

PIPER HOUDINI

APPRENTICE OF
CONEY ISLAND



• A NOVEL •

—❧— GLENN HERDLING —❧—

PROLOGUE

Myrtle Corbin hobbled across the wooden planks, trying not to disturb the delicate bundle clasped to her chest. She was no longer a young woman and her lungs burned with each step.

A giant stork guarding a nest of cherubs peered down at her from a tall gable overhead. Myrtle fell against the door of the building. She had to arouse the people inside!

But she wasn't able to knock. One hand was carrying the bundle while the other pinched the blanket together to protect it from the corrosive sun. And because Myrtle was born with a clubbed right foot, her left foot supported all her weight, rendering them both useless as well.

The sun was peeking over the Atlantic horizon and growing brighter with each passing moment. The blankets would soon provide no protection at all.

Out of habit, Myrtle looked around to make sure that no one would catch a free glimpse. Then she nudged her hips forward. Two tiny legs protruded from the slit of her custom-made skirt. They began to kick at the front door like a child throwing a temper tantrum.

The ground floor was made of brick and the upper floor was a lattice of wood-framed panels, making it look like a half-timbered German farmhouse. But Myrtle knew better. This was a hospital.

Under its tiled roof, the facility cared for frail or underdeveloped infants that had been born too early. To fund its operation, the hospital doubled as a sideshow exhibit, displaying the premature babies in incubators behind a large picture window so people could gawk at them.

The boardwalk attractions wouldn't open for several hours, but that wouldn't keep Myrtle's family from meddling. Already they had begun to gather.

"Whatcha got there, Myrtle?" Elastic Skin Joe called out to her, bouncing down the boardwalk on his fingers and toes. His spindly arms were wrapped behind even spindlier legs so that he resembled a ball with hands and feet. "The Nightgaunt leave us another present?"

On most days she would find it amusing that these so-called "Curiosities" were in fact the most curious creatures of all. But today she had no patience for their nonsense.

"Yes," she replied, once more striking her tiny shoes against the door. "I found it by the drainpipe next to the Foolish House."

"Figures you'd be the one to find it then, huh?" Joe chuckled, untangling himself and vaulting to his full length beside her. The

four-legged woman kicked him in the funny bone with one of her extra feet, making the elastic man howl in pain.

“Should’ve booted him somewhere else,” said a girl in a pink dress, poking her heads between Joe’s spiderlike legs.

“Must you always be so vile?” asked the girl’s other head.

“Charlotte! Scarlet! We have no time for your bickering!” Myrtle chided. “If we don’t get into the Hatchery soon, we’ll lose another one!”

“The doctor’s not in?” Baby Bunny’s fleshy face contorted with worry, making it look like the underside of a pumpkin. As always, she brought up the rear of the troupe with her boyfriend, the Living Skeleton, in tow. The shadow of Bunny’s massive frame enveloped the others and shrouded Myrtle’s precious bundle, offering additional protection from the vicious sun. But it wouldn’t last long.

“If they don’t open the door, can we eat it before it goes *poof*?” asked Lionel the Dog-Faced Boy, licking his chops.

“There will be no feeding on the foundlings!” declared a voice with a heavy German accent as the door to the Child Hatchery flew open. A pale man in his early forties appeared in its frame, yanking the sash of his robe to conceal his nightshirt. He swatted Lionel on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper.

“I hate when they do that,” the hairy boy complained, rubbing his furry snout.

“Dr. Couney! Thank God!” Myrtle exclaimed, still trying to catch her breath. “The Nightgaunt—he brought us another one. But I don’t understand why he would leave it so exposed this close to daybreak . . . ?”

“Calm yourself, Myrtle,” said Dr. Couney, patting the knees of her smaller appendages. “Despite his own aversion to the sun, I do not believe the Nightgaunt would be so reckless, no matter how much of a rush he was in.”

The doctor leaned over the bundle and peeled away the blanket as though unwrapping a fragile present. He plucked a wriggling figure from the folds and held it out for all to see. The bright green eyes of a baby girl beamed back at them.

Myrtle and the other Curiosities gasped. Instead of turning to dust, the baby giggled as the sun’s rays glinted off its tender white skin and fine red hair. An odd pattern of dots on the infant’s cheeks sparkled like glitter and then dimmed as the sun grew brighter in the sky.

Myrtle saw a grin spread across Rosita the Painted Lady’s face. Like an artist struck with inspiration, the tattooed woman glanced

at the insides of her wrists and nodded. Other than her face, they were the only remaining spots of unmarked flesh on her body.

Beneath the brim of his floppy fur hat, Zip the What-Is-It peered at something shiny in the blanket. He sunk his huge hand into the soft fabric and pulled out a silver padlock. Running his fingers over some cursive letters on the lock, Zip scratched the tuft of hair on his scalp. Myrtle knew that Zip didn't like words.

A young girl beside Zip—whose head, like his, was shaved except for a patch at the tip to emphasize its small size—extended a frail arm from her pink muumuu and reached for the babe.

“No, Elvira,” Dr. Couney said, gently swatting her wrist. Elvira withdrew her hand, bit her lip, and lowered her tapered cranium.

In the distance, the El Dorado carousel chimed its first refrain of “Twelfth Street Rag.” Couney turned from his fellow attractions, hoisted the infant girl over his head, and let her bathe in the full glow of the morning sun.

“This one is meant for the light.”

CHAPTER ONE

The Magician's Niece

The glow from the distant boardwalk bathed the falling snow in a glimmer of neon. Lacey white fronds peppered the trees and gardens but perished where they touched the street, sidewalk, and other lifeless surfaces.

A small figure sloshed across the street, trying to keep pace with the man who clutched her wrist in his gangly fingers. When they reached the other side, the man thrust an ashen hand in front of the girl. She brushed a layer of icy petals from the brim of her hat so she could see him more clearly.

His cheeks were cleanly shaven but a mustache and goatee crept across his upper lip and down the center of his chin. A snowflake twinkled in the glow of an electric streetlamp. It grazed the man's protruding brow and disintegrated.

Prying her eyes from the man's burning glare, the girl turned her attention to the building that loomed before them. An odd blend of hope and despair coursed through her frigid body.

Twelve-year-old Piper Weiss had stayed at large houses before, but the time had always come for her to go. Not that she'd been

bad or anything. The problem was, strange things always happened around her and she was always sent back to Hollygrove.

Hollygrove was an orphanage—which the children were told was a “bad” word. The people who worked at Hollygrove called it a “foundling home” or a “happiness home.” But that didn’t fool the kids who had to live there.

The places that always sent her back were foster homes. Piper had been in and out of them for as long as she could remember. She had liked two of them because they had lots of bugs and she liked to catch bugs. Once, when a foster family had taken her in as a baby, they had to fend off a colony of bats that swarmed around her crib every night. There was no sign of how they got in.

Another time she had gotten into all sorts of trouble playing Hide 'n' Seek. The other kids had been unable to find her so the foster parents called the police. The officers searched the home from top to bottom. They finally found her in the attic, hanging by her knees from the rafters—asleep in the middle of the day.

Despite the long wraparound coat that concealed her slight frame and the brimless cloche hat that covered her head, Piper shivered. A cloche hat told everyone that you had short hair. It was only possible to get a close-fitting cloche over your skull if your hair was cropped short and flat.

That's why it looked so awkward on Piper. Her frock of red hair grew all over the place. The hat was pulled well over her big green eyes and Piper had to hold her head at a clumsy angle just to see where she was going. Foreheads were unfashionable for girls in the 1920s.

Not that Piper cared all that much about the latest fashion trends. While wealthy women still continued to wear beautifully embellished silk garments and the masses were reveling in their new-found sophistication of fashionable flapper clothes, Piper's wardrobe consisted mostly of hand-me-downs from the Salvation Army.

The few rags that she owned fit comfortably in the small suitcase that she lugged down the slushy sidewalk. Beneath her wraparound coat, Piper wore a pair of faded blue overalls. She envied the carefree flapper style of the middle class but she didn't think any sort of fashion trend would transform her miraculously into another Coco Chanel.

That's because Piper was small and skinny. She had a thin face and bony knees. The only thing she liked about her appearance was the set of ten evenly-spaced freckles on each cheek that formed two stars if you connected the dots.

Piper gazed at the odd-looking townhouse in front of her. It stuck out like a sore thumb amidst the extravagance of New York's Coney Island.

She stood silently because she didn't know what else to do. The old doubts and fears nagged at her. What sort of place had she been brought to? What kind of people lived here? What sort of grim adventure had she embarked upon this time? Everything was happening so fast that it seemed like a wonderful dream and a horrible nightmare all rolled into one.

The house's dark contours provided a jagged contrast to the bright, snow-feathered lights of the Manhattan skyline in the distance. Piper felt an odd vibe around the building, a mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, and barely discernible.

The house's most prominent feature was the hexagonal skylight that graced its roof. The grille crisscrossed the hexagon in such a way that it looked like a wavy "H." It was by far the brightest window in the house and even the snow would not invade its preternatural glow.

"Welcome to your new home, Piper."

The words spilled like gravel from the throat of the man who had accompanied her all the way from Hollygrove.

It had happened shortly after dinner, when all the other kids were either doing their homework or getting ready for bed. Piper

had finished her homework early and, as usual, she wasn't interested in going to bed. She had been playing alone on the staircase when there was a knock at the door.

Mrs. Buckley pushed the chair out from under her ample bottom, mumbling something about the front gate being improperly locked. She didn't like visitors at this hour.

The plump caretaker stormed across the reception room floor and threw open the door. The visitor didn't flinch. He wasn't very tall, but his stiff bearing gave the impression that he towered above Mrs. Buckley. His complexion was pallid and his eyes were like two black caves that seemed tortured by even the faintest light.

"I'm here for the girl Piper Weiss." His voice seemed to echo as though it were coming from a sewer. "I am her father."

Mrs. Buckley glared at the man. She knew, of course, that Piper had been brought to Hollygrove more than twelve years ago by a man named Dr. Couney. She had been abandoned beside a drainpipe near his wondrous hospital for premature babies. Only a tattered blanket and a silver padlock engraved with the name "Weiss" had accompanied the orphaned child. Piper had worn the lock around her neck for as long as she could remember.

"You can't just waltz in here and claim custody of a child without the proper paperwork . . . " Mrs. Buckley began.

The gaunt man ignored her. A red glow emanated from the dark pits of his eyes as though a fire had been stoked inside them. He held Mrs. Buckley with his fiery gaze and said, "Piper Weiss is my daughter."

"Oh . . . of course," Mrs. Buckley stammered, dropping her hands to her sides and walking numbly to her desk. She filled out several forms and handed them to the man who claimed to be Piper's father. Then she leveled her empty eyes at Piper, who had been watching the entire exchange through the baluster posts.

"Go get your things, child," she said without inflection. "Your father is here."

So Piper had gathered up the few possessions that she owned and walked silently out into the snowy twilight with . . . whom? Her father? Surely, Mrs. Buckley wouldn't release her into the custody of a stranger if his claim hadn't been true?

"Keep going."

The man's snarl returned Piper to the moment. They stepped across the slick sidewalk and her father pulled open a wrought-iron gate. The rusty hinges squealed like frightened rats.

"And don't touch anything," the man cautioned as they walked up the stone path.

Piper hardly heard him as her attention wandered from the odd-looking house to the flower garden. Somehow, it was in full bloom . . . in the middle of winter! Wondering if the ice-blue roses were real or artificial, she reached out to touch one. She slid her fingers along the silky underside of its petals and then jerked her hand back when her index finger snagged a thorn.

“Ouch!” Piper gasped, pressing the injured digit to her lips. “Guess it’s real,” she giggled.

She pulled the finger from her mouth and a tiny droplet of blood trickled down it. Her father was not amused. In fact, his eyes blazed with demonic fury. And was it her imagination, or did Piper see froth forming at the corners of his mouth?

“I told you not to touch anything!” the man growled.

Something had been nagging Piper about her father’s appearance. Something less obvious than the gray pallor of his complexion and the hollowness of his dark eyes. Piper had known kids who’d lived on the streets. They had come to the orphanage with that same look on their faces. It was the look of deep, insatiable hunger.

The hunger consumed the man who claimed to be her father. It transformed him into a monster before her eyes. His front teeth extended into two curved barbs.

Piper could see he was struggling with some sort of inner demon. Every nerve in her body told her to run. But fear, confusion, and downright cold rooted her to the spot.

Perhaps it was self-pity that petrified her. The first rule of being an orphan is that you have to let go of the dream that your parents will show up for you any second. She had allowed herself to fall prey to that fantasy. After all these years, she believed she was about to become part of a real family. And now it was being torn from her in the worst way imaginable.

The twisted figure leaped at Piper like a rabid hyena. She gulped and clenched her eyes. But the agony she anticipated never came.

A tremendous wind whipped around her several times and then lift her in the air. She heard her father roar as she soared past his clawing hands. The gust blew her through the front doors that had somehow swung open from what should have been the hinged side.

Piper landed harshly on a tiled floor. She looked up and found herself staring into the billowing tails of a black tuxedo laced with blood-red trim. The tails of the tux fluttered around the figure of a short, sturdy man. Piper could only make out the back of the man's head, which was peppered with gray curls.

The stranger stood between Piper and her father, his stance bold and challenging.

“What foolishness is this?” he demanded with a baritone voice that pierced the dark chill of night like a knife. He made a peculiar gesture with his right hand and the wind simply dissolved.

The curly-haired man relaxed and softened his tone when next he addressed the intruder.

“Hello, Willie. To what do I owe the honor?”

Piper got to her feet and hid behind the man’s tuxedo. She tried to keep an eye on her father while shielding herself from his ravenous stare. The two men obviously knew each other.

Willie? Willie Weiss? That was her father’s name?

But if he wasn’t dead, where had he been all these years? And why had he brought her to the doorstep of this bizarre individual only to attack her?

Question after question shot through Piper’s mind as she continued to watch from behind the expensive cloth of the stranger’s garb. Piper’s father—Willie—seemed to cower slightly, wiping away a string of saliva and covering his mouth as though he were ashamed.

“Not going to invite me in . . . Harry?” he asked, a lugubrious chuckle in his unearthly voice.

“Hardly,” said the man called Harry, as though acknowledging a sick joke between them. He swept his hand aside to indicate Piper

but never looked back to address the child directly. “And this . . . dinner, I presume?”

The casual way he said it appalled Piper and she slid behind the heavy oak door for protection. Were the two of them in league with each other? Was this some sort of conspiracy, some organized cult that plotted to make gourmet meals out of young, abandoned orphans?

“No, dear brother,” Willie replied. “This young lady is going to be your house guest for a while. You will take her in—as a favor to me. After all, I do believe you owe me a favor . . . or two.”

“Maybe so,” admitted Harry, running his hand through his hair. He turned to study the girl and Piper thought he looked familiar. “But why would I wish to have a prepubescent street urchin running around stirring up all sorts of trouble in my home?”

“She’s not a street urchin, Harry,” Willie corrected. “She’s a twelve-year-old girl who’s lived in an orphanage for most of her life. Twelve years, Harry. Do you remember what happened twelve years ago?”

Piper saw the well-dressed man’s body go rigid. Willie seemed to enjoy the discomfort that he was inflicting on his brother.

“Her name is Piper. Piper Weiss.” He paused, allowing the name to register.

“She’s my daughter.” Again, he paused.

“Your niece.”

Piper felt Willie’s crimson gaze turn on her.

“Piper, I’d like you to meet your uncle, Ehrich Weiss . . . a.k.a., the legendary Harry Houdini.”

Harry peered down at the small, red-haired girl and raised an eyebrow. Piper gasped in sudden recognition. He looked a bit older in person, but it was the same strong face, thick nose, and lofty, domed forehead she had seen in newspapers and handbills. His hair, parted in the middle, had grown white at the temples, but it was dark everywhere else, just like in his pictures.

Harry’s thin lips quivered slightly. This man who had appeared so strong and confident only moments ago now stood unnerved by the prospect of a child in his midst.

Piper wasn’t thrilled by the idea either. Her freckles burned like tiny branding irons. For the first time in her life, Piper Weiss wished she were back at Hollygrove.

CHAPTER TWO

The Author's Daughter

Across the Atlantic, a meeting of a different sort was taking place.

On the edge of Ashdown Forest in Crowborough stood a redbrick Victorian villa that its original owner had christened Little Windlesham. Its current residents had enlarged the house to include fourteen bedrooms and five reception rooms. It was maintained by a large domestic staff—Rogers the butler, a cook, five maids, two gardeners, and a chauffeur. The Lord of the Manor often referred to the place as “Swindlesham” because of the cost to maintain it.

The enormous billiard room, which ran from the front to the back of the house, doubled as a ballroom but looked more like a museum. A harp and a grand piano were on display at one end and the billiard table at the other.

The Earl of Stafford's portrait decorated the wall above one of the room's huge limestone fireplaces and a stag's head draped with a bandolier parlayed the other. An assortment of animal-skin rugs adorned the polished wood floor, and there were two large casts of dinosaur footprints on display opposite the billiard table.

A door along the back wall led to a room that used to be a nursery. Here, Lady Doyle was holding court, charming her husband's many influential friends as he looked on with pride.

Lady Doyle had originally viewed the new Spiritualism with nervous distrust. She thought that dabbling in the unknown was risky and unnatural. But she had recently developed a talent for automatic writing, a means of communicating with the other world. Spirits would manipulate her pen and she claimed to have no control over what she was writing.

The gardeners were busy showing Lady Doyle's guests where to park their cars. Rogers greeted the guests at the door and guided them across the billiard room into the old nursery.

One of the visitors, an older gentleman dressed in gray dining attire, spotted a small girl sitting on the staircase outside the billiard room. She was stroking a faded downy quilt that was lying across her lap.

"Hello, Billy!" the man said.

The girl on the stairs blushed and gave the visitor a subtle smile.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wallace," she replied.

Her name was Jean Conan Doyle, after her mother. But she liked to be called Billy. She liked it even more when adults indulged her.

Billy was a reserved thirteen-year-old who enjoyed spending time with her father. She loved playing on the floor of his study and listening to his pen squeak as he worked.

Seven years earlier, on a trip to Australia, her father had told her that there was no such thing as death. “What people call death really means the passing on to another life,” he had said. So from then on, Billy always had this nice feeling that death wasn’t the end.

It was a wartime tragedy that had converted her father to this belief in Spiritualism. Billy’s half-brother Kingsley had died in the Great War. About a year later, her father met a medium who said he could put him in touch with his son.

Billy’s father was a rational man and therefore somewhat skeptical. So the medium agreed to be tied to a chair. Yet amazingly, Kingsley somehow came back—and even made physical contact with him!

Unfortunately, the man’s obsession with his dead son overwhelmed his concern for the living. Shortly after the Australia trip, an eye doctor was stunned that Billy’s father had failed to notice her extremely poor eyesight. That’s because Billy’s father was not only an ophthalmic specialist himself, he was also the creator of the famous detective Sherlock Holmes and should have noticed that without glasses Billy was as blind as a bat.

Rogers ushered the guests into the old nursery. Billy spotted her father beaming behind his walrus mustache at the far end of the séance table.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was over six feet tall and heavily muscled, a giant of a man made even greater by the dignity of his warm personality. But for all that, he was something of an overgrown boy.

Billy heard her mother's voice bellow from inside the room. "Rogers, tell the household that we are not to be disturbed."

The butler drew the blinds and then bowed to Lady Doyle and her guests. He stepped out of the room, closed the door behind him, and took the phone off the hook. Rogers then rushed past Billy to warn the servants in the kitchen not to make a sound.

Clenching her blanket securely to her chest, Billy slid across the billiard room floor in her stocking feet and dropped to her knees. She pressed her ear against the door and continued to stroke the soft, worn quilt.

Séances had become a highlight of the Conan Doyles' social life at Windlesham. Lady Doyle's spirit guide was named Pheneas, who claimed to have died thousands of years ago in the Middle East, near Egypt. He was a leader of men.

Each time Lady Doyle filled a page with Pheneas's spirit writing, Billy could hear her rip it from her notebook and thrust it in front of Sir Arthur to read.

"God has ordained that a great light shall shine into the souls of men through a great external force which is slowly penetrating through into the Earth's atmosphere."

Sir Arthur's booming voice penetrated the heavy door like the sound of a French horn.

"The world of men will not wake otherwise. All the shams and ceremonies must be swept away forever, and only this sweeping power can do that. It will be the biggest thing that has ever happened in the Earth's history, but great blessings will follow. All the shadows will flee away."

"What about Houdini?" asked one of the sitters.

Billy pressed her ear against the door. Harry Houdini and her father had been close friends up until about three years ago. Billy had met Houdini a few times during their travels and the magician always treated her nicely. She loved it when he performed card tricks for her.

Then one summer day in Atlantic City her parents invited Houdini to join them in their suite for a séance. Lady Doyle claimed to have contacted his mother, who had died years earlier.

Lady Doyle filled fifteen sheets with automatic writing in English, each page addressing Houdini as “Harry.” Houdini was deeply annoyed. For one thing, his mother didn’t speak English, she spoke German. For another, Houdini’s birth name was Ehrich. His mother had never called him Harry.

“I was willing to believe, even wanted to believe,” Houdini had said.

Billy felt sad for Mr. Houdini. He had been tricked, and she knew it. That’s when Billy started to suspect that Pheneas might not be all that he claimed to be.

She knew Pheneas had lied because Mr. Wiggly had taken her all over the Otherworld to seek the real spirit of Houdini’s mother. It was nowhere to be found. It was—somewhere else.

The séance in Atlantic City was the start of a bitter feud between Houdini and Billy’s family. Since many of Houdini’s fellow magicians had no idea how to explain his tricks, let alone repeat them, Sir Arthur accused Houdini of working real magic rather than sleight-of-hand.

Many people believed that the self-proclaimed “man from beyond” truly was someone who could pierce the spiritual realm at will. One Spiritualist claimed that he had seen Houdini dematerialize during one of his performances.

The magician had been submerged under water in a locked container. The man said he experienced a great loss of physical energy as Houdini used his powers of dematerialization to pass through the glass and transport himself to the back of the stage.

Sir Arthur asked the public, “Is it not perfectly evident that if he did not deny using real psychic powers, his occupation would be gone forever? What would his brother-magicians have to say to a man who admitted that half his tricks were done by what they would regard as illicit powers? It would be ‘exit Houdini.’”

Houdini, on the other hand, went on a crusade to expose fake Spiritualist mediums. He despised the way that bogus mediums would take advantage of people’s grief by pretending to communicate with dead loved ones.

“Money taken for contacting spirits is the dirtiest money ever earned on this earth,” he claimed. “These so-called Spiritualists are getting money under religious disguise.”

But Houdini’s honorable mission quickly degenerated into an obsessive desire to unmask *all* mediums. He began to exploit their “tricks” by duplicating them during public displays. He boasted that he could expose any medium as a fraud and soon became known as the greatest scourge of the Spiritualist movement.

So Billy knew that the fate Pheneas would pronounce on Houdini would be cruel.

“Houdini is going rapidly to his Waterloo,” her father read from the spirit writings. “He is doomed! Doomed! A terrible future awaits him.”

Billy wondered why Houdini’s destiny was an issue at all. Pheneas had already told them that 1926 would be the year of doom. Billy continued to listen to the frantic scribbling of Lady Doyle’s pen.

“In October, the Earth will be shaken from the sky. There will be great loss of life. It will be terrific. All humanity will be shaken to the core. Shams will then fall away. God will come into his own. After that comes the deluge. No one will suffer that should be spared. God is love. Remember that. It will be like a great sieve passing through all that is worthless, retaining only the fruit.”

When Billy heard her father’s ominous declaration, she knew that time was running out. It was December. The great crisis of the world was at hand—the Earth had less than a year to live. She was in the end times. And somehow it was tied to Houdini.

Billy was convinced that Pheneas’s goal was not as noble as he made it sound. Yes, he wanted to bring peace to the Earth by eliminating humanity’s destructive urges—but that could only be accomplished by removing its collective soul entirely.

Pheneas would be powerless, however, unless he could get some willing instruments to work through. The Spiritualist movement was strong, but was it strong enough? Would Houdini be the savior that would expose the true nature of the movement, shaking it to its very core? Or would his own demise somehow hasten the end of all things?

Pheneas isn't a spirit, Billy thought. He's something else. Something rotten. She rocked on her knees, clutching and petting the blanket in long, quick strokes. Her eyes rolled up into her head until only the whites showed.

Nuzzling the quilt beside her ear, she whispered in a voice altogether different from her own, “Do not take lightly the words of Pheneas the Pretender. There is confusion in the astral realm—the spirits are fearful. The abyss between the living and the dead grows thinner. This once impenetrable gulf is now infiltrated on both sides by demonic forces that have begun to assault the physical and spiritual planes. For the human race to survive, the girl must survive. But for the girl to survive, the magician must die.”

Billy's eyes returned to normal and she stopped petting the quilt. She stared blankly at it. “A girl? Do you mean me, Mr. Wriggly?”

She was suddenly aware of the sound of chiffon rustling beyond the door. Lady Doyle had risen from her chair and was smoothing out her dress. Her trance had been broken and the séance had ended.

Billy's mother invited her guests to enjoy a taste of wine and tea in the billiard room. Billy tried to stand. But because she was still leaning against the door when her mother pulled it opened, she fell in.

“Billy!”

Lady Doyle was strikingly good-looking for a woman in her early fifties. She retained most of her dark blonde hair, with only a few strands of gray mixed in. Her green eyes fixated on her daughter.

Despite the initial tinge of anger in her voice, the Lady tousled her daughter's hair and dismissed her with a playful affront.

“You little rascal! Were you listening in?”

The woman laughed elegantly and, with a pirouette worthy of Clara Bow, she led the visitors single-file past her daughter and into the billiard room.

Sir Arthur was last in the procession and he grinned down at Billy. But she could sense the nervousness behind his façade. Had he been shaken by Pheneas's prediction too?

“Still dragging the disreputable folds of that absurd rag with you everywhere you go, Billy?” His smile turned slightly sympathetic. “I’m sorry to say, it will not bring him back.”

Sir Arthur walked away without picking up his head, and she thought she heard him say, “It won’t bring any of us back.”

Billy scrambled into the nursery, closed the door behind her, and collapsed against it. She pulled the quilt close to her face and dabbed the tears that were dripping beneath her glasses.

“Oh, Mr. Wiggly. I must warn Mr. Houdini! But I can’t just call him up—he lives all the way across the Atlantic. Besides, why would he believe me, the daughter of his sworn enemy?”

She thought for a moment, biting her fingernails and rocking back and forth. Then she had a rather clever idea.

“I know!” She jumped to her feet. “If I can’t tell him, I’ll *show* him! He’s a sensible man. How often has Father said that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?”

She bit her lower lip and stared into the thread-worn quilt. “Of course, we’ll be risking detention again, Mr. Wiggly. But I hear the new Imperatrix isn’t nearly as dreadful as Mrs. Mathers.”

Then she glanced around as if someone might have heard her. *No one could be that dreadful*, she thought.