

Hoardfrost

Roses

D. L. Gardner

# Hoarfrost to Roses

## Sample Chapters

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## GRAI

Grai Madison clicked open his pocket watch—a keepsake his grandfather had entrusted to him—twenty-four carats, with a ruby on the latch and his grandfather’s initials etched on the cover. He groaned as the thin metal minute hand clicked another notch. Half-past eleven. Close to midnight! He’d been working way too long, completely oblivious to the world outside. No wonder he had a mild headache, and his eyes burned. He brushed back the curl that hung over his forehead and gathered the papers on his desk, filing them neatly in his leather case, which he snapped shut, satisfied. He had everything he needed for the lawyer in the briefcase except for the Will. The tattered parchment written in his grandfather’s hand was too personal to file away. Not only was Grai listed as the heir in the legal documents, but Grandfather had included a personal note which was not for anyone’s eyes but his own, at least not until everything was docketed and settled.

*Grai, My Dear Grandson.*

*Of all the relatives in my family, you are the one that has remained the most faithful. I love you like a son. You know how I despise the man your mother married. Were it not for him, she would be my beneficiary. However, because this territory has denied women the right to own land, I am leaving all my assets to you. All of it! Don’t let that scallywag of a brute lay one finger on that property. You have the talent and the whither-all to foster that estate to what it once was.*

*Let the little tribe of Kallam families remain in the valley. They aren’t bothering anyone. Protect them if you must. This Territory was their land before we came here.*

*Make room for the vagabond, maybe one or two of those freed slaves that need a home. They can help you keep the place integral. Find a pretty miss to marry. One who will be good to you and then you be good to her. Don’t emulate the man your mother married. Your sweetheart can sew fancy curtains for the windows and tat lace for the tables. Wish I could live long enough to see your children, my dear boy.*

*Above all, don’t forget about the roses. We worked so hard, you and I, to tend them. Their roots sustained the fire. They will bloom again, and you’ll have your own park, this haven will be an oasis for your soul, as it was mine.*

*I left you a gift in the root cellar. No one knows about the gold except for Professor Reinhardt, and he already has his share. He’s a good person and may even want to help you*

*rebuild. There's enough gold coin in those bags to erect three times the manor that burnt down. You can do it. You've got the talent.*

*I love you, Grandson. Take care of your mother when you can.*

*Grandpa Cyrus.*

Grai folded the letter carefully and sealed it in the inside pocket of his waistcoat. He took his frock coat from the coat rack and put it on, retrieved his derby, patting his hat firmly on his head, and tucked his case under his arm. Before he snuffed the lantern, he peeked into the adjacent room where the banker's secretary thumbed through papers on her desk by candlelight.

"I'm leaving, Mary," he said.

Mary pulled her spectacles off. An attractive middle-aged woman—her lace collar tight around her neck, her mutton sleeves stylish for women older than her—she hung onto fashions that were quickly becoming obsolete. Grai attributed her modesty to being a widow.

"Did you find all that you were looking for?"

"Finally! It took long enough to locate the deed and the Will, I have everything here!" He held up his briefcase. "I honestly thought he had lost these papers in the fire. That the Will was preserved is awe-inspiring! A chance of Providence, have you!"

"Your grandfather was very articulate at securing his paperwork. I'm not surprised he had all that information in a strongbox."

"Well, now that I have what I need, probate proceedings will cease, and I can claim my inheritance."

"Nine hundred acres, is it?"

Grai used the snuffer to extinguish the lantern and stepped out of the den into Mary's office, shutting the door behind him. He grabbed a stool and sat across from her, resting the briefcase on his lap. The hours he spent searching through paperwork this last week isolated him from the outside world, bottling up his excitement. He had to share!

"I loved that place, Mary. I spent my childhood there. The land is forested with elk and bear, but there's a fertile valley where grandfather farmed and a creek with the biggest brook trout you'd ever seen. This estate will be the perfect place to settle and raise a family—and to share those memories with my children, or grandchildren. Grandfather's property is everything a man could want."

“I thought it all burnt to the ground during the earthquake?”

“The manor did, and a few of the outbuildings. But I can build it again. Maybe better.”

Mary raised her brow and tapped the papers she’d been working on into a neat pile.

“Construction is costly, Grai. You do realize property around here is coveted, especially with the railroad stretching its tracks to Port Summerhill. People do strange things when candy is flashed in front of their eyes. Your land will be a prime target.”

“Even more reason to protect it.”

“You don’t understand. Nine hundred acres is a lot of land, land which might be stolen from you.”

“How? What are you saying?”

“I’m saying the land might be better protected if you let probate run its course. The estate by law would go to your stepfather. He has influence, people who can help keep the estate intact.”

“Except Grandfather once told me he’d sooner someone push him off a bridge than leave Richard Bonneville a single copper coin.”

Mary shook her head and clicked her tongue, laughing gently. “You shouldn’t continue your grandfather’s vendetta. What good is it to take such a hostile attitude? If I remember correctly, your grandfather’s anger did nothing beneficial for him. Look how it alienated him from his daughter?”

Grai closed his mouth. There was no sense arguing with Mary Sellers. She was a pleasant person, but sometimes she pried into his life too much. Richard Bonneville abused Grai’s mother, and his grandfather knew how his stepdad treated her. Mary Sellers didn’t need to know. Family matters stayed within the household. That Bonneville had fathered an illegitimate child should have been revealed before their wedding for they fought every day thereafter.

“I’m sorry, Miss Sellers. If Bonneville had a legal deed to the property, the fiend would level the land, clear-cut the forest, and sell everything. I would feel as if I had betrayed my grandfather’s love and let his hard labor go to waste.”

“So, what’s left of all that labor and love?” Mary asked.

“A few stone walls, rock, and mortar fragments. And me!” He grinned.

She snickered. “Even sentimental holdings will be pushed aside in the name of progress.”

“The gardens alone are priceless. Some roses are shoots from our family’s garden in England. Some a hundred years old.” Grai’s voice tapered. He needed to champion the estate but didn’t need to convince the banker’s secretary.

There were other features worthy of salvaging; A fountain that had been shipped from England, a well Grai helped his grandfather dig, and stone sculptures too many to describe. These things may not have a monetary value, but they had a spiritual value and were personal to Grai. Bonneville didn’t know about the dugout, and Grai wasn’t about to tell him.

“I loved my grandfather, Mary. Watching him fade away with consumption hadn’t been easy. He was the father I didn’t have. He took me under his wing for a reason, to continue his legacy. I wouldn’t have pursued structural design without him. No one else thought I had the talent.”

“Those are foolish words, Grai. We’ve all recognized your abilities. Another Renwick Jr, your mother used to boast. She was good to you. She deserves a piece of that property.”

“She was good to me until Bonneville moved in. After that, she’s been... I don’t know, incongruous.”

Mary shrugged and shook her head.

“I will build a room for my mother, but she’d have to leave him.”

When Miss Sellers didn’t respond, Grai set the briefcase upright on her desk and leaned over it, giving her a warm smile.

“You are a kind woman, Mary Sellers, and I appreciate your concern for my mother. I know you two are close. But I intend to honor my grandfather’s wishes. If Mother could own land, and if it were just the two of us, things would be different. But they aren’t.”

Mary sighed heavily and frowned. “Times change. You need to be careful.”

“Careful?”

“So much ill fortune befell your grandfather because of that estate. The earthquake, the fire, his consumption. What if the same demons he faced suddenly attached themselves to you?” Her frown reminded him of his mother’s, eerie and ominous. He listened too often to his mother’s soothsaying.

“The property is not haunted. I promise you.” Grai smiled. His mother tried to convince his grandfather he was cursed—a conviction his grandfather passed off as superstition.

“Not haunted. Plagued just like so many other dwellings in this town. Something evil exists here, Grai. The dead come back and when they do, they mean ill well for the living.”

“Yes, that’s what many people in Port Summerhill say.”

“You best heed those warnings, Grai Madison.”

“I’ll do my best to tread softly on their graves.”

“Not their graves, their spirits.”

“I’m sure the Good Lord gathered their spirits already, Miss Summers.”

“Nothing is for sure, young man.” She looked up from her work with a stern expression, and Grai lost his smile out of respect. “Do not scoff them lest you lose *your* spirit!”

“And where would my spirit go if I should lose it?” he asked.

She stared at him; the candlelight casting a wicked shadow across her otherwise gentle face. “You know I’m not the one to answer that question.”

“Miss Sellers, I will be as careful as I can.”

“You’re going to do what you will, and I’m no one to stop you. I’m just offering advice.”

Grai tipped his hat and walked out the door.

The downpour had stopped, leaving in its place a coat of ice on the road and walkway. Glad he had sanded his leather soles that morning, he took a confident step into the street and began his walk home. He wouldn’t tell Bonneville about finding the Will until he spoke with the lawyer.

Gas lamps reflected light in storefront windows and cast shadows that stretched across the narrow street. A wind had picked up, causing an occasional shutter to slam, a sign to creak, and mist to spray from trees dampened by the rain. The ocean rumbled in the distance; the sound captured by a thick cloud cover. He hurried over the cobblestone until the road turned to dirt and the light of downtown faded in the distance. Passing yard after yard of stately homes, wrought-iron fences, and wild roses, their fragrance long since muted in the fall weather, he turned down a remote forested pathway that led to his mother’s house. He had no idea someone had been following him until he heard raspy breathing, as if they were running to catch up.

“Grai!” a voice called.

Grai stopped and turned.

With a sudden crack, his head burst. The world went black, and he collapsed as someone tore his briefcase from his hand. Grai gained consciousness, flattened against the ground with a

man straddling him, wringing his neck. He couldn't breathe. He gasped, kicked, fought against the attacker.

"Finish it and let's get out of here," someone ordered.

The dagger flashed in the moonlight and the sharp blade dug into his side.

He retched and doubled over in pain.

The man jumped off of him and yanked the knife out. Grai cried in agony. A warm trickle of wet leaked from his gut, his hands darkened when he held them over the wound. Someone heaved him off the pathway and dragged his body into the brush, rummaged through his coat pockets, ripped his pocket watch out of his vest, and the last Grai heard was the sound of his murderers racing away.

The rain woke him. Or was it him? He saw his body lying in the dirt, blood pooled under him and clotted over a wound on his head, his curls buried in leaves, his clothes muddy, his flesh pale, his neck marred with hand marks. Remorse flooded his spirit. He didn't want to die. He was too young to die.

"Grai," he said and shook the lifeless body on the ground. "Get up. Get up to safety before they come back. Move," he urged, though no sound came from his lips. He slipped inside the body and tried to move him from within, massaged his heart to get a beat. Pulled open his air passage, massaged his lungs, held tight the muscles ripped apart from the knife.

"Don't die, Grai," he whispered.

The body moaned, coming to life.

Grai's spirit pulled and prodded and finally got the body to move, to connect, but not to meld. He couldn't fully become one. Something kept them apart, but this would work for now. They staggered at first; the spirit lifting the body's weight. The body's mind was not functioning, and the spirit—fearful—could not think. They crawled through the brush. The spirit led him away from downtown on the only safe road he was familiar with—the road to his grandfather's estate. They would be unscathed in its hiding places until they could unite again—until this near-death state of existence could be reconciled.



## Adele Moves In

There must have been a hundred people in the courtroom, and Adele never once turned around to see who they were. All she knew is that the smell and heat of their bodies turned her stomach. This session would change her life forever. Her parents had already been tried. Guilty. Today they would be sentenced.

“This should only take a moment,” Aunt Eloise whispered in her ear, squeezing her hand. Adele hadn’t taken her gloves off, nor had she unwrapped her scarf from around her neck or removed her frock off her shoulders. She shivered despite the body heat that stifled the room. She wore her mourning dress, a black wool bodice, and a skirt that had been her mother’s and swore to herself she would never change out of it.

She knew what was coming. There’d be little chance of mercy. The crime had been horrendous. If only she could have waited in the carriage during this proceeding. The cold air would have been a respite, the torrential rain splattering off the cobblestones would have been a welcome release. However, her Uncle Nicholas Barrington insisted she sit with them.

“All rise,” a voice said, and Aunt Eloise helped her stand.

*The poor woman. This was her sister and here she was helping me.*

The judge took his seat, his ridiculous white wig placed on what was probably a bald head, his double chin and spectacles made Adele’s mouth sour and her lips twitch.

They brought her mother and father in from the side door. Mother wore what was once a white bodice and blue skirt, tattered and stained. Father wore stripes. The guards must have disrespected him, for he had a pale and gaunt look about him. Adele bowed her head, glad for the veil that covered her face. She didn’t dare meet their eyes, doing so would be too painful.

“Be seated,” the judge ordered and after the shuffling of bodies taking their seats, cleared his throat.

“The court has found you, Madam Catherine Cora Johansson and Mister Johnathan Paul Johansson guilty of first-degree murder. I might mention for the record that Jim Marlin Delaney, an accomplice in this murder, has forthwith been tried and condemned as well, and a death warrant is currently being posted even as we speak. Despite your help with law enforcement, Mr., and Mrs. Johansson, as explained to you by your attorney, the naming of this additional murderer does not exonerate you. I sentence the two of you to hang by the neck until dead this Saturday on October

29<sup>th</sup>, 1879.” He looked up at the courtroom. “It will be a public hanging to give resolution to those who knew Professor Reinhardt. This session has ended.”

His gavel hit the desk. The judge rose and Aunt Eloise had to pull Adele up from her seat to get her to stand she trembled so. Adele held the kerchief over her mouth and forced back bile from her fragile insides. She had spent the entire trial with her head down, ashamed, hiding her remorse, and hiding the world from her eyes.

She whimpered, seeing her parents strong-armed by the constables on their way out.

Aunt Eloise had to guide her outside with an arm locked through hers. Adele fought dizziness while they waited for Uncle Nicholas and his coachman, Mr. Fernsworth, to drive the team of mules and the carriage to them. Rain thundered onto the awning of the courthouse entry and dribbled into the stream that had formed along the gutters of the roadway. The world cried with her as she wiped her eyes. A useless gesture, as no sooner did she dry them then they were wet again.

“Hurry,” Aunt Eloise said, holding an umbrella over the both of them as they trotted through puddles to the carriage. Uncle Nicholas took her hand as she stepped inside, the hem of her skirt now dripping wet. She scooted over as her aunt followed. The woman threw a stole that had been left on the seat over Adele’s shoulders and wrapped her arms around her.

“There, love,” she whispered in Adele’s ear.

The carriage tilted slightly with the weight of Uncle Nicholas as he pulled himself into the compartment and took a seat across from them. The smell of wet wool sickened her—a putrid aroma that would bleed into her memory from this day forth—the smell of abandonment, of disgrace, humiliation, and of death.

“Well, that’s the end of that!” Uncle Nicholas grumbled and glanced at Adele. “You’re our charge now, young lady. I expect you to live according to our standards.”

“Nick,” Eloise scolded. “Give her a moment’s peace.”

“A moment for what, Eloise? To mourn for your foolish sister and her brigand husband? They’re guilty as sin, and we all know it. They’re getting what they bargained for.”

Adele put the hankie under her veil and pushed back the tears.

“And to mourn for them is treasonous. Would you have joined them in their pitiless escapades, Adele?”

“Nicholas!”

“Quiet, Eloise, do not interrupt me.”

Adele’s aunt breathed heavily and sat back, clutching her coat tightly, and looked out the window. No one spoke after that. Adele didn’t blame her uncle for his reaction. Nicholas Barrington lived the life of an aristocrat, and he now risked his influence, wealth, and reputation by boarding the daughter of two murderers. Port Summerhill was a small community attempting to find its place on the map, and her uncle played a huge role in its success. If he suffered because of his wife’s family, who knows the devastation. He had much to lose.

“I’m sorry, Uncle,” Adele whispered to the man who gazed at her with his dark eyes. No compassion came from lips that were buried under his salt and pepper mustache. A hard man, her uncle won his status with a powerful hand, determined, forthright. He expected no less from his children and even more from in-laws who would live under his roof.

Staying with the Barringtons couldn’t be any worse than what Adele had been through, though. She practically lived by herself as her mother and father were always off on some secret mission. They never told her where, and now that Adele had sat through the entirety of their trial, she wished she didn’t know. Imagine murdering a man! A professor at that. And to what gain? Why had they killed him? Adele folded her kerchief, fumbling with the corners, fingers shaking as the carriage rolled along the dirt road overlooking the ocean.

They had already been to her parent’s shanty in Port Galleon that morning to retrieve all of Adele’s belongings. Packed in a single trunk that now bounced on top of the carriage, they transported them to Port Summerhill where her parents were sentenced. Under other circumstances, staying with Aunt Eloise and Uncle Nicholas would be enjoyable. They resided in a pleasant part of the country, atop the highest hill in the thriving seaside town, where you could see the Puget Sound, an inlet of the Pacific Ocean, and part of the Salish Sea.

As far as her own home? She needn’t ask what would become of her father’s small cottage. Being a woman, she had no rights to any property. Uncle Nicholas would sell it and the money would go for her sustenance. Neither would she see the friends she grew up with.

The carriage slowed as the mules towed it through the wrought-iron gate of the Barrington estate. Adele drew the curtain back and peeked outside. Pouring rain dampened the red brick of the manor and obscured the arched gables and ornate trimming surrounding the eyebrow and bay windows. Two stately columns bordered the ingress, and the stairs glowed white in the dismal

weather. A balcony stretched out over the porch way, and cherry wood double-doors provided the entrance to the home. Extravagant, and yet cold. The house stirred a sick feeling inside of her.

The carriage came to a halt and Mr. Fernsworth opened their door.

He was a dark man, one of Uncle Nicholas' few servants. Her uncle paid his domestics well and gave them a clean bunkhouse to live in. Many of the dark people had fled west after the Civil War, looking for a better life, and found one settling in the Pacific Northwest where they sought to raise their families. Port Summerhill promised a decent existence for those who made the journey. With the talk of a railway connecting this township to the rest of the world, industrialists had already staked a claim. Men of all races joined them.

Adele would have smiled at the stocky middle-aged black man when he helped her descend the step, but she had no smiles in her. Aunt Eloise hurried her to the porch and opened the doors, shaking a volley of raindrops from the umbrella and stomping her boots in the foyer. Adele took off the stole, hung it on the coat rack, and set her hat above it. Proper etiquette demanded she remove her outside wear while in the house. She would have kept the veil on if she had a choice.

Once inside the house, the aroma of freshly baked bread reminded her she hadn't eaten all day, and the sky had already darkened. Uncle Nicholas brushed by her and Aunt Eloise, bound to fireplace in the living room while Lila, Adele's cousin, a woman older than her, greeted them.

"Adele, you remember your cousin Lila?"

Adele nodded slightly. "Yes," she mumbled.

She barely knew Lila. Her parents had seldom visited Aunt Eloise and her family. As a child, she wondered why, but now that her parents' lives had been exposed for what they were; she understood. She grew up in Port Galleon, a town south of Port Summerhill where the shellfish industry dominated the trade, and where saloons and bars dominated the nightlife—where young men from the countryside would go to work in the oyster beds, drink their wages, and then find themselves shanghaied on a ship to foreign waters. No one went to Port Galleon if they didn't need to, and very few could pull themselves away from its curses.

"And my children, whom you never met," Lila brushed the hair of a little girl clinging to her dress. "This is Maggie, and Peter is there on the davenport with Benjamin. Maggie's five, Peter is ten. I was with child the last time I saw you. Peter follows my brother around like a shadow, I can barely pull him away."

Peter sat stiff-backed on the couch, his hands folded, lips sealed, sitting next to her cousin, Benjamin.

Adele remembered Benjamin from her childhood now an attractive, sandy-haired fellow with olive skin like his father. Benjamin wore a black silk vest and red ascot, his stark white shirt cuffed at the sleeves. A good-looking man, long-legged, but he lacked the poise of her uncle. That comes with age. Benjamin set his newspaper next to him and stood.

“Cousin Adele! It’s been years!”

“Indeed, it has,” Adele said, avoiding his stare, and the peculiar twist of his lips which she read as either a smile or a sneer.

“What a misfortune that you finally came to us on such tragic...” he shook his head and snapped his tongue, “...such tragic circumstances.”

“Supper’s set on the table, mother,” Lila announced. “We knew you’d be hungry when you got home, so I had Mei Ling cook an early supper.”

Adele followed her aunt and uncle across the polished wood floor to the dining nook. Stunned by the visuals of the home, Adele gawked at the portrait of her grandparents on the wall—a couple dressed in black standing against some unknown forest, a wolfhound at their feet—a chandelier lit with candles dripping crystals on gold chains; a collection of delicate porcelain figurines dressed in pastel hues dancing on the mantle, and Uncle Nicholas’ sword collection above the hearth. Disoriented, this home was much too luxurious. Adele did not belong here. This mansion was the sort of home where you touched nothing and if you breathed you covered your mouth. The dark mahogany walls eclipsed her as if the chamber were a glorified prison. She shuddered at the thought.

Lila gestured to a man in a stylish suit who bowed slightly in greeting.

“This is my husband, Gareth,” Lila said.

“My pleasure,” he mumbled without a smile and then glanced away as though he’d already seen enough of her. “Shall we?” He strode haughtily to the table and pulled a chair back for Lila.

Adele knew she lacked some etiquettes the sophisticated side of her family swore to, so she took her time eating and observed their mannerisms. A servant, an Asian woman who stood no taller than the backs of their chairs, served the men first. She smiled at Adele as she scurried around the table pouring water and handing out platters of food. She seemed not able to speak

English, for when Adele thanked her, the woman only nodded and rattled something in her native tongue.

“Her name is Mei Ling,” Aunt Eloise whispered to her. “A particularly good cook. And she washes the linens as well. She’s prepared a room for you, and as soon as we’re finished dining, you can change your clothes, and she’ll wash them.”

Adele cleared her throat. Having someone wash her clothes seemed invasive. She hadn’t grown up with servants.

“Don’t look so aghast,” Benjamin said. “Coming out of the ghetto is going to be a culture shock for you, but we’ll see you through this experience. I’d be more than willing to help you feel at home.”

Adele looked at him, stunned by his insolence, yet she had no response for him. She had no words for the rest of the family either. She ate quietly, unsure of what she could say, or who she could address without offending someone. The men at the table, aside from Benjamin who kept smiling at her, concentrated on their dinner. From time to time Uncle Nicholas would shoot her a concerned frown, but Gareth refused to look at her. Peter stared. So obnoxious was the little boy’s gaping that Lila had to nudge him to eat. Little Maggie had been the only person Adele could relate to. Maggie and Aunt Eloise.

“I hear there will be people from the railroad attending your gala at the hotel, Nicholas,” Gareth said, breaking the stiff silence that seemed to have been focused on her.

“The president of the Northern Pacific Railway will be in attendance. I believe he’s bringing his wife and a few of his colleagues. Aside from the festivities, we’ll be presenting our proposal. You’re welcome to join us.”

“I may do that. I commend you for pulling this together. Proud to be part of the family that puts Port Summerhill on the map!” He looked up with a broad smile.

“Nothing is set in stone yet. We’ve tried this before, but I think we have a better understanding now as to what they’re looking for.”

“What are they looking for, Papa?” Lila asked as she cut Maggie’s meat into bite-size pieces.

“For one, better press. That last critic gave our town a poor review. According to his report, one would wonder why anyone lived here. There was also the concern about the natives, and that

our state had not then become a territory under the protection of the United States government. I have addressed all those details.”

“And the end of the war, no doubt.”

Uncle Nicholas nodded as he wiped his hands with his napkin.

These matters seemed too personal for Adele, so she finished her supper and asked to be excused. Once Uncle Nicholas nodded, she set her napkin down and left the others. She heard another chair pushed back but didn’t look behind her to see who else had left the table.

She stepped outside on the porch to catch the last rays of daylight. The downpour had ceased, and the cloud cover lifted, leaving the fresh fragrance of rain on the lawn and in the woodlands behind the house.

Mesmerized by the peace, Adele didn’t notice that someone had snuck up behind her until he locked an arm onto hers and propelled her off the stairs onto the wet grass.

“What?” she gasped.

“Hush now, princess,” Benjamin said. Adele glanced over her shoulder at the child, Peter, standing in the doorway watching them.

“I know this is sudden, but you are the most beautiful young thing I’ve seen in months,” Benjamin whispered, pulling her across the lawn.

“Contain yourself!” Adele freed herself from his grasp by the time they reached the gazebo.

“Oh, I’m contained, lovely. I’ve been waiting for this moment ever since I heard what happened and that you would be staying with my mother and father.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your parents murdering that old man. I know what sort of blood runs in your veins, sweetheart. I know about the women in Port Galleon. I want to make your stay here as comfortable as can be, poor thing, now that they disposed of your parents. If you let me, I can help you feel right at home.”

He leaned into her, her dress caught between the railing of the gazebo and his body. What was he doing, his mouth nearly touching hers? She drew back further, freed her hand, and slapped him across the cheek. He pulled away with eyes wide.

“How dare you!” she said.

He laughed. He looked foolish with his cheek flaming red where she had slapped him and that bewildered smile on his face.

“Surely you jest, Adele! Port Galleon has no honor. Admit your poor upbringing and accept me.”

“You’re my cousin. I will never ‘accept you’ as anything besides that.” She ducked away from him and walked back to the house. She could see Peter still in the doorway, frowning. Benjamin grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

“Don’t rile me. I can make your stay here ecstasy, or wretched. Your choice.”

“I cannot believe you accosted me within minutes of my arrival. Is that what you do to all the ladies? No wonder you’ve never married!”

He pinched her when he squeezed her arm and yanked her closer. “Where you come from, there are no ladies. You’re an offspring of murderers and thieves. Consider yourself lucky you aren’t sleeping in the barn!”

She stumbled backward when he released her and turned to the house, straightening his vest as he walked. He lifted his head and slowed as he neared the stairs, ruffled Peter’s hair, and stepped inside. Peter paused a moment to glare at her before he followed his uncle indoors.



## The Attic

Soon after dinner, Lila and her family left, taking Benjamin with them. Adele relaxed when he stepped into the carriage. Thanks to the Good Lord, he doesn't live here, and that he boards with his sister and her husband! She would no doubt have other confrontations with him, and for that, she needed to prepare herself. With a bit of luck, he wouldn't pester her again. She would have a hard enough time recovering from the trauma of her parents' trial, and of their deaths.

Adele sat on the couch stroking the family's calico cat, her focus on the fire, attempting to adjust to what had happened, and to this new life. Uncle Nicholas refused to bring them back to Port Summerhill that weekend to watch the hanging, claiming he didn't care to have his family exposed to such shame. For that she was thankful. Despite his rough demeanor, at least he showed some clemency.

Uncle Nicholas had changed into his smoking jacket, a rich red satin with gold threads that glimmered in the firelight. How wealthy he and Aunt Eloise were. Every piece of fabric, she noticed, heralded elegance. A far cry from the meager home and cotton and wool clothes Adele had grown up in. She didn't fit into their gentry. She had no wardrobe that would complement theirs. Her name would be on the tongues of the townspeople as the daughter of outlaws. How would her aunt and uncle cope with that? Maybe they would keep her hidden forever, give her the role of a servant. That wouldn't be so bad. The manor was large and roomy, with plenty of nooks and crannies to hide in when she didn't have a chore to do. Solitude was a lifestyle Adele was accustomed to only here she would be safe from carousing sailors and thieves who frequented the streets like those in Port Galleon. She may even be able to hide from her cousin Benjamin.

Uncle Nicholas retreated into the den with a newspaper in his hand, and soon the fragrance of brandied pipe tobacco permeated the air. Aunt Eloise also had changed into her nightclothes and wore a lovely blue robe. She peeked in at Adele from the hallway.

The cased clock next to the hearth struck a bedtime hour.

"Adele, shall I see you to your room?"

"May I bring your kitten with me?"

"Butterscotch?" She laughed. "She's hardly a kitten. She's nine years old. But yes."

Adele carried Butterscotch up the spiral stairwell. Portraits of ancestors hung in gilded frames on the wall—people she had never seen and had only heard stories of. Great grandparents

who had arrived from England, and cousins who had settled in New York before the civil war. On the second floor, they passed a row of rooms with closed doors except for one. Beyond those double doors, the walls adorned with blue and gold print, a crystal chandelier hung low above a grand piano. Adele had never seen a piano before, and so she took her time as she walked by, admiring the instrument.

“Do you play?” she asked her aunt.

“Yes,” Aunt Eloise said. “When I have time.”

“I would love to learn.”

“There are many things I need to teach you. Music is only one.”

She opened a hatch to another staircase that led to the uppermost level of the home. Adele followed her up the narrow shaft.

“We rarely use this chamber, but the tower is pleasant and overlooks the garden. You won’t hear anyone downstairs and I think you’ll enjoy the seclusion. Consider this tower your own private space. The water closet is on the second level. We’ll have a servant bring an armoire up here for your clothes tomorrow. There was so much else happening this week we didn’t get to rearrange everything we had planned. Perhaps over time, we can get you some other furniture.” Aunt Eloise opened the door to a room that overlooked the western boundary of the manor.

The room had been dusted recently, the floor swept, and the smell of walnut oil used to polish the cherry wood walls fragrancd the area, but the space lacked the warmth of having been lived in. An iron framed bed rested near a bay window, and the only fixture, a roll-top desk with a lantern stood across from it. That should come in handy if she found the need to write a letter. To whom, Adele couldn’t imagine.

“I know it’s not extravagant,” her aunt said.

There were other guest rooms in the house, this Adele knew—they had passed by them on the way. A room in the tower was more fitting for her because of who she was. Out of sight, out of mind she could see it in the apologetic language of her aunt’s eyes.

“Of course. Being tucked away in a tower is perfect for someone whose parents will be hanged,” Adele whispered, releasing the cat. Butterscotch found her way to the bed, jumped up, and pawed at the cotton mattress. Finally curling into a ball, the cat rested her head on her paws.

“You know that’s not how I feel,” Aunt Eloise said, wringing her hands. The poor woman’s oppression leaked through her worried gaze.

“It doesn’t matter how you feel, though, does it? This is a man’s world, and that’s how your husband feels. I can adapt, for your sake. I’ll have to.”

Aunt Eloise sighed heavily. She didn’t mean to be rude, but how could she hold her feelings in after all that had happened? She would burst soon if left to stew. Her aunt tossed her hands in the air.

“I’m doing my best, Adele.”

“I’m sorry, Auntie. I do love you and am grateful for a home. I’m going to try to be obedient and not cause trouble. If I want Uncle Nicholas to respect me, I must work for it.”

“He’s a hard man to please, but he’s also a righteous man once he comes to trust you. I know adjusting to this alternative way of life is hard, but you may come to enjoy your stay here.” Aunt Eloise opened her arms to her, and Adele accepted her caress for only a moment, fearful of breaking down in tears. Crying any more than she had would be a sign of weakness, and Adele needed to show strength.

“You’ve been good to me,” Adele said and stepped away. “There’s something else.” She opened her mouth, wanting dearly to tell her about Benjamin’s inappropriate advance, but stopped herself. No. She wouldn’t. If her cousin found out, she told his mother, he may retaliate. Benjamin frightened her.

“What?” Aunt Eloise asked.

“I... Butterscotch and I would love to have a pillow.”

“I’ll have Mei Ling bring one up. Sleep well, tonight. I’ll see you in the morning,” Aunt Eloise said, and hugged her again.

“Goodnight, Auntie.”

Once her aunt closed the door, Adele lay her stole on the back of the chair. Mr. Fernsworth had carried her trunk up earlier and had set it against a wall. When Adele opened the lid and rummaged through her belongings, she found all her clothing damp, having been transported through the storm. She pulled her wardrobe from her suitcase piece by piece and draped each article over the chair, the desk, the curtain rod, the lid to the trunk, wherever she could find support to hang them. The chore wasn’t difficult, but putting up wet clothes disheartened her, and tears soon streamed down her cheeks. She had no possessions but what was in this chest, no home to call her own, no parents, no one who understood how she felt, and now all her clothes were near ruined. Is this what has become of her life? Is this what being an orphan felt like?

She wiped her tears with her sleeve.

The last item she came to in the trunk was her nightgown. The driest article she had, she lay the cotton lingerie on her bed and looked at Butterscotch.

“I can certainly use a friend right now. I’m beside myself in despair,” she told the cat. In reply, Butterscotch gave her a quiet mew and rolled on her back. Adele fell to her knees scratched her belly. “Silly kitty, you look fierce, but you’re all hair.”

While Adele scratched between Butterscotch’s ears and under her chin, a gentle rapping at the door interrupted her.

“Come in.”

Mei Ling carried a pillow and bowed before she handed the downy cushion to Adele.

“Thank you,” Adele said.

Mei Ling bowed again.

“No need to bow,” Adele waved for her to stop. “Do you speak English?” she asked.

“Little. Just a little.” Mei Ling’s apron had stains and flour on it, and there was a smudge mark of the powder on her cheek. Her hat curled up at the edges and bulged over her thick black hair.

“The dinner tonight was so good. Thank you.”

The woman smiled. “Oh, no need to thank me. Cooking is my duty.”

“You went beyond your duty. I should like to know how to cook as you do someday.”

Mei Ling laughed. “Oh, no need cook. I will.”

“No, I would like to learn.”

Mei Ling laughed and bowed. “As you wish,” she said. “With Master Nicholas’ permission, then I teach.”

Of course. She must ask her uncle’s permission for anything she wanted to do.

“I will speak with him tonight, thank you,” Adele said, and Mei Ling pivoted and hurried back down the stairs. Adele read Mei Ling’s swift exit as a personal rebuff. She pouted when the door closed. Mei Ling meant no offense. Still, the loneliness that came with being a criminal’s daughter stung. Would anyone want to be her friend again? Will the stigma of having convicted felons for parents follow her for the rest of her life?

“I would like very much to learn to cook. Manual labor would be a means of redemption for me,” she said to Butterscotch. “I must find some way to prove myself. I can’t bear for everyone to think of me as a candle to the devil!”

Adele sighed and looked out the window. The garden area needed tending. The beds looked as helpless as she felt, but winter had already claimed ownership to a good portion of plant life. Though some greenery still fought against decay, most of the foliage had turned brown and with the rain, rotted. The laurel, still green, bordered a patio with stone beds in the center. Beyond that, in the distance where the courtyard ended, dying weeds grew tall, and a curious wrought-iron fence peeked through a wall of ivy. The area on the other side of the fence couldn’t be her uncle’s property, or there would be stone beds and landscaping similar to the rest of the yard. She could see extraordinarily little in that direction, though, for the last hues of twilight were fading into night.

Adele changed out of her dress and breathed freely once the corset and stockings came off. She exchanged the chemise she wore for the nightgown and paced back and forth, hoping exercise would get her blood pumping and generate body heat. Finally, after watching Butterscotch rest peacefully on her bed, she sat by the window and lifted the cat onto her lap, warmed immediately by the animal’s fur.

“Being a cat must be so much easier than being a human being,” she whispered. “Such a grand life, making yourself comfortable any time of the day and wherever there is a soft blanket to lie on. You have no worries, do you?”

Adele never had a pet before. There were feral cats in Port Galleon, but they were barn cats and hunted rats and mice and would flee from human beings. No one thought to tame them. Cats roaming about outside kept the varmints and pests that fed off of the shellfish at a minimum. Port Galleon may be a poor village, the homes were not grand estates like they were in Port Summerhill and the residents hadn’t fancy silk and satin to wear, nor did they have carriages to ride in. Most of them didn’t even own a horse or even a mule. There were donkeys and carts to move their goods with, though their primary means of transportation was by boat. Life was not as degenerate as Benjamin claimed. Many good people lived there. Not everyone committed crimes—as her parents did.

She sighed heavily as the ache inside of her took hold again. She missed her home, as poor and run down as their shanty had been, and she despised what her parents had done. Society—and

Uncle Nicholas—would have her deny any love she had for them. According to her uncle, the sooner she rebuffed her father and mother for their crimes, the better off she'd fare.

He didn't understand. As sympathetic as her auntie tried to be, Aunt Eloise didn't understand either. Neither of them had anything to do with her family until now. They could have helped during the thin times after steam-powered vessels replaced sails, and ships stopped docking in Port Galleon, taking away whatever wealth the port had pledged. Supplies became scarce then, and even bartering among the residents suffered. Farmland where she used to live was not as fruitful as the vineyards, orchards, and homesteads in Port Summerhill, and most residents in Port Galleon couldn't afford the technology to compete with their northern rural neighbors. They weren't destitute, but someone like her uncle could have helped pull her family out of poverty. If they had, maybe her parents never would have felt the need to rob the Professor.

Ah, well, Adele knew better than to blame her aunt and uncle. Many affairs kept her uncle distracted from family issues. Maintaining his status and influence, managing a hotel, trading stock, and mingling with bankers gave him plenty to agonize over. Why would he feel a need to rescue his wife's sister and her husband from deprivation?

"It's just that if I ever get in a place where I can assist someone, I will not turn my back on them." She folded her arms, thinking about what she had just told Butterscotch. "I supposed that's unfair. Uncle Nicholas consented to care for me. But how can he expect me to spurn Mother and Father? Am I not allowed to love them for who they were to me?" She stroked Butterscotch's fur, examining the many colors of each hair as they interlaced on top of one another, forming the cat's lovely gold, white and black patches.

"They raised me. They loved me. No matter what they did to anyone else." She held the cat close to her breast, rocking back and forth, fighting the sick feeling inside until nighttime swallowed the earth, and moon rays filtered through the window. She gazed outside at the stars.

Her eyes were teary, and so when she saw a stream of colorful lights in the distance, she thought moisture had caused the distortion. When she blinked, the glow did not disappear, so she set Butterscotch on the bed, rose, and found her hankie. She stood by the window after drying her eyes and, with her arms crossed to keep herself warm, stared at the lights.

Beyond Uncle Nicholas' estate, past the weeds and the iron gate she had noticed earlier, the lights moved about on the neighbor's property. Unlike a lantern, they flickered soft and colorful and did not travel as a candle were being held by someone walking through the garden. These

lights moved in clusters, first one constellation over here and then trickling to another place further away—on again, off again. She must have watched for a good half hour as these little clusters of twinkling color slowly made their way into the woods until they faded completely.

She stood by the window awhile longer, hoping for a clue what this strange phenomena was, but there was no other movement or illumination after that. She yawned, shivered, and decided she had too much trauma that day. The stress made her see things that weren't there, and it was time for her to rest.

She returned to her bed, pulled the covers over her head, and with Butterscotch tucked under her arm she fell asleep to the sound of purring.