

CHAPTER 1



SARAH—FRIDAY, APRIL 15, 1910, 3:00 A.M.

An eerie creak sounded from deep within the dark, silent mansion.

Sarah heard the noise because, as usual, she could not sleep. Reading something light and frivolous was the only way to quiet her hyperactive mind enough to induce slumber. The book open before her, *Psychology and Perception of the Paranormal*, was suitable for that purpose.

A floorboard groaned, closer this time. Then a faint rattle as if someone had touched the doorknob. The housekeeper could be up and about, even though the woman rarely stirred at this hour.

“Hello?” No answer.

Sarah massaged her temples, exhausted. She had volunteered twelve hours a day for the past week at the Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital, a treatment facility for the mentally ill. She usually put in less time, but several patients came down with typhoid fever and needed her help. One patient died—an older woman who took great comfort from Sarah’s devoted attention.

She picked up reading where she left off: the deluded belief that people can communicate with the dead. “This fantasy includes encounters with ‘spirits’ claiming to offer advice or

confer criticism. The subject may talk of apparitions that appear spontaneously or via the services of so-called ‘mediums.’ We may attribute most such sightings to neurotic suggestibility, although we cannot rule out a serious personality disorder or even psychosis . . .”

She closed the book. After switching off the electric lamp, the bedroom glowed with the full moon’s cold silver brilliance. With a shiver, she pulled up the blankets and closed her eyes.

“My sweet sister.” Grace stood over the bed, wearing a pale dress. Her light hair was in a thick nighttime braid that fell over a shoulder.

“Grace. I am surprised to see you.”

“I’ve missed you terribly, Sarah.” She laughed softly and sat on the bed, light as a feather. “And yes, I know you’ve missed me, too. You don’t need to say so.”

Sarah sobbed as they embraced. “You are unchanged since we last met,” she said while using the sheet to dab a wet cheek. A disturbing thought floated through her mind: she was twenty-five, and Grace was three years older. It was therefore impossible for Grace to be nineteen, as she appeared.

“And you are all grown up.” Grace leaned over to wipe away more tears and stroke her hair. Her sister had exactly the right touch—a precious comfort that Sarah had dearly missed.

“I am so proud that you are a doctor with a degree from the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine,” said Grace. “It’s a remarkable achievement, especially for a woman. More remarkable still is your work as a forensic pathologist on behalf of justice. All of us deeply appreciate what you are doing.”

“I am determined to hold murderers accountable for their crimes.” Sarah clutched her sister’s hand tightly.

“You have a new opportunity in that regard. Let me show you.”

She was now standing in a room looking down at a young woman lying on a bed and wearing a yellow nightgown embroi-

dered with pink roses. “Who is this sleeping person? Why am I here?”

Grace stood close by, looking at the supine form. “She is not sleeping. She is dead—murdered. Only you can find the killer.”

In an eyeblink, they were back in Sarah’s bedroom. “Grace—how can I investigate the murder of an unnamed victim in an unknown location? Will you notify the police?”

“You must use your expertise to help the police solve the crime.”

“I prefer to work alone. Except for Jack, of course.”

“Yes, I know all about your Jack. But you must engage boldly with others if you are to solve this killing.”

“Grace. Explain how you can present yourself here and communicate with me when you were murdered eight years ago. Bear in mind that I do not believe in the supernatural. I rely on tangible evidence, not on information from a dream.”

“There is more to the world than you know, darling sister. Our minds are capable of experience far beyond the ordinary. Think of love, of how different it makes you feel.”

“I have not loved another since your death.” Sarah squeezed her sister’s hand, desperate not to let her go.

“Are you sure?”

“I cannot measure my experience—”

Grace was gone, her light laughter fading into the nighttime silence.

She opened her eyes, feeling oddly certain her sister had been here. Impossible.

But for reasons Sarah could not explain or even begin to justify, she was sure the woman on that bed had been recently murdered—and that she must find the killer.

CHAPTER 2



JACK—SATURDAY, APRIL 16, 1910, 4:00 P.M.

The thundering shockwave from the foundry came every five seconds, vibrating his teeth with each metallic bang. It was enough like cannon fire to draw icy rivulets of flop sweat. Not good—his nerves were already as tight as a plug in a cider barrel.

Jack was last here at the water's edge in the Fells Point neighborhood weeks ago looking for a missing person. A client had a brother who, when drunk, had a habit of jumping into the harbor. When the brother disappeared, Jack agreed to check the wharf pilings for floaters. He found a body, but it wasn't the guy. The brother eventually turned up in jail, dazed and wearing another man's ragged clothes.

Jack's mental troubles were under control at that point. But the visions had come back.

He was nearly broke and behind on his rent. His most pressing need for money, however, was for a trip to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for its magical mineral baths. The soothing waters might finally banish the ghosts bent on driving him insane.

He'd seen a brochure for Dr. Hope's Miracle Bath Palace in Hot Springs and was sold with the promise of "radioactive waters flowing from the electric heart of the Earth," guaranteed

to “cure every affliction of the body, mind, and spirit.” The brochure pictured a happy customer tucked into bed, snoozing away in a “restorative, mind-healing sleep that settles nerves and reawakens joy in the despondent.” He hadn’t slept without nightmares for weeks and weeks. At twenty-eight, he felt like an old man on his last legs.

Jack continued down the broad wharf to a sprawling pile of oyster shells eight feet high. Straining men pushed overflowing wheelbarrows up a sloping pathway to the top. Seagulls screeched as they circled the mound looking for bits of flesh.

He took in the ramshackle collection of buildings running along the wharf’s edge. It was hard to believe this dump of an oyster packing plant made so much money for its owner.

“Hey, mac,” called Jack to a nearby barrow man. “Where can I find the boss?”

“Dunno,” the guy kept on pushing his load without looking up, “but you can bet he’s watching.”

A stiff breeze blew in from the harbor. It smelled like sewage but had the virtue of pushing away the fouler stink of rotting shellfish. The waterfront stunk, but this spot was especially nasty.

“Harden? That you?”

Jack turned to see a short, fortyish man approaching. He wore an expensive suit with a yellow tie and a blue-striped shirt. A straw boater with a broad black ribbon sat on his head.

“It is if you own this place.”

“I do.” He thrust out a short-fingered hand. As expected, the guy’s grip was like a vise.

“Had your cornflakes this morning, I see,” said Jack. A short fellow always had to prove something to a taller guy.

“A buddy tells me you’re a great private detective,” said the man. “And if you got that son of a gun out of trouble, you surely can help me. Come on into the office and let’s talk.”

Jack followed as the guy strolled into the plant. The interior was dimly lit, and it took a few seconds for his eyes to

adjust to the murk. Several dozen workers hunched over two long rows of slatted wooden crates, each with a tin pail hanging at the side. Nearly all the laborers were kids under the age of fourteen; many were much younger. Their small hands worked furiously to pry open oysters, scoop meat for the bucket, drop the empty shells, and reach for another mollusk. The place was damp, fetid, and much colder than outside.

“Listen up, you loafers!” yelled the owner. Nobody stopped working. “See this here detective? He’s a real bastard and is going to keep an eye on you.”

A huge man leaning against the wall gave a braying laugh. “You lazy dogs are in trouble now!” The guy had “FOR MAN” written in crude letters on a card stuffed into the brim of his greasy derby hat.

“Keep them working,” said the owner. “We’ve got another load of pearlies coming in tonight.”

“You got it, boss.” The foreman hit a crate with a long club. The sharp thwap made Jack jump, but none of the workers missed a beat. They were a sad lot, with thin, foxy faces and scrawny bodies. The youngest kids stood with bare feet on splintery risers, their short arms straining to grab one oyster after another. Nobody spoke; nobody smiled.

Jack had nothing against hard work: after running away from home at eleven, he’d done plenty to support himself. But that was on farms in the fresh air without a club-carrying goon watching his every move. He’d also been lucky enough to finish fifth grade and learn the basics of reading and writing. These wretched kids had no shot at any education. Their minds would be forever stunted and their bodies permanently damaged—all to make one man rich.

“I was just keeping them in line,” said the owner with a friendly nudge before heading through a warped door with “Office” painted in faded lettering. He dropped into a shiny leather chair. The room was a mess, with slime-green paint

peeling off the walls and wooly dust balls scattered across the floor.

“I haven’t taken the job,” said Jack. “And if you want me to strong-arm kids, forget it.”

“The thief’s no kid. Have a seat.”

Jack considered walking out. He didn’t want to be in this place, and he sure didn’t want to deal with this character. But the job was supposed to pay well. He sat down.

“Here’s the deal, Harden.” The man lifted the top off a cedar humidor and pulled out a fat black cigar, which he sniffed for a good five seconds before sparking it up. “Somebody stole some photographs off me.”

“Dirty pictures?” This guy seemed like the type.

“No, nothing like that.” The man grinned as he puffed. “Just photos of my employees hard at work.”

“So?”

“So, some muckraker might think it’s wrong for me to give those brats honest work to earn money for their families.”

“I get it,” said Jack. “You’re afraid of getting dinged by the new law against child labor. Why were you ignorant enough to have those pictures in the first place?”

“Watch your mouth, pal.” The owner jabbed his cigar. “I’m paying you, remember?”

“I haven’t taken a dime.”

“The child labor hubbub comes and goes,” said the owner. “Most people don’t care—law or no law. And when it comes to oysters, the newspapers only get in a tizzy about tainted product. Did you see those stories recently about how packing plant workers are sick with tuberculosis? Got customers worried about disease in their canned oysters. It’s bad for business.”

“Yeah,” said Jack. “A real shame.”

“You bet. And unfair to me. I hire kids, mostly. Young and healthy. I see anyone cough, they get fired on the spot.”

“And the pictures showed how your swell operation is disease-free.”

“I was going to publish a pamphlet called ‘My Sanitary Oysters are Packed with Young Energy.’” The owner drew on his stogie and made the tip glow like the eye of a demon.

Jack shook his head, amazed at this guy’s pickle. While it was true that press attention to child labor went up and down, nothing sold papers like a good scandal with pictures.

“Here’s what I want from you, Harden. Fetch those glass negatives back to me and I’ll give you a hundred dollars.”

Jack stared at the ribbon of smoke rising from the smoldering cigar. This guy was in a big enough jam that he’d pay a lot more than that to get those photographs back.

“Probably a cakewalk. I got a good idea who swiped them. Fired him yesterday when I caught him coughing. I think he stole them off my desk on his way out. Low-down sneak.”

“Why doesn’t your gorilla foreman go get them?”

“He’s my baby brother.” The owner smiled. “He can get a bit too excited when smacking people around. Him killing the guy would cause problems.”

“I’m supposed to deliver a beatdown, too?”

“Got to send a message not to screw with me. Look, it’s easy money for you. The guy’s old and won’t put up a fight.”

Jack stood. “Not interested.”

The owner laughed and brushed ash from the desktop. “I’ll give you two hundred. Final offer.”

“I don’t do dirty work.”

“You’re a private detective. That means you’re already dirtier than a bum with a soap allergy.”

“I can deal with dirt,” said Jack. “Scum is another matter.”

“Okay, you’re weak-kneed.” The man tossed a five-dollar gold piece on the desk. “Get lost and keep your mouth shut about what I told you.”

Jack ignored the coin and walked out.

The improbable baby brother approached, his buck teeth displayed in a grin. He blocked Jack’s path and poked him in the

chest with the club. “Hold up, friend. I’m supposed to give you the fired guy’s address.”

Jack swatted at the stick and knocked it out of the man’s hand. “I turned the job down. Out of my way, clown.”

The man glanced at the nearby workers. “I ain’t finished talking with you.” He stepped close, a surly curl of the lip replacing the goofy grin.

Jack tried to brush past, but the bruiser grabbed his arm and threw a roundhouse punch. Jack blocked the swing and countered with a quick fist into the man’s chin. The blow was powerful enough to drop most men, but this guy shook his head and charged with a shrill yell.

Jack’s ghosts had triggers—children crying, poor sleep, even not enough coffee. For whatever reason, the screaming spectral forms, bloody and torn, chose this moment to appear in a dream-like haze. Jack barely managed to sidestep the lunging brute.

A ghostly woman, bloody and clutching an infant, ran at Jack with a terrible shriek.

“Mister—look out for the gun!”

The young shucker’s voice cut through the unearthly din, giving him just enough time to kick the foreman’s hand as he fired a pistol. The gun skittered away as Jack shoved the man against an oyster crate. Everything was tinted a bright pulsing red with ghosts crowding around, screaming and moaning. Jack was ready to pound the foreman’s face until it wasn’t a face anymore, but the guy had tumbled backward into the crate with his big feet hanging motionless over the top.

Breathing raggedly, Jack ran out of the place, ghosts in pursuit. He kept going up the street for blocks until dropping to the curb, eyes pressed shut. Still, the bloody woman with the baby continued to shake a gory fist at him while screaming words in an unknown language.

He rocked back and forth on the curb, begging her: “I can’t take anymore. Please just kill me. Kill me now.”

CHAPTER 3



SARAH—SATURDAY, APRIL 16,
1910, 11:00 A.M.

People communicated with gestures and facial expressions that were impossible for her to understand. Spoken language was also impenetrably coded. When a person said, “I would love to do that,” they could mean the opposite. A question might require no answer. A smile could convey a hostile intent.

Confoundingly, these cryptic modes of expression were deemed *normal*. Sarah was not normal and could not pretend to be otherwise. Dealing with people was difficult, and so she preferred solitude whenever possible.

Yet, here she was, standing in the foyer of Mrs. Beatrice Lanvale, undertaking a most arduous engagement. The woman had couched the invitation as an obligation to welcome an out-of-town guest, forcing Sarah to attend as a matter of high society etiquette. She relied on the rules of proper behavior as a lifeline to the world of others, but stress often led her to violate decorum. This was a particular issue with regard to people she disliked, such as Mrs. Lanvale.

“Sarah—are you still with me?” asked the woman. “I said your petticoat is showing—fix it. Your skirt also has a frayed waistband, but there is nothing to be done about that now.”

Honestly, a young woman with so little to work with simply must present herself better.”

Sarah glanced down and saw a swath of petticoat drooping over her shoes. She tugged at her skirts and managed to hide most of the offending undergarment. She began pulling at loose threads hanging from her waistband, but Mrs. Lanvale scolded her again.

“Stop. I told you to leave it alone. My guest is waiting.”

“Why does this person want to see me?” Sarah balled her hands into fists so tightly they hurt.

“Miss Nightingale has heard of your detectiving exploits and wants to talk. Now, stop dawdling. She’s waited long enough for your grand entrance.”

Sarah raised her eyes to the garish brooch hanging on her hostess’s blue silk dress. Why did the woman feel compelled to make such an ostentatious display? Sarah pondered the mystery while swaying back and forth, long skirts swishing. A darting glance revealed enough space between Mrs. Lanvale and the door to permit a dash to freedom. *Must not do that*, she told herself firmly. *Must follow the rules*. She turned and moved toward the parlor and the waiting stranger.

“My goodness, hello,” said a tall woman. She was about fifty, slim and elegant, with a pale face contrasting with strikingly dark hair. Her simple dress consisted of floor-length white piqué fabric with a lace collar.

Sarah stared unblinkingly into the woman’s eyes. She was making a special effort lately to establish eye contact, as others seemed to regard it as polite.

Mrs. Lanvale rushed up, out of breath. “Miss Lydia Nightingale, may I present Miss Sarah Kennecott—”

“Isn’t it *Doctor* Kennecott?” interrupted the visitor, who met Sarah’s gaze with a serene smile.

Their hostess snickered. “Oh, yes, I suppose so—”

“I only insist on that form of address when I am working as a

physician.” Sarah reluctantly accepted the guest’s hand before quickly dropping it. “This is a social call.”

“I understand, Sarah—I hope I may call you that. And please, call me Lydia.”

“Well, then.” Mrs. Lanvale cleared her throat noisily. “Miss Sarah Kennecott, may I present Lydia’s assistants, Mr. Luther Fuller and Miss Lucinda Pike.”

Perhaps twenty-one, Mr. Fuller was dressed all in black as if for a funeral. Miss Pike was about sixty and wore a conventional day dress constructed of patterned green cotton. Both nodded simultaneously. Much to Sarah’s relief, neither extended a hand.

“Let us be seated.” Mrs. Lanvale dropped heavily into an armchair covered in a shiny brocade. “Niblett, we will take tea.”

“Yes, madam,” said the butler, who promptly departed.

Sarah sat prim in a chair near a low lacquered table populated with artless bric-a-brac, including small porcelain birds with big eyes.

The butler reappeared, pushing a cart with an elaborate tea service. “Mr. Niblett serves so beautifully,” said Lydia, sitting on a sofa with an assistant on either side.

“Niblett is a genuine English butler,” said Mrs. Lanvale. “He used to work for a duke.”

“I was in the service of an earl, madam,” said the butler in a very stiff, very proper accent.

“Doesn’t matter—I pay more,” said Mrs. Lanvale with a humorless titter. “That will be all, Niblett.”

Sarah’s thoughts wandered to blood and murder. A Hungarian scientist had recently published a paper outlining a simple portable test to differentiate the blood of humans from that of animals. If true, it would represent a remarkable advance in criminal forensics. At present, testing for human blood at a crime scene required a complex laboratory procedure. She was eager to read more about the new method—as soon as this tiresome social assignment was finished.

“Sarah,” said Mrs. Lanvale. “Listen to me. I told you to try

the shortbread biscuits. They are imported directly from Glasgow.”

“No, thank you. Please inform me as to the purpose of this meeting.”

“Watch yourself, dear.” Mrs. Lanvale glared while dabbing at her downturned mouth with a napkin. “Lydia is a spirit medium and is in town for the Death as Transformation and Opportunity Spiritualism Convention. She has taken time from her busy schedule to talk with you about a missing person.”

“Miss Lydia Nightingale, I reject purported clairvoyance, communication with the dead, and all other forms of so-called spiritualism.” Sarah noticed her right leg churning up and down but made no effort to stop the motion. She hated surprises—Mrs. Lanvale had not mentioned spiritualism in the invitation.

Lydia smiled. “I have no wish to discuss such matters with you. But will you use my first name? Please?”

Sarah disliked informality but knew that some people insisted upon it. “Very well—Lydia.” She shifted her gaze to the floor.

“The missing person is my secretary, Anna Gilbert,” said Lydia. “She and Lucinda traveled from Boston together. They got here yesterday, some hours ahead of Luther and me. Lucinda is staying in this house, but Anna is at a hotel closer to the convention site.”

The separate accommodations struck Sarah as odd, but she remained quiet.

“All seemed well at first.” Lydia wrung her hands. “I telephoned Anna at the hotel just after I arrived. She then met with Mrs. Lanvale and others shortly afterward but has not been heard from since.”

“Perhaps she merely wishes to remain undisturbed,” said Sarah.

“Anna values her privacy,” said Lydia. “But it is unusual for her to remain out of contact for so long.”

“You should know that dozens of unaccompanied women

arrive in Baltimore every day. Lotharios and criminals are known to prey upon them.” Sarah’s discomfort grew. Talking with prospective clients was not her strength. Jack, her detective partner, should be here.

“I did telephone the police,” said Lydia. “But they were no help.”

“The person of interest could be hospitalized,” said Sarah.

“Oh, my.” Lydia trembled. “I have a photograph of her—Mrs. Lanvale will pass it on to you. And if Anna is in a hospital and unable to communicate, the name tags sewn into her clothing should identify her.”

“A woman’s clothing may be removed during a crime. As I mentioned previously, young women, newly arrived and unaccustomed to the city, are prime targets for sexual violence and murder.”

Mrs. Lanvale sputtered into her teacup. “What ghastly words! Show some discretion. This is my parlor, not some tawdry police station.”

Sarah looked at Mrs. Lanvale and noticed a pronounced ghosting of cream-laden tea on her upper lip. The rules of etiquette stated that one should discretely notify someone with food or drink accidentally lingering on the face. She ran through all the possible ways to perform the required task while continuing to look at the woman’s bedaubed *labium superius oris*.

“What are you staring at?” Mrs. Lanvale quickly put a napkin to her mouth and then threw it forcefully on a side table.

“My statement regarding unclothed deceased females is based on evidence,” said Sarah, looking at a far wall. “I have conducted autopsies on such victims—”

Lydia moaned and began shaking, eyes rolled back in her head. “There is danger in love, for the precious worry us deeply,” she said in a soft, girlish voice. Another person seemed to have taken over the woman’s body. “We prepare for a great sorrow, a pain that almost resents love, it is so inflamed.” The words tumbled out in a breathy murmur.

“My—what a stunning demonstration!” Mrs. Lanvale clapped excitedly. “Are there spirits about? Speak, oh you phantasmal visitors from the beyond!”

Mr. Fuller and Miss Pike grabbed hold of their employer’s arms and imparted a vigorous shaking. Lydia’s head lolled as she continued to speak quickly in a whispery voice: “An awful tempest mashed the air / The clouds were gaunt and few . . .”

More shaking caused a sudden retransformation. “I do hope no evil has befallen Anna,” said Lydia as if as nothing unusual had occurred. Her two attendants resumed sipping tea.

“Sarah,” said Mrs. Lanvale. “You can see that Lydia is much too delicate even to consider what might have befallen Miss Gilbert. Your help is required.”

“Please, my dear.” Lydia leaned forward, reaching for Sarah’s arm. “I am so worried.”

Sarah moved away quickly.

“I’m sorry.” Lydia pulled back her hand. “I so need your assistance. I can pay you.”

“You and your Mr. Harden currently have no clients,” said Mrs. Lanvale. “Tell Lydia you will help her.”

“Our policy is to discuss a potential case before accepting.” Sarah clenched and unclenched her fingers, eager to leave this place.

“I understand,” said Lydia. “Perhaps Mr. Harden could visit with us here?”

“Is that necessary?” Mrs. Lanvale held her chin high. “Mr. Harden would not feel welcome among the cultured class.”

That was true enough. Sarah’s detective partner despised sitting in parlors, referring to himself as “a man of the streets.” She thought it an odd sobriquet, as he spent more time in saloons, pool rooms, and police stations than on pavement.

“I can meet at a place of your choosing on Monday morning,” said Lydia. “I’m not picky. Just tell me where and when.”

“Let us not forget your appointments, Lydia,” said Mrs.

Lanvale. “You have consultations and séances. My friends are terribly excited to speak with their dearly departed.”

Lydia’s serene smile returned. “I am perfectly able to split my attention between the living and the dead.”

“Well, then.” Their hostess stood, followed by everyone else. “I’ll see you out, dearie.”

“Sarah. I take such pleasure in meeting you.” Lydia clasped her hands over her heart.

“I offer my regards—Lydia. My regards to you, Mr. Luther Fuller. And my regards to you, Miss Lucinda Pike.” The two assistants nodded in unison.

Mrs. Lanvale strutted to the marbled foyer where Niblett stood ready to open the enormous oak doors. The woman wheeled unexpectedly and backed Sarah against the wall. “Listen, you peculiar slip of a girl. You will help Lydia. Don’t force me to be unpleasant.”

“I believe your behavior towards me already conforms with the definition of unpleasant.”

“Such impudence.” The woman stepped closer. “And to think all that money your father left you includes funds stolen from my husband.”

“That is incorrect.” Sarah’s claustrophobia spiked along with her anxiety. “My father, from what I understand, loaned your husband a considerable sum to cover his financial losses. Your husband never repaid the loan.”

“No. When we lived in London those many years ago, your father swindled us. My husband told me so just yesterday.”

Sarah shrank against the wall like a scolded child. “I know nothing of that claim. In any event, your husband died fifteen years ago and therefore is incapable of telling you anything from that time forward.”

“He talks to me from the beyond.” Mrs. Lanvale threw out her fleshy arms, hemming Sarah in even more. “If you don’t help Lydia, I’ll sue for damages.”

“Am I to believe you would undertake legal action based on spoken testimony from a person after their death?”

“Don’t underestimate my son.” Mrs. Lanvale tossed her head. “Barnabas is a judge with considerable influence, and he is devoted to me.”

Sarah stared silently at the marble floor.

“Help Lydia, or I will also destroy your reputation by telling everyone Mr. Harden has deflowered you.” Mrs. Lanvale produced a photograph. “This is Anna Gilbert. Go on, take it. You need to find her.”

The object was inches from Sarah’s face, and she grabbed it as an act of self-defense. She glanced at the photo and could hardly believe her eyes—it was the same young woman Grace had presented as murdered in that peculiar dream.

“Are you going to stare at that all day? Those silent spells of yours are quite strange.”

“Good day, madam.” Sarah slipped past the woman and charged out the door while clutching the eerie photograph.



THE ENOCH PRATT FREE LIBRARY READING ROOM WAS mercifully quiet. Earlier it had been full of students and their incessant whispering and paper crinkling. The librarian shushed the offenders far too infrequently for Sarah’s liking.

Despite the quiet, distress still gnawed at her. How was it possible that a dream had forecast the murder of Anna Gilbert, personal secretary to a supposed spirit medium?

Anxious and unsettled, she turned to a favorite remedy: reading. She sat with a stack of books in her usual place. The volumes related to purported communication with the deceased.

The first book noted that conspiracies, superstition, and other ideas not rooted in fact naturally attracted some people. Such individuals also were skeptical of expertise, preferring to place their trust in charlatans. Doing so channeled their

personal grievances into a larger worldview. The practice also gave people a sense of mastery: they claimed to see through the supposed manipulation of forces pitted against them.

Sarah closed the book and thought of Jack. While he was in no way a follower of crazed conspiracies, he did believe in ghosts. He also sometimes mocked her expertise, calling her ridiculous names such as “Miss Smarty” and “Doctor Do-Good.” Here was an explanation—Jack represented a wider population resentful of her professional authority. It was as if her achievements came at the cost of conferring failure and shame upon those less successful.

If only Jack could understand how little she knew about life, that she felt superior to no one. Quite the opposite was true. Her social awkwardness left her feeling excluded and isolated.

A second book told the remarkable story of how the Fox sisters launched the spiritualist movement in 1848. While living with their family near Rochester, New York, Maggie, then fourteen, and Kate, nine, claimed an ability to communicate with spirits of the dead. With the girls present, spirits would answer questions via raps or knocks. This demonstration astounded observers, as neither girl appeared to make the sounds. Word spread, and soon the sisters were traveling the nation, drawing crowds and collecting hefty fees.

In an era of high child mortality and short adult lifespans, the notion of communicating with the dead was a powerful comfort. The departed were not really gone at all—they were merely lurking beyond the thin curtain of living reality. All one needed was a person with the ability to serve as a conduit—a medium—between the living and the dead.

The fame of the “Rochester Knockers” grew over the years, despite denunciation from skeptics. The downfall of the Fox sisters came, ironically, not from expert debunking but from love and alcohol. Maggie Fox began a relationship with a wealthy adventurer who ordered her to quit spiritualism. She obeyed but felt stifled and fell into alcoholism. Distraught

after the man's tragic early death, Maggie confessed that the sisters were frauds from the start. They had cracked different joints in their toes and ankles to make disembodied sounds and fool observers. Maggie died penniless and alcoholic in 1893. Her sister Kate died a year earlier after a drinking binge, forgotten.

Following the lead of the Fox sisters, most of the innumerable psychics and mediums who came forth were women. Mediumship was, to be sure, one of the few lucrative professions open to females, as the practice was linked to traits popularly associated with the so-called "weaker sex"—nervousness, heightened sensitivity, and flighty behavior.

As Sarah mulled the story of spiritualism, she marveled at how popular perceptions change. If some years earlier the Fox sisters had claimed to communicate with spirits, they would have been dragged to the stake and burned as witches.

"Are you reading for business or pleasure?" Sarah jerked her head up to see a red-bearded, middle-aged fellow smiling at her. A gangly young man in a worn suit stood behind him.

"Why do you wish to know, sir?"

"I am a seeker of knowledge." He sat at the table and rebuked the young man when he started to do the same. "Go get started with the research, boy."

"As you wish, professor." The young man bowed and left.

"My name is Professor William Jaworski, most recently employed by the American Institute for Psychic Studies. And I know quite a bit about you, Dr. Sarah Kennecott."

She noticed the awful smell of artificial mint, perhaps from cologne or hair pomade, wafting from the man. "How may I assist you, sir?"

"A girl is so much more appealing when she smiles." He drew an exaggerated arc with his finger in front of her face.

"That is your personal opinion." Sarah disliked few things more than a man presuming to explain something to her. What they said was frequently foolish, simplistic, or wrong, and not

infrequently, all three. "Once again, sir, what do you want from me?"

"Just a bit of your time." He pulled a meerschaum pipe and a tobacco pouch from his jacket. "I'm writing a book about the life and exploits of Lydia Nightingale. You, of course, will be in it."

"I do not understand." She leaned further away from the odiferous man while staring at the table.

"Oh, come now. Don't be coy." He loaded the pipe, carefully tamping the tobacco. "Let's do an interview. It's a chance to tell your side of the story. Give me some rich material, and I promise to portray you in a good light."

"I fail to comprehend your line of reasoning."

"Okay, play that game. I've already got lots of gossipy details about you. Readers eat up that personal stuff almost as much as they do ghost stories." He leaned in close and spoke with a quiet urgency. "Speaking of which, have you ever experienced anything supernatural?"

Sarah would bolt but for the fact that he blocked her in with his bulk.

"I saw an evil spirit two years ago in England," said Jaworski. "I was walking during a moonless night in the countryside. Suddenly, a hideous flying creature swooped down and flexed its sharp, bloody talons. I stared into its blazing red eyes, ready for my doom. Then the creature spoke. 'Remember me,' it croaked. 'And tell the world anyone may encounter us, anyone can die at our hands.' It then flew off."

"Hands? You said the creature had talons."

"You are so literal," Jaworski said with a laugh.

"I believe your account is untrue."

"It's the story that matters, not the truth." He lifted his pipe and pointed to the bust of a bearded man carved on the bowl. "This is the Greek Herodotus, known as the father of history. I prefer his other nickname: the father of lies." He lit the pipe while sucking loudly on the stem. "I can write anything I like about you, and people will believe it."

Sarah gagged on the foul smoke wafting from the pipe. She stood, causing her chair to scrape loudly as it moved across the wooden floor. “I remain baffled by your entreaties and offended by your pointed rudeness. Good day, sir.” She gathered two unread volumes in one hand and placed the other hand over her nose and mouth. Jaworski waited for a long moment before moving to let her pass.

The librarian jumped, startled at Sarah’s sudden approach.

“I request to check these out.” Sarah handed over the volumes.

“I saw you chatting with Professor Jaworski,” said the librarian as she stamped the books. “Isn’t he charming? He and his student will be here all this week researching spiritualism. The subject fascinates me. A psychic—Madame Polyhymnia—said I would marry my Henry before I even met him.”

“You married because an alleged psychic told you to do so?”

The woman looked up, eyes squinched. “She said I would marry a tall man with light hair who was two years older. Four months later, I met someone who matched that description. I knew right away we were fated to marry. And look.” She held up her left hand to show off a small gold band.

“Madam Polyhymnia’s characterization was general enough to fit a multitude of men. Surely you do not assume any causation between what she said and your romantic relationship?”

The librarian lowered her hand with a frown.

It dawned on Sarah that she had mishandled the interaction. When a female reveals she has married, she expects words of approval, particularly from other females. “I withdraw my question and offer felicitations on your acquisition of a husband.”

“Thank you,” said the librarian with a sigh. “But marriage isn’t for everyone.”