

## Chapter One

*Those whom God wishes to destroy, he first makes mad.* —Euripides, c. 485-406 B.C.

*Friday, October 9, 1818 - Rosecrest Manor, Surrey, England*

Prudence Barnard concentrated and tried once more to contact the spirit realm. Either the incorporeal world didn't exist, or the inhabitants were singularly uninterested in the living. The darkened room remained quiet despite the restlessness of the twelve other guests sitting with her around the table. Only odd currents of cold air moved with sly whispers through the gloom. The flame of the single candle in front of her flickered wildly and flared before nearly extinguishing.

"I—I feel a draft," Miss Abigail Spencer said, in a soft, hesitant voice.

"Oh, for God's—" Lord Crowley abruptly broke off his sharp rebuke to his betrothed as if suddenly remembering there were women present, particularly his mother. He glanced at her and flushed.

The dowager, Lady Crowley, let out a long sigh. The sound indicated more clearly than words her disappointment and her lack of surprise at her son's outburst, even if he did manage to control it.

"Mother." Lord Crowley frowned.

Her hand fluttered to her neck. "I beg your pardon. I didn't intend to criticize—"

"You never do." He cut her off before transferring his angry gaze to Miss Spencer. "What is it, now?"

"A draft!" Miss Spencer's nervous response increased her resemblance to a small mouse sitting uncomfortably close to a large, vindictive cat. She flashed a quick look at Lord Crowley before glancing over her shoulder. "The door is—"

"Closed." Lord Crowley completed her sentence for her. "Now can we get on with it?"

“Certainly,” Pru replied, just as eager as he was to be done with this evening's entertainment. She hated to perpetuate the charade that she could contact the spirit world, but as a guest of the dowager, Lady Crowley, she was hardly in a position to refuse her fervent request.

“The door is directly behind me,” Miss Spencer blurted out. The brown mouse might be nervous, but she was also stubborn. “Something might come in—”

“Apparitions have no need of doors, do they, Miss Barnard?” Lord Crowley's derisive tone made Pru's back stiffen. “Assuming one shows up at all.”

“There's no need to worry,” Pru reassured Miss Spencer.

“Perhaps we could change seats?” Mr. Knighton Gaunt, the man sitting next to Pru, suggested. He was almost as out of place in the small gathering of close friends as she was.

They were both relative strangers at Rosecrest, although she had a slight advantage. She was a guest and had an acquaintance with a few of the others. On the other hand, Mr. Gaunt was a lowly inquiry agent, most likely brought in by Lord Crowley to prove she was a fraud.

Lord Crowley had threatened to do so, at any rate, the day before Mr. Gaunt joined them.

Pru studied Mr. Gaunt, wondering just how observant he was. She'd spent a great deal of time preparing the room, including attaching a small bell under her seat. Although she'd since decided not to use it, she now felt uneasy. She didn't want to give up her chair and have someone else accidentally find it, or worse, ring it.

“Change seats?” Pru echoed his words with a frown.

“If Miss Spencer is uncomfortable, we could shift seats so the door isn't at her back.” Mr. Gaunt's dark eyes glinted maliciously as if he was perfectly aware of the source of her discomfort.

“Would you like to exchange seats?” Pru asked Miss Spencer, praying the young woman

would be shy enough to stay where she was.

Miss Spencer nodded. “Yes, please. I’d sincerely appreciate it.”

“I’ll trade seats with Miss Spencer,” Mr. Mark Jekyll offered in a bored voice.

“That will ruin the symmetry of the circle,” Mr. Gaunt said before Pru could reply. “It places three men together, Lord Crowley, Mr. Jekyll, and Mr. Denham. And next to them, three women, Mrs. Jekyll, Miss Spencer, and Mrs. Marley. Surely that would be infelicitous, Miss Barnard?”

She stifled the strong urge to slap him. “It’s best to alternate ladies and gentlemen, but it would by no means ruin—”

“Nonsense,” he said helpfully. He clearly enjoyed Pru’s discomfiture and had no qualms in prolonging it. “We want the best possible conditions to encourage the spirits. We can all simply shift two seats to the right.”

That would put Lord Crowley in Pru’s chair with the bell hidden under the seat. And he was the one who had hired Mr. Gaunt to prove she was a charlatan.

“Or we could shift two seats to the left,” Pru suggested. That would place Miss Howard in Pru’s seat, which was much less dangerous. Miss Howard had been quiet and agreeable all evening, seemingly content to shadow her mother, Lady Howard. And even more reassuring, Miss Howard was not nervous or restive enough to disturb the spirit bell.

Then Pru realized that moving to the left would place her in Miss Spencer’s chair, with her back to the door. Despite her common sense, she couldn’t help feeling uncomfortable at that thought, although she’d never considered herself nervous. She looked up to find Mr. Gaunt watching her, his wide mouth quirked into a lopsided grin.

She blushed and felt a shiver slide down her back like a cold draft from the door.

“I applaud your boldness,” Mr. Gaunt said. He rose, waiting for the others to follow suit.

“I have no objections to exchanging seats,” Mrs. Jekyll said, her voice low and melodic with a soft, Surrey accent. “I’ve no worries, leastways, not of closed doors.”

Pru looked at the older woman in surprise and was granted a small, tired smile. Pru nodded, grateful for the unexpectedly generous offer of support, even if it did result in Lord Crowley sitting in the chair provisioned with the spirit bell.

Exhibiting varying degrees of impatience and irritation, the eleven guests, Lord Crowley and the dowager, Lady Crowley, pushed their chairs back. The grace of their initial movements rapidly disintegrated into a tangle as everyone tried to shift seats without stepping on their neighbor's feet or tearing hems. No one wanted to venture far from the small circle of light radiating from the single candle on the table.

When they finally reseated themselves, Pru cleared her mind and stared at the pale flame of the candle. She frowned, trying desperately to recreate an atmosphere rich with eerie potential and yet not terrifying enough to cause another over-wrought interruption.

It was not an easy task.

The more she concentrated, the more her spirits sank. Ever since her father’s death a year ago, she’d suffered from the lowering notion that she was doomed to continue these nonsensical sessions until she withered into a wispy gray apparition, herself. But as a lady of extremely modest means, she couldn’t afford to refuse a request from her hostess to summon her dead husband if at all possible. It was Lady Crowley’s reason for inviting Pru to join this select house party and it meant a room and meals at nearly no expense to Pru except for the occasional tip to the servants.

The smooth expanse of the maple tabletop glistened in the wavering light and smelled

faintly of lavender beeswax. Clustered around the table, the other guests fidgeted. The soft susurrus of their clothing sounding like whispers in the darkness. And beyond them, the shadows shifted in the uncertain light, as impatient as the guests.

*Please just this once, let there be unseen things hovering in the darkness. And let them communicate!* Even a rattle of chains or a ghostly wail would do.

“Miss Barnard, is anything happening?” Lady Crowley broke the silence. “Is he there? Can he truly speak to us?”

Pru looked up and smiled encouragement. “Please, we must remain quiet. Rest assured we’ll contact your late husband, if he’s present.”

With a snort, Lady Crowley’s son pointedly retrieved the heavy watch dangling from a gold chain stretched across his belly. “It’s after midnight. If father were going to pass a message to us from the *Great Beyond*, surely he’d have done so by now. We’ve been sitting here for nearly an hour.”

“And midnight is the perfect time to communicate with the spirit realm,” Pru replied smoothly. “Just a few more minutes, Lord Crowley. For your mother’s sake.”

Lady Crowley gripped Pru’s hand once more to reestablish the circle of clasped hands. Her blue-tinged lips trembled as she pressed Pru’s fingers. “Please try again, Miss Barnard. And be quiet, Henry, *please!*” She patted her son’s wrist as if trying to soothe a fretful infant.

Lord Crowley jerked his arm away from her and frowned, deep lines creasing his heavy face. The muscles tightened in his jaw, but he refrained from commenting. However, he refused to meet his mother’s anxious gaze and eyed Pru. Then he deliberately resumed his habit of rubbing his fingers over the tabletop in a gesture of irritation instead of completing the circle.

“Go on, then,” he said. His fingertips squeaked across the polished wood. “See if my dear

father has anything to say. Perhaps he's hidden a cache of gold coins in the wine cellar. Or French brandy. We could all use some of that.”

The gentlemen chuckled at his remark before the room quieted again. As the silence grew, a gradual feeling of pressure made Pru dart a glance to the left. Mr. Gaunt met her stare. The cynical lines of his face were harsh in the shifting candlelight as he returned her gaze dispassionately. She could sense his underlying impatience, as well, although he sat relaxed in his chair.

His black jacket and trousers enhanced his forbidding air. Only a small glimmer of white at his neck and cuffs lightened the somber attire. With his black hair, dark eyes, and olive skin, he could easily pass for a Spaniard instead of an Englishman.

Her imagination suddenly veered away to paint him as a member of the infamous Spanish Inquisition. She could see him, tightening the screws and staring dispassionately at a prisoner as he asked one more time for the truth. As if a heavenly ordained concept called “The Pure Truth” existed.

In her experience, truth was often a matter of opinion, weighted heavily in favor of social position and money.

In a distracting movement, Mr. Gaunt brushed a speck of invisible dust off the smooth surface of the table. Then he rested his hands in front of him, his gaze sweeping around the room. When his mocking appraisal caught her glance, she quickly broke off to transfer her attention to the task at hand and her hostess, Lady Crowley.

What message would the late Lord Crowley pass to his wife if he could break through the barrier of death? What did Lady Crowley need to hear?

It was not difficult to guess. Two days ago, Pru had inadvertently discovered a letter

signed by the previous Lord Crowley and dated just before his death. She winced with sympathy and guilt when she read the angry lines. Harsh, scolding words filled the missive, taking Lady Crowley to task for not obeying and returning home promptly when bidden. Small streaks of ink smeared the pages, testifying to the fury that made the pressure of his pen spray black ink in arcs over the thick, creamy paper.

Lady Crowley might wish to hear her late husband had loved her. Or that he had forgiven her for her supposed disobedience, whatever the truth of the matter.

*The only meaningful forgiveness comes from the dead, but they so rarely speak.*

The dark circles under Lady Crowley's sunken eyes spoke of restless nights. Her hands shook as she twisted her rings around her thickened fingers. She obviously spent far too much time brooding over similar letters with no way to relieve her remorse.

Could Pru exorcise Lady Crowley's guilt-ridden ghosts?

She hesitated, uneasy. An icy sense of foreboding filled the room. Finally, she closed her eyes and composed her thoughts despite the chill. The feeling was just a draft, or perhaps her silly, superstitious fear of the number thirteen.

Even Lord Crowley had been disturbed by that. He'd insisted a maid, an unfortunate woman named May, stay to make fourteen. However, he did not allow her to join them at the table. She sat in the shadows, ensconced in a straight-backed wooden chair by the door with her hands folded on her aproned lap. Her eyes stared at the floor as if she wished she could simply disappear.

Pru felt precisely the same way, but she sighed and twitched her limp left hand. Her knuckles brushed the pencil lying on the table next to a slate. The small movement caused a swirl of air to brush the candle. The flame flickered wildly.

One of the women gasped as Pru's left hand picked up the pencil, seemingly of its own volition. She stared fixedly at the flame of the thin taper, forcing all emotion from her face.

The dowager inhaled sharply. Pru slipped into a rigid pose that could be mistaken for a trance.

The pencil scratched awkwardly over the slate. Only sheer force of will prevented her from flinching at the screeching sound.

"What is she writing?" Lord Crowley asked. His loud voice caused several people to jump in their seats.

"Shush," Miss Spencer whispered. She swallowed audibly and shifted closer to her betrothed, Lord Crowley, seated on her right. Her face paled in the wavering light. She repeatedly stared over her shoulder, her nervous gaze darting from one shadow to the next.

Maintaining her rigid posture, Pru didn't respond. After a few meaningless scratches, she wrote in a tolerable semblance of Lord Crowley's forceful scrawl.

*forgive*

*forgive*

*I forgive*

*love you*

The pencil stilled in her hand.

A sob broke from the dowager, hastily smothered as she pressed her fingers to her lips. She reached over and clutched Pru's right wrist.

"Is he ...is he h-happy?" she stammered.

"Oh, mother! For God's sake!" Lord Crowley said. "Must you?"

The pencil moved again. Pru wrote with a bold flourish, *yes-happy*.

Weeping openly now, the dowager held onto Pru, her hand shaking with emotion. But Pru did not relax or react to the dowager until Lord Crowley spoke again.

“For God’s sake!” Lord Crowley said, the words punctuated by a snort. “This is ludicrous!”

Mr. Jekyll, a long-time neighbor of the Crowley’s, protested, “Lord Crowley, really, there are women present. Watch your language. Please.” He gestured at his wife, seated on his left, but she didn’t seem the least shocked by the outburst.

She stared past her husband as if trying to catch the eye of her daughter, Mrs. Marley, seated on Mr. Jekyll's right. However, the young woman was apparently unconcerned about Lord Crowley’s language. Her pasty, white face held only a deeply lined expression of overwhelming tiredness. As Pru watched, Mrs. Marley cast a speculative glance at her mother as if wondering about her chances of obtaining a reprieve and escaping to her bed chamber.

The three members of the clannish Jekyll family, Mr. and Mrs. Mark Jekyll, and their sickly daughter, Mrs. Marley, sat on the far side of the table from Pru. They all seemed uninterested in the proceedings, although they’d been polite and helpful despite Mr. Jekyll’s few, acidic comments. The light from the candle barely illuminated their pallid faces as they stared at one another, still holding hands on top of the table.

The muffled sobs of Lady Crowley faded as the guests whispered to each other. The flame in the center of the table flickered wildly as they bent their heads to speak. Shadows leapt in response, dancing around them and leaning over their shoulders, pressing forward toward the meager light.

Tiring of the charade, Pru fluttered her lashes and exhaled, making a show of coming out of her trance. She glanced at her left hand.

With a startled exclamation, she dropped the pencil. “Did we communicate with your husband?”

“Yes, *thank you!*” Lady Crowley said.

Aware of Mr. Gaunt’s presence, Pru could not help a quick look in his direction while Lady Crowley spoke. His black eyes caught and held hers. An uncomfortable flush rose to her cheeks.

He stared a trifle too long before one of his brows arched. “Bravo,” he said, his voice soft with sarcasm.

She glanced toward her hostess, refusing to acknowledge his remark. “Did you—”

Without warning, the single candle in the center of the table flickered. The flame died.

The room went entirely dark.