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Seances at Holloway House

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Introduction

By lamplight and breath held in common, the parlor at Holloway House makes a theater of longing. Here, in a decade when mourning clothes outnumber bridal lace and science argues with scripture in the papers, a circle of seekers gathers around a table waxed to a gleam. They come for messages, certainly, but also for absolution, for a name spoken aloud in the right voice, for a touch that does not startle the living body yet makes the heart shudder. The room has been arranged for tenderness as much as terror; velvet curtains dull the street's clatter, and the trumpet waits on its stand like a promise.

This is a book about the strange routes desire can take when it is not safe to travel in daylight. In these pages, people ask spirits to carry what they cannot dare to speak face to face. Confessions are delivered at a remove—through raps, through automatic script, through a medium whose pulse quickens with borrowed words. To speak through another is to risk being misheard; to yearn at a distance is to imagine consent as a glow traveling across wires. The circle at Holloway House believes that yearning itself is a summons. The danger, and the beauty, lie in how the living answer.

Letters thread the house like nerves. Some are secreted behind skirting boards, some tucked inside hymnals, others folded into bodices, warm against the skin. Writing promises precision: a signature, a date, a testimony no breath can erase. And yet those letters become, in the presence of candles and deep attention, almost as volatile as voices. They are props for conjuration, yes, but also proofs of the ordinary courage required to declare oneself in a world that punishes candor. A letter can cross rooms where touch cannot. A letter can confess, and haunt.

Grief is the first language of many who assemble here. The Victorian appetite for séances did not spring from credulity alone; it grew from the arithmetic of loss—children taken by fever, lovers by war, wives by childbirth, futures by class and convention. In Holloway House, grief is not a pathology to be cured but a climate to be survived, and the mediums are its weather-readers. The supernatural in this story wears the texture of the everyday: the scent of orris at a wrist, the tremor of a teacup, the low cough of a coal grate. What the characters summon is not only company from the other side but also permission to continue among the living.

Consent, in such a room, is a negotiation with silence. Who owns a voice that travels through another's mouth? Whose boundaries are marked when a confession arrives by candlelight and collective wish? The circle's rules—who sits where, who holds whose hand, who may ask and who must answer—are as binding as any contract and as fragile as ash. When attraction enters this choreography, the danger sharpens. Some

disclosures liberate; others ensnare. The difference is felt not in the rhetoric of love but in the aftermath of hearing it.

Holloway House itself is a participant, memory-laden and observant. The corridors hold drafts of older conversations; the mirrors keep watch. Its rooms teach the living how to listen, and how not to. The supernatural ambience here is not escapism but an instrument tuned to psychological realism. You will find phenomena—the trumpet lifted, the table stirred—but you will also find the quieter vibrations of shame, hope, and the sober knowledge that a heart cannot be obliged by spectacle to open.

If you join the circle, come as the house requires: with skepticism enough to keep your footing and tenderness enough to hear what trembles at the edge of speech. This story follows the consequences of messages sent and received, of love declared where the air is charged and the witnesses are not all living. Attend to the knocks, yes, but more to the pauses between them. In that hush lies the boundary between longing and trespass, and the choice each soul must make about how—and whether—to answer when called.

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CHAPTER ONE: Arrival at Holloway House

The omnibus rattled Hugh's teeth and his resolve in equal measure. He gripped the worn leather strap, watching the transition of London from the respectable, gas-lit avenues of Marylebone to the dimmer, slightly more chaotic streets leading toward Islington. The air grew thinner on propriety, thicker with the smells of coal smoke and wet paving stones. Hugh, a man whose professional life was dedicated to the precise, measurable world of engineering—specifically, the structural integrity of new railway bridges—felt acutely misplaced. His purpose for being here, traveling toward a house rumored to be haunted by spirits and scandal, was both ludicrous and entirely necessary.

He carried a small, tightly packed valise containing clean collars, a ledger for notes, and a worn copy of *The Principles of Light and Shade*. He'd chosen the name 'Holloway House' from a list provided by his acquaintance, Dr. Ellery, a fellow of the Royal Society and a man deeply disturbed by the burgeoning popular fascination with spiritualism. Dr. Ellery maintained that these séances were merely parlor tricks preying on the bereaved, and he had offered Hugh a significant sum to infiltrate the most prominent circle, observe its mechanics, and produce an exhaustive report on the chicanery involved. Hugh considered himself a rationalist, an absolute devotee of demonstrable fact, and yet, the prospect stirred a nervous excitement entirely unbecoming of an engineer.

Holloway House, when he finally stood before it, was less grand and more fatigued than he had imagined. It was a three-story Victorian dwelling, brick blackened by years of city grime, with tall, narrow windows that looked perpetually blind. A small, neatly tended garden was bordered by iron railings, giving the impression that the house was attempting to hold the world at bay. The atmosphere was not gothic or overtly sinister, but rather intensely private. It spoke of secrets maintained in deep silence, a place where the curtains were drawn not to keep the sun out, but to keep the gaze of the street from entering.

Hugh adjusted his cravat, lifted the heavy brass knocker—a stylized face of a melancholy woman—and let it fall with a heavy thud that seemed to absorb the sound rather than project it. He was not arriving as an investigator, of course, but as a genuine 'seeker,' a man newly afflicted by the gnawing curiosity of the age. He'd fabricated a backstory involving a deceased fiancée and a need for closure, relying on the spiritualists' reputation for welcoming those with fresh grief.

The door was opened by a maid, small and perpetually weary-looking, who wore a uniform so starched it seemed to stand away from her body. Her eyes darted over

Hugh's respectable but unfashionable suit, cataloging his likely social standing and his degree of nervousness.

"Good evening, sir. You must be Mr. Thorne." Her voice was barely a whisper, as though the air itself might carry messages the living were not meant to hear.

"Indeed. I wrote to Mrs. Hallows two days ago."

"Please come in. The séance is scheduled for half-past eight. She is waiting in the drawing-room."

The interior of the house was a contradiction. The entrance hall was chilly, smelling of old wood and faint dust, but intensely plush. Heavy Turkish carpets muffled his footsteps. Every surface was draped, polished, or obscured. Hugh felt immediately that he was walking into an atmosphere designed for controlled sensation. The gaslights were turned low, creating deep pools of shadow that softened the edges of reality.

He was led down a short, curved corridor and into the drawing-room, which was far brighter than the hall, though still subdued. This was clearly the preparation area, not the séance chamber itself. Mrs. Hallows, the mistress of Holloway House and the organizer of the circle, was seated by the fireplace, reviewing some papers.

Mrs. Hallows was not the ethereal, pale creature Hugh had expected. She was perhaps fifty, robust, dressed in heavy velvet that did not apologize for her figure, and possessed of eyes that were startlingly clear and shrewd. Her hair, worn in tight black curls, seemed to absorb all the available light. She looked less like a mystic communing with the dead and more like a successful theatrical agent—which, Hugh supposed, was not entirely inaccurate.

"Mr. Thorne," she said, rising with surprising speed. Her handshake was firm, her skin warm. "We are so pleased you could join us. Dr. Ellery spoke highly of your sensitivity."

Hugh nearly stumbled. "Dr. Ellery? I... I did not mention his name in my letter."

Mrs. Hallows offered a brief, knowing smile. "My dear man, Dr. Ellery speaks of all of us to anyone who will listen, primarily to denounce us. It is, shall we say, a symbiotic relationship. His outrage lends us credence. We are quite accustomed to receiving his 'skeptical enquirers.' You may stop pretending to mourn your unfortunate fiancée, though the effort was quite touching."

Hugh felt a flush creep up his neck. His carefully constructed facade had collapsed in less than sixty seconds. He stood straighter, realizing that intellectual honesty might

be the better course, especially if he wished to remain inside the circle.

“Very well, Mrs. Hallowes. I confess, I am here to observe. I study mechanics and structure. I find phenomena fascinating, but I do not currently believe in disembodied intelligence. I am a rationalist seeking explanation.”

Mrs. Hallowes gestured him toward a velvet armchair, already warmed by the fire. “Excellent. Skepticism is merely an inverted form of devotion, Mr. Thorne. It requires immense energy to maintain disbelief in the face of widespread conviction. We require your skepticism. It provides the crucial magnetic resistance necessary to anchor the communications. Total believers, you see, float away too easily.”

She sat back down, picking up a silver locket on a chain around her neck. “Our circle is small and stable. We are not interested in the grand, public theatricals favored by certain American mediums. We seek intimacy, and above all, truth—emotional truth, if not always factual. You will sit tonight and merely observe. You will hold hands, you will listen, and you will refrain from making any sudden movements, whether from excitement or from exposure of the mechanisms.”

“And if I discover trickery?” Hugh asked, pushing the limits of their détente.

Mrs. Hallowes tilted her head slightly. “Then you may write your report, Mr. Thorne. But I ask you to consider the possibility that ‘trickery’ is simply the most readily available term for phenomena which defy your current vocabulary of steel and steam. Sometimes, the spirit world requires a little stage management to be properly heard by heavy, material ears.”

She then spent the next few minutes detailing the house rules, which centered mainly on decorum, silence, and the prohibition of any metal objects, save wedding rings, during the sitting. Hugh noted her precise language: she never promised ghosts, only ‘communications,’ ‘manifestations,’ and ‘energy.’

“You will be sitting with Mrs. Beatrice Ainsley, whose husband is currently away on business, and who seeks advice on matters of finance. Mr. George Vane, a gentleman in the publishing trade, who has recently lost his father. And our medium, of course: Miss Evelyn Audley.”

The mention of the medium’s name caused Mrs. Hallowes’ voice to drop to a level of almost reverent intimacy. “Miss Audley is new to our circle, possessing an extraordinary, and sometimes inconvenient, degree of sensitivity. We must be very careful with her energy. She will be exhausted afterward.”

“Is she a full trance medium?” Hugh inquired.

“She enters a state of deep absorption. She channels script and occasionally speaks. But her greatest strength is the creation of the *rapport*—the emotional connection between the sitters and the realm of the departed. She allows their unarticulated yearnings to find form.”

Hugh scribbled a quick note in his ledger, disguised under the heading of ‘Thermal Dynamics’: *Medium = Evelyn Audley. Focus on ‘Rapport.’ Emotional transference.*

A discrete knock sounded at the drawing-room door. The maid reappeared, announcing the arrival of the other guests. Hugh watched them enter with a renewed sense of purpose.

First came Mrs. Ainsley, a woman whose silks rustled with cautious opulence. She looked fragile, her eyes wide and slightly nervous, continually smoothing the gloves she wore. She was clearly seeking not a dead relative, but perhaps an escape from a difficult financial reality, or perhaps just company. Her grief seemed manufactured, applied like an expensive scent.

Mr. Vane, the publisher, was the next. He was a small, intense man with spectacles perched low on his nose and an air of intellectual superiority that struggled to mask deep, raw sadness. His coat was slightly too formal, too dark. He greeted Mrs. Hallowes with profound courtesy but only gave the briefest, most suspicious nod to Hugh. Vane looked like a man who believed in the spirits not because he wanted miracles, but because he demanded justice.

The final arrival was Miss Audley herself, and the temperature of the room seemed to drop by several degrees upon her entrance. Evelyn Audley was younger than Hugh had anticipated, perhaps twenty-two or three, dressed in a simple, high-necked gown of charcoal grey. She was strikingly pale, with hair the color of midnight that seemed too heavy for her delicate frame. Her presence was profoundly quiet, drawing the attention of the entire room not through volume but through absence.

She carried nothing but a single, folded linen handkerchief. Her eyes, large and shadowed, met Hugh’s across the room, and for a startling moment, Hugh felt a sudden, sharp jolt of awareness—as if she had seen straight through his railway engineer façade and glimpsed the calculating skeptic beneath. The glance lasted barely a second, yet it conveyed a profound understanding.

Mrs. Hallowes made the introductions quickly, emphasizing the need for silence and composure. Hugh found himself nodding, captivated by the medium’s stillness. She seemed already halfway between realms, breathing shallowly, her hands held clasped tightly before her.

“The room is prepared,” Mrs. Hallows announced. “Mr. Thorne, you will sit between Mrs. Ainsley and Miss Audley tonight. The seating arrangements are important for balancing the energies.”

Hugh felt a slight tightening in his stomach at the thought of being physically linked to the medium—the very conduit of the suspected deception—for what might be an hour or more. But he accepted the instruction with a practiced bow. Proximity was precisely what he required to observe the mechanics.

Mrs. Hallows led the small group out of the drawing-room and down the corridor, turning toward a back staircase that descended into what Hugh immediately recognized as the servants’ quarters, or perhaps a specially prepared cellar. The air grew immediately cooler, the darkness deeper. This space, he realized, was structurally isolated from the noise of the house and the street. *Ideal conditions for acoustic deception*, he noted mentally.

They were ushered into a small, windowless chamber. It was draped entirely in thick, black velvet—walls, ceiling, and floor. Even the door was covered, sealing the room in total darkness once closed. The air was close and carried the peculiar scent of ozone and dried flowers. In the center sat a heavy, round mahogany table, upon which rested a single, small oil lamp turned down to a mere point of light. Next to the lamp was an empty space for the trumpet—a cone-shaped device designed, Hugh knew, to amplify the purported spirit voices.

Mrs. Hallows lit two small candles and placed them in hurricane lamps against the wall, reducing the central light. This, she explained, was to allow their eyes to adjust, and to allow the spirits to gather their material energy. Hugh noticed the candles were placed well away from the table.

“Please take your seats,” Mrs. Hallows instructed, taking the head of the table. Mr. Vane sat to her right, and Mrs. Ainsley to her left. Hugh settled stiffly into his chair next to Mrs. Ainsley, and Miss Audley took the seat next to him, completing the circle.

The proximity to the medium was immediately disquieting. Miss Audley was a collection of sharp angles and fragile bones. He could feel the faint warmth of her presence beside him, the lightest movement of her dress fabric against his arm. She was silent, her breathing already shallow and rhythmic.

Mrs. Hallows gave the final instructions. “We will now join hands. The circle must not be broken under any circumstances. Hold firmly, but gently. Relax your minds, and allow your emotions to surface. We seek openness, not performance.”

Hugh stretched his hands out. His right hand met Mrs. Ainsley’s, whose grip was dry and hesitant. His left hand met Miss Audley’s. Her skin was startlingly cool, and her

hand felt alarmingly small and inert in his. It was the hand of a statue, not a living person. He felt a sudden, wholly irrational urge to rub warmth back into it, a protective instinct that warred violently with his commitment to scientific detachment. He tightened his grip slightly, anchoring himself to the material world.

Mrs. Hallows extinguished the candles. The small, isolated point of light from the oil lamp made the shadows in the room absolute. Hugh could no longer discern the faces of the others, only the faint shimmer of the table's surface and the rhythmic creak of the chairs.

"We sit now in silence," Mrs. Hallows intoned, her voice low and resonant, "and invite the attention of those who have crossed the threshold. We are here with purpose, with respect, and with love. Let the spirit of truth prevail."

The silence that descended was heavy, almost physical. It pressed against the eardrums. Hugh focused intently on the structure of the room, listening for the faint cough of a concealed confederate, the scrape of a wire, or the subtle manipulation of a mechanism. He focused on the contact points: the table, the floor, the cold hand in his.

The minutes stretched into an uncomfortable duration. Hugh began to feel the heat of the circle, the shared breath of the sitters. He felt the nervous, slightly clammy hand of Mrs. Ainsley, and the utterly unwavering, cold touch of Miss Audley. It was the medium's hand that unsettled him most—it felt like a conducting wire, drawing energy from him without returning any of its own.

Then, the first manifestation came, not as a sound, but as an alteration in the air itself. A faint, sweet scent—like very old, dried roses, the kind pressed between the pages of a forgotten book—pervaded the small chamber. It was subtle, yet distinct enough to cut through the smell of dust and oil.

Mrs. Ainsley gasped softly, squeezing Hugh's hand almost painfully.

"Patience," Mrs. Hallows whispered.

Hugh registered the smell. *Possible mechanism: scented spray or atomizer concealed near the grate.* But the sensation did not stop there. The table, a massive, heavy piece of furniture that Hugh judged would require serious effort to shift, began to tremble beneath his fingertips. It was not a violent rocking, but a rapid, almost electrical vibration, like a vast, humming insect trapped just beneath the wood. The vibration traveled up his arms, into his chest.

The medium's hand, resting in his, began to move. It was the first sign of life he had observed in her since entering the room. Her fingers curled and uncurled twice, a

delicate, spastic movement, before settling again, her grip strengthening slightly.

A sharp, clear rap sounded on the underside of the table, directly beneath Mr. Vane's seat. *Tock*. It was undeniably audible, sharp and mechanical.

Mr. Vane inhaled sharply, his distress palpable even in the darkness.

"Welcome," Mrs. Hallows said, her voice full of controlled emotion. "We welcome the communicating intelligence."

Another rap sounded, slightly fainter. *Tock. Tock*.

"Are you a friend?" Mrs. Hallows asked the empty air.

Tock.

"Are you here for one of us in particular?"

Tock. Tock.

"Are you here for Mr. Vane?"

A single, resounding *Tock* that seemed to vibrate the floorboards. Hugh, despite his resolve, felt a chill trace down his spine. The precision of the response was remarkable. He tried to determine the point of origin for the sound, analyzing the acoustics of the heavily draped room, but the sound seemed to arrive from everywhere and nowhere simultaneously.

He turned his focus entirely to Miss Audley's hand. He could feel the tension mounting in her small body beside him. Her fingers were now rigid, and her pulse, which he could just detect beneath the cool skin, was hammering with an alarming speed. He realized, with a sense of sudden clarity, that if there was any conscious manipulation of the séance—if the raps were being produced by a mechanical device—it was not being done by this girl. She was in genuine, physical distress. She was the anchor, and the current was pulling at her.

Mrs. Hallows began questioning the entity, establishing the classic code: one rap for yes, two for no, three for uncertainty. The exchange focused entirely on Mr. Vane's recently deceased father, confirming details that seemed too intimate for general knowledge—the man's profession, his fondness for a specific type of German pipe, the name of his favorite dog. Mr. Vane's sorrow filled the room, making the air thick and difficult to breathe.

Then, the tone of the communication shifted. The raps became hesitant, fragmented.

“Is there something else you wish to communicate, Father?” Mr. Vane asked, his voice cracking with hope.

The raps answered, *Tock. Tock. Tock.* (Uncertainty).

Mrs. Hallows interpreted: “The message is difficult to form. Perhaps a different channel is required.” She turned her attention to the medium. “Miss Audley, surrender your consciousness to the impulse. Let the energy flow through you.”

Hugh felt a distinct tremor run through Miss Audley’s entire body. She leaned heavily against his arm, and her grip on his hand became an involuntary clench, bordering on pain. He could hear her breath catching in a series of ragged little hitches.

And then, Miss Audley spoke. It was not her earlier, quiet voice. The voice that emerged from her throat was deeper, rougher, filled with a smoker’s rasp and the cadences of a man who spent his life yelling across the roar of printing presses.

“The letters. The letters in the house. Tell him to burn them.”

The voice was unmistakably masculine, elderly, and entirely foreign to the medium’s slight form. Hugh stared into the darkness, his engineer’s logic momentarily suspended by the sheer, unsettling reality of the sound issuing from the young woman beside him. He felt the cold shock of genuine wonder—a feeling he had not experienced since childhood.

Mr. Vane cried out, a sound half-gasp, half-sob. “Father? Which letters? I don’t understand!”

“Behind the wainscot,” the voice groaned through Miss Audley’s mouth, sounding strained and agonizingly present. “The blue room. Burn them, or the shame will cling to the ledger.”

Miss Audley’s body went utterly rigid, then slumped forward slightly against the table edge. Hugh tightened his hold on her hand instinctively, steadying her. The deep, heavy voice was gone, replaced only by the medium’s rapid, shallow breathing. The moment of true, unverified phenomena had passed, leaving behind a profound psychological wreckage.

“The circle is breaking,” Mrs. Hallows announced quickly, her voice betraying a hint of triumphant relief. “Hold fast. Mr. Vane, you have received your message. You must now find quiet and consider its meaning.”

The table, which had been vibrating, stilled instantly. The scent of dried roses faded.

The room was just a dark cellar again.

Mrs. Hallows relit the candles. In the faint, flickering light, Hugh observed the medium. Miss Audley was utterly drained, leaning heavily into his side, her eyes closed, beads of sweat glistening on her forehead. Mr. Vane was staring blankly at the tabletop, his lower lip trembling. Mrs. Ainsley looked more frightened than ever, her nervousness now tinged with existential terror.

Hugh knew, with the certainty of structural analysis, that whatever mechanisms were at play in Holloway House, Miss Audley was not running them. She was merely the instrument, the human wire that allowed the current to pass. And the message itself—cryptic, specific, and intensely emotional—was far more disturbing than any physical knock could have been. The shame would cling to the ledger.

“The sitting is concluded,” Mrs. Hallows declared. “We thank Miss Audley for her sacrifice.” She looked directly at Hugh, her shrewd eyes seeming to hold a question mark. *Well, Mr. Thorne? Was that mechanics?*

Hugh released the medium’s hand. His own palm was now sticky with nervous sweat and the odd, lingering cold of her touch. He stood slowly, his mind already racing, attempting to classify the event: Ventriloquism? Post-hypnotic suggestion? Or simply a profound psychological manifestation of Mr. Vane’s deepest fears, channeled through a highly sensitive accomplice?

He realized his first night had yielded far more than he expected: not just mechanical observation, but a deep, unsettling plunge into the psychological realism of spiritualism. And it had put him, the rational engineer, directly in contact with the young woman who was the emotional epicenter of the entire enterprise. As Miss Audley was gently helped to her feet by Mrs. Hallows, she opened her eyes briefly and met Hugh’s gaze one last time. There was no recognition in her eyes, only a blank, terrifying exhaustion. She had given something away, and Hugh felt certain he was the one who was now expected to retrieve the pieces.

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