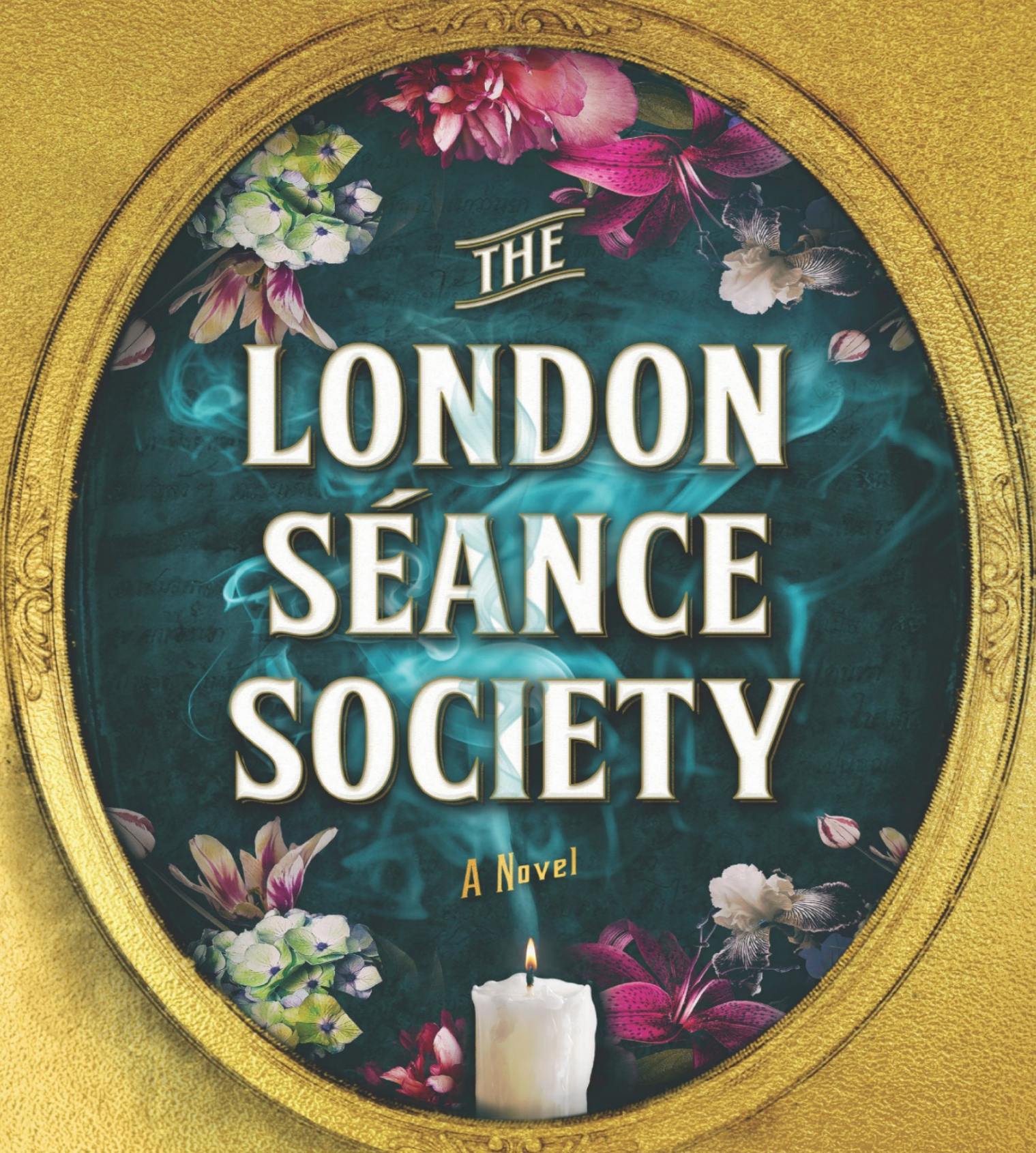


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SOCIETY

A Novel

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*Sarah Penner*

# **The London Séance Society**



For my big sister, Kellie.

(And for you, Mom. After all, you were the first to say, “*Let’s go to a séance...*”)

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Graves, yawn and yield your dead...

—William Shakespeare

# The Seven Stages of a Séance

## I

### **Ancient Devil's Incantation**

*The medium recites an incantation to protect séance participants from rogues and fiends.*

## II

### **Invocation**

*The medium issues a summons to all nearby spirits to enter the séance room.*

## III

### **Isolation**

*The medium rids the room of all spirits except the target spirit, i.e., the deceased person whom the séance participants intend to contact.*

## IV

### **Invitation**

*The medium compels entrancement by the deceased's spirit.*

## V

### **Entrancement**

*The medium is entranced by the deceased's spirit.*

## VI

### **Dénouement**

*The medium ascertains the information desired.*

## VII

### **Termination**

*The medium expels the deceased's spirit from the room, ending the entrancement and concluding the séance.*

# 1

## LENNA

*Paris, Thursday, 13 February 1873*

At an abandoned château on the wooded outskirts of Paris, a dark séance was about to take place.

The clock read thirty-two minutes after midnight. Lenna Wickes, spiritualist understudy, sat at an oval table draped in black linen. A gentleman and his wife, the other séance participants, sat at the table with her. Their faces were somber and their breathing uneasy. They were in what was once the parlor of the dilapidated château, which had not been inhabited for a hundred years. Behind Lenna, blood-colored paper peeled from the walls, clusters of mildew hiding underneath.

If all went well tonight, the ghost they sought—that of a young woman, murdered here in this very place—would soon appear.

Above them, something skittered. Mice, surely. Lenna had seen the droppings when they walked in, the tiny black kernels scattered about the baseboards. But then the skitter turned to a scratching noise and—was that a thud she'd just heard? She fought off a chill, thinking that if ghosts did indeed exist, this derelict château would be the place to find them.

She glanced quickly out the window into the darkness. Fat, wet snowflakes, rare for Paris, drifted down around the château. They'd set a few lanterns outside, and Lenna's eyes fell on the metal gate at the front of the estate, wrapped in dead ivy vines and quivering in its brace. Beyond it stood dark, thick forest, the needly evergreens dusted with white.

The séance participants, called *sitters*, had gathered at midnight. The parents of the victim—whom Lenna had met several days prior to this event—arrived first. They were followed soon after by Lenna and her teacher, the renowned medium who would lead tonight's affair: Vaudeline D'Allaire.

All of them were dressed in black, and the energy in the room was neither warm nor welcoming. As the parents waited in their seats, their movements were nervous and abrupt: the father knocked over a brass



candlestick and apologized profusely. Lenna, opening her notebook from across the table, couldn't blame him. They were all anxious, and Lenna had wiped her damp palms on her gown a dozen times already.

No one wanted to spend this agonizing hour under Vaudeline's guidance. The price of admission was terribly high, and that wasn't accounting for the francs she required up front.

The spirit they meant to conjure tonight was not of the everyday sort, but nor were any of the ghosts Vaudeline invited to come forth. These were not old grandmothers in white nightgowns, lives lived long, stalking through corridors. These were not the casualties of war, valiant men who'd known what they were getting themselves into. No, these ghosts were victims of violence, and gone too soon. They'd been murdered, every one of them. And worse, their killers had gotten away.

This was where Vaudeline came in, and it was why people sought her out. People like the couple trembling across the table now. People like Lenna.

Vaudeline, aged thirty, was known throughout the world for her skill in conjuring the spirits of murder victims in order to ascertain the identities of their killers. An esteemed spiritualist, she had solved several of Europe's most baffling murder mysteries. Her name had made headlines dozens of times, especially after her departure from London early last year, the circumstances of which yet remained unclear. Even still, this hadn't dampened her loyal, worldwide following. She lived now in Paris, her city of birth.

The forgotten château was an unusual place for a séance, but then, much was strange about Vaudeline's methods, and she claimed spirits could only be conjured at the location where they'd died.

Two weeks earlier, on the first of February, Lenna had crossed the English Channel to begin studying under Vaudeline. Lenna knew she wasn't her teacher's most devoted student. She wavered in her beliefs often, struggling with the necessity of the *Ancient Devil's Incantation* or the *palo santo* or the bowl of warbler shells. It wasn't that she didn't believe; she simply couldn't be *sure*. None of this could be proved. None of this could be weighed or analyzed or turned over in her hands like the stones and specimens she kept back home. Where other students might have readily accepted even the most far-fetched theories about the occult, Lenna found herself constantly asking *How? How do you know for sure?* And though

she'd attended one séance a few years ago, nothing convincing had come of it. Certainly, no ghosts had appeared.

It was maddening, this truth-versus-illusion business.

In her twenty-three years of life, Lenna had never seen an apparition. Some claimed to feel a cool presence when walking among old estates and cemeteries or said they'd seen a flicker in the candlelight or a humanlike shadow on the wall. Lenna would nod along, wanting badly to believe. But couldn't these be explained by something more...reasonable? Tricks of the light existed everywhere, prisms and reflections easily explained by science.

If Lenna had been asked a few months ago to travel to Paris to participate in a séance, she might have laughed. And studying the art of séance itself? Quite the waste of time, what with so many rock specimens waiting to be collected along the River Thames. But then came All Hallows' Eve—the night Lenna found her precious younger sister, Evie, stabbed to death in the garden of their parents' modest travelers' hotel, the Hickway House, on Euston Road. It was clear there had been a struggle: Evie's hair was in disarray, and there was trauma—blanching and bruising—to various parts of her body. Her satchel, emptied of its contents, had been flung next to her body.

In the days that followed, the police had given Evie's death as much attention as they gave the murder of any middle-class woman, which was to say not much at all. Three months gone, and not a single answer. Lenna was desperate—and desperation prevailed over disbelief; she knew that now. She adored Evie, more than anything else in this world. Magic, witchcraft, poltergeists. She'd commit to any of it, if it meant finding a way to reconnect with her beloved younger sister.

Besides, even though Lenna hadn't made up her mind about ghosts, she considered that her treasured fossils might be proof that remnants of life could still exist after death. Evie had first posed the idea, and now more than ever Lenna yearned to see the truth in it.

Evie had been a budding medium, an unyielding believer in spirits, and a former student and devotee of Vaudeline. If anyone could find a way to breach the barrier between life and death, it would be her. Lenna needed to communicate with her, to learn the truth about what had happened. The police might not have been willing to pursue justice, but Lenna was. So she

had chosen to set aside her doubts and learn—if not master—this strange art of séance.

She could not even properly grieve, so consumed was she with untangling the crime against her sister. Lenna didn't want to mourn, not yet. Before she mourned, she wanted vengeance.

Knowing Vaudeline wouldn't travel to London—she hadn't been back, not since her abrupt departure the year before—Lenna had decided to make the trip to Paris. She was determined to solve Evie's death, one way or another. Even if it meant spending a month under the tutelage of a stranger—albeit a stranger she'd decided she quite liked—and even if it meant learning the sinister subtleties of an art in which she was not sure she believed.

Besides, perhaps tonight that would change.

Perhaps tonight she would see her first ghost.

\* \* \*

Lenna pushed her hands between her thighs: she was trembling and did not want anyone to see it. She wanted to appear a brave understudy, an adept student. And she needed to demonstrate her levelheadedness for the sake of the parents across the table, who were visibly terrified about what might unfold tonight.

She was glad she'd met them a few days ago in a place far less ominous. They'd visited Vaudeline's sizable flat in central Paris, and the four of them had gathered in the parlor to talk through their questions about the upcoming séance.

And the risks.

Lenna knew the risks of séance already—she and Vaudeline had discussed them when she first presented herself as a prospective student—but during the meeting in the parlor, the hazards seemed of greater consequence.

“You will not find any Ouija boards or planchettes in my possession,” Vaudeline had explained to the parents. “Those are the playthings of children in attics. My séances are apt to take a different, more dangerous, direction.”

The parlor door opened, and a guesthouse maid brought in tea for the four of them. She set it on the table in front of the group, next to a diagram

Lenna and Vaudeline had been studying earlier noting the proper setting of a séance table with its many *ouils*. The black beeswax candles, the opals and amethysts, the snakeskins and salt bowls.

“A trance state,” the mother offered, once the maid had gone.

“Precisely.”

Having been under Vaudeline’s tutelage for some weeks, Lenna didn’t need to ask for clarification. She knew that in mediumship, a trance state, or entrancement, occurred when a spirit quite literally took over the medium’s flesh, once again subsisting within a living, breathing body. Vaudeline described it as a sort of dual existence that allowed mediums to cognize the memories and thoughts of the deceased while also maintaining their own, in parallel.

The mother took a sip of her tea, then leaned forward to withdraw something from her bag: a newspaper clipping. Her hands trembled just as they had upon her arrival, when she’d stared at Vaudeline a long while before being able to speak.

Lenna had reacted the same upon first meeting Vaudeline, though it wasn’t because she’d been dazzled by the medium’s reputation. It had more to do with her cloud-colored eyes and the way she’d held Lenna’s gaze a few seconds longer than convention permitted. The brief moment had revealed plenty: Vaudeline was self-assured. And like Evie, she didn’t care much for rules.

Both of which were traits that Lenna found quite transfixing.

The mother handed over the article. Lenna couldn’t understand the French headline, but the date of the article indicated it was a few years old. “It says a man died at one of your séances,” the mother explained. “Is it true?”

Vaudeline nodded. “Spirits are unpredictable,” she said. “Especially the ones we seek—the victims. The risk is greatest early in the séance, after I’ve recited the *Invocation*, which invites all nearby spirits into the room. It is like turning on a water spigot. To manifest the spirit of a murder victim and solve a crime, I must also deal with the dead at the periphery. I try to get through this stage quickly, but I cannot keep them at bay entirely.” She nodded to the article.

“Did the police ever determine how the man died?” the mother asked.

“Heart failure, officially. But those of us in the room saw it happen, the shadow of a hand over his mouth.” Vaudeline handed the article back over.

“In a decade of doing séances, only three people have died on my watch. It is very rare. More common is the sudden appearance of wounds, which are connected to the traumas suffered by the victim before their death.

Lacerations, twisted ligaments, bruises.”

The father dropped his head forward, and Lenna fought a sudden urge to leave the room, maybe even vomit. Their daughter had been strangled. What if a rope burn spontaneously appeared on someone’s neck during the séance? The mere thought of it was intolerable.

“There are lesser dangers, as well,” Vaudeline continued. Perhaps she sensed it would be wise to move on. “The things someone might...*engage* in, for instance. At a séance a few months ago, two of the participants—under the influence of spirits—began to fornicate on the table.”

Lenna gave a small gasp. For all the stories Vaudeline had shared with her in the last two weeks, she hadn’t heard this one. “Were they lovers beforehand?” she asked, thinking surely the parents were as curious as her.

Vaudeline shook her head. “They’d never met in their lives.” She turned, and Lenna’s gaze fell on the tiny freckle at the tip of Vaudeline’s nose. So small it might be mistaken for a shadow.

“Despite the risks,” Vaudeline said, looking back to the parents, “trances are the quickest and most effective way to get the information needed to solve a case. This is not about entertainment or peace-seeking. If that’s what you’re after, I’d direct you to any number of reputable ghost hunters throughout the city.”

The father cleared his throat. “I am concerned...” he said, gently taking his wife’s hand “...well, I am concerned about my wife’s well-being if we hold the séance at the château, where our daughter died.”

*Where our daughter died*, he’d said. Easier words to say aloud than *where our daughter was killed*. That was too much to admit, too sharp on the tongue. Lenna knew this better than anyone.

Vaudeline looked at the wife. “You will need to find a way to remain composed, or I suggest you do not attend at all.” She sat back and folded her hands together, inviting no further discussion about it. This was, after all, one of Vaudeline’s key beliefs: a spirit could only be conjured within proximity to the site of their death. If she could perform a séance from afar, Lenna wouldn’t be here in Paris at all. She’d have written Vaudeline and asked her to perform Evie’s séance in France and then report back to Lenna with the results.



But as Vaudeline had publicly stated, she wouldn't be returning to London anytime soon. Lenna would have to learn the art of séance herself in Paris, then return to the site of Evie's death with the hope of conjuring her sister's spirit on her own.

"Plenty of mediums carry out séances in their own homes," the mother said now. "Nowhere near the place where their loved ones have died."

"And plenty of mediums are frauds." Vaudeline swirled her cup of tea and went on, undeterred. "I understand it is difficult to be at the site of your daughter's death, but we are not there to be delicate with our emotions. We are there to solve a crime."

This might have come across as cold, but Vaudeline had said it countless times. She could not intertwine herself with the grief of the family. Grief was weakness, and there was nothing so dangerous in the séance room as weakness of any kind. Spirits—the dangerous, free-roaming ones, apt to haunt and tease sitters whether summoned or not—liked weakness.

"It will be just the two of you, is that right?" Vaudeline asked.

The father gave a single nod.

"Was your daughter married, or did she have a beau? If so, it would be helpful to extend an invitation to him or her. The more of your daughter's latent energy we can gather in the room, the better."

"No," the father said. "Not married, and no beau."

"That we're aware of, at least," the mother added, giving a small smile. "Our daughter was quite...independent."

Lenna smiled, musing on the woman's delicate word choice. Perhaps her daughter had been a bit like Evie. Free-spirited. Unbridled.

The mother coughed lightly. "Might I ask," she said, looking at Lenna, "what role you will play in the séance?"

Lenna nodded. "I'm Vaudeline's understudy," she said. "I'm still memorizing the incantations, but I'll be taking notes on the seven-stage séance sequence."

"She is not part of my traditional cohort," Vaudeline added, "which typically has three to five students. Lenna's circumstances were such that, after she arrived between cohorts a couple of weeks ago, I opted to take her on for an individualized training program."

This was all factual, if not grossly short on detail. When Lenna arrived in Paris and told Vaudeline that Evie—her former student—had been murdered in London, Vaudeline found the news staggering. She quickly

ushered Lenna in, set her up in the empty bunkroom typically set aside for students, and began an accelerated training program. Typically, cohorts studied under Vaudeline for eight weeks, but she aimed to have Lenna's training done in half that time.

"I didn't realize you taught mediumship," the mother said to Vaudeline, "in addition to conducting séances yourself."

"Yes. I've been a medium for ten years, a teacher for five." She leaned forward, her tone more serious now. "Regarding the séance, there are things you can do to diminish the risks I've just laid out. Foremost, no wine or liquor beforehand. Not even a drop. And do your best to keep any tears at bay. Don't dwell on memories. Memories are weakness. And in the séance room, weakness is your downfall."

The peril posed by weakness was one of the first lessons Vaudeline had taught Lenna when their studies began. The world teemed with ghosts. Every bedchamber, every meadow, every seaport. Over millennia, so long as people had lived, so too had they died—and they did not go far. Because of this, Vaudeline explained, many séances resulted in the appearance of spirits who weren't invited. Most of these were benign and merely curious. They longed to feel the sensation of embodiment once again, or they meant to playfully tease the sitters. Vaudeline had no problem steering these affable spooks away.

It was the malicious spirits and destructive poltergeists who posed the danger, and much could go wrong during a séance on their account. They might entrance Vaudeline before the target spirit had a chance to do so, or they might entrance the sitters, a phenomenon known as *absorptus*. These entities were intelligent and knew exactly who to prey on: The crying. The young. The inebriated. The lustful. These were all forms of fragility, a sort of porousness allowing the diabolical being inside.

To prevent such fiends from interrupting a séance, Vaudeline carefully assessed the sitters before the affair began. She did not permit anyone under the age of sixteen to attend, nor anyone with liquor on their breath. Crying family members were sometimes tossed out.

This diligence, together with the ancient, protective incantation that Vaudeline read at the start of each affair, and the two expulsive injunctions that could be used as a last resort, kept her séances safe.

Most of the time.

Nothing was guaranteed. This was an *art*, Vaudeline said time and time again. And spirits were terribly unpredictable.

\* \* \*

At the château, Lenna glanced up from her notebook and looked again at the parents, studying their expressions. The father's face was hard, both hands set firmly on the table. He looked ready for battle. The mother, meanwhile, had a gray, dazed look in her eyes, and a streak of dried tears had carved a rivulet through the rouge on her cheeks.

Lenna was proud of her. Proud of both of them. But their strength might put her in a vulnerable position. She shuddered, wondering whether a spirit might find *her* the weakest person in the room, or if something else might go awry. She recalled a few of Vaudeline's stories, tales of people pulling weapons on one another while in a trance state, or candelabras thrust across the room as if by their own accord. Lenna glanced around now, thankful there were no candelabras to be seen.

Vaudeline unlocked a leather suitcase and pulled a few items out. Everyone else had taken their places, and a nervous silence descended upon the room. What, Lenna wondered, would transpire in the minutes to come? She chewed mindlessly at her fingernails, a lifelong vice, and watched Vaudeline closely for any signs of trickery. She could find none.

Vaudeline retrieved two lengths of black linen from her case. She delicately hung them over the brick hearth and the lead-latticed window at the front of the room, which overlooked the entrance to the dilapidated château. The bottom portion of the window glass was broken, so the fabric would keep out the drafts. But Lenna knew the other reason Vaudeline covered it now, for they had reviewed it in their studies. Windows were portals of light and encouraged the entrance and movement of uninvited spirits who had died close by. Hearths, too. A rogue spirit could swoop down a chimney as easily as it could come through a window. Thus, it was best to encapsulate the room if possible. *Close and dark.*

Well, things certainly felt close now. Vaudeline finally took a seat, pulling her chair closer to Lenna and angling her legs toward her. Lenna wondered if the movement was inadvertent. She hoped not.

As Vaudeline opened her book of incantations, her long lashes cast shadows on her cheeks. A wisp of hair slipped loose and dangled in front of

her face, but she paid it no mind as she turned the pages of her book, the fabric of her silk gown sliding easily over her pale arms.

Lenna caught the father gazing at Vaudeline. His pupils had gone wide and black, and his lips were parted. Lenna recognized this look—lust—and she didn't blame him a bit. One might call the man deviant, even debased, for having the capacity to feel desire while still so overwhelmed by grief and loss. But not Lenna. She knew this twist and tangle well.

Indeed, they might have made an ugly pair, grief and desire. But Lenna couldn't blame the man across the table, for she suffered both agonies herself these days.

\* \* \*

The room grew very still. The candle did not flicker, nor did the window covering rustle. The séance had not yet begun, but it was undeniable: Vaudeline had established full and complete control of the room. Anything she asked, the participants would do.

Lenna was glad for it, comforted by Vaudeline's steady expertise, so in contrast with the eerie feeling about the room. She recalled her teacher's promise en route to the château. *No harm will befall you*, Vaudeline had said softly. *You would be the first I would protect, if needed. Ma promesse à toi.*

Now Lenna repeated these words, this promise, in her mind. Her own incantation.

Vaudeline withdrew a small watch from inside her cloak. She studied its face, then returned it to an inner pocket. "We will begin in forty seconds," she said. Across the table, the mother of the victim sniffled, and the father cleared his throat, straightened his back. Lenna could not fathom the emotion plaguing them, the nuanced temptation and terror of what they were about to experience. What must it feel like to approach an encounter with one's dead daughter?

The same, probably, as it felt to approach an encounter with one's dead sister.

The thought jarred Lenna. Tonight, and indeed her entire course of study, was not just about learning the art of séance. This endeavor, ultimately, was about communicating with Evie and learning the truth about her murder.

Lenna offered a warm smile to the mother across the table. Candlelight glinted in the woman's eyes; she was fighting back tears. Lenna wished she could whisper a few words of comfort to her, but the time for that had long passed.

The sitters kept their eyes low as the forty seconds ticked slowly by. Lenna could hear the timepiece inside Vaudeline's cloak, the movement of the tiny mechanism within its metal encasement. She knew Vaudeline was counting the ticks, and then she would begin her first incantation, the protective *exordium*, the prelude, extracted from a thousand-year-old Latin text on demons. Lenna had already memorized the first four stanzas, but there were twelve in total.

She waited for Vaudeline's long intake of air: the incantation needed to be recited in a single, unbroken breath. Breath control was another thing Lenna needed to practice. While reading the incantation from her notebook in recent days, she could only get through half of it before feeling faint and gasping for air.

The candle closest to the hearth flickered, and somewhere nearby—was it outside the room, or above it?—a *thump* sounded.

Lenna froze, looked up from her notebook. It had not been mice in the floorboards—that much was clear. The pencil fell from her fingers. Instinctively, she leaned closer to Vaudeline, ready to clasp her hand if it came to that. Decorum be damned.

“Something is coming,” Vaudeline said suddenly. Her voice remained even and low. She kept her gaze down, eyes closed.

The *thump* sounded again. Lenna tensed, jerking her head toward the family. Across the table, the mother's eyes were wide, and the father leaned forward, looking hopeful. Surely, they thought this thumping meant the spirit of their daughter was nearly upon them. But Vaudeline hadn't covered the detailed seven-stage sequence with them, so they couldn't know that it was too soon for a manifestation, that the *séance* had not even begun.

Lenna might have been the only one of them to know it, but something was not right. The sequence was off: Vaudeline would never begin a *séance* without the *Ancient Devil's Incantation*, meant to protect them all. For a moment, terror seized her. Was there some demon making its way into the room at this very moment? Something sinister enough to have disrupted Vaudeline's sequence? A chill ran down her arms as she waited for the medium to act.



Still, Vaudeline had not moved. Bravely, as a sort of second-in-command, Lenna turned to her. “Something is...coming? A spirit?” she whispered.

Vaudeline exhaled, frustration writ on her face. She shook her head and held up a finger as though to say, *Just wait*.

At once, the door to the room flew open.