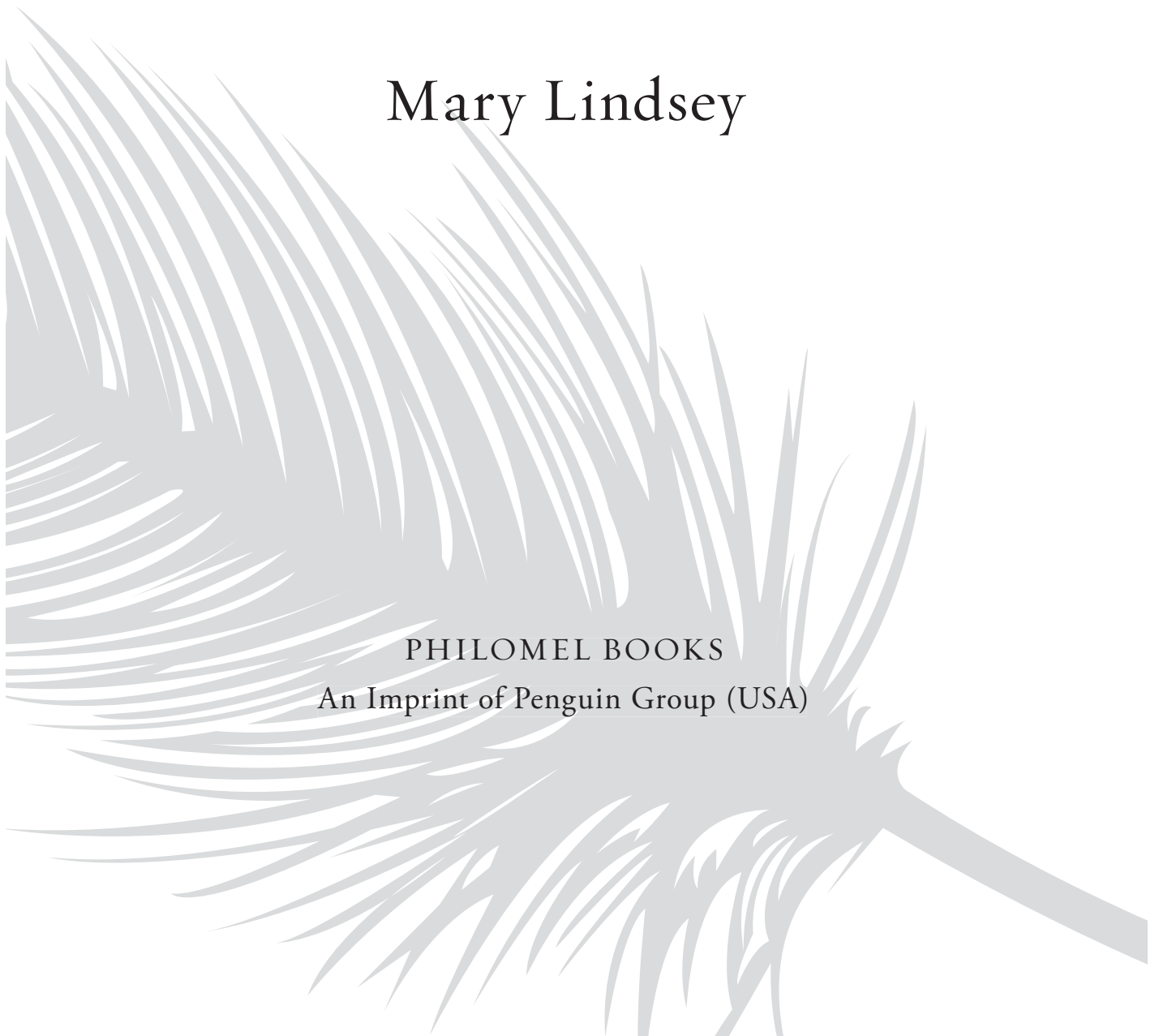


# FRAGILE SPIRITS

Mary Lindsey

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TO EMILY LINDSEY

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Don't worry.

I didn't take my eyes off you.

Not even for a second.



*He died as he had lived, with unmentionable  
wickedness on his lips—  
a sad spectacle of depravity, unwept and  
unregretted by all!*

*Thomas North on Nicaragua Smith from  
Five Years in Texas, 1871*





ONE

*21st-Century Cycle, Journal Entry 1:*

*I have been instructed to keep a journal of my Speaker's progress for this cycle in order to track her/his preferences and trends to carry over into our future lifetimes together. I await my assignment with great excitement.*

*Paul Blackwell—Protector 993*

**D**o you know the answer, Mr. Blackwell?" Ms. Mueller tapped her pencil on the grade book laid open on her podium.

I didn't know the answer. I hadn't even heard the question. Ever since Charles had told me I'd meet my Speaker tomorrow, I couldn't concentrate. I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry. No."

Lenzi shot me a sympathetic look over her shoulder as Ms. Mueller smirked and marked her grade book. This was the second time this class period she'd caught me not paying attention. I'd always been an exceptional student, but the thought of being paired up at last with my Speaker made it impossible to focus. Charles would be furious if I made a bad grade after he'd fought so hard to get me into this exclusive private school in the middle of the year. More than that, *I* would be furious if I made a bad grade.

"Mr. Thomas?" Ms. Mueller crooned. She loved Alden. He always knew the answers to her questions about the American Civil War.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Of *course* he knew the answers. He'd lived one of his past lives during the Civil War. It hardly seemed fair.

It was strange to see Alden in a regular classroom. Instead of his usual black, he wore a preppy school uniform complete with starched white shirt and navy blue blazer. I was used to seeing him in his role as Protector 438. We'd trained together at Wilkingham Academy since we were ten or so until two years ago, when I turned fifteen and Charles pulled me out to be his apprentice.

Lenzi slumped in her desk while, to Ms. Mueller's delight, Alden described what events had led to the Battle of Whateverberg with perfect accuracy and in excruciating detail.

As if the air had been charged with electric current, my



body came alive, causing the back of my neck to prickle. I gasped as fear crashed through me.

Lenzi's fear.

Alden stiffened and turned to face her.

From her podium, Ms. Mueller droned on to the class, unaware of the invisible danger that had entered her room.

Lenzi sat rigid in her chair, giving no physical indication of what was going on, but her emotions were a jumble of terror and confusion. She was under attack. Alden and I couldn't hear it, but being Protectors, we could feel her reaction as if her emotions were our own.

A spirit was communicating with her, and unable to reveal her special abilities to "normal" people, she was hiding the event as best she could from our classmates.

This wasn't an ordinary dead person she was dealing with. It was more than just a Hindered seeking her help for resolution. Her level of fear indicated it was a demon—a Malevolent.

She hissed a breath of air through her teeth and gripped the side of her desk like she was in pain. Alden slid sideways in his chair, preparing to rise. She jerked her arm down to her side, and crimson drops of blood splattered the beige linoleum floor. Terror still emanating from her, she grabbed her navy blazer from the back of her chair and slipped it on. She pressed her arm to her body and met Alden's eyes. He rose.

"Mr. Thomas? Is something wrong?" Ms. Mueller asked.

He shot me a look as Lenzi stood. Her face paled, and she

shook all over. Something was terribly wrong. Neither of us would be able to soul-share with her in front of so many people, so all I could do was wait for Alden's cue. I'd been assigned to shadow the pair in case of an incident like this—in case he needed a second Protector to keep her alive.

“Mr. Thomas?” Ms. Mueller's voice was shrill, but Alden's eyes never left Lenzi's face.

The bell rang, and our classmates scrambled to the door—the last-period-of-the-day-on-Friday excitement drowning out the bell and Ms. Mueller.

“Follow us, Paul,” Alden ordered, grabbing Lenzi's backpack. He put his hand against the small of her back and guided her to the door, pressing into the mass of students and away from Ms. Mueller's curious stare. Once clear and in the hallway, he pitched the backpack to me and scooped Lenzi up in his arms as if she weighed nothing. “Is it—”

“Yes,” she answered. “Smith is back.”