

# Chapter 1

NO SOONER HAD HE REMOVED THE CHUNK OF JET-BLACK Obsidian from atop his sermon notes than Reverend Ian Clark realized he had a visitor.

A ripple of electricity swept through the room, and the atmosphere tingled in its wake. It was a precursor to the manifestation, further evidence that his shrinking imagination—his world without wonder—had been invaded. The hair along Clark’s forearms bristled, and his body grew tense. He knew what was coming. The stench of burning flesh fouled the air, forcing his throat into a knot. He stood rigid by the filing cabinet.

Mr. Cellophane had arrived.

Clark swallowed hard, his mind churning in indecision. Should he look at the spirit? Sometimes if he ignored it, the thing would go away, seeping back into the netherworld from where it came. But he didn’t have time to waste. The girls would be here any minute, so he had to hurry. He gritted his teeth and turned toward the far end of the bookshelves, glowering.

The specter rose in the corner—its usual spot—and watched him with sallow eyes. An opaque, gauzy sheath seemed to cloak the presence. Pale organs throbbed beneath its translucent skin. It appeared to be a young man, or the remnants of one, caught between worlds. A demon or ghost, he speculated, maybe a transient from a parallel plane. How it had come to haunt the church, Clark could not say. Nor did he really care.

He’d been forced to call it something, what with the frequency of its visits and his interminable need to bleach existence of its mystery. *Beings aren’t anonymous*, he often reasoned. *Amoebas, yes*. As far as Clark could tell, Mr. Cellophane was more than an amoeba or an ectoplasmic phenomenon. His repeated attempts to evict the entity had proven futile—no doubt an extension of

his spiritual impotence. But Clark was history; soon the ministry would be nothing more than a bad dream. As far as he was concerned, the swirling bag of bones could rot over there.

The apparition rose to the ceiling and hovered, undulating; its head tilted forward, a brooding presence in the corner of the church office. Elastic arms braided with sinews dangled at its side as it stared dispassionately at the minister.

That look—that pleading, defenseless gaze—always unnerved Clark.

He wiped the moisture from his eyes and, with a type of resolute indifference, snatched his notes from the cabinet. He scowled at the glassy wraith—a childish, demoralized pout—and turned away. As he went to the coat rack and removed his black leather jacket, he sensed the sad, empty eyes following him. He flung the jacket over his shoulder and marched toward the exit.

“Leave me alone,” he muttered.

He marched out of his office and slammed the door. Clark stormed past Vinyette’s desk, dragging cords of the fetid vapors with him. Opening the front door, he peered into a dense spring fog. Intermittent droplets pattered the welcome mat, and something rustled in the camphor branches. Other than that, the parking lot was silent.

A groan of relief left him. At least he didn’t have to deal with Ruby and her fanatical entourage. Clark locked the door, rolled his notes into a tight baton, and plunged into the misty veil.



A chill clung to the church office, as usual. Ruby Case shivered and yanked the sleeves of her sweat jacket over her wrists. *Why was it always so cold in this building?*

Once again it was just the three of them, but Ruby didn’t mind. She had given up trying to generate enthusiasm in Canyon Springs Community Church. In a way she preferred the anonymity of her little prayer group. Vinyette, on the other hand, used it as motivation. “Goliath went down with one stone,” she’d say. “So’s the three of us should do some damage.” Vinyette was

not one to aim low. For Ruby, it was more about doing right than getting payback. The fact that her two best friends shared the burden every Sunday morning before church made the commitment a lot easier.

She slipped her eyes open and peeked at them. The girls sat as they always did—Vinyette propped forward with her elbows on her thighs, rocking back and forth, the tattoo on her bicep in full display, and Marje at attention, hands folded on her lap like a prim schoolgirl, eyes squeezed into a fine line of lashes. Vinyette had the lead—her natural position. Ruby smiled and shut her eyes again. She needed to concentrate and stop letting her mind wander.

As she settled in, something brushed past and sent goose bumps skittering up her spine. She thrust her eyes open, fully expecting to see someone standing near. There was no one. *Weird.*

Suddenly her insides somersaulted.

Ruby leaned back, forcing a metallic groan from the folding chair. She picked at her jeans, waiting, hoping for the wave of nausea to go away. Instead a flush of warmth cascaded over her, and the room turned fuzzy.

She unzipped her jacket and shook the collar of her shirt to let some air in. What was going on? Ruby blinked hard, trying to regain her mental equilibrium. She wasn't one to not be in control, and this, well, this wouldn't do. Her scalp tingled, as if invisible fingers caressed her hair. Maybe this was premature menopause. Like fifteen years premature. She frowned at the thought and kept flapping her collar.

That's when an image sprung into her mind, sharp and inescapable, and snatched her breath away.

Ruby slowly rose with one hand over her mouth, gawking at the vibrant impression that sketched itself in her mind's eye. She fumbled behind her for the chair, trying to steady herself, trying to comprehend what she was seeing, what she was feeling.

"Speak to him, Lord," Vinyette prayed in her slight Southern drawl, unaware of Ruby teetering in the circle. "Would you please

get that man's attention?" Marje nodded in agreement, her gold hoops swinging in confirmation.

Ruby swayed, fighting to retain control of her senses. "The boys, Vin," she mumbled with a lightheaded lilt. "Can you..."

Vynette snapped her eyes open and stopped rocking. She shouted something and leaped forward, grappling for Ruby, but she wasn't fast enough. Ruby collapsed. Her head struck the chair and sent it clattering. Then her body thudded to the carpet and she gasped.

Formless figures and indistinct sounds whirled around her, but the image remained. She lay spellbound, captivated by the bizarre vision.

It was stark in its simplicity: an immense gray tree with barren, arthritic limbs tilted on a high hill. Behind it stretched an unending curtain of crimson sky.

She commanded her body to move, but it could not. Even her heart seemed to freeze at the sight of the unfolding revelation.

The tree towered over her, its skeletal limbs like a vast umbrella speckled with blackbirds. She lay mesmerized, not at all fearful, just captivated by the terrible dream. As she studied it, her thoughts went to a single leaf blooming on a craggy bough, bright and green like newly sprung grass. It seemed incongruent, so out of place on the pale dead branch, like a glorious banner unfurling in some bomb-blasted war zone.

Ruby's bad leg lay crumpled underneath her. Someone wrestled it free and hovered overhead, shouting gibberish. Just behind her right ear a hot, sharp pinging began and tugged her back to reality. The vision dimmed, ebbed back into the recess of her psyche, the fuzz cleared, and she recognized her friend.

"Breathe, Ruby!" Vynette's forearm quivered, and the tattoo-green barbed wire shown under her receding shirtsleeve. If Reverend Clark were here, he'd make her cover the darned thing. "Call them. Hurry!" Vynette ordered someone. "Breathe!"

"No," Ruby gasped, struggling to sit up. "No."

"Stay down." Vynette placed her trembling hand flat against Ruby's tummy with the perfect amount of pressure.

“I can’t find the phone.” Marje stumbled past them in her heels, sending a stapler tumbling off Vinyette’s desk followed by fluttering papers.

“Then use your cell, Marje. C’mon!”

“No.” Ruby groaned, pushed aside Vinyette’s hand and sat up, still loopy. “I’m all right.”

“All right, my butt!” Vinyette glared at her. “You fainted. Nearly cracked your head open.”

Ruby touched the knot behind her ear and grimaced. The image of the tree finally faded. The coffee pot gurgled and the aroma hit her, as did a faint whiff of smoke. She wiped moisture from her eyes, drew a deep breath, and the church office came alive again. The lime green, low-back leather chair, excavated by Vinyette from some vintage thrift store, assured Ruby she was back on Earth.

“Here! Found it!” Marje held the cordless up. “Should I call?”

Vinyette stood and fidgeted with her turquoise rings, one after the other, biting her lip.

“No, Marje, I’ll be OK.” Ruby patted the back of her head to ensure her ponytail was intact. Marje stood ogling, and Vinyette knelt next to Ruby. They watched as she sat and brushed carpet fibers off her jeans. *Great!* She was now officially something she hated most—the center of attention.

Ruby drew her legs up and struggled to her feet.

“Careful.” Vinyette had her by the elbow.

Marje rushed over, picked up the chair, and steadied it behind Ruby.

“Here,” Vinyette said, “sit down. I’ll get you some water.”

She stomped across the room in her cowboy boots, plucked a paper cup from the water dispenser, and filled it. As she did, Ruby squinted and scanned the office to make sure the fuzziness was gone.

Vinyette returned and extended the cup, her long auburn hair gracing her lean frame. “What happened? Good Lord, Ruby. You scared the wits outta us.”

Ruby savored the cool water, which gave her time to consider

her options. She'd had intuitions before, subtle discernments about people or events. Her husband, Jack, called it her *baloney detector*. Sometimes harebrained words would pop into her mind, real off-the-wall like. Of course, she refused to consider herself psychic or profess some otherworldly calibration, but no amount of dismissal had stifled the gift.

Still, she'd never experienced anything like this.

She finished the water, brought the cup down, and squinted. "Is something burning? That smell. I can barely..."

Vynette and Marje looked at each other and started sniffing the air like a couple of hound dogs. After a moment, Vynette shrugged. "I don't think so." Then she pointed to the cup. "Do you want some more?"

"Please." Ruby coveted the chance to stall.

Spinning on the toe of her boot, Vynette clomped to the cooler again and refilled the cup.

Ruby surveyed her nails for damage as she pondered her next step. She'd heard about things like this before. Trances and ecstatic visions, however, were the stuff of religious wackos. The fanatics up in Northfork were always touting premonitions and foreign tongues. Once they announced that God had turned some members' fillings into gold. The ensuing media curiosity was short-lived when the church refused to have the miracle verified. Of course, this only buttressed Jack's cynical sentiments. He wondered aloud about hillbillies actually having enough teeth to turn to gold and why God should bother with starvation in sub-Saharan Africa when some yokel needed precious metals gracing his diseased gums. That was Jack. As much as she believed in miracles and hated validating her husband's warped sense of humor, Ruby was hard-pressed to concede *that* kind of miracle. Besides, if Reverend Clark learned that a parishioner of his church had had some wild vision, he would have a field day dissecting it—that is, after the board's inquisition. She clucked her tongue as she spotted a chip in the polish on her right index finger.

Vynette returned, and Ruby took the water and sipped it. Should she tell them? The thought made her stomach somersault

again. *Why not?* Vynette and Marje knew how to keep a secret. They had proven that. However, something this big always leaked out. The last thing Ruby Case wanted to do was start a scene. Besides, she needed a better handle on this before she went yakking.

“You said something about the boys?” Marje peered at Ruby. “Right before you—”

“That’s right!” Ruby nodded enthusiastically. “That’s right. They’ve been sick. Sean brought something home from preschool, and I must’ve got it.” She smiled sheepishly.

“Yeah, but you passed out.” Vynette sounded skeptical. “That’s it. I’m getting my truck and driving you home. You can have Jack take you to the doctor.” She snatched her keys from the desk, jangled them, and arched her eyebrows in her usual mother-knows-best expression.

Ruby scrunched her lips. “Mmm, well...”

“Don’t you dare.”

The haunting dreamscape lingered—she could feel it. The invisible fingers were nearby, waiting to draw Ruby back.

Gulping the last of the water, she crumpled the paper cup in her fist. “I just...I probably caught something, Vin. I’m feeling better now.” She studied the chip in her soft ivory polish and said unconvincingly, “Really.”