

THE CLIFF HOUSE STRANGLER

CHAPTER ONE

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this!” Robert Campbell grumbled.

As if to punctuate this complaint, jagged bolts of lightning flashed across the night sky, followed by a resounding clap of thunder. That brief burst of light revealed my companion’s tense face as the cabby’s frightened horse nearly ran our brougham off the road. Eddie Cooper – the young lad I’d met several months ago during the Russian Hill murders – quickly brought the dappled-gray under control. Unfortunately, he seemed disinclined to lessen his horse’s pace as the first heavy drops of rain splashed onto the roof of the carriage.

My tall, brusque colleague – until recently one of my co-workers at the prestigious San Francisco law firm of Shepard, Shepard, McNaughton and Hall – pressed his face against the window to glare outside at what was rapidly turning into a downpour.

“I told you we were in for a storm. But no, nothing would do but that you drag me out to Land’s End in the middle of a hurricane. And for a séance, of all the bizarre—“

“Oh, for the love of heaven!” I sighed, fighting to retain my patience. Robert Campbell, who had proved to be a loyal ally in several past adventures, nonetheless could exhaust the fortitude of a saint. “Hurricanes occur in the tropics. This is nothing more than a rainstorm. Do stop being so melodramatic.”

Naturally, he ignored me. “If your brother Samuel is so het up to write an article about ghosts and goblins, why didn’t he make this ridiculous trip himself?”

“For the dozenth time, Samuel had to leave for Sacramento this morning. And as he has not as yet acquired the ability to be in two places at once, he asked me to go in his stead.” I was forced to grip the seat, as our carriage wheels bounced over a deep pothole, resulting in a fresh mumble of curses from my disgruntled companion. “Robert, be honest. Aren’t you the least bit curious about Madame Karpova? The city has talked of little else for weeks. From what I’ve heard, her European tour earlier this year was a huge success.”

He gave a low grunt. “I don’t have any patience for gullible people who believe that this – this charlatan can actually communicate with the dead.”

He jerked as another flash of lightning threw the bleak countryside into stark illumination. “And why in god’s name does she have to perform her parlor tricks all the way out at the Cliff House, instead of some decently dry room in the city?” He ran his fingers through his unruly mop of red hair, causing it to stick up in small, irregular patches. I also noted that his Scottish ‘rs’ were rolling along nicely, becoming ever more pronounced as the storm intensified.

Not wishing to encourage Robert’s bad temper with a response, I silently busied myself straightening the folds of my dark lavender skirt, particularly the horizontal pleating which had become tangled with my boots during the uneven ride. My unhappy colleague did not take the hint.

“It’s a mystery to me why Junius Foster agreed to this crazy idea in the first place. Lieutenant Foster has been managing the Cliff House for fifteen years, and damn profitably, too. What do you suppose possessed him to turn the place over to a Russian tea leaf reader, of all things?”

“Apparently Madame Karpova has some very influential admirers in San Francisco Society,” I replied, determined not to be pulled into another one of Robert’s pointless arguments. “I’ve never been to the Cliff House myself, but Madame Karpova evidently claims the place possesses a unique atmosphere conducive to ethereal vibrations.”

“Good lord, Sarah! Do you hear yourself?”

“Oh, do calm down, Robert. I’m merely repeating what Madame Karpova is reported to have said. I suggest you put away your preconceptions for the evening, and approach the experience with an open mind.”

He muttered something largely unintelligible by way of a reply, then once again came an inch out of his seat when another flash of lightning lit the carriage. It was quickly followed by a clash of thunder.

“Try to relax,” I said, steadfastly ignoring the frayed state of my own nerves. “I’m sure this bit of weather will soon play itself out.”

Half an hour later, I was forced to eat these words. Not only had the “bit of weather” not dissipated by the time we reached our destination, it had developed into a full-fledged deluge, made worse by erratically gusting winds.

Successfully negotiating the last rugged stretch of muddy road leading up the cliff, Eddie reined up in front of what had become popularly known as the “second” Cliff House. It had acquired this name some ten years earlier when Lieutenant Junius Foster added two large wings to the original structure which, heretofore, had primarily consisted of a saloon and dining establishment. This ambitious remodeling provided hotel accommodations for moneyed guests who, after an over-priced dinner, chose to postpone their long trek back to the city until the following morning. From rumors I’d heard, these rooms were just as frequently occupied by politicians and gamblers, or by gentlemen seeking a convenient trysting place to bring their paramours.

I looked out the carriage window at the single-storied edifice perched high above the northwest tip of San Francisco. One of the reasons for the Cliff House’s burgeoning popularity was the spectacular view it afforded of the entrance to the Golden Gate – at least on a clear day. Tonight, the churning black sea crashed against Seal Rocks as if determined to crush them into sand. And for once there was no sign of the sea lions, otters and seals responsible for naming the famous rocks, even though they commonly cavorted upon the sandstone cliffs at night. Perhaps Robert was right, I thought, looking out at driving sheets of rain, most sensible mammals would not venture out on a night like this.

Descending from his perch at the front of the brougham, Eddie Cooper opened the carriage door and handed me an umbrella. I nodded gratefully, although I feared it would do little to protect us from the torrent, which, at the moment, was pouring almost horizontally down upon us from the west.

“Take the brougham around to the carriage sheds, Eddie,” I shouted, in order to be heard above the howling wind. “After you’ve wiped the horse down, go to the kitchen. I’ve made arrangements for you to be given food and something hot to drink.”

“Righto, Miss,” Eddie replied, his youthful enthusiasm not in the least diminished by the storm. He looked furtively around, then pulled a heavy brown stocking from his coat pocket. By the way it jangled as he whacked the sock into his palm, I guessed he’d filled the toe with a goodly number of coins, making it into an effective, if somewhat primitive, cosh. “If you or Mr. Campbell need me, Miss, just call out.”

I wasn’t sure whether to smile or frown at this improvised, if serious-looking, weapon. “I’m sure that won’t prove necessary, Eddie. But it’s good to know you’ve come prepared.”

With a conspiratorial wink, Eddie helped me out of the carriage and I opened the umbrella. As Robert and I danced about trying to avoid the larger mud puddles, the boy leapt back onto his seat at the front of the brougham and clicked the horse off in the direction of the carriage sheds. True to my fears, the umbrella was next to useless as Robert and I hurried up the wooden stairs to the Cliff House entrance.

Before we reached the front door, it was flung open by a tall, rangy-looking man with a riotous black beard set off by vivid streaks of white, shaggy black eyebrows, and equally forbidding black eyes. The stranger’s appearance was startling enough to take anyone by surprise, but the way his towering frame filled the doorway certainly created a chilling enough atmosphere for the upcoming séance.

I must say he was well suited for the role. The deep lines on his craggy face had been uniquely chiseled, having the curious effect of making him appear menacing one moment and devoid of emotion the next, depending upon the angle in which he was viewed. He was dressed entirely in black from head to foot, which produced the brief, but startling illusion that his head floated through the air independent of a physical body. I guessed him to be in his fifties, but his deeply lined skin made age difficult to judge.

After several moments of awkward silence, the man stood back from the door, allowing us to enter. Although he uttered not one word of introduction – or indeed of welcome – I knew from Samuel’s description that this must be Dmitry Serkov, Madame Karpova’s brother. Stone-faced and mute, the gloomy Russian reached out his hand and inclined his head at our wet coats. Just as silently, we handed them over, then followed him as he led us to what I assumed must be the Cliff House dining room.

When we reached the door, I stopped so abruptly that Robert collided into my back. Even then, I made no move to go any further. Call it my imagination, but the atmosphere in that room was so

palpable I felt goose bumps rise on my arms. For a dazed moment, I thought I had somehow stumbled upon Aladdin's Cave!

All around us dozens of candles sparkled like glittering jewels, darting about this way and that as they were caught in a confluence of small drafts caused by the storm outside. While my eyes adjusted to this optical extravaganza, I spied a large, beautifully rendered Japanese screen standing against the wall to my right. I blinked as the flickering candlelight made the daintily painted birds and butterflies on the screen appear to flap their wings and fly.

Feeling Robert's none too gentle nudge upon my shoulder, I mentally chided myself on being fanciful. Gathering my scattered wits, along with my sadly dampened skirts, I stepped through the door and into the dining chamber.

It was immediately apparent that the room had been considerably rearranged, in honor, I supposed, of tonight's séance. Most of the dining tables had been moved to either side of the room, creating an empty space before an expanse of windows overlooking Seal Rocks. There, three or four tables had been pushed together to form one long, rectangular surface, totally bare except for a large white candle glittering in its center. Normally, this location would have been ideal for viewing the popular rocks below. Tonight, however, the famous boulders were visible only when lightning illuminated them with stark streaks of light and shadow, making them loom up before us like some kind of demonic sea monster.

So taken was I by nature's frenzied display, that it was only when someone coughed that I realized a group of people were already seated at the improvised table. Recalling myself to tonight's task, I noted that nine guests sat before the window, five women and four men. All of them were dressed in fashionable, if dark-colored clothes. Were they afraid, I wondered a bit giddily, that the sight of brighter tones might offend the spirits?

Everyone sat in awkward silence, as if not sure what to expect and therefore unwilling to let down their guard. A few people regarded Robert and I with fleeting curiosity, then immediately shifted their eyes elsewhere.

Before we reached the group, a tall, exotic-looking woman seemed to materialize out of nowhere. Since the only visible door was the one through which Robert and I had just entered, I concluded the woman must have stepped out from behind the Japanese screen. For effect? If so, it had certainly succeeded. Almost surely the partition must conceal a second entrance into the dining room, perhaps from the kitchen, or even from the saloon.

The four gentlemen at the table rose to their feet as the distinctive-looking woman swept majestically to the table. From her regal bearing, I was certain this must be the famous – or should I say *infamous* – Madame Olga Karpova, the self-proclaimed Russian aristocrat and psychic who had successfully conquered Europe and who now seemed determined to triumph over north America as well.

Sinking gracefully into the vacant chair at the head of the table, Madame Karpova motioned for the gentlemen to take their seats, then beckoned Robert and I toward the last two unoccupied

places opposite her. Our company now numbered an even dozen, but the tension I'd originally sensed in the room had increased exponentially with the clairvoyant's entrance. The drama was about to begin, and I felt a brief shiver of anticipation. Looking at the expectant faces watching her from around the table, I was sure I wasn't the only person eager to see what Madame Karpova had in store for us.

While the occupants of the table resettled themselves, some sharing whispered comments with their neighbors, others darting inquisitive looks at Madame Karpova, I, too, took the opportunity to study the psychic. She presented a singular appearance, both in her manner of dress as well as in her demeanor, which, like her brother, was decidedly theatrical. Perched straight-back in her chair, hands placed palms down on the table before her, Madame Karpova resembled nothing so much as an enthroned queen surveying her subjects. She had yet to utter a single word, yet she easily dominated the room. Even those individuals in our company who numbered among the cream of San Francisco Society, were regarding her with expressions of uneasy, yet undeniable, deference.

There was no doubt that Madame Karpova gave the impression of a woman accustomed to being in control; every movement of her slim body exuded self-confidence and absolute faith in her own powers. As with her brother, she was dressed completely in black, her gown constructed from some sort of diaphanous material, and decorated with astrological signs, some rendered in gold and some in silver. The flowing, long-sleeve dress was fastened at her throat by an onyx broach. The dangling silver and gold bangles that hung from her ears, were also shaped into astrological signs, although the light was too dim, and I was too far down the table, to identify which ones they represented.

Madame Karpova's face was long and boldly sculpted, with high cheek bones and a thin, patrician nose. Her light olive-colored skin was very smooth and surprisingly free of wrinkles for a woman who must be approaching fifty. Full, beautifully shaped black eyebrows arched elegantly across a high forehead, and her lips were dark and somewhat severe, as if they rarely curved into a smile. The woman's hair color was a mystery, since she had wrapped her head in a black turban. This, too, was fastened with an onyx broach.

Despite her unorthodox costume, the psychic's most distinctive features were her dark brown, almost black, eyes. The heavy kohl she had applied to outline them was obviously for dramatic effect, but there was a deeper, almost magnetic quality about them that transcended artificial enhancement. To say that they were penetrating would be an understatement; I found them absolutely compelling.

Madame Karpova was effectively using them now to capture her guests' attention. One by one, every eye at the table fixed upon her. Except for the uneasy shuffle of Robert's feet and the sound of rain beating upon the roof and windows, the room was eerily silent. Like an actor milking every ounce of drama from a scene, she waited several long moments before speaking.

"Welcome, my friends," she said at last. "I am Madame Olga Karpova." She paused as if to give this pronouncement the significance it deserved, then gestured to the beautiful young girl in her mid to late teens seated to her right. "This is my daughter, Yelena." Turning to the dour man who

had let us in, and who was now seated directly to Robert's right, she added, "And this is my brother, Dmitry Serkov. It is my practice to dispense with further introductions to protect the privacy of my clients. Be assured that those spirits beyond the pale require no introductions. They come to us in peace, bringing comfort and enlightenment to those loved ones who have been left behind."

The clairvoyant's voice was deep and richly textured. Although I detected a Russian accent, her command of the English language was surprisingly good. It was so exceptional, in fact, that I questioned her insistence that she had only left her native Russian three years earlier.

Once again she paused, taking us all in with that darkly intense gaze. "I have one, implacable rule. Those entities who choose to join us this evening are to be treated with the utmost respect and deference. Is that understood?"

This was answered by a surprised nod of heads, and a general, albeit hushed, murmur of agreement.

Seemingly satisfied, Madame Karpova turned to her brother. "If you please, Dmitry."

Silently, the tall man stood and with a lumbering gait made his way around the room snuffing out candles. As he slowly but methodically set about this task, Madame Karpova explained what we might expect to see that night.

"Unlike many spiritualists, I disdain the use of cabinets, curtains or other such props. They are for those pretending to possess *the gift*, that rare ability to communicate with those souls who inhabit the nether world beyond our own."

She spread her arms to indicate the empty space surrounding the table, and particularly the area around and behind her chair.

"I, Madame Karpova," she went on with histrionic self-importance, "have no need to hide behind such artifice. I will remain in your sight throughout tonight's reading." Her dark eyes captured each of ours in turn. "Even when I am no longer in possession of my body."

This last bit was said in a voice so pregnant with implications that it precipitated another low, nervous murmur around the table. She quickly squelched the response.

"There are some of you in this room who scoff, who doubt not only my powers, but the very existence of life beyond the dark portals of death. Oh, yes, I know who you are." Her voice rose to a crescendo, drowning out even the storm. I felt Robert stiffen beside me, and could not deny my own quick intake of breath. If nothing else, Madame Karpova certainly knew how to mesmerize an audience.

"Yes," she went on. "I tell you the world is filled with disbelievers. But cynics beware. The spirits have been known to exact a terrible vengeance upon those foolish enough to deny their existence."

She paused, and such was the sheer magnetism of the woman, that not a single sound filled the sudden void.

“I must also caution you,” she resumed in low, compelling tones, “I have no control over which entities will choose to join us tonight. My primary control – the spirit whom I will allow to inhabit my body during tonight’s reading – is Tizoc, an Aztec priest. But even a spirit over a thousand years old has limited influence over those who have traveled beyond our earthly plane.”

As she droned on about the world on the “other side,” Robert leaned close to my ear and asked what I knew about the others seated at the table.

Thanks to my brother Samuel, who had somehow managed to obtain a list of tonight’s attendees, I was able to identify most of the guests. I required no list, however, to recognize the distinguished-looking man sitting directly to my left at the opposite end of the table from Madame Karpova.

“That’s state senator Percival Gaylord,” I informed Robert quietly. My elder, sadly narrow-minded brother Frederick, was also a member of the California senate. Since I had been forced to listen to him gush about Gaylord, whom, for reasons best known to himself, had become Frederick’s mentor, I’d been more than a little surprised to learn he would be present tonight. What would my brother think, I wondered, if he knew his revered adviser was taking part in a séance?

“That’s the senator’s wife, Maurilla Gaylord, seated to his left,” I went on in a hushed whisper.

Robert gave a derisive grunt, then nodded toward the young man seated to Mrs. Gaylord’s left. “What about the boy? He looks too young to be taken in by this spirit nonsense.”

Unobtrusively, I peered down at Samuel’s notes which I’d placed in my lap. My brother’s horrible handwriting and the dim light made them difficult to read. Yet because of the young man’s age, there could hardly be a mistake.

“That must be Nicholas Bramwell,” I told my companion. “He’s the younger son of Edgar Bramwell, you know the San Francisco contractor. Samuel says he recently graduated from Yale University’s School of Law. That must be his mother, Philippa Bramwell, seated to his left.”

I nodded toward a plump, middle-aged woman stylishly dressed in a burgundy silk gown, the long cuirasse bodice decorated with narrow satin stripes that gleamed in the candlelight as her breath moved in and out of her ample bosom. Atop her perfectly-coiffed brown hair, perched a small but elaborate burgundy hat, trimmed in feathers, jewels and the same satin material.

“The elderly widow next to her is Mrs. Theodora Reade. Apparently, she and Mrs. Bramwell are devotees of spiritualism and rarely miss one of these events.”

“Then we have Yelena, Madame Karpova’s daughter,” Robert murmured, admiring the lovely, dark-haired girl sitting to Madame Karpova’s right. “By the silly look on the Bramwell boy’s face, he’s clearly taken a fancy to the lass.”

I had also noticed the admiring looks the young man was bestowing upon the medium’s daughter. Although Yelena pretended to be unaware of young Bramwell’s attention, the occasional sidelong glances she gave him from beneath long, thick black lashes told me she was very conscious of him indeed.

Seated directly to Madame Karpova’s left was another unlikely attendee: Lieutenant Frank Ahern of the San Francisco police department. Ahern was a short, rather burly middle-aged Irishman with a ruddy, good-natured face, and sandy-colored hair liberally sprinkled with grey. His eyes were a vivid blue, and seemed to gleam with ill-disguised skepticism as he regarded the Russian clairvoyant. To his left was his wife, Nora, a small, pleasant-looking woman who was watching Madame Karpova with single-minded intensity.

“By the horn spoons!” Robert exclaimed after I’d identified the Aherns, his so-called whisper loud enough for Madame Karpova’s penetrating eyes to fasten on us in silent disapproval. “A state senator and a police lieutenant. You’d think they’d be the first ones to escort this Karpova woman and her bag of tricks out of town.”

“Shh,” I hissed, as other faces at the table frowned in our direction.

With a final, disapproving glare at Robert and myself, Madame Karpova’s attention went to her brother. In that same ponderous pace, Dmitry Serkov extinguished the last candle – save for the white pillar positioned in the middle of our table – then once again took his seat between Robert and Mrs. Ahern. The light cast by this sole remaining candle barely penetrated beyond the twelve of us, leaving the rest of the room in virtual darkness.

Madame Karpova cleared her throat and solemnly announced that we were ready to begin. “I would ask each of you to relax and concentrate on the entity you wish to contact,” she instructed. “Please remember, once I have entered into a trance I will be in an altered state, delicately balanced between this world and the next. While I am out of my body, it is vital that no one make any sudden sounds or movements, or attempt to—“

Her words abruptly cut off as the dining room door swung open with a bang, and the room was vividly lit by another flash of lightning. Startled, we all turned to see a large man standing framed in the doorway. At least I supposed the intruder was comprised of flesh and blood. In truth, he was so bizarrely dressed in a long black cape and matching cowl pulled low over his eyes, that for a wild moment I thought he might actually be one of Madame Karpova’s spirits.

Since he was only illuminated for a fleeting moment, I had to question whether the figure had truly been there at all. But when a second bolt of lightning quickly followed the first, I knew the stranger had been no figment of my imagination.

With a muttered oath, Lieutenant Ahern rose halfway out of his chair. By the light of the table's flickering candle, I could see that his expression was a cross between anger and barely suppressed fear.

“Darien Moss!” the police lieutenant hissed. “What in the name of all the saints are you doing here?”