



A Paranormal
Adventure

EGLANITNE

CASE
#1

Allie's Ghost Hunters

eglanitne - type of rose
"look up" - look up



CATHERINE JINKS

EGLANTINE

CATHERINE JINKS was born in Brisbane in 1963 and grew up in Sydney and Papua New Guinea. She studied medieval history at university, and her love of reading led her to become a writer. She lives in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales with her Canadian husband, Peter, and her daughter Hannah.

Catherine Jinks is the author of over twenty books for children and adults, including the award-winning Pagan series.



CATHERINE JINKS



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83 Alexander St
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Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

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To Ursula Dubosarsky, who planted the seed

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It happened after we bought this house.

I couldn't believe that Mum was serious, at first. She'd been going on and on about how wonderful it was, how it had been built in 1886, how it still had its slate roof and two original marble fireplaces . . . that kind of thing. But then, when we got out of the car, we came face to face with this dump. (Half of its windows were boarded up!) It was a terrace house, squashed between two other terrace houses, with a tiny patch of front garden and a sign out the front that said 'For Sale'. Only it wasn't for sale any more.

Mum and Ray had bought it.

'Needs a bit of work,' said Mum as she opened the front door. 'Look, kids! Look at the lovely patterns on the ceiling! I'm going to have all that linoleum taken up, and the floorboards polished. And everything will be painted, of course.'

Bethan sniffed. 'It stinks,' he offered.

'Well, that's because there were squatters living here for a while. But the smell will go.' Mum turned to Ray. 'I've aligned the *bagua*,' she said, 'and the Gate of Chi is in six, so that's okay. In fact the whole alignment's pretty good.'

Ray nodded. I should explain that while Mum may work in a bank part time, she's also an artist's model, and does some tarot reading on the side. What I mean is, she's a bit of a hippy. And she believes in all that Feng Shui stuff, where your house has to be arranged properly, for good luck.

I'm not sure if I believe in it or not.

'The kitchen's a disaster,' she said, leading us down the hall. 'We can live with the bathroom, but not the kitchen. I think I'll have the whole lot ripped out and replaced.' She said that the stove would have to be moved, because it was right next to the refrigerator – a placement that would cause 'danger and conflict'. Unless, perhaps, she put a plant between the fridge and the stove, to allow a smoother flow of energy from water to wood to fire? But that still wouldn't cure the bad placement, because the stove was sitting under the window. 'No,' she said. 'I think we'd better start from scratch. After all, a kitchen is the symbolic source of wealth and wellbeing in any house. We can't afford to get it wrong.'

No comment from me. Bethan remarked that the kitchen smelled like the old man at the railway station, and wondered aloud if *he* could have been living here. Ray wanted to know where his studio would be.

Ray is an artist, so he needs space to paint in. Mum met him when she was modelling for a life-drawing class, about five years ago. She likes his work because it's not just a bunch of squiggles and splodges and abstract shapes. She says that abstract shapes create an environment in which people find it hard to finish things. Ray paints people and houses and fruit and chairs, but not trees. He spends forty hours a week drawing trees for the Department of Forestry, so he won't paint them in his spare time.

Before Ray there was Simon, and before Simon there was my dad. But Dad lives in Thailand, now. He phones us about once a month.

'Are the bedrooms upstairs?' I asked, because the bedrooms were what really interested me. The main reason we'd decided to move in the first place was so that Bethan and I could have our own rooms. No eleven-year-old girl should be forced to share a bedroom with her eight-year-old brother.

‘Yes, the bedrooms are upstairs,’ Mum replied. ‘Yours is the one at the back, and Bethan’s is the little one next to the bathroom. You go up, if you like – I’ll just show Ray his studio.’

Ray’s studio was a kind of shed in the back yard; Mum said that it had ‘a lot of potential’. Upstairs there were three bedrooms and a bathroom, all sitting one behind the other. The big front bedroom was for Mum and Ray, because it was the nicest, with glass doors opening onto a balcony. The bedroom at the back wasn’t as nice, or as big, but it had a view of some trees out the window.

I was standing there, wondering who had painted the whole room red (yuk!) and who had left a suspicious-looking pile of rags in one corner, when Bethan called out.

‘Allie! Come and look at this!’

I’d better admit, right here and now, that Allie is short for Alethea. Alethea Gebhardt – that’s my name. Alethea means ‘truth’ in Greek, and Bethan means ‘life’ in Welsh.

Like I said, Mum’s a bit of a hippy.

‘Wow,’ I said, when I reached Bethan’s room. It was little and dingy, and it was covered with writing. There was writing scrawled all over the walls, the ceiling and the windowsills; only the dirty shaggy old carpet had been spared. It wasn’t the usual sort of graffiti you see around the place, either. It looked as if it had been written with a pen – not spray-painted – and it was neat and small and dense.

So dense was it, in fact, that you couldn’t read most of it. Lines had been scribbled over other lines, layer upon layer of script. You could only vaguely tell that it was writing at all.

From a distance, the walls appeared almost black.

‘Gee,’ I said.

‘Is yours like this?’ Bethan inquired.

‘Nope. Mine’s red.’

‘Red writing?’

‘Red paint.’

‘Why do *I* have to get the weird one?’ Bethan complained.

‘It’s no big deal, Bethan. We’ll just paint over the writing.’

‘I still don’t think it’s fair.’

When Mum saw the room, she said that the squatters who had lived in it must have been on drugs. Then she told Bethan not to worry, because the next time he walked into his room its walls would be white, its floor would be polished, and its energy would be very positive. Give her a month, she said, and we wouldn’t know the place.

Well, she was wrong. Six weeks passed, and she was still fighting with tradesmen and poring over laminex catalogues. She was always going off to visit the new house, and bringing back things she found there. Once she brought back scraps of ancient newspaper from under the old linoleum. Once she brought back a dirty blue bottle. (She said it was an antique.) The best thing she brought back was a book, which had been shoved under one of the stair-treads for extra support. (The stairs also needed repairing.) It was a copy of *Idylls of the King* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson – a book of poetry – and it was mouldy and speckled and eaten up by rats (or perhaps cockroaches). But you could still read bits of it, including the inscription on the flyleaf. Someone had written, *Eglantine Higgins, 1906*, and underneath had scrawled, *A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life. – Milton.*

We kept it for a while, that book, but we don’t have it any more. We got rid of it because . . . Well,

you'll see why. You'll see why when I tell you what happened after we finally moved in.

Our possessions were transferred on a Tuesday. When Mum picked us up from school and brought us to the new house, all our furniture was neatly arranged, although most of the boxes still had to be unpacked. The walls downstairs were white and yellow; upstairs, they were all white. The floors gleamed. There was glass in every window. The kitchen looked great, with polished wooden cupboards and clay-coloured tiles on the floor. Mum had made new curtains and hung them in the bedrooms. Even our cat, Salema, seemed happy with the change.

I went straight to my own room and lay for a while, glorying in the privacy. It was *my* room. Mine. No longer would I have to put up with Bethan's speedway set and football posters. No longer would I have to protect my Derwent pencils and animal skulls from Bethan's prying friends.

Then I heard him complaining, and went to see what was wrong.

'Look,' he said.

His room had been transformed. It was all white, and seemed much bigger, despite the cardboard boxes piled everywhere. Of course, Bethan had already begun to strew his Lego and dinosaurs about. Soon the floor would be impassable.

He's always been a messy boy.

'Look,' he said again, and pointed.

Down near the foot of his bed, along the top of the skirting board, I could see a line of script. *Once there lived in a bleak clime a white-bearded king*, it said. You could hardly make it out, but Bethan was most offended.

'The painters missed a bit,' I remarked patiently. 'What's the problem?'

'The problem is that I don't want it there!'

'So tell Mum. She'll paint over it. She's got leftover paint, remember?'

He stumped off to summon help, and Ray came up and dabbed a bit of white paint over the troublesome graffiti. We all thought that the problem had been solved. But the next morning, Bethan came down to breakfast grumbling about another missed bit, near the ceiling, above the window. He was quite worked up about it. When I stuck my head into his bedroom, however, I could barely see the writing from the door; it was the faintest grey smudge, impossible to read. I asked him why it bothered him so much.

'Because it does,' he said.

'You can't even read it.'

'I still don't want it there.'

'Why not?'

'Because this is *my bedroom*.'

My brother is very stubborn. He has red hair and freckles, like my mum, but he's stubborn like my grandmother. When he decides that he doesn't like something, there's no way you'll change his mind – not ever. So there's no use trying to convince him that books can be more fun than football magazines, or that a little bit of writing won't spoil a whole bedroom.

He'd decided that he didn't want the ravings of some loony squatter soiling his beautiful white walls. (And you can understand his point of view, I suppose.) So poor old Ray had to climb up a ladder, that evening, and paint over the words *His realm was wide enough, indeed*. Bethan went to bed much happier, as a result.

But the next morning he discovered, not one, but two more missed spots. *Many rugged mountains crossed the kingdom had been written under the windowsill. A barren soil and chilly sky made it seem poor* was tucked behind the wardrobe. With a sigh, Ray had to haul out the white paint again.

It was Thursday before Mum finally began to get suspicious.

‘Wait a minute,’ she said, peering at the line that was written directly over Bethan’s bed. (*Among these were great mines of salt and iron ore.*) ‘Wait just a minute. Are you trying to tell me that the painters missed this? I don’t think so, Bethan.’

Bethan’s freckles stood out sharply against his white face, the way they always do when he’s frightened or angry.

‘Well, *I* didn’t do it,’ he mumbled.

‘Look at me, Bethan.’

‘I didn’t!’

‘Well, it wasn’t me,’ I interjected, and Ray sidled out of the room. He doesn’t like family arguments.

‘I’ll just get the paint,’ he called, clumping down the stairs.

‘This is very silly and childish behaviour,’ Mum informed Bethan. ‘And if you do it again, there’ll be no TV for a month.’

‘But I *didn’t* do it!’

‘Don’t talk to me like that, thank you.’

‘You *never* believe me! I *didn’t* do it! Why should I?’

‘Don’t ask me, Bethan. Probably for the same reason that you wrapped the cat in toilet paper, and put all those silly things in the microwave oven.’

‘That isn’t fair!’

‘Bethan,’ said Mum, ‘I’m not going to argue with you. One more time, and you won’t be watching TV for a month.’

Well, I thought – that should do the trick. Bethan’s a real TV addict, you see. And Mum hates television, so she’s always happy to deprive us of it. I don’t think she’d have it in the house, if it wasn’t for Ray. Ray watches the news every night, religiously – he can’t do without his news and current affairs.

Anyway, I wasn’t surprised when Bethan stopped complaining about missed spots. Two days passed, and he didn’t utter another word on the subject. I noticed that he was looking subdued, and distracted, and that he wasn’t making his usual blunt remarks and dumb jokes. (Maybe Mum would have noticed too, if she hadn’t been so busy unpacking boxes.) In the end, I decided that some footballer must have been disqualified, or that Bethan had done something stupid at school. I mean, I was still eating like a vacuum cleaner and kicking his ball around the backyard. I didn’t think that anything could be *really* wrong.

Not until he came to me one morning, with tears in his eyes, and begged me to look at his room.

CHAPTER # two

‘Why? What’s happened?’ I asked.

‘I have to show you,’ he replied.

‘Show me what?’

‘Please,’ he said.

Now, ‘please’ isn’t a word that my brother uses very often, so I got a bit concerned. I looked at him closely, saw that he was seriously rattled, and stood up. I had been doing my homework, which was due on Monday, but some things are more important than homework.

I followed him into his room.

‘There,’ he said, pointing. ‘And there, and there. See?’

I saw. There were more scribbled black lines scattered around his white walls – about six of them. Some were too high up to read. One was on the back of his door: it said, *and his coasts were populous with fishermen*. Another was scrawled near the night-light.

I shook my head, slowly. ‘Mum’s going to kill you,’ I said.

‘But I didn’t do it!’ Bethan wailed. His voice cracked and began to wobble all over the place. ‘I didn’t, honestly, why doesn’t anyone believe me? Al, I *don’t know how they got here!*’

Frowning, I peered at him. He didn’t sound like himself at all. Usually, when he starts protesting, his tone is very defensive. This time he just gave the impression of being upset. Upset and scared.

‘Are you sure?’ I pressed him.

‘Yes! I didn’t! It was someone else!’

‘Who?’

‘I don’t know.’

It didn’t seem likely. But when I looked at the writing again, it occurred to me that Bethan wouldn’t have had the ability – let alone the patience – to write in such a precise, elegant way. Bethan’s writing is big and round, with some letters squashed up and others stretched out. Not only that, but he needs lines under his letters if he wants them to stay straight and even.

The writing on the wall was straight and even without the help of lines.

‘Do you think . . . I mean . . . it couldn’t be Ray, could it?’ I murmured, and we looked at each other.

‘Ray?’ said Bethan, in bewilderment.

‘It can’t be Mum. You saw how cross she was.’

‘It can’t be Ray. Why would Ray do it?’

‘I don’t know.’

Suddenly Bethan’s face went red.

‘It better not be you!’ he cried. ‘If it’s you, I’m going to *kill* you!’

‘It’s not me.’

‘Then who is it?’

I stepped back, and gazed around the room.

‘Let’s ask Mum,’ I said.

So we went downstairs. It was Mum’s turn to cook dinner, and she was making her risotto (which

isn't one of my favourites), humming as she moved around her shiny, brand-new kitchen.

It seemed a pity to spoil her mood, but we didn't have any choice.

'Mum,' I said.

She looked up from the chopping board, and smiled. 'Yes, my darling?'

'Mum, there's something I've got to tell you. And you mustn't blame Bethan, because it's not his fault. Honestly. He didn't do it.'

Mum's smile faded. 'Didn't do what?' she asked.

I took a deep breath. Bethan and I exchanged a quick glance.

'There's more writing on his walls,' I explained, reluctantly, 'but it's not his writing.'

'I didn't want to tell you, because of the TV!' he blurted out. 'I don't like it, Mum, really I don't. Someone's coming into my bedroom!' His voice cracked again. 'It's *my* bedroom! No one else should be going in there.'

Mum laid down her knife. She fixed me with a very grave and serious look.

'Alethea,' she said, 'I want the truth, please. Do you know anything about this?'

'No,' I replied. 'Cross my heart.'

'Bethan? If you're lying, Bethan, I'm not going to forgive you for a very long time. Do you understand?'

'I didn't do it!' he squealed.

'He couldn't have done it, Mum,' I said, as something else occurred to me. 'Some of this stuff is written on the ceiling. How could he have written it on the ceiling? The ceilings in this house are so high.'

'Well . . .' She was starting to sound uncertain. 'We do have a ladder . . .'

'But how would Bethan get the ladder up those stairs? All by himself?'

We stared at him, Mum and I. He growled, 'Well, don't ask *me*.'

'Perhaps I'd better have a look,' said Mum. 'Bethan, why don't you go and get Ray? He's out the back.' She wiped her hands on a tea towel, followed me down the hall and began to climb the stairs. 'You don't suppose this writing might be the old stuff?' she suggested. 'Soaking through the paint, for some reason? Maybe it was written in something that's reacting with the paint, as it dries.'

'I don't know,' I said. It was a reasonable explanation. But when we reached Bethan's room, and studied the writing, we began to have doubts. Surely, if the words had soaked through the paint, they wouldn't have been so clear and dark? Surely they would have been blurry?

'You don't think Bethan's lying, do you?' Mum asked me, in a low, worried voice. 'You don't think he's doing it himself?'

'No. I don't.'

'Not even to attract attention? I just – oh, dear. I hope this isn't a symptom of some kind of – I don't know – emotional problem.' Then she muttered something about therapy, and I was afraid that she might start mentioning alternative treatments like acupuncture again. (She's always suggesting that we have acupuncture, which I don't fancy at all. Injections are bad enough.)

'No, Mum,' I said firmly. 'That's not Bethan's writing. If only Bethan *could* write like that. It's grown-up writing.'

'That's true,' she admitted.

‘In fact, it’s more than grown-up – it’s old-fashioned. Like Granny’s used to be. Oh!’ And that’s when I realised. ‘You know what it looks like?’ I gasped. ‘It looks like the writing in that book from under the stairs!’

Mum shot me a quick, startled glance. I could see a hint of alarm in her expression.

‘But it’s probably a coincidence,’ I added quickly. I didn’t like what I’d just said any more than Mum did.

Then Ray appeared, with Bethan. They were slightly out of breath.

‘Ray, where did I put that book?’ Mum asked. ‘Do you remember? The old one, from under the stairs?’

Blinking, Ray thought for a moment. Without Ray, Mum would be losing things all the time. He’s very tidy and logical for an artist. In fact he doesn’t look like an artist at all. He has short hair and glasses, and he irons his shirts (even his T-shirts), and he’s always cleaning the paint from under his fingernails.

‘I know I packed it,’ Mum continued, ‘but I can’t remember – did I put it in the bedroom bookcase or in the bookcase downstairs?’

‘Neither,’ Ray replied, with decision. ‘It’s in that cupboard in the studio, with the old magazines.’

So I was sent to fetch the book. Naturally, I studied the writing on its flyleaf all the way back to the bedroom, growing more and more uneasy as I did so. When I finally reached Mum, I couldn’t get rid of the thing fast enough. Suddenly, I didn’t want to be touching that mouldy old book.

‘God,’ said Mum, staring at it. ‘God, Ray, would you check this out?’

‘Lordy,’ said Ray, adjusting his glasses. Bethan squeezed between them, and all three peered at the inscription on the flyleaf. Then they gazed at the wall. Then they fixed their eyes on the book again.

‘Jeez,’ said Bethan. He sounded both anxious and awestruck.

‘It can’t be the same,’ Mum said plaintively. ‘Not *exactly* the same.’

‘I can’t see much difference,’ Ray replied. ‘Compare the capital E in Eglantine with the one on the wall. There are a lot of ways you can write a capital E. These have the same loops. The same thickness of line.’

There was a long, long silence. No one wanted to come right out and say anything stupid. Not at first.

It was Bethan, of course, who finally couldn’t resist.

‘Do you think it’s a ghost?’ he squeaked.

‘Oh, Bethan,’ said Ray, and Mum remarked, in hollow tones, that there were no such things as ghosts – just concentrations of negative *chi* sometimes associated with past misfortune.

‘If there’s a ghost in this room,’ Bethan went on, sulkily ignoring her, ‘I don’t want to sleep here.’

‘It’s highly unlikely, Bethan,’ said Ray, in his gentlest voice. ‘I’m sure there’s another explanation.’

‘Like what?’ said my brother, sharply. He was really nervous, or he wouldn’t have talked like that. Not to Ray. With Ray, he usually mumbles.

But Ray didn’t take offence. He rarely does.

‘Like maybe the squatters found that book,’ he suggested. ‘And maybe one of them was a bit – you know – odd, and copied the writing, and now the writing is soaking through the paint for some reason –’

‘I’m still not sleeping in here,’ Bethan said, at which point alarm bells began to ring for me.

‘Well, he’s not sleeping in *my* room!’ I protested.

‘A bit of writing isn’t going to hurt you,’ Ray sensibly pointed out, laying a hand on Bethan’s shoulder.

Mum, however, was beginning to freak. ‘Negative energy, Ray,’ she said. ‘The balance in here can be good, surely?’

‘Why not?’

‘Well . . . I don’t know, but -’

‘I won’t sleep in here,’ Bethan declared, looking sick. ‘It’s giving me nightmares.’

That *really* made everyone sit up and take notice. Mum hissed through her teeth, and Ray asked, ‘What kind of nightmares?’

I quickly pointed out that everyone had nightmares, I had them myself, and it didn’t mean I had to move out of *my* room – but Mum shushed me.

Ray repeated his question.

‘I dream that I’m choking,’ Bethan mumbled. ‘And then I wake up.’

‘Just that?’ said Ray. ‘Nothing else?’

‘I don’t think so,’ my brother replied, vaguely.

‘And is that the only dream?’

‘Yes,’ Bethan admitted. ‘But I’ve had it every night since we came. And,’ he added, ‘I’ve never had it before.’

Choking, I thought. Yuk. But I didn’t let my sympathy get the better of me.

‘We’re each supposed to have our own bedroom,’ I remarked. ‘That’s why we moved -’

‘Oh, stop it, Alethea!’ Mum snapped. She was worried, I guess, but she made me jump. ‘Don’t be selfish!’

‘*You* can sleep in this room, if you want to,’ Bethan said to me, but Mum informed him that no one would be sleeping in his room that night. He would be sharing my room until the mystery was solved – or until the writing stopped.

‘And I don’t want to hear one more word out of *you*,’ she told me, ‘or you’ll be sleeping on the sofa.’

Which is how I lost my bedroom, almost before I’d had time to enjoy it. Boy, was I mad. It was so unfair! But I have to admit that, if I hadn’t been so keen to get Bethan out of my room, the problem might never have been fixed. Because I might never have concentrated so hard on helping to solve it.

CHAPTER # three

That night, Mum did three things.

First of all, she phoned her friend Trish. Trish is a masseur, and even more of a hippy than Mum is. They're both into tofu, and yoga, and Feng Shui, but Trish has a much wider circle of vegetarian Buddhist astrologer friends. So it didn't surprise anybody when Trish said that she knew a woman who was a member of a group called PRISM (Paranormal Research Investigation Services and Monitoring). If Mum didn't mind, Trish said, she would ring this woman and see if they could all get together.

Mum replied that it was okay by her. The more help we had, the better it would be.

The second thing that Mum did was ask me to make a note of every word scribbled on Bethan's wall. She explained that it would help us to determine whether anything was added overnight. She also asked me to underline every word on the wall with a red pen, for the same reason.

So I got out my journal, and copied down the mysterious script. Ray had to bring a ladder before we could work out what was written on the ceiling: it was more strange stuff about kings and sailors and seaports, and it didn't make much sense. But I wrote it all down, and underlined it in red, and tried not to think about it again for a while (because I had to finish my homework).

I thought about it that night, though, when I was lying in bed. I thought about the writing, and about Eglantine Higgins, 1906. If there was a ghost in the house (which there probably wasn't, but if there was), then it was almost certainly the ghost of Eglantine Higgins. During the daytime, this hadn't worried me. After all, a bit of ghostly writing never did anyone any harm.

At night, however, I have to admit that it freaked me out. I didn't like the idea of Eglantine Higgins drifting around in the next room while Bethan and I were dead to the world. Perhaps that's why I didn't sleep very well. I didn't have bad dreams, but I kept waking up with a start. I think I was half-expecting to find Eglantine Higgins hovering over my bed.

The third thing that Mum did, that night, was to take a long red hair from her head, stick one end of it to the bottom of Bethan's bedroom door, and stick the other end onto the base of his doorframe. She didn't tell us what she had done until the next morning. But she warned us, before we went to bed, that *no one* was to enter Bethan's room again before summoning her – and in the morning we found out why.

'Look,' she said, as we stood around Bethan's bedroom door in our dressing-gowns. 'See that hair? We didn't, at first. She had to show it to us. 'That hair is unbroken. Which means that no one went through the door last night.'

We gazed at her in admiration.

'Wow, Mum,' Bethan exclaimed. 'That's really smart.'

'Good work, Mum.'

'Clever,' said Ray.

'So if there's anything new on the walls,' Mum went on (pointing out the obvious), 'whoever put it there didn't come through this door.'

'Unless you did it yourself,' I volunteered, and she made a face at me.

'Very funny,' she said.

'Well, it's true, isn't it?'

‘Come on,’ Ray interrupted. He sounded almost keen, though he doesn’t usually get very excited about anything. ‘Let’s have a look.’

He pushed at the door. It creaked slowly on its hinges, like something out of a horror movie, revealing Bethan’s light, bright, echoing room.

We saw the new writing at once. We couldn’t have missed it: there were new lines everywhere – twenty-four, to be exact. (I counted them afterwards.)

‘My God,’ Mum breathed.

‘This is so unbelievable.’ I was the first one over the threshold. Timidly I advanced, clutching my journal and my blue fountain pen. *I am the proudest of my line* was new; it was inscribed at eye level, above the chest of drawers. I didn’t recognise *I have the wherewithal to defend myself*, either. Quickly I opened my journal, and began to copy out these most recent messages.

Ray went to the window. He rattled it. The catch was firmly in place. ‘No one could have come through here,’ he declared. ‘Not without leaving the catch open when they left.’

‘What’s happening, Ray?’ Mum asked quietly.

‘I don’t know.’

‘It doesn’t seem possible, does it? I mean, it doesn’t make any sense unless – well, you know what I mean.’

‘I’m sure there’s some chemical explanation,’ he replied – but not with any conviction, I thought.

Bethan asked when ‘that ghost woman’ was coming.

‘I’m not sure yet,’ said Mum. ‘Trish has to ring me.’

‘Well, it had better be soon,’ Bethan grouched, with a wary, sidelong glance at the walls. ‘Because I want my bedroom back.’

Happily for all of us, Trish called Mum soon afterwards, bearing good news. The PRISM woman (whose name was Sylvia Klineberg) would be visiting us that very evening. Sylvia had suggested half past eight, so if Mum had no objections, Trish would ring Sylvia back and confirm the arrangements.

Mum had no objections.

‘Come to dinner, won’t you?’ she pleaded with Trish. ‘Early, at six. Then we can be finished and cleaned up by the time she appears.’

I hate it when Trish comes to dinner, because she eats macrobiotic food – which is rice and not much else. It’s a bit bland. It also has a bad influence on Mum, who always starts talking about black bread and herbal teas and grinding her own grain. Personally, I like the food that she cooks for us now (except the risotto). I’d much rather have mashed potato and lamb cutlets than soy-and-birdseed rissoles.

Fortunately, however, at this particular dinner there were more exciting things to talk about than macrobiotic food.

‘It seems to me,’ said Trish, after much thought, ‘that your house must be sitting on the intersection of a lot of ley lines.’ When asked what ley lines might be, she explained that they were lines of energy, or life force, flowing over the earth. ‘Ley lines connect all the world’s sacred sites,’ she assured us. ‘And those points where ley energy paths converge are always prone to strange manifestations, because of the energy surges.’

‘Too much earth energy,’ Mum interjected, and Trish agreed that there was, indeed, a risk of imbalance.

‘What kind of sacred sites are you talking about?’ I asked, whereupon Trish began to reel off a list of them: churches, temples, stone circles, holy wells, burial grounds . . .

‘Burial grounds!’ Bethan exclaimed, his mouth full of food. ‘Oh, no. You don’t think this house was built on an Aboriginal burial ground, do you?’

Bits of rice sprayed all over the table as he spoke. Politely, Trish ignored them – or perhaps she didn’t see them. She’s a vague sort of person when it comes to things like electricity bills and table manners. Though she can be quite sharp about people’s feelings.

She looks a little like a ghost herself, with her pale, skinny face and floating hair and layers of drifting shawls and scarves and Indian cotton skirts.

‘I don’t think it’s likely, Bethan,’ she responded, with the utmost sincerity.

‘In America, haunted houses are always sitting on top of Indian burial grounds,’ Bethan went on, in a glum voice. Mum said something about dispersing the negative energy – with wind-chimes, perhaps? At least they would moderate the *chi* flow where different energies converged.

‘I don’t know,’ Trish replied. ‘Perhaps you shouldn’t start moderating energy flows until Sylvia takes a look at the place. She’s had a lot to do with manifestations like this. She may help you to identify the problem.’

‘How?’ Ray inquired, and Trish said that she wasn’t sure, exactly. She didn’t know Sylvia very well. Sylvia was a naturopath who had treated Trish’s friend, Alice. In her spare time, Sylvia went about investigating reports of paranormal activity for PRISM, which was a large organisation based in Adelaide. Trish had no idea what a paranormal investigator actually did.

‘But I’m sure it will be very interesting,’ she added brightly, and I could see that she had high hopes. Perhaps she was expecting that we’d all have to sit in the dark, holding hands and waiting for the spirits of the dear departed to communicate with us. I was expecting much the same thing myself.

As it turned out, we had the wrong idea entirely. When Sylvia knocked at the door and we went to open it, we were all very surprised at how *normal* she looked. There was no fluttering black cloak. No crystal ball. She had short grey hair, and neat pearl earrings, and she wore a pale linen jacket over navy-blue trousers. She was carrying a green gym bag.

After she’d been invited into the kitchen for coffee, she took a notebook and a tape-recorder out of the gym bag before she sat down.

‘Trish tells me that you’ve had unexplained writing on the walls of a bedroom,’ she said, once everyone had been introduced to each other and her coffee had been poured. ‘I guess you’d better tell me the story from the beginning. You’ve only just moved in, is that right?’

Mum said yes. She explained about the squatters. She described her improvements: the new kitchen, the new paint, the new window glass. She showed Sylvia the book from under the stairs, and – with many interjections from me and Bethan – related the strange tale of Bethan’s bedroom. It all took a long time. Sylvia made notes as her tape-recorder whirred quietly away. She didn’t say much. She just listened, and I couldn’t tell from her expression what she was thinking.

‘Do you reckon it’s a ghost?’ Bethan finally asked her, and she gave a half-smile.

‘That’s what we have to establish,’ she answered.

‘If it *is* a ghost,’ I said, ‘it must be the ghost of Eglantine Higgins. Because it’s got the same handwriting.’

‘Perhaps,’ Sylvia replied. She shut her notebook and turned off the tape-recorder. ‘I suppose I’d

better see the room, now,' she added, rising, whereupon we all trooped upstairs to look at Bethan's bedroom. ~~The door was shut, of course; it had been shut all day. No one had been in there since nine o'clock that morning.~~ When Ray clicked on the light switch, I couldn't see any evidence of further unexplained activity. Every word on the wall had been underlined in red, by me, at Mum's request.

'I think it only happens at night,' Mum remarked. 'Which is what you'd expect, really, isn't it? With a ghost.' She gave an unconvincing little laugh.

Sylvia didn't reply. She took out of her pocket a funny thing the size of a calculator, and began to pace the room with it.

Bethan asked her what it was.

'An electromagnetic field detector,' she replied.

Everyone – except Sylvia – exchanged glances.

'And what does it do?' Ray wanted to know.

'It identifies anomalies in electromagnetic readings.' Sylvia stopped, her gaze fixed firmly on her gadget. 'High volumes of electromagnetic activity are usually associated with poltergeist reports and so forth. Hmm.'

'What?' said Mum.

'Well . . . you do have a very high reading in here. Anything over point nine is a problem, and this room is registering point twelve.'

'Oh, dear,' said Mum.

Trish nudged her. 'You see?' Trish whispered. 'What did I tell you? Intersecting ley lines.'

'So there *is* a ghost in here?' Bethan inquired, but Sylvia wouldn't commit herself.

'Not necessarily.'

'Then what's happening?' Mum demanded. 'Who's doing this?'

Sylvia raised her eyes from her gadget. She surveyed us all in a way that made me feel uncomfortable.

'At the moment,' she said at last, slowly, 'we can't rule out a human agent.'

'What?' Mum cried, and Ray said, 'Who?'

'That is what we'll have to determine.'

'Well, it isn't me,' I announced. '*I* don't want Bethan in *my* room.'

'And it isn't me, either!' Bethan cried. 'I don't want to sleep with Alethea. I want my own room back!'

Sylvia looked at me long and hard. Then she looked at Bethan. Then she said, with a hint of apology, 'We have to rule out the possibility of human intervention before we can accept that any strange activity has a paranormal cause. It's standard procedure.'

'And then what?' asked Mum. 'If you rule out human intervention, what happens after that? How can you get rid of this thing?'

Sylvia blinked.

'Get rid of it?' she echoed.

'Yes. That's what you do, isn't it? You're a kind of ghost-buster, aren't you?'

'Well . . . no,' said Sylvia. 'Actually, I'm not.'

‘You’re not?’

‘My job is to identify what the problem is – if it’s paranormal or not. If it is, and you want it stopped, well . . . we can make some suggestions -’

‘Like what?’ Mum sounded quite cross, and Ray put a hand on her shoulder.

Sylvia watched them both cautiously. ‘It depends on what you have here,’ she said at last. ‘And what your religious beliefs might be. You may want to talk to Laurie, in fact – he’s our president. He may be able to help you. But really, nothing can be done until we establish exactly what it is we’re dealing with.’

She went on to explain that, if the mystery was to be solved, she and some of the other investigators would have to spend at least one night in Bethan’s bedroom, with their equipment. Would Mum object to that? Mum said no, she supposed not, since Bethan wouldn’t be sleeping in there anyway. When was Sylvia planning to return?

‘Oh, I’ll have to get back to you,’ Sylvia replied. ‘As soon as possible. This is a very interesting case. I’m grateful that you brought it to our attention.’

And that was that. After peering at the ghostly handwriting one last time, Sylvia moved out of the bedroom briskly, her heels clicking on the floor.

I have to admit, it was a bit of a let-down. We had all been expecting her visit to be more dramatic.

‘So I take it that my son shouldn’t be sleeping in his room?’ Mum inquired, as Sylvia said goodbye on the doorstep. ‘I mean, with all that electromagnetic activity?’

‘It’s entirely up to you,’ Sylvia responded. ‘A microwave oven registers sixty-five when it’s switched off.’

‘I won’t have one of those things in the house,’ said Mum, and Trish asked, ‘What about wind-chimes? Would they moderate the negative energy?’

Sylvia raised her eyebrows. ‘I’m not sure,’ she said cautiously. ‘But anything’s worth a try.’ Turning back to Mum, she added, ‘If I were you, Judy, I would scatter some talcum powder on the floor of that room. It’s a way of ruling out human intervention. We often use it ourselves.’

Then, after promising to call Mum as soon as possible, she disappeared into the shadows.

Mum scattered talcum powder over the floor of Bethan's room before she went to bed that night. The next morning, the powder lay undisturbed, but the walls were covered in so many new lines of script that it took me an hour to copy them all down.

The copying took place after school, naturally. I didn't have time to do it in the morning. Besides, Mum didn't want me trudging around Bethan's room before she'd vacuumed up the talcum powder. So it wasn't until Monday evening that I made my interesting discovery about the text on the walls.

Before that happened, however, I spoke to the school librarian. I'd been thinking about our family's problem all morning, off and on. (I usually finish my work long before everyone else does, and have to sit around waiting as a result. That's why I have so much time to think.) It seemed to me that we weren't going to get much help from PRISM – not until Sylvia was convinced that we actually had a ghost in the house. Weeks might pass, I thought, before anyone tried to stop the ghost from writing on our walls. And I didn't want to wait that long for sole custody of my bedroom.

I decided to do a bit of research. Instead of joining my friend Michelle in the playground, at lunchtime, I went to the school library, collected a stack of books about ghosts, and sat down to work out why ghosts haunt houses. After a lot of reading, I came to the following conclusion. Ghosts – if they exist – are tricky, unreliable things that don't respond well to being told what to do. Nevertheless, some of them need help. Some of them are only drifting about because their killers have gone unpunished, or because their earthly remains haven't been given a decent burial.

I wondered what could possibly have been troubling Eglantine Higgins. She couldn't have been buried under the house, because the house had been built in 1886, and Eglantine had been alive twenty years later. Had she died *in* the house, perhaps? Had someone killed her in it? That was a nasty thought, but it had to be faced.

I asked Mrs Procter, the librarian, how you could find out who had been living in your house a hundred years ago.

'Well,' she said, after some hesitation, 'that might be a bit difficult. Is this your new house, Alethea?'

'Yes.'

'Why do you want to know?'

I had no intention of telling her the truth. I was already having a hard enough time convincing people that I wasn't a weirdo – the last thing I needed was a reputation for seeing ghosts.

'Just some things we found,' I replied vaguely. 'A book and . . . other stuff.'

'I see.' She thought for a moment. I like Mrs Procter, because she always takes me seriously. She's very intelligent, too, and knows a lot about books. (I'm a favourite of hers, because I actually read them.) 'You might ask your neighbours,' she finally suggested. 'Sometimes people have been living in one place for a long while, and know things about the neighbourhood.'

I grunted. Our new neighbours weren't very friendly. On one side lived a big sloppy lady who spent all her time in front of the television, when she wasn't on the phone complaining to Mum about the noise of our renovations. On the other side lived a well-dressed young couple with an expensive car, who were hardly ever home. The big sloppy lady wouldn't talk to us any more. The young couple were never available.

‘I don’t think our neighbours would be much help,’ I said.

‘Of course, if you wanted to find out who *owned* the house a hundred years ago, you could check the title deeds,’ Mrs Procter remarked. ‘When your mother bought the house, her lawyer would have done a historical search, and had a copy made of the old title deeds. Title deeds show the names of all the past owners, and tell you when they bought the house. That might be useful – although just because a person owned a house, it doesn’t mean that they lived there.’

Or died there, I thought. Then something else occurred to me.

‘How do you find out where and when somebody died?’ I asked. ‘If it happened about a hundred years ago, say?’

Mrs Procter fixed me with a curious look.

‘There’s a name in the book we found under the stairs,’ I added hastily. ‘I want to find out if the person who owned the book lived in the house. And whether she’s still alive.’

‘I see,’ said Mrs Procter. ‘Well, you can check with the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. There’s one in every state. They keep records of death certificates.’

‘Where’s the New South Wales one?’ I inquired, wondering doubtfully how I might persuade Mum to take me there. But Mrs Procter assured me that, like most other government bodies, the Registry would have its own internet site. I would simply have to log on.

‘They do have rules about privacy,’ she continued, ‘but I don’t think rules like that would apply to people who died a long time ago, or no one would ever be able to trace their family trees. Anyway, you should give it a try. Can’t do any harm, can it?’

‘No,’ I said. But then the bell rang, and I had to put off looking at the Births, Deaths and Marriages site until the next day.

We don’t have the internet at home, you see. Mum doesn’t really trust it, for some reason – she says it’s too expensive. She doesn’t even like computers very much, despite the fact that she works in a bank. So I have to use a school computer, or one at the local library. It’s very annoying. The school computers are nearly always hidden behind a crowd of boys who ignore you when you say that you’ve booked a session for an hour, and would they please move? As for the library computers, they’re usually broken.

But that’s neither here nor there. I was telling you about Monday. On Monday afternoon, I came home from school to find Mum vacuuming up the talcum powder in Bethan’s room, and I told her what Mrs Procter had said about title deeds, and asked her where ours were.

‘I don’t have all those papers,’ she replied without much enthusiasm. ‘The solicitor has them.’

‘Could you call the solicitor?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘If we don’t do *something*,’ I declared, ‘we’ll *never* get rid of this stupid writing.’

‘I’ll call the solicitor when I finish the vacuuming,’ Mum promised. And she did, too. And he said that he would send over a copy of the old title deeds as soon as he could.

So that was my first job done. My second job was to record and underline all the new lines of text on Bethan’s bedroom wall, which, as I said earlier, took me an hour because there were so many. But as I copied them into my journal, I noticed something. To begin with, I noticed a name: Emilie. For the first time, a name had been used. “*Emilie is a good child*” was written on the back of the door, and it was a sentence that caught my attention, not only because of the name, but because of the opening

quotation marks. Quotation marks mean that somebody's speaking. What's more, you can't have one set of quotation marks at the beginning of a line of speech without another set closing the same passage. So I looked around for more quotation marks, and found them – three sets of them, widely scattered, all brand new – and thought, I wonder if these quotation marks match up, somehow? I wonder who's speaking?

That's when I settled down with my journal, and began to piece all the lines of text together. It was just like doing a jigsaw puzzle. With a jigsaw puzzle, you always look for the corner pieces first, and attach other pieces to them. With this funny collection of stray sentences and phrases, I used the quotation marks as my corner pieces. I also used the name Emilie, which I tried to match up with all the female references that were starting to appear. (*My great crown would crush her smooth brow*, for example.) It wasn't easy. But I made it easier by cutting out every separate line of text – again, just like a jigsaw puzzle. (I love solving puzzles.) Then I arranged the pieces and rearranged the pieces, and by dinner time I was pretty much convinced of one thing.

Though the lines had been written all over the place, they did fit together. They fitted together into a story. It was even possible that they had been written on the wall in order, and we hadn't noticed because we had spotted later lines before earlier ones.

Amazing? I thought so. Of course, I didn't have everything worked out by dinner time. There were more than sixty strips of paper to join up, and I had homework to do. But when I sat down at the kitchen table, I was able to inform everyone that the ghost upstairs was trying to tell us something, and that she wasn't finished yet.

Three heads turned.

'What do you mean, tell us something?' said Mum. 'What gives you that idea?'

'I've been putting all the sentences together,' was my response. 'They do make sense, when they're not scattered all over the walls. I think the ghost has been writing them out in the proper order, too, because the first few nights she was talking about a king and his kingdom, but last night the king started talking about a daughter. Emilie.'

'Wait – wait a second.' Ray lifted his hand. 'You're saying that the writing upstairs can actually be joined together? Into a composition of some kind?'

'Yes,' I said patiently. 'That's what I've been doing. Cutting out the lines and sticking them together with sticky tape. Like a puzzle.'

'What does it say?' Mum demanded. 'Is it some kind of message?'

'I don't know.' I thought about the little strips of paper spread over my bedroom floor. 'Maybe. It's about a white-bearded king, with mines, and sea ports, and a good navy, and a daughter but no son. The daughter's name is Emilie.'

'It sounds like a fairytale,' Bethan offered.

'Yes,' I replied. 'It does. That's just the way it sounds. That's just the way it's written.'

'But it might be a piece of history,' Ray mused. 'What king had a daughter called Emilie? Can anyone remember?'

Mum, however, wasn't interested in history. 'You said something about its not being finished,' she interrupted, fixing me with an anxious gaze. 'How can you possibly tell?'

'Well – I don't know. It doesn't *feel* finished.' I tried to work out why. 'Nothing's happened yet. I think the king wants an heir.'

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