

ALDERLEY

THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1897



My parents are in the business of death; that is, they run a small undertaker's practice in the village of Alderley where we live, half a day's carriage ride from Bristol.

My pa, a cabinet maker by trade, fashions simple caskets. Mama lays out the bodies. 'The dead can't hurt us' is a much-used phrase of hers.

On the whole, she is right.

The door between our parlour and the small 'dressing room' is rarely locked and my mother's practical approach means death holds little fear for me. The dank sheen of a body in the hours after passing would turn the stomach of many; city folk pay handsomely for potions and powders to stop the body stinking when the rot sets in. I don't know

what the fuss is about. If, like me, you've washed and tidied and cared for a body after death, you know it's a vessel; nothing more. Something for your spirit to get around in, so it can live and love and experience all the good and all the bad . . . and then you die and all that's left is a clammy, stiffening carcass.

When you're dead, you're dead.

When you're gone, you're gone.

Unless, of course, you're not.

And that's where I come in.

'Lardy or Battenberg or iced bun or lardy or Chelsea bun or lardy or —'

'Fine, we'll have a lardy!' I say. 'Lardy, lardy, lardy!' I laugh and nudge Sally hard in the ribs with my elbow.

'Ow! Look at them, though, Pegs! Ain't they proper lush?' She has her nose to the baker's window, clouding the glass with every out breath. She grins, wiping the smudge ineffectually with her sleeve. She isn't wrong. Mr Sweeting and his wife have outdone themselves today. Their display is always a treat early on a Saturday morning, when the weekday necessities of warm, crusty loaves and

fat, brimming pies are complemented by the most wonderful cakes, buns and pastries.

Alderley is popular with visitors, with its riverside walk, picturesque ruins and a tearoom or two. The village is a pretty place, a necklace of shops and houses threaded along a gently curling river, looping up into wooded slopes and farmland. Our house is on Bothwick Hill, which is a pleasing walk for those that have the time. The track leads you up and up, past the school and vicarage, until, red-faced and puffed, you reach the top, where you can stop in the shadow of St Mary's Church and enjoy a view of the village below. On a clear day you can see for miles, and whenever I'm feeling lonesome I fancy I can see Clifton Lodge and give Sally Hubbard a wave. It's where she works in service, as lady's maid to her mistress, Lady Stanton. I've only seen the house in a photograph, a handsome place, tucked away behind a drive lined with feather-shaped trees, but I can imagine Sally there all the same, going about her chores with a cheerful, tuneless whistle.

Today is Sally's one day off a month, and we are spending it together, or at least part of it. We'll make the most of it, and this means lardy cake.

Sally wears her uniform even on her days off, albeit without an apron, but I don't question it. She's walked taller since taking up her position at the Lodge, and what sort of friend would I be if I knocked the shine off that? They don't have much, the Hubbard family, and, other than her Sunday best (which she won't be wearing today, on account of it being a Saturday), her high-neck, black cotton work dresses are the neatest clothes Sally has.

'I'll get it,' she says, and marches in with a 'Mornin', Mr Sweeting, can I have a lardy, please?', her coil of long red hair bobbing at the back of her head as she goes. I watch her through the fogged-up window, pink tongue-tip set in the corner of her mouth as she decides which lardy she wants, while Mr Sweeting waits patiently with a paper bag held open in readiness. 'That one at the front . . . No . . . Left . . . Yes! Ooh, lovely! How's yer ma? Is she any better?'

'Not so good, Sally love, but thanks for asking. How's your lot? Your pa . . . OK?' He hesitates, as everyone does, when he asks about Sally's father.

'Oh, you know, mostly drunk, but Ma says at least she knows his whereabouts when he can't even find the front door without fallin' over!'

‘Oh. Every cloud . . .’ says Mr Sweeting, smiling awkwardly as he folds the paper bag tightly round the cake. Sally peals with laughter, seemingly unaware that her pa being a drunkard really isn’t very funny at all.

There is a poster in the window of the baker’s. I know its wording by heart – we all do, for by law one must be displayed in every public building and every shop, office, inn or place of worship, a reminder that times have changed, that we are modern citizens.

WHISPERLING PROTECTION POLICY:

BY ROYAL DECREE

**NO HECTORING.
NO TORTURING.
NO EXECUTING!**

**ALL INCIDENTS OF THE ABOVE CRIMES
AGAINST WHISPERLINGS ARE TO BE
REPORTED TO A PERSON OF AUTHORITY.**

**THE PERSON OF AUTHORITY IN THIS
PARISH IS THE REVEREND SILAS TATE.**

There was one of these ‘incidents’ you see, somewhere in a village up north. A young girl

was accused of being a whisperling. They tried her, found her guilty; she protested her innocence, but they drowned her anyway.

‘Hurry up, Sal!’ I glance back at the decree. Whisperlings. Those that can talk to the dead. A flush creeps up my neck.

‘All right, all right, keep yer hair on! I got us a big ’un, the very fattest!’ She giggles as she dips one hand into the bag and licks a dusting of sugar from her finger. ‘You lookin’ at that notice again, Peg?’

I shrug. ‘I can’t stop thinking about that poor girl. If only – oof!’ A shove from Sally knocks me fair off my feet.

‘*Pff!* If only what? If only they’d thought to stick up a poster or two!’ she scoffs. ‘Bleedin’ ’eck, Peg, half of the lummoxes that’d do such a thing can’t read, an’ if they could they’d only grumble about do-gooders forcing them to give up “the old ways”. Can’t see the point of it, meself. Anyway,’ Sal adds, giving me a theatrical wink and waving goodbye to Mr Sweeting, ‘there’s been no whisperlings – or creepers, if you wants to be rude about them – reported in these parts for decades, has there, babber?’

‘Shush, you gommo – someone might hear!’ I hiss as we start walking back through the village.

Sally's rosy face is beaming as we link arms, nodding to folk as we pass.

At fourteen, Sal's older than me by two years but you'd never know it. There's a lack of guile about her that makes her appear much younger. Everything is close to the surface with Sally, good and bad. Mama says she's 'young at heart', and that's a perfect way to describe her.

There are others in the village, like Mrs Dulwich, for example, who say Sal is a 'bit soft, like all them Hubbards'. There she is now, white-haired and as brittle tempered as that skinny black cat of hers, lurking behind her potions and unctions in the window of her chemist's shop. It's the last building on the corner before we turn up the hill to home. Inside, the shelves are laden with glass bottles, jewel coloured and stoppered, with a handwritten, white paper label stuck to each one.

'Good morning, Mrs Dul-witch,' we singsong, pausing on purpose between the syllables: discreet but brave enough to make Sally feel better, because this is a small place and Sally has heard what the mean old bat has been saying about her. And then we run, picking up the pace until our chests burn and legs scream, and we laugh and squeal our way

past the shopfront and round the corner, until we're safely out of view.

'See 'er starin' at me?' Sally cries, slowing down, and I side-eye her. Her jaw is set and her pretty grey eyes have hardened to lead shots. A Sally storm has rolled in.

'She isn't starin' at you, Sal – she's jus' looking out the window, that's all.' I nudge her playfully in the ribs, trying to blow her clouds away. 'Let's go. You don't want to be causing any trouble, not with your new job and all.'

'She thinks she's better than me, don't she? Because I'm a Hubbard, an' everyone thinks they're better than us.'

'No one thinks that, Sal. Come on now – we've got cake to eat, if you don't squash it first.' I nod at her hands, one gripping the paper bag, the other balled into a fist.

She ignores me, head down, scanning the ground, then dropping to the floor as if to curtsy. She picks up a stone, throws it up and catches it one-handed, bouncing it in her palm to assess its weight. She looks me straight in the eye and shoves the paper bag towards me. 'Here, hold the lardy.'

‘I will not.’ I fold my arms and twist away from her. ‘I’ll have no part of this, and if you’ve got any sense at all in that head of yours you’ll put that stone down right this minute.’

‘But she deserves it! She’s proper horrid and —’

‘And what? Throwing a stone through her window will help how, exactly?’

‘Well, it’ll make her feel bad for a minute, like what she makes me feel.’ There’s a catch in Sally’s voice and for a moment I want to yank the stone out of her hand and lob it myself.

‘But what if she gets word to Lady Stanton? You know what she’s like, Sal. She’s nasty old baggage. Imagine her face, all pinched and pleased with herself if you lost your job because of her. Come on, let’s go. Please, Sal.’

Sally sniffs and wipes her nose with the back of her hand, leaving a trail of sugar from the cake glinting on her cheek. ‘She said I could go with her to the seaside next time she goes.’

‘Who? Mrs Dulwich?’

‘No, you lemon, Lady Stanton. She hasn’t been feelin’ too well and likes the sea air on account of her “constitution”, whatever that is. I wouldn’t want to miss a trip like that.’ She drops the stone.

‘Have you ever been to the seaside, Peg?’ And, just like that, the clouds are lifted and the knot in my chest unravels. Sally has got *such* a temper, but I can usually pull her out of it.

I link arms with her and drag her towards home before she sees that Mrs Dulwich has stepped out of her shop and crossed the road to watch our progress, hands on her skinny hips, her cat snaking round her ankles.

‘No, Sally, I’ve never been to the seaside,’ I reply. ‘We’ll go when we’ve made our fortune. That’s a promise.’

Minutes later, we sit on my bed and unwrap the lardy cake, tearing open the paper bag and smoothing it flat like a plate. ‘Save some for me!’ Pa shouted from his usual spot in the parlour as we scurried past, but there’s no chance of that.

‘This is heaven,’ says Sally, shovelling a chunk of cake into her mouth. She’s right. It’s really good. It’s squidgy and gloopy in the middle – if you squeeze it, it oozes with sweet stickiness – and bursting with plump raisins, topped with a crunch of baked sugar. Sal signs her name, *Sally Hubbard*, with her finger in the syrupy paper and I swallow a smile – it wasn’t so

long ago that she couldn't read a word, let alone write, and now she doesn't miss an opportunity to show off her swirly script. Mama taught her in school and with *hours* of extra lessons at home. Sally tucks half of her share of the cake in its wrapping for later, and we lick our fingers before the syrup trickles to our wrists and rinse our hands in the washbowl in the corner. As I push my hands into the water, a pulse of energy like the buzz of static flashes through me, knocking me back. *What was that?*

'You all right, Peg?' asks Sally.

'Yes, yes, I'm fine,' I say. 'It was nothing, really.'

She's at my side, eyes darting mischievously round the room. 'Ooh, is it a ghost? Is there a ghost here? What they sayin'? They whisperin' at you, Peg? Is it right here?' She pauses, then jumps to one side. 'Or here?'

'Stop it, Sally.'

She grins, then jumps again. 'Here maybe?'

'Sally!' I'm laughing now because she's acting so daft and, whatever it was, it has gone. It's been happening more and more lately, although I've kept that to myself. I'm used to feeling a ripple in the air or a flutter in my chest letting me know a spirit is close by, hesitating for some reason before

they move on from this world. I *should* be used to it by now, given it's been happening since I took my very first breath. Except . . . this time it was more than the usual flutter or ripple.

This was a whip-crack.

I probably imagined it. It's likely that poster at the bakery has put me on edge; all the posters have, ever since they started springing up. There's a cloud of suspicion hanging over everyone, and that chills me, for was it not the same with the witches? Anyone odd or difficult was suspected of being one. The harmless old woman who looked a bit funny; the wise-woman who grew medicinal herbs; the poor childless widow who talked to herself; that stubborn girl who wouldn't be tamed . . . Witches, all of them, or so it was decided. That last one gives me the shivers the most.

It became a pastime, witch-hunting, like dancing or scrapbooking. Some whisperlings were killed in those times too, Pa told me, before folk came to their senses and it was put a stop to. Little wonder he tells me to keep my mouth shut: no one can know my secret. Pa says it's best that way.

Sally knows, though. She's known since I was three, when I told her about the 'nice lady with the

rainbow round her' who asked if I would remind her husband to 'feed the poxy dog'. She giggled at my potty mouth, but believed me without question. Things are never complicated with Sally, and that's why she's my best friend.

A knock at my bedroom door. 'Peggy, when Sally goes home, there's half a dozen eggs going spare, and a quart of milk that we won't get through before it turns. She'd be doing me a favour taking it.'

'ThankyouMissusDevona,' Sal calls. She has cause to say it so often it's become one word.

'And, Peg,' adds Mama, 'I'll need your help in the dressing room in a bit.'

'Of course, Mama.'

Sally waits until the pad of my mother's feet has reached the stairs. 'Do you know who it is?' she asks.

'The boy from the dairy farm, Barney something or other. Got the consumption, poor lad.'

'I knows him! Ooh, there's a shame. He was a right looker, all tall and strong and fair-haired.'

'I wouldn't know,' I lie, remembering the blush that crept up my neck when I peeked in on him earlier. I can't sense his spirit at all now, which is both a crushing disappointment and a huge relief.

Sally taps her lip with her finger. ‘Do you . . .
Would you . . . Nah, I can’t say it!’

‘What? Do I, would I what?’

Sally smiles impishly and nibbles at her thumb-nail, her eyes gleaming with devilment. ‘Would you sit with him? Hold his hand and pretend he’s your sweetheart?’

‘Sally!’

‘What? Where’s the harm?’ She rolls back on my bed in delight. ‘Go on, I dare you!’

‘No!’ I say, all the more indignant as I can’t honestly say it didn’t cross my mind. I’m not sure about boys yet. Mama says there’s plenty of time for all that. I look at Sally, flush-cheeked and giggly.

‘It’s fine,’ says Sally. ‘You can do it and confess afterwards cos you’ll be dissolved of all your sin.’

‘It’s *absolved*, you banana. What are you talking about though?’

‘Oh . . . Mr Tate was at the Lodge in the week. He came to pay his respects to the lady of the house.’ She pulls a face. ‘But the lady of the house can’t stand him. Oh, Peg, the names she calls him when his back is turned! Nothin’ very ladylike about them at all!’ She grins, then her face falls. ‘He’s been there a lot lately, whisperin’ in Lady

Stanton's ear.' She pauses. 'He was askin' about you again.'

The Reverend Silas Tate. His name makes my skin scuttle. Sally reaches for my hand and squeezes it, tight.

'I know, Peg.'

A pink doll-like splotch appears on her cheeks, deepening in colour as I look at her.

'Sally? What's wrong?' I ask.

'He wanted to know if you'd been up to any of your old tricks.'

'My old . . . What did you say?'

'Nothin',' she says, snatching her hand away and tucking it under her skirts.

'Sally?' Blood thuds in my ears. 'Great green-gages, Sally, please say you didn't —'

'I can't lie to a vicar! He might get me sent to hell or somethin'!'

'No, Sally! No, no, no, no, NO! He can't do that — we've been through this! What did you tell him?'

'I said I didn't know what he was talkin' about.'

I relax. 'Well, all right then. That's fine. You had me worried for a minute.'

'But then,' she hurries on, 'he got me all confused an' started askin' loads of different questions an' I got

a bit flustered, an' then I think I said that if you *could* speak to dead people – only if you could, mind – then I definitely wouldn't tell him anythin' about it an' folks should mind their beeswax an' not listen to rumours an', besides, if you *could* talk to dead folk, then there's no harm in it an' really it's just a skill – like speakin' French or somethin'.' Her cheeks are scarlet now, as well they might be. How could she be so *stupid*?

'Oh, well done – that definitely put him off the scent, didn't it?'

'I. Didn't. Say. Nothin'. Wrong.'

'Yes you DID, Sally! Why did you have to say *anything*?'

'All right, Miss High and Mighty, don't get yer bloomers in a bunch!' Sally shifts on the bed, shoving the wrapped cake to the floor in a swift, angry motion, her eyes burning. 'YOU weren't there! YOU don't know what he's like –'

I'm on my feet, hands clenched. 'Of course I know what he's like! That's why I stay out of his way!' I boot the paper bag so hard it slams into the wall, the cake Sally's carefully saved for later exploding over the floorboards. 'At least that way I don't have to worry about saying something so bogging STUPID!' I shout.

I want to take it back, straight away. Heavy tears wobble in Sally's eyes and I step towards her, reaching out a hand, but she slaps it away. The heat of her mounting fury is already drying her eyes. 'Don't,' she says. 'Don't you dare.' She gathers her things, scrabbling at her coat and gloves. 'You think you're so special, don't you, Peg?'

'I . . . What do you mean?'

'You with your *gift*.' She sneers at the word. 'But it doesn't make you better than other folks, Peggy Devona, and it definitely don't make you better than *me*! Jus' because your *pa* says you're special doesn't mean everyone else thinks so. You're a really terrible friend. Maybe Mr Tate is right – maybe you are an abominable-ation.'

'Abomin–' I see Sally's fist curl and I bite down on my lip, stopping the urge to correct her. 'If you really think that,' I say, 'then get out.'

She hesitates. I should say sorry, and then *she* will say sorry, and then we will be fine, as we have been a hundred times before.

I say nothing.

Sally turns on her heel, marches out of the room and down the stairs. Mama calls after her but she's gone.



A week goes by. There has been no word of Sally from the Lodge, and her mother was little help when I called by with the eggs and milk that she had forgotten in her haste. I thought that Sally might have left a note or passed me a message through her mother, but there was nothing. Fine, if she wants to be like that. Fine. I really don't care. No odds to me at all. Cowpats to her. She's probably having a jolly old time at the seaside with Lady Stanton. Good for her. I hope she gets her toes nipped by a horde of hungry crabs.

Curse you, Reverend Tate! My fight with Sally is all his fault. Five years ago he ignored me, the small girl who tugged at his sleeve and told him there'd been an accident down the pit. The look that that

poor man's spirit gave me will haunt me forever. He used every ounce of energy he had left to give me that message. *Get help*, he'd said, but the vicar dismissed us both. He swatted me away like a fly on his black wool frock coat and has hated me ever since. Would it have made a difference, those minutes that were wasted? Could more lives have been saved?

A noise jolts my thoughts and I slide my book under the coverlet. This morning my insides are cramping again and I reach for the hot stone Mama gave me, but it's long cold. I'm supposed to be doing my chores rather than reading, but all that will happen is that tomorrow I'll have to do them all again, so really, I think, what's the point? Why waste my time dusting, when I could be losing myself in worlds more exciting than my own? . . . There's the noise, again. An insistent *rat-a-tat-tat* at the scullery door, the rattle of glass giving it away. Wolf, always close by, looks up and whines, wet-pebble eyes latching on to mine. I pad to the top of the staircase, the floorboards smooth under my bare feet.

'Mama?'

My mother looks up from where she hesitates at the bottom of the stairs and smiles stiffly. 'Peggy,'

she says, ‘there you are. I’ve been looking for you everywhere.’

I am about to question this statement – there are five rooms in our cottage and a thorough search would have taken her no time at all – but something about her ghastly pallor stops me. She wipes her hands on her apron. ‘Will you answer the door? There’s a good girl.’ Her voice is tight and unnaturally high.

‘Is everything all right?’ I ask, turning my head as the knocking resounds once more. ‘Who is it?’

‘Mr Bletchley,’ says Mama.

I honestly don’t know why my mother tolerates him. I know he’s family – my father’s brother, in fact, though you’d never know it. I will *not* call him ‘Uncle’ for he is no such kin to me; I’d sooner refer to Mrs Dulwich as Aunty Agnes! Mr Bletchley and I don’t even have the same last name, not since the brothers had a mysterious falling-out, after which Mr Bletchley disappeared and wasn’t seen in the village again until after the accident at the mine. Imagine being in such a huff with your sibling that you change your own last name! And Mama doesn’t trust him, of that I’m certain, and that’s good enough for me.

‘Can we not hide?’ I whisper, creeping down the stairs and putting my head round the parlour door in the hope that Pa agrees with my suggestion, but the room is empty. He too has no wish to see his brother and makes himself scarce whenever he calls. ‘Mr Bletchley wouldn’t know we were home, what with the lamps not lit and no fire in the grate.’

A pause. A sigh. A sag of shoulders. ‘No, Peggy. Show him into the kitchen and offer him some tea. I’ll make myself presentable and be through in a moment. Sooner he’s in, sooner he’s gone.’ She’s too nice, is Mama.

The outline of his top hat is the first thing I see when I approach the scullery door, every movement causing it to loom ever more terribly through the rippled glass, and for a moment I hesitate, for he’s a tall, imposing figure.

A second silhouette, smaller and wider, hat cocked at a ridiculous angle, appears at his side. I am immediately irritated and open the door while trying to smooth my raised hackles.

‘Mr Bletchley,’ I say, bobbing a reluctant curtsey as he sweeps in. He’s likely in his fifties, with a good sweep of hair and a rich man’s moustache, for

which I'd bet a shilling he has a special little comb he uses to tend to it like a beloved pet. Broad of stature and well fed, in my mind he's always overdressed. Today he wears a black frock coat, grey twill trousers, a swirly-patterned sky-blue waistcoat and matching necktie so voluminous I swear he's tipping his head back to avoid it rubbing his chin. Or maybe, in keeping with the fancy businessman that he is, he's just looking down his nose through his gold-rimmed glasses at us commoners. He ignores me anyway, for a girl of twelve is no longer an amusing child nor yet considered good company.

His colleague follows him: shorter, wider, bumblier. 'Master Chimpwell,' I say, letting go of the door so that it bangs against the younger man's foot.

'SHIPwell,' he corrects automatically, his face flaming as he notices my ill-hidden smirk.

'May I make you some tea, gentlemen?' I say, lifting the copper kettle to the hotplate. It's heavy, but I make every effort not to show it.

'That would be very pleasant, Miss Devona,' replies Mr Bletchley. (Well, what do you know? I am suddenly visible.) 'A capable young girl like

yourself would do well in service. Perhaps get out of the village, see a little more of this fine land.’ He pauses. ‘I may even have a job for you myself.’

My stomach drops. Not this again. My eyes flick to the narrow sideboard on the far side of the scullery, next to the washing dolly and mangle. I pick it out immediately – the business card propped up against a small brass rabbit. It’s no bigger than a box of matches, its golden copperplate script glinting against a navy-blue background.

Jedediah Bletchley’s Psychic Emporium, it reads. *Communicate with the Other Side! – By Invitation Only.*

There is a telephone number (the man is an insufferable show-off) and, underneath, a symbol: a simplistic eye set in front of what could be the outline of a crown. The eye is presumably there to represent the supposed ‘second sight’ skills of the clairvoyants in his employ. And the crown? Its only significance is the insight it gives into the man’s over-inflated opinion of himself.

It truly baffles me how, not ten miles away, there are people faking the gift that I must hide (for none of them are genuine whisperlings, that is certain). Nowadays, speaking with the dead has become entertainment for the wealthy and terminally

stupid. And this man – this *Devona* man – is part of the farce. How *could* he?

Mr Bletchley eyes me curiously, face reddening when he sees what I'm looking at. I wonder, not for the first time, if this is what he and my father fell out about. Was Pa's brother a traitor to our whispering legacy? I hold Mr Bletchley's gaze for as long as I dare; he looks away first and I swallow a fizz of triumph.

'And where is the fragrant Mrs Devona?' he simpers. 'Not avoiding me, I hope.'

At this, Mama sweeps into the room, her strawberry-blond hair loosely piled into a cottage-loaf bun, a pencil sticking out of the top. Her features are small and freckled, her skin lightly tanned, and her eyes are greener than jade. Pa sometimes calls her Peachy, which suits her perfectly, though her name is Lydia.

'Mr Bletchley, I do apologize. I had something I had to attend to. I trust Margaret has been attentive?'

'Ah, do not concern yourself, my dear woman. I can assure you that we're being well looked after. I've made mention to Margaret that, given her age, she might like to secure a role in service. I could

always speak to one of the local houses, or perhaps she could come to work for me – as always, the offer is there . . .’

‘Why, thank you, Mr Bletchley. That’s terribly kind of you, but Peg – but Margaret is invaluable to me at the schoolhouse, helping to keep an eye on the younger ones, not to mention helping around here when winter comes and things get busier.’

Mr Bletchley thins his lips. The action nudges loose a bead of sweat, which rolls from his nostril, over his mouth and down to his chin. I look away, for fear of my morning porridge flying up from my stomach. ‘Well, if you insist, dear lady, on holding to these modern ideas of education for the masses . . .’ A smile plays under his moustache. He is teasing, but my mother glares at him. He catches her look, and his grin disappears under a cloud of disappointment. He looks down at the table and runs a buffed, clean fingertip over the edge as if inspecting for dust. ‘I suspect young Margaret here would fancy herself a scholar.’

‘Well, *of course* I would!’ I say indignantly. To have an education like boys – like *him* (I slide a daggered glance at Ambrose Shipwell) – would be everything.

He will go to university! Even if we had the money I wouldn't be allowed, because I'm a *girl*. It is *infuriating*! I am *far* cleverer than him.

Mr Bletchley looks at Mama, bitter and regretful. 'But for a flip of a coin, eh?'

I'm not sure what he means, but Mama ignores him and looks towards the parlour. I know what she's thinking. *What if Pa heard?*

I grip the kettle handle, feeling its heat through the cloth, and imagine the look on Bletchley's face should I swing the copper from the hotplate and drop it on to his shiny shoes.

But I don't. Mama says that lately we've needed Mr Bletchley, business-wise, and that's why she tolerates his visits. So instead I say, 'Are you happy to take your tea here at the kitchen table, Mr Bletchley, or would you be more comfortable in the parlour? We've only the one body in today and he's reasonably fresh. I mixed some camphor in with the lamp oil, so you probably won't smell anything at all if I light it and keep the door to the dressing room shut.' Then I give him my purest smile as his florid face pales to ash and he grips the edge of the table, knuckles as white as bone.

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‘You’re a sharp one, all right,’ says Ambrose Shipwell, tugging at the royal-blue cravat under his chin. The smug smile dancing round his lips infuriates me.

‘Choking you?’ I say.

He squints at me. ‘No,’ he says. ‘It’s just a little snug this morning.’

‘Perhaps you should lay off them meat pies, Ambrose,’ I say, nodding at his rounded belly straining under his flannel trousers. He looks out of place in our little courtyard – so full and ruddy and plump, so resplendent in navy and plum: a loud, colourful shout among the pale-washed whisper of grey flagstones and reedy, long-harvested vegetable beds.

‘What does Mr Bletchley want?’ I ask.

‘The usual arrangement, I imagine,’ he says. ‘A body from the gaol to tidy up, ready for some scholars to prod and study. A body that no civilized funeral home will deal with.’

I pounce at him, fists clenched. ‘And we’re considered *uncivilized*, I suppose? Why you –’

‘Peggy, stop – that’s not what I meant!’ Ambrose holds his hands up and backs away. ‘You know what city folk are like. It’d be bad for business if they

knew their beloveds were sharing a funeral slab with a prisoner who'd been hanged. Your family is discreet and sensible and the pay is good. I know Mr Bletchley has a soft spot for your mother . . . Don't huff, Peggy – he wants to help out.'

'I still can't believe he invested in a city undertaker's. It's like everything he does is to show how much better he is than us. Than Pa.'

'He's the landlord of the undertaker's, nothing more. It could easily have been a sweet shop or a dressmaker's. Not everything is a conspiracy, Peg. And since the mining accident it's obvious he'd want to help you. He's your family, like it or not. Your mother would never accept handouts, so this is one way for him to do it.'

'We haven't had a body from the gaol for ages,' I say carefully. What I mean is we haven't had one for over six months because Mama asked not to be involved any more in that sort of work, money or no money. Ambrose clearly doesn't know this.

He shrugs, then grimaces. 'You know they think they can tell if someone was born evil by what's inside them, or by counting the bumps on their head. Have you ever heard such rot? Excuse the pun!' He giggles. 'They should chuck the lot of 'em in the pit

after the long drop, if you ask me. Who in their right mind would want to dig about in a dead convict's innards? The very thought of it turns my stomach.'

I honestly can't say I blame him, even if his reasons are different from mine. If only he knew.

'Although . . .' he continues, 'a dead body is a dead body, wouldn't you say?' He watches for my reaction. 'I mean, it's not like they can *do* anything once they're gone, is it?'

'I'm not sure what you mean,' I say.

Ambrose straightens his hat, meaning business. 'I've heard that sometimes the dead will speak, if they have an accommodating ear to speak to.'

'Well, that sounds very fanciful,' I say, smoothing my skirts. The tops of my legs are aching now, to match the dull throb in my back and stomach. Can't these two leave so I can heat up my stone and take to my bed again? Better still that our places would switch and Ambrose Shipwell could deal with the insufferable monthlies, do my chores, help with the ungrateful brats at the schoolhouse, *and* have it suggested to him that his future lies in servitude.

'Don't be coy, Peggy,' he says. 'It's perfectly acceptable these days to be a whisperling. People like you are rather fashionable in the city. Everyone

knows you have the gift. I'll bet that's why Bletchley sends you the *interesting* bodies in case they wish to chatter!

'Well then, *everyone* is a fool, especially you!' I catch Ambrose's smirk at my outburst and poke my tongue out at him.

I've known Ambrose forever. He had no ma or pa of his own but was adopted by Mr Shipwell, and grew up in one of the bigger houses close to the river. When we were younger we'd spend every summer's day swimming and dunking and launching off the rope swing above the deepest spot by the jetty. It's odd to see someone you've seen in their undercrackers all polished and puffed and playing at being a grown-up. He has long suspected my whispering abilities, but Pa was jumpy enough about Sally knowing so I kept my counsel, and eventually Ambrose stopped asking. Also, he is a *boy*, and an annoying one at that, so I didn't blab, but even so it's exhausting keeping the secret from him. Now he works for Bletchley it's even worse, but for Pa's sake I continue the charade.

'So, how is business at the emporium?' I say. 'Still scamming unsuspecting folk with your elaborate parlour games?'

‘Your reluctance to be truthful about your gift is one thing, Peggy, but your certainty that everyone else is a charlatan is remarkably pompous.’ He grins. ‘Even for you.’

‘Oh please!’ I reply.

‘Honestly, Peggy! I have seen things with my own eyes that I could scarce believe!’ He beams with stupid delight. ‘I’ve seen spirits of the dead transform themselves into solid form, heard voices from a different realm, watched as the ghosts take hold and speak through the living!’

At this I give pause. I don’t think he is trying to trick me. ‘At the emporium? What do you mean?’

‘A spiritualist, Miss Richmond – she has the power to allow her body to be used by those who have passed in order for their beloveds to feel their touch or hear their voice once more.’

‘Well, that sounds . . . strange. So you actually saw her *become* the dead person?’

Ambrose hesitates. ‘Well, no. She doesn’t do that, for surely that would be the work of the Devil.’

‘Quite.’

‘So she doesn’t transform, exactly, but the very essence of the person speaks through her.’

‘Oh, come *on!*’

‘Well, you obviously don’t know about these things, being such a little country mouse,’ he blusters. ‘But we do. It’s not like we’re fools, is it?’

I raise an eyebrow. I didn’t realize it before, but if you are quiet for long enough you can hear the rattle of someone’s irritation. Ambrose is a tittle-tattle toad ready to gobble up gossip. Does he really think he can manipulate me into revealing my gifts?

That said, it doesn’t hurt to have a little fun.

‘Did I ever tell you, Ambrose, about one of the first cadavers we had from the gaol?’ I ask.

‘No. What happened?’

I nod towards an upturned pail next to the chicken house. ‘Sit down and I’ll tell you,’ I say, and Ambrose obliges, dragging the pail next to me while I perch on a milk crate and tidy my skirts.

‘This feels like a church confessional!’ says Ambrose, settling himself down.

I grimace at the mention of church, and an unwelcome image of Mr Tate slithers into my head. I’m more likely to trust the rats that scuttle through the slop trough with my eternal soul than our weasel-faced vicar, but there we are. I take a theatrical breath and begin.

‘I knew we were due a body. The cart went by when I was walking up from the village. I’d got some of the butterscotch drops that Pa likes and was about to pinch one, but the sight of that box bouncing around . . . well, it turned my stomach, just thinking about what was jiggling about inside. I half expected the body to bob right out in front of me.’

‘Were they from Bailey’s?’

‘What?’

‘The sweets. Were they the ones from Bailey’s, the ones with the brown stripe running through? They’re the best ones, I think, better than —’

‘You wish to discuss the *sweets*? Really, Ambrose! *That’s* all you’re curious about?’

‘I apologize, Miss Devona. Please tell me more about the corpse of the ne’er-do-well.’

I tut at his ridiculous turn of phrase.

‘I couldn’t sleep that night, knowing that there was such an evil sort lying out downstairs, not ten feet under my head. I’d heard them talking to Mama, the men that brought the body. They said he was a shameless beast who’d laughed when they put the noose round his neck. Imagine that!’

‘I’d rather not,’ said Ambrose, rubbing at his own neck.

‘I must have nodded off eventually, for I woke with a jump. I glanced at the gap at the bottom of my bedroom door, and was reassured to see the glow of lamplight. But then I saw something else. In the middle of the yellow light was a small black patch and it was slowly growing, from the size of an eye at first, to a fist . . . to a foot. I tried to scream but no sound would come, so I watched helplessly as this *thing* slid under my door . . . and disappeared. I held my breath. Had it all been a nightmare? But then came a movement. At the foot of the bed. Under the cover. Ambrose, it was IN MY BED!’

I side-eye Ambrose. He is covering his face with his cravat, the daft dollop.

‘Shall I tell you how I escaped from this dreadful creature, Ambrose?’

He nods his head, jaw slack and quavering.

I tap my ankle discreetly and Wolf, responding to my silent signal, brushes Ambrose’s leg.

Ambrose shrieks. He tips backwards on the upturned pail, landing in an undignified heap as Wolf slobbers over him, and I roar with laughter.

‘Wolf, you scared me so! Miss Devona, that is quite a tale.’ He regards me from the flagstones, then turns to scratch Wolf under her chin. She responds by

lifting a paw for Ambrose to shake, which he does with much ceremony. It annoys me that Wolf likes this buffoon. I thought dogs were supposed to be good judges of character. ‘Have you been playing with me, Peggy?’ Ambrose says.

‘Course I haven’t! How could you suggest such a thing!’ I say, leaving him to right himself as I turn away and allow myself a smile. I don’t mind Ambrose, not really. Not that I’d ever tell him that. It’s nice to have someone to torment, and he’d believe anything, the dozy doorknob.

To be fair to Ambrose, however, my tale wasn’t completely fiction: it wasn’t one of the first cadavers we’d had, but the very last. ‘Everyone has a right to dignity,’ my mother had said after that, ‘but no more bodies from the gaol.’ She told Mr Bletchley so too, in no uncertain terms, which makes me more curious about what today’s visit is for. He tends not to drop in without good reason, for my father made it patently clear to him many years ago that he was not welcome.

The clatter of the pail brings Mr Bletchley and my mother to the yard, the former unnaturally stony-faced. Bletchley would describe himself as jolly and charming, so it’s unusual to see him this annoyed.

‘Quite the commotion out here,’ he says, rocking back on his buttoned boots and casting a pitying eye around our garden. ‘Nice to see you young folk getting along for a change.’ His eyes land on the privy and he pats his stomach. ‘Mrs Devona, would you please be so kind as to let me use your, ahem, facilities?’

‘Of course,’ says Mama. ‘I’d be honoured.’

I raise a brow at her obvious sarcasm. I don’t know what they’ve been talking about in there, but it’s plainly got to her, as the scarlet flush at her throat attests.

A wave of collective embarrassment at watching a man like Mr Bletchley prepare to do his business sends the three of us back into the kitchen. Mama pours Ambrose and me a cup of milk, pushes a slice of bread and dripping towards Ambrose, and mouths a silent order for me. ‘Behave,’ it says.

Suddenly a terrible thought occurs to me. ‘Oh, Mama!’

‘Whatever is it, child?’ she says. ‘You’ve gone quite pale. Drink your milk and calm yourself.’

‘My . . . my . . .’ I glance at Ambrose, but he is shovelling bread into his mouth as if he’ll be starved from now until Christmas. ‘My rags, Mama!’

‘Are they not covered in the pail?’ she asks, and I shrug helplessly. I truly can’t remember and now my head is spinning with embarrassment. Moments later Bletchley steams in, cheeks red, and clips Ambrose unnecessarily round the ears. ‘Come along, lad, stop stuffing your face. You’ll not fit into the carriage if you keep on like that. Quick, quick, I don’t have all day. Good day, Mrs Devona, Miss Margaret,’ and he tips his hat without even looking at us.

‘Yes, goodbye, dear ladies,’ says Ambrose. ‘I’ll see you again, perhaps next –’ but he is cut off by Bletchley, who grabs his arm, drags him down the path and through the gate. Such is his impatience to leave that I swear if he’d been a fitter man he would have leaped over it.

‘Oh, Mama, I’m sorry – I’m so ashamed! What must he think?’

Mother grips my shoulders, the pinch of her fingers bringing me back to the now. I smell the faint, soft warmth of violet cologne and feel her breath on my cheek. As I settle, her grip softens and she pulls me to her.

‘There now,’ she says, stroking my hair. ‘Like as not, he wouldn’t know what they were anyway. He

has no *Mrs* Bletchley, but if there ever were one she'd never have to deal with her own sanitary napkins. Don't you trouble yourself about it.'

'Of course, I won't do it again. I'll be more careful . . .'

'That's not what I meant,' says Mama, choosing her words carefully. 'What I mean is, this won't be the last time we unsettle men, Peggy, simply by virtue of the fact we're women.'