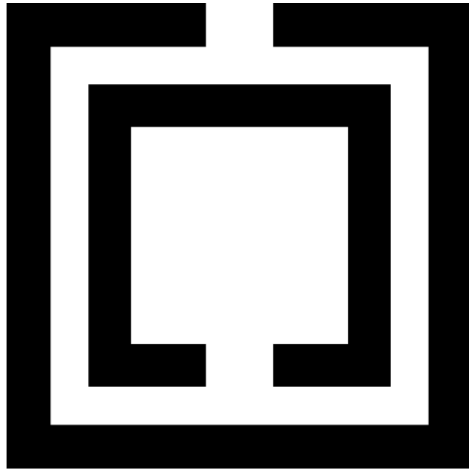


P R O O F O F T H E

EXISTENCE



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A PARANORMAL TECHNO-THRILLER

CHAPTER 1

WAYLAND, NEW JERSEY
SHILLING ESTATE
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Amanda Denoyer wanted to believe in spirits and souls with good reason. But even now, giddy with nervous energy as she steered off Skyline Drive through the gates of the Shilling Estate, it would take more than a disembodied voice to prove it.

She turned down the radio, a favorite song by Adele, and checked the rearview mirror. No one was there except herself. But for a second, the twenty-six-year-old girl staring back was barely recognizable: hazel contacts, heavy makeup—Amanda brushed a lock of scratchy blond wig-hair from her face and turned back to the road, trying to shrug off the uncanny feeling. Now was the time for rehearsing her real estate alias, not dreaming up phantom stalkers. Besides, while she believed in sixth sense and remote viewing, no evil eye could curse convincingly enough to dispel the doubts she held about life after death.

The Shilling Estate was west of downtown Wayland, and winding along the tree-lined driveway, the leaves let through shafts of setting sunlight. Amanda squinted, catching glimpses of the mansion between trees. Imagining the weight of all those windows glaring down, she tightened her grip on the wheel. Then her lips parted, and with little conviction, she whispered one of her lines, a bit of real estate cliché that had sent General Flint into an unsettling fit of laughter during the mission briefing.

“What a heavenly property.” She had to calm her nerves, and she fell to rehearsing. “I’m Mandy Moyer, from RE/MAX.”

This surreal trip into the Ramapo Mountains of New Jersey had started conventionally enough five years ago with a summer internship. Like the CIA, the National Security Agency recruited aggressively from the ranks of science and engineering students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It was toward the end of Amanda's junior year at MIT that her undergraduate advisor, Professor Dirk Jenner, had coaxed her out of a dark time in her life into the NSA's Cyber Summer Program.

The internship had been a turning point, a bookend on her Air Force-brat childhood and a way to get past her father's death. She went on to earn an agency-sponsored PhD from Princeton, and with five summers of Fort Meade, Maryland under her belt, she would soon be a full-fledged agent. Not just a signals analyst, but also an intelligence collector—a field operative.

Up ahead, the trees parted on a circular driveway, and Amanda rechecked the rearview mirror. There was still no one to be seen. She slowed to a stop, cut the ignition, and looked up at the Tudor-style mansion. A dozen or so curtained windows were set into the slate-colored stone, and any one of them—or every one of them, she thought with grim fascination—could conceal a spy. She got out of the car and shut the door without fanfare. Either she was alone or she wasn't; this was training, after all. She slung the strap of her purse over her shoulder, primed her wig as best she could, and thought it through.

Like this trip, her doctoral research had been surreal, too. The Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research lab had been blurring the line between physics and psychology for thirty years. Amanda knew there was more to the feeling of being stared at than chance or coincidence. Also, she was naturally sensitive to the feeling of being stared at. By a twist of genetics, she had been the unwitting object of sidelong glances and longing gazes since grade school—nothing supernatural about it.

From an old shoebox of photographs, she knew she had inherited her mother's Elizabeth Taylor-blue eyes and slanted eyebrows. Combined with her father's aquiline nose and tall stature, she had turned out a classic beauty, with long, wavy,

dark-brown hair and blameless skin that tanned surprisingly well. But she was bookish, too, with a penchant for overstuffed schoolbags and horn-rimmed glasses.

She'd ditched the glasses at Newark Airport for the hazel contacts, and standing here eighty clicks northwest of New York, she unzipped her purse, got out her smartphone, and launched the signal-tracking app. While she waited for the satellite to lock, she looked up past the windows of the mansion to take in the pink-orange shades of sunset, never thinking it could be her last.

Amanda knew that sunsets only looked colored due to atmospheric scattering, but she loved the way the sun squeezed in between the cloud-breaks and backlit their snowflake-like fringes. Turning east, she saw the horizon above the trees had cleared up and was gathering dusk. The treetops were black against the sky, and while she was still looking up, she was surprised and relieved to catch the shooting star-like flash of a satellite flare.

Roger that, she thought, and she took a deep breath.

Low-Earth orbit was a thousand miles straight up, home to the space station and Hubble telescope, but the glint of the satellite's solar panels felt like a wink and made her feel better. Her squad was here in spirit, at least, tracking her mission. And though the parameters felt improbable to her analytical mind, she sensed that training was just the tip of the iceberg.

The Danish meteorological satellite Ørsted had detected a magnetic field "cold spot" up here in the Ramapo Mountains, and while billed by General Flint as just a warm-up exercise, Amanda felt certain it was pass or fail: find the source of the cold spot or go home. Like in school, she'd fight to earn an A, but mostly she wanted to honor her father's Air Force legacy. He was here in spirit, too—or so she hoped.

She looked at the magnetic field map on her smartphone. The dot marking the center of the cold spot was pulsating blue. Remembering General Flint's warning about the caretaker, Amanda hunted around until she found a path to the rear grounds. Then she hit the home button to hide the map and picked her way down the path, into the estate's sunken gardens.

This late, with the sun low between the chimneystacks, the caretaker should have given up and left. And that was just how Amanda had planned it—establish a credible cover story, just in case, and then find her own way in after hours.

But ten meters out she saw an elderly woman appear from behind a rose-covered trellis. Amanda was exposed, beyond reach of the shadows overtaking the grounds.

Waited all this time just for me? Unlikely, she thought, and she closed in.

The elderly woman smiled and holstered a pair of pruning shears as Amanda descended the steps. Returning the caretaker's smile, Amanda asked to be sure. "Mrs. Kozlov?"

"Yes, dear?"

She felt her core muscles tense as she extended her hand. "Please accept my apologies for arriving so late," Amanda said. "I'm Mandy Moyer, from RE/MAX."

Here we go, she thought. Lie number one.

"Oh, the real estate agency!" Mrs. Kozlov took Amanda's hands in hers. "I'd all but given up on you, dear. But Professor Shilling's letter said you would arrive today, and arrive you have."

You mean General Flint's letter, Amanda thought with some misgiving.

With a twinkle in her eye, Mrs. Kozlov continued. "You must be swatting them off like flies, sweetie."

"Almost engaged," Amanda said as she shifted her stance. Minding the woman's age, she gently slipped her hands free and then crossed her fingers for luck. "Almost."

Lie number two.

Looking over Mrs. Kozlov's shoulder, Amanda caught the first flash of a firefly on the air, and with it, a tug of nostalgia. Crickets were chirping, and daylight was quickly going out.

"Pardon my asking," Mrs. Kozlov said, reaching when Amanda wasn't looking, "but that beautiful blond hair—"

Amanda backstepped as fast as she dared, putting space between the woman and the wig. "Cancer," she said. "And lucky, I'm told. But in this job, I couldn't just wait until it grew back."

Lie number three—a sacrilege, she knew, but necessary. Still, she felt like a kid who'd stepped on a sidewalk crack.

“Please forgive me, dear.” Mrs. Kozlov reached out and squeezed Amanda’s arm with surprising vigor. “It’s just that you’re so fit! And wigs were all the rage in my day.”

“No need, ma’am,” Amanda said. “All’s well that ends well.” Then, back to the task at hand. “But if it’s not too late?”

“Oh, dear, I nearly forgot—might forget these roses, if I didn’t like to snip!” Mrs. Kozlov patted her holstered pruning shears and invited the freshly minted NSA agent to follow.

The twilight garden gave off the heady scent of honeysuckle and a dark-magic, fairy-tale feel—stars coming out, lanterns flickering up ahead, and an iron-hinged door fast approaching.

Amanda ducked a rose vine as they emerged from beneath the canopy of an overgrown arbor, and only the magnetic metamaterial built into her smartphone case broke the old-world, storybook spell.

Cold spot, here I come.

“Professor Shilling hasn’t visited us in years,” Mrs. Kozlov said as they made their way into the grand foyer of the mansion.

The space had been conceived on an impressive scale, Amanda saw, complete with a crystal chandelier, grand staircase, and cathedral window. The rumpled dustcovers shrouding the furniture were the only eyesore.

“It’s a pity,” Mrs. Kozlov said. “We’ve served the family since before young Robert was even born, and we were here when his parents passed.” She paused. “There was an accident, you know.”

“I wasn’t aware,” Amanda said, and she really hadn’t been. General Flint hadn’t said anything, and she wondered what else he’d left unsaid—like whom the caretaker meant by “we.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Kozlov said. “And ever since, we’ve kept the place at the ready, just in case.”

“In case?”

“In case our young Robert ever finds his way home.”

After several minutes of exchanging pleasantries beneath the chandelier, Mrs. Kozlov begged off and left Amanda to herself. Now, back on target, Amanda relaunched the signal-tracking app and climbed the grand staircase past the cathedral window. She kept an eye over the handrail.

Bench-pressing bookends in the library, Agent Kozlov, or just blocking my exit, sharpening your shears on the roses?

She supposed anything was possible now. Flint's warning not to trust the caretaker had been right—with her parting words, Mrs. Kozlov had blown her cover. Amanda steeled herself and ventured out onto the balcony.

The chandelier hung below the level of the balcony floor, leaving only the meager reach of its refracted light to see by. She felt her way along, skimming the buckled wallpaper, until her hand hit an antique, push-button light switch. The button stuck, but it worked, switching on a string of electric wall candles that trailed off down a corridor to a closed door.

You don't have to prove yourself like this, Amanda thought. Dad would understand. Tell Flint to file a foreclosure.

Her real estate cover had seemed simple enough yesterday at the close of the mission briefing, with General Flint laughing along while she practiced her lines. The heir to the estate, Professor Rob Shilling, had been made an offer. The offer was under wraps, and she, the agent, was here to catalog the property and any damage—or unpermitted electrical improvements.

High-voltage power lines had long been notorious for their electromagnetic fields. From a national security perspective, what was concerning were clandestine, military sources of EMF. Since the mid-1970s, centrifugation had become the method of choice for enriching weapons-grade uranium, and spinning centrifuge rotors at 100,000 RPM not only consumed power but also radiated electromagnetic waves.

Amanda didn't expect to find a uranium-enrichment facility in the professor's basement, especially not on a training mission. But the mission dossier indicated the cold spot hadn't shown on the decades-earlier Magsat passes. It could be man-made.

Amanda checked the signal-tracking app on her smartphone. Satellite maps weren't detailed enough to pinpoint the cold spot, but the magnetic metamaterial built into her phone case offered a workaround, focusing the flux on a sensitive Hall-effect sensor. The magnetic field lines were hypnotic, circling the cold spot like a hurricane on a radar map, and the GPS put her location about twenty meters from the eye of the storm.

Knowing there could be cameras, she fought the urge to look over her shoulder as she tracked the signal down the hall. Instead, she tried to picture her father in his Air Force flight suit as she thought over Mrs. Kozlov's last words. The caretaker had slipped into her mother tongue at the door, addressing her as Agent Moyer in the course of her farewell.

Only instead of *agent*, Mrs. Kozlov had used *razvedchik*, which, from an NSA crash course in Slavic languages, Amanda knew had nothing to do with real estate salespersons.

Razvedchik was Russian for "intelligence agent."

That could only mean that Mrs. Kozlov was one, too.

I'm in, Amanda thought.

She had followed the electric wall candles to the end room, but it was dark, and the push-button light switch inside the door wouldn't budge when she pressed it. She pressed the flashlight icon on her smartphone and swept the beam around the room.

Made-bed, bedside table, table lamp—she went to the lamp and felt around under the shade, but she couldn't find the switch. Then her hand grazed the hammered brass.

Amanda turned away and shielded her eyes with her hand, marveling at the high-wattage surge of white-hot light. It took a second for the touch-lamp to dim—only to feel an icy cold draft.

A real-life cold spot? It felt like someone had opened the door to an industrial freezer. Feeling vulnerable, she opened and closed her eyes rapidly to blink away the afterimages of the bulb. The bedroom closet door swam into focus. The door was ajar, and she walked over and swung it wide open. She gripped the dangling string of the light fixture, turned her head, and pulled.

The musty closet shelves were stacked with memorabilia of bygone times—moldering boxes of board games; thumb-sized Matchbox cars; and plastic toy soldiers aiming rifles, kneeling by mortars, and shouldering bazookas. Amanda had fond memories of Monopoly, of game nights with her dad back on the base, but those days were over. The old board games had been made obsolete by shoot-‘em-up video games and the Internet-era. And who needed a toy car you had to rev up with your imagination when you could have a remote-controlled flying drone?

Amanda wondered where the cold draft was coming from. The dot on the signal-tracking app was pulsating green now, showing that the cold spot was close by. And the draft could be its signature, she thought, evidence of a hidden passage or room. Seeing nothing at eye level, she kneeled down, pushed aside a stack of magazines, and reached blindly into the dark recess of the bottom shelf. Then, as she got up, a dusty magazine cover caught her eye. She pulled the magazine off the top of the stack, brushed it off, and held it beneath the glow of the bulb.

Like the one beneath it, it was an issue of *Omni* magazine. The May 1983 cover featured a Stonehenge-like megalith backlit by a nebulous, star-sprinkled sky. What had caught her eye was a ghostly black shape hidden among the unknown constellations. Affixed to the cover, the yellowing mailing label was addressed to a Robert Shilling, Jr., and feeling like an intruder, she put the magazine back and nudged the stack out of sight with her foot.

She turned from the shelves and ran her hands over the closet’s back wall. It was exposed down to the strips of wood lath, with dark gaps between the boards. It was definitely getting colder, but she couldn’t feel any air moving, making her wonder.

Then, with the sharp snap of a TV switching on in her head, she felt the stalking presence again. It was stronger then when she turned off of Skyline Drive through the estate’s iron gates. There was no doubt this time. The evil eye was on the back of her head, and the feeling was not friendly—

“Finding everything, sweetie?” Mrs. Kozlov asked, and Amanda almost dropped her smartphone as she spun around.

Back in school, Amanda's mind had always been ten steps ahead of her mouth. But caught off-guard with her back turned, her cover story momentarily escaped her. "I found a cold draft."

"Yes." Mrs. Kozlov stepped into the room. "I've felt it, too."

Amanda saw the caretaker was still wearing her holstered pruning shears, and she averted her eyes. She quickly reconstructed the contents of the closet in her mind's eye and rifled through the board games, Matchbox cars, science-fiction magazines, and toy soldiers. She needed to find a weapon.

"But I don't understand," Amanda said, trying to buy time. "It's warm out." Feeling flushed and claustrophobic, her hand went instinctively to her wig. It took every effort not to rip it off.

"Not underground it isn't." Mrs. Kozlov started closing in. "I should know. Mr. Kozlov was an iron miner."

"Mr. Kozlov?" At the mission briefing, General Flint had said that the woman's husband was deceased.

"My dear husband," the elderly caretaker said and smiled. "Mr. Kozlov lives on."

"Oh, is he home?" Amanda feigned a smile and locked eyes on the cut-glass knob of the bedroom door. It wasn't far, and she could run for it—right through the woman if she had to. She flicked her eyes at Mrs. Kozlov's holster.

Amanda knew that knife defense was unreliable at best and Hollywood fantasy at worst, but pruning shears? The grisly possibilities made her stomach turn.

"Yes and no, dear." Mrs. Kozlov surprised her by shuffling forward and taking her hands in hers. "Mr. Kozlov is at my side."

Nothing was there, Amanda saw, except for cold thin air. And for a second, she wondered if the woman might be losing it, if Mr. Kozlov wasn't just a figment of the elderly caretaker's imagination. But then, as if having read her mind, Mrs. Kozlov dashed Amanda's hopes with three toneless syllables.

"In spirit."

