

Prologue

APPROACHING NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA, 1914

Dear Friend,

I have never told this story before for fear of not being believed — or, worse, ridiculed. The strange circumstances of my childhood have inclined me to have faith in only that which can be proven by science or verified by research, yet this tale defies both methods of inquiry.

It is difficult to know where to start such a story as the one I am about to recount, but I believe my tale has its roots in events that all occurred on a single day in 1898, well before the even more remarkable happenings of 1912. The things that occurred in 1898 led me on a path that, as I look back on it now, seems predestined.

That day in my early childhood is emblazoned in my mind. All that I know about my life before that, I have been told by others. But the events of that most remarkable day I recall as though they had been photographed.

Now I am on a train headed toward Nova Scotia in Canada. I am propped against my suitcase writing this

chronicle, partly in order to make sense of all that has happened, and partly to occupy my time and steady my nerves.

So much is at stake now.

My story, which I believe will have its final resolution in the next few hours, was set in motion on the day I witnessed my mother, Maude Taylor, in a spirit trance, contacting the dead for the very first time.

Chapter 1

NEW YORK CITY, 1898

I edged behind a burgundy drape as my mother raised her arms wide and began to sway rhythmically, eyes shut, head thrown back. An expression of earnest supplication suffused her delicate-featured face. Her reddish brown curls swung behind her. “Speak to me, Mary Adelaide Tredwell,” she intoned in her full, throaty voice. “Cease your lonely haunting of this house and come to us!”

She was seated at a round table. To her right were two middle-aged women, their hair plaited high on their heads, lace framing their hopeful faces. Owners of the house, they watched my mother with intense, expectant eyes. To her left was a balding, ill-at-ease man of about seventy.

“Your sisters, Gertrude and Julia, are here,” Mother went on. “They sense your presence in this house. They have heard your footsteps at night, noticed the furniture you have moved. Your husband, Mr. Richards, has joined

us, as well. It is their dearest wish that you make yourself known to those of us present now.”

The luxurious drapes had been drawn, separating the white blast of afternoon light from the elegant, high-ceilinged room. In the deep alcove behind the curtains, I could turn toward the street to see life proceeding as usual: horse-drawn wagons trotting down cobblestoned streets and women walking with parasols to protect them from the blazing summer sun, their male partners properly attired in top hat and coat despite the heat. It was reassuring to be reminded that normal life was going on, especially when compared to the scene unfolding within the darkened parlor room.

I peered back through the break in the curtain and watched as my mother placed her hand on the table and told the others to do the same. “You have been haunting this house of your childhood, Mary Adelaide. Tarry no longer in the shadows of the afterlife. Those who have loved you in life wish to know you still.”

A soft hand not much larger than my own reached out to clutch my fingers. My sister Mimi had also been shaken by the eeriness of it all and had come behind the curtain to hide. Ever the protective one, she had pulled our twin two-year-old sisters, Amelie and Emma, asleep together in their large perambulator, behind the drape with her.

How old must we have been then? I am certain it was

the summer of 1898, which would mean I had just turned four and Mimi was six.

Mimi's large, amber brown eyes sparked with terror even as her heart-shaped face radiated its startling beauty. With the hand not holding mine, she nervously twisted one of her curly, raven black locks around her finger, a habit she would retain all her life.

Even though Mimi looked as terrified as I felt, it was a comfort to have my big sister there holding my hand. She might not be able to save me from any horror that could arise from this summoning of the dead, but even at that young age I was confident that she would never abandon me.

With my medium brown hair and more ordinary looks, I would always see myself as a plain brown sparrow next to her glossy beauty. But it never mattered. We were so close that I experienced her glory as simply a reason for sisterly pride.

A woman's sharp gasp riveted us to the scene. The table had begun to tip, first to one side, and then to the other. The two women gazed at it, agape with horror. The man craned his neck below its top, searching for the source of this movement.

The tipping increased in speed. The banging of its three-legged pedestal as it lifted from side to side on the wooden parquet floor created an unsettling clatter.