

I

September 1839

*Thus sing I to cragg'd cliffs and hills,
To sighing winds, to murmuring rills,
To wasteful woods, to empty groves,
Such things as my dear mind most loves.*
(Sonnet XVIII, Henry More)

Standing on the treacherous cliff, Liza closed her eyes against the incoming storm as streaks of rain pelted her face. Waves crashed below, sending vibrations through her body. The seagulls had long since abandoned their screeching cries and found shelter among the jugged rocks.

Do it.

Liza opened her eyes and stared at the furious foam below. Feeling a sudden dizziness, she stepped back and looked behind her for the source of the words, squinting through the sea spray.

Seeing nothing, Liza shivered and pulled the wool coat tighter around her slight frame, wondering if she had imagined the voice. She was two steps away from falling off the cliff.

The menacing clouds descended and the wind picked up its pace as a force

outside her body seemed to urge her to take those two steps forward.

“No,” she said. But the wind was her only companion.

Aunt Maeve had told her that the New England coast was not for the faint hearted. And now Liza understood why. Not only was September the most active month for hurricanes, but apparently the ghost stories she’d heard had just proved themselves credible.

She hurried to the lighthouse, bent against the gathering wind. By the time she entered the decayed building, she was panting, shivering, and thoroughly soaked.

Maeve stood at the base of the stairs, a lantern in hand. “‘Bout time you came back.” She glared at her niece. “I thought you had decided to take a swim.”

Liza knew better than to believe her aunt was cross, but her still pounding heart overrode any flippant reply. Through Maeve’s stern Puritan demeanor, a twinkle showed in her eyes. “I’m ready to go back to the house,” Liza said.

Maeve held the lantern high, motioning for her niece to follow.

In the few seconds that Liza had been inside the lighthouse, the wind had multiplied in strength. The two women clung to each other as they exited the lighthouse and ran to the cottage, their sodden skirts whipping their legs. When they reached the front door, it took both of them to pull it closed.

Leaning against the secured door, Maeve clutched her chest and fought for normal breath. “On my life, it’s going to be a big ‘un. Leave your wet things here, we’ll clean up later.”

After stripping off her coat, Liza removed the wool scarf covering her head.

Maeve chuckled with delight. “You look like a wet dog.”

Liza shook her auburn hair free, spraying the scrubbed entryway with water. She couldn't help the slight smile that crept to her lips. It was good to be inside the cottage—away from the cliff, away from the voice.

“Aye, you are shaking just as a dog would—” Maeve began.

Ignoring her aunt's comment, Liza left the hallway with Maeve calling after her, “I'll put the tea on.”

Liza entered the cozy front room, knelt in front of the great hearth and threw two logs into the starving glow. A warming fire began to thaw her stiff fingers. When they were nimble again, she combed through her wet tendrils until the sound of the voice she'd heard on the cliff began to fade. She'd been in the Puritan town of Maybrook for nearly a month now. It was a refreshing change from her high society life back in New York. Liza smiled to herself as she thought about the simple life her aunt lived. Maeve had once been a young debutante in New York, but had fallen in love with a Puritan, moved to Maybrook and had remained ever since. Liza was grateful that her aunt didn't use the cumbersome Puritan speech.

Flames leapt close to Liza's skirt, and she scooted back, shaking out the dancing sparks.

Maeve entered the room with a silver tray. “Here you are.”

“Delightful,” Liza said with a grateful smile. She accepted the steaming cup and sat on the sofa.

The wind howled its way around the house, causing Liza to shiver.

“There now, dear, you will grow used to the wind,” Maeve soothed, amusement in her eyes.

Liza brought the teacup close to her lips and inhaled the sweet fragrance. She slowly sipped the liquid, although she wanted to gulp it down. “When you are here alone, don’t you feel afraid?”

Maeve settled into the rocking chair near the fire. After a pause she said, “When my husband was alive, I never gave the storms a second thought. After he was gone, I was surprised that I didn’t mind the weather. I believe this old house protects me.”

Liza glanced about the room—everything was cozy and familiar. She understood how her aunt could feel secure. Then the wind suddenly increased its tempo, sending rapid bursts through the chimney into the hearth. Instinctively, Liza wrapped her arms around herself.

“What did your mother say in her letter?” Maeve asked.

Looking at her aunt, Liza took in the woman’s blown hair and mended pinafore. “She would like to come visit.”

“That would be nice,” Maeve murmured.

Liza refrained from letting out an exasperated sigh. “I don’t want to hear about the latest dance or what everyone wore,” she said in a quiet voice. “It’s hard to read her letters, but at least I can put them away and forget.”

Maeve nodded as she rocked. “I had those same feelings once. I felt that I was drowning in an ocean of greed.” She hesitated. “When I met Edward, I saw my escape. It probably was an extreme choice, but I loved him, and I have been happy here.”

Detecting a note of nostalgia in her aunt’s voice, Liza said, “Maybrook is so simple and unfettered. As long as you’re an upstanding citizen, no one cares which house in Paris made your dress, or how many people attend your coming-out party.”

Leaning forward, Maeve gazed into Liza's eyes. "Things around here are not always what they may seem."

"What do you mean?" Liza asked, feeling a slow chill crawl up her neck.

"As I told you, this house protects me," Maeve said, her eyes glowing. Liza nodded and drew her knees up to her chest. The room had suddenly grown cold. "The woman who lives in this house watches over me."

Liza raised a brow. "You are the only who lives here."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Liza?"

Flinching, Liza gripped her hands together. "Ghosts?" It seemed strange that her aunt would believe such nonsense. The Puritans were so strict about their traditions.

"You don't believe in the village stories, do you?"

Maeve's eyes twinkled. "You think I don't believe in ghosts? Everyone does, we just don't talk about them much," she said in a low voice.

"But my parents—"

"Forget what thy parents have told you." Maeve interrupted. "You are nineteen, practically a grown woman, and it's time you knew about such things."

The blood returned to Liza's fingers, and she felt a sharp pain as if a thousand tiny needles were jabbing her at once. Just then, something hit the window, causing her to jump. With a slow exhale, she realized it must have been a fallen branch.

"She was about your age," Maeve began, oblivious to the noise.

"Who?" Liza asked, not sure if she wanted to hear this story on such an awful night.

Maeve continued as if she hadn't heard the question. "And Jonathan Porter . . .

some say he was ten years older. I suppose he could have been, for all the places he had seen.”

A shrill whistle knifed its way through Liza’s heart as the wind vibrated the clapboard walls.

“It’s been only twenty years since Helena Talbot was lost, and some say she’ll come back,” Maeve said. “Others say they can hear her voice on nights like this. Helena’s mother could never forgive her—never even visited the baby. Some say that old Mistress Talbot went mad from hearing her daughter’s tortured spirit cry during the night. It was during a storm such as this one when Mistress Talbot climbed upon a horse and plunged off the cliff, falling to her death.”

Did the old woman hear a voice at the edge of the cliff? Liza wondered.

“After Jonathan left for England, Helena discovered that she was with child. Mr. Porter was a wealthy widower, and he should have married her properly. The minister and town authorities banned her from public sight.” Maeve paused. “Helena’s shame was so great that she would not even accept visitors. She lived alone—couldn’t face her own family or any of the townspeople.”

Liza felt a pang twitch within her. “Wasn’t there anyone she could depend on?”

“Oh, some had pity and left baskets of food at her doorstep, but only on the darkest of nights,” Maeve said, her eyes looking past Liza, as the candles in the room flickered madly. Then she continued, her voice barely above a whisper. “The night of her son’s birth was a violent one—the townspeople had never heard such a storm. By morning Helena’s place was hardly recognizable. But she had delivered a healthy boy. She stayed away from town for the first year then she started to venture out. The boy was

a quiet lad. I can still remember his dark hair and black eyes . . . he was only three years old when his mother disappeared. Many think she drowned. Someone found the boy wandering at the edge of the cliff all alone . . .” Maeve’s voice trailed off and she stared past Liza.

Leaning forward, Liza asked, “What happened to the boy?”

Maeve looked at her with surprise. “Little Jon? Reared by the old spinster, Ruth. He moved to the big city some years back, and the town hasn’t seen him since.” She rose and busied herself with collecting the tea things. “I found Helena’s journal in the lighthouse a few weeks ago. Maybe you can help me read it since my eyes aren’t what they used to be.”

“You have her journal here?” Liza asked.

Maeve shook her head. “It seemed disrespectful to move it. For all I know, I found it exactly where she left it.”

“Maybe it will give a clue as to what really happened to her.”

“Perhaps,” Maeve said, doubt crossing her face. “But it won’t answer why her spirit cannot rest.”

“What do you mean?” Liza asked, feeling a strange churning in her stomach.

Maeve hesitated then said, “Because, my dear, this is the house Helena delivered her poor child in and lived for three years. Her sorrow of raising a fatherless son must have been inconsolable, because each time a storm rolls in, one can still hear her crying for her lover.”

After Maeve retired for the night, Liza lay curled in her bed underneath a heavy

goosedown cover. She wondered what had become of Helena Talbot, and why her lover had never returned for her. Liza burrowed deeper into the covers, feeling the warmth. She was relieved to have something else to think about than the marriage controversy at home. Her parents thought if she spent a few months with her aunt, it would give the gossip columns a chance to cool. Liza's heart lurched as she thought about the pompous Mr. Thomas Beesley. When he had made his intentions clear and she rejected him, her family was spurned by the inner circles of New York society.

Liza felt her face grow hot with familiar indignation. It wasn't fair, she thought. Why should she have to marry a forty-year old man, just because he was her father's business partner and very wealthy? She cringed as his image appeared in her mind. Thomas was shorter than she by several inches, and his middle was so large that Liza wondered how he laced his shoes in the morning. But what appalled her most was his constantly running nose and commentary to match.

When rumors circulated that Thomas was about to ask for her hand in marriage, Liza had brushed them off. Her parents had always respected and spoken highly of the man, but they had never alluded to a possible union. To her dismay, a short time later at the annual charity picnic, he proposed on bended knee. Over the sound of exploding fireworks, he took her hand and asked, "Ms. Liza Robinson, will you bestow upon me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Liza had stared at him, wondering if she had heard right. Then she began to giggle, which soon turned into a laugh. Thomas smiled with hope and waited patiently.

"I'm sorry," Liza began, but continued to laugh until tears spotted her cheeks. When she saw his reddened complexion deepen into purple, she realized that she had

made a fool of him. He left in a hurry and by the next morning Liza discovered that it was too late to make her apologies. Thomas had already confronted her father, and by that evening the gossip columns were in full swing.

At least, she thought as her eyes grew heavy, Helena never had to worry about printed gossip columns in Maybrook. As Liza drifted to sleep, the sound of branches hitting the windowpanes combined with her dreams of fireworks from the past.

Hours later, Liza was jolted awake by shattering glass. Heart pounding, she bolted out of bed and grabbed her robe. The windows in her bedroom shook—ready to burst.

“Aunt Maeve,” she called as she ran out of her room. She practically stumbled as she descended the stairs in the dark. When she reached her aunt’s room, she found the door locked. Liza pounded on the wood. “Are you all right in there?” A burst of cold air hit her bare feet as she felt for the handle again in the dark. “Aunt Maeve!” she screamed.

The whining grew louder, or was it crying? Liza felt gooseflesh on her arms spread to her neck until the hair on her head prickled. Something was wrong. Her aunt couldn’t be sleeping through all of this commotion.

Liza frantically kicked at the heavy door, but there was no give. She dashed into the kitchen and scrambled in the dim light for anything she could break the door handle with. Finding a cast iron skillet, she stumbled back to her aunt’s room.

She froze. The door stood ajar.

“Aunt Maeve?” she asked in a shaky voice. “Are you all right?” But only the wind answered as it coursed through the shattered window and assailed her muslin nightgown. On the bed, Maeve lay motionless, her face hidden in the shadows.

Liza gripped the skillet in one hand and stepped around the shards of broken glass. “Wake up,” she whispered. But there was no answer.

As she slowly circled the bed, terror caught in her throat. Maeve’s eyes were closed. Liza reached out and touched her aunt’s protruding hand. It was ice cold.

Aunt Maeve was dead.