

The Novice Ghost Hunter

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“Brilliant. Really enjoyed this. Left me wanting more!” (5* Amazon Review)

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THE NOVICE GHOST HUNTER

By

MARTIN J. BEST

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."

"Hi hello Anna," Mal stammered. "Hi 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.