

ONE MAN'S EFFORTS TO RELEASE THE SPIRIT
OF HIS DEAD WIFE INTO THE NEXT WORLD.

MYRIAD *of* CORRIDORS

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *AFTER THE DREAM*

STAN MASON

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Myriad of Corridors

by
Stan Mason

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It was the time of year when darkness fell early like a great blanket blotting out the light. The cold weather was in evidence and the weather forecasters predicted that snow was about to arrive. Hunter started to clear his desk at the office and sat still in his executive chair for a moment reflecting the events of the day. At breakfast, that morning, he had read his horoscope in the national newspaper which told him that his stars were in the wrong places and that he would face incidents that were not going to please him. It was true in every respect for it was his destiny to experience them, First of all, his car wouldn't start because the battery was flat so he was late for work which didn't go down well with his senior manager. Then he accidentally spilled a cup of coffee on his desk which ran out over his trousers. After that, he was forced to fire a member of staff under orders from his boss, on the grounds that the woman was incompetent, forcing her to leave by the end of the week. And lastly, he had to deal with a case of theft by a member of staff who fervently denied the crime.

He left the office under a cloud and arrived home a short while later. He was puzzled to note that none of the lights had been switched on. His wife, Ruth, should have been cooking the evening meal but she couldn't do it in the dark. They had been married for seven years and were without children mainly because Ruth had a problem conceiving and the IVF treatment hadn't worked. Nonetheless, they carried on regardless although their attitudes towards each other had begun to change and, over the past year. The marriage had started to founder. Hunter had arranged for them to go on a holiday abroad in an effort to change their environment so that they might be able to restore the situation. Relationships were such a delicate thing to handle and it was common knowledge that after a number of years of

marriage many people began to feel differently about each other. The Hunters were no different!

He opened the front door and called out her name but there was no reply as he switched on the lights. Moving into the kitchen, he was surprised to find that no one was there and after going into the lounge he went upstairs to the bedrooms. Where was she? All the lights were out and his wife wasn't there. He returned to the lounge and sat on the settee trying to think whether she had told him that she was going somewhere but he had forgotten, but nothing came to mind. It had turned out to be one of those bad days in his life... a dark evil day. In due course he went to the kitchen to make himself a meal and then saw an envelope resting on the table. He opened it to read a 'Dear John' letter. She told him that she was bored with her life and wanted time to herself. There was no one else in her life but she was leaving him for good to do something exciting and romantic. She would come and see the children in due course but their marriage was at an end.

He read the letter twice and was devastated. Although things hadn't been right with them for some time, this was a bolt from the blue. He returned to the lounge and reflected the situation. It was true that he had been unfaithful with a female client, Arabella, and had spent some nights with her, having told his wife that he had to visit a client in the north for the company. It had been quite clear to him that Arabella only had the affair with him to obtain a lucrative contract but he had taken advantage of the situation. It was then that news came to shake him even further.

The doorbell rang and he faced two plain-clothed policemen who showed him their warrant cards.

'I'm afraid we have some bad news, Mr. Hunter,' stated the first officer. 'We're sorry to have to tell you that your wife has been killed in a hit-and-run accident about half a mile away from here. We'd like you to come to the morgue tomorrow to identify the body.'

Hunter stood there in a state of shock. Ruth dead! He couldn't believe it. He had a sinking feeling about the fate of his wife at

that moment because throughout his life, death had followed him closely albeit he was given a reprieve on each occasion. In truth, he was often aware of the score before the deathly event actually happened. It began when his sister died of leukaemia at the age of six. His mother was distraught at the loss. However less than three months later she stepped off the kerb on a zebra crossing without looking and was knocked down by a passing vehicle. Then there was the case of him and two friends, Jake and Henry, going down to the local lake for a swim when he was fifteen years of age. They spent an hour in the water enjoying themselves when Henry made the poor decision to go to the edge of the bay and dive below the water. Unfortunately, he went too far down too swiftly to strike his head on a rock. When his body surfaced he was dead. Five years later, Hunter went on a climbing trip with three other experienced mountaineers. Foolishly, it was their intention to climb the north face of the Eiger in a very swift time so that they could have their names published in the Guinness Book of Records. The journey was progressing well on the difficult snow-covered slopes when a piton wrenched itself loose and one of the men left the side of the mountain to hover over dangerous jagged rocks over a thousand feet below. The force of the fall caused the rope to rub and fray against the rocks. Within a few minutes, the strands gradually tore themselves apart and the rope snapped causing the mountaineer to fall to an untimely death. To prove that the Grim Reaper followed him everywhere, there was another event when he and two others flew in a Cessna aeroplane one weekend to travel to Lyons in France. They cleared the English Channel and continued across the French countryside until they came to the Massif Central. At that point the engine cut out and it became necessary for the aircraft to make a crash landing. The pilot lost control of the plane which had the misfortune to hit a cottage in a clearing. Hunter emerge from the wreckage with a cut on his forehead and a few sore ribs but the pilot sitting beside him died of serious head wounds. And so it was with his wife, Ruth. The death syndrome had overwhelmed her as a result of his closeness

to her. It was quite clear to him that anyone who befriended him made a date with death.

He stood looking out of the bedroom window of his house convincing himself that he was a fool... a complete and utter fool. He considered that it was a punishment for his affair with Arabella. Her unsolicited visit to his office had been made in the hope of winning a substantial contract to decorate his office building. As a professional commercial decorator she was not indifferent to cold calling. However, in truth, she was a femme fatale! He had been strongly attracted to her from the moment he had cast his eyes on her. After all, she was a very beautiful woman, who could easily have passed for a fashion model, wearing a smart low-cut light grey dress which displayed a large cleft of a full-blown bosom and ending high above her long lovely stylish knees. He had stared at her gorgeous face, her sensuous lips, her beautiful large dark eyes and, within seconds, he became so overwhelmed by her presence that he began to experience strong feelings of sexual emotion rising within him. It had never happened to him so strongly before but suddenly he began to throw caution to the winds in a moment of lust. Hunter knew the danger of breaking his vows but Arabella was so different to any woman he had ever seen before that he became overwhelmed by her. As far as she was concerned, as a professional woman, she cared little what she did as long as she won a contract. When she saw the look of lust in Hunter's eyes, she knew immediately that her battle had been won. Without wasting any time, the dialogue between them advanced at a rate of knots and he took her on a number of occasions to a hotel booking in with the name of Mr. & Mrs. Smith. It had all happened so quickly that it took his breath away. Each time, they made passionate love in bed together. The architect had given way to his lust and was on the way to destroy his marriage; for Arabella it was simply a means of concluding the contract. However, as the great poet Robbie Burns once said, 'the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley' After the policemen had gone, he became very angry. A hit-and-run driver had killed his wife and driven

off without even stopping to see whether she needed help. How reprehensible! How callous! How thoughtless and unfeeling!

He turned up at the morgue on the following morning to identify his wife's body and then went home covered with guilt at his affair with Arabella. He leaned against the door of the kitchen and began to sob heartily at his loss. Ruth had been a good wife... honest in everything she did... so beautiful. Only now, when it was too late, did he realise how much he had lost. How could he have betrayed her in such a fashion for a woman he hardly knew... someone who had seduced him to win a contract to decorate his office? He poured himself a drink from a bottle of whisky and swallowed it quickly, replenishing the glass without delay. The only alternative he had was to drink himself stupid to take the pain away. He felt so guilty... totally responsible for her death, even though he was not.

Guilt is a remorseful awareness of having done something wrong and the personal blame for his illicit affair wore very heavily on the architect. Despite all his efforts, he was unable to erase it from his mind and insomnia became a normal aspect of life because the arms of Morpheus did not embrace him at night... he failed to be able to get to sleep. Food was no longer a necessity for his appetite was lost to him. To compensate, he took to drinking almost a bottle of whisky every day to ease the pain that tortured him throughout the day and night. Nothing material seemed to matter to him any more. The faster he drank, the easier it became to handle the guilt. It was not surprising that his health began to deteriorate after three weeks of self-pity and personal punishment. He had lost a stone in weight and the fact that he was drinking heavily and not eating started to affect both his mind and his body. Occasionally, during the daytime, he would cry out in a long mournful manner like a wounded wolf in the woods in an attempt to ease his frustration but it failed to ease his conscience. At other times, he would sit solemnly in an armchair with a bottle of whisky in his hand staring vacantly at one of the walls in the lounge. All reason had left him... he considered that his life was

over. This pattern continued for a period of three weeks and it seemed that it would go on indefinitely until he died of starvation or eventually went insane. After hearing the news of his wife's death, Hunter imprisoned himself in his house, refusing to go to his place of employment. He was an architect working in the City of London employed by a large building company and, as a result of Ruth's demise, they granted him compassionate leave for as long as he desired. It was his own idea to spend his days getting drunk and lounging about the house half dressed, immersing himself in guilt as he continually rued the fate of his beautiful wife. How much people tended to take life for granted! The blind would die to see a gorgeous sunset in the countryside; the deaf would pay dearly to hear music again; those with terminal illnesses would give their souls to recover their health. On reflection, he missed Ruth far more than he could ever have imagined. She would soothe the pain of work from his mind each evening when he returned tiredly from the City, cook him his meals, make love to him in their bed, and satisfy all his needs. Why did he ever get mixed up with a voluptuous whore who bounded into his office that day holding a book containing photographs of decor? It was beyond all reason; beyond all logic. Why had he done such a foolish idiotic thing? He continued drinking heavily, looking more like a hobo with his unshaven face, uncombed tousled hair, and wearing the old dressing-gown which had become stained with liquor that had dribbled from his lips. He hadn't eaten for three weeks but it made no difference to him. He wanted to die while the guilt he suffered was partially expunged by the whisky that he drank. He was quickly poisoning himself to death. There had once been a rumour that drinking a bottle of whisky each day acted in the same way as poison and would damage the body's organs in a short space of time. Well he hoped that the Grim Reaper would speed up the process to visit him and relieve him of the torture he was going through.

One night after he had gone to bed, he fell asleep and dreamed of his wife his wife being struck down by a hit-and-run driver. It

wasn't the first time he had experienced the same dream but each time it advanced to the next stage. What would the next dream show him? Would he see the remains of his dead wife... with her bones being broken as she was hit... and the car driver fleeing in the distance? It was too horrifying to imagine! Then the dream changed dramatically much to his concern. He found himself spinning dizzily in a vortex with no means of escape. Round and round he spun until the action became too much to bear. At that point he opened his eyes to wake himself from the slumber hearing a strange sound which echoed throughout the bedroom... a sound he had never heard before. In his drunken state, he sat up in bed and stared around the room bleakly. He reckoned that he must have heard the noise in his dream when suddenly the apparition of his wife appeared at the foot of the bed. There she was wearing the floral dress she had liked so much, staring directly at him although her image was wispy and hazy almost like the mist which appears at dawn over a marsh. He shook his head and closed his eyes to erase the image from his mind but when he opened them again she was still there.

'Ruth,' he managed to say, believing that the whisky he had imbibed over the past three weeks was causing him to suffer delirium tremens. The exception was that instead of seeing ants, mice, spiders and pink elephants he was staring at the apparition of his dead wife.

'You deceived me!' she accused in a low moaning tone that sent a shiver running down his spine. 'You were unfaithful!'

'I'm so sorry, Ruth,' he apologised profusely, clutching at the bedclothes. 'I never intended to hurt you, my love. I was weak and stupid. I gave in to my inner feelings. I'm sorry... so sorry!'

'Your regret is of no concern to me,' she responded sharply in the same tone of voice.

'You have to forgive me,' he went on with a miserable expression on his face. 'You have to!'

'Forgiveness is an emotion not open to me any more. I am dead.'

Intrepidly, he rose from the bed and walked towards her. As he reached her, the vision vanished like a whisper in the night. His hands groped the place where she had stood as his bleary eyes opened widely with amazement. He pinched himself to prove that he wasn't dreaming. No... he wasn't. He was well and truly awake, convinced that Ruth had been there to visit him from beyond the grave. A host of thoughts passed quickly through his tired mind. How was it possible and what did she want? Was she going to come back to haunt him for the rest of his life? He shook his head sadly and turned to the bottle of whisky which he had left on the side-table beside the bed. He opened the screw top and was about to put it to his lips when he stopped. No... this was not the way forward! He needed to pull himself together. Ruth might return and he felt that he had to look decent if she did. Consequently, the vision of her standing at the end of his bed became the catalyst to help him bring his life back to normality. Her spirit was alive to say the least and he was positive that she would return. It was absolutely essential for him to be compos mentis for the next time she came to speak with him. Drunkenness was no longer an option and his well-being became the most important thing in his life. In his dull dreary mind, he considered that her visit was something unprecedented in the world of the paranormal. It was up to him to make the most of it.

The following morning he examined the spot where she had stood but he could find no evidence of her presence. He then went to the bathroom, shaved, washed, combed his hair, and dressed. Her visit had changed his life which was now more meaningful but he was determined to gain her forgiveness even though she had told him it wasn't in her power to grant it. However, that particular mercy meant so much to him. He returned to work and applied himself to his professional tasks although he was unable to take his mind off his dead wife and his infidelity. His change of attitude didn't mean that he had expunged the guilt from his mind but passing time seemed to have eased the strain on his conscience.

One week later, after a hard day's work, he arrived home extremely tired and fell asleep in an armchair in the lounge. A range of images passed through his mind during his slumber until suddenly he found himself spinning faster and faster down the same vortex, twisting and turning in agony until waking up sharply when it became too hard to bear. Looking up, in the privacy of his lounge, he faced the vision of his dead wife again, who appeared in the same misty form as before.

'My spirit cannot stay long with you,' she told him in vaguely whispered tones as he stared at her wide-eyed. 'Listen to me carefully!'

His mouth seemed to be filled with cotton wool but he managed to speak. 'I'm listening,' he responded weakly.

'My way forward in this world is impeded by another spirit who was known as Amy Chester when she was alive,' continued the ghost formally.

'Amy Chester,' Hunter managed to say briefly.

'She was raped, beaten and strangled. Until her killer is found she cannot go forward. Nor can I. You must find the person who killed her. Only then will she be released and I can then move on. Until that time, I shall continue to come back to you.'

'What are you saying?' asked the architect in a puzzled fashion.

'You have to find her killer!' The apparition of his dead wife seemed to be irritated that he didn't understand her demands.

'I have to find her killer?' repeated Hunter mystified.

At that moment, the vision of his dead wife faded and disappeared leaving him puzzled at her command. He stared at the spot where she had been standing but nothing was evident of the visitation. It was as though she had never been there at all in which case he believed that he might have dreamt it all along. How could he possibly undertake the task she asked of him? He was an architect not a private detective. How could he find out who killed Amy Chester, whoever she was when she had been alive? It would be easier to find the Holy Grail! Obviously the police had known about the case but they had failed to discover the murderer. If they

couldn't find the perpetrator with the multitude of police at their command, what chance did he have? Worst still, if he failed, as he was likely to, it appeared that Ruth would continue to haunt him for the rest of his life. And what then? Would she still haunt him in the after-life? He couldn't understand why his dead wife's progress to the next world had been prevented by another spirit. But then he couldn't possibly know the workings of the next world... not until he got there himself.

He reflected on the matter in depth wondering whether he should take the request seriously. After a great deal of thought, he realised that in order to act as a private investigator he would either have to ask his employer for more compassionate leave or quit his job altogether. How could he possibly tell anyone the reason for his actions? They would think he had lost his mind and tell him that he needed urgent medical treatment or that he needed to endure a number of sessions with a psychiatrist. Indeed, when he considered the details, he felt very much that way himself. He dwelt on the issue for quite some time, reluctant to make a final decision. Eventually, however, he approached his employer to enable him to engage on his new adventure and managed to convince his boss to allow him to take the three weeks' holiday allotted to him for the years ahead immediately. Whether that would be sufficient time for him to know whether he succeeded or failed was beyond his comprehension. However, the way was now clear for him to start on the trail. With his life suddenly turned upside down, he paused to reflect what needed to be done. What would a private investigator do? How would he start the ball rolling? Although he had ignored the news and never read daily newspapers, he recalled vaguely that Amy Chester's death had been published widely and she had obviously been on the police files so, initially, he needed to go to the library to examine the microfilm of the newspapers that published the story. The information on the woman and other details would be a useful place to begin his quest.

At the local library, he examined the microfilm of the published material, taking notes as he did so on a large notepad. If he expected to find many details of the case, other than the lurid sensationalism published, he was to be sadly disappointed. Only one other name was mentioned. It was that of her ex-boyfriend, but there were no addresses... no additional details that might assist him. The newspapers engaged in a great deal of print about the police and their activities, plus comments by a number of people involved in the case but none of it was helpful to him to find Amy's killer. He closed the notepad having written practically nothing except Amy's name and that of her ex-boyfriend and he left the library with an element of frustration. If his investigation was going to produce such little information he was never going to find Amy's killer. However, he knew that it was only the beginning. There would be many avenues to explore before he could think of giving up.

His next port of call was a confrontation with the police. Thinking negatively, he presumed that they would be unwilling for a stranger to start stirring up a mess of pottage on a case they had failed to resolve. With that in mind, he boldly strode into the local police station and asked point-blank to see the police file on Amy Chester. The Desk Sergeant stared at him oddly, using his computer to bring up the details.

'She was raped, beaten and strangled,' stated the policeman looking at Hunter suspiciously. 'Why do you ask?'

'May I see the file?' requested the architect.

'See the file?' The request stunned the Desk Sergeant. 'Why would you want to do that?'

'You wouldn't believe me if I told you,' retorted Hunter.

'May I ask your name, sir,' continued the policeman politely.

'Jeff Hunter. I'm a private investigator.'

There was a pause as the policeman stared at him strangely. 'Amy Chester was killed four months ago,' he went on. 'Why are you interested in the case? Do you have further evidence?'

'If I could just see the file...'

The Desk Sergeant interrupted him as he repeated the question. 'Do you have further evidence?'

'I think I have,' lied Hunter, desperate to progress his demand.

'Then you should talk to DI Watson!' interrupted the policeman sharply. 'He was in charge of the case.'

'Roger Watson,' forwarded Hunter with delight. 'I know him. I was the architect who built this station. I discussed the plans with him at the time.'

'I see,' retorted the Desk Sergeant. 'You were an architect then. Now you're a private investigator!' He stared at the visitor suspiciously.

'Just for the time being,' commented Hunter realising that he had been caught out. 'It's of vital importance that I find Amy Chester's killer.'

The policeman stared at him strangely. 'Now why would you want to do that after we used most of the police force to investigate the matter fully and been found wanting?'

Hunter's face puckered up as he felt his boldness drifting away. 'If I told you, you wouldn't believe me.'

'Try me!' came the swift response.

'I think I'd rather talk to Roger Watson.'

The Desk Sergeant paused for a moment and then picked up a telephone receiver dialling a single-digit number. 'Roger... can you come to the front desk. We have an architect-cum-private investigator who say he knows you. He wants to see the file on Amy Chester because he says it's vital that he finds her killer.' He replaced the receiver. 'He's on his way,' he said, staring suspiciously at the architect. 'Please take a seat over there.'

Watson arrived shortly recognising Hunter immediately. They shook hands and he led him into an interview room where the two men sat facing each other.

'You asked to see the file on Amy Chester,' he began. 'Why?'

The architect looked uncomfortable wondering whether to tell the policeman the true story before deciding to come clean. 'My wife died recently,' he ventured slowly. 'A vision of her keeps

coming to me saying that she can't go forward into the next world until Amy Chester's spirit is released and that won't happen until her killer is found.'

Watson stared at him for a moment in disbelief. He was ill-prepared for a strange story of the paranormal. There had been many crank calls during his investigation of the case but here was a man who had come to express an incident which was entirely unbelievable.

'Have you told this story to anyone else?' he asked wondering how to deal with the matter. The architect shook his head. 'Well it's just as well you haven't. You'll be locked up as insane if you go round spouting that the vision of your wife keeps coming to you. I hope you realise that.'

'If I could just see the file,' pleaded Hunter passionately, 'I could progress the investigation. The case is still open. I think the public have a right to see police records, don't they?'

'No they don't,' came the blunt answer, 'but as I know you, I'll let you see it.' At that moment, Watson felt that he was dealing with a lunatic. The man had clearly lost his mind after his wife's untimely death and it was his misfortune that he had come to his police station. His main aim was to get rid of him as quickly as possible in the hope that Hunter left the police station and never returned again.

He left the room and came back five minutes later with the file in his hand. The architect removed a pen and notepad from his pocket and wrote down a number of details. He stared at the four photographs in front of him. Three of them showed Amy's face which had been crushed badly above the left eye. His expression indicated the way he felt about the murder.

'Awful, isn't it?' commented Watson sombrely.

'How could someone do that to a woman?' asked the architect, shaking his head slowly before closing the file and passing it back to the policeman.

Watson re-opened the file to look at the photographs. 'Well,' he said jokingly, which was totally unwarranted anecdote. 'I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy.'

Hunter was less than amused by the remark and his expression made his feelings clear. 'Where are Amy's personal effects?' he went on, pretending not to have heard the policeman.

'They were passed back to her mother after forensics had finished with them. Just the normal things. A watch. A necklace, two rings, a diary. I think that was it.'

'One last question,' he said finally. 'What was Amy wearing when she was found?'

The policeman stared at him gloomily. 'She wore a scarlet blouse which was torn and all the buttons were missing, nothing else. No skirt or panties.'

Hunter grunted as he made brief notes in his notepad thanking Watson for his co-operation. He left the police station and went directly to a cafeteria where he read his notes over a cup of coffee. At least he had more information than he had gathered at the library. He looked down at the notepad. 'Amy Chester, nineteen years of age. Worked for Hamptons, as a supermarket cashier. Lived at 16, Acacia Terrace. Her mother lived down the same street at number 44. Brown hair, brown eyes, five feet six inches tall, weighing eight stone five ounces. Her ex-boyfriend: Tom Houghton, lived at 77, Oakhill Road. Raped, beaten and strangled. Found practically naked on Vernon Beach.'

At least he now had some key leads although each person mentioned had clearly been well interviewed by the police. Although there must have been suspects, they had not found evidence to prove anyone guilty and it was quite likely that he would suffer the same fate. He screwed up his face with frustration as he viewed the task. Oh, to be like the star television detectives such as Columbo, Jessica Fletcher, Jane Marple, Hercules Poirot and Quincy. They all seemed to make it so simple, finding clues which entrapped murderers in their respective television programmes. As an architect, with no investigative skills, how could he possibly

match their powers of detection? Well he couldn't detract from the quest so he decided to start with the ex-boyfriend and travelled to the man's home later that evening.

'Tom Houghton?' he began, as the young man opened the door at 77 Oakhill Road.

'Who wants to know?' the question was fired like a bullet from a gun.

'My name's Jeff Hunter,' replied the architect. 'I'm a private investigator. I'd like to talk to you about Amy Chester.'

'The police already questioned me over and over again,' replied the young man harshly. 'I've had it with questions! It's definitely over.' He went to shut the door but Hunter placed his foot in the doorway to prevent it closing.

'No it's not!' he snapped curtly. 'It's not over!'

'Get your foot out of the door or I'll call the police and have you arrested for trespassing!' snarled Houghton angrily.

'She can't get to the other world if I don't find her killer.' The words echoed in the silence that followed.

The young man stared at him puzzled by the remark. 'What did you say?'

'I said her spirit can't get to the next world until I find her killer.'

'Are you saying she spoke with you?' There question came in a moment of suspense.

'Not her. My dead wife did. She can't go forward until Amy Chester's killer's found.'

'She actually spoke to you?'

'I've seen her apparition twice recently.'

There was a long pause as Houghton absorbed the information. Then he opened the door widely. 'You'd better come in,' he invited rather reluctantly. Hunter entered and found himself in a small lounge. 'What's this all about? What do you mean her spirit can't get to the next world?'

The architect sat down in on old armchair that had seen far better days. He began to explain the vision of his dead wife and told the young man of his quest.

‘Is this some sort of a wind-up?’ challenged Houghton. ‘Did Charlie Furbanks send you?’

‘It’s all true, I assure you. I’d like to ask you a few questions, if that’s all right,’ continued the architect.

By this time, Houghton was all ears. As a aficionado of the paranormal he was well acquainted with ghosts, apparitions and visions. The fact that his visitor had seen one... on two occasions... and was involving him with his ex-girl friend, was of great interest to him. ‘Go on,’ he concurred swiftly.

‘Tell me about your relationship,’ advanced Hunter.

‘We met at a party. She lived here for five weeks. We had an argument and parted. It’s as simple as that.’

‘It’s never quite that simple,’ related the architect sagely. ‘Did she leave you for someone else?’

‘Not to my knowledge. Our argument was over marriage. She wanted to; I didn’t. She kept her apartment while she was with me and went back to it afterwards.’ The interview continued with questions on which places they went to, with whom, what other people were their friends, what Amy told him in private, details of the time her attitude changed, whether anyone had stalked her, and a variety of other information. Hunter took notes on everything the young man told him and rose to leave later with a dozen thoughts going through his mind.

‘Here’s my card,’ he suggested before he left. ‘Call me if anything else comes to mind.’

The young man took the card and asked one final question. ‘I’m clued up on the paranormal,’ he said. ‘Do you think you could include me in your investigation? I’d like to become involved.’

Hunter allowed the idea to run through his mind for a moment and then nodded. ‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘I’d like that. But you’ll have to bear with me for a while. I’m new to this game.’

He left wondering how the police could have been suspicious of the ex-boyfriend when they questioned him. There was no doubt in the architect’s mind that the young man was totally innocent. But there was the assertion that most people who are raped and

murdered are known by their killer. That was a point he had to retain in his memory. It was possible that Amy's killer might have been someone she knew.

Hunter returned to his house that evening deep in thought. He had agreed to allow Houghton to join the investigation with him but the last thing he needed was someone else to burden him on his quest. The young man was really only interested in the paranormal developments, caring little for finding Amy's murderer, therefore in the long run his contribution would not be worth a fig. There was no alternative but to go it alone. He began to place pages of notes on the wall of his study, firstly identifying Amy at the top and then drawing a diagonal line to Houghton on the right-hand side. If he was going to operate professionally he needed to do it in the same style as the police. There wasn't much to go on at present but, in time, the picture would build up and his efforts would produce evidence that he could see without reference to the notes in his notepad. He had visited Amy's ex-boyfriend... next was the turn of her mother. What would she be like... a woman who allowed her daughter to leave home at an early age? What was their relationship? Were they loving... or did they fight? He was determined to find the answers to such questions.

The following morning he went to Amy's mother's house but discovered that she wasn't at home. A nosey neighbour, watching him from behind a net curtain next door, emerged eventually.

'Looking for Mrs. Chester?' she asked with interest.

'I am,' declared Hunter. He suddenly realised that he might get more out of a neighbour than the woman he had come to see.

'She works in the Chinese laundry down the road,' revealed the woman. 'Comes back at ten past five. Do you want to leave a message?'

'I wanted to find out some details about her daughter.' He held his breath for a moment awaiting her response.

'Amy... the dead girl?' she paused as he nodded.

'I'm a private investigator,' he told her.

'Oh, well, in that case you'd better come in,' she invited much to his surprise. 'I can tell you a few things. What do you want to know?'

He entered the neighbour's house and sat in a tiny front room which was filled with very modern furniture. She left him for a short while, returning with a tray bearing two teacups, a teapot, a bowl of milk and another one containing sugar.

'There's nothing like a good cuppa tea,' she said smiling broadly. It was quite clear that she was a lonely person who enjoyed having company.

'May I have your name for my records?' he asked politely.

'Of course,' she replied readily. 'Alice Prescott.' She sat down on an chair far too elegant for the room and poured out the tea. 'What do you want to know, dearie?' she ventured as she shifted to make herself comfortable.

'I want to know what kind of relationship Amy had with her mother,' he began, producing his pen and notepad.

'They fought like dogs,' revealed the woman readily. 'They argued so loudly, you could hear them through the walls. Hammer and tongs I used to think. Hammer and tongs. Her mother couldn't control her. She was a wild one. Well, just think of it... a young girl of seventeen, her hormones running wild. Her only aim in life was to flirt with men. She didn't have any hobbies that I knew of. Went clubbing every night. Used to come home tipsy. What does a mother do with a girl like that?'

'What about her father?'

'What father?' ranted the woman now that she was in her stride. 'He left when the girl was three. Ran off with another woman. Poor Elsie!'

'Elsie? Who's Elsie?'

'Her mother. Elsie Chester! She's had a hard life. Her only daughter raped and strangled at the age of nineteen. How can you get over a thing like that? Mind you, I saw it coming. She was a disaster waiting to happen.'

'Do you know the names of any men with whom she developed a relationship?'

'There was one who knew her from school. She went out with him for quite a while. But being young and free she was too fickle. Far too fickle!'

'Do you remember his name?'

The woman sat back to try to recall the name in her mind. After pursing her lips for a while her memory came to the fore. 'It was Mervyn. I remember that name because it's Welsh and I came from Wales, but I can't think of his second name.'

'Which school did they go to?'

'Lampshire Secondary,' related the neighbour.

She continued to rant on about trivial matters which were of no help to the architect and, after drinking his tea, he thanked her profusely for the information and left. He would have to pass the day until Mrs. Chester arrived home from work.

He had lunch at a nearby restaurant thinking about the information the neighbour had given him. So, in Alice Prescott's opinion, Amy was a wild young girl who flirted with men and she went clubbing most evenings. Well many young woman did the same thing. There was nothing terribly unusual in that. She had a boyfriend whom she knew from school named Mervyn who came from Wales and her relationship with her mother was far from satisfactory which was obviously the reason why she had left home to start up on her own at such an early age. He was now forming an opinion of the girl but it didn't help him find her murderer. In fact the details indicated that it could have been anyone. He needed to obtain a photograph of Amy and tour the nightclubs to see if anyone could provide further information.

Just after ten past five that evening, Elsie Chester returned home. She was a short woman with straying black hair who had