

JOHANNA CRAVEN

# AFTERLIFE



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## Afterlife

She was breathtaking. Beautiful in the way that steals the air from your lungs and makes your words come out backwards. Blonde curls fell across her shoulders and shone in the candlelight. Her cheeks were porcelain; perfectly sculpted. And her voice so like honey that when she said, "We've visitors from the other side," I was somewhat inclined to believe her.

This was the shadowy, candlelit parlour of Arabella Mills, whose fame as a medium had spread across London as the city's obsession with the afterlife grew. We were charging towards the twentieth century at a rate of knots and our world was infused with science so new and mind-bending it felt like magic. Change seemed the only constant in the smoke-stained grind of Victoria's London. The line between natural and supernatural had begun to blur.

People imagined the dead peering out from behind the gas lamps. They heard the clatter of invisible feet on the cobbles and flooded to parlours like Arabella's every Friday evening in hope of catching a glimpse of what lay beyond the curtain of mortality.

Twelve of us were seated around the long table in the séance room. Women and men, old and young. A sea of starched collars, curls and lace. We sat hand in hand, all but me with eyes closed. London was in the grip of ghost mania. I was in the grip of Arabella Mills. Why would I choose to close my eyes when I could be looking at her?

She breathed slowly, deeply. An earthy musk scent hung in the air. Incense, perhaps? I heard the distant clatter of horses in the street.

I felt George's eyes on me. George Harvey, my long-time friend, was the one who had convinced me to come to this affair. He'd raised the idea over an ale at the Queen's Larder.

"A séance?" I repeated.

George nodded, his eyes full of laughter. "Everyone's doing it these days, Fred." To George, the eternal bachelor, life was a game. Arabella's séance, like everything else, was a joke. A way to pass the time. George was a warden at Newgate prison and spent his days among the condemned and incarcerated. His flippant approach to life I supposed was a direct response to his employment. He—and I—had the freedom that many didn't, and George was adamant we make the most of it.

"Just think," he'd said, eyes glinting mischievously as he brought his ale to his lips. "A parlour full of lonely women, pining for love."

Typical George to not consider my own lost love. My wife, Rose, had been in the grave for three years, dead before her twenty-fifth birthday. A difficult loss, to be certain, but I'd

found my feet again quickly. Had made myself a life worth living. I'd never considered myself lonely and pining. Still, I thought George's comment rather insensitive.

He winked at me. "You're not afraid, are you?"

I snorted. "Don't be mad."

George grinned. "Good. Because I've got us two places in the parlour of Arabella Mills this Friday." Her name rolled off his tongue like a jewel.

And so, not wanting to be a stuffy old coward, here I was. And very glad of it.

I glanced across the table. George's smile was toothy and mocking. He tossed his head back in a silent laugh. I felt a sudden burst of anger.

"If there is anyone who would like to speak with us," Arabella said slowly, "come forward now."

Around the room, lips were parted with anticipation. Jaws clenched in anxious tension. These men and women aching after the dead were pitiable. I felt a rush of gratitude that I'd not been so consumed by my own grief.

"A man is here," Arabella breathed. "His name... the letter J..."

"John?" gasped the woman opposite me.

George swallowed a snort and I kicked him beneath the table.

"This man... I sense a long illness... I see ice and snow. But he suffers no longer."

The woman gave a loud sob. "That's my John. He died of consumption last winter."

I glanced at the candles in the centre of the table. The flames had become long and thin. They seemed to waver in an invisible breeze. I frowned. A draft, perhaps?

"John is here to speak to his wife," Arabella continued, to a louder sob from the woman. "He says he wants you to mourn no longer. And he wants you to know the dog is there with him and they are both happy."

And then John was gone, replaced with a tragic Mary. There was more gasping, wailing. Messy tears.

Finally, Arabella rose. With a nod of her head, she vanished from the room in a sigh of white silk. I gazed after her. I felt dazzlingly alive. The beautiful medium had woken something within me. Lust. The capacity for desire I thought had passed over with Rose.

Arabella's assistant, a young woman with dimples and an unruly brown bun, herded us out into the entrance hall. The lamps were dimmed, but after the darkness of the séance, I felt exposed in the light. The world seemed strange and unsettled, as though the edges of reality had blurred. Was it that possible glimpse of the afterlife I'd just witnessed? Or was I shaken up by my sudden, pressing need for Arabella?

George barrelled up to me. "What's the matter, man? You look as though you've seen a ghost!" He snorted with laughter.

I forced a smile.

"Oh come on, Fred. You don't actually believe all this rubbish do you? The whole charade could hardly have been more vague!" He chuckled. "John and Mary? An illness? Christ, she gave herself good odds with those! I have to say, though, I was hoping for a few more theatrics. They say Hellish Bessie Green makes the table tip and floats around the room in her underclothes. Would have given my eye to see something like that!"

The sister of the dead Mary turned and glared.

"Keep your damn voice down," I hissed. I glanced around, hoping for another glimpse of Arabella. I realised my heart was racing. "I think you're being too closed-minded," I said, aware I was opening myself up to a torrent of ridicule. "If we can telephone a man in an entirely different city, why shut off the possibility of speaking to someone who has passed over?"

"That's science, Fred," said George. "This is a fantastical trick designed to fleece those in mourning of their money."

"Indeed. Science. Science that a decade ago you would have said was also mere fantasy."

George raised his eyebrows and chuckled. "Never took you as a spiritualist. I've seen enough," he said brassily. "Let's go."

"Already? What about all those lonely women you were so desperate to meet?"

He snorted, gesturing around the room at the sea of lowered eyes and mourning attire. "Turns out these ladies aren't quite my type." He clapped me on the back. "Come on. Time for a drink."

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I went back to Arabella's parlour the following Friday. Without George. I arrived early, and milled around the entrance hall with two women I recognised from the previous week. They glanced at me sideways and whispered behind their hands. And then, there she was, having appeared soundlessly in the hall as though she floated rather than walked. Her gown was made of lilac lace, her golden hair arranged in an elaborate pile of curls. She swept over to me and smiled.

"Good evening, Mr..."

"Edwards," I garbled. "Frederick Edwards."

She placed her gloved hand in mine. "A pleasure to see you again, Mr Edwards. I apologise for not greeting you in person last week. You enjoyed the session, I take it."

"Yes," I managed, feeling like a giddy schoolboy. "Very much."

"And who is it you hope to speak to?"

The question brought an odd lurch in my chest. I'd come to speak to her. To Arabella. In spite of what I'd witnessed in the previous session, the thought of actually speaking to the dead seemed preposterous.

Arabella seemed unfazed by my silence. She drew a silky hand along my arm and said, "You will tell me in your own time. Or perhaps *she* will tell me. It is a *she* you've come for, is it not?"

I said nothing.

"Please excuse me, Mr Edwards," Arabella said finally. "I must prepare myself for the séance. I do hope I can provide the answers you are seeking." She flashed me a smile and disappeared down the passage, leaving me with a dry mouth and a thudding heart.

Arabella's assistant ushered us towards the parlour. I caught a faint floral scent. My chest tightened. Orange blossom. I knew it well. I'd not smelt such a scent since my Rose was alive. I suddenly, urgently, wanted to be anywhere but here. I glanced over my shoulder. Could I make it out the front door without causing a scene? Arabella had seen me. I couldn't bear for her to know I'd left before the show... My thoughts swarmed dizzily.

A young woman in a dark blue gown pushed past me and I smelled the orange blossom again. Her perfume, I realised, pressing a hand to my chest in deep relief. I took a long breath and forced Rose from my mind. I followed the scent into the parlour, ready to drink in as much of my gold and lilac goddess as I could take.

I took the seat beside Arabella's, my heart leaping as she flashed me a small smile. Her eyes panned around the table.

"Some new faces," she said, smiling warmly. "To you, I say welcome. Tonight, I ask not for you to question your faith. I do not aim to overturn your beliefs. I simply ask that you trust what you experience here. Trust your eyes, your ears. Trust your hearts. And a world will open up for you far greater than you ever imagined."

A murmur rippled through the audience. We were instructed to close our eyes. Arabella placed her hand in mine and I felt a sudden rush of energy.

Her breathing was soft but audible.

In and out.

In and out.

For the first time, I allowed myself to consider the authenticity of Arabella as a medium. I'd not come for her psychic abilities, so I'd given little thought to whether or not she was the charlatan George had claimed. I'd made what I felt was a solid case for her psychic abilities: might science soon catch up to these spiritual adventures? But I'd done so to protect the integrity of a woman I had inexplicably fallen hard for. I was unsure whether to believe my own arguments.

Yes, Arabella's messages had been suitably vague that first night. A John. A Mary. Death by disease. But there'd been small details. The dog. The ice and snow.

Those strange, bending candles.

It was a child who came to us first that night. A child who, according to Arabella, was sad she had missed her sister's birthday.

There had been my own disorientation too, I realised. That odd, unbalanced sensation I'd put down to the sudden grip Arabella had taken on my heart. But was there more to it? Was it possible John and Mary and this little girl had returned to us from the other side? And, if so, was my wife among them?

I inhaled slowly. The scent of orange blossom was there, beneath the incense and melting wax.

"There is a woman with me now," said Arabella. "She is here to speak with her husband. A name beginning with R..."

My throat clamped. The dizziness returned.

*No. I don't want you here. It's not you I've come to see.*

"Rebecca?" the man opposite me croaked. "Is that my Rebecca?"

Arabella paused. "Yes," she said finally. "It's Rebecca, come to speak to her husband, Albert." A low cry escaped the man's throat. I felt a wash of relief.

I opened my eyes and turned to watch Arabella. Felt a smile creep across my lips.

A group of men in dark overcoats were waiting in the street outside Arabella's townhouse that night.

"Sinners! Repent!" they shouted as we filed out the front door. "Heed the word of the Lord!"

I marched past them into Eaton Square, then glanced over my shoulder. The men charged up to Arabella's door and pounded. I hurried back to the house. The frizzy haired assistant poked her head around the door.

"You lot ain't welcome here," she snapped. "Leave before I fetch the police."

One of the men stepped forward, towering over her. "We are here to save the soul of your devilish mistress. I insist you let us speak to her. For her own good."

"I know what you're here for. We've heard your claptrap before. We ain't interested." She shoved the door closed but the man caught it before it slammed. I marched up behind them.

"You heard the girl. You're not wanted here. Now leave."

The men glared at me. One turned back to Arabella's assistant. "Tell your mistress to repent. Or she'll face eternal damnation. You understand me? Eternal damnation!"

The mistress planted one hand on her hip. "I'll be sure to pass on your message."

I stood with my arms folded, glaring until the men disappeared into the night.

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I couldn't stop thinking about the men. Fear for Arabella's safety gnawed at the bottom of my stomach. I left the office early and walked through the park to her townhouse in Belgravia: an elegant, whitewashed building opposite a manicured garden square. I knocked tentatively on her front door. Expecting the assistant, I was surprised when an elderly housekeeper in an apron answered. I was ushered down the hall to the library, passing the closed door of the *séance parlour*. The housekeeper instructed to wait inside. I paced with nervous excitement. Would Arabella welcome me? Would she even *remember* me? And then a worse thought rushed towards me: had she a husband? I considered leaving.

"Mr Edwards." Her face lit up when she saw me. I relaxed slightly. "This is a surprise." She wore a plain white visiting dress, her hair pulled into a neat plait. My wife had worn similar clothing many times. On Rose they had seemed dowdy, plain. Arabella looked like a Greek goddess.

"Forgive my intrusion," I bumbled.

"Not at all." She gestured to a worn leather armchair. "Tea?"

I shook my head. How could I accept something as mundane as tea from such a creature?

She produced a cigarette box from the folds of her gown and offered it to me. I took one and slid it between my teeth, leaning close as she struck a match and lit the tip of my cigarette. I could see faint freckles on her nose.

"What brings you here, Mr Edwards?"

"Perhaps you were aware there were several men outside your house on Friday night. Making threats against you based on the nature of your... business."

The corner of her lips turned up slightly.



"I was concerned," I continued. "I came to see if there was any way I could assist."

She smiled warmly. "That's very kind of you. Extremely kind. But unnecessary." She sat back and blew a cloud of silver smoke upwards. "Perhaps you are aware that the Bible forbids making contact with the spirit world. By doing what I do, these men believe I have wronged the Lord. People are entitled to their own beliefs, of course. But in response, I would say that the fact the Bible refers to spirits could be seen as proof of their existence. And it would be remiss of us as a human race not to explore such a fascinating world further. Wouldn't you agree?"

I smiled faintly, rather taken aback by her intelligence and self-assurance. "But the threats those men made—"

"Threats? Eternal damnation, you mean?" She laughed airily. "You must believe in a thing in order to fear it. And the nature of my work has led me to have a far more... *flexible* view of the afterlife than eternal damnation." She tapped ash into a tray on the coffee table. "I learnt long ago to ignore such men. People like them appear every now and again. Full of hot air and bitter words yet completely devoid of action."

I took a long draw of my cigarette, my throat heating. I felt strangely out of my depth. I churned through my brain in search of something intelligent to say.

Arabella leant forward to study me. "Tell me. Who is it you come to my séances for?"

I swallowed hard. "You. I come for you."

She flicked her eyebrows, a slight smile on her lips.

"Forgive me," I said. "That was far too forward. Your husband—"

"I have no husband. But there is someone else in your life. Someone you've lost. Your wife."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I've seen her around you."

I shivered. "You're just saying what you think I want to hear. But you're wrong. I don't want to hear that at all. It is most disconcerting."

She raised her eyebrows. "You are a sceptic, Mr Edwards? That surprises me."

"No," I said hurriedly. "I'm not a sceptic. I mean... Perhaps I am... I don't know..." I took a deep breath. Tried to order my thoughts. "I came to the séance because my friend thought it would be good fun. It had nothing to do with my wife. Rose is dead. Gone."

"She's not gone," Arabella said, matter-of-factly. "I've seen her following you."

My stomach lurched. There was that unbalanced feeling, like the world was rolling onto its side. "Is she here now?" I coughed.

"No. But she'll not be far. Would you like to speak to her? Perhaps she will come forward if I ask."

I opened my mouth to protest, but nothing came out. I found myself nodding. Arabella took the cigarette from my hand and placed it and hers into the ashtray. Smoke rose and circled around her pink cheeks. She took my hands.

"Close your eyes."

Hesitantly, I obeyed. Through my eyelids, I could sense the sun flooding the library. I longed for the light. But I kept my eyes closed.

For a time: nothing. I heard the clatter of dishes from the kitchen, laughter from the street. The noises seemed distorted and far away. And then: orange blossom. My shoulders tensed. I was imagining it. I had to be.

"She's here." Arabella's hands began to tremble. I opened my eyes in alarm. She threw her head skyward, her back arching suddenly.

"Freddie?" The voice that came from Arabella was not her own. "Freddie, it's me."

Sickness rose in my throat. That voice. Once, it had been my world. But she'd left me. Gone to the other side without me. I had learnt to live without her. How dare she try and worm her way back into the land of the living? How dare she intrude on my time with Arabella?

"Leave," I hissed. I tried to pull away, but Arabella clung to my hands with surprising strength.

"No," she cried, her voice somewhere oddly between Rose's and her own. "You mustn't let go! Terrible things can happen!"

I yanked my hands from hers. Grabbed my coat and stumbled out into the sinking sunlight.

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My house felt hollow and empty. Susan, my daily, had left for the evening, the salty smell of the stew she'd prepared for my supper pervading every room. Afternoon shadows lay across the house, bathing it in shadows. The grandfather clock in the hall ticked loudly, echoing in the dusk. I lit the lamps with a shaking hand. And then, shivering despite the pleasant April evening, I started the fire. I stood over the hearth, mesmerised by the flames licking the wood. My mind churned through the memories of the afternoon. The smell of orange blossom. The lilt of Rose's voice. The look of horror in Arabella's eyes as I tore my hands from hers.

*Terrible things can happen.*

What did I care? As far as I was concerned, they already had. I cursed George for ever taking me along to that séance. I longed for the simple life I'd had a week earlier: a life of accounting and drinking at the Queen's Larder and Susan's dreadful overcooked suppers. A life before I'd been left senseless by the mysterious beauty that was Arabella. A life where my dead wife was still and safe in her grave.

I sat on the floor beside the fire until long into the evening. *Trust what you experience*, Arabella had said. *Trust your heart*. If I were to do such a thing, it would confirm that death was not as final as I had once believed it to be.

I edged closer to the fire. Was Rose here right now? I couldn't bear to turn around, afraid of what I might see lurking behind the shadows.

I started at a thump on the door.

George stood on the doorstep with several of his colleagues from Newgate. They reeked of smoke and brandy. "Christ, Fred," he said. "You look horrendous."

I rubbed my eyes. "What do you want?"

"We were expecting you at the bar tonight. When you didn't show, we thought we ought to come and see what your story was."

"I don't feel like going out." I tried to push the door closed. George held out his arm to stop me.

"Never mind that." He and the others pushed past me into the house. "We'll bring the party to you."

Before I could argue, they'd collapsed on my lounge suite in a cloud of smoke, laughing, joking, pushing overflowing glasses into my hand.

I took a tentative sip of brandy. It ran hot down my throat. Eased the tension in my muscles a little. Another sip.

Yes, this was good. I needed people around me. Someone to make sure I kept both feet in the land of the living.

George waved his glass and lurched towards me on the couch. "Wilkins was hanged this morning. Executioners botched the weight calculations. Poor bastard's head came clean off!"

I stared, horrified, but George and the others roared with laughter. "You ought to have seen it, Fred! Blood everywhere! I've never seen such a debacle!"

I tossed back the last of my brandy and lifted the bottle for a refill. Empty. I went to the cupboard in the hall for another. Stopped at the foot of the stairs. Down from the second storey floated the metallic chinking of a music box.

‘Amazing Grace.’

We'd sung the hymn at our wedding. I had bought the music box for Rose soon after.

I stepped onto the staircase, leaving behind the glowing light of the parlour and ascending into the blackness. The notes grew clearer. I fumbled in the darkness and lit the lamp at the top of the stairs. It hissed loudly. Orange light flickered across the hall. The door to Rose's dressing room was ajar. I swallowed hard. No one had been inside since her death. Not even me. Susan had offered to clean it out many times. I had always refused.

*Why bother?*, I'd said. It wasn't like anyone needed the room. *Why make the extra work for yourself?*

The door opened with a loud creak. A thick layer of dust lay over everything: the chemise strewn across the fainting lounge, the drawn curtains, the dressing table holding a half-finished bottle of orange blossom perfume. The room smelled stale; grime and neglect.

There was discomfort in my stomach. What was that feeling? Grief? Regret? No.

Fear. It swirled inside my body like a restless animal.

The floor creaked as I crossed the room, leaving footprints in the dust like I was walking through fallen snow. The music box hummed and pinged on the dressing table. With a trembling hand, I reached out and flicked the lid closed. Silence. I could hear my heart chugging in my ears.

George pushed open the door. He glanced around the room, eyes falling on Rose's chemise and scent bottles, all the things I'd never been able to put away. He let out his breath.

"Oh, Fred. Forgive me. It was damn foolish of me to make you come to that farce of Arabella's. I didn't think... I'm a bloody idiot... I..."

I pressed my back to the wall and slid to the floor. "She contacted Rose."

"What? When?"

"This afternoon. I went to see Arabella. She spoke to Rose. Or rather, she *became* Rose. I heard her voice, George."

He rubbed his eyes. "Oh hell, Fred. These séances, they're just theatre. You know that, don't you? Magic tricks and parlour games. Nothing more. Christ, what a bastard I was taking you along to that thing. You always seemed fine... I never thought you ..." He began to pace. "Why did you go and see Arabella today?"

I sat up. "I had to. I can't stop thinking about her. I've never felt anything like it. She's a... a *goddess*."

"A goddess who claims to be able to speak to your dead wife?" George sighed. "Come on, Fred. Open your eyes. Can't you see what's happening here? This medium isn't Rose. She never will be."

"But that's the thing. I don't want Rose. I want Arabella. This isn't about ghosts and spirits and speaking to the other side, George. It's about love. I'm falling in love with her."

"Love. Have you lost your bloody mind, man? The woman's playing you. She's a charlatan."

A sudden rage welled up inside me. I stumbled to my feet and charged into George, pinning him against the wall. "How dare you speak of her that way?"

He pushed me away. "Look at you. Moping around in your dead wife's dressing room. You really think this is about Arabella?"

I ground my teeth. Said nothing.

George pressed a hand to my shoulder. "Why don't you come home with me tonight? The guest room is all yours."

I shook my head. "I'm fine. But I want you gone. All of you, with your cheap brandy and tales of hanged men."

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I woke with a pounding head and tongue that felt as though I'd been licking the carpet. I lay curled up on the floor of Rose's dressing room, harsh yellow light slicing through the gaps in the curtains.

I sat slowly. Tried to remember what the devil I was doing in there. I remembered the night in snatches. Arabella. George. Brandy. That damned music box. Shivering, I climbed to my feet. My stomach lurched with nausea. I dashed from the room and pulled door closed with a thud.

I took a cup of coffee and a cigarette to the balcony. Yesterday's sun had been replaced with a thick bank of cloud. The street was empty in the early morning, the road glistening from a sprinkling of rain. The cold air seemed to restore my senses. And, somewhat regrettably, my memories. I'd acted a fool last night. I owed George an apology. In truth—the kind that comes to you in the cold light of the morning after—I'd been acting a fool for far longer than just one night. My little excursion into the otherworlds had to stop. I was a respectable man, for Christ's sake. I couldn't allow myself to get drawn in to such games.

I'd have Susan clean out Rose's dressing room. See that damned music box destroyed. There would be no more séances. No more Arabella. My pounding head made me see her for what she was: a temptress praying on a man's weakness. What in hell had I been thinking letting her weasel her way into my heart?

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I tried for normalcy. Long days at the office. Evenings spent in the company of my friends instead of a medium and her devoted followers. But those days I had spent with Arabella had changed me. My view of the world now included the very real possibility of the afterlife: something, which, despite my best intentions, I was unable to forget.

I took myself to Rose's grave. The logical part of me told myself I was going as a reminder that she was dead and buried. But there was a voice in my head I couldn't silence. *Trying to appease her*, it said, as I laid flowers beside the headstone. *Trying to keep her happy so she'll not come for you again*. I shook my head furiously, as though trying to dislodge such foolish thoughts. I pulled my coat tightly around my body. Told myself I'd finally have Susan clean out that room. And this time I truly meant it.

I was no more able to forget Arabella. *Temptress*, I'd hissed. But beneath my words was a desperate longing to see her, to speak to her again. On more than one Friday evening, I found myself detouring through Belgravia and standing pathetically in the square opposite her house. Love, I came to realise, had no regard for common sense.

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A month had passed since Arabella's contact with my wife. With each day, I was able to edge closer to convincing myself it had all been my imagination. And then one evening I answered a knock at my front door to find Arabella standing on the doorstep. My heart fluttered at the shock.

"Arabella," I garbled. "Miss Mills."

I looked her up and down. She wore a dark blue gown, buttoned to her neck, her blonde hair bundled beneath a feathered blue bonnet. She was beautiful. And yet, there on my doorstep, I saw her for the first time as just a woman. A mortal.

"May I come in?" she asked. There was tension in her voice and I realised she was nervous. I ushered her inside. "I hope you don't mind me coming. You left your details with my assistant when you came to my séance."

"Yes of course." I gestured to her to sit. She perched on the couch. I took the armchair opposite. "What brings you here?"

"I've not seen you at my sessions for a while." She looked deep into my eyes as she spoke. I found it slightly unnerving. "I was concerned."

"Concerned? Why?"

She glanced at her gloved hands. "It can be a difficult thing to speak to the departed. Especially someone as close to you as your wife."

"Late wife. Rose is dead."

"But not gone."

The muscles in my neck tightened. I pushed away the memory of 'Amazing Grace'. "Dead and gone," I said tersely. "Six feet under at Saint Gabriel's." I felt suddenly angry. My world was beginning to contract back to a manageable size. How dare Arabella try and upend it again? Who did she think she was? "Hearing Rose's voice," I continued, "that was nothing but my imagination."

She sighed. "Frederick. You know that's not true."

I leant forward. "You want me to come back to your séances so you can line your pockets with my hard-earned money."

Her eyebrows shot up at my accusation. She placed her hand on my wrist. Energy pulsed up my arm. "This is not about money. You showed deep concern for me recently. It would be remiss of me not to do the same. And besides," she smiled shyly, "I very much enjoyed our conversation the other week. I was rather hoping for another."

And like that, my anger was gone. In its place, a boyish thrill. This beautiful creature had sought me out. Chosen to spend her time with me. I felt the corners of my lips turn up involuntarily.

"I am about to sit down to dinner," I said hurriedly, before I lost the nerve. "Would you care to join me?"

I retrieved a bottle of red wine from the cabinet in the hall. Uncorked it noisily and poured two glasses. I handed one to Arabella and went to deliver the news of a dinner guest to Susan.

"I apologise," I said, returning to the parlour with a smile. "My housekeeper is not much of a cook. I hope you've a strong stomach."

Arabella sipped her wine and peered at me coyly across the top of her glass. "I'm here for the company, not the food."

My heart fluttered. I ushered her into the dining room as Susan produced an unappetising array of sausages and congealing gravy.

"Thank you, Susan," I said. "I shall manage from here. I will see you tomorrow."

The housekeeper nodded her thanks and disappeared into the kitchen. Soon, Arabella and I were alone in the house. I smiled. It had been far too long since I'd sat at that table with a woman by my side. We began to eat in a comfortable silence.

"So," she said finally. "You believe my skills to be a product of your imagination?" Her eyes were sparkling. Curious, not offended.

"I don't know what to think," I admitted.

"Well," she said after a moment. "I will simply repeat what I tell all my clients. That you ought to trust your own eyes and ears. Although I understand this can be a difficult thing to do."

I grinned. "George was most disappointed to find your act doesn't include table tipping and flying around the room like Bessie Green's."

"Ah. The domain of frauds." She met my eyes. "Why stoop to such trickery when I have real ability?"

"Do you consider yourself lucky to have such skills?"

"Yes. Certainly. I'm able to bring peace and closure to those who are mourning their loved ones." She flashed a smile. "And make a handsome earning at the same time."

A sudden dull thud came from above our heads.

Arabella glanced upwards. "What was that?"

I clenched my teeth. We were directly beneath Rose's dressing room. My fingers tensed around my fork. I waited for another sound, but the room was silent. The lamp on the wall flickered.

Arabella looked down, avoiding my eyes. She took a miniscule bite of potato.

"Tell me about yourself," I said with exaggerated lightness. My voice came out thin and high-pitched. "Have you lived in London all your life?"

And there it was, faint, but unmistakable. 'Amazing Grace.'

Arabella put down her fork. "How did she die?"

I pursed my lips bitterly. "I thought you knew these things. I thought they *communicated* with you."

"I'm not asking her. I'm asking you."

I closed my eyes. The music rose and fell. "An accident," I mumbled. "A carriage overturned."

Arabella looked down. "I'm sorry." She pushed back her chair and stood. "I ought to go."

"Go? Please don't." I followed her into the parlour.



"She doesn't want me here."

"You can see her?"

"Yes."

"What is she doing?"

Arabella sighed. "She wants me to leave. That's all that matters."

"What she wants means nothing! *I* want you here!" She looked up at me fleetingly. Her gaze darted across the room. I snatched her wrist. "What is she doing? Tell me."

"She's by the fireplace. With her hand on that snuff box above the hearth. There's a watch inside that she gave you, isn't there. She's upset that you no longer wear it. She thinks it means you've ceased to love her."

My grip on Arabella's wrist tightened. "I have. I have ceased to love her."

"Have you? Truly?"

"Yes." I turned. Walked slowly towards the hearth. "There is no love between us, Rose," I said blackly. "You lost the chance to love me when you died on me. You've no right to be angry. You left me. Remember? You left me all alone!" I charged suddenly to the mantel and swiped at the box. It flew across the room, my watch spilling out and sliding beneath the couch. I grabbed Arabella and kissed her hard on the lips.

"What do you think about that?" I cried. "Rose? Do you understand now?" Sweat ran down the back of my neck. "Where are you?" I hissed. "Don't you have anything to say about that?"

Arabella reached for her bonnet and edged towards the door. I grabbed her arm roughly.

"You're not going anywhere. Tell me where Rose is. What is she doing?"

Arabella shook her head stiffly. I darted across the room and stood between her and the door.

"She's not here. She's gone." Arabella's voice was tiny.

"Gone?" I felt a sickening plunge in my chest. I'd felt that sense of dread before, when I had opened the door to find the police on my doorstep. The first time I'd lost Rose. I shoved it away. *Gone* was good. *Gone* was what I wanted.

I reached for Arabella's hand. She tensed.

"Then we're free," I said. "Free to be together. Without her."

She pulled her hand from mine. "I'm sorry, Mr Edwards. I should never have come."

"What? Where are you going? Rose is gone now. You said so yourself."

She swallowed hard. "You frighten me."

"Frighten you? After all you see, you're frightened by *me*?" I gripped her shoulders. "I love you, Arabella."

She exhaled sharply. "You don't love me. You barely know me. And how can you love me when you're still in love with your wife?"

I released my grip on her shoulders. Skulked across the room and sank onto the couch. I buried my head in my hands. I felt heavy with dredged-up grief. "I don't want to love her," I murmured. "I want her gone. Out of my house and out of my heart. But she has a grip on me. I can't let go. She won't let me." I clenched my fists against my eyes. "These dead husbands and wives who bring messages to you, all they ever want is for their beloved to move on. To be happy. And yet my wife invades my house and demands I wear the watch she gave me, worshipping her until the day I die."

I heard footsteps come towards me. A gentle hand on my shoulder. I looked up. Arabella was gone. In her place: someone else. Her blonde curls had been replaced by a thick, brown plait, blue eyes turned the colour of chocolate. Her chin sharp and narrow. My beautiful Arabella had vanished, replaced by the woman who had betrayed me in death and left me to carry on my life without her.

I looked into the eyes of this woman who had long ago been my wife. Looked at the face it had taken me three years to get over. Fierce anger tore through me. How dare she, after all I'd been through, come back to me now? How dare she make me mourn her again? I felt hot and senseless with rage.

"No!" I hissed, my voice deep and guttural. "No!" I leapt off the couch, stumbling away from her.

"Freddie—" She reached for me with boney fingers.

"Get away from me! You demon!" Hands still outstretched, she moved nearer. I snatched the fire poker and held it out threateningly. "Don't come any closer!"

"Fred, please. It's me. Your Rosie."

Sweat ran down my back. "No! You're dead!" I swung the poker. Crack. Into the side of her head.

And then nothing but my own heavy breathing. The slow, warped thudding of the grandfather clock.

I dropped the poker. Looked down. At my feet lay Arabella, a thick seam of blood snaking from her temple. I dropped to my knees, a low cry coming from deep in my throat. I pressed my hand to her pale cheek. Sickly, I felt for her pulse. Nothing. I lurched forward and vomited beside the fireplace.

I knelt beside her, breathing hard and fast. My vision was blurred. I couldn't swallow. I stood dizzily and began to pace. Finally, I lifted Arabella and carried her upstairs to Rose's dressing room. I lay her on the fainting couch. A fat blonde curl had come loose from her bun and lay across her cheek. I brushed it aside tenderly. Blood oozed onto the couch. I tugged at Rose's chemise, which lay beneath the body.

I sat on the floor, clutching the soft cotton to my chest. "Rosie?" I mumbled. "Where have you gone?" I waited. The house was still, the music box silent. Tears pricked my eyes. "Rosie? I need you." I stood and walked down the hall, calling her name. My desperation building, I began to run, tearing down the stairs and throwing open the doors of every room. "Rosie," I sobbed. "Where are you? I need you!"

Stillness lay over the house. The lamps had ceased to flicker. The clock ticked rhythmically. Any fragment of the afterlife was gone.

I stumbled back into the parlour. Reached under the couch and picked up my watch. I slid it into my pocket. Beside the hearth, the poker lay in a thin pool of blood.

Murder.

I'd hang for it. I'd waste away in a cell at Newgate and be dragged through an endless trial. There'd be death at the end; of that I was certain.

And then what? Would I have any thought of my own death? Would I become another of the countless souls who clung to this world by the delicate threads of the medium's voice? And—did I dare think it?—would I be reunited with the woman I loved?

Urgency gripped me. If I was to die, I wanted it to be now. I turned in a desperate circle. How did one achieve death?

I yanked at the thick cord around the curtains. Tugged it between my hands. Thick and coarse. Yes, it would hold my weight. Trembling, I tied the cord around the door handle, then passed it over the top of the door. I dragged a chair from the dining room and slid it up to my self-made gallows. I climbed on the chair. Took the cord in my hand and slowly, deliberately, tied the noose. Slowly, deliberately, placed my head inside. I took one last glance around the house, longing for another glimpse of Rose. Nothing. I would find her on the other side.

I stepped off the chair.

And I was falling, falling.

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My feet landed soundlessly on the floor of the parlour. I waited for the shock to course through my legs, but my body felt numb. I lifted a tentative hand to my neck. The rope was gone. So was the chair. The poker was gone, the blood gone. My house was ordered and tidy. I turned in a dazed circle. The colour was wrong. Faded, somehow. Drained.

Terror seized me. What was this? I pressed a hand to my chest. My heart. It ought to have been racing. I was suddenly, strikingly aware that I had no pulse.

I lurched to the window and pulled back the curtains. Beyond the house, I saw nothing but whiteness. I rattled the windows and then the door. They refused to open.

"Rosie?" My voice sounded odd and hollow, as though it was present only in my mind. "Rosie?" And then tentatively: "Arabella?"

Not a sound. Even the grandfather clock was still. No breath escaped my lips. I was alone in this blank, white afterlife. Was this my punishment? Had I fallen into eternal damnation?

And then a voice: "You are in the presence of Miss Bessie Green. If anyone would like to speak with us, I ask you to come forward now."