

*the*  
**Missing**  
THE CURIOUS CASES OF  
WILL WINCHESTER AND  
THE BLACK CROSS

*Jerico Lenk*



**Month9Books**

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*For everyone waiting to be found.*

# 1

*LONDON, 1890*

Making my usual rounds through the townhouse, I weaved in and out between the front and back drawing rooms, carrying a silver serving tray of brandy and gin slings and ready smoking pipes.

“Look at you, boy, all dapper. But your collar’s turned down ...”

Mr. Shelby, editor for a rather popular serial magazine and one of the night’s guests, stretched from his chair to right my collar for me. “Thank you, sir,” I said, pausing just long enough to accept the kindness before passing a cock-tail his way.

Near the mantle, the chemist, Dr. Lowells, noticed my approach and smiled. He parted the gentlemen with whom he mingled so I might slip by, balancing the serving tray propped against my side. One of Dr. Lowells’ conversation partners, a gentleman with a mustache alarmingly liken to a chimney brush, and quite clearly a first-time visitor here, snatched a pipe from the tray with a twitched smile.

“And what is this?” A jolly-looking older man with a pink silk necktie lit up with a grin as I swung by his little group at the armchairs. Miss Calico sat perched on his knee as if she were his daughter—and we all knew she was not his daughter, especially by the way his hand rested comfortably at her hip.

“Oh,” I said, slowing to a stop. The man seemed familiar to me for some reason. “Me, sir? Another refreshment?”

“Yes, you!” His eyes shone brandy-bright. “You were at the planchettist party last week. You’ll call at the next get-together, won’t you? The planchettist said you were an interesting little fellow I’d be keen to acknowledge.”

Miss Calico sent me a knowing look from the corner of her eye. Ah, yes. That was why I felt I recognised him. Blushing, I waved my free hand hard, not because I cared if the man’s cabaret hosted another planchettist party like the one in Mayfair last week, but because I did not want my father or Miss Valérie overhearing and making inferences about just how often I snuck away to such Spiritualist events.

The gentleman’s smile fell away and he looked at me anew, bushy brow furrowing. “But what the devil has you *here*, boy?”

Miss Calico sighed, nuzzling her nose into the man’s temple. “Darling,” she said, dismissing me with a twirl of her hand, “young Mr. Winchester is presently at work, himself, so you mustn’t busy him with your own boring business talk.”

I left a drink for the man, for when Miss Calico was through distracting him. She was right, after all; I was at home, but I was indeed at work.

My father ran an accommodation house for respectable mistresses and their respectable partners colloquially nicknamed Julien’s-off-the-Strand after himself, never mind the distance between Belgravia and the Strand. Throughout the week, under the guise of stylish after-dinner parties, it was a clean, sophisticated *maison* right out of our 18 Winston Crescent townhouse—certainly not a place for children.

But I was sixteen, hardly a child anymore. And, even knowing the secrets beyond the townhouse’s closed doors—some of them, secrets of my own—playing waiter at my father’s parties was certainly better than some vocations with which other ’teens were faced.

My father’s guests never complained for the absence of real domestic hands. The outrageousness of me, a sprite of a server, a Julien in training, wandering about with sweets and hard liquor, was apparently just part of the establishment’s draw, equal to that of my father’s girls in their lacy, low-cut dresses and scandalous black knee stockings.

Long after a large, hot dinner by now, the townhouse was full of guests and tobacco smoke. A Berliner in the rear drawing room spewed forth a frolicking, lighthearted German opera; the clatter of a table tennis game echoed from the downstairs reception room. Voices and laughter sloshed together like champagne in glistening stemware.

My father found it greatly distasteful when others referred to his girls as “prostitutes.” They weren’t, he always clarified, and adamantly; they were companions of matching class, generally adhering to the most virtuous of womanly beauty. Mistresses of married men, solitary men, bachelors, bankers, barristers, barons. Everyone knew the importance, for virtue and for health, of outlets for the masculine appetite both before marriage and after marriage. Such vigour was admirable, but it required regulation. Thus ... respectable establishments such as that of my father’s.

At least, that was the narrative I’d overheard. I thought it a very forgiving comment on the sort of oppression, repression, depression or humdrum Hyde Park persuasion which drove men to pay such an awful lot of money for one evening with one my father’s ladies.

And I was certainly not exempt from eyes which, at times, followed *me* around the place more than they followed any of the ladies—like tonight, those of a man with hair so slick with hair wax, one might mistake it for polished wood in the light. I caught him twice staring, but he looked quickly away as soon as I did. The third time, his hand twitched, and I knew he was soon to wave me over for refreshment, so I turned sharp on my heel and marched back to the other room before he could do so.

“Oh—Will!”

Miss Agatha, one of my father’s girls, waved at me from the corner where she and her most regular gentleman visitor lingered at an open window.

“I want one of those cakes, John,” she said, looking so pretty and young with her long dark hair falling casually down the back of her lavender gown. Her regular, Mr. John, plucked some sweet things from the tray as I drifted to a stop with the two of them, glad for a

short break. I liked when Mr. John called. He was no rake; he always treated Agatha so nicely. Not that my father allowed his girls to be treated any other way, but John's niceness was different—as if Agatha were a lady whom he truly wished to court. She came alive when he visited, the two of them always exchanging playful glances and secretive laughter, teasing and elbowing like old friends.

"Why, Will, what's the matter? Your eyes are like a stormy sky," Mr. John remarked suddenly. His faint new mustache danced around a sip of Brandywine.

Agatha reached out, affectionately finger-combing the hair around my ears. "Oh, he always wears that look in the wake of his father's neglect."

"What look?" I echoed, brow knotting. "Father's neglect?"

Agatha gave a dramatic sigh. "A stormy sky, he says. How poetic for brown eyes! Why can't the man be as poetic about *my* eyes? My eyes are plain, then?"

Mr. John laughed and hooked an arm around Agatha's tiny waist, leaning forward against her even as she smiled but avoided his kisses. "*Your* eyes," he said, "*your* eyes, sweet dove, are finer than the Crown Jewels."

Miss Nina strode up beside us then, prodding me in the side with her closed hand-fan. Leaning close, she whispered, "She's giving you that look again."

She meant Miss Valérie. I turned a little, casting a glance around the rest of the drawing room.

Yes, with her feet in their bejeweled slippers tucked up beside her, elegant Miss Valérie lounged on the floral-print loveseat, the usual spot in which she spent most every party smiling and watching through hooded eyes.

Of the six ladies employed by my father, Miss Valérie was the oldest and his obvious favourite. She'd retired from the profession before the parties had ever really begun, playing head mistress now, the unofficial manager of the others.

"A longtime friend!" my father always said. "A business partner!"

But she could have been my stepmother if there were any papers

to say so, and she surely didn't pay a shilling of room and board since she'd moved in.

I knew the look Nina meant. It was Miss Valérie's sharply observant face, at once soft but cold, lofty and attentive. Her gaze lingered on me a moment longer after I met it, brow gently arched as though she meant to say, *Yes, I am looking at you.* After a few uncomfortable seconds, she was greeted by a barrister friend of my father's, and back she went to her carefully sociable character, releasing me from her scrutiny to accept the kisses he rained upon her ringed hand.

"She hates me." I turned around again with a sigh, raising my brows. If I hadn't won her affection when I was small, I wouldn't now.

Mr. John raised his drink as if to toast. "Well!" he said. "One day this will all be yours, you lucky little chap; and you'll breathe easy."

*Thump!*

I leaned to the side quickly, looking down the hall into the other drawing room. Someone had tripped, perhaps, or conversation was getting rowdy. Yet no one else seemed to have heard the sound at all.

"What do you mean?" I asked Mr. John.

"You'll inherit all this, won't you?" He swept his hand around the expanse of the lively room. "You could send Lady Valérie off for good!"

"I suppose ... " I shrugged. As if the solution to my problems were so easily attained. I certainly did not covet such a business.

*Thump, thump-thump.*

I bristled. There was that odd sound again.

Agatha must have heard it as well. She tipped her head just slightly in the direction of the noise, then suddenly flashed me a pointed look around Mr. John's shoulder.

*Thump-thump-shuffle, thump-thump-thump!*

The ruckus came from upstairs—like children played tag or chased hoops in the attic room just overhead. Which also happened to be my room.

My heart sank. I knew what it was.

"Blast," I muttered, plenty flustered. I needed to stop the ruckus before anyone else noticed, especially my father. This was how it always went.



I pushed my silver serving tray at a spirited Mr. John, who took it in tipsy confusion, and struck off as smartly but casually as I could so as not to draw much attention. But once I reached the main stairs, I took off running in the direction of the noise.

The attic floor was closed to visitors, bearing just a handful of small bedrooms—mine, Daphne and Agatha's, the cook's, and Miss Zelda the housekeeper's. The door to my room, a bit crooked on its hinges as it was, remained closed.

*Thump-thump-thump!*

Hand curling on the high brass knob, I pressed my ear to the door to listen.

Patter of feet. Hollow giggles.

The doorknob clicked as I turned it slowly, deliberately, then edged the door open with a gentle creak.

I saw them instantly in the mirror across the room, felt the gust of air and throb of fast footsteps as little Charlie and Colette dashed to-and-fro before me, playing some game all around the loft room.

"Charlie, you cheater!" Colette whined. But she should have known better because Charlie always cheated.

Outside the mirror, the room was empty.

Quickly, I stepped inside and closed the door.

"Hey!" I interrupted, quiet but stern. The children had moved beyond the scope of the mirror, but I could feel them looking at me in guilt. "Could you both kindly hush up?" I pressed. The sound of the party echoed up through the house as their play had echoed down. "You're rather loud, and you know we can't have my father's company hear you."

"Sorry," the two of them chorused, voices tiny and warped. Then, like candles blown out in the wind, they were gone.

Charlie and Colette were dead, after all—there in my attic room, but also dead—murdered by a friend of their scoundrel brother back in 1861. They were still here because the clothes in which they'd died lay hidden beneath the floorboards. My mother and father hadn't known as much when they acquired the townhouse, but I surely was not about to remove the clothes. One night two years ago,

Charlie and Colette had roped me into a game of Hot Boiled Beans, whispering excitably, “Warmer, warmer—hot!” until I had the slat of wood wedged upwards and could see in the candlelight a blue dress and shirt collar, both bloody and crumpled up in the dust and dirt below. Since then, Charlie and Colette had been yet another secret of mine to keep safe.

My room was still again. I breathed a short sigh, relieved.

I felt as though, somehow, I’d become their caregiver. The fact of the matter was that I often felt responsible for them, because for as long as I could recall, it had been my unique curse to see and hear the Missing, a sensitivity normal men and women didn’t generally possess.

The Missing. Ghosts. Spirits, phantoms, the *dead*. Nobody else called them that—*missing*—but I did, as they quite clearly weren’t completely gone, just caught somewhere between mostly unseen and generally unnoticed. Never mind why *I* saw and noticed them, or that they saw and noticed me.

“Hello!” Charlie had chirped the first time I met him and his sister, their two little, foggy, grey faces peeping at me from the door of what used to be my playroom. I’d been *quite* small, too small to understand the significance of their differences from me. If I think deeply enough, I can remember a lady in the nursery with me then, perched in the window seat across the room, her dark hair swept up in a loose bun and the back of her neck soft and white in the sunlight like her dancing dress. Turning. Waving for me. Laughing. My mother.

“Guardian angels,” she’d said.

I didn’t see Charlie and Colette again until she was gone. Perhaps they’d worried I was lonely without her, or maybe they finally felt permitted to find a playmate in me. And they were certainly my playmates for a while, I suppose. They weren’t always around, just suddenly there now and again to pet my hair or insist they could not play marbles because the marbles went through their ghostly fingers.

Of course, I mentioned them to everyone. “The child just wants attention,” Miss Valérie said, after she’d shown up and effectively

stepped into my mother's shadow.

"Well, we'll leave these imaginary friends at home and go to the zoo, then!" my father said, swinging me up to hold on his hip. The zoo, the carousel, the park, the toyshop. "See now?" he'd cry. "You shouldn't be lonesome! You have Miss Valérie and I, and Miss Zelda, of course ... "

I don't recall exactly how old I'd been—it was just before the mistress business started—but it was a Christmas Eve telling ghost stories together in the front drawing room that it finally sank into me what Charlie and Colette *were*. I burned my mouth on hot chocolate and sputtered from the pillows stacked on the loveseat, "Daddy, they're not guardian angels, they're dead! Ghosts come from dead people!"

"Well, yes, they do, darling." My father had chuckled, exchanging a glance with Miss Valérie.

Afterwards, aiming to assert some sort of authority as the living one, I boasted to Charlie and Colette, "I should be afraid of you, but I'm not."

But, inevitably, I outgrew them as playmates, and grew quite irritated that blame always fell to me for their occasional puckishness even when it was impossible for me to have moved this or that item while never in the room, or slammed a door downstairs all the way from my playroom, or made a mysterious ruckus on the wide old staircase while I sat with my primer and tutor.

The business of respectable mistresses for respectable men began slowly. Acquaintances of Miss Valérie came for dinner, pretty ladies and young women who cooed and fussed over me as if it were some contest in affectionate nature, until their gentlemanly friends arrived, and Zelda toted me off to bed. At times, I was sent off without dinner, like the evening on which I adamantly explained that *I* had not made my first real human friends cry—the son and daughter of a hired woman to whom my father let out an empty loft room—but Charlie had, after pulling their hair and stamping around, furious they couldn't see him like I could.

"There are no *ghosts* in this house," my father reproved, appalled.

“There are no ghosts anywhere, at all!”

I told Charlie and Colette to leave the others alone, but the lady and her children still quit the place not long after. I got older, the parties lost their illusions, and the way my father looked at me ... began to change. As though I were a troublesome, mischievous thing. As though I'd committed some crimes against him.

As though he were slightly afraid of me.

A few times, gentlemen refused to return because someone had grabbed at their ankles from under a bed, or thrown open doors on rooms in which they'd sought privacy with a companion. Naturally, ladies came and went as employees, but in as many years four girls who'd boarded with us fled in straits.

“Frightened,” the other girls said after Miss Valérie turned up her nose and demanded I ask what concerns they'd expressed to her. As if to shame me for already knowing, being in her eyes the one at fault. “The house is haunted.”

“Haunted!” My father coughed out the word in contempt. “You are far too old to be keeping up this nonsense. Are you jealous, then? Do you think it noble to drive out mine and Miss Valérie's friends?”

It was a game, I convinced Charlie and Colette. “Only the three of us may know about one another,” I said, sitting with them in the rear drawing room one afternoon. “I'll be helping Daddy with his parties now, and you *must* be good while I am. If someone notices you, you've lost the game.”

They listened to me, of course. Most of the time. They're children; it can't be helped.

“We know.” Miss Daphne had peeked into my room one night with a candle in hand and Agatha wide-eyed behind her, shortly after the two of them had taken up board down the hall from me. “There's something ghostly in the house and we know you're aware of it.”

I had just nodded, gawking at them from my bed feeling quite guilty and sad, as if it really were my fault Charlie and Colette were there in the first place. Now when anything out of the ordinary happened, Daphne or Agatha came to me to put a stop to it. Nobody questioned why. They just ... knew that I could and I would.

It wasn't Charlie or Colette for which my father scorned me anymore; he was in deep denial of them, I'd swear it. Now it was just my interest in the metaphysical he hated.

"Rubbish!" he chastised. "All penny dreadfuls and parlour tricks!"

Miss Zelda, the longtime family housekeeper and thus as good as my governess over the years, didn't lecture me, but when she caught me with books on Spiritualism and the occult, or found me slipping out with Daphne to see West End spirit photography and ghost conjuring galas, the worried shadow on her face was enough to guilt me into obedience.

"I don't even *engage*," I insisted. Not as much as I wished to, anyway. Daphne and I would simply watch from the background, from the safer shadows against the wall.

"Too dangerous," Zelda always said, and I could never figure out if she believed in Charlie and Colette, or not. "Please. Listen to your father."

But ... how could I *not* be interested in it all? It was my ghastly cross to bear, though for what sins, I was never totally positive.

In my bedroom, I sighed and leaned back against the door.

"Be good and don't cause any more ruckus tonight," I said to Charlie and Colette, if they were even there to listen anymore. "I mean it."

Voices muffled and thin, as though they hid somewhere full of mischief yet, they chimed, "Yes, Will!"

## 2

“What’s the matter, Will?” my father asked as I came down from the attic.

“Nothing, of course,” I said, letting him tousle my hair and give a loving pat to my shoulder, reminders of fatherly affection that came easily to him after a few drinks but were never enough to distract from his duties as business host and man of the house.

He went off towards the front drawing room and I hurried back to where I’d left Agatha and the others—but just as I stepped through the doorway, a hand closed on my arm. I halted, looking around in dismay. God, but if it was that spying man from earlier ...

It was only Miss Athena, another of my father’s girls—sweet, baby-faced Athena. Something wasn’t right.

Her lower lip quivered and a veneer of tears made her eyes shine like crystal. The last time she’d looked at me like that, confused and cold, Charlie had chased her down the stairs sometime after midnight, laughing and tugging at the ribbons on her dress.

Yet somehow, I knew even before she opened her mouth that it had nothing to do with ghostly children’s pranks.

“It’s Daphne,” she said. “Daphne’s left, Will! She said she’s really through with it all, can’t even bear the rest of the night, and she’s off to Waterloo, I’m sure—”

My heart dropped fast.

I shook loose of Athena's grip so suddenly, I almost knocked the cigarette out of some gentleman's hand as he passed by.

"She really means it tonight?" I demanded, so very tired of fearing the worst.

"I watched her leave." Athena struggled against the tears. "Will, I don't think she's coming back!"

As I shoved my way out of the party, hardly even noticing those with whom I collided, Miss Calico simpered from where she had been eavesdropping nearby, "There he goes, little Romeo, after his precious Juliet ... "

But she did not understand. Daphne was my best friend. She was my favourite, to be honest. Daphne, who tip-toed to my room on the quiet nights to read *Fun* and *Tales of the Dead*. Daphne, who was like a sister to me—who never complained and never said bad things about others, and who hid a terrible aching sadness behind her lovely smile. In Miss Daphne, I wanted to trust not just my petty secrets, but my *real* secrets, because she trusted me with hers, too.

I didn't think to grab my coat. I just flew out the door with Athena on my heels, and the temporary attention of the house's crowd rippling in our wake.

Daphne was about to do something unspeakable, and I couldn't let her. So, it was straight to the Strand with Athena's clammy hand tight in mine as we darted up the sidewalk and stole a hansom cab from a group of distracted gentlemen, apologising around the side as we rattled off.

My heart was a glass prism waiting to shatter into a million pieces if Daphne really were to jump from the bridge tonight.

"I can't!" Athena moaned as the cab shuddered to a stop at the great arch of Waterloo Bridge, which was particularly inhospitable and glum in the night's thick fog, almost enough to wholly shroud the occasional coughing passerby or jerking coach.

"I'm scared, Will!" Athena said. "Haven't you heard about the Wraith at Waterloo?"

Of course, I'd heard the gossip of a ghost haunting the bridge. Who hadn't? It was some of the most popular Spiritualist parlour talk.

All through the night, a white figure wandering the bridge, following pedestrians, there and gone again in the blink of an eye. But even if I weren't already well-acquainted with the dead, my fear of Daphne's demise was greater than the fear of some paltry, rumoured specter.

"It's all right, Athena," I promised, already out and on the road. "You wait here for me. I'll be back with Daphne."

I hoped.

Athena stayed with the cab as I hurried up the bridge, which was strangely vacant, except for a few men in overcoats huddled under a streetlamp. The slap of water and the nighttime fog distorted the echo of the city around me. Horses, music, voices, so far away, it felt.

"Daphne!" I called. "Daphne!"

"I'm sorry!" The distant sound of Athena sobbing bounced off the stone of the bridge. "I'm sorry I told him when I promised not to, Daphne, but I couldn't let you do it, I couldn't!"

There she was—Daphne, just a silhouette, leaning at the side of the bridge. The burst of relief left me numb. She hadn't jumped. Thank God, she hadn't even climbed up yet. She just stood looking down into the water, courting unthinkable things.

I staggered to a halt.

No ... *there* she was, on the other side of the road. Up on the ledge peeking down at the Thames below. Midnight wind tugged and yanked at her thin coat. Had she not heard us cry out for her?

I dashed forth. I'd never forgive myself if I watched her jump, too late to grab her.

"Bloody—"

My foot caught against a tightly-stretched twine and I hit the cobbles hard with a choke of a gasp, whilst a series of bells, apparently attached to the string, rang to announce my gracelessness.

Palms raw and cheek burning from the bite of the stone, I scraped myself up off the pavement. A whole *web* of strings and bells on little rods caught lamplight in pale sparks through the fog. What was this about ... ?

*Daphne.*

I looked up, panicked. Daphne was still on the ledge, skirts



dancing about her naked ankles. Her slippers sat discarded at the base of the lamppost.

Bells ringing shrilly, I stamped down twine to clear my path and bounded across the bridge. My face throbbed; blood stained my sleeve as I wiped at the apple of my cheek. God knew how badly I'd scraped it.

I pulled Daphne off the ledge by the wind-chilled wrist, tumbling down with her all flaring petticoat and pearls to hit the ground a second time.

"Oh!" she gasped, wrestling against me not to break free but to meet me face-to-face, wide-eyed with shock as if I'd yanked her from some sleepwalking dream. And then a dark sort of guilt eclipsed her, stubborn and unapologetic.

"Will!" she cried. "What are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing?" I retorted.

Daphne's eyes jumped around; her face pinched. "I ... " She wriggled again, trembling hands pressed to the cobbles as she sat up on her own. "I almost did it," she said, in a daze.

"But you *didn't*," I said, "and you're coming home with Athena and me now!"

Perhaps it was selfish to feel so wounded, so angry beyond the relief. But it was unfair, that she might have gone to end her life without saying good-bye to me. How could someone smile and laugh so freely but still be so unhappy?

"Will, your face! What happened to your face?" Daphne's fingers drifted along my cheek.

"Damn it, Daphne—"

The men who'd been clustered a few lampposts down suddenly hovered over us, two of them casting scowls and the other pair looking torn between curiosity and obligation amid the crisis.

"You're interfering with our inspection!" one of them roared, a baby of a bachelor with messy hair and a tetchy countenance that ruined his handsome face.

"Are you two all right? That was quite the fall!" sputtered another, this one about my size and probably not much older, and I would

have answered him had I not been immediately distracted by the two different colours of his eyes. One a lovely clear blue; the other, grey and clouded like there was no colour to it at all. Something about him felt rather familiar, but then some people just possessed such charisma.

How utterly humiliating, for these strangers to have witnessed the entire thing.

"You ruined all our bells!" the angry one went on. "Do you know how long it took to set those up?"

"Clement, the ambience compass is going wild." The third man was all worked up and out of breath, a nervous-looking thing with a knapsack and prominent ears, and that awkward course of motion that befell long gangly people.

The last—a taller, more muscular fellow whose square jaw and sharp mutton chops made him look what I imagine it might if a wolf were a man, still fierce even with tiny spectacles perched atop his head—helped Daphne and me off the ground. He met my eyes and held them, unperturbed.

"Be a gentleman," he instructed. "Take your lady home now that she's safe. We're in the middle of something."

"All our bells, God damn it!"

"Please, go," the bespectacled man urged again, gruffly. "You're only in the way now, boy."

*Boy.*

"Daphne!" Athena called from the junction archway in a ragged sob of relief. Daphne pulled away from me and dashed down the bridge, colliding with her in a tangle of tears and messy curls.

My head spun. "*You* set up those bells?" I blurted. Daphne was safe. The panic should have retreated. But it just coiled in on itself and sharpened into fury. Real gentlemen wouldn't have dared turn someone else's almost-crisis into a slight on their behalf. But maybe they weren't real gentlemen. Not that my impression of gentlemen wasn't perhaps a bit skewed by my father's line of work.

I hissed, "Those wires could kill a man who doesn't know they're there. I tripped on them!"

“Well, you’re not dead, are you?” The petulant one uttered a sound somewhere between scoff and laugh.

“Clement, the ambience compass ...”

“Oh, did you know you’re bleeding?” the one my size interjected, face dimpled in concern. But the look he shot at their irascible associate was surprisingly feisty. “Quinn, tell Clement to let it alone. It *is* our fault, after all.”

Somewhere beyond, noise echoed from crepuscular crowds. The hair rose on the back of my neck and a faint ringing shivered in my ears. The silhouette of the other girl was there again, only a few lamps up the bridge. Staring at us, it seemed. Well, weren’t we putting on quite the show?

Ah, but ...

That peculiar ladylike shadow was not *alive*. It was the Wraith at Waterloo.

There was something deeply unsettling about running into ghosts outside my attic. I backed away from the arguing men, brow knotting. “There’s something here,” I blurted, flustered and uneasy. Never mind the quarrel. I’d see myself off with Daphne and Athena. “I’m sorry, I ... well, you know, you’ve heard the tales, I’m sure, about ...”

I didn’t have a chance to explain and they didn’t have a chance to question me, because up from the ground sprang that ghostly silhouette, right there between us and blocking my view of the loudmouthed one the other men had called Clement.

Wide-eyed, fixed stare and sunken cheeks, hair flowing about her face as lusciously and unnaturally as a drop of ink in water, the Missing woman looked right into my eyes, curiously, ominously, as if I had trespassed somehow. A wave of dread rolled through me. I wanted off this bridge. I wanted away from this thing. Why did they always come to *me*?

A horrid wheezing sound brushed up against my ear—she was to speak, perhaps.

But the apparition just suddenly slunk away as fast as it had come and left me staring right at that Clement fellow, who gawked back at me equally as stunned.

Had they witnessed it, too, then? Or did I seem a madman, distracted by things unseen to them?

"I'm sorry," I sputtered, mouth chalky with the taste of embarrassment. "I'll be going—"

A freezing gust that reeked of the Thames struck me hard and dissolved into fingers around my neck. I staggered back, coughing with the blow as if I'd been punched in the throat.

The whole world veered violently to one side, seemed to blur all together into only colours and lights. I couldn't breathe. My throat and chest were full of water. *Oh God*, I thought, *I've fallen into the river!* Sadness and fear crashed heavy through me, but quite unfamiliar, as if the weight of them came from beyond my own body. And then everything just ... stopped.



I pried my eyes open and found myself seated on a crooked bed in a dingy, cluttered room.

Others spoke nearby, beyond the closed door. I could hear them, but the conversation was incomprehensible and warped as though I were small again, submerged in bath water and listening to my mother and Zelda have words somewhere above my head. *Count how long I hold my breath, Mamma!*

I must have fainted, I decided, and been brought somewhere by the dubious foursome on the bridge to recover. And yet ... somehow, I knew that was not so.

It wasn't so, as I wasn't *me* anymore.

There was a smudged little looking-glass on a wash stand not far away. I forced myself to look. Not at my reflection, no ...

*Her* reflection.

It was the Wraith's, and her name was Kitty. But how did I know that ... ?

In some inharmonious rush of colours and smells and muffled sounds, this was Kitty's life. And I knew because I was Kitty.

Hunger. Poverty. Too many siblings and not enough love. Mother

pitied me. Father despised me. Shiver of cold desperation slicing through my ... *her* soul. Forget the factories. Squalid street after street, man after man, and the business of the bed, lying flat on my back, the air cold on bare skin. The business of the bed, why always the business of the bed? Every sane bit of me wailed for release. No, no, *no*, this was a nightmare! What was this? *Where* was this, and how was I to escape—

Darcy James and his morphine dreams. Darcy James' touch made my heart swell as Kitty's heart swelled. As Kitty vomited everything she ate into a rusty pail in the corner, I vomited everything I ate into that same rusty pail. *Help!* I tried to scream, but it hurt; my voice was trapped in my throat and went nowhere, and there was such a pressure in my head, I feared it might burst ... Bethnal Green, dress houses, Darcy James, whore, whore, *whore!*

The stone of Waterloo Bridge, icy and slick below my bare feet. I leaned out until there was nothing to hold me, and I fell into the Thames, taking deep breaths of the dirty water because I wanted to die, because Darcy James stopped coming because he was married now. He'd moved to the suburbs. There were so many voices, buzzing, whispering, closing in on me.

The towering wolf-man the strangers on the bridge called Quinn slapped me across the face, and the trance-like stream of visions careened to a halt.

I sucked in a stuttering breath, eyes rolling open to the fog and the startling glow of a streetlamp overhead.

Thin wire spectacles dropped to his nose, the Quinn fellow hovered beside me. I didn't really care that he'd hit me; I clutched his thick arm as I struggled against shocked tears and the lingering feel of cold, filthy ghost water in my throat.

But I was again myself—I was real, and I was safe.

I lifted a shaking hand to my freshly throbbing cheek, the one without the scrape, and croaked, "Well, at least you've evened things out for me, haven't you?"

"What did you see?" The nervous-looking one was far too spirited for my comfort, words bobbing and dipping with his Irish accent as he crowded me impatiently, clutching a scrap of paper as though he

wished to write down what I said. I shrank away, face twisted.

"O'Brien!" the one my age hissed. "Give him some room, man, for Christ's sake."

Daphne. Athena. They needed to get home. And Kitty ...

"Where's Kitty?" I choked out, turning roughly against Quinn's hard shoulder. "Where'd the bloody wench go?"

O'Brien's face pinched. "Kitty?" he said.

"The *Wraith*," I snapped, as if they could have known that. "The Wraith at Waterloo."

"Yes!" Clement cried, then seemed to realise his genuine smile and promptly shook it off as I wrenched free of Quinn's hands. Stumbling over Daphne's shoes, I threw myself against the stone to vomit off the side of the bridge.

The foul, black water gawked back up at me. I spit once, twice, until the unpleasant tang of vomit was mostly gone.

What did they think of me, these unfortunate strangers, after an episode like that? That I was mentally unwell, surely, suffering from neurosis or a rare but obvious hysteria. *Kitty*. Her memories. That eerie gust of wind and hellish loss of control. Dreaming while still awake, it had felt. Or a ... collision of realities. And yet the nervous one had asked, *What did you see?* as they all looked at me, as though they knew something I did not.

They did, though, didn't they? I turned slowly around, eyes wide and cold with the weak tears that sprang up when one became ill.

"What was that ... just now?" I asked.

"A mild possession," Quinn muttered.

A possession. Like a ghost conjurer, or a medium. I squinted at him, incredulously and not entirely kindly. Clement's eyes blazed into me. "What was her full name? Could you discern the year? Recall any details whatsoever?"

"Mild possession?" I repeated, eyes darting from Clement to Quinn and back.

Clement uttered a tart sigh. "Yes, reliving the spirit's memories."

The Missing could change the feel of an empty room. Move things that ought to remain stationary. Open and close doors, blow

out candles, let their voices and footsteps echo cool and bodiless, but never in my life had I even *imagined* it was possible to experience their ... memories.

"You're Spiritualists?" I whispered, in a daze.

Yes, dazed, or breathlessly bewitched.

"What did you see?" Clement tried again.

"Kittredge Ann McGowell," I reported hoarsely, and the most frightening part was that I hadn't had to think about it. Wiping my mouth with the back of my sleeve one last time, I just knew the name. And I felt so very violated by the knowledge. "From Bethnal Green. I saw it all. She *jumped*."

"Suicides." Quinn nodded. "Malevolent echo. The ambience compass is going mad, you see?"

My eyes veered off to this ambience compass in which they were so interested. In Quinn's big hand, it looked like a regular compass, but its little arrow stuttered and jerked as if North were constantly on the move.

Never mind that. They *believed* me.

"What's going on?" I asked again, warily. "You saw her? The ghost?"

Quinn's hand closed on my shoulder as he ordered, "You're staying until we collect your testimony."

"What?" I sputtered. "Testimony? I can't—I must get Daphne and Athena home. Are you from the press?"

"Kingsley shall return them home." Clement gestured to the young man about my age. "Won't you, Kingsley?"

Kingsley's face pinched. "Ah, I suppose ..."

"A malevolent enigma," O'Brien said to himself as he wrote it down.

"Malevolent *echo*," Quinn corrected gruffly.

They'd seen the spirit. *Mild possession*. They spoke as though they'd been *searching* for it. "Excuse me ..." I almost swallowed my question at all their curt glances. "What does that mean?"

"It's the type of haunt," Kingsley answered as Quinn ignored me once again and Clement's lip curled at my partisan ignorance.

Oh, I knew different ghosts behaved in different ways. But a classification?

"Of course it's a malevolent echo. Just my favourite." Clement heaved a dissatisfied sigh.

"What are we to do?" owl-eyed Kingsley urged as a miserable coach rattled by. "Mr. Zayne's, Clement?"

"Yes. Zayne's it is."

"*Stop!*" I cried.

All four of them halted and looked at me as though they'd briefly forgotten I was there. I was shaking. But I was also terribly turned on to the whole affair. What were they doing? How did they know all of this?

I met Clement's narrowed eyes, standing my ground. My heart thundered to be so bold but I was loath to leave.

"I must insist I will not be giving you any testimony, whatever you need it for, unless you take me along to see what you're doing," I said. I wanted to know. I needed to know. "Oh." My brow knotted. "But first I *must* return Daphne and Athena home safely."

The other three all looked to Clement. Clement gawked at me. Then his jaw tightened and, clearly resentful of my unnegotiable conditions, he conceded, "Fine. Shall we go, then?"



### 3

I thought they'd part ways with Daphne, Athena, and me the moment we weren't looking, but the men from Waterloo truly did follow us back to Julien's-off-the-Strand. The night's reception still spun along as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred at all.

"Will, what are you doing?" Daphne hissed as I returned her shoes to her on the stoop. There was a strange wide-eyed calmness about her now, as though she were at peace with almost fulfilling her threats. Almost jumping. Almost *dying*. "Your father will *not* be happy. You don't know those men. You can't ..."

"You don't understand," I said, urging her and Athena to the door. "This is something I must do for myself."

"But *Will*—"

"I think you owe it to me after tonight, don't you, Daphne?"

Daphne's face hardened. Curls all broken up and windblown about her brow, she said, "Abandon your high horse, Will Winchester. We all have our demons."

What was I to do or say? That finally I saw the opportunity to speak one-on-one with Spiritualists who might believe what I said, who seemed more truth than fraud? A chance to discover others who bore witness to the dead, and what might become of someone with a curse like that?

I didn't even know if I *could* speak those words with the dreadful

lump in my throat.

“What am I to tell your father, then?” Daphne asked wearily, shivering and looking far too fragile for my liking.

“Tell him nothing.” I shrugged. I kissed her cold cheek. And then I strode briskly down the block to where the men from the bridge waited with a coach.



It was off to Fleet Street, apparently.

Once seated, Quinn offered me a splash of cognac from an ornate silver flask to calm my nerves.

“So, you’re Will,” said Assistant O’Brien, the gangly one, after my delayed introduction, his face bright and eyes brighter as the coach rattled on. The one my size was Inspector Cain Kingsley, young Earl of the old Kingsley family.

“Oh—yes!” I’d sputtered sheepishly as if I’d remembered Cain all along. I knew of the large noble family; no wonder he’d felt vaguely familiar to me. The Kingsleys were notorious around London for all sorts of glamour and sensation. A small handful of them were deep into London’s Spiritualist scene, too.

And now that I could think a bit straighter, I realised with a hot blush to be in Kingsley’s company in such an embarrassingly unpresentable state that I’d even seen him not very long ago, when Daphne and I had slipped out to that planchettist party. How could I not have remembered the moment I saw the milky lack of pigment scarring his left eye, the same that I’d noticed it through shoulders and elbows in the moving crowd of the ghost conjuring party, Daphne’s hand in mine, as Kingsley had sat surrounded by companions not on a chair, but perched gracefully on the edge of a billiards table, a real center of conversation as everyone waited for the private medium to arrive with her jewels and crystal ball?

“Still can’t believe he’s been decorated Earl before he’s even twenty-one,” Daphne had whispered. And then we’d both forgotten all about it, fading into the audience as in the candlelight the medium called

on this spirit or another.

I leaned forward to shake O'Brien's reaching hand, offering a poor excuse of a smile and too flustered to meet Kingsley's gaze in the dark of the coach.

"You must be shaken, still," O'Brien murmured. "Apologies again for all this mess—Lord, you're so young, too."

"I'm not terribly young," I assured him, hesitantly. For just a breath or two, I doubted the whole thing. But then the words came tumbling forth. "I'm not terribly shaken, either. I'm actually rather impatient to see what comes next because I've observed them, myself, when others couldn't all my life. The dead. Spirits. So ... "

"I knew it by the look in your eyes." A small but triumphant smile broke across Kingsley's face. "You possess the talent."

"I don't know that I'd call it talent." Quinn took the words right out of my mouth, in that rough baritone of his, cramped in a shadowy corner of the cab. I felt very small next to him, never mind the cold, curt glances of appraisal he thought I didn't notice.

"Don't mind Quinn," Kingsley insisted with a gentle smirk that made half-moons out of his eyes. "He wants you to believe he's frightening—old habits die hard for a former Yard detective—but he's our gentle giant now."

Quinn sighed.

It was just after midnight and Fleet Street was the usual circus. Clement waved me on impatiently as I followed O'Brien out of the coach. "Come on then, if you're so bent on being involved."

The four of them strode down past a cabman's shelter towards what appeared to be a menagerist's shop, but in the streaked front windows, easily missed between lurid displays of stuffed alligator heads and off-kilter bird skeletons in rusty cages, an unassertive sign read: *STYGIAN SOCIETY – WEST LONDON BURIAL CLUB*.

"This can't be open now, can it?" I protested weakly. Nobody seemed to hear.

The doorstep bowed underfoot; the place was thick with the odour of chemicals, smoke, and mould. To my surprise, a group of men was situated inside with gin and cigarettes. I could hardly see them at first

for lack of light and looming mountains of acquired ... *stuff*.

All manner of objects from the curious to the funereal piled around. Books, furniture, dusty graphoscopes, broken mirrors, bottled specimens parading alongside bizarre taxidermy displays. An ancient magic lantern sat squat and bulky, draped half in grimy velvet; forests of fat old candles were planted in heaps of wax atop stacked coffins.

We'd walked in on something of a party. The men were in the middle of charades, one of them wearing a ridiculous feather boa and a bejeweled belt surely snatched from some playhouse. They recognised their visitors almost immediately, and startled laughter trickled round the room until the man in the fabulous garb cried:

"Clement! Good to see you. You look in a bind, per usual."

"Pleasure's all mine, Zayne," Clement grumbled. "Now, listen, this is urgent."

"It's always urgent with you! You never call just to chat anymore, chum. Always expecting favours and never paying your gratitude ..."

Mr. Zayne affected an injured frown. Rough, suggestive laughter chorused from his companions.

Clement looked far from amused. "You'll be paid, and handsomely. You know that, Zayne."

"Ah, hold on, now! Is that a threat or a promise? Come now, my man; won't you honour me with dinner first?"

Mr. Zayne gave a saucy wink and there was another eruption of laughter. *My man*, this scruffy fellow in the feather boa called Clement, puffing on his cigarette and looking maybe one drink too far into that bottle of gin.

"We've got work for you." The ghost of a smirk waited at Clement's mouth as if for the moment to be right.

"And what's that?" Mr. Zayne countered, tapping cigarette ash into one of the other men's drinks. The other man didn't notice.

"You know," Clement said.

The tension in the air sharpened to a point; the men at the table quieted. Mr. Zayne discarded the obnoxious studded belt and peered at Clement with round, bright eyes, either drastically serious or deeply thrilled. Maybe both.

"A body?" Mr. Zayne raised his brows. He didn't wait for confirmation. He climbed over an examination table, which apparently served as a front desk of sorts, and then he began digging through a cabinet with a pitch pine infant-sized casket on its highest shelf.

I looked to O'Brien, and then Quinn, and then Kingsley. None offered any explanation. Only Kingsley at least returned the glance.

"Who's the newest pretty boy?" one of Mr. Zayne's grubbier company called from the back of the table, eyeing me with a gin grin.

"A witness." Clement didn't miss a beat. It might have been mildly protective. Or maybe he was just exasperated.

"Where the hell'd you grab the likes of him? Cleveland Street?"

There was another uproar amongst Mr. Zayne's men with the pounding of fists on the table and peals of laughter. A scrawnier man lit a pipe.

Last year on Cleveland Street, in Fitzrovia, there had been discovered a brothel which served as part-time work for a number of boys also employed by the London Central Telegraph Office. The place had received solicitations mainly from aristocrats; most scandalous of all was the mention of Prince Albert Victor in association. My neck was hot under my collar. And in my state of uncertainty, the paths became all crossed in me between wit and simple spite as I sputtered, "Oh, I see! As though I am a telegraph boy. How perfectly clever. While you certainly don't *look* the type to be more intimate than I with the whole Cleveland Street event last year, I'm sure—"

"That's enough, *gentlemen!*" Clement had moved off deeper into the shop to loom expectantly over the exam table with Mr. Zayne, who finally discovered what he'd been rummaging for: a massive, swollen, stained and mouldering book, through which he presently thumbed at a rapid pace. Clement threw me a sharp glance, though he still addressed the others. "As you might see, it has been a hell of a night."

Mr. Zayne's men glared at me, and I glared back at them. After I shrank behind Quinn a bit, of course.

A small collection of clocks ticked away, off rhythm with one another. Clement spoke in a tiny humming tone with Mr. Zayne

as Mr. Zayne pushed aside the book to search a second just like it. I peeked around Quinn's side. The pages were crammed corner to corner with faded handwritten lines, in some vague semblance of order.

"McGowell!" Mr. Zayne finally cried with a jab of the finger to the book. "See, here. Miss Kittredge Ann McGowell. From the Green. Cause of death, 'drowned, suicide.' Born 1829, died 1852. Ah, lucky you, Clement! She just barely missed the Stiffs' Express!"

*Kitty.*

"Amazing," Clement murmured. He slid me a glance that only lasted long enough for him to realise I'd seen it. Then he crossed his arms on the exam table and grinned up at his friend Mr. Zayne.

"So," he said, "where is she buried, then?"



The churchyard of the parish to which Kitty McGowell had once belonged was not exactly the kind of late-night stop I'd ever be wont to make, but the streets felt vaguely familiar to me. I didn't recognise them; it was just a shimmering, lingering sense of having walked them before. Sordid alleys, beggars and jakesmen, rattling shutters. Lanterns bobbed in the wind. St. Matthew loomed against the nighttime sky.

With the ambience compass out, Quinn and O'Brien manoeuvred through what crumbling monument stones were left above ground in the cramped cemetery. The parish watch house was dark. No one in these parts seemed to care about trespassers.

"I hope we won't have to dig more than twice," Clement grumbled, holding a lamp outstretched before us as Kingsley and I followed him through the nippy dark.

"She's a very active one," Kingsley muttered back. "The compass won't have any trouble finding her."

"Here," Quinn said suddenly, and not very enthusiastically. With their spades and shovels, Mr. Zayne and his men swarmed the small stretch of ground to which he pointed, and apparently to which their

odd little compass had led.

Clement heaved a sigh. "We'll see," he said to Kingsley.

Peeking around the edge of the pit as Quinn directed Mr. Zayne and his men to dig, the sight of disintegrated coffins and not-so-freshly-buried corpses probably should have been more disturbing to me. But it was a very mortal thing to be so engrossed by the morbid, I'd been thinking lately.

"Don't worry about that light, now!" eccentric Mr. Zayne called from the shallow hole. "We've done this plenty of times in pitch dark, my man!"

Maybe Mr. Zayne and his crew were body snatchers, then. *Crunch!* Soft, worm-filled coffin wood gave way under the blade of a shovel. Instead of a name, it was marked with a number that matched the one for Kitty McGowell in Mr. Zayne's mouldy index of burials.

How terrible, to be discarded as a number when you died.

I regretted not having grabbed my coat earlier; the night was just chilly enough to make me grit my teeth against their chattering, fingers tingling and shoulders bunched up—

*Fwump.*

Clement draped his patchwork coat about my shoulders, a bit large but warm from his body. I looked his way, perplexed, feeling quite the nuisance now.

"Brisk tonight, isn't it?" Clement remarked to Kingsley, rubbing his hands together. Kingsley's eyes slid from Clement to me, and then back to Clement, his brows just gently raised.

Bashful—but thankful, of course—I wiggled around to poke my arms into the long sleeves of Clement's coat.

O'Brien rummaged through his knapsack for two small glass flasks and a few tied leather bags as big as coin purses ... all of which he handed to Clement. Mr. Zayne and his men, under Quinn's curt instruction, knocked the wood away from the top of Kitty's coffin to uncover her remains.

It felt as though my heart fell right through my chest to look at the dirty grey bones and calico, the mud and the sawdust. Beetles, nested in the wiry mass of dead, unkempt hair. A skull seemed remarkably

more grotesque when one knew to whom it belonged.

Clement splashed the contents of the flasks over the rotted remains. He dug into the tiny bags O'Brien had given him, following up with some sort of powder. Quinn struck a match and threw it down into the mix. Little flames slithered fast along the bones and rags, as Kitty's remains went up in smoke.

Crossing himself, Clement spoke flatly, below his breath.

*"... Deus, in nomine, tuo salvum me fac ... et non proposuerunt Deum ante conspectum suum ... "*

I backed away, lest the other stinking, broken coffins catch fire in turn.

But the fire was confined to Kitty's crooked casket and Kitty's alone, like some unseen boundary had fallen to keep it contained.

*"... Deus, exaudi orationem meam ... drive away from the places you are sprinkled every apparition, villainy, and turn of devilish deceit ... the living and the dead, amen ... "*

Clement watched the remains burn in a half-bored, half-distracted way, it seemed, the hot glow of the fire softening his face a little. Now and again his hooded eyes caught a flicker of the flames. Maybe the fire danced in my eyes, too, wide as they were as we stood over the burning corpse.

"What is this, sir?" I whispered, mouth dry.

Clement glanced my way. But before he could reply, a horrendous gust drove down through the little churchyard, carrying on its back a low, hellish moaning distinctly more human and less of the night. Mr. Zayne and his men and I all clutched at our collars and winced against it. It was as though the wind had *aimed* for us. Meant to tug and drag at us. Stank of the Thames.

Swiftly, the moaning thinned into a rattling, whistling sound like distant screaming. The flames leapt higher from the coffin, and up from the middle of the fire sprang *Kitty*.

Somehow the apparition had been summoned from the bridge. But there was scarce enough time to recognise that before it dissolved into a writhing mass of shadows and whirled off into the smoke as the flames died away.



Save for the blackbirds cawing from the nearby belfry, the churchyard was quiet once more. And the night felt empty.

Mr. Zayne whistled long in relief. Then he and his men went to work piling dirt atop the broken coffin.

Clement returned to my question. "We with the Black Cross Spectral Department inspect hauntings in the Greater London area. *This* is the end of the case. We ascertain the phantom's identity—well, your mild possession did tonight—and ... " He held up the flasks and the little leather bags. "Holy water. Chancel oil and kerosene, blessed salt. Burn the bones and that's all, *fin*. Kitty McGowell's spirit has been freed. No longer here and shall never be again."

"Like an exorcism, then?" I asked.

"Ah ... in a sense, I suppose." He paused. Then he muttered, "Please, don't call me 'sir.' I go by Inspector Clement."

*The Black Cross*. Where had I heard that before? A séance party, some time ago. The lecturer had been introduced as a member of the Black Cross ... Order of Mysteries, or something?

They *were* Spiritualists, then.

I gawked at Clement, fingers curling in the ends of his coat sleeves as I struggled to wrap my mind around such a concept. *No longer here and shall never be again*. The cause and effect was conceivable enough, yes, but for some reason, it had never occurred to me quite in that light, whether the place in between living and dead was permanent, or even preferable. I'd just thought the Missing were—well, dead. Or perhaps, naïvely, I just hadn't *wanted* to think about it.

And these Spiritualists not only believed in it all, they desired to do something about it.

With the grave filled in, Mr. Zayne and his men bid us good-bye; we squeezed into a coach and I directed the way to Julien's-off-the-Strand. Quinn took my testimony as we rode, O'Brien jotting it all down. Clement bemoaned to no one in particular, "Wouldn't it be more efficient to simply implement a biannual inspection of the bridge? Instead of building case after case ... not to mention reconnaissance ... Do you know how many jump from there each year? O'Brien? Quinn?"

We came to a stop at the junction of Winston Crescent. Clement walked me to the townhouse stoop; I returned his coat to him. The West End was still alive and merry, and would be nearly into dawn. But the townhouse had quieted down a bit. The coach's horses stamped and snorted. A bicyclist wavered past, spraying muck at nearby foot-passengers. And standing there where the glow from the townhouse pooled on the walkway, I dreaded going inside. Suddenly all the warmth and the lights felt deader and more despairing than the cool dark outside, Waterloo in the fog, the wind in the cemetery and the blaze of some fire going up in me ...

My brow knotted. With a scrape of my heel, I turned around and beseeched Mr. Inspector Clement from the stoop.

"Tonight ..." I ventured demurely. I was still rather dazed by it all, yes, but hopelessly stirred up. "You perform these inspections routinely?"

Clement nodded and shrugged, avoiding my eyes. He was quiet for a moment. Then he finally looked at me and said, in a soft and secretive way, "Do you really wish to know?"

I nodded mutely.

Out of the breast pocket of his waistcoat, Clement plucked a small, ornate cigarette case, and from the case, he pulled a visiting card—a crisp little rectangle, thick white parchment with neat letters below a gold-embossed crest.

I took it as he bid me good-night and climbed back into the coach. Hands cold and still a bit shaky from the adventure, the card slipped from my fingers and fluttered down to my feet, glowing like a dull pearl in the spill of streetlamps. So small, so seemingly insignificant. Waiting to be stepped on, or kicked off somewhere never to be rediscovered, simple as that.

I crouched down and snatched it up, framed between both sets of thumb and forefinger to read in the dim light:

*BLACK CROSS ORDER OF OCCULT OCCURRENCES  
PRETERNATURAL INVESTIGATION  
NO. 98 ½ PORTLAND PLACE*

It was as fate would have it.

## 4

*Snip—snip, snip.*

The last little damp tendrils of hair fell to the floor of Zelda's room as she brushed them away with the towel on my shoulders.

"Handsome thing, you are," she muttered, sharing the reflection in the looking glass. Her fading blonde braid fell over one shoulder; the creases of a smile cradled her sensitive brown eyes. Pride and sadness made for an interesting tone of voice.

"It's a real shame," she lamented, taking a comb to my clean hair. "Long, flowing locks, and you could dress up with petals and pearls like your father's girls. Except not like your father's girls, a bit more respectable."

She made a face and I laughed a little. But something in my chest tightened, just for a moment. "That wouldn't fit me, Zelda," I murmured, shrugging off the towel and carefully folding it near the wash bowl. "You know that."

"Still, Willow." Zelda turned away as if I wouldn't know what she thought. "To keep this up for your father ..."

*Willow.*

The name felt so foreign to me sometimes, although it wasn't rare from Zelda's mouth. Today it didn't necessarily feel wrong. Biting idly at my lower lip, I took the comb from her for the last of my cowlicks. Nothing I might truly tame with sweet-scented styling pomatums or

wax; my hair fell of its own accord, a stubborn, tousled laurel of hair framing my ears and the nape of my neck.

"Well," I sighed. "If my mother hadn't run off before I was even reading, my father wouldn't have had to face the decision of how to raise a daughter himself, hmm?"

I hadn't meant to sound so bitter; the words just thickened in my throat on their way off my tongue. *Raise a daughter himself*. Not entirely himself. There hadn't been too long an interim between my mother and Miss Valérie, but it was obvious from the start even my father was far more inclined to parent than she. Zelda's gaze roamed me through the mirror from head to toe—inspecting the hair she'd just trimmed and the trouser braces hanging limply from my narrow waist, then the locket that had slipped from hiding under my shirts where it always danced safely over the bandages there that kept me bound.

I was, after all, contrary to the way I appeared and oftentimes felt, a sixteen-year-old girl when it came to anatomy. But only Zelda and my father knew me as anything but Will, son of Julien Cavanaugh Winchester II.

I couldn't recall exactly when or how my mother left.

No one ever divulged to me if she'd been one of my father's ladies or born into something better. I never asked. I certainly didn't ask if she died or just took her leave of us, either. One day, she was there. The next she was gone like she'd never been there at all. My father sat me down on the floor of his library some night after and just stared at me, deep in rumination. Second guessing his aptitude as a parent, perhaps. He'd said quietly, to himself, pre-grey mustache of his younger years barely moving around the words, "We shall do this together, shan't we? We will manage." And I climbed to sit on his knee, wondering why someone might cry and smile at the same time.

He'd had Zelda cut my hair. No more little dresses, only knickerbockers and sailor suits, and I'd been publicly Will instead of Willow every day and night since then.

"Poor little boy blue!" my father's different girls had said over the years when they heard of my mother's desertion. The occasional

room-renters spoiled me each in their own ways, I think because they knew they didn't have very good chances at families of their own, but ... it was nice to be worth something to them, however sad and unspoken the significance was.

My father's unorthodox strategy was selfish. Yet at the time, perhaps he hadn't thought through its immense potential to become problematic. He never told me why he chose it; that was easily the better or the worse of his decisions, somehow. I'd concluded by now that it was the only way he felt he could manage single fatherhood—as even my father wished to be a father once, it seemed—and succeed at protecting me in a world that swallowed innocent young girls whole. I only had to look around his business to know that much.

Whatever his reasoning, it didn't seem to bother *him* in a different way than it didn't bother *me*, but clearly it bothered Zelda quite a lot yet.

*It's a shame, Willow*, she'd said, as though she feared I'd become a character instead of my own self and had to remind me of who I really was.

But this *is* me.

I was not confused by the whole thing, as Zelda seemed to dread. There had been confusing *moments*, of course. Bodies are all rather the same up to a point, and it wasn't as though I'd had any ordinary female friends to whom I might contrast or compare myself. I didn't really form any ideas of my own about it at all until I'd woken one night and thought I was dying thanks to my anatomy, and Zelda explained and I sat there in the candlelight with her feeling as though the world were both very different yet exactly the same.

Truthfully, like Charlie and Colette were both dead but alive in a particular sense, I felt both a young lady and a young man. Not at the same time—sometimes, Will; other times, Willow. And despite how it sounds, it all felt very normal to me. *My* normal. A kind of bi-genderness, something fluid between the two. Simple as that.

But nobody could know *that* part of me, especially now. Even it did not exempt me from the dangers that awaited a young lady—a young man—on their own. Beyond that, though, how might anyone

know how to treat me? I wouldn't ever be taken seriously again. Deformity, sexual inversion, deception was all anyone would see. Worse yet, perhaps betrayal.

At times, I wondered about being the type who liked wearing dresses and had long hair through which boys could run their fingers or which their mother might pin up in little curls.

But there was something sort of wicked and liberating about no one knowing whom you really were, so I was thankful for now. Zelda always said one must find something for which to be thankful in every day; I was lucky to have many things. An upbringing, even untraditional, that provided everything and left me wanting for little. The kind of independence not generally reserved for those who more strictly fit the gender role that accompanied a girl's anatomy. Laughter over Turkish coffee and English biscuits or late-night reading of serials and penny dreadfuls with Daphne and Agatha. And Zelda herself, who loved me like a family maid and governess irrevocably loves the children they raise whether they wore dresses or not. If I only had a clue as to how, I would come out and tell her about my queerness.

For now, though, I was content with the way things were.

Zelda clucked her tongue. "Pretty face," she hummed, trying to lighten the mood. She pinched me gently at the chin so my mouth pursed in a little pout as she had me observe myself in our shared reflection, then shook her head in half-teasing disapproval of my scraped cheek and bruised jaw. "And you treat it so terribly!" she scolded. "Don't tell me what happened here last night ... I don't know that I could handle it ... a scuffle, you rascal? Boxing matches?"

I laughed. Me, boxing? Preposterous. I was a bit impetuous, but I unquestionably lacked the stature or the nerve for that sort of thing.

She knew I'd gone after Daphne. Everyone knew.

Smiling sheepishly, I tried to wiggle free of her arms, debating whether I *should* tell her about my wild night with the Black Cross inspectors and how long I'd turned the calling card over and over in my hands before finally going to sleep.

Suddenly Zelda cried out, slipping into French, her fast and melodic first tongue, as she tugged down my collar to inspect the

dance of bruises on my throat. My eyes widened. I'd known they were there; I'd been gravely disturbed to find them this morning upon waking. And then I'd completely forgotten to hide them from her—

Judging by the look on her face, Zelda did not suspect the faint pink and purple came from fingers. She thought the marks left by someone's mouth.

"Oh!" I shook off her arms and clapped both hands over the bruises, blushing and uttering a short, frantic laugh. "It's not that!"

She kept haranguing me in and out of English, swatting as if at a pesky cat at the kitchen door. Imagine, me in such a position with another person. Imagine, *she* was imagining I had been, and I wasn't sure which was the more flustering.

"No, not at all!" I insisted, embarrassed but so overwhelmingly relieved. What could I have said to help my case if she hadn't misunderstood? "I promise it's not that, Zelda."

The only possible source for the marks was Kitty's ghost cruelly grabbing me on the bridge. Which meant that everything last night had been real. The dimensions of it all still felt so beyond my grasp, the meaning of what we'd done in that churchyard in the grand scheme of things.

It terrified me. Yet, even looking at the bruises another time now, I wanted to do it again.

"Shoo! You unbelievable thing, all my good upbringing for naught thanks to your father." She ushered me away with a flap of the hands. "He's waiting for you, and now I send you down to him in such an unpresentable state!"

I caught her by one hand and cleared the way to peck a kiss on her wrinkled cheek, extra sweetly, before hurrying on towards the door. She shook her head as she hobbled over to her corner chair.

"You've worn me out, now ... " she muttered.

I flashed her a repentant smile as I swung out the door into the hall. Thank God, to be escaping that mishap.

But I was not quite as jovial as I played. My father wanted to see me. And my father was not happy.

With a long, nervous breath, I trudged downstairs, past my mother's locked room, to the humble office that served as his library, where he waited.

His leather wingchair was turned away from the mahogany desk and backed against the window, which was opened just a crack for the late afternoon air. He sat with bags under his eyes and a greyness to him that spoke of the toll his business had begun to take. Never mind that by the time tonight's scheduled affair started, he'd be replenished and ready to go again. How much longer before it took more than a day's hangover to revitalise him?

"That was quite the event last night," he greeted me. "Your leaving so abruptly and rather inconsiderately."

I frowned, closing the thick walnut door behind me. "Daddy . . ."

"You left with no explanation!" he cried. "How could I know you'd be safe, wherever you were off to? Look at your *face*, first of all! And abandoning our guests in such a way—can't you grasp how poorly such actions reflect upon the business? How ill-mannered you've presented yourself before those to whom impression is all?"

I stood on the old tiger-skin rug in the center of the cramped, cluttered library, hands twisting together behind my back as if I were a guilty child again. But I wasn't, and I didn't regret or feel guilty. I felt gravely misunderstood. I'd felt gravely misunderstood for a long time, and suddenly it was not something I could brush off.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," I mumbled. "I didn't mean for any disregard."

"I won't accommodate such carelessness any longer. Do you hear me, Willow? Do you understand?"

My jaw tightened. Unlike with Zelda, it was a guessing game with him for which name he might speak. Force of habit, and all. "I understand."

He softened then, slouched in his chair. He shook his head. "Where did you go?" he murmured, sounding truly worried. I softened a little, too.

"Waterloo Bridge."

"Why the devil there?"

I avoided his frown, looking instead around the dark, smoky



room with all its untouched books and trinket collections from travels made before my father had become a family man.

"To save Daphne," I said. I didn't know if it was right to tell him or not, but if nothing else he deserved to be aware of the moral states of his working girls. "She was going to jump, Daddy—"

My father heaved a sigh to interrupt, pushing out of his chair as if it were a great effort, to pour himself a small glass of brandy from the sideboard decanter. He turned just halfway, eyes lingering on my battered cheek. "You know she's always seeking attention through pity," he said flatly. "If it's not a threat to drink the whole bottle of Daffey's, it's a promise to press a blade to her wrist, dash out before a speeding coach or eat the paint from the walls."

My heart went hollow for a moment. "How can you be so flippant?" I demanded, in disbelief. "She's one of your girls. One of your *best* girls."

"I've already saved her, from Mile End. She wasn't even a virgin when I bought her—though the brokers were trying to sell her off to Belgium as one, the *conmen*."

I reared back, appalled.

"Why am I to be accountable for the penalties of her chosen profession?" Any previous kindness had withered away; now my father just looked cold and disinterested.

Daphne and I hadn't talked yet of what she'd almost done. She'd just been wandering about all dreamy and distracted like a quaint little Miss Havisham, her hair loose and her feet bare, as everyone else aimed to avoid her as if the self-despair were catching.

But how could he say such things? Didn't he care whether she lived or died—not because of her situation, but because she was also a human being?

"Don't look at me like that, darling," my father murmured, voice gravelly but still tender as he reached out to stroke the hair off my brow. I'd clearly drained him, as all impertinent children were wont to do, according to Miss Valérie. "It was good of you to bring Miss Daphne back. You try so very hard. But, Willow, you'll learn soon enough you can't save others from their own demons. It isn't your

responsibility to save anyone at all.” His eyes were dark as he held his other hand out, gestured expectantly to the edge of his desk. I retrieved his pipe and tobacco for him.

Picking at the packet of tobacco, he said, “Now that we’ve remedied the matter of your running around uncivilised ...”

Again, his glance flickered to my scrapes; I hunched my shoulders up a little, begging he did not see the bruises, too.

“And the matter of your troublesome goodness,” he went on, “is everything *else* all right?”

Oh, wouldn’t it be a simple life to ignore things as easily as he? Then again, that seemed a miserable thing.

“Daddy,” I said, before I could really think about it, “you’ve had members of the Society for Psychical Research to dinner before.”

“I have,” my father confirmed as he lit his pipe.

“And members from the old Metaphysical Society, too,” I reminded. “But ... what about the Black Cross?”

He tensed, briefly, then scowled at his smouldering pipe. In a thick voice, he said, “The Black Cross is a fraternity bent on glorifying the irrational, whereas the other two groups exemplify scientific explanation and have proven good reputation to invite on certain nights.”

I frowned, looking over at him without lifting my head. “I don’t really believe that,” I said quietly.

Weary anger flared on his face. “And why not?”

I bristled. I knew very well what types of arguments and lectures my brazen disobedience on this matter procured. But I couldn’t stop my tongue.

“Daddy, last night I encountered men from the Black Cross. They were at Waterloo, investigating the wraith everyone’s been talking about, and once I saw Athena and Daphne home, I went along with them to exorcise the spirit and ...”

I neglected to mention the mild possession part. In the past, he’d disparaged anything I’d said about the Missing; certainly, my playing a physical part in a Spiritualist activity would sit even less well with him.

“And it seems to me the Black Cross is just as scientific as the

others," I finished.

My father stormed to his wingchair, paced a moment before turning sharply and waving his pipe at me. "I do not approve of your associating with those *charlatans*," he sneered through clenched teeth, eyes flashing. "They merely take advantage of the lost and confused, Willow. They did it to your mother and I *will not* permit they take you from me, as well!"

My mother ... ?

I stared at him, dumbstruck. She'd known of the Black Cross? Feeling suddenly very small and helpless, I pressed, "They did *what* to Mamma?"

My father went rigid as if turned to stone. Finally, he pointed at me again with his pipe, clutching it so tight his knuckles bulged. "She is no 'mamma' to you," he said, but the disapproval in his voice fiercely contradicted the mournful pinch to his face. "If she were such a devoted and family-oriented creature, she would not have disappeared."

That belittling remark stung me far less than his words about Daphne. The fire under the library mantle crackled and sighed with a crumble of glowing embers.

"Never mind it anymore," my father hissed. "I won't hear another word about these so-called inspectors, or Spiritualism, or your *mother*. Stay here with me in the real world, Will, not the nightmares of yesterday or the fantasies of tomorrow."

Something inside me gave a firm snap.

"That's unfair," I argued. "How can you object when you and Miss Valérie host séance parties now and again? How can you—"

"Parlour tricks and silly games to entertain guests!" He waved my protest away and cast his eyes elsewhere.

"Is it because you don't believe? Or is it solely because you presume they took Mamma from us?"

A strange look twisted his face. "You will abandon these insolent fancies the moment you leave this room!" he roared. "Do you understand?"

"*No*." The urge to cry tightened in my throat. There was a plain,

undeniable division between us. We looked out at the world through very different windows; there was no changing that. And it was his fault if he could not see his forbiddance only deepened the chasm.

Voice pitching like my temper, I said, "I'm going to visit the Black Cross, at the least to understand, seeing as you won't tell me! You never tell me anything even though I deserve to know. And well, you can't keep me prisoner here forever, you know, I'm not your *employee*, I'm your *child*—"

*Slap!*

The back of his hand sent me reeling, shuffling away only to trip over the flat, snarling head of the tiger-skin rug and fall in a shocked tangle to the floor. One of his silver rings scraped against my already-tender cheek; the shock of the hit stung first, then throbbed fierce enough to make my head spin.

I gawked up at him, holding my face. He stared back at me, eyes wide as though he hadn't expected it, either—but dark, impenetrable, like the coke of his library fire.

If he was afraid for me, he had a horrid way of showing it.

"Darling," he said, brow furrowing.

"No!" I'd never tasted so much hatred for him in my life. *Father's neglect*, Agatha had teased the night before. I hadn't ever thought of it that way. I held on to little things like his smiles over the desk while I played card games with myself on the rug before the fire, the fantastic stories he still told about adventurers in faraway jungles and arid deserts, the way it had made me smile when I was smaller to hear his laughter fill a room, how safe I'd felt against his shoulder when, instead of Zelda, he'd carried me off to bed.

But suddenly, I felt the fool for that. I had never felt so much *smarter* than him, so *different* ... so much more like a burden than a beloved child.

Livid, I jumped up and shoved out of the library. My father followed, at least at first. Perhaps to apologise, perhaps with cruel things yet to say. But I left him behind fast, pounding up the stairs past Zelda, past Agatha, and past Miss Valérie who had emerged from the morning room concerned in a meddlesome way.

They'd all heard us.

Of what was my father so afraid I should know or be? Myself? My mother?

I spun around on the attic stairs, trembling, and howled so hard it left me breathless, "*You can't stop fate, you know!*"

All I found was Miss Valérie peeking up after me, light glinting off the brooch at her throat. Distantly, my father shouted for others to ignore me, to refrain from encouraging my emotional outburst.

And Miss Valérie stood there, regal and unruffled, eyes hooded. Smiling, I swear it. As though she'd been waiting for something like this to happen, some irreparable fracture between my father and me. She wished me gone. I was the last tie to my father's former life, after all—to husbandry, to parenthood, to remorse and responsibility. And she had never liked that.

I flew up into my room and slammed the door, then kicked it for good measure. It rattled satisfactorily but my foot was not quite as pleased. Daylight bled dim through the dusty skylights as I sagged down to the cold floorboards and burst into tears.

It was hard to breathe, frantic as I was. I fumbled with my waistcoat and shirt, the undershirt beneath, loosening the bandages from my chest to cry hot, dry, and furious, like a miserable little fool, arms wrapped tightly about myself.

My mind was already made up. I wasn't sure anymore what I'd expected, broaching that cursed subject with my father. Perhaps I'd simply needed a final injustice to prove I wasn't wrong. He believed in the Missing, too, I was sure of it! But something he wouldn't speak seemed to haunt him, drove him to preach against it, insist against it, keep my mother's old room locked up even as he struggled to erase her everywhere else.

But it didn't matter what he refused to say, did it? I had a calling card for the Black Cross.

*You can't stop fate.*

The tears stopped almost as soon as they'd come, leaving my face raw and red, my nose sore. I curled up in the old armchair and picked at its seams as I watched the chimneypots of tiled roofs around ours

belch their thick, grey smoke, and I did not stop Charlie and Colette from singing and playing.

I was not *unhappy* here.

But nothing—not my father's temper tantrum, nor the possibility that my mother had had something to do with the Black Cross—none of it could do a thing to change the way the night with the Spiritualists had made me feel.

I'd glimpsed a world in which I might mean something, but only as if peeking through the keyhole of the door that kept me out of it. I needed to see more of it. I needed to see all of it.

## 5

Daphne brought me food because I refused to leave the attic. The danger distilled slowly, chilled in my veins and left me feeling clear-headed in a very numb way. If I were to leave my room, it would be to pretend the whole argument had not happened ... or to leave for the address on the calling card, and see what the Black Cross was all about.

Daphne and I ate dinner together in my room but we did not speak much.

When the next daybreak coloured the smoggy sky purple and blue, I took my time rising, lying there idly trailing one hand up and down the wall above my pillow as birds called out from their roosts near the window.

On the armchair, my trousers lay sloppily folded and draped across the side.

The Black Cross calling card was still there, burning a hole in my pocket. A flash of the inspectors in the little cemetery as we'd set fire to Kitty's bones, scorched into my memory.

I threw back my blankets and rolled out of bed, grabbed my trousers from the chair and tried not to dress so impatiently that I'd look a complete mess.

Downstairs, there was barely a whisper of life. Too early, too soon after the night had finally wound down. What had my father told

guests inquiring about his quaint little server's absence? That he was out? Under the weather?

Hashish and tobacco had left their ghosts in the halls along with French perfume; someone must have spilled liquor on a sideboard. Gin and tonic, it smelled like, when I investigated with a wrinkle of the nose.

I turned onto the last set of stairs and found a gentleman below at the front door, quite like a kitchen mouse as he fumbled into a bowler hat and overcoat. I stopped and peered down at him; at the sound of my footsteps, he froze and looked up at me. His first time at Julien's-off-the-Strand, judging by how jumpy and ashamed he was, hastening to leave before anyone saw him.

"Good morning to you, sir," I greeted, sliding my hand along the banister as I practically skipped down the stairs, avoiding the squeakiest ones. Despite the argument with my father, there was a strange lightness to my step today.

The man cleared his throat, eyes leaping all around as though he suspected I'd brought other witnesses.

"Yes, good morning," he said in a thin, hoarse way as he bobbed his head and left.

I swung into the kitchen for coffee and a quick breakfast of bread and cheese. Cook waved at me with an elbow, his hands busy with the morning's newspaper. Cigarette clenched between his teeth, he raised his brows and husked, "Where are you rushing off to?"

"I'm off to the Black Cross," I said, shrugging into my light coat at the kitchen door. And speaking it aloud gave me pause for a moment or two, just staring at my shoes.

I really was off to see it.

Scruffy little Cook nodded, calling after me over his shoulder as I slipped out the door into the alley, "Zelda's requested that beet and potato stew for lunch, like at Pagani's! Don't miss it!"

I poked my head back into the kitchen. "I won't!"





Clutching the Black Cross calling card, I dodged through the street traffic of a crisp, bustling September morning and endeavoured not to immediately change my mind.

The Black Cross would surely send me away. I was just a tiny fool in a cap and a half-buttoned, slim-fit coat, brimming with obsessive questions. Of course, they wouldn't have time to spare on endless inquiries. And yet what if they did? Maybe they took on students, or ... did Spiritualists require office boys? How did one presume to request a purpose in life, anyway? Working for my father was far from purpose for me.

Midmorning sunlight glinted off the many different greens in the corner of Regent's Park that jutted against Park Crest and Portland Place. The Black Cross was almost too easy to miss, an enormous, scholarly corner building of old-world limestone and Lincolnshire, rising four stories with smooth but tired columns redeemed by a lovely lace of green ivy as they propped up a wrap-around second floor promenade. Blackbirds perched on the highest window ledges. The building was the last on the row of lavish old noblemen's townhouses encircling the park, but must have come before them because its romantic state of sleepy, rain-stained elegance spoke of a timelessness the townhouses lacked.

A bronze plaque announced the Order on the low, wrought-iron balustrade between columns.

*98 ½ PORTLAND PLACE*  
*THE BLACK CROSS*  
*ORDER OF OCCULT OCCURRENCES*  
*1701 – MDCCI*

Strange, how excitement could make one feel so lightheaded and ill.

I climbed the shadowy portico and heaved open one of the heavy black walnut doors.

It groaned a wave of cold, slightly musty air as I slipped inside, and promptly stopped short to gawk around like an idiot. The front gallery was a bit dark, sparsely but nonetheless thoughtfully decorated by little potted palms, paintings and tapestries that drooped above a lacquered sideboard or two. On the far wall hung a massive oil

painting, one of those surreal Romantic types with a fair lady and a nightmarish creature.

The door thudded shut behind me with a thunderclap that echoed around the room. I jumped.

"Hello," a sharp-nosed secretary called from the high desk off to the left, and I jumped again.

"Good morning." Hesitantly, I crossed the room to present my calling card. "My name is Will Winchester. I would like to formally inquire about ..."

I frowned, waiting for the secretary to look up from some paper on which he busily scribbled with a satisfying *scrape-scrape* of his gold-tipped pen. Pale hair swooped to one side of his head, he raised his brows. "Are you reporting an incident?" he asked.

My mouth hung open for a moment as I considered the question. "I'm reporting ... Actually, I'm reporting an interest in *working* with the Black Cross."

The secretary raised his brows a bit higher.

"I have a card." I stared at him. "I was given a card."

"You're in need of an interview, then."

"Well, I'm not certain what—"

"Wait here, Mr. Winchester." The secretary climbed down from his tall desk and left me in the gallery.

Shyly, I looked around. The room was about as somber and silent as an empty church. Somewhere, a clock stuttered along. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* Did I mention my mother to anyone? Would they know her name, or ... ?

"Mr. Winchester?" The secretary leaned back in from the hall. "Sir Westwood and Officer Chesley will see you now."

I followed him down a hall even darker than the gallery. We rounded another corner, and half the corridor became a stretch of multi-paned windows looking out on a humble, private courtyard. The whole place turned in an L-shape, forming a full square where it joined the neighbouring old slate and brick terrace. Clearly that was Black Cross property, as well; doors with little framed stoops opened onto the courtyard with its garden fountain and rose bushes.

Outside in the morning sunlight, a groundskeeper struggled with overgrown shrubbery while a group of men spoke together outside the brick terrace. Over their heads, a neatly-dressed woman opened the window of her room for fresh air. The whole place emanated a sense of preserved knowledge and quiet mystery. We passed a small den, where a gentleman in tweed paced with a lady in sky blue, their voices carrying.

"It's a discard case. Warren's only transferring it because he doesn't think it matters."

"Well, he'll want to be credited if the Cross discovers anything, won't he, Mr. Abberline?"

"Oh—please, we don't need any more Cock Lanes. This place is cluttered up enough as it is by useless artefacts and ..."

They caught me glancing their way. The man's face soured. The lady just smiled.

Anxiously, I ran my thumb over and over across the golden letters on the calling card, my stomach in knots. The secretary stopped at an open door. I noticed just in time to keep from running into him.

"Mr. Winchester," he announced me, then skirted around and went back the way we'd come.

I stood in the open door, neck hot under my collar.

In a plain and faintly gloomy room, some melody tumbled unobtrusively from the horn of a little phonograph under the only window. Busts of Greek philosophers sat frowning in the corner, and over those hung Rembrandt-esque portraits of men whom the plaques beneath proclaimed to be: *FOUNDER*, *FOUNDER*, and *FOUNDER*.

Two gentlemen sat on the opposite side of a broad walnut desk staring back at me as if they'd expected someone much different. Which was reasonable. One of them sported a sharply-trimmed beard in shades of greying brown, and below his thick, brooding brows, his eyes were surprisingly clear and receptive. The other gentleman seemed a neurotic piece of work, sniffing into a kerchief with one hand while with the other dusting crumbs from a light midmorning snack back onto a plate at the corner of the desk.

"Good morning, sirs," I said in a tiny voice.

“Good morning,” both men replied almost in unison, and proceeded to wait for me to explain my visit.

“My name is Will Winchester.” I cleared my throat, realising then that I should have organised an introduction on the way over. I was painfully conscious of the pitch of my voice, wavering under the words as I tried to sound formal and composed, especially with the way the older gentleman’s eyes sharpened on me. But my thoughts all ran together, per usual. “I recently bore witness to one of your organisation’s inspections and thereafter had the great fortune of accompanying your team to the close of the inspection, and upon the close of the inspection and the gathering of my testimony, Mr. Inspector Clement—sorry, *Inspector* Clement presented to me this card, and I knew I had to call—if you’ll have it, of course—”

“Good Lord, boy, take a breath,” the older gentleman interrupted with a weary chuckle. I snapped my mouth shut; today was one of those days I could not help but keep tally of every *boy* and *sir* and *Mr.* He smiled faintly, eyes nested in crow’s feet, as he stood and reached across the desk, coaxing me in to shake his outstretched hand. “And why did Inspector Clement present you with a card?”

“Because,” I said, “I expressed a tentative interest in ... joining on with the Black Cross.” I stumbled on the words, breathless again. I’d only intended to visit. But said out loud, there was a terrifying realness to the possibility. And I *loved* it.

“Commissioner Westwood,” the older gentleman introduced himself, not very enthusiastically but certainly cordially. “And this is Officer Chesley.” With a nod to the other gentleman, Commissioner Westwood seated himself again and leaned back with a few creaks of his chair. Chesley glanced at him, then glanced at me. He raised his brows, smiling a twitch of a smile that didn’t seem entirely sincere. There were still some crumbs on one of his lapels.

Patently, Westwood said, “Well, take a seat, boy. We’ve a process to this interview.”

I eased down into the leather chair before them and went back to staring, far from confident. An interview. More testimony, perhaps. It was as though Commissioner Westwood’s grey eyes saw right

into me. I wasn't sure how to feel about it. God, but my heart was thundering.

"The Black Cross is the Scotland Yard of the occult, in a way," he said with the ghost of a smile. "We work closely together."

"Closely enough," Chesley hastened to elaborate. "But you know how that goes."

"I don't," I replied sheepishly. Chesley just squinted at me, appraising my plain but clearly middle-class clothes, perhaps. My size. More than likely the faintly-bruised and scraped state of my face.

"Dealing with *criminals* is not exactly the same thing as dealing with the *metaphysical*," Chesley paused to blow his nose. "Apologies. I've a chill. Anyway, if we aren't officially affiliated with the Church—we still use some old procedures, but we are by no means Catholic—we must be affiliated with something, somehow. And that isn't to say we are just some club of folklorists or ghost conjurers, either." He glanced at Westwood as if seeking some commiseration, then threw his eyes back to me. "Perhaps it's all superficial worry, though, what with interest in the preternatural *all the rage* now."

Oh ... I nodded, raising my brows a bit. He suspected my interest to be short-lived, a hobbyist's, the fleeting fancy of trend.

Westwood sighed. There was a moment of quiet. Once confident Chesley was very much through, Westwood went on. "Yes, Commissioner Warren and I have gone over this."

"Hmm." Chesley shrugged.

"You're a Spiritualist society," I concluded. "You investigate spirits."

Chesley's face pinched into a disdainful smile just on the edge of laughter. Westwood nodded first, then shook his head.

"Well, yes," he said. "But more than that, we seek, and we study, and we archive any and all occurrences of the occult. *Mysteries*, if you will. Hauntings are merely one department in which we specialise. We've also accounts and inquiries into daemonology, myth, the revenant and corporeal undead, witchcraft ..."

With a gentle creaking of his chair, Westwood reclined to adjust

his forest-green waistcoat. I felt very small under his clear, solemn gaze.

"The Black Cross acts not to deem anything 'good' or 'bad,'" he said slowly. "The end goal is not to police the occult, but to pursue some harmony between natural and preternatural, to record its existence in as much possible detail. I suppose, next to our brother societies, that *is* a bit idealistic. While we indeed endeavour to scientifically support the mysterious things we compile, there comes time all a scholar can do is archive and theorize." He cast me a glance from the corner of his eye. "You see, science and superstition are not divorced of one another. Quite the opposite, actually. And so, we work to gather evidence, to engage in order to learn, and to use what we learn to instruct the balance of man and ... what he has yet to understand."

An entire agency of men. An order of Spiritualists. Not just mediums, or conjurers, or mind readers. *Scholars*.

"Did you not read all this in the application paperwork?" Chesley flashed a quick, fretful smile before snapping Westwood a hard look. "Have we taken that out of the application paperwork?" he whispered as if I did not still sit before them.

*Wait ...*

I stiffened, eyes wide.

Commissioner Westwood rummaged through the desk. "I seem to have misplaced this month's submitted applications, Chesley," he declared below a low chuckle. He didn't seem worried by it; Chesley, on the other hand, watched with clear distress, edging out below his breath, "There were only four."

They misunderstood. They thought I'd *already applied* for membership.

My heart pounded hard below my throat, stomach all aflutter with horrified excitement.

Well ... I could not dash their hopes, now, could I?

"Oh, yes, that's all right, I'm sure you're very busy and receive many applications each month," I insisted, the words again running breathlessly one over the other.

"No, they don't seem to be here. Well!" Westwood sighed and pulled out a little leather folio from a drawer. "Nonetheless, if you'd like to review the paperwork before you sign ..." He gestured for me to take the folio. I did, shyly, running my fingers over its edges as I peeked inside. The first page was a membership agreement, awaiting my signature.

But what would I sign? *Willow Winchester*? That wasn't going to work, was it? Never mind that, surely a guardian's signature was also compulsory for someone not yet of age. My heart sank. Here it was, over as soon as it had begun. Foolish to ever have expected more. I would go home. Miserably, but I would.

*Unless ...*

"Is this a legal contract?" I asked. "I'm afraid I cannot sign a legal contract yet myself, sirs. I'm not of age, and I haven't my birth papers—nothing, actually—fire—tragic fire, lost my mother. And the papers, of course. Such misfortune."

My father's official legal guardianship was over *Willow Winchester*, after all. Not *Will*.

Westwood's smile faltered just a bit; his gaze darted over me, up and down. "You're a proper Englishman of ... what age?"

"Sixteen years, Commissioner."

Chesley's eyes slid over to Westwood. Westwood studied me a moment, newly intent, as if he suddenly saw something he hadn't before. Never mind the signature—*now* I was to be sent home. I was too young. I waited, breath caught in my throat, for the verdict.

"Winchester, you said?" Westwood pressed.

"Yes, sir," I answered meekly.

He softened again. "It's a written promise of both parties, not a legal contract," he assured me. "Our solicitors keep it extensively up-to-date, so there should be no problem. Signing does not bind you formally nor suggest we act as your caretakers, but if your legal guardian is apprehensive—I presume that's where your concern lies—he may meet with our solicitors any weekday after the hour of one o'clock."

Maybe they assumed I was a complete orphan, not just motherless,

some unfortunate who'd slipped through the cracks somewhere along the way. God knew it wasn't a rarity. But what Westwood said seemed sensible. And for me, a young man as the world mostly saw me, to be operating much on my own was not a rarity, either.

"Mr. Winchester ... may I call you that?"

"If you must," I sighed. Chesley squinted at me. I flushed, embarrassed to have accidentally spoken it aloud, and avoided his eyes.

"If you don't mind, I've one more question." Westwood drummed his knuckles at the corner of the large desk. "For what reason, *truly*, other than your witnessing an investigation, was your interest raised in the Black Cross? What compelled a middle-class fellow like yourself to enquire at an order such as this?"

I fell still with the folio in my lap and my heart in my throat, gawking at him. My eyes skipped to Chesley; I could feel his judgment.

"Well ... " I said, finally finding my voice again. I looked to Westwood once more, holding his gaze. "I see the phantasmal world every day, sirs."



END OF SAMPLE