

## Chapter 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 afternoon 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.