

POLTERGEIST

Any power— any talent—anything can be used for good or evil. Sometimes only destruction can be good.

JAMES H. SCHMITZ

ILLUSTRATED BY KELLY FREAS

Late summer had faded into fall in that region of Orado, and though the afternoon sun was still warm, the season was over at the mountain resort lake. No more than a dozen boats could be seen drifting slowly about its placid surface.

The solitude suited Telzey fine. The last three weeks at college had been packed; the weeks to come were going to be at least as demanding. For this one weekend she was cutting out of the pressure. They were to be two totally unambitious days, dedicated to mental and physical loafing, separated by relaxed nightlong sleep. Then, some time tomorrow evening, refreshed and renewed, she'd head south to Pehanron College and dive back into her study schedule.

The little kayak she'd rented went gliding across the green-blue lake toward the distant banks opposite the quiet resort village. Great cliffs rose there, broken by numerous narrow bays where trees crowded down to the edge of the water. If she came across some interesting looking spot, she might get out and do a little leisurely exploring.

She pressed a fingertip against the acceleration button on the console before her. A paddle was fastened along the side of the kayak, but it hadn't touched water this afternoon, and wouldn't. Exercise definitely wasn't on the program. Telzey clasped her hands behind her head, settled against the cushioned backrest, steering rod held lightly between tanned knees.

Her eyebrows lifted.

What was *that*?

It came again. A faint quivering tingle, not of the nerves, but of mind . . . a light momentary touch of psi energy. Interest stirred briefly. She was a psi of some months' standing, a telepath—still a beginner and aware of it. So far, there hadn't been as much opportunity to practice her newly discovered abilities as she'd have liked. The college workload was too heavy at present, and she'd learned quickly that investigating the possibilities of a burgeoning psi talent was no casual undertaking. It was full of surprises, not always pleasant ones. She'd have more leisure for that kind of thing by and by.

As for those ripples of energy, they hadn't necessarily been generated in the vicinity of the lake. Chance could have brought them echoing into her awareness from some other area of the planet. In any case, she didn't intend to break her restful mood now by trying to determine their source.

Eyes half shut, knees occasionally nudging the kayak's steering rod a little to one side or the other, Telzey watched the tall gray cliffs along the lake front drift slowly closer. She sensed no more psi touches and the momentary experience soon sank to the back of her thoughts. There was a government department called the Psychology Service which demonstrated a paternalistically restrictive attitude toward psis who weren't members of its organization and not inclined to join up. Not long after her telepathic ability began to manifest, she'd discovered that the Service had tagged her, put restraints on her use of psi. She'd worked free of the restraints and maneuvered the Service then into accepting the fact that it would be best all around if she were left alone. It wasn't impossible though that they still had an eye on her, that those psi whispers had been bait designed to draw some reaction from her the Service could study.

Telzey decided not to worry about it. If it had been bait, she hadn't accepted it. Some other day she might, just to see what would happen.

Nobody seemed to be living along the water inlets among the cliffs. Campers might be there in summer. Tall trees stood gathered above the shelving rocks, and there were indications of animal life. They were pleasant, peaceful nooks. The kayak circled through each in turn, emerged, glided on along the cliffs to the next. So far, Telzey hadn't seen one that evoked the urge to explore.

But this she thought might be it.

Cup-shaped and considerably larger than most, the bay was enclosed by great steep rock walls on both sides. Trees rose above a sandy shore ahead, their ranks stretching far back into a cleft in the mountain. It would be easy to beach the kayak here and get out.

She saw someone lying on the sand then, not far above the water. A motionless figure, face down, feet turned toward her. There was no boat in sight, but an aircar might be parked back among the trees. What seemed immediately wrong was that the man wasn't dressed for a sprawl on the sand. He was wearing city clothes, an orange and white business suit. She had the impression he might be sick or dead—or stoned and sleeping it off.

She sent the kayak gliding closer to shore. Thirty feet away, she stopped, called out to the figure, "Hello there! Are you all right?"

He wasn't dead, at any rate. At the sound of her voice, his body jerked; then he was up on hands and knees, staring around at the trees clustered along the bank above him.

"I'm out here!" Telzey called.

He turned his head, saw her, got to his feet. Brushing sand from his coat, he started down toward the water's edge. Telzey saw his mouth working silently. Something certainly was wrong with that man!

"Are you sick?" she asked him. "You were lying there so quietly."

He looked distressed. But he shook his head, tried to smile.

"No," he said. "I'm quite all right. Thank you very much for your concern. It's good of you. But . . . well, I'd rather be by myself." He tried to smile again.

Telzey hesitated. His voice indicated he was neither drunk nor doped. "You're sure you're all right?" she said. "You don't look well."

"No, I'm perfectly all right. Please do go now! This isn't . . . well, it simply isn't a good place for a young girl to be."

Scared, she decided suddenly. Badly scared. Of what? She glanced over toward the silent trees, said, "Why don't you come with me then? The kayak will carry two."

"No, I can't. I—"

Great electric surges all about and through her—a violent burst of psi. And a rushing, grinding noise overhead. Something struck the water with a heavy splash ten feet away. Telzey jammed the acceleration button full down, swung the steering rod far over. The kayak darted forward, curving to the left. Another splash beside the boat. This time Telzey was drenched with water, momentarily blinded by it.

The bulk of the rockslide hit the surface of the bay instants later. She was clear of it by then, rushing along parallel to the shore. She shook water from her eyes, stabbed the brake button.

The kayak slammed against something just beneath the surface, spun sideways with a rending sound, over-turned, pitching her into the water.

The kayak was a total loss. Face submerged, she could see it from the shifting surface, twenty feet down in the clear dark depth of the bay where it had slid after tearing itself open almost from bow to stern along a projecting ledge of rock. Feeling weak with shock, she lifted her head, stroked through angrily tossing water toward the shore where the man stood watching her. Presently she found a sloping sand bar underfoot, waded out.

"I'm so sorry!" he said, white-faced. "You aren't hurt, are you?"

Telzey's legs were trembling. She said, not too steadily, "Just scared to death."

"I would have come to your help—but I can't swim." He looked haggard enough but must be considerably younger than he'd seemed from the kayak, probably not much over thirty.

"Well, I can," Telzey said. "So that was all right." She gave him a brief reassuring smile, wondering a

good deal about him now. Then she looked up at the cliff on her right, saw the fresh scar there in the overhanging wall a hundred and fifty feet up.

"That was a mess of rock that came down," she remarked, pushing her hands back over her hair, squeezing water out of it.

"It was terrible. Terrible!" The man sighed heavily. "I . . . well, I have towels and clothing articles back there. Perhaps you could find something you could use if you'd like to dry and change."

"No, thanks," Telzey said. "My clothes are waterproofed. I'll be dry again in no time. You don't happen to have a boat around, do you? Or an aircar?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Neither."

She considered it, and him. "You live here?"

He said hesitantly, "No. Not exactly. But I'd planned to stay here a while." He paused. "The truth is, I did use a boat to come across the lake from the village this morning. But after I'd unloaded my supplies and equipment, I destroyed the boat. I didn't want to be tempted to leave too quickly again—"

He cleared his throat, looking as if he badly wanted to go on but couldn't quite bring himself to it.

"Well," Telzey said blandly, "it doesn't really matter. If I'm not back with the kayak by dark, the resort people will figure I'm having a problem and start looking for me."

The man seemed to reach a decision. "I don't want to alarm you, Miss—"

"I'm Telzey Amberdon."

He said his name was Dal Axwen. "There's something I must tell you. While you're here, we'll have to be very careful. Or something may happen to you."

She said cautiously, "What might happen to me?"

He grimaced. "I haven't the faintest idea—that's what makes it so difficult. I do know you're in danger." He cleared his throat again. "I'm sure this will sound as if I'm out of my mind. But the fact is—I'm being haunted."

Something shivered over Telzey's skin. "Haunted by what?" she asked.

Dal Axwen shook his head. "I can't say. I don't know who he is. Or what he is."

Telzey said after a moment, "You don't think that rock fall was an accident?"

"No," he said. "It wasn't an accident. I didn't think he would go that far, but you can see why I wanted you to go away immediately."

Telzey said, "He wasn't trying to get at you with the rocks?"

Axwen shook his head. "He intends to destroy me. Everything indicates it. But not directly—not physically. If he wanted that, he'd have done it by now. There's nothing I could have done to prevent it."

Telzey was silent. At the instant she'd felt that eruption of energy, a tight protective screen of psi force had closed about her mind. While Axwen was talking she'd lightened it carefully, gradually. And now that she was looking for indications of that kind, she could tell there was something around on the psi level. A mentality. She had the impression it was aware of her, though it wasn't reacting in any way to the thinning of her screen. Otherwise, she couldn't make out much about it as yet.

She looked at Axwen. He was watching her with a kind of anxious intentness.

"You say you don't know what he is?" she asked. "Haven't you seen him?"

Axwen hesitated, then said wonderingly, "Why, I think you believe me."

"Oh, I believe you, all right," Telzey said. "Those rocks were up there, part of the mountain, a long, long time. It really seems more likely something started them down on purpose at the moment I was under them than that it just happened."

"Perhaps it's because you're still almost a child," Axwen said nodding. "But it's a relief in itself to find someone who accepts my explanation for these occurrences." He looked up at the cliff and shivered. "He's never done anything so completely terrifying before. But it's been bad enough."

"You've no idea at all who's doing it?" Telzey asked.

"He's something that can't be seen," Axwen said earnestly. "An evil spirit! I don't know what drew him to me, but he's selected me as his victim. I've given up any hope of ever being free of him again."

An electric tingling began about Telzey's screen. The psi mentality was active again, though on a

relatively minor level. Her gaze shifted past Axwen's shoulder. Thirty feet farther along the shore, sand swirled up and about silently as if more and more of it were being flung high into the air by shifting violent blasts of wind in this wind-still bay. Then the sand cloud collapsed. Falling, it seemed to outline for a moment a squat ugly figure moving toward them. Then it was gone.

All right, I'm already scared, Telzey told the psi awareness mentally. You don't have to work at it. She sensed no response, no reaction whatever.

Couldn't it hear her?

She moistened her lips, puzzled, looked up at Dal Axwen's worried, sad face.

"Let's walk around in the open a bit while I dry off," she suggested. "How did all this get started?"

Axwen couldn't say precisely when his troubles had begun. There'd been scattered occurrences in the past few years which in retrospect indicated it was developing during that period. He was an attorney; and sometimes at his office, sometimes at home, he'd discover small articles had been displaced, were lying where he hadn't left them. It seemed inexplicable, particularly when they happened to be objects he'd been handling perhaps only moments before. Once he found a stack of papers strewn about the carpet as if by a sudden gust of wind, in a room into which no wind could have penetrated.

"It was mystifying, of course," he said. "But those events were quite infrequent, and I didn't really think too much about them. They didn't seem important enough. Then one night a door started slamming in my home. That was half a year ago."

That was the first of a series of events. There were periods in which nothing happened, but he never knew when a previously solid chair might collapse, or other even more disconcerting things would occur. He began to wake up at night to hear somebody walking heavily about the room. When he turned on the light, the footsteps stopped and no one was there. He took to sleeping with every part of the house well illuminated, but assorted manifestations continued. His office staff presently came in for its share of mystifying and alarming experiences and deserted him. Replacements didn't last long. It didn't really seem to matter. By then his business was almost nonexistent.

"Last night at my home there was a continuing series of disturbances—enough to make it impossible for me to get to sleep. It was as if he'd decided to drive me out of my mind. Finally I drugged myself heavily and fell asleep almost at once. I slept for a full twelve hours and woke up more refreshed than I'd been in weeks. There were no indications that my persecutor was around. That's when it occurred to me that if I went far away and hid for a while, I might be able to rid myself of him permanently. I acted on the thought at once, picked out this resort at random from a listing, flew up here, bought a boat in the village, loaded it up with camping equipment and supplies, and set out across the lake. This bay seemed ideal for my purpose. Then, when I was beginning to feel almost certain that I was free of him at last, he let me know he'd found me again."

"How did he do that?" Telzey asked.

"I had set up my shelter and was reaching for one of the food containers. It exploded just as I touched it. I wasn't hurt in the least. But I knew what it meant. I could almost hear him laughing at me."

Axwen added, looking dolefully at Telzey, "I don't remember very well what happened most of the rest of the day. I was in a state of total despair and fear. I remember lying here on the sand, thinking I might never get up again. Finally I heard you call me."

Some time passed—

Axwen stirred suddenly, lifted his head, and observed in a startled voice, "It seems to be getting dark very quickly."

Telzey glanced over at him. They were sitting on the sand now, a few feet apart, looking toward the lake beyond the bay. She felt tired and tense. Her face was filmed with sweat. She'd been working around inside Axwen's mind for some while, investigating, probing. Naturally she hadn't let him become aware of what she did.

It had been instructive. She knew by now what manner of entity haunted Axwen, and why he was being haunted. The haunter wasn't far away, and eager, terribly eager, to destroy her, the psi who

seemed to stand between itself and its prey. It had appalling power; she couldn't match it on that direct level. So far, she'd been holding it off with a variety of stratagems. But it was beginning to understand what she did and to discover how to undo the stratagems. It couldn't be too long before she'd find she'd run out of workable defenses.

She didn't know just when the moment would come. So she'd decided to bring Dal Axwen awake again. She had to try to get his help while it was still possible.

Axwen then had come awake and made his puzzled comment on the apparent shortness of the day.

Telzey said, "I guess it's just turning evening at the normal time for this latitude and season."

Axwen looked at his watch. "You're right," he admitted. "Strange—the last two hours seem to have passed like a dream. I recall almost nothing of what we said and did." He shook his head. "So I seem to be losing my memory, too. Well, at least there've been no further manifestations." He glanced at Telzey in sudden question. "Or have there been?"

"No," Telzey said.

Axwen yawned comfortably, gazing over at her.

"It's curious," he remarked. "I feel very calm now, quite undisturbed. I'm aware of my predicament and really see no way out. And I'm concerned that you may come to harm before you're away from here. At the same time, I seem almost completely detached from those problems."

Telzey nodded. "You try to never get angry at anyone, don't you?"

Axwen shook his head. "No, I don't approve of anger. When I feel such an impulse, which isn't often, I'm almost always able to overcome it. If I can't overcome it, then at least I won't express it or act on it."

Telzey nodded again. "You're someone who has about the average amount of human meanness in him. He knows it's not good, and he's trained himself, much more carefully than the average man, not to let it show in what he says or does. In fact, he's trained himself to the point where he usually doesn't even feel it."

Axwen said uncertainly, "This discussion is beginning to be rather confusing."

"A couple of things happened when you were ten years old," Telzey said. She went on talking a minute or two. Axwen's face grew strained as he listened. She said then, "I might have hypnotized you a while ago, or given you a spray of dope and asked you questions and told you to forget them again. But you'd better believe I know what I just told you because I read your mind. It isn't all I've done either. You've felt calm and detached till now because that's how I arranged it. I've been keeping you calm and detached. I don't want you to get any more upset than we can help." She added, "I'm afraid you're going to be pretty upset anyway."

Axwen stared at her. "About what?"

"The fact that you have a kind of second personality," Telzey said.

His eyelids flickered for a moment, and his jaw muscles went tight. He said nothing.

"Let me tell you about him," Telzey went on. "He's the things you haven't wanted to be consciously. That's about it. The way most people would look at it, it didn't make him very evil. But he's known what he is for quite a time, and he knows about you. You're the controlling personality. He's been locked away, unable to do anything except watch what you do. And he wasn't even always able to do that. He hasn't liked it, and he doesn't like you. You're his jailer. He's wanted to be the controlling personality and have it the other way around."

Axwen sighed. "Please don't talk like that," he said.

He considered, added, "However, if I did have such a secondary personality as a result of having purged myself of characteristics of which I couldn't approve, I agree that I'd keep it locked away. The baser side of our nature, whatever form it takes, shouldn't be permitted to emerge while we can prevent it."

"Well, things have been changing there," Telzey said. "You see, Mr. Axwen, you're a psi, too."

He was silent a moment, eyes fixed on her. Then he shook his head slowly.

"You don't believe you're a psi?" Telzey said.

"I'm afraid I don't." Axwen half smiled. "I'll admit that for a moment you almost had me believing you were one."

Telzey nodded. "That's how the real trouble started," she said. "You didn't want to believe it. You should have realized a few years ago that you were beginning to develop psi abilities and could control them. But it frightened you. So that was something else you pushed out of awareness." She added, "These last few months I've noticed other people doing the same thing. Usually it doesn't matter—there isn't enough ability there anyway to make much difference."

"Then why should it make any difference to me?" Axwen said gently.

Telzey didn't reply immediately. That gentleness overlay a mental rigidity strained to the breaking point. Axwen could hardly have avoided having uneasy intimations by now of what she was leading him to. But he still wouldn't let himself see it; and if the barriers against understanding he'd developed over the years were to be broken down, he'd have to do it himself—immediately. His personality was too brittle, too near collapse under pressure as it was, to be tampered with at this point by a psi—certainly by a psi whose experience was no more extensive than her own.

Just now, in any case, she'd have no time at all for doubtful experiments.

"I never heard of a psi with anything like your potential in some areas, Mr. Axwen," she told him. "I didn't know it was possible. You've shoved control of all that power over to your other personality. He's been learning how to use it."

Axwen made a sudden ragged breathing noise.

"So he's who has been haunting you this past half year," she went on. "Really, of course, you've been haunting yourself."

If it hadn't been for the careful preliminary work she'd done on him, Axwen's reaction, when it finally came, might have been shattering. As it was, she was able to handle it well enough. Some five minutes later, he said dully, "Why would he do such a thing to me?"

It was progress. He'd accepted one part of the situation. He might now be willing to accept the remaining, all-important part. "You said you thought he was trying to drive you out of your mind," Telzey said. "He is, in a way. After he's reduced you down to where you can barely think, *he'll* be the controlling personality."

Axwen said, in desperation, "Then he'll succeed! I can't hope to stand up against his persecution much longer!"

"You won't have to," Telzey told him.

He looked at her. "What do you mean?"

Telzey said, "I've checked this very carefully. You can take psi control away from him if you'll do it at once. I can show you how to do it and help you do it. I know people I could send you to who could help you better than I, but we haven't nearly enough time left for that. And we can do it. Then—"

Axwen's jaw had begun to tremble; his eyes rolled like those of a frightened animal. "I will not associate myself with whatever that creature has become," he said hoarsely. "I deny that he's part of me!"

"Mr. Axwen," she said, "let me tell you some more about him, about the situation. I'll talk about him as if he weren't really you. He's one kind of psi; I'm another. In a way, he's much stronger than I am. I couldn't begin to tap the kind of energies he's been handling here, and if I could, they'd kill me.

Telzey pushed her palm across her forehead, wiped away sweat.

"There's a lot he doesn't understand. I'm the first psi he met—he didn't know there were others. He thought I was dangerous to him, so he tried to kill me, his way.

"I can't do any of the things he does. What I've done mainly when I had the time was study minds. What they're like, what you can do with them. Like I studied you today—and him. He didn't know I was doing it for a while, and when he knew that he didn't know how to stop me. He's been trying to do things that will kill me. But each time I confuse him, or make him forget what he wants to do, or how to do it. Sometimes he even forgets for a while that we're here, or what he is. I'm holding him down in a lot of different ways.

"But he keeps on trying to get away—and he is tremendously strong. If I lose control of him

completely, he'll kill me at once. He's drawn in much more energy to use against me than he can handle safely—he still doesn't know enough about things like that. He's trying to find out how I'm holding him, and he's catching on. I can't talk to him because he can't hear me. If I had the time, I think I could get him to understand, but I won't have the time. I simply can't hold him that long. Mr. Axwen, don't you see that you must take control? I'll help you, and you can do it—I promise you that!"

"No." There was the flat finality of despair in the word. "But there is something I can do . . ."

Axwen started climbing to his feet, dropped awkwardly back again.

"That would be stupid," Telzey said.

He stared at her. "You stopped me!"

"I'm not letting you dive into the bay and drown yourself!"

"What else is left?" He was still staring at her, face chalk-white. His eyes widened then, slowly and enormously. "*You—*"

Telzey clamped down on the new horror exploding in him.

"No, I'm *not* some supernatural thing!" she said quickly. "I haven't come here to trick you into spiritual destruction. I'm *not* what's been haunting you!"

Something else slipped partly from her control then. Far back in the forested cleft behind them, high up between the cliffs, there was a sound like an echoing crash of thunder. Electric currents whirled about her.

"What's that?" Axwen gasped.

"He's got away." Telzey drew a long unsteady breath. "He doesn't know exactly where we are, but he's looking for us."

She blotted consciousness from Axwen's mind. He slumped over, lay on his side, knees drawn up toward his chest.

She couldn't blot consciousness so easily from the other personality. Nor could she restore the controls it had broken. The crashing sounds moved down through the cleft toward them. There was one thing left she could do, if she still had time for it.

She drew a blur of forgetfulness across its awareness of her, across its purpose. The noise stopped. For the moment, the personality was checked. Not for long—it knew what was being done to it in that respect now and would start forcing its way out of the mental fog.

Psi slashed delicately at its structure. It was an attack it could have blocked with a fraction of the power available to it. But it didn't know how to block it, or, as yet, that it was being attacked. Something separated. A small part of the personality vanished. A small part of its swollen stores of psi vanished with it.

She went on destructuring Dal Axwen's other personality. It wasn't pleasant work. Sometimes it didn't know what was happening. Sometimes it knew and struggled with horrid tenacity against further disintegration. She worked very quickly because, for a while, it still could have killed her easily if it had discovered in this emergency one of the ways to do it. Then, presently, she was past that point. Its remnants went unwillingly, still clinging to shreds of awareness, but no longer trying to resist otherwise. That seemed to make it worse.

It took perhaps half an hour in all. The last of Axwen's buried personality was gone then, and the last of the psi energy it had drawn into itself had drained harmlessly away. Telzey checked carefully to make sure of it. Then she swallowed twice, and was sick. Afterwards, she rinsed her mouth at the water's edge, came back and brought Axwen awake.

A search boat from the resort village picked them up an hour later. The resort had considerable experience in locating guests who went off on the lake by themselves and got into difficulties. Shortly before midnight, Telzey was in her aircar, on the way back to Pehanron College. All inclination to spend the rest of the weekend at the lake had left her.

The past hours had brought her an abrupt new understanding of the people of the Psychology Service and their ways. Dal Axwen was a psi who should have been kept under observation and restraint

while specialists dissolved the rigid blocks which prevented him from giving sane consideration to his emerging talent. If the Service people had discovered him in time, they could have saved him intact, as she'd been unable to do. And there might be many more psi personalities than she'd assumed who could be serious problems to themselves and others unless given guidance—with or without their consent.

It seemed then that in a society in which psis were a factor, something like the Psychology Service was necessary. Their procedures weren't as arbitrary as they'd appeared to her. She'd keep her independence of them; she'd earned that by establishing she could maintain it. But it would be foolish to turn her back completely on the vast stores of knowledge and experience represented by the Service . . .

Her reflections kept returning unwillingly to Dal Axwen's reactions. He'd been enormously, incredulously grateful after she restored him to consciousness. He'd laughed and cried. He'd kept trying to explain how free, relaxed and light he felt after the months of growing nightmare oppression, how safe he knew he was now from further uncanny problems of the kind. Forgetting she still was able to read his mind, knew exactly how he felt—

Telzey shook her head. She'd killed half a unique human being, destroyed a human psi potential greater than she'd suspected existed.

And Axwen—foolish, emptied Axwen—had thanked her with happy tears streaming from his eyes for doing it to him!