

So  
Enchanting

CONNIE BROCKWAY



AN ONYX BOOK



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—*Amanda Quick*

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Also by Connie Brockway

*Skinny Dipping*

*Hot Dish*

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*To D.B. Thanks for the magic.*

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## Chapter One

*Mayfair, London*  
1892

When exactly had the mediums of London gotten together and decided that the afterworld reeked of sandalwood? Lord Greyson Sheffield wondered, taking a sniff of the séance parlor. Because obviously they had, for in every one of the séances Grey had attended—and he'd attended many—the sickly, sweet stench inevitably preceded the resident spiritualist's declaration that he'd made contact with the hereafter.

And sure enough, right on cue, Alphonse Brown's eyes widened with childlike wonder.

In appearance, Brown was typical of male mediums: pasty complexioned, with white-blond hair, thin, downy mustache, and a slight build. His only remarkable features were his large, heavy-lidded eyes, nearly imbecilic with guilelessness. Grey had been told by several females who'd met the man that he was a comely youth, even though he suspected Brown was close to his own age of thirty-two years. To Grey, he'd looked like a dim-witted adolescent.

But then, Grey doubted two males could have looked more unlike than he and Brown. He was well aware that the combination of his swarthy complexion, the asymmetry of his features achieved by dint of a nose broken in a past altercation, and his perpetually beard-shadowed jaw only augmented his resemblance to a Welsh physical laborer. His burly physique didn't refute the similarity, either.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, and frankly muscular, all assets he'd used to his advantage in the ring, where he'd been his regiment's boxing champion for three years running. Happily, those days were done; he'd always disliked being hit. Currently his situation demanded he present a more refined persona to the world, since presenting a refined *appearance* was out of the question. As the son of a marquess, it was not too great a feat to pull off.

"I sense we are going to meet with success tonight," the medium now said aloud to the small group gathered in the dark room. "Can you not smell the perfume of the Other Side? Your loved ones are near."

A rumble of excited murmurs met this remark, followed by the usual round of barely voiced hopes, wet-eyed self-remonstrations, and eager questions, all of which Brown answered with vague assurances. The wealthy industrialist nodded emphatically, while a renowned M.P., recently knighted, swallowed convulsively, and his wife dabbed at her eyes. Next to Grey, a plump opera singer sucked in enough air to sing an aria, while on his other side an ancient German stared sadly at the ceiling above, waiting patiently for a glimpse of his lost love. There was only one empty chair at the table, that being directly across from where Brown sat, on the other side of the opera singer.

"The scent of the divine," the opera singer whispered raptly.

More likely a smudge pot. The only mystery was how Brown had introduced the scent into the



room. Thick velvet draperies covered the walls from ceiling to floor, the only openings being the door through which they'd entered, another in the small cabinet in the corner of the room, and the small unlit fireplace that Grey had surreptitiously examined while they waited for their host's arrival. The smell came from none of these sources.

"Mr. Kidd, you look dubious," Brown said, and Grey cursed himself. Spiritualists were successful because they read their quarry's every expression and word and designed their responses accordingly. And Brown was very, very successful.

"No. Just distracted," he said. It had taken him weeks to secure an invitation to this sitting. Brown was cautious. He invited only true believers, and only very wealthy believers. Grey had arranged an introduction to Brown by posing as a recently immigrated and immensely rich widower. "I don't dare hope too much," he added.

His answer must have succeeded in reassuring Brown, for he reached across the table and patted Grey's hand consolingly. Grey tensed as he fought to keep his face immobile.

He'd gotten very good at forgetting the events that had led him into his career as a special prosecutor for the Lord Chief Justice, exposing frauds and confidence tricksters, but every now and then the past awoke and ripped his heart anew before he kicked it back into submission. Just now when Brown had patted his hand, Grey had been a boy again, quivering with impotent rage as his father fawned over a smug, sweating little toad of a man who'd hinted that he might be able to contact the marquess's long-dead daughter—Grey's half sister, Johanna. Grey had stood at his father's side, humiliated and impotent. The toad had noted Grey's revulsion and patted his hand in just such a manner, his hard eyes mocking him as he'd simpered, "Now, don't you worry, lad. I'll find your dear sister for your dad. No matter how long it takes."

It had taken two years, a huge portion of his family's heirlooms, and most of his father's unentailed properties. After his father's death, the recovery of each penny and every artifact had become Grey's *raison d'être*.

That, along with the complete annihilation of the toad.

But Grey hadn't stopped there. He found he enjoyed being the predator in this game, chasing his quarry to ground, dragging them into a court of law, where he exposed them as gimcrack charlatans, destroying their reputations and their livelihoods.

"Let us begin," the spiritualist now said, bringing Grey back to the moment.

Grey watched, interested. Brown rose and headed toward a cabinet in the back of the room. Though Grey had seen spirit cabinets before, he'd never seen a male simulate the effect. Generally, a female medium would enter the cabinet and forthwith fall into a "trance." Only in this state could she conjure up the "spirit guide," who would appear on the other side of the room. Should anyone open the door to the cabinet during the manifestation, however, not only would the spirit vanish, but the medium's very life would be imperiled. Or at least her credibility. Because inevitably the spirit was simply the medium herself, who, after circumnavigating the room through a hidden hallway, flounced about in the dark room in a bedsheet and a wig.

Grey hoped to God Brown didn't don a wig. Even a medium should draw the line somewhere.

But Brown simply opened the door, whispered something within, and turned with a tremulous

smile. “My wife, Francesca.”

A sylph entered the room. A creature of moonlight and shadows, wary, a hint of trepidation in the cant of her brows and the angle of her chin. That was his first impression of Francesca Brown, not her beauty—he barely noted it at first—but of the isolation that surrounded her like an aura, detachment that suggested she did not share the same air with mortal men.

He shook his head, troubled by such uncharacteristic fancifulness. She was young, perhaps not yet twenty, and luminous. There was no other word for it. Her eyes glowed like polished onyx. The sheen of the gaslight glistened on her flesh and caught in the inky coils of unbound hair that rippled down her back and around her breasts in a parody of innocence that verged on the indecent. Her gown, a semi-transparent batiste revealed just enough of the figure beneath to ensure that the attention of every man in the room was focused on it rather than on Brown.

She hesitated as she came toward the table, her gaze sweeping over the sitters, catching on him before quickly passing on. Had he imagined it? She took her seat at the table without looking at her husband.

*She shouldn't be here.* The thought appeared out of nowhere with visceral certainty. *I need to get her out of here.*

He frowned, astonished and disturbed, first, because she was another's man's wife—though more likely she was his mistress—and second, because it was his self-appointed task to hunt her type, not . . . get them out of here.

She was a fake, a sham. Everything about her had been artfully orchestrated for the purpose of deceit. He'd witnessed similar performances hundreds of times. Why, during Madame Blavatsky's séances, the “apparition” of a bawdy harem girl bounced from one delighted gentleman's lap to the next—a conjuration for which Blavatsky was handsomely compensated.

There was nothing unique about Francesca Brown. Except how she looked, how she moved, the midnight hue of her hair and the limitless depths of her eyes, the fullness of her lips and the exquisite sheen of her flesh. His body tightened in response, his reaction primal and uncomfortable.

“Too bright! Too . . . bright!” At the sound of Brown's groan, Grey's head snapped around.

The medium had taken his seat at the table and Grey hadn't even noticed, confirming his suspicion regarding Francesca's role as a diversion. Now Brown's eyes rolled back in his head. “The spirits cannot . . . find their way!”

The industrialist leaped to his feet and turned down the sconce, plunging the room into utter darkness.

Grey peered through the murk, trying to find Francesca, angered by his fascination, unable to help himself. He had just made her out, a slender shape dissolving into the darkness, when a sudden swirling pressure filled the room. He tried to pull his hands away, but the opera singer and the German held on with viselike strength.

“Angel wings,” Brown whispered reverentially, and as quickly as the sound had arrived, it was gone.

Grey ground his teeth in frustration. He'd been caught off guard. Preoccupied with libidinous

thoughts of Francesca Brown, he'd been unable to bring his full faculties to the task of identifying what sort of chicanery was going on. It was this specific effect that had won Brown his fame. Ang wings, the brush of a loved one's hand, the tug on a skirt—the witnesses Grey had interviewed claimed it could not have been possible for Brown or his wife to manufacture the effect from the positions at the table without the use of magic or the presence of a spirit.

Of course, they were wrong. There was no such thing as magic, and the world wasn't harboring ghosts. There were no mysteries, simply answers that had yet to be discovered.

Another memory sprang forth unbidden. He'd been seventeen, forced to endure yet another séance. This one would be different, his father had promised. This woman was authentic.

He could still see his father's expression as he watched a face "materialize" above a table in a dimly lit back room. It had been nothing but a plaster mask covered with luminescent paint and dropped from a box hidden in the ceiling. It was so pitiful, and yet his father had whispered, "Johanna." His father, someone he had once so admired and loved, had been reduced in that moment to a glib buffoon.

Grey wished they'd just come one night and taken everything from him, every bit of silver, every family treasure, every stick of furniture and deed of ownership, every penny, painting, and promissory note, rather than take, as they had, that one thing no amount of effort on his part could ever replace: his respect for his father.

Grimly, Grey focused his attention on Brown, determined not to be distracted again. There followed the usual round of thumps, raps, and sighs, after which began a series of ear-offending twangs and off-key peeps. (Why had no one ever wondered why the entire population of the hereafter did not count amongst their members one passable musician?)

Francesca did not speak. She did not move. She did not, as far as Grey could determine, add anything to the proceedings besides her presence, which, he allowed, was addition enough.

Finally, after Brown had declared in a voice rife with wonder that the shriek of an ill-tuned violin was the spirit of Handel come to serenade them, Grey could stand it no more.

Jerking free his hands, he bounded to his feet and flung open the door to the séance parlor, flooding the room with light and exposing to view the five burly policemen he'd arranged to be waiting without. Then, as the séance party gaped, blinked, and gasped, he ripped the damask cloth from the table, revealing Brown's unclad right foot braced against a miniature violin, whilst the hoary toes of his left curled about a little bow. The trapdoor where he'd secreted his props still lay open beneath his chair.

"There's your spectral musician. No shade of Handel, just Mr. Brown's unwashed feet," he declared in disgust.

His pale mustache quivering like an albino rabbit's whiskers, and his large, soulful eyes narrowed to not-so-soulful slits, Brown sprang up, upending his chair.

Chaos erupted in the room. The opera singer collapsed in terror, and the other women screamed. Red-faced with outrage and, Grey hoped, chagrin, the gentlemen rose to aid the ladies and confront their deceiver.

Only Francesca remained motionless. Brown dove, seizing her by the shoulders and dragging her

her feet to use as a shield. She did not resist. She stood flinching in his bruising clasp, her expression contemptuous.

---

A red haze filled Grey's vision. He vaulted the table, jerking Francesca out of Brown's clutches, and thrust her behind him. Desperate, the spiritualist scuttled away, grabbing a nearby chair and flinging it. Grey knocked it aside, advancing relentlessly.

"Stay away! Stay away from me!" Brown shrieked, backing up.

Grey's right arm shot out, his fist landing squarely on the bastard's chin, knocking him off his feet and sending him crashing into the wall. Except it wasn't a wall.

The sound of shattering glass filled the room, and then Brown was swallowed by the velvet draperies and disappeared. The sound broke the paralysis holding the policemen, and they rushed to join Grey at the newly revealed window, just in time to see Brown pick himself up off the pavement ten feet below and flee across the street.

"Son of a bitch!" Grey shouted. He was every sort of ass. He should have tackled Brown, let the police tackle Brown, let the others tackle Brown, but because of some misplaced compulsion to be the bastard senseless he'd allowed him to escape.

He spun around to glare at Francesca and found she had fallen to the floor and knelt in a pool of delicate batiste, her dark hair falling across her pale face. His curse died on his lips. He wanted only to sweep her up in his arms and take her away from here.

*Madness.*

She wasn't even looking at him. Her eyelids fluttered like those of a dreamer coming awake from a fantastical nightmare, and she gazed around her uncomprehendingly.

Then, slowly, she tipped back her head and laughed.

---

## Chapter Two

### SPIRITUALIST EXPOSED AS FRAUD! EXCLUSIVE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT!

“Scoundrel!” Lord Greyson’s ringing denunciation followed the escaping villain. But, alas, all efforts to apprehend the fleeing criminal came to naught as Brown made good his escape.

“He didn’t say *scoundrel*,” Francesca muttered. He’d said something far worse, something unrepeatable.

She’d known “Mr. Kidd” posed a threat the moment she’d walked through the door. He’d no more in common with Alphonse’s usual clientele than a bullmastiff did with lapdogs. A tall, powerful looking fellow, dark complected and black haired, he’d looked like a Spartan entering battle, and just as harsh. Indeed, the only aspect of lightness about him had been his eyes, a unique, clear blue-green framed by banks of black lashes. They held no softness, no compassion, just hard brilliance, like gemstones.

The newspapers went on to say that he was a newly minted barrister and special investigator attached to the Crown prosecutor. She hadn’t realized Alphonse had been worthy of such exalted attention.

She went back to reading the newspaper, even though she had read very nearly the same article on several different papers every day since their dramatic exposure ten days ago. But today there was a new bit added.

Word arrived in this London office late last evening that Alphonse Brown, né Alfie Pudlin, died yesterday in a railway accident in Paris, where he reportedly fled. Brown’s wife, Francesca, remains in London. The authorities have declined to charge her with any crime, deeming her involvement in her husband’s schemes “undiscoverable.”

She’d known Alphonse had died, of course. The police had told her. She was surprised she actually cried for him. He certainly didn’t deserve her tears. Not after sending his mistress—“M’name’s Dorothy, but Alf calls me his li’l Dot”—to demand Fanny pack his clothing so that she could take them to him.

“Alf also says to say you ain’t to consider yerself married to ’im no more ’cause he don’t,” she announced. “Says to say he knows it ain’t yer fault, but he can’t abide sharing a bed wid’ you no more ’counta it gives him the creeping willies, you not bein’ normal-like.”

Well, at least that had explained the infrequency of Alphonse’s conjugal visits. Even through her humiliation, Francesca had appreciated the irony. Just four short years before, Alphonse had talked her into eloping with him not in spite of her strangeness but because of it.

Dot cocked her head, eyeing Francesca from head to toe as she obviously tried to determine ju

what peculiarity Fanny was hiding beneath her clothing that could keep a man out of a woman's bed.  
"Oh, and you ain't to come after him."

---

"Tell 'Alf' he needn't fret," Fanny said, and slammed the door in her face.

Mrs. Brown is still reputed by a number of her husband's former followers to have occult powers. And, indeed, one might be forgiven for wondering if there is any fact behind the fancy for surely if the old adage about a woman scorned is valid, the consequences must be doubled when the woman scorned is reputedly a witch. The question must be begged, did a hex enter Alfie Pudlik's life?

No. It had been the morning train from Orléans.

Carefully, Francesca folded the newspaper and set it aside. She supposed she should be flattered. She was accumulating titles at an astonishing rate: confidence artist, oddity, spiritualist, and now witch. And one must not forget to add pauper.

She looked around the hotel room. She couldn't stay here long. The Savoy was expensive, but it was the only hotel she knew, and there was no one to suggest another.

Her parents were dead, having both fallen victims to a tin of tainted beef the year after Fanny had eloped. Her brother, Wesley, had blamed her, claiming they'd been so devastated by her disastrous marriage early that same year that they'd been too weak to combat the poison. But then, Wesley had been blaming her for everything bad that happened ever since The Incident.

She hadn't meant for anything bad to happen. There'd been no warning that her rapport with animals could have a dangerous side.

When she was three years old, the estate deer approached her; at five, wild hare suffered her touch; at ten, birds alit on her outstretched hands. But only when she was feeling some powerful emotion. And initially her family had been charmed by her affinity with wild things, her mother even claiming it was a family trait.

Until Wesley's "accident."

She'd been twelve, skinny, awkward, neither woman nor girl, but at that uneasy stage in between, oversensitive, overdramatic, and quick to talk back, as she had done at luncheon that day. She didn't even recall what she'd said that had her father sending her to her room. She just recalled marching out of the house and slamming the front door behind her.

Later, she learned that Wesley had been sent to retrieve her. He'd gone out the back of the house intending to intercept her at the stable. Wesley and she had never been close. Five years her senior, he was a bit of a snob and a bully who took himself and his position as his father's heir very seriously. The only value he found in her was as someone to tease.

Perhaps it was the desire for a spot of revenge over having to interrupt his meal, perhaps sibling rivalry, perhaps a little resentment that as the youngest, Fanny was babied. Whatever the reason, when he spotted her he'd waited in the shadows, and when she passed, he jumped out, shouting.

Terrified, Fanny screamed like a banshee.

Wesley laughed.

He held his sides, hooting and pointing at the tears streaming down her cheeks. She could still recall the fury rushing up in a molten streak. Unable to speak, shaking with anger and impotence, she glared at him as he continued laughing and doubling over with hilarity.

And then, as suddenly as Wesley had leaped from the stable door, a small dog shot from nowhere snarling ferociously. Another joined it, this one larger, more muscular. Then another. And another. With single-minded intent, the estate dogs, the collies, and the hunting spaniels, the gamekeeper's mastiffs and the cook's little ratter, all came together like a pack and attacked her brother.

He went down shrieking amidst a flurry of snarling, snapping maws and slashing fangs. Fanny's fury vanished. For three breathless heartbeats she stared, stunned, before she started screaming. And once, as if answering some inner command, the dogs fell back, revealing Wesley where he'd fallen.

He lay on his side, bloodied and sobbing, his clothing shredded, in ten short seconds having acquired scars that would last his lifetime and an injury to his Achilles tendon that would cause him a limp for the rest of his days.

Fanny could not stop screaming. The dogs began to howl. In their stalls, the horses thrashed and kicked. Rats and mice streamed out of the barn in a panicked frenzy. Birds hurled themselves into the manor's windows, falling dead to the ground in little mounds.

Her parents came running.

Her life changed after that. The dogs, of course, were all destroyed, adding to her guilt and grief. Fear became her daily companion. How had it happened? What had she done? What if it happened again? What if next time it didn't stop?

The day marked the end of the garrulous, exuberant child she'd been and the beginning of the solitary creature she'd become. Her parents reassured her that they didn't blame her, as did her older sister, Jeanne—at least, for a while—but afterward there was always a certain watchfulness in the older woman's eyes.

Wesley made no mystery about his bitterness. Five years later, when Jeanne was to make her debut, he vehemently opposed Francesca's coming with the family to London. The scenarios he described had been so vividly appalling that Jeanne, always easily swayed by Wesley, had begged Fanny to ask to be left behind.

Fanny had been happy to oblige. She had no more desire to risk an "episode" than did anyone else in her family. It hadn't taken much to convince her parents to leave her with an elderly cousin that season.

It had all worked out well enough. Jeanne had met the baronet she later married. In fact, just yesterday Fanny had received a letter from her sister, the first communication since their parents' deaths three years ago. Jeanne had read about Alphonse in the penny press and sent a hundred pounds along with a plea to keep silent on the matter of their relationship.

In a fit of prideful indignation, Francesca had sent the money back—in retrospect a vainglorious gesture, because before he'd decamped, Alphonse had emptied their bank account.

Luckily, Alphonse had a taste for extravagance. The furnishings, the paintings, and the silver

their apartment had fetched a decent price from the reseller she'd summoned the day after the police raid. But that money wouldn't last long. Where would she go then?

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. She opened it to find an older gentleman standing outside with his hat in his hands, exposing a bald dome tanned by a fringe of fading red hair. His ruddy complexion was blistered and freckled, the effects of prolonged sun exposure on fair skin, and he held his thin body rigidly erect. A military man, then, and, judging by the state of his skin, likely once posted in the East.

"Don't recognize me, do you?" he said.

She launched into her now familiar speech. "If you've come to demand I return the money my husband defrauded you of, I am afraid I cannot help you. He withdrew every cent from our bank account and took it to Paris with him, and now he is dead and I do not know where the money is."

She suspected Dot did, but Francesca hadn't the wherewithal to pursue the suspicion. "If I should ever receive any portion of it, I shall make whatever restitution is possible. If you could leave me your card and the amount—"

"You misunderstand," the gentleman interrupted. "I am Colonel Chase. Your family's estate in Surrey borders my own."

"Oh? Oh. Yes, of course." She looked closer, recognizing him now. The years had not treated him kindly. She recalled him as a hearty, robust, red-haired fellow who'd married late, taking his wife to the fort in India where he'd been posted and where she'd died young. There had been a child, too. . . .

"I was wondering if I might have a few minutes of your time."

*Oh, dear.* She regarded him sadly. "I cannot contact the deceased for you, Colonel. Surely you've read the papers? It was all a hoax."

"Oh, no. I know," he said, worrying his hat between his gloved hands. "It's nothing like that, I assure you. If I could persuade you to accompany me, I have secured a table on the terrace of the hotel's restaurant overlooking the park."

He stepped aside hopefully. She hesitated, marshaling her courage. She couldn't hide in her hotel room forever. She took his proffered arm, allowing him to escort her down the grand staircase into the Savoy's lobby. As she descended the stairs, the murmuring of those scattered about sipping coffee and chatting faded to whispers.

"Witch, they're saying now."

"Just a trumped-up actress."

"Can't imagine the hotel would like knowing how she earned the money she pays her bill with."

"Earned? You mean stole."

"I wonder if she's a witch."

And then they were on the terrace under a bright April sun, alone except for another intrepid pair braving the chill of the morning in order to find some privacy. Colonel Chase ordered coffee and biscuits and, as soon they'd been delivered, began speaking.

She might not remember much about him, he said, but he remembered her quite well, especially



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