

Cold Case

Jeff Resnick

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“You’re not the first psychic to come through Paula’s apartment, Mr. Resnick.”

Hands on hips, Dr. Krista Marsh stood before me. Her heels gave her an inch or more on me. Blonde and lithe, and clad in a turquoise dress with jet beads resting

on her ample breasts, she was the best looking thing in that lower middle-class apartment.

“I don’t use that term. Con-artists, liars and frauds take advantage of people with problems. I’m just someone who sometimes knows more than I’m comfortable knowing.”

Truth was, I hadn’t wanted to be there at all, giving my impressions on the fate of four-year-old Eric Devlin. He’d gone missing on an early-autumn evening some eight months before. One minute he’d been there—riding his Big Wheel in front of the apartment building—the next he was gone. Like every other good citizen, I’d read all the stories in the newspapers and seen the kid’s picture on posters and on TV. The only place I hadn’t seen it was on the back of a milk carton.

I was there as a favor to my brother—actually, my older half brother—Dr. Richard Alpert, who’d joined me on that cold gray evening in early May. Richard was Paula Devlin’s internist at the university’s low-income clinic. He liked Paula and hated how not knowing her son’s fate was tearing her apart. He hoped I could shed some light on the kid’s disappearance.

I’m not sure why Dr. Marsh was there. Maybe as Paula’s therapist she thought she could protect her patient from someone like me.

So, there I stood, in the middle of Paula’s modestly furnished living room, trying to soak up vibes that might tell me the little boy’s fate.

Paula waited in the doorway, looking fearful as I examined the heart of her home, which she’d transformed into a cottage industry, distributing posters, pins and flyers in the search for the boy—all to no avail. Vacuum cleaner tracks on the carpet showed her hasty clean-up prior to our arrival. Too thin, and looking older than her thirty-two years, Paula’s spirit and her determination to find her missing son had sustained her over the long months she’d been alone. The paper had never mentioned a Mr. Devlin.

“I don’t know if I can help you,” I told Paula.

She flashed an anxious look at Richard, then back to me.

“Where would you like to start, Mr. Resnick?”

“Call me Jeff. How about Eric’s room?”

A sixty-watt bulb illuminated the gloom as the four of us trudged down a narrow hallway. Paula opened the door to a small bedroom, flipped a light switch, and ushered us in. “It’s just the way he left it.”

I doubted that, since the bed was made and all the toys and games were neatly stacked on shelves under the room’s only window—not a speck of dust. A race car bedspread and matching drapes gave a clue to the boy’s chief interest—so did the scores of dented, paint-scraped cars and trucks. I picked up a purple-and-black dune buggy, sensing a trace of the boy’s aura. He’d been a rambunctious kid, with the beginnings of a smart mouth.

“He was a very lively child.”

“He’s all boy, that’s for sure,” his mother said proudly.

She hadn’t noticed I’d used the past tense. Either that or she was in deep denial. I’d known little Eric was dead the moment I entered the apartment.

I gave her a half-hearted smile, replaced the toy on the shelf. There wasn’t much else to see. I shouldered my way past the others and wandered back to the living room. They tried not to bump into each other as they followed.

A four-foot poster of Eric's smiling face dominated the west wall. He'd been small for his age, cute, with sandy hair and a sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of his nose.

An image flashed through my mind: a child's hand reaching for a glass.

I hitched in a breath, grateful my back was to Dr. Marsh. A mix of powerful emotions erupted—as though my presence had ignited an emotional powder keg. Like repelling magnets, guilt and relief waged a war, practically raining from the walls and ceiling.

Composing myself, I turned, a disquieting depression settling over me.

"Ms. Devlin—"

She stepped forward. "Call me Paula."

"Paula. Did Dr. Alpert tell you how this works?"

"He said you absorb emotions, interpret them, and that sometimes you get knowledge."

"That's right." More or less. "There's a lot of background emotion here. May I hold your hand for a moment? I need to see if it's coming from you, or if it's resident in the building."

Without hesitation, she held out her hand, her expression full of hope. And that's what I got from her: Hope, desperation, and deep despair. She loved that little boy, heart and soul. And there was suspicion, too, but not of me.

I released her hand, let out the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"Paula, ever heard the expression about a person taking up all the air in the room?" Her brows puckered in confusion. "You're broadcasting so many emotions I can't sort them out. I know you want to stay, but I can't do what I have to if you're here."

"But he's my son," she protested.

Dr. Marsh stepped closer, placed a comforting hand on Paula's shoulder. "You want him to give you a true reading."

I turned on the psychiatrist. "I'm not a fortune teller, Dr. Marsh."

"I didn't mean to offend," she said without sincerity.

"I'll go if you say so, Krista." Paula grabbed her windbreaker from the closet and headed for the door. Once she was gone, my anxiety eased, and I no longer needed to play diplomat.

"What're you getting?" Richard asked.

"The kid's dead—been dead since day one. He wasn't frightened either, not until the very last minute."

"You're talking murder," Richard said. "Not Paula."

"No. I'm sure of that."

Dr. Marsh eyed me critically, brows arched, voice coolly professional. "Are you well acquainted with sensing death, Mr. Resnick?"

"More than I'd like." I glanced at Richard. "What's this about a pervert in the neighborhood?"

His eyes narrowed. "It hasn't been reported in the media, but Paula told me about the cops' prime suspect. A convicted pedophile lived three units down at the time the boy disappeared. They've had him in for questioning five or six times but haven't been able to wring a confession out of him. How'd you know?"

"From Paula—just now. She's afraid he took her kid."

Dr. Marsh frowned. She probably figured I was just some shyster running a con. Can't say I was sorry to disappoint her.

"You got something else," Richard said. He knew me well.

"I saw something, but it doesn't make sense." I told them about the vision.

"Close your eyes. Focus on it," he directed.

I shot a look at Dr. Marsh, saw the contempt in her gaze. Skepticism came with the territory.

My eyes slid shut and I allowed myself to relax, trying to relive that fleeting moment.

"What do you see?" Richard said.

"A kid's hand reached for a glass."

"Is it Eric?"

"I don't know."

"Describe the glass."

I squeezed my eyes tighter, trying to replay the image. "A clear tumbler."

"What's inside?"

"Liquid. Brown. Chocolate milk?"

"Look up the child's arm," Richard directed. "Can you see his clothes?"

The cuff of a sleeve came into focus. "Yeah."

"The color?"

I exhaled a breath. Like a camera pulling back, the vision expanded to include the child's chest. "Blue... a decal of—" The image winked out. "Damn!"

"Give it a couple of minutes and try again," Richard advised.

Uncomfortable under Dr. Marsh's stare, I wandered into the kitchen again. I couldn't shake the feeling of... dread? Whatever it was surrounded me, squeezing my chest so I couldn't take a decent breath.

Hands clenched at his side, Richard studied me in silence. We'd been through this before, and his eyes mirrored the concern he wouldn't express for fear of embarrassing me. He knew just what these little empathic forays cost me.

Turning away from his scrutiny, I went back into the boy's gloomy bedroom. Though banished from the apartment, Paula's anguish was still palpable. How many times had she stood in that doorway and cried for her child?

I ran my hands along all the surfaces a kid Eric's age could've touched. After eight months there was so little left of him. His clothes in the dresser drawers, neatly folded and stacked, bore no trace of his aura. I pulled back the bedspread, picked up the pillow, closed my eyes and pressed it against my face. Tendrils of fear curled through me.

Airless.

Darkness.

Nothingness.

Death.

A rustling noise at the open doorway broke the spell. Dr. Marsh studied me as she must've once looked at rats in a lab. Her appraising gaze was sharp, her irritation almost palpable. Even so, she looked like she just walked off the set of some TV drama instead of the University's Medical Center campus. I'd bet her brown eyes flashed when she smiled. Not that she had.

"I understand you've done this before," she said.

“Define *this*,” I said.

“Helping the police in murder investigations.”

“Once or twice.”

“Are you always successful?”

“So far,” I answered honestly and replaced the pillow, smoothing the spread back into place.

“And what do you get out of it?”

Her scornful tone annoyed me.

“Usually a miserable headache. What is this, an interrogation?”

“I’m merely curious,” she said. “My, we are defensive, aren’t we?”

“I can’t answer for *we*, but I’m certainly not here to fence with you, doctor. If you’ll excuse me.”

Brushing past her, I headed back to the kitchen. The smooth walls and ceiling were practically vibrating. Eric’s childish laughter had once echoed in this room, though nothing of him remained there. I frowned; I still didn’t have the whole picture, and Dr. Marsh had rattled me.

I opened all the cupboards. The remnants of Eric’s babyhood—plastic formula bottles and Barney sippy cups—had been stowed on the higher shelves.

No Nestle’s Quik.

“Any conclusions?” Richard asked.

“Whatever I’m getting seems strongest in the kitchen.” I leaned against the counter, stared at the refrigerator covered with torn-out coloring book pages attached with yellowing Scotch tape. Something about it bothered me. I opened the door.

Paula wasn’t taking care of herself. A quart of outdated skim milk, half a loaf of sliced white bread, a sagging pizza box and three two-liter bottles of diet cola looked lonely in the full-sized fridge. No chocolate milk. An opened box of Tater Tots, a sprinkling of damp crumbs, and a couple of ice trays were the only things in the freezer. Everything looked completely innocent, yet something was terribly wrong.

“Think all the apartments are set up the same?” I asked Richard.

He shrugged.

Pushing away from the counter, I walked through the rooms one last time—just to make certain—then paused in the kitchen before heading into the building’s entryway. No trace of Eric, but something else lurked there.

Hands thrust into her jacket pockets, Paula waited by the security door, looking pale and frightened. I couldn’t even muster a comforting smile for her.

“Chocolate milk,” I said.

She blinked.

“Did Eric drink it?” I pressed.

“He loved it, but was allergic to chocolate. I never had it in the house.”

I glanced up the shadowy staircase. A wounded animal will always climb. Eric hadn’t been wounded, but something had lured him up those stairs. I took three steps and staggered against the banister when a knife-thrust of pain pierced the back of my head—fierce, but unlike the skull-pounding headaches these intuitive flashes usually brought.

“You okay?” Richard asked, concerned. Was he feeling guilty for roping me into this?

I leaned against the wall, closed my eyes and tried to catch my breath. “Who lives upstairs?” I asked Paula through gritted teeth.

“Mark and Cheryl Spencer in apartment D. A retired widow, Mrs. Anna Jarowski, lives on the other side.”

“They see Eric the day he disappeared?”

Paula shook her head. “No.”

I took another step. The heaviness clamped tighter around my chest. I’d felt something when I first entered the building, but I’d assumed it belonged to Paula.

I’d been wrong.

“I want to talk to them.”

“They’ve been cleared,” Paula insisted.

I didn’t budge.

She bristled with impatience. “You came here to find answers about my son, not waste time questioning my neighbors. They’ve been cleared by the police, and badgered by the press.”

“Paula,” Richard said gently. “It can’t hurt.”

Finally she tore her gaze from mine, stormed back for her apartment, letting the door bang shut.

Richard took the lead, leaving Dr. Marsh and me to follow. He went to knock on the first apartment door, but I shook my head. He gave me a quizzical look and I nodded toward the opposite door.

Richard crossed the ten or so feet to the adjacent door and knocked. We waited. Were Richard and Dr. Marsh struck by the unnatural quiet in that building?

The door opened on a chain. Steel gray, no-nonsense eyes peered at us. “Yes?”

“Mrs. Jarowski, I’m Doctor Alpert and this is Dr. Marsh,” Richard said with authority. “We’re from the University. May we speak with you?”

Mrs. Jarowski blinked in surprise. “Did Dr. Adams send you?”

Dr. Marsh gave Richard an inquisitive look, but he said nothing.

Mrs. Jarowski looked at us with suspicion. “Can I see some identification?”

“Of course,” Richard said, and reached into his coat pocket.

“I left mine in my purse,” Dr. Marsh said.

Mrs. Jarowski scrutinized Richard’s hospital security badge. “Please come in,” she said at last.

I didn’t want to. I wanted to go home. I wanted to be anywhere but this place that smelled of mothballs and sour cabbage.

She ushered us inside, stepping into her kitchen. Anna Jarowski was a compact woman in her mid-sixties. Her short silver hair was caught back from her forehead with a barrette, like something out of the 1950s. Dressed in a faded housecoat, no make-up brightened her wan features, leaving her looking colorless and ill.

She glanced at me. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t catch your name.”

“Jeffrey Resnick,” I said, forcing a smile, and shoved my hand at her.

The woman eyed my outstretched hand, hesitated, then took it.

Our eyes locked. Her hand convulsed around mine. Peering past the layers of her personality, I looked straight into her soul.

A tremor ran through me. I pulled back my hand, my legs suddenly rubbery. Sweat soaked into my shirt collar and I took a shaky breath, hoping to quell the queasiness in my gut.

“Mind if I sit?”

She gestured toward the couch in the living room, but I lurched into the kitchen and fell into a maple chair at the worn Formica table. The others followed, leaning against the counters, looking like wallflowers at a dance. Mrs. Jarowski moved to stand in front of the refrigerator, arms at her side, body tense. The open floor plan allowed me to look into the apartment. Like the kitchen set, the rest of the furniture was shabby but immaculate. Mrs. Jarowski’s faded house dress was freshly ironed. She probably spent her days scrubbing the life out of things.

I looked around the sterile kitchen, an exact replica of the room directly below us—the floor, the counters, the cupboards—everything, right down to the white plastic switch plates. Three embroidered dishtowels lined the oven door pull, Mrs. Jarowski’s only concession to decor. The tug of conflicting emotions was even stronger than downstairs. We looked at one another for a few moments in awkward silence.

Mrs. Jarowski cleared her throat. “Are you a doctor, too?” she asked me.

“You might say I’m an expert on headaches. Tell me about yours, Mrs. Jarowski. Migraines, aren’t they?”

The old lady’s sharp eyes softened. “I’ve had a lot of tests, even a couple of CAT scans, but they’ve all been inconclusive. I’ve been told they’re due to stress. One doctor said they’re psychosomatic.”

“I doubt that,” I said, winning a grateful nod. “They get pretty bad sometimes, don’t they?”

She nodded again, looking hopeful.

“I can sure identify with that. I got mugged last year. A teenager with a baseball bat cracked my skull. Since then I get some really bad ones. I’m working up to a doozie right now.”

“What does that have to do with me?” she asked, an odd catch to her voice.

“Nothing. Tell me about Eric Devlin.”

Her back went rigid. “I’ve already told the police, I don’t know anything about his disappearance.”

“His mother said he was *all boy*, but I get the feeling he was a little hellion. A noisy kid. Kind of a brat, really.”

Dr. Marsh glared at me as if I’d blasphemed God almighty. The whole city had developed a reverence for the missing child.

Mrs. Jarowski didn’t share that feeling.

“He used to ride up and down the sidewalk on one of those big plastic tricycles for hours at a time. Up and down and up and down. They make one hell of a racket, don’t they?”

Her lips tightened. The tension in that kitchen nearly crackled.

My nausea cranked up a notch and I loosened my tie. On the verge of passing out, I rested my elbows on the table to steady myself.

“When I have one of these sick headaches, I have to lie down in a dark room with absolute quiet. Otherwise I think I’d go insane. That ever happen to you?”

Mrs. Jarowski’s gaze pinned me.

The vision streaked before my mind's eye: Eric, eyes round with anticipation, his small hand clutching the tumbler of chocolate milk, something his mother would never let him have. Paula calling to him from somewhere outside. The half empty glass falling to the spotless floor, shattering. Chocolate milk splashing the walls and cabinet doors.

"It's peaceful and quiet these days," I said. "Like a morgue." My gaze drifted to the full-sized refrigerator—back to her. I swallowed down bile. "You want to show me?"

Her cheeks flushed. She wouldn't look at me.

Dr. Marsh and Richard looked at me in confusion. Mrs. Jarowski seemed to weigh the question, her solemn gaze focused on the floor.

"The freezer, right?"

Mrs. Jarowski's anger slipped, replaced by a tremendous sense of guilt—but not, I noticed, remorse.

"Dr. Alpert, maybe you should have a look."

She held her ground.

Richard brushed past me, crossed the room in three steps. His eyes bored into hers and she backed down, moving aside. The freezer door swung open. A heavy, black plastic garbage bag filled the space. He worked on the twist tie, pulled back the plastic. His breath caught and he slammed the door, suddenly pale.

"Holy Christ."

The quartz wall clock ticked loudly, but time seemed to stand still.

At last Richard moved to the phone and punched 911. "I'm calling to report a body at 456 Weatherby, apartment C."

Richard swallowed as he listened to the voice on the other end of the phone. Dr. Marsh blinked in confused revulsion.

Stony-faced, Mrs. Jarowski turned, her slippered feet scuffing across the vinyl floor as she headed for the living room. She sat down on her faded couch, picked up the remote control and turned on the television.

Finally Richard hung up the phone.

"Dr. Marsh, can you watch Mrs. J until the police get here?" I asked.

She nodded, still looking shell shocked.

I squinted up at Richard. "Maybe you could help me to the bathroom. I don't want to barf on Mrs. J's nice clean floor."

Breathing shallowly, I sat back against the lumpy couch, a hand covering my eyes to blot out the piercing light. After more than an hour, two of my pills still hadn't put a dent in the throbbing headache.

The cops had already taken Mrs. Jarowski away. The ME arrived, and the crime photographer was still flashing pictures in the kitchen. The place was full of cops, and the murmur of a dozen voices drilled through my skull.

"Can I get you something, Mr. Resnick?" Lieutenant Brewer of the Buffalo Metropolitan Police stood over me. The chunky, balding cop still seemed taken aback that his case had been broken by an outsider.

I squinted up at him. "Yeah. Assure my privacy—don't give the press my name. The last thing I want is publicity."

"Okay, but answer me this; how'd you know?"

"I don't know how it works, it just does."

"The old lady waived her rights. Said she heard Ms. Devlin had signed a new two-year lease and decided she'd had enough of the noise. She lured the kid up here and made him quiet—permanently."

"And the chocolate milk?" Richard asked me.

"The lure of a forbidden treat. Mrs. J ground up sleeping pills, had him drink it," I said. "When he was dopey, she planned to smother him."

I thought about it—remembered what I'd seen when I'd touched her. Fury gave her the strength to hold the boy, who'd struggled in those last minutes. She'd sealed his nose and mouth with a wad of freshly pressed linen dish towels, pinning him against the floor until his body slackened, his small chest no longer heaving. Then she'd heard Paula Devlin frantically calling for her son. Anna Jarowski sat beside the dead boy for a long time—triumphant in the knowledge she'd finally silenced her intolerably noisy neighbor.

I looked up at Brewer. "I take it you haven't searched the place yet."

"Call me paranoid, but I'm waiting for a warrant. No way do I want this thrown out on a technicality."

"You'll find what's left of the tricycle in one of the closets. She's got a hacksaw. Been cutting it up and sneaking it out in the trash for the past eight months."

Dr. Marsh elbowed her way through the crowd in the kitchen. She'd been gone about an hour—breaking the news to the boy's mother, no doubt.

"How's Paula?" Richard asked.

"I gave her a sedative. Now that her mother's here, I think she'll be all right." She looked at me. "How are you, Jeff?" Her icy veneer had melted, her best bedside manner now firmly in place.

"Sick."

"But you've got to feel good about what you've done."

I frowned. "I made two women miserable. Why would that make me feel good?"

She seemed puzzled by my answer, but I didn't have the energy to explain it to her. "Dr. Marsh, you said another psychic came here—what did she tell Paula?"

"That the boy was well and living in a small town down South, anxious to be back home with his mother."

Poor Paula.

"You need me anymore?" I asked the detective.

He shook his head. "Go home before you keel over."

I glanced at my brother. "Now would be a good time, Rich."

I moved on shaky legs. Richard and Dr. Marsh steadied me on the stairs. We ducked under the crime scene tape and they pushed me through the throng of press as we headed for Richard's Lincoln Town Car.

Dr. Marsh crushed her business card into my palm. "Call me." Her voice was husky, excited, like a rock star's groupie.

Reporters and cameramen swarmed as she slammed the car door. Richard left her to deal with them, taking off with a squeal and leaving rubber on the asphalt.

"Sharks," he muttered.

I leaned against the headrest and considered my first consultation. By all counts, a royal success.

Then why did I feel so dirty?

