



EVOCATION

S.T. GIBSON



CHAPTER ONE

David

David pulled up to the haunted house ten minutes before he was expected, because arriving late was for amateurs and getting there too early was for interns. He used three of those minutes to sit in the Audi and review case notes for an upcoming deposition on his phone. Technically, it wasn't six yet, which meant he was *technically* still on the clock for his day job. Not that he ever really checked out of working as a prosecutor for the city of Boston, he just spent his nights expanding his vocational horizons. He had been juggling full time work and a thriving private occult practice ever since graduating law school, not to mention weekly secret Society meetings, and he would rather donate his entire fortune to charity than walk away from any of it. David was like a diamond, forged under pressure and made entirely of hard, cutting edges.

At two till, David straightened his collar in the rearview mirror, ran a hand through his wavy bronze hair, and locked up his car. Tonight's client was an eccentric heiress with a penchant for the occult and a recently-dead husband, which was right up David's alley. He could be in and out before eight, with time for a workout and an hour or so answering work emails before bed. It was his ideal type of day; packed to the brim with meaningful, lucrative work and centered entirely around himself. The only thing that could possibly make it better was a round of athletic sex, which was off the table for reasons relating to David's lack of interest in almost all the men in Boston and his ironclad marriage to his work, or a stiff drink, which was off the table for reasons related to David's sanity and general well-being.

The widow lived in an ivy-covered Brookline brownstone with black-shuttered windows closed tightly to the world. David had to knock three

times to get an answer, and when the door finally opened, it was only an inch.

“Who’s there?” a reedy voice from inside demanded.

David tried—to no avail—to peer inside the darkness of the house.

“David Aristarkhov. We spoke on the phone?”

“David who?” she pressed.

David flipped open his wallet and thumbed through the glossy cream business cards the firm had given him until he came to a few embossed black cards hidden in the back. He slipped one free and held it out between his fingertips through the crack in the door. The silver script gleamed like a knife under the bright spring sunlight.

Spirit Medium and Psychic Intuitive.

“I don’t know,” the woman said after a moment. “I’ve changed my mind. I don’t know if my Levi would want me to try and contact him after all this time. Come back tomorrow. We’ll see how I feel then.”

Cold feet, then. Typical. There was no way he was cutting his losses and driving back to Fenway now, though, not when he was wired after a long week at the firm and ready to, quite literally, raise the dead.

“Miriam,” David said, every syllable deliberate. His voice had the timbre of smooth, polished brass, without a trace of anything less than all-American. It was a voice curated for conveying utmost surety and bulldozing anyone who got in his way. “Why don’t you just open the door a little bit and you and I can talk about it?”

There was a long pause, but then the widow obeyed him. People usually did, when he asked nicely. It was one of the innate, uncanny abilities that had been with him since childhood, like mediumship or perfect pitch.

The door swung open to reveal a wizened but glamorous woman in her seventies, wearing a purple silk headscarf and large tortoiseshell glasses. She took David in appraisingly, flicking her eyes across his wood-inlay summer Rolex and monogrammed cufflinks. He was still dressed for the firm, in his bespoke shirt and slacks that cost more than what most men paid for their wedding suit. The Aristarkhoffs had money so old you could have exhibited it in the Hermitage: vodka-exporting, fur-trapping, wartime-advising money. Champagne in the box seat money. Discreet exit from the public eye when wealth became unfashionable money. David had never been interested in denying himself any of the comforts his inheritance provided.

“I just don’t know if I’m ready to talk to him again, is all,” she said, a little quieter.

David gallantly took her small hand between his own, pressing gently. He was better with the dead than he was with the living, but he could feel the apprehension wafting off her like a perfume gone sour. Best to lay on the charm a little bit to put her fears at rest.

“That’s what I’m here for. You wouldn’t have called me if we weren’t meant to do this together. It will be wonderful, I promise. Now why don’t you invite me inside?”

She nodded absently and stepped aside, muttering something about being willing to try anything once. Entry secured, David dropped his pleasantries at the door and strode past her into the house. She stared at him as though baffled at how quickly she had let down her defenses, and David simply gave her a wry smile over his shoulder.

It was whispered that a long time ago, before Martin Luther had even written his treatise and plunged Europe into holy war, an Aristarkhov made a deal with the Devil. One thousand years of servitude for an apprenticeship in the art of persuasion, with a crash course in the occult arts thrown in to sweeten the pot. It was difficult to say whether there was any truth to the claim. But it was true that David’s grandfather had been gifted entire stables of thoroughbred horses simply by asking for them, and that his father stole his prima ballerina mother away from her debut in *Giselle* by draping her in his coat and telling her that a car was waiting outside.

David rolled up his sleeves, revealing the thickly-inked *monas heiroglyphica* tattooed on the inside of his right arm. It was a sigil meant to represent the principles of alchemy distilled into universal power. David had gotten it when he was young and drunk on his own invincibility, but of all the occult symbols he could have chosen to get marked on him forever, it wasn’t the worst option.

He spread his fingers, testing the aura, air pressure, and electrical currents of the room. The familiar cold malaise of dead energy curled around his fingers, lighting up the psychic intuition in the base of his brain. His whole body relaxed into the sensation, comforted by the familiarity of restless ghosts.

“I’m going to need a quiet room to work in and an object that belonged to your late husband,” David said, “and a sparkling water, if you have one.”

David Aristarkhov didn’t believe in the Devil. But he was certainly willing to work with everything his birthright had given him.

An hour later, David was holding Miriam's hand in a dimly-lit room while she wept gently. A glass of water—still, not sparkling—sat untouched on the table between them along with David's phone, facing up with the black screen on display. David only lugged around a crystal ball when he was doing a group seance at a private event. Today, the dark mirror of his iPhone worked perfectly well to scry into and decipher messages from beyond the grave.

“Levi is only restless because you're having so much trouble letting him go,” David said, the script smooth and rote in his mouth. “He'll be able to rest easy once he knows you've settled into life without him, and then he'll stop rearranging the furniture while you're asleep. These things just take time. “

Miriam dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

“Will you ask him if he misses me where he is? Please?”

David resisted the urge to roll his eyes. This was always the million-dollar question, and the answer was always something along the lines of “yes and no,” but he asked it anyway, turning his attention down on the black screen. A familiar drowsiness filled his limbs as his consciousness drifted deeper into an intuitive state, his mind opening wider.

He was born to do this. It was as natural to him as breathing.

All at once, David was knocked back by a psychic blow to the head. He reeled, eyes stinging, and his teeth ground against each other painfully.

David had been put in his place by spirits before. He had been scratched up by poltergeists, dragged around the room by demons, tortured with nightmares by the dead who refused to let him rest until they could. It took a lot to make him uncomfortable, and even more to scare him. But now he was battling back a terror so big he felt five years old again, frozen by the bedside of a mother dying terribly and slow.

David gasped, ripping his hands out of Miriam's. He felt like he had been doused in freezing water, and he shivered uncontrollably as cold passed through him in waves. His vision went indigo at the corners, tightening into a claustrophobic tunnel, but then he was out of it again, taking in so much light and color that his eyes hurt.

Something spoke to him, so close that he knew it had to be coming from inside his own head.

SON OF ANATOLY

Whatever that was, it had nothing to do with Miriam, or with the ghost of her dead husband. Whatever this was, it was something entirely new. It felt like he was channeling a spirit directly, only he hadn't invited

this one in. The voice had simply asserted itself and expected him to listen.

“Is everything alright?” Miriam asked. She looked like she was going to pat his shoulder reassuringly, and David would rather die first. He pulled together a smile and glanced down at his watch, angling his body away from any of her pity.

“Everything’s fine. But unfortunately, it looks like we’ve reached the end of our time together. Do you want to book a follow-up session?”

Ten minutes later, David left the townhouse a few hundred bucks richer and considerably shaken up, though he took care not to show it on his face. He had put Miriam at ease with some well-placed jokes and flattery, total child’s play, and had gotten out before she’d realized anything was wrong.

David loitered outside his car to have a cigarette, turning his phone over in his hands as he sucked down the nicotine-laden smoke.

He nearly dismissed it entirely. Headed home to shake off whatever funk he was in and turn his attention back to the next case on his to-win list.

But something nibbled at him, burning in the back of his skull in the same spot that acted up when he was near a murder site, or on the precipice of making contact with the dead.

There was an opportunity here—for connection, for reaching out and seizing a moment that might not pass him by again anytime soon.

He pulled out his phone and scrolled through his messages until he found Rhys’ name.

He had to scroll back pretty far.

David’s thumb hovered over the name, his palms suddenly clammy. His heart leaped in his throat, pounding a rhythm in his jugular. This wasn’t exactly a good idea, but it was the best chance he would have at making contact for a long while.

He and Rhys didn’t have real conversations, not these days. They avoided each other at social events and sniped at each other occasionally during Society meetings, rarely venturing further than to ask the other to pass the ceremonial salt during a spirit summoning. David had made a promise, after all. He had sworn to keep his distance, to let Rhys live his own life outside of the realm of David’s influence or interest. They were supposed to be acting like perfect strangers.

Not like two men who had been as close to each other as blood and breath, once.

David decided, with a lick of pettiness flaming behind his ribs, that he was done keeping his distance. It had been six months since the incident. If Rhys wasn't ready to talk now, he was never going to be.

David shot off a quick text.

What do you know about possession?