

CHAPTER ONE

The patient is not cooperating. The sutures keep coming out, because she absolutely refuses to take it easy, no matter how hard her nurse works to keep her confined to her bed. It doesn't help that she's so young. It also doesn't help that she's a cat. A Scottish wildcat to be specific.

A month ago, my boss had to amputate her right hind leg after an accident, and short of permanently sedating her, we can't seem to keep her from ripping out the sutures. Now I'm holding her, along with her "nurse"—our parlormaid, Alice—and she's already bitten Gray twice. The kitten, that is, not Alice, though the thirteen-year-old can't keep from glowering at her employer each time her precious baby yowls.

The patient's name is Freya, from Alice's recent obsession with Norse mythology. I'd suggested Houdini, for the cat's uncanny ability to escape from any bandages we put on her. Of course, no one else got the reference, probably because it's 1870 and Houdini likely hasn't been born yet.

My name is Mallory Mitchell. Or that's my name in Victorian Edinburgh. I was born Mallory Atkinson, in Vancouver . . . in 1989. How I ended up in the body of a nineteen-year-old housemaid is a long story, but I've been here just over a year, in the household of Dr. Duncan Gray, physician turned undertaker and early forensic scientist. I'm no longer a housemaid, thankfully. I'm Gray's assistant,

which is a position much more befitting of a former police detective. Even if my current job is wrestling a very small and very pissed-off wildcat.

"Mallory . . ." Gray says through gritted teeth. "The patient needs to be restrained."

"The patient is a five-pound fanged eel masquerading as a kitten. Are you sure you don't want to sedate her?"

Gray only grunts. The problem is that Freya rips her stitches too often and anesthetic is still relatively new. Gray—rightfully—is concerned about overusing it on such a young patient, and I have to give him credit for that. As with so many "miracle" advancements, chloroform and ether are used a little too zealously in this world, right up to being given out at parties. Because nothing says "a good time" like passing out cold in your host's living room.

"Can you hold her for a moment, Alice?" I say. "I have an idea."

She restrains Freya, while cooing and petting her, and promising this will all be over soon. I grab a small strip of bandage. Then, after getting Gray to hold Freya's head, I blindfold her. She instantly goes still.

I exhale. "Now, Alice, if you can keep her good back leg steady, I'll look after the front end."

With the mask on, Freya seems confused. Probably also freaked out, but not the hissing and biting kind of freaked out. I remember a friend who used a blindfold to brush her Persian cat, and the trick seems to work.

Gray swiftly restitches her tiny stump. Then he takes over holding Freya's rear quarters as Alice bandages the area. Alice has plenty of experience doing that, and her small fingers fly.

When the front doorbell rings, we all glance in that direction. The grandfather clock recently struck nine in the evening, which means our housemaid, Jack, is gone. Gray's sister Isla is out with McCreadie. Mrs. Wallace will have retired.

"Do you wish me to answer that, sir?" Alice asks Gray, her tone proper now that Freya is tended to, the evil kitten-hurting doctor replaced by her respect-deserving boss.

"I'll get it," I say. While it'll still be light out, I don't like the idea of Alice answering the door at night.

I leave Alice cuddling Freya and slipping her bits of fish from

dinner. When I walk out of the laboratory, Gray is right behind me, because while I might not be willing to let Alice answer the door so late, *he's* not willing to let *me* do it. Also, he's curious, as always, but it would be unseemly for the man of the house to answer his own door, even if he runs his family business out of the building.

We live in a town house on Robert Street, in the New Town district of Edinburgh, which in this time means the area where people like Gray live. Educated professionals, yes, but also people with money. His father ran a successful undertaking business that put the family solidly in the upper end of the middle class.

After Irvine Gray's death, the business should have gone to his eldest son. I've never even met Lachlan Gray—he's off in . . . Asia? America? Who knows these days. Definitely not the stay-at-home type or the look-after-the-family-business type. The best person to run the company would have been Irvine's oldest, Annis, who is a genius when it comes to business. But there was no way he'd bequeath it to a daughter. So when Lachlan refused, it went to his youngest—even though Gray is the illegitimate son Irvine brought home nearly thirty years ago.

Gray does not love undertaking. He does, however, love Isla and his stepmother, Frances, and so he took over the business to provide for them while he pursued his passion in forensics. His laboratory is here, on the ground floor, the rest of the level given over to the business of undertaking. So we don't have far to go before reaching the front door.

I pull it open to see a middle-aged manservant on our steps.

"Good evening, miss," the man says. His face is ruddy and he's short of breath, sounding as if he ran instead the whole way, despite the coach parked right behind him. "Is Dr. Gray at home?"

"May I tell him who has come to call?" I ask, as if my damned boss isn't right behind the door, listening and waiting to decide whether he wants to be at home or not.

"I come from Lady Adler," he says. "She needs Dr. Gray, urgently."

I hesitate. Gray is a trained doctor with degrees in both medicine and surgery. But he isn't licensed to practice, so unless this Lady Adler is a very close friend, she'd never call him for that. I've never heard the name, which means she's not a close friend.

Yet that isn't the only reason she might know Gray well. When it comes to romantic entanglements, his tastes run to sophisticated widows, and while I haven't known him to be "entangled" since I arrived, his former lovers do tend to find reasons to renew the acquaintance.

When I look at Gray, though, he seems genuinely puzzled. That should mean this "Lady Adler" isn't a former lover, but he can be a wee bit oblivious in this regard, honestly confused as to why women might reach out after their affair has ended.

"I fear I have not been with Dr. Gray for long," I say. "Will he know what this is in regards to?"

"Lady Adler is a longtime patron," the man says, with some impatience. "If you take him the message, I am certain he will come."

"Patron . . ."

"Of his business?" the man snaps. "As an undertaker? I do not know who you are, miss, but I would strongly suggest that if you wish to keep your position, you may wish to not interfere with your employer's occupation. Particularly when it comes to very influential patrons."

"Of course. I am so sorry, sir. Dr. Gray has retired for the evening, and I was loath to wake him, but obviously I will do so immediately. Would you like to step inside? We have a waiting room."

Gray's look of alarm is very satisfying. Really, if the guy is just going to hide behind the door and make me run interference, he deserves a scare. Of course, the fellow refuses the invitation—he can't leave the coach on the road—and I assure him I will fetch Dr. Gray immediately.

Then I shut the door and glare. "Please tell me you know who Lady Adler is."

"Of course," he says.

My glare deepens to a scowl. "Then why did you act as if you didn't?"

"I am confused by the summons, not the name."

"I presume someone has died."

"Perhaps. But to show up at my door? At night? That is not done."

He has a point. In this time period, undertakers have nothing to do with the bodies. His laboratory isn't for embalming. When

someone dies, the grieving relatives hire Gray to make all the necessary arrangements for the burial, the service, and so on.

"Does no one ever call you out in the middle of the night?" I ask. "When they're in shock and all they can think to do is make the necessary arrangements?"

"It has happened, but it is exceptionally rare, and that is not like Lady Adler."

He has a point. In my world, we might panic at having a dead body in the house and call the first person we can think of to help. If our family has an undertaker they've used before, it could be that person. But Victorians are much more accustomed to death.

Here, people die of disease and accident all the time, and you don't shove the body out the door as quickly as you can. You keep it until the service, and people pay their respects in your home. To an unembalmed corpse. Well, no, not always. Because while bodies aren't embalmed by undertakers, I actually found instructions for a form of it in a book. A book of household hints. So the women of the house could keep the body of their loved one fresh throughout the visitation period.

Say what you will about the Victorians, but while they may have a reputation for pretty manners, they were not squeamish. Well, not when it comes to death. Sex is a whole other matter, though from what I now understand, they're only reticent about discussing it. They're certainly doing it.

"This Lady Adler . . ." I say. "Could she be summoning you for . . . anything else?"

His expression is adorable bewilderment. Oh, I know I shouldn't call it adorable. I doubt anyone else would. Gray doesn't have that kind of face. It's perpetually serious. Handsome, but in a severe way, cool and austere.

"Is she . . . a widow friend of yours?" I prod.

I say it as delicately as I can, but that doesn't keep him from going red. Victorians.

"Lady Adler is at least sixty," he sputters.

"Well, I know you don't have a problem with older women. Is that *too* old?"

More sputtering. "She is married."

"Ah, okay. Yes, you don't do that."

"I do not," he says. "My relationship with Lady Adler is purely professional, and even then, I have only met her a handful of times. Her husband was friendly with my father. Isla knows her better, through their charitable work. Lady Adler is a renowned philanthropist."

"Who is your . . . patron? What does that mean? That you're her family undertaker? Like being the family lawyer? I know the death rate is high in this time, but it still doesn't seem like a regular job."

"Her father used our services and recommended them to others, and Lady Adler does the same. It's the recommendations that make her a patron. Her support is immensely valuable, as her family is very well respected and connected."

"Ah, so she's responsible for a good chunk of your business—not directly, but by sending clients your way. And I presume those clients recommend you to others."

"Yes."

"Is it okay to convey your regrets, then? Tell the driver I cannot rouse you? Or you are not at home?"

Gray's shoulders slump with a look that is as adorable as the bewilderment. He wants to refuse. He might not like undertaking, but he's very good at it—the organizational parts, at least. He can make the arrangements efficiently and expediently at a reasonable cost, never cheating the client, which is a huge issue with Victorian undertakers. What he's not so good at? Dealing with the mourners themselves.

Since I have experience with grieving relatives as a police detective, I've started handling that where I can, leaving him to support them in *his* way—taking all the arrangements off their shoulders. If Lady Adler is summoning him at this hour, though, she doesn't want to arrange a funeral. She needs comfort.

"I could do it," I say.

He shakes his head. "That would be an insult to someone of Lady Adler's stature. I must go. But if you would come with me . . ."

I smile. "Of course."

CHAPTER TWO

Ten minutes later, we're in the coach. We still don't know why. Gray tried asking the driver whether there'd been a death in the family, but he said he didn't know anything about that—Lady Adler just told him to fetch Dr. Gray immediately.

While sitting across from me, Gray explains that Lord and Lady Adler own two homes—one outside the city and one in the Sciennes district. That surprises me. Sciennes is an unusual part of what I would consider the Old Town. At one time, it had been mostly mansions and large homes. But after the New Town emerged, people fled over the Mound to escape the growing congestion and attendant poverty. So many of those grand homes have been replaced by tenements.

To be clear, “tenement” is just the period-appropriate word for apartment building. It doesn't have the connotations it does in the modern world, but given the overcrowding of those buildings, I can see where those connotations came from. From what I can recall of Sciennes in my day, it's mostly apartment buildings and row houses. Being close to the university means it's heavily student housing.

On a modern-day visit to Edinburgh, I once wandered into a section of stately homes right beside the student housing, and a middle-aged blond in expensive athleisure came down her drive to ask if she could “help me.” I'd said no, but she stood on the sidewalk

and watched me like I was wearing a ski mask and carrying a rucksack over my shoulder.

As Old Town neighborhoods go, this is a decent one. Even those tenements are mostly—for now—occupied by lower-middle-class families. One building I do know in twenty-first-century Sciennes is the historic A division police office, designed in the Scottish baronial style. In my time, it's been converted to apartments. In this time, it doesn't exist yet.

It's the Adlers' Sciennes house where we're taken, and when I see it, I recognize it as the same house that self-appointed neighborhood-watch woman came from. The structure itself wouldn't otherwise have caught my eye—it's a very basic stone box of Georgian architecture. What I notice now are the gardens. It's a country-house oasis in the heart of a city so smog-filled it's already known as Auld Reekie. The house is on a small piece of property, but every bit of it has been terraced and planted, and in July, it's a riot of color.

"You know, if you want gardens at the town house, we could plant more," Gray says as he catches me ogling the flowers.

"We have a lovely garden." I smile over at him. "We even have a poison garden."

"True, but you cannot sit out in it. Not safely. I know you do like to sit in the garden, when the weather is fine."

He leans across the space between our seats. "Gardens are not something my mother or sisters ever cared for, beyond the more pragmatic plants for medicines and such. But it would be easily done. I noticed how much you admired Dr. Rendall's country garden last month."

"I'm a terrible gardener."

"We have Mr. Tull, and you know he is always asking for more work to fill his hours. He would be delighted if I commissioned a garden. Whatever you like."

When I don't answer, he leans further, lowering his voice as if we might be overheard.

"It is your house, too, Mallory. I wish you would make it your own. You will not decorate your bedchamber, much less move down out of the attic. May I give you this? A garden?"

I want to say yes. That's the obvious response, isn't it? Gray's

expression says the offer is genuine, even hopeful. Mr. Tull *would* appreciate it, as would I.

So why do I hold back?

Because it's not my house, and that isn't me being difficult or pedantic. Isla and McCreadie are deep in their romance, and I am so happy for them. On a selfish note, though, I'm terrified for me. They will marry. It's only a question of when, and I suspect it won't be a long courtship. They're in their thirties and have been in love for years, meaning there will be neither a need nor a desire to wait. Isla has already been slowing every time we pass a baby pram, and while she'd never admit it, I know that's her dream. To marry and start a family as quickly as possible.

I can't keep living in the town house once Isla is gone. As eccentric as the Gray family might be, that crosses a very clear line of propriety. Gray is unmarried. Without Isla, there is no "woman of the house," and if I am no longer a maid, I must go.

Even having me continue to work there would be problematic when Gray's business is in his home.

I couldn't live in the town house. I probably couldn't work there. I certainly couldn't hang out there in my free time, as I do now.

Gray has a solution for this. We should get married.

Yep, an old-fashioned marriage of convenience.

I consider myself a practical person. I am also, however, a terrible romantic, and those two parts clash here. I'm horrified by the thought of marrying him.

Horrified because I don't think of him that way? Nope, and *that's* the problem. I absolutely do think of him that way, however hard I've tried to stop.

Maybe marrying a guy you're secretly crazy about seems like the perfect solution. Every romance-novel marriage of convenience tells me this will go smashingly—we'll marry and he'll fall madly in love with me. That's the fictional version. The real-life one is that he sees me as a platonic friend, and that isn't going to change with a wedding ring.

I don't want to marry a guy who doesn't love me. And I sure as hell don't want to marry a guy I've fallen for who doesn't feel the same way.

But after my initial horror—and epically bad reaction—I've agreed

to consider it if we can't find another solution. And so far? We can't find another solution.

So when Gray wants to build me a garden, it's like seeing a shimmering fantasy . . . and knowing I can't have it. The garden, maybe, but not the life to go with it, at least not in the way I want.

Luckily, I'm saved from a response by the driver, who has stopped the coach and is now opening our door.

Gray sits up quickly before he's seen leaning intimately toward me. Then he exits first and helps me out. When we turn, the front door to the house is already open, a butler standing stiff in the entryway. I can't read the man's expression, but when we approach, his cool gaze lights on me.

"I realize the hour grows late, sir, but Lady Adler expected you to come alone," he says, in a tone that suggests Gray rolled out of bed and brought his lover.

"This is my assistant, Miss Mitchell."

A long silence, equally frosty with reproach. We deal with this all the time. I don't look like Gray's assistant; therefore my position must be a facade, hiding our true relationship. Or, at the very least, while I *think* I'm his assistant, he really only hired me to get in my drawers. Salacious rumors about us abound, and nothing we do squelches them.

"I am also a companion to his sister, Mrs. Ballantyne," I say. "I reside in the family home she shares with her brother."

His look softens. "Mrs. Ballantyne is a fine woman."

"She is," I say.

He nods, accepting this explanation for why I'd be with Gray at this hour, and as he ushers us in, I am reminded yet again of how things will change when Isla is gone.

"Before we see Lady Adler," Gray murmurs, while we follow the butler down a long corridor, "your driver was not able to tell me the circumstances regarding this late-night call, and I fear the worst. I should like to be prepared. Has there been a death?"

"I would not know, sir."

Gray and I exchange a look. If someone in the household has died, *all* the indoor staff would know it.

We continue down the corridor. It is oppressively dark, with only a few gas fittings, the light sputtering and hissing. I can barely make

out portraits on either side of the hallway. The doors we pass are all locked, and if this weren't a respected patron of Gray's, I'd be questioning this journey down a foreboding hall.

When the butler finally stops at a door, it too is closed. He raps twice. A man opens it. Dressed as if for a formal dinner, he's in his late thirties, tall and broad-shouldered, with a solemn expression and guarded eyes.

"May I introduce Dr. Gray, Mr. Parsons," the butler says. "And his assistant, Miss Mitchell."

"Yes, please, come in."

The man steps back. Inside, it's even darker than the hall. Every drape has been drawn, and the room is lit only by candles. I can make out a table ringed with people. At the head of it is a white-haired woman with a cherubic face, dimpled and button-nosed, her brown eyes glittering.

"Dr. Gray," she says, reaching out.

He walks over and lifts her hand to kiss it, making her titter. "Lady Adler. I hope you are well."

"As well as can be expected under the circumstances."

"I understand," he says, as if he actually does.

I certainly don't. I discreetly scan the room for clues. When Mr. Parsons met us at the door, he looked solemn, but Lady Adler—despite her words—is positively vibrating with excitement.

As I noted, the curtains are all drawn, and the gaslights are off, with candles flickering instead. The room is dominated by a long table with a black cloth, which suggests mourning, but no one is in mourning clothes.

Five people sit around it—six when Mr. Parsons takes his seat. He's beside a woman in her early thirties, dressed in a gown that is dark but not mourning wear. On her other side is a younger man with shaggy brown hair and a broad mustache, and he bears enough resemblance to the woman for me to surmise they're related. Next to him is a young woman, maybe in her twenties, who seems lost in thought. The last is an older, well-dressed gentleman who sits next to Lady Adler. Gray is speaking to him now, which suggests he's Lord Adler. He looks uncomfortable, as if he's embarrassed to be here.

Huh.

I don't see anything untoward about the gathering. It's a little odd,

with the darkened windows and the candles and the black tablecloth and—

Holy shit.

Did we just walk into a séance?

I try to catch Gray's eye, but he's focused on Lord and Lady Adler. And the more I think about it, the less certain I am. Why would anyone summon Gray to a séance?

Isla and I share a love of the macabre, including things like spiritualism, and so I know we're right at the rise of it in the UK. It's much bigger in America, but it's growing here, led in part by the fact that the Queen herself believes in it. After her husband died, in 1861, Victoria started contacting him via a thirteen-year-old medium. She continues to do so, allegedly seeking Albert's advice that way. And anything that catches the interest of the Queen catches the interest of her country. They are the Victorians after all, proudly naming themselves that in her honor.

As much as Gray would hate me saying it, part of the popularity of séances comes from the explosion of science. So many new discoveries are being made, seemingly every day, that people's minds are being opened to all possibilities. If we can now communicate by the "magic" of telegraph, does it really seem so impossible to reach into the beyond and communicate with the dead? It isn't just spiritualism that gets a boost. Many of the paranormal sciences saw their start in the Victorian era.

Another thing that fascinates me about the rise of spiritualism is that it happened in parallel with the rise in women's rights. Mediumship is a female-dominated profession. We're considered more in touch with our spiritual side, and so in this one arena, we can dominate and even be considered the "superior" sex. It's a very small arena, to be sure, but it's something, including a place in the "sciences" where women can establish themselves.

While I know there is no such thing as ghosts, I'm still fascinated. Gray is not, which is why I really hope that's not what this is.

I remind myself that darkened windows, a black tablecloth, and candlelight could also indicate someone has died, probably a relative of the others sitting with the Adlers. Their clothing suggests they are upper middle-class.

Gray said that Lady Adler is heavily involved in charity alongside

Isla. Not that these guests require charity—their clothing says they do not—but they might work with her in that area. She would be something of a patron to them as well, maybe to one of the women. They've had a sudden tragedy, like the death of a child, and they've come to Lady Adler, in their grief and confusion. She has said she knows just the person to help and summoned Gray.

That would explain the one man looking solemn. It doesn't explain Lady Adler's excitement and her husband's discomfort.

"You are in need of my services?" Gray says, having finished the small talk.

"We are indeed," Lady Adler says. "Desperately."

"There has been a death?"

She nods vigorously. "My maid, Nellie."

"I am so sorry to hear that," Gray says, without missing a beat, though I know his mind will be whirring to make sense of this. Summoning an undertaker because a maid has died? It would be unusual to summon him at this hour even for a family member. Still, that could explain Lord Adler's embarrassment, if his wife insisted on calling in Gray for a "mere" maid.

"I presume you need arrangements made?" he says.

"Oh no. Not yet. We don't even have a body to bury, poor child."

"You do not have . . ." He trails off and then clears his throat. "Tell me what I can do, Lady Adler."

"Find the monster who has murdered her."

Here Gray's composure finally slips. "Find . . . ?"

"Her killer. That is what you do, is it not? My daughter has told me all about your grand adventures. She reads every installment. She says you are a great detective."

"I . . ." Gray clears his throat. "That is very flattering, but I fear the chronicles of my adventures are written for entertainment. While I do assist, it is the police who solve murders. My friend Hugh McCreadie is a criminal officer, and as your daughter will know, he features heavily in those stories. Please, allow me to summon him."

"But she asked for you."

"Your daughter?" he says.

"No, Nellie. She asked for you by name. Not but an hour ago. Right here. In this room."

"I . . . I do not understand."

"Her spirit," says the woman at the other end of the table, her voice so soft it barely carries to us.

"Her . . . spirit."

"Yes," Lady Adler says. "Madame Paix was trying to contact a dear friend of mine who passed recently, but instead, it was Nellie who responded. And she was very clear." Lady Adler peers down the table. "What did she say, Madame Paix?"

" 'I have been murdered,' " the woman says in that same soft voice. " 'Tell Dr. Duncan Gray that he must find my killer.' "

CHAPTER THREE

Silence falls in the room. No one moves except Lord Adler, who squirms like a child being forced to witness a particularly juvenile prank.

"I . . . do not understand," Gray says finally.

Lady Adler's dark brows draw together. "What is there to not understand, Dr. Gray? We have a murdered girl who is personally requesting your assistance to find her killer."

Lord Adler coughs. I think it's supposed to be just a single cough, either discomfort or warning, but it turns into a full hacking fit, causing his wife to leap to his aid.

"I do apologize, Dr. Gray," says Mr. Parsons. "I know this is most irregular. My wife . . ." He looks at Madame Paix.

"She's a gifted medium," the younger man beside Madame Paix says, leaping up and reaching to shake Gray's hand. "Freddie Home. I know some men of science doubt the existence of the spirit world, but I assure you, my sister is the real thing. Incredibly gifted. Always has been. Why, when she was a child—"

"Freddie?" Madame Paix murmurs with an affectionate smile. "I do not think Dr. Gray requires the sales patter. Whether he believes or not will be up to him." She looks at Gray, her pale blue eyes meeting his. "A young woman has been slain, and her killer is at large. That is, I believe, the important part."

Seeing Gray's expression—torn between annoyance and civility—I

clear my throat. "I am sorry to interrupt, ma'am. I am Miss Mallory Mitchell, Dr. Gray's assistant. If it is acceptable, I believe it would be best for me to ask questions." I quirk a smile. "That is part of my job. Dr. Gray works best when he is left alone to think and process."

"Like Stella and me," Freddie pipes up, puppy-dog eager again. "That is how we do it. My sister needs peace to think and reach out to the other side, and so I direct the questions for her."

I turn my smile on him. "Exactly so. We take on the mundane tasks to allow the great minds to work their magic. Is that acceptable?" I look down the table, to where Lord Adler has now settled, dabbing his mouth with a handkerchief.

Everyone agrees that it's okay for me to speak for a man. Odd, but acceptable if the woman is his assistant and not, you know, trying to take charge.

"You said your maid, Nellie, is missing. Is that correct, Lady Adler?"

"She is not merely missing. She is dead."

I pause and choose my words. When I was a police detective, there had always been people I was supposed to treat with deference. As much as it rankled, I usually did, because it never helps to piss off a witness. Here, though, it's more than simply being respectful. This woman is a Lady—uppercase *l*—and I am a young lady—lowercase *l*—which means I'm expected to do everything short of getting down on one knee and begging her pardon for my questions.

Gray spoke to her with care and respect, but I need to go further. That means I can't just bluntly ask whether she has any proof Nellie is dead.

"I understand that her ghost said she had been murdered," I say. "Was that your first indication that harm had befallen her?"

"Yes."

Again I consider, treading with extreme care. "You said she had disappeared. Was that disappearance a surprise to you?"

I inwardly exhale as Lady Adler only pauses in thought. She just said she had no indication harm had befallen the maid. That could mean they weren't surprised the maid—Nellie—had left . . . or that they just didn't give it much thought, beyond the obvious inconvenience. I spent enough time as a housemaid to understand that some people see them the way modern people might see a robotic vacuum.

It's just there, doing its work, until it's not, which is terribly annoying.

There was a good chance that Lady Adler hadn't even considered whether Nellie's leaving was suspicious or not. It's like asking whether you were alarmed when your robotic vacuum fell down the stairs to its death. These things happen.

But she does give it some thought, and when she speaks, her words come slowly. "Nellie was relatively new to us. An excellent worker, and a lively conversationalist, which I appreciated, though she never spoke about herself. When I was told she had disappeared, I was concerned and disappointed. The world is not kind to young women, and I had hoped she had found good employment here, but I was not privy to her inner thoughts on the matter."

She pauses, and then says, "I did ask Mrs. Loomis—our housekeeper. She said she didn't know what happened, but Sully—the lady's maid—said she probably met a lad and ran off with him."

Was that a wild guess, based on Nellie's age? Or did the lady's maid have reason to believe there was a man involved? I'll need to speak to both the housekeeper and maid.

No, I remind myself. *McCreadie* will need to speak to them—if he determines there is reason to investigate. Now, if a young woman *has* been murdered, he'll obviously investigate, but if we only have a maid who took off, well, *McCreadie* might be one of the most honorable people I know, but he's still a cop with oversight, and his superiors wouldn't want him "wasting" time looking for a maid.

"Do you know when Nellie disappeared?" I ask.

"Three nights ago. She went to bed with the others—I have three housemaids, and they share a room with the parlormaid. When they woke, her bed was empty."

"Had she taken her things?" I ask.

"Yes, which is why Sully said there was no reason for concern. It was not as if Nellie was abducted from her bed. She left of her own accord and took her belongings."

I glance at Gray. He's been quiet, but at this, he gives a slow shake of his head. Yeah, I don't see a case here. A maid gathered her things and left.

"May I ask how old Nellie is?" I say.

"Sixteen. This was her first position in service. I usually promote

the parlormaid, but ours is still too young for that, so I . . . Oh!" Lady Adler closes her eyes and shakes her head. "I am truly not thinking properly tonight." She turns to her husband, who has been as silent as Gray. "Why did you not remind me that Mrs. Ballantyne is the one who brought Nellie to us?"

"Who?" Lord Adler says.

"Mrs. Isla Ballantyne. Dr. Gray's sister."

At her husband's blank look, she shakes her head. I'm not surprised Lord Adler doesn't know who Isla is—or that Nellie came to them through her. His wife's social group doesn't interest him any more than the details of household management. It's women's business.

I could roll my eyes at that, but Alice once told me that she'd been working in the Gray household for three days before Gray turned to her and said, "You are new." In some ways, he is the most supportive brother or boss a Victorian woman could hope for. But in others, he's a Victorian male.

"Mrs. Ballantyne found Nellie for you?" I say.

"She is so wonderful for that. Finding girls hoping to change their position in life. Yes, I know working in service is not what every young woman aspires to, but for some, it is a step in a good direction. Toward safety and stability. As I recall, Nellie had been employed in a factory. The conditions were appalling." Lady Adler shivers. "I dream of a world where children will not need to work. Not in factories. Not as parlormaid. Where they can be children."

Lady Adler inhales, her cheeks coloring. "My apologies, dear. I sound as if I am at a charitable luncheon, trying to convince other ladies to join a cause."

"It is a laudable cause," I say. "A world where children do not work because their families do not need them to work."

She taps the table. "Precisely. The problem is poverty and—" Another inhale. "And we were speaking of Nellie. Yes, Mrs. Ballantyne brought her to us, and it was her first position in a household."

"How long had she been with you?"

"A few months? Oh, yes, she came in February. So five months."

That's not long, which might explain why she left. Working in service is usually easier than in a factory, but it also pays less, because room and board are covered. Nellie was young. She might

not have seen the advantages—only that she had less money and freedom.

So we have a sixteen-year-old housemaid who disappeared after working for a few months. Collected her things and left in the night. Quitting properly and getting a reference would have been wise, but she was young and also—if she left because she hated the work—not expecting to ever return to domestic service.

On the surface, her disappearance doesn't seem to require an investigation. But Lady Adler will expect one, because Madame Paix contacted her ghost, who said she'd been murdered. And told them to call Gray, apparently. Yeah, even if I did believe the dead could reach out, I cannot imagine a sixteen-year-old housemaid randomly naming Gray to solve her murder.

I *do* have a logical explanation for this bizarre situation, but I'll save that for later, when Gray and I can speak privately.

For now . . .

Lady Adler watches me expectantly, as do the medium and her brother. They expect action, and Gray is just sitting there, letting me handle it.

Because I'm the detective, and it's time to remember that. Step fully into Detective Mallory Atkinson, who had to deal with people expecting me to open a case for something that didn't warrant taxpayer policing.

Step one: Make them feel heard.

Step two: Let them down gently, promising nothing without belittling their concerns.

I look around at those faces again, trying to determine whether I'm finished with step one. I'm not, unfortunately. The medium's brother is fairly bouncing in his seat as he waits to tell me more. Madame Paix is calmer, but clearly expects questions. And Lady Adler directs my gaze toward the medium, gently prodding me in that direction.

Fine.

"So you contacted Nellie's ghost," I say to Madame Paix, and Gray doesn't quite manage to hide a pained expression that makes me want to kick him in the shin.

It's Freddie—the brother—who jumps in. "Her ghost contacted us. We had no idea the poor maid was dead."

"You were attempting to contact someone else. But it was Nellie who came through the veil."

Madame Paix looks up at this, her blue eyes lighting with pleased surprise as I use what I believe to be the correct terminology for the time. "Yes, that is it, Miss Mitchell. She reached out through the veil to let us know she had died."

"Did she say how she died?"

"Murder."

"Yes, but did she mention more? The method of murder?"

Madame Paix shakes her head. "She did not seem to know. She was most distraught."

"Forgive me for my ignorance, ma'am, but how did this communication take place? Did she speak so everyone could hear? Or so only you could hear?"

A frown tells me I've lost points here. Again, I'm faced with the problem of history melding into an amorphous blob in my brain. How did a séance now differ from, say, one in the 1920s? Was this the period of spirit cabinets? Ectoplasm? Levitation?

Right. Focus on what I've read with Isla. Definitely no ectoplasm. That must come later.

I pass the medium a wry smile. "I truly know very little of your craft, ma'am, as fascinating as it is. I understand the concept of rapping. Is that how the spirits communicate?"

She relaxes and returns my smile. "It is one method. There are others, such as planchettes and automatic writing. Some mediums even have the spirits speak through them, but that is rare. I have had little luck with those methods. I work best with rapping."

"So the spirit raps in response to questions."

"Yes. It begins when I feel a presence. In this case, I would ask whether the spirit is Mrs. Emerson, the recently deceased friend of Lady Adler, and the mother of Miss Emerson here."

She indicates the young woman who has said nothing during all this, and I feel a pang of sympathy for Miss Emerson. She came hoping to speak to her dead mother, and instead they allegedly contacted someone else, and now her mother has been forgotten while Miss Emerson is forced to sit politely through this.

Madame Paix continues, "The spirit rapped twice, for no. I would then ask whether they came to speak to someone present. Once for

yes. I went around the table, naming the participants and asking again." She smiles. "I will not bore you with all the steps. Answers are given by rapping yes or no, and then, when questions become more complex, they rap for letters of the alphabet. That is how we knew she was Nellie, and it is also how we knew she wished for Dr. Gray."

"Spelling out the names."

"Yes. First, we identified her. That led to much disconcertion as Lady Adler realized the poor girl was dead. I asked whether it was an illness, accident . . . and the answer fell on murder. I asked how. No response. I asked who. No response."

"That is not unusual," Freddie cuts in. "I have made great study of the science, ever since my sister's gifts became clear. Sadly, those dead at another's hand often do not know who did the deed. If they did, imagine how much easier police work would be? Police offices could all have a medium on staff to speak to the dead and ask who killed them."

I school my expression not to react to that.

"Whatever the reason," Madame Paix says, "Nellie would or could not elaborate. She only indicated that we needed to summon Dr. Gray to find her killer."

"Perhaps she will tell *him*," Freddie says. "Dr. Gray, join us. We will contact Nellie again—"

"I believe that is enough for one evening."

I follow the voice to the man sitting on Madame Paix's other side. Her husband, Mr. Parsons. He's rising, his gaze fixed firmly on his brother-in-law.

"Stella has had a very long evening. She cannot be asked to do more so soon."

"But—"

"Mr. . . ." I begin. "Parsons, yes? Or did I mishear?"

"It is Parsons for both of us," Madame Paix says with a sheepish smile. "Paix is a stage name."

"It means Peace in French," her brother interjects. "Stella wishes to bring peace to all, the dead and their relatives."

"Mrs. Parsons is fine," she says. "Or even Stella. I do not stand on ceremony. This is my husband, Edgar Parsons, and my brother, Freddie Home."

"Have you heard that name?" Freddie says. "Home?"

"Freddie?" Parsons says, chill warning in his voice. "That is enough."

His sister pats his hand. "It is, Freddie. Please. Edgar is right that this has been a very long evening for me. We can certainly try to contact Nellie again, but not tonight."

I expected she'd leap at the chance to perform. While I'm glad I didn't need to talk her out of it—for Gray's sake—the fact that she's demurring suggests she really doesn't want to do it again. Not in front of a detective, at least, who might scrutinize her methods much more closely.

With this, I decide I have indeed fulfilled step one and made everyone feel heard. Time for step two.