

# True Believer

# One



Jeremy Marsh sat with the rest of the live studio audience, feeling unusually conspicuous. He was one of only half a dozen men in attendance on that mid-December afternoon. He'd dressed in black, of course, and with his dark wavy hair, light blue eyes, and fashionable stubble, he looked every bit the New Yorker that he was. While studying the guest onstage, he managed to surreptitiously watch the attractive blonde three rows up. His profession often demanded effective multitasking. He was an investigative journalist in pursuit of a story, and the blonde was just another member of the audience; still, the professional observer in him couldn't help noticing how attractive she looked in her halter top and jeans. Journalistically speaking, that is.

Clearing his mind, he tried to focus his attention on the guest again. This guy was beyond ridiculous. In the glare of television lights, Jeremy thought the spirit guide looked constipated as he claimed to hear voices from beyond the grave. He had assumed a false intimacy, acting as if he were everyone's brother or best friend, and it seemed that the vast majority of the awestruck audience—including the attractive blonde and the woman the guest was addressing—considered him a gift from heaven itself. Which made sense, Jeremy thought, since that was always where

the lost loved ones ended up. Spirits from beyond the grave were always surrounded by bright angelic light and enveloped in an aura of peace and tranquillity. Never once had Jeremy heard of a spirit guide channeling from the other, hotter place. A lost loved one never mentioned that he was being roasted on a spit or boiled in a cauldron of motor oil, for instance. But Jeremy knew he was being cynical. And besides, he had to admit, it was a pretty good show. Timothy Clausen was good—far better than most of the quacks Jeremy had written about over the years.

“I know it’s hard,” Clausen said into the microphone, “but Frank is telling you that it’s time to let him go now.”

The woman he was addressing with oh-so-much empathy looked as if she was about to faint. Fiftyish, she wore a green-striped blouse, her curly red hair sprouting and spiraling in every direction. Her hands were clasped so tightly at chest level that her fingers were white from the pressure.

Clausen paused and brought his hand to his forehead, drawing once more on “the world beyond,” as he put it. In the silence, the crowd collectively leaned forward in their seats. Everyone knew what was coming next; this was the third audience member Clausen had chosen today. Not surprisingly, Clausen was the only featured guest on the popular talk show.

“Do you remember the letter he sent you?” Clausen asked. “Before he died?”

The woman gasped. The crewman beside her held the microphone even closer so that everyone watching on television would be able to hear her clearly.

“Yes, but how could you know about—?” she stammered.

Clausen didn’t let her finish. “Do you remember what it said?” he asked.

“Yes,” the woman croaked.

Clausen nodded, as if he’d read the letter himself. “It was about forgiveness, wasn’t it?”

On the couch, the hostess of the show, the most popular after-

noon talk show in America, swiveled her gaze from Clausen to the woman and back again. She looked both amazed and satisfied. Spirit guides were always good for ratings.

As the woman in the audience nodded, Jeremy noticed mascara beginning to stream down her cheeks. The cameras zoomed in to show it more clearly. Daytime television at its dramatic best.

“But how could you . . . ?” the woman repeated.

“He was talking about your sister, too,” Clausen murmured. “Not just himself.”

The woman stared at Clausen transfixed.

“Your sister Ellen,” Clausen added, and with that revelation, the woman finally let loose a raspy cry. Tears burst forth like an automated sprinkler. Clausen—tan and trim in his black suit with nary a hair out of place—continued to nod like one of those bobbing dogs you stick on your dashboard. The audience gazed at the woman in utter silence.

“Frank left something else for you, didn’t he? Something from your past.”

In spite of the hot studio lights, the woman actually seemed to pale. In the corner of the set, beyond the general viewing area, Jeremy saw the producer rotating an upraised finger in a helicopter pattern. It was getting close to the commercial break. Clausen glanced almost imperceptibly in that direction. No one but Jeremy seemed to notice, and he often wondered why viewers never questioned how channeling from the spirit world could be timed so perfectly to fit with commercial breaks.

Clausen went on. “That no one else could know about. A key of some sort, is that right?”

The sobs continued as the woman nodded.

“You never thought he’d save it, did you?”

Okay, here’s the clincher, Jeremy thought. Another true believer on the way.

“It’s from the hotel where you stayed on your honeymoon. He put it there so that when you found it, you would remember the

happy times you spent together. He doesn't want you to remember him with pain, because he loves you."

"Ooohhhhhh . . .," the woman cried.

Or something like that. A moan perhaps. From where he was sitting Jeremy couldn't be certain, because the cry was interrupted by sudden, enthusiastic applause. All at once, the microphone was pulled away. Cameras zoomed out. Her moment in the sun completed, the woman from the audience collapsed in her seat. On cue, the hostess stood from the couch and faced the camera.

"Remember that what you're seeing is real. None of these people have ever met with Timothy Clausen." She smiled. "We'll be back with one more reading after this."

More applause as the show broke for commercials, and Jeremy leaned back in his seat.

As an investigative journalist known for his interest in science, he'd made a career out of writing about people like this. Most of the time, he enjoyed what he did and took pride in his work as a valuable public service, in a profession so special as to have its rights enumerated in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. For his regular column in *Scientific American*, he'd interviewed Nobel laureates, explained the theories of Stephen Hawking and Einstein in lay terms, and had once been credited with sparking the groundswell of public opinion that led the FDA to remove a dangerous antidepressant from the market. He'd written extensively about the Cassini project, the faulty mirror on the lens of the Hubble spacecraft, and had been one of the first to publicly decry the Utah cold fusion experiment as a fraud.

Unfortunately, as impressive as it sounded, his column didn't pay much. It was the freelance work that paid most of his bills, and like all freelancers, he was always hustling to come up with stories that would interest magazine or newspaper editors. His niche had broadened to include "anything unusual," and in the past fifteen years, he'd researched and investigated psychics, spirit guides, faith

healers, and mediums. He'd exposed frauds, hoaxes, and forgeries. He'd visited haunted houses, searched for mystical creatures, and hunted for the origins of urban legends. Skeptical by nature, he also had the rare ability to explain difficult scientific concepts in a way the average reader could understand, and his articles had appeared in hundreds of newspapers and magazines around the world. Scientific debunking, he felt, was both noble and important, even if the public didn't always appreciate it. Frequently, the mail he received after publishing his freelance articles was peppered with words like "idiot," "moron," and his personal favorite, "government flunky."

Investigative journalism, he'd come to learn, was a thankless business.

Reflecting on this with a frown, he observed the audience chatting eagerly, wondering who would be chosen next. Jeremy stole another glance at the blonde, who was examining her lipstick in a hand mirror.

Jeremy already knew that the people chosen by Clausen weren't officially part of the act, even though Clausen's appearance was announced in advance and people had fought wildly for tickets to the show. Which meant, of course, that the audience was loaded with life-after-death believers. To them, Clausen was legitimate. How else could he know such personal things about strangers, unless he talked to spirits? But like any good magician who had his repertoire down pat, the illusion was still an illusion, and right before the show, Jeremy not only had figured out how he was pulling it off, but had the photographic evidence to prove it.

Bringing down Clausen would be Jeremy's biggest coup to date, and it served the guy right. Clausen was the worst kind of con man. And yet the pragmatic side of Jeremy also realized that this was the kind of story that rarely came along, and he wanted to make the most of it. Clausen, after all, was on the cusp of enormous celebrity, and in America, celebrity was all that mattered. Though he knew the odds were utterly improbable, he fantasized about what would happen if Clausen actually picked *him* next. He

didn't expect it; being chosen was akin to winning the trifecta at Santa Anita; and even if it didn't happen, Jeremy knew he'd still have a quality story. But quality and extraordinary were often separated by simple twists of fate, and as the commercial break ended, he felt the slightest twinge of unjustified hope that somehow Clausen would zero in on him.

And, as if God himself wasn't exactly thrilled with what Clausen was doing, either, that was exactly what happened.

Three weeks later, winter in Manhattan was bearing down hard. A front from Canada had moved in, dropping temperatures to nearly zero, and plumes of steam rose steadily from the sewer grates before settling over the icy sidewalks. Not that anyone seemed to mind. New York's hardy citizens displayed their usual indifference to all things weather-related, and Friday nights were not to be wasted under any circumstance. People worked too hard during the week to waste an evening out, especially when there was reason to celebrate. Nate Johnson and Alvin Bernstein had already been celebrating for an hour, as had a couple of dozen friends and journalists—some from *Scientific American*—who'd assembled in Jeremy's honor. Most were well into the buzz phase of the evening and enjoying themselves immensely, mostly because journalists tended to be budget-conscious and Nate was picking up the tab.

Nate was Jeremy's agent. Alvin, a freelance cameraman, was Jeremy's best friend, and they'd gathered at the trendy bar on the Upper West Side to celebrate Jeremy's appearance on ABC's *Primetime Live*. Commercials for *Primetime Live* had been airing that week—most of them featuring Jeremy front and center and the promise of a major exposé—and interview requests were pouring into Nate's office from around the country. Earlier that afternoon, *People* magazine had called, and an interview was scheduled for the following Monday morning.

There hadn't been enough time to organize a private room for the get-together, but no one seemed to mind. With its long granite

bar and dramatic lighting, the packed facility was yuppieville. While the journalists from *Scientific American* tended to wear tweed sport jackets with pocket protectors and were crowded into one corner of the room discussing photons, most of the other patrons looked as if they'd dropped by after finishing up at work on Wall Street or Madison Avenue: Italian suit jackets slung over the backs of chairs, Hermès ties loosened, men who seemed to want to do nothing more than to scope out the women in attendance while flashing their Rolexes. Women straight from work in publishing and advertising were dressed in designer skirts and impossibly high heels, sipping flavored martinis while pretending to ignore the men. Jeremy himself had his eye on a tall redhead standing at the other end of the bar who appeared to be glancing his way. He wondered if she recognized him from the television ads, or whether she just wanted some company. She turned away, apparently uninterested, but then looked his way again. With her gaze lingering just a little longer this time, Jeremy raised his glass.

"C'mon, Jeremy, pay attention," Nate said, nudging him with his elbow. "You're on TV! Don't you want to see how you did?"

Jeremy turned from the redhead. Glancing up at the screen, he saw himself sitting opposite Diane Sawyer. Strange, he thought, like being in two places at once. It still didn't seem quite real. Nothing in the past three weeks had seemed real, despite his years in media.

On-screen, Diane was describing him as "America's most esteemed scientific journalist." Not only had the story turned out to be everything he'd wanted, but Nate was even talking to *Primetime Live* about Jeremy doing regular stories for them with a possibility of additional features on *Good Morning America*. Though many journalists believed television was less important than other, more serious forms of reporting, it didn't stop most of them from secretly viewing television as the Holy Grail, by which they meant big money. Despite the congratulations, envy was in the air, a sensation as foreign to Jeremy as space travel.



After all, journalists of his stripe weren't exactly at the top of the media pecking order—until today.

“Did she just call you esteemed?” Alvin asked. “You write about Bigfoot and the legend of Atlantis!”

“Shh,” Nate said, his eyes glued to the television. “I’m trying to hear this. It could be important for Jeremy’s career.” As Jeremy’s agent, Nate was forever promoting events that “could be important for Jeremy’s career,” for the simple reason that freelancing wasn’t all that lucrative. Years earlier, when Nate was starting out, Jeremy had pitched a book proposal, and they’d been working together ever since, simply because they’d become friends.

“Whatever,” Alvin said, dismissing the scolding.

Meanwhile, flickering on the screen behind Diane Sawyer and Jeremy were the final moments of Jeremy’s performance on the daytime television show, in which Jeremy had pretended to be a man grieving the boyhood death of his brother, a boy Clausen claimed to be channeling for Jeremy’s benefit.

“He’s with me,” Clausen could be heard announcing. “He wants you to let him go, Thad.” The picture shifted to capture Jeremy’s rendition of an anguished guest, his face contorted. Clausen nodded in the background, either oozing sympathy or looking constipated, depending on the perspective.

“Your mother never changed his room—the room you shared with him. She insisted that it be kept unchanged, and you still had to sleep there,” Clausen went on.

“Yes,” Jeremy gasped.

“But you were frightened in there, and in your anger, you took something of his, something very personal, and buried it in the backyard.”

“Yes,” Jeremy managed again, as if too emotional to say more.

“His retainer!”

“Oooooohhhhhhhh,” Jeremy cried, bringing his hands to his face.

“He loves you, but you have to realize that he’s at peace now. He has no anger toward you . . .”

“Oooooohhhhhh!” Jeremy wailed again, contorting his face even more.

In the bar, Nate watched the clips in silent concentration. Alvin, on the other hand, was laughing as he raised his beer high.

“Give that man an Oscar!” he shouted.

“It was rather impressive, wasn’t it?” Jeremy said, grinning.

“I mean it, you two,” Nate said, not hiding his irritation. “Talk during the commercials.”

“Whatever,” Alvin said again. “Whatever” had always been Alvin’s favorite word.

On *Primetime Live*, the videotape faded to black and the camera focused on Diane Sawyer and Jeremy, sitting across from each other once again.

“So nothing Timothy Clausen said was true?” Diane asked.

“Not a thing,” Jeremy said. “As you already know, my name isn’t Thad, and while I do have five brothers, they’re all alive and well.”

Diane held a pen over a pad of paper, as if she was about to take notes. “So how did Clausen do this?”

“Well, Diane,” Jeremy began.

In the bar, Alvin’s pierced eyebrow rose. He leaned toward Jeremy. “Did you just call her Diane? Like you’re *friends*?”

“Could you please!” Nate said, growing more exasperated by the moment.

On-screen, Jeremy was going on. “What Clausen does is simply a variation on what people have been doing for hundreds of years. First of all, he’s good at reading people, and he’s an expert at making vague, emotionally charged associations and responding to audience members’ cues.”

“Yes, but he was so specific. Not only with you, but with the other guests. He had names. How does he do that?”

Jeremy shrugged. “He heard me talking about my brother

Marcus before the show. I simply made up an imaginary life and broadcast it loud and clear.”

“How did it actually reach Clausen’s ears?”

“Con men like Clausen have been known to use a variety of tricks, including microphones and paid ‘listeners’ who circulate in the waiting area before the show. Before I was seated, I made sure to move around and strike up conversations with lots of audience members, watching to see if anyone exhibited unusual interest in my story. And sure enough, one man seemed particularly concerned.”

Behind them, the videotape was replaced by an enlarged photograph that Jeremy had taken with a small camera hidden in his watch, a high-tech spy toy he’d promptly expensed to *Scientific American*. Jeremy loved high-tech toys almost as much as he loved expensing them to others.

“What are we looking at here?” Diane asked.

Jeremy pointed. “This man was mingling with the studio audience, posing as a visitor from Peoria. I took this photograph right before the show while we were talking. Zoom in further, please.”

On-screen, the photograph was enlarged and Jeremy motioned toward it.

“Do you see the small USA pin on his lapel? That’s not just for decoration. It’s actually a miniature transmitter that broadcasts to a recording device backstage.”

Diane frowned. “How do you know this?”

“Because,” Jeremy said, raising an eyebrow, “I happen to have one just like it.”

On cue, Jeremy reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out what appeared to be the same USA pin, attached to a long, thread-like wire and transmitter.

“This particular model is manufactured in Israel”—Jeremy’s voice could be heard over the camera close-up of the gadget—“and it’s very high-end. I’ve heard it’s used by the CIA, but, of course, I can’t confirm that. What I can tell you is that the technology is

very advanced—this little microphone can pick up conversations from across a noisy, crowded room and, with the right filtering systems, can even isolate them.”

Diane inspected the pin with apparent fascination. “And you’re certain that this was indeed a microphone and not just a pin?”

“Well, as you know, I’ve been looking into Clausen’s past for a long time now, and a week after the show, I managed to obtain some more photographs.”

A new photograph flashed on the screen. Though a bit grainy, it was a picture of the same man who’d been wearing the USA pin.

“This photo was taken in Florida, outside Clausen’s office. As you can see, the man is heading inside. His name is Rex Moore, and he’s actually an employee of Clausen’s. He’s worked with Clausen for two years.”

“Ooohhhh!” Alvin shouted, and the rest of the broadcast, which was winding down, anyway, was drowned out as others, jealous or not, joined in with hoots and hollers. The free booze had worked its magic, and Jeremy was deluged with congratulations after the show had ended.

“You were fantastic,” Nate said. At forty-three, Nate was short and balding and had a tendency to wear suits that were just a bit too tight in the waist. No matter, the man was energy incarnate and, like most agents, positively buzzed with fervent optimism.

“Thanks,” Jeremy said, downing the remainder of his beer.

“This is going to be big for your career,” Nate went on. “It’s your ticket to a regular television gig. No more scrambling for lousy freelance magazine work, no more chasing UFO stories. I’ve always said that with your looks, you were made for TV.”

“You have always said that,” Jeremy conceded with the eye-rolling manner of someone reciting an oft-given lecture.

“I mean it. The producers from *Primetime Live* and GMA keep calling, talking about using you as a regular contributor on their shows. You know, ‘what this late-breaking science news means for you’ and all that. A big leap for a science reporter.”

"I'm a journalist," Jeremy sniffed, "not a reporter."

"Whatever," Nate said, making a motion as if brushing away a fly. "Like I've always said, your looks are made for television."

"I'd have to say Nate's right," Alvin added with a wink. "I mean, how else could you be more popular than me with the ladies, despite having zero personality?" For years, Alvin and Jeremy had frequented bars together, trolling for dates.

Jeremy laughed. Alvin Bernstein, whose name conjured up a clean-cut, bespectacled accountant—one of the countless professionals who wore Florsheim shoes and carried a briefcase to work—didn't look like an Alvin Bernstein. As a teenager, he'd seen Eddie Murphy in *Delirious* and had decided to make the full-leather style his own, a wardrobe that horrified his Florsheim-wearing, briefcase-carrying father, Melvin. Fortunately, leather seemed to go well with his tattoos. Alvin considered tattoos to be a reflection of his unique aesthetic, and he was uniquely aesthetic on both his arms, right up to his shoulder blades. All of which complemented Alvin's multiply pierced ears.

"So are you still planning a trip down south to investigate that ghost story?" Nate pressed. Jeremy could fairly see the wheels clicking and clacking away in his brain. "After your interview with *People*, I mean."

Jeremy brushed his dark hair out of his eyes and signaled the bartender for another beer. "Yeah, I guess so. *Primetime* or no *Primetime*, I still have bills to pay, and I was thinking I could use this for my column."

"But you'll be in contact, right? Not like when you went undercover with the Righteous and Holy?" He was referring to a six-thousand-word piece Jeremy had done for *Vanity Fair* about a religious cult; in that instance, Jeremy had essentially severed all communication for a period of three months.

"I'll be in contact," Jeremy said. "This story isn't like that. I should be out of there in less than a week. 'Mysterious lights in the cemetery.' No big deal."

“Hey, you need a cameraman by any chance?” Alvin piped in. Jeremy looked over at him. “Why? Do you want to go?”

“Hell yeah. Head south for the winter, maybe meet me a nice southern belle while you pick up the tab. I hear the women down there will drive you crazy, but in a good way. It’ll be like an exotic vacation.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be shooting something for *Law & Order* next week?”

As strange as Alvin looked, his reputation was impeccable, and his services were usually in high demand.

“Yeah, but I’ll be clear toward the end of the week,” Alvin said. “And look, if you’re serious about this television thing like Nate says you should be, it might be important to get some decent footage of these mysterious lights.”

“That’s assuming there are even any lights to film.”

“You do the advance work and let me know. I’ll keep my calendar open.”

“Even if there are lights, it’s a small story,” Jeremy warned. “No one in television will be interested in it.”

“Not last month, maybe,” Alvin said. “But after seeing you tonight, they’ll be interested. You know how it is in television—all those producers chasing their own tails, trying to find the next big thing. If GMA is suddenly hot to trot, then you know the *Today* show will be calling soon and *Dateline* will be knocking at the door. No producer wants to be left out. That’s how they get fired. The last thing they want to do is to have to explain to the executives why they missed the boat. Believe me—I work in television. I know these people.”

“He’s right,” Nate said, interrupting them. “You never know what’ll happen next, and it might be a good idea to plan ahead. You had definite presence tonight. Don’t kid yourself. And if you can get some actual footage of the lights, it might be just the thing that GMA or *Primetime* needs to make their decision.”

Jeremy squinted at his agent. “You serious about this? It’s a

*nothing* story. The reason I decided to do it at all was because I needed a break after Clausen. That story took four months of my life.”

“And look what it got you,” Nate said, putting a hand on Jeremy’s shoulder. “This may be a fluff piece, but with sensational footage and a good backstory, who knows what television will think?”

Jeremy was silent for a moment before finally shrugging. “Fine,” he said. He glanced at Alvin. “I’m leaving on Tuesday. See if you can get there by next Friday. I’ll call you before then with the details.”

Alvin reached for his beer and took a drink. “Well, golly,” he said, mimicking Gomer Pyle, “I’m off to the land of grits and chitlins. And I promise my bill won’t be too high.”

Jeremy laughed. “You ever been down south?”

“Nope. You?”

“I’ve visited New Orleans and Atlanta,” Jeremy admitted. “But those are cities, and cities are pretty much the same everywhere. For this story, we’re heading to the real South. It’s a little town in North Carolina, a place called Boone Creek. You should see the town’s Web site. It talks about the azaleas and dogwoods that bloom in April, and proudly displays a picture of the town’s most prominent citizen. A guy named Norwood Jefferson.”

“Who?” Alvin asked.

“A politician. He served in the North Carolina State Senate from 1907 to 1916.”

“Who cares?”

“Exactly,” Jeremy said with a nod. Glancing across the bar, he noticed with disappointment that the redhead was gone.

“Where is this place exactly?”

“Right between the *middle of nowhere* and ‘*where are we exactly?*’ I’m staying at a place called Greenleaf Cottages, which the Chamber of Commerce describes as scenic and rustic yet modern. Whatever that means.”

Alvin laughed. "Sounds like an adventure."

"Don't worry about it. You'll fit right in down there, I'm sure."

"You think so?"

Jeremy noted the leather, tattoos, and piercings.

"Oh, absolutely," Jeremy said. "They'll probably want to adopt you."



# Two



On Tuesday, the day after his interview with *People* magazine, Jeremy arrived in North Carolina. It was just past noon; when he left New York, it had been sleeting and gray, with more snow expected. Here, with an expanse of blue skies stretched out above him, winter seemed a long way off.

According to the map that he'd picked up in the airport gift shop, Boone Creek was in Pamlico County, a hundred miles southeast of Raleigh and—if the drive was any indication—about a zillion miles from what he considered civilization. On either side of him, the landscape was flat and sparse and about as exciting as pancake batter. Farms were separated by thin strands of loblolly pines, and given the sparse traffic, it was everything Jeremy could do to keep from flooring the accelerator out of sheer boredom.

But it wasn't all bad, he had to admit. Well, the actual driving part, anyway. The slight vibration of the wheel, the revving of the engine, and the feeling of acceleration were known to increase adrenaline production, especially in men (he'd once written a column about it). Life in the city made owning a car superfluous, however, and he'd never been able to justify the expense. Instead, he was transported from place to place in crowded

subways or whiplash-inducing taxicabs. Travel in the city was noisy, hectic, and, depending on the cabdriver, sometimes life-threatening, but as a born and bred New Yorker, he'd long since come to accept it as just another exciting aspect of living in the place he called home.

His thoughts drifted to his ex-wife. Maria, he reflected, would have loved a drive like this. In the early years of their marriage, they would rent a car and drive to the mountains or the beach, sometimes spending hours on the road. She'd been a publicist at *Elle* magazine when they'd met at a publishing party. When he asked if she'd like to join him at a nearby coffee shop, he had no idea she would end up being the only woman he ever loved. At first, he thought he'd made a mistake in asking her out, simply because they seemed to have nothing in common. She was feisty and emotional, but later, when he kissed her outside her apartment, he was entranced.

He eventually came to appreciate her fiery personality, her unerring instincts about people, and the way she seemed to embrace all of him without judgment, good and bad. A year later, they were married in the church, surrounded by friends and family. He was twenty-six, not yet a columnist for *Scientific American* but steadily building his reputation, and they could barely afford the small apartment they rented in Brooklyn. To his mind, it was young-and-struggling marital bliss. To her mind, he eventually suspected, their marriage was strong in theory but constructed on a shaky foundation. In the beginning, the problem was simple: while her job kept her in the city, Jeremy traveled, pursuing the big story wherever it might be. He was often gone for weeks at a time, and while she'd assured him that she could handle it, she must have realized during his absences that she couldn't. Just after their second anniversary, as he readied himself for yet another trip, Maria sat down beside him on the bed. Claspng her hands together, she raised her brown eyes to meet his.

"This isn't working," she said simply, letting the words hang for

a moment. "You're never home anymore and it isn't fair to me. It isn't fair to us."

"You want me to quit?" he asked, feeling a small bubble of panic rise in him.

"No, not quit. But maybe you can find something local. Like at the *Times*. Or the *Post*. Or the *Daily News*."

"It's not going to be like this forever," he pleaded. "It's only for a little while."

"That's what you said six months ago," she said. "It's never going to change."

Looking back, Jeremy knew he should have taken it as the warning that it was, but at the time, he had a story to write, this one concerning Los Alamos. She wore an uncertain smile as he kissed her good-bye, and he thought about her expression briefly as he sat on the plane, but when he returned, she seemed herself again and they spent the weekend curled up in bed. She began to talk about having a baby, and despite the nervousness he felt, he was thrilled at the thought. He assumed he'd been forgiven, but the protective armor of their relationship had been chipped, and imperceptible cracks appeared with every additional absence. The final split came a year later, a month after a visit to a doctor on the Upper East Side, one who presented them with a future that neither of them had ever envisioned. Far more than his traveling, the visit foretold the end of their relationship, and even Jeremy knew it.

"I can't stay," she'd told him afterward. "I want to, and part of me will always love you, but I can't."

She didn't need to say more, and in the quiet, self-pitying moments after the divorce, he sometimes questioned whether she'd ever really loved him. They could have made it, he told himself. But in the end, he understood intuitively why she had left, and he harbored no ill will against her. He even spoke to her on the phone now and then, though he couldn't bring himself to attend her marriage three years later to an attorney who lived in Chappaqua.

The divorce had become final seven years ago, and to be honest, it was the only truly sad thing ever to have happened to him. Not many people could say that, he knew. He'd never been seriously injured, he had an active social life, and he'd emerged from childhood without the sort of psychological trauma that seemed to afflict so many of his age. His brothers and their wives, his parents, and even his grandparents—all four in their nineties—were healthy. They were close, too: a couple of weekends a month, the ever-growing clan would gather at his parents', who still lived in the house in Queens where Jeremy had grown up. He had seventeen nieces and nephews, and though he sometimes felt out of place at family functions, since he was a bachelor again in a family of happily married people, his brothers were respectful enough not to probe the reasons behind the divorce.

And he'd gotten over it. For the most part, anyway. Sometimes, on drives like this, he would feel a pang of yearning for what might have been, but that was rare now, and the divorce hadn't soured him on women in general.

A couple of years back, Jeremy had followed a study about whether the perception of beauty was the product of cultural norms or genetics. For the study, attractive women and less attractive women were asked to hold infants, and the length of eye contact between the women and the infants was compared. The study had shown a direct correlation between beauty and eye contact: the infants stared longer at the attractive women, suggesting that people's perceptions of beauty were instinctive. The study was given prominent play in *Newsweek* and *Time*.

He'd wanted to write a column criticizing the study, partly because it omitted what he felt were some important qualifications. Exterior beauty might catch someone's eye right away—he knew he was just as susceptible as the next guy to a supermodel's appeal—but he'd always found intelligence and passion to be far more attractive and influential over time. Those traits took more than an instant to decipher, and beauty had nothing whatsoever

to do with it. Beauty might prevail in the very short term, but in the medium and longer terms, cultural norms—primarily those values and norms influenced by family—were more important. His editor, however, canned the idea as “too subjective” and suggested he write something about the excessive use of antibiotics in chicken feed, which had the potential to turn streptococcus into the next bubonic plague. Which made sense, Jeremy noted with chagrin: the editor was a vegetarian, and his wife was both gorgeous and about as bright as an Alaskan winter sky.

Editors. He’d long ago concluded that most of them were hypocrites. But, as in most professions, he supposed, hypocrites tended to be both passionate and politically savvy—in other words, corporate survivors—which meant they were the ones who not only doled out assignments but ended up paying the expenses.

But maybe, as Nate had suggested, he’d be out of that racket soon. Well, not completely out of it. Alvin was probably right in saying that television producers were no different from editors, but television paid a living wage, which meant he’d be able to pick and choose his projects, instead of having to hustle all the time. Maria had been right to challenge his workload so long ago. In fifteen years, his workload hadn’t changed a bit. Oh, the stories might be higher profile, or he might have an easier time placing his freelance pieces because of the relationships he’d built over the years, but neither of those things changed the essential challenge of always coming up with something new and original. He still had to produce a dozen columns for *Scientific American*, at least one or two major investigations, and another fifteen or so smaller articles a year, some in keeping with the theme of the season. Is Christmas coming? Write a story about the real St. Nicholas, who was born in Turkey, became bishop of Myra, and was known for his generosity, love of children, and concern for sailors. Is it summer? How about a story about either (a) global warming and the undeniable 0.8-degree rise in temperature over the last one hundred years, which foretold Sahara-like consequences throughout the

United States, or (b) how global warming might cause the next ice age and turn the United States into an icy tundra. Thanksgiving, on the other hand, was good for the truth about the Pilgrims' lives, which wasn't only about friendly dinners with Native Americans, but instead included the Salem witch hunts, smallpox epidemics, and a nasty tendency toward incest.

Interviews with famous scientists and articles about various satellites or NASA projects were always respected and easy to place no matter what time of year, as were exposés about drugs (legal and illegal), sex, prostitution, gambling, liquor, court cases involving massive settlements, and anything, absolutely anything whatsoever, about the supernatural, most of which had little or nothing to do with science and more to do with quacks like Clausen.

He had to admit the process wasn't anything like he'd imagined a career in journalism would be. At Columbia—he was the only one of his brothers to attend college and became the first in his family ever to graduate, a fact his mother never ceased to point out to strangers—he'd double-majored in physics and chemistry, with the intention of becoming a professor. But a girlfriend who worked at the university paper convinced him to write a story—which relied heavily on the use of statistics—about the bias in SAT scores used in admission. When his article led to a number of student demonstrations, Jeremy realized he had a knack for writing. Still, his career choice didn't change until his father was swindled by a bogus financial planner out of some \$40,000, right before Jeremy graduated. With the family home in jeopardy—his father was a bus driver and worked for the Port Authority until retirement—Jeremy bypassed his graduation ceremony to track down the con man. Like a man possessed, he searched court and public records, interviewed associates of the swindler, and produced detailed notes.

As fate would have it, the New York D.A.'s office had bigger fish to fry than a small-time scam artist, so Jeremy double-checked his

sources, condensed his notes, and wrote the first exposé of his life. In the end, the house was saved, and *New York* magazine picked up the piece. The editor there convinced him that life in academia would lead nowhere and, with a subtle blend of flattery and rhetoric about chasing the big dream, suggested that Jeremy write a piece about Leffertex, an antidepressant that was currently undergoing stage III clinical trials and was the subject of intense media speculation.

Jeremy took the suggestion, working two months on the story on his own dime. In the end, his article led the drugmaker to withdraw the drug from FDA consideration. After that, instead of heading to MIT for his master's degree, he traveled to Scotland to follow along with scientists investigating the Loch Ness Monster, the first of his fluff pieces. There, he'd been present for the deathbed confession of a prominent surgeon who admitted that the photograph he'd taken of the monster in 1933—the photograph that brought the legend into the public eye—had been faked by him and a friend one Sunday afternoon as a practical joke. The rest, as they say, was history.

Still, fifteen years of chasing stories was *fifteen years* of chasing stories, and what had he received in exchange? He was thirty-seven years old, single and living in a dingy one-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side, and heading to Boone Creek, North Carolina, to explain a case of mysterious lights in a cemetery.

He shook his head, perplexed as always at the path his life had taken. The big dream. It was still out there, and he still had the passion to reach it. Only now, he'd begun to wonder if television would be his means.

The story of the mysterious lights originated from a letter Jeremy had received a month earlier. When he'd read it, his first thought was that it would make a good Halloween story. Depending on the angle the story took, *Southern Living* or even *Reader's Digest*

might be interested for their October issue; if it ended up being more literary and narrative, maybe *Harper's* or even the *New Yorker*. On the other hand, if the town was trying to cash in like Roswell, New Mexico, with UFOs, the story might be appropriate for one of the major southern newspapers, which might then further syndicate it. Or if he kept it short, he could use it in his column. His editor at *Scientific American*, despite the *seriousness* with which he regarded the contents of the magazine, was also intensely interested in increasing the number of subscribers and talked about it incessantly. He knew full well that the public loved a good ghost story. He might hem and haw while glancing at his wife's picture and pretending to evaluate the merits, but he never passed up a story like this. Editors liked fluff as much as the next guy, since subscribers were the lifeblood of the business. And fluff, sad to say, was becoming a media staple.

In the past, Jeremy had investigated seven different ghostly apparitions; four had ended up in his October column. Some had been fairly ordinary—spectral visions that no one could scientifically document—but three had involved poltergeists, supposedly mischievous spirits that actually move objects or damage the surroundings. According to paranormal investigators—an oxymoron if Jeremy had ever heard one—poltergeists were generally drawn to a particular person instead of a place. In each instance that Jeremy had investigated, including those that were well documented in the media, fraud had been the cause of the mysterious events.

But the lights in Boone Creek were supposed to be different; apparently, they were predictable enough to enable the town to sponsor a Historic Homes and Haunted Cemetery Tour, during which, the brochure promised, people would see not only homes dating back to the mid-1700s but, weather permitting, “the anguished ancestors of our town on their nightly march between the netherworlds.”

The brochure, complete with pictures of the tidy town and



melodramatic statements, had been sent to him along with the letter. As he drove, Jeremy recalled the letter.

*Dear Mr. Marsh:*

*My name is Doris McClellan, and two years ago, I read your story in Scientific American about the poltergeist haunting Brenton Manor in Newport, Rhode Island. I thought about writing to you back then, but for whatever reason, I didn't. I suppose it just slipped my mind, but with the way things are going in my town these days, I reckoned that it's high time to tell you about it.*

*I don't know if you've ever heard about the cemetery in Boone Creek, North Carolina, but legend has it that the cemetery is haunted by spirits of former slaves. In the winter—January through early February—blue lights seem to dance on the headstones whenever the fog rolls in. Some say they're like strobe lights, others swear they're the size of basketballs. I've seen them, too; to me, they look like sparkly disco balls. Anyway, last year, some folks from Duke University came to investigate; I think they were meteorologists or geologists or something. They, too, saw the lights, but they couldn't explain them, and the local paper did a big story on the whole mystery. Maybe if you came down, you could make sense of what the lights really are.*

*If you need more information, give me a call at Herbs, a restaurant here in town.*

The remainder of the letter offered further contact information, and afterward, he flipped through the brochure from the local Historical Society. He read captions describing the various homes on the upcoming tour, skimmed the information concerning the parade and barn dance on Friday night, and found himself raising an eyebrow at the announcement that, for the first time, a visit to the cemetery would be included in the tour on Saturday evening. On the back of the brochure—surrounded by what seemed to be hand-drawn pictures of Casper—were testimonials from people

who'd seen the lights and an excerpt from what appeared to be an article in the local newspaper. In the center was a grainy photograph of a bright light in what might, or might not, have been the cemetery (the caption claimed it was).

It wasn't quite the Borely Rectory, a rambling "haunted" Victorian on the north bank of the Stour River in Essex, England, the most famous haunted house in history, where "sightings" included headless horsemen, weird organ chants, and ringing bells, but it was enough to pique his interest.

After failing to find the article mentioned in the letter—there were no archives at the local newspaper's Web site—he contacted various departments at Duke University and eventually found the original research project. It had been written by three graduate students, and though he had their names and phone numbers, he doubted there was any reason to call them. The research report had none of the detail he would have expected. Instead, the entire study had simply documented the existence of the lights and the fact that the students' equipment was functioning properly, which barely scratched the surface of the information he needed. And besides, if he'd learned anything in the past fifteen years, it was to trust no one's work but his own.

See, that was the dirty secret about writing for magazines. While all journalists would claim to do their own research and most did *some*, they still relied heavily on opinions and half-truths that had been published in the past. Thus, they frequently made mistakes, usually small ones, sometimes whoppers. *Every* article in *every* magazine had errors, and two years ago, Jeremy had written a story about it, exposing the less laudable habits of his fellow professionals.

His editor, however, had vetoed publishing it. And no other magazine seemed enthusiastic about the piece, either.

He watched oak trees slide past the windows, wondering if he needed a career change, and he suddenly wished he'd researched the ghost story further. What if there were no lights? What if the

letter writer was a quack? What if there wasn't even much of a legend to build an article around? He shook his head. Worrying was pointless, and besides, it was too late now. He was already here, and Nate was busy working the New York phones.

In the trunk, Jeremy had all the necessary items for ghost hunting (as disclosed in *Ghost Busters for Real!*, a book he'd originally bought as a joke after an evening of cocktails). He had a Polaroid camera, 35mm camera, four camcorders and tripods, audio recorder and microphones, microwave radiation detector, electromagnetic detector, compass, night-vision goggles, laptop computer, and other odds and ends.

Had to do this right, after all. Ghostbusting wasn't for amateurs.

As might be expected, his editor had complained about the cost of the most recently purchased gizmos, which always seemed to be required in investigations like this. Technology was moving fast, and yesterday's gizmos were the equivalent of stone tools and flint, Jeremy had explained to his editor, fantasizing about expensing the laser-beam-backpack thing that Bill Murray and Harold Ramis had used in *Ghostbusters*. He would love to have seen his editor's expression with that one. As it was, the guy mowed through celery like a rabbit on amphetamines before finally signing off on the items. He sure would be pissed if the story ended up on television and not in the column.

Grinning at the memory of his editor's expression, Jeremy flipped through various stations—rock, hip-hop, country, gospel—before settling on a local talk show that was interviewing two flounder fishermen who spoke passionately about the need to decrease the weight at which the fish could be harvested. The announcer, who seemed inordinately interested in the topic, spoke with a heavy twang. Commercials advertised the gun and coin show at the Masonic Lodge in Grifton and the latest team changes in NASCAR.

The traffic picked up near Greenville, and he looped around the downtown area near the campus of East Carolina University.

He crossed the wide, brackish waters of the Pamlico River and turned onto a rural highway. The blacktop narrowed as it wound through the country, squeezed on both sides by barren winter fields, denser thickets of trees, and the occasional farmhouse. About thirty minutes later, he found himself approaching Boone Creek.

After the first and only stoplight, the speed limit dropped to twenty-five miles an hour, and slowing the car, Jeremy took in the scene with dismay. In addition to the half dozen mobile homes perched haphazardly off the road and a couple of cross streets, the stretch of blacktop was dominated by two run-down gas stations and Leroy's Tires. Leroy advertised his business with a sign atop a tower of used tires that would be considered a fire hazard in any other jurisdiction. Jeremy reached the other end of town in a minute, at which point the speed limit picked up again. He pulled the car over to the side of the road.

Either the Chamber of Commerce had used photographs of some other town on its Web site or he'd missed something. He pulled over to check the map again, and according to this version of Rand McNally, he was in Boone Creek. He glanced in the rearview mirror wondering where on earth it was. The quiet, treelined streets. The blooming azaleas. The pretty women in dresses.

As he was trying to figure it out, he saw a white church steeple peeking out above the tree line and decided to make his way down one of the cross streets he'd passed. After a serpentine curve, the surroundings suddenly changed, and he soon found himself driving through a town that may once have been gracious and picturesque, but now seemed to be dying of old age. Wraparound porches decorated with hanging flower pots and American flags couldn't hide the peeling paint and mold just below the eaves. Yards were shaded by massive magnolia trees, but the neatly trimmed rhododendron bushes only partially hid cracked foundations. Still, it seemed friendly enough. A few elderly couples in

sweaters who were sitting in rocking chairs on their porches waved at him as he passed by.

It took more than a few waves before he realized they weren't waving because they thought they'd recognized him, but because people here waved to *everyone* who drove by. Meandering from one road to the next, he eventually found the waterfront, recalling that the town had been developed at the confluence of Boone Creek and the Pamlico River. As he passed through the downtown area, which no doubt once constituted a thriving business district, he noted how the town seemed to be dying out. Dispersed among the vacant spaces and boarded-up windows were two antique shops, an old-fashioned diner, a tavern called Look-ilu, and a barbershop. Most of the businesses had local-sounding names and looked as if they'd been in business for decades but were fighting a losing battle against extinction. The only evidence of modern life was the neon-colored T-shirts emblazoned with such slogans as *I Survived the Ghosts in Boone Creek!* that hung in the window of what was probably the rural, southern version of a department store.

Herbs, where Doris McClellan worked, was easy enough to find. It was located near the end of the block in a restored turn-of-the-century peach-colored Victorian. Cars were parked out front and in the small gravel parking lot off to the side, and tables were visible beyond the curtained windows and on the wrap-around porch. From what he could see, every table was occupied, and Jeremy decided that it might be better if he swung by to talk to Doris after the crowd had thinned out.

He noted the location of the Chamber of Commerce, a small nondescript brick building set at the edge of town, and headed back toward the highway. Impulsively, he pulled into a gas station.

After taking off his sunglasses, Jeremy rolled down the window. The gray-haired proprietor wore dingy coveralls and a Dale Earnhardt cap. He rose slowly and began strolling toward the car, gnawing on what Jeremy assumed to be chewing tobacco.

“Can I hep ya?” His accent was unmistakably southern and his teeth were stained brown. His name tag read TULLY.

Jeremy asked for directions to the cemetery, but instead of answering, the proprietor looked Jeremy over carefully.

“Who passed?” he finally asked.

Jeremy blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Headin’ to a burial, ain’t ya?” the proprietor asked.

“No. I just wanted to see the cemetery.”

The man nodded. “Well, you look like you’re heading to a burial.”

Jeremy glanced at his clothing: black jacket over a black turtle-neck, black jeans, black Bruno Magli shoes. The man did have a point.

“I guess I just like wearing black. Anyway, about the directions . . .”

The owner pushed up the brim of his hat and spoke slowly. “I don’t like going to burials none. Make me think I ought to be heading to church more often to square things up before it’s too late. That ever happen to ya?”

Jeremy wasn’t sure exactly what to say. It wasn’t a question he typically encountered, especially in response to a question about directions. “I don’t think so,” he finally ventured.

The proprietor took a rag from his pocket and began to wipe the grease from his hands. “I take it you’re not from here. You got a funny accent.”

“New York,” Jeremy clarified.

“Heard of it, but ain’t never been there,” he said. He looked over the Taurus. “Is this your car?”

“No, it’s a rental.”

He nodded, saying nothing for a moment.

“But anyway, about the cemetery,” Jeremy prodded. “Can you tell me how to get there?”

“I s’pose. Which one ya lookin’ for?”

“It’s called Cedar Creek?”

The proprietor looked at him curiously. "Whatcha want to go out there for? Ain't nothin' for anyone to see there. There's nicer cemeteries on the other side of town."

"Actually, I'm interested in just that one."

The man didn't seem to hear him. "You got kin buried there?"

"No."

"You one of them big-shot developers from up north? Maybe thinking of building some condos or one o' them malls on that land out there?"

Jeremy shook his head. "No. Actually, I'm a journalist."

"My wife likes them malls. Condos, too. Might be a good idea."

"Ah," Jeremy said, wondering how long this was going to take.

"I wish I could help, but it's not my line of work."

"You need some gas?" he asked, moving toward the rear of the car.

"No, thanks."

He was already unscrewing the cap. "Premium or regular?"

Jeremy shifted in his seat, thinking the man could probably use the business. "Regular, I guess."

After getting the gas going, the man took off his cap and ran his hand through his hair as he made his way back to the window.

"You have any car trouble, don't hesitate to swing by. I can fix both kinds of cars, and do it for the right price, too."

"Both?"

"Foreign *and* domestic," he said. "Whaddya think I was talkin' about?" Without waiting for an answer, the man shook his head, as if Jeremy were a moron. "Name's Tully, by the way. And you are?"

"Jeremy Marsh."

"And you're a urologist?"

"A journalist."

"Don't have any urologists in town. There's a few in Greenville, though."

"Ah," Jeremy said, not bothering to correct him. "But anyway, about the directions to Cedar Creek . . ."

Tully rubbed his nose and glanced up the road before looking at Jeremy again. "Well, you ain't going to see anything now. The ghosts don't come out till nighttime, if that's what you're here for."

"Excuse me?"

"The ghosts. If you ain't got kin buried in the cemetery, then you must be here for the ghosts, right?"

"You've heard about the ghosts?"

"Of course, I have. Seen 'em with my own eyes. But if you want tickets, you'll have to go to the Chamber of Commerce."

"You need tickets?"

"Well, you just can't walk right into someone's home, can you?"

It took a moment to follow the train of thought.

"Oh, that's right," Jeremy said. "The Historic Homes and Haunted Cemetery Tour, right?"

Tully stared at Jeremy, as if he were the densest person ever to walk the face of the earth. "Well, of course, we're talking about the tour," he said. "Whaddya think I was talkin' about?"

"I'm not sure," Jeremy said. "But the directions . . ."

Tully shook his head. "Okay, okay," he said, as if suddenly put out. He pointed toward town.

"What you do is head back to downtown, then follow the main road north until you reach the turn about four miles from where the road used to dead-end. Turn west and keep going until you get to the fork, and follow the road that leads past Wilson Tanner's place. Turn north again where the junked car used to be, go straight for a bit, and the cemetery'll be right there."

Jeremy nodded. "Okay," he said.

"You sure you got it?"

"Fork, Wilson Tanner's place, junked car used to be," he repeated robotically. "Thanks for your help."

"No problem. Glad to be of service. And that'll be seven dollars and forty-nine cents."

"You take credit cards?"



“No. Never liked them things. Don’t like the government knowing everything I’m doing. Ain’t no one else’s business.”

“Well,” Jeremy said, reaching for his wallet, “it is a problem. I’ve heard the government has spies everywhere.”

Tully nodded knowingly. “I bet it’s even worse for you doctor folks. Which reminds me . . .”

Tully kept up a steady stream of talk for the next fifteen minutes. Jeremy learned about the vagaries of the weather, ridiculous government edicts, and how Wyatt—the other gas station owner—would gouge Jeremy if he ever went there for gas, since he fiddled with the calibration on the pumps as soon as the Unocal truck pulled away. But mainly, he heard about Tully’s trouble with his prostate, which made it necessary to get out of bed at least five times a night to go to the bathroom. He asked Jeremy’s opinion about that, being that he was a urologist. He also asked about Viagra.

After he had replugged his cheek twice with chaw, another car pulled in on the other side of the pump, interrupting their talk. The driver popped his hood up, and Tully peered inside before wiggling some wires and spitting off to the side. Tully promised he could fix it, but being that he was so busy, the man would have to leave his car there for at least a week. The stranger seemed to expect this answer, and a moment later, they were talking about Mrs. Dungeness and the fact that a possum had ended up in her kitchen the night before and eaten from the fruit bowl.

Jeremy used the opportunity to sneak away. He stopped at the department store to buy a map and a packet of postcards featuring the landmarks of Boone Creek, and before long, he was making his way along a winding road that led out of town. He magically found both the turn and the fork, but unfortunately missed Wilson Tanner’s place completely. With a bit of backtracking, he finally

reached a narrow gravel lane almost hidden by the overgrowth of trees on either side.

Making the turn, he bumped his way through various potholes until the forest began to thin. On the right, he passed a sign that noted he was nearing Riker's Hill—site of a Civil War skirmish—and a few moments later, he pulled to a stop in front of the main gate at Cedar Creek Cemetery. Riker's Hill towered in the background. Of course, "towered" was a relative term, since it seemed to be the only hill in this part of the state. Anything would have towered out here. The place was otherwise as flat as the flounders he'd heard about on the radio.

Surrounded by brick columns and rusting wrought-iron fencing, Cedar Creek Cemetery was set into a slight valley, making it look as if it was slowly sinking. The grounds were shaded with scores of oaks that dripped with Spanish moss, but the massive magnolia tree in the center dominated everything. Roots spread from the trunk and protruded above the earth like arthritic fingers.

Though the cemetery might have once been an orderly, peaceful resting place, it was now neglected. The dirt pathway beyond the main gate was rutted with deep rain grooves and carpeted with decaying leaves. The few patches of dormant grass seemed out of place. Fallen branches were propped here and there, and the undulating terrain reminded Jeremy of waves rolling toward shore. Tall weeds sprouted near the headstones, almost all of which appeared to be broken.

Tully was right. It wasn't much to look at. But for a haunted cemetery, it was perfect. Especially one that might end up on television. Jeremy smiled. The place looked like it had been designed in Hollywood.

Jeremy stepped out of the car and stretched his legs before retrieving his camera from the trunk. The breeze was chilly, but it had none of the arctic bite of New York, and he took a deep breath, enjoying the scent of pine and sweetgrass. Above him,

cumulus clouds drifted across the sky and a lone hawk circled in the distance. Riker's Hill was dotted with pines, and in the fields that spread out from the base, he saw an abandoned tobacco barn. Covered in kudzu with half the tin roof missing and one of the walls crumbling, it was tilting to the side, as if any uptick in the breeze would be enough to topple it over. Other than that, there was no sign of civilization.

Jeremy heard the hinge groan as he pushed through the rusting main gate and wandered down the dirt pathway. He glanced at the headstones on either side of him, puzzled by their lack of markings until he realized that the original engravings had largely been erased by weather and the passage of time. The few he could make out dated from the late 1700s. Up ahead, a crypt looked as if it had been invaded. The roof and sides had toppled in, and just beyond that, another monument lay crumbled on the pathway. More damaged crypts and broken monuments followed. Jeremy saw no evidence of purposeful vandalism, only natural, if serious, decay. Nor did he see any evidence that anyone had been buried here within the last thirty years, which would explain why it looked abandoned.

In the shade of the magnolia, he paused, wondering how the place would look on a foggy night. Probably spooky, which could prompt a person's imagination to run wild. But if there were unexplained lights, where were they coming from? He guessed that the "ghosts" were simply reflected light turned into prisms by the water droplets in the fog, but there weren't any streetlamps out here, nor was the cemetery lit. He saw no signs of any dwellings on Riker's Hill that might have been responsible either. He supposed they could come from car headlights, yet he saw only the single road nearby, and people would have noticed the connection long ago.

He'd have to get a good topographical map of the area, in addition to the street map he had just bought. Perhaps the local li-

brary would have one. In any case, he'd stop by the library to research the history of the cemetery and the town itself. He needed to know when the lights were first spotted; that might give him an idea as to their cause. Of course, he'd have to spend a couple of nights out here in spookyville as well, if the foggy weather was willing to cooperate.

For a while, he walked around the cemetery taking photographs. These wouldn't be for publication; they would serve as comparison points in case he came across earlier photographs of the cemetery. He wanted to see how it had changed over the years, and it might benefit him to know when—or why—the damage had occurred. He snapped a picture of the magnolia tree as well. It was easily the largest he'd ever seen. Its black trunk was wizened, and the low-hanging branches would have kept him and his brothers occupied for hours when they were boys. If it weren't surrounded by dead people, that is.

As he was flicking through the digital photos to make sure they were sufficient, he saw movement from the corner of his eye.

Glancing up, he saw a woman walking toward him. Dressed in jeans, boots, and a light blue sweater that matched the canvas bag she was carrying, she had brown hair that lightly swept her shoulders. Her skin, with just a hint of olive, made makeup unnecessary, but it was the color of her eyes that caught him: from a distance, they appeared almost violet. Whoever she was, she'd parked her car directly behind his.

For a moment, he wondered whether she was approaching him to ask him to leave. Maybe the cemetery was condemned and now off-limits. Then again, perhaps her visit here was simply a coincidence.

She continued moving toward him.

Come to think of it, a rather *attractive* coincidence. Jeremy straightened as he slipped the camera back into its case. He smiled broadly as she neared.

“Well, hello there,” he said.

At his comment, she slowed her gait slightly, as if she hadn’t noticed him. Her expression seemed almost amused, and he half expected her to stop. Instead, he thought he caught the sound of her laughter as she walked right by.

With eyebrows raised in appreciation, Jeremy watched her go. She didn’t look back. Before he could stop himself, he took a step after her.

“Hey!” he called out.

Instead of stopping, she simply turned and continued walking backward, her head tilted inquisitively. Again, Jeremy saw the same amused expression.

“You know, you really shouldn’t stare like that,” she called out. “Women like a man who knows how to be subtle.”

She turned again, adjusted the canvas bag on her shoulder, and kept on going. In the distance, he heard her laugh again.

Jeremy stood openmouthed, for once at a loss as to how to respond.

Okay, so she wasn’t interested. No big deal. Still, most people would have at least said hello in response. Maybe it was a southern thing. Maybe guys hit on her all the time and she was tired of it. Or maybe she simply didn’t want to be interrupted while she did . . . did . . .

Did what?

See, that was the problem with journalism, he sighed. It made him too curious. Really, it was none of his business. And besides, he reminded himself, it’s a cemetery. She was probably here to visit the departed. People did that all the time, didn’t they?

He wrinkled his brow. The only difference was that most cemeteries looked as if someone came by to mow the lawn now and then, while this one looked like San Francisco after the earthquake in 1906. He supposed he could have headed in her direction to see what she was up to, but he’d talked to enough women to realize

that spying might come across as far more creepy than staring. And she didn't seem to like his staring.

Jeremy actively tried not to stare as she disappeared behind one of the oak trees, her canvas bag swinging with every graceful stride.

It was only after she'd vanished that he was able to remind himself that pretty girls didn't matter right now. He had a job to do and his future was on the line here. Money, fame, television, yadda yadda yadda. Okay, what next? He'd seen the cemetery . . . he might as well check out some of the surrounding area. Sort of get a feel for the place.

He walked back to his car and hopped in, pleased that he hadn't so much as glanced behind him to see if she was watching him. Two could play that game. Of course, that presupposed that she even cared what he was doing, and he was pretty sure she didn't.

A quick glance now from the driver's seat proved him correct.

He started the engine and accelerated slowly; as he moved farther away from the cemetery, he found it easier to let the woman's image drift from his mind to the task at hand. He drove farther up the road to see if other roads—either gravel or paved—intersected it, and he kept his eye out for windmills or tin-roofed buildings, without luck. Nor did he find something as simple as a farmhouse.

Turning the car around, he started back the way he had come, looking for a road that would lead him to the top of Riker's Hill but finally giving up in frustration. As he neared the cemetery again, he found himself wondering who owned the fields surrounding it and if Riker's Hill was public or private land. The county tax assessor's office would have that information. The sharp-eyed journalist in him also happened to notice that the woman's car was gone, which left him with a slight, though surprising, pang of disappointment, which passed as quickly as it had come.

He checked his watch; it was a little after two, and he figured that the lunch rush at Herbs was probably ending. Might as well talk to Doris. Maybe she could shed some “light” on the subject.

He smiled lamely to himself, wondering if the woman he’d seen at the cemetery would have laughed at that one.