

CHAPTER 1

SARAH—MONDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1909,
9:00 A.M.



Dr. Sarah Kennecott scanned the dead girl's naked body. The corpse had a small bullet wound near the heart. The right side of the forehead had a one-inch gash over a swollen, purplish bruise, and dark material clustered under fingernails of the right hand. A shallow quarter-inch cut marked the top knuckle of the left index finger. The upper lip had a slight bulge.

Sarah knew exactly how to proceed with the postmortem examination—if she were in charge. Which she most definitely was not.

With difficulty, she broadened her awareness to include the three men also standing around the autopsy table. *Do make eye contact*, she told herself as her pulse sprinted. *Do control the tics. Do not offend the men. Stay out of trouble.*

Bare electric bulbs lit the body chamber of the Baltimore city morgue with brutal efficiency. The dead girl's blue-black lips contrasted with the bright white autopsy table, which had rust spots from where tools had chipped the enameled surface down to the iron base. Saws, drills, chisels, and knives lay ready on a scratched steel counter below shelves of organs floating in

murky glass jars. A harsh chemical stink mixed with the odor the dead hung in the dank air. None of the sights or smells disturbed Sarah's focus.

"Old Horace Shaw went and killed himself this pretty little high-kicker," rasped the coroner with a blast of whiskey breath. He was an older man with broken capillaries exploding across ruddy cheeks. A fine thread of what looked like maple syrup ran down one side of his chin whiskers and over his cravat.

"Just another day in Baltimore," said the medical examiner, whose gray handlebar mustache dominated his gaunt face. "Shaw and the rest of those damn politicians have let our city become a playground for fallen women. Every slattern south of New York has flocked here to make a dirty dollar." He shot a sharp look at the scribbling male attendant. "Don't put that in the notes!"

The attendant jumped. "I-I-I was only j-j-jotting the time and date, sir."

"Why can't we get a clerk who can speak right?" The medical examiner turned his cold gaze on Sarah. "And to top it off, we're forced to have this twitchy little girl standing in our way. Things are going to hell in a handcart around here."

Unlike with the dead, Sarah was uncomfortable with the living. Experience had taught her the best way to cope with people was to concentrate on the work at hand. She picked up a nearby clipboard holding the police report along with four photographic prints. One print was of the dead girl lying naked on her back in a bed against a wall. Someone had placed a towel over her chest and groin. The gain in modesty came at the expense of concealing how much blood was on or under the body.

Another photograph showed the whole room, which was in an extreme state of disorder. The final two photographs showed both sides of a small pistol; one side had "H. Shaw" engraved in bold lettering. The weapon was also covered with dark,

swirly markings—the police had processed the gun for finger marks.

“There’s no mystery here,” said the coroner. “Police Commissioner Lipp wants us to work fast and get Shaw arrested. That will also have the benefit of knocking the commissioner’s main competitor out of the mayor’s race.”

“Amen to that,” said the medical examiner. “Commissioner Lipp is a godly man and the only one tough enough to clean up this city—he’s got to be elected. All right, then. Let’s get started.”

“Her name is Lizzie Sullivan, a showgirl, nineteen years of age.” Sarah read aloud from the report. “Police found the body in the deceased’s boardinghouse room, along with a discharged pistol. A feather pillow with powder burns and a bullet hole was also found.” The only sounds were the coroner’s wheezy breathing and the drip of melted water from the corpse iceboxes. Sarah lowered the clipboard. “Where are the bedsheets from the crime scene?”

The medical examiner flicked a speck of dust off his white medical gown. “You’re here, missy, strictly to observe. Stop your annoying prattle.”

Sarah pressed the clipboard to her chest. “You must address me as ‘Doctor.’” She forced herself to stop rocking back and forth on her feet. “You know my qualifications. I graduated from the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine this spring with a specialty in pathology. And let me remind you I am here at the request of the mayor to learn the truth behind this murder. That is my job with the Pinkerton National Detective Agency.”

The two men rolled their eyes. “Political shenanigans,” said the medical examiner. “The mayor must be in the pocket of the Pinkertons for him to send you instead of someone who knows what they’re doing. What kind of physician works for a gumshoe firm?”

Sarah hesitated. He had a point—the Pinkerton Agency was

not her preferred employer. She should be working as a pathologist.

“No sheets. All we have is the body,” said the coroner. “The report says there was blood on the bed. It’s safe to assume she bled out.”

“The report fails to specify how much spilled blood was present at the scene. We are missing a key piece of information.” Sarah looked at the girl’s body. “The victim is not, however, drained of blood.”

The coroner’s jaw tightened. “How do you know that, *Doctor*? We haven’t even opened her up.”

“Observe the lividity pattern.” Sarah pointed to the pronounced purple patches along the visible edges of the girl’s back, rear end, and thighs.

“Lividity is present even after severe blood loss,” said the medical examiner with a deep sigh. “Guess your fancy school didn’t teach you that.”

“If she suffered severe blood loss, the lividity would be much reduced and would present as more pink than purple,” said Sarah. “Also, let us consider the cut on the right side of the head. Surely it occurred before death.” Sarah was swaying again, and her extended finger moved closer to, then farther away from the girl’s head as she spoke. “The area is swollen and discolored, indicating the blood vessels had time to expand. There are signs of healing.”

The coroner and the medical examiner glowered in silence. Sarah’s shoulders clenched tighter and a bead of sweat rolled down her spine as she struggled to assess their reaction. It was reasonable to suspect they viewed her behavior as difficult. And, for unknown reasons, they were ignoring her valid points.

The men turned the body over on its side. “No sign of a bullet exit wound or any other trauma to the back,” said the medical examiner. He rolled the body back and sliced into the abdomen. After a quick check of the stomach and other organs,

he cut open the chest, using long-handled cutters to snip the ribs. Dipping his hands into the cavity, he conducted a perfunctory examination of the heart and lungs, splattering fluid onto his apron.

“Right. Here’s the bugger.” The medical examiner plunged forceps deep into the chest and pulled out a small bullet. “I say this is a homicide with death due to a twenty-five-caliber gunshot wound to the heart. That’s consistent with the discharged pistol and the hole in the pillow. Will that make the commissioner happy, Mr. Coroner?”

“Yes,” said the coroner. “It’s the perfect finding.”

“I disagree about the cause of death.” Sarah blurted the words out. “The gunshot wound must have occurred after she died. The bullet pierced a coronary artery. If alive when shot, she would have bled internally and perhaps even jetted blood externally. Yet there is little internal hemorrhaging, and from the crime scene photograph it is apparent there was no blood spray on the bed or adjacent wall.” Sarah forcefully gestured at the photo on the clipboard.

“Lower your damn voice, girl.” The coroner snatched the report from her hand and flung it onto the nearby counter. The clipboard skittered over the slick surface and fell onto the floor, coming to rest under a cadaver ice chest in a puddle of water.

“Why are you unwilling to acknowledge obvious evidence? And you have not even examined the brain. This is not a competent examination,” she said, small hands slashing the air.

“That’s enough sass out of you.” The coroner pointed a sausage-like finger at the door. “Get out.”

“Ah, she’s not worth your breath,” said the medical examiner. “Let’s get out of here and leave her to the sputtering clerk.” The men laughed coarsely as they ambled off to the dressing room.

“Miss—I-I-I mean, Doctor—do you wish me to enter your

comments into the notes?" The morgue attendant stood poised with his pencil.

She slammed her palm on the workbench. "Do not mock me." He shrank away, Adam's apple bobbing. A pang of regret hit her for browbeating the man, who must have truly meant what he had said. She tried to relax the discomfort in her shoulders as she stared at a cockroach scuttling across the greasy tile floor. "No. Nothing I said is official, but I offer my gratitude to you for inquiring."

"You're more than welcome, Doctor. I have a daughter who's interested in nursing. She's a good student and sometimes has notions about becoming a physician. We tell her to be realistic. Still, it's wonderful to see a woman working in the health field."

"Your daughter's ambition is the most encouraging thing I have heard in days." Sarah stepped to within inches of the man. "There is a book your daughter must read. I will bring it to you."

"That's very kind, but please do not trouble yourself." The clerk took a step back as he spoke. "I-I-I can't be asking you to come back to this unpleasant place on my account."

"It is an excellent book in memory of Mary Putnam Jacobi. Dr. Jacobi won a Harvard University prize for her essay 'The Question of Rest for Women during Menstruation,' which refuted the notion that women had to rest during their monthlies to avoid damaging their reproductive organs." The clerk took another step back as Sarah kept talking. "Dr. Jacobi is a wonderful model for any girl considering medicine. And it is no bother for me to come back. I am at ease around the dead. We can understand with precision why they are, in fact, dead. I—"

"Thank you, Doctor. If you will excuse me, I-I-I need to suture the corpse and finish my report."

After washing, Sarah removed the white gown, ignoring the lint adhering to her jacket. She lifted her broad-brimmed hat, piled high with lace and silk flowers, from the coatrack and,

with a complete absence of fuss, plopped the millinery on her head and anchored it with a single long pin.

Stepping outside, she put her hands over her eyes to escape the midmorning sunshine. She was at the edge of the harbor and engulfed with the smell of brackish water, raw sewage, and dead fish. An occasional warm breeze carried the smell of rotting oysters dumped outside a nearby packing plant, causing her to gag.

Harsh sounds came from everywhere—steamboat whistles, longshoremen shouts, sawmill shrieks. The noise forced her to clap her hands over her ears. Slowly Sarah adjusted to the full sensory experience and began walking.

The cabdriver who had brought her said he would wait at the nearby President Street Railroad Station, but she wanted to avoid the man at all costs. His crude sexual comments had been the worst she had endured in days.

She headed up East Falls Avenue toward Pratt Street, where she could find another cab. The fetid stream known as Jones Falls ran along her left. A silent procession of worn men shuffled by on the right, all bent under massive loads of freshly cut lumber.

As she walked, Sarah thought about her difficult time in the morgue, which was just the latest in a long line of confusing, often frustrating, encounters. She could never grasp why some people appreciated her ability while other people held it against her. At school, the instructors were fond of the girl they called “little miss professor” for her habit of talking in detail about a few favorite subjects. Classmates, on the other hand, called her a teacher’s pet and relentlessly teased her social awkwardness.

She had excelled academically at Vassar and Hopkins, and then won a prestigious postgraduate internship in pathology at a major out-of-town hospital. But the internship supervisor, citing disobedience, had forced her out just last month. Somehow, she must find a way to fulfill the promise, made over the side-by-

side graves of her father and older sister Grace, to focus her life on catching murderers.

Sarah's most immediate concern was getting back to the Pinkerton office as quickly as possible to write a report on Lizzie Sullivan's autopsy. Her boss would complain the report was too long and complicated. No matter—her only care was uncovering the truth.

A motorcar roared past and splashed foul liquid across her skirt from ankle to thigh. She looked at the stains in disbelief. Everything was so hard. She wanted to do good, but things kept going wrong.

Looking out over the sludge-brown Jones Falls, she saw mottled seagulls screeching and squawking as they jockeyed for bits of bobbing offal. Across the muddy flow, her eye went to a great blue heron standing in a shallow spot, elegantly dipping its beak and pulling out one waggling fish after another. She watched until the bird had its fill and took flight toward the harbor, and beyond that, the open waters of the Chesapeake Bay.

She continued walking and reached a spot where the entire width of the street was covered by a pool of water so big the breeze stood up little waves on its surface. Sarah hitched her long skirts and kept going. At the halfway point the pool was two inches deep. Just then, the breeze stopped and an oily rainbow spread on the water before her.

She remembered how her dear sister Grace used to say that seeing a rainbow meant happiness was coming. As much as Sarah wanted a change for the better, there was absolutely no valid reason to think that colors on a puddle promised her anything.