



*The Novice  
Ghost Hunter*

*Martin J Best*

# **THE NOVICE GHOST HUNTER**

**By**

# **MARTIN J. BEST**

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## CHANCE ENCOUNTERS

Standing alone at the bar, Mal Hunter waited for his friends. It was early evening, and there were only a handful of patrons drinking. He was deliberately the first of the group to arrive; it allowed him to be in position at the bar to buy the first drink. He sighed quietly. If he was honest, it was a pretty transparent ploy to increase his popularity, and it didn't really work.

His four friends were in reality little more than acquaintances. He had vaguely known one of them, Tony Sanders, at the local grammar school. The others were Tony's friends.

The regular Saturday night meeting had started three weeks earlier, when Mal had bumped into former fellow pupil Tony in the town. He had recognised Tony immediately, but had been surprised when Tony had recognised him. Mal had been even more surprised when Tony had invited him for a drink with his friends. Mal had made sure that he arrived early, and had been waiting for over half an hour when Tony and his mate Mike arrived. As Tony introduced him to Mike, Mal was aware of guarded looks and suppressed smiles between them. The reason soon became clear. Tony proceeded to regale Mike with tales of

Mal's unhappy schooldays, which they both found hilarious. This continued until the other two members of the group arrived. Mal, already reeling from the unexpected lampooning of his past, was stunned to discover that they were female. He felt shy and awkward in most social situations, never quite sure what to say, or how to act and react. But this reached another level when the opposite sex was involved. Not that this stopped him from being attracted to girls, not at all. In fact, he would've given almost anything to be in a relationship. One of the girls, Kirsty, was plump, and wore her dark hair in a short, fashionable bob. Anna, the other, was the complete opposite. She was tall, blonde, and had a prevailing facial expression that made her look like she was chewing a lemon. Mal was instantly smitten. He very quickly discovered that her personality matched her expression. She completely dominated Kirsty.

She was bossy, arrogant, opinionated, and a snob: but Mal thought she was fantastic. She spoke to him only once, when Tony introduced them.

"Mal?" she asked curiously. "Is that short for Malcolm?"

"No," he had replied nervously, "Malachi."

"Oh." She seemed suddenly wary. "Are you Jewish?"

"No," he had answered hesitantly, afraid of disappointing her, "my mum just liked the name."

And that had been that. However, he decided immediately to become a regular member of the Saturday night club regardless of the personal cost.

Mal looked back at himself from the mirror on the far side of the bar, wondering what he could do to improve his self-esteem. He hadn't been a good mixer at school. His obsessive interests, particularly with the occult and supernatural, had meant that his fellow pupils shunned him, and some of his less discrete teachers routinely referred to him as weird. He hadn't changed much after he had left school and started work. His favourite topic was still the supernatural. Work was another issue. He had a well-paid job, working for his father's garden services business, but his new friends didn't do manual work. Without exception they had gone on from school to complete university courses, and although they weren't necessarily now employed in their dream occupations, they were all in white collar jobs.

Tony and Mike worked in sales at Tony's father's Mercedes dealership; Kirsty was a trainee teacher at the same independent school that she and Anna had attended; and Anna managed her father's up market letting agency.

Mal wondered, not for the first time, why he sought out the company of these people who didn't hide the fact that they had little regard for him. He sighed again. He knew very well why he tolerated the jibes and mockery from Tony and his sidekick Mike, and why he

endured being practically ignored by the girls. He was simply grateful to be part of any group that contained Anna. He knew that she wasn't a nice person, but it didn't seem to matter. He also knew that she was completely unobtainable. She was outside of his usual social orbit, and was doubtless destined for better things than becoming involved with a lowly gardener.

As if conjured by his thoughts, Anna Spalding walked into the bar. Mal saw her in the mirror, and caught his breath. She looked stunning in a short summer dress, her blonde hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. Immediately Mal panicked. What was she doing here so early? Why was she on her own? The girls usually arrived together, after the others. She spotted Mal at the bar, and headed directly for him.

"I thought you'd be here," she said by way of greeting, "Tony told me that you're always the first to arrive."

"H hello Anna," Mal stammered. "H how are you?"

"I'm fine thanks," she answered briskly. "Now, I wanted to ask you something."

Mal's heart was hammering. Suddenly he was sweating. What could she want? She couldn't be about to ask him out, could she? "OK."

She nodded. "Tony told me that when you were at school you made an idiot of yourself, his words, talking about ghosts and suchlike. He said it's the only subject you know anything about. Is that true?"

"Well, it's not the only subject," replied Mal defensively. He felt disappointed and slightly insulted. Still, if she was interested in ghosts there was hope.

"Well, I'm sure it isn't," she said as though it were irrelevant. "Do you really

know anything about ghosts and hauntings?”

“Oh yes!” he replied, rather too enthusiastically. “I’ve been learning all about ghosts and hauntings since I was a kid. Proper serious stuff. I watch all the decent programmes on the television. I’ve even got some of the gear: digital voice recorder; magnetic field meter; night vision camera...” Mal tailed off, aware that Anna was just staring at him.

After what seemed like an eternity, she seemed to come to a decision. “Buy me a drink, and we’ll go and sit over there.” She pointed to an empty table in the far corner. “Before the others arrive I want to discuss something with you.”

Mal did as he was instructed. When they were seated, Anna took a large swallow of her white wine.

“What I’m going to tell you isn’t to go any further. I’m only telling you because I can’t think of anyone else who might be able to help; I particularly don’t want the rest of the crowd to know that you’re helping me. No offence.” The last words lacked any sincerity.

Mal nodded.

“You probably know that my father owns a letting agency.” The pride was obvious in her voice. “Well, he recently acquired a new property, a three bedroom semi-detached house, in a nice area. It was in an awful state though, and needed everything doing. It took weeks for the work to be completed, but now it has: a new roof; new kitchen and bathroom; central heating replaced; and a complete rewire. Decorated to a high standard throughout.” She made it sound like a sales pitch.

“Disturbances like that to a property can trigger paranormal activity,” Mal interrupted.

“Yes, well, I wouldn’t know about that,” Anna replied impatiently. “What I do know, is that when the work was finished I moved a couple in there: decent people, with good references. We don’t get involved with the benefits brigade.” She looked at Mal as if expecting him to comment. He nodded. “Well, they’d only been in for ten days when they turned up at my office asking if there are any other vacant properties. Of course I want to know why.”

I'll bet you did, thought Mal.

"At first they wouldn't say, but eventually the woman tells me that the place is haunted.

The man just looked embarrassed. Of course, I thought that it was some sort of con. We didn't have anywhere else in their price range available, so I said that they would have to stay there." She paused, and took a large swig of her wine. "Two days later I came in to work to find that they'd put the keys through the letterbox and gone. Of course they lost their deposit."

"Did the woman say what had happened to make her believe that the house was haunted?"

"No." Anna looked a little sheepish for a moment. "Well, I didn't really give her a chance.

I thought it was some sort of trick, you see, so I just told her that it was a lot of nonsense."

God, Mal thought, how can someone who looks like you be so obnoxious? And why do I still fancy you? "So what makes you think that the house is haunted?"

Anna frowned at him. "If you'll let me finish, I'll tell you." She drank the remainder of her wine. "Same again please." She held out her empty glass.

Without protest, Mal complied.

When he returned, Anna sipped her wine and continued her story, "I had no difficulty letting the house again, this time to a couple with a young child. We don't normally allow children under sixteen, or pets, but the wife is related to our local councillor who's a friend of my father, so that was different."

To Mal, it just proved the old adage: 'It's not what you know, it's who.'

"They had been in about a month, when the wife came to see me. She asked if any previous tenants had experienced problems in the house. Of course, I said that they hadn't, and asked what was bothering her. She told me that their three-year-old daughter claimed to have seen an old lady in the house, and several times they'd found her talking to something that they couldn't see. At first, they



just put it down to overactive imagination. Then one day, as she was bringing the little girl home from nursery, she thought that she glimpsed an old woman looking out of the front bedroom window. When she got inside, she looked all around the house but there was nobody there, so she assumed that it was a trick of the light.” Anna paused to drink more of her wine. “The night before she came to see me, she had woken up in the early hours and seen the ghost of an old lady, standing by the bedroom window looking out. By the time she woke her husband up, the old lady had vanished. To cut a long story short, she refused to spend another night in that house. Fortunately, I was able to organise another property for them quite quickly, but they still spent several nights in a hotel; at our expense. That was a week ago.” Anna sat back in the chair, nursing her glass of wine. She crossed her legs, revealing a length of smooth thigh.

Mal found it difficult to concentrate on what she said next.

“My father got on my case about having the house standing empty, so I had to explain what had happened.” She looked introspective. “Actually, he quite surprised me. I expected him to say that it was a load of nonsense, but he didn’t really comment. He just told me to get it sorted out, and keep him informed. I remembered what Tony had told me about you, and here we are. So can you help or not?”

Mal dragged his gaze from her legs, and took a gulp of his beer. He mustered his thoughts.

“If you want me to,” he said cautiously, “I can investigate the house and let you know what I find. If that’s what you want.”

Anna smiled. “I’d really appreciate it if you’d do that for me,” she said softly, leaning toward him across the table. Then she was back to business. “Come to my office next Saturday morning and I’ll let you have the keys. You’ll have all weekend if you need it, but I must have the keys back by Monday morning without fail.” There was movement at the door, and she looked over. “Tony and Mike are here. Promise me that you won’t say anything.”

“I promise.”

The evening passed in the usual manner. Tony and Mike drank too much and performed their comedy double act, with Mal often cast as their stooge. Kirsty and Anna, when not

engrossed in their smart phones, spoke mostly to each other. After a particularly intense series of text messages, Anna announced that they were going to meet some other friends, and she and Kirsty left. Shortly afterwards, Mal made his excuses and departed, eliciting calls of 'lightweight' and other less charitable remarks from Tony and Mike.

Walking back to his parent's home, Mal was able to give some serious thought to what he had volunteered to do. He hadn't lied to Anna, he really was extremely knowledgeable about the supernatural, and he did own the basic equipment favoured by professional ghost hunters.

The sticking point was that he'd never personally been involved in an investigation. He'd frequently visited all the local paranormal hotspots that were accessible to the public: but never after dark. His parents, having given up any hope of dissuading him from his obsession, had suggested that he join one of the organised groups that operated in the county. It was a tempting idea, he would love to spend time with likeminded people: but he didn't feel confident enough to actually do it. So he had continued accumulating other people's experiences, and keeping up with the latest theories and technical developments. Perhaps it was a good thing that he had committed himself to this investigation. He had left himself no choice but to confront his self-doubt and lack of self-confidence; Anna was relying on him.

That was another issue. There was no doubt that Anna was using him for her own selfish purpose, and he knew that his unreciprocated feelings for her were clouding his judgement.

Even if he was successful, it was unlikely that she would see him as a potential suitor. If he could muster the courage, he could tell her how he felt, but that would almost certainly invite rejection. In all honesty, he would rather have the possibility of a relationship, even if it was a fantasy, than know for certain that there was no hope.

Mal's reverie was interrupted; his feet had brought him home on autopilot. He looked up at the semi-detached house that he shared with his parents. The front room light shone dimly through the curtains, his parents were still up. More likely, he corrected himself, his father was still up, watching the football. His mother, if she wasn't already asleep, would be in bed, immersed in the latest Danielle Steele on her electronic reader. He looked at his phone, it was only

twenty minutes past eleven. Mal couldn't bring himself to go in just yet. He could walk further and think some more. Then it occurred to him: he could make practical use of the time. There was a church, complete with graveyard, not twenty minutes' walk away. He wasn't aware of any claims of paranormal activity associated with the place, but it would be a good test of his ability to function in the dark. He ought to have a torch, though, no sense in breaking his neck on some unseen, but completely natural, obstacle.

He quietly walked to the back door and let himself in; he could hear the television playing beyond the closed front room door. Mal felt a mild thrill as he tiptoed past and up the stairs to his bedroom. There was no light showing beneath the door to his parent's room, so he assumed that his mother was asleep. Quietly he opened his bedroom door and moved inside.

He didn't bother with the light. Everything in his room was neatly arranged, and he knew exactly where to find his torch. He retrieved it, and within two minutes was outside the house and on his way with no-one any the wiser.

Mal walked briskly for about fifteen minutes, weaving his way to the edge of the estate, until he reached the turning for the church. The old vicarage, now a private residence, stood sentinel on one side of the junction. This final stage of the journey involved leaving the public road and walking down a steep, narrow drive bordered by high-banked hedges. There was no street lighting. The sky was clear, with a sliver of moon glowing high up, which did little to relieve the darkness. Mal switched on his torch. The powerful LEDs brilliantly illuminated a broad patch of road ahead. Unfortunately, Mal quickly realised, it meant that, by contrast, everything beyond the circle of light appeared as a featureless, solid black mass.

He switched the torch off again, preferring the low, but consistent, natural light. After walking for a few more minutes the drive levelled out, and shortly afterwards he arrived at

the gravel covered church car park. Ahead, the church itself reached starkly into the air. It was a comparatively small building, a throwback to when this area had been a separate village in its own right. Mal crunched his way self-consciously across the gravel to the lich gate. Lich came from the old English, meaning corpse. It was literally where the dead bodies entered the churchyard. He was feeling distinctly nervous. Was he really going to wander around this graveyard

on his own in the dark? He had to! If he was ever going to succeed as a ghost hunter, he had to prove that he was capable of operating under the conditions that went with the job.

Mal pulled himself together, opened the gate and entered the churchyard. He had to turn the torch on now, as there was a real chance of missing his footing on the rough stony path.

He stopped, and shone the torch around to gain his bearings. The churchyard looked unsettlingly larger than he remembered it being in daylight. Gravestones spread out in rows on either side of the path, terminating at the low wall that bordered the area from the farmland meadow beyond. There were a couple of large monuments that he presumed had been erected to commemorate members of wealthier families. He decided to head for the larger one of these. It stood next to an ancient looking Yew tree, and had a winged stone angel in an aspect of prayer on top. As he left the path and set off across the unmown grass, Mal was painfully aware that he was almost certainly walking over graves, which only fuelled a growing sense of unease. He kept the torch beam playing over the area ahead of him, frequently flicking it randomly off to the sides in case something should be revealed. He knew it must be in his mind, but he felt as though he was being watched. Arriving at the monument he quickly span around, shining the torch back the way that he had come. There was nothing unusual to be seen. Mal stood quietly for a few moments, becoming aware that his pulse was racing and that he was sweating profusely. He couldn't deny that he felt scared, but at the same time, strangely exhilarated. He tried to think about what to do next. A loud unexpected sound made him start. It took a long moment before he identified it as his mobile phone, informing him that it had received a text message. A rookie mistake: he had forgotten to change the setting to silent. Sighing with relief, he pulled the phone from the inside pocket of his jacket and read the message. It was from Tony.

“Did I wake you up lightweight? Lol.”

Mal deleted the message, set the phone to silent, and blocked Tony's number for good measure. Whatever happened now, he had decided in that instant that he was finished with the Saturday night club. Emboldened by his uncharacteristic decisiveness, Mal knew what he must do now. He must call out and see if anything answered.

Mal thought for a moment, deciding what he should say. “Is there anybody here with me?”

he tried to say, but his voice was little more than a squeak. Oh Hell, he thought, that was pathetic. I sound like a eunuch with laryngitis. He swallowed and tried again. “Is there anybody here with me?” That was better. He listened intently, his concentration outweighing his anxiety. He heard no reply. He should’ve brought the digital voice recorder. He tried a different strategy. “If you can hear my voice,” he called out more confidently, “please give me a sign.” There followed a long silence. Just as Mal was about to speak again, he heard a soft thump from near the outer wall. Immediately his stomach lurched, and the hair stood up on his arms and the back of his neck. His mother’s voice was suddenly loud in his mind, ‘Be careful what you wish for, you might get it!’ Fighting to regain his composure, he pointed the torch in the direction that he thought the sound had come from. At first, he could see nothing.

Then he discerned a small round shape on the grass. His mind raced. What could it be? Some sort of orb? A shadow figure? A snorting sound came from the mystery object. Then it put out appendages and began to walk along, snuffling and grunting as it went. It was a hedgehog.

Mal realised that he had been holding his breath. He released it noisily. He wasn’t sure if

he was relieved or disappointed, but at least he hadn’t screamed, or run away. A hedgehog climbing over a wall wasn’t exactly what he had been expecting, but it had dispelled much of the tension that he had felt. He had proved to himself that he could deal with unexpected situations. Yes, he was scared, but he had overcome it. He looked at his watch: it was half past midnight, time to head home. Following the torch beam, Mal crossed the graveyard and exited through the lich gate, then crunched across the car park and made his way up the dark lane. At the top, he stood in the glow of the streetlights and smiled to himself: he had done it!

He had faced his fear and beaten it. He was ready to take on Anna’s haunted house.

## **THE INVESTIGATION**

As the week went on, his confidence gradually, but steadily, dissipated. Even the

lure of Anna was beginning to lose its appeal. By Friday evening, he was convinced that he was making a terrible mistake. As he would be staying out overnight, Mal had reluctantly explained to his mother what he was doing. She had philosophically accepted his story, and then tactfully enquired into his relationship with Anna. He unburdened himself without going into too much detail, while his mother nodded knowingly.

“If I were you,” she said, “I wouldn’t read too much into it. This Anna has fluttered her eyelashes and got you to look around her house, but once you’ve done it, I think that’ll be the end of it. You’ve said that you’ll do it, so you must. But do it for yourself.” She pointed sternly at him. “Make sure that it benefits you.”

Mal knew that she was right, but it was difficult for him to abandon his ambitions for Anna. Feeling a little less dispirited, he went up to his bedroom to prepare his equipment. He had a Sony high definition digital camcorder, equipped with night vision and a separate folding tripod. He had never dared to tell his parents how much it had cost! There was the digital voice recorder for capturing everything he heard, and hopefully voices that he couldn’t. The technical equipment was completed by an electromagnetic field meter, which detected energy fields that might indicate paranormal activity. Four LED torches accompanied the ensemble. Mal made sure that all the rechargeable batteries, including spares, were at full capacity, and packed everything into a holdall. He also packed his laptop, so that he could upload and review the contents of the camcorder and DVR. Satisfied that his preparations were complete, he whiled away the evening surfing the internet and watching television. It was after midnight when he finally got into bed and turned out the light, but sleep eluded him. He lay half-awake, catastrophising about everything, seemingly for hours.

He must have fallen asleep eventually, because he woke to the sound of the alarm at seven o’clock.

Mal got up, washed and dressed, then made his way downstairs for breakfast. He found that his mother was up before him, a load of washing already in the machine. He could smell bacon cooking.

“I thought that you might appreciate a bacon sandwich before your adventure,” she said,

“start your day off right.” She paused for a moment. “What’re you doing about eating for the rest of the day?”

Mal hadn’t thought about that. “I don’t know.”

“Then it’s a good job that I’ve made enough sandwiches to last you ’til tomorrow isn’t it?”

she said triumphantly. “There’re bottles of water in the fridge, take as many as you need.”

“Thanks Mum!”

After breakfast, Mal walked, carrying his bag, into town. The letting agency owned by Anna’s father was prominently situated at the top of the main street. As usual he was early, and the office wasn’t open. He spent a few minutes looking at the pictures of property featured in the window. All the apartments and houses were in desirable areas, and had rents that reflected this. He decided to stroll around the town to kill the remaining minutes until the office opened. As he walked, the large holdall banging against his leg, he still wasn’t convinced that he should be doing this. He turned off the main street into a small shopping arcade, and stopped in front of the window of an empty shop. Studying his reflection, he saw a six-foot idiot with a heavy, bulky bag slung over his shoulder. Why on earth was he doing this? He remembered his mother’s advice, ‘Do it for yourself,’ and pulled himself together.

He would do this for himself! He had always dreamed of being a ghost hunter, and here was a chance to do it. If nothing else, he had the right name for the job. To Hell with Anna Spalding

and her selfish ways, he would do this because he wanted to. Feeling unusually self-assured, he turned away from the empty shop and strode purposefully back the way that he had come.

Arriving at the letting agency, he found the door unlocked. He hesitated for just a moment, then entered. Anna was sitting behind a desk near the rear of the office. Recognising him, she rose, picking something up from the desk, and walked to meet him.

“You’re here then,” she greeted him, “I did wonder whether you’d turn up.”

Mal's new found confidence vanished instantly. Anna was wearing a tight black knee length skirt and a white blouse. Her long blonde hair was in a plait that fell over her shoulder and down below her left breast. She casually flicked her hair back over her shoulder, then stood with hands on hips, waiting for him to reply.

"Uh, yeah," he said, "I wouldn't let you down."

She smiled indulgently, and as though speaking to a child asked, "So what's in the bag?"

Mal felt a little less awkward as he listed the contents of his holdall.

"I see," she said. "But why did you bring it in? Couldn't you have left it in your car?"

His silence was sufficient answer.

Anna looked amazed. "You don't have a car?"

Mal was crestfallen. "No," he admitted despondently. "I can drive though," he added quickly, "I just don't need my own car. I can use the firm's pick-up if I need to."

Anna was shaking her head in disbelief. "How do you intend to get you and that great big bag to the house? It's well out of town, it'll take you forever to walk."

"I'll be fine," he replied, trying to sound reassuring. "Where exactly is it?"

Anna silently handed him a key ring with four keys and a label attached. Mal read the address on the label and mentally cursed; it would take him at least three quarters of an hour to walk there.

"Right, well, I'd better be on my way then," he said, trying to sound business-like.

"You'd better have my mobile number in case there're any problems," said Anna, walking back to her desk. "You'd better give me your number too, I suppose." Mal told her his number, and she jotted it down on a pad. She wrote her number on a post-it note and handed it to him. "Only call in an emergency tonight, because I'll be out," she said sternly.



“With Kirsty, Tony, and Mike I suppose.” The words were out before he could stop himself. Anna gave him a look, and for a moment he thought that she wasn’t going to answer.

“Kirsty and I’ll meet them as usual,” she explained grudgingly, “then we’ll go on somewhere else and meet our real friends.”

Mal pushed his luck. “Why do you bother with Tony? You don’t seem to like him very much.”

Anna pulled a face. “His father owns the Mercedes dealership where my family buy their cars. My mother wants me to keep in with them so that we get preferential treatment.”

Before Mal could ask her anything further, the office door opened and two young women dressed similarly to Anna walked in.

She glanced at a clock on the wall, and then turned her attention to them. “You’re late,”

she said icily.

The girls exchanged a glance and scurried behind the two desks at the front of the office.

“Off you go then,” she said, dismissing Mal. “Let me know how you get on.” She turned away, and went back to her desk.

Mal hoisted up his bag and left the office. A little way up the road, he paused and considered which would be the best route to take. It was only just after nine o’clock, but the summer sun was already warming the air. He resigned himself to a hot and sweaty trip, and set off.

An hour later, Mal had reached his destination. As predicted, he was drenched in sweat; he also had a headache. The unremarkable house had a small front lawn, that needed trimming,

bordered by flower beds, and was separated from the adjoining house by a waist high fence.

A concrete path led to the front door, with the garden on one side and a short drive leading to the garage on the other. He looked at the double-glazed windows, all were obscured by net curtains. It was possible, he supposed, that someone who was expecting to see a figure at the window might matrix a shape from the net curtain; particularly if a window was open and the curtain was moving. Anyway, he thought, get inside and have rest for a few minutes. He walked up the path to the door and fumbled in his pocket for the keys. One was obviously the garage key, another the wrong shape for the lock. He randomly chose one of the other two and tried it; it didn't turn. Naturally, it was the last one. Sighing, he opened the door and entered the hallway, dropping his bag with relief.

Inside the house, it felt wonderfully cool. Leaving his bag in the hall, Mal wandered into the first room on his left. He was surprised to find that the room was empty of furniture apart from an old, but good quality, armchair. He smiled wryly. This was probably Anna's definition of semi-furnished. The dining room next door contained a robust looking table with four matching chairs. He moved on to the kitchen. It was fitted with expensive looking units and worktop, and boasted a new cooker and washing machine. Looking out of the window above the sink, he saw a bigger than expected back garden that was laid to lawn and surrounded by high fencing. Mal made his way back into the hall, and took a bottle of water from his bag. A trip upstairs was next; up to the haunted bedroom. He immediately corrected himself; the allegedly haunted bedroom. Now mostly recovered from his journey, he was beginning to feel a build-up of nervous excitement. The doorbell rang loudly in the empty house, startling him. Who on earth could that be? Perhaps it was Anna, he thought hopefully, come to check up on him. Cautiously he opened the front door. A lady, probably in her late sixties, was standing on the step, looking rather nervous.

"Can I help you?" asked Mal politely.

"I do hope so, young man," she replied with a tremor in her voice. "I'm Mrs Johnson from next door, and I happen to know that this house is supposed to be empty." She pulled herself up to her full five feet five inches. "I should like to know what you're doing here." She pointed a trembling finger at Mal. "And don't tell me any tales, or I shall call the Police!"

Mal had to stop himself from smiling. "I've been asked to come here by Anna Spalding at the letting agency," he explained, holding out the keys, "she wants

me to do a few little jobs.”

“Oh, well, that’s all right then.” Mrs Johnson looked relieved. “I’m sorry to have bothered you. But you know what it’s like; you can’t trust anyone these days.”

“No, no, you were quite right to ask,” Mal said encouragingly, “most people wouldn’t have bothered.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to your work.” Mrs Johnson turned to leave. “Goodbye.”

Mal suddenly had a thought. “Mrs Johnson, before you go, can you tell me anything about the people who used to live here?”

She stopped and turned back. “Well, I keep myself pretty much to myself you know, but there was a pleasant young couple with a little girl here last.”

“How long have you lived next door?”

“My husband and I moved here about three years ago, when he finally retired. He didn’t get to enjoy it for very long I’m afraid: he passed away eighteen months ago. Cancer.” She took a deep breath. “Life goes on, I suppose. I wish now that we hadn’t moved so far away from our family, but you don’t consider that when there’s the two of you.” She stood lost in thought.

“Do you remember who lived here when you first came?” Mal prompted gently.

Mrs Johnson came back to the present. “Well, there was an old lady here then.” She laughed. “Listen to me talking about old ladies! I suppose I’m one myself now. Anyway, I only ever saw her a couple of times, wandering around in the front garden. A man in a flash

car used to call once, sometimes twice a week with shopping. Perhaps he was a relative, I don’t know. He might’ve been a charity worker. As I say, I didn’t really know anything about her.”

“Do you know where she went?”

Mrs Johnson laughed again. “Heaven, or the other place. She died about eight months ago.

I think that she must've been a drinker, because when the workmen were clearing out the house, you should've seen all the empty bottles!" She paused, and looked shrewdly at Mal.

"How come you're so interested?"

Mal had no intention of telling her the truth. "Oh, I was just curious as to how the place got into such a state of disrepair."

Mrs Johnson seemed to accept this. "I think it's the same old story. Someone on their own, no family to speak of, maybe not much money, it all gets away from them. I suppose I'm lucky really. My son and his family visit in the school holidays, and my George left me well provided for."

"That's good," replied Mal, keen now to bring the conversation to a conclusion. "Thank-you very much for your help."

Mrs Johnson took the hint. "That's quite all right. I must get on now, good luck with your jobs." She turned and headed back to the adjoining house, waving from the gate.

Mal walked back inside and shut the front door. His mind was racing. He might be jumping to false conclusions, but the first person he thought of at the mention of a flash car, was Anna's father. Perhaps this was how he had acquired the property. If the old lady really hadn't any family, it wasn't too great a stretch of the imagination to believe that Anna's father had somehow befriended her and persuaded her to leave him the house. Of course, there could be a dozen other reasonable explanations; he really shouldn't speculate. But it was a juicy thought. Mal dragged his mind back to the task in hand. He was here to investigate, and he had learned some pertinent information. The old lady who had died here could fit the description of the ghost given by the last occupant. Suddenly the haunting became plausible in Mal's mind. If she had really been a drinker, who knew what state of mind she had been in when she died? He quickly deflated himself. Always look for a natural explanation. It was entirely possible that Mrs Johnson had told the last occupants the same as she had told him. The mother and child may have subconsciously retained the information about the old lady who had died in the house, and their imaginations had provided the rest.

It was time to finish his tour. Mal walked up the stairs and stopped on the

landing. He still felt a little nervous, but at the same time it was quite a thrill to actually be here. He opened the door in front of him, and found himself in the bathroom. It had a new suite and an electric shower unit. The next door opened into the back double bedroom. It was sparsely furnished, like the rooms downstairs, with just a double bed and mattress occupying it. He moved on to the next room. This was the front double bedroom. The room where the apparition had been seen. A chill ran up Mal's spine. The door opened smoothly on well-oiled hinges and he stepped quickly inside. The room was bright and spacious, the sun streaming in through the large window. Like the other bedroom, it contained a double bed and mattress. A built in wardrobe occupied the long internal wall. He hadn't really known what to expect, but this wasn't it. The room was utterly ordinary. Feeling a little disappointed, he had a cursory look around, fiddled with the net curtain and looked inside the wardrobe. He moved on to the last bedroom, a much smaller single which was completely empty. Tour complete, Mal made his way back downstairs to decide on a plan of action.

He picked up his bag from the hall, and went into the front room. Although it wasn't quite eleven o'clock, he opened a packet of sandwiches and sat in the armchair to eat. Comfortable and munching, he considered what he should do next. The most sensible thing, he decided, would be to have what he grandly thought of as his central command in the kitchen. He

would set up his laptop there, ready to analyse evidence. He could shut the blind and leave the light on without attracting attention or contaminating the rest of the house. First though, he would finish his sandwich and conduct an EMF sweep throughout the whole house. That would give him a baseline for comparison if it fluctuated later on. What else did he need to do before it got dark? He could go around the house taking still photos with his phone, as a record of the visit. It was possible that something anomalous might show up. Mal stuffed the last of the sandwich into his mouth and took the EMF meter from the bag.

Half an hour later, Mal had photographed each room from every angle and uploaded the pictures to his laptop. He had discovered the only source of significant EMF readings was the fuse box, or consumer unit as they called it now, in a cupboard under the stairs. He carried a chair into the kitchen from the dining room, and spent some more time carefully studying the photographs on his laptop, but couldn't see anything unusual. He should have asked Anna for the address earlier in the week, and researched the property before he came here.

Then, perhaps, he would have a name to work with. Too late now, he decided. He couldn't face walking back into town to visit the library, then all the way back again possibly none the wiser. Next time, assuming there would be a next time, he would get it right. There was nothing else he could think of to do. Then he remembered the garage; he hadn't looked in the garage. He went out immediately and opened the up and over door. The garage contained a hosepipe hanging on one wall, and a small electric lawnmower. At the rear was a door opening into the back garden. For the sake of due diligence, he took a couple of photos with his phone, then stood wondering how he was going to pass the time until it was dark. Mal's eyes came to rest on the lawnmower. He spent all his working life tending people's gardens, and didn't really want to be doing it in his own time. However, cutting the grass would give him something to do, and lend credibility to the story he had told Mrs Johnson. Resignedly, he unwound the mower's electric cord, plugged it in, and carried the machine out to the front lawn.

It was just after one o'clock, and Malachi had cut the grass front and back. He had cleaned the mower as best he could, put it back in the garage, locked up, and retired to the armchair to eat some more sandwiches. The sun was now shining in through the front window, warming the air in the room. He hated to admit it, but he was bored. The initial thrill of being in an allegedly haunted house had gone. He felt sure that things would improve when it got dark, but how was he going to occupy himself until then? It was his own fault, of course. He was always early wherever he went. He began to reminisce over his life so far, then let his mind wander aimlessly through a variety of subjects: Anna; ghosts; work; real ale; school. The combination of the comfortable chair, warm room, full stomach, and little sleep the previous night could have only one outcome. Mal was soon snoring.



Malachi woke slowly. At first, he was puzzled by his sitting position. His neck ached where his head had lolled to one side. Then it came back to him, he had dozed off in the haunted house. What time was it? The room was darker and cooler than he remembered. He reached for his phone and pushed the button on the side. The time flashed brightly on the screen: twenty-three minutes past seven. He had slept for over six hours! Well, that was the boredom problem solved. He rose slowly from the chair and stretched. The nervous thrill was returning. It was nearly time to start investigating. He picked up his bag and

walked to the kitchen. Although it wasn't dark outside, he closed the blind over the window and switched on the light. He placed the contents of the bag neatly along the worktop, and inspected them.

He felt quite proud of his equipment. He had bought the very best that he could afford, and had taken the time to learn how to use each item until operating it was instinctive. It was still too light to begin investigating in earnest, he decided, but he could take the digital voice recorder and quietly wander around to familiarise himself with the natural noises of the

house. Being aware of the location of squeaky floorboards and suchlike would be an advantage as well.

Malachi set off on his third tour of the house. With the recorder held out in front of him, he walked carefully around the downstairs rooms. There were some faint sounds of timber contracting as the temperature dropped, but otherwise it was quiet. He climbed the stairs, noting that the workmen who had refurbished the house had done their work well, as none of them squeaked. On the landing, he could hear beams in the loft creaking as they cooled. He entered the bathroom and used the toilet; listening to the plumbing until the cistern refilled.

Belatedly, he realised that he had recorded himself peeing, having put the recorder down on the side of the bath whilst emptying his bladder. Probably best not to play that for Anna! He carried on with his tour, visiting the back and single bedrooms next, deliberately leaving the front double bedroom until last. He paused at the door. The light outside was still quite bright, but inside the house it was becoming dim. Shadows were creeping from their hiding places and reclaiming the rooms. He opened the door and stepped into the room. It looked exactly as it had earlier, only darker. Mal suddenly wished that he'd put a torch in his pocket.

The room looked the same, but it felt somehow different. It might be imagination, but he felt that there was a hint of tension in the air. Closing the door behind him, Mal walked across to the bed and climbed onto the bare mattress. He sat with his back against the wall, and looked at the window, trying to see if anything could possibly be mistaken for an old lady. It occurred to him that the curtains were unlikely to have been open. He walked to the window and pulled the lined curtains, reducing the light to almost nothing, then resumed his position on the bed. He could hardly see anything now, let alone something that

could be mistaken for a figure. Remaining on the bed, he changed position several times, but it made no difference.

For something to be visible, it would have to be emitting its own light. He rose from the bed, walked to the window, and opened the curtains again. As he stood looking out at the quiet road, he shuddered involuntarily. In that instant he became absolutely convinced that something was standing close behind him. Every instinct told him that he was not alone. He whipped around, but the room was apparently empty. Unnerved, Mal crossed the room as quickly as he could, looking around him constantly. As he opened the door, still scanning the room, he felt the atmosphere change, and the room was truly empty once more.

Out on the landing, Mal took a deep breath. For the first time in his life, he was sure that he had genuinely experienced the paranormal. He felt with unshakeable certainty that there had been a presence in the bedroom. He was scared, but exhilarated. This had always been his ambition, but, until now, he had lacked the confidence to go out and experience it. Now, a piece of the jigsaw that was his life, had fallen into place; and it felt absolutely right. The feelings of satisfaction began to subside, and Mal became aware that he was still clutching the digital recorder in his right hand. What if he had caught something on it? It was still early, only just after eight o'clock, he had time before he began investigating properly to review the recording. He closed the bedroom door, and made his way back downstairs to the kitchen. He woke up the laptop and connected the digital voice recorder to it with a USB cable. Using an audio program, he played through his recording, relieved that he had remembered to bring headphones. The recorder was remarkably sensitive, catching his every footstep, his clothes rustling, even picking up the faint sounds of creaking wood from the loft. He smiled at the waterfall-like sound of himself peeing, but was soon focussing intently again as the recording reached the point where he had entered the front double bedroom. He listened to his footsteps, the rustling as he drew the curtains, the sliding sounds as he climbed on and off the bed and wriggled about on it, the curtains again as he opened them. But there was something else, very faint. He skipped back and replayed the section where he opened the curtains. Yes!

There was definitely another sound there. He applied one of the filters that reduced hiss, increased the gain, and replayed it. Initially, he thought it was a breath, but he was sure that



he could detect two syllables. He increased the gain as much as he could bear, and the sound became a wheezy drawn out name, 'David.' Mal highlighted the section of waveform and saved it as 'EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomena) Front Bedroom.' He took off the headphones and sat back in the dining chair. He felt stunned. An EVP! He couldn't believe it. He had recorded actual evidence.

Mal's moment of triumph was interrupted by the doorbell. What now? he thought irritably.

However unlikely, he hoped that it would be Anna. Realistically, it was more likely to be Mrs Johnson, calling to find out why he was still there. He walked to the front door and opened it.

On the step stood a young policeman, his gaudily marked car parked outside the house. Oh Hell, thought Mal, that's all I need.

"Good evening sir," said the policeman politely. "I'm responding to a call concerning a possible intruder at this property. Do you live here?"

"No, I don't," replied Mal, trying to marshal his thoughts.

"I see," said the policeman, nodding as though this was a significant revelation. "Perhaps you can tell me who you are and what you're doing here?"

"I can. Do you want to come in?"

"No, that's all right sir," the young policeman looked nervous for a moment, but quickly hid it, "you can tell me here."

Mal realised, that apart from being on a higher step, he was at least two inches taller and considerably more muscular than the policeman. No wonder he didn't want to come in alone!

"My name is Malachi Hunter, I'm here on behalf of the letting agents." He took the door keys from his back pocket and handed them to the policeman.

He took them and read the label. "And what are you doing here on a Saturday evening?"

Malachi sighed. He would have to tell the man the truth. "Please come inside,

it'll be easier if I show you.”

“Very well,” agreed the man reluctantly, “after you.”

Mal led the way through to the kitchen. Once there, he stood well clear of the policeman so as not to appear threatening in any way.

“Well?” the policeman asked.

“Well, believe it or not, I’m a ghost hunter.” Mal actually felt quite proud of himself.

“A ghost hunter? That’s novel.” The man smiled, and seemed to relax somewhat. “Care to elaborate?”

As concisely as possible, Mal related the circumstances leading up to his presence in the house. He concluded with a brief description of his experience in the bedroom, and the capture of the EVP.

“Wow!” The man seemed genuinely interested. “Could I hear it?”

“Yes, of course. In fact, I’d value a second opinion.” Mal was relieved that the man wasn’t laughing at him. He gave the policeman the headphones and played the recording.

“Can you play it again please?”

Mal looped the segment and played it. After a few repeats, the man removed the headphones, and looked at Mal with amazement in his eyes.

“What do you think it says?” Mal asked him.

As though afraid of being wrong, the man replied cautiously, “I think it sounds like,

‘David’.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Any idea who David might be?”

“No, no clue I’m afraid.”

There was a pause, then the policeman was back to business. “Well, I’m satisfied that your presence here is legitimate. I’ll just make a note of your name and address for our records; you never know, we may need to call on your expertise one day!”

Malachi gave the man the information. “Do you have much call for a ghost hunter?”

The policemen laughed. “Not really. We occasionally have reports from people coming across what they believe to be ritualistic activity: Devil worshippers; witches covens; that sort of thing.” He looked thoughtful. “That said, there was the business in the bungalow down by the hospital, that had some odd aspects.”

“I think I saw something about that in the paper.” Mal vaguely remembered reading the article.

“The daughter of the family accidentally killed herself with a drug overdose. Local kids, being morbidly curious as they are, were always hanging around the house. We were called out a number of times to chase them away. Well, several of them reckoned that they saw the deceased through a bedroom window. I must admit that we didn’t take them very seriously, but who knows? Maybe they did see something.”

“Maybe they did.”

“In the end, the father got drunk, locked himself in his daughter’s bedroom, and set fire to the place. He was killed in the fire.” After a long pause, he continued, “Well, on that cheery note I’ll leave you to it. Very interesting to have met you. By the way, I’m PC Bradley Maunder.” He smiled to himself. “Hopefully soon to be DC Maunder.” He began to make his way to the front door.

“Are you going to be promoted?”

PC Maunder paused. “It’s not exactly a promotion, more of a sideways step. I really want to be a detective. Nothing’s certain yet.” He carried on walking.

“Who was it that reported me?” Mal asked as PC Maunder opened the door.

“The elderly gentleman who lives in the house opposite. He was walking his dog, and saw you at the window.” He opened the front door and paused. “I’m on my way over there now to put his mind at rest.” He saw the look on Mal’s face. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell him what you’re doing. If I were you, I’d draw all the curtains just in case any more vigilant members of the public spot you.” With a cheery wave, he left Mal on the doorstep.

Mal closed the door, pulled out his phone and checked the time. It was almost twenty past nine. Although still fairly bright outside, the house was positively dismal. He went to the kitchen and collected a torch, then, as suggested, went around the house and drew all the curtains. He entered the front bedroom tentatively, with the torch already on, but he was able to draw the curtains without a repetition of his earlier experience. Almost disappointed, he went back to the kitchen to get organised.

First things first, thought Mal, and he sat and ate two more sandwiches. The number remaining in the large lunchbox was dwindling rapidly. Hunger temporarily at bay, Mal checked the batteries in the digital voice recorder and EMF meter; they were both almost full.

He unpacked the HD video camera, switched it on, and panned around the kitchen. He replayed the few moments of video, and was satisfied that the camera was fully functional.

Now was the time for the serious investigating to start. Immediately he encountered a problem: he had three devices that he wished to monitor, but only two hands. He settled for tucking the EMF meter in the waistband of his jeans, carrying the digital voice recorder in his right hand, and the video camera in his left. Then he realised that he’d forgotten he needed to carry a torch. After a moment’s irritable consideration, he tucked the digital voice recorder into his back pocket and carried the torch in his right hand. Although he was sorely tempted to go straight to the front bedroom, he forced himself to work methodically. He made his way into the hall, closing the door on the lit kitchen.

Immediately he was glad that he had the torch in his hand. Apart from a sliver of light escaping from under the kitchen door, there was no natural light whatsoever. He could clearly see his surroundings on the video camera monitor, but the screen was so small that he couldn’t concentrate on it and walk along. Mal opened the dining room door and stepped

inside, ensuring that the door was fully closed behind him. He panned the camera slowly around the room, watching the screen intently, but didn't spot anything of interest. Putting the camera on the table and retrieving the digital voice recorder from his back pocket, he pulled out a chair and sat at the dining table. He placed the recorder on the table, and took a deep breath.

"EVP session in the dining room of the Spalding Lettings house," he announced rather self-consciously. He checked his phone for the time. "Nine thirty-seven. Can you tell me your name, please?" He paused, allowing time for a reply. "Why are you still here?" Another pause. A thought occurred to him. "Can you tell me who David is please?" He was about to speak again when he heard a creak. It came from opposite him. To Mal, it sounded like someone had leaned on the back of one of the other chairs. Slowly and carefully, he picked up the camera and pointed it across the table. "Is that you over there?" he asked, feeling suddenly nervous. He could clearly see the other side of the table on the monitor; there was nothing there. "If you're there, please knock on the table." He waited in silence. Time passed, and nothing happened. "EVP session in the dining room ends," he said finally, and gathered up the equipment.

He exited the dining room, closing the door, and made his way down the hall to the front room. As he entered the room, Mal was immediately aware of a difference in the atmosphere.

It felt somehow heavier, as though the darkness was denser. He closed the door, and stood still, absorbing the feeling. It was a little uncomfortable, yet he felt that he was starting to become accustomed to it. He shone the torch around the room, its beam revealing nothing but the walls and the armchair. He walked towards the chair, focussing the camera on it.

Swapping the torch for the EMF meter, he held it out before him. Immediately the illuminated digital display registered a slight fluctuation in the electrical field. Mal pointed the camera at it to record the reading. He moved the meter closer to the chair, and the reading rose. Moving the instrument around, he was able to establish that the electrical disturbance was only present in the immediate vicinity of the chair; as if someone he couldn't see was sitting on it. He cautiously put the meter on the seat, and stepped back a pace, pulling the digital recorder from his back pocket, whilst keeping the camera trained on the chair.

"EVP session, front room, Spalding Lettings house," he whispered. Then at a

more normal volume asked, "Can you tell me your name?" There was no audible reply. "Can you tell me who David is?" The EMF meter slid slowly from the seat of the chair and fell to the floor.

Mal's jaw dropped open. There was no way that it could have happened accidentally! A shiver ran through his whole body. There was really something there. He had to keep going.

With a tremor in his voice, he asked, "Why are you here?" But it was too late. As he spoke, he felt the atmosphere lighten. Whatever had been there was gone. It was as though the effort of moving the EMF meter had exhausted its energy, and it had gone back to wherever it came from to recuperate.

Mal could hardly contain himself. He scooped up the fallen meter and hastened back to the kitchen. Fumbling as his eyes adjusted to the light, he plugged the camera into the laptop and uploaded the recording, waiting impatiently as the computer worked. As soon as it was ready, he opened the file and played it, skipping to the section in the front room. Yes! He had it! He could clearly see the EMF meter slide slowly across the seat and fall out of view to the floor.

Mal sat back in the chair, feeling almost euphoric. All his self-doubt vanished. This was what he had been waiting for; he had found his purpose. Forcing himself to calm down, he swapped the camera for the recorder and uploaded its contents to the laptop. Putting on the headphones, he listened to the recording. The first section in the dining room was unremarkable; there was a creaking sound, but he couldn't realistically attribute it to anything paranormal. The session in the front room, however, was quite different. As he asked 'Can you tell me your name?' there was what he could only describe as a wail that started as he

was speaking, and finished afterwards. But when he asked about David, there was a reply. He had to replay the section several times, as the words were quick and indistinct, but in the end, he was satisfied that he understood what was being said: "Not your business." The voice was unmistakably female.

Mal saved and labelled the EVPs and the section of video, then considered what he had learned. The evidence so far pointed to an intelligent haunt. An entity that was aware of its environment and events within it. It seemed to respond most strongly when he mentioned the elusive David. He couldn't shake the conviction

that this was somehow connected to the mysterious man in the flash car. He wondered whether Anna's family were involved, or if it was just his over-active imagination. The more he thought about it, the more far-fetched it seemed. Anyway, back to the matter in hand. Mal wondered if he should change his strategy.

How would he behave if he were an old alcoholic woman? It was far more difficult to imagine than he had reckoned. After a few fruitless minutes, he gave up. Perhaps it would be best to concentrate on the rooms where he had already witnessed activity. Although, he remembered from one of the television programmes involving an intelligent haunt, the ghost had initially avoided the investigators by occupying areas not associated with paranormal activity. No, he would stick with what he was doing. Work methodically. He checked the time on his phone, ten forty-seven, collected his equipment, and went upstairs.

By eleven thirty, he was back in the kitchen, uploading what he had recorded to his laptop.

A careful review revealed nothing. He had felt nothing, seen nothing, heard nothing. After his initial success, he was a little disappointed, but, he reasoned, it was far more likely that nothing would happen. It was exceptional that he had caught anything at all, and he was truly grateful, but now he had experienced paranormal activity he wanted more! Mal sat and finished off his sandwiches. It was twenty-five past twelve, and he was starting to feel tired.

He wondered what his former companions were doing. Tony and Mike would probably be full of lager by now; Anna and Kirsty would most likely have left them to it, and gone elsewhere. Mal wondered who their actual friends were. Or, more precisely, what gender they were. He stopped himself pursuing that line of thought. He needed to stay focused. What should he do next? He decided to concentrate his efforts now on the front double bedroom. It was, after all, where the woman claimed to have seen the apparition. He put all the equipment into his bag except one torch, switched off the laptop, turned off the kitchen light, and relocated upstairs.

With the light on, the bedroom looked as ordinary as any he had ever seen. He set up his equipment quickly, not wanting to draw any further attention from outside, and turned the light off again. He was quite satisfied with what he had done. The video camera, now mounted on its tripod and plugged into the mains,

was positioned opposite, and focussed on, the window. He had leaned the digital recorder against the wall beneath the window. The EMF meter, torch, and his phone, he kept beside him on the bed. Sitting on the mattress with his back against the wall, using the empty bag as a pillow, he announced to the recorder,

“Front bedroom, Spalding Lettings house, twelve fifty-six.”

He waited. Time seemed to stand still. After what seemed like an eternity he checked his phone for the time. He had been sitting on the bed for three minutes. He resolved not to check the time again. To occupy himself, Mal began to review the day’s events in his mind. He really couldn’t believe how lucky he had been. Not only had he caught solid evidence, but he had never felt more comfortable in his own skin. He began to imagine a future full of paranormal investigating. His mind struggled at first to include Anna in this fanciful future, but finally managed it as he drifted into sleep.

Malachi awoke with a start. How had he fallen asleep? How could he have done that here and now? He shook himself, and looked towards the video camera. He could see the small green LED glowing reassuringly. He relaxed a little. If anything had appeared by the window

during his unscheduled nap, the camera would have recorded it. Feeling less guilty, he found his phone and checked the time. It was seven minutes past three. Now that he was fully awake, the first thing he had to do was empty his bladder. Mal switched on the torch, climbed off the bed, and exited the bedroom, closing the door behind him. He crossed the landing, entered the bathroom, switched the light on, and relieved himself. He switched the light off before leaving to accustom his eyes to the torchlight once more. Stepping out onto the landing, Mal shone the torch towards the back bedroom. The door was closed as he had left it. As he looked, he shivered. Suddenly he felt distinctly chilly. Rubbing one arm with his free hand, Mal turned towards the front of the house and stopped abruptly. Someone else was on the landing. Immediately he pointed the torch at the figure, revealing an older lady. For a moment, he thought that it was Mrs Johnson, but quickly realised that the woman was a stranger. They silently regarded each other for several seconds, then, as Mal opened his mouth to speak, the woman’s face contorted in anger. With unnatural speed she rushed across the landing towards him, her clawed hands flailing. Without thinking, Mal threw himself out of her path and collided with the wall. The torch flew out of his hand, briefly illuminating portions of walls, floor, and ceiling as it spun in the



air. For a second, he was stunned into immobility, then he lunged across the floor for the fallen torch. He grasped it and waved it around frantically, trying to reveal the woman. He couldn't see her. He got to his feet, ignoring a sharp pain in his shoulder, and flicked on the light switch. As he stood, blinking in the bright light, it was obvious that he was alone. Convinced that the woman must be hiding, Mal went into every room, turning on the lights regardless of who might notice. As he searched the upstairs rooms, the truth began to dawn on him. By the time that he reached the kitchen, he knew that he had seen a ghost.

Malachi sat trembling on the chair, absolutely stunned by what had just happened. He had been utterly convinced that the woman was flesh and blood. In the torchlight, she had appeared three dimensional and solid. He forced himself to focus. What had she looked like?

He closed his eyes and the image of the woman was vivid in his mind. She was wearing a blue cardigan over a white jumper, and dark coloured trousers. Her hair was long, white, and unkempt. But it was her face that really stuck in his mind. It was deeply lined and wrinkled, far more so than her apparent age would have suggested. Her eyes were a rheumy blue. She looked prematurely worn and tired. Mal opened his eyes. The trembling was subsiding. He felt elated. He had really seen a ghost! Not just seen one, but been attacked by one. He was one of the few who had experienced a genuine haunting.

It was now half past three, and Malachi didn't think he could accomplish any more. He collected his equipment from upstairs, turning the lights out as he went. Back in central command, he carefully played through all his recordings, but they revealed no new evidence.

He could faintly hear the sounds of his escapade on the landing, followed by doors being opened and closed, but nothing that he could call paranormal. Still, with his personal experience and the evidence he had captured, he could say with certainty that the place was haunted. He wondered what Anna would make of it? Right now, he was too tired to care much. His adventures, plus hours of reviewing evidence, had taken their toll. Mal yawned. It was nearly eight o'clock; time for him to pack up and go home. He walked around the house opening all the curtains, and making sure that he had left no trace of his visit. He packed all the gear into his bag, and set off for home. It was another beautiful summer's day.

## CONSEQUENCES

Malachi was surprised, but relieved, to find that his parents were out when he arrived home.

A note in his mother's hand informed him that they were visiting relatives on the other side of the county, and wouldn't be back until after dinner. Mal prepared himself a bowl of cereal, ate it, and went to bed. He set the alarm on his phone for one o'clock, and was asleep in moments. He awoke, feeling refreshed, almost an hour before the alarm was due, and got out of bed, had a leisurely shower, dressed, then went down to the kitchen. He made himself two generously filled rounds of sandwiches, accompanied them with a pint mug of tea, and sat at the breakfast bar to enjoy his lunch. Finished, and with appetite satiated for the moment, Mal decided that it was time to text Anna. It took him several attempts to produce a message that he was satisfied with, but finally he sent it. Now all he could do was wait for a reply. He was just wondering what he could do to pass the time when his phone announced that it had received a text.

"Dad & I will meet you @ house 7.30PM."

Mal uploaded all the recordings and video to his PC, and reviewed the evidence that he was going to present to the Spaldings. He was still extremely impressed with what he had caught, and was tempted to post the evidence on one of the ghost hunter forums, but decided that it was more professional to share it with the client first. He whiled the remainder of the afternoon away on the internet.

His parents had still not returned when he left the house at seven o'clock. He had put the laptop and digital recorder into his bag and helped himself to the keys of the company pick-up. It was a new Mitsubishi L200 Warrior in black, and Mal looked after it as though it were his own. His gardening equipment was in the covered back section, and to avoid marking the paint, Mal had bought a load liner with his own money. His father thought he was mad; it was only a van after all. As far as he was concerned, it was just another tool like a lawnmower.

His father's van was of a much older vintage, functional but unattractive. Mal drove to the haunted house, and backed carefully onto the drive with twenty minutes to spare. He let himself into the house and set-up the laptop on the dining room table. He switched on the digital recorder and put it back in the open bag. He had a strong suspicion that neither Anna nor her father would want

a record of what was said, but he did. Mal still couldn't shake the feeling that there was something dodgy about the way Anna's father had acquired this house.

The doorbell rang, and Malachi's stomach lurched. This was the moment of truth. Now he would discover what his efforts were worth to the Spaldings. He walked down the hall and opened the front door. Anna stood on the doorstep, her father on the path behind her. She was dressed casually in tight blue jeans and a loose T shirt. Her father wore light brown chinos and a pale blue short-sleeved shirt. Although he wasn't wearing a tie, he looked as though he should be.

"Are you going to let us in then?" Anna greeted him.

Mal stood aside, holding the door open for them. Anna marched straight past him.

"I've set-up in the dining room," Mal said to her back. She disappeared into the room.

"Thank-you," said Anna's father politely as he passed Mal. Mal closed the door and followed them into the house. In the dining room, Anna had already seated herself at the table. Her father stood waiting for Mal. He extended his hand.

"I'm Mr Spalding, Anna's father."

"Malachi Hunter," Mal replied self-consciously, returning the handshake.

"Malachi? That's unusual. Are you Jewish?"

"No," replied Mal with a sense of déjà vu, "my mum just liked the name." Anna's father wasn't at all what Mal had been expecting. He was probably in his late forties or early fifties,

balding and paunchy. He wore a neatly trimmed moustache that didn't suit him. He stood a good five inches shorter than Mal. His appearance aside, he gave the impression of a man who was used to being in control.

"Shall we?" said Mr Spalding, gesturing elegantly to the dining table.

Mal was immediately flustered. "Yes. Yes, of course."

“So what happened?” Anna asked once they were both seated.

Mal talked them through his investigation as concisely as he could, deliberately leaving out the specific details of the evidence he was to present. He found himself warming to the job, surprising himself with his eloquence. Mr Spalding and Anna sat silently until he had finished.

“So you expect us to believe that you actually saw a ghost?” asked Anna, the scepticism clear in her voice.

“I’ve no proof, but I know what I saw. It’s what’s known as a personal experience. What I do have is some evidence for you to give me your opinion on.” He cued up the first EVP on the laptop and held out the headphones. Anna took them and put them on. Mal played the recording.

She looked at him. “Play it again,” she commanded. Her father gave her a look. “Please.”

Mal looped the section and continued playing it until Anna removed the headphones. She seemed somehow less assured as she handed the headphones to her father. “You need to hear this.”

Mr Spalding put on the headphones and nodded that he was ready. Mal played the section twice individually, then looped it. Mr Spalding removed the headphones slowly, looking unexpectedly concerned, and handed them back to Mal.

“What do you think it says Dad?”

Mr Spalding answered slowly, “It sounds like ‘David’.”

“That’s what I thought,” Anna agreed. “It’s a bit creepy don’t you think? David being your name.” Mr Spalding nodded distractedly.

Mal could see that David Spalding was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Perhaps there was something to Mal’s theory after all. Possibly this inoffensive looking man had a guilty conscience. Mal ploughed on regardless.

“This next one was recorded in the front room.” He cued up the clip and handed the headphones to Anna. She listened to the piece several times before

motioning him to stop.

“I can hear words after the, I don’t know, screech I suppose, but I can’t make them out.”

She handed the headphones to her father. “See if you can get it.”

Reluctantly David put on the headphones and Mal played the clip. He took them off after one play.

“I don’t know. What do you think’s being said?”

“To me it sounds like a female voice saying ‘mind your business,’” Mal replied.

“Let me listen again,” said Anna, taking the headphones from her father. Mal obliged.

“You’re right!”

“This final piece is a video,” Mal continued before either of them could say anything else.

“It was taken at exactly the same time as that last recording.”

Anna and David leaned in towards the laptop screen, and watched the EMF meter move across the cushion then fall from the armchair. Mal studied their faces intently. Anna looked genuinely shocked. David looked frightened.

“Would you like me to play it again?” Mal asked.

“Yes!” said Anna.

“No!” said David.

They turned and looked at each other. Anna finally appeared to realise that something was troubling her father.

“What’s the matter Dad?” she asked, a note of concern in her voice.

David Spalding sighed. “I was afraid it might come to this.” He lapsed into silence.

Here it comes, thought Mal.

“Might come to what?” Anna asked.

“I owe you an explanation, Annie,” she winced at the use of her pet name, “and you, I suppose, young man.” He faced his daughter. “I don’t think you’re going to like it very much.”

“Try me.” She looked worried.

“This house, it belonged to my mother.” He looked Anna in the eye. “Your grandmother.

When she died it came to me.”

“But that can’t be right!” Anna was adamant. “Granny S died years ago, when I was little.

Before I started school in fact.”

David looked very uncomfortable. “That’s what your mother and I told you,” he admitted.

He looked at Mal. “My father died in a car crash not long after Anna was born.” There was pain in his eyes. “My mother didn’t cope well on her own. She felt very bitter, that life had cheated her. She started drinking. At first Miriam and I, that’s Anna’s mum, had no idea. She hid it very cleverly. Then one night we had a business dinner to attend and she offered to look after Anna here while we were out. We were grateful to accept, dropped her off, and away we went. When we came to pick Anna up, we found her screaming in her carrycot and mother as drunk as a lord. To say there was a scene doesn’t do it justice. You can’t begin to imagine!

Miriam vowed there and then that mother would never see Anna again, and I had to agree.

What she had done was unforgivable. But time goes past, and my resolve wavered. She was still my mother after all. I started visiting her without Miriam knowing. Just popping in on my way home from work. To be honest, it was a pretty thankless exercise. I never knew how she’d be until I got here. Sometimes

she was pathetically grateful, sometimes argumentative and aggressive. As her drinking got heavier, she didn't leave the house at all. I used to do her shopping, mostly booze, and drop it in. She used to stand at the front bedroom window and look for my car." He paused, and looked at Anna. "I'm so sorry you had to find out like this, darling."

"No, it's all right, really." For the first time since Mal had met her, Anna looked vulnerable. She reached across the table and took her father's hand. "It must've been awful for you."

Mal felt uncomfortable, an intruder in an intensely private moment. This was really none of his business.

"Yes it was," David replied. "I hated deceiving your mother, but what else could I do? I was all that your grandmother had left!" He took a deep breath. "To cut a long story short, the booze killed her in the end. Cirrhosis of the liver. I'm pretty sure that she had a dementia as well, but it was difficult to tell because of the alcohol. She wasn't really that old by today's standards, only sixty-seven, but she looked much older because of the drinking. She left everything to me in her will."

"Couldn't you do anything to help her?" Anna asked tentatively.

"She didn't want to be helped. She was very stubborn. No-one could make her do anything that she didn't want to do." He smiled wryly at Anna. "Does that remind you of anyone? And that just got worse as time went on."

He paused for so long that Mal felt even more uncomfortable.

"That's enough for now," he said finally. He turned to Anna. "We can talk more later, if you want to." Anna nodded. "Now, Malachi, you're the expert, what do you think we should do?"

"Well, I've been giving it some thought. Is any of the furniture original to the house?"

"This dining set, and the armchair in the front room," David replied. "It was all that was

worth keeping."

“It’s possible that she, I’m sorry, your mother, may be attached to something in the house.

The armchair would be favourite, if she spent a lot of time in it.”

David was nodding in agreement. “She spent hours in it.”

“Well, getting rid of that would be a sensible move. Burning it would be best.”

“But what if granny’s not attached to the chair? What then?” Anna sounded more like her usual self.

“It’s more complicated then,” Mal replied slowly. “The evidence all points to this being what’s called an intelligent haunt. That means when the entity is present, it, she, is aware of her environment and, to an extent, can interact with it. More importantly, we can interact with her.”

“So what you’re saying,” said David, “is that we have to ask her to leave.”

“In a nutshell, yes.”

“That sounds too easy,” said Anna sceptically.

“It might sound easy,” replied Mal, “but I think it’ll be anything but.” He turned to David.

“I mean no disrespect, Mr Spalding, but your mother was an alcoholic. You said yourself that you never knew how she’d be when you visited her. We have no idea what frame of mind she was in when she passed. It might sound daft, but she might not even realise that she’s dead.”

“Is that possible?” David looked horrified.

“I’m afraid so.” Malachi was warming to his pet subject. “If she was confused and disoriented when she passed, she might simply not have realised. She’s possibly still confused and disoriented, just not physically here. You see, although we can’t definitively say what a ghost is, there are a number of theories that suggest—”

“Theories are all well and fine,” interrupted Anna, “but what are we actually



going to do?”

Mal was suitably chastened. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to get carried away. We’ll have to wait until she manifests and try to communicate.”

“Do you mean we’re going to have to stay here all night?” Anna didn’t look impressed.

She turned to her father. “What’s mum going to say?”

Mal forestalled David’s reply. “If you’re serious about moving her on, then we’ll have to try. But, I have to stress, there’s no guarantee it’ll work.”

“Can’t you do it? You’re supposed to be the expert.” Anna was becoming increasingly belligerent.

“I’m not family,” Mal said simply. He faced David. “From the EVPs I caught, I think that you’d stand the best chance. I think that she’s still waiting for you. If you remember, when I asked her who you were, she replied that it wasn’t my business.”

“I think I understand,” said David.

“Well I don’t want to be involved in this anymore,” Anna said petulantly. “If you’re not coming home, I’m going to call a taxi.”

“Calm down Anna,” said her father patiently. “We’ll both go home, tell your mother what’s going on, and pray that she understands.” He turned to Mal. “Then, if you’re willing, I’ll come back and we’ll try to sort this out.”

Mal nodded his agreement. “I’ll nip home, collect the rest of my stuff, and meet you back here.”

◆◆◆

Malachi was back at the house before David. It was half past eight. He had brought the rest of his equipment, and left a note for his parents explaining vaguely what was happening. On his return, he remembered that he had left the digital recorder running in the bag. He stopped it and pondered for a moment. He hadn’t expected events to take the course that they had.

Really, he ought to delete the entire recording, but he couldn't quite bring himself to do it. He couldn't explain why he wanted to keep it, but decided to wrestle with his conscience at a

later date. He quickly uploaded the recording to his laptop and reset the recorder. Mal set up as before in the front bedroom, figuring that it was the most promising location. He had just finished when the doorbell rang. Opening the door, he was amazed to find that Anna was with David.

"I thought you'd had enough." The words were out before he could stop himself.

Anna gave him a withering look. "The mood my mother's in now I'd rather be here with you and ghostly granny."

"She didn't take it well then?"

"That," said David in a measured voice, "is an understatement."

They entered the house, and Mal led them upstairs, explaining why he'd chosen the bedroom. Predictably, Anna had an objection that Mal hadn't been prepared for.

"Where are we all going to sit?" she asked, looking at Mal. "I'm not going on the bed with you."

Mal solved the problem by enlisting David to help him carry two of the dining chairs up to the bedroom. He placed one beside the bed, which Anna immediately sat on, and the other on the far side of the room for Mr Spalding. Once they were seated, Mal furnished them with a torch each and drew the curtains. He climbed onto the bed.

"What do we do now?" David asked.

"I think we should sit quietly for a little while," Mal replied, "let things settle down again.

Try to relax and get a feel for the atmosphere. Then, when you're ready, you call out and we'll take it from there. By the way, what was your mother's name?"

"Wendy Spalding. What should I say?" he added nervously.

“Just ask if she’s here with us, if she can hear your voice. If there’s any response, we’ll play it by ear.”

“I don’t like it,” grumbled Anna, “this chair’s uncomfortable, I’m creeped out, and I feel sick.”

“Please Anna,” there was entreaty in her father’s voice, “I know that it’s not pleasant, but put up with it. For me?”

“Oh all right,” replied Anna grudgingly. She lapsed into a moody silence.

As they sat quietly in the dark, Malachi’s mind wandered. It was just sinking in that he had changed. The past twenty-four hours had altered him profoundly. He couldn’t previously have imagined a situation where he would take charge, and yet here he was in a position of authority. David interrupted his thoughts.

“Mum?” he asked hesitantly. “Are you here?”

In the silence that followed, Mal thought he could feel a change in the room, but it passed quickly, so he put it down to his imagination.

“Can you here my voice?” David asked more confidently.

“Yes,” came a reply from where Anna was seated.

“I know that you can hear me Anna!” David sounded annoyed. “Keep quiet can’t you?”

He took a deep breath before continuing. “Mum, are you in this room with us?”

“I’m here, David,” replied a voice that wasn’t quite Anna’s.

“Anna! That’s not funny.”

“Wait a second Mr Spalding,” Mal had a bad feeling, “I don’t think that’s Anna.” He turned on his torch and pointed it at Anna. She was sitting stiffly upright on the chair, staring rigidly in front of her. “Anna, can you hear me?” She didn’t reply.

“What’s going on?” David was confused.

“I think your mother has,” in the heat of the moment he couldn’t think of a less emotive word, “possessed Anna.”

“What!”

“Keep calm!” Mal spoke sharply. He wasn’t prepared for this, but he mustn’t panic.

“Speak to her, this could be our best chance.”

David swallowed audibly, then did as instructed. “Mum, is that really you?”

“Yes, David,” the voice was weary. “Where have you been?”

Mal was fascinated. He could clearly see Anna’s mouth moving as she spoke, but the voice wasn’t quite hers, and the words that issued were certainly not. He carefully and quietly rose from the bed, walked to the camera, turned it to face Anna, then resumed his position.

“I’m here now.” David sounded as though he were holding back tears.

“But where’ve you been?” The voice took on a whining tone. “I’ve been waiting and waiting.” She paused. “I expect you’ve been running around after that lazy bitch you married.”

“Mum!” David forgot the circumstances long enough to sound outraged. “You mustn’t speak about Miriam like that.”

“Hold on Mr Spalding,” admonished Mal, “don’t forget why we’re here.”

“Who are you, telling my boy what to do!” Mrs Spalding sounded angry. “What are you doing in my house?”

Mal didn’t let himself be fazed. “Wendy, do you know what the date is?”

“Who told you my name? I’ve nothing to say to an intruder in my house.”

David made an attempt, “Mum, do you know what happened to you?”

“Nothing’s happened to me. Only my son’s not been bothered with me.” Self-pity was clear in her voice.

David ploughed on, “Do you remember feeling ill?”

“I did feel ill,” she said thoughtfully, “but I had a doze, and then I felt better.”

“Mum, this is so hard for me to say, but you died.”

The silence that followed was almost palpable.

“Don’t be so stupid!” she answered finally, but there was an undercurrent of doubt in her voice.

David was becoming frustrated. He seemed to forget that he was talking to his dead mother. “What did you think had happened?” His voice rose an octave. “All those workmen?

Different people living in the house? No-one able to see or hear you?”

There was another long pause.

“I thought it was the drink,” she finally confessed in a tiny voice.

“Mrs Spalding,” Mal said gently, “it’s time for you to move on.”

David didn’t give Mal the opportunity to say anything further.

“How do you think you’re talking to us now?” he continued doggedly. “You’re using Anna!”

Anna’s lips smiled.

“Anna,” said Wendy, “little Anna.”

“Yes, Anna!” shouted David, making Mal jump. “You’re using her body!”

This time the silence lasted so long that Mal thought Wendy had gone.

“I’m sorry,” she said finally, almost inaudibly. Then a little louder: “I don’t know what’s happening. Will you help me?”

“Mrs Spalding,” Mal tried again, “it’s time for you to move on.”

“But this is my house! Where will I go?”

Mal had a sudden inspiration. “Mr Spalding, what was your father’s name?”

“Henry. Why?”

Mal ignored the question. “Mrs Spalding, do you want to see Henry again?”

“Henry’s dead. He left me on my own.” It was an emotionless statement of fact.

“But now you’re dead too, you can find him, be together again.”

Anna’s head turned, and Wendy Spalding glared at Mal through her granddaughter’s eyes.

Mal knew he had said the wrong thing. He felt a sudden wave of nausea rush over him. The

dead woman’s bitter thoughts, confused and contradictory, invaded his mind, threatening for a moment to overwhelm him before withdrawing. He knew then that there would be no reasoning with her.

“Get out of my house!” she suddenly roared, and launched Anna’s body from the chair at Mal.

He rolled away from her across the bed and fell from the far side, landing in an ignominious heap on the floor. David was on his feet, torch on, rushing towards Anna.

“What happened?” Anna stood looking confused in the torchlight.

“Anna? Is that really you?” The concern in David’s voice was touching

“Of course it’s me!” She shook her head as if to clear it. “Why are my jeans wet?”

Mal levered himself off the floor using the bed. He pushed past David who was now embracing a baffled Anna, and switched on the light. The three stood looking at one another.

“Well?” demanded Anna. “What happened?”

David suddenly took a step away from his daughter. The unmistakable odour of urine tainted the air. Anna had wet herself.

“Oh my God!” she exclaimed in embarrassed disbelief, looking down. The crotch and the tops of her jeans’ legs were soaking.

Silently Mal led her across the landing to the bathroom, switching on the lights as he went.

He left her to effect what remedial action she could, and re-joined a stunned looking David in the bedroom.

“My God!” said David with feeling. “What the bloody hell have we done?”

“We’ve done the best we could, under the circumstances,” Mal replied as calmly as he could manage.

“But she’s still here! We couldn’t make her go.”

“No, I know that,” Mal was starting to feel irritated, “and I don’t think we’re going to be able to.”

“What! You mean there’s nothing we can do? How am I meant to rent the house with her still in it? You said we could get rid of her!”

“I said we could try,” Mal corrected him. “I told you it wouldn’t be easy. Your mother’s mental state is such that we could keep trying for years and not get anywhere. You could go down the religious route, but it would take months to get approval for an exorcism, if you could get one at all, and it’s unlikely to be more than a temporary solution. It might even make things worse.”

“So what do I do?” David’s frustration was becoming anger.

Mal was silent. He could hear the sound of running water from the bathroom.

“I’m talking to you! For God’s sake, you’re supposed to be helping. What am I going to do?”

“The first thing you can do, is stop shouting at me!” said Mal in a voice that made David take a step back.

“I’m sorry,” David said quickly. “It’s just...” he threw his hands up in despair. “It’s too much to take in.”

“I know, I know,” replied Mal. “There’s no such thing as a typical haunting, but this is...this is something else.”

Anna came back into the room. Her jeans were thoroughly soaked; she had obviously taken them off and rinsed them. Malachi spotted her wet underpants protruding from a front pocket. Anna noticed his glance and shoved the offending article out of sight. With a dignity that Mal didn’t think he would be capable of under the same humiliating circumstances, she flicked her hair back over her shoulder and fixed the two men with a scowl.

“Now,” she said sternly, “I want to know what happened to me.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Mal asked.

“I was sitting on that chair.” She pointed needlessly at the chair. “Wishing I was somewhere else. I already felt a bit sick, but I started to feel lightheaded and dizzy as well. I thought that I was going to fall off the chair. I was just about to say something, but...” She paused, marshalling her thoughts. “It was really weird. I suppose the closest I can come to describing it, is to say it was like being paralysed. I couldn’t speak or move. But it felt like I was speaking. I knew my mouth was moving, and I could hear a voice. Sort of in my head.

But it was,” she paused again, struggling to find words that matched her experience,

“separate from me. I was still there, but not involved. The next thing I clearly remember was being stood up and wondering how I’d got there.”

“You remember we were trying to communicate with your grandmother,” said Mal.

Anna nodded.

“Well, she came through. Using you.” He tried to explain the phenomenon in terms that would make sense to her. “You were acting as a medium, channelling her spirit.”



Anna's eyes were wide with amazement. "You mean granny talked to you, through me?"

Mal nodded. "Exactly that."

She composed herself, hands on her hips. "And?"

"And we didn't get anywhere," replied David.

"But what about..." She pointed to her wet jeans.

"Towards the end, she didn't have much control in that department." David looked embarrassed. "I had to buy her incontinence pants at the chemist."

"So what do we do now?" asked Anna practically.

"Unless you're both willing to keep trying, possibly for years, without any guarantee of success," Mal said gloomily, "I don't think we can do anything else."

"Can't we force her to go?"

"I honestly don't think so," Mal answered her. "How would we do it? It's not like a horror film where we call in an exorcist and he sends her off to the light. In the real world it doesn't work like that. I know that she's dead, but imagine that she's just the same as when she was alive; just not physically here. As far as she's concerned, this is her house and she wants to stay. In time, I believe that she'll," he struggled to find a suitable description, "run out of energy. Fade away. But that could take decades."

Anna turned to her Father. "You'll have to sell it," she said bluntly. "It's the only option left."

"I think we should take some time," David was reluctant to commit himself, "and consider the situation when we're not feeling quite so emotional."

"Whatever," said Anna dismissively. "It's up to you. It's your house. I've had enough of it now. I'm going home to have a long, hot shower, and try to forget the whole thing. I'll wait in the car. Give me the keys please." David handed her the key. Without another word, she stalked out of the bedroom and went

downstairs.

David and Mal looked at one another.

“What will you do?” asked Mal.

“I have no idea,” replied David with a hollow laugh.

“Give me a few minutes to pack up and I’ll be on my way,” said Mal, keen now to be away from the house. He immediately started to break down the camera and tripod.

David watched him silently for a few moments. “I’m sorry if I was rude to you earlier. I’m so far out of my comfort zone, I just don’t know what to do.”

“I understand.” Mal carried on packing his equipment away. “It’s not exactly an everyday situation for most people.”

“How do you deal with it?”

Mal smiled. He had only just found that out himself. “Well, my own experiences have taught me to accept things that most people can’t or won’t. You’ve had a dose of that yourself

now.”

“Yes,” said David thoughtfully, “I suppose I have. I certainly never would’ve believed it if I hadn’t been here.”

As he was speaking, Mal zipped up the bag and slung it over his shoulder. “Just my laptop left downstairs.”

They went downstairs, turning off the lights as they went. Mal collected the laptop from the dining room and put it into his bag. They made their way along the hall to the front door.

Mal handed the keys to David.

“It might seem odd,” he began, “but thank-you for letting me do this. It’s been...” He tailed off, remembering that his companion didn’t share his feelings.

“Interesting,” he finished, lamely.

“That’s one word for it!”

“Mr Spalding, if I can help you, in the future, I’d be happy to.”

“No, thank-you. I appreciate the offer, but I believe that what you said earlier is right, and I have to deal with it another way.” As David reached for the lock, a thought occurred to him.

He turned back to face Mal, and suddenly he was a businessman again. He reached into his back pocket and brought out his wallet. “Let me give you something for your trouble.”

“No, really.” Mal wasn’t expecting this. “There’s no need, honestly.”

“I appreciate that,” David looked calculating, “but it would make me feel better if you took something. More like a business transaction. I’m sure that I can trust you not to mention any of this to anyone, but I’d feel easier if you were on the staff, so to speak.”

He’s trying to buy me, the cheeky bugger! But, despite his indignation, Mal knew that he was going to accept the money. Not as a payment for his silence, or even for the work he had performed, but for putting up with these obnoxious, shallow people. “Well,” he said, “if you’re absolutely sure.”

“Do we understand one another?” David looked hard at Mal. Mal nodded his assent.

“Then I am.” He opened his wallet, and without counting removed a thick bundle of notes and handed them to Mal.

Mal, took the money, studiously not looking at it, and thrust it into his back pocket.

“Thank-you very much.”

“You’re welcome.” David opened the front door, and politely motioned Mal through before him. Once outside he locked the door. “Well, goodbye then,” he held out his hand, and Mal shook it, deliberately gripping hard enough to make

the older man wince. David walked down the path to his car and got in without a backward glance. Mal tried to catch Anna's eye, but she turned her head away. Then the powerful engine was running and the car pulled away, quickly disappearing up the road. He sighed, and walked to his pick-up. Once inside, he pulled the wad of notes from his pocket and counted them. The total made him whistle silently: three hundred and seventy pounds. He manoeuvred the pick-up out of the drive, pausing on the road for a final look at the house. He smiled to himself, and drove away.



Ten days later, and Mal was back outside the house. He had been working at an address just around the corner, and couldn't resist coming to have a look. The only change he could see was a 'For Sale' sign in the front garden. In some US states, if a vendor believed a property to be haunted, it was a legal requirement to declare it. He would bet a year's wages that Mr Spalding wouldn't tell any potential buyers about his sitting tenant. He looked at the house for a few more moments, remembering the weekend he had spent there. His parents had noticed a change in him immediately. He was still the self-contained loner, but, on the plus side, he was more confident and self-assured. On the negative, he had become considerably more cynical. He thought of Anna. He knew that she would have nothing further to do with him; perhaps that was for the best. With an effort, he put it all from his mind, and drove on to

his next job.

If you've enjoyed *The Novice Ghost Hunter*,

a review is always much appreciated.

Thank-you!

Martin.

Malachi Hunter's story continues in

[A Matter of Faith](#)

[Of Gods and Ghosts](#)

[Blood Ties](#)

[Remnants and Revenants](#)

### **About The Author**

Martin J. Best was born in Torquay, Devon, England, in 1965, where he still lives with his wife Kim. Martin grew up in an actively haunted house, which, he admits, probably accounts for his interest in the paranormal! He has had a varied work life, and spent many years running his own mobile disco business. He now writes full-time in the Paranormal Hard Fantasy genre. He is a keen walker, music enthusiast, and ghost hunter.

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### **Also by Martin J. Best**

#### **[Ghost Hunter: A Matter of Faith](#)**

In the first Ghost Hunter novel, Malachi Hunter has reluctantly benefitted from traumatic times. The death of his father has given him his own business; the departure of his mother, his own house. Whilst coming to terms with the situation, he is tracked down and befriended by a policeman whom he met on his first paranormal investigation.

Detective Constable Maunder has a problem: his sister and niece are at the epicentre of an aggressive haunting. Grateful for the diversion, Malachi agrees to help, and finds himself involved in a potentially lethal struggle with a supernatural entity. His resolve will be taxed to the extreme, as he defends his friend, his family, and the newfound love of his life.

“Well, what can I say? Nearly missed my bus stop twice in one day because I was so enthralled by this story. Can't wait for the next instalment! Thank you Martin Best for the best so far! Whether you like a mystery, ghost story, thriller, or love story, this has all that and more!” (5\* Amazon Review)

“Had been waiting for this authors next story and I was certainly not disappointed...I read it in an evening, staying awake until I had finished it! The development of characters from his previous books was very interesting, and the inclusion of local places and speciality beers really gives it a special appeal. I

cannot recommend stories by this author enough, they are definitely must reads. When can I see the next one?" (5\* Amazon Review)

### **Ghost Hunter: Of Gods and Ghosts**

With its award winning cover, the third instalment in the ongoing Ghost Hunter series is a compelling and thought provoking supernatural thriller with a hard fantasy twist. Join Malachi, Teena, and Carolyn as they investigate a haunting that is anything but straightforward, and become embroiled in an increasingly desperate and dangerous struggle between opposing occultists for control of Camulos, the hitherto mythical Pagan God of Warfare. In the face of betrayal, fear, and mortal danger, they must find a way to prevail; or the consequences will be dire and far-reaching.

"Another superb read from this author. His writing gets better with each book. The depth to his characters and the storyline as well as his use of real places and knowledge of the subject made this a cracking good read that I could not easily put down." (5\* Amazon Review)

"Enthralling plot, enticing imagery and exceptional characters... What more can I say? Highly recommended!" (5\* Amazon Review)

### **Ghost Hunter: Blood Ties**

Featuring a foreword by the 'Queen of Occult Horror', Sarah England, the third Ghost Hunter

novel is a compelling blend of supernatural terror and hard fantasy.

For Charles Chandler, early retirement seems like a dream come true. He moves his family to Devon, unaware that they are bringing with them a dangerous and sordid secret from the past. Before long, disturbing things begin to happen, and they turn to Malachi Hunter for help. Unaware of the tragedy that is unfolding, Mal and his team agree to investigate. As the ghost hunters begin their work, occultist Pasha Sokolov learns of Camulos, the Celtic God of Warfare, and launches an audacious expedition to capture him. The supernatural and the mundane worlds are about to collide, and the outcome is far from certain...

"Wonderful read. I've read a lot of ghost stories but this is the first that merges with mythological gods. Very unusual but works very well and I thoroughly

enjoyed it to the end.

Highly recommend it to fans of both the ghost story and fantasy genres.” (5\* Amazon Review)

“This latest tale in an excellent series is an indication that the author continues to develop his already impressive story telling skills. Truly a 5 star read.” (5\* Star Kobo Review)

### **Ghost Hunter: Remnants and Revenants**

Ray and Christa Brown have invested their life savings in buying and refurbishing the Torre Mews guest house in Torquay, Devon, only to find that one of the previous tenants hasn't left. Called to attend a breach of the peace after a guest sees the ghost, police sergeant and paranormal investigator Tasha Dabrowski, persuades Ray to involve Malachi Hunter and his team.

William Cooper, another guest at the Torre Mews, is examining the mysterious circumstances of his father's unsolved murder. By chance, he identifies retired policeman, now ghost hunter, Nick Rueben, and challenges him on the circumstances of the case. Cooper reveals that his father had discovered the secret location of The Fall, gateway to the Summer Lands, and that he intends to share the information with the enigmatic Esoterica Foundation.

Drawn into direct confrontation with Esoterica, the ghost hunters find themselves fighting for their lives in two realities, resolving the haunting their only hope of success.

### **The Moth Trap**

Tom Hatton's short-cut home from work has unexpectedly become a source of erotic pleasure to him. That is until he is lured into the home of Simon Marsh. Tom's weakness heralds the start of a bitter retribution from beyond the grave!

“Extremely well written with an exciting plot and incredibly developed characters for such a short story. Highly recommended to anyone interested in the supernatural!” (5\* Amazon Review)

“Utterly compelling from the first, a chilling thrilling read that will make you want to sleep with the light on! Can't wait for the next one by this author.” (5\*

Amazon Review)

### [A Step Aside](#)

To amuse himself on his day off, Stuart Price decides to see how the restoration of an ancient chapel is progressing. He meets the volunteers undertaking the work, and soon discovers that their motives are other than civic pride. Stuart finds himself unwillingly caught up in a quest to access a land whose occupants are still living in the Middle Ages; and where the savage and unpredictable Celtic Gods rule. Can Stuart escape the brutal reality of Dumnonia, or will he be forced to abandon his family forever?

“Another incredibly exciting story from Martin Best. Never have I been simultaneously so desperate to finish a book whilst dreading the end!” (5\* Amazon Review)

“Another brilliant story. Unexpected, gripping a MUST read! Once I started reading I couldn't stop until it was finished. Waiting for the next one from this author with bated breath.” (5\* Amazon Review)