess, because he was over in seconds with his shotgun in hand.

“Troy is like a brother to me—and to Chris, too. I don’t think I could endure Chris traveling as much as he does if Troy weren’t around. Well, anyway, Troy came over and I told him what happened. He called the police right away and two officers showed up about ten minutes later. I repeated to them what happened and they asked to see the bedroom.”

I paused for a moment, picturing my bedroom the morning the police arrived—tangled sheets, broken lamp and the dish towel.

“And then what happened?” asked Dr. Cole.

My voice began to quiver again, betraying the composed façade I had hoped to maintain.

“That’s when I saw one of our kitchen steak knives wrapped in a dish towel by the bed. I didn’t even know he had a knife until then. I’m glad I didn’t know or I might have thought twice about fighting back.”

For a brief moment, I pictured him slitting my throat—a pencil thin line of red blood seeping from the cut down my neck.

Dr. Cole interrupted the image. “Did the police find anything?”

“The police dusted the knife but couldn’t find any prints. Then, they looked around the house to try to figure out how he got in. We didn’t have an alarm system then. We just dead bolted the door at night. After all, our neighborhood has always been very safe. While we were trying to find out how he got in, I noticed our white wedding album in the den. We usually leave it under the coffee table. It was open with all of the pages torn out. Some of the pages were sliced into shreds. And the photos of me and Chris were cut, surgically sliced to remove my picture.

“That’s disturbing,” said Dr. Cole.

I nodded.

“It creeps me out to know that he was sitting on my couch in my house while I was asleep in the next room and I didn’t even know it. And now he can look at my photos whenever he wants, and probably do disgusting things while staring at them.”

“Surely the police found prints on the album?”

“They didn’t. The police didn’t find any signs of a forced entry into the house so they started asking me if I was sure that I had locked the door. I was so infuriated. I knew I had locked the door. I always do, especially when Chris is gone, and especially after the weird feeling I had before going to bed that night. I mean, for them to think I was the cause of my own attack! Troy and I began to search the house. He actually found where the kitchen window had been pried open.

“Your window was pried open?” interjected Dr. Cole.

“It was. Even worse was that the police couldn’t find any fingerprints there, either. Well, except Troy’s from when he discovered it, but that doesn’t count. Then, they asked me to describe my attacker, but I never got a good look at him. I knew he was black, around six feet tall, maybe taller, wide shoulders, but that was it.”

“Is there anything else you can remember?” the doctor asked.

I shook my head. “When we were in college, my sister, Lucy, taught me a few self-defense moves. She said to always try to find a distinguishing feature on an attacker so he could be identified later. I guess that was one piece of her advice that I forgot. That is the part that is most unnerving. He got away and I don’t even know who he is. He could pass me on the street tomorrow and I wouldn’t recognize him.”

Dr. Cole replied, “What an ordeal. You were very brave.”

After a short silence, she asked, “Laura, you said earlier you had a weird feeling before going to bed. What made you feel weird?”

I explained, “Oh, yes. It was the strangest thing. I was in our bedroom that night about to change out of my clothes, and I had the feeling that someone was watching me. It was like a sixth sense had been triggered and I could feel someone or something there with me. I even jerked back the window blinds to see if someone was outside looking in, but there wasn’t anyone. I just figured that I was being paranoid with Chris gone. But the feeling was so strong that I changed clothes in the adjoining bathroom instead of the bedroom, something I never do. And I put the little bar latch on the bedroom door. It’s just a flimsy thing but that eerie feeling made me want to latch the door before going to bed.”

“It sounds like you were listening to your intuition that night.”

“I guess, but now I’m *so sensitive*. Before, I dismissed that weird feeling, but now I pay attention to it *all of the time*.”

I exhaled. I couldn’t hold it back—my eyes began to tear.

*How can I be crying in front of a total stranger?*

Dr. Cole spoke in a soothing voice. “That’s quite normal.”

The tears were starting to roll down my cheeks. I confessed, “It’s exhausting—and it won’t stop.”

She nodded. “There is a lot of psychological distress that comes with the trauma you faced, and it doesn’t just disappear once the threat is gone. Your sensitivity may be what is called hyper vigilance.”

“Hyper vigilance? I’ve never heard of that,” I said. “My husband thinks I have PTSD.”

“Well, hyper vigilance is one of the symptoms of PTSD, but I’d need a better understanding of all of your symptoms before we make that diagnosis.”

*Maybe I did have PTSD? Part of me was scarred, but I wasn’t sure how badly.*

Dr. Cole handed me a tissue and I wiped my face.

“How do I get better?” I asked.

Dr. Cole smiled. “Laura, dealing with your feelings is the first step in the process of recovery and that is something we can work through together, if you like. The good news is that the worst part, the actual attack, is over, so now you can begin the recovery.”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “The recurring nightmares make it seem like it’s not over. Nearly every night I’ve been reliving what happened.”

Dr. Cole jotted a quick note. “Can you tell me more about the nightmares?”

I thought back to the terror of the preceding night.

“Usually, I dream about the attack. It’s not much different than what really happened. I see his dark silhouette in the doorway and he pounces on me. Usually Chris wakes me up because he says I’m screaming in my sleep. One time I was even scratching the bed post when he woke me.”

“I see,” she said. “The nightmares are your mind’s way of processing the trauma. When you feel threatened, your mind tries to cope with the situation subconsciously. Having nightmares is actually a good sign that you are struggling to make sense of a horrific situation.”

“But why don’t they subside? It’s been over a month.”

“You said your husband wakes you each time?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I can’t say for sure, but it could be that your unconscious self wants to be heard. If you don’t pay attention to it, if you resist it rather than accept what it is trying to tell you, it will keep trying. It may sound counterintuitive, but if you listen to the dreams, if you embrace them instead of suppressing them, your unconscious self will feel that it is being heard.”

I gave that hypothesis some thought. I would often “sleep on a story” if I was getting writer’s block and let my subconscious work on it. Though this explanation wasn’t exactly the same, it made sense.

Dr. Cole continued, “Once you pay attention to the dream or, in this case, the flashback nightmare, your unconscious self will likely work with you to process the information.”

“So, should I tell Chris not to wake me?”

“You could try asking him to just hold you, to comfort you as you process the images but to let it play out. Once your unconscious self

knows you are embracing the experience, the energy may shift. It's a bit like a child who wants your attention. If you ignore the child, he will keep acting up."

I shifted uncomfortably; I didn't know much about children or how they behaved. That could be a whole separate therapy session on why Chris was stalling.

Before the attack, I rarely remembered my dreams. Now, they were on vivid replay and I couldn't press the stop button. I had never considered that trying to suppress them might make them want to be heard even more. Though I didn't relish the idea of letting it play out, I was willing to try anything that would make the nightmares end.

I asked, "If I let them play out, how long before they stop?"

Dr. Cole smiled again. "I'm afraid the mind isn't that precise. Have you ever dreamt about the part when he retreats?"

"No. He's always still there."

"Well, once you let it play out, you might be surprised how quickly it dissipates, especially because you were able to fight back."

The pillow behind my lower back had sunk into the couch. I adjusted it to try to get more support.

Dr. Cole jotted a note on her pad. "Laura, is there more you'd like to share?"

"Well...Dr. Cole," I began.

"Please call me Barbara. That's only fair since you have allowed me to call you Laura."

"Okay, Barbara. You said I was able to fight back. I did. I fought him so hard. From the minute he broke into my bedroom to the minute he left, all I could think about was getting him away from me. But because I wasn't raped, I think people expect me to be instantly okay—like it doesn't count that I was attacked.

"My friend, Heather, said I should consider myself lucky because I wasn't raped. Lucky! Now that it's over, I certainly don't feel lucky. I mean I'm afraid to go in the house alone now. I'm afraid all the time, even when the alarm is on."

Barbara nodded. "Sometimes people are inconsiderate or at the very least uneducated about trauma. Just because you were not raped does not mean that you don't feel similar insecurities, just as someone who is robbed feels violated. From my experience, I have seen that the reactions of people are very much the same. It is the length of time to heal

that can differ, depending on the severity of the crime. Like I said, you were able to fight back, which brings you a step closer to healing, to feeling secure again.”

“Maybe you should give Heather a call,” I huffed.

Barbara jotted another note and then glanced at her clock. “Laura, our time is almost up. I think I can help you with your recovery, but only if you like. I know you said your husband made the appointment so it is up to you if you would like to return. If you need to think about it for a while, that’s perfectly fine.”

Without hesitating, I replied, “I think I’d like to come back.”

I could already hear the “I told you so” from Chris. No matter; I beat him at basketball at the state fair. He could be right this time.

“Okay, good.” Barbara’s voice became slow and deliberate. “You’ve told me a few things that have changed in your life over the last month. For your next visit, would you be open to writing them down as you think of them?”

I nodded.

Barbara started the list, “You mentioned earlier that you are now having nightmares, that you have an alarm system and that your sense of being watched is more acute. I suppose we could start with that.”

“I said all that? I sound like a basket case.”

Barbara shook her head. “Not at all. And I’m sure there are more changes in your life as well. So, as you think about them, even if they seem small, please write them down. We’ll look at them together next time. Okay?”

“Okay.”

We stood; I was surprised by the fact that I wanted to stay and talk longer.

“Well, good. Why don’t you set up an appointment with Alisa on the way out?”

I shook Barbara’s hand and made my next appointment for the following Tuesday. As I shut the office door behind me, I couldn’t remember which way to the elevator. Was it right or left?

I glimpsed the back of someone opening the door to the stairs and remembered that the elevator was in the other direction.

FROM THE DESK OF  
**BARBARA COLE**

July 7, Viat 1

New Patient - Laura Holland

Husband made appt, did not make appt herself

- \* speak to Alisa about appt policy

Husband - Chris, Neighbor - Troy, Mother, Sister, Brother-in-law

- No mention of father?

Attacked at home during night, attempted rape, bitten

- Other injuries? Does she have full recollection?

Had premonition - changed clothes in bathroom, latched bedroom door

Attacker had a knife (not known until after)

Destroyed wedding album - took her photos

Broke in through kitchen window, neighbor's (Troy) finger prints there?

Symptoms:

- Recurring flashback nightmares
- Hypervigilant
- Afraid to go into house alone

-SAC