

Shannon J. Kelley  
7215 Wallace Ave.  
Kansas City, MO 64133  
(816) 737-2222  
sjkelley@outlook.com

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THE HIGHWAYMAN

by

Shannon Kelley

The rain pelted Elias' face, stung his cheeks. He stumbled blindly, boots splashing in the muck, a stabbing pain shooting through his side with every step he took. He had kept his hand clamped over that spot as he fled through the night, all the while feeling warm fluid running through his cold fingers. Though he couldn't see it in the dark, he could feel his entire hand was now slick with a mixture of blood and rainwater.

Elias ran with a lurching gait, the wound in his side almost more than he could bear. With the muscles in his legs burning, his lungs aching, only fear and sheer willpower kept him on his feet. Yet the wind swirled around him, buffeted him, threatened to knock him off balance. To make matters worse, his saturated cloak clung to his body, inhibiting his movements and weighing him down. His wobbly legs finally buckled and he fell to his knees, his chest heaving, his breaths coming in great gasps.

The rain poured in streams over his frayed tricorne hat. He had unstitched it to create a wide, drooping brim to help conceal his identity. Under the hat he wore a black bandana, tied off in the back. A robber's mask hid the top half of his face, but it was too confining, making it hard to breathe. Elias snatched the hat and bandanna from his head in one motion, then yanked off the

mask with his other hand. He leaned back as he gulped for air, for the first time feeling the full force of the rain cascading over him.

The distant neighing of a horse brought an instant reaction. Elias pulled a flintlock pistol from his belt, spun and pointed it into the stormy darkness behind him. Eyes searching the gloom, he detected no movement, no other signs of life. He had acted on impulse, drawing his weapon before he had time to think about what he was doing. He could just see the outline of his pistol in the night, the metal barrel glistening in the rain. The powder was no doubt soaked, turning the firearm in his hand into a useless hunk of wood and metal. Grimacing at his own foolishness, Elias slid the pistol back into his belt.

Another whinny, this time a little closer. Desperation gave Elias strength, allowing him to fight through his exhaustion and push back up to his feet. He had fled across Sutter's Moor, a wide expanse of open land with patches of heath and peat bogs. The rain had turned the ground into a muddy, swampy mess, something he hadn't foreseen when he had first decided to cross it. But the storm had also collaborated with the black of night to hide him from his pursuers, and was probably the only reason he had been able to elude them up to that point.

They would hang him if they caught him. That was a fact. Elias could still see, in his mind's eye, the man he had shot: falling back, clutching his chest, a rapier twirling from his grasp—the same rapier that had taken a slice out of Elias' side. The man was a soldier, one of King George's men, his red uniform leaving no doubt. And because Elias had killed one of their own, it was King George's men who would hang him the moment they caught him. No arrest. No trial. No mercy. Especially after having to chase him down on such a miserable night. They probably wouldn't even bother to hang him. They would just shoot him on the spot, or thrust their bayonets into him until he stopped moving.

Elias could envision them charging through the storm, coats and uniforms soaked through, the hooves of their horses chewing up the soggy earth as they fought to catch up to him. And the captain. That damned captain would grasp onto vengeance like a hound on a bone.

So he had to press forward, one foot in front of the other, ignoring the pain, ignoring his exhaustion. His boots, his breeches, and the bottom of his cloak were slick with mud as he staggered over the next rise. It was little more than a small hill, but in his condition felt almost insurmountable. Elias paused, shoulders slumped, body stooped, as he gazed up through the wailing storm. And his eyes filled with hope.

A structure stood across the bleak, waterlogged landscape. It was no more than a faint shape in the night—except for a corner window on the second floor. A lit candle had been placed at the casement, its soft, flickering glow somehow shining through the downpour.

It was an inn, though Elias could make out very few details. A brick and wood façade, a gabled roof. Elias wasn't sure he could reach it before he succumbed to fatigue, but he was certainly going to try. He staggered over the top of the hill, down the other side, toward the beckoning light in the window. Still clutching his side, his wobbly legs barely sustained him as a crashing streak of lightning lit up the night...

The sun shone down over the same inn, now much older and in disrepair. Peeling walls, a sagging roof, missing windows, broken shutters. Untold years had passed since the inn's heyday, and the ravages of time had not been kind.

The surrounding fields had grown wildly out of control, now a tangled sea of green that swayed back and forth in a light breeze. Beyond the inn lay steep cliffs overlooking the ocean, and as the wind swelled so did the soft rumble of the surf crashing against the rocks far below.

A white gravel road looped the moor, ending at a quaint, stone bridge leading to the inn's courtyard. A red Impala and a white work truck were parked near the front door, both contradicting an environment that appeared untouched for centuries. Within earshot of the vehicles, strange sounds arose from inside the inn. Banging. Thumping. Noises that were very out of place in the otherwise tranquil setting.

In a dark room somewhere inside the inn came scratching sounds and muted voices. With a sharp *crack*, a sliver of light pierced the gloom. That was followed by a grunt, the scrape of metal on wood. Then came a *snap* as the fissure opened wider, causing a bright beam of light to shoot through.

A crowbar poked through the opening, prying two wooden planks further apart. There was soft panting, another grunt, before one of the planks was forced loose. More light streamed in through the breach, illuminating a hardwood floor blanketed in dust. Two pairs of gloved hands reached in and tugged at the upper plank, until it finally pulled free. Then the crowbar swooped in and knocked away the remaining planks below the breach.

Two figures stooped beneath the partial opening. Dressed in white workman overalls, both wore dust masks. The taller of the two, possessing a lean frame with muscular arms, held the crowbar down at his side. His companion was shorter, clearly a woman, her blonde hair bouncing about her shoulders as she shuffled under the opening. She carried a flashlight, its beam cutting through the shadows.

Brian Davis pulled down his mask as he surveyed the tiny room they had found. It was sparsely furnished with a small bed, a built-in bookshelf, and a simple desk and chair. He crinkled his nose in disappointment.

“Why would someone wall this off?” he wondered aloud. He had a slight Boston accent when he spoke.

Kelli Davis slipped her own mask down. She stared, fixated, as her flashlight spotlighted a coffer sitting on the desk. She crouched in front of it, her blue eyes glowing with wonder. She brushed away a thick layer of dust, uncovering intricate patterns in the coffer’s lid.

“Look at this.”

Kelli puckered her lips and blew softly, steadily, over the coffer’s top. The remaining dust rolled away to reveal an elaborate cross surrounded by ornate swirls.

Brian peered over her shoulder, whistled. “Is that made of silver?”

“I believe so.”

“Open it.”

Kelli gave it a tug, but the lid wouldn't budge. “It's locked. It's a nice piece though. Maybe I can restore it.” She picked it up and turned it over in her hands. “It's beautiful, isn't it? Feels like there might be something inside.”

Brian jutted his lower lip. “I'm sure we can find a way to get it open. Go ahead and put it back for now. We've still got a lot to look over.”

Leaving the coffer on the desk, Brian and Kelli ventured into the main area of the inn, which was just as dilapidated as the rest of the place. Remnants of furniture, little more than broken pieces of debris, littered the floor, most of it buried under a layer of dust. Cobwebs hung heavy over the walls and ceiling, and dark shadows pooled especially in the corners and away from the windows. An old staircase off to the side led up to a second level, the top of it disappearing into gloom.

An old grandfather clock stood against the wall next to the stairs, its hands stuck precisely on twelve. Though in desperate need of restoration, the clock was about the only noteworthy thing left in the place. Kelli walked over to it, admiring it more for its potential than its current condition. Her eyes flicked over to Brian, and she couldn't help but watch him as he stepped carefully through the debris. His line of work had kept him fit, his skin tan. He had always had a handsome face. Wavy brown hair and hazel eyes. But a sadness had filled those eyes of late, and it seemed his posture, once so confident and strong, was now constantly slouched in defeat.

Brian never noticed Kelli watching him as he rotated, peering all around, a frown on his lips. Attempting to renovate the old place would be a nightmare. No, a nightmare within a nightmare. In the seventeen hundreds, the room they were in had most likely been a tavern, but

now it was a broken down mess that was probably beyond hope. Brian stared up at the ceiling, focusing particularly on the rotting wood.

“Who did you say owns this place?” he asked.

Kelli had made her way over to the bar, which was little more than a rickety old counter with a rack above it. Just behind it was a doorway that in all probability led to a kitchen. She glanced Brian’s way as she ran a finger over the counter’s dusty surface.

“His name’s Edward Thomas. Sweet old guy. His family has owned this property for more than a century.”

Brian placed his hands on his hips, his gaze still locked on the ceiling. “Did they ever come out here? Place looks like it hasn’t been touched in a century.”

The corner of Kelli’s mouth turned up into a smirk. “I know the feeling.”

She had spoken softly, and Brian didn’t quite hear her. “What’s that?” he asked, finally looking over at her.

“Nothing,” she answered demurely.

Brian still barely heard her as his gaze floated back up. “I have to confess... I was surprised you asked me to do this,” he called over to her.

“I know. I was a little surprised myself.” As Kelli replied she ran her finger over the countertop in a nervous manner, clearing an erratic trail within the dust. “But I figured... you were still the best person to bring out here.” She thought for a second, hesitant to continue, but then finally gathered her courage. “Listen, Brian. I know it’s been hard lately. It’s just... ever since the accident—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Brian said quickly, cutting her off. He had snapped his head around and was now staring at her. “This isn’t the place or the time.”

Kelli nodded glumly. Then she took a few steps toward him, her face brightening as she watched him closely. “So what do you think?”

Brian scrunched his lips together. “Whole thing’s falling apart. Probably beyond fixing. Sort of like our marriage.” He tried to say the last line jokingly, but Kelli only appeared hurt, her face falling, the light in her eyes fading away.

“That wasn’t funny.”

Brian looked back over at her. “It was a little funny,” he cracked. But when he saw Kelli’s gaze harden, he quickly responded with a shrug. “Sorry. Just trying to lighten the mood.”

He performed an about face and resumed examining the tavern walls. Kelli could tell he was uncomfortable, so she let it go and inspected the room along with him. She stared up at the elaborate crown molding. It was crumbling, missing in several areas, but it had been beautiful once, and could be again.

“I know this place is old, but I like it. It has character. And how do you know it’s beyond fixing if we don’t even try?” Kelli asked.

Brian looked back over his shoulder. “Are we still talking about the inn?”

She hesitated. “You tell me.”

Brian’s eyes took on a faraway look as he answered quietly. “Some things aren’t so easy to fix.”

Kelli felt her throat constrict. Her lips drew taut. His answer definitely wasn’t the one she was hoping for. “I guess maybe not,” she muttered. She turned, headed slowly for the stairs. As she did her foot came down on the remains of a rotted chair leg.

*Snap.*

Brian flinched. That sound. That awful sound. A quick memory burst through his mind. He recalled a scaffolding board breaking free, falling from its metal frame, heard Kelli screaming from somewhere below him...

He shook that image out of his head, not wanting to dwell on it for even a second. Kelli had stopped at the foot of the stairs and was now looking back at him expectantly. His whole body was tense, and a sweat had gripped him.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Come on. I’ll show you the second floor,” she said.

“Sure.”

Brian tried to act normal as he followed her, the steps groaning loudly under their weight. Still morose, he tried hard not to admire her form as they ascended. But it had been a while since he had seen her, and he had to admit that she looked great.

The stairs brought them up to a hallway lined with doors, each one leading to a bedroom where the inn’s customers used to stay. Peering down the old, dark hallway, a chill shot right through Brian, causing him to shudder. Goosebumps leapt up on his arms, and the air he took into his lungs, just for a moment, felt icy cold—a sensation he couldn’t explain.

He exhaled deeply while slapping a hand to his chest. He looked quickly to Kelli, but she hadn’t noticed his reaction, nor did she appear to have experienced what he had just felt. She had stopped at the door right at the top of the stairs. The knob rattled as she turned it, and the door creaked on rusty hinges as she pushed it open. She peered back at him with a crooked grin, and then stepped through the doorway. Brian, not knowing what else to do, followed her in.

Just inside, a colonial, four-poster bed sat facing a window overlooking the courtyard. The bed had been elegant once, but was now covered with mildew and filth. The window was the old casement style, where the whole sash swung out on two hinges. It was open, with frayed curtains swaying gently.

“This is one of the better rooms,” explained Kelli.

Brian barely heard her as he ran his foot over a dark stain on the floor. The result of a leaky roof, most likely. Not unexpected in such an old structure. Over the years he had restored at least a hundred old houses, and he had felt uneasy upon entering each one for the first time. Yet there was something about the inn, and particularly that very bedroom, that amplified his usual anxiousness tenfold. Once again, he couldn't explain the feeling.

Brian lifted his attention from the floor, and peered up at the window.

“I don't remember any of the windows being open when we arrived,” he said.

“All our banging around probably shook it loose.” Kelli walked over and latched it shut. She had barely turned around when the bulb in her flashlight flickered, flared, and then died. She gave it a couple of whacks into the palm of her hand with no result.

“Great. I just put in new batteries. Maybe it's broken?”

“Or maybe you're just sucking the life out of it,” Brian said with a snicker.

He had always been sarcastic in a good-natured, playful sort of way. But this time, underneath his words, Kelli thought she might have detected a hint of bitterness.

“You're a riot,” she retorted dryly. “Come on. I'll show you the other rooms.”

Kelli brushed past him and through the doorway. Brian sniffed the air while following her out. “I like your new perfume.”

“I'm not wearing perfume,” said Kelli, her voice fading.

Their footsteps were still echoing down the hallway when willowy, translucent shadows from the curtains danced across the bedroom wall.

A few seconds later, the window Kelli had just latched shut slowly creaked open again.

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A quick groan, followed by a thump, filled the cellar as a trapdoor in the ceiling was flung back. A weak beam of sunlight shot in from above, highlighting a rickety staircase. Brian crouched down through the opening, his feet on the top step. Swinging a flashlight back and forth, his beam played over an old wine rack against the wall near the foot of the stairs.

He eased down the steps, afraid he might fall through if he put any weight on them at all. He stopped about halfway, stooped low. His flashlight beam cut through the dank old cellar, revealing a crumbling foundation and sagging ceiling joists.

Most cellars stayed relatively cool throughout the year by a phenomenon known as thermal lag, which in the eighteenth century made them ideal storage rooms for roots, apples, smoked meats, jarred goods, and especially wine and cider. Unfortunately, the damp, cool conditions were also a perfect incubator for mold. Insufficient ventilation, together with natural water vapor, encouraged the growth of wood-devouring fungi. This was something Brian was all too familiar with, and he grimaced as he ran his beam over what was left of the wooden floor, noting that most of it had long since rotted away to leave large patches of soil showing through. He shook his head, blew a puff of air.

As Brian examined the cellar, Kelli had decided to return to the secret room they had found. Dirty cobwebs covered the built-in shelves. Kelli pushed them aside, wiped the clinging remnants on the pants of her overalls. With the cobwebs gone, she could see the bookcase was filled with old tomes, all of them blanketed in thick dust. She gently brushed away some of the

grime to expose the book spines. Then she blew the tops of the books clear, creating a swirl of dust that sent her into a coughing fit. Waving the air, she could tell the tomes were bound in a very old style, their leather badly cracked. They were still basically intact, though the pages had turned yellow. Kelli ran a finger along each volume, noticed that one name appeared on all of them—an author named Alfred Wheeler.

She slipped one out, carefully opened it, but the pages crumbled at the slightest touch. Frowning, Kelli closed the book and returned it. Inspecting the others, it appeared the rest of the books were in similar condition. Not a one had survived.

Sighing in disappointment, she moved on to the desk. Kelli picked up the silver coffer, once again turning it over. Hearing just the slightest thump, she put it to her ear and gently shook it. There was definitely something inside. Frustrated by the gloom, Kelli placed the coffer back down, reached over the desk and grabbed the dingy curtain covering the only window in the room. She jerked it aside, allowing in a flood of sunlight.

She opened the side drawers in the desk. They were loose, rattling, and, aside from the familiar dust deposits at the bottom, completely empty. She opened the top drawer to similar results, and was just about to close it when movement caught her eye. Something small shifted within the dust and glinted in the sunlight. Kelli took off a glove, her fingers fishing in the dust for only a moment before she was able to pluck the object out.

It was a key.

Kelli gazed down at the coffer, then at the key in her fingers. Could she really be that lucky? She blew on the key to clear off any residual grit, then inserted it into the coffer's lock. It fit perfectly, and turned easily.

Click.

A breath of disbelief shot from Kelli's lips. She took off her remaining glove, slipped her fingers under the lid's edge, and carefully lifted up. A blue, leather-bound book sat nestled within a plush, velvet interior, with just enough room around the edges to lift it out. There was no title on the book's cover, only an elaborate cross embossed in gold—the same symbol that was engraved on the coffer lid.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. But Kelli, staring down in awe, barely heard it.

#

Brian stepped up to the wine rack, his light sweeping over it. Old bottles lay within, but they were too dirty to even refract his beam. He slid one out to find it still corked and full of wine. Brian snorted in mild surprise before putting it back. The wine would have gone bad ages ago, but at one point someone had spent a small fortune to have collected so much of it.

What was he doing there? Standing in an old, dank cellar, surrounded by mold and mildew and God knows what else? Sure, Kelli had asked him to appraise the place. After all, that used to be what they both did for a living – flipping old houses, selling them for a profit. But that was before they were separated, before their marriage was hanging by a thread. Before the incident that had destroyed them both mentally and emotionally, and eventually had turned them against each other.

What was he doing there?

Brian turned away from the rack, his flashlight at waist level, and for just an instant the beam projected a shadow on the far wall. His head snapped around. He instinctively took a step back as he swished his flashlight back to that very spot. There was nothing there, but his mind reeled. Brian hadn't been looking at it directly. He only saw it out of the corner of his eye. Yet he could have sworn the shadow had looked almost human. Arm and legs. A head. A torso. But of

course, that was impossible. There was no one between him and the wall to have cast such a shadow.

The beam of his flashlight faded and flickered, threatened to die altogether. And for a few moments Brian was left mostly in darkness.

“You got to be kidding,” he muttered under his breath, giving the flashlight a smack.

The light returned as strong as ever. Brian shined it back on the wall, but it revealed only dank stone and crumbling mortar. Thinking perhaps he had seen his own shadow, Brian peered back at the top of the stairs. The light seeping in through the trapdoor was just too weak to have created what he thought he had seen. Passing it off as a play of the light, Brian pressed forward into the gloom, though now with some trepidation.

#

Gently, gently, Kelli lifted the book out of the coffer. She had already cleared off a spot on the desk with her glove, using it as a dust rag. She set the book down, her actions slow, cautious, fearful the whole thing might crumble similar to the books on the shelf. Remarkably, the pages still appeared white, and the leather and binding had remained pliable and intact. Seeing no title on the spine, Kelli gingerly opened the cover using her thumb and forefinger. On the first page, printed in fancy lettering, was book's the title: *The Highwayman*.

Kelli's gaze darted to the top corner of the inside cover. The name *A. Wheeler* had been neatly written there in black ink. Her eyes narrowed, and then her mouth gaped slightly. She sat down at the desk, opened the book to the first chapter, and read aloud.

“The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees. The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas...”

A shrill wind picked up and blew across the moor as Kelli read. Dark clouds moved in with almost preternatural swiftness, choking out the dying rays of the sun. Kelli barely noticed the change before returning to her reading.

#

Flashlight in hand, Brian had stooped low in front of the one of the foundation walls. The masonry had fissured, and several of the stones had shifted.

*...The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor...*

Brian ran his hand over the protruding edges. He could feel the wind from outside, and could even see sunlight trickling in through the cracks between the stones.

*And the highwayman came riding, riding, riding...*

Thunder rolled not far off. Though muffled through the wall, Brian could faintly hear it. As the thunder faded, Brian detected the slight rustle of clothing, perhaps the scrape of a shoe over the floor just behind him. He spun, his flashlight slicing through the gloom.

Nothing. There was no one there. He was alone.

#

“The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn door.”

The wind blew hard against the inn, bringing a moan from the entire structure as Kelli was just finishing the verse. She peered up at the ceiling as the moan grew louder, concerned the old building might not be able to withstand such a powerful wind surge. She watched in wonder as a hard rain beat against the window panes, quickly growing in force. The rumble of the storm grew intense, like a bucket of nails spilling over the roof. Had a nor'easter blown in? She didn't remember hearing about anything like that in the forecasts.

Having lived in New England all her life, Kelli knew there wasn't much she could do but wait out the storm. Her gaze returned to the page, scanning the printed words.

She flinched as thunder crashed just outside the window.

Thunder crashed and rain blasted down over Elias as he stumbled over the sloppy ground. Just ahead of him loomed the inn, the soft glow in the window still beckoning him.

His clothes were soaked through, his skin chilled to the bone. Shivering, bleeding, sick with fatigue, he knew he couldn't last much longer.

*Almost there. Have to keep going. Almost there.*

Another lightning flash lit up the night, briefly turning night into day, as Elias staggered toward the inn. And toward that mysterious, welcoming light.

The candle had been burning for some time. Streams of wax had dribbled down and hardened around its sides and into the base of its brass holder. Sitting just inside the window, the flame danced serenely, its orange glow reflecting off the panes of glass.

Bess Turner sat at a vanity not far from the casement. She was staring into the vanity's mirror, brushing her long, black hair by the paltry candlelight. With slow, absent-minded strokes, she was lost in her thoughts, her eyes gleaming contentedly, a constant grin on her face. She put down the brush to pick up an egg-shaped perfume bottle made of faceted glass, opened the top to dab a little of its contents on her neck. She wiped the rest of it away by running her fingers through her hair.

A peal of thunder shook the casement, giving her a start. Bess stood up, hopped over to the window. With one hand braced on the sill, she leaned forward to peer through the glass panes. Her expression grew sullen as her brow furrowed. She could only make out a few silver streaks of rain, caught in the candle's glow. Beyond that was inky darkness.

Down in the tavern, the rain beat against the inn's façade and streamed down the windows. A hearty fire blazed in the fireplace, its soothing crackle at odds with the raging storm just outside. Timothy, a meek-looking young man with hair like tousled straw, sat at one of the tables close to the fire. He held a quill pen in one hand, with an ink bottle and a maroon, leather book sitting in front of him. His quill hovered over the blank page, its tip maybe an inch from the clean, white paper. He had been rendered impotent with writer's block, unable to squeeze out a single word.

Nathaniel Turner, gray hair, weathered skin, stood behind the bar polishing glasses with a small hand towel. He occasionally glanced over at Timothy, curious as to how the lad could sit stock still for so long, hunkered over, quill poised, eyes staring down at the page. Nathaniel had taken the young man in just a year earlier, giving him a job as the inn's hostler. Timothy was dependable and a good worker, though he frequently drifted off into long reveries during his free time. And in those moments, he could hardly be disturbed.

Nathaniel had been surprised to find out that not only could Timothy read and write, despite a lower-class upbringing, but he was a virtuoso with the written word. His parents had taught him literacy using the Bible and a hornbook, and not only did Timothy take to it at a young age, it seemed to be his only interest. While his contemporaries spent their earnings on good drink and pleasant company, Timothy would spend what he could on ink and paper. He

would scrawl furiously in his books for hours, while at other times it seemed he couldn't find the inspiration to write a single word, to the point he would actually become depressed.

The wind howled against the door, its shrill, banshee-like wail filling the tavern. It was eerie enough that Nathaniel stopped his polishing and stared over at the door. He was a tad superstitious, and out of all his years he wasn't sure he had ever heard a sound like that before, even during the most powerful gales. Timothy looked over as well, and inspiration struck him at once. He dabbed his quill into the ink and began to write hurriedly. He spoke what he wrote in an urgent whisper, too soft for Nathaniel to make out.

Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, Nathaniel turned his head toward the stairs. Bess had walked down from her room and now stood on the bottom step. Dressed in a nightgown, her feet bare, one hand rested casually on the newel of the railing.

"Hello dear," called Nathaniel.

She smiled. "Hello father."

Timothy's quill pen stopped at once. He gazed up at Bess, fixated.

"I thought you were asleep?" asked Nathaniel.

Bess stared over at one of the windows, and at the rainwater pattering against it. "Not yet. The storm is getting worse." She shifted her gaze, and Timothy shrunk bashfully in his chair as her eyes fell on him. "Hello Timothy," she said cheerily.

"Hello Bess," he stammered.

Timothy's eyes shot up at her, then right back down. He could never keep her gaze for long. A sick feeling rose in the pit of his stomach every time he was close to her. The sensation was hard to describe, like a strange flutter that bordered on nausea. He would become jittery and flushed to the point he was almost paralyzed. His throat would constrict and his tongue would all

but freeze, letting him sputter out only a few words at a time. It had been that way since the day he had met her, and he seemed helpless in doing anything about it.

Her eyes were as black as night, like endless, liquid pools. No, he could never stare into them for very long. Often, when she spoke to him, it helped if he moved his gaze lower, focusing on her nose. Her flawless nose, made up of small, subtle curves, the tip slightly turned up. At least then he could almost hold a short conversation with her. Or sometimes he would focus on her mouth. The top of her upper lip had a wonderful double arch, what his mother used to refer to as a “cupid’s bow.” Her lower lip was full and soft, and both together could only be described in one word: flawless. Hers was a face that stood out immediately in a crowded room, that made men turn and stare in wonder, and women glare with jealous admiration.

She was, in Timothy’s view, perfect. The embodiment of beauty. It was infuriating and wonderful and despairing all at once. He had described Bess’ beauty many times in his writings. With hastily scrawled words he would attempt to capture the effortless way she moved, how the sun would reflect off her dove-like skin, or how her dress would catch the wind and form around her, giving just a tantalizing hint of what might lie underneath. He would write endlessly about how her hair would fall about her shoulders in splendid, dark waves, framing her perfect face, or about how her laugh and her smile would light up a room.

Before Timothy knew it, his hand was scrawling again, the quill scratching over the paper. He was describing her, how she stood poised at the foot of the steps, unaware of her own beauty, or how that beauty could destroy any man in her presence.

Timothy stopped, glanced up, afraid Bess might be watching him. But her gaze had returned to the window.

They all jumped as a loud *pounding* shook the door. Bess stared over at her father, her eyes wide, her lips drawn taut with concern. Nathaniel scowled when he heard the door lever rattle. Whoever was on the other side was testing to see if the door was locked.

“We’re closed!” he bellowed.

The door shook as the pounding started up again.

“Crazy drunk,” Nathaniel muttered. He took down a musket from the wall behind him, gripped it in both hands as he wove his way through the tables. He threw the brace up and opened the door to a crack. Elias stood just outside, desperate and shivering, streams of rainwater pouring over the rim of his hat.

“Sir, I need your help.”

“We’re closed. Go away!” Nathaniel growled.

“Please. I’m injured.” Elias’ bloody hand reached through the crack, preventing Nathaniel from closing the door. Nathaniel cocked the musket. The click instantly caught Elias’ attention, his eyes darting down to the weapon in Nathaniel’s hands.

“We can’t help you. Go away for I’ll shoot.”

Bess had already hurried from the stairs and was halfway to the door. “Father! Let him in,” she demanded, her voice scolding. “He’s hurt.”

Nathaniel glanced over at her, his scowl deepening. As soon as Elias saw Nathaniel’s eyes flick off of him, he threw his weight against the door, sending Nathaniel stumbling back. Elias rushed in, wrenched the musket from Nathaniel’s grasp. The weapon twirled in his hands, the barrel of the musket stopping right under Nathaniel’s chin.

“No! Please!” Bess shouted.

Staring down the barrel of his own weapon, Nathaniel swallowed hard as he raised his trembling hands. Elias' lips were contorted in anger, his jaw clenched. He kicked the door closed behind him, shutting out the rain. He touched the tip of the musket's barrel to Nathaniel's chest, then used it to push him back a little further to add distance between them. The old man didn't object, nearly stumbling over his own feet out of fear. He couldn't help but notice two pistols tucked into Elias' belt, or the rapier he wore at his hip.

No one saw Timothy quietly close his book, then slide his quill into the ink bottle. He placed both hands flat on the table as he observed Elias. He seemed just as intrigued as he was wary of their new arrival.

Elias shuffled toward the center of the room, keeping the musket trained on Nathaniel. He grimaced, doubled over. He kept the weapon up with one arm while clamping his other hand to his bloody side.

"I don't want to hurt you, but I can't you have shooting me," Elias spat through clenched teeth. He uncocked the musket and tossed it away. He staggered back, the light in his eyes fading as he collapsed to his haunches. It wasn't until that moment they all realized what horrible shape he was in. Mud-covered, clothes dripping wet, a streaming wound in his side. Elias was breathing heavily, but couldn't seem to catch his breath. He leaned back until his head touched the floor, and stared up blankly.

Bess approached him, eyeing his bloodstained shirt. Nathaniel's whole body stiffened, his voice becoming tense.

"Bess. No."

But she was already kneeling over him. Elias gazed up into her lovely black eyes. He could barely focus.

“Miss...”

He took out a small, felt bag from under his cloak, and pushed it into her hands. Before she could gather a firm grip on it, several white pearls spilled out and scattered over the floor. Then Elias closed his eyes, and his world went dark.

#

Elias slept peacefully, chest rising and falling in a regular rhythm. Bess and Nathaniel stood over him, watching the mysterious man who had barged into their lives. They had brought him up to Bess’ room and laid him in her bed. The other rooms were for their patrons, and they couldn’t afford to take up even one of them for any time at all—certainly not for the duration it would take him to heal. Nathaniel had decided Bess would sleep in his room until Elias could be nursed back to health.

Hauling Elias up to the room had not been easy. Bess had done her best to staunch Elias’ wound by ripping his shirt sleeve into strips, and using them as makeshift bandages. With Timothy lifting Elias under his arms, and Nathaniel grabbing his legs, they just managed to shuffle him up the stairs and into the bed without dropping him. After that, it was up to Nathaniel and Timothy to strip Elias’ bloody clothes from his body. Bess had been sent away, her father telling her she was still too virtuous to witness such a thing.

But she was the one who sutured his wound. It was a matter of sterilizing a sewing needle in a candle flame, and then stitching up the laceration—not unlike mending a dress, once she had grown accustomed to the blood. Her mother, before she had passed, taught her how to sew, though it was Bess who had learned how to use the skill to stitch human flesh. The first time she ever had to do it was several years earlier, when her father had run a knife across the top of his hand while trying to cut open a bag of potatoes. After that, she had assisted customers who had

suffered from similar accidents, from broken glass, a fall off a horse, or even from an occasional drunken brawl.

It hadn't been ideal, sitting in a chair beside the bed, slipping her needle and thread in and out of Elias' skin by the light of a candle. Blood would flow with every puncture, and Bess would have to wipe it away with a cloth in order to see what she was doing. After the final stitch, Bess cut the thread with her teeth, then tied it off. She leaned forward, examining her work. A little crooked perhaps, but not bad under the circumstances. Bess rose up and fetched her father, who helped her properly wrap bandages around Elias' waist. After that, it was just a matter of waiting and hoping he would wake up again.

"I wonder who he is?" Bess pondered aloud, staring down at the stranger in her bed.

"Robber most likely. Those pearls couldn't be his," replied Nathaniel, his disdain for the man evident in his tone.

"A robber. It appears he got what he deserved then," said Bess.

Nathaniel grunted. "It was a good wound. He'll have a scar from it. A little deeper and it would have spilled his guts."

They had hung Elias' rapier by its belt over the back of the chair. The more Nathaniel studied it, the more he was sure the weapon was cavalry issue. Then he gazed down with interest at Elias' hat. By its style, Nathaniel thought it might have been a military hat, possibly even that of a ranger or a scout from the French and Indian War. That was fifteen years earlier, but could that mean the man before them had been a soldier?

"What could cause such an injury?" asked Bess. She had examined the wound up close, a single cut, but larger and deeper than any she had ever seen before.

“Question isn’t what, but who,” replied Nathaniel. His arms were crossed, his face stern, as he observed the man lying before them. “We should inform the authorities the moment the storm lets up. He’s clearly dangerous.

Bess spun her head toward her father. “If he’s moved in this condition he could die.”

Nathaniel barely reacted, arms still crossed, his voice exhibiting the same gruff tone. “Maybe. But if they find him here, they won’t care about that. They’ll just know we helped him.”

“I don’t want this man’s death on my hands.”

“Neither do I. But they’re liable to arrest us as conspirators. Bloody redcoats.” Despite his scorn for their guest, Nathaniel spat the word *redcoats* in clear disgust.

Sliding her hand up to her father’s shoulder, Bess gave him a comforting smile.

“Yes, you’re right. We’ll figure it all out tomorrow. Get some rest, papa. It’s late.”

Nathaniel nodded, then grinned while patting her hand. “Tell me if he wakes.” He shuffled toward the door, opened it. He paused and looked back at the chair. He hurried back, gathered the belt and rapier in his arms. “Just in case he does wake, perhaps this shouldn’t be within reach.”

Bess grinned. “Good thinking.”

Nathaniel walked out, shut the door behind him. And Bess’ grin quickly faded. She sat down in the chair, her elbows on her knees, her hands pressed together at her chin. She leaned forward as she studied the man in her bed. He had a handsome face. Dark, wavy hair, soft lips. He had a strong jaw as well, although it was concealed under dark stubble that ran from his cheeks to his chin. Bess regarded his bandaged waist, lightly touching it. At least the bleeding had stopped.

She stared down again at his gorgeous face, and before she realized what she was doing, she had reached out. The back of her hand grazed his cheek, the soft prickle of his beard tickling her skin.

Elias' eyes snapped open. Startled, Bess withdrew her hand.

"Where am I?" Elias asked, his eyes darting around the room. He had such beautiful eyes, their color similar to a dark brandy.

"You're safe," she assured him.

Elias tried to get up, but barely rose an inch before he groaned loudly, clapped a hand against his wound, and flopped back down.

Bess placed her hand on his shoulder, her voice urgent. "Don't move. You'll start bleeding again."

Elias stared at her, trying to focus. "Forgive me for coming here. For endangering you. I had nowhere else to go."

Bess glanced at the door, making sure it was firmly closed.

"Oh, my love!" she exclaimed, her voice hushed yet fervent. She threw herself over him, kissing his lips. Elias grunted, then groaned as he attempted to kiss her back.

"Careful darling."

Draped across his chest, Bess' eyes glistened as she spoke. "I was so frightened, Elias. I thought you might die. It was so hard... with my father here... not reacting."

Elias showed his best comforting smile. "It was the right thing to do. Bess, they'll be coming for me. The rain will wash away my trail. But the captain. He is relentless."

Her feet thumping over the steps, Bess raced downstairs to the tavern. She tied on an apron, gathered up a mop and bucket from behind the bar, and quickly swabbed Elias' blood

from the floor. Satisfied she had wiped up every last trace, she began plucking up the pearls that had scattered about, even dropping to her hands and knees to search under the tables. It was a tedious job, but she knew she couldn't miss even one.

Nathaniel heard the commotion from his room, shuffled in from the side hall wearing a nightshirt and carrying a candle. He observed her through bleary eyes, and it took him a moment to realize what she was doing. Bess froze when she saw him, instinctively clutching the bag of pearls close to her body.

“Bess, what are you doing? Let Timothy do that.”

She was about to respond when a loud knock shook the door. They stared at each other, both apprehensive. A second knock followed, this one more forceful. As soon as Nathaniel started for the door Bess shot up, eyes filled with dread.

“Don't open it,” she said in a scared whisper.

Nathaniel regarded her in silence, then shouted, “Who's there?”

A commanding voice bellowed out from the other side of the door. “I am Captain Artemus D'abo of his majesty's royal army. I ask that you open this door immediately!”

Bess stood frozen, unblinking, the color draining from her face. Nathaniel pressed his lips together in silent deliberation, but finally decided he didn't have a choice in the matter. The longer he waited, the more suspicious it would seem, so he lifted the brace and swung open the door. As he did, Bess quickly slipped the leather bag into her apron.

An imposing figure emerged from the rainy darkness beyond the door. He was tall and lean, draped in a long overcoat and wearing a black, tricorne hat. Two features about him immediately stood out to Bess: his aquiline nose and his cold, piercing gaze. The captain moved carefully, deliberately, not acknowledging Nathaniel or Bess as his eyes swept the room.

Three more men followed him inside, all wearing identical overcoats. They carried muskets with bayonets, and as they flapped their coats to shake off the rain, Bess could see their red and white military uniforms underneath. They stood quietly, their expressions grim, emotionless.

Bess fidgeted as she felt her throat tighten up. She swallowed hard. Could they see her anxiousness? Could they sense it? Her heart pounded in her chest, and her whole body trembled as her stomach twisted into knots. She gripped the back of the chair in front of her with both hands, using its support just to stay upright.

Captain D`abo reached up and took off his hat, held it down in front of him in both hands. He had blonde hair that was slightly thinning on the top, giving him a bold forehead that added to his authoritative presence. He hadn't bothered with pomade or powder. Perhaps he hadn't seen the point due to their arduous ride through a thunderstorm. His hair was graying at the sides, and Bess placed him in his late thirties, possibly early forties.

"Your name?" The captain asked, his voice terse, commanding. He didn't look at Nathaniel as he spoke, but rather kept his eyes attuned to his surroundings.

"Nathaniel, sir. Nathaniel Turner."

"You're the owner?"

"I am," replied Nathaniel. "How may I help you?"

The captain finally turned his head and stared directly at Nathaniel. "We're looking for a criminal. He might have passed this way. We believe him to be wounded." The captain had a measured tone, but Bess sensed a ferociousness inside him she feared would burst loose at the slightest provocation.

Nathaniel shook his head. "The last patron left at eleven. No one's been by since."

Bess had kept her gaze down for the most part, hoping to avoid eye contact with the captain. But she found herself unable to look away from him for very long. He had hard features, rugged skin, with slight creases running from the sides of his nose to the corners of his mouth. His intense gaze shifted onto her before she could avert her eyes. Bess felt her chest tighten, her breath flee from her, as his blue-gray eyes bore right through her.

D`abo's stern demeanor melted as he took her in, and his lips unconsciously turned up into a smile. But Bess could no longer hold his stare. Her eyes shot back down, her gaze falling right onto the mop and bucket of bloody water at her feet.

Terror gripped her. She hadn't realized how red the water had become. The table sat between her and the soldiers, blocking their view of the bucket. They had yet to see it. But it was just a matter of moments before they did.

"This is Bess, my daughter," said Nathaniel. "She helps me run the inn."

"Miss. It is a pleasure," said D`abo. He brought his hat up to his chest and bowed slightly at the waist.

"You're too kind, sir," replied Bess, her voice cracking as she forced out the words. D`abo's gaze lingered upon her, as though studying her, or perhaps testing her, to the point she squirmed anxiously.

"How about you, Bess? Have you seen anything this evening you might want to tell us?" The captain had a prying way about him, as if he could detect more than he was letting on.

Could he see her shaking? Could he hear the tension in her voice?

"No sir," Bess answered meekly. Her cheeks felt flushed. Almost on fire.

Seeing her distress, Nathaniel jumped in. "We were just cleaning up, and about to retire for the evening," he explained. To his credit he had thus far managed to keep his calm.

With the captain returning his attention to her father, Bess took the opportunity to pick up the bucket and mop and set them down behind the bar. As she straightened, her heart caught in her throat. She spied a white pearl under the center table that she had missed, just a few inches away from the captain's boot.

"It's almost midnight. Do you always clean up so late?" asked D`abo. He eyed the grandfather clock, its hands almost on twelve.

"Sometimes. Not always—"

D`abo's finger shot up, cutting Nathaniel off. "I was asking her," said D`abo, using that same finger to point toward Bess. And once again his piercing gaze fell upon her, those penetrating eyes looking her up and down. Bess tried to appear casual even as she clutched the top of the counter with both hands, her knuckles white. D`abo noticed her face had turned pale, almost sickly-looking, and her chin trembled ever so slightly. She was staring back at him with wide, unblinking eyes.

"Are you all right, dear?" D`abo asked, almost mockingly. He could clearly see that something wasn't right with her.

"I'm fine," she stammered.

"I should hope so. Well, Bess, if you didn't see anything tonight that might help us, then perhaps one of your lodgers did?"

Nathaniel shot forward before Bess could respond. "We don't have any lodgers tonight, captain. I would be happy to show you." He started toward the stairs, gesturing with his hand.

His bluff succeeded. The captain eyed the top of the stairs before a small grin spread over his face. "No. That won't be necessary." He peered back over at Bess, who still appeared shaken. He cocked his head to one side while taking a step toward her. As he did the toe of his boot

tapped the pearl, causing it to roll further underneath the table. Fortunately, Bess was the only one who noticed.

“Bess? Are you sure everything is all right?” he asked. He was prying again, hoping she might reveal something. Bess could hear it in his voice.

Their ruse wasn't going to last much longer. The captain was starting to see through it. Struggling to remain calm, Bess thought quickly. What would Elias do? He would turn the tables, throw the captain's confidence, his smugness, right back at him. That's what he would do. What a fool she had been, letting her fear control her. In that moment, Bess cast out her fear to let her anger replace it. And she boldly met the captain's gaze.

“No, I'm not all right, Captain. It's late and I'm tired, and as you can see, I am hardly decent. I think we've been more than polite.”

Nathaniel spoke up quickly, afraid she might have offended the captain. “She's young, sir. I think what she means is we'll be happy to help in any way we can. It's just getting so late. You and your men are certainly welcome to stay the night here. Like I said, we have plenty of rooms available.”

D'abo kept his eyes trained on Bess, but she didn't flinch under his gaze. “A generous offer, but no,” the captain said at length. Then he turned to face Nathaniel. “We have to keep searching.” D'abo headed for the door, his men following behind him.

“This criminal you're looking for, is he dangerous?” asked Nathaniel, walking with them.

D'abo nodded. “Extremely. He robbed a local merchant and shot one of my men.”

“That's ghastly,” said Nathaniel.

“The merchant he robbed is well known for his support of the king. I suspect the man who robbed him is a member of the growing colonial militia in these parts.”

Nathaniel placed a hand over his heart. "I swear to you, sir, I wouldn't know. We are loyalists through and through."

"Good. Keep your doors locked. I'm sorry to have troubled you."

"Not at all, Captain. Thank you for the warning."

No one noticed the door to the side hallway had been cracked open the entire time. Nor had they seen the soft, vertical line of candlelight highlighting Timothy's face as he watched the incident play out through that crack. Realizing the captain and his men were leaving, Timothy quietly shut the door and hurried down the hall to his room.

The soldiers had already disappeared into the night, but Captain D`abo hung back, his gaze falling onto Bess one last time. In that moment she noticed something disturbing in his eyes. She had been too fearful to detect it earlier, but now it was obvious. She saw clear infatuation. Even desire. His intentions toward her couldn't be more evident. Suddenly feeling very exposed in only her nightgown, Bess crossed her arms over her chest. She felt degraded under his brazen gaze, but she coolly returned his stare.

"Good evening, captain." Bess replied with the most gracious smile she could muster.

He returned her smile. "Goodbye Bess."

Then he turned and walked off into the rainy darkness. Nathaniel shut the door, lowered the brace. He spun to face Bess, his face red, livid.

Bess let out a breath she had been holding. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"Don't thank me. They could hang us for what I just did." Nathaniel pointed up toward her room. "If I didn't fear for your safety so much, he'd be in shackles this very moment." He quietly fumed as he pushed past her and into the side hallway, leaving her alone in the tavern.

Her arms still crossed, Bess stood thoughtfully, her dark eyes staring off into space. At that moment the grandfather clock struck twelve, causing her to jump.

*Bong... bong... bong...*

*Bong... bong... bong...*

Kelli looked up from her reading as she heard the chiming of the clock. She turned in her chair, resting her forearm over the back of it, listening intently.

*Bong... bong...bong...*

There could be no mistaking it. The old grandfather clock in the tavern was definitely chiming. Somehow.

The side door creaked open. Kelli stepped into the tavern, the book clutched in one hand, her head cocked to one side as she approached the clock.

*Bong... bong... bong...*

Kelli stared into the casing as the clock finished its mysterious chiming. But it was getting late and the sun was no longer shining directly into the tavern windows. The resulting gloom made it difficult to see inside the clock.

They had left a kerosene lamp and a box of matches on the bar. Kelli struck one of the matches and lit the wick. The flame inside leapt higher as she replaced the glass chimney and turned the brass knob, casting a flickering, orange glow about the room. She returned to the clock, the lamp held out in both hands. Leaning forward at the waist, eyes focused, Kelli could

just see through the casement glass. The large pendulum, draped in undisturbed cobwebs, wasn't moving. Surely the clock's intricate cogs and mechanisms had all rusted together. Surely it had stopped working ages ago. So how could it chime?

“What are you doing?”

Kelli yelped and wheeled round. Brian stood in the kitchen doorway just behind the bar. He had one arm up against the frame for support.

“The clock was chiming. How is that possible?” asked Kelli.

Brian glanced over at the decrepit old thing. “Chime weight probably slipped.”

Kelli peered back at the clock, and to its corroded interior. She wasn't sure she believed that explanation, but it was better than anything she could come up with. She twisted her lips, clicked her tongue, before turning back to Brian.

“What did you find in the cellar?”

“Rotting floors. Sagging joists. Crumbling foundation. You brought me here for my advice, so I'll just give it to you straight. Run way. Run away as fast as you can.”

Kelli grinned.

“That was supposed to be bad news,” said Brian.

“Well I've got some good news.” Kelli put the book down on the bar, turning it so Brian could get a better view of it. “This was from the coffer in the back bedroom. I found a key that unlocked it.”

Brian scrutinized the book, even running a finger along one of the edges. “Looks almost new. The coffer must have been airtight to keep it in that condition.”

“I think I know why that room was walled up. I think Alfred Wheeler lived here.”

Brian stared blankly.

“Alfred Wheeler. He was an eighteenth-century writer from Boston,” Kelli explained. She opened the book and pointed out the handwritten name on the inside cover: A. WHEELER. “From what I can tell so far, the story is about a highwayman who meets his lover in secret. I think this was Alfred Wheeler’s personal copy. Most of the books in there were written by him. He may have even written several of them at that very desk. I think that room obviously meant a lot to him, and that’s why I think it was supposed to stay hidden.”

Brian still didn’t appear very impressed. “And that’s important because…”

“Just imagine if it’s true. This inn could be more valuable than we ever could have imagined. That alone would be worth restoring it.”

Brian thought on that a moment, not looking directly at her, but staring just over her shoulder. “You do remember we’re separated, right? That our marriage is on life support?”

“Maybe we can work around that.”

He snorted. “Even if we could, and that’s a big if… we just got our heads above water, and you want to shove us right back under.”

Kelli stared at him in disbelief. “Why should someone else make a fortune off this place? We’re the ones who discovered it.”

“You’re the one who discovered it,” Brian shot back.

“Brian, it’s an investment that will pay off exponentially. I promise.”

“Everything is always so simple with you, isn’t it? While I’m the one forced to take on the burden.”

“You want to explain that?” Kelli snapped.

Brian didn’t hesitate. “When’s the last time we did anything where you didn’t get your way? I mean who cares what I think, right?”

Kelli looked away while scrunching her lips and nodding quietly. “You know that’s not what this is about.”

“Don’t go there, Kelli. Not now.”

“Then when?”

Now it was Brian who looked away. He didn’t answer her.

Kelli decided not to push him, but she still shifted impatiently. Then she exhaled, leaned forward on the counter. “We’ll never get another chance like this again. It’s a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

Brian regarded her, his eyes flicking up and down. “I get it. You need me. It would be too expensive to get someone else to do it, right? Well, Fool me once, shame on you...”

“This isn’t a joke,” said Kelli.

“I joke. You drink. We both have our coping mechanisms.”

“If you would just—”

“I said no!” Brian slammed his fist on the counter. Kelli jumped, surprised at his outburst. Brian held up his hands and took in a calming breath. “I’m sorry. I just... I just don’t think it would work.”

Kelli nodded quietly, visibly dejected. And an awkward silence rose between them.

“It’s getting late. I have to get back,” mumbled Brian. He flattened his lips together, clearly feeling guilty, but didn’t say another word as he walked out of the tavern. After a few moments, Kelli heard his truck start up in the courtyard. She stared vacantly, trying her best to control her disappointment. Finally, she lifted the top off the kerosene lamp and blew out the flame, throwing the tavern into shadow.

The truck's tires rumbled over the gravel road. Brian stared straight ahead, face sullen, eyes empty. He gazed into his rearview mirror, watched as the inn got smaller by the second. He slammed his foot on the brake, the truck skidding to a halt.

His eyes shot back up to the mirror. It was almost five o'clock, the sun shining directly on the front of the inn, turning it into a white fleck against gray skies. Kelli's red Impala was still parked out front. She had yet to leave the inn. Brian considered turning around, maybe talking things through with her. There was a time when that's exactly what he would have done. But that was then. Angry at the situation more than anything, Brian scowled and hit the steering wheel with the flat of his hand. Then he stomped down on the accelerator, the truck's wheels throwing gravel as he peeled away.

It took forty minutes to drive back to town. Brian pulled his truck to the curb in front of an old, brick building. It was covered with ivy on one side. The wall next to it had a metal fire escape that zigzagged all the way up to the top floor, rusted in various places, and covered in untold layers of peeling, black paint. At one point the old place had served as a watch factory, but had since been transformed into tenements. Brian got out, walked toward the entrance.

A few moments later, Brian stepped into his cramped and cluttered studio apartment, tossed his keys on an end table before collapsing onto a couch—an old, green eyesore that sagged from overuse. Brian sunk into the cushions to the point of awkwardness. He often referred to the couch as “The Green Monster,” not only because it was the perfect name to describe such a hideous thing, but it was also a nod to his love for Fenway Park. He had bought the couch at a garage sale in 2004. That was the same year the Red Sox won the World Series for the first time in eighty-six years, so there was no way he could ever part with it. The couch was his good luck

charm. But after he and Kelli got married, she wasn't about to let him keep it in their house, so he had been forced to put it into storage. He had almost forgotten about it until he moved out.

The only thing in the apartment that looked remotely new, or of notable quality, was the television: a huge, high-definition monstrosity that sat on a stand that was comically too small for it. Kelli didn't mind at all that he had taken the television with him. She had always considered it obnoxiously large and never watched it anyway.

Aside from the sofa and the stand, there wasn't much furniture. Brian didn't even have a table. When he needed to eat, he just picked up a folding tray that was leaning against the wall and plopped it down in front of the couch. It was his dining room slash entertainment area slash bedroom all in one, and in truth he couldn't be happier with it.

There was still a stack of boxes in one corner that had been collecting dust for over a month. Brian had opened only one of them since he had moved, and that was just to take out some clothes and a few personal belongings. One of those items was a framed picture he had positioned on the end table. Half absorbed by the sagging couch, Brian looked over at the picture, a small grin creeping across his face. It was a family photo of Kelli, himself, and of their son, Adam. All three of them appeared happy and smiling. But as Brian's stare lingered over the picture, his grin slowly disappeared.

#

A larger version of that same family picture hung on the wall in the dining room of their house. Kelli still thought of it as "their" house, even though Brian no longer shared it with her. Sitting at the head of the table, she absentmindedly picked at a meal she had cooked. Chicken marinara, a romaine salad, Italian bread. She wasn't sure why she had fixed that particular meal. It was Brian's favorite, not hers. She had barely touched it, still despondent over their meeting at

the inn. Kelli picked up a bottle of red wine and poured its remaining contents into her glass, took a sip while staring quietly at the empty chairs around the table. Brian used to sit at the other end, while Adam would sit in the chair just next to her. When Adam was still a baby, Brian would carry in a highchair and set it down in that very spot. As Adam grew into a toddler, and then later into a young child, he had kept that place beside her.

Now the house was quiet. Depressingly quiet. Kelli had considered playing music from the other room while she ate. That was her typical routine to help lighten her mood. Perhaps it was the disappointing conversation with Brian, or maybe it was the discovery of the secret room, but that evening she felt music would only distract her. She needed to think. She needed clarity.

But it was in that stark silence where she couldn't help but remember the sounds that used to be commonplace. They sprang up from her memory despite her best efforts to ignore them. She could recall Brian working in the garage, or yelling her name from his office. The patter of Adam's feet in the hallway, or his joyful hum as he made engine noises with his mouth while playing with one of his toy cars. She recalled Brian and Adam roughhousing in the living room, with Adam giggling as Brian picked him up and swung him around. The house used to be filled with sounds that touched her heart, but they had been replaced by a despairing silence. Empty halls. Empty rooms. Empty chairs. The house was an empty shell of what it once was. And as Kelli pondered those things, she realized she and the house had a lot in common.

#

As the sun sank below the horizon, long shadows crept across the moor and over the inn. A skirling wind swept through the surrounding fields, whipping the long stalks of grass like frenzied ribbons. One of the few shutters still attached to the inn, most of its slats haven fallen out long ago, was caught up in the gusts and banged erratically against the clapboards.

Night fell soon enough, and the inn appeared as little more than a lonely, black shape against the horizon. The ocean beyond had transformed with the setting sun, dissolving into a bleak, muddied backdrop that was almost indistinguishable from the darkness.

An orange light appeared in the window of the corner room on the second floor. Glowing brightly in the night, it flickered and wavered as if from a candle.

#

A small figure stood, hazy at first, slowly coming into view. It was a young boy from the looks of it, his back to Brian. He wore jeans and a red jacket, with his hands shoved into his pockets. For some reason Brian found it hard to focus. His surroundings seemed overly lit, with a strange, silky sheen. Sounds were hollow and muted, similar to being underwater. It took a moment for Brian to realize an old cemetery lay just beyond where the boy stood, its desolate hills peppered with eclectic tombstones.

The boy turned, and a lump caught in Brian's throat. It was Adam. He was smiling, his eyes holding a gentleness, a calmness, that belied his age. His lips didn't move, but Brian could hear his voice.

"Have you seen her?"

Brian woke up with a start, eyes staring up, his mouth open. He lay unmoving for several seconds as images from his dream lingered in mind. He blinked, peered around. Sunlight poured through the windows and birds were chirping just outside. It was morning. He had fallen asleep on the couch, and he was still wearing the same clothes from the day before. Brian sat up with a groan, wiped his hands over his face. He peered over at the family picture.

The three of them, happy and smiling.

Brian shaved and showered quickly, then ate fast food for breakfast. After that, he stopped by the supermarket and bought a bouquet of flowers. There was something he knew he had to do that morning. Something he couldn't put off any longer. He drove out to one of the oldest cemeteries in Boston. It was the kind with a lot of character: a cast iron fence, elaborate headstones, and huge, twisting trees older than the cemetery itself.

He sought out one grave in particular, his gaze falling on the modest headstone. It bore a plaque that read simply: Adam Davis, our beloved son. Brian crouched in front of the marker and placed the flowers over it. His eyes were hollow, empty.

"I'm so sorry," he said softly.

#

Kelli had gotten up early. The melancholy that had overtaken her the night before had vanished, replaced by a growing excitement. Not even a slight hangover from drinking too much dampened her mood. She realized she still had the book, and if she could just prove how valuable it was, perhaps she could talk Brian into reconsidering her offer. Or if he refused to reconsider, then maybe she could find someone else to help her, and Brian would be left out. It would be his own fault, and would serve him right.

Kelli called a friend of hers that specialized in antiques, including rare books, and by his reaction over the phone she realized she might really have something. They agreed to meet at his shop later that morning, and soon Kelli found herself walking down a sidewalk in downtown Boston. The air was crisp, with a light breeze, adding to her chipper demeanor. She had felt so good that morning she had even dressed up a bit, wearing her favorite beige peacoat, her best pair of "headturner" jeans, and the cutest brown boots she had in her closet. Over one shoulder she carried a leather satchel containing the book.

She passed by several store windows until she came upon one that read: Bloomfield Books & Antiques. The door had an old-style handle with a thumb latch, very ornate. Kelli opened the door and stepped into a quaint little shop. A rush of smells hit her, the unmistakable odor of old books, the slight trace of varnish, and a heady aroma that resembled cherry pipe smoke. But it was the old book smell Kelli loved the most. It prickled her nose and made her imagination come alive. There was something special about the smell of an old book. Slightly sweet, with an underlying mustiness, often mixed with vanilla or some sort of floral fragrance. It brought back memories from her childhood, when she would eagerly read the simple volumes her parents had given her. Most of those books consisted of infantile stories that became too girlish or banal as she grew older. It was at that time she had moved on to paperbacks, everything from Jane Austin to Stephen King. And when the books began to age and curl, that's when she first truly experienced the "old book smell." But it was later, into her high school years, and then into college, when she would peruse the shelves of those libraries with that wonderful smell wafting all around her.

She had recently read an article on the subject: how it was the breakdown of hundreds of organic compounds within a book's pages, its ink, and the adhesive used in the binding, that made it smell the way it did. Hints of grass and lignin, along with a slew of chemical mixtures too wordy to remember. In any case, that smell brought a cheerfulness, along with a nostalgia, that thrilled her almost more than anything.

The building the shop was in had been built in the 1920s, maybe earlier, but had been faithfully restored. The flooring was old growth chestnut, and the sturdy antique shelves that stood throughout put most modern equivalents to shame. Most of the shop was filled with

antique furniture and knickknacks, but in the back were shelves that held rows and rows of rare and hard to find books.

The owner of the shop, Thad Weisman, stood behind the sales counter, ringing up a purchase for an elderly lady. Seeing he was indisposed, Kelli wandered down one of the aisles. Her eyes darted immediately to an old music box that was sitting among several other expensive bric-a-bracs. She carefully scooped it up for a better look.

Thad eyed her the whole time, even while talking to his customer. He was younger than Kelli, but not by much. A bit of a hipster, Thad was more soulful than handsome. He wore a long-knit cap on his head to go with dark-rimmed glasses and an ironic beard. Kelli glanced his way, caught his gaze. The elderly customer was doing most of the talking, with Thad nodding patiently, obviously eager to end the conversation, yet too nice to do anything but let it play out. The woman was talking about petunias, and why she thought they were the best flowers for her garden since they bloomed all summer. Or something like that. Kelli wasn't paying much attention as she rotated the music box in her hands, admiring its design.

The woman finally thanked Thad and left, and as soon as the door closed, he strolled briskly over to Kelli with a smile on his face.

“Well hello again.”

“Hi Thad,” Kelli said cheerfully.

Kelli opened the music box, but when nothing happened, she couldn't hide her disappointment.

“It doesn't play music anymore. It's still a nice piece, though,” said Thad.

“Yes, it is,” replied Kelli.

Thad eyed the satchel hanging near her hip. “Is that the book?”

“Yeah.”

Kelli placed the music box back onto the shelf and shrugged the strap of the satchel from her shoulder. She opened the leather flap and pulled out the book. It was bundled in protective cloth, and Thad’s eyes widened with anticipation as Kelli carefully unbound it. Once she managed to get the cloth open, she held it up so he could get a better look at it.

“Magnificent,” Thad muttered. “Here, bring it over to the counter.”

They both stepped over to the sales counter, Kelli setting the book down next to the register. Thad reached behind the counter and took out a pair of white protective gloves. He slipped them on before examining the book with scholarly reverence.

“Sprinkled leather over boards. Decorative ‘V’ pattern to the edges. Hubbed spine with five raised bands. I would say the binding dates it from the mid to late seventeen hundreds. Its condition is exceptional, Kelli. Just exceptional.”

He carefully opened it, taking particular interest of the name *A. Wheeler* written on the inside cover.

“Amazing. If the room you found did belong to Alfred Wheeler, it would be of historical significance.”

“How much significance?” Kelli asked, leaning forward on her hands.

“It would be huge. No one is sure where Alfred Wheeler came from, or where he was even born. He appears suddenly in history with the printing of his first book. He went on to write three more novels and a book of poetry, all published here in Boston. Then he vanished almost as quickly as he had appeared.”

Kelli crinkled her brow. “How can that be?”

“Records back then weren’t kept like they are today. If I were you, I would go back to that inn and look around a bit more. See if you can’t turn up something.” Thad traced a finger over the symbol of the gilded cross on the book’s cover. “This is interesting.”

“I thought so, too.”

“You mind if I take a few pictures?”

“No, of course not.”

“Let me look into it further. If I find anything, I’ll give you a call.”

“Thank you, Thad.”

Kelli walked out of the shop more confident than ever. She had just started down the sidewalk when her phone rang. She took it out to see Brian was calling. She considered answering it, staring down at it for several seconds. But if she did answer, then she might have to explain to him what she was doing. And that was a conversation Kelli didn’t want to have with him just yet.

But Kelli had no way of knowing that Brian was sitting in his truck in a parking lot across the street, watching her through the windshield. His phone to his ear, he observed solemnly as she put her phone away and kept walking down the sidewalk toward her car. As the call went to voicemail, Brian ended it with his thumb, the hand holding the phone dropping down to his lap. His sullen eyes stayed on Kelli the whole time.

Brian watched with a heavy heart as Kelli pulled her red Impala from the curb and sped away. She drove right by the parking lot, never knowing he was there.

Kelli decided to follow Thad’s advice. She drove out to the inn, a pleasant trip on such a sunny day. She was feeling buoyant, even excited, as she pulled into the courtyard, parking in almost the exact same spot she had before. She got out carrying a flashlight, and stared up at the

old structure. The peeling paint. The broken shutters. The dark, empty windows. The inn loomed over her, decrepit and foreboding.

Her feet crunching over the loose cobblestones, Kelli made her way toward the tavern entrance. All the while she kept her eyes on the old, creepy façade. The place was so quiet. A derelict forgotten by time. She hesitated upon reaching the entrance, her hand hovering a few inches from the door. As the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, Kelli realized she had never explored the inn alone. Despite her best efforts, her feeling of excitement was quickly transforming into one of dread. She blew a nervous puff of air through her lips, gathered herself. Then she pressed her hand flat against the door and pushed it open...

The tavern door opened to reveal tables full with patrons. The air was hazy with pipe smoke, and the clink of glasses and plates, along with the murmur of idle conversation, permeated the room. Yet a conspicuous silence fell over the whole tavern as everyone turned and looked toward the doorway.

Captain D`abo stood at the entrance, a prominent, intimidating figure. Just behind him stood the same three soldiers who had accompanied him on his prior visit. Not a soul in the place had the courage to look them in the eye. Most turned away, pretending they didn't see them.

Ignoring the reaction, D`abo and his men sat down at the nearest empty table. D`abo leaned back slowly, his hands in his lap. His face was aloof, all but expressionless, as he surveyed the tavern. The patrons were a ragtag lot, and he was sure every single one of them loathed him to his very core.

Bess had been filling the glasses of her customers when she noticed D`abo enter. She stared, tentative to approach. She could think of only two reasons why he would bother making the trip to their inn, and both frightened her. Mustering the courage to walk over, the captain's eyes focused upon her as soon as he saw her coming, and inwardly Bess shuddered.

“Hello again, Captain,” she said as she stepped up to their table. She spoke as pleasantly as she could, and even managed to force out a grin. She noticed Captain D’abo appeared much more dapper than when last they met. No longer disheveled from the rain, his uniform fit without a wrinkle, and his buttons and boots had been polished to a shine. This time he wore a wig beneath his tricorne hat, which somehow only added to his imposing demeanor.

D’abo’s lips spread into a thin smile. “Bess.”

“You’re a little far from your post, are you not?” Bess asked.

“We were in the area,” said D’abo.

Bess nodded. “How may I serve you gentlemen?”

“Ales for all of us please,” replied the captain.

“Of course.” Bess turned away, started for the bar. D’abo kept his gaze on her the whole way, admiring her shape, the sway of her hips, the bouncy waves of her long, black hair.

The soldier sitting to his right, a Lieutenant Tobias, followed D’abo’s eyes. “If I may be so bold, sir, I believe I now understand why we ventured so far south.”

D’abo sniffed in amusement even as the other two soldiers grinned.

“Can’t say I mind the view either,” snickered one of the others. His name was Archibald, young, red hair, freckles. By his uniform he was a lowly private.

D’abo’s expression became hard, his eyes cold. Archibald lowered his gaze down at the table. “Sorry sir. I spoke out of place,” he stammered.

Throughout their conversation, none of them had paid any attention to the man sitting in the booth across from their table. He had been discreetly observing them from the moment they entered, and was quick to notice their leering stares concerning Bess, as well as the degrading way they spoke of her.

Elias had already deduced the ranks of the soldiers who were sitting with Captain D`abo. The lieutenant's coat and hat were trimmed in gold metallic lace, with a similarly colored epaulette on his right shoulder. He was a well-educated man, by the way he spoke. And due to his higher rank, he was able to converse informally with the captain. He also seemed to have a rapport with D`abo the others did not share. So, Elias had guessed correctly that he was a lieutenant.

The younger man, simply by his age, along with the dull, madder red color of his uniform, was clearly a private. He came off as brash, yet eager to please his higher-ranking associates. Yet his inexperience showed. He had carried a musket in with him, but placed it against the wall before he sat down. Apparently, he assumed no one would dare touch it, given who they were. But Elias estimated he could easily bound over, scoop it up, and use it to shoot the young private before he could even rise from his chair.

The remaining soldier, the one who had yet to speak, was a sergeant. Keen-eyed and tough from the looks of it. Elias hoped he would never have to fight him. As was typical of his rank, the sergeant's coat was a rich scarlet, trimmed with plain white lace instead of the typical regimental pattern. The lace of his hat was trimmed with silver. Another clue to his rank was the red wool sash he wore over one shoulder, with a stripe of the regiment's facing color woven in the middle. His musket was fitted with a bayonet, which he kept as his side. Elias noticed the metallic glint of a pommel and handle, which belonged to a saber he wore on his hip.

D`abo glared disapprovingly at the private, still put off by his remark. The young man fidgeted nervously in his chair, and couldn't seem to meet D`abo's gaze.

“Perhaps you should follow Sergeant Durning’s example, Archibald,” chided D`abo. As he spoke, he gestured with his head toward the sergeant. His eyes, however, remained locked on the poor private. “The less you talk, the more you listen.”

“Yes sir. Sorry sir,” Archibald replied, his eyes shooting up at D`abo before dropping back down.

D`abo again leaned back in his chair, taking his hat off as he did. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed he was being observed, and turned his head to peer over into the beaming face of Elias.

“What brings you to these parts, Captain?” asked Elias, in the most effeminate tone he could muster. He had also adopted a foppish manner, as someone trying too hard to be a gentleman. The ploy worked, as all four soldiers, evident by their annoyed expressions, were immediately repelled by him.

“Let me guess. The wine.” Elias held up a glass of red wine he had been drinking. Then his lips transformed into a mocking grin as his eyes strayed over to Bess, who was now at the bar. Then he added in a spirited tenor, “Or perhaps the desserts?”

The captain shifted in his chair, clearly irritated at Elias’ implication. “We are after a highwayman, if you must know. We believe him to be in the area.”

“Oh yes, I believe I heard something of the villain last night,” Elias replied with feigned enthusiasm. “I took it as a story of make believe.”

Private Archibald snorted, his mouth falling open. Who was this colonial popinjay, this effete dandy, who clearly had no clue who he was speaking to? Did he not see their uniforms? Did he really not know who they were, or what they could do to him?

The mere topic of the highwayman visibly provoked D`abo. Elias noted a quick grimace, an agitated breath, as the captain rotated toward him, one hand braced on his knee. "He's quite real, though the exaggerations of his deeds do him far too much justice."

"I'll be travelling the highway this very day. Should I worry?" asked Elias. He quickly shifted his eyes, noted that the other three soldiers were staring right at him now. The sergeant, in particular, was watching him studiously.

"No," said D`abo. "Like most scavengers, he only comes out at night."

"I see. Still, how stimulating. An unruly rogue wandering these parts. I wonder who he could be?"

"No one knows. He always wears a mask. But I assure you, we'll find out soon enough," D`abo replied with confidence.

Elias lifted his wine glass once more. "Well, I'll certainly sleep better knowing you're the one who's after the scoundrel."

D`abo bristled as he detected a trace of sarcasm. "And what might you be doing in these parts, Mister..."

"Browning. Joshua Browning. I'm on my way to Boston," Elias replied cheerfully, pretending not to see how aggravated the captain had become.

D`abo regarded him, his eyes narrowing. "What business have you there?"

"My own, Captain. But if you must know, I'm going to see family."

"There's been a lot of unrest in Boston lately."

"Yes, I've heard. The tax on tea. There's no telling what might happen these next few days. Just thinking about it all gives me a frightful headache. These patriots. Always drumming up trouble."

“Indeed,” mumbled D`abo, growing weary of their conversation.

As Elias set his glass down, he noticed blood from his recent wound had seeped through and stained his shirt. Fortunately, it was on the side facing away from D`abo and his men. Thinking quickly, he pretended to knock over his glass. The wine spilled over his shirt, camouflaging the bloodstain.

“Oh, what have I done?” he yelped. “Would you excuse me, gentlemen?”

Elias shot up, bowed quickly, and headed for the stairs. Archibald snickered, while the lieutenant merely watched in amusement. D`abo, on the other hand, regarded Elias in utter disdain—going so far as to shake his head in bewilderment. But they quickly put him out of their minds as he strode off. Only the sergeant, a sneer on his lips, continued to watch Elias.

“Fucking coxcomb,” he muttered under his breath.

Elias almost bumped into Bess, who was returning with the pints of ale.

“Pardon me, miss,” he said.

She gave him a polite smile, barely acknowledging him as he brushed past her. She hurried over and placed the mugs down on the captain’s table.

“Here you are, gentlemen.”

She was already leaving when she heard the captain’s voice behind her.

“You don’t like us very much, do you?”

Bess stopped short. She slowly turned back around and stared into the captain’s intense, blue-gray eyes. She glanced at the others, then back at the captain.

“I don’t dislike you, Captain.”

D`abo stood and took her gently by the arm, leading her a few steps away for privacy. Again, those blue-gray eyes bore right through her as he admired her features. Her lips, her perfect cheekbones, her beautiful, black eyes. D`abo's face softened.

“Bess. You are so lovely. Let me be very honest with you. You are the real reason why I'm here.”

She stiffened, her eyes never leaving his. “I don't understand.”

“If I startled you the last time I was here, I apologize. In truth I would like nothing more than to know you better. If we could possibly sit down and talk for a few moments...”

“I can't now. My father needs me,” replied Bess. A sick feeling rose in the pit of her stomach. She wanted nothing more than to walk away from him.

“No, of course not right now. Maybe later when you're free. Another day perhaps? Maybe you could join me for a nice walk?”

“Captain. Your words are flattering, but I should tell you that I have already promised myself to another.”

Her words hit him hard. He blinked, tightened his lips, but kept his composure. “I see. And who is this fortunate individual?”

“I don't think I'll tell you,” Bess said, trying to stay as polite as possible.

D`abo cocked his head to the side. “Oh? Why not?”

Her dark eyes glistened as she stared up at him. She faltered, then realized, if she were to respond at all, she could only tell him the truth. “Because he is a simple man, and you are a man of power. In all honesty you frighten me, Captain.”

“Frighten you? You don't even know me.”

“I believe I do, actually. I think it would be best if you would please just leave.” There was no malice in Bess’ tone. To the contrary, she was all but imploring him.

Yet the captain was still insulted. His face hardened. His jaw clenched, while the grin he was trying so hard to keep quickly faded.

“I’m sorry.” Bess gave him an apologetic look before turning away. The captain grabbed her by the wrist and spun her back to him. Her eyes widened in shock, flicked down at his hand holding her, and then back up at him. She attempted to wrench her hand free, but D`abo kept a vice-like grip, even tightening his hold. Bess’ teeth gnashed together. The pain she felt was evident on her face, yet the captain’s lips formed a sneer as he yanked her closer.

Bess slapped his cheek with her free hand. D`abo’s head jerked to one side, remaining frozen in its new position for several tense moments. Then he glared back at her, his upper lip twisting. Though she was inwardly terrified at how he might respond, Bess’ eyes were fierce, her face contorted in anger.

Everyone in the place was now watching them in stunned silence. It was the quiet that seemed to temper D`abo’s rage, as it was then he realized the whole tavern had witnessed the incident. Then a soft *click* drew his attention. He turned his head, saw Nathaniel standing behind the bar with his musket in his hands, his thumb still on the cocked hammer.

Sergeant Durning gripped his own musket, his fingers subtly dropping down to the flintlock. D`abo raised his hand and shook his head, stopping the sergeant from doing anything brash. He let go of Bess, who jerked her hand away as soon as it was free. D`abo did not look at her again as he stepped back to his table, retrieved his hat, and tugged it firmly into place. With a quick gesture of his head, his men stood and followed him out of the tavern.

Every patron appeared to breathe a sigh of relief in one way or the other.

Bess waited for the door to close behind them, then wove quickly between the tables and toward the stairs. She hurried up them, strode directly to her bedroom door. Bess opened it and slipped inside, quickly closed the door and slid the locking bolt into place.

She spun to see Elias standing at the casement, peering through the panes of glass. He had taken off his shirt, and had just finished wrapping a new bandage around his waist. The old one lay on the floor, stained red. Elias was watching as D`abo and his men, now in the courtyard, mounted their horses. He could feel Bess' furious glare, briefly shifting his gaze toward her as she stepped further into the room.

"You just had to speak to him, didn't you? You couldn't leave well enough alone," she said angrily.

His gaze swung back to the window. "He'll never catch me. I'm too smart for him."

Bess sniffed at his conceit. "He's not a stupid man."

No, but he is a jealous one, isn't he?" Elias looked right back at her as he spoke.

Bess took a step closer, still livid. "And you're a careless one. Strolling around with a leaky wound—right in front of them no less. And those pearls you stole. They could have gotten us all hanged if they had discovered them. Even my father. You've become careless."

The corners of Elias' mouth shot up into a blithe smile that Bess always found irritating, yet also strangely attractive and disarming all at once.

"The more we grow the more we need munitions. Such things do not come cheap, my dear. If I must rob them to stand against them I will," he said.

"How noble."

Elias pulled away from the window to face her directly, a sly grin still on his face. “Is that sarcastic tongue for me? Do you not condone what I’m doing?” He came toward her slowly as he spoke, stopping right in front of her.

“You know I do,” she said.

His dark eyes peered right into hers, warm and mesmerizing. She loved how they caught the light, like brandy with streaks of honey. Bess’ heart beat faster. She felt flushed. Her mind began to float.

Bess averted her eyes. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“You know.”

He gently took hold of her arms, only to have her shove them away.

“I said stop. You know I’m angry with you.”

Elias’ grin only grew larger. He glanced through the window, saw the captain and his men riding slowly out of the courtyard, almost to the bridge.

“He’s leaving?” Bess asked, while craning her neck. She couldn’t quite see them from her angle, but figured that’s what Elias was looking at.

“Yes,” said Elias, still watching.

Bess turned somber, placing her hands to his bare chest while staring off into space. “It’s ironic, isn’t it? He wants us both equally, but for very different reasons.”

“Aye. You for his bed and me for the noose. If he ever returns, stay as far away from him as you can. Men like him take what isn’t theirs to have.”

Bess grinned and drew nearer, just inches away. “Isn’t that what you do?”

Elias returned her grin, swiftly reached out and pulled her to him. “There’s that sarcastic tongue again.”

He had grabbed her by the arms more forcefully than before, yet this time she didn’t push him away. Instead, she leaned toward him, her lips all but touching his. She spoke softly, almost whispering her words.

“Maybe what you meant to say... was that you didn’t want him to have what is already yours?”

Elias drew her into him, his lips engulfing hers. His kiss was so warm, so urgent, she had no willpower left to fight him. And as his arms came around her, Bess felt a surge of desire that swept away any last ounce of resistance. She met him with equal passion, her fingers shooting up to his cheeks so he couldn’t pull away even if he wanted to.

There were traces of sweet wine on his breath and in his kiss, transferred now to her lips and onto her tongue. As their bodies came together, she closed her eyes and surrendered to an intense yearning that had been pent up inside her for way too long. Those feelings had been a whirlwind trying to get out, and once she let them free, they quickly overwhelmed her, taking complete control over her senses. All she could feel were his lips, his touch, the hot press of his skin. Oh, the scent of him, the taste. Her mind reeled. Her stomach fluttered. She was floating again, and this time there was no coming back.

Elias buried his face into her perfumed hair, the fragrance sending his passion for her over the brink. His hands sank into those lush, black waves, stroked lovingly while cradling the back of her head. His lips moved down to Bess’ neck, warm and wonderful, gently sucking, nibbling. The tingling flush of arousal spread through her, and Bess became sensitive to even the slightest touch—his hands gripping her, caressing her, clutching at her through the thick fabric of

her gown. His insistent kisses, his tongue plunging between her lips. Bess' whole body felt suffused with heat until all she could feel was an aching, throbbing desire.

Floating. Floating away.

His fingers twisted loose the top button on her gown, then darted down, urgently worked the button just below it. As it gave way, the confines of her bodice loosened, revealing the swells of her breasts.

“We can't. We can't!” Bess responded in a persistent whisper, yet her body told him otherwise. A third button came free, exposing more of her lovely, white flesh. Elias dipped his head and kissed those beautiful swells, then cupped them in his hands. Bess gasped.

“Please,” she whimpered through panting breaths, though it was impossible to tell whether she was begging him to stop or encouraging him to continue. Elias could barely hear her either way. Drunk on passion, he rose swiftly, kissed her lips once more.

Bess turned her head, murmured softly in his ear. “Stop. I can't... I can't...” Yet she was pressed firmly into him, her cheek against his cheek, her mouth open wide as her breaths came in great sighs.

“Not yet.”

Bess' words somehow reached Elias through the swirl of pleasure and desire that had taken over. In that moment he wanted her more than anything. But he knew of her convictions, that she wanted to stand before a minister before she completely gave herself to him. Though he wanted nothing more than to sweep her up and carry her over to the bed, he knew later she would regret it, and might very well hold it against him. In any case, he was already feeling a dull ache in his side, and he realized his wound inhibited him from exerting himself much more than he already had.

Elias dropped to his knees in front of her, the flat of his hands sliding down her hips, over her belly, his lips kissing a trail down her very center. Bess couldn't keep herself from arching into him. Her inhibitions, her self-control, had been swallowed up at the moment he had pulled her to him. Even with her eyes shut tight, her world was spinning as a hundred sensations seemed to flow through her all at once.

She felt him reach under her petticoat, trying to gather the fabric in his hands. She was swaying, chest heaving, her entire body quivering with anticipation. Elias found the bottom of her shift, grabbed handfuls of it and pushed it up along with her petticoat, exposing her bare thighs to the open air. Bess' heart hammered in her ears. Her knees felt weak. And her blood, racing furiously, flowed so hot in her veins. She could feel it pulsing. Pulsing.

She was floating again, floating away right before she felt the touch of his lips, so warm and wonderful. And then hot. So hot and electric. Her eyes were still shut tight as Bess threw her head back and exhaled a breathy moan.

#

Nathaniel stood in the hallway just outside Bess' bedroom. After the incident with the captain, he had walked upstairs to see if she was all right, only to discover that she certainly was. On the other side of the door he heard amorous whispers and sighs of passion. Scowling, he considered forcing open the door and barging into the room. Had he brought his musket up with him, he might have done just that, either throwing Elias out at gunpoint or shooting him on the spot. But Nathaniel didn't have his musket, and ultimately, he lacked the courage to do anything. Bess was, after all, an adult woman, and free to make her own decisions. And the shame that would come upon both of them if the affair was discovered could destroy them both. His face glum, Nathaniel slowly turned away and headed back down the stairs.

Yet there was another eavesdropper no one had detected. Timothy had slipped into the adjacent room. He had been in the process of cleaning it when he heard Bess' door open and then close. He had perked up, then listened in as their muffled conversation drifted through the wall.

Now bent over, his ear pressed to that very wall, he had overheard just about everything they had said. Every quip, every moan, every passionate sigh. His imagination soared as he envisioned himself in Elias' place. He did feel some shame in doing so, but he had always loved Bess, and if he had to live vicariously through Elias, then that's the way it had to be.

He listened as Bess' passionate gasps reached a crescendo, followed by brief silence. There were a few whispers, a few affectionate words toward one another, but they were so softly spoken Timothy couldn't make them out. Soon he detected several heated breaths, then an ardent groan from Elias, and he could only imagine what was happening beyond that wall.

A giggle from Bess, a quick laugh from Elias. A few more tender words, just whispers. After that all was quiet.

Timothy rose up, straightened himself. He left briskly but quietly through the door, down the stairs, through the tavern. No one noticed his hurried pace. In truth, no one noticed him at all. That was always the case. It seemed no one ever noticed him, even when he was standing right in front of them. Especially Bess.

Timothy flung open the side door and strode down the hall. When he reached another door on his left, he yanked it open and darted into the room beyond...

A cold chill. The feeling of no longer being alone. Kelli twirled, sensing a presence in the room with her. And her heart leapt into her throat as she half-expected to see someone coming right at her. But as her eyes pierced the gloom, Kelli could see she was alone. The hidden doorway they had ripped open stood empty, with only the darkness of the hallway beyond. She had been standing in front of the desk, facing the window, when she was sure someone had walked in behind her. But there was no one there. Only silence. Only shadow.

Chalking it up to her imagination, Kelli did her best to pass it off. She turned her attention back onto the coffer, picking it up from the desk and turning it over in her hands. As she did, she absentmindedly recited the book's poem under her breath.

“The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees. The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.”

She placed the coffer back down, rotated as she gazed around the small bedroom. She dropped to the floor on her hands and knees, shining her flashlight under the bed.

“The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor...”

She found merely a thick layer of dust for her trouble. Kelli stood up, dusted off her jeans. Her gaze fell once again to the bookshelf, and she stepped over to it.

“And the highwayman came riding, riding, riding...”

She tilted several of the books forward to get a look behind them, but discovered nothing of interest. Only more dust. More cobwebs.

“The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.”

Just as she was finishing the last verse, the wind outside picked up, whistling shrilly. A moment later the floorboards right outside the room *groaned*. Kelli’s heart once again leapt as she spun toward the sound. A few seconds later the door to the hallway creaked open and then closed. She waited with bated breath, her eyes shifting back and forth, listening for any other sound. But there was only the wind. High and piercing. Almost wailing.

“Hello?”

A shutter *banged* against the side of the inn, caught in the gusts of wind. Kelli jumped and gasped out loud. She closed her eyes, her lips forming into a scowl. She took in a breath to calm herself.

The clattering shutter became so nerve-wracking that Kelli decided to leave the bedroom and walk back to the tavern. Reaching the middle of the room, she stopped and turned slowly, tentatively, her flashlight sweeping over the walls.

Dark and dreary. Deep shadows. Draping cobwebs. Once again, the hairs on the back of Kelli’s neck stood on end. What was it about the place that had her so on edge? She had clearly heard the hallway door open and then shut. The wind? Air pressure? No, it was the wind that did it. Had to be. Only the wind. That wailing wind. And that damn shutter just wouldn’t stop.

*Bang. Bang... bang.*

The floor *creaked* behind her. Kelli spun, her flashlight cutting through the gloom beyond the kitchen doorway. Her beam caught a figure just as it stepped out of view. Shadowy.

Indistinct. Kelli took in a breath as she backed away.

It was an instant, a blink, but she was sure she saw something.

“Hello?” she called out, voice shaking. “Is someone there?”

Only the wind.

“Hello?”

Kelli gasped, cocked an ear when she heard the distinct groaning of the cellar stairs, along with the thump of footsteps. She swallowed hard. Her hand shaking, the circular beam of her light jiggled over the kitchen doorway. Her heart raced. Her stomach dropped. She edged closer, pausing just in front of the bar to see that the trapdoor in the kitchen had been swung open, leaving a dark, gaping hole in the floor.

The wind wailed. The shutter banged. And the whole inn creaked and groaned under the force of the gusts outside. Yet just underneath those sounds, Kelli thought she detected a faint, peculiar *moan* floating up from the cellar. *Has to be the wind flowing through the cracks in the foundation*, she told herself. But it sounded eerily human. High-pitched. Feminine.

The tavern door behind Kelli swung upon as a dark figure barged in. Kelli screamed and swung around, her flashlight spotlighting Brian’s face. He threw up a hand, eyes squinting in the light. Kelli sobbed in both relief and anger.

“Brian! What are you doing here? You scared the hell out of me!”

“Sorry. I tried calling you, but there’s no service out here. Figured you’d come up here. You shouldn’t be wandering around this place alone. It’s not safe.”

Kelli was breathing heavily, a terrified look still on her face. “Brian, there’s someone downstairs.”

“What?”

“I’m serious.”

Brian ran out to his truck to grab up a crowbar and a flashlight. Kelli waited at the entrance until he returned, not about to stay in the tavern alone.

“Come on. Let’s go see,” said Brian, squeezing passed her. Kelli watched him, a little astounded. He didn’t seem nearly as concerned about a possible intruder as she thought he should be.

“Maybe we should call the police?” she suggested. She had stayed back at the door while Brian was already halfway across the room.

He stopped, peered over his shoulder. “No service out here, remember?” He motioned with his head. “Come on. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Kelli slinked inside. She was still shaking a little, visibly anxious. She stayed right behind Brian, gripping his arm with both hands, as they made their way behind the bar and into the murky kitchen. Brian stepped warily, swinging his flashlight all around. On the far wall was a large fireplace made of soot-stained brickwork, basically what would have acted as the oven in the inn’s early days. An old andiron still sat within, broken and crusted over with red-orange layers of rust. The rest of the room was just open space.

“There was someone in here. I’m sure of it. They walked down into the cellar,” Kelli whispered, her voice filled with dread.

Brian shined his flashlight down onto the trapdoor near his feet. He paused.

“It’s open,” he said.

“I know. We closed it when we left last time. Didn’t we?”

“Yeah. We did.”

Gaining a firmer grip on his crowbar, Brian descended into that darkened hole. Kelli followed, the cellar stairs creaking loudly under their weight.

Kelli gripped his arm tighter. “These steps creaking. This is exactly what I heard.”

Brian crept down a little further. He stooped low, using his flashlight to search every shadow, every nook and corner that he could. Rotted floor, dank stonework. Cobwebs everywhere. Nothing had changed since the last time he was there. Brian ventured to the middle of the cellar, now confident they were alone. He turned around, arms out.

“There’s no one down here.”

“I heard them walk down these steps. I know I did,” Kelly insisted. Hugging herself in her arms, Kelli walked over to join him. Brian could see that she was still scared, trembling.

“The whole place creaks, especially when its windy like this,” Brian said, attempting to allay her fears.

“I saw...” Kelli stopped mid-sentence.

“Saw what?” Brian prodded.

“I... don’t know. I thought... nothing I guess.” Kelli was still peering around, clearly uneasy, as if she didn’t believe her own words. “But the trapdoor. It was open.”

Brian shrugged. “Maybe we didn’t close it. Old places like this can play tricks on you. Believe me. I know.”

Kelli relaxed a little, her cheeks expanding as she blew a puff of air through her lips. She reached up, gripped one of the joists above her with both hands, leaned on it for support.

“Don’t put weight on that!”

An earsplitting *crack* filled the cellar as the joist splintered in Kelli's hands. Brian was already launching toward her when a loud *groan* reverberated across the entire ceiling. He grabbed Kelli around the waist, yanking her out of the way an instant before the ceiling collapsed right where she had been standing. They both fell hard to the floor, barely avoiding a crushing avalanche of jagged debris. Kelli became disoriented as a terrible cacophony filled her ears, so loud it hurt. She didn't have time to recover before a cloud of dirty, choking dust billowed up from the wreckage, engulfing them as it surged out in all directions. Brian held Kelli tight, covering her head in his arms and shielding her with his body as the remainder of the ceiling threatened to give way.

A protracted screech drowned out everything else, prompting Brian to stare up in horror at the wine rack towering over them. Dislodged from its age-old spot against the wall, it was slowly tipping forward, and its screech turned into a banshee-like wail as gravity took it and the whole thing toppled. Still clutching Kelli in his arms, Brian rolled over, taking her with him, moving them both out of the way as the rack came crashing down. The wine bottles inside shattered on impact, and the wood exploded into an upheaval of mangled timbers. The old wine gushed out from beneath the massive heap and spread quickly over the floor.

Both Brian and Kelli lay stunned. Brian propped himself up, looked back in disbelief at the near miss. The dust was so thick he couldn't make out much, the destroyed wine rack just a dark, hulking mass of broken boards and glass. Brian erupted into a coughing fit, clamped his hand over his mouth. He waved his hand in a futile attempt to clear the air, then lifted his flashlight in an attempt to observe the damage. His beam barely penetrated the swirling cloud that had filled the cellar.

Fortunately, the floor slanted toward the center of the room, away from where they were laying. The crimson flow followed the grade, quickly filling the cracks and hollows in the floor. Reaching a jagged fissure in the old foundation, the old wine created an odd gurgling sound as it poured into it. Brian heard the noise, shifted his flashlight, watched as the frothy, blood-red liquid drained into the depths of the earth.

He got up slowly, helping Kelli to her feet as well. She had dropped her own flashlight. It had rolled away into a corner, now lost in the dust and gloom.

“Are you all right?” Brian asked tersely.

“I’m fine,” she stammered.

Both of them were covered from head to toe in chalky grime. Still coughing, half blind, Brian stumbled over to the stairs, clambered up them on all fours.

“Brian?” Kelli called after him. When he didn’t respond, she hurried up after him.

By the time she made it up to the kitchen, Brian was nowhere to be seen. She ran into the tavern, saw he was walking quickly toward the front door.

“Brian. Stop. Please!”

He halted, exhaled in exasperation, shoulders slumping. He turned around.

“What?”

“Don’t leave.”

“We were almost crushed to death, Kelli! We’re lucky the whole building didn’t come down on us!”

“Please hear me out.”

Brian answered her by wheeling around and walking out the door. Kelli followed him, popping through the doorway and into the courtyard.

“I’m not giving up!” she yelled after him.

“You’re going to rebuild this place all by yourself?” he hollered back, not missing a step as he headed for his truck.

“If I have to!”

Brian finally stopped, turned to face her. “Seems like an awfully expensive and time-consuming way to commit suicide.”

Kelli’s lips shortened, her brow lowered. “I’m not leaving,” she said stubbornly.

“I am. I’m done with this place. And good riddance. It’s a deathtrap.” Brian hadn’t finished speaking before he had spun back around.

“Run away then, Brian! That’s all you do now! You didn’t used to, you know! There was a time when you wouldn’t let anything beat you!”

Brian had already reached his truck, had one hand on the door handle. But what she said made him pause. He scowled, strode quickly back toward her. She held his gaze, crossing her arms and reflexively raising her chin as he approached. Brian’s eyes burned, his lips still frozen in that angry scowl.

“The man I used to know would have jumped at a chance like this,” said Kelli.

“That was before. We’re not even qualified for something on this scale. I have a crew of three, Kelli. Three. That’s it. We couldn’t even—”

“I already bought it,” Kelli blurted.

Brian’s eyes widened. His jaw dropped. Then he blinked several times as he tried to process what he just heard. “What?” he finally asked in disbelief.

“I already bought this place. It was about to go on the market. Someone else would have snatched it up. I had to make a decision, so I used our money to buy it.” Kelli explained quickly, afraid he would blow up at any second.

Instead, Brian just stared at her, completely dumbfounded.

“I overpaid for it. Because I knew it was worth it, and I know in time you’ll come to realize that, too. But we can’t just sell it back, especially after what just happened in there. The way I see it, we can either go broke or make a fortune fixing it up. It’s up to you.”

Brian glowered, too stunned to speak at first. When he tried to finally respond, he choked over his words, had to stop, then finally got them out. “Who do you think you are?”

“I’m sorry. I know it was a crappy thing to do. But like it or not, if we’re going to get out of this, we’re going to have to do it together.” She managed to keep his gaze, but her eyes were large and glistening. Her shoulders had wilted. Her arms remained folded, but her elbows had drooped down to her stomach. The fight in her had been replaced with guilt.

Brian thought long and hard. He crossed his arms over his chest, peered around in dismay, his eyes not focusing on anything in particular. He gave another snort of exasperation, then threw up his hands before slapping them down against his sides.

Kelli was right. If what she said was true, then he didn’t have a choice. Whether he liked it or not, they were going to have to renovate the inn. And they’d have to do it together.

About forty-five minutes later, Brian was sitting on the Green Monster, staring blankly. The drive back to his apartment had been filled with heavy contemplation, mixed with bouts of cursing and fits of slamming his hand against the steering wheel. He was pretty sure if he had the means to burn Kelli in effigy in those moments, he would have done so. Words had flown out of his mouth that later, once he had calmed down, he was grateful no one had been around to hear.

The television was on, but he wasn't watching. He was thinking, fuming, then thinking some more. Could they afford to fix that place up? Maybe flip it for a profit? There were no modern conveniences in it whatsoever. The whole thing was about to collapse. There was so much that had to be added and repaired. Hell, it would almost be easier just to demolish the whole site and start over. Not that Kelli would ever let him do that—because that would be too practical. How could she be so stubborn, so foolish?

She had tricked him. Coerced him. That's what she had done.

No. That wasn't Kelli. She had acted impulsively, which was her nature, but she hadn't meant to deceive him. She figured he would agree with her. Because there was a time he would have snapped up that place without thinking twice. If she was right about anything, she had been right about that. But that was before. And now she was trapped by her decision. They both were.

As those thoughts tumbled through his mind, Brian hadn't realized he had lounged back onto the sofa, his head on the arm pillow. With the drone of the television, his eyes became heavy. And somewhere amid his ponderings, he dozed off.

#

“What have you done! What have you done!”

Kelli was shrieking, running frantically.

But Brian could barely see her. He was peering out over the railing of a scaffold overlooking a grassy lawn. Kelli was racing across the lawn. Right toward him.

“Adam! Adam!” she screamed.

Brian had a firm grip on one of the rails. He clung to it desperately, knowing that if he slipped off, he would fall. One of the walk boards had broken loose underneath him, nearly sending him plummeting three stories. He wanted to climb down, but for some reason he

couldn't move. He watched as Kelli ran to the base of the scaffold, disappearing from his line of sight. Brian struggled to lean over the edge far enough to get a better view, but his arms and legs felt abnormally heavy. For some reason his body wouldn't respond to what his mind was telling it to do. Everything felt sluggish, disjointed.

Finally, he shifted position so he could see through the opening underneath him—where the plank had fallen away. He stared down in horror at Adam's lifeless form. He was lying sprawled on the ground thirty feet down, the fallen plank right next to him.

Kelli had already dropped to her knees beside Adam. She was screaming, weeping, tears running down her face as she scooped him up in her arms.

Somehow, Brian was no longer on the scaffolding, but right next to them. He could hear Kelli's distraught cries, see her hands cradling Adam. But Brian's focus was on his son. Adam was limp in Kelli's arms, his eyes staring blankly. There was a huge, bloody gash on the top of his head.

And then Adam's face was floating in front of him. He was grinning, his blue eyes sparkling, beautiful. He seemed so happy. The background behind him was white. So endlessly white. Adam's mouth didn't move as Brian heard him speak.

“Have you seen her?”

Brian opened his eyes. He was lying on the Green Monster, all but enveloped in the cushions. The television was still on. He reached over, grabbed the remote, turned it off. He sat up, groggy. Why would he dream something like that? Oh yes, the deal with Kelli. That's what triggered it. Had to be. The day Adam died was the last time they had worked on a job together. The job had fallen through because of the tragedy, and it nearly broke them both emotionally and financially.

A wave of depression overwhelmed him, and it was all Brian could do to keep from burying his head in his hands and sobbing like a baby. He fought it, though, forcing it back in. Back where it belonged. He squeezed his eyes tight, allowing only a glistening dab of moisture in the corner of each eye. He wiped his face, groaned, tried to stretch a kink out of his neck. The couch was so uncomfortable. Why did he still have the thing? Oh, that's right. The Red Sox.

He felt awful. He hadn't showered since he had gotten home, still covered in grime, his clothes still dirty. Brian got up, shuffled into the bathroom, turned on the water. His mind wandered as he washed the grime away.

How had Kelli responded after their visit to the inn? Probably a lot different than him, that's for sure. If history had taught him anything, she had more than likely driven straight home and downed a bottle of Bordeaux. No, she only did that when she was depressed. Since she had gotten her way, she probably ran right over to that antique store, happy as a lark. Yeah, that's what she did. Brian could just envision her explaining to that hipster doofus who owned the place how they were going to renovate the inn.

Hipster doofus. That's what Brian called him. He had joined Kelli on a trip to the shop once to look for an antique chair, and she had introduced the two of them. Chad. Thad. Brad? Gonad? Brian couldn't remember the guy's name, so hipster doofus it was.

No, he could never remember the guy's name, but Brian did remember catching the hipster doofus checking Kelli out when she had her back turned. At the time he almost said something, and had even considered punching the guy.

And she had probably scampered right over there, book in hand, so she and the hipster doofus could pore over it together. And it wouldn't surprise him if she wore her "headturner" jeans again. That's what she liked to call them. Though he did have to admit she looked damn

good in them, a skinny-flex style that were all but painted on. Maybe she wanted the hipster doofus to look at more than just the book?

No. He wasn't her type. Was he? *Was he?*

Nah. She wouldn't have done that. They were in this together now. Kelli would have called him if she was going to do that. There was no way she would have gone to that antique store without him. In fact, once he really thought about it, Brian was pretty sure that was the last place she would go.

#

Kelli stood across the counter from Thad in the antique store, the book between them. She was leaning over, propped on her elbows, looking damn good in her skinny-flex jeans. Thad had closed the shop for the rest of the day so they could focus completely on the book. He reached under the counter, brought out a research tome, and opened it to a marked page. He plopped it down so Kelli could see it. The page showed a drawing of a cross surrounded by elaborate swirls. It was identical to the gilded cross on the book cover.

Kelli's eyes widened. "They're the same."

Thad nodded in agreement. "I couldn't find much on it. It's the symbol of an obscure secret society that vowed to bring independence to the colonies. They were just a small sect, and disbanded once the war started."

"That would coincide with the main character in the story."

"It's the book itself that I'm more interested in. Outside of your copy, there's no record of it anywhere."

"You mean like a lost work?" asked Kelli.

“Yes. Wouldn’t that be something? Just think if it was Wheeler’s final novel. It would be priceless.”

Kelli gave a breathy smile. “How can we find out?”

Thad scrunched his lips, leaned his cheek into his hand. “I suppose if we could locate another sample of Alfred Wheeler’s handwriting, we could compare it to the signature on the inside cover.”

“Are there any samples of his handwriting in existence?”

“I don’t know. But that’s certainly a start. I’ll call around to a few collector friends of mine to see what I can find out.”

“Thank you, Thad.”

“Of course.”

More intrigued than ever, Kelli stared down at the gold cross on the book’s cover. There were eight intricate swirls surrounding it, at times entwining around it, beautifully engraved. What a remarkable work of art it was.

The gilded cross, surrounded by ornate swirls, gleamed when it caught the sun. It had been inlaid into the front of a satchel that was old and worn, the leather distressed.

Though certainly within the range of ordinary, the satchel was quite a bit more interesting in appearance than the man holding it. Average in height, with plain brown hair, he was not altogether attractive. A little stocky, he had a wide face with a squarish jaw, and a bit of a pug nose. His clothes were merely pedestrian, but of course that helped him blend in. Those who passed by barely took notice of him. They certainly didn't pay any attention to the old satchel he was holding, or in particular the small, gold cross that it bore.

He was leaning with his back against the wall of a two-story brick building. He held the satchel down in front of him, the gilded symbol facing out. With a gabled roof and a brick façade, the building behind him was, for the most part, unremarkable. Only the emblem of a dragon, mounted on a spire above the door, set it apart from the establishments surrounding it. The layout of the building was a little odd—in that its windows were set symmetrically six across instead of the usual five, and the paneled front door was set just right of center. The door was capped with a triangular crown, framed by pilasters on either side.

Elias, propped up against a lamp post across the street, knew that building well. It was the Green Dragon Tavern. The members of Boston's growing resistance movement used it for secret meetings. And the glint of the gold cross had caught Elias' attention almost immediately. Little more than three inches in diameter, no one passing by would think anything of it. But then, unlike most casual observers, Elias had actually been looking for it. There were only eight people in Boston who knew what that cross symbol meant, and Elias was one of them.

Elias studied the man holding the satchel as subtly as he could, never looking directly at him. Their eyes did happen to meet at one point, though the man didn't seem to think much of it as he shifted his gaze to the passersby walking the street between them. Elias had never personally met him, but had been told his name was Paul. That was about all Elias knew of him.

Concluding he had found the man he was looking for, Elias peered up and down the street, wary that others might be watching them. The regulars were out in number that day, and spies as well as colonists loyal to the crown were everywhere. A horse drawn carriage clattered past, and a few citizens strolled by, but Elias spotted no one he would identify as suspicious. Satisfied no one was watching, he left his spot at the lamp post and started toward the tavern.

When Paul saw Elias approaching, he nonchalantly turned and walked through the tavern door. The interior of the Green Dragon was typical: a bar, several tables, decorations on the walls that leaned toward the masculine. It was similar in almost every aspect to Bess' inn, including a waft of pipe smoke and beer that hit Elias the moment he stepped inside.

Paul strolled over to an empty table in the corner and sat down. Elias scooted out the chair opposite, and joined him. They studied each other for several quiet seconds. Then Elias took out a small, leather bag, and plopped it down on the table. Paul picked it up and opened it just wide enough to peek inside. A cluster of white pearls lay within.

“This shall do nicely,” he said.

He pulled its string tight and slipped the bag into his satchel. Then he slid the satchel under his chair. He leaned forward on his elbows, his hands clasped together on the table in front of him. He had calm eyes. Friendly.

“It’s good to finally put a face to the name.”

“And you,” said Elias.

“I had heard a rumor you were dead,” Paul remarked.

“Not quite.”

“I have heard other things. That you were a soldier. And a scout. That you have fought for the king and for the colonists. And yet no one really knows who you are.”

Now it was Elias who leaned forward. “But you know what I can do.”

“And we are very grateful for all you have done.” Paul leaned in closer as well, speaking softly. “You fought at Fort Frontenac, did you not? And later at Ticonderoga. That would have made you what? Seventeen at the time? Sixteen?”

“Fifteen. And Ticonderoga was hardly a battle.”

“Still, you served with the king’s army.”

“As did everyone at the time.”

“I’m not questioning your loyalty. What I mean to say is... you were a ranger in the French and Indian War. It was there you learned your... considerable skills.”

Elias stared quietly, nodded once.

“I’m just a silversmith. I have a mind for planning, but there are certain things I cannot do. That most men cannot do. And then there are men like you.” He slid a folded piece of paper across the table. Elias picked it up and slipped it into his coat.

“More pearls?” Elias asked.

“Guineas.”

Elias started to get up, hesitated, stared broodingly back at Paul. “Are there others like me? In our little... circle.”

“None as good,” answered Paul, his gaze steady.

Elias stared thoughtfully a moment, then rose up and walked out.

#

Bess hurried up the stairs carrying a tray of eggs, bacon, milk, and a slice of bread spread with jam. As she neared the top of the steps, her face beamed at the prospect of seeing Elias. His wound had all but healed, and he was on his feet now for most of the day. That had made Nathaniel increasingly uncomfortable sending her up alone. She knew he suspected a relationship between them, but had no idea to what extent. He seemed to know whenever she was about to attempt to steal up to the bedroom, and meeting in secret anywhere else on the premises had become all but impossible under her father’s watchful eye. As a result, their romantic encounters became increasingly sporadic. Usually upon entering the bedroom, Bess found she had only enough time to drop off the tray and say a few words to Elias before her father would grow wary. So they would make the most of those brief moments. When she entered, she would never close the door all the way, as that would draw suspicion.

“Here you are, Elias,” she would say.

Then she would put the tray down on the dresser and immediately throw her arms around him. And he would wrap her up as well, sometimes lifting her up in his embrace. Their kisses, so intense, so powerful, sent her head buzzing every time. His hands would slide over her body,

groping, exploring, not wanting to let her go. She loved the feel of him as well. The solid frame of his back, the firmness of his chest, the strength in his shoulders.

She would always be the first to pull away, knowing they only had a few seconds. As she headed for the door, Elias would keep hold of her as long as he could, until the last possible moment, when her fingers slipped out of his. Sometimes, instead of releasing her, he would quickly pull her back, kiss her passionately while embracing her once more. She loved those moments, giving in to him for just a few more seconds she knew they did not have. Often, she would stifle a giggle, or swallow a particularly passionate sigh, just in case there were any snooping ears outside the door. Sometimes, when his hands would grip her tightly through her gown, Bess could barely refrain from groaning aloud.

Those urgent, desperate, bliss-filled seconds were all Bess could think about day in and day out. Everything else merely led up to those moments.

She had to be especially careful whenever leaving the room. The glow in her eyes and the smile on her face would reveal too much. On more than one occasion, after she had lingered too long, she saw her father standing at the foot of the staircase, glaring up at her. She would play it off, acting like it was him she was so happy to see, but his suspicion was obvious.

Bess had realized soon enough why her father had decided she would sleep in his room. It made it impossible to sneak away at night. She chanced it on occasion, but only when he was snoring loudly in his bed. Padding across the floor, she would quietly open the door. Then she would sneak up the staircase, cringing at every little creak, and slink into her room where Elias would be waiting. Even then it was risky to stay very long, allowing for just a few intimate moments intermingled with some frantically whispered words.

With so little time to be together, they decided to make a pact one evening to read passages from the Song of Solomon, and to imagine each other in the two main roles within the poem—Elias as Solomon, and Bess as the Shulamite woman. Bess had managed to sneak her mother's old bible to Elias, while she would read the family bible her father kept in his bedroom. It became a link between them, a way they could be together without having to be in the same room. When Bess had any free time at all, she would slip away into an isolated part of the inn and eagerly read what she could. She knew her father would not have approved, and most likely would have considered what she was doing abhorrent. Yet Bess found herself poring over the printed words on those pages. At times it was all she had of Elias.

*“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.”*

And Elias, still recovering, would lie in bed scouring those same passages, imagining it was the two of them together.

*“Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes.”*

A dove was a symbol of innocence and purity, revealing the woman he was speaking to was still a virgin. And in this Bess found great joy. She felt she related to the woman in the story in more ways than could be counted.

*“Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits.”*

Bess knew nothing of the winds of Jerusalem, or much about that region at all except for what she could glean from the Good Book, but she understood the meaning of the passage. How she wanted his sweet caresses, his gentle kisses, to rouse her passions.

*“How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights!”*

Elias recalled the feel of her body, the smell of her perfume, the softness of her hair. At times it was like she was there with him. He had only to close his eyes and think back to the intimate moments they had already shared, and to relive them over and over.

*“I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me.”*

Bess could imagine Elias cradling her head, his other hand at the small of her back, as he laid her down. How she longed to receive his touch again, to feel him in return. At times she didn't think she could bear being separated from him any longer.

*“The joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman. Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies”*

The curves of her body, the white of her skin. The red of her lips. Her raven hair. And those ebony eyes. Those glistening, endless pools. Elias' desire for Bess had transcended above love and lust and into a sensual vortex of emotions.

*“A bundle of myrrh is my well beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts. My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of Endgedi.”*

Often Bess felt flushed all over her body as she read, and she would suddenly be aware of how hot and sensitive her skin had become. In those moments, she knew just a mild touch of a hand on her thigh, or the brush of fingers over her neck, would have sent her shivering. Her very core would throb and her breathing fluctuate. Memories spilled through her head, every passionate moment she had experienced with Elias, and she couldn't help but fantasize about being with him again.

*“Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense.”*

The more Elias read the more the imagery spoke to him. The author’s use of metaphors to refer to the womanly contours of his lover’s body nearly sent him into a state of perpetual craving. Yet he also understood he was becoming captive to those feelings.

*“Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.”*

Before long, every time Bess opened the pages, she felt a swooshing in her stomach. Like butterflies, but more intense; it was a pervading, tingling sensation that swept down, pooling especially between her legs. And along with that wonderful tingling rose a heat that spread throughout her body, until even her ears were burning, and she could feel her cheeks blushing. It was torment. Exquisite torment. And at times she simply couldn’t take it. She had to find a way to be with him again.

And yet there was one passage she could not shake from her thoughts.

*“I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please.”*

Three times the poem repeated that verse. The more Elias read the passages, the more he realized the author was comparing marriage to guarding and tending a vineyard. It was clear from the poem that Solomon and his Shulamite lover had waited to give into their desires until they were husband and wife. Yet Elias understood love had already been awakened within him, that he had reached a point where he had to either run from those feelings, or wholly embrace them. There could be no middle ground.

*“I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please.”*

Her hands burdened with the tray of eggs, bacon, milk, and a slice of bread and jam, Bess knocked quickly before opening the bedroom door. Adhering to their usual routine, she didn't bother waiting for a reply. She knew Elias would be expecting her. Bess' heart leapt with the anticipation of joining him for just a few amorous seconds, but right as she stepped into the room, she stopped short.

The bed was empty and neatly made. His possessions were no longer there. The window hung open, the curtains blowing gently in a light breeze. Bess, standing frozen in place, could only stare in disbelief.

Elias was gone.

#

The clatter of carriage wheels, and the clapping of hooves, echoed down one of Boston's main streets. An impressive coach emerged from the gloom, drawn by two Cleveland Bays. As night fell, a light rain came with it, coating the exterior of the coach with beads of moisture. The overcast sky had thrown a dark veil over the city, making for difficult travel. Only the coach lamps at the sides of the driver's bench showed the way, though their radiance fell off significantly in the overcast night. However, their orange glow did fall over the faces of the two passengers inside, a man and a woman. They sat shoulder to shoulder, swaying upon their seat as the carriage shuddered over the rough street.

The man was Henry Lytton, known throughout Boston for his considerable real estate holdings. A powdered periwig of gray curls sat upon his head, the ends falling about his shoulders. A mulberry-colored coat, sporting deep cuffs and trimmed with gold embroidery, was

the centerpiece of his extravagant wardrobe. It was fastened with buttons and loops over a long waistcoat, both lined in pale blue. He wore a fine linen shirt underneath, with ruffles protruding from his neckline and at his wrists. His matching mulberry breeches fit to tailored perfection, while silk stockings rose up to his knees. His shoes were brightly polished, with large, showy buckles. In one hand he gripped a mahogany walking cane with a silver head.

His wife, Agatha, had barely spoken a word, her eyes staring out the window and into the dreary darkness. Henry's coat alone held more value than the average Bostonian earned in six months, yet Agatha's lavish ensemble put him to shame. Her blue gown was trimmed with metallic lace, woven with pleated robings of ruched fabric and striped ribbon rosettes, while its bell-shaped sleeves were accentuated with lace engageantes. She wore a high, elaborate wig of tight curls, while her face was heavily made up with powder and rouge. Fine jewelry adorned her fingers and her garments, glimmering as they caught the light of the coach lamps.

The monotony of their ride was shattered as they heard a loud *snap* just outside the window, and Agatha screamed as the coach lurched violently. She collapsed against Henry before being hurled back against the cushioned seat. Henry pitched forward before being thrown back as well. He threw his hands out against the ceiling and the side of the coach, bracing himself as the entire chassis tilted awkwardly.

The metal carriage axle scraped harshly over the cobblestones, throwing sparks. The driver of the coach struggled with the reins, attempting to keep the horses, as well as the coach, from careening off the street. As the coach ground to a stop, the driver breathed a sigh of relief.

Henry and Agatha sat in stunned silence. Henry finally snapped from his stupor to peer over at Agatha. She was breathing heavily, her bosom heaving, her eyes large with fright. Henry patted her leg.

“We lost a wheel. That’s all.” He leaned over in his seat and called out through the window. “How bad is it, Gerard?”

Gerard, the driver, was already hopping down to inspect the damage. From what he could see in the limited light, the outer rim of the wheel was still intact, but most of the spokes had broken away. Gerard reached out and snapped off a loose spoke, held it up toward the coach light for a better view.

“Master Lytton, the spokes look... sawed through. I’m afraid we’ll have to walk, sir.”

Agatha looked aghast. “Walk? Henry, my dress.”

A light thump sounded on the roof, and the whole carriage rocked slightly. Henry didn’t pay much attention to it, figuring the coach was merely shifting from an unstable position. But Gerard noticed. He peered up, his eyes bulging in alarm.

Henry paused, a queer look on his face. “Gerard, did you say sawed through? Gerard?” After a moment of silence, Henry called out again. “Gerard?”

Henry poked his head out the window, watched in dismay at the sight of Gerard running off into the night, coattails flapping, shoes clopping loudly, almost comically, over the cobblestones.

Elias slipped down from the roof on Agatha’s side, his feet touching down lightly upon the coach step. Shrouded in a dark cloak, his face was concealed under his mask and wide-brimmed hat. He brandished a flintlock pistol in his right hand. Agatha opened her mouth to scream, but stopped as Elias lifted a finger to his lips.

“He buggered off,” Henry puffed in dismay. Then he turned from the window to find himself staring down the barrel of Elias’ pistol. His mouth fell open.

Elias tossed a small bag into Henry's lap. "Place your valuables into that, if you would. And if you don't mind, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"How dare you," Agatha gasped.

"Do you know who I am?" snapped Henry.

Elias replied smoothly, "Yes, Henry. That's why I'm robbing you. And don't forget the purse of guineas you keep in your inside coat pocket."

Henry glared as he reached into his coat and brought out a small, jingling purse. He dropped it into the bag. Elias, noticing the gold chain of a pocket watch under Henry's coat, waved his pistol at it. Henry huffed and rolled his eyes. He unfastened the chain with a scowl and dropped the watch into the bag as well.

"Now her," said Elias, again motioning with his pistol. Agatha whimpered each time her husband slipped a jewel-encrusted ring from one of her fingers and plopped it into the bag. Still scowling, Henry thrust the bag into Elias' waiting hand.

"You'll hang for this," spat Henry.

"They'll have to catch me first," said Elias. His hand shot forward, snatched a beautiful necklace from around Agatha's neck. And then he was gone.

Agatha screamed.

Elias ran down the street, stuffing the necklace into his coat pocket. His cloak fanned out behind him as he raced by the large, shop windows, and under the hanging store signs. He was already two blocks away by the time Henry had climbed out of the coach and began yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Stop him! We've been robbed! Help! Someone help us! Night watch! Night watch!"

It was just a matter of seconds before two regulars ran out from a connecting street. Following Henry's shouts, they quickly noticed him flailing his arms and pointing frantically. They turned, caught sight of Elias's dark form fleeing through the shadows. Both soldiers brought up their muskets and tracked him. They fired almost simultaneously, the glowing sparks from their flintlocks leaping through the night air.

The shots pounded into the wall just behind Elias, one of them slicing through his cloak. A cloud of musket smoke engulfed the soldiers, obscuring their view as Elias turned sharply down an alley and toward the backstreets. By the time the smoke had cleared, Elias was nowhere to be seen. He had slipped away into the black of night.

The pitch black gave way to Brian's face, lit from underneath by his flashlight. Three men appeared right behind him, all of them wearing identical workman overalls. Hunched forward almost shoulder to shoulder, their names were Malcolm, Jack, and Enrique. Having worked for Brian for years, together they were a tight, professional crew that Brian considered more like brothers than colleagues.

Malcolm flipped on an LED lantern. It lit up the whole cellar, while throwing hard shadows over the floor and ceiling. He shuffled around Brian, held the lantern up to the foundation wall for a better look. Malcolm was about Brian's age, with dark hair and a van dyke beard. Brian had always thought Malcolm might have been considered a good-looking guy, if not for a heavily tattooed arm, several earrings, and a nose ring in one nostril. But when it came to inspecting the foundations of older buildings, Malcolm was the most knowledgeable person Brian knew. There was no one he trusted more on a renovation job.

"Yeah, right here," said Malcolm, running his hand over the shifted stonework. "This is what I was talking about. This wall looks like it's been rebuilt once before. We'll definitely need to buttress it before we do anything else."

Jack came over and crouched next to Malcolm. He was tall and lean, always a bit scruffy-looking. And he almost always wore the same, dirty ball cap. He studied the cracks in the wall as he added his own insight. “We’ll have to stabilize this entire structure. One little tap from the backhoe and the whole place could come crashing down.”

Enrique had stayed behind them. He was shorter than the others, stocky, with a pockmarked face and a slight paunch. His expertise was not in foundation work, but in flooring. As if to emphasize that point, he ran his flashlight over the ground at his feet, speaking with a slight Honduran accent.

“I’d go with a wood floor down here instead of concrete. It would be more practical. Trying to pour down here would be a bitch.”

Brian nodded in agreement. “It would keep its past look that way. Kelli will like that.”

“The more you keep things the same, the more genuine it will feel,” said Malcolm. “But man, Brian. Old places like this. No electricity, no plumbing. You sure you want to do this?”

Brian took in a breath through his nose, pressed his lips flat together while letting it out. “At this point we really don’t have a choice,” he said.

Enrique hugged himself in his arms and shivered. He peered around, his eyes darting uneasily to the darkest areas of the cellar. “This might be the coldest cellar I’ve ever been in.” He paused, crossed himself, then looked at the others. “I’ll be up top.”

Brian, Malcolm, and Jack could only watch, a little perplexed, as he turned from them and headed up the stairs.

#

Roaring and crashing, the yellow claw of the backhoe ripped into the ground next to the inn, bringing up a streaming pile of dirt. Brian and the others watched from a safe distance away

as Jack operated the machine, driving it forward and dumping its load onto an ever-growing heap. It was tricky work, which is why Brian had hired Jack to do it. His trained eye, his steady hand, his ability to wield the giant metal claw in the tightest of spaces, was invaluable.

The goal was to dig as close to the foundation wall without touching it. As Jack had already stated, the slightest miscalculation, the lightest touch or scrape against the stonework, could buckle the wall and send that entire side of the inn collapsing in on itself. It was tedious work, but had to be done. Not only did the foundation wall need to be reinforced, but a drainage system needed to be laid under the inn before any other repairs could take place. Installing plumbing into a structure built over a hundred years before the invention of the modern flush toilet was never an easy task.

The rumble of the backhoe reverberated throughout the inn—through the bedrooms, the tavern, the hallways, the cellar. The walls vibrated throughout, and dust shook loose from the ceiling in several spots. The whole inn itself seemed to protest, as a soft moan rose up just under the clamor of the backhoe. It was similar to what Kelli had heard on their prior visit, like the wind blowing through the cracks in the foundation.

The backhoe's engine whined and then sputtered. Jack backed it off right before the machine totally died. He clambered out, took his cap off, and wiped his brow with his sleeve. He stood with his hands on his hips, staring at the backhoe with a confused look on his face. He gave a sideways glance at Brian as he came walking over.

“Did the battery die?” asked Brian.

“Don't know. It's like the power just drained out of it. Never had one do that on me before. I won't be able to get another battery until tomorrow.”

“Not much else we can do then,” Brian said.

Brian had barely finished his sentence when a series of loud caws filled the air. He shielded his eyes as he peered up at the inn's roof. A huge flock of crows had gathered near the very top of one of the gables, fluttering, bobbing, carrying on. A mass of wriggling, dark shapes. The crows were riled for some reason, their caws turning into high-pitched shrieks. Everyone present winced as the uproar became almost painful.

Kelli could hear the eerie cawing as she strolled through the tavern. She stared up at the ceiling, intrigued, not sure what to make of it. She stepped slowly while listening, thinking eventually the commotion would ebb, but the crows just kept going at it. Kelli snorted quietly, then crossed her arms as a shiver ran through her whole body. A sense of uneasiness began to well up inside her. It was a sensation that she recognized. She had felt it before—on the day when she had visited the tavern alone.

The sudden flapping of wings caused Kelli to jump. She cried out and spun around, watching in astonishment as a big crow flew from the kitchen and out the open front door. Almost at once, the cawing on the roof stopped, replaced by an abrupt quiet. The change was so unsettling Kelli peered up, her eyes shifting back and forth as she listened for even a single caw. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Outside, Brian watched in amazement as the crows took off, a drum of swarming, flapping wings. They shot out over the moor and toward the horizon.

“What was that all about?” asked Malcolm. He had been standing and watching the spectacle from the courtyard, and had just come around.

At a loss for words, Brian shook his head.

A powerful silence had fallen over the tavern. Kelli could hear every little creak from the floorboards, every whisper in the wind, and the uneasy feeling by that time had swelled within

her gut. Her stomach dipped, forcing her to stop and take a breath just to calm her nerves. She started for the tavern door, but then paused as a soft laugh drifted up from the cellar.

It was a young boy's laugh. Kelli was sure of it.

Her head snapped around. She crept up to the bar, dropped her fingers down on the counter. She leaned forward and peered through the kitchen doorway. The trapdoor was open. Brian and his crew had been down in the cellar. Did they not bother to close it when they left? Perhaps one of them was still down there? Where was Enrique? She hadn't seen him in a while.

"Hello?" she called. "Is someone in the cellar?"

Kelli felt goosebumps over her skin. Her heart beat just a little faster even as she tried to ignore the dread welling within her. She hated the cellar. It was her least favorite place in the whole inn. She had already decided she wouldn't go back down there again unless she had to. But at that moment, she felt she didn't have a choice.

As she made her way around the bar, and forced herself to once again step foot into the kitchen, Kelli felt like she was floating outside of her body, as though watching what she was doing, but not entirely believing it. Her feet at the edge of the trapdoor, she stared down at the rickety steps descending into darkness.

It was a laugh. She was sure of it. A little boy's laugh.

She swallowed hard, took a step down, then another. One foot in front of the other. Then she hunched down, crawling sideways on her hands and feet as far as she dared. She stopped when she was almost swallowed up by the darkness. The dank air. The musty smell. The black shapes in the gloom. Everything about the cellar felt oppressive, like some unseen weight encompassing her, forcing itself down upon her.

They had since cleaned out the debris from the collapse, but there was still a hole in the ceiling. Even with a little light dribbling in from above, it was difficult to pierce the shadows. Kelli fumbled for a flashlight in the loop in her overalls, wriggled it free, and flipped it on. Its beam cut through the black, the little bit of extra light giving her some comfort. Sweeping it over the floor, Kelli's mouth fell open. In the beam of her flashlight, lying in the middle of the cellar, was a stuffed toy bear.

Kelli gasped out loud. She pushed herself up, hurried over, and snatched up the bear. It was a little ragged, a little worn, its marble eyes slightly scuffed. Her dread had vanished as she stared down at it, replaced with a deep anguish. Fighting back tears, Kelli hurried up the stairs.

Brian had gathered with Jack, Malcolm, and Enrique. They were discussing possible ways to proceed without the use of the backhoe when Brian spotted Kelli hurry out of the tavern. She walked briskly across the courtyard toward her car, and even from that distance he could tell something was wrong.

"Hang on, guys," he said, and then ran to catch up to her.

She had to have heard him coming, but didn't look back at him as she kept walking.

"Hey. What's wrong?" Brian asked, now a few feet behind her.

Kelli whirled around, clutching the stuffed bear in one hand. "Did you bring this here?"

Brian stared down at it, baffled. "What? No. What is that?"

Kelli's lips trembled, and Brian could see moisture in the corner of her eyes. She spun away and hopped into her car. The engine roared to life, and Brian could only watch in dismay as Kelli peeled away.

#

Kelli was bawling by the time she got home. After pulling into the drive, she plucked up the stuffed bear from the passenger seat and scrambled out of the car. Wiping tears from her eyes, Kelli rushed into the house and headed directly to Adam's old bedroom. It hadn't changed since his death, still decorated for a five-year-old boy. Kelli threw open the lid to a large, plastic toy chest sitting against the wall. She dug through it, spilling toys onto the floor in her haste, growing more and more frantic when she couldn't find what she was looking for.

She sat back on her heels, her hand to her forehead, distraught. Thinking for a moment, she shot up and walked quickly to the dining room. One of the pictures on the wall showed Adam with his favorite stuffed animal—a little stuffed bear. It was identical to the one Kelli was holding. She quickly dug out her phone and called Brian. He answered on the second ring.

“Kelli? You Okay?”

Her voice shook as she responded. “No. I'm not. Can you come over?”

“What's wrong?”

“Just come over. Please.”

A second of silence. “Okay. I'll leave now.”

“Thank you.”

It was getting dark by the time Brian made it to the house, and it didn't take long before they were in the middle of a heated conversation. He took a seat on the couch while Kelli paced anxiously over the living room floor.

“There's something strange about that place. I don't think we should go back there,” Kelli said. She was still upset, every word dripping with emotion.

Brian sat stunned. “Don't go back there? We don't have a choice. Fix it up or go broke. Remember? Those were your exact words.”

“I know. It’s just... how did it get down there? It wasn’t there before. Someone had to have recently put it there.” Kelli kept pacing as she spoke, barely looking at him. Finally, she stopped and stared right at him. “I know it’s his. I know it’s Adam’s.”

Brian scoffed. “That’s impossible.”

“I looked through Adam’s toy chest. His bear wasn’t in there.” Kelli held up the plush toy in her hand. “This is his. Someone took it out of there.”

Brian sucked in a breath, let it out as he stared off into space. He stood up, strolled over to the bay window, and peered out. He raised his hands to his hips as he slowly turned around to face her.

“I took it out of there,” he finally said.

Kelli stared, unblinking. “What?”

“I took it out of there and placed it on Adam’s marker the last time I visited his grave. I knew it was his favorite. But that’s where I left it. I swear.”

Kelli snorted in disbelief. She still hadn’t blinked. “At the inn you acted like you didn’t recognize it.”

“I didn’t at first. I didn’t get a good look at it. Not until I came here. And... it really does look like the one he used to have.”

Kelli finally blinked, but her stare became vacant. “Someone’s messing with us.”

“Oh, come on.”

“No. No, don’t you see? It all makes sense. Someone else must have discovered how valuable that place is. They’re trying to scare us off.”

Brian’s skeptical expression changed as he considered that explanation. It did actually make some sense.

“Tell you what. It’s been a long day. Let’s sleep on it. We’ll talk about it in the morning,” he suggested. “We’ll go from there. Figure this thing out.”

Kelli nodded. “Okay.”

As Brian drove home, his stomach turned. He felt almost sick. *How did* the bear get down there? It had to be a coincidence. Maybe it fell from the room above after the collapse? Yes, that had to be it. Except the stuffed toy was clearly factory made within the last few years. What would it be doing in an eighteenth-century inn?

He shook his head. It was impossible. *Impossible.*

The owner. They needed to talk to the owner. Maybe that would clear things up.

The blare of a horn tore Brian from his thoughts. His eyes shot up and stared right into the headlights of a semi bearing down on him. He rammed the steering wheel hard to the right, swerved out of the way. He went too far, overshot his own lane. His truck rumbled over the shoulder on the other side, one wheel sinking into the grass next to the road before he was able to straighten it out. He slowed to a stop and turned on his hazards.

Brian sat back, wiped his hands over his face. He was tired. No, exhausted. He just had to wait until morning, he told himself. Surely it would all make sense in the morning.

“I’m going crazy,” he muttered.

Brian turned off his hazards, shifted the truck into drive, and pulled back onto the road. When he got home, he sat down on the Green Monster and turned on the television. He absent-mindedly flipped through the channels, staring blankly. Before long he shut it off in frustration. Despite his fatigue, he felt restless and morose. He glanced over at the picture of Adam. Happy. Smiling. Brian sprung up and began digging through one of the boxes sitting in the corner. He finally came upon an old jewel case. He took out the DVD that was inside, and slipped it into the

player. It started up automatically as he collapsed back onto the Green Monster, grabbed the remote, and turned the TV back on.

A recording of Adam's birth popped up onto the screen. It showed Kelli in a hospital bed, perspiring, hair matted, utterly exhausted. The piercing cry of a newborn baby filled the room. Brian had filmed the whole event on his phone, and as he watched the shaky recording, he heard himself speaking just out of frame.

"Oh, he's beautiful, Kelli. Great job, honey. You did so good. He's so beautiful."

The view swished from Kelli's face over to the doctor cutting Adam's cord. Kelli was sobbing quietly as several nurses cleaned the squealing baby and handed him to her. She cradled him close, bouncing him gently.

Again, Brian heard his own voice. "I love you so much."

Brian couldn't take it anymore. The hand holding the remote shot up, and the television blinked off. His hand dropped down to his side, and he stared in silence for several long seconds. Something deep inside him spewed up. He could no longer hold it back. He could no longer keep it buried. Brian planted his face into his hands and started to weep.

#

"Dear. A young lady is here to see you," said Margaret. "She says she called ahead?"

Edward Thomas, an upper crust fellow in his eighties, sat in a wingback chair, peering at a collection of stamps on the desk in front of him. Margaret, gray hair, around his age, stood several yards behind him, waiting for a reply. Edward didn't bother looking back at her when he finally answered.

"Yes, Margaret. Thank you. Send her in, if you would."

Margaret walked out. Edward stood up slowly, with some difficulty, right before Kelli stepped into the room. Edward met her with a smile.

“Hello, Mrs. Davis. Nice to see you again. Please, have a seat.” He gestured to a pair of nice leather chairs that faced each other.

“Thank you,” Kelli said. She pointed back with her thumb in the direction Margaret had departed. “What a lovely woman. Is she your maid?”

“No, she’s my wife.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

They both sat down.

“That’s all right,” replied Edward. “I suppose I do treat her like the help sometimes.” He sat back with a grin, crossed his leg and clasped both hands over his knee. “Now, from your phone call I gathered you were curious about the inn. Is there a problem with the property?”

“Not at all. It’s lovely. I would just like to know a little more about its history. Specifically, do you know who owned it before you did?”

Edward thought back. “That land had been in my family for generations, dating back almost two hundred years. I have no idea who owned it before then.”

“I couldn’t find any records on the inn. I thought you might have some in your possession,” said Kelli.

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t think I do.”

Kelli pressed her lips together and slumped her shoulders. “I’m afraid I’ve wasted your time then. It’s just that…” She hesitated.

“Spit it out, dear. My prostate is the size of a grapefruit. I can’t sit here all day,” Mr. Thomas said with a chuckle.

Kelli tried but failed to stifle a laugh. “Have you ever heard of the name Alfred Wheeler?” she asked.

Edward tilted his head back and crinkled his lips together. He made a clicking noise with his tongue as he pondered. “No, I don’t believe I have.”

“I thought he might have been the previous owner. Or at the least, might be linked to the inn somehow.”

“Not that I know of. I’m sorry, I’m afraid I haven’t been much help at all.”

“That’s all right. It was a shot in the dark,” said Kelli. She looked down, thinking for a moment before peering back up. “Mr. Thomas, has anyone else asked about the property, or did anyone else know you were selling it for that matter?”

“No. No one. In fact, I don’t know if you know this, but you contacted me about the property the day before we were going to advertise it was on the market. That place had basically sat deserted for two hundred years. I have to admit I have always been a little curious how you knew I was going to sell it?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Kelli said sheepishly.

“Oh, you might be surprised at what I believe,” replied Edward.

Kelli straightened in her chair, shifted to a more comfortable position. She was still a little hesitant, but decided to give in. “I was driving. To where I don’t really know. My husband and I had separated, and I just needed some fresh air. I drove so far that day, and for some reason I turned down that white road. I can’t explain why. It’s like... something was just telling me to. I ended up at the inn and saw the realtor’s sign out front. I called you as soon as I got back home.”

Edward quietly regarded her. “Well how about that,” he said, smiling.

The next morning Brian drove out to the cemetery. It had been a rough night. He hadn't slept much. Troubling thoughts kept turning through his mind—to the point that he just had to see for himself if that bear was still there.

The weather was a bit overcast, a bit dreary, as he walked through the tombstones. Nestled in a corner spot across from one of the older lots, it always took a little searching to find Adam's grave.

As Brian came around the marker, his worst fears were realized. The spot where he knew he had placed the bear was empty. He crouched down, put his hand in the empty space where the bear once sat. The bouquet of flowers had remained in place, now wilted, with many of the petals fallen and scattered over the ground. The last time he had visited, Brian remembered saying the words, "I'm so sorry," and then he had taken the bear out of his jacket pocket and placed it at the front of the marker, right beside the flowers.

It had been sitting right there. And now it was gone.

A sharp *caw*, along with movement out of the corner of his eye, made Brian roll back on his heels. He realized he wasn't alone, his heart skipping a beat as his eyes focused on a large crow perched atop a nearby gravestone. It seemed to be staring right at him, its dark eyes flicking open and closed. Then it swiveled its head back and forth, opened its black beak to emit another piercing *caw*. Brian hadn't noticed the bird on his approach. Had it just swooped down? Had it been there all along? What the devil was it doing there?

Brian stared, awestruck, as the thing flitted and fluttered upon its perch before settling back down. It didn't seem at all concerned at his presence.

*Caw. Caw.*

*Caw. Caw.*

Bess shot straight up from her bed, surprised to see a crow perched upon her windowsill. Its feathers were black as night, glossy and sleek. It cawed once more, bobbed its head and flapped its wings. She had left her window open the night before, and it must have found its way into her room. Unnerved at the sight of the large bird, Bess got up, approached cautiously, and shooed it away. After it fluttered off, she quickly closed and latched the window. She watched the crow fly away through the panes of glass, until she lost sight of it. She had left the window open numerous times over the years, but that was certainly the first time anything like that had ever happened.

She soon put the crow out of her mind as she got ready for the day. She entered her usual routine, which, in the morning, meant helping her father open the inn. While cooking breakfast in the kitchen for their guests, Nathaniel noticed Bess was quieter than usual. She seemed distant, lost in her thoughts.

“No word from Elias?” he asked. He had always been good at reading her.

“No,” answered Bess. She was preparing a plate for one of their patrons, keeping her focus down on it instead of looking over at him.

“He’s gone for good then, I guess,” said Nathaniel.

Bess’ face drew even more sullen as her eyes remained down. She responded softly, solemnly, “It would appear so.”

“I’m glad to see he had a sense of propriety. I have to admire him for that.”

“Excuse me,” Bess replied tersely.

Nathaniel studied her as she walked out into the tavern carrying the plate. Bess could feel his eyes on her, but she could never tell him the truth. How could she ever admit to him that her heart was broken? That the one man she had ever truly loved was gone, and she wasn’t sure if he was ever coming back?

Bess worked through the rest of the day in a daze, the faces in the tavern just a blur. The hours seemed to pass excruciatingly slow, every second a labor, every minute a toll upon her heart. When night finally fell, Bess decided to light a candle in the window just in case. Doing so had always been a signal to Elias that she was waiting for him.

Bess settled down into her bed and stared out the window. The candle flame danced, reflecting in the panes of glass while throwing a soft glow over the room. But only the dark of the night lay beyond—except for the empty, white road on the horizon, and even it was barely visible. Bess rolled to her side, snuggling her head into her pillow as she closed her eyes.

#

Elias’ eyes snapped open. Rising up from the mound of hay he had been using as a bed, his whole body was tense as he struggled to see into the darkness. A noise had jarred him awake, perhaps the distant whinny of a horse? He couldn’t be sure.

While escaping through the night, he had come across an old country barn. Elias figured he could use it for shelter until morning, and the owners would never be the wiser. There was even an empty stall where he could keep his horse.

When he had fled the city, he was sure he had lost the night watch. It would be difficult to track him in the dark, although the light rain had turned the ground soft, and his horse was certain to have left a trail. Even though Elias had put countless miles between them, he was more than aware that if his pursuers had come across those prints, they might have been able to track him all the way to his current location. It would have been slow-going by lantern light, but certainly feasible if they were determined enough.

Another whinny. This time a little louder. Then came the flutter of a horse blowing air through its lips. Was it the same horse? The two sounds seemed to originate from different directions. The rain had stopped, and the cloud cover along with it, allowing soft moonlight to stream in through the cracks between the barn's wall boards. Elias scooted over to the wall closest to him, peered through one of the larger openings. Within his limited view, he saw only an empty field bathed in blue moonlight.

He perked up at the shuffle of footsteps, and his head whipped around as he homed in on them. He caught movement near the front entrance—to where a dark form, visible through the wall cracks, blotted out the moonlight as it passed. Elias drew a pistol from his belt, quietly cocked the hammer, and held it ready.

Elias steeled himself as the barn doors creaked open. A silhouetted figure crept inside, distinct against the nebulous blue of the night. Elias could just see the intruder clutching a leveled musket, its long barrel pivoting slowly back and forth. There was a bayonet at the end, a stark shape in the moonlight. Then Elias made out white pants. A red coat. A tricorne hat.

Elias fired before the intruder could spot him, smoke leaping up from his pistol. The soldier jerked, groaned, and stumbled back out through the doorway. Elias raced over, staying low as he threw himself against the doors. He dropped the brace over them as they slammed shut. He rolled to the side, just in time before two shots exploded through the wooden door, leaving jagged holes.

Elias spun down into a crouch, his eyes darting to the egress on the opposite end of the barn. Fortunately, it was already closed and barred. Elias flinched as the doors beside him clattered and shook, threatening to burst open. Elias pulled out his second pistol, turned and fired right through one of the holes. He heard a cry of pain, followed by shouts of alarm, and instantly the doors stopped shaking.

Elias peered around desperately, eyes straining in the gloom. Smoke hung in the air from his discharged pistols, making it hard to see anything. Through the haze, his gaze fell on a small, two-wheeled hay wagon, little more than a black shape in the darkness. He leapt up, ran toward it. As he did, three more shots rang out. He heard the musket balls buzz behind him, one of them missing by inches.

Elias skidded to a stop, the soles of his boots sliding over the hay-strewn ground. He lifted the thill, braced his shoulder against the wagon. Teeth gritted, feet digging for traction, he pushed with all his might. Wobbling and rattling, the wagon moved sluggishly toward the entrance. Slowly gathering momentum, Elias ducked his head as several more shots burst through the doors. The bullets pounded into the front of the wagon, splintering the wood. Elias kept pushing until he felt the wagon ram hard against both doors, effectively barricading them.

The gunshots ceased, and a silence fell over the barn. Elias backed away, staying low. He cocked an ear, listening for any noise at all. He heard only his horse fidgeting in its stall. Irritated by the gunshots, it snorted as it wagged its head.

A flurry of commotion sprang up from all around. The stomp of feet, the rustle of clothing, the jostling of military gear. A multitude of shadows moved against the moonlight, again visible through the cracks in the walls. Elias whirled around, trying to keep track of it all.

He couldn't see it, but a whole detail of regulars was running onto the field, taking positions around the barn. They were led by Captain D`abo. He sat in his saddle, giving silent arm motions to his men. He paused only when Lieutenant Tobias rode up next to him.

“Is it him?” asked D`abo.

“We believe so, sir,” replied Tobias.

D`abo nodded, a pleased gleam in his eyes.

Inside the barn, Elias huddled at one of the larger wall cracks, and peered through. He could see a group of redcoats lining up in the field. They were also using hand signals, moving as quietly as possible. They all took a knee and raised their muskets in unison.

Elias' eyes widened. He dove to the floor right before a volley of gunshots shattered the night, tearing through the wall where he had just been crouched. He heard the balls zipping over him, pounding into the barn's interior. The stalls, the framework, the support beams. Splintering gashes and holes and ruptures appeared in all of them. His horse bucked up and down, becoming frantic as several of the shots struck around it.

The barrage finally lulled as the redcoats outside were forced to reload. Shouts rose up, clear and resonate in the quiet of the night. Elias could hear them running by just outside, their boots thumping over the ground. He leapt up and ran over to his horse. Grabbing the reins, he

had just slipped one foot in a stirrup when he heard pounding on both the front and rear doors. Fortunately, the braces held, but he knew they would give way in a matter of moments.

D`abo appeared confident as he watched his men attempt to break down the doors. The wood was weakening, already buckling near the middle. He leaned over in the saddle to speak with Tobias.

“There’s no way out of there. It’s just a matter of time now.”

“If he’s not dead already,” replied Tobias.

A single gunshot echoed in the night, and one of the regulars at the door cried out and staggered back, then crumpled to the soggy ground. Most of the other soldiers at the door fearfully backed away, while a few stood their ground and fired back through the door.

“Apparently there’s still some fight in him,” Tobias muttered.

D`abo scowled. “Fine. If that’s the way he wants it.” His eyes searched the moonlit field until he spotted the man he was looking for. “Sergeant Durning!” he shouted.

The sergeant heard him, turned in his direction. D`abo gave him a series of hand gestures. The sergeant nodded that he understood.

“Hold!” shouted Durning.

Elias, crouched next to the stall, was reloading his pistol when he heard the command. He paused, listened intently. He detected movement en masse, as if every redcoat was pulling away from the barn. Then all was quiet once again. Elias’ eyes shifted back and forth, and he waited, wondering what it could mean.

And then the realization struck him.

Elias whirled around to his horse, grabbed its reins. It neighed in protest as he forced it down to its knees.

Outside, the soldiers had backed away and completely encircled the barn. They knelt on one knee and raised their muskets, barrels and bayonets gleaming in the moonlight. Sergeant Durning looked over at D`abo, who nodded his head.

“Fire!” bellowed the sergeant.

The crack of muskets filled the air, the combined blasts more deafening than thunder. Gunshots poured into the barn as Elias wrestled his horse to the floor and flung himself down across its neck. He covered his head in his arms as bedlam erupted all around him. Holes shattered open in the barn walls. The wooden posts, the beams, the fencing, all splintered and fractured and broke apart under the barrage. Tempests of debris, hay and dust flung up into the air. Elias could hear the musket balls whizzing, buzzing, streaking over him. Pounding into the structures around him, destroying everything in their wake. Furious. Relentless.

The gunshots diminished, then stopped altogether. And, again, an eerie silence fell over the field. Elias dared to look up, saw moonlight pouring in through the walls that were now riddled with holes. The entire barn groaned as if in great pain, and Elias worried if the whole thing might come crashing down.

The redcoats lowered their muskets to observe the destruction they had wrought. A cloud of white smoke hung over the field like a fog, but even that couldn't obscure the damage they had inflicted.

Lieutenant Tobias gave a half-cocked grin. “I wager that took the fight out of him.”

D`abo smirked. Then he motioned for the men to close in. Sergeant Durning nodded and flicked his hand forward. The soldiers, most of them in the process of reloading, started toward the barn. The majority of them headed for the rear or the front, knowing that Elias, if he attempted to flee, would have to use one of those exit points.

Elias clambered up, allowing his horse to rise as well. The beast whinnied, snorted, angrily bucked its head. Keeping hold of the reins, Elias reached down, drew a blunderbuss from a leather holster on the side of his saddle. It was a vicious-looking thing, with a robust stock and a stout, flared muzzle.

Gunshots ripped through the middle of the barn doors on either side. And Elias realized the redcoats were attempting to shoot the braces that were holding them closed. The brace across the front entry splintered, ruptured, then burst apart. The doors shoved in, scooting the hay wagon, almost knocking it over.

Two regulars ran around the south side of the barn to join the larger group at the front. By the shouts of their comrades, it was clear they were about to gain entry, and they wanted to be there when it happened. They were about halfway to the other end when a melon-sized hole exploded through the wall next to them. Peppered with shrapnel, both men cried out and whirled away from the blast. A second later, the weakened area in the wall burst apart as Elias came crashing through.

He rode atop his horse, the smoking blunderbuss still clutched in one hand. Already dazed, the soldiers were thrown off their feet as the powerful stallion barreled between them. Both men were flung hard to the earth. One of them accidentally discharged his weapon into the air as he was struck. The other man fell prone in the mud, his musket tumbling from of his grasp. His face and hands were nicked and bleeding from shrapnel cuts as he clambered and clawed for his fallen weapon. He managed to grab hold of it, then struggled up to one knee.

Elias was already riding into a wooded area bordering the field, but he was still in range. The soldier lifted his musket, tracking Elias through the smoke and the dark, and then pulled the

trigger. The hammer of the flintlock snapped forward, igniting the powder in the pan. The musket jerked against his shoulder as smoke belched from the bore of the gun.

The shot smacked into the stout trunk of an oak. Elias heard the shot, but never knew how close it had come to hitting him as he took a slicing path through the trees. Then he heard more muskets firing. One shot after another. Then three more almost in unison. Several of the redcoats had heard the commotion, and had rushed around to investigate. They quickly spotted Elias riding off, but they were further away, and firing from poor angles. Elias heard the balls buzzing past him, hitting the trees around him, but not one came within five feet of him.

By that time both braces had already given way, and a mass of redcoats had stormed into the barn. Finding it empty, they were now pouring out of the front and rear entrances, and even through the jagged opening Elias had made. Though he was now out of their range, and well into cover, many of them kept firing blindly, some of them kneeling, others remaining standing. They shredded the wilderness with one last, frantic fusillade. But at that point it was futile. Elias had already disappeared into the night.

Captain D`abo rode up, emerging through the cloud of choking musket smoke that was now roiling around them. His eyes scanned the tree line even as his lips twisted into a snarl. D`abo's horse seemed to share his frustration, bobbing its head up and down, stomping its hooves irritably.

Thunder rolled in the distance. It was going to rain again. D`abo could feel it in the wind and smell it in the air. That was the last thing they needed if they were to form any sort of pursuit. Very few of his men had horses, leaving D`abo with half a mind to leave Lieutenant Tobias in charge and ride after the highwayman by himself. He'd be damned if he was going to

let another storm help that man get away again. It seemed even nature was on Elias' side. Or perhaps, by the way things had turned out, even the blessing of the Almighty.

The snapping of wood, followed by a hideous creak, rose up behind D`abo. He spun in his saddle to see the barn falling in on itself. The terrified cries of several of his men, still inside, were drowned out as the whole structure crashed down over them.

D`abo's horse skirted away from the calamity, its eyes bulging. Then it rose up and whinnied, front legs kicking, nearly throwing D`abo from the saddle. It came back down, turned completely around, before he got it under control.

Looking back at the collapsed barn, his snarl turned into a gape of disbelief. The men not buried under the collapse were already running up and frantically digging through the rubble.

Captain D`abo yanked on his reins, turning his horse back toward the tree line. The highwayman was out there somewhere, but there would be no chasing him. Not that night. Just caring for the wounded would take them well into morning. D`abo closed his eyes and hung his head. Finally staring back up into the dark wilderness before him, it was all he could do to keep from bellowing in rage. Once again the highwayman had slipped through his fingers. Once again he had escaped.

#

The rain beat a gentle rhythm over Bess' window. She slept fitfully, with soft, worried moans floating from her lips. She was dreaming, perhaps even having a nightmare.

Amid the rain's soothing rhythm came an occasional, light *thump*. The recurring sound eventually stirred Bess from her slumber. She sat up, stared over at the casement. She saw nothing out of the ordinary, and at first wasn't sure what had awakened her. She did notice that the candle had burned low, almost to a stub. The wax had filled the bottom of the holder and was

starting to dribble out onto the sill. She climbed out of bed with sleepy eyes, stepped over to the candle to blow it out. She had just bent forward at the waist, lowered her head and puckered her lips, when a pebble hit the window. *Thump*. Bess recoiled with a gasp.

She froze, blinked once. She clawed at the latch, managed to unlock it, swung open the casement and peered out into the night. Elias sat on his horse in the courtyard below. He was staring up at her, the rain pouring over the rim of his hat. A huge smile formed on Bess' lips. She blew out the candle and closed the window. A few moments later, she stepped out the front door in her bare feet, with only a robe over her nightgown. She walked right up to Elias, rainwater soaking her hair and dripping from the tip of her nose.

He held out his hand. She took it, letting Elias pull her to him. She climbed up behind him in the saddle, and together they rode off down the white road.

The white road looped the moor, stretching off to the horizon. Kelli lifted a hand to her brow as she looked out over it. She had been keeping an eye out, hoping Brian's truck would appear over the hill in the distance. The other crew members had been there since early morning, and were already hard at work. But Brian had yet to show up. It just wasn't like him.

Malcolm walked into the courtyard to get some tools out of his work truck. He noticed Kelli standing with her back to him, looking out across the moor.

"Looking for Brian?" he called to her.

She turned back to meet his gaze. "Yeah. Do you know where he is?"

"He called me earlier. Said he was sick. Wouldn't be coming today. Sorry, I just assumed he had told you."

"No. No he didn't," said Kelli.

They were scheduled to install a drainage system in the cellar. Malcolm, Jack, and Enrique had already started working on it, so Kelli decided to leave them to it. That wasn't her area of expertise anyway.

She drove out to Brian's apartment, but when she arrived and knocked on his door, there was no reply. When she tried calling, he wouldn't answer. She could see his truck parked at the curb, but he just didn't seem to be home.

She called again later that evening, just after dinner. He still didn't answer, the call going to his voicemail. She paced back and forth in her living room as she left a message.

"Brian, this is Kelli again. Please answer your phone. Or if you don't want to call me then at least call someone. I'm getting really worried. Everyone is." She had already left several voicemails, but this time her tone was bordering on panic.

She had just ended the call when there was a knock at her door. She strode over, opened it up. Brian stood on the porch, disheveled, wobbly, bleary-eyed. His vision foggy, he found it hard to focus.

"Hey."

Kelli crinkled her nose. "Are you drunk?"

Brian had to think about it. "Little bit."

Kelli looked him up and down. "A little bit. You can barely stand."

She grabbed his arm and helped him inside.

"It would be easier to stand if the room would stop spinning." Brian's words were halting and slurred, his steps unsteady. As his breath hit her, Kelli grimaced and turned her head away.

"Gah. You stink."

Brian held up his index finger. "That's not me, that's the booze."

"Wait. Did you drive here?" Kelli asked in alarm.

"I took a cab."

Sighing in relief, she helped him over to the couch. He collapsed onto it with a loud groan. She stared down at him in bewilderment.

“Why are you here?”

“You left, like, a hundred messages on my phone. I thought you might be in... a mood.”

“It was more like ten messages. And I was just worried.”

“Really?” Brian sounded surprised. “I would have called you back, but I didn’t have my phone on me at the time.”

“What were you doing?”

“I was... indisposed.”

“You mean passed out?”

“No. Mostly throwing up. And passed out.”

“So, you weren’t sick today. You were just drunk.”

“Actually, I was hungover. I didn’t get drunk again until about an hour ago. And I was throwing up all night and into the morning. That counts as being sick.”

Kelli’s face scrunched up. “What’s wrong with you?”

He chuckled. “I know right? Usually you’re the one who does this.”

“Screw you then.” She pointed toward the door. “You can leave whenever you want.”

Brian held up his hands. “I’m sorry. Not trying to mellow your harsh.” He tilted his head, his expression cockeyed, as he realized he didn’t say it right.

“Mellow... mell-ooow.” He over pronounced his words, making exaggerated movements with his mouth. “Mellooow your harsshhh. Mell-... No. Harsh your mell-ow.”

“Seriously, what’s wrong with you?”

He stared up at her through a drunken haze. “Why do you keep asking me that?”

Kelli threw her arms out at her sides as she shouted, “Because there’s something seriously wrong with you!”

Brian reflected quietly for several moments. His voice turned serious when he finally spoke again. “Last night I watched the recording of Adam’s birth. It... affected me.”

Kelli’s face softened. “Oh. Well I’ll say it did.”

Brian gave her a sideways glance. “Went out to his grave. Flowers were still there. His bear wasn’t.”

“So it was his. Someone must have taken it.”

Brian replied with a shrug and a sigh. “I don’t know what to think.” Then he half slid, half collapsed onto his side. His cheek was smashed into the cushion, squishing his lips up into a funny-looking pout. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“There’s something going on here that we’re not seeing,” Kelli replied. Her eyes became unfocused as the wheels in her head started turning.

Brian stared blankly. “So what are we going to do about it?”

Kelli crossed her arms as she turned away from him. She took a few steps toward the bay window before staring through it. “I guess there’s not much we can do. Not at the moment. We’ll just keep at it. See what happens.”

“Your couch is more comfortable than mine,” remarked Brian. It was clear, at that point, that he was no longer absorbing anything she was saying.

“That’s a shock,” Kelli quipped, as images of the Green Monster flashed up in her mind. When Brian didn’t respond, she turned around. His eyes were closed and he wasn’t moving. It appeared as though he had passed out. Kelli huffed, frowned, started to leave the room.

“Kelli. I miss you.”

She stopped and looked back. He was all but asleep, his eyes still closed.

“I miss you, too,” she said. Kelli walked to the hall closet and took out a blanket, then came back and laid it over him. Brian was softly snoring by the time she turned out the light and walked out of the room.

#

Brian slept soundly, his snores filling the house—the result of sleep deprivation and too much alcohol. He was dreaming, and in his dream, he saw Adam walking along the edge of a lake. Brian was following right behind him, a fishing pole in his hand. He knew he was carrying a fishing pole because he could see the rod protruding out in front of him, a lure dangling at the end. Adam said something about catching fish. Or maybe he asked how many fish were in the lake? Brian couldn't hear him clearly enough to be sure. It was one of those dreams where they were in a place they had visited before, but everything that was happening was a little different than when they were actually there.

Adam crouched down and dipped a finger in the water. “Daddy. Look!”

Brian peered into the lake. A school of huge goldfish were swarming in the shallows, all but wriggling over each other, their mouths opening and closing in eerie silence. From somewhere in his subconscious, Brian knew it was a scene from another place they had visited, that in his dream two events had merged into one.

It was at that moment Brian realized Adam was missing. He looked up and down the lakeshore, a wide-open expanse that stretched for miles. Adam was nowhere to be seen. It was impossible, given the terrain, that he could be gone, yet he had simply vanished.

“Adam? Adam, where are you!”

Brian felt panic welling up inside him. *Not again*, he thought to himself. Then it dawned on him that Adam couldn't be there. Adam was no longer alive.

There was a large crow hopping in the sand nearby. It took off and flew out over the water, soon disappearing from sight.

“Wait!” Brian heard himself yell.

But then he was in the living room, lying on the couch. He happened to peer over to the recliner against the wall. Adam sat in it, perched forward, his hands on the chair arms. He was smiling.

In a blink, Adam's face was right in front of him. Again smiling. Happy. The backdrop behind him was bright, brilliant even. Glowing white. Once again Brian could hear Adam speaking even though his mouth didn't move.

“Have you seen her?”

Brian opened his eyes. He was still lying on the couch, though Adam was no longer in front of him. Morning sunlight shone through the bay window, reminiscent of the brilliant background from his dream.

He stared over at the recliner next to the coach. Adam's stuffed bear sat on the cushion right where Kelli had left it, its little marble eyes staring straight ahead.

#

The cellar floor had been a mess the last time Brian saw it. Decayed wood. Patches of soil. While he was gone, the others had laid down a layer of peastone and installed a perforated drainpipe. Above that, they had placed a polyethylene vapor retarder membrane to block buildup of excessive humidity, as well as to funnel away any water seeping through the walls.

After inspecting their work, Brian was more than pleased. “I need to take the day off more often,” he said to them jokingly.

Yet the most difficult part of the renovation lay ahead. As time had passed, the settling foundation, decaying support columns, broken joints, cracked timbers, and even poor framing, had allowed the inn to shift under its own weight. Brian and his crew had to secure the sill beams and make the floors level. Two more weeks. More precious time consumed. More of the budget drained. And even after doing that, the roof still sagged, and some of the walls leaned crooked.

From his very first glance at the inn, Brian had known they would probably have to jack up the roof in order to straighten the entire structure, but since that was a task that would take weeks to do right, he was hoping they could somehow avoid it. Unfortunately, there was no getting around it. They would have to deal with the problem before they could do anything else. It took another two weeks of preparation before they could even attempt such a huge undertaking: bracing the walls, reinforcing the rafters, and then adding plywood gussets. Despite lower than usual pay, the crew was motivated by friendship, making the jobs that required a team effort a lot easier than they might have been otherwise. And eventually, through grueling work and sheer determination, they completed their goal. Using come-along winches, while simultaneously lifting the ridge beam, they managed to pull the whole building together so that it stood straight once again.

But it meant more precious time consumed. And more of the budget drained.

Despite such a rigorous undertaking, the whole crew grew closer together with each passing day. At one point they were all sitting outside, eating lunch, when Jack emerged from the inn with a noticeable limp. His hand clamped to the back of his hip, he was groaning, teeth gritted, as he stepped gingerly over to Brian.

“What happened?” asked Brian, clearly concerned.

“I think something’s wrong,” said Jack, grimacing as he spoke.

“What?”

“It’s my butt,” said Jack. He spun around, dropped his pants, and mooned Brian at close range. “I think it’s got a crack in it!”

“Oh, come on! I’m eating!” shouted Brian. He could hear Malcolm and Enrique laughing behind him. Kelli, sitting off from everyone else, just rolled her eyes. But even she couldn’t help but grin.

The next phase of the renovation required scaffolding to be erected around the inn. This allowed them to remove all the windows, and to cover the openings with plastic sheeting. Once that was done, they hung long, polyethylene chutes that draped down from several of the openings and into huge, metal trash receptacles on the ground below.

More precious time consumed. More of the budget drained.

Malcolm, Jack, and Enrique worked to replace the shingles on the roof, while Brian and Kelli toiled within the innards of the old place. Wearing protective glasses, dust masks, and their white overalls, they ripped the old plaster away from the walls using prybars. Then they tossed the fallen fragments into the debris chutes. During that time, Brian and Kelli interacted with each other more than they had since Adam’s death. They were often forced together into cramped spaces, sharing eye contact, accidentally bumping hips, unintentionally touching arms. Through it all, they found they could actually talk to each other without arguing. And being that close to one another brought back old feelings they had almost forgotten.

Two months into the renovation, the inn sat in an awkward state of mid-repair, as did their relationship. At times it felt like there had barely been a problem between them at all, but

then one or both of them would see how comfortable they were becoming with each other, and would subconsciously pull back without realizing it.

Joining in on a particularly stubborn area, they found themselves very near to each other as the plaster fell to the floor, shattering into pieces on impact. Both a bit winded, they pulled down their masks to catch their breath. Brian groaned and rotated his sore shoulders. They had been going at it all day, and the work had taken its toll. He stretched his neck, letting his arms hang limp at his sides.

“Yeah, I feel it, too,” said Kelli.

Brian smiled, nodded. “If this flip doesn’t pan out, I need to find a job that requires eating, sleeping, and watching Netflix all day,” he said jokingly.

Kelli snorted in amusement, a grin forming on her lips. Brian peered over at her.

“I’m serious. I would be the best employee they ever had. My bosses would be like, “Man, that guy’s really dedicated.”

Kelli laughed. It was a pleasant sound, and Brian couldn’t remember the last time he had heard it. As their eyes locked, Brian found himself admiring her. She’d always had a great face. Good cheekbones, a small but distinctive chin, nice lips. Her eyes were a sharp hue of blue so pale and vivid it was easy to become lost in them, and they were a perfect complement to her blonde hair. After dealing with so much plaster, their gloves were covered in chalky grime. Brian wiped a finger down the bridge of Kelli’s nose, leaving a thick, gray mark. He chuckled and went back to work.

Kelli froze, surprised at his playful behavior. Then she smirked and wiped the grime away with her sleeve. She watched as Brian strained to pry free a stubborn patch of plaster, his hands clutched around the pry bar, his shoulders and lats almost jumping through his t-shirt. And

oh, those forearms, the muscles rippling just under his skin with every little movement. His biceps popped as he slowly made progress, and his triceps bulged as he shifted position and pushed down. Kelli realized she was staring at him.

Staring.

Kelli couldn't help but think back to all the times her fingers had caressed those arms in the dark. She knew their every contour by touch alone. In that moment, she wanted nothing more than to feel them again. And then she realized, much to her astonishment, that she wanted to do a lot more than that.

As the segment Brian was working on finally came crashing to the floor, Kelli turned back to the wall so he couldn't see her staring. He was breathing heavily as he looked over at her, wondering why she had stopped.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She shook her head and gave him a coy grin. "Nothing."

Sensing she was hiding something, Brian observed her as she crouched down to pick up her supplies. In that position, Kelli's usually loose overalls tightened around her, flattering her figure, and Brian couldn't help but watch her. As they continued their work, he kept glancing at her, finding it difficult to look away.

Even through the overalls, it was clear she had kept up with her regimen of aerobics and yoga. Kelli had loved exercise even before they were married, but after they had tied the knot, she had adhered to a remarkably strict routine. Brian would learn later that exercise was how she managed stress, which explained why, given the loss of their son, and the state of their marriage, she had kept to her program with almost fanatical devotion.

Brian recalled one past moment in particular. They hadn't been married for very long, and had decided to go on a picnic in a picturesque meadow. He remembered admiring Kelli's form as she ran ahead of him. At one point she peered back over her shoulder as she ran, her pretty, smiling face haloed by rays of sunlight.

Brian shook his head, trying to push that memory out of his mind. A sort of melancholy overwhelmed him as he realized he might never be able to experience another moment like that with her again. He felt a little beside himself as he stared down at the floor and blew a puff of air through his lips. It was just so hot he couldn't think straight. *She* was so hot he couldn't think straight. The pry bar slipped from his fingers and landed with a clang. Kelli stopped what she was doing, peered over to see him walking down the hallway. Brian grabbed a bottle of water out of an ice cooler they had brought up with them. He chugged about three fourths of it before pouring the rest of it over his face and hair. He looked over, caught her gaze.

"I think I need a break," he said.

Kelli agreed, and they decided to stop for lunch. They usually ate outside when the weather was nice. During the first couple of months into the renovation, they had rarely sat close to one other. Brian would usually eat in the back of his truck. Kelli would sit under the shade of a huge sycamore just off the courtyard, and eat while reading a book.

But that day was different. It started in a similar way, Brian lowering the tailgate of his truck and plopping down on it, Kelli strolling off to sit under her tree. It was unusually hot for that time of year, but a breeze made the heat tolerable. Brian watched the guys on the roof with envy. Replacing shingles was one of his least favorite parts of renovating, but on that day he would've much rather been working out in the open air than in the sweltering confines of the inn. Brian could hear them shouting to one another from one end of the roof to the other. And the

constant *pop* of the nail gun filled the air as they laid down new shingles. Every few minutes or so, one of the guys would hurl an armful of the removed shingles over the side. The old, crumbling things would tumble down and land in a messy pile over the ground.

As Brian lowered his lunch pail into his lap, he happened to catch Kelli out of the corner of his eye. He observed with amusement as she took out a blanket from a large, colorful tote she had brought with her. She spread the blanket down over the grass with such meticulous detail it bordered on obsessive-compulsive behavior. Smoothing out every wrinkle. Making sure every corner lay perfectly flat. When she was finally satisfied, she sat cross-legged on it and dug through her bag. She was very particular as she took out several items, placing them around her in just the right spot: a sandwich in plastic, a bag of chips, a bottle of IZZE sparkling juice, a small Tupperware dish of potato salad, then a napkin and a fork. Brian chuckled, shook his head. Yet his grin transformed into a quizzical smirk when he saw her slip on a pair of white gloves. She took out the Wheeler novel bundled in cloth, carefully unwrapped it, and began to read.

Kelli peered over the top of the book as Brian approached. He was holding his lunch pail down at his side, gently swinging it as he walked, his other hand shoved into his pocket. Kelli looked surprised when he sat next to her on the blanket. He was grinning, staring. Still holding up the book, still sitting cross-legged, she kept his stare.

“What?”

“So let me get this straight. You put on protective gloves so you won’t damage the book, but then you decide to eat while reading it. So... anything you get on the gloves will be transferred to the book.”

“I’m being careful.”

“Maybe you should eat first, then read?”

“Don’t have time. It’s called multitasking. You should try it.” She brought up her sandwich, took a big bite as if to emphasize her point.

Brian gave her a crooked grin. “Is it any good?”

“The book or the sandwich?” Kelli asked with her mouth full, being purposefully obnoxious.

“The book.”

She swallowed. “It’s very romantic. In the chapter I just read, the main character fears he might do more harm than good if he stays with the woman he loves, so he leaves. Which of course devastates her. But then he decides he can’t be without her and comes back for her. They ride off together in the rain.”

Brian snorted and shook his head. “See. Only in storybooks is that romantic. In real life, no one would ever do that. At least not without an umbrella.”

She took another bite. “Killjoy.”

“Am I wrong, though? It’s the same thing with movies. People run out into the rain, all dramatic, and get into a lover’s quarrel. And not once do they ever say, hey, let’s go inside to talk this out. Seriously. The front door’s right over there. Maybe we shouldn’t be standing out here in the pouring rain to hash out our feelings. One of us might just die of pneumonia during the night and that would be even more tragic than the argument we’re having now.”

Kelli was still staring at him, chewing. “Because that’s not dull at all, right?”

Brian leaned back against the tree, flipped up his hands. “I’m just a realist.”

She grinned before nodding down at his lunch pail. “So what did you bring?”

Brian pursed his lips. “Let’s find out.” He opened his lunch pail, took out a sandwich encased in a Ziploc bag. He held it up, eyes squinted as he turned it over in his hands. “Damn it! Peanut butter and jelly *again!*”

Kelli laughed. Brian had never been good at preparing meals. About all he could manage was the simplest of sandwiches. At least he had a sense of humor about it.

“Here. Try this.” She handed him the sandwich half she was holding. He took a bite out of it, and immediately his eyes lit up. He stared down at the sandwich in awe.

“Holy crap.”

She smiled, resting her cheek against her hand. “It’s just deli turkey with a little tomato, lettuce, and Dijon. But I also added some pesto. That’s what really makes it pop. I’ll make one for you tomorrow if you want.”

“Could you? Seriously.”

She nodded, still smiling. “Sure.”

“I mean it. Don’t screw with me on this. If you show up tomorrow empty-handed, I’m going to throw a tantrum like a three-year-old. And really who wants to see that?”

She laughed again, enjoying their back and forth. In that moment, as their eyes met, she could see there was definitely a renewed spark between them. And her heart leapt. Brian felt it, too. A sort of energy. An unspoken, exhilarating connection he hadn’t felt in a very long time.

Kelli grew quiet for several seconds, her eyes staring off. A small grin crept across her face. “Remember that flip downtown?” she asked wistfully.

“You mean the loft?”

“Yeah. When that light fixture shattered above me? You grabbed me and held me. Covered my head in your arms. Let the pieces fall on you instead of me. You didn’t think. You just acted.”

Brian’s face softened. “I remember.”

“You did the same thing in the basement. When the ceiling collapsed. And for one brief moment... I felt like I used to. Before the accident.”

Brian shifted awkwardly. In that instant he realized his own actions had exposed his true feelings. Despite his morose behavior, or his refusal to confront the problems between them, when it came down to it, he would still do all he could to protect her. Reading his body language, Kelli could see he felt vulnerable.

“Well, like you said. I just acted on impulse. Right?” he finally replied.

“Yeah. I guess so,” responded Kelli. She didn’t press it further, letting him off the hook.

Brian returned his focus to the inn. “Yeah. Well. Better get back to it. The plaster isn’t going to pry itself off the walls.” He groaned as he rose to his feet.

“You haven’t even eaten your lunch yet,” said Kelli. Though in truth she didn’t care about that. She just wanted him to stay a little longer.

Brian looked back at her as he was walking away. “I’ll eat it while I work. It’s called multitasking.”

Kelli chuckled, her eyes sparkling. As she watched him walk back to the inn, a wave of joy swept over her. She was actually happy. She couldn’t remember the last time she had felt that way. Kelli finished eating, then wrapped up the book and put it back in her tote. It may have been hot, but it was such a bright, cheery day, that she decided to take a stroll to the cliffs behind the inn before heading back inside. She stopped near the edge and looked out over the blue-gray

ocean stretching off to the horizon. The wind was more powerful there, whipping through her hair and cooling her skin. She crossed her arms, a smile on her face. It was such an amazing view. That alone was worth the price they paid for the property.

Kelli remained there for some time, delighting in the beauty of the rolling waves and the pleasant rumble of the surf far below.

The waves crashed against the rocks in a frothy spray.

To Bess, standing high atop the cliffs overlooking the ocean, she heard merely a soothing rumble. The swirling winds blew through her hair, whipping it about her head in beautiful, dark streams. The wind also caught her gown, sending it clinging and fluttering about her legs.

It had been two days since she had seen Elias. After their night ride together, she had returned before dawn and slipped up to her room before her father awoke. She had a secret she needed to tell him, but she knew it wasn't the right time. Not yet. She wasn't sure she could find the right words to say to him anyway. How could she tell the man who had always taken care of her that she had found someone else who would fill that role? How could she tell him she would be leaving soon with a man he had come to despise? And that she would be leaving forever.

No, she just couldn't tell him yet.

Elias had promised he would return, told her there was something he had to do. But it had been two days and there had been no sign of him. Bess couldn't bear being away from him for more than a minute, so two days seemed like an eternity.

She turned from the beauty of the ocean, and, with a worried countenance, stared down the white road looping the moor. Her focus darted to the hilltop in the distance. Elias would be

coming over that hill, riding down that white road. But what was taking him so long? Had something happened?

#

The small jeweler's shop on Fleet Street wasn't overly impressive at first glance. Sandwiched between two larger buildings, it had a rather simple façade. A somewhat ordinary sign hung perpendicular above the door, and read simply: Blackwell Jewelry.

Yet the owner, Jacob Blackwell, was a renowned craftsman known throughout the city. Some of the wealthiest residents in Boston frequented his shop. His merchandise was the envy of every rival jeweler in the city. He was also a master at repairing damaged valuables, so he was never without work. Customers often had to wait days, or even weeks, before they could pick up their priceless trinkets.

There was a chill in the air as Elias strode down the walkway just outside the shop. He wore a black, French-cocked hat, pulled low. A draping cloak of tightly woven broadcloth shrouded most of his body, keeping out the cold.

Two rugged-looking men, their faces stern, lounged just outside the shop. One was tilted back in a chair, chewing on a straw, while the other leaned against the wall, arms crossed. Elias' footsteps on the walkway drew their attention. As he walked up to the door, they eyed him suspiciously. Elias gave them a casual nod as he pushed open the door.

A small bell above the door rang out as he stepped inside. He found himself in a quaint little shop, polished and elegant, with boiserie paneled walls and dentil crown molding.

A short, pleasant gentleman, balding and spectacled, stood behind the counter at the other end of the room. He smiled upon seeing Elias.

"Mr. Browning! How good to see you again," he called out.

Elias had already started toward the counter. “Mr. Blackwell. The pleasure is mine.”

Mr. Blackwell took out a small, wooden box from behind the counter. “I have your order right here, sir. I think you’ll be most pleased with it.”

Elias was about halfway across the room when his eyes locked with a brawny guard sitting on a stool in the corner. A wooden cudgel leaned against the wall, close enough that the guard could snatch it up in a moment’s notice if need be. By his dour expression, he seemed an unpleasant and suspicious sort of fellow. Although, given his occupation, that certainly didn’t seem out of the ordinary.

Mr. Blackwell opened the box, revealing a gold, heart-shaped locket nestled inside. Elias picked up the locket, letting it dangle by its slender chain as he admired its craftsmanship.

“Beautiful,” he said softly.

The guard on the stool slowly reached out and wrapped his fingers around the handle of the cudgel. As he did, he kept his eyes fixed on Elias. Distracted by the locket, Elias was leaning on the counter, braced on his elbow. He lifted the locket up higher so that it gleamed as it caught the light.

“It’s perfect.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied Blackwell. “That’s quite a compliment. It’s for someone special, I presume?”

“Yes. Yes, it is,” answered Elias.

The guard launched off his stool, his cudgel raised, preparing to bash in Elias’ head. He was quick for his size, and quite nimble, his footfalls barely audible. He closed the distance between them in a flash.

A deafening blast filled the shop, shaking the windows, and caused Mr. Blackwell to jolt

with terror. The guard cried out as he collapsed backwards, his weapon flying from his hand and clattering over the floor.

Elias withdrew a smoking pistol from under his cloak. His other hand was still holding up the locket. Smoke rose up through a singed hole in the broadcloth where the shot had punched through, and Elias threw his cloak back to disperse the lingering smoke.

Mr. Blackwell trembled, his face white as a sheet. Elias stared at him calmly, motioned with his head at a display case behind the terrified jeweler.

“I could see his reflection in the glass.”

Mr. Blackwell flung open a mahogany candle box on the counter, grabbed for a small pistol hidden inside. Elias twirled his still-smoking weapon and smashed the butt end of it down on Blackwell’s fingers. Blackwell howled and clutched them in agony, staggered back into the cabinet behind him hard enough to crack two of the panes.

Elias slid his gun back into his belt. With his other hand he snatched up Blackwell’s small pistol. He brought it up, cocked the hammer. Mr. Blackwell, on the verge of fainting, still clutching his injured fingers, stared down the barrel of his own weapon in absolute horror.

“Please. I’m sorry. I thought you were him. You have to be him.”

Elias narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“The pearls you used as payment. I assumed they were the ones reported stolen. The reward on your head... I would do good to make that in six months.”

Elias’ eyes shifted as he detected movement in the reflection of the glass. The front door crashed open, the bell ringing loudly, as one of the guards outside burst in with a musket brandished. He fired as Elias spun to a crouch.

The blast of powder, a torrent of smoke, and Elias heard Mr. Blackwell cry out behind

him. Elias' arm was already up, his pistol leveled. He pulled the trigger, a loud pop emanating from the tiny gun. Elias saw blood spurt out just above the guard's collarbone, near the center of his throat. The man lurched back, slammed against the doorway. He flailed awkwardly as he whirled around, stumbled across the walkway. Still holding his throat, he took two more steps before collapsing into the street.

Elias tossed Blackwell's firearm to the ground and pulled his second pistol from his belt, drew back the cock with his thumb. He watched the empty doorway. And waited. There was still one more guard, but was he still there? Or had he run off?

Elias heard the soft shuffle of feet, spotted a shadow on the walkway just outside the door. He aimed his pistol at the wall beside the door, and pulled the trigger.

The shot blasted through the wood, leaving a small, jagged hole. The body of the third guard slid out from behind the wall and crumpled down in a heap in front of the doorway. A musket he had been holding fell out of his limp hands.

Shouts of alarms were already springing up from the street. Elias had dropped the locket onto the counter before he had spun around. He scooped it up, shoved it into his cloak. He paused at the sight of Mr. Blackwell behind the counter. He was lying on the floor in a pool of his own blood. The guard's shot had buzzed over Elias' head and struck Blackwell in the chest. His mouth hung slightly open, his lifeless eyes staring straight up.

Elias stared somberly for only a moment. Then he darted around the counter and through an open doorway. He found himself in a dimly lit workshop, immediately spotted an exit at the rear of the room. As he strode toward it, he passed a small forge and a table filled with metalworking tools. And a pang of guilt hit him. Blackwell's skill, his artistry, had just been taken from the world, and that was a shame. Even though Blackwell had attempted to ambush

him, Elias felt no ill will toward him. He had been told Elias was a criminal. He had merely acted on the information he was given. Ironically, Blackwell's greed probably saved Elias' life. Had Blackwell not tried to collect the bounty himself, but had contacted the authorities before Elias arrived, they would have been lying in wait. Elias would probably be dead or in shackles at that very moment.

Elias heard a commotion from the front room, looked back over his shoulder to see a contingent of regulars filing into the shop entrance. They held muskets up and at the ready, sweeping them back and forth. Though Elias could see them through the open doorway, the workshop was dark enough that they could not see him.

Lieutenant Tobias emerged from the group, his eyes scanning the room. He was quick to notice the guard's body, the blood spatter on the floor, a thin haze of smoke lingering in the air.

"Sir, there's a body behind the counter," shouted one of the regulars.

The Lieutenant's eyes flicked up to the gloomy doorway leading to the workshop.

"Check the back," he ordered.

Several soldiers surged into the workshop. They searched about the room, muskets pointed. It was dark, and there were shadows everywhere, but the room was small and cluttered with equipment, leaving very little space to hide. Tobias strode briskly over to the rear door. He flung it open, flooding the room with sunlight.

Elias had already slipped out, and was just rounding the corner of the back alley. He walked out onto a main street when he heard the rattle of the door behind him. He kept to a normal pace, not wanting to draw attention. Out of view from the alley, he casually crossed the street. He took off his French-cocked hat as he did, carrying it in the crook of his arm. When he reached the other side of the street, a one-horse chaise rumbled noisily behind him.

Lieutenant Tobias ran around the corner, his gaze shooting to every person within his sight. The chaise clattering past was the first thing he saw. There were two women walking, chatting to each other. There was a husband and a wife out for a stroll. A man in rather non-descript attire leaned against the building on the other side of the street. Tobias homed in on him, watching suspiciously. He was about to head across the street toward him when the man was met by a woman, presumably his wife, maybe a girlfriend. The man threw out his arms and smiled, and she ran into his embrace. They hugged and then walked away. Tobias stopped, peered around once more. People ambled by without a care in the world. Men. Women. A few children. Tobias thought nothing of the man in a cloak, his French-cocked hat in the crook of his arm, strolling calmly down the opposite sidewalk. The man turned the corner and walked out of sight. Tobias scowled, his eyes darting around in vain one last time before he turned and started back toward the workshop.

#

Bess dropped the brace over the tavern door, then tested it to make sure it was secure. She turned around, watched as Timothy and her father lifted the last of the chairs onto the tables. Nathaniel happened to catch his daughter's gaze.

“Look at you. I've never seen you so happy,” he said.

“Father, I'm always happy,” she responded playfully, yet inwardly she cringed. There was a glow in her eyes, and she had been smiling without realizing it. She was sure Elias would be coming that night, most likely in just a few hours' time. Her anticipation for his return had betrayed her once again.

Yet her father, thinking Elias was gone for good, took her expression to mean she had finally gotten over him. No longer was she moping around, despondent.

“Good night, papa,” said Bess.

“Good night, dear.”

Timothy watched with a heavy heart as Bess took off her apron and scampered up the stairs. He could see the eagerness in her movements, could detect a slight quiver in her voice that her father had missed. Timothy knew why she scurried up the stairs so quickly. He knew why she always placed a candle at her bedroom window, especially on the darkest of nights.

He had been watching from the stables the night Elias had visited her. He had watched as they rode off into the rain. He had taken an account of just about everything they had done.

Bess hurried into her room and shut the door. She stepped over to the fireplace, snatched up a poker, and stoked the dying flames. She returned the poker, then tossed in another log for good measure. The sun was setting as she hurried to the window and threw it open, her eyes shooting to the empty, white road on the horizon. Bess snatched a spill from the mantle, used it to catch a flame, and then lit a new candle on the windowsill.

Yet an hour had passed and the white road remained empty. With a dejected frown, Bess closed the window and prepared for bed, donning only a white chemise. She laid down, though found she couldn't sleep. So she waited. Thinking. Worrying. At one point she shot up and paced the floor, occasionally glancing out the window—and to the white road glowing in the moonlight.

In the darkened tavern, the grandfather clock struck twelve, emitting its chimes. *Bong... bong... bong...*

Before the chimes could finish, the silhouette of a horse and rider appeared over the hill. Bess darted again to the window, her lips spreading into a huge grin. She could only see small details in the dark. The French-cocked hat, the flowing cloak, the large, black stallion. It had to be him.

Elias galloped into the courtyard, slowing after he passed the bridge. He looked up just in time to see Bess throw open the window. She leaned halfway out, lit by the candlelight, its warm glow highlighting her face. She was smiling, eyes gleaming. Elias guided his horse beneath her window, then quickly tied off the reins. Using his saddle as a stepstool, he scaled the wall, an ivy-covered trellis giving him the handholds he needed.

Bess took up the candle in both hands, blew it out, and moved it to a small table to make room for him. When Elias neared the window, she grabbed his arm and helped pull him up the rest of the way. He was about halfway through, balanced on his hip, when he swung his legs around and into the room. Elias held a smile to match hers as he rose up to meet her. He took off his hat and shrugged off his cloak, tossing them both onto a chair in the corner. He hadn't fully turned back around before Bess lunged into him, throwing her arms around the back of his neck. Their lips smashed together as he wrapped his arms around her, lifting her up.

Bess' head was swimming as the bottled-up passion inside her soared to heights she had never known before. Even as he eased her back down, her feet once again touching the floor, she felt like she was drifting on air. Their lips had yet to part, their kisses sweet and fervent. They bumped the table in their urgency, causing the candle to wobble off the edge. The weighty holder thumped to the floor, throwing the candle and flinging white, liquid wax over the wall. They barely noticed or cared, now completely lost in their own world. Bess' body seemed to melt against his. She could feel him, the strength in his arms, the solid press of his chest. The eagerness in his touch.

His hands slid over her, groping, grasping at her flesh. Her chemise was not very thick, allowing him to feel her body almost like there was nothing there at all. Bess shuddered,

moaned, as his caresses sent little darts of pleasure dancing over her skin. The desire to touch, to be touched, overwhelmed her. She couldn't take it anymore. She had to feel more of him.

She clutched at his shirt, gathering handfuls of it before frantically yanking it up. Elias helped her pull it over his hand before he flung it away. Her fingers spread out over his chest, slid down to his firm stomach, his skin warm and smooth to the touch. Elias gripped her shoulders, tugged her closer, crushing her against him as his mouth melded into hers. Demanding yet tender, it was as if his lips, his tongue, his very being, couldn't get enough of her. At the same time, his fingers pulled the bow at the collar of her nightgown. She felt it loosening, then his hands sliding the fabric over her shoulders. She brought her arms in, letting the garment slide down, so soft against her skin, and land in a pool around her feet.

Bess trembled as she stood naked before him. She had never felt more vulnerable, yet had never experienced such exhilaration. She was already dizzy with desire, and this new sensation sent her spiraling even further into a blissful delirium. She yielded to his movements as his hand slid around to her back, his other hand scooping her legs out from under her. He carried her over to the bed, gently laid her down. Her dark hair fanned out over the pillow, framing her perfect face. Hovering above her, Elias paused to admire her, his eyes staring deeply into hers.

Glistening pools as black as the night.

Brandy with streaks of honey.

Their gaze remained locked together as he reached down, tugged off his boots, then slipped out of his breeches. Highlighted in the fire's glow, his body was a mixture of orange light and shadow, and Bess' heart caught in her throat as she took him in. The tautness of his stomach, the wonderful "V" shaped lines where his lower abdomen met his thighs, and that beautiful dip in the side of his hip. Elias slid into the bed beside her, his eyes still fixed upon her. His fingers

rose up, grazed the side of her cheek. He pressed forward and kissed her lips gently, lovingly. Then he took her hands into his, their fingers clasping together, and once more he pulled her into him, his arms encompassing her. Bess whimpered, relishing the heat of his body against hers.

To Bess, the ensuing moments felt like a dream. Their eyes gleaming, their lips never parting for more than a second, so eager for one another. The firelight cast them in golden hues as they came together, kissing passionately, their fingers interlaced as their bodies moved sensuously beneath the flaxen sheets.

Through the fog of passion, Bess almost couldn't believe what was happening. She had always loved Elias. For as long as she had known him, she had loved him. There had always been an unspoken, indescribable attraction between the two of them. Bess could still recall, so vividly, seeing him sitting alone at one of the tavern tables, their eyes locking for the first time.

Glistening pools as black as the night.

Brandy with streaks of honey.

There was something so electric, so genuine and pure, within his stare. And even back then, after they had decided to rendezvous in secret, Bess couldn't help but feel they were made for each other—that before they had met, they were both somehow incomplete. Yet deep down she had always feared they could never truly be together.

Bess recalled something her father once told her: that after her mother had died, Bess was the only thing that had kept him alive. She had heard stories of couples dying within hours of each other because their hearts were so broken from losing the love of their life. That's the kind of love she wanted, and now she was certain she had found it. She knew she had to hold onto it and never let it go.

Laying with Elias in that bed, bathed in the light of the fire, cherishing his kisses, his loving caresses, Bess' heart leapt with joy. She had never felt so alive.

#

Bess' eyes flicked open. Her first realization was that Elias was no longer next to her. She turned swiftly while rising up on her arms, her hand instinctively sliding to that empty spot where he should have been laying.

Her heart skipped a beat as she feared he had left her again. Her sleepy eyes searched the room until she saw him kneeling in front of the fireplace, the flames casting him in a golden silhouette. Bess draped herself in the sheet as she got up and padded over to him. Crouching behind him, she affectionately slipped her arms around his waist, wrapping him in the sheet as well. He leaned into her while patting her arm, his gaze staying on the fire.

She kissed his cheek. "What are you doing?"

"The fire was getting low."

"How long have you been here?"

"Not long."

Bess hugged him tighter, resting her chin on his shoulder. "When I woke up and you weren't next to me... I thought you might have left."

"No, of course not, darling." He turned his head to look at her, then kissed her on the cheek so vigorously it forced a smile from her. But that smile quickly faded as she stared broodingly into the crackling flames.

"I'm afraid someday you'll leave and never return."

"You shouldn't think such things," he said quietly.

“They’re searching everywhere for you now. It’s just a matter of time before they discover who you are.”

“We’ll see,” replied Elias. He stared again into the fire. “Soon it won’t matter.”

Bess cocked her head back in surprise. “Why do you say that?”

“There’s going to be war.”

She swallowed, her eyes large, her face sullen. “And you plan to be a part of it.”

He turned back to her. “No. I plan to be with you. I will have done my part.”

Bess was overjoyed, almost sobbing as she squeezed him as hard as she could.

“I have a gift for you,” Elias said. He leaned over, reached into his cloak on the chair.

Bringing his arm back, he unfolded his fingers to reveal the heart-shaped locket. He let it dangle from its chain, its golden surface glimmering. Bess’ eyes sparkled at the sight of it, the flames from the fireplace reflecting in her eyes. Elias reached around her and clasped the chain behind her neck. She took the locket in her hands, immediately treasuring it as she gazed down at it in wonder. Then she peered up at him excitedly.

“I have something for you, too.”

Bess draped the sheet over his shoulders, rose up and stepped over to the vanity, her dove-white skin glowing in the firelight. She plucked something out of the top drawer, and then returned with a grin. She knelt behind him, took hold of his hand and pressed a metal object into it. Elias opened his fingers to reveal a small, flintlock pistol. Bess slid her hands to his shoulder, one atop the other, then rested her chin on them as she waited for his reaction.

He marveled at the pistol’s craftsmanship. It had a pearl handle engraved with ornate scrolling, an intricate sidelock mechanism with a bridled powder-pan, and a matching gooseneck hammer. Its stout, brass barrel meant a limited range, but made it easily concealable.

“It’s beautiful, darling. I’ll always keep it close.”

Bess’ tone drew serious. “Just promise me you’ll always be careful. I don’t know what I would do if I lost you.”

Elias gave her a comforting pat on the arm. “To sacrifice for another is the greatest love of all. I know how much you have already sacrificed for me, but there are others who have given so much for this cause. Their very lives. I’m afraid there will be more blood spilled before it is all said and done.”

His statement hit her hard. “I fear it will be yours.”

“The last thing I want to be is a martyr. I believe in what I do, but I don’t want to die for any cause.” Elias smiled, raising his fingers to her chin. “But I would die for you.”

There was worry in Bess’ eyes, but she let those feelings wash away as Elias leaned forward, and they came together in a passionate kiss.

The Wheeler novel snapped shut. Kelli lay in her bed holding the book, absent-mindedly hugging it to her chest as she pondered what she had just read. She looked longingly over at the empty spot in the bed next to her, then placed the flat of her hand down on the sheet.

Kelli was distracted as she got ready for the day. Her relationship with Brian was going almost too well, making her worry the only direction they could go at that point was back down. She showered, ate quickly, and hopped into her car. Given the distance to the work site, the crew members usually showed up each morning between seven to seven-thirty. It was maybe ten after seven when Kelli drove up the hill that overlooked the property. There was a certain spot in the road she was very familiar with. Every day, when she hit that spot, the inn would come into view. Surrounded by green fields, with the ocean stretching off to the horizon, it was a beautiful scene that she had come to know all too well.

Yet that morning, as she was just coming up over the hill, all Kelli saw was a red pickup truck barreling toward her. She screamed and frantically shoved her steering wheel to the right. Her car bounced as it hit the grass, only two wheels staying on the gravel road. The pickup roared past, dust from the road churning behind it. Kelli whipped her head around, but the truck

was already rumbling out of sight. She stared into her rearview mirror, watching the truck speed away, barely visible through the dust cloud it was throwing up.

It was Jack's truck, and for just a split-second she had seen him sitting at the wheel as he roared past her. Though he had swerved to avoid her, he didn't once slow down, or even look in her direction. And was that a look of fear Kelli saw on his face? He had sped by so quickly she couldn't be sure.

The billowing dust hadn't settled by the time Kelli careened to a stop. Catching her breath, she looked in her mirror one more time. The truck was just a speck—still barreling down the road, still churning up a long, white cloud in its wake. Kelli watched in bewilderment.

As she pulled into the courtyard, she saw Brian was already there. He was standing beside his work truck, leaning on the open window with his elbow. He had been waiting for her, and came walking over before she had even pulled to a stop. Kelli got out, closed her door. She looked back at the hill, and then to Brian.

“What was that all about?”

“I don't know. I was just coming in when he drove past me like a bat out of hell,” said Brian. He was already trying to call Jack on his cell phone, but then remembered there was no service. He growled and shoved his phone back into his pocket.

Kelli stared over at the inn. The old façade, the dark, empty windows. The same uneasy feeling she had felt before quickly returned.

“So he got here before anyone else?” she asked.

“Yeah, looks like it,” said Brian.

“Did he go inside?”

“How should I know? What difference does it make?”

“Maybe he had an emergency or something.”

“Maybe.”

“But he passed right by you. Wouldn’t he have stopped and told you if that was the case?” Kelli asked.

“I don’t know. It’s just speculation at this point. If he doesn’t come back, I’ll call him later when I get home. Come on. Let’s get to work. We have a long day ahead of us.”

Brian and Kelli spent the morning peeling away the remaining plaster in the upper hallway. Before long, Kelli was forced to pause and catch her breath. She turned to look over at Brian, who was a little further down the hall.

“You know what I was thinking?” Her voice was slightly muffled by her dust mask. “It would be neat to duplicate this original old plaster method when we redo the walls. That way it would look exactly the same.”

“You mean wet wall? I hope you’re joking.” Brian didn’t look away from his work as he responded, barely taking her seriously.

“A lot of people are doing that now, using traditional techniques when renovating. It’s more authentic.”

“And a lot more money. Time. Effort.” Brian grunted, prying off the plaster he had been working free. “And we’ve already got the drywall. We can always try to match the original appearance afterwards.”

“I didn’t mean everywhere.”

Brian growled in frustration. He leaned against the wall with one arm while staring down at the floor. “Do you even know the process for wet wall?” he snapped.

Kelli slipped down her mask. “Well, no. But I just wanted it to look—”

“Stop!” Brian shouted. “All right? Just stop!”

Kelli jumped, his outburst taking her by surprise. Brian jerked down his mask, finding it stifling while trying to speak through it. “You always do this. Me, me, me. I want, I want, I want. Without any thought to anyone else. For as long as I’ve known you.”

Brian was glaring at her by the time he finished.

Kelli stared, eyes wide. She turned slowly, now very sullen as she went back to work. Neither of them said a word for several awkward moments. Brian finally sighed and stopped what he was doing. Again, he looked down at the floor.

“Kelli. I’m sorry.”

“Let’s just get this done,” she replied in a hurt tone.

“It’s easier if we do it together,” said Brian.

Her voice was heavy with sorrow as she replied, “When’s the last time we did anything together?”

“I said I was sorry.”

Kelli’s head dropped and her shoulders slumped. She hadn’t looked at him since his outburst. “That’s the problem. You’re always sorry, but we never solve anything.”

“I know. I don’t know what to do. I wish I did.”

Brian slid his prybar behind the plaster patch he had already loosened, flung it to the floor with a jerk of his wrists. He glanced over at Kelli, saw that she had also returned to working. She was dejected, still not looking at him, and he could tell she was just going through the motions.

Brian’s eyes flicked down as he pondered quietly for several seconds. Then he looked back up at her. “Remember the other day? When we were doing this very thing?”

She didn’t even acknowledge him. He wasn’t even sure she had heard him.

“And I made you laugh? I hadn’t heard you laugh in so long. I loved the sound of it.”

Kelli paused, gave him a sideways glance before going back to work. “I remember that. I remember I was actually happy,” she said. “Before that happened, I couldn’t remember the last time I felt that way. And now... I still don’t.”

The plaster she had been working on came free and shattered over the floor. Kelli moved on to the next section, reared back and stabbed down. Brian could see, in her movements, that she was now frustrated, angry.

Brian frowned, returned to his own portion of the wall. He had come upon a particularly stubborn area, and couldn’t seem to make any headway. He kept pulling, arms straining, as he peered back over at Kelli. She had to see him watching her, but she was purposefully ignoring him. His mind raced. He would give anything to hear her laugh again. She had always loved his humor, his charm. Perhaps that’s how he could get through to her?

“Remember my Uncle Roy?” he called over to her.

Kelli didn’t answer.

“He told me a story once, about how he and a friend went hunting. They weren’t out an hour before his friend dropped dead of a heart attack right in front of him.”

He saw he had her attention. Kelli seemed at least a little intrigued, watching him out of the corner of her eye as another plaster fragment landed at her feet.

“Uncle Roy got all panicked, and took out his cell phone to call nine-one-one. When the emergency operator answered, he yelled, ‘I think my friend just died of a heart attack! What do I do!’ The operator said, ‘Well, the first thing we need to do is make sure he’s actually dead.’ So, after a moment of silence, there was a gunshot, and Uncle Roy gets back on the line and says, ‘Okay, now what?’

Kelli had to think about the punchline for a moment, then smiled quietly. But she still didn't look at him.

Brian pursed his lips. Nodded. He focused back onto his work, pushing down on his prybar with all the strength he could summon. The plaster finally ripped free.

Breathing heavily, he turned to face her once more. "Uncle Roy told me another story," he said, before he went back to prying. "He told me he once had a friend named Bubba. They were almost inseparable. Anyway, one day they were watching a movie on television starring Brad Pitt. Well, right out of the blue, Bubba nods at the screen and says, 'He's a friend of mine, you know.' And Uncle Roy, all skeptical, says, 'You don't know Brad Pitt.' So Bubba bet him a hundred bucks he was friends with Brad Pitt. Uncle Roy took the bet, thinking it would be the easiest hundred he ever made."

*Bam.* Another plaster segment fell to the ground. Brian barely noticed, moving on to the next area without missing a beat. "So they go up to this huge mansion in Los Angeles, and Bubba rings the doorbell. Sure enough, Brad Pitt answers. He not only instantly recognizes Bubba, but he's overjoyed and invites them both in. So they spend the night partying with Brad Pitt. My Uncle Roy can't believe it."

Finally surrendering, Kelli turned to face him, a hand on her hip, wondering where Brian was going with the story.

Now perspiring heavily, Brian kept right on working as he continued. "So, the next day they're watching television, and another movie comes on. This one starring Jennifer Lawrence. Bubba points to the screen and says, 'She and I used to be really great friends. Man I miss her!' Of course, Uncle Roy didn't believe it for a second. He looked Bubba right in eye and goes,

‘You don’t know Jennifer Lawrence!’ So Bubba bet him a thousand dollars that he and Jennifer Lawrence were great friends. Thinking this time he had to be full of it, Uncle Roy takes the bet.”

Brian had cleared half the wall, yet kept right on going. He started talking faster, really getting into it. “So this time Bubba takes him to a nice house in Beverly Hills. Rings the doorbell, and sure enough Jennifer Lawrence answers. She throws out her arms and yells, ‘Bubba! How’ve you been,’ and gives him a great big hug. She invites them in, and they spend the whole evening with Jennifer Lawrence. Just talking and laughing. So now my Uncle Roy is not only completely in shock, but he’s out a thousand bucks.”

Kelli crossed her arms and leaned against the wall, now fully engrossed. She even seemed to be enjoying herself a little.

Brian just kept at it, jamming his prybar into the plaster, pushing and straining away. “So anyway, not long after that, they’re in Rome to watch the Pope give a benediction. He was dressed in all his getup—white robe, pointy hat and all. And Bubba turns to my Uncle Roy and goes, ‘I know you won’t believe this, but I know him, too.’”

Brian turned to fully face Kelli, forgetting all about the plaster as he gestured wildly with his hands. “Except this time Uncle Roy knows he has to be lying, because Bubba isn’t even catholic. So he bets him one hundred thousand dollars that there’s no way in hell he knows the Pope. Well, about that time the Pope spies Bubba in the crowd, and was so happy to see him he stopped everything and invited him into the Vatican. They were in there for hours, apparently catching up on old times. When they finally came back out, they found my Uncle Roy lying unconscious on the ground, fainted dead away. So Bubba wakes him and asks him, ‘Why did you faint? Because you owe me so much money?’ My Uncle Roy goes, ‘No. When you and the Pope came back out there, I heard the guy next to me say, ‘Hey, who’s that guy with Bubba?’”

Silence. Nothing at first. Kelli's face was a stoic mask. Then her lips turned up. Her chin quivered. She closed her eyes and clenched her jaw, trying her best to keep from laughing. But she just couldn't help it. In fact, attempting to stop it only made it worse as a loud guffaw burst out of her mouth. She shook her head, put a hand to her cheek, trying to catch her breath. She looked up at Brian, and their eyes met. He smiled, relishing her reaction.

But then her grin faded, and the light in her eyes vanished. She turned from him and back toward the wall. Her shoulders shook, and Brian realized she was softly crying. All the emotions she had endured, all the feelings she had repressed or ignored over the past several months, in that moment had exploded to the surface. She felt an onslaught of extreme joy and bitter anguish all at once. She couldn't take it anymore. She had to release it.

Brian was confused at first, but it didn't take him long to understand. He could tell she was frayed. Exhausted by it all. He could see she couldn't keep going day in and day out like they had been. It was then Brian realized, as he watched her weep quietly, that something had to change. There was an underlying problem he knew he had to address. He had always avoided facing it, even after she had all but begged him to resolve it with her. But that was the one thing he couldn't do. At least not yet.

Brian started forward to console her, but had only taken a step when Malcolm poked his head through the middle doorway.

"Hey guys, check this out."

Brian stood with one hand on his hip, his other hand gripping his pry bar. Kelli didn't look at either of them, but kept facing the wall, conspicuously silent. Malcolm's eyes darted back and forth between them as he realized he had just interrupted something.

"You guys all right?"

Kelli quickly wiped tears from her eyes. “We’re fine,” she said softly.

Brian exhaled, dropped his pry bar, and yanked off his gloves. He tossed them down as well. “Yeah. We’re good. Show us what you got.”

They both followed Malcolm into an unfinished bathroom. They had taken the middle bedroom and split it in half, giving a private bathroom to each of the rooms on either side. Malcolm stepped through the two by fours that would eventually be the wall, and over to a newly installed toilet. He held out his hands as if to say: *Ta-da!*

“Looks good,” said Brian.

“Moment of truth,” Malcolm said. He flushed it, peering down proudly. But the water in the bowl rose instead of drained, and quickly spilled out over the floor.

“No! Stop! Aw man!” Malcolm yelled. He waved his hands frantically before clapping his hands to the sides of his head.

Brian stared down at the pool of water forming on the floor. “I’m pretty sure that’s not how it’s supposed to work.”

Malcolm hurried over to grab up a plunger, was already walking back to the toilet. “Must be a clog somewhere. Man, I hope plaster didn’t get down there.” He jabbed the plunger into the toilet, vigorously pumped it. “Doesn’t make any sense. It shouldn’t have overflowed with one flush. It’s like the water’s being pushed up from underneath.”

“Maybe a blockage in the main line?” asked Brian.

“Already checked with the snake camera. Didn’t find a thing.” Malcolm slapped a hand to his forehead. “Oh man, I really hope we won’t have to dig up the pipe in the cellar. That’s all we need right now.”

Enrique stepped into the room, looked down at the water at his feet.

“Don’t ask,” said Brian.

“I need to show you something,” said Enrique.

Enrique led Brian and Kelli into the first bedroom. It was completely finished. New windows installed. New floor put down. They had even restored some of the furniture, including a bed and a dresser. Enrique waved down at a dark stain on the floor, near the foot of the bed.

“That’s the same stain that was there before,” said Kelli.

Enrique crossed his arms while staring down in annoyance. “It always reappears, no matter how many times I clean it. New floor. New roof. I don’t get it. You know how long it took me to put this in?”

Brian scanned the ceiling. “Must still be a leak somewhere. What else can go wrong?”

They heard a flush from the other room, then Malcolm shouting. “No! Aw man! Stop. Come on! No!”

Brian slumped his shoulders and dropped his head.

In the depths of the inn, conspicuous *rushing* and *banging* noises reverberated all through the plumbing. The pipes running along the ceiling and down the walls rattled and shook as water coursed through them.

Bubbling and gurgling sounds rose up from just under the drain in the cellar floor. Almost lost within that clamor came the distraught moans of a woman. Though barely distinguishable at first, the moans slowly grew louder.

#

With all the problems at the inn, Brian had told everyone they could take off early. Kelli, still emotionally raw, didn’t hesitate to take advantage of it. She hurried right home, turned on the stereo. Then she drew a bubble bath with Epson salts, and poured a glass of wine. She eased

into the warm water, leaned her head back against the porcelain edge, her concerns quickly drifting away. After several sips from her glass, Kelli had forgotten all about the inn. After draining a second glass, she welcomed the warm tingling that floated through her body. She closed her eyes and let the soothing sensation take her.

*The First Time I Ever Saw Your Face*, by Roberta Flack, played on the stereo from the other room. It was one of Kelli's all-time favorites, haunting and beautiful. Yet at times, especially as the song ended, Kelli felt a sadness she couldn't explain. And she started to think of Brian again, and the argument they had.

But then the song ended. *Can't Take My Eyes off You* by Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons followed, and soon Kelli was feeling good again. Her mood, with the help of sweet red wine, only brightened as *Unchained Melody* by the Righteous Brothers played.

So soothing. So relaxing. She was starting to feel sleepy. And happy. Really happy.

*I've Got You under My Skin* by Sinatra.

*You Look Wonderful Tonight* by Clapton.

Three glasses in now. Kelli was floating as a warm, soft buzz enveloped her. Her eyelids were heavy, her vision a little blurry. Her breathing had slowed, now long and deep.

The *City of Angels* soundtrack came up next. Kelli had only seen the movie once, and considered it a trite remake of a far superior film. But she had always thought its music was one of the most romantic compilations she had ever heard. She had gone so far as to add several of its songs to the end of her "bath time" playlist.

After two songs, she looked down at her fingers to see they were thoroughly pruned. And the bathwater had turned cold. The wine and the music could no longer distract her. Kelli rose up

dripping, her bare feet sinking into the fluffy bath mat beside the tub. She had slipped on her bathrobe, and had just finished drying her hair with a towel, when she heard the doorbell ring.

With the stereo still playing, she walked into the living room and over to the front door, peered through the peephole. Brian stood on the porch, waiting. She was a bit hesitant to open it, but finally gave in. As the door opened, Brian looked up at her and smiled.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Kelli replied. She looked him over. He had cleaned up, now wearing a dark Henley shirt and jeans.

“I wanted to come by and say I was sorry. You know, for today,” he said.

She leaned against the edge of the door. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“And I wanted to give you this.” He handed her a gift box, tied with a bow and ribbon. She took it slowly, a grin forming.

“What is this?”

“Open it and find out.”

“Come on in,” she said with a jerk of her head. She stepped away into the room as her fingers picked at the ribbon. Brian shuffled in and closed the door behind him.

Kelli finally managed to slip the ribbon off. She opened the lid to see a leather-bound edition of Robert Frost poems. Her mouth fell open.

“You always said he was your favorite poet. It has that Road Not Taken poem in it. I remembered you really like that one. I even like that one, so I guess it’s got to be good. Right?”

She took the book out and tossed the box onto the chair. It was a pretty rare and hard edition to find. “Where did you get this?” she asked in disbelief.

“I’ve had it awhile. Since your birthday, actually. But things weren’t going so well between us back then, so I never had a chance to give it to you.”

“I remember,” she said solemnly. “I thought you had forgotten.”

“It’s even got that old book smell you like so much.”

Kelli felt her eyes welling up. She was glad she had turned away from him so he wouldn’t notice. How could he be so infuriating at times, and yet at other times so thoughtful? Then it hit her: that’s why she had loved him. He remembered the little things about her, even when she didn’t think he was paying attention. And he made her laugh, and made her feel loved. And in that moment, she knew she would do anything to get that back. She wiped the corner of her eye and turned to face him, staring quietly.

Brian fidgeted awkwardly as he stepped closer to her. “I don’t even know if it’s the kind of poetry you—”

“I love it,” she blurted.

His eyes met hers. He gave her an uneasy smile.

“Do you want something to drink?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Sure. I guess. Just water. My throat’s so dry.”

Kelli nodded, then walked into the kitchen still holding the book. Brian followed, keeping several feet behind her. Kelli placed the book on the counter, took a glass from the cabinet, and filled it with water from the tap. With her back to him, Brian noticed her hair was still damp, and he couldn’t help but admire the shape of her figure under her bathrobe.

She turned around and handed him the glass. He drank about half of it. “Oh, that’s good.” She watched him as he downed the rest. He handed it back to her. As she took it, the tips of his

fingers grazed hers. It was brief, but that connection felt like an electric charge, imagined or not, that shot through her whole body.

Brian seemed to sense it as well. “You smell good,” he said.

“I just... took a bath,” she replied haltingly. Kelli turned slowly, placed the glass on the counter. The tension between them was palpable, almost overwhelming—an unseen force that they both felt, but were hesitant to admit.

*Feelin’ Love* by Paula Cole was just starting on the stereo. *Of all the songs, at all the times*, thought Kelli. Why hadn’t she turned it off?

The sultry rhythm, Paula’s breathy, sensual voice, filled the room. *Oh no, Paula, not now*. But it was too late.

A lump caught in Kelli’s throat. Her arms felt heavy. She remained facing away from Brian for several seconds, knowing what would happen if she turned back around. She didn’t see a choice, though. She couldn’t just stand there. Strangely, Kelli found it difficult to move, her legs and arms barely obeying her as she rotated back toward him. Her head was buzzing again, and she almost felt as if she were floating outside of herself. Maybe it was the wine? Perhaps it was something more?

She leaned back, placed the flat of her hands on the counter. And she swallowed hard as their eyes locked. Paula crooned from the other room, her voice husky, sexy. She couldn’t have set the mood any better if the lights had suddenly dimmed and all the candles in the house ignited at once.

Brian took one step closer, slowly reached out and pulled one of the tails on the belt of Kelli’s robe. She looked down as it slipped free, then stared back up at him.

Was she really going to let him do that?

He reached out with his other hand, took hold of the second tail, slowly pulled it until the belt came undone. And for some reason Kelli let him do that, also. Something inside her, something primal, prevented her from stopping him. She sensed a rush of cool air as her bathrobe opened in the front, felt his warm fingers slip in under the fabric and graze her bare hips. Kelli gulped for air, unable to look him in the eyes as she felt his fingers run admiringly over her belly. His fingers spread out, leaving traces over her skin, and Kelli's heart pounded in her chest as she gave in to it, even welcomed what was happening. They had been intimate more times than she could count, of course, but since Adam's death Brian had barely touched her. And in that moment, she ached more than anything for his touch.

It had been so long.

He leaned forward, kissed her softly on the lips. Once. Twice. Three times. After the third kiss, his lips stayed pressed into hers. At the same time, his hands ran over her body, her hips, her bottom, the backs of her thighs, groping, squeezing, like he was trying to remember what she felt like. Kelli's arousal made her skin that much more sensitive, his every little touch sending a jolt right through her. She arched into him, her knuckles turning white as she clutched the countertop even harder. Kelli's whole face felt hot, her cheeks flushed. And the buzzing in her head became almost overpowering.

Kelli took in a quick, deep breath as Brian parted her robe further, the edges of the collar falling just over her shoulders. His gaze lingered on her breasts as they spilled free, full and erect. Brian reached out slowly, gently cupped them from underneath. Kelli sighed, then lunged forward and kissed his lips so hard Brian was forced to take a step back. She leapt up and wrapped her legs around his waist. Brian caught her, slipping his hands underneath her, holding

her up. Their lips still locked together, Brian carried her through the kitchen and into the darkened doorway of her bedroom.

Paula Cole continued to sing in silky, breathy tones, slowly fading out. Once the song was over, the next one played, and then the next, and this continued on until the playlist reached its end. By that time more than two hours had past, leaving the house in stark silence.

Outside the wind blew, picking up suddenly. It whistled as it surged over the roof, causing the whole house to creak. Wind chimes outside the window swayed wildly, clanging together, singing a discordant song. Several sheets on the clothesline in the backyard whipped and fluttered, threatening to fly away.

*Whipping. Fluttering.*

*Whipping. Fluttering.*

The surging winds through the harbor caught the ship's sails, making them flap and snap, whip and flutter.

It was a cold December night, the wind bringing with it a bitter chill. Yet dark forms stole across the wharf despite the cold, their creeping steps falling softly over the wooden planks. Many held odd silhouettes—feather headdresses, fringed doeskins. A few others revealed colonial attire, cloaks and jackets and tricorne hats. A strange mixture to be sure.

Those out front moved quickly, quietly. Yet a larger group followed behind them, spreading out across the harbor. Their conspicuous footsteps, and all manner of murmurs and grumblings, filled the night. Numbering almost two hundred, a group so large couldn't hope to stay quiet.

As they moved into the lamplights on the wharf, it was clear some carried tomahawks and wore the clothing of Mohawk warriors, though they were clearly white men dressed up in disguises—and not very authentic ones at that. They were interspersed among others who opted to wear more normal attire, but all of them concealed their identity in some way, the majority having smeared their faces black with grease, soot, or coal dust.

The smaller, quicker group out front stole up to the Dartmouth, a large merchant ship moored nearby. The lead man hurried up the gangplank and bounded onto the deck, a pistol in his hand. Several of his cohorts followed right behind them, similarly armed.

The captain of the ship, as well as some of the crew, had heard the commotion on the harbor and walked out onto the deck to investigate. As soon as the captain saw the pistol, he took a step back, his eyes widening.

“Captain, we’ll have the keys to the hold,” said the lead man.

Several more of his strangely dressed cohorts lifted their pistols as well. A few of them made a show of it by ominously cocking their weapons. The captain gazed over at the first mate standing beside him, nodded his head. The sailor reached into his coat and brought out a large, jangling ring of keys. They were snatched away from him, and then captain and crew were ushered to the rear of the ship. With the crew secured, the doors to the hatches were unlocked and thrown back, the crates inside hauled out.

“Only the tea!” cried the leader. “Dump it overboard! All of it!”

The men swiftly carried out his orders, splitting the crates open with their tomahawks before hurling them overboard. The remaining horde of Mohawk-clad intruders spilled onto the ship and joined them in the effort. Two other ships at the harbor, the *Beaver* and the *Eleanor*, suffered the same fate, as they were also boarded by the angry mob. No longer concerned about any pretense of stealth, their loud utterances, the whack of their blades, and the splash of the crates filled the whole harbor. Before long a layer of tea floated over the surface of the water, turning it into a black, undulating mass.

The din they created carried all the way to Sir Henry Lytton’s mansion. Even though it was a good distance away, it held a decent view of the harbor. Henry stepped out onto his

balcony, squinted his eyes as he tried to peer through the night. He could see three of the ships overflowing with people, many of them carrying torches or lanterns. They were shouting and making all sorts of ruckus, and appeared to be throwing cargo overboard.

His wife, Agatha, appeared in the doorway behind him. “What is it, Henry?”

“I can’t tell,” he called back, his eyes glued on the commotion in the harbor.

Agatha joined him, her hands dropping down to the railing as she looked on with Henry.

“Some sort of celebration?”

Henry stared grimly. “Hardly.”

A lone figure opened the front door of Henry’s mansion, pocketing a key as he slipped inside. Wearing a three-piece formal suit, his stealthy demeanor belied his gentleman’s attire. The intruder’s coat, waistcoat, and breeches were all made of dark velvet. Lace cuffs and a lengthy cravat accentuated his outfit, along with an attached wig bag at the back of his collar that held his considerable queue. A large tricorne hat sat atop his head, concealing his face as he kept his gaze downward. His polished shoes sported large buckles, and clopped lightly over the tiles as he strode through the foyer and up the stairs.

Once at the top, he peered in through the doorway of the master bedroom, spotted Henry and Agatha on the balcony. They had their backs to him, both of them engrossed with the mob in the harbor. The intruder plucked a wax candle from his inside pocket, lit the wick from a candelabra on the hallway table. Making sure to stay out of sight from the bedroom doorway, he darted stealthily into Henry’s study just off the upstairs hall.

The pale glow of the candle fell over the elegant furniture in the room—made mostly of rich mahogany and leather. A rare pang of envy struck the intruder, but he was smart enough not to let those feelings deter him. He strolled over to a bookcase built into the wall, the shelves

filled with leather-bound tomes. Holding up the candle, he ran a finger along the hubbed spines, pausing when he spied the title of the book he was looking for. He slid it out and opened it. The pages were hollowed out just enough to hold a bulky, brass key. The intruder plucked out the key and slipped the book back into place.

He gazed up at the bookcase's top overhang, decorated with lavish capitals and beaded molding. He reached up, fingers searching underneath the overhang until he felt the small, metal lever he was hoping to find. He pulled it down, heard a *click*, and a whole section of the bookcase swung inward. The intruder pushed it open further and snuck inside.

The candle's flickering light played over the walls of the hidden room, revealing it to be barely bigger than a closet. Paintings from renowned artists hung on the walls, and there were even a couple of sculptures set up in the corners. The intruder sniffed in disdain. Only someone with Sir Lytton's conceit would collect beautiful works of art and hide them away.

The intruder's candlelight fell over the far wall, highlighting an iron strongbox with a black finish. Double hasps on the outside had been created for extra padlocks, but fortunately for the intruder, Sir Lytton was too impatient to have employed them. The intruder stooped over the strongbox, a dribble of wax spilling over the lid as he inserted the key. He found that it fit perfectly, and when he turned it, he heard several, loud clicks as an incredibly intricate locking system was disengaged. He gripped the lid firmly with one hand, heaved it open.

The intruder stared down at pounds sterling, silver Spanish dollars, a bundle of property deeds and bank papers, as well as precious jewelry and uncut gems. The intruder slipped a folded bag from his inside coat pocket, snapped it out to full length. He scooped up the valuables within the box, and dumped them into the bag. After he had plucked up every last piece of jewelry, he

took the bundled paperwork and placed the corner of it into the candle's flame. When it caught, he tossed the bundle back into the strongbox, let it burn for just a bit, and then closed the lid.

He hurried out, pushed the secret panel back into place, then put the key back into the same book where he found it. He blew out the candle and stuffed it into the bag.

The intruder walked through the hall and hurried down the stairs. Sir Lytton, just coming in from the balcony, straightened with a start when he saw someone pass by his doorway. He hurried out into the hall, bounded over to the top of the staircase. He caught just a glimpse of the intruder leaving through the foyer. A dark outfit. The top of a black, tricorne hat.

“Gerard? Gerard, is that you?” he called.

“Sir?”

Henry twirled. His manservant stood in the doorway of his room at the end of the hallway. Henry's eyes bulged in his head. He ran down the stairs, feet thumping loudly. Dashing through the foyer, he saw the front door had been left wide open. Ignoring the cold night air, Henry ran outside, looking every which way, but the intruder had disappeared.

He could still hear the commotion down at the harbor, the sounds carrying on the wind.

#

Paul stood just off a main street with a good view of the wharf, watching as the Mohawk-clad mob hurled crates of tea into the sea. Another man stood with him, taller, well dressed, the collar of his overcoat pushed up to keep out the cold. He was observing the activity in the harbor along with Paul.

“It's taking too long,” he said, worry in his voice.

Paul nodded glumly. “Longer than we thought.” His eyes scanned the other vessels in the harbor. “There have to be soldiers on some of those other ships. Fortunately, no one seems willing to intervene.”

“That’s a good sign. They know what a mess that would mean,” said the man.

Paul spun as he detected someone coming up behind them. Startled at first, he smiled when the newcomer lifted his head, revealing his face from under his tricorne hat.

“Mr. Browning,” said Paul, using Elias’ alias.

The other man turned and took him in as well. He saw that Elias wore a three-piece suit of dark velvet, and carried a bag at his side. The man gave Elias a respectful nod before quietly slipping off.

Elias gestured with his head at the fellow. “One of the eight?” he asked. At the same time he stepped forward and tossed the bag to Paul. The bag jingled as Paul caught it with both hands.

“Of course not,” said Paul.

Elias smiled. “You better hope they never catch you. You’re a terrible liar.” Elias watched as the mysterious man strolled away, all but disappearing into the shadows. “That’s Christopher Redding, isn’t it? The shopkeeper on Union Street? A shame he scampered off so quickly. I would like to have said hello.”

“None of you are supposed to see each other’s faces, or know each other’s names for that matter. Those are the rules. You know that,” Paul grumbled.

“Yet you know everyone,” Elias remarked.

“Yes. That responsibility is mine, and mine alone. The center of the wheel, sort to speak.” Paul bounced the bag up and down, feeling its weight, then peered over at Elias with a grin. “It was a good haul?”

“More than I would have thought. Your man spoke the truth. The key was right where he said it would be,” Elias replied.

“And it appears you were right.” Paul waved his hand at the commotion in the harbor. “This whole thing doubled as a proper distraction.”

Elias gazed out over the harbor, but didn’t seem to share Paul’s enthusiasm. Men in silly costumes. Hooting and hollering. Dumping masses of tea overboard. “This will change things forever. You know that,” he said.

“Good,” said Paul.

“There will be consequences. King George won’t stand for it.”

“And so it begins,” Paul replied matter-of-factly.

Elias pondered quietly, gave a small grin as he nodded. Then he turned and walked off into the night.

#

The heavy irons that had been clamped around Daniel Beckett’s wrists jingled every time he moved. The crude edges had already caused bruising, and had rubbed his skin raw. Sitting slumped on a wooden stool, Daniel kept his eyes down at the floor. He was young, late teens. A little scrawny, his whole body shivered from cold as well as from fright.

Two soldiers stood behind him, one on either side, both holding muskets at their shoulders. Two more soldiers stayed near the back, but the room was dark. Daniel never got a good look at them.

A week earlier he had stolen a silver goblet from a house on Beacon Hill, and thought he had gotten away with the theft until that morning—when regulars burst into his room and dragged him out. Instead of taking him to a jail cell, they had brought him to some drab, empty stable.

Beams of sunlight snuck in through the cracks of the warped, stable walls, creating a distinct pattern over the floor. It gave Daniel enough light to make out strands of hay strewn over the floor at his feet.

The large door at the front was flung open, allowing in a burst of sunlight. Daniel turned his head away and lifted his hands to shield his eyes, his chains clanking. Squinting hard, he could just make out a tall form, silhouetted by the intense light, striding toward him. Then the door boomed shut, throwing the stable back into darkness. The bright square of the open doorway, and the silhouette inside it, lingered as a floating, negative afterimage in Daniel's eyes. As his vision finally cleared, he realized the imposing figure he had seen was standing right in front of him.

"Your name is Daniel Beckett?" came the voice of D`abo.

Daniel stared up, eyes wide. "Yes-s sir," he stammered.

D`abo stepped forward, a ray of light from the one of the cracks falling over his face. His cold gaze shot right through Daniel. The young man averted his eyes, staring back down at the floor. Captain D`abo snapped his fingers, and Lieutenant Tobias emerged from the back of the stable, a silver goblet in his hands. He gave it to the captain.

"Do you recognize this?" asked D`abo.

Daniel sheepishly nodded his head.

"I should think so. It was found under your bed. This goblet was stolen five days ago. Normally, I would not pay personal attention to such a small crime, except the man who owns this is a tried and true Tory, well known for his loyalty to England. Perhaps you were not aware of that?"

Daniel's face shook as he peered back up. "I was not, sir. I swear."

D`abo leaned down, his face just inches away from Daniel. "I think perhaps you did. I think perhaps you are also guilty of treason."

Daniel's eyes shifted wildly back and forth, his lips trembling as he struggled to comprehend D`abo's assertion. He finally managed to choke out a response.

"Treason?"

D`abo observed him, searching for anything in Daniel's face that might tell him something. "You used to work for Henry Lytton, did you not?" he asked at length.

Daniel appeared even more confused. "Sir?"

"Henry Lytton!" growled D`abo. "You worked in his house as a servant."

Daniel stuttered, finding it hard to catch his breath. "Yes sir... but... I have not been in his employment for... six months at least."

"He let you go because he suspected you were stealing from him."

"Yes sir, but..."

"Last night someone broke into his home, opened a hidden strongbox, and stole the valuables that were inside of it."

"I swear to you sir, it wasn't me," said Daniel.

D`abo cocked his head. "No?" Then a snarl rose on his lips as he reared back and lashed out with his boot. He kicked Daniel's stool out from under him, sending the young man spilling to the floor. Crying out in surprise, his eyes bulging with fear, the chains of his manacles clattered as Daniel brought his hands up in a defensive posture. D`abo loomed over him, eyes steely with contempt.

“There was a key hidden in Sir Lytton’s study. The thief knew exactly where to find it. Sir Lytton was the only one who knew about it, unless of course a particular servant had happened across it while cleaning. A servant who doesn’t work there anymore.”

“I promise it wasn’t me!” exclaimed Daniel, now on the verge of tears.

D`abo rose up, straightened his coat. “I believe you. There was a certain panache to the theft. Whoever did it set flame to Sir Lytton’s important papers, then tossed them back into the strongbox before the smoke could alert anyone. There was just enough air left in the chest for the papers to burn to ash. It was a statement, not from some amateur thief, but from someone with the gall and the motivation to do such a thing.”

Daniel stared up at him, too afraid to speak.

“I think you discovered the key at some point, but you didn’t know what it was for. If you were aware of the hidden room where Lytton kept his strongbox, you would have robbed him then. Lytton himself admits he bragged about the room in a drunken stupor not two weeks ago. No doubt he was overheard, and someone put two and two together. You told someone about that key, didn’t you? Someone who knew you used to work for Lytton. Who did you tell?”

Daniel’s voice was shaky, panicked. “No one, sir. I swear.”

The captain scowled, grabbed up the stool and sat it upright. Then he peered deep into the shadows at the back of the stable.

“Archibald.”

The floorboards creaked, and Daniel turned his head toward the approaching footsteps. Private Archibald emerged, a smirk on his lips and a thick rope in his hands. Daniel’s eyes widened when he realized at one end of the rope hung a dangling noose.

“Throw it over the beam,” ordered D`abo, motioning with his head.

Archibald was a dutiful soldier, always eager to prove himself—the type of regular D`abo preferred to have under his command. The private looked up, gauged the distance, and tossed the noose over the ceiling beam above them. As the noose came over the other side, it swayed back and forth like the pendulum of a clock. Daniel couldn't take his eyes off of it, watching it with hypnotic dread.

“Have you ever seen a man hanged?” asked D`abo. “It isn't pretty. Sometimes the neck can stretch two, even three times its normal length. That's with the full weight of the body pulling down on it. Of course, that only happens when the neck breaks. That's the idea, you see. To snap the neck at the base of the skull, ensuring death to be instantaneous.”

Archibald had just finished tying off the other end of the rope. D`abo reached up and gave it a firm tug, making sure it was secure. Daniel's eyes still hadn't left the noose swaying ominously above him.

“My father was a judge, you see,” D`abo continued calmly. He walked around Daniel as he spoke, his hands clasped behind his back. “When I misbehaved as a child, he made me watch as the criminals he sentenced were hanged on the gallows. I remember one man in particular who lacked an arm. The executioner didn't realize the imbalance it would cause, and so he didn't prepare the noose correctly. When the man dropped, his weight was uneven. The noose cut across his jugular on one side, and sprayed a torrent of blood over the first row of onlookers. I still remember their horrified gasps. But above all, I remember the man choking and gurgling as he bled out right in front of everyone.”

D`abo turned, now focusing fully on Daniel. The young man was whimpering softly. D`abo smiled down at him, then casually used his foot to scoot the stool directly under the noose.

“Of course, if the drop is too long, the victim’s head will pop right off. I have seen that happen as well.” Captain D`abo eyed the roof above them, as if inspecting it. “But I don’t think we’ll have that problem in here.”

No longer able to look at the noose, Daniel turned away so that he was lying almost prostrate on the floor. D`abo noticed his shoulders shook intermittently, and realized the young man was crying. D`abo’s face only hardened.

“Now if the rope is not long enough, that is another situation entirely. From the looks of things in here, that might just be a problem. The neck might not break, you see. It really is the ugliest way to die by hanging.” His voice took on a more serious tone as he glared down at Daniel. “You won’t be able to breathe. Your legs will kick. You’ll squirm in agony like a fish on the line, your face red, your eyes bulging, your tongue hanging out. And as you expire, you’ll lose the function of your bowels. I cannot think of a more undignified way to die.”

He gave Daniel a swift kick to the ribs. The terrified young man sobbed loudly as he rolled over and clutched his side in agony. Captain D`abo bent over him, his mouth close to Daniel’s ear. “I’m sure someone will find you within the week. When the stench reaches the street outside.”

“Please,” Daniel moaned. “You would hang me over a cup?”

“I could care less about a bloody cup!” D`abo bellowed, his outburst making Daniel jump and then cower. “I want a name! You spoke to someone! Who was it?”

“He came to me! He came to me!” Daniel blubbered.

“What is his name?” D`abo demanded.

“Sir, I don’t—”

“His name! Give me his name!” bellowed D`abo, all but frothing at the mouth.

“Redding. His name is Christopher Redding,” whimpered Daniel.

D`abo straightened, a look of satisfaction on his face. His eyes remained fixed on the sniveling youth at his feet. “This Christopher Redding... he asked you if you might know how to get into Lytton’s strongbox, and that’s when you told him about the key?”

Daniel looked up with tear-streaked cheeks, his lips trembling. “Yes. I didn’t even know the man. He found me.”

D`abo’s eyes narrowed. “You didn’t know him, but you somehow know his name? I’m supposed to believe that?”

“He didn’t tell me his name. He owns the dry goods shop on Union Street. That’s how I know of him. Please, I’m telling you the truth!”

“And he was alone? You saw no one else with him?”

“I swear it!”

D`abo nodded thoughtfully. “Yet where there is one conspirator, there are bound to be others. Because of your actions, Sir Lytton is leaving Boston. He has decided to return to England. God speed, I say. These colonials don’t deserve a man like him anyway. You will, of course, be charged for the theft of the cup, and brought before the magistrate. Whether you will be charged with treason, and subsequently hanged, will be up to him.”

Now resigned to his fate, Daniel sobbed again as he bowed his head, one cheek pressing against the floor. D`abo rolled his eyes and sighed, then looked to Archibald.

“Get him out of here.”

Daniel felt hands grab him roughly and yank him up to his feet.

“Agh! He’s soiled himself!” Archibald cried out in disgust. There was a puddle on the floor where Daniel had been lying, and a dark stain covered the front of his breeches. Captain D’abo didn’t seem too surprised, merely sniffing in contempt as his soldiers hauled Daniel away.

They pushed open the front door, allowing in another burst of sunlight that was almost blinding.

Blinding white light. All encompassing. Seemingly endless. Adam's face glided slowly into view, blue eyes sparkling. He was smiling as his voice echoed through Brian's mind.

“Have you seen her?”

Brian opened his eyes. The first thing he took in was Kelli's dresser. As his sleepy eyes began to focus, he observed various objects sitting on it: a perfume bottle, a jewelry box, then a wedding picture of him and Kelli standing at the altar. His gaze lingered on the picture. In it, he wore a black suit and she her white dress. They were so happy back then. Before.

He turned over, expecting to see Kelli asleep next to him. But her side of the bed lay empty, the blanket and sheet rumped and thrown back. Hearing movement, Brian watched as Kelli emerged from the bathroom. She already had a shirt and her underwear on as she hurried to the closet. She pulled out a pair of jeans, started to wriggle into them.

“Going somewhere?”

Her jeans were halfway up her hips when she looked up at him, smiled. “Hey. I was going to let you sleep.”

Brian's eyes darted up and down as he observed her—bent over, pants halfway on, a look of surprise on her face.

“I thought last night was a big deal. I mean, I fully expected the first words I was going to hear this morning would be: we need to talk.” He said the last part mimicking her voice.

She sighed, clearly feeling guilty. “It was a big deal. And we do need to talk.” She yanked her jeans all the way up, hopping a little as she did. “It’s just that I forgot—I have an appointment this morning.”

“Great timing then, huh?”

“It’s not like I expected last night to happen,” she said, just buttoning her jeans.

“I guess I didn’t either,” Brian said quietly.

Kelli paused, her blue eyes gazing right into him. “Yeah.”

He gave her a quiet smile. “Yeah.”

Her phone on the night stand dinged as a text alert came in. Kelli reached over, plucked it up. She grinned as she silently read the message.

“Something important?” Brian asked.

“It’s Thad. He has new information on the Wheeler novel.”

“I’ll bet he does,” Brian sniffed. “So that’s where you’re running off to.”

Kelli shot him a look. “He’s just a friend.”

“Does he know that?”

Kelli rolled her eyes. “He’s just helping me out with research on the book.”

“Yeah? I’m pretty sure he’d also like to help you out of your pants.”

Kelli’s eyes flashed. She plopped down in a chair, pulled her shoes on, started tying them.

“What? So your meeting with him couldn’t wait? You couldn’t put it off a little bit.”

“Not if I’m going to get to work on time today.”

“I guess that’s why you were sneaking out of here.”

Kelli stopped what she was doing, her face hard. “I wasn’t sneaking.”

“You weren’t exactly announcing your departure, either.”

Kelli snorted, went back to tying her shoes. “You sound like a jealous idiot.”

Brian scoffed. “You think I’m jealous of that guy?” He peered down, speaking more to himself than to her. “I don’t trust him.”

“I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself,” Kelli said. “If you would spend a little more time trying to talk to me instead of sulking you would know that.”

“Because I don’t have any reason to sulk, right?” Brian shot back.

Kelli’s face softened. “Of course you do. But you just keep it all bottled up, and it’s killing you. I don’t even remember the last time you mentioned Adam’s name.”

Brian turned his head away. “Just stop.”

“No. It’s time we talk about it. I know it’s hard, but we have to do it.”

“Oh, so now you have the time.”

“Brian, that’s not fair.”

He sighed, still wouldn’t look her in the eye. “I’m not ready yet, all right?”

“That’s what you always say.”

“And I always mean it!” Brian snarled, now glaring. “Why do you always do this?”

She flung up her hands. “What? Do what?”

“Try to make me do something I don’t want to do. Or try to turn me into someone I’m not. Why did you even marry me if you didn’t like who I was?”

“What are you talking about? I do like who you are.”

“Do you?”

“Yes!”

“Really? I don’t like the books you read. I don’t know a thing about any of the authors you like. I hate poetry.”

“So?”

“So go ahead and trot on over to your little hipster doofus. I bet he’ll spout all the poetry you want. No matter how many times you ask him.”

Kelli closed her eyes, shook her head, rolled her tongue around in her mouth.

“Am I wrong?” pressed Brian.

Kelli’s eyes flicked back up at him. “You’re a dumbass,” she finally said.

“Yeah, that’s real mature,” countered Brian.

“Go to hell.” Kelli quickly gathered up her belongings, headed out. “Feel free to show yourself out,” she grumbled, already through the door.

Brian mockingly threw out his arms. “What, no breakfast?” he shouted after her. “I feel so used!”

He heard the front door slam shut.

#

Kelli was still in a foul mood as she drove to the antique shop. Pulling up to a stoplight, she grabbed up her phone and sent off a text to Thad, telling him she was on her way. As she did, she couldn’t help but recall a particular part of her argument with Brian.

*He’s just a friend.*

*Does he know that?*

A horn honked, and she realized the light had turned green. She waved an apology to the car behind her and took off. How long had she been sitting there, pondering? She wasn't sure. She had lost herself in her thoughts.

It didn't take long to reach the shop. As she walked inside, Thad stood behind the counter, eagerly waiting for her.

*He's just a friend.*

*Does he know that?*

"So, what's the news?" Kelli asked. She placed the Wheeler novel down and leaned forward on her elbows.

Thad tapped the symbol on the book's cover with his index finger. "Got in touch with an old professor of mine who specializes in this era of history. He says this symbol belonged to a group called the Circle of Eight. That's why there are eight tips within these swirls. Each one represents a member of the group.

Kelli shook her head. "Never heard of them."

"That's because they were truly a secret society—made up of spies and elite soldiers. Many now believe they were a branch of the Sons of Liberty. Perhaps even a precursor. Paul Revere was even rumored to have led the group."

"The main character in the book mentions belonging to a circle with other members," said Kelli.

"That's fascinating," replied Thad. Then he shot up while waving a finger in the air. "Oh, I almost forgot. I have something for you." He reached down, took the music box Kelli had been admiring from behind the counter. He set it between them and opened the lid. A light, jingling melody started playing.

Kelli grinned from ear to ear. “You fixed it!”

“Consider it a gift.”

“Oh, I couldn’t.”

“Sure, you can. I’m not taking it back. It’s yours.”

“Thad.”

“I mean it. It’s yours.”

She pressed her lips together, truly touched. “I love it.”

#

Brian sat in his truck across from the antique shop. He kept his eyes glued on the front door as he talked on his cell phone.

“Come on, Jack. I know it’s been rough... yeah. Yeah, listen, I understand. You have to go where the money is. It sounds like a great job. No, I’m not mad. Don’t worry about it. We can finish without you. Yeah. Okay. Bye.”

Brian ended the call with an exaggerated press of his thumb, his frustration boiling over. Then his eyes darted up as Kelli stepped out of the door of the shop. She was holding the music box, admiring it as she walked down the sidewalk. Brian followed her with his eyes, his expression hardening.

Ten minutes later, Thad’s keys jingled in his hand as he shuffled outside and locked the door of the shop. He was just turning around when he almost bumped right into Brian. He swallowed, unblinking. He recognized Brian, and since Kelli had left minutes earlier, it was pretty clear Brian had been waiting for him.

Brian’s glare left little doubt.

“Can I help you?” asked Thad, his voice higher-pitched than usual.

“Yeah,” Brian shot back. “You can stop giving gifts to my wife.”

“A... a gift?” Thad stammered, feigning ignorance.

Brian bristled. “You know we’re still married, right?”

“Is that what you call it?” The words left Thad’s mouth before he could stop them.

Brian pressed closer, the corner of his mouth turning up. “What did you say?”

“Maybe if you treated her like she deserved, you would still be together?”

Thad had barely finished his sentence when Brian threw a quick jab. Thad staggered, clutching his nose. A muffled moan escaped through his fingers. When he pulled his hands away, he saw they were covered in blood. He stared down in disbelief.

“Look what you did you knuckle-dragging Neanderthal!”

Brian stepped closer, now guilty. “I’m sorry. Listen man, I’m sorry. I lost my cool. You all right? Let me get you some ice or something.”

“Just leave me alone!” Thad shouted.

Brian threw his hands up and backed away.

On his way to the inn, Brian thought about calling Kelli to try and explain his altercation with Thad. He ultimately decided against it, thinking she was already mad at him enough. She hadn’t shown up yet when he arrived, so he started without her. He spent the rest of the morning hanging drywall in the upstairs hall, and it wasn’t until noon when he realized Kelli had yet to show up. He shot her a text: *Are you coming today? Maybe we can talk when you get here?*

He never received an answer. Brian spent the rest of the day in a daze, going completely on autopilot. All the while, thoughts about the two of them would float through his mind. How did they always manage to screw things up right when it seemed they were about to fix their relationship? Was it a lack of self-control? Something deeper? Brian had to wonder if he really

should have gotten so offended when she told him she was meeting Thad. And did she really not have time to put it off, even for an hour? Why could they never seem to compromise?

*You know why, he told himself. Until you confront it, things will never get better.*

And yet that was the one thing he just couldn't get himself to do.

Before Brian knew it, the day had gotten away from him. As he was leaving, he saw Enrique through the doorway of one of the second-floor bedrooms. The last one still there, Enrique was laying down flooring.

“Hey man, everyone else is gone,” said Brian.

Enrique peered up at him, grinned. “It’s all right. I’ll be here pretty late. I want to finish this,” he replied.

“All right. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow, Brian.”

Brian stepped out into the courtyard, headed for his truck. The only other vehicle left was Enrique’s car, reminding Brian how lonely and desolate the place could seem. A gust of wind howled through the open area, whisking around Brian, even buffeting him, whipping his hair and his clothes. He shut his eyes while holding a hand in front of his face.

A clanging behind him, and then a crash, caused Brian to jump. He spun around, saw a board from the scaffolding had shaken loose and smashed down onto the cobblestones. He stared down at it in shock, then peered up to the empty space from where it had fallen. He gazed back down at the board, splintered and broken on the cobblestones.

It had to be a coincidence. *It had to be.*

#

The moon was bright and full as it emerged from behind the clouds, casting an eerie, pale glow over the inn.

Enrique didn't take notice as he labored by the light of several work lamps. After everyone else had left that afternoon, he had decided to stay. He had already started laying the floor in the last upstairs bedroom, and he didn't want to stop until he was finished. That left him working into the evening hours. He wore pads on his knees and elbows, but the strain was getting to him. His neck, his back, his shoulders. The job required him to crouch on all fours as he laid the hardwood over the subfloor. Once a piece was in place, he would use a tapping block to make sure it fit snugly.

He was almost finished when the wind outside picked up and fluttered the plastic sheeting over the windows. At the same time, the bulbs in the work lamps buzzed and flickered. Enrique stopped what he was doing and peered around in alarm.

Through the windows, he heard the gas-powered generator falter. Its usual, droning hum fluctuated wildly before ultimately chugging to a stop. Without power, his work lamps blinked out, leaving him in the dark. Enrique straightened up to his knees. With the loss of the generator, the inn had been thrown into an unsettling silence. The only sounds were his own breathing and the occasional flutter of the plastic.

*Bong... bong... bong...*

Enrique took in a quick breath as the grandfather clock in the tavern started chiming. His mouth fell open, his eyes darting back and forth. The old clock couldn't possibly work. Yet he could hear it clear as day, the chimes floating up the stairs and into the second-floor hallway. Enrique rummaged around in the pocket of his overalls, located his phone, and whipped it out. His eyes widened when he saw the time. It was midnight exactly. As the last chime faded away,

he lowered his phone and stared blankly, not sure what to think of it. Twelve times. If he counted correctly. He was pretty sure the clock chimed twelve times.

*Boom.*

Enrique flinched, his head snapping around at a pounding noise from down in the tavern.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Enrique put away his phone and slipped a flashlight from his tool belt. He stole out into the hall, aiming the beam of his flashlight over the stop of the staircase.

*Boom. Boom. Boom...*

The pounding stopped, an eerie silence again falling over the tavern. Enrique stared hard into the spot his flashlight revealed—the bannister, the wall, just a portion of the floor—all caught within its circular beam. Everything else was darkness. He couldn't help but imagine some awful creature slinking into view from off the steps, its arms out, mouth hissing, as it loped toward him. Enrique closed his eyes tight, did his best to block out those ridiculous thoughts. Taking in a calming breath, he opened his eyes.

“Hello?” he called out. He crept toward the stairs, each step filled with dread. At the first sight of a pale, clawed hand, or an inhuman eye peeking around the corner, or the sound of a guttural hiss from the stairs, and he was going to run like mad back into the room and bolt the door. When Enrique reached the top, he peered fearfully around the corner, sweeping his flashlight over the staircase, and down into the tavern below. There was a stillness about the room, a cold silence, an awful emptiness.

The steps creaked under his weight as he started down. He was sure it was just his imagination, but sometimes the shadows appeared to move just outside the beam of his light. A

shiver ran down Enrique's spine. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched, that he wasn't alone.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

The tavern door shook on its hinges. Someone was pounding on it from outside! Enrique, having reached the bottom of the stairs, his foot having just hit the floor, pressed back against the wall the moment the pounding started. His light shot up, spotlighting the door, his heart racing.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

"Hello? Who's there? Brian?" Enrique shouted.

The banging stopped.

His chest heaving, Enrique shuffled toward the door. Perhaps someone had gotten stranded in the night and happened upon the inn? But then why wouldn't they answer? Enrique made it about halfway across the room when he heard the floorboards squeaking from upstairs, as though someone walking through the hall. He spun and stared up at the top of the steps, his flashlight shooting up as well. He could clearly hear a bedroom door slowly creaking open and then closed again.

"Hello? Who's up there? Hello?"

*Bang. Bang. Bang.* Enrique jumped and whirled around as the pounding on the door started up again. His eyes bulging in his head, he stared in disbelief as he watched the door shake each time it was struck. An oppressive cold enveloped him, chilled him to the bone, as white mist blew from his lips with each breath he exhaled. The temperature had dropped drastically in a matter of seconds. But how was that possible? *How could any of it be possible?*

*Bang. Bang. Bang.*

Enrique's flashlight flickered, the bulb inside flaring right before it *popped* and fizzled out. Scared out of his mind, his mist-filled breaths shot out loud and fast.

*Bang. Bang. Bang.*

He crept over to the door, his hand hovering, too fearful to open it. Gathering his courage, Enrique crossed himself, grabbed the handle, and flung the door wide.

The freezing wind blew in, and the very darkness seemed to roil around him, but there was no one there.

"Hello? Hello! Who's here?" he shouted.

Enrique's panicked cries echoed into the night air, but only the familiar, eerie silence answered back. He stepped outside, looked all around. The moon's bluish light shone down over the courtyard, revealing he was truly alone.

The moon shone down over the streets of Boston, its pale light casting a silent yet foreboding aura. Christopher Redding considered it a bad omen as he walked briskly, his hands shoved in his pockets. He had his head down, his hat concealing his face. Christopher had sensed he was being followed even before he heard the quick scuffle of feet from somewhere behind him. It seemed that whoever was pursuing him was trying to stay quiet, yet attempting to overtake him at the same time.

He detected movement just down the street in front of him, looked up to see three regulars heading his way. They were walking at a normal pace, but were spread out, blocking the road. All three of them carried muskets.

Christopher turned quickly down the alley to his left, tried to pretend he wasn't purposefully avoiding them. Deep down, he knew why they were there. *Why else would they be there? At this ungodly hour?* As soon as he was out of sight, Christopher started running, hit the next street, turned to his left.

He skidded to a stop. A whole squad of regulars filled the street. Captain D`abo stood in front of them, casually waiting. Christopher swallowed, his eyes darting back and forth. He backed away, turned around, but then was forced to stop again as the regulars he had seen earlier

emerged from the alley, cutting off any escape. It was then Christopher knew they had manipulated him into going exactly where they wanted him to.

He rotated slowly, met the eyes of Captain D`abo.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” he asked bravely.

“Calm under pressure. I like that,” said D`abo. He even managed to smile.

“What do you want?” responded Christopher, this time more brazen.

“Arrest him,” D`abo ordered his men, sounding almost bored.

As the soldiers stepped forward, Christopher yanked a flintlock pistol out of the pocket of his overcoat and cocked it. Most of the soldiers swiftly leveled their muskets, cocked back their own hammers, and prepared to fire. D`abo’s hand shot up, gesturing for his men to stop. He eyed Christopher with a modicum of respect.

“You can’t win,” D`abo said smoothly.

Christopher raised the barrel of the pistol to his temple.

“No!” D`abo shouted.

But Christopher was already pulling the trigger. The shot rang out, his head jerked to one side, and his body collapsed limply onto the cobblestones.

#

A blue sky with white, puffy clouds looked down over Bess and Elias. A forest clearing not far from the moor had become a frequent rendezvous point, a place to meet in anonymity and safety. The afternoons were the only time Bess could get away. She would take her favorite horse from the stable, telling her father she was going out for her daily ride. Once she was away, she would head directly to the clearing, where Elias would always be waiting for her. On that

particular day, they had spread a blanket over the grass to lounge upon. Bess lay next to Elias, her head on his chest, her eyes staring off into the trees.

“I feel safe here. In this place,” she murmured. “Away from everything. Maybe we could find a place just like this far away.” Bess looked up at him, stared into his eyes. “I want to leave, Elias. I want to leave and never return.

“What about your father?”

She laid her head back down on his chest, again staring thoughtfully. “I could tell him. I know he wouldn’t understand, but at least he would know. I hate keeping everything from him.”

“It would be a mistake to tell him,” said Elias. “The risk is too great. And I have already put you in enough danger.”

Bess drew silent for several long seconds. Finally, she spoke up again. “I worry.”

Elias hugged her close, bringing his mouth close to her ear. “I know.”

Bess sighed, closed her eyes tight. She knew she had to leave. Her father would be growing suspicious. She kissed Elias one last time, said her goodbyes, and then galloped back to the inn as fast as she could. When she rode into the stable, Timothy was already there brushing the other horses.

“Let me have him, I’ll tend to him,” he said. Bess hopped down and gave him the reins. She never noticed that he didn’t once look her in the eyes as he led the mare away. Bess hurried through the open stable door, strode across the courtyard and into the tavern. Her thoughts still on Elias, she was happy, her face glowing.

Nathaniel sat in a chair close to the fireplace. He had his head bowed, elbows on his knees, his hands clasped in front of him. He looked up as Bess entered, his countenance the exact opposite of hers.

“Where were you?” he asked sharply.

Bess hadn’t even seen him there. She stopped, a bit startled. “I was with a friend, Papa,” she replied.

Nathaniel sighed heavily. “What is a father supposed to think when his daughter lies to him continually?”

Her joyful expression vanished.

“You think I don’t know?” he snapped. “You think I’m blind? The nights when you scurry up to your room, always at the same time. Do you really think me such an ignorant, old fool?”

“Father, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Nathaniel pumped his arms and clenched his teeth angrily. “Enough! Do you know how much it break my heart every time I hear that clock strike twelve? The hour I know he comes to your window?”

“Father, please. You don’t understand.”

“After everything I’ve done! I helped him! I hid him at risk of everything! How dare he! How dare he!”

Bess shook her head. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“It’s obvious when you’ve been with him. I see it in your face. I see it in your eyes.”

“Then you know how much I love him!” Bess cried.

Nathaniel’s face turned red, livid. “You will never see him again.”

Tears had formed in the corners of Bess’ eyes as she stared pleadingly. “Please. I wanted to tell you. We thought it best that I didn’t. Please understand.”

“You will do as I say!” he bellowed. “I know you will hate me for a while, but it is the only way. In the end you’ll see. You’ll know that I am right.”

“No!” Bess sobbed. “I’ll leave first! We’ve already discussed it! We’ll leave together and never come back! You’ll be all by yourself, sad and alone!”

Nathaniel shot up from his chair, sending it crashing back into the wall behind him.

“Enough I said!”

Bess brushed the tears from her eyes as she ran up the stairs. She hurried into her room and slammed the door. From inside, her sobs drifted out into the hallway.

#

The familiar smells of alcohol and tobacco hit Elias as he stepped into The Green Dragon Tavern. He was dressed a little differently than usual, having replaced his old, floppy-brimmed military hat with a French-cocked tricorne. He wore a coat of claret velvet, and breeches of brown doe skin. Lace at his wrists and throat gave him the appearance of a real gentleman. No one would have ever suspected him of being anything other than that.

Paul was already waiting for him at their usual table. Elias sat down across from him, stared quietly. His usual, cheery expression had turned solemn.

“Have you heard the news?” asked Paul.

“I have.”

Paul leaned forward, folded his hands on the table. “The circle has been broken. We no longer number eight, but seven.”

“Christopher was a good man,” Elias said, keeping his voice low. There could be unwelcome eavesdroppers attempting to listen in, so they had to remain cautious.

Paul pressed his lips together as he nodded sadly. “Yes, he was. And he was the very best at gathering information. He simply knew too much to let them take him. So he made sure they didn’t. I doubt he will be the last of us to fall before it is all said and done.”

“I fear you’re right,” said Elias.

“He did impart one last bit of information before his death.” Paul took out a folded piece of paper from his coat and slid it across the table.

Elias placed his hand over it, eyeing the paper for only a moment before his gaze shot back up to Paul.

“This is the most important one yet,” said Paul. “Greater than all the others combined. If you are successful, it will change everything. Everything.” Paul’s face turned even more serious as he leaned forward and stared hard right at Elias. “Do you have one more mission in you?”

Elias picked up the paper, unfolded it. His eyes scanned over it.

“The route is isolated. They believe they will be traveling in secret, so they won’t be suspecting trouble,” Paul explained.

Elias, sensing there was more to it, lowered the paper and eyed Paul expectantly.

“It will be well guarded,” continued Paul, his gaze never wavering. “But I am confident a man of your talents can overcome that. If you refuse, I will understand.”

Elias held his gaze as he deliberated. “This is the last one,” he said at last.

Paul nodded, expecting as much. “The drop off point is a farmhouse just outside of Boston. Put the directions to memory, and then burn the paper.”

“Of course,” replied Elias.

“After this, the circle will vanish to history. We will not meet again.”

“Then it has been an honor,” said Elias.

“For me as well,” replied Paul.

A small, respectful grin formed on Elias’ lips. Then he rose up from his chair. He had already slipped the paper into his inner breast pocket before he walked out the tavern door.

#

From atop the hill, the inn stood out as a black silhouette against the night sky. Gusts of wind blew through the surrounding fields, sweeping the long stalks of grass like dark waves on the ocean. What few trees there were swayed back and forth, their barren, winter branches creaking and groaning.

The moon seemed to sail across the sky, an illusion brought on by drifting clouds. Bathed in those ethereal rays, the white road was just a ribbon of moonlight that looped the purple moor.

The rumble of hooves. The neighing of a horse. Chunks of earth and gravel flung up into the air as Elias’ stallion galloped over the top of the hill. Staying low in the saddle, Elias’ cloak fanned out behind him as he raced down toward the inn. He drove the horse with his whip, his actions urgent, determined. He was little more than a shrouded figure atop his shadowy mount, yet his pistol butts twinkled, his rapier hilt twinkled, under the jeweled sky. Crossing the bridge and entering the courtyard, the horse’s hooves clapped over the cobblestones.

In the dark of the tavern, Nathaniel sat in his chair beside the fireplace. He had his elbows braced upon his knees, his head bowed in his hands. The clap of hooves from outside carried easily to his ears. And only pale moonlight illuminated Nathaniel’s anguished face as he peered up just in time to see the clock strike twelve.

*Bong... bong... bong...*

A series of hollow, echoing chimes leapt from the bowels of the lacquered casement. Nathaniel stared, eyes glazed and unblinking.

Elias pulled his horse beneath the corner window. He steadied the animal before leaning forward in the saddle. There was no candlelight in the window to greet him, and all the shutters were locked and barred. So Elias tapped on the shutters with his whip, but received no answer. His horse bucked its head and stomped in place, perhaps sensing his owner's distress.

With his gaze fixed on the window above him, Elias whistled a tune into the cold night air. A moment later, the shutters opened and Bess appeared, a smile spreading over her face as she peered down at him. She was plaiting a red ribbon into her hair, tying it into a love-knot just for him. Elias returned her smile the moment their eyes met.

A wicket creaked from inside the darkened stable. Timothy emerged from the gloom, the clopping of the stallion's hooves having alerted him. He opened the main stable door to just a crack. Pressing his face up to it, he had a limited view of the courtyard.

Timothy caught a breath and held it when he spied Bess. Beautiful and vibrant, her red lips forming a perfect smile. Timothy cocked his ear as Elias spoke. From Timothy's vantage point, his words were low, almost a murmur.

"One kiss, my bonny sweetheart."

Bess' beautiful face twisted in confusion. "Just one?"

"Yes. I'm after a prize tonight," said Elias.

"Is that prize not me?" Bess asked with disappointment.

Elias grinned. "It is not comparable to you, Bess. But I must have it... and I must leave now if I am to attain it."

Bess shook her head, her bewilderment growing. "You must come up," she insisted.

The horse swaying beneath him, Elias kept his eyes on her as he responded. "I wish I could, but I have to leave. I wanted to see you first... for luck."

Bess' voice was fraught with dismay. "I don't understand."

"You will."

"Please don't go."

"Listen to me. I should return before morning. But if I am unable, if they press me sharply, and harry me through the day, then I'll come at night," Elias explained quickly. "Look for me by the moonlight."

"Elias..."

"Don't be afraid. If not at dawn, then I'll come at night, but no matter what I *will* come," he assured her.

"The morning is too far away."

"This is something I must do. And I must leave now. Forgive me." Elias could feel her anguish, and could see his words had done little to soothe her.

"I'm afraid I will never see you again," moaned Bess.

Elias gazed up at her confidently. "Nonsense. I'll return, I promise, even if Hell should bar the way."

Bringing his horse about, he stood upright in the stirrups. He extended his hand as high as he could, but he could barely touch her fingers. Bess reached back and loosened the red ribbon, letting her long, black hair tumble down to him. The scent of rose petals and jasmine enveloped him, and Elias kissed those soft, dark waves. At the same time, his fingers grasped the red ribbon that was dangling down within his reach. Bess let go of it, letting him have it.

Timothy watched it all by the moonlight. Saw Elias kiss those sweet, black waves in the moonlight. Then saw Elias tug at his reins in the moonlight, and spur his horse to the west. Bess, still leaning out the window, watched him leave with a heavy heart.

The swift, departing drum of the stallion's hooves echoed through the courtyard. As Elias galloped over the bridge and off into the night, in one hand he still clutched Bess' red ribbon.

The red ribbon slid between Kelli's fingers. She paused, for the first time taking particular note of it. How intriguing that the bookmark sewn into the novel would be a red ribbon, and that the end of it would be fashioned into the shape of a love knot. She had never noticed that before. Surely it was purposeful, and not merely a coincidence?

She sat the novel down on her dresser, stared into the mirror. She had been crying, her eyes still a little red and puffy. Her argument with Brian still fresh in her head, she reached over and picked up their wedding picture. In it, she was happy and smiling. And Brian had looked so handsome in his suit. But at the moment she was still mad at him.

"Dumbass," she muttered, before placing the picture back on the dresser. Her cell phone rang. She picked it up, saw it was Thad. She accepted the call, brought it up to her ear.

"Hey Thad."

Her expression soured as Thad erupted into a maelstrom of chatter. Kelli struggled to understand what he was saying at first, but it all sunk in soon enough.

"Wait. Slow down. Thad. What? Brian did what? He did what!"

#

The trowel scraped over the crack, covering it with a smear of drywall mud. Brian had hit his stride, having hung the whole upper hallway with sheetrock. Trowel in one hand, a mud pan in the other, he had already “taped” most of them when Kelli entered the hall from the stairs. She looked furious, but Brian didn’t notice. He saw her out of the corner of his eye, glanced over at her, then focused back onto his work.

“Where have you been? Enrique quit. Called me before I left this morning. He sounded strange.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Kelli growled.

Brian looked over at her, finally saw her expression. He grimaced. “You spoke to Thad?”

“Yeah, I spoke to Thad. I had to talk him out of pressing charges.”

Brian sniffed. “He squealed on me. What a shock. Thad. Even his name screams ‘I’m a douche.’”

His response only made Kelli angrier. “You’re unbelievable. So what did you do? Wait for me to leave the store so you could confront him? Were you spying on me?”

“Pssh. No. What do you see in that guy anyway? You never liked that type before.”

“What type?”

“You know. Big brain, small everywhere else.”

“Brian, he’s just helping me with research on the book. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“I can see why you get along with him. He’s a male version of you. You’ve always loved yourself more than anyone else. It makes perfect sense.”

Kelli shook her head in exasperation. “Why do you say things like that? You have to know how much it hurts me.” Her voice cracked as she was finishing.

Brian's jaw tightened, his lips drawing up. "Because when I get hit, I hit back. All right? The nagging. The complaining. The manipulating. Anything to get your way. If your mother was anything like you, it's no wonder your father was an alcoholic."

Kelli stared, so infuriated and wounded that several seconds passed before she could even speak. "I can't take this anymore! The fighting. The lashing out. This was never us! I miss Adam, too. All right? I know what you're going through. I was there."

Brian looked away, unable to find the words to respond.

"Please just talk to me. I can't help you if you won't even try to help yourself. You keep pushing me away. You've pushed everyone away."

He spun his head toward her, his face tense. "Pushed you away? I'm right here. Neck deep in a mess you created. Like I always am. We shouldn't be here, Kelli. Just like Adam shouldn't have been there."

Kelli's mouth fell open, her eyes growing large. "You blame me?" she gasped.

Brian didn't answer, instead avoiding her gaze. Barely able to hold back tears, Kelli's face trembled with anger. She picked up a paint roller off the floor, reared back and hurled it at him. Brian ducked it, the roller smacking the wall and then clattering over the floor. He held out his arms as if surprised by her reaction.

"That's it! Enough! You don't have to worry about me being such a burden anymore!" Kelli shouted.

"What are you talking about?"

"I want a divorce! We both know it's been a long time in coming!"

"Kelli... I was just..."

“No, you’re right. It’s time I start living in reality. I’m sorry I actually wanted to believe in us.”

Brian studied Kelli. Her glaring eyes. Tight lips. Jutting chin. He nodded and turned back to his work with a sneer.

“Fine.”

Kelli snorted in disgust. Devastated, she spun away from him. Brian felt ashamed as she hurried down the hall, turned the corner. Her heard her feet thump down the stairs. A few seconds later the tavern door slammed shut. Brian looked down with his hands on his hips. After a moment, he angrily punched the drywall, leaving a gaping hole.

#

Kelli strode purposefully toward the cliffs. As she neared the edge, she twisted her wedding ring off her finger and held it up, ready to hurl it over.

But she couldn’t bring herself to do it. She lowered her arm, decided to slip the ring back onto her finger. But the shank caught on her fingertip, and she fumbled it away. The ring landed at the lip of the cliff and bounced over the edge.

Kelli made a grab for it, lurching down, her hand slapping over a patch of grass and dirt. But it was too late. Now on all fours, she stared in shock, her mouth agape. Slowly, carefully, Kelli peered over the edge. The ring had found a resting spot several feet down on a narrow ledge, the white gold gleaming in the sunlight. Kelli stared helplessly, until her anxious expression transformed into one of indifference.

“Good riddance,” she said under her breath. Then she got up and walked away, leaving the ring behind.

#

Brian sat in his truck, his phone to his ear. After several rings, he was once again greeted by Kelli's voicemail.

"Kelli, please answer your phone. Call me back when you get this."

Frowning, Brian ended the call. Then he threw open the door, hopped out, slammed it shut. He walked across a sidewalk, then headed up a set of concrete steps that was cracked in two places. Reaching a landing, he saw another set of steps just ahead of him. They led up to a quintessential, Bostonian apartment building. Brian made his way to it, knocked on the door. He shoved his hands into his coat pockets as he waited. When no one answered, he tried knocking again, and this time he heard footsteps approaching. A few seconds later, the door opened just wide enough to reveal Jack's face.

"Brian?"

"Hey Jack. Can I come in?"

"Yeah. Yeah I guess so."

Jack opened the door all the way. Brian stepped inside and closed the door behind him. When he turned around, he found himself in a small living room. Jack had already shuffled over and sat down in a recliner.

"You can have a seat if you like," Jack said.

"Thanks."

Brian plopped down onto a couch against the wall. He noticed Jack seemed a little tense, his face rigid, his hands gripping the arms of his chair.

"So what brings you by?" Jack asked, trying to hide the suspicion in his voice.

"Oh, just wanted to talk," Brian replied. "Enrique quit today."

"Oh yeah?"

“It was strange. It’s like something spooked him.”

Jack stared, then swallowed. “He said that?”

Brian shook his head. “No. He didn’t have to. I could hear it in his voice. I think something happened to him at the inn. The way you drove off like a bat out of hell, I think something happened to you, too.”

Jack turned his head down, his eyes darting back and forth. After a moment he finally spoke. “There’s something not right about that place.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes... especially when I was in the cellar... I would experience things. Weird shadows. Noises. Just passed it off at first. But that day you saw me...” Jack shook his head, hesitant to continue.

“What?” pressed Brian.

“That morning I arrived before anyone else, so I figured I would start bringing paint cans into the tavern. At one point I heard footsteps in the upstairs hallway, and one of the doors creaked open and then closed. Someone was up there.”

“And that’s what scared you?”

Jack again shook his head. “No. At first I figured it was you or Kelli. Maybe one of you had dropped the other off or something. I called out, but didn’t get an answer. I was looking up at the top of the stairs when it happened.”

Jack was tentative to continue, so Brian prodded him. “*What* happened?”

“Someone grabbed my shoulder from behind, hard enough to turn me around. But there was no one there.”

Brian stared quietly.

“I know what you’re thinking, but I’m telling you the truth. Even before it happened, I sensed something. Like I wasn’t alone. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing up so hard it almost hurt. Man, I tore out of there, ran right to my truck. Wasn’t about to ever go back.”

Brian swallowed, not sure how to respond. Though tense, he still appeared skeptical. “You don’t think it was just your imagination?”

Jack leaned forward in his chair. “I know it wasn’t. Listen man, I’m sorry for quitting like I did. It wasn’t true when I said I got another job. There’s just no way I’m going back there. Since that day I’ve barely slept. I jump at every sound. When I do sleep, I have nightmares. There’s just something not right about that place.”

Brian’s face turned white. “That’s exactly what Kelli said. Almost word for word.”

“Then maybe you should talk to her.”

Brian snorted. “I wish I could.”

Jack cocked his head, confused, but quickly passed it off. “Don’t mean to cut this short or anything, brother, but I got something in the oven. Don’t want to burn it.”

“No. No. I understand. Hey thanks for talking to me.”

“Of course,” said Jack. “Next time a job opens up let me know. I’ll be there. I promise. Just not that place.”

“Yeah. I’ll remember that,” said Brian.

He left Jack’s apartment even more unsettled than when he had arrived. Surely there was a logical explanation for what Jack thought he had experienced? But Brian couldn’t shake the memories slinking around in the back of his own mind. A shadow on the wall that couldn’t be explained. The sounds of movement behind him, only to see that no one was there. And then of course there was Adam’s bear. Somehow. In the middle of the cellar floor.

Shifting shadows. Paranoia. Imagination. Surely that's all it was? Brian decided to call Malcolm, and they agreed to meet at their favorite local dive. They talked over a couple of beers, and to Brian's surprise, he found Malcolm more open to a supernatural explanation than he would have expected.

"Maybe the place is haunted?" he suggested flatly.

"Have you ever experienced anything while you were there?" Brian asked.

Malcolm shrugged one shoulder. "No. I've gotten an eerie vibe from that place, but that's just what old buildings do to you. Of course, I've never been there alone, either."

Brian took a gulp from his bottle, sighed. "Honestly, I don't know what to do."

"Tell you what," said Malcolm, slapping the tabletop. "I'm going to call a friend of mine. His name's Dorian. He's real sensitive to these kinds of things."

Brian crinkled his nose. "You mean, like, emotional?"

"No. I mean he can sense shit. Spiritual imprints. That sort of thing. Been doing it for years. Claims he's even seen a couple of apparitions."

"Are you being serious?"

"No joke, man. He's good at it. At least he says he is."

"Well at this point I'm willing to try about anything," said Brian.

"Maybe tell Kelli. She might want to come, too."

Brian grimaced. "We're not on speaking terms at the moment."

Malcolm dropped his shoulders. "What did you do?"

"We got in an argument at the inn. She stormed out. When I decided to go after her... I caught sight of her through one of the windows. I watched her drop her wedding ring over the cliffs in the back. She didn't seem too upset about it either."

“Really?”

“Yeah. Right over the edge. And I think our marriage went down with it.”

“Maybe you should try to call her?”

“Already have, but I guess one more try wouldn’t hurt.”

Brian took out his phone and tapped Kelli’s number.

#

The cemetery was bleak, the sky grey, the ground cold beneath her. Kelli sat cross-legged in front of Adam’s gravestone, her eyes soft and full of sentiment. She was singing, her voice sweet, yet sad.

“Hush little baby don’t say a word. Mommy’s going to buy you a mocking bird. And if that mocking bird don’t sing, Mommy’s going to buy you a diamond ring...”

Kelli’s purse and phone lay on the ground next to her. She had the phone on mute, and never noticed as Brian’s call came in. The screen lit up for several seconds before finally going dark again.

“And if that diamond ring turns brass, Mommy’s gonna buy you a looking glass. And if that looking glass gets broke, Mommy’s gonna buy you a billy goat.”

The song had been Adam’s favorite. Kelli had often sung it to him when he was a baby to get him to fall asleep. She had hoped it might help soothe the raw state she was in, but instead she felt a profound sadness welling up inside her—to the point she found it hard to keep going. Her voice cracked as she sang the next verse.

“And if that billy goat don’t pull, Momma’s gonna buy you a cart and—”

Kelli stopped as a fluttering caught her eye. She snapped her head around to see a large crow perched atop the adjacent gravestone. It cawed piercingly as it swiveled its head from side

to side. Kelli stared, a little startled at its proximity. She took in its glistening feathers, it's large, black beak. Again, the crow fluttered and opened its mouth.

*Caw. Caw.*

#

The three of them walked across the side yard of the inn. Brian had come alone. Malcolm had arrived with his friend, Dorian Price. Though Brian had never heard of him, Dorian was actually a minor celebrity in the Boston area, at least within the ghost hunting community. Dorian piqued Brian's curiosity from the moment he met him. He was maybe five-nine, slender build, wearing a dark sweater and slacks. Clean shaven, he had retained a youthful appearance beyond his years. He was friendly enough, if not a little extravagant. Dorian wanted to get a layout of the land before they entered the inn, so they had decided to walk around the whole of the property. Dorian stopped when they had a clear view of the cliffs.

"Over there," he said, pointing.

Both Brian and Malcom looked over to where the cliffs ran out into open sky, but they couldn't see what he was referring to.

Dorian closed his eyes, concentrated. Then he opened them again, staring over at the exact same spot. He saw a human form against the sun, what looked to be a man with his arms straight out at his sides.

"I see a silhouette of a man," Dorian said softly.

"Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do the fandango?" Brian joked.

"Man, come on," chided Malcolm.

"Sorry," Brian said sheepishly. Up to that point he wasn't buying it.

Dorian acted as though he hadn't heard him. He lifted his hand in front of his face, as if shielding his eyes. "He's standing against the sun."

Brian peered over his shoulder, confused. The sun was setting behind them to the west. "Sun's over there," he remarked.

"It happened in the morning. The sun was coming up over the ocean. He has messy hair. Blonde, I think. He's leaning forward, slowly, like he wants to fall. Despondent. Heart-sick. Ashamed. His emotions are so strong. I can feel them. He can't face it anymore. He's going to throw himself over the edge. Into the sea..."

Dorian's whole body jumped as he snapped out of it, and he took in a deep breath. Brian still appeared skeptical, while Malcolm seemed more fascinated than ever.

"What happened?" Malcolm asked breathlessly.

"He's gone," Dorian replied quietly. "He went over the edge, I think. By what he was wearing, it happened a long time ago."

"You mean like the seventies?" cracked Brian.

"If you mean the seventeen seventies," replied Dorian.

"The inn was first built back in the seventeen-hundreds," offered Malcolm.

"I don't doubt that at all," said Dorian, a bit arrogantly. He rotated, regarded the inn.

"Now, let's see what we can find inside." As they walked toward the structure, a single crow on the roof began to caw, its piercing cry carrying in the open air.

"Look at the size of that thing. Weird that it would be out here this time of year," said Malcolm.

“Legends date back to ancient times describing crows as messengers of death, or intermediaries between the living and the dead,” Dorian remarked, his voice taking on an overly serious tone.

“Or maybe it’s just a crow on the roof?” Brian suggested glibly.

Dorian turned to Brian. “While inside the inn, have you ever experienced electrical fluctuations, or maybe cold spots?”

“Uh, no. I don’t think so. Not really.”

As they reached the courtyard, Dorian stopped abruptly—like he had hit an invisible barrier. He raised his hands out in front of him, and a breath shot from his lips. “There is tragedy here. A great sadness. It permeates this whole place from the ground up.” Dorian stretched out one hand as far as he could, bowed his head and closed his eyes tight. “I can also sense frustration, intense anger.”

“I think you’re just sensing me,” Brian quipped.

Again, Dorian acted like he hadn’t heard him. “Something is trying to reach, but in vain. This place acts as a conduit. It lost its potency when you gutted it, but now that you’ve built it back up... its energy has returned. It’s growing stronger every day.” His hand still out, he opened his eyes and stared off into space. “I’m sorry. I can’t go any further.”

Brian balked. “What, are you serious?”

“Yes. There’s too much pain here. It’s been festering for years. Maybe centuries. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

All three of them looked up at the inn. It had never appeared more ominous.

“But you guys drove all the way out here,” said Brian.

Dorian had already spun on his heel and was returning to Malcolm's car. "And now we're going to drive all the way back," he said over his shoulder.

"Oh, come on," called Brian. "I'm sorry I was so sarcastic. It's just my nature."

Dorian stopped, turned around and looked at him. "That's not it. I've grown accustomed to those who don't believe." He pointed back at the inn. "What I feel in that place is crushing. If I were to step inside, I don't think I could endure it. You want my advice? Bulldoze the whole thing to the ground. Maybe you'll free whatever's inside there."

With that, Dorian walked to the car, climbed into the passenger seat, and waited patiently for Malcolm. Brian stared silently, dumbfounded. He peered over at Malcolm.

"So that's it?"

"Apparently so," replied Malcolm. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. The guy's clearly off his meds or something."

"No. I mean I'm sorry, but I can't work with you on this anymore. Not after what Dorian just said. In fact, I think you should forget about it, too. I've never seen him like this."

"What? I can't just forget it. Everything we have is sunk into this place."

Malcolm started walking backwards as he threw out his arms. "Wives, man. That's why I'm never getting married."

"Wait, Malcolm. You can't leave."

"Yes I can. And you should, too. But if you do decide to finish the renovation, all that's left is cosmetic stuff. You and Kelli should be able to handle that."

"Kelli and I aren't even on speaking terms!"

Malcolm had reached his car at that point. "I guess you're just going to have to figure out a way to get around that!" he shouted back.

“How do I do that?” Brian yelled. “She won’t even talk to me!”

Malcolm opened the car door. “Maybe instead of trying to talk to her, you should try showing her!” he suggested.

“What? Malcolm!”

Malcolm merely waved and climbed into the car. Brian flung up his hands as Malcolm started the ignition. He threw his car into reverse, turned sharply, and then drove away. Brian wheeled around, stared up at the inn looming before him. It’s dark, empty windows. Its gabled roof against the grey sky. His imagination got the better of him, and a tingle ran down his spine as the hairs on his arms and on the back of his neck stood on end. In that moment, he couldn’t help but wonder if the things Dorian had said weren’t so farfetched. In any case, after that, he wasn’t about to enter the inn alone.

As Brian drove home, he again tried to call Kelli, and again she didn’t answer. He frowned and plopped his phone down on the console. The sun had gone down by that time, and the open stretch of wilderness around him was pitch dark. Brian’s headlights cut through the night just enough to reveal the road in front of him, the overhanging trees limbs just stark, black shapes in the darkness...

The road cut through a thick woodland, the overhanging limbs just jagged, black shapes against the night sky. Elias rode hard beneath them, the hooves of his stallion thundering over the ground. He had donned his robber's mask and his floppy-brimmed hat. His pistol butts protruded out of the front of his belt, and his rapier hung at his side. The rest of his body was hidden under a dark cloak that fluttered behind him as he rode.

Elias reached a large bend in the highway, with a dense forest on either side. He slowed his horse, looked around, and then urged it off the road. With his dark attire, and stallion's black coat, the two of them vanished into the deep shadows.

The cold December air was already starting to creep in, and Elias knew it was only going to get worse as the night drew on. Having picked a spot next to a large sycamore tree, Elias huddled down into his cloak, pulled the brim of his hat low over his face, and waited.

#

Bess plodded slowly down the stairs, her fingers gliding over the railing. Deep in thought, she would pause after every step. When she finally reached the bottom, her eyes flicked up, her gaze meeting her father's. He stood at the bar with several bottles in front of him. He held a glass down in front of him, filled with an ochre-colored liquid. Bess suspected he was drinking

a *stone fence*, a bracing concoction of cider and rum. She had fixed it for him on many occasions. Drop two ounces of dark rum in a glass, then simply top it with hard cider—preferably one with a touch of residual sweetness. It was one of his favorites, but Bess was more concerned about why he was drinking so late, or why he was up at all. She gazed over at the clock to see it was well past one in the morning.

“Father, why are you still up?”

Nathaniel set down his glass, peered over at her with a somber stare. “I couldn’t sleep,” is all he said. His eyes were red, his words a bit slurred.

She looked him up and down, her expression troubled. “I couldn’t either,” she replied.

Nathaniel nodded, turned his eyes back down at the bar. “I’ll be leaving in the morning. Be gone most of the day. You’ll be fine here by yourself?”

“You know I will,” she answered.

Again, he nodded. He sighed, picked up his glass, and downed the rest of it. Then he plunked it back down on the bar and shuffled off. He disappeared into the side hallway, and soon Bess heard his bedroom door open and shut. She stepped over to the bar, about to clean up the mess he left behind, when she caught movement out of the corner of her eye. She yelped and spun halfway around.

Timothy stood just a few feet away, his arms burdened with a stack of firewood. Bess hadn’t seen him lurking in the shadows. She threw a hand up to her chest.

“Timothy. I didn’t see you there.”

“I... I’m sorry, Bess,” he stammered. Timothy didn’t look at her as he spoke. Instead, his eyes seemed to shift everywhere but onto her.

“What are you doing?” asked Bess.

“Your father insisted I bring in more firewood. I could have just done it in the morning, but he was...”

“Adamant?” said Bess, finishing his sentence.

“Yes,” he answered awkwardly. He still couldn’t look her in the eye.

“I understand,” said Bess. “Well, good night to you.”

“Good night.”

Bess had already turned to walk back up the stairs before Timothy had finished speaking. He watched her go, an anguished grimace on his face. Had she even heard him? It seemed she couldn’t get away from him fast enough, at least in his mind. Timothy rushed over and dumped the firewood beside the hearth. Then he hurried into his room and forcefully shut the door. He was muttering, his eyes hollows of madness, his face eerily contorted in the orange light of his desk lamp. He paced about the room, gripped the sides of his head, yanked at his hair.

*She didn’t even see me, he thought. Didn’t even know I was there. He clenched his fists out in front of him, then angrily flung them down at his sides. She never sees me! His teeth gritted together, his frown transforming into a snarl. Why didn’t you say anything to her? Why can you never say anything?* He flopped down onto his bed, his head bowed in his hands.

*Because she still wouldn’t look at you. Not like she looks at him. Not like she looks at Elias!*

*Can you fetch my horse? Muck the stable? Stoke the fire? Can you spare a candle?*

*Fetch your own horse! Muck out your own stable! Stoke your own fire! You have two working hands! And no, I can’t spare a candle! Why did I give one to you?*

*You know why. You’d give me anything. You would do anything. Just to get another glimpse at me.*

*Yes, you would take anything and not look twice at me. I'm nothing to you. You're only there when you need something from me! Otherwise you don't even notice me!*

*But you see me, don't you? All the time. I see you staring at me. Watching. You should be ashamed of yourself.*

*Don't you say that to me! You're the one who should be ashamed! I know why you place a candle on your sill. I know how desperately you wait for him! I know the exact time he comes to your window! And I know what you've done with him in that room! I've heard you!*

*You like listening, don't you? You vile, pitiful little boy.*

*Stop it! I've seen him ravish you in the clearing where you meet daily! When you thought no one could see you! That's right! I know where you go on your daily rides!*

*Yet you would take his place in a second if you could. How sad! How pathetic! How pathetic you are, Timothy!*

*Stop! Shut up! Shut your mouth!*

Timothy shot up, scooted out his desk chair and collapsed into it. He picked up his quill, dabbed it into the ink. He wrote furiously, the quill's tip scratching. Scraping. He spoke what he wrote in a low, rambling whisper. Passionate. Intense. Muttering. Murmuring. Babbling. He filled two pages before he finally stopped, his hand cramping, his frustration, his muse, finally appeased. His head dropped, his shoulders slumped, his arms went limp. He was spent.

Slowly, Timothy reached out, took the glass top from his lamp. He blew out the flame, throwing the room into darkness.

#

More than an hour had dragged by when Elias perked up. The faint beat of hooves, the clatter of wheels, carried through the still, night air. The clamor grew louder and louder until a

coach appeared around the bend, drawn by two black horses. Elias glimpsed them through the trees, the driver constantly snapping his whip, forcing the horses to an almost reckless pace. A guard sat next to the driver on the bench, a blunderbuss in his hands. Both men were jostled in their seat as the coach shook and clattered over the bumpy road.

From what Elias could see of the coach, it had no openings. Solid oak paneling had been riveted over the doors and windows, reinforced by iron framework, making the coach a virtual moving fortress. The only way in were through doors in the back, both securely bolted and locked. Elias knew that much from the information he had been given.

As soon as the coach rumbled past his hiding spot, Elias spurred his horse into a gallop. He shot from the woods, spraying leaves and snapping limbs as he burst onto the road. In one hand Elias held a grappling hook. It had an eye at one end, where he had looped a thick rope. Elias had tied the other end of the rope around the huge base of the sycamore tree. Most of its slack lay in a heap on the ground, like a great, hissing snake, quickly uncoiling as Elias raced after his target.

The coach was just a black, rumbling shape before him, most of its details lost in the dark of night. Elias stayed low as he kicked his spurs, pushing his horse as hard as he could.

Faster and faster the rope uncoiled, until it was almost depleted. But Elias remained calm. Leaning to one side, he just managed to hook the grappling onto the rear axle, then veered his horse safely away. The guard on the bench heard the clang of metal on metal, looked back to see Elias riding behind them. He cocked his blunderbuss, brought it up to fire.

Before he could pull the trigger, the rope snapped taut. The coach lurched violently, flinging the guard and the driver clear of the bench. With a sharp *crack* the axle broke free, the back end of the coach scraping along the road as the horses continued to pull it.

As Elias rode up, he saw the guard and the driver lying motionless at the side of the road. His hand dropped instinctively to the handle of his pistol before he realized they were both unconscious. Smiling, Elias shook his reins, urging his stallion after the driverless coach.

He came upon the coach just a little distance down the road. Both horses had stopped, unwilling to drag it any further. Elias hopped out of the saddle and drew his blunderbuss from its holster. Approaching the back of the coach, he saw that the doors had been bolted shut with a large, iron padlock. Elias took a step to the side to be clear of any ricochet, then he raised his blunderbuss and pulled the trigger.

In a cloud of smoke, the padlock burst apart and dangled from the latch. Elias yanked it away, unbolted the doors, threw them open. The moonlight revealed a single chest sitting inside. It was a stout thing, made of sturdy oak, with a latch at the front that was clasped with a second, less intimidating padlock. Elias drew his pistol and fired into it, and the body of the lock fell away from its shackle. Elias removed the remnant and anxiously flung back the lid. His eyes lit up when he saw the chest was filled with gold bullion. He dipped his hands into the pile, laughing out loud as he let the coins pour through his fingers. They twinkled in the moonlight as they fell clinking and jingling back into the chest.

Elias reached up, shut the lid hard, the latch rattling.

The latch rattled as Brian lifted it. Then he threw open the lid to his toolbox. He reached inside, fished around before taking out a roll of twine, a nail, and a tube of epoxy. The label on the side of the tube read: *Sticky Putty*.

Brian shut the tool box, which he had stored in the back of his truck. Sitting on the open tailgate, Brian stuck a glob of the putty onto the tip of the nail. After that, he tied one end of the twine to the nail's head. Satisfied with the results, he hopped down and walked toward the cliffs behind the inn.

When he reached the edge, he dropped to his stomach and peered over. His eyes searched around before he spotted Kelli's ring on a narrow outcrop below, a metallic circle gleaming in the sunlight. He grinned, then dangled his homemade contraption over the precipice. He lowered it slowly, letting the twine slide through his fingers. The putty bounced off the side of the cliff on its way down, began to spin and sway out of control. Brian let it calm down, then tried his best to drop the putty right onto the ring. He missed just to the right, catching his breath when he saw the ring move a little. A simple bump could send it plummeting into the ocean below, where it would be lost forever.

Gently, he lifted up, gauged the path of the swaying glob, then let it plop down once more. It dropped right onto the ring. Chuckling proudly, Brian pulled the twine up hand over hand. The ring, adhering to the bottom of the glob, came up with it.

#

Kelli's phone came to life, buzzing, jingling. She strolled into her bedroom and plucked it off the dresser, brought it up to see Brian was calling. She huffed in annoyance, then quickly flipped through the recent call history to see she had missed ten calls and four voicemails, every one of them from him. She didn't think twice before deleting all of them.

Kelli picked up her purse, stuffed her phone into it, and slung the purse over her shoulder. She was about to leave when their wedding picture caught her eye. Regarding it for only a moment, she snatched it up and dumped it into the small trash can beside the dresser. She heard the glass break, but didn't seem to care as she walked out the door.

Kelli drove out to the Boston Public Library, a beautiful, palatial building that boasted over twenty-four million volumes. It was the third-largest public library in the United States, behind only the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library. The librarian on duty gave Kelli a perplexed look when she asked for everything they had on Alfred Wheeler.

The librarian started her off with several biographies, telling her she would be happy to locate all of Wheeler's works if she really needed them. The first thing Kelli noticed was that there wasn't a single book that dealt specifically with Alfred Wheeler. His biography could only be found in books that covered various authors. She soon realized, because there was so little known about him, that there simply wasn't enough information to fill a whole book.

Kelli tapped her finger in frustration as she read the paltry snippet in the fourth and final book she had been given. The description sounded annoying similar to the previous three she had

just read. Kelli spoke quickly, similar to checking off a laundry list, her voice bored, her eyes glazed over.

“Alfred Wheeler was thought to have been born around seventeen-fifty-five, though that is just an estimation. Official records on the author have never been located. He burst onto the literary scene with his first novel, titled: ‘The Man Who Loved Her.’ He wrote four novels altogether, plus one book of poetry.”

Kelli looked up, waved down the librarian who was passing by. “Excuse me, ma’am.”

The librarian stopped, forced out a smile. “Yes?”

“Is this all there is?”

“Biography wise, I’m afraid so,” said the librarian. “I know it’s not much. We get college students in here from time to time wanting to do a research paper on Alfred Wheeler. They almost always change their minds and switch to someone else. There just isn’t a lot of information about him. We do have all of his works here. I can get them for you if you like?”

“Could you please?” asked Kelli.

“Of course,” replied the librarian.

As the librarian walked off, Kelli kept reading the bio snippet in the same monotone voice. “All of Alfred Wheeler’s novels were tragedies revolving around a man who loses the love of his life. Associates and fellow writers claimed that Wheeler, though likeable enough, was a bit odd. He was a recluse, living in Boston for a short period of time, before moving out to the countryside. From all accounts, he never married. Very few people even knew what he looked like. Alfred Wheeler vanished as quickly as he had come onto the scene. To this day, no one knows what happened to him, or where he’s even buried.”

Before long, the librarian returned with a stack of five books.

“Thank you,” said Kelli.

She shuffled through them. The top four were the novels Alfred Wheeler had written, all of them reprints dating from the sixties to the nineties. *The Man Who Loved Her*, *The Long Walk*, *In the Moonlight*, and *Annabelle*. It was the bottom book that intrigued Kelli the most, a volume of poetry titled *Shadows in the Dark*. She skimmed through it, stopping on a poem that caught her attention. She read several verses out loud.

“What brittle bones lay in silent repose? What time worn sadness lies beneath these rows? And after the final, whispering breath, is there a love so powerful to transcend death?”

Kelli sat back in her chair and contemplated what she had just read. Then she uttered softly, “Transcend death?”

#

Brian fumbled with the cord, cursing under his breath as it slipped out of his fingers. He was trying to tie it around a white gift box, but just couldn't seem to keep hold of it. He had recalled the novel sitting on Kelli's nightstand, the bookmark ribbon hanging out of it. The end of it had been made to look like a Celtic love knot. So Brian had searched the internet on his phone on how to tie a love knot. Unfortunately, it wasn't as easy as he had hoped it would be. Even after he had propped up the phone, the instructions were hard to follow on such a little screen. That made what he was trying to do even more frustrating. The website he had found suggested using white cotton rope, but Brian wanted it to be red. Besides, he didn't have any cotton rope, much less red cotton rope. The website also said yarn or cord could be used. Brian preferred the look of the cord, so he ran out to the nearest crafts store—the first time he had ever been in a crafts store—and purchased some red cord instead.

He growled as he struggled with it. The cord was just too thin, his fingers too big. He took in a breath, tried to relax. Okay, back to step one: fold the cord over itself to create a small loop. Brian did that easily enough.

Okay, step two. Take the right working cord, end down, through the loop, as shown. Though it was a little confusing, Brian did the best he could. *Okay, here goes nothing.* He looked again at the picture provided, was pretty sure he did it right.

Okay, step three. Bring the working end back, going upwards through the upper loop and then down through the lower loop, as shown. Brian's face scrunched up. *Wait. What the hell did I just read?* He read it again, shook his head. *Oh, come on! Is that really the best way you could describe it?* Brian followed the picture, wasn't sure he was even close.

Step four. Take the working cord down through the bottom loop. Next, thread the end up through the center loop and back down through the top loop. Brian fumed. *If I ever meet the person who wrote this, I'm going to punch them in the face,* he thought. He tried to follow the instructions, but was disgusted with the results. *Okay, this just looks like a mess. This can't be right.*

At that point, a web ad popped up about a ski resort in Colorado. Brian had his volume all the way up, and the sudden noise startled him. He angrily punched the ad away with his finger as soon as he was given the option to skip it. Of course, then the whole website started buffering, almost sending Brian into convulsions.

“Son of a –”

Finally, the site came back up.

Okay, step five. Carefully pull the two ends of the rope and begin to shape it into a heart. Now shape the knot into a more defined heart by gently pinching the bottom. Continue to pull the ends of the string for a tighter, smaller knot.

*Huh. That might just work.*

Brian gently pulled at the two ends, and the whole thing began to take shape. He pinched the bottom of the knot while tightening it, and indeed it actually turned into a heart before his eyes. His lips spread into a huge grin.

*There, that wasn't so hard. Oh, who are you kidding? Yes it was. You should've just slapped a freakin' bow on it.*

Brian drove to Kelli's house, rang the doorbell. No answer. He peered through the windows to see the lights were out. He still had a key, so he unlocked the front door. But as he stepped inside, he could tell no one was home. Brian walked into the bedroom just in case Kelli might be napping, but the bed was made, the room was in order. She was clearly gone. Brian was about to leave when he saw the empty spot on the dresser. He looked around for a moment before noticing the trashcan protruding more than usual. He scooted it out, the broken glass clinking in the bottom. With a somber face, Brian picked up their wedding picture, stared down at it. There was still glass in the frame around the edges, but most of it had fallen out.

If Kelli had been angry enough to throw their wedding picture away, then it appeared their relationship really was over. But where could she be? Brian wondered if she was with that hipster doofus again. Or maybe she drove out to the inn? After all, since she had stopped speaking to him, Kelli would have no idea he wouldn't be there, or that Malcolm had also quit. The thought of her working there alone worried him, so Brian decided to drive out there. He needed to fix the hole he had punched in the drywall anyway.

Brian could see the place was deserted before he even reached the bridge. Pulling into the courtyard, he got out, looked up at the old building. For some reason, he just couldn't get what Dorian had said out of his head, and a sinister feeling gripped him. Taking his tool box out of the

back of his truck, Brian entered the inn with apprehension. Standing in the doorway, he peered around at the darkened tavern. It was eerily quiet, and just as creepy as ever. However, after only a few seconds, Brian smirked. There was nothing wrong with the place at all. It was just old. And he knew more than anyone how old buildings could play tricks on you. Brian suddenly felt embarrassed for letting that crazy little charlatan get to him. Dorian Price, fraudster and imposter extraordinaire! That's what he was. Of course, Jack's story still gnawed at him, but until he witnessed something himself, Brian decided to chalk that up to an overactive imagination. Again, just an old building playing tricks.

Brian made his way upstairs. Without electricity, the hallway was still dark during the day, so he set up several work lamps. He used a utility knife to cut out a square around the damaged area in the drywall. Then he cut a patch the exact size out of some scrap pieces, making sure it was the same thickness. By the time he had trimmed a backing for the patch, he had forgotten all about the felling of dread he was experiencing earlier.

He was almost finished with the job, smearing joint compound over the patch with a taping knife, when his thoughts shifted toward Kelli. After he fixed the hole, then what? Was he going to finish renovating the place all by himself? Did she even care anymore? The last job they were on together fell apart, and now it looked like this one would, too. Except this time, she had tricked him. Had forced him into it. The more Brian thought about it the angrier he got—to the point he didn't realize he was putting too much pressure on the putty knife. The handle snapped off, the blade flying back at him and cutting across the top of his hand. Brian yelled out and flung the handle down the hall in a rage. He shook his hand, stared down at the injury. It wasn't deep enough for stitches, but he still needed to staunch the bleeding. He grabbed up a rag from his toolbox and pressed it over the top of his hand. Then he backed up against the wall, slid

slowly down to the floor. After a few minutes, he tossed the rag away. Now stained red, it hit the far wall and fell silently to the floor next to his tool box.

He had reached his breaking point. Brian lowered his head in his hands, closed his eyes, and sat unmoving. His whole body withered in defeat.

Brian didn't notice as the work lamps he had set up began to buzz and flicker. He remained oblivious even as another person stepped up right in front of him. Brian's eyes snapped open when he sensed someone standing over him. And he gaped in shock as he stared up into the face of an older man, glowing eerily in the lamp light. His graying hair was unkempt, his eyes wild, his expression distraught. He was wearing eighteenth century clothing, and the front of his white, ruffled shirt appeared to be soaked with blood.

"Have you seen my daughter?" he asked.

Brian jerked awake, his head snapping up, his arms flailing out at his sides. He half expected to see the man still standing over him, but there was no one there. He looked up and down the hall, streaked with shadows from the soft glow of the lamps. But he was alone. Brian laughed out loud, raised a hand to his forehead.

It was a dream. Only a dream. He must have fallen asleep. Brian was about to stand up when he noticed a puff of mist shoot from his lips with every breath he exhaled. The temperature in the hallway had dropped precipitously—to the point he began to shiver. Brian wrapped himself in his arms as he slowly rose up. And Dorian's words echoed through his mind: *Have you ever experienced electrical fluctuations, or maybe cold spots?*

Brian's rational mind didn't know what to make of it. What he was experiencing seemed impossible, yet could not be denied. Had some crazy change in weather caused a cold front to move in? Or maybe it wasn't a dream after all? In that moment, Brian recalled something else

Dorian had told him: *You want my advice? Bulldoze the whole thing to the ground. Maybe you'll free whatever's inside there.*

Brian swallowed hard, his eyes trying to pierce the shadows. Though he couldn't see anybody else in the hallway with him, he sensed he was no longer alone. It was an unnerving feeling, and one he couldn't shake.

Two stories below him, too far beneath the inn to be detected, gurgles sprang up from under the cellar floor—like water backing up into the drainage system. The gurgling grew louder and louder, until water began to spurt up out of the drain in small, spastic waves.

And within the gurgling and the bubbling, from somewhere in that inky darkness beneath the floor, distraught, high-pitched moans rose up as well...

Darkness enveloped most of the cellar floor. Bess' feet padded over the dry soil that was almost as black as the shadows around her. She slid a bottle of wine from the rack, looked it over to make sure she had retrieved the right one, then headed back up the steps. Hurrying into the kitchen, she opened the bottle and poured two glasses. She picked them both up, brought them out to the tavern, set them down on a table where an older couple was seated.

"There you go," Bess said.

"Thank you, dear," replied the older woman.

The front door opened and Nathaniel shuffled in, put his coat on a rack near the door.

Bess stepped over to greet him.

"Father, how was your trip?"

"Fine. Just fine." Nathaniel surveyed the room, saw they were near full capacity. "Well, it doesn't look like you've needed me at all."

"I've managed," Bess replied with a smile. Nathaniel smiled back and patted her hand.

Then he walked over to his usual place behind the bar. Bess observed his body language, studied his face. He seemed a little distracted, inwardly melancholy. Her smile faded. He had never appeared so old or tired.

She couldn't help but gaze over at the clock, the hands pointing to just after one in the afternoon. News that the coach had been robbed had reached the inn that morning, yet Elias had never arrived. Something had prevented him from reaching her. The captain and his men were after him, Bess was sure of it. And patrols were no doubt riding the highways night and day. Elias had probably been forced to stay in hiding. She certainly would have heard something if he'd been caught. That's what she told herself, anyway. That explanation, as forced as it might have been, made her worry a bit less.

Bess' eyes flicked back to Nathaniel. He was staring at her, probably wondering why she was standing in the middle of the tavern, gazing at the clock. She gave him another smile and returned to serving their customers. Yet as the day wore on her eyes kept going back to the clock, despite her best efforts not to look at it. Two o'clock. Then three o'clock. And still no Elias.

*Look for me by the moonlight*, he had said.

It was getting late when the stress she was feeling became a burden she wasn't sure she could bear. Bess decided she needed a break, and walked upstairs and to her bedroom. She stepped over to the window and gazed out over the empty white road in the distance. What had happened to him? She had eavesdropped on their patrons throughout the day, but there had been no word, no new report or update. Perhaps the redcoats had caught him and no one knew of it? Perhaps he was in jail awaiting the hangman's noose, or worse, lying wounded or dead somewhere out in the wilderness.

Finally, almost mercifully, dusk approached. The sun, sinking fast, cast long shadows over the gusty moor, the white road, the bridge, the tavern. It would be dark soon.

*Look for me by the moonlight*.

Timothy was in the stable, brushing the horses, when movement through the window caught his eye. He paused, put down the brush, walked slowly over for a better look. The sun was going down, forcing him to squint his eyes. He raised his hand to shield the sun, but he still couldn't see much.

Bess hurried to her window, smiling as a shape appeared on the horizon. Someone was coming. A man on horseback. But she, too, was looking against the sun, and struggled to make anything out.

Her smile faded as details of the rider became clearer. A tricorne hat. Polished boots. A long overcoat, worn above a military uniform. The rider sat atop an Andalusian stallion, its impressive, white coat looking almost orange in the fading light. Just behind the rider, out of the tawny sunset, a line of soldiers marched over the hill, two by two. Even at that distance, their red and white uniforms were unmistakable. They carried muskets at their shoulders, muzzles pointed toward the sky, bayonets jutting up like swaying spires against the twilight rays of the sun.

The rider who led them was still mostly a silhouette, but as he crossed the bridge and entered the courtyard, Bess had already recognized him. The blood drained from her cheeks as she backed away from the casement.

The rider dismounted near the stables. He walked calmly toward the tavern, his long overcoat blowing around him. The patrons inside had no idea he was coming. Enjoying their food, their libations, their pleasant conversations, they were all startled when the tavern door burst open in a torrent of wind. And the whole tavern fell alarmingly quiet.

Captain D`abo stood in the doorway, his imposing figure filling the frame. Everyone in the place turned and stared—until his gaze fell over them. Then they quickly averted their eyes.

The captain's troops, ten in all, filed in behind him. Their faces were taut, menacing, as they took up positions around the room.

D`abo studied those seated before him, a shabby, disparate group if ever there was one. He walked forward slowly, pulling off his gloves and slipping them into his coat pockets as he spoke. He made sure to raise his voice so they could all hear him.

"We are looking for a criminal by the name of Elias Luther. Does anyone know this man?" he asked, his voice carrying throughout the room.

Bess, listening at her door, could hear D`abo from downstairs. She felt her stomach lurch, her heart race. She realized her hand was shaking as she reached up and quietly slid her door lock into place.

"No one? I find that hard to believe."

Everyone in the tavern sat timidly, most of them staring down at their tables. None of them were brave enough to look up at the captain or his men.

"There was a reward on his head. The largest sum ever placed on a criminal in these parts." D`abo paused, his eyes sweeping the room. "After last night it has been doubled."

Silence followed. Uncomfortable. Palpable. D`abo puckered his lips while nodding his head. "So be it. I intend to seal this tavern. If anyone here wishes to leave, they should do so within the minute."

Every one of the customers hurried up, chairs scooting out, their shoes clapping en masse over the floor. They filed out the front door in a controlled panic. The captain and his men made sure to get a good look at every person who passed by them, but only one of the patrons fit Elias' description, a young man named Patrick Lamb. It was Sergeant Durning who grabbed him by the

arm and pulled him to the side. D`abo stepped up to the scared young man, looked him up and down, then frowned.

“That’s not him.”

The sergeant shoved Patrick off, allowing him to leave with the rest of the group. Soon the tavern was empty aside from D`abo, his soldiers, and Nathaniel. Captain D`abo turned his head and regarded Nathaniel, who was still standing behind the bar.

“Gentlemen. Help yourselves to the ale.”

Nathaniel’s mouth fell halfway open, his hands falling limply to the counter, as the soldiers cheered amongst themselves. An eager band of them barged behind the bar, one of them actually sliding over the top of it.

“Now wait just a second,” Nathaniel protested. They simply disregarded him until they realized he was in their way. Nathaniel felt their hands grip his shoulders, yank his clothes, and forcefully remove him from his spot. He could only watch helplessly as the redcoats rummaged behind the bar, and then through the kitchen, for anything they could find. They carelessly broke his glasses, his bottles, spilled his alcohol. What they didn’t destroy, they guzzled down. Nathaniel heard the trapdoor open, their boots stomp down the stairs to the cellar, where they were sure to get to the wine. His livelihood being consumed in front of his very eyes, Nathaniel shuffled over to D`abo in dismay.

“Please, Captain,” he implored.

Captain D`abo ignored him, his eyes focused on the top of the steps. As soon as Nathaniel realized the captain’s intentions, he tried desperately to distract him.

“Perhaps you would like something as well, Captain? We have the best wine in the area. Would you like me to pour you a glass?”

D`abo acted as though he hadn't heard him. Instead, he brushed by him and strode toward the stairs. Nathaniel darted in front of the captain, blocking his way.

"Please, there's no need to go up there."

D`abo glared. "I need to speak to your daughter."

"Please leave her out of this. You can talk to me. I'll fully cooperate."

D`abo leaned forward, his teeth clenched. "I know you will. Or I'll hang you both for treason," he hissed.

"Please, not my Bess."

D`abo's hand shot out, gripped Nathaniel by the throat, tugged him close. "You know full well she's in love with the bastard!" Then D`abo shoved Nathaniel away, sending him spilling into the chairs at the closest table. Cold rage on his face, D`abo started up.

Bess backed away from her door when she heard the thump of approaching footsteps. They were slow. Deliberate. Echoing. The footsteps reached the landing, and she could see the shadow of someone's feet beneath the door.

The handle rattled, the door shook, but the lock held.

And then silence. Bess held her breath and stood frozen, desperate not to make any noise at all. A moment later the door smashed open, kicked in by Captain D`abo. He barged aggressively into the room, but paused the moment his eyes fell onto Bess. Her beauty seemed to calm him. She had already recoiled several steps away from him. He could see she was shaking, although she was trying to appear brave.

"Captain D`abo, this is my bedroom."

D`abo walked slowly forward, speaking calmly. "When word came to me that you were in love with a notorious murderer and bandit, well, I cannot describe to you my disappointment."

Private Archibald and Sergeant Durning appeared in the doorway behind him. Bess' eyes darted over to them before returning to the captain. His eyes stayed trained right on her.

“Tell me, Bess. When will he come for you? Tonight? Tomorrow maybe?”

Bess lifted her chin, her lips now rigid, her gaze steely. “I don't know who you're talking about.”

D`abo studied her. He was sure her attempt to appear angry was a ploy to mask her fear. It had worked the first time they met—had kept him from searching the inn that night. This time he wouldn't let her fool him. He peered back at Archibald and Durning, gave a motion with his head. They strode in, took Bess by the arms, and forced her to sit at the foot of her bed. As they released her, she angrily yanked her arms away, glared up at them as they stepped back behind Captain D`abo.

D`abo only smiled, gripped the top of Bess' vanity chair, calmly scooted it out next to her bed. He took off his overcoat and hung it over the back before sitting down. His eyes stared right into her.

“We're going to stay here until he comes. No matter how long it takes.”

She looked away from him. “I don't know who you're talking about.”

D`abo smiled calmly, mockingly. “Bess. Come now. I think we're past that point.”

She met his gaze only briefly before looking away again. “He won't come here. You and I both know he's smarter than that.”

“Is he?” the captain asked scornfully. Then he shook his head. “I've been such a fool. Tell me when Elias will come for you. I promise no harm will befall you or your father.”

“So you can have him at the end of a hangman's noose? I don't think so.”

D`abo's eyes turned icy, intense. “Better him than you.”

Bess merely turned her head away once more, calling his bluff as she stoically stared off into space. D`abo smirked. He couldn't help but admire her.

"Every soldier in the county is looking for him. He can't escape," he said.

Bess continued to stare off, her expression stiff, as she responded in a matter-of-fact tone, "He always escapes."

Her impudence infuriated him. D`abo's lips curled, his face shook, before he jolted in his chair. "Enough! I know he's coming here!"

Bess kept the same faraway look, the same deliberate tone. "No one is coming here. You're wasting your time."

The captain gathered himself, calmly folding his hands beneath his chin as he leaned forward. "We'll find out tonight won't we?"

Bess' façade finally broke. She just couldn't take it anymore as her shoulders slumped and she began to cry softly. D`abo leaned back in the chair, a satisfied gleam in his eyes. He knew then that Elias was coming that very night. He shot forward, leaned in close to her, even dared to speak in a comforting voice. "I don't want to hurt you, Bess. But he gives me no choice. He has robbed and hurt innocent people. I have to stop him."

Bess' lips contorted as she fired back at him. "Your words are twisted. You twist them so you appear as the man of good and he as the criminal, when you know as well as I that it is the other way around."

"You think him innocent? I'm not the one guilty of treason."

"Please, Bess. Listen to him."

Everyone in the room turned to follow the voice. Nathaniel stood in the doorway, his face sad, haggard. He took a few steps into the room, his pained expression never leaving his face.

“Tell them what they need to know. Then all of this will be over.”

Bess shook her head. “Why would you—” Then she gasped as the realization hit her. “You told them. That’s how they knew to come here. It was you. Why?”

“For your sake. You’ve disgraced me. You’ve disgraced yourself. Taking him as a... lover.” Nathaniel could barely spit out the word. “*He* has disgraced you before God and man.”

Tears flowed freely down Bess’ cheeks. “How could you? How could you? They’re going to kill him!”

Nathaniel took in a long breath through his nose, drew a stiff upper lip before responding. “Patriot or no. Whether I agree with him or not. It doesn’t matter. These men are here tonight to apprehend a thief and a murderer.”

“He’s my husband!” Bess shouted.

Nathaniel staggered, wide-eyed, almost as if he’d been punched. The revelation seemed to surprise even D`abo and his men.

“We rode off one night in the rain to find a minister to marry us! We did it in secret because I knew you wouldn’t understand!”

Bess’ whole body shuddered as she sobbed. Guilt filled Nathaniel’s face as he stared down at the floor, too ashamed to look at her.

“You had best pray God forgives you for what you’ve done, because I never will!” she shouted.

Her words cut deep. Nathaniel's face visibly shook as he bowed his head into his hand, slowly turned and shuffled out of the room. D`abo felt no such guilt as he walked over to the window, clasped his hands behind his back, and peered through the panes of glass.

"Your father was mistaken, and you were correct," he said. "Tonight we are here not to apprehend a thief and a murderer, but to kill one."

D`abo heard Bess sob once behind him, but nothing more. He kept his gaze out the window as he spoke up again. "Please just leave. Remember when you said that to me? A shot fired into my gut would have stung less than those words."

"Somehow I doubt you feel at all," Bess replied bitterly.

D`abo wheeled around from the window, dropped to one knee in front of her.

"But I do, Bess. I would have given you anything. My heart, my power, my love. Everything I had."

She gazed up at him, her eyes glistening and tear-streaked. Her lips twisted into a hateful sneer. "Even your life?"

The captain hesitated, her words hitting him hard. He regarded her for several tense seconds. "Do you really think he would die for you?"

"Yes."

"How noble. This evening he will do just that." D`abo leaned forward even further, until he was just inches away from her. He again tried to sound comforting. "But you can save his life. Come to me, Bess. I can give you so much."

Bess again turned her head away, refusing to give him the satisfaction of looking at him. "I won't betray him," she said.

"Do you really think he wouldn't betray you? A murderer like him?"

“You underestimate him.”

D`abo sniffed. “We’ll see.”

She was still averting her eyes. D`abo wanted to grab her by her cheeks and force her to look at him, but he refrained from doing so.

“I’m not going to sit here and just watch him die,” Bess snapped.

“Yes, you are,” D`abo replied coldly. He rose up, turned to Sergeant Durning. “Make sure she stays in front of the window. I want her to watch when he comes. I want her to watch when we shoot him down like a dog.”

“Yes sir,” replied Durning.

Captain D`abo strode toward the door, was about to leave the room, when Bess called out to him.

“I can still close my eyes.”

D`abo looked back at her. “You could. But somehow, I don’t think you will.”

As he disappeared through the door, Bess looked desperately out the window, and to the hill in the distance. Elias would come riding over that hill, and down that white road. It was just a matter of time.

Captain D`abo entered the tavern from off the stairs, walked over and sat down at the closest table. Falling deep in thought for several seconds, he finally peered up at Nathaniel.

“I think I’ll have that wine now.”

Nathaniel had been staring down, numb and heartbroken, when he heard the captain’s request. He gave a submissive nod, squeezed past several of the soldiers before disappearing through the doorway to the kitchen. He returned soon with a bottle and a glass.

He set the glass down on D`abo`s table and poured the wine, the blood-red liquid  
gurgling down into the glass...

The red wine sloshed down into Kelli's glass as she poured it. She brought it up, gently swirled it, enjoying the aroma. She took a sip and placed the glass back down. She was sitting on her couch in her living room, the coffee table in front of her strewn with books and papers. She was trying to do more research on Alfred Wheeler, but a familiar, soothing warmth had enveloped her. She was drifting a bit, and chuckled to herself as she realized she had already drunk a little more than she should have. She glanced over at the wine bottle, saw that it was already half empty. Kelli picked her glass back up, sat back into the couch. She was feeling happy, wrapped in a tingling, pleasant cocoon of intoxication. Her anxieties were departing, her heartache fading. She began to float, her vision distorting. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation, smiling broadly despite herself. She leaned her head back against the cushion, turned her head to the side. Perhaps her research could wait.

Kelli opened her eyes, her hazy gaze falling on the stuffed bear still sitting on the recliner. Her smile faded, her vision began to clear, as she became focused on it. She swallowed hard. Adam's bear. It had been his favorite. He used to go everywhere with the old, dirty thing.

Kelli remembered back to a time when he was playing outside. His swing set in the backyard had come with a freestanding trampoline. It was small, built for kids, with a bar to hold onto while in use. It was safe enough, but Kelli never liked it. It seemed like an unnecessary risk. She had always been overly protective of Adam, but Brian didn't mind it at all. He thought the trampoline taught Adam proper motor skills.

"Mommy, look how high I can jump!" Adam had shouted over to her. He was gripping the bar with one hand, his other hand holding onto that bear. Even that had made her worry.

"Yes, I see that!" she called back. "Hey, let's try to use both hands, okay?"

"Okay!" But he didn't even attempt to do what she had asked, just kept jumping while clutching his little bear close to his body.

"Mommy, watch this!" Adam shuffled to the side of the trampoline. Kelli couldn't tell what he was doing at first, but then realized he was rearing back to leap to the swing set. There was a support bar that ran parallel to the trampoline, and Adam liked to leap from the trampoline and grab onto it. But he had never tried to do it while holding his bear. He just assumed he could still make the jump with only one free hand.

He latched onto the bar briefly, but his right hand, hindered by the bear, slipped off, and the bear fell tumbling. As his momentum carried him, his other hand slipped right off the bar as well. There was a bare spot under the swing, created over time by his feet repeatedly hitting the soil. Usually it was just a dirt patch, but it had rained the day before, turning the bare spot into a puddle of mud. Adam landed directly into it on his back, sliding a bit before coming to a stop. Kelli could see the fear and shock in Adam's eyes right before he burst out crying. He leapt up, his whole backside covered in a slick, messy sludge. Kelli ran to him, hugged him close despite the mud. She comforted him with soothing words as he cried into her shoulder.

That was the last day she would ever hold him in her arms. It was the last day she would hear his voice. The last day to hear his joyous laughter or his cries of pain.

They had been in the middle of a tough renovation: a three-story colonial, with a leaky roof and deteriorating windows. She had told Brian she would meet him onsite, but she hadn't counted on giving Adam a bath and changing his clothes before she had to leave. She was already running late when they arrived. Pulling to the curb, she could see the house they were working on through the car window. Scaffolding surrounded the place, and the vehicles belonging to Brian and his crew were parked in the driveway.

Kelli felt rushed, and she was already growing irritable as she clambered out of the car, hurried around to Adam's door. She threw it open and unbuckled him from his car seat. She lifted him up into her arms and started across the spacious yard in front of the house. She could see Brian at the top of the scaffolding. He spotted them, and waved hello.

"Mommy, my bear!"

Kelli huffed, put Adam down, stepped back to the car. She again opened the door and leaned inside. She had to stretch to see past Adam's car seat, finally spotting the bear lying on the other side of it. He must have dropped it during the ride, yet another irritating and all too familiar occurrence. She grabbed it up, pulled herself out of the car.

"Hey, buddy! Come here!" she heard Brian yell.

"Daddy!"

When Kelli closed the door and turned around, she realized Adam was no longer with her. He was running across the lawn toward Brian, the hood of his red jacket bobbing up and down.

"Adam! Adam, come back here, please!" Kelli shouted.

But Adam didn't listen as he scampered right up to the base of the scaffolding. He was peering up and waving at Brian.

"Are you ready to go to lunch with us?" Adam yelled up.

"Yep! I'll be right down!" Brian shouted.

Kelli frowned. Adam was five, and had developed a stubborn streak. That was something they were going to have to work with him on.

She was just starting forward when she heard a snap, and then Brian cry out in surprise. Kelli's eyes shot up to the top of the scaffolding. She saw Brian struggling, straddling an opening below him, holding desperately onto the railing. The board he had been crouched on had broken loose beneath him, and was clattering down through the scaffolding framework. Adam was still standing right below, staring up in confusion as the broken board plummeted toward him.

"Adam!" Kelli shrieked.

She jolted on the couch. She could feel her heart racing as she sat forward, elbows on her knees. She took in a deep breath to try and calm herself. The wine had caused her to momentarily slip away into a reverie, or perhaps a nightmare. Now the buzz that she had found so soothing moments earlier had vanished in a blink. Kelli looked back over at the bear. Its dull, glassy eyes seemed to be staring right at her. She got up, picked up a throw blanket from off the back of the couch. She tossed it over the bear so she wouldn't have to look at it.

#

Brian's sanity was reaching its breaking point. He couldn't get the image of the man in the hallway out of his mind. That face. That distraught face. Bent over him, hair disheveled, eyes wide. Blood covering his shirt. It had to have been a dream. Had to have been. But the sensations he felt afterwards had been real enough. Brian had to admit the incident had left him shaken.

After Jack's story, and what Dorian had told him, he was starting to question what he believed. He had held a brief phone conversation with Enrique on the day he quit, but Brian had never really pressed him on his reasons for leaving. He just remembered Enrique sounding strange that day. Almost scared. Brian decided to call him up, just to pin down his story. After several rings, he heard a low voice on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Enrique. This is Brian. How you doing?"

"Hey man. I'm all right."

"Are you? Because honestly, you sound a little... off," said Brian.

"Just tired, I guess. What's up?"

"Malcolm and Jack both quit. I guess you know that."

"I knew Jack had quit. So Malcolm quit, too, huh?"

"Yeah. Listen, I need to ask you something. Jack told me... a story almost too crazy to believe. And some of the things I've encountered myself... I just... something happened to you, didn't it? Something at the inn? Maybe you saw something? I could hear it in your voice the last time we spoke."

There was silence on the other end for several seconds. Enrique finally spoke in the same, low voice. "I don't think I can talk about it."

"I just want to know what happened."

"There is something there, Brian."

"What do you mean?"

"Something has been disturbed, I think. Maybe we woke it up. I don't know. All I do know is that I'm never going back there. You and Kelli need to stay away as well."

“Well, I’ll tell her that if I can ever find her,” said Brian.

“You can’t find her?”

“There’s... a lot to explain.”

“She didn’t go out to the inn, did she? There’s no reception out there, you know.”

Brian smirked. “Yeah. Believe me, I know.”

“Brian, you have to make sure she didn’t go out there. She shouldn’t be out there alone. No one should.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll track her down.”

“I’m serious. There are forces there that shouldn’t be provoked. Stay away from that place, Brian. It’s evil.”

Brian paused, not sure how to respond. “Evil,” he repeated softly.

“Yes. I’m not joking. Find her.”

“Well, okay. I’ll—”

The other end went dead.

“Enrique?” Brian looked down at his phone. A message had popped up: *Call ended.*

Well that settled it. Enrique was clearly scared out of his mind. And he was certainly right about one thing: Kelli needed to be located. Brian punched Kelli’s number. Just like before, it rang until going to her voicemail. Brian sighed, ended the call with his thumb.

“Kelli, please tell me you didn’t go out to the inn.”

#

Pen in hand, Kelli hovered over a notebook on the coffee table. The page was filled with notes, some of them highlighted in yellow, some of them circled, many of them connected with lines she had drawn between them. She had broken down every story Alfred Wheeler had ever

written, all while piecing together elements shared by each one of his works. Almost every of them involved lost loved ones, tragedies, hauntings, restless souls, untimely deaths. All were macabre in some way or another.

Kelli had checked out a stack of books from the library. One of them was a compendium that gave an overview of all of Alfred Wheeler's novels. In his first book, *The Man Who Loved Her*, a wounded colonial soldier was sent home after fighting in the war. Wanting nothing more than to see his beloved wife again, he had to endure several misfortunes and narrow escapes along the way. He finally made it back, only to find that his house has been burned down, and his wife killed by redcoat raiders out for revenge. Mad with grief, he chased after the raiders, merely to be shot down before he could even reach them.

*In the Moonlight* told the story of an Irishman who fell in love with a beautiful woman in a white dress, who walked the Cliffs of Moher at night. Though he talked with her frequently, she never let him touch her—until one night he couldn't take it anymore, and reached out to embrace her. She instantly vanished, making him realize she was actually a ghost who only appeared in rays of moonlight.

*The Long Walk* was about a man who had to travel over dangerous and inhospitable terrain, on foot, in order to bring medicine to the love of his life. Exhausted, his spirit all but broken, his health failing, all he could think about was saving his precious beloved. When he finally arrived, he was told she died shortly after he had left. He expired soon after from a broken heart, and was buried next to her. Once again united, they were able to spend eternity together.

Wheeler's final novel, *Annabelle*, wasn't received quite as well as his others. It told of a man who was haunted by the spirit of the woman he once loved. In life, Annabelle had spurned his advances, but he vowed to win her. So she gave him a list of seemingly impossible tasks, and

told him she would agree to marry him if he could complete all of them. Over a span of years, with almost inhuman effort, he accomplished everything she asked of him—only to find out she had never taken the agreement seriously. She simply wanted to be rid of him and never thought he would actually do it. Upon realizing he had been duped, he flew into a rage. As Annabelle hurried across the street to get away from him, she was crushed beneath a horse drawn carriage. Ironically, the carriage was carrying the man she actually loved, who was coming to see her. In the end, the main character, sick with guilt over Annabelle's death, and haunted by her ghost, put himself out of his misery by ending his own life.

Kelli took another sip of wine, gazed down at her notes as something occurred to her. Every story contained a supernatural element except for the first one. *The Man Who Loved Her* was published in 1785, just two years after The Revolutionary War had ended. At the time, the war would still have been fresh in everyone's mind, which most likely helped contribute to its popularity. It also seemed to coincide with the time period that Alfred Wheeler lived in Boston. His other novels seemed to have been written after he had moved to the countryside.

Kelli sat back, thought on that for a moment. The countryside. Is that when Alfred Wheeler had moved to the inn? He had become wealthy after the success of his first book. Perhaps he had purchased the inn and lived there for the rest of his days? Perhaps the creepy old place had inspired some of the themes in his stories? With their discovery of the hidden room, they probably had enough physical evidence to make that connection, and that excited Kelli. That fact alone probably meant the property was worth so much more than they had paid for it. But what had become of Alfred Wheeler? And why had someone walled-off that room? The answers to those questions might very well have been lost to history.

Kelli shot forward, drained the last of her wine, then picked up the bottle and poured another glass.

#

The keys jingled in Thad's hand as he walked up to the door of his shop. His nose had a bandage taped over it from where Brian had struck him. So it was somewhat alarming when he caught movement in his peripheral vision, turned his head to see Brian approaching from the street. Thad's heart skipped a beat as he took a step back.

"What you want?" he asked, his body shrinking into a defensive posture.

"Relax," said Brian. "I just came to apologize. I completely overreacted the other day."

"You think?" Thad shot back, though his voice was higher-pitched than normal.

Brian put a hand over his chest. "I'm sorry. Really. I am," he said earnestly.

Thad looked him up and down, gauging his manner. Seeing Brian wasn't a threat, he loosened up a little. "Well... all right. I appreciate that."

"I was actually hoping you had talked to Kelli," said Brian. "I can't find her. She won't answer her phone."

Thad shook his head. "No. I'm sorry. I haven't talked to her."

Brian frowned in disappointment. "Okay. Thanks," he said, turning to leave.

Thad snorted. "Don't you get it?"

Brian looked back at him.

"You think she wanted to rebuild that inn just for the money? She wanted you to do it with her. Together."

"What?"

“I’ll be honest,” said Thad. “I would run away with her in a heartbeat if I could, even if it meant being pummeled by you over and over. But the fact is, she’s still in love with you. She always has been.”

Brian turned to face him directly, mouth slightly open, his eyes narrowing. “Did she tell you that?”

Thad sighed in exasperation. “She didn’t have to.”

Brian blinked, a small breath escaping his lips.

“There’s something else,” Thad added quickly. “I was going to tell Kelli this, but I’ll just tell you since you’re here. I found out there’s an old cemetery on the east side of town. One of the oldest in the country, actually. It’s rumored that several members of The Circle of Eight were buried there.”

Brian’s face scrunched up. “What are you talking about?”

“Kelli will understand. I don’t know if it will help, but I thought she would like to know. I’ll give you the address if you like.”

Brian shrugged. “Sure.”

Thad fished around in his pocket before coming up with a slip of paper. He handed it to Brian. As Brian looked it over, he was shocked at the address Thad had written down.

“You sure this is the cemetery?” asked Brian.

“Yeah. Why?”

Brian played it down. “Nothing. It’s just... I’ve been there before.”

#

The stack of books sat on the coffee table in front of Kelli. Leaning forward on the couch, she was flipping through the very last one she had checked out, struggling to find anything new

on Alfred Wheeler. Written in the nineteen-sixties, the book was titled “Sons of Liberty” and held detailed descriptions of the most famous patriots of the Revolutionary War. Having scoured the bibliography, Kelli nearly leapt up when she found a listing for Alfred Wheeler. Flipping to the page that was given, she read excitedly, her mouth moving silently, her finger tracing along with each sentence.

She still didn’t find much, but at least it was something new. From what she could glean, it seemed that after Alfred Wheeler had become popular, he had befriended several notable figures of the Revolutionary War. Paul Revere, Samuel Adams, Benjamin Edes, Joseph Warren, James Swan, and Benjamin Tallmadge. Apparently, from eye witness accounts, he had met with all six men in Boston on more than one occasion.

*So maybe they just liked his novel? Kelli thought to herself. After all, it was about a soldier who fought in the war. But why meet them all? At the same time. And on several occasions?*

“Maybe he was doing research,” Kelli muttered under her breath. That thought almost made her giddy. Could he have been doing research for the very novel they had discovered?

Her phone dinged. Kelli looked over, saw she had received a message from Thad.

*Hey. Brian stopped by my shop looking for you. I gave him something you probably want to see. Maybe you should call him? Where are you?*

Kelli got up, crossed her arms in front of her as she stepped over to the bay window. She had been so caught up in doing her own research that she had almost forgotten about their argument. And at long last her thoughts began to dwell on Brian. What had he been doing since she had demanded a divorce? How had it affected him? Was there any hope remaining for them

at all? She couldn't remember a time when he had been so angry or hurtful, but she still had to wonder if their relationship could be saved. Part of her simply wanted to walk away.

No. She had to see it through. At least until the inn was finished. Even if the things Brian said were horrible, he had been right about one thing: they were in their current predicament because of her. Of course, she had hoped the whole situation would be the catalyst to bring them back together, but the fact was, *she* had bought the inn without asking him. *She* had spent *their* money. *She* was the one who had been determined to fix it up. If she walked away now, it wouldn't be fair to him. Would it? If she did, she was sure they would never recover personally, and more than likely it would ruin them both financially.

*Just call him*, she told herself. She wasn't sure why that was so hard. She had been deleting her phone history every time he tried to call her, to the point it had become automatic. But perhaps next time he called she would find the courage to answer it, and actually talk to him.

She wasn't sure if she could. She was just so wounded and angry.

Kelli gazed up through the window. In the dying rays of the sun, the sky was streaked with orange, turning the billowy clouds on the horizon into brilliant, pink hues. She smiled. It was a beautiful scene that would be over all too quickly, and she was thankful she had been able to see it. Night was fast approaching, and soon the inevitable darkness would swallow up the last remnants of sunlight. But for as long as she could, Kelli decided to stay at the window and admire its waning glow.

The last rays of daylight, merely a dull, orange glow, filtered through the casement. Bess watched as the last trace of the sun dipped below the hill in the distance. The white road was still empty, but nightfall was just minutes away. And again, Elias' words echoed through her mind.

*Watch for me by the moonlight.*

Bess knew then she had to somehow escape and warn him. Even though the sergeant was still watching her like a hawk, if she could talk her way down to the tavern, maybe she could flee before they could stop her. Perhaps she could slip into the stable to get to her horse, then ride out and meet Elias on the road. Numerous scenarios raced through her mind as Bess turned from the window, but she hadn't taken a step before she stopped short, her eyes widening. Private Archibald stood in the bedroom doorway, a coil of rope in his hands. As their eyes met, a repugnant grin spread over his face.

"Where are you going, miss?" he asked mockingly. A lump formed in Bess's throat. Her chest tightened. Her whole body began to shake. She saw that three more soldiers had come up the stairs behind Archibald, all of them eyeing her, all of them leering.

Timothy crawled through the long grass of the field until he had reached the edge of the courtyard. Having seen the redcoats coming, he had been able to slip out through the back of the stable and remain undetected. He had watched as Captain D`abo stood at the second story window and looked out. He had stared up with dread as the captain left his view, only to have Bess step up to almost the exact spot moments later. She, too, had gazed out, her face drawn, her eyes filled with torment. She was still beautiful, of course. But to see her so distraught broke his heart. Timothy wanted to help her, to save her, to come charging to her rescue, but instead he only watched, like he always did, too impotent to do anything.

He saw her turn from the window, stop suddenly. He could only make out the back of her head and part of her shoulder, before several redcoats appeared and hauled her away. Timothy shot up, bracing himself on his arms, neck craning. But he could see nothing more. They had moved out of his line of sight.

#

The redcoats positioned Bess in front of her bed, just like D`abo had ordered. They snaked the rope around her body, her chest, her waist, her legs, lashing her to the bedpost. She stayed poised all the while, refusing to let them see any weakness in her at all. Her only grimace came when they forced her arms behind her and bound her wrists tight. Bess lifted her chin and stared straight ahead as they huddled around her, snickering, jeering. Archibald was the worst of them. His boyish face, his red hair, freckles, his constant, insufferable grin, everything about him seemed clownish and juvenile.

One of the soldiers ran his fingers through her hair. "You are a pretty little thing, aren't you?" he spoke with a taunting grin. His foul breath hit her, reeking of sulfur and alcohol. Bess turned her head away, her lips twisting up in disgust.

“What? You don’t like me?” he jeered.

“Your face looks like a horse’s arse, and your breath smells like what comes out of it,” she retorted.

They all slapped their legs and giggled. A second soldier leaned forward, his mouth close to her ear. “How about me? Would you like me to strum you a little?”

“I doubt you even could you lobcock,” she sneered.

They burst out with laughter and cries of delight—except for the soldier she was responding to. His face turned bright red, his mouth curling in anger.

“She’s feisty!” laughed Archibald.

“How about you just bagpipe me, darling?” snickered one.

“She’s got the lips for it,” said another.

“I’d like a taste of those lips!” came the next jeer.

The soldier she had insulted cracked a smile as he looked her up and down. “I wouldn’t mind a taste of something else.”

“Enough!” shouted Sergeant Durning. “Carry out your orders and head back down.”

“Yes sergeant.”

“Sorry sergeant.”

They tested the ropes around her to make sure they were secure. As they did, Archibald took a step back to observe their work. He crossed his arms, scrunched his lips together. Then, with a grin, he took up his musket and positioned it at her side. To the delight of his fellow soldiers, he pressed the barrel into her belly, just below her bosom. He removed the shoulder strap of his weapon, and fastened it around her waist, lashing the musket into place. Then he reached out slowly and carefully cocked the hammer.

“There. Now you’re a soldier—standing at attention like one of us.” The corner of his mouth shot up. At the same time, he raised his hands out in front of him to signify caution. “Careful now. No sudden movements. I would hate for it to go off.” His tone was so smug, so obnoxious, that it was all Bess could do to keep from spitting in his face.

Archibald waited for a response, but Bess kept her gaze straight ahead, her chin raised high. Archibald brought a finger up to his lips. “What do you think, boys? Is there something still missing? I think there is.”

Archibald stepped over, took D’abo’s overcoat from the back of the chair, and slipped it over Bess’ shoulders.

“There we are. Now you really are one of us.” He was close to her now, his head tilting to one side, as he studied her face. Again, he cracked a boyish, obnoxious grin. “Don’t you worry now. It will all be over soon enough. Now keep good watch.”

He kissed her on the cheek, a string of saliva drooping down as he pulled away. Bess’ lips wrinkled up in disgust even as the next soldier came forward, a licentious smile on his face. “Now keep good watch,” he jeered, then kissed her in almost the same spot.

The soldier standing on the other side of Bess followed in turn. “Now keep good watch,” he repeated, and then he kissed her.

By the time it was the fourth man’s turn, Bess closed her eyes. He was the one who had been particularly vulgar toward her, and she visibly shuddered when she felt his lips press against her skin.

“Now keep good watch.”

As his kiss lingered, Bess wriggled and strained her hands against the ropes behind her. The soldier pulled back, still grinning, then shot forward and kissed her mouth. She jerked her

head away, her eyes flashing, a fierce snarl on her lips. All the while she kept her gaze straight ahead, not about to look at him. They all snickered.

Archibald glanced toward the hall, snapped to attention when he realized Captain D`abo was standing just outside the doorway.

“Captain. We’ve carried out your orders, sir.”

The captain observed them, his patience simmering. He had been quick to notice their leering and smirking faces snap taut the moment they were aware of him.

“Take your posts,” he said in a low voice.

“Yes sir.”

“Yes sir.”

All four men scurried away, passing sheepishly by D`abo and heading downstairs. Bess could hear their boots thumping down the steps almost in a panic. As D`abo stepped further into the room, she stared out the window in front of her.

Her top lip curled as she spoke. “The men under you are pigs.”

D`abo eyed the sergeant for confirmation.

“They were rather uncouth, Captain,” said Durning.

D`abo merely sighed and nodded before turning toward Bess. “They are the same sort of rabble that frequent your tavern. I would think you would be used to their type by now.”

Bess didn’t respond, keeping her gaze through the casement. Her jaw was rigid, her lips drawn tight.

“I will say this,” D`abo added. “Not one of them is a thief or a murderer. Or a traitor.”

“Or honorable. Or decent,” she countered. “Not one of you can hold a candle to Elias, and that is the greatest irony of all.”

D`abo merely snorted and gazed out the window along with her. “He’ll be coming soon, won’t he? In just a few hours?”

He was met with cold silence. D`abo sniffed, expecting as much.

“Sergeant, go downstairs and tell the lieutenant to set the men up two to a window. Tell him to bring three men up here.”

Durning nodded. “Yes sir.” He started off.

“Oh, and sergeant,” D`abo added quickly. “The men who were just up here—make sure they are not among them. They can stay down in the tavern with you.”

“I understand, sir.” Durning spun on his heel and disappeared through the doorway.

Bess’ gaze darted over to a musical bracket clock on her dresser. With an ornate face and a polished wooden casing, it was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship that had been a gift from her father. Its hands pointed to just past eight o’ clock.

Lieutenant Tobias came up shortly with three other soldiers. When Captain D`abo saw them, he nodded toward Bess.

“Gag her. We can’t have her warning him.”

As soon as Bess heard the command, her heart sank. She had anticipated doing that very thing the moment she saw Elias on the road. Shouting out a warning to him was her last option, and the captain had just taken that away from her. Bess struggled not to panic as the soldiers tied a gag tight over her mouth.

And they waited. And they watched. The minutes passed painfully slow, and Bess couldn’t help but eye the hands of the clock, barely visible in the moonlight. Just before nine, the clouds covered the moon, throwing the inn into almost complete darkness. Bess had to strain to

see the clock face. The white road outside wasn't much clearer, but from what she could tell, it still sat empty.

The soldiers knelt two to a window, their muskets at the ready. Captain D`abo sat in the chair, quiet, contemplative. All the while Bess fought the ropes binding her hands, hoping to loosen them, but all the knots held good.

And they waited. And they watched.

At eleven o' clock the moon had come back out, and Bess could tell the soldiers were growing restless. They sat just next to the windows, with their backs against the wall, some leaning on their muskets, one man holding his musket across his knees. Bess had slowly worked against the ropes the entire time, twisting her hands back and forth, but try as she might she had yet to loosen them much at all. As she struggled, the coat fell from her shoulders and slid to the floor. Her heart caught in her throat. The coat created a conspicuous rustle in the dead silence, but the soldiers barely took notice.

Waiting. Watching.

It was close to midnight when Bess realized her fingers were wet with sweat or blood. She glanced over at Captain D`abo. He was the only one that seemed unaffected by the ordeal. He sat quietly, one leg crossed over the other, a finger against his temple.

Yes, it was blood that Bess felt, warm and wet. It had to be. Dripping from her raw wrists and into her palms, drenching her fingers. Every little movement brought pain, but she didn't dare stop.

A sharp wind blew over the cobblestones, transforming quickly into an unnerving howl. At the same time the grandfather clock in the tavern struck midnight, emitting its eerie chimes.

*Bong... bong...*

Bess perked up when she heard their foreboding toll. Her gaze shot toward the road in the distance, and she prayed Elias had been delayed—that by some act of providence he would be forced to arrive a day later than he had wanted.

*Bong... bong...*

Her hands stretched, strained in the darkness, her own blood making the ropes slick enough to reach further than she had before.

*Bong...bong...bong*

Still hunkered in the shadows of the field, Timothy stared out over the desolate white road. In the stark silence, away from the chiming clock, he thought he detected a distant beat. He rose up as high as he dared, watching the hilltop in the distance. Just visible in the moonlight, the silhouette of a man on horseback appeared over the rise.

*Bong... bong...*

Nathaniel shot forward in his chair as he spied, through one of the windows, the lone horseman approaching on the road. The redcoats in the tavern saw him, too, each one of them cocking their muskets.

“Look sharp, boys,” whispered the sergeant.

*Bong... bong...*

Bess’ fingers, pale in the moonlight, struggled and fought for every inch against her restraints. With her eyes glued on the white road, she had noticed the silhouette before anyone else. The hat. The horse. The figure. It was Elias. *It was Elias.*

*Bong...*

As the last chime faded away, silence once again fell over the inn, and over the entire moor for that matter. Just a few seconds later the slow *clopping* of hooves broke that silence.

Captain D`abo sprung up from his chair and over to the window, and Bess slumped in despair when she realized D`abo could see what she could see. Her heart beating fast, her eyes glistening, Bess screamed as loud as she could, but the gag stifled her warning.

Now just beyond the stone bridge, Elias slowed his horse to a walk, its plodding steps echoing over the cobblestones. As Elias looked up at the inn, the moonlight fell over his face, finally revealing his identity. He peered from one dark window to the other, always cautious.

Lieutenant Tobias, kneeling at the casement, quietly cocked his musket. Then he whispered back to Captain D`abo.

“He’s almost in range.”

Tears streamed down Bess’ cheeks. She was hysterical as she tried, with all her might, to scream through the gag in her mouth. She thrashed against the ropes, shook her head from side to side, as her screams went unheard. She finally had to stop to gather her breath. Sobbing, chest heaving, despair filled her face when she realized her struggles were in vain.

Elias urged his horse across the bridge and into the courtyard. The redcoats waited like statues, all of them aiming their weapons. They all had a good bead on him, their fingers tense at their triggers.

But then Elias stopped his horse and stared up into the inky black of Bess’ window. It was open, but there was no lit candle there to greet him. He waited, listening, watching. For a moment Bess’ eyes filled with hope. *Yes, the candle!* She would always set it out to signal that she was waiting for him. Surely that’s why he had stopped. Surely he would realize something was wrong and go no further! Surely he would turn his horse about and ride out across the moor. But Bess’ hopes were dashed when she saw Elias urge his horse onward. He was clearly suspicious, but not enough to turn and flee.

“Fire the moment you have a shot,” D`abo whispered to his men.

*Tlot-tlot. Tlot-tlot.* The horse’s hooves rang clear, growing louder as Elias drew closer. Bess felt a flutter in her stomach, a tightness in her chest, and a hopelessness that completely overwhelmed her. Again she screamed, but to no avail. Elias simply couldn’t hear her. Her eyes grew wide as the refrain of the horse’s hooves matched that of her own beating heart. And she drew in a long, deep breath. Her hands writhing, stretching desperately against the ropes, Elias’ voice replayed in her mind...

*But I would die for you.*

The captain’s eyes gleamed as he watched Elias ride obliviously toward his own demise. He had hunted Elias, chased him relentlessly, only to endure frustration and embarrassment time and again. And now, finally, all of it would come to a successful end.

A single gunshot shattered the night. D`abo jumped, spun around as he realized the shot came from behind him. A look of confusion spread over his face, changing quickly to one of horror.

Bess had managed to stretch her hands just far enough to fire the musket strapped to her side. D`abo’s eyes darted down to see her finger still dangling at the trigger, before limply falling away. Her mouth was gaping and her eyes stared vacantly. Smoke rose off her body as a dark, red stain spread out over the front of Bess’ white dress. Then she crumpled, the musket propping her up, her head bowed over the barrel.

“No!” D`abo shouted.

Elias had heard the shot. He yanked his horse to a stop, the animal turning in a circle as it felt him tug hard on the reins. Elias quickly scanned the windows, spurred his horse back toward the road. The soldiers opened fire even though Elias was at the brink of their range. Bright

flashes erupted from every window as gunshots rang out in the frosty night. Great plumes of smoke shot up, spilling out of the open windows and rolling up toward the sky.

Musket balls buzzed all around Elias, many of them ricocheting off the stones near his stallion's hooves. One whistled an inch past his ear, but none of them found their mark. Ducked low in the saddle, his whip slapping at his horse's flanks, Elias galloped away. Before the redcoats could reload, he had raced down the white road and disappeared over the hill.

Captain D`abo rushed over to Bess, took out a knife, and sawed away the ropes lashing her to the bedpost. He laid her down gently, one arm cradling her head. Her whole body was limp, her breathing ragged. D`abo, in tears, pulled the gag off of her.

“Why? Why for him?”

Bess tried to answer, tried to form a word between her shallow breaths, but before she could her last breath hissed away. Her lips remained open as her eyes stared blankly up at him. D`abo gently closed her eyes with his hand, and then, weeping, hugged her close.

“Forgive me.”

His remorseful cries drifted out through the window. Timothy, lying in the field, knew what those cries indicated. He had pieced together all the sounds he had overheard, and knew deep in his heart what had happened.

Tears streamed down his face as he leapt up and sprinted out toward the moor. *It couldn't be possible*, he thought to himself. It was like a dream. Like he was floating outside of his own body. Nothing seemed real. The grass tugging at his legs. The night wind on his face. The dreary, moonlit landscape in front of him. It was all a haze. Later, when he would try to recall the path he ran through the moor, his memory would fail him. He would recollect only bits and pieces, as

though peering through an inebriated delirium, yet in this case the effects were brought on by overwhelming heartache.

Timothy ran until he couldn't run anymore, and he finally collapsed onto his back in the tall grass. Struggling to catch his breath, he stared up at the night sky, his eyes wild, his cheeks tear-stained. All he could think about was how he could have warned her when he first saw them coming. He could have acted. He could have saved her. But instead, he chose to hide and save himself, and now it was too late.

Nathaniel had heard the shot. He, too, had heard D`abo's mournful cries. He stood behind the bar, his whole body trembling, as Captain D`abo plodded slowly down the stairs. He felt faint, sick to his stomach, when he saw the captain's pale face, the front of his uniform covered in blood. Horrified by D`abo's appearance, Nathaniel spoke softly, fearfully.

"Where is Bess?"

D`abo took several, shuffling steps toward the center of the tavern, a look of shock still frozen over his face. He was so dazed he had barely heard Nathaniel.

"Captain?" Nathaniel pressed.

"Bess... is dead," D`abo finally muttered.

Nathaniel wilted as he shook his head. "No. No. You are a coward. You are a liar and a coward."

"Yes, I am," D`abo said flatly. He yanked his pistol from his belt, spun around and fired. Nathaniel jerked as he was hit, and collapsed out of view behind the bar. D`abo turned to the soldiers in the tavern. They were all watching him in silence.

"Burn this place. Burn it to the ground," D`abo sneered.

A roaring fire quickly consumed the inn. Flames shot up into the darkness, crackling and popping, while glowing embers floated down into the courtyard like drunken fairies. From a safe distance away, the troop of redcoats, holding incriminating torches in their hands, watched in silence as the whole structure burned.

Captain D`abo stood in front of his men, the inferno throwing an eerie glow over his face. The roar of the blaze filled his ears. And the firelight twinkled in his eyes as he watched those devouring flames. Those hot, red-orange flames.

*Roaring. Crackling. Popping.*

The flames in the fireplace crackled and popped, throwing a comforting glow over the living room. Kelli barely noticed. Holding the novel up in her hands, she was absorbed in her reading. After finishing the chapter, she quietly placed the novel down on the coffee table in front of her, set the ribbon bookmark, and gently closed the book. She sat back on the couch deep in thought. While contemplating what she had just read, her eyes happened to fall on an envelope sticking out a pile of mail. Almost lost within all the papers and research books, she had forgotten that she had brought it in earlier. She could just make out the name, *Thad Dunlap*, on the return address label. Kelli scooted forward, plucked the envelope out of the pile. She grabbed up a letter opener and carefully sliced through the top of it, careful not to damage any documents that might be inside. She pulled out two folded sheets of paper. The top one was a simple note, handwritten by Thad, that was addressed to her.

*Kelli, here are a few known signatures belonging to Alfred Wheeler. They were taken mostly from correspondence he had written to fellow authors. I'm afraid I wasn't able to find very many. I hope this helps. Best, Thad.*

She slid out the second paper from behind the first. It contained several photocopied signatures written out as *Alfred Wheeler*.

Kelli's eyes scanned over them, a grin forming on her lips. She picked up the Wheeler novel and opened the front cover. The signature written on the inside, *A. Wheeler*, perfectly matched the photocopied signatures. Kelli clapped her hand over her mouth out of sheer joy, almost yelped out loud. She was about to put the paper down when one of the signatures caught her attention, giving her pause.

It was written out as *Timothy Alfred Wheeler*.

An astonished breath shot from her lips. "His first name was Timothy," she murmured.

She thought back to the character in the novel—a shy and timid young man always scrawling away in his books, always watching Bess from afar, but never bold enough to profess his love for her. Kelli could just imagine him hunched over his desk, his quill pen scratching over the paper, speaking the words he wrote in a frenetic whisper...

*Her eyes grew wide for a moment; she drew one last, deep breath. Then her finger moved in the moonlight. Her musket shattered the moonlight. Shattered her breast in the moonlight, and warned him with her death.*

Kelli sank back into the couch, her hand to her forehead as she realized that Alfred Wheeler, the reclusive and mysterious eighteenth-century author she had been researching for months, was *Timothy*.

#

Brian stepped slowly through the grave markers. He was holding the slip of paper Thad had given him, following the directions scrawled upon it. The further he ventured, the more anxious he became. That part of the cemetery was looking all too familiar to him. He had walked an almost identical path through those same tombstones many times before—to the point he was

starting to find it disturbing. He strolled past an above ground vault, and then the statue of an angel. Both familiar. Next, he recognized a kerbed headstone that had been neglected over time.

Brian turned to the right, walked several rows before stopping in front of Adam's grave. He looked down at the slip of paper in his hand, saw that he wasn't quite in the right spot. He turned, surveyed the tombstones in the section opposite. They were old, rough, and eroded from untold decades of wind and weather. Brian crossed a small path and entered the older area of the cemetery. As his eyes darted from stone to stone, he felt as if he had stepped right into the past. Many of the markers were too worn away to even see a date on them, but he located several from the eighteen-hundreds, even some that dated all the way back to the seventeen-hundreds.

His head jerked up as he spotted a small figure running the tombstones ahead of him, what appeared to be a young boy with brown hair. He was wearing a red jacket that appeared remarkably like the one Adam used to wear. Brian gawked at first, then shuffled after the boy. He craned his head, but couldn't get a good view at him. His line of sight obscured by tombstones, Brian could only see the boy's head bobbing up and down as he ran away. Brian followed him, weaving through the graves, picking up his pace until he had entered into a full run. He stopped, surveying the area in front of him. He had lost sight of the boy.

"Hey! Hello? Is anyone here?" Brian called out.

He took a step forward, then jumped as a crow shot up from one of the headstones. It cawed loudly as it flapped away, a sudden flurry of movement. Brian scowled as he closed his eyes, quickly gathered himself by taking in a breath and then blowing it out. The bird had given him quite a start.

Brian crept forward, stopped and stared as he came to the very gravestone the crow had been perched upon. It was unremarkable from the others around it—except for a symbol etched

into its face. And Brian's eyes widened as he looked upon the emblem of an ornate cross surrounded by elaborate swirls, the very symbol on the front of the Wheeler novel. He crouched in front of the gravestone to get a closer look. Though aged and pitted, he could still see the name and date upon it.

*Elias Luther 1744-1773.*

Brian shot up to his feet, mouth agape.

#

Kelli plopped down onto the couch, her phone to her ear. She heard it ring twice before Edward Thomas answered, his cheery, crackly voice unmistakable.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Mr. Thomas?"

"Yes?"

"This is Kelli Davis again. May I speak with you for a moment?"

"Yes, dear. How can I help you?"

"I need to know more about the inn. Do you know if it ever burned down sometime in the past? Possibly in the late seventeen-hundreds?"

Mr. Thomas paused in thought. "That's very possible. I heard the stables had burned down at one point, which is why they were never rebuilt. But as for the whole inn? I wouldn't know. To be honest I rarely went up there."

"Why did you rarely go up there, Mr. Thomas?"

"When I was a boy my grandfather told me not to. He told me to stay away from that place, especially at night."

"Doesn't that seem odd?" Kelli asked.

“Well, no. The floors were a mess, the whole thing was in disrepair. Going in at night could have been dangerous.”

“Did you ever go in during the day?”

“No. No, I never stepped foot inside. What’s this all about?”

To Kelli, he didn’t sound completely forthright. He answered a little too quickly, and Kelli thought she detected something in his voice. Trepidation. Maybe fear...

“Probably nothing,” said Kelli. “Sorry to have bothered you.”

“No, that’s all right. Call any time.”

“Thank you. Goodbye Mr. Thomas.”

“Goodbye dear.”

Mr. Thomas hung up his phone, then sat back in his study chair. He stared down at the phone a moment, an old landline relic he had owned for decades. Lost in thought, he absent-mindedly chewed on his thumbnail.

His wife appeared through the study door behind him. “Who was that, dear?” she asked.

Mr. Thomas spoke over his shoulder. “Kelli Davis. She was asking about the inn.”

“Why did you tell her you never went inside?”

“You know why.”

“Yes. That’s why you should tell her. It’s only fair.”

Mr. Thomas bristled. “I made a vow never to tell anyone I ever set foot in that place. I’m not going to break it now.”

His wife threw up her hands, shook her head, and left the room. Mr. Thomas never saw her reaction. He stared back down at the phone, again chewing on his thumbnail. He knew he would never tell anyone what he had experienced in that place. What he had seen. What he had

heard. Not ever. He couldn't. If he did, everyone he knew would think he was a senile old fool. Or possibly even insane.

After Kelli ended the call, she put her phone down on the coffee table, leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, her hands draped toward the floor. She gazed over at the wine bottle, reached out to pick it up. But then she hesitated. No, she needed a clear head. She needed to think. Ever since Adam's death she had let the bottom of a wine glass kill her pain and escort her through her struggles. In that moment she realized if Brian had avoided dealing with his pain, then she had merely found a way to drown hers. It was time to do something about that.

Kelli grabbed up the bottle, hurried into the kitchen, and poured the rest of the wine out into the sink. She turned on the faucet, grabbed the sprayer to wash away the drops of wine that remained. As she did, her phone on the coffee table buzzed and vibrated. A message popped up showing that it was Brian calling, but Kelli couldn't hear it over the running water.

#

His phone pressed against his ear, Brian drove his truck down the desolate, country road that led to the inn. He frowned as he once again got Kelli's voicemail.

"Kelli, listen," he said. "I'm sorry about everything. Everything. I discovered something you need to see. I haven't been able to get a hold of you... but maybe you're at the inn. Maybe that's why you're not answering. I don't know. I'm headed there now. Just... please call me back when you get--"

The call dropped. Brian brought up his phone to see he had no bars. The area he had entered was just too remote. With a frustrated scowl, he tossed his phone into the passenger seat. He gripped the steering wheel and sat quietly, despondently, as his truck rumbled down the road. It was starting to rain, a light sprinkle dotting his windshield. Storm clouds had turned the sky

black, and the sun was dropping fast. The countryside around him was already getting dark. It made for an uneasy ride. But more than that, Brian sensed something in the air around him. Something oppressive, inescapable. And he couldn't help but dread that what he felt was an omen of things to come.

#

The doorbell rang. Kelli opened her front door to see a UPS driver holding a package.

“Hey.”

“Hello. Kelli Davis?”

“That's me.”

“Sorry about the hour. We were really busy today. Can you sign here, please?” the courier asked, handing her an electronic pad and pen.

Kelli signed for it and then took the package. “Thanks.”

“Have a good one.”

She closed the door and looked at the name of the sender. *Brian Davis*. Kelli tore open the top of the package as she walked back toward the couch. She took out a white box with a red ribbon tied around it. Immediately, she noticed the ribbon was tied in a love knot, and she let out a soft breath of disbelief. Was it a coincidence? How could Brian have possibly known about it? He hadn't read the story. And then she remembered the ribbon bookmark sewn into the novel. He must have seen it. He had always been good at picking up on little details like that. It was one of the things she loved about him.

That she *loved* about him. Yes, in that moment the realization struck her like water to the face. Despite it all, she did *love* him. Kelli, not wanting to ruin the love knot, gently slipped the

ribbon off the box. She sat down on the couch while placing the box on the coffee table. She opened the lid, pulled back a layer of tissue paper.

Inside sat their wedding picture. Brian had taken it and replaced the glass. Kelli gently lifted it out, beads of moisture forming in the corners of her eyes. She set the picture up on the table and viewed it for a long while. And it was all she could do to keep from bursting out into tears. Looking back to the box, Kelli saw a small, pocket envelope still inside, also white in color. Brian had tucked it under the picture.

As Kelli picked it up and turned it over, her wedding ring slipped out into her palm.

Kelli almost doubled over, clapping her hand over her mouth as she began to cry. She just couldn't hold it back any longer. How? How was it even possible? Her watery eyes darted to her phone. She was about to scoop it up to call Brian, when she saw a message had popped up.

*One missed call.*

#

Storm clouds covered up the moon, plunging the moor, the white road, the inn, into darkness. The rain was falling harder, pattering over the inn's roof. Deep in the cellar, a gurgling noise rose up from the gloom. Water was spurting up out of the drain, and a shallow pool had already formed over the floor.

With the rain pelting down, Brian pulled up into the courtyard, his headlights falling over the front of the inn. He hopped out, flashlight in hand, and ran to the front door. Brian hurried inside, closed the door behind him to shut out the rain. He pulled back the hood of his coat, and then flapped his arms to shake off the water the best he could. He strode over toward the bar, the beam of his flashlight playing over the walls. When he saw that Kelli's car wasn't parked outside, he had considered turning right back around and going home. But he needed a break,

especially with the rain coming down so hard. Besides, it was a prime opportunity to see how well their renovation would hold up under the downpour. As he swished his light around the ceiling, he was pleased to see there were no leaks. Of course, he would also have to check the second story rooms. He was about to do just that when he rotated toward the kitchen and cocked his head. Through the doorway he could hear a faint gurgling.

Brian threw back the trapdoor to the cellar. He scrambled down to the second step, the beam of his flashlight twinkling over the dark surface of the water. And his worst fears were realized. The cellar had flooded.

Brian rushed back outside to his work truck. Doing his best to ignore the pouring rain, he threw back a tarp covering the truck bed. His coat was drenched through by the time he took out a portable work lamp, a shovel, and a crowbar. His arms full, he ran back to the tavern.

As he did, a flickering, orange glow appeared in the corner room on the second floor, as if someone had just lit a candle. But Brian never saw it. He had already reached the door.

#

Kelli drove as fast as she dared, her high beams straining to reveal the road, her windshield wipers offering little relief against the pounding rain. Panic shot through her as a downed tree limb appeared suddenly in her headlights. It was huge, broken in several places, filling up most of the road. Kelli yanked the steering wheel to the left, just managed to swerve around the limb, its longer, thinner branches actually scraping across the side of her car.

As she raced up over the next hill, she spied the inn in the distance. What had been her favorite view of the property had been turned into a twisted scene right out of a nightmare. Dark, cruel, and desolate. She shot forward in her seat, trying to grasp what she was seeing. Through the fury of the storm, she could clearly make out the orange light in the second story window.

Kelli pulled up next to Brian's truck in the courtyard. She clambered out of her car, slammed the door shut. She ran forward several steps, one hand up to shield her face. Her eyes squinting against the rain, she gazed up in wonder at the tavern.

The tavern was burning. Captain D`abo and his men stared up in silence as the whole building became engulfed in a red-orange firestorm. Dark, acrid smoke churned up into the night, while glowing embers swirled down into the courtyard around them. The deafening roar from the fire's sheer mass, the intense crackle of its devouring flames, carried across the moor. Even from where he stood, D`abo could feel the intense heat on his skin. He ignored the heat as he watched the corner window on the second floor. He could see tongues of flame shooting up inside the room and rolling across the ceiling.

They had placed Bess' body on her bed, her arms crossed peacefully over her breast. The fire surged above her, had spread to the walls, had crept across most of the floor. The dresser, the vanity, the chairs, were already ablaze. Flames licked up the sides of the bed, and it was only a matter of moments before it would be consumed as well.

Before long the roof collapsed, causing the whole tavern to fall in on itself. The crash of blazing timbers seemed to shake the very ground as an extraordinary spray of ash and embers erupted into the air. Caught up in a vortex of wind, they whirled toward the sky before fluttering back down, turning the night into an image of Hades itself. More than a few of the soldiers couldn't help but compare the scene to descriptions of the biblical hell. Fire and brimstone. A

roaring inferno. Unspeakable heat and pain. And many of them wondered if that wouldn't be their eternal fate after what they had done that night.

A quick hint of remorse showed on D`abo's face, right before he wheeled around and strode off. His men quickly parted to make way for him. The remaining soldiers continued to look on, their faces bleak and emotionless.

None of them noticed Timothy standing off in the field. He watched the distant flames swirling up into the night, their orange glow revealing the tears pouring down his cheeks.

Eventually the redcoats headed off, following their captain back to Boston. By the time morning came around, the inn had been reduced to a smoking pile of rubble. Elias saw the smoke from across the moor. He had hidden out all night in their rendezvous spot, figuring if Bess could get away, she would be clever enough to assume he would go there. But Bess had never showed up, and when Elias saw the line of smoke drifting up in the distance, he threw away any thought of his own safety, jumped onto his horse, and galloped toward the inn.

The closer he got, the more his heart sank, and the more his stomach turned. He felt sick to the point of nausea at the sight before him. The gabled inn that had always stood so strong against the backdrop of the ocean, an image that had become so familiar to him, was gone. In its place lay a heap of charred wood and stone. Elias had barely reached the courtyard when he leapt from the saddle and ran toward the smoking rubble. He fell to his knees in front of it, his eyes empty with grief. He wasn't sure how long he stayed there, head bowed, shoulders slumped forward. He felt numb all over, so filled with despair he couldn't think straight.

Elias didn't move until he heard the scuffling of feet behind him. He twirled around, pulling a pistol from his belt and pointing it. Timothy gasped and raised his hands, his eyes

bulging with fear. Elias, his eyes darting up and down, studied him quickly. Timothy was disheveled, his face distraught and tear-streaked.

Elias lowered his pistol. "I know you. You worked here," he said.

Timothy nodded, clearly beside himself.

"What happened?"

"The redcoats. They did this," Timothy stammered. He appeared very awkward as he spoke, his hands fidgeting at his sides.

"Where's Bess?" Elias asked. His voice was low, shaky, fraught with worry.

Timothy opened his mouth to speak, but he was too devastated, too heartbroken, to get anything to come out. His lower lip trembled as he was forced to choke back an outburst of emotion.

Elias swallowed hard. "Did they take her?" He almost sounded hopeful that they had, because the alternative was too painful to comprehend.

Timothy finally found the strength to explain what happened, how the captain and his soldiers invaded the inn, how they had tied Bess up, how she had watched for Elias, and how she had died for him. Timothy described how he had hidden in the field and heard it all through the window of Bess' room.

Elias broke down as Timothy's story unfolded, collapsing in utter despair. He clenched his fists as tears streamed from his eyes. So many thoughts spilled through his mind. If only he had turned down the last mission. If only he had listened to her. If only he had agreed to leave when she wanted.

If only.

As Timothy finished his account, Elias' face contorted with rage. He shot up, bellowing at the top of his lungs as he leapt onto his horse and galloped away. He raced down the road, a white dust cloud churning up behind him.

#

Numerous white tents, more than could be counted, sat scattered over a meadow beside the highway. An entire regiment had made camp in that location, at Captain D'abo's request. Still early, most of the men had yet to rise. There were a few milling about, some eating a meager breakfast, others cleaning their weapons, some shaving outside their tents.

Captain D'abo sat on his horse at the camp perimeter. He was watching the highway, where soldiers on horseback were approaching from the east. They were his most trusted regulars, the same men who were with him at the tavern. Lieutenant Tobias led them, and upon seeing the captain, he put his horse to a gallop. Leaving the group behind, he rode up to D'abo, pulling alongside him.

"Any news?" asked D'abo.

"There's no sign of him, sir. But if the locals know anything, they aren't about to give up his whereabouts."

"How surprising," D'abo remarked dryly.

"We've stationed men on all the roads, sent several patrols roaming the countryside. If the fugitive is still in the area, he can't stay undetected forever."

"The gold?"

"Not a trace. Probably dispersed among the colonials by now."

"Probably. And they will use it to buy weapons and equipment. Elias Luther will not escape justice. His apprehension is now our full priority."

Tobias balked. "Captain, he could be all the way to Philadelphia by now."

"Then we'll follow him there!" D`abo growled.

"Yes sir."

"He's fleeing scared now," D`abo spoke through clenched teeth. "The coward. But then what do you expect from a—" The word caught in his throat as he happened to glance toward the highway.

He finally let it out... "Thief."

A lone rider appeared in the distance, galloping toward them, the dirt road smoking behind him. The lieutenant followed D`abo's stare, gaped in disbelief.

Elias raced full speed right toward them, kicking his spurs, lashing his stallion's flanks with his whip. He had no intention of hiding from them. The remaining redcoats still on the road were strung out, plodding slowly along. There were six out front in a loose group, three straggling. None of them saw Elias coming.

The last man, Private Archibald, trailed the furthest behind. He heard the pounding of hooves behind him, mistook it initially for a fellow soldier, or a messenger of some sort. Elias, closing in on him, drew his rapier, the blade hissing from the scabbard. Sensing something wasn't right, Archibald finally spun around in his saddle. His eyes protruded in horror when he saw Elias charging right at him, his rapier brandished high. Archibald screamed, but that scream was cut short as Elias swung his blade, separating Archibald's head from his shoulders.

The two redcoats just ahead of him heard the commotion and turned their horses around, both fumbling to raise their weapons. Elias never slowed. Riding between them, his rapier sliced right, then left. He rode past as both men fell from their saddles with gushing wounds. The soldier he struck first was the one who had forcefully kissed Bess' lips, who had acted

particularly vulgar toward her. With his torso sliced from shoulder to belly, he received the most grievous wound of all of them. Upon impact with the ground, his entrails spilled out onto the road, leaving him as a disemboweled corpse.

Elias never knew what the man had done. He never knew what justice he had delivered. None of that mattered to him. In his eyes they were all equally guilty. He dug in his spurs, pressing his horse to its limits as he rode right toward the remaining group of soldiers. His stallion seemed to share his rage, its eyes wild, its breaths loud and deep as frothy saliva flew from its lips.

Captain D`abo shouted a warning, but his men were too far away. They couldn't hear him clearly. However, the soldiers camped in the meadow behind the captain were rousing, curious at what was happening. Some of them had already started in his direction, muskets in hand.

The group of redcoats on the highway didn't see Elias coming until he was right on top of them. A few had noticed D`abo yelling and waving his arms, but it had only served to distract them from the coming threat. They just weren't ready as Elias plunged into their midst, swinging his rapier into any red-uniformed body he could see.

Startled whinnies. Shouts of alarm. Cries of agony. Bedlam and mayhem. Several weapons discharged into the air, turning the melee into smoke and chaos. In the confusion, one redcoat shot his own comrade when he inadvertently pulled the trigger of his musket. He watched in horror as his fellow soldier jerked and spilled from his saddle, joining three regulars already on the ground.

Blood-red were his spurs, wine-red his velvet coat, as Elias ran his blade through the chest of his closest enemy. The redcoat tumbled off his horse still impaled on the blade. Insane with rage, his face dotted with their blood, Elias was a terrifying spectacle to behold.

Sergeant Durning drew his own rapier as he rode up alongside Elias. He bellowed loudly as he swung down, but Elias caught his arm, keeping the rapier at bay. As they struggled against each other, Elias pulled a pistol from his belt, rammed the barrel into the sergeant's belly, and pulled the trigger. A hole blew out of the back of Durning's uniform. He grunted hard and crumpled from the saddle.

D`abo sneered when he watched the sergeant fall. He pulled out his own pistol, took aim at Elias, and fired. But Elias was just out of range, and the sway of the captain's horse beneath him hindered his accuracy. The shot buzzed by Elias' head, piercing the floppy brim of his hat.

His eyes burning with hatred, Elias turned his horse. At the same time, he yanked out the blunderbuss from the side of his saddle. He brought it up, its flared muzzle glinting in the sun. D`abo swallowed as he stared down its bore from across the meadow. He had his chance. He had taken his shot, and in that moment, he realized the consequences of missing his target.

Lieutenant Tobias desperately raised his musket, cocked the hammer. Elias saw the movement, swiftly altered his aim and pulled the trigger. With a *crack* like thunder, the load of shot spread out over the distance between them, and slammed into the lieutenant's chest. Tobias cried out and toppled over the back of his saddle. His horse spooked and galloped off with a terrified whinny. As it bolted, D`abo's own mount became startled. It rolled its eyes, bucked and stomped its feet, before he could get it back under control.

The soldiers from the camp reached D`abo, and quickly formed into a firing line. They raised their muskets almost in unison, the first row kneeling, the second row standing. An arrogant smirk appeared on Captain D`abo's face as he realized there was nowhere Elias could go. This time there would be no escape.

Still mad with rage, Elias jerked out his last pistol and spurred his stallion toward them. D'abo's smug expression turned to one of surprise. He even appeared a little impressed. But Elias hadn't crossed half the distance between them before the first redcoat fired, his musket roaring as smoke belched up. The others followed in turn. A cloud of white gushed up from the line as an eruption of gunshots rang out one after the other, so numerous they quickly combined into a single, thunderous boom.

Thunder boomed and lightning flashed not unlike gunshots as the storm beat down over the inn. Gale force winds surged against its walls, while rainwater poured down over the windows in gushing streams.

Brian stabbed down with his crowbar, shoved the end of it under one of the cellar floorboards. He put his full weight into it, popping it loose. He had already pried up several of them, and chucked them into a loose pile behind him. They were damp and slick from the flooding, but the water had receded into the hole Brian had made.

He had set up a work lamp on the floor next to him, but its paltry light offered little assistance, leaving most of the cellar in murky darkness. He had to strain just to see into the floor drain, but after removing the grate, it was clear nothing was blocking it. So just as Malcolm had feared, Brian found himself ripping up the floor to examine the main pipe. Once more he jabbed down, pried up another board, leaving a pitch-black hole. The crowbar clanked loudly as he dropped it and grabbed up the work lamp. Brian thrust it down into the opening.

#

Kelli stood outside in the storm, hugging herself in her arms as she stared up at the corner window on the second floor. Diffused by the curtains, the orange glow from within flickered, as

if from a candle. Kelli's hair was soaked and clung to the sides of her head. Rain pelted her face as beads of water dripped from the end of her nose, but for some reason she just couldn't look away. Then her eyes widened as a shadow shot by the window—as if someone in the room had just walked in front of it.

Kelli hurried into the tavern, shut the door. She was chilled to the bone, her coat sopping wet. Virtually blind, she shuffled over to the bar where they kept the kerosene lamp and the box of matches. She fumbled around until she felt the box, heard the matches rattle inside as she picked it up. She slid it open, took one out, then struck a flame. It gave Kelli just enough light to take off the lamp's glass chimney. She lit the wick, then waved out the match right before it could burn her fingers. She slipped the glass chimney back on, but the lamp still wasn't very bright. So she upped the wick, the tongue of flame inside growing instantly, its light casting a soft glow about the room. The flame fluttered, throwing dancing shadows over the walls.

From upstairs came the groaning of floorboards, like someone walking. Kelli's heart caught in her throat, and she twirled toward the sound. Her first thought was that the inn might be stressed by the force of the storm, but then she clearly heard one of the bedroom doors creak open and then closed. Cold and shivering, lamp in hand, Kelli crept to the foot of the stairs, peered up into the gloom with fearful eyes.

Her voice shook as she called out, "Brian?"

#

Brian shot up from the hole. He could fit one arm in, along with his head, but it was still too constricting to get a good look underneath the floor. Growing frustrated, he scooped up the crowbar, thrust its sharp edge between the cracks in the floorboards near the edge of the hole. He was about to pry them up, but then hesitated. He recalled back to when the ceiling had almost

collapsed on top of them, and he had watched a pool of blood-red wine gurgle down into a certain spot in the floor. In that moment, he realized it was in the same place Kelli said she had found Adam's bear.

Not far away from where they had installed the main drain. Not far away at all.

He wasn't sure why, but Brian started prying up the boards in that spot instead. He heaved with all his might, working quickly, almost carelessly, uncaring in how much damage he caused. The floorboards snapped up, and he tossed them aside. When the hole was big enough, he used the end of the crowbar to cut through the polyethylene tarp beneath, exposing the peastones under it. The crowbar clanked as he tossed it aside. He grabbed up the shovel in both hands, raised it high before jabbing down.

#

Kelli held the lamp up in front of her as she slowly ascended the stairs. Within its sphere of light, she could just make out the doorway at the top. It was closed. Waiting for her. Apprehension gripped her, and it was all Kelli could do to take the next step upwards.

*Bong... bong... bong...*

The old grandfather clock in the tavern began to chime. Kelli froze, gasping softly. There was no way it could be working. Even without looking through the glass casement, she knew none of its parts were moving. They were too rusted together. Yet it continued to chime.

*Bong... bong... bong...*

A look of resolution came over Kelli's face as she started up again. Each new step brought a moment of revelation as she thought back to what they had experienced. She remembered the first time they had entered the corner bedroom. The window was open, even though they were both certain it had been closed when they had arrived.

She thought back to the novel when Bess would open her bedroom window and smile down at Elias, who would be waiting for her in the courtyard below.

*Bong... bong... bong...*

Kelli was about midway up now, each creaking step bringing her closer to the top. Again, her thoughts reflected upon the novel: to the single, sharp crack of a musket ringing out in the night, followed by Captain D'abo's anguished cry as he cradled Bess in his arms. The blood from her self-inflicted wound had covered the front of his waistcoat, and no doubt pattered down into a puddle on the floor. Right where the dark stain always resurfaced.

"It always reappears, no matter how many times I clean it," Enrique had told them. And up until that point they hadn't been able to offer an explanation for it.

Closer and closer she came to the door. Dark. Foreboding. Shrouded in shadow. Kelli's heart hammered in her chest. Her mouth was dry and her throat constricted. Her feet felt heavy. Just a few more steps. Almost there...

#

The shovel plunged into the wet soil, lifting out a rich, dark heap. Brian flung it onto a growing pile beside him before jabbing it back down into the hole.

He was so caught up in his digging, he didn't notice the work lamp beside him starting to buzz and flicker...

#

*Bong... bong... bong...*

The last chimes of the clock faded away, leaving only the patter of the rain outside. Beyond that, the inn had fallen alarmingly quiet. The bedroom door loomed before Kelli, both a

physical and mental barrier. She was sure *it* was the door she had heard open and then close, and the prospect of what she might discover on the other side almost made her faint from fear.

She was trembling, not only from the cold, but from the dread building within her. Kelli looked down at the knob, yellow-orange in the light of the lamp. She slowly reached out, grabbed hold of it. Gathering her courage, all she had left, she turned it. The door creaked open, revealing darkness beyond.

Kelli raised her lamp, its light shining bright...

The sun shone bright over the meadow, the sky blue and clear. Elias lay in the green grass near the highway, his faithful steed lying next to him. Both were broken and bloody, mortally wounded. The horse had taken the brunt of the barrage, its chest and neck riddled with holes from where the musket balls had slammed into it.

A tranquil silence had fallen as the redcoats circled around Elias. Captain D`abo stood over him, staring down. It appeared as if Elias had been struck at least five times, but his clothes were too saturated with his own blood to tell for sure. Elias, barely alive, held the captain's gaze.

"What do you have now, Elias? Vengeance?" the captain asked smugly. "You have nothing."

A calm filled Elias' face as his bloody lips formed into a smile. "I will have her forever," he spoke in a hoarse whisper, each word difficult. "You will not."

D`abo's smug expression faded, his upper lip curling. Elias laughed when he saw the captain's reaction. He could see the jealousy, the fury in D`abo's eyes. He kept laughing, deliberately taunting the captain. Provoked to rage, D`abo grabbed the musket from a soldier standing next to him, preparing to silence Elias once and for all as he cocked its hammer and brought it up to fire.

No one noticed the tiny pistol Bess had given Elias concealed in his hand—until he raised it and pulled the trigger. Several of the captain's men attempted to shout a warning, but it was too late. The shot struck D`abo in the chest, just above his belly. He staggered, dropping the musket as he fell back, clutching his wound.

Too weak to hold the pistol up any longer, Elias' hand dropped limply into the grass. With his other hand, Elias reached into his coat, his numb fingers searching until he pulled out the red ribbon Bess had given him. He clasped it close to his chest.

A few feet away from him, Captain D`abo lay on the ground gasping for breath. The captain's men had gathered urgently around him, though at that point there was nothing they could do. Elias never noticed their panic as his eyes became dim and unfocused. As his life slipped away, he seemed to welcome it, his face smiling, peaceful. The last thing Elias ever saw was the sun above him, its white light washing down over him.

A white flash lit up the night as lightning streaked across the sky. Wind and rain continued to beat down over the inn, raging, howling, battering the walls, threatening to smash in the windows.

Down in the cellar, Brian had no idea how furious the storm had become. Perspiring, his shirt stained with sweat, he finally stopped digging. He tossed down the shovel, and once again grabbed up the work lamp. Crouching low on his knees, he thrust the lamp down into the opening, his eyes narrowing as he peered around. He withdrew the lamp, reached into the hole as far as he could, until he felt the soil several feet down. When he raised his hand back up, it was dark and sooty. Rubbing his fingers together, he realized they were covered in ash. There appeared to be a whole layer of it under the floor.

Again he stared down into the hole, lowering the lamp as far as he could. Something gleamed in the dark, what looked to be a small, gold chain. It had been uncovered when he disturbed the ashes. Brian reached down once more, fingers stretching, straining, until he found it and pulled it free. As he held it up to the light, he saw that it was indeed a gold chain. At the end of it dangled a gold, heart-shaped locket.

The flickering flame in Kelli's lamp cast swaying patterns of shadow and light. Its glow fell over the four-poster bed, a vanity, a chair in the corner. The rest of the room was just fluttering pools of gloom. Kelli couldn't perceive any source of the mysterious light she had seen from outside. There was no candle in the room, nor could she see or smell any smoke from one that had been recently extinguished.

The storm seemed to be waning, the rain just a patter, the wind a mere whisper. Yet Kelli could hear all of those sounds clearer in that room and in any other area in the inn. And that could only mean one thing. She took several steps forward until her lamp light fell over the casement, and she paused. Swallowed.

The window. It was open.

Kelli crept over, gently closed and latched it. She rotated, holding the lamp high to give the room one last look over. There was a stillness, a creepiness about the room, especially drenched in darkness. Perhaps it was the period furniture, but for an instant Kelli felt she had stepped back into time, and all the sorrow and despair from that era seemed to arrive with it. Kelli felt an unexplainable heaviness all around her, an unseen weight that filled her entire being. A palpable terror overwhelmed her, and in that moment, she felt the urge to flee from that room and never return.

She walked briskly toward the door, was about to leave when she heard the window creak open behind her. Kelli stopped, frozen in place. She took in a shaky breath, let it out, then slowly turned around. She had latched the window. It couldn't have opened. Not by itself. Yet even through the gloom, she could see the room was deserted, that she was alone. Sensing the same oppressive stillness, the same foreboding uneasiness, Kelli stepped back toward the window, reached out to close it. As she did, she realized she could no longer hear the rain. Only water

dripping from the roof. The storm clouds seemed to be clearing. Kelli grabbed hold of the handle, closed the window tight, and latched it good. She backed away slowly, her eyes fixed on the casement. She felt a tingle up and down her spine as the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. And the heaviness she had been sensing, the peculiar uneasiness, seemed to surge all around her, even cutting right through her.

Kelli gasped, her eyes bulging, as she watched the window latch pop up seemingly all by itself. Then the window clattered open, as if pushed angrily by unseen hands. Kelli's chest heaved as fearful breaths sprung from her lips—each one emerging as a puff of white mist. The room had suddenly become very cold.

Kelli lifted her fingers into the mist, watched in astonishment. Now shivering, she wrapped herself in her arms. Her skin, her hair, her clothes, were all still damp from the rain, and the drop in temperature made her entire body tremble uncontrollably. Kelli backed away toward the door, her hands shaking so badly she could barely hold onto the kerosene lamp.

The storm clouds outside parted long enough to let the moon shine in through the window. Its light streamed over the floor and onto the edge of the bed. And as it did, Kelli noticed something odd out of the corner of her eye. She turned her head, stared in confusion, not understanding at first what she was observing. It took her a moment to realize she could see, within the rays of moonlight, two ghostly feet and the bottom of a white dress.

Her mouth fell open.

The clouds parted further, and as more moonlight shone in, the more it revealed. The body of a woman slowly appeared before Kelli's eyes—into the apparition of a woman with dark hair, dark eyes, and wearing a seventeenth century dress. The ethereal specter sat at the foot of

the bed, staring sadly out the window. From the description in the novel, Kelli held no doubt that she was looking upon Bess Turner.

Kelli shuddered as a wave of terror washed over her. Her lips quivering, she was so scared she couldn't even scream. As she backed away, the lamp slipped through her numb and shaking fingers. It shattered as it hit the floor, the kerosene instantly catching fire.

#

Brian dug like a man possessed, the dirt pile next to him now quite large as he turned the shovel in his hands, heaping more dark soil onto it. He was breathing heavily from his efforts, almost to the point of exhaustion. His fervor getting the better of him, Brian flung down the shovel and grabbed up the lamp. He shoved it once more down into the hole, lowering his head and shoulders along with it. And his eyes swelled in astonishment.

He had dug deep enough to uncover a skeletal hand half-buried in the earth. As he stared down at it, Brian thought back to what Adam would always ask him in his dreams. He could still hear Adam's voice echoing in his head.

“Have you seen her?”

#

Kelli backed out of the room until she hit the wall of the hallway. She had clapped her hands to the sides of her mouth, hysterical with fear. The spilt kerosene had gushed over the floor, the fire surging with it. Flames crackled and snapped as they spread quickly through the bedroom. Kelli's gaze shot over the licking flames, to the foot of the bed where Bess had been sitting. The space was empty just like before, and Kelli had to wonder if she was going mad.

#

Brian dug with his bare hands, his fingers clawing through the dark soil and ash. He was terrified at what he might find, but he couldn't help himself. He finally stopped, stared in disbelief. He reached down with both hands, then struggled up to his knees. As he did, he brought up a human skull. Swiftly, he held it out into the lamp light for a better look. Still caked with earth, its empty eye sockets seemed to stare right back at him.

Kelli clambered down the cellar stairs behind him, her feet pounding. Stooping low on the third step, her face was panicked and tear-streaked. She saw Brian kneeling on the floor in front of the hole. He was sweaty and dirty, and she figured he was making repairs.

“Brian!”

His head snapped around, his eyes meeting hers.

“Brian! We have to leave! We have to leave right now!” she shouted.

Brian didn't move. His eyes stared vacantly up at her. Kelli scurried down the remaining steps, crouched down in front of him, and shook his shoulders.

“Did you hear me?” she yelled desperately.

Her words barely registered as Brian peered down into the hole he had dug. “The story's real,” he muttered.

“I know. I know it is. Honey, we have to hurry.” Though her voice was pleading, she was trying to stay calm, trying to get through to him.

But Brian was still too shocked to understand the urgency of the situation. “Two people who would sacrifice everything for each other. Why can't that be us?” he asked in a stupor, more to himself than to Kelli.

Kelli gripped his shoulders hard. “That already is us. Can't you see that?”

Brian finally stared up at her, his face contorted in anguish. “I’m sorry I couldn’t deal with what happened. I didn’t want to push you away. It’s just that…”

When he couldn’t finish, Kelli shot forward until their noses were almost touching. “I know, Brian. I know you loved him. I know you miss him. I do, too.”

Brian broke down in tears, dropping his head into her lap. “I was supposed to protect him, but I’m the one who called him over,” he cried.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Kelli’s voice cracked as she sobbed the words. When she realized he hadn’t heard her, she took his head in her hands, lifting him up so that he they were staring right at each other.

“Hey, look at me,” she said comfortingly. “It wasn’t your fault. You’re haunted by memories you have no control over. Give those memories to me. Give that pain to me. I’ll share it so you don’t have to deal with it anymore. We’ll get through it together, just like we’ve gotten through everything together.”

Brian stared vacuously, his eyes glistening. Then he nodded, her words finally getting through to him.

Kelli’s tone turned urgent. “Brian. We have to leave here. Now.”

She helped him up, and they both scrambled for the stairs.

The whole second floor was burning, the roof engulfed in flames, by the time Brian and Kelli ran out the inn’s front door. Upon reaching the safety of the courtyard, they stared up helplessly. All their hard work was being consumed by the roaring inferno.

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When morning came, the inn was little more than a smoking pile of rubble. Brian and Kelli had called the fire department as soon as they entered the range of a cell tower, although by

then they both knew the inn was lost. They weren't able to see the extent of the damage until the first rays of dawn.

Firefighters were poking through the inn's burned out remains. Brian and Kelli, standing nearby with blankets draped over their shoulders, watched in a daze. They didn't snap out of it until the firemen became animated, and started talking excitedly amongst each other. It was clear they had discovered something.

One of them approached. His face haggard and smeared with soot, he was wearing his full suit, with his fire helmet in the crook of his arm.

"Mr. Davis, you were right. We found skeletal remains beneath the rubble, right where you said. Female I think."

Brian, his face grim, nodded. The fireman nodded in return and walked away. Kelli, completely exhausted and bewildered, lowered her head into her hands.

"All that work. Everything we put into it."

"It was worth it," said Brian.

Kelli wrapped her arms around the back of his neck and hugged him. Brian folded his arms around her and held her as close as he could.

"I love you," he said in her ear.

Kelli cried softly. "I love you, too."

Two weeks had passed and Thad hadn't heard a word from Kelli. He had tried calling a couple of times without any luck, and had sent several texts, but with no reply. He had no idea what had happened, or what she had been going through, but he was starting to worry. It was on a cold but cheery morning when he finally received a response. He had just finished with a customer, and was walking back to the counter, when he pulled up in surprise. The music box he had given Kelli was sitting next to the register. Thad peered around the shop, searching every aisle within his line of sight, but saw no sign of Kelli. Though a bit heartbroken, he couldn't help but smile a little as he picked up the music box and opened the lid. Its music started playing.

Later that day, Brian and Kelli, both them peering down with affection, stood before two headstones. The first headstone was familiar, worn and gray.

The name on it read: *Elias Luther 1744-1733*.

The marker right next to it was brand new, the earth in front of it recently dug. The name on it read: *Bess Luther 1752-1773*.

Kelli couldn't take her eyes off of Bess' name.

"She waited for him at that window, and couldn't understand why he never came back to her. Why he couldn't reach her."

“I’m sure he tried. I’m sure he tried every night,” Brian replied.

Kelli slowly shook her head. “To think the inn was rebuilt right on top of her, and no one realized she was still down there among the ashes.”

“I think Timothy Wheeler knew,” said Brian. “I think he was haunted by that knowledge, or by her, and ended up throwing himself over the cliffs because of it.”

“It’s all so sad,” said Kelli, her gaze going back and forth between the tombstones. “At least now they’re together. At least now she’s with him.”

A questioning expression came over Brian’s face. “So, if Timothy Wheeler bought the property after he became wealthy... why did he rebuild it exactly the way it was before it burned down?”

Kelli, her gaze never leaving the gravestones, smiled as she answered. “Because he loved her. The landlord’s daughter. Rebuilding it just like it was would remind him of her every day.”

Brian nodded in agreement. “I guess maybe so. But in the end, that’s what destroyed him. He spent all his energy dwelling on the past. And where did it ever get him? Maybe it’s time we dwell on the future.”

Kelli stared up at him. “What do you mean?”

“Adam always wanted a baby brother,” Brian answered with a smile. “I think maybe it’s time we give him one.”

Kelli’s eyes softened as she returned his smile. Though surprised at his remark, she was also truly touched. She came to him, hugging him close. Her head against his shoulder, together they turned and walked back through the tombstones. They didn’t say another word after that, at least not until they reached their car. They just kept holding each other as they walked in silence, neither one of them wanting to let go of the other.

Just across the worn path, in the newer area of the cemetery, lay Adam's grave. Having visited him first, Brian and Kelli had left fresh roses at the base of his headstone, as well as his little stuffed bear.