

RAISED IN DARKNESS

A novel by David Skeele

CHAPTER ONE

My grandmother, who is French, had a word for bad omens. She called them “corbones,” or something unpronounceable that sounded like “corbones.” More than once, I remember shifting around uncomfortably on her bony legs, in that living room that always smelled like cloves, as she thrust her face next to mine and said something like: “There is warnings all around, mon cheri. You is safe the whole life if you learn to see the *corbones*, learn to listen the *corbones*.” Much later, I figured out that it must be some sort of corruption of *corbeaus noirs*—meaning “black crows—which she thought were about the worst omen of all. She saw and listened to other omens, too, though, some of them really strange. Tulips coming up late meant a miscarriage in the family, and fall foliage that hit the ground before it reached its brightest colors meant financial loss. Foxes were either good or bad luck, depending on what color fox and which season you saw them in. And then there was the truly weird one in which any dead branches falling into the yard in an X pattern had to be burned, and burned immediately. I remember one morning after a windstorm when I was nine or ten, scurrying around her yard in a panic gathering branches while my mother alternated between yelling at me to stop and swearing at her in French, and my hungover Dad just sat on the steps and

laughed helplessly. I should add here that my grandmother was not a *parisienne*—if she were, then these ideas would have been less colorful eccentricities than signs of approaching dementia. No, Grandma Claire was from a remote village somewhere in Normandy, and she didn't follow her daughter to the New World until she was in her sixties, so her corbones were bona fide cultural beliefs. And she clung to them with a Gallic stubbornness—when my mother swore at her, she swore back, and twice as loud. I'm sure she still has her dimming eyes peeled for foxes and exes and late-blooming tulips.

For us modern American types, though, omens are a lot harder to see. Most of the time, in fact, if we recognize them at all, we can only recognize them in our rearview mirrors. We can only see them long after the point at which they would have done us any good.

Whenever I can stand to raise my head and look in my own rearview mirror, whenever I can bear to gaze over the worst stretch of road I've ever traveled, I can see what must be my own corbone in the distance, my own croaking black crow. And she is a petite and well put-together psychic named Virginia Taylor-Brecque.

As it happened, it was just a coincidence that my bad omen happened to be a psychic. She didn't *warn* me about anything specific—in fact, we hardly talked about me at all. (Also, it's a little weird, but otherwise a meaningless coincidence, that she was part French, or her husband was, or something.) And even if she had warned me, no one could have blamed me for not taking the word of a psychic more seriously. After all, she was only one of about seventy psychics in the room. Besides, at the time I don't think I really believed in omens. Which was kind of her point.

Yes, I can see her in the rear-view mirror. Looking poised and perfectly coiffed, holding herself like an aging movie star. And I can see myself there too, standing in front of the crowd of psychics, seers and other New Age luminaries at a spiritualist community called Lily Dale Assembly. I look so easy, so confident, so smug: it's no wonder Virginia Taylor-Brecque wanted to attack me. I want to attack me.

If I remember right, however, most of the crowd seemed to like me that day. And at Lily Dale, that's far from a sure thing. There, as in most places, I've had to get used to the idea of being a "tweener," a *demi-monde*, someone half-respectable, half-suspectable. Being a paranormal investigator, I'm naturally viewed with skepticism—if not outright hostility—by most mainstream scientists. On the other hand, my insistence that I *am* a kind of scientist makes me detestably mainstream in the eyes of a lot of psychics and mediums. But, as I said, this crowd was a fairly friendly one. I'm sure they were the usual assortment of people to be found at Lily Dale: many psychics of probably genuine ability, others who cheerfully admitted to being psychics-in-training, and a few characters lurking around the fringes who were either self-deluded or total frauds. On this day, it seems to me they were being unusually polite.

However they felt about what I was saying, my appearance must have reassured them. I don't remember exactly how I was dressed, but I'm sure it was something, befitting my *demi-monde* status, that combined preppie and New Age—and given where I was speaking, I probably leaned a little toward the latter. Something like sandals, freshly pressed jeans, and one of my Guatemalan pullovers—the kind with a hood and tie-strings around the collar. I'm bald on top, but I wear my hair long enough on the sides and back to get a decent ponytail going. I've been told I'm good-looking, in an

open, affable sort of way. I'm quick to smile (or I used to be), and my teeth are in good shape. I've always been kind of thin, but at that time I was spending a few hours a week in the health club keeping myself this side of gauntness. My height—six foot four—usually works for me in these situations, too, giving me an air of authority that I don't necessarily deserve.

My eyes are maybe another story—they're completely gray, the palest gray I've ever seen in a pair of eyes, and that can work for or against me. Women have told me, on occasion, that they look sexy and wise, but I've seen people suddenly getting a little creeped out when they notice them—like they just got the startling sensation they were conversing with a Siberian Husky. From a decent distance, though, I'm a friendly-looking guy, and, as I said, my appearance probably allowed me to get away with what otherwise might have seemed a little condescending.

So on this day I was saying something like this: "...so much of what we do is based on anecdotal evidence. Alleged eyewitness accounts backed up by hearsay about other eyewitness accounts. Is that enough to establish a core belief in the existence of ghosts? Well, yes, for many people it is. Ghost stories are what attracted me to the field in the first place, and I still love them. But is this kind of evidence ultimately enough?" Here I smiled knowingly at the audience, and a few of them, sensing that it is supposed to be a rhetorical question, shook their heads no, while others sat stone-faced, refusing to play the game. "I don't think so," I went on. "We have yet to establish indisputable scientific proof of the existence of ghosts—and we may *never* have that proof—but we have to keep pressing for it. It has to be the focus of our work. The world of mainstream science laughs at us, and in a way, they're right to laugh. Now, we all know there are a

lot of minds out there that are wedged shut too tight to ever be opened, and I don't mean to apologize for them. But I think the vast majority of people out there are fence-sitters, just waiting for us to be responsible and *show* them, using some kind of methodology they can respect. But—let's be honest—they can't respect much of what we're doing now. There are too many of us running around applying theories that are, at best, unproveable, and we're doing it with a certainty that makes us sound a little foolish.”

I felt the atmosphere shift a little in the room then, as if a bit of thin cloud cover had passed in front of the sun (one wall was made up of large glass panels, so maybe that's all that *did* happen), but I was used to audiences blowing hot and cold, so I went merrily on. “I can't count how many times I've worked with people who immediately assume, number one, that there *is* a genuine psychic disturbance, and number two, that the presence is sentient and possible to reason with. They immediately start with the incantations, you know, sometimes scriptural and sometimes...personal innovations.”

This got a few chuckles. “And I have to tell you, to begin with, very few of the houses I've investigated were troubled by anything more than say, mine subsidence, or squirrel infestations. It's very disappointing to people when I tell them this—but the main part of my job is finding the dreaded ‘rational explanation.’ You have to start by assuming that there is a perfectly normal—as opposed to *paranormal*—reason for the sounds or visions or whatever, and eight times out of ten, in my experience, there is. And when there *is* a genuine manifestation, statistically it's almost guaranteed to be an *apparition*—that is to say, what many of us believe is a kind of psychic imprint, a pattern of energy generated by some traumatic event in the past that can sometimes re-form into an actual picture or...”

There was a sigh from somewhere in the room. I looked out and it was easy to find the source. In the second row, a little to my left. A late-middle-aged woman in a pale green pantsuit, graying auburn hair frosted into a permanent wave. She had her arms crossed, and was shaking her head, staring up at ceiling with an expression of weary amusement. I recognized the expression: it was the one I wore when I had to sit and listen to some Harvard physicist declaim against parapsychology.

She sensed me looking at her and lowered her gaze until it met mine. “I’m sorry,” she said in a voice strangely deep and resonant for her size, colored with just a faint cigarette rasp. “But Mr. Berenger, I don’t think there’s anyone in the room who doesn’t know what an apparition is.”

I nodded and smiled contritely. “Sorry. I’ve been talking at too many high schools and Kiwanis clubs.” There was general laughter in the room, and I took a breath. Another conflict averted. But it seemed like a warning, I thought. Maybe I should have considered steering the lecture away from my pet peeves and on to something less provocative—talking up the technology, demonstrating, say, the new ultra-fast digital thermal scanners. I suppose there was something perverse in me that day, something, maybe, that wanted to pick a fight, that wanted to bait some smug pseudo-mystic like that woman in the second row. So I stayed with my polite rant a little longer.

“Anyway, all I meant to say is that we have to be cautious about trusting our own assumptions. I’ve worked with people who immediately rushed up to the clients and told them that the best cure for their disturbances is to ask the spirit to leave. Okay, fine, but they don’t just ask them, they have whole sets of *rules* for asking. It only works at night,

some of them claim, when the forces of evil are at their most active, or in the mid-morning, when the forces of evil are at their lowest ebb...”

“Excuse me.” The throaty voice again. I looked to the second row. The woman had her hand raised, fingers pulled demurely back and head cocked to one side. An ironic pose, like a precocious child preparing to make fun of the teacher. “Yes, Ms....I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve...”

She stood, carefully smoothing out her blouse before giving me a level, searching gaze. I tried not to swallow. “Virginia Taylor-Brecque,” she said. I nodded, recognizing the name. One of Lily Dale’s full-time summer people, as opposed to the psychics who breezed in for week-long guest spots. Also, one of the most sought-after psychics there—one of the really good ones, supposedly. I was surprised I’d never met her before.

“I was just wondering,” she went on, “If you don’t get the spirits to leave, then what exactly do people get when they hire you?”

A few chuckles from around the room. I smiled again, but this one was a little harder to keep in place. “I didn’t say I didn’t solve the problem. I don’t have a perfect record—I don’t know any investigators who do—but I...”

“Now you do.”

“Now I...what?” I could feel myself getting completely thrown off stride now. not used to being interrupted in mid-lecture even once, much less repeatedly.

“Now you know someone with a perfect record.” The room was silent. Most of the group seemed uncomfortable with the turn things were taking, but I knew some must be silently cheering her on. “Now I don’t have all of the fancy equipment you do, Mr. Berenger. And I clearly don’t have your sophisticated, scientific understanding of the

afterlife. What I do have, using nothing but my charmingly naïve methods, is a one-hundred percent success rate.”

She was still smiling, but her sarcasm was now edging into open hostility. I leaned back against a low desk, sitting on my hands and breathing slowly through my nose. This was getting bad, and getting worse, and I had to get it back on track somehow. I knew humor was probably the answer, but at the moment my wit was deserting me.

I smiled again. “That’s impressive. I’m genuinely happy for you and your clients. And, by the way, I completely accept the possibility that everything you personally believe about ghosts—that anyone in this room believes about ghosts—is true. All I’m saying is that we are still at the stage where we should admit we have more questions than answers...”

“And all *I’m* saying is that sitting around asking questions probably doesn’t help people who are being troubled by unquiet spirits.”

“Now, *wait*.” I could feel the word snap into place like a hammer cocking on a gun. A couple of people looked up, startled, and I fought to regain control. “I never said I sat around asking questions. What I do is go in with an *open mind*, always looking for the obvious explanation first. And I have to repeat that my usual recipe for success is recommending a good exterminator or a good stonemason. If the disturbance can’t be explained by any natural means, then I look to see if it is something that is actually being generated by the occupants.” She rolled her eyes and started to open her mouth, but I cut her off. “Ms. Taylor-Brecque, this is a documented phenomenon. It’s astounding what people can do using psychokinetic energy, knowingly or unknowingly. They can project apparitions, they can move objects. It’s common knowledge now that most so-called

poltergeist disturbances center around adolescents or preadolescents—just the age group that is believed to project the greatest amount of PK.” I was moving fast now, probably cramming two lectures worth of material into a few sentences, but I sensed this was my best strategy for staying on top: throw a lot of ideas at her and force her to stop and sort them out. “And look at so-called ‘demonic’ infestations. Isn’t it interesting that in my experience—and in every experience I’ve ever encountered in books—demons only appear to people who are predisposed to believing in them? Doesn’t that suggest that a home’s inhabitants may be influencing events in some way?” I made the mistake of offering a dramatic pause, into which Virginia Taylor-Brecque charged.

“Circular logic,” she snorted. “If someone is attacked by a demon, they’re going to start believing in demons, aren’t they? And pretty quickly.”

There was laughter, but the heat in my voice shut it off as if by a switch. “I said *predisposed*. That means they believed in them *before* the attack. You don’t find atheists getting demons, Ms. Taylor-Brecque—it *doesn’t happen*. It rarely even happens to Protestants. But, look—” I saw her start to respond and moved once more to intercept her, placing my palms up in a sign of surrender. “I do want to add that I *have* come across cases in which all of those explanations have proven...insufficient. I admit that. At least once, I was...forced to entertain the possibility of sentient otherworldly beings. Only once, mind you, but it has happened to me. And in that case, I want you to know that the first thing I did was to call in someone like yourself. Of course, I don’t believe I ever had the honor of working with someone who had a one-hundred percent success rate. So, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get your card at the end. That way, the next time I run into something that I want to ask to leave, I’ll happily let you do it for me.” There

was more laughter, people breathing easier again. Even Virginia Taylor-Brecque smiled a little. I don't think she was taken in by the flattery, but she seemed to appreciate the olive branch.

Smiling, a little limp with relief, I had just stepped forward to solicit questions from the audience when she spoke, her voice surprisingly gentle. "Tell us about it."

I stopped, mouth half-open. "What?"

"That one case." She crossed her arms and leaned back, peering at me from under half-closed lids. "You know. The one that still frightens you."

I stared at her, my mouth suddenly dry. In my peripheral vision, I could sense people straightening in their chairs, heads swiveling toward me. "It doesn't...frighten me." Even as I said the words, I could hear the quaver in them, the pinched voice. I reached back to steady myself against the desk again. I wanted to make the movement look nonchalant, but there was a shake in my hand I couldn't quite conceal.

She smiled, a lightly mocking, don't-try-to-lie-to-a-psychic smile. "All right. You're not frightened. So why not tell us?"

In the heavy silence of the room, I had a sudden image of myself. Cowering back against the desk, pale, shaken, spots of color high on my cheeks. After all my brave talk of shrewd, objective scientific analysis, I was in danger of looking seriously stupid. The image gave me a burst of strength. I cleared my throat and straightened up, trying for a jaunty smile.

"Of course." I took my time, filling a glass of water and coating my parched throat with a long pull from it. "It was...a church. In New Hampshire. An odd little church. Red brick. Octagonal. A very old church, dating back to some time in the

seventeenth century. Lots of phenomena. People had reported...seeing figures. Figures sitting in the pews who would suddenly vanish. Sometimes people would hear voices, right in the middle of a service. One morning the rector tried to get in and found the door blocked by something. When he went through a side door, he found that during the night, someone had taken the altar, moved it all the way to the front of the church, and wedged it against the front doors. It was oak, and it weighed about three-hundred pounds—it took three workmen to move it back. So...they called me in. My instruments immediately went wild in this place—all of them. I was getting crazy EMF readings all over the place, fluctuations in temperature—extreme fluctuations—voices speaking gibberish on the recorder. I was scared, a little, but mostly excited. It's the kind of case you hope for. Then one night, I was standing in a pew with my voice recorder, and something spoke in my ear.”

I took another drink, felt the silence intensify yet more. I looked at the crowd, and saw that to a person, they were all wide-eyed with anticipation. I could feel the tiny beads of sweat popping from my pores, little pinpricks of warmth on my forehead. Two or three at a time. Pop, pop, pop.

“And what did it say?” It was Virginia Taylor-Brecque again, nodding at me to continue.

I nodded, smiled a brief apology. “This one...was clear as day. It said ‘Barry’s crying.’ I whipped around, pointed the recorder in that direction, asked it to repeat itself. I didn’t get anything, so I started to climb over the pew to try a different section, and then again, right in my ear it said ‘He can’t find you.’” I took some breaths and put my arms behind me, surreptitiously wiping my palms on the seat of my pants. “I had to leave then.

I went outside and sat against a tree for a while, trying to get my nerve up to go back inside. But I couldn't. You see, Barry was my father's name. He'd been dead for a long time."

I heard several sharp intakes of breath from the group, and a few whispered mutterings. I stared out over their heads, not daring to make eye contact with anyone, but in the lower range of my vision I could make out Virginia Taylor-Brecque nodding slowly. I thought I could also detect several people turning their heads to glare at her. Sympathy was on my side again, though at the moment I didn't care much about that.

A new voice, male, from another part of the room asked "Did you go back?"

"Not for a while. First, I did what I always do. I researched. I don't have the benefit of Ms. Taylor-Brecque's psychic insights, but I believe just as much in arming myself with knowledge. So I researched the hell out of the place, tried to find out what I was up against. Town records, mostly. A lot of afternoons in a dusty basement. About the only thing I could find that smacked of controversy was from the 1770s. It seemed the first congregation had held a kind of kangaroo court there. They barred the doors and confronted a couple that were...supposedly adulterous. They ordered the couple beaten and placed in the local jail. She ended up dying of pneumonia later that year. I never found out what happened to him. Anyway, knowing now what might have happened, I did come back with a psychic—an excellent one. We spent a long night in there. She reported feeling crowds of people around her, screaming at her. It scared her, badly, but she hung in there, just kept talking and talking about how the two of them could be happy now. How they were someplace where no one could touch them. Of course, who knows

if that was true? Who knows if the adulterous couple were even the ghosts in the first place? But you know what? The phenomena almost completely stopped.”

“Almost?” Virginia again.

“Yes. No more voices, no more apparitions. Except for one night every year—the anniversary of the night I brought the psychic. What the hell does *that* mean? I have no idea.”

I took a few moments pulling myself out of that chilly New Hampshire churchyard and back into the present, and when I focused my eyes on the group I saw that the atmosphere had shifted considerably. Virginia Taylor-Brecque looked almost relaxed, gazing thoughtfully at a far corner of the room. Most of the others were more relaxed now, too, beginning to talk softly in small groups, though some sat still and gave me commiserating looks, perhaps still a little embarrassed at what I’d been put through. Everyone sensed, though, as I did, that some kind of *détente* had been reached.

“There’s always one,” the psychic mused, still staring at nothing. “Every scientist I’ve talked to, there’s always one they can’t rationalize away.” She turned to me.

“Thank you, Mr. Berenger, for sharing that story. And if you do ever call me, I will come, I promise. I think it’s important that it be me.” There was silence again in the room. No one, including me, knew what to make of that comment.

“You see,” she went on, “I’m still worried by what I’ve heard here today. Laughing at the idea of spirits, and more troubling, at the idea of evil spirits. I’ve spent my life talking and listening to spirits, and I can tell you, *anecdotally*, that they are just like people. There are profoundly good ones—most of them are good ones—but there are profoundly evil ones as well. There are beings out there who are full of pain and

have used (like asking her what to do if I was “being troubled by unquiet psychics”). But letting things like that eat away at me was an old sin of mine, one that I was getting better at letting go of with every step I took toward middle age. And anyway, at that moment I was blessed with much happier preoccupations.

For one thing, I had my car. It is a forest green '84 Jaguar convertible, an automobile that in no way has ever reflected my actual financial situation (I got an incredible deal from a happy client—take that, Virginia Taylor-Brecque!), and that fact has given me bouts of self-consciousness sometimes. But the lines of this car were so damn sleek and elegant, in the way that only the British can design, and if I got to have torpedo fenders then feeling pretentious was just the price I was going to have to pay. As I slid into it, the feel of my back muscles unclenching and spreading into the deep, cushioned leather gave me the big, spontaneous smile it always did.

Yep, I had my car, and even better, I had my dog Porno next to me. Porno was so happy to see me, and so happy about the prospect of a long ride with the top down, that she twirled in delirious circles on the passenger seat, stopping occasionally to slap at my ear and neck with her tongue. Porno is probably one of the strangest looking dogs on the planet. I can't even venture a guess about her parentage, but people say they can see either whippet or greyhound, some kind of terrier and maybe a little German shepherd in there. She's short-haired and rail thin, with little tufts of longer fur around her neck on the back of her legs. She has a long muzzle that is thin and pointy, and the black nose on the end of it looks two sizes too big—like the rubber nose they stuck on Rudolph the Reindeer. One ear always sticks straight up and the other is permanently folded in half, and when she is happy (which is always), she cocks her head to the side in a way that

makes her look cheerfully deranged. So ultimately her name is probably the least bizarre thing about her.

There is, of course, a story behind the name. I inherited my apartment from a bunch of Harvard frat boys, and when I moved in the only things they had left was some broken furniture, a stack of porno tapes and a scrawny, half-starved dog with a too-small flea collar digging into her neck. The college kid I hired to help me move didn't have any interest in taking the dog—though he was more than happy to take the tapes—but before he left he jokingly started calling her Porno, and the scary thing was that the dog immediately responded to it. Who knows, maybe that *was* her name. Anyway, she's amazingly obedient, so I don't have to yell for her in public much.

I had my car and my dog, and the weather was sensational. It was September, at the height of the Indian summer that Western New York State always seems to get, a warm and breezy day that mixed summer temperature and autumn smells. I drove along snaky back roads, loving the countryside out there: all hilly farmland, lush with vineyards and dotted everywhere with giant poplars. A poor man's Tuscany.

But the best thing I had going for me that day was *where* I was going. Normally, after my annual stint at Lily Dale, I'd be heading north to 90 and settling in for the long, dull drive east to Massachusetts. This time I traveled southwest, angling around Chatauqua and Jamestown and heading for the Pennsylvania border, my trunk jammed full of boxes of belongings. For a creature of habit such as myself, there was something so deliciously impulsive about what I was doing. A lifelong Bostonian, I was moving to Pittsburgh, a city that still conjured outdated images of sooty air and coke ovens turning the evening sky orange. Even stranger, the committed bachelor, notorious among my

friends for my aversion to long relationships, was doing it all for a woman. And even stranger yet, it was for a woman who came already equipped with a four year-old daughter. Each mile toward highway 79 was a mile farther into new and uncharted waters, a step farther into Ike Berenger's simultaneous reinvention of himself as reckless adventurer and family man, and God help me, it felt good.

I had a Jewish friend in college who used to quote an old family saying: "when you're in love, the world is Jewish," which reminded my Italian friend that her grandparents had an Italian version of the saying, and led them both to conclude that so did every ethnic group in the world, most likely. I had to admit, I'd never heard anyone say "when you're in love, the world is French Presbyterian," but at that moment I understood the concept, the feeling that harmony and like-mindedness were radiating across the universe. I had my car, my dog, and there was nothing in my rear-view mirror but giant poplars swaying in a warm wind. Yes, the weather was wonderful and the world was French Presbyterian, so who could blame me for ignoring omens?

All I knew then was that I'd received a bit of a public humbling, let myself get too upset over that damn story about the church in New Hampshire. Looking back, I can't even blame myself much for that, though. After all, that used to be the worst story I knew.

CHAPTER TWO

We were naked, propped up on pillows on opposite ends of the bed. I gazed down the length of my body at Marge. She stared at the ceiling, arms still thrown wide open in abandon. Her long brown hair was everywhere, stuck to her face in sweaty wisps, splayed out across her pillow like tentacles. Her warm leg was draped across my thighs and where her flesh met mine I imagined I could feel energy humming between us. I idly massaged her foot. My old office in Boston was two blocks from the Combat Zone, and driving through it every day, it was easy to start thinking about sex as something pathetically comic, a dance of furtive middle-aged men and callous, hard-eyed women. But at moments like these, it seemed entirely worthy of being the center of our universe, the Western world's main obsession.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“Freud. Calvin Klein. Cinemax.”

She rolled her eyes. “I knew I shouldn't have asked. Are you sure you weren't staring at my fat thighs?”

I sat up, began massaging her thigh. “I don’t even know how to respond to that. Summoning up all the objectivity I can, I’d have to say that these are picture-perfect thighs. Swimsuit issue thighs...”

She laughed. “Oh, right...”

“But even if they weren’t, it would be nearly impossible for me to tell. They’re Marge’s thighs, and I would love every inch of them, because they are a part of Marge. Your whole body—to me it’s so...so...”

“Marginal?”

I tossed a pillow at her head. “Hey, I’m trying to be sincerely romantic, here.”

“Well, don’t strain yourself.” She giggled, and I pulled her up to sitting. We embraced, her face snuggling into the side of my neck. I felt a small weight on the bed next to me, then felt something warm and furry nuzzling against my ribs. Marge’s cat Jezebel, trying to work her way in between us. Marge laughed and broke away from me, cradling Jezebel between her breasts.

I watched in wonder as the cat did her usual thing, wrapping her front legs around Marge’s neck and seeming to hug her. “I can’t believe it. She’s actually jealous. A *cat*.”

“Yep, she’s one of a kind.”

Jezebel was a great cat, as far as cats go. She was some sort of long-haired mongrel, her fur a riot of orange and black and brown and white, and she had a personality that was much more dog-like than any cat I’d ever seen. She actually responded to her name, for instance, and she craved human affection. For some reason, though, she also hated dogs. You’d think two girls named Porno and Jezebel would be best friends, but their encounters so far had been disastrous. Porno’s eyes always lit up

when she saw her—something new to play with!—but Jezebel inevitably hissed and scratched and sent Porno yelping off to some hidden corner of the house. So for now, Porno was sleeping outside in a hastily constructed doghouse. I didn't like it, and Porno, who was used to sleeping in bed with me, liked it even less. It was the closest thing Marge and I had to a point of contention. Jezebel wasn't going anywhere, and one thing I knew was that Porno wasn't going to a pound, so it was conceivable that our relationship hinged on us being able to reconcile our pets. Still, I loved watching Marge and Jezebel talk to each other. They were in their own world, giving each other the intense eye contact of a fakir and a cobra. Marge made some sort of low-throated nonsense sounds, and I could almost swear Jezebel nodded in return. Marge sensed me smiling at her and looked up.

I laughed. “Oh, Marge Johnson, Marge Johnson. In my line of work, I'm constantly meeting these totally boring women with names like Skylark and Ginseng and Aquitane. And here I find the deepest, most mysterious, most wonderful woman in the world, and she's named 'Marge Johnson.' We've got to do something about that.”

She gave me a fish-eyed look through strands of hair. “Oh, yeah, like I grew up dreaming I'd fall in love with someone named 'Ike.' A *ghost hunter*, no less.”

“Yeah, I don't think I was ever an option in *Mystery Date*.”

We both laughed and lapsed into an easy silence. We hadn't been together long, but light sarcasm about my vocation already qualified as one of our “old jokes.” I didn't mind at all, because in truth Marge was a lot less judgmental about it than any other woman I'd dated. Even women who had tried to understand it always seemed faintly patronizing. I'd come to expect the polite questions about how I *ever* got into a field like

this, while a little smile tugged at the corners of the mouth that said “How charming, but I wonder what he’ll do when he grows up.” I’ve never been patient with the arbitrary pigeonholes society chooses for us, and getting a quick, dismissive analysis of “Peter Pan Syndrome” or some other pop-psych crap was tiresome enough to me to sour me on any budding relationship.

And in all honesty, I didn’t know if I could even answer the question about how I got into a field like this. I remember that reading was my most reliable means of escape, my insulation from near-constant household tension. And I remember that the ghost story—both the fictional and the supposedly factual—was my favorite reading. I liked reading fantasy, too, and science fiction and the occasional Western, but I was always frustrated by the remoteness of those worlds, by the knowledge that I would never get the chance to truly live those adventures. It was the *attainability* of the world of ghost stories that tantalized me: a whole realm existing parallel to mine, full of dread and danger and mystery, separated from me only by a thread-thin layer of perception. I also remember the moment of giddy excitement when I realized that “ghost hunter” was a real occupation, a job performed by actual scientists and not just goofy teenagers with talking dogs. Like most kids, I batted around a half-dozen career possibilities, but I never could let go of the dream that I might be the pioneer who finally proved the existence of ghosts to the world. When I graduated from high-school, moved to Boston, and began looking for a job, the first flyer I saw pasted to a lamppost was an invitation to take a three-week workshop in investigating paranormal phenomena. I took it as a sign.

“Hey, wait a minute.” Marge suddenly sat up straight, then eased Jezebel off her lap and hurried over to her dresser. “Your line of work. That reminds me.” She began

rummaging, bending over a bunch of coins and hair ties and slips of paper. I watched her, admiring the play of muscles in her lower back, smiling at the typical pile of Marge clutter on her dresser, and at the way she had of bringing her face inches away from whatever she was concentrating on, even though she wasn't the slightest bit nearsighted.

“What are you doing?” I finally asked.

“You just made me think of it. I found work for you.”

I sat up straighter. “Already? I was going to hang out the shingle tomorrow.”

She turned around, flattening out a crumpled piece of paper in her hand. “Aha! Here it is. I know you don't need me helping you, but it was kind of an accident. I met this woman at an art opening on the South Side, and I happened to tell her I had a boyfriend who was a ghost hunter and she had this really bizarre reaction. She really stiffened up, and at first I thought I'd made a mistake—this *is* Western Pennsylvania, so I try to be a little careful about who I mention it to. For a second I thought she was going to shove a cross in my face or something, you know, ‘begone, heathen slut!’ But then she started crying—she actually started crying. I kind of steered her into a quiet corner, and she started telling me that something weird has been going on in her house. She said it's a really new house, in a nice development, so she couldn't see how it could be haunted...” I laughed a little at that. “I felt so sorry for her. But she seemed almost insane with relief to hear about you. And you know, I've always thought it was kind of cool to be dating a ghost hunter, but for the first time I felt really proud of what you do. You might be the only person who could help this poor woman.”

“Well, don't be proud yet. I might not be able to do anything at all.”

“Oh, yes you will. And you know, I realized that we basically do the same thing. You’re kind of a social worker, too, just with a different kind of troubled home.”

“If you can’t rehabilitate them when they’re still alive, then I get a shot.” Her smile wavered, and I realized she probably had seen her share of clients die. “Sorry,” I said. “Tasteless.” She waved away the comment and took my hand, putting the paper into it.

“Beverly Stelzner,” I read. “(724)—is that a Pittsburgh area code?”

She shook her head. “Slippery Rock. Her husband teaches at the university.”

I laughed. “There really is a place called Slippery Rock? I saw it on the way down, but I thought the sign must be a joke. And they actually have a university?”

“It’s about an hour north, I think. I’ve lived here my whole life, but I’ve never been there, can you believe it? It’s supposed to be the newest yuppie hotbed. The sprawl keeps moving north.”

“Thanks, honey,” I said, kissing her on the forehead. “You done good.”

She patted my cheek. “Maybe we should get to sleep. They’re ripping up the sidewalk out there, and they start bright and early.”

I tipped her chin up to me and we kissed more lingeringly. “Mmm. Then again,” I reminded her, “it isn’t midnight, and we’re not quite middle-aged yet.” She moaned softly and I felt the coarseness of her pubic hair pressing against me. I reached down and cupped the curve where her buttocks met her thighs and gently began to work my fingers inward.

“Wait,” she said, a little breathlessly, breaking away. “Let me check on Colette first. You want to come?”

“The monitor’s on,” I pointed out. It was a good one, so sensitive we could hear her breathing louder than if we were in the room with her.

“You still have to check.” She gave my cheek a playful pinch. “Don’t worry, you’ll learn.”

I padded down the dark hallway with her, enjoying the feel of the heart-of-pine floor, smooth and cool and still fitting together with a remarkable tightness and precision, considering that this was one of the oldest houses in Squirrel Hill. It had once been one of the largest as well, attached to a mill on one side and in the back to a Quaker meeting house. The mill didn’t even survive the nineteenth century, and the meeting house was destroyed by a fire in the ‘thirties. It still would have left a pretty good sized house, except some philistine carved it up to make a duplex in the ‘seventies, and wouldn’t you know it, the other half of the house had it’s own fire fifteen years ago or so, and the owner decided to simply cut away the burned part and take the insurance money and run. So all Marge was left with was one funny-shaped chunk of the original complex. Still, the older residents of the neighborhood sometimes called it “Miller House.”

I loved the place. I loved the funkiness of the architecture, and I loved the curlicued trim, and having floors and walls crafted from the indestructible wood and stone that new-home owners would never know. It had a great backyard, too, like the rest of the house, small but unique. It was sheltered on two sides by high stockade fences and in the back by a heavily overgrown hill, and on that hill, choked by weeds and sumacs, you could still see the old foundation of the meeting house. Whenever I got the chance, I loved to go up there and hang out, soak in the oldness, imagine I could still feel the Quaker vibe. Once, a walkway had led from the second floor of the house to the front

door of this structure, and I kept thinking that if I ever came into a little money and found some extra time, I would rebuild that walkway. Oh, yes, one other cool thing about the house: it had a ghost.

The ghost was what brought Marge and I together. I was doing a lecture, the usual Halloween college programming—this time at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh—when a lovely woman with cascades of curly dark hair stayed after to tell me about her ghost. She laughed easily and blushed easily and stood with just the slightest self-consciousness and within the space of one minute I was having a terrible time concentrating on anything supernatural. I was supposed to fly out that night, but on the spur of the moment I lied and said I was in town for a week, and hey I've got an idea, why don't I come out and take a look. No, no, no charge—this one sounds like fun.

We had a great time the next day. I wowed her with all of the instruments, and scared her enough with stories from the field that she stayed exquisitely close to me for the whole afternoon. Not that she was scared of her ghost. The ghost was a woman, Marge was sure (she named her Millie, after Miller House), and a gentle, maternal spirit. She believed Millie would put Colette's covers on when she kicked them off, and would generally look after the house. Once, she claimed, she was about to accidentally omit salt from the pie crust she was making. When she bent down to get a pastry blender from a drawer she heard a sound behind her and turned around to find the salt canister sitting there next to her mixing bowl. She also said she heard singing once, spirituals in a light soprano, wafting in from the back yard, and so she squealed with delight when a spot back there caused two or three spikes in the electro-magnetic frequency detector.

I never was able to produce any other results (and in reality, the EMF detector is less than perfectly reliable when used outdoors), and I never saw or heard anything out of the ordinary. I always tried, though. Even now, making the short trip to Colette's room, I tried to extend the psychic antennae and read something in the mellow darkness, cull singing or voices from the night sounds.

Colette's room was at the opposite end of the hall, an odd little room that the previous tenants had used as a walk-in closet. Marge had had a window knocked into one wall, but had never gotten around to finishing the sill or patching the wall around it. That was something I'd have to do before winter, especially since Colette's little bed sat right underneath it. All that was visible of Colette was a few curls poking out above her quilt. Marge eased the quilt back and tucked it under her chin, and we stood in silence and gazed down at what had to be the world's most angelic face. Her hair was lighter than Marge's, almost blonde in places, but her skin and her eyelashes were dark, and I knew her eyes were such a rich, deep brown that they almost seemed to be solid black. Her father was Italian, a married man with whom Marge had had a brief, instantly regretted fling. He was transferred to Memphis, and moved there without ever learning about his daughter's existence. I wasn't entirely comfortable with the situation, but Marge was, so I went along with it. And anyway, I knew the chance of this guy ever showing up to claim parental rights was remote. That would mean confessing to his wife, and married men are basically pussies. I could say that now that I was seriously considering becoming one.

Colette rolled onto her back and made a sigh that sounded like a musical note. We smiled. She had a small upturned nose and a heart-shaped mouth, her lower lip

slightly protuberant. When she smiled, she had a look of such devilish glee that you had to laugh yourself. I counted myself unbelievably lucky that I got favored with that smile so much. For some reason, she found nearly everything I said or did to be funny. Maybe it was because I was so tall or so bald or because I had that little ponytail, but mostly I think she was just happy to have a father. The first time I met her, she responded to having a man around with such open, honest delight that I instantly melted. She climbed all over me, rubbed my head in wonder. Marge kept telling her to stop, but I knew she was thrilled with the reaction. And finally, when it was time for bed, she shocked her mother by placing a little kiss on my lips—delicate and solemn, as if she was aware that it was not a gift to be bestowed lightly. I was already falling in love with her mother when I met her, but Colette, in the space of about twenty minutes, sealed the deal.

Watching her, I wondered what it is about the sight of a sleeping child that is so awe-inspiring. Maybe it's simply because moonlight makes their hair and skin look so impossibly soft. Or perhaps it's because in a sleeping child you suddenly see human life at its most peaceful and happy and open and vulnerable, and there is something miraculous about that. I felt a lump forming in my throat, my eyes watering. Marge looked up at me and squeezed my arm and I smiled down at her, trying to blink away the moisture. She motioned me toward her, and when I bent down she whispered "Thank you for loving her so much."

I shook my head and looked at her incredulously. "*You're thanking me?*" Colette made another one of her musical sighs and began to stir, and Marge took my arm and we hurried back toward the bedroom.

CHAPTER THREE

I arrived at Silver Birch Circle a little before dusk, the way I always try to. I like to time it so that I can talk to the clients during the daylight, then conduct most of the actual investigation in darkness. It sounds like one of the superstitions I had mocked at Lily Dale, but one ghost-hunting cliché I absolutely believed in was that, for whatever reason, paranormal activity always heated up after nightfall. And I'd noticed over the years that clients were a lot more willing to open up about their problems while it was still light outside.

I decided to drive around for a while, just to get a feel for the place, though I wasn't counting on feeling much of anything. I have always harbored the urban liberal's prejudice against suburban developments, and for the usual vague reasons: there was something elitist about them, as well as something soulless and conformist. Essentially, they seemed to be havens for imaginationless people; people who have given up caring about anything more ethically taxing than lawn and shrubbery maintenance. But strangely, as I traveled around this one, I found myself looking wistfully at the contemporary farmhouses and faux Victorians, and at the eponymous circle at its center: a park with a pond and gazebo, ringed by towering silver birches. At first I thought this

must be just an especially nice development (and maybe it was), but mostly, I think, it was because I was looking at this one in a new way. It wasn't just the houses I was seeing—it was the broad, shady back yards, the cedar swing-set/clubhouse combos, the empty cul-de-sacs so perfect for bike riding and skateboarding. In short, for the first time I was seeing things like a father. I was seeing Colette on that swing-set, on that bike. Or maybe I was just getting old and tired. Maybe I was ready for some lawn maintenance.

Red Clover Lane was one of five cul-de-sacs arranged in spokes around the center circle. Unlike the others, it sloped upward onto a promontory, with the Stelzner's house at the far end. This was the "old" section of Silver Birch Circle, Beverly Stelzner told me on the phone, one of the two original streets they put in twelve years ago. From here I could see a lot of new construction in the distance, just on the other side of those swaying birches, but it was amazingly quiet here. I felt another one of those surprising pangs of longing, and in annoyance I turned away from the view and looked at the house. 303 was a gray-green contemporary with a deep front porch and a three-car garage. I had laughed at Ms. Stelzner's notion that her house was too new to be haunted, but I had to admit I hadn't been called to many places this new. It *didn't* look haunted.

As I stood there, the front door opened and a slender woman in a tan pantsuit appeared on the porch. "Mr. Berenger? Are you Mr. Berenger?" She looked back and forth from me to the Jaguar a few times, the way people almost always do the first time they see me. I usually made some wiseass comment about it to put people at ease, but this time I just nodded—she didn't look like she was in the mood for wiseass comments. She was smiling, but there was a lot of strain in it, I thought. A smile on the verge of tears. And though she'd only said six words, I heard something in the voice I didn't like:

something desperately hopeful. Like if I'd turned out to be the Federal Express man instead of the ghost hunter she would have collapsed into a sobbing heap on the porch. It was a snap judgment, based on just the briefest impression, but what eighteen years of experience was already telling me was that this was no curious thrill-seeker—this was someone at the end of her rope.

I strode to her quickly and extended my hand. “Ike,” I said, giving her my biggest, most reassuring smile as we shook hands. I searched her face, trying to gauge if I was right. She was attractive, I thought. She was probably close to fifty, though her face was mostly unlined. She had shoulder-length blonde hair, just going to gray, which she nervously tucked behind her ear. Something in this woman was already bringing out my protective instinct, and that too was setting off alarm bells. I have never been the least bit psychic, but I have found over the years that every time I meet someone who genuinely needs my help, I know it. I have an urge to throw my arms around them and hold them. Not psychic, just human, I guess. And standing here looking at this woman, that urge was as strong as it's ever been.

“Beautiful out here,” I said, and she nodded absently. “I was just admiring it.”

She tried a smile, and again it seemed to falter before it got as bright as she wanted it. “Yes, and it's very convenient for Michael. The University is just over that hill.”

“Ah,” I said, nodding. We stood there, me smiling amiably, unhurried, her doing her nervous hair thing. I've found that initially it's best to let the client take the lead, take things at her own pace. It's always telling to see how enthusiastic the client is about having you there. Most of the time, they will charge right ahead into their stories of

footsteps and disembodied voices, and insist on immediately dragging you off to the trouble spots in the house. Much less common was the reaction I recognized in Beverly Stenzler. She was stalling. As if, upset as she was, she still wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. Some "rational" part of herself was still insisting she was being completely absurd. It was worrying, and simultaneously, I had to admit, it was a little exciting. Because while of course it didn't prove anything, it did give her credibility, increased the chances that there might be something genuine going on here.

Finally, she looked directly at me. "Well. Shall we talk inside, or out here, or where would you...?"

"Wherever is most comfortable for you," I answered.

She gave a little laugh and looked back and forth between the porch furniture and whatever room was just inside the door. "Comfortable. Oh, I guess the den. Michael's upstairs somewhere. Please, come in."

I followed her through a formal front room and into an airy family room. She sat on the couch and I took the leather armchair across from her. The back wall was almost solid window, and the sunset gave an orange glow to the beige walls and light wooden trim. There were family pictures—Beverly, a man and a girl at various ages—on every wall and table. In the one next to my chair the three of them sat on the deck of a sailboat. The girl was about seven in this one, I thought, bundled into a life jacket that was a few sizes too big. She smiled toothily at the camera, and I smiled back, the way I found myself doing more and more with children. With her sun-streaked hair and summer tan, she looked kind of the like the young woman Colette might become. I shook myself out of that reverie and looked up to see Beverly looking down at the rug.

“Ms. Stenzler?” I said softly. She raised her head and looked out the window.

“Ms. Stenzler, look. I know you’re a little...hesitant to talk to me. But please, understand that this is what I do for a living. Nothing you can tell me is going to sound too strange or ridiculous. I am the last person in the world who would ever doubt you, or think you were crazy. And if you want me to keep this confidential, I am professionally bound to do so. All right?”

She nodded and turned to me, her eyes glistening with tears. “Thank you. You know, I want to move out of here. But Michael doesn’t want to leave. The more I tell him about the...whatever, the more he seems to get angry and...dig in his heels.”

“He doesn’t believe you?”

“He says he doesn’t, but I know he’s seen things too. He has to have. There have been so many things...”

“Ms. Stenzler?” I interrupted. “When did you first start noticing the occurrences? How long have they been going on?”

“Beverly. You can call me Beverly.” She rubbed her hands along her slacks and looked out the window again. “And I’d say it’s been happening for...oh, ten years.” I drew in a surprised breath. She looked at me and smiled ruefully. “Yes. A long time. I just never could bring myself to...” She began to cry. I watched her, feeling a wave of irrational anger starting to build in me. I was a little angry at her, for being so myopically conventional that she would rather let herself suffer for ten years than even bring up the possibility of ghosts. The real target of my anger was a lot less specific: “society,” I suppose. The mass of people who made her too afraid to talk about what was happening to her. The pompous idiots who would have laughed in her face and told her to lay off

the prescription drugs; the ones who would have stopped talking to her altogether. “I’m sorry,” she said, wiping her eyes on a sleeve.

“What made you finally look for help?” I asked. I had my anger and shock under wraps—my voice was all gentle concern again. “Why now?”

“Because...things got so much worse.” I said nothing. “Do you want me to start at the beginning?”

“Start wherever you’d like to.” I held up my digital voice recorder. “I’d like to tape our conversation, if you don’t mind. If it makes you uncomfortable, I can take written notes, but I like the accuracy this gives us.”

She waved her hand in a “whatever” gesture, then sat back, taking a long moment to begin. “I think it began ten years ago. I don’t know what Michael thinks. The early...what did you call them?...occurrences were pretty easy to miss. Would you like something to drink?” I shook my head, smiling tightly at her, and she nodded, knowing she’d used up her last excuse. “Okay, I suppose the first thing was my daughter, Charlie. Charlotte—we’ve always called her Charlie. Charlie must have been five or so. She would tell me that she had a friend, a boy, that came to talk to her at night. You know, nothing alarming, just usual invisible friend stuff. Oh, but at first she said he couldn’t talk, so he just knocked on her wall. Don’t ask me how she knew he was a boy if he was just knocking, but that’s what she said. Her wall was right next to the garage, but it was really next to the rafters of the garage—she’s on the second floor. I asked Michael to check. I thought it must have been animals up there. He looked, but he said there’s nothing that could get up there next to her wall. The nearest beam was—is—a few feet away. As I said, I wasn’t really worried. Then I guess he started talking, this...boy. One

morning at breakfast she told me that his voice was coming through the wall. And then a few mornings later she started telling me things he would say to her.”

“Like what? What would he say?”

“Oh, a lot of different things, but at first it was all along the same line: he would tell her she was beautiful. She was like a princess. And, of course, she was a five year-old. She was all Barbies and make-up kits and very much into anything glamorous. So of course, if she had an imaginary playmate, a boy, it would make sense that he would tell her that. I mean, it’s the same kind of thing she would talk about with her stuffed animals, you know?” She looked at me, eyes faintly pleading, and I nodded reassuringly.

“But something made you suspicious.”

“Yes! Yes. He started saying things that were a little weird. She said one morning that she wanted to dye her hair black. A five year-old wanting to dye her hair! So I asked her why, and she said he’d told her to—said she’d be much prettier if she did. Again, I thought that she must have gotten that off of TV. It’s just that she seemed so desperate to please him. When I didn’t let her, she threw a temper tantrum, and said he was really going to be mad at *me*. I’ll never forget that. It’s the first moment I became scared. I mean, it was just a stupid thing a child might say, but I felt, for the first time, like there really was somebody. But I had to keep believing it was all imaginary, I mean...” She made a helpless gesture with her hands.

“What was the alternative?” I finished for her and she let her head droop in agreement.

“Then things got worse. One day, she used a word that...that I knew she’d never heard before, at least not from us. She said...” She took a little breath, looked away in

embarrassment. “She said, ‘Mommy, what’s a cunt?’ I stayed calm. I took her hands and said that it’s a very ugly word that means...’vagina,’ and that it was a word that she should never, ever use. And finally, really softly, trying not to make her nervous, I asked her where she had heard it. She said...she said the night before that he—the boy—had called her ‘a little cunt’ over and over. He sounded mad, and she said she was scared of him now. She didn’t want to sleep in her room tonight. So I marched up there with her, and we stood in front of her wall. And I said in a really loud voice ‘Boy, you are not to bother my daughter anymore! You are being mean and rude and it is time for you to leave!’”

“What happened?”

“We went back downstairs to play for a while, and we were feeling really good. Charlie was convinced we had gotten rid of him, and I think I was, too. And then I went up to my room to get something, and...and I had a big, framed photo of Charlie and me on my dresser. It was shattered. Glass all over my dresser. I was right downstairs all afternoon and I never heard anything. I knew it wasn’t Charlie, she was with me the whole time. And there was no window open anywhere, so...”

“You must have been scared.”

“God, yes. But of course, I still couldn’t completely accept that there was anything...supernatural. I’m glad I couldn’t—I think I would have lost my mind. I told my husband, though, and I mentioned the idea of the...ghost, or whatever, and...I don’t think I’d ever seen Michael that mad. I actually thought he was going to hit me for a moment. He accused me of breaking it, then Charlie, then came up with crazy reasons like a bird getting loose in the house or something.” She shook her head, and in her

expression I could read faint disgust. It was, perhaps, the same thing I'd seen so many times in hauntings. Something like this tended to hit a marriage pretty hard: women would question their rationality, men would feel exposed as inadequate protectors, couples would clash over belief systems that they never even knew they had—in short, any fault lines already there were probably going to get a little wider.

Beverly started to dig an ashtray out of a drawer, then stopped with it halfway out. “Do you mind if I smoke?” I did, but I shook my head no. As big a pain-in-the-ass ex-smoker as I was, I wasn't about to tell someone she couldn't smoke in her own house. She lit up, sucking her cheeks so hollow it looked as though she was drawing the nicotine into her very soul. “I quit for four years, do you believe it? But lately I just felt that I needed them again. I didn't want to be without my old friend.” She laughed again and held up her cigarette. “I know, with friends like this...right? Anyway, after that, after I yelled at him, after the broken glass, nothing happened for a long time. Charlie said the boy wasn't coming to visit her anymore. I felt very proud of myself. I had exorcised him. I think it lasted about six months or so, maybe a little longer. She turned six. Then Michael built this swing set and fort thing behind the garage. You can just see it from here.”

I looked out but only saw a dark shape in the twilight shadows that could have been anything.

“I don't remember when it was,” she went on. “Fall, I think, a cold day. Charlie was playing in the fort, and there's this...it has this plastic tunnel between the fort and the swing part, and I was raking or something and Charlie tugs on my sleeve. She's crying, and I said ‘My goodness, Charlie, what's the matter?’ And she said that the boy was in

the tunnel and he wouldn't let her go through." She stopped and looked at me. I could feel the silence and the darkness of the house around me. "Oh, God. You can't imagine how...chilled I felt at that moment—like a cold wind just going right through me."

I nodded. Perhaps the greatest talent I bring to what I do is my ability to listen. When a client talks about their experiences, I find I can go into a kind of trance, where I put myself completely in their shoes: seeing what they saw, feeling what they felt. So she didn't have to tell me how she felt—I could feel that cold wind, too. The trick was to be able to shake myself out of it at the end, to pull myself out of their horror movie and back into some kind of objectivity. Fortunately, that was another talent I had.

"But I was also mad," she continued. "This was *my* house, damn it!" She laughed a little, making smoke puff out of her nose in little bursts. "But the weird thing is I still didn't really believe it. Does that make any kind of sense? I was furious with this 'boy' or ghost or whatever it was, but if you'd asked me, even in that moment, if I believed in ghosts, I would have said no. Even now..." She threw her hands up and let them slap back down on the couch cushions. "Anyway, I was mad. So without even thinking much about it, I headed right for that tunnel. It isn't really adult-sized, of course, so I had to squeeze. I kind of slithered in until I was in the middle, and I started to do my thing again, you know, 'Boy, you get out of this tunnel and leave my little girl alone!' And I think I got about three words out, and I couldn't talk anymore. I don't...I'm not sure I know how to describe this. Do you know the feeling when you jump into really cold water? The way you suddenly don't have any breath? That's what it was like. I was all crunched in there in the middle of a child's tunnel, and I couldn't

speaking, I could barely breathe. I couldn't go any further, couldn't go backwards. I was just held there. And then...then I felt such...*hatred*. I never felt anything like it."

I interrupted here. "Are you saying *you* felt hatred? Or was it more that you sensed someone else's hatred?"

"Someone else's, I think. I don't know. It was hard to separate them, I think. I'm sorry, I'm not being clear, but it's confusing..."

"You're doing *great*. I feel like I'm getting a very clear account. Just keep talking."

She nodded and frowned in concentration. "I think it was directed at me—I was feeling how much someone hated me. Have you ever faced a really irate person? Where you could feel the rage just *rolling* off of them? That's what it was like, I think. And I remember seeing sort of...pictures in my mind."

"Pictures? What kind of pictures?"

"Oh, I don't know. A house, the inside of a house. Just...filth. A linoleum floor all crusted with old food and cockroaches and who knows what else. A man, I think. An enormous man standing over me. Oh, I don't know. This was a long time ago, and it happened so fast, I'm not even sure anymore what really happened and what I imagined later. But I remember seeing pictures...and feeling that I didn't make them up in my own head, you know?" She made an impatient gesture. "No, you probably don't know. No one does. Except crazy people."

"Beverly. Have you ever been tested for psychic ability?"

She gave me an incredulous look. "Are you kidding?"

I let it go for the moment, smiled at her to continue. "So what happened?"

“I heard Charlie screaming. It snapped me out of it. I guess I was making noises in there, and it scared her. I crawled out, and told her he wouldn’t be back to bother her anymore, but I was pale and shaking and sweating, and I don’t think she believed me. Also the fact that I wouldn’t let her go back in that tunnel for two years probably clued her in.” She took another monster drag, then crushed the butt into the ashtray. I followed her gaze out the window and toward the black shape of the playset. “I didn’t even bother telling my husband about that. And I told her not to tell him, either. He’d think I was putting her up to it.”

“You said things got worse. What happened?”

“Not at first. First things stayed the same, maybe even got better. There was a long time where it would just be little things.”

“How long did this...lull last?”

She began to raise her hand to her mouth, then realized she’d finished her cigarette. She jammed her hands beneath her thighs, shivered a little. “I wouldn’t call it a ‘lull,’ exactly. It was still scary, but nothing I couldn’t deal with. When I was alone with Charlie, when Michael would be gone at a conference or something, that’s when it would start to happen again. Sometimes I would hear someone walking around in her room—heavy footsteps, not anything a child could make. Of course, I ran right up every time and there was never anyone up there. She was always fast asleep. The only thing wrong was the temperature in her room...”

“Cold?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes unbearably hot. Whatever it was, it never had any relationship to the actual temperature outside or in the rest of the house. And I started having these...never mind.”

“What? Having these what?”

She made a dismissive gesture. “Nothing. It’s stupid, and I don’t want to sidetrack you...”

I shrugged and clicked off the recorder. “Off the record, then. Go ahead, sidetrack me.”

She smiled a little. “All right. I started having...dreams. Like a recurring dream, except it wasn’t really, because the dreams were always different, but there was a recurring...character, I guess. An old woman.”

“A woman. What did she do? Did she frighten you?”

“That’s the thing. She *comforted* me. I was always happy to see her. I don’t remember ever hearing her speak, but her...presence was always reassuring.” She gave me a look of wan hope that was almost comic. “Stupid, right? Just dreams.”

I shook my head. “I can’t tell you what they have to do with anything, but some people believe that we’re at our most psychically receptive when we’re in dream-states. And then other people say no, we’re just dreaming when we’re in dream-states. Who knows? Even if it isn’t psychic, it might be significant. I think it was Jung who said that every person we encounter in a dream represents ourselves. So, maybe you have a wise old woman inside you who was trying to tell you that you were handling everything just right.”

She looked up, smiling and bobbing her head back and forth as she weighed the idea.

“Did you ever get a sense of a female presence in the house?”

She shook her head emphatically. “Definitely not. Just the male. He...” Her eyes widened. “Something else I forgot to tell you—sometimes I could smell him.”

I sat forward, clicking on the recorder again. “Smell him? Really? What did he smell like?”

This time she answered without hesitation. “Cats. He smelled like cats. Oh, like a person, too. I could smell human sweat, and soap or shampoo. But primarily he smelled like cats.”

“Did you own any cats at the time?”

“Absolutely not. I loathe them, and anyway, I’m allergic. I’ve always hated the smell, and I’d know it anywhere, and that’s what I’d smell in her room after I heard the footsteps. It would last for a few minutes, then completely disappear.”

“Did you ever experience any allergic reactions to the smell?”

She sat up straighter, a surprised expression on her face. “No, I didn’t. Never. How strange. I never thought of that. What does that...mean to you?”

I shrugged. “It suggests to me that what you were smelling wasn’t ‘real’ in the ordinary sense of the word. There was no dander, no actual particulate matter in the air causing the smell, or else you would have had a reaction. That could either mean an hallucination of some sort or a psychic sensory impression.”

“Or a ghost, right? Isn’t that what we’re talking about? Why can’t you just say a ghost?” Her face was partly in shadow now, but I could see that her eyes were wide and

intense and I could read the tension in her body and hear the shrillness creeping into her voice.

I kept my own voice quiet and calm. “I don’t know, Beverly. It’s really difficult to tell until I know more. Then I’ll do some tests, and...”

“No! You tell me now. Do you think I’m crazy, is that what you’re trying to say? I knew it. Do you know what it took for me to agree to do this, to see a...a...ghost hunter? And now you’re going to sit there and tell me I’m having ‘hallucinations?’ Just like my *husband*? I should have known!”

“Beverly!” I put a placating hand out to her, but she’d already turned away from me, collapsing onto the opposite arm of the couch. Her sobs were deep and agonized, ten years of fear and loneliness pouring out at once. I looked around me, wondering why her husband wasn’t even poking his head around the corner to see what was going on.

“Beverly, look, I’m...” There was no way she was going to hear me over her sobbing, so I crossed around and knelt down in front of her. “Look, Beverly, I’m sorry I used that word. For what it’s worth, I don’t believe for a moment that you imagined any of this, all right?” At this, she raised her head and looked at me through tear-matted hair, sobs still convulsing her body. “That’s right,” I continued. “I didn’t mean that this was all in your head. As I said, this almost certainly *isn’t* imagination—I just want to avoid rushing to conclusions about exactly what it *is*. All I meant was that it might not be an actual entity that you’ve been dealing with. Despite what you see in movies, more often than not in a situation like this, the trouble is coming from some place the family never suspects.”

“Where?” She was sitting up now, reaching for one of her cigarettes with a shaky hand.

“Have you ever heard of something called psychokinetic energy?” She shook her head. “At its most basic level, PK, as it’s called for short, is the power to move objects using only the mind. But we also now understand that there’s much more the mind can do. It can create sensory impressions, apparitions, sounds, you name it. Still, the most common manifestation in a disturbed home is the so-called ‘poltergeist’ phenomenon, in which objects are misplaced, moved, sometimes even thrown at people. Now, you had this picture broken: tell me, where there any other instances of things being moved or misplaced? Like furniture being shifted in the night? Keys disappearing? Anything like that?”

“Yes, yes. All the time. Until recently, that’s all that happened, really. For years. You could never just lay something down on a table in the evening, because in the morning it would be in the attic or behind the toaster. Once I woke up and found this couch turned upside down in the middle of the room. Can you believe that? This heavy couch.” She became a little breathless at the memory. “But I don’t understand—are you saying that *I* am making this happen somehow? With my mind?”

“Actually, I was thinking of your daughter.”

She blinked at me a few times. “My...daughter?”

“Yes. Most often, psychokinetic activity is connected to a child. Usually, it’s a child going through puberty—something about the intense hormonal activity seems to generate a lot of PK—so five is pretty young, although it’s not unheard of. Fifteen is a much more typical age. You did say that things have gotten worse lately, and I wonder if there’s a connection between what she might be going through physically now, and the new developments in the house. I’d like to meet her, if I could...”

She held up a hand and shook her head as if to clear it. “No, no. This doesn’t make sense. She’s not here. She went away. To a boarding school, in Philadelphia. She’s been there for three weeks. When I said things got worse, I meant they got worse after she *left*. All of the recent things happened while she was away.”

I stared at her dumbly for a second, then rocked back on my heels and groped for the first thing I could sit down on—a small, embroidered hassock. “Oh.” We sat in silence. “Damn. I guess it’s back to the drawing board.

“Beverly,” I said, “I really am sorry. I’ve committed a cardinal sin here: coming up with a theory, and then trying to make all the facts fit into it.”

“It’s all right,” she said quietly. “We all do that. I’m sorry for...getting so upset.”

“Oh, no, not at all. You’re doing great. Ten years—I can’t even imagine.” We sat together in silence again, her smoking pensively on the couch, me folded together like an accordion on the little hassock. It was a more relaxed silence this time, now that some of the tension had been vented. Finally, she stubbed out the cigarette and looked at me. For maybe the first time since I’d met her, she broke into a genuine smile. “Mr. Berenger! What are you sitting on?”

I stood up, a little creakily. “Maybe I’ll just listen to the rest of the story standing up.”

“Okay. It’ll be quick. There isn’t much more to tell. We went for...oh, six years or so with just little things here and there. Just the mischievous things. Until three weeks ago. We had just gotten back from Philly, and I went to straighten up Charlie’s room a little. I turned on the light switch and nothing happened. So I turned on the hall light and

got out a chair to change the bulb, but when I got up there I could see the entire fixture had been almost torn out of the ceiling. It was just hanging by a single wire. You know, if I had reached my hand up there without really looking, I could have been electrocuted. So I started to step off the chair, and I saw him.”

“You *saw* him?”

“In the mirror. He was in the doorway. For just a second, I thought it was Michael, and I started to say something about the light, and then...then I knew it wasn't Michael.”

“What did he look like?”

“He was just a shape—just a silhouette in the doorway, so...I don't know. He was big. Muscular, I think. And he had long hair. Kind of bushy. I couldn't tell anything else. I...fell off the chair, hit my head on the dresser. I don't know if it was that or the shock, but I could feel myself about to pass out, and I was trying as hard as I could not to—I didn't want to be helpless. So I was dazed, sitting on the floor, trying to get my senses back, and I felt him lean down next to me. You know how you can tell someone is near you, even if you can't see them or hear them?”

I nodded. “You can sense someone's energy field—at least that's what some people believe. Maybe you're just feeling their warmth.”

“*This* wasn't warm. It wasn't warm at all. It was energy I was feeling, but it was...putrid energy, whatever it was. It was like, oh Christ, I don't know...”

“Beverly.” I squatted down next to the arm of the couch. “I thought we were past that. Whatever it was, you can say it.”

She nodded. “It was like I could feel how he felt about me. And I was nothing. Like an animal. No, worse than that. Like a...*specimen*. Even worse than that, I think—a *hateful* specimen. That’s the best I can describe it. It was the same...being I met in the tunnel, I know that definitely. But he, or it, or whatever, was angrier now.”

“What did you do?”

“I screamed. I screamed for Michael. And he came up, and whatever it was just vanished. And I stood up and looked at him. Neither of us said a word, and I finally just walked past him and went downstairs.”

I didn’t comment on that. We both thought for a moment, then I asked “Why do you think it was angrier now?”

“I could feel it.”

“No, but what was the reason?”

“Because she was gone, of course. He wanted Charlie to stay. But that wasn’t even the worst part. He does things...oh, every night now.”

“What sort of things?”

“Sometimes, if I have to get up in the night to use the bathroom, I’ll hear him...breathing in there. I can hear my own breathing, and then on top of it there’s this loud, obscene-phone-call kind of breathing. But when I stop to listen, he’ll stop, too. Once he did it to me in the hallway, too. Basically, any place it’s dark.” I started to interrupt, but she held up a hand. “Please. Let me tell you this while I still can.” She took several deep breaths, then gave me a determined stare. “Last night. Right after you called me. I went into the bathroom and turned on the light immediately, the way I do in every room every time I’m alone. Well, I did that, and in the mirror...I saw...right on the

counter, next to the sink...” She closed her eyes and shivered in disgust, making a quick spasmodic gesture with her hands. “It was a cat, or really just the...head of a cat. Sitting there on the counter. All bloody. Some of the...flesh had been ripped off it. You could see all its teeth.”

“Then what happened?”

“Nothing!” she snapped, then shook her head. “I’m sorry, it’s just...that’s what was so horrible. You know, sometimes when you turn on the light, there’s an image for a second, and you know it’s just an optical illusion because it’s immediately gone. But this just stayed like this for five seconds? Ten seconds? Forever, it felt like. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t move—just like that day in the tunnel. Finally, I don’t know what I did. I kind of fell, toward the doorway, I guess. And my breath came back, like after you get punched in the stomach, and I didn’t dare look back until I had crawled out into the hallway. And then there was nothing there. Just the soap dispenser. But there is no doubt, *none*, about what I saw.” We looked at each other for a long moment, me nodding pensively as a cover while I tried to put my thoughts in some kind of order. Finally, she gave a small, tense shrug. “So, what do we do now?”

“I can tell you where I am so far,” I answered. “The kind of disturbances you’re reporting are so varied: auditory, visual, olfactory, even tactile, sort of. I can’t think of a natural explanation that could possibly explain so much phenomenon. I can’t rule out the idea that what you’ve experienced could be some sort of apparition—a sort of psychic imprint of something that went on here on this site, some traumatic event that is replaying itself as a series of pictures and sounds and smells. Though again, I’ve never heard of an apparition manifesting itself in so many different ways. The good news, *if* it is an

imprint, is that it's really like having a movie running in your house. It can't hurt you, can't even be aware of your existence..."

Her response was quick and cold. "It's *aware* of my existence, Mr. Berenger! Haven't you been listening to anything I've said?"

"Beverly, listen. From what you've described, I believe you may have serious psychic abilities. Your sensitivity may be so strong, in fact, that when you perceive this apparition, you're actually receiving all kinds of extra information. The way that a clairvoyant can touch a subject's sweater, say, and suddenly get a picture of where she is, what she's feeling. So, if it is in fact the spirit of someone deceased, you may be simply sensing what was in this person's mind when they died." She shook her head doubtfully. "Hey, I'm not saying that's what's happening—it's just a possibility we have to keep in mind. There is of course another possibility: that what we have here is one of the rarest types of paranormal phenomena, which is some sort of sentient presence. An actual thinking, feeling being."

She stood up and turned on a floor lamp. "That's what it is. You're wasting your time with any other idea."

I decided to concede the point. "All right," I said softly. "Tell me about this house. Who lived here before you?"

"No one. We had it built."

"Hmm. Well, what about the property? What was here before?"

She looked at the ceiling and frowned. "I'm trying to remember. We used to drive by it when we lived in town. I think it was all farmland. Yes, it was part of a farm. Corn on the flat parts, and cows grazed on the hills up here."

I laughed a little. “Cows. You’re not making my job any easier. Do you know of a good local historian? Someone who would know about any old dwellings on the site?”

She moved to a wall dimmer and cranked it up as high as it would go. “I know some people in the history department. Michael is kind of an amateur historian. I could ask him.”

I squinted at her in the bright light. “Actually, I was thinking I’d ask him myself. I thought maybe I’d talk to him alone for a second.”

She stiffened. “Why? What would be the point of that?” she snapped. Then she softened her tone. “I mean, aren’t you going to start doing tests or...something?” She shifted uneasily, tried to find a relaxed-looking position, and it suddenly occurred to me that she had legitimate reasons to worry about the two of us talking behind her back.

“Yes, I’ll do tests after I talk with him. And Beverly, it’s standard procedure to talk to everyone in the house. I promise you I’m on your side here.” She stared at me for a moment, then eventually she let her shoulders sag. “All right. I think he’s upstairs in his office. I’ll call for him.”

Five minutes later I sat across the kitchen table from Michael Stenzler, sipping iced tea that his wife had wordlessly poured for us. He was a fairly handsome guy, or had been once. Curly salt-and-pepper hair, with sort of wiry, angular good looks. There was a deep tiredness around the eyes, crow’s feet and forehead furrows that seemed far too pronounced for a man his age. Something in the way he held himself suggested an athletic past, and the gut that hung off him now seemed truly out of place, like one of those sympathy bellies men sometimes wore. I didn’t say much at first, just sat there and took him in. His body language—twisted away from me in his chair—said he was

impatient, restless, didn't want to be talking to me. After what Beverly told me, what did I expect? And yet, for some reason my intuition was giving him an okay review. On the surface, he seemed like an edgy, competitive guy, and usually those kind of guys make me feel edgy and competitive, but at the moment I didn't. I felt relaxed, open, like I didn't mind letting my guard down around Michael Stenzler.

"What do you teach at Slippery Rock?" I asked.

"Communications," he muttered, still angled away from me.

"I remember that major," I said. "What is it, exactly? I never really knew."

He smiled faintly. "No one knows. It's pretty much anything you want it to be, I guess. Sort of a catch-all discipline."

I laughed. "That's what I thought."

He turned toward me, for the first time seeming to really look at me. "Look, Mr..."

"Berenger. Ike is preferable."

"Mr. Berenger, I'm really sorry my wife has dragged you all the way up here."

"I'm sorry she felt she had to drag me up here, too."

"That's not what I said!" he snapped, then stopped to breathe, running his fingers through his hair in impatience. "Look, while you were talking to her, I got on some websites. 'Parapsychology' websites."

Heavy irony on the word, but I just smiled blandly, pretending not to notice. I was fully inoculated against irony.

“I have to admit, I was pleased to see that some of you guys put an emphasis on natural, rational explanations for things. Isn’t that right? You try to eliminate all the rational possibilities first, right?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“Well, that’s what I want you to do here. Convince my wife there’s nothing happening here. I mean, *ghosts*...” He snorted. “It’s all pretty childish. I’m sorry, I don’t want to offend you, but come on.”

“According to her you’ve already tried to convince her. For ten years. What makes you think I’ll be any better at it?” He said nothing, just stared at me, breathing through his nose. I went on. “She thinks you’ve seen things and heard things, too, over the years. Things that you can’t explain. But, according to her, for some reason you won’t admit it.” There. I’d laid it on the table: one of the major conflicts in their marriage. He didn’t seem to like it one bit. He pushed himself away from the table and sat back in his chair, glaring at me. “So now you’re going to make assumptions about me?”

I shrugged, my expression mild. “I’m not making assumptions. I’m telling you what she thinks.”

“I know what she thinks.”

“For instance, she said that for the past few years you’ve both noticed things missing. Small objects moved during the night, furniture rearranged. Is that incorrect?”

He continued to glare. “No, it’s not incorrect. There have been some pranks like that. But it isn’t *ghosts*. It’s...well, it’s different things, I’m sure. Charlie, sometimes,

playing jokes on us, sometimes just my wife's absentmindedness. Menopause makes a woman forgetful, you know. And hysterical, sometimes."

"Menopause made her flip the couch over in the middle of the night?"

"That...must have been Charlie."

"Is that really what you believe is going on here?" I kept my gaze calm and steady.

He broke the contact first, as I knew he would, looking out toward the den.

"Yes," he said.

I thought about the most pigheaded homeowners I'd met over the years, the kind that might be capable of rationalizing away ten years of near-daily occurrences. It seemed to me that all of them possessed certain weapons that allowed them to hold awareness and logic at bay: denseness, pomposity, a smug satisfaction with one's vision of the world. Michael Stenzler had none of those things. He was pensive, he was shifty, and there was no doubt in my mind that he was scared. I watched his profile for a moment, watched his eyes widen slightly at some secret thought.

"Mr. Stenzler." He turned back to me. "I'm trying to figure out why I like you. It's just an instinctive thing, but I do like you." He frowned, and I went on before he could say anything. "It's because you remind of someone, I think. I've been trying to figure out who that might be, and I think I've finally got it. It's your wife, Mr. Stenzler, you remind me of Beverly." He squinted in confusion. "It's your expression. You both wear the same expression, you both look like you're carrying the same burden. And now that I mention it, you look like anyone I've ever met who was being haunted. In short, I think you want to talk to me about this. There's a stigma, sure, a terrible stigma about it,

but no one knows that better than me, and you won't find anyone more sympathetic. Mr. Stenzler, this is what I *do*." He looked away, and I could see the muscles in his forearms flexing as he prepared to get up from the table. Rapidly, I changed directions. "What's it like having your daughter gone?"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, she told you that one, too, did she? 'The ghost is getting stronger since she left...'"

"That's not what I mean. I just meant...empty nest syndrome. What's it like? Do you miss her?" He eyed me suspiciously. "I've sort of...inherited a stepdaughter," I explained. "She's only four, but I'm already imagining what it's going to be like helping her pack for college. It almost makes me cry sometimes." I laughed, and he surprised me by joining in, a little grudgingly.

"I know," he said, easing back into his chair. "I wasn't ready yet. I never liked this boarding school idea. Fifteen is too young. And it's a good school district here. But they don't have a gifted program, and she's better off in one. She's a really promising painter, and Philly has a really great arts school, so..." For the first time, Michael started to relax, the pride in his daughter pushing everything else onto the back burner for a moment. "But, yes, God yes, I miss her. Every night I keep starting up there to kiss her good night, and when I remember she's not here..." I could hear emotion creeping into his voice. "It's just a...hollow feeling, you know?"

I was about to agree. I was opening my mouth to tell him that was exactly what I pictured when I thought about a grown-up Colette, when three things happened nearly simultaneously. First, I heard a sound above me, a small sound, a grinding, scratching noise. Second, before I could even look up, something landed on the table next to my

arm. A chunk of something small and white. Ceiling plaster. Then, just as I was making this connection, I also became aware of something strange about the light in the kitchen. It was moving, shadows flitting back and forth across Michael's upturned face. I followed his gaze upward to the lighting fixture, which rocked as if in a breeze. My reaction was practiced, almost unconscious. From my pocket I whipped out a small digital camera and clicked off several shots without bothering to aim. The arc of the swinging light shrank and then diminished to nothing as we watched. I snapped off a few around the rest of the kitchen, just to make sure, then looked back at the light. It was still. Just an ordinary-looking brass fixture, made to look like a small hurricane lamp, with an ornamental point at the bottom.

Michael stared at me. He was pale, a mix of emotions in his expression. Annoyance and fear were in there, I thought, but mostly, it seemed to me, there was guilt. He looked as if he'd been caught at something. I stood on my chair and examined the base of the fixture in the light. Just as Beverly had described the one in Charlie's room, there was space between this fixture and the ceiling, as if it had been working itself free. It was still on, though, and it still looked stable: all three wires were connected. I looked down at Michael, who was now staring at the kitchen floor. "Your wife said this same thing happened in other places in the house."

He waved at me dismissively without looking up. "It's...just the house settling. Or heavy trucks up on the road above us. Causing...vibrations." This time the explanations sounded so tired, so half-hearted that I didn't bother refuting them, even though I knew I hadn't *felt* any vibrations. I wished I'd been looking at my iced tea—I could have seen the ripples in it if there were any to be seen. I sat down and held the

camera up, pressing the buttons that made the display come to life. The order went backward from the most recent picture to the first one, and in the last two I saw nothing of interest—just glare from the light—though I could tell from the blur that the fixture was swinging. But in the first shot I'd taken, there was a shape in the far right corner. It was partly cut off by the edge of the frame, but I could still see an unmistakable form there, one I'd come across many times over the years. A funnel cloud of light, it's narrow base twisting toward the center of the frame. I turned the camera to Michael and pointed to the shape.

Michael swallowed. "What is it?"

"It's called a 'vortex.' A lot of parapsychologists believe it's the visible manifestation of psychic energy. And they also believe it's a particularly strong sign. Usually, all you get are little balls of light called 'orbs.'"

He handed the camera back to me, his face tight. "There are a hundred reasons something like that could appear in a picture. Dust on the lens..."

I nodded agreeably. "Yes, there probably are, but we don't know what they are. The dust argument has been pretty successfully refuted, but it could be that there are reasons we just haven't thought of yet. Honestly, I really don't know what I think about this kind of photography. We well may find out one day that it's all complete bullshit. Actually seeing lamps swinging by themselves, on the other hand, seeing a lamp fixture working its way out of the plaster... Well, that's a different story." We sat and looked at each other, and I watched him wrestle with something. It was short-lived. He stood up, dragging his chair noisily away from the table.

“I told you what I think it was. I really can’t think of anything else I have to say to you, Mr. Berenger. Now, I can’t stop you from talking to my wife, but...”

As he spoke, something occurred to me. What had we been talking about when the lamp started swinging? “Michael,” I said, thinking the use of his first name might get his attention, “tell me more about your daughter. What were you saying? About how much you missed her, that ‘hollow feeling?’”

He looked baffled and a little pissed-off. “Look, I don’t know what you’re...”

To cut him off, I pulled my wallet from my pocket, flipped to the picture I keep right below my driver’s license. Colette last Halloween, dressed as a princess, preening for the camera, twisting her body into some sort of dramatic curtsy. Something she’d seen on TV, probably. The way princesses are supposed to act. “That’s her. That’s my new daughter. Colette.” I slipped the photo out of the sleeve and handed it to him. Despite himself, he reached out and took it, held it under the light. He smiled a little, maybe just out of politeness, but I thought I saw a little of the usual reaction. I fancied myself a more objective Dad than most—she wasn’t my own biologically, and I hadn’t known her from infancy—but I thought she was about the most beautiful child I’d ever seen.

“She’s adorable,” Michael said, and placed the photo on the table in front of me. His tone was soft, and his features were relaxed again: any talk about kids and fatherhood were music to the savage beast, it seemed. Another reason I instinctively liked this guy, maybe.

“I think she looks a little like your daughter,” I said. “At least the complexion, and the hair. Colette’s hair is actually lighter now, this was last Fall.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Michael was starting to lean over and take another look when the sound froze us both. A sizzling sound, so loud it was like the snarl of some great electronic animal, then a *POP* and a flash of sparks from above us. We leapt back and as the room blinked into blackness there came a crash of splintering wood. Then silence, just the sound of Michael’s breathing from wherever he was crouched on the other side of the kitchen.

“Michael,” I called out. “Turn a light on. Something on a different breaker.”

I could hear him fumbling around and then he switched on the light over the stove. It was an eerie, shadowy kind of illumination, like the auxiliary lighting that comes on in a power failure. But it was enough. I walked over to the table. “Jesus Christ,” I whispered, running my fingers over the brass fixture, now planted in the center of the table. I gave it a little shake, but it didn’t budge. It had crashed down with such force that its point was imbedded in the wood. Sunk in to the hilt. I looked up at Michael, who seemed even more stunned than me. I tried to guess how much the fixture weighed. Two pounds? Three? It made me think of photos I’d seen of hurricanes—the ‘after’ photos, where you see things like a piece of straw that’s been driven into a telephone pole. Then I noticed something else, and the air became still and heavy. Peripherally, I was aware of Beverly appearing, running into Michael’s embrace, both of them sagging against the stove, but suddenly I couldn’t care less about their domestic drama. Because my eyes were fixed on the place where the metal bit into the wood; a place where a bit of white photographic paper poked out. The place where the sharp point of the light fixture had slammed right through the picture of Colette.

CHAPTER FOUR

When I got home at one a.m., I could see the bedroom light on, and I had mixed feelings about that. On one hand, I was grateful for the company. After an investigation, the last thing I want to face is another dark and empty room. On the other hand, I knew Marge was going to want to talk about the case—she was still excited about what I do, God bless her—and I thought I needed some more time to process what had just happened.

I kept seeing that photo, or what was left of it. What must have been one of her knees was visible at one bottom corner, a raised hand here, a bit of purple dress there. But the center of the picture was just a ragged hole. Colette had been obliterated. What did that mean? Nothing. There was nothing that it could mean. Still, the question sat like a tiny, icy ball in my heart.

Maybe even stranger than what had happened was what *hadn't* happened. After the incident in the kitchen, I'd made my tour of the house, using every trick in my little black bag—the EMF detector, a digital voice recorder, a thermal scanner, my camera—and found absolutely nothing. Well, not quite nothing: as I stalked around the garage,

clicking photos with one hand and recording with the other, the voice recorder picked up something. Just a squawk—one barking syllable, which cut off abruptly into static and silence. I'd been listening to the tape over and over in the car on the way back to the city, trying to figure out if it was a word, or even if it was definitely a voice. Other than that, according to every instrument, the Stenzler house was the emptiest, deadest, most psychically threadbare dwelling I'd ever been in. After the flurry of activity around the kitchen table, the rest of the house seemed desolate. A ghost town, it was so empty of ghosts.

The whole drive, I couldn't keep the dreadful emptiness of those rooms out of my mind. The deathly silence on the headphones, the stillness of the equipment monitors. And alternating with those images, flashing back and forth in my brain like one of those video billboards, was that photo with the subject torn from its center. A little tremor of rage welled up every time I thought about it, which I would immediately rationalize back down again. If some stranger in a bar had done that to Colette's picture, it wouldn't have seemed much different than an assault on *her*, and I probably would have ass-kicked him into the nearest emergency room without much thought about it. But did it make sense to feel anger toward whatever was in that house? Of course not, especially since it was probably nothing more than the manifestation of some kind of marital tension. Two people, probably both possessed of more psychic energy than either could realize, subconsciously projecting that energy all over the place. Standard poltergeist stuff, except this time it was being generated by the *adults* around the child. Bizarre, but probably not entirely unheard of. I'd have to do some research, see if I could find any parallel cases. And there was no question I'd have to talk to the daughter.

I started to get out of the car, then sat back down again and closed the door. Maybe it was theoretically possible that Michael or Beverly or both could have generated enough PK to create all of the movement of objects and the voices and the apparitions, but Jesus, what a variety of phenomena! And in test after test, pubescent children were shown to have the greatest psychokinetic powers—did it make sense that two middle-aged adults seemed to be getting more powerful over a period of ten years? Even more troubling was the fact that all of the phenomena seemed to be directed at Charlie, and with such hostility. I could easily accept a teenager subconsciously lashing out at her parents, but for it to happen the other way around was unthinkable to me. Especially since I'd seen and heard the way both parents spoke of Charlie, and I'd seen that den set up like a shrine to her. The young girl's joy in those pictures looked so real, so spontaneous. If there was even a fraction of the resentment toward her that it would take to make these things happen, wouldn't she have sensed it? Wouldn't I have sensed it? Aw, shit. I remembered how excited I'd felt about the challenge I might find in that house, but now I just felt out of my depth, not only as an investigator, but as a potential father and husband as well. Maybe there were undercurrents to family dynamics that I could never even guess at. I clicked "play" on the voice recorder, listened to that strange noise one more time. It was starting to sound like a laugh.

Before I went inside, I stopped in the back yard to spend some quality time with Porno. She gave me sleepy kisses and some long soulful looks, as if to ask "What did I do wrong? What did I do to deserve this?" I left feeling gnawed by guilt, on top of everything else. I was going to have to do something about this situation, have a long talk with Marge. But not tonight.

Marge was propped up in bed when I got in, doing some of her bizarre bedtime reading. It was another of her endearing quirks, the way she would read anything but fiction before bed. Literally, *anything*: textbooks, brochures, road atlases. This time it was a cookbook, called “Great Winter Soups.” She looked up and smiled when I came in, sticking a bookmark in.

“Don’t let me interrupt,” I said. “I’m sure you’re right in the middle of an exciting part.”

She laughed. “It was. ‘Roasted Chestnut Bisque.’” She put her arms out and I slipped into a bed-warm embrace. Her nightshirt was baggy, with big armholes, and I slipped my hands inside them and massaged her back.

“How was it?” she murmured into my ear. “Was it scary?”

“Not as scary as ‘Roasted Chestnut Bisque.’” She giggled. I pulled back and looked at her. “Seriously, I might need your help with this one.”

She cocked her head at me. “My help?”

“You do family counseling, right?”

“It’s *mostly* what I do these days. Why?”

I sat down next to her. “There’s a chance that this could be one seriously fucked-up family.” I settled in next to her and gave her an abridged account, of course leaving out anything about Colette. I could hear her breathing quicken several times, and when I described Beverly’s vision in the bathroom mirror, she gripped my arm so hard that it hurt. “Are you sure you wanted to hear all that?” I asked her finally.

She nodded, though her eyes were doe-wide. “Yes, I want to hear all of it, as long as I don’t have to sleep alone afterwards. But I still don’t understand what I can do to

help.” I told her my theory about the Stenzlers causing the manifestations themselves. She’d already heard me talk about PK, though her eyes kind of glassed over when I did—it’s not what most people want to hear, not anywhere near as exciting as disembodied spirits and demonic home invaders.

Her reaction was predictably unenthusiastic. “Do you really believe that?” she asked. “Is that really what you think is going on?”

“I know it’s not very glamorous, Marge, but yes, I think that that’s the explanation I have to rule out first.” I realized I’d fairly snapped it at her, and I gave her a shoulder an apologetic squeeze and tried to smile. “Long night.” I was defensive. Why? It *had* been a long night, but worse than the tiredness was this unaccountable nervousness I was feeling. Nothing I could put my finger on, just this buzzing of low-grade fear, coming from no place in particular. Bizarre. There I was in the safest harbor I knew, and I felt as though I was walking some strange, dimly lit urban street. Like I wanted to keep looking over my shoulder. She looked at me with concern, and I waved the concern away. “Have you checked Colette lately?”

She nodded and picked her book back up. “Just before you got here. She’s been whimpering a little, but she’s fine.”

“Whimpering?”

She stroked my face. “Hey, she’s fine. Just a bad dream.”

I stood up. “I think I’ll check her again anyway. I want to see her.”

She patted me on the shoulder. “Sure. I’ll just finish this.”

“Don’t ruin the ending for me,” I called out over my shoulder. Jezebel was huddled on the middle step, giving me a hyper-intense cat stare. I waved as I walked past

and gave her that tongue-clucking sound that cats like for some reason. Colette's covers were thrown in different directions, and she was sleeping in a ridiculous position, one arm forward and one leg back, like the FTD logo. She stirred, frowned in her sleep and shook her head a couple of times while I rearranged the sheet and blankets. I chanced waking her, resting my lips against her temple, inhaling her warm child smell. I stayed that way for a few minutes, unwilling to move. It's all right, Colette. I'm here with you. I'm here with you always.

A sound behind me then. Something soft: a gentle scraping or shuffling. A muscle in my neck pinged as I whipped around, trying to keep myself from falling on top of Colette. My heart slamming around inside my chest like a racquetball, I scanned the room frantically. Nothing, until my gaze settled on the form of Jezebel sitting on her haunches just outside the doorway. I laughed and slumped back against the bed, tried to get my heartbeat under control. "Oh, Jezzy, Jezzy. Your stepdad is a friggin' idiot. I hope you can live with that." Her tail twitched a couple of times. "Come here, you crazy cat." I stood and reached down toward her and put my tongue to the roof of my mouth to make the clucking sound again.

The cat's scream was so sudden and so vicious that it sent me reeling backward again, hitting my already ragged nerves like a bolt of electricity. I had one glimpse of Jezebel rearing back, fur standing straight out, and then she was a dark bullet streaking down the stairs. Marge came running out of the bedroom as I staggered to my feet.

"What?! What happened?!"

I clutched the doorframe for support. "I...don't know. Nothing happened. I went to pet her, and she...just freaked out. She ran. She just..." I was babbling, feeling

strangely guilty under her stare. I looked back at Colette, but she hadn't budged. Oh, to be able to sleep like a four year-old.

"Are you all right?" she asked, taking hold of one of my hands. "Jesus, you are white as a ghost."

I laughed weakly. "Yeah, just overtired. And you know, all the weirdness before." I was ashamed of what I looked like: some ghost hunter. And yet I was having an inexplicably hard time getting my composure back.

"What got into Jezebel? Did you step on her tail?"

"No, no. I was on the bed, and she was all the way out there. I just..." I recreated the movement I'd made, reaching out from the bed.

"I'd better check on her. Did you see where she went?"

"Down the stairs. Faster than I've ever seen a living creature move."

She started down the steps, then stopped and turned. "When did you start calling her 'princess?'"

Silence. The blood thrummed in my ears. "What?"

"Princess. I heard you calling her that over the monitor."

I shook my head, trying to slow everything: my thoughts, my breathing, the bass-drum thudding of my heart. "No, I didn't. I never said that. I didn't say anything."

Her eyes narrowed in irritation. "I heard you. You said it like three times."

"I never said that!" I snapped.

She stepped back, surprised. "Okay," she said slowly. "I guess it was just the monitor picking up another signal. It does that sometimes." She turned again to go

downstairs. “That’s a pretty weird coincidence, though,” she called back, “she was a princess for Halloween last year. Remember?”

Behind me, Colette began to cry quietly in her sleep.