

# PROLOGUE

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NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT, 1850

THE PATH ENDED in a clearing.

The clearing held one tree.

Anyone with an eye half open and a salt toss of thought could see the oak was old. It was a jagged woodcut against the ochre twilight. Rot wafted off it. Beetles skittered on westward-tilted branches. Sap coated the woodbine that climbed the trunk.

Sarah Pardee had no control over her hideously curly hair, how short she was, or the fact that even though she was eleven, her mother dressed her in frilly, floral frocks, but on these precariously nailed planks Sarah stood in control. She was the captain of the dread ship *Pandemonium*.

Captain Sarah Pardee was known throughout the eastern American seashore as the Belle Hellion. Her treeship housed a multitude of stolen jars, jugs, vases, and teacups. Was it not discovered by the Belle Hellion that 1,600 candlebugs generated the coequal propulsion of 1,600 pounds of coal? Radiating tableware dangled from branches and kept company with crows. Wine bottle pyramids glowed against the November gloaming. A mason jar chandelier hung over the center of the deck.

The figurehead barked.

“Aye Cort. The drear gains.”

The puppy, a Lilliputian creature, turned a tight circle and scratched at its post three times. He was shaggy, the color of rain splashing stone, and floppy eared. An insubordinate but kindly mutt.

“No, it has not been three hours, dog. We are not yet called in for dinner.”

Sarah inspected the clearing. Dead leaves knee-deep. The scrub overgrown. The uphill path through the trees toward home.

Cort snuffed a chunk of hair off his eyepatch, circled, and scratched thrice—this time marring the wood.

“Scoundrel! It has been but two hours and fifty-three minutes and you mark my *Pandemonium*? Be warned dog, I suffer fools foully. There are places, deep, flea-ridden, hexed locations for traitors.” The captain leaned back at the helm and bumped into a shelf of teacups.

Cort hung his head and gnashed his teeth.

A rock cut the air in front of Sarah’s nose.

“Cort! Prepare for hostilities.”

The dog leapt from the forecastle to the main deck, nails clicking.

Isabelle Pardee was tall for her age and nearly the same height as Sarah, though she was four years younger. She rustled through the fallen leaves, attentive to avoid the Place of Traitors. It was a two-day-dig of a pit covered with shrubbery. It exuded the odor of rancid apples.

Isabelle peeked from behind a thicket.

“Sarah, come down. It is time for dinner.”

“I will dine on my ship, gravel-lobber.”

Sarah took in the sight of Isabelle. Thin, elegant for a child, always in a dress the color of cantaloupe. Of her five siblings, Isabelle was Sarah’s favorite. She was prim and polite in front of adults, but often stayed up late with Sarah

to read adventure tales. They shared a secret. Both wanted to move to California. Sarah dreamt of prospecting and Isabelle wanted to marry a rich hardware store owner.

“No. Mama said come in and wash up.”

Isabelle stepped outward, threw another rock upward, and knocked a jug off the deck. It landed with a shatter. The *Pandemonium* did not appreciate this.

Isabelle ran to the base of the oak and huddled against a pile of discarded jars.

“You there, Isabelle the Destroyer!” Sarah yelled. She knelt to sort through the armory basket. Honey trickle? Bean toss? Ant gush? “I told you what would become of you if you broke any more of my jars!”

“You wouldn’t dare dirty me before dinner. Mother would punish you.”

Cort nipped at Sarah. He pointed a drippy nose at the water pitcher.

Yes, recompense. Isabelle had recently put Sarah’s hand in a warm glass of water as she slept. Sarah had peed all over her bedding.

“Sarah.”

“It’s Captain Pardee and I’ll pit you for that indiscretion.”

“Sarah, mama will knock a sensible woman into you if we are late. Not me. Only you.”

Cort snapped at the air in Isabelle’s direction.

“She knows you are not in the garden reading.”

Sarah poked her head down the escape hatch. Cort followed suit. Isabelle lifted her head at the noise.

Sarah poured the water pitcher down the hatch.

Isabelle screeched the keen of a hoof-crushed kitten.

“Sarah!”

“Cort, we miscalculated.”

The dog nodded. It had been a partial soaking.

Isabelle picked up several stones that had begun their lives as mountains.

“Sarah, mama noticed the missing dishes and I’m going to tell her what you and your mutt are doing out here.”

Isabelle’s stones soared skyward, arched around the deck, and landed on Cort. The dog careened and leveled a light tower. Jars crashed.

The *Pandemonium* wanted to crush Isabelle with a fallen branch but refrained its revenge out of respect for the Captain.

Sarah remained calm.

Losses were calculated.

Homeless candlebugs crept through Cort’s fur.

Cort headbutted the armory basket. A cheesecloth ball filled with flour rolled out.

“Brilliant sir, you are brilliant!” Sarah picked it up and stepped to the edge of the deck.

“Fine. Stay here. I am telling.” Isabelle turned toward the path to the Pardee house. There was plum pudding and hot tea to be had.

“Do we let her depart, Cort?”

Isabelle turned and tried one last time to bring her sister home. She stomped her foot. “Sarah, now. Come *now*.”

“But Isabelle, I need help.”

“With what?” Isabelle eyed her elder sister.

“I need help down.”

Isabelle squinted at the ladder. It was intact.

“I am seven. Not stupid. Your ladder is whole, Sarah. I do not want to help you. I do not like you right now. I am sodden.” Isabelle wrung water out of her skirt.

A red leaf fluttered against Sarah's neck. Then an orange one. Sarah grabbed the leaves with the palm of flour still behind her back.

"I didn't want to yell it to you all the way down there." Sarah lowered her voice. "But I have a secret."

Isabelle's eyes enlarged with interest. She went back to the treeship.

Sarah wound her arm back, affecting an itch.

Isabelle stopped.

Cort growled.

Sepia-colored clouds curtained the sky.

Mrs. Pardee looked at the hall clock. She tapped two fingers against its face and thought better of sending Isabelle after Sarah. Mischief-makers, the both of them.

"What sort of a secret?" Isabelle demanded.

"Quiet! You cannot go yelling about privacies in these parts."

That was the truth. An aggregation of ghosts, unseen by the sisters, promenaded the clearing, collecting ambiguous information.

"What sort of secret?" Isabelle whispered.

"A tremendous secret. A terrible secret. A very large and important secret."

Isabelle forgot about the plum pudding. She no longer noted her chilled person.

"Tell me, Sarah. Tell me, *please*."

"Come closer, sister."

"Tell me from here. I might know it already."

Sarah held up the red leaf. "I learned how to read leaves."

Isabelle was shocked.

"What does that mean?"

“I can see your future in this leaf. I won’t say a word further until it is in hushed tones on the deck of the *Pandemonium*.”

Cort shook a moth off his ear. Sarah passed him the flour ball. He edged to the escape hatch, ready for the drop.

Isabelle ran to the tree in awe.

Sarah sat at the edge of the deck. Her feet dangled off. She waved the leaves like fans.

“Sarah, will I marry someone handsome? Am I going to have a big house with lots of snapdragons and daisies? Will I leave New Haven?”

“This red leaf says you will marry a noble and handsome man and have at least one noble and handsome baby.”

Sarah dropped the leaf on her sister.

Isabelle tried to catch the leaf as it fluttered downward. She missed and it tumbled to the thousands of other leaves at her feet. Isabelle’s eyes narrowed. Her lips tightened.

“This leaf,” Sarah said. She held up the orange leaf. “This one says you will live a glorious life with yearly holidays to European places, in the spring, of course. But it only counts if you keep the leaf forever.”

“Give it to me, Sarah!”

Sarah swung herself back on deck and scuttled to the hatch. There she dropped the orange leaf.

It fluttered past the trunk.

Cort snorted. The flour ball had clotted his nose.

Isabelle ran to the base of the oak before the leaf could finish falling.

Cort dropped the flour ball.

Isabelle caught the leaf.

The missile struck Isabelle’s head. She and the leaf became floured shades.

Isabelle shrieked.

Cort did a tail-wagging waltz with Sarah.

Isabelle sat on the ground, a hiccupping mess. She held the leaf in her hands.

“Oh come now,” Sarah said. She grabbed Cort, put him in the armory basket, and dangled him over the edge of the deck. With a flick of a cord, Cort flitted downward. The basket landed with a yip and a thud. “You can’t possibly be angry. You broke at least twelve of my propulsion jars.”

Sarah climbed down the ladder. She sat next to Isabelle.

“You cannot be sore. Those candlebugs took three evenings to collect. Three!” Sarah elbowed Isabelle. Cort licked the younger girl’s nose. It left a peach spot in the pale dust.

Isabelle wheezed. She stuffed the leaf into her skirt pocket.

The pale and pearl of late evening edged toward the children.

“Isabelle, we should go. You said so yourself.”

Sarah stood.

Isabelle gave one final hiccup and focused. She grabbed Sarah’s pantalettes and pulled.

Sarah yawped. She and her undersuches went to the dirt.

Isabelle gave a crow-stirring cry and the girls rolled, pulled, and generally thwarted one another in waves of leafage.

Cort nipped at the muslin of Isabelle’s underskirt.

“You are bad, very bad, Sarah,” Isabelle heaved.

“Little villain,” Sarah countered with a tug on the ear.

“Dwarf.” Isabelle kicked Sarah’s shin.

“Corrupt child.” Sarah pulled her sister’s curls.

Cort pillaged the auguring, orange leaf from Isabelle's skirt and sat back with a growl. His ear smarted from a kick by an undecipherable foot. He would democratically chew on both of their special things later.

"Liar," Isabelle uttered. The laughter began to boil as Sarah tickled behind her knee.

"Street rat," Sarah said. She snorted as Isabelle poked her in the ribs.

"You are a horrible, horrible sister, Sarah Lockwood Pardee." Isabelle pulled her sister forward.

"And you are a fussy, upstanding civilian, Isabelle C. P."

They stood in the fallen leaves.

"In return for your horribleness, Sarah, you will have a terrible future. I will marry a nice man and have nice children and the world will be well for me."

Sarah nodded. "Duly noted."

Cort deposited the leaf in Sarah's palm, who put it in her own dress pocket.

"All of your paramours will depart, all of your children will die, and you will have a nasty, ugly widow's life. The world will be dark for you," Isabelle said brightly.

"Yes, yes. Noted as such. Shall we?"

"Yes."

"Darling Isabelle?"

"What?"

"I'll wager my pudding I reach the porch first."

Sarah bolted.

"Not fair!" Isabelle cried, running after her sister.

Cort disappeared under the leaves as he followed the girls.

The air was thin.



The apparitions wandering the wood frowned as the children passed.

The *Pandemonium* shuddered, but could not strike the girls' conversation from the clearing.

Sarah's leaves had held no meaning. It was the words. No matter the age of those that said them, no matter the intent—a person's words carried weight in the world.

# CHAPTER ONE

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NEAR CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, 1852

HENNET C. DANIELS required a pick.

What he had was a beggar, a drunk, and a Chinese fella watching as he stabbed at a keyhole with a stick from a busted chair.

The pins didn't shuffle. Didn't shift. Didn't click.

A guffaw came from the cell crosswise.

Hennet raised eyes to find a wild-haired woman in tattered flounces laughing at him. Likely seventeen to his twenty.

"Inapt width," the woman said.

Hester Garlan was her name, but she didn't give it out often.

"Thin enough," Hennet replied.

"Don't even have a tension wrench."

"Don't need one."

The sheriff grunted, cheek flat on his desk, arms hanging by his knees, hat slouched into a puddle of sleep-spit. His wheeze, wheeze, snore filled the two-cell jailhouse.

Hennet ran a hand through his dark hair. It came back bloody. He'd been pistol-whipped before he was thrown in his cell.

"Sweetmeat, you're the least able picker I ever witnessed," Hester said.

Hennet didn't abide offensive attentions.

He flicked his hand at the woman. Blood spattered Hester's chin and frayed lace collar. The cutpurses and evening women bunking with her scampered to the clapboard wall. Hester wiped the blood from her chin with her knuckles and sucked on them. She did this slowly.

There was vantage in owning your adversary's fluids.

Hennet watched the woman.

Her head tilted.

Hester's head tilted because a deceased, pink-faced woman paced the jail that only she could see. Hester was a medium. She saw and spoke to the dead.

Most ghosts were mumblers. There was no accounting for what confidentialities would tumble past their teeth. Hester sold these dead-uttered intimacies. She should have been propertied and prosperous, but for every coin that came to Hester, so did a curse.

"You're boil-brained if you think you're going to dub the jigger with a stick," she said after the pink-faced woman walked through a wall.

"Speak like you're learned on the matter."

Hennet loosened the kerchief on his throat. He thumbed the scar of a bullet graze under his ear.

Hester ferreted through her skirt folds. She emptied four hidden pockets. She searched the nest of curls behind her ear and pulled forth her picking kit.

"Tell you what I'm *learned on*," she said as she jiggled her own lock. "I'm *learned on* the certitude that a proper man doesn't throw blood at a lady. I'm *learned on* how to punch that sheriff dead. I'm *learned on* how to take his gun to your chipped ear for staining my time and dress."

Her lock clicked mightily.

Hennet turned to the men in his cell. “Whatday’ all got?”

The beggar flipped him a button.

The drunk tossed in two ribbons of rabbit jerky.

The Chinese fella pitched a short knife into the ground by Hennet’s boot.

Hennet nodded appreciation and picked up the knife.

His cellmates crossed their arms and backed away.

Hester had halted.

“Forget how?” Hennet sneered and took to the keyhole with the blade.

“Didn’t want you sniveling I had excess time when I shoot you in the head while you’re still diddling that hole.”

Hennet shived to.

Hester’s lock clinked louder.

“Think you’ll prize this, little bird?”

“Look at the mud brick, outlaw, it’s where you’ll die.”

Hennet frowned.

Both locks whined over their common assault.

Hester wanted to hit the man’s lips. His chapped, thin lips. She hissed a fragrant whore out of one of her shoes, picked up the boot, and threw it. The leather sole smashed into Hennet’s cheek.

“For Chrissakes!” Hennet yowled.

“Your face is a botheration,” Hester replied.

This was a moderate lie. Hennet was a full, frontier fathom of handsome.

Hennet wiped the new sprung blood from under his eye and slung the boot at the sheriff.

A wham and a slam and the sheriff fell off his chair.

Hester kept at her keyhole.

Hennet stood with his fists on his hips.

“What’s this?” The sheriff huffed on the short walk to the cells. He shook the boot at Hester.

“Pickin’ a lock, sir,” Hester said.

“You ain’t picking a lock here.”

Hester looked at him dead-on and kept tricking pins.

“Stop.”

“No.”

The sheriff dropped the boot, rolled his right cuff, directed his fist betwixt the bars, and boxed Hester in the eye.

Her head jerked back. The lock clicked. Hester rolled her neck and gazed lazily at him.

“Ain’t you got sense? Stop,” the sheriff told Hester.

There was a deep split in Hester’s eyebrow from the sheriff’s wedding band.

The sheriff’s dead wife, she of the pink face and pacing, was present. Mrs. Lawman passed of heat stroke on an August afternoon, after she brought her lovely-dovely his lunch. Permanent perspiration dripped grey from her temples. Her husband did not ignore her. He did not see her. This did not stop Mrs. Lawman from chattering at him about church and the weather and washing his hands.

Hester kept at the lock.

It was Hennet’s turn to guffaw.

The sheriff never beat on his delicate lovely-dovely—rest in the glorious Lord’s peace, she’d been gone one year and one half. He woulda never beat on any decent woman, but this one, she was nabbed for roughing up a priest.

The sheriff picked up the boot and swung it at Hester’s hands. Busted fingers would teach her to respect his warnings.

The pick went through the web of Hester's thumb and forefinger.

There was an intake of breath from the other prisoners.

Hester held up her hand with the pick still in it. She pulled it out, clinched the sheriff's collar, pulled him forward, and drove the pick into his hairy neck.

The deceased Mrs. Lawman screamed.

Only Hester heard it, but the scream caused a wind to rush through the jailhouse.

The sheriff fell to the floor yelling and squirting red.

The other prisoners grunted in satisfaction.

Hester's hand was five minutes from swollen, her eyeball felt slack, and the sheriff's late wife alternately crooned apologies for her husband's disreputable behavior and squealed ruination for Hester's untoward attempt on his life.

Hester looked at the brown-eyed outlaw.

He had the grin a wolf gave a rabbit half a second before innards become outters.

Hester ripped a strip of leather from the whore's shoddy boot. She rubbed it in the blood Brown Eyes had flung at her earlier. She pulled out a hair, lathered it in her own blood, and wrapped it around the leather with a dirge in her throat. Lace torn from her collar bound the bundle.

Hester threw it at the candle on the sheriff's desk.

A lick of fire exploded outward. Ate the bundle. Burnt quick. Disappeared.

The women behind Hester started a prayer circle.

The beggar, the drunk, and the Chinese fella did likewise, though they didn't join hands and not two of them prayed in the same way.

Hennet went back to lock picking.

Hester drew a line in the dirt with her hand. She walked over it three times then smoothed it out and said, “You will never once be satisfied in this life.”

Those that take notice of such declarations took notice of Hester. The line in the dirt, the bloody bundle—that was stagecraft—but the words mattered.

“You curse me, little bird?”

Hester winked at him and blood reddened her eye.

“Damn you and your damning me.”

Hester attempted to absolve herself, but the outlaw’s curse was already marked by the world for later use.

Hennet huffed over his keyhole.

Hester concentrated on hers.

It took one minute more.

The locks sighed in defeat. Each opened.

Hester had to kick-shove the groaning sheriff from her path. By such time, Hennet had his haversack from a wall peg. Had his gun belt from the sheriff’s drawer. Had his six-shooter trained on her.

What Hennet noticed was that there’d be a slight less beauty in the world when he shot this woman. Fetching, in spite of the split brow and puffed knuckles. Maybe it was because of the split brow and puffed knuckles. Hennet came from a line of half-crazed wildcats and appreciated vigor in his women.

The sheriff grunted. Felt like he was dying. Thought he heard his wife calling. (She was.) Reached out for mercy and found Hennet’s pant leg.

Hennet kicked the sheriff in the armpit without looking at him.

Hester stomped her flat-heeled boot. A razor shifted out of the toe. She kicked Hennet in the neck, but she missed the main vein. The cut wasn’t deep, but it bled flowingly and Hennet’s footing faltered. His head hit the mud-brick.

His six-shooter went off.

The bullet brushed Hester's arm and found a home behind her in the guts of a thirteen-year-old vagrant who, a lifetime ago, was the spelling bee champion of Little Tick, Illinois.

The sheriff tried to drag himself from the fray.

Hennet got to his hands and knees. Hester kicked him in the ribs. There was a delightful crack.

The other prisoners eyed each other. Looked at the open cell doors. The near-dead sheriff. The brawl.

Hester swung her foot at the outlaw again, but this time Hennet grabbed her by the heel, wrenched it, and Hester fell. Her ample backside would bruise.

The women, the drunk, the beggar, and the Chinese fella exited their cells and ran from the jail. The Spelling Bee Champion of Little Tick, Illinois died. A straw bonnet was tipped over her blank eyes.

"Sonofabitch, you sonofabitch there is dirt on my dress." Hester elbowed Hennet in the face.

"Already was dirt on your dress." Hennet dragged her to him.

The sheriff moaned. Hester had fallen on his legs. Hennet punched the dying man, but it was Hester's follow-up thump that sent the sheriff into the final dark.

Hester and Hennet got to their knees.

"Sweetmeat, I will cut you." Hester grabbed a fistful of Hennet's hair and swung his head back. She searched her pockets left-handed for a blade.

"No, you won't." Hennet shived Hester in the shoulder instead. Twisted it.

Hester growled, extracted the blade, and lost her grip on the outlaw's hair.

Hennet dove forward and landed on top of the woman.



“Not so bad down here.” Hennessey eyed the low scoop of Hester’s dress. The lace collar had fallen off.

“Not a here you’re welcome to.” Hester knelt Hennessey in the particulars, grabbed at the sheriff’s belt, and found his sad, little knife. She stabbed Hennessey in the side and dragged a jagged pattern.

Hennessey wailed every wrong-sided word he knew, pulled the short knife out, fell off the woman, and landed on his back. He clutched at a bow as he rolled and a hole appeared at the hip of her dress.

“Can’t claw a woman’s dress to flitters without her permission,” Hester said as she climbed on Hennessey’s chest and strangled him with a broken chair leg.

It was sitting astride Brown Eyes that Hester noticed what a fine chest he had. The kind of chest that could stop a hammer, a train, or a whore walking a full room.

While grabbing at the chair leg, Hennessey couldn’t help but admire the woman’s calves. They were traveling calves.

“I mean to tear something, it’ll be imperative,” he said. With a quick rip, Hester’s scoop neck split. Her bosom spilled out.

“Never been a lonely, unclad lady, and I’m not starting now.” Hester kept the chair leg at Hennessey’s neck and tore open his vest and shirt.

They bled onto each other from abundant wounds. Each raised an eyebrow.

“Temporary accord?” Hester asked.

“Com’ere,” Hennessey said.

Hester let the chair leg fall.

Hennessey bunched the dress over her thighs. Being a man of the world, he attempted composure at Hester’s lack of britches, but she felt him rise beneath her.

The dead blathered of Hester's vulgar talent for having sexual relations outside of bedrooms. The sheriff was now one of the blatherers.

Hester didn't give a fig what the dead thought of her.

She rocked her weight over the outlaw's waist.

Hennet undid his belt. Once again, he thought on the world losing a damn sight of beauty when he shot this woman.

Thirty minutes of biting, scratching, back curving, thrusting, bending, rolling, and Hester's hips moving up and down later, Hennet wouldn't have the chance to shoot her. The wound in his side bled through the fornicating. He passed out shortly after Hester wiped the inside of her thigh with his kerchief.

The dead said that Hester's lewd aptitudes appalled Hennet into a swoon.

When Hennet awoke, it was midmorning. He had no pants, his vest was in shreds, his neck had gummed up, his side wound had a rag shoved in it, and he was back in a locked cell. Be that as it may, there was a pick within spitting distance.

It wasn't his lowest start to a day.

Then, the screeching started.

"Net!"

Hennet's brother ran into the jailhouse.

"Mornin', Walleye."

"Net, you ain't got none pants on." Walleye leaned against the bars and gave them a shake.

"Do now." Hennet pulled on his pants.

"Why you the only one in jail, Net?"

"Because your sorry trigger finger couldn't coffin a sheriff."

“I was gonna pick you out, Net, pick you right outta here,” Walleye said. And he could. Walleye could liberate any lock in less than eleven seconds.

Hennet thought he smelled marjoram. His neck smarted. Hell, his everything smarted.

“Why you hurt?” Walleye asked.

“None of your fool business.”

Hennet thought on her brown hair, full of twigs and shivs. The curve of her neck. The way she tongued his ear. The weight of her legs. The extension of her arm before she stabbed him. Hadn’t even got her name.

Hennet shook his head, then worked the keyhole. His brother poked at the pick.

“Quit.”

“I’m helping.”

Walleye poked Hennet’s hand one more time.

“I’ll bust you up, Wall.”

But the lock clicked open.

Hennet sighed. It should’ve taken at least three more minutes.

Walleye stepped back and rubbed one of his feet. He didn’t believe in shoes before eleven in the morning or after eleven at night.

Hennet washed out his side wound and stitched it up with a needle and thread from his haversack. How that little bird didn’t puncture any of his guts, Hennet had no idea. He’d had worse but barely. He hoped her shoulder festered.

Walleye kicked the sheriff’s cadaver.

Hennet took the dead man’s boots, but his gun and billfold were already gone.

It wasn’t the first time the Daniels Brothers walked out of a jailhouse and into the morning light.



## CHAPTER TWO

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NEAR CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, 1852

AS HESTER STOLE the sheriff's horse—a spotty fella whose teeth didn't fully fit in his mouth—she thought on death.

The heart beats. Beats. Aches. Then quits. This resignation was an unavoidable experience. That which lived died, but not everyone left the world when they died. She didn't understand how the world decided who stayed.

“Giddyup.”

The horse ignored her. It was old. It was tired. It was in the middle of a shit and enjoyed the moonlight.

Hester counted to five to calm herself.

A reek arose. The horse moved.

They passed the jail tree and the general store. Two dead farmers played checkers on the porch. Each had a bullet hole in one eye. They had quarreled over cattle. One of them noticed Hester, balled his fists, but could not leave the porch to swing at her.

When and if the dead recognized Hester, they did not like her. She was not surprised. She killed them, often, for pay. She was the lone practitioner in all thirty-one states of sending a spirit to the Something After. Heaven, Hell—

wherever they went—they were gone from the living world after she met their eyes and said a few words she had learned from her mother.

Hester didn't like the puzzle of how some people stayed on as spirits and others didn't. Hester didn't like any puzzles or riddles. She didn't like thinking. She liked doing. She didn't like learning. She liked knowing.

From what Hester could parse, it came down to a person's last words and thoughts.

For example, the pick-stabbed sheriff.

His last words were "Not yet."

As such, he was destined to brood at the jailhouse, never to be noticed by anyone, except for the desperados whom his harping was experienced as piss cans spilled by no visible wind and the thumping of food tins out of steady hands.

If the sheriff's last words had been "Shit" or "Oh hell," he would have left the vale to the Something After. But no. His final reflection was that of self-preservation. Hester knew that because she heard him.

Something, or someone, heeled to the closing consideration of the living mind—especially if that thought was said aloud.

Thus the earthly province, inhabited by humans doing their breathing and living, was also populated by those that need not breathe, that went unseen. Specters, spirits, apparitions, ghosts—all words for the same damn thing—the dead.

Hester had seen them all her life. They did not age. They did not sicken. They wore the clothes of their last day and bore the marks of however they died.

Hester kicked her horse. It didn't move. It gnawed on a shrub in front of a booze tent. It savored the scent of whiskey-piss near the entry. Hester did not. She kicked harder. She wanted out of town before that brown-eyed outlaw

awoke. She had taken a scuffed silver pocket watch and one-hundred-seventeen dollars from his billfold. The horse gave in, but it decided to chew on her when it had the chance.

A sleeping drunk was propped against the trunk of the last tree before town turned to flat land then forest. Hester leaned sideways to steal the rum cradled in his arms and winced. Her body was a patchwork of bruises and wounds. It'd been years since anyone had given to Hester as good as she gave, and she didn't even get the man's name. She sighed, tipped back the bottle, and forced herself to think.

Haints had limited ambulation. When somebody passed on, they affixed to an object, a place, or a person—but once attached, shit, there was no unhitchin'. Hester rummed her weary mind trying to figure why the hell a ghost had to attach to anything. She believed the dead were bound to what or who they wanted most. If they held no passions, their adherence was arbitrary.

Spirits splintered into one of three categories: idiocy, artifice, and aid. As you were in life, so you were in death.

Broad quantities of the dead were too dull to be anything other than pantry-opening-air-cooling-wind-whispering-wall-knocking nuisances.

Others shirked wickedly around and knit their anger into nets to cast over the living. Hester had found that the dead could harm humans. Animals for that matter. Plants, even.

But the dead were not completely atrocious. There were those spirits that found fulfillment in alleviating the living. They reinforced walls during earthquakes. Unobstructed jammed shop locks. Did the dusting. Set the tea to boiling. Opened holy books to encouraging passages. Assisted wheeled-chairs over breaks in the boardwalk. Frayed hangman's knots and snuffed fallen candles before fires caught.

These helpers believed that good deeds would quicken them to the Something After. Hester knew better. Her dead sight and words were the only unnatural carriage to other worlds.

She also thought that it was hardly appropriate that those who lived continually wished for something *more* and those that died continually wished for something *after*.

It all deepened Hester's headache and barely any of these were even her thoughts. Her great-grandmother had written *An Uncommon History of the Dead*. She took another drink. Knew that all she had were hunches and an old woman's speculations. Remembered that she had to pick up her wagon in Joliet, felt another brain shudder, and took a larger swallow.

The only surety Hester held, as she set off on her farting, unpleasant horse, was that all people—living and dead—were greedy and needy and never to be trusted.



## CHAPTER THREE

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BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, 1852

NATHAN GARLAN WAS a sixth-generation medium conceived by a ne'er-do-well and an outlaw.

He was not expected or desired.

In truth, Hester Garlan had several times drunk abortive teas. When these had no useful effect, she had the sincerest intention to lift the lid of the nearest garbage barrel and leave the sniveling babe for the mutts and maggots.

It was known among her people that unless you were done watching the dead, you didn't breed. Your dead sight would go to the child.

Hester had never had an accident breathe out of her before. In a candlelit moment of the child blinking dark eyes, she called him Nathan. Once. Then Hester thought better of becoming sentimental over a swaddled setback and hoped that when she killed him, she'd once again be able to see spirits. If not, she'd be fighting the dead blind-eyed all of her days.

But waste made woe.

Hester, lacking in delicate sensibilities, had a mind for money. Why drown in a trough that which might bring a grip of gold?

Solomon Nerebit's silver door knocker was a human fist hanging out of a lion's mouth. The fist was polished, but the porch step was in sad want of a

scrubbing. Hester Garlan knocked, paused, then added two boot jolts to the bottom of the door.

She nudged a burlap sack with her foot. It, for Hester regarded her son, Nathan, as less engaging than an upturned beetle, chirped and rolled toward the edge of the stoop. She stepped on the child to halt Its progress.

Across the cobblestones, two gentlemen had silk top hats and base speculations. They could smell Hester. A stimulating cinnamon brine wafted from her.

She reached under her unbustled skirts, winked at the scattering, scandalized men, and produced a nub of chalk.

The child punched tiny fists at the burlap.

Hester sat on her heels and scribbled on the stoop.

The door creaked open. A cherrywood pegleg and an opal-buttoned leather shoe reflected the spiders in Hester's hair.

Mr. Solomon Nerebit, worth approximately 13,000 dollars a year, stood six foot four with greying temples and a cigar stub. The box the stub came from cost more than a housekeeper who'd properly open the door, but who was Hester to question a rich man's peculiarities?

Hester liked her men thoughtless bastards.

Solomon Nerebit was a thoughtless bastard.

The child wouldn't live long in Solly's hands. It'd be tupp'd at a mantel, starved, or dropped down the stairs in a month, maybe less—give it till the thing pissed on the parquet.

The infant had taken her dead sight, but Hester could still hear the departed mutter. Bothersome lot always warbling about something lost, lonesome, or undone. Much as Hester wanted to promptly hatchet the boy apart, if it meant a hoard of velvet and her hotel bill paid through the end of the year, she could endure a month without seeing the dead.

But it would give them time to scheme. Their hate had grown in the past nine months. They'd become more violent with her. All because of that churchyard of spirits Hester'd sent to the Something After.

Until Hester could get her dead sight back, she soaked her clothes in salt water. It repelled most of the bitter Bessies intent on her destruction. Her once deep burgundy walking dress was now a lackluster red.

"Darling, so pleasant of you to drop by unannounced." Nerebit flicked his cigar and grasped his lapels.

The cigar landed on the burlap sack.

The ghost of a three-year-old girl watched from a neighbor's chokeberry bush. She hoped the baby boy inside the burlap would burn. Then she would have a friend.

Nathan saw the rotted specter from the holes in the cloth. Ribbons sliced deep into the girl's throat and were tied into a neat bow at the back of her neck. She had been strangled by a coachman. She was a dense brume rather than a solid being.

Not every spirit was more fog than form, though most beclouded about the edges.

Nathan cried.

He was yet to understand that this was his lot in life—to be an agency of communication between the living and the dead.

"Hello, Solly." Hester dropped the chalk into her corset and stood. "I was leaving my remarks on the ownership of a certain tot to you and the missus."

Hester had outlined a baby discharging offensive liquids while Solomon attempted to change its bottom cloth.

The burlap smoldered.

The garden ghost smiled widely. Too widely.

Since Its birth Hester had felt empty. Somewhat less. Not even hot baths and room service could make up for more than one ghost-blind month. Too many dead things wanted her gone to grass, and how did one exchange blows with invisible enemies?

“Your illustration has missed my distinguished eyebrows, my pushing girl.”

“But I left room for all that forehead.”

“Utterly splendid yourself, precious. Are those, hmm, are those twigs in your hair? How festive.”

Hester kicked the cigar off of It. Can’t sell It if It was dead. Not for as much, anyhow.

The dead assembled in front of the Nerebit home. A mob of shufflers who’d perished on the thoroughfare.

Their murmurs headached Hester.

Solomon Nerebit heard nothing.

Nathan saw them. Heard them.

“You’re the pa,” Hester lied.

“Hester, my mischief, that child looks not a lick like me.”

“Solly, it’s in a bag.”

“Still. Perhaps some embroidery would do agreeably?”

Solomon Nerebit was not a fool. He knew the infant did not commemorate his last association with Hester, a dolorous bout of itching did.

“You and the missus still want one?”

“Not that one, Hester-pet.”

“I’d sell It for a just rate.”

This time Solomon thoughtfully nudged the burlap with his toe.

“No.”

“Fair enough.”

“Hester, my pretty plague.” Solomon placed peaked fingertips on an upturned lip. “My requirement of your affections has diminished. I am astounded and disappointed in your appearance at my private residence.”

Hester leaned into Solomon.

Solomon’s chest puffed out.

Hester raked her fingers across the piping of his jacket. Her left hand pilfered his pocket watch. “Solly, you’re a hideous man with a terribly unimpressive requirement.”

Hester thieved from Solomon.

He had never once caught her in the moment.

He tolerated it because the thought of one day seizing Hester in the act and beating the blue into her aroused him greatly.

But verily the itching was awful.

“Mister Nerebit, who is at the door? Come back to tea,” beckoned Mrs. Nerebit from the parlor.

Mrs. Nerebit drank posh tea picked by trained monkeys.

She would not be pleased to learn that the monkeys did not delight in their trade and often relieved themselves on the tea leaves.

“Shortly, Missus Nerebit, I’ll be there shortly. It is only a repellent solicitor.”

Solomon pushed Hester back. Her shoulder blades stitched into the brick entry. He grabbed her ear and twisted.

Solomon Nerebit delighted in intimidating people.

“Hester-pet, toss it off a high precipice, perhaps the bank. That might be tall enough. As the awful, unfashionable creature falls toward Old Scratch, step after. Do what you will, but never come back to my home.”

Solomon let go of Hester’s ear, put his palm on her forehead, and cracked the back of her skull on the brick.

There are many bad decisions made each day.

Bill money goes to whiskey.

Tithes fund dog fights.

Little ones fib.

Large ones lie.

The thick-headed thief, nimbly or not.

Sons of Cain kill and are only sometimes caught.

There are a mighty number of missteps man may take. None are as foolish as enraging Hester Garlan.

The dead knew this.

Solomon should have known this.

Hester squinted. Her lips tightened.

She took deep, steady breaths.

She put her hand to the back of her head to see how much blood was there. She frowned at her fingers.

Hester was not a woman of meditative pausation.

Nor was she a woman to be bullied.

The dead skittered several steps back.

The garden child hid and peered hollow eyes out of the chokeberry bush.

Solomon Nerebit should have known better.

Hester rummaged under her skirt. She plucked one of three knives tied to her thigh.

Solomon saw a distinguished eyebrow mirrored in the blade before it befriended his throat. Crimson soaked his tailored shirt.

Solomon fell onto Nathan.

A cheer came from the chokeberry bush.

A squall from the bag.

A sigh from the bush.

Nathan had not been broken.

With a practiced hand, Hester pillaged. “Gold watch, good for nothin’, bullheaded, sonofabitch.” She flipped over Solomon so that he was face up.

Solomon Nerebit’s lips moved soundlessly.

“Where’s the billfold, lover?” Hester popped the opals from his shoe. She tapped his pegleg until she heard an echo, tipped the knife into a slit, and found twenty dollars.

Solomon punched Hester with a loosely balled fist. Hester pushed his hand down.

“Repellent, Solly? Am I?” Hester took off his rings. “All I wanted was to sell the sprat, and look what you made me do.”

Solomon Nerebit blinked one final time.

Mrs. Nerebit put down her tea and went to the door.

Nathan gibbered as Solomon’s blood leaked into his burlap.

Hester reached inside Solomon’s left cuff. Three more dollars. “And really Solly, toss myself off the bank, eh? Eh?” Hester smacked Solomon’s cheek hard.

One of his eyelids fell shut.

Hester tugged It from under the formerly attractive Mr. Nerebit and shoved her findings into the sack. She kicked Solomon’s neck and a spurt of blood fountained across the doorframe.

Mrs. Nerebit’s plump silhouette screamed.

“Don’t sham like he was a decent man,” Hester said.

Mrs. Nerebit stepped into the light, a lace handkerchief to her puckered mouth.

Hester crossed the entry and took a silver dessert plate from the foyer table. Almond sticks and butter cookies dropped on Nathan. The plate put a minor, permanent dent on the side of his head.

“Don’t suppose you’d purchase this chickadee from me?” Hester swung the sack. Nathan cried. Mrs. Nerebit demurred.

A bouquet of lilies and irises from a further entry table were fastened into Hester’s hair for later sale.

Mrs. Nerebit’s skirt hem soaked up Mr. Nerebit’s blood.

A miniature painting, a lock of Solomon’s hair, the silver door knocker, and a gold and blue damask pillow smothered Nathan.

Hester patted Mrs. Nerebit on the puffed sleeve. “Think of it as a wild, new beginning.” Hester’s other hand stole Mrs. Nerebit’s amber earrings.

Mrs. Nerebit opened and closed her mouth like a decked fish.

“You’ll have plenty to squawk about at bridge club, eh, pretty lady?” Hester took the now Widow Nerebit’s scarab brooch.

The Widow Nerebit would tell the ladies. Only they played rummy, not bridge, and it would have to be after a brief mourning period. She would spread tears across the tablecloth and for at least three weeks she would win every hand. She would buy extravagantly beaded black gowns and never, ever again would the Widow Nerebit have to listen to Mr. Nerebit complain about her tea selection, or how he thought she was growing fat in the face, or how the violet brocade curtains (she absolutely adored) violently clashed with her “potato pallor.”

Hester hopped down the steps with the sack over her shoulder.

The stoop would need a harsher scrubbing.

Solomon Nerebit did not join the dead milling about the cobblestones. Call it lack of ambition or luck, but sometimes, most of the time, dead was dead.



The garden ghost sat with her head on her knees in the chokeberry bush, yet again cold and all alone.



There are many ways to kill an infant.

Infants do not have the physical structure to run from you. Nor do they make a mewling if one has properly sealed their mouths.

Anybody could go about suffocating one of the things, but it's getting rid of the carcass that can be a trial. One mulling over murdering an infant should quietly inquire into close-at-hand pig sheds, riverbeds, rendering kettles, train tracks, soap boxes, and large manure heaps.

Since the meat-pie man wouldn't buy the babe, Hester thought to burn It. Were Hester not arrogant—and easily distracted by the scent of coffee—perhaps she would've lingered to watch Nathan roast, but Hester didn't stay and Nathan didn't burn, and it was ten damn years before she found the mishap again.

