

HARPER TEEN **IMPULSE**



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**A Dawn Most Wicked**  
**Something Strange and Deadly 0.5**  
**by**  
**Susan Dennard**

*In memory of Zena Gibson and Beth Lunsford:  
the librarians who showed me the world through  
books and taught me that true warriors never give  
up.*



# PROLOGUE

## PHILADELPHIA, 1876



*I perched on the edge of Eleanor's hospital bed. My fingers twisted and twined in my flat cap as I ransacked my brain for something clever to say—anything to break this silence. Anything to make this good-bye easier.*

But after everything we'd been through, I couldn't find a damned thing to say.

Stray beams of moonlight flickered on Eleanor's face. She looked beautiful, even with all those scratches and bruises. Even with the pain that lay just beneath the surface of her glassy-eyed gaze.

I knew about pain. I knew about loss too, and the black hunger that could live in a man's gut forever. . . . She'd lost her brother, her hand, and her entire life in only a few days.

And now I sat here, about to take myself away as well. But the Spirit-Hunters and me? We couldn't stay—though dammit if I wished otherwise. If the three of us hadn't been wanted for murder—if the people of Philadelphia weren't crying for our blood—I would've stayed.

I picked at a threadbare patch on my cap. The initials sewn on the inside—SQ—were barely visible anymore, the navy and red thread having long ago dulled to gray.

SQ. *Sadie Queen*. A steamer and a job from a lifetime ago.

And another girl made of grit and sunshine.

Another girl I'd loved.

*Cassidy*. The name whispered through my brain, and my jaw clenched. I hadn't been good enough for Cass, and I sure as hell wasn't good enough for Eleanor.

My fingers dug into my knees as Eleanor stared at me expectantly. Finally I stood. "I should go now."

But Eleanor reached forward and grabbed my sleeve. "Wait."

I stopped and forced my eyes to meet hers. I wouldn't look away—not when her fingers squeezed my sleeve with such desperation. Not when I might never see her again.

Never was a long time.

“Daniel,” she said, her voice rough, “you don’t . . . or, that is to say, you’re not . . .” She licked her lips. “You’re not in love with me, are you?”

It was exactly what I’d hoped she wouldn’t say. I twisted my face away. “It’s not that simple.”

“It’s a yes or no,” she replied with surprising strength. Like she believed what she was saying.

I clutched my cap in a death grip until the SQ vanished into the folds of wool. I used to believe the same: that love was simply a matter of feelings. But it wasn’t. It was circumstance and timing. Money and support. I knew that now—so I forced myself to say what needed saying.

“Then . . . then no. No, I’m not.” I slapped my flat cap on my head and, rising, gave Eleanor a final stare. Her face showed hurt, but also a resigned acceptance. For some reason that made this whole thing worse.

I guessed . . . I guessed, deep down, I’d hoped she would fight me. Hoped she wouldn’t let me go.

I swallowed. “Please, Empress. Take care of yourself. I won’t be here to rescue you.”

“Of course. I’ll be careful.” She smiled sadly. “Best of luck to you, Mr. Sheridan.”

Mr. Sheridan. It cut like a knife. No more Daniel. No more feelings. No more nothing.

My mouth bobbed open, and I inhaled to ask her . . . what? What could I possibly say? Me and the Spirit-Hunters were leaving. I would never see Eleanor Fitt again. It was just like Cassidy. I was the one who had to be smart. I was the one who had to say good-bye.

So I forced myself to shake my head. To press my lips together and doff my hat. “Take care, Empress.” Then I sucked in air until my chest was too full to feel anything else, and I strode from the room.

I didn’t look back.

But walking down the empty hospital hall, with trapped air burning in my chest, I couldn’t help but second-guess myself. I couldn’t help but grit my teeth in time to my clicking heels.

And I couldn’t help but think back to the first girl who’d taught me to love.

To Cassidy Cochran of the *Sadie Queen*.

# CHAPTER ONE

## NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI, 1873



*This was not how best friends hugged.*

Maybe best friends of the same gender could get away with this, but Cassidy and I were definitely not the same gender.

In fact, should anyone walk into the *Sadie Queen*'s engine room right now and see us, they would not notice how brightly I'd gotten the brass machinery to gleam. Nor would they notice how doggone tired I was after four hours of engine scrubbing. They also wouldn't notice that my greasy shirt was halfway unbuttoned.

No. They'd only see the captain's daughter bouncing excitedly on her toes with her arms flung around my neck. And trust me when I say that my body was noticing it too—and it was letting me know exactly how different our genders were.

*Best friends*, I told myself as I gazed into her smiling face. Her freckles blended into her rosy flush and her dark eyes shone. *You're the striker, the apprentice engineer, and she's the apprentice pilot. Best friends—nothin' more.* But no matter how many times I shouted at myself, it was damned near impossible not to pull her just a little closer. Not to dig my fingers ever so slightly into the supple shape of her waist.

But then movement flashed at the corner of my vision—at the entrance to the engine room. I lurched back, panic flashing over me . . . but when my eyes latched on the door, I found it empty.

*You're being paranoid*, I chided. *Ain't no one there.* Fortunately Cass didn't seem to notice the speed with which I'd detached myself from her. So I tried to salvage the moment as best I could with a rakish grin.

"Why, Miss Cassidy," I said, "we've only been docked a few hours, but you look like you ran clear across Natchez and back."

"Because I did run." She spoke in a breathless way that made my blood stir. "I was at the Natchez telegraph office waiting for the news, and it came, Danny!" She dug around in her gray uniform's pocket—a match for mine but with skirts instead of trousers and looking fresh instead of grimy. Then she whipped out a

newspaper and shoved it at me. "It's today's *Picayune*."

I took the New Orleans newspaper warily from Cass's hand. Sure enough, a glance at the top showed, "June 16, 1873." I scanned the headlining article as fast as my meager reading skills could get me.

*Haunted Steamer to Race*

*New Orleans is alight with news that Eric Dunlap, captain of the luxury steamer Abby Adams out of New Orleans, has accepted a race challenge from his longtime rival, Captain Robert Cochran of the Sadie Queen. Once the most popular steamboat for Mississippi cruises, the famous Sadie Queen recently lost all business due to a series of hauntings that began in April of this year.*

*"Apparitions or no, we are the fastest ship on the Mississippi," claimed Captain Cochran to this Picayune reporter three weeks ago. "We will prove it once and for all, if Dunlap is man enough to accept my challenge: A race from New Orleans to Natchez."*

*Racing steamboats, a long tradition on the Mississippi, can bring captains and their ships great fame or great failure. Early yesterday, Captain Dunlap accepted Cochran's challenge, declaring that "the Sadie Queen is about to taste the bitter tang of loss." Such a highly publicized rivalry and race have not been seen since the Great Steamboat Race of 1870, in which the Robert E. Lee raced the Natchez from New Orleans to St. Louis. Already bets are being placed on who will win this latest competition.*

*According to Kent Lang, heir to the Lang Company, which operates out of New Orleans and owns the Sadie Queen, "We hope that winning this race will prove to potential passengers that the integrity of the Lang Company's fleet has not been affected by the hauntings."*

*Yet even with a win for the Queen, this Picayune reporter speculates nothing can bring back the steamer's glory days.*

I reached the final line—a line I was inclined to agree with—and noticed that a familiar *clack-clack-clack, thwump!, clack-clack-clack* had filled the room. I lifted my eyes to Cassidy. She held her tarnished old spyglass and was extending it. *Clack-clack-clack*. Then snapping it shut. *Thwump!* Open, shut, open, shut—she always did that when she was nervous.

The electric lamplight flickered on her hair, making the mahogany color shine red. Her eyes met mine, and a grin spread over her lips. *Clack-clack-clack, thwump!* "Well?" She dropped the spyglass in her pocket.

"It wasn't an optimistic article," I said cautiously. "The reporter said we're doomed no matter—"

"I don't care what the reporter said." She grabbed my wrists, rocking back and forth on her heels. "Dunlap accepted Father's challenge. That means we'll go



back to New Orleans tonight to get as prepped as we can before the race next week. If we win—and by God, we have to, Danny—then the Langs won't shut us down."

*Won't shut us down yet*, I thought. But I kept the sentiment to myself. What the *Sadie Queen* needed was passengers, and if she didn't get some soon, the Lang Company was going to take her—and all her crew—off the river. I didn't think a race would change that.

Cass must've realized the direction of my thoughts because her smile faltered . . . and then fell. She released my wrists. "You don't think we can win?"

"Of course I do." I slung off my flat cap and scrubbed at my scalp. "You're the best apprentice pilot on the Mississippi."

"Damn straight." She stomped one heel and set the command bells—an array of all sizes that hung on a column between the engines—to ringing. "And you're the best striker on the Mississippi. No engineer is as fast as you."

"So there you have it." I spread my hands. "We'll whip Captain Dunlap and the *Abby Adams*. Me and you. A team."

"A team," she repeated. Then she punched the air and gave a loud whoop. "We'll whip 'em, all right." But almost instantly her arm dropped . . . and her smile crumbled. "I wish Ellis could see it."

Ellis. Cassidy's little sister. I'd only met the girl once, but it had burned her image in my brain—a neck swollen wider than her head and a life confined to a hospital bed.

"Hey now." I tugged my cap back on. Winning a race wasn't going to change Ellis's fate, and I wasn't about to let Cassidy lose hope already. "What was the very first thing I told you when we met?"

Her forehead bunched up, replacing her frown. "I don't know. That was a year ago, Danny."

I took a step toward her. "I said that if anyone could tame the Mississippi, it would be you."

She gave a sly, satisfied smile—my favorite kind. "How could I forget that? I usually catalog all your compliments up here." She tapped her temple. "I'll just file that one under M for 'Mississippi.' Or should I make it T for 'taming'?"

I laughed, but before I could summon a worthy response, her eyes widened. "Why are you half dressed?"

"Are you just now noticin'?" A blush warmed my face, and I tugged my shirt collar closed. "I've got to put on my coveralls and clean the boilers."

"But didn't you just clean the entire engine room? Where's Murry? Or Schultz?"

"Schultz is seein' his family today, and Murry's old and half blind."

She frowned. “That doesn’t make it all right to shirk.”

“It ain’t shirkin’, Cass.” I swatted the air. “I’m the striker. It’s my job to keep everything clean and running smooth.”

“You may be the apprentice, but you do the same work as the full engineers.” She pushed out her chin. “In my book that means the full engineers should help you from time to time too. I’m only the cub pilot, but Father still shares the work with me fifty-fifty. We have to since we’re only a skeleton crew these days.” She planted her hand on her hip. “Should I say something to Father?”

“No.” I shook my head quickly. The last thing I wanted was for Captain Cochran to lose his temper. Especially at Murry. The rumor was that all the burn scars around Murry’s eyes—and the reason the Chief Engineer could barely see anymore—was because Cochran had shoved the man’s face in a boiler furnace.

I didn’t know if that was true, but it wouldn’t have surprised me. The captain had a temper, and as a rule, I avoided that temper at all costs.

“All right,” Cass said slowly. “I won’t say anything. . . . But don’t let Murry overwork you. This team”—she motioned between us—“won’t work if one half is broken.” She twirled around to leave, a whoop already bursting from her lips. “We’re going to race, Danny Sheridan, and we’re going to win!”

I watched her go, hair falling from her bun, and prayed she was right. Because if we didn’t, then the *Sadie Queen* and all her crew really were doomed.

Once I’d donned my coveralls and snagged a chain from the blacksmith’s office beside the engine room, I stalked out to the *Sadie Queen*’s Main Deck. My mind was still on Cass. On the hug. On the way her hips had felt beneath my fingers . . .

I swallowed and cleared my throat. Cassidy Cochran was my best friend—no matter how much I might’ve wished otherwise. She was the captain’s daughter; I was a lowly engineer’s striker. Trying to make more of that would only ruin the friendship we had. One day I might be a full engineer—no more scrubbing boilers or following Murry’s orders—but that day was a long ways off.

I stepped into the midmorning sun and took in the *Sadie Queen*. Everything about her catered to the lap of luxury—from the filigreed, whitewashed balustrades and elegant windows to the lush, costly interiors. Four floors of opulence: the Main Deck, with the engine room and space for cargo; the Passenger Deck above it, with the enormous saloon and sixty-one (now empty) passenger cabins; the Hurricane Deck, with a nice area for viewing the river and fifty more, empty cabins; and finally the Texas Deck, with the crew’s staterooms. It was no wonder we normally needed hundreds of crew—from waiters to footmen to cooks—to serve all those hundreds of passengers.

Of course, that was normally, and we hadn’t been “normally” since the ghosts

had arrived back in April.

Towering over it all were two cherry-red smokestacks and the jack staff—a pole at the ship’s front with a navy flag and the words “Lang Company” in curly red script. Below the flag were the two pairs of golden racing horns we’d won . . . back before the ghosts had taken over. Back when we’d still had passengers.

I sighed and swung my gaze toward Natchez. The city stared down at me from atop a green hill. The muddy wharf at the foot of the hill crawled with burly roustabouts, their job to unload cargo from the few steamers that had already arrived. They were also bringing new cargo down to the *Sadie Queen*. Tobacco and cotton weren’t nearly as lucrative as luxury passengers, but they kept the steamer afloat.

And they didn’t mind the ghosts.

I strode to the ship’s front, where the boilers stood. They were outside so air could whip through the attached furnaces and keep the fires stoked. These eight long tanks served as the intestines of the ship. If they got clogged with mud, they didn’t work. It was one of the striker’s jobs to clean the boilers because, as a rule, we were younger and smaller than the engineers. While I was certainly thinner than Murry or Second Engineer Schultz, I was a full head taller. In fact, I had to fold my body near in half to get into the tank, and if there was one way I didn’t want to die, it was trapped inside a boiler.

Two months ago, in the middle of the night, I had thought I might die such a death. We’d stopped between Baton Rouge and Devil’s Isle because the boilers had taken on too much mud in the night. Captain Cochran had dragged me from my bunk with only a dim lantern to see by and a harsh order to get the boilers cleaned.

So I’d stuffed my body inside . . . and that was when I felt the cold. It had brushed over my neck. The hair on my arms had shot up. Then blue had flashed at the top of my eyes, and I’d paused mid-scrape to glance up.

To stare straight into the charred eyes of a dead woman.

“Blood,” she hissed. “Blood everywhere.”

White panic exploded in my brain.

“Blood,” she hissed again. Then her voice had changed, shifted into the voice of my mother. The raspy, rattling voice she’d had just before she coughed her last breath. . . . “You left me, Danny Boy. It’s your fault I died.”

Bile burned up my throat at those words, at that voice. How this ghost could speak with my mother’s tongue, I didn’t know . . . but I didn’t care. It was too real.

I *had* left my mother. It had been nine years, but I would never forget that wet, blood-filled sound of her final breaths. . . .

“You must pay, Danny Boy. You left me, and you must—”

Without thinking, I pitched my hammer at the ghost's face.

It went right through her. She reached for me with spirit fingers, but her hand slipped through my chest with nothing more than a cold stab.

She yanked her arms back, and that's when I started hollering—really shrieking—for someone to get me the hell out of the boiler.

And ever since then, even if it sometimes interrupted the *Sadie Queen's* schedule, I had never, ever again cleaned the boilers at night.

And no one had really blamed me—not even Captain Cochran.

When I crawled from the eighth boiler almost nine hours later, it was to the sound of boisterous hollers and the hum of other steamboats. The volume had been gradually growing until almost all of my senses were overcome by sound. All the tobacco and cotton would be loaded by now, and our new deckhands—the men who kept the ship running—would be hunkering down for the journey. Cochran couldn't keep any deckhands longer than a trip or two—the nightmares and ghosts always scared 'em off. These days he was having to offer double wages to hire enough crew to get us to New Orleans and back.

It was then, as I sat there wiping my sweat and watching the deckhands get organized for departure, that I heard the familiar slow, scraping shuffle of an old man. "Striker," Chief Engineer Murry shouted as he came toward me. I turned and looked at him. His eyes were permanently coated with a white film, and one was half closed—almost sewn shut by scar tissue. The skin was puckered and shiny on his forehead and beneath his eyes.

It sure looked as if Cochran had shoved Murry's face in the furnace.

Murry's half-blind eyes squinted, then he smiled. "Just who I was lookin' for." He beckoned me over, so biting back a sigh, I went.

"Sir?"

"Cap'n wants to see you." The edge of his lip curled up. "You shouldn't have done that, Striker. Mighty stupid of you."

"Huh?" I reared back slightly. When Murry wore a smile like that, it only meant bad things ahead. "What did I do?"

"You know damned well." He snickered, almost gleefully. "And by the Shadow of Death, it was stupid. Ha!" He gave a guttural laugh and clapped his big gnarled hands. "It's nice to see someone else feel the captain's wrath for a change."

Then, faster than I knew the old man could move, his hand snapped out and grabbed my collar. He yanked. "Come on, then, Striker. Don't wanna keep Captain Cochran waitin' no longer—it'll only make this worse, and I need you alive t'work the engine. Or"—he towed me into a walk, throwing me a milky-eyed glare—"I need you mostly alive."

Moments later I found myself in the blacksmith's office, the tiny room beside the engine room where we mended broken parts and made new ones. Chains and hatchets and screws gleamed at me from all corners of the tiny room, building terror in my chest.

I'd insisted I could walk myself, but Murry had, in turn, insisted he didn't trust me. So he'd dragged me by the collar the whole way before shoving me inside with a cackle that was still ringing in my ears.

And then he'd left me. To wait. And with each passing second, my fear ratcheted up another notch. I had no idea what I'd done, but it had to be bad if the captain wanted to see me . . .

When Cochran finally slammed inside, my panic boiled straight into my skull. With his huge shoulders tensed straight to his ears and his eyes on fire, I knew I was in for it.

*Shit.* I scooted backward until my legs hit the low anvil in the center of the room.

"As soon as we reach New Orleans," Cochran said in a voice lethal and low, "you are off this ship."

My jaw sagged, surprise briefly stifling my fear. "What?"

"What, *sir*," he snapped. "And you heard me. As soon as we hit New Orleans, you're gone."

"Why?" I asked—but when his face turned even darker red, I quickly added, "Sir. Why, sir?"

"I ain't blind, Striker." He took a long step toward me. "I know damned well how you feel about my daughter, and if you think you can kiss"—spittle flew with the word—"then you're wrong. Murry saw the two of you, and there's no way in hell I'll stand for it. When we hit New Orleans, I'm turning you in."

"But I haven't kissed her." I gaped at him. "I swear, Cap'n. I didn't t—"

His fist hit my eye faster than I could blink. I crumpled to the floor—just in time for his boot to smash into my ribs. My back hit the anvil with a crunch, and I toppled onto my stomach. My skull was on fire. My ribs screamed.

"You think I don't know who you are?" he snarled, towering over me. "I have news for you, Sure Hands. I've known about your past for quite a while now." He smiled, clearly pleased with himself, and it took all my self-control to keep my face blank as he went on.

"You see, Striker, there's a man named Clay Wilcox, and he has a reward out for a boy your age. He says this 'Sure Hands' fellow killed a factory guard over in Philadelphia. That he blew up the factory, and—imagine this!—the picture of Sure Hands looks just like you."

*Don't react!* I shouted at myself. *Don't react.* But it was damned near

impossible. Why was Clay Wilcox still looking for me? He had set me up to die in that explosion—set me up to take his fall and rot in prison for his crime. I had killed the guard on accident, but I sure as hell hadn't blown up the factory.

"The thing is," Cochran drawled, "I'm not the sort of man to miss out on easy money. I've only ignored this reward money because you're so good with an engine. I've kept you on this long because my steamer needed you. . . . But now?" His boot suddenly slammed into my kidney. Black rolled through my brain.

"That boy ain't me," I finally ground out. "I ain't been to Philadelphia, and I ain't kissed—"

Another kick and another black wave. Then more kicking, over and over again, until I prayed that unconsciousness would overtake me.

But finally—finally—after twenty kicks or maybe a hundred Cochran made a satisfied grunt, as if pleased I would never budge again. Then his footsteps moved away from me, and I heard the door click open.

I peeled my eyelids back. "You'll . . . lose," I rasped.

For a moment he stood frozen before the door. Then it clicked softly shut, and his boots stomped back to me. Next thing I knew, Cochran was crouched beside me, his face in mine. "What did you say?"

"You'll lose . . . the race." I sputtered a cough and gulped in fresh air. "Murry and Schultz . . . can't work as fast as me. . . . You need me . . . sir."

His lips curled back, but I could see in the way his eyes darted that he was considering my words. "Fine," he hissed at last. "You can stay until after the race and then you're off."

"But there's no reason for me to win now—"

Hands grabbed my shirt and yanked. The world spun in spurts, moving in time to my pulse . . . until suddenly I was back on my feet, Cochran's breath rolling over my face and his grip tight.

"Do not play games with me, Striker. The bounty on your head says nothing about you being alive." He pulled me even closer, his eyes boring into mine. "But if you want incentive, then I'll give it to you." Gripping my head, he twisted it to one side and whispered directly into my ear. "If you stay until the race and if you win, I won't turn you over to Clay Wilcox."

"Or I could just run," I croaked out. "Hop off the ship right now—" My words broke off as fingers laced around my neck. Pushed into my windpipe.

"You try running, Striker." He squeezed. Stars speckled across my vision. "See how long it takes me to find you. I may have lost my fortune, thanks to these goddamned ghosts, but I still have more money and more connections than you. I will hunt you down and destroy you. But if you stay . . ."

He released me. I doubled over, gagging, and grabbed at the anvil to stay



upright.

*You should've stayed quiet*, I thought. And then a deeper, sadder part of me said, *And this is why you'll never be good enough for Cass*. No matter how much I wished for a different past, there was no changing what I was.

I was a fugitive.

And I was a murderer.

"I'll . . . stay," I said, forcing my head to tip up. Forcing my eyes to stay open and meet his. "I'll stay until the race, and then I'm gone."

"Good." A slow, easy smile spread over his lips. "And in the meantime you keep away from my daughter. If I see you anywhere near her, then—race or not—you will die, and I will collect that bounty. I have plans for Cassidy, and they sure as hell don't include a piece of crap like you."

## CHAPTER TWO



*I'm in my bed—the one I share with my ma. She won't come to our room for another hour. Mrs. Roper is always at her most demanding before bed.*

*I can't sleep. There's an owl outside that won't stop its hollering. Ma always said it's good luck to hear that owl, but tonight . . . it doesn't sound like the same kind of owl. And it sure doesn't sound lucky.*

*This owl sounds scared.*

*It screeches into the night. The Roper house is on a big plot of land south of Chicago, and there ain't no one but me, my ma, and the Ropers to hear this owl's cries.*

*I twist in the sheets, covering my ears with my hands. I try to think of happy things. Ma says she's got a surprise for my birthday. "You'll be five," she said at supper. "That's an important occasion, Danny, and I got somethin' special for you."*

*The owl screeches again. I burrow farther beneath the blanket.*

*Maybe she'll give me a rocking horse. The Ropers have one in their nursery—a big red one with real hair coming out its tail. I snuck in once to play with it. Ma boxed my ears when she found me. I still don't see why she was so mad—the Roper boys're all grown-up now.*

*The owl screams again. And again.*

*No.*

*I shoot up in bed, the wool blanket falling off me. That wasn't an owl. That was a human scream. A woman's scream.*

*My mother's.*

I jolted upright, the dregs of sleep threatening to pull me back under if I didn't. . . .

"Wake up," I muttered to myself. "It was just a dream." After a few panting breaths I managed to get my heart to slow.

Just a dream. The words repeated in my brain, like they did every night when the ghosts of the *Sadie Queen* flickered through and haunted my sleep.

I swung my legs left and felt the cool planks beneath my feet. A sliver of light peeked under the door.

We were in New Orleans now. A week had passed since Cass had told me about the race, since Cochran had beat me to shit. My ribs and back still shrieked with pain—and my face was still speckled with bruises and cuts.

But those aches didn't hold a candle to the agony from a nightmare.

*Just a dream*, I told myself again, pushing onto my feet. I staggered to my window, careful to avoid the boots and uniform I knew lay on the floor. As I flung open the red curtain, the lamplights of New Orleans seared into my eyes. I reckoned it was near ten o'clock, and the streets were crawling with people. Tourists, merrymakers, and more than a few gamblers out to decide between the *Abby Adams* or the *Sadie Queen*.

"Just a dream," I whispered one more time, digging the heels of my hands in my eyes. It was the same routine every night—the same cold sweat and exhaustion to hold me close; the same failed attempts to clear away the nightmares' claws.

But no matter how often I reminded myself they weren't real, the dreams still left me shaking in my bunk. Still left my mother's screams blasting in my ears and rattling in my lungs. That had been our last night in the Ropers' house. The last night we had a roof over our heads and the first night we lived on the run.

I didn't want to think about it—so I did what I normally did to forget. I crossed to my bureau, to the only neat part in my room, where boxes of organized, unfinished tinkering lay. And where *A School Compendium of Natural and Experimental Philosophy* sat wrapped in twine. I picked it up, careful about unwrapping the string now that the cover had fully disintegrated. I'd worn it out from all the reading and skimming and tracing. This book was the reason I had taught myself to read—all those diagrams of machines had downright demanded I learn my letters.

But just as I leaned against the window and held my favorite page to the light—page 258, "An Introduction to Electricity"—cold licked over my cheeks and grabbed at my neck.

I wrenched my gaze left just as a misty ghost floated through my cabin door. The blistered, scorched mess that was his face glowed a soft blue and lit up my room.

"Blood," he whispered, a sound that pierced my ears. Pierced my lungs. "Blood everywhere."

I eased out a shaking breath. I knew that voice . . . a voice from my past. The ghosts did that—spoke in voices that weren't their own. Sometimes they were the voices of the dead . . . and sometimes they were the voices of the living.

This voice belonged to the dead.

To the man I had killed.

The ghost's mouth sagged open. "Murderer," it moaned. "You'll hang for

this.”

Fear spiked my gut—brief and insistent. I *had* almost hanged for it, and if Cochran didn’t keep his word, if he told Clay Wilcox about me . . .

“Oh, stop being a Nancy-boy,” I growled at myself. “That ghost is harmless and Clay Wilcox is a thousand miles away.” I let my voice rise over the ghost’s hissing, and then—to prove to myself I wasn’t a coward—I made a quick decision.

I was going out.

No one was supposed to leave the steamer tonight, on account of the race . . . but if I stayed, I would lose my sanity on top of my sleep. Nightmares didn’t even compare to the rage that had been growing in my gut for the last week. Rage at Cochran for firing me. Rage at Murry for lying about me. Rage at Cassidy for not noticing I had avoided her.

In just over a day I’d be out of work . . . and on the run again. Life was spiraling that way no matter what I did, and tomorrow I would wake to a dawn most wicked. So I might as well enjoy myself before.

A splash of water and a clean uniform later, I crept to my door. The ghost still floated there, and I almost considered not leaving . . . just so I wouldn’t have to walk through it.

But with a steeling breath, I walked directly into his wispy form.

Cold, more biting and complete than any natural cold, snapped through my bones. A dank, earthy scent filled my nose. And then I was through, my teeth grating and my hands shoving the door wide . . .

I was almost halfway down the pier, the hum of Canal Street becoming a mighty roar with each racing step. I had managed to get off the *Sadie Queen* unnoticed by anyone, and the life of the city was calling to me. It was a steamy night with humidity so thick you could grab it. And there was an electricity shimmering through the air—the sort of charge you felt only on summer nights in the South.

I jogged around a giant stack of crates and skittered to a stop, my arms windmilling. A girl marched toward me, the burnt orange silk of her evening gown like a flame in the dark. I didn’t have to see her face—I knew from her long strides that it was Cass.

*Shit.* I huffed in air, trying to catch my breath. I’d done so good at avoiding her. A week of hiding behind boilers, skipping lunch, sleeping outside with the deckhands. Maybe I could scoot back behind the crates. . . .

Her gaze landed on me, and even in the shadows I could see her eyes widen with recognition. She stopped dead in her tracks.

“Danny?”

“Uh, hello, Miss Cassidy.” I bobbed my head and slung off my flat cap. “Going to a party?”

She blinked, as if surprised by my question. “The . . . the Langs. They’re hosting a dinner.” She smoothed at her bodice nervously. “I haven’t seen you in a while, Danny. Have you . . .” Her fidgeting slowed. Then stopped. “Have you been avoiding me?”

I stiffened. She *had* noticed my absence.

That made me happier than it should’ve.

But I made myself swipe the air carelessly. “Avoidin’ you? That’s ridiculous, Cass.”

She wasn’t fooled. “Is it because you got in a fight?” With a tentative step toward me, her gloved hand reached for my face. “I noticed that black eye, so I know you must’ve fought with someone. I could have helped you, you know—”

“Stop.” I ducked back from her. She’d noticed I was gone and she’d noticed my wounds. It made my chest hurt to think about. “It ain’t what you think, Cass.”

“Oh.” Her hand fell. Then anger flashed over her face and she stood taller. “So where have you been, then?”

“I might ask you the same thing,” I grumbled, sliding my cap on. “You and your pa have been gone every day since we got to New Orleans.”

Some of her bluster deflated. “It’s the Lang Company. They refuse to leave me alone.”

“Oh?”

“Every night since we got here, they’ve hosted galas and balls and dinners”—she ticked the events off her fingers—“and then teas and luncheons and more galas. Kent Lang parades me around like a spectacle. Reporters prod me with question while ladies twitter behind my back. ‘Oh, tee-hee,’” she mimicked in falsetto. “‘A female pilot—gracious me!’”

“Huh,” I grunted. The idea of Kent Lang, young bachelor and heir to the Lang Company, paying that much attention to Cass . . . I didn’t like it one bit.

And seeing Cass this close after a week made my traitorous heart pound a bit too hard. I slid my hands in my pockets to hide my trembling. “So, uh, if you’re going to a party now, then why’re you walking back toward the boat?”

“I forgot my cape.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s absurd, don’t you think? Why would anyone need a wrap on a night like this?” To prove her point, she dragged her finger over her exposed chest—then jabbed the finger at me. “My glove is soaked through!”

I didn’t respond. I was too preoccupied by her collarbone—by the way moisture beaded across it. . . .

I eased out a tight, churning breath, then I forced my eyes back to her face.

*Focus. Only friends. Nothin' more.*

"It is positively boiling outside!" Cass went on. "Yet I must waltz around in gowns and slippers and gloves. Oh—and did you know I cannot touch a gentleman or another lady without gloves? Of course I knew the rule existed, but I did not think anyone actually abided by it—not in this weather, leastwise." She stomped her slippared foot—and it made her body bounce in ways I should not be seeing.

My gaze snapped to a stack of crates behind her. *Only friends. Not a damned thing more.*

"I keep trying," she said, "to think of all this as a grand story to tell Ellis when I visit her in the hospital next. At least she'll love all the fancy dresses and dancing." Cass stared ruefully down at her skirts. But then her head whipped back up. "I almost forgot the worst part!" she exclaimed. "Why, it makes my temper practically ignite, Danny! No matter how many times I tell the reporters that I am only half of the team—that the apprentice engineer is just as important as the apprentice pilot—they don't write it down. I keep telling them that you're my other half, but they don't seem to care. . . ." She trailed off.

My eyes shot back to her face. She was watching me through lowered lashes. I scratched the back of my neck. "Uh . . . what is it?"

"For my so-called other half, you have been almighty scarce this week." Her lips pressed into a frown. "Why? Where have you been? I demand you tell me."

"You demand, do you?" I gave a lazy shrug. "In that case I reckon I had a lot of work."

"Don't lie to me, Danny. We're best friends, and . . ." She swallowed, hugging her arms to her stomach. "And I deserve better than that. You left the ship for a reason tonight, and if it wasn't to talk to me, then what was?"

"To . . . to talk to you?" Is that why she thought I was here? For some sort of apology?

She leaned toward me, expectant, and I exhaled sharply. She was too near. The shape of her shoulders, the contour of her neck—I couldn't stay sane with her here.

I scooted back a step. "I'm, uh, goin' out."

"Out?" Her mouth fell open, and for a half breath her eyes filled with hurt. With disappointment. But then she drew her shoulders back. "But the race is tomorrow, Danny. No one's allowed to leave."

"That so?" I drawled, turning my attention to my shoes.

"Dammit, Danny. Look at me. What if you ruin the race by getting rowdy tonight?"

"That won't happen, Cass—"

"Then what if you get caught sneaking off? My father will have your hide!"



“That’s the least of my concerns.” I snorted. Captain Cochran was the last person I wanted to think about right then. He was taking away my job . . . and taking away Cassidy. All for something I hadn’t even done.

I doffed my cap. “You have a nice time at your party, Miss Cass, all right? Don’t dance too much.” Then I set off, forcing a jaunty whistle from my lips. But I made it only a few steps before her voice lashed out.

“You may not be concerned, but I am.”

My gut tightened—sharp and hard. I stopped walking.

“I’m concerned,” she repeated behind me. “Please, Danny. Please don’t risk your neck for something stupid.”

“You . . . don’t understand,” I said gruffly, glancing back. My gaze raked over her. Her fingers were clenched into fists, her eyes bright . . . and her breathing too fast.

Hunger burned up from my stomach, through my lungs. Into my throat. I felt like shouting, letting all my rage loose on someone—something. . . .

But it wasn’t rage, I felt—not at Cassidy. This was a brighter, sharper feeling. A need. I was losing everything I’d earned for a kiss that hadn’t even happened.

“I am asking you to stay, Danny. Please.”

I watched the way her mouth moved as she spoke—the way her bottom lip trembled. The way her chest rose and fell with each breath. The way her collarbone gleamed in just the right way to drive a man mad.

I shifted my body toward her. “Is . . . your pa here?”

“No. He left an hour ago.”

“Good.” In three steps I closed the space between us, laced my fingers behind her head . . . And then I pressed my lips to hers, and I kissed Cassidy Cochran.

Her breath did this little catch thing, and her whole body stiffened. But then I pulled her harder to me, and the next thing I knew, she was kissing me back.

My stomach clenched. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. All I could do was kiss her harder. My head was spinning too fast—my blood roaring too loud—to care about stupidity or risk or anything but Cass. And when my teeth grabbed hold of her lower lip and tugged, her body followed until we were so close together, I *really* couldn’t breathe. Yet, somehow, she still wasn’t close enough. I wanted to push her to the nearest crates and taste every inch of her—

*Stop.* The word blazed through my mind. I wrenched back, gasping. I hadn’t meant to kiss her like that. . . . Not with so much need. Not with so much rage.

She stared at me, her breathing shallow. Her lips were scarlet and raw, her cheeks flushed. “What . . . ,” she began. “What was that for?” There wasn’t accusation in her voice—only genuine surprise.

“You’re . . .” I swallowed and rubbed my eyes. “You’re . . .” I dropped my

hands, and it took me a long moment to collect my thoughts. “You’re my other half,” I finally said. “Just like you said. And no matter what happens, Cass, don’t forget it.”

“Why would I f—”

“Me and you,” I cut in, taking a single step back. “Don’t forget it.” Then I spun on my heel and launched into a jog—away from her, away from the *Sadie Queen*, and away from all those hungers I couldn’t control.

## CHAPTER THREE



*The bar I wound up in was a foul place filled with the* lowest of the New Orleans's low. The ceilings crumbled, the lamps swung every time someone stood, and the liquor was watered down.

"I bet my money on the *Abby Adams*," drawled a mustached man, who—judging by the amount of money he'd swindled from me in poker that night—was a professional gambler.

I strained over the table to see the man's sunken-in eyes, but the oil lamps above us needed new wicks. Their patchy, flickering light made it hard to see much of anything.

Of course, that was probably intentional, since I'd felt more than a few creatures scuttle over my boots.

But I didn't much care. I was feeling pretty damned invincible tonight. I had kissed Cassidy Cochran, and she had kissed me back. Come hell or high water, nothing could take that back.

Plus, for all the disgusting forms of humanity that were trickling through the bar's half-collapsed door, I'd ended up playing poker with the most savory of the bunch. A Chinese boy in navy and red servant's livery, a professional gambler, and then a Negro gentleman with kid gloves so white they practically glowed in the seething darkness. The gentleman spoke elegantly, his swinging accent undoubtedly Creole and his ramrod posture absolutely well-bred.

"What do you think?" the Chinese boy asked in his soft, high-pitched voice. "You think the *Sadie Queen* can beat the *Adams*?"

For a moment I blinked stupidly at the boy's bald forehead. I'd lost track of the conversation, and the boy's long braid and half-shaved head were distracting. I'd known a few Chinese men, but most had been laborers. Bottom of the bottom when it came to jobs . . . and treatment. For this kid—and he was definitely a kid, at least a year younger than me—to be a servant in some local household was unusual. Special.

And there was something familiar about the navy and red uniform.

"Well?" the boy pressed. "You work on the boat, yeah? So who's gonna win?"

“You been readin’ the *Picayune*,” I drawled. “Otherwise you’d know the *Sadie Queen*’ll win.” I tipped back my bottle of whiskey, satisfied with the way the liquor burned my gullet. I smacked my lips. “We got the Natchez horns, you know. And the Memphis horns too.” At the Creole man’s blank look I explained, “When you win a race or set a record speed, you get a pair of gilded deer horns from the city you raced to. And the *Queen* has two pairs sitting on her jack staff.”

“Now, hold up.” The mustached man leaned on the table, sloshing everyone’s drinks. “I thought the *Abby Adams* had the Natchez horns.”

“And then we took ’em.” I pounded the table. “We beat the *Adams*’s time back in April—why else do you think Captain Dunlap hates us so much?”

That shut the man’s pan for a moment, so I seized the moment to steer the subject away from racing or business or Captain Cochran. “Listen,” I drawled, “are we playin’ another round of poker or not?”

At everyone’s nod the Chinese boy dealt new hands. For an hour we played—and drank—until the professional gambler had taken almost all of our cash.

Then I was dealt a good hand . . . or I thought it was good. The more I stared at it, though, the more the cards became a bleary mess of color.

Inwardly I groaned. When had I gotten so bad at poker? Or so bad at holding my alcohol? I used to knock back drink after drink. After all, it was the easiest way for a young pickpocket to stay warm.

But right as I opened my mouth to fold from the game, the Chinese boy said, “Hey—you’re cheating!”

My eyebrows shot up. I glanced around, wondering who the boy meant . . . until I realized that he was pointing at me. “Huh?” I grunted.

“You’re cheating.” The boy jumped up, his stool kicking behind him. “You slid an ace up your sleeve.”

I looked down at my cuff. The SQ initials swam side to side, but behind that . . . yes, that was definitely the corner of a card poking out. With great difficulty I tugged it loose. “I dunno how this . . . got here.”

But my words were lost in the uproar that spewed from the Chinese boy’s mouth. “You were gonna take all our money! This game doesn’t count!”

“I didn’t cheat,” I tried to say. “I swear, I didn’t.”

The Creole gentleman seemed to agree, for he thrust a crisp finger in the Chinese boy’s direction. “Actually, it was you who slipped that card in his sleeve.”

Now the mustached man jumped to his feet, a deep red rising on his face. Then he was shouting at the Chinese boy while the boy hollered, “Liar!” Suddenly there were people everywhere—a blurred mass of flesh—as the rest of the bar’s patrons crowded in to watch the inevitable bar brawl.

*Oh, hell with it*, I thought. Clearly I should be angry about this . . . and maybe defend my honor. Either way, the thought of crunching in someone's nose, of letting all my fury with Captain Cochran and Engineer Murry loose—it sounded mighty appealing.

I lurched up, and my fist flew at the Chinese boy's jaw. Then my knuckles cracked, my wrist snapped, and I got to momentarily revel in the boy's look of surprise. But as I dove in to tackle him to the ground, my fingers grabbing at his waistcoat, I latched on to something I was not expecting. Where there should have been flat chest, there was definitely something more. Something . . . round.

Just as I managed to comprehend the meaning of what I had grabbed, the Chinese boy whirled around, shoved a shoulder beneath my armpit, and flipped me headfirst into the crowd.

As I flew through the air and the disgusting bar smeared along the edges of my vision, I had time to mourn both the loss of my drinking and the loss of my fighting skills.

For I'd been bested by not only someone half my size but by a girl.

I awoke with the most disgusting taste in my mouth. A cross between a dead rat and a cow's foot. There was also a tenderness in my jaw and persistent throb in my skull that suggested I had survived a pummeling.

Though the word "survived" might've been generous. This felt worse than what Cochran had done to me.

My eyes—when I finally managed to pry them open—were met with crumbling stucco and weeds.

"Ah," said a voice nearby. "At last you are awake."

Squinting, I twisted my head back—and instantly wished I hadn't. The world spun, and I had to clamp my lips tight to keep from vomiting.

When at last my vision righted itself, I realized I was lying on the ground. With a Creole gentleman overhead. In a cramped courtyard in which someone had attempted (and failed) to start a garden. Beyond the courtyard's mouth a streetlamp flickered and gray light hovered over rooftops.

It was already morning.

I tried to rise, but I found my body was not a willing participant. I could barely even get onto my elbows without the urge to curl up and die.

"Allow me," the Creole said. I flinched. I'd already forgotten the man was there. But then a gloved hand appeared before my face. In half a breath I was on my feet—and severely wishing I'd opted to stay down.

Pain blazed behind my eyeballs. Bracing myself against the stucco—which I now recognized as the outside of last night's bar—I clenched my eyes shut. "How did I get out here?"

“The police.”

My head snapped up. “The coppers came?” Had Cochran contacted Clay Wilcox?

“*Wi*,” the man replied. “The police came because of the fight. They barely noticed you.” His head tilted to one side. “You were quite unconscious, you see. Yet since I told the police that you were with me, they left you alone.”

I frowned, one eyebrow rising. “And why,” I said warily, “would you tell ’em something like that?”

The man opened his hands. “A good question and one best answered while we walk—or am I wrong to assume you need to be on your ship?”

I started. “What time is it?”

“Just after dawn.”

“Shit.” I lurched into a stagger. “I gotta clean the boilers.”

“And that,” the man said as I stumbled past a withered pomegranate tree and long-dead azalea, “is precisely why I suggested walking and talking.”

I staggered from the courtyard and into—I squinted at a sign—Chartres Street. Good. That put me only a block from the river . . . and then about twenty blocks from the *Sadie Queen*.

Aiming right, I shambled past arched porticoes and lacy balconies. Surprisingly, people already roamed the streets—some with pralines or coffee to sell, but many with the telltale lost expression of a tourist. Certainly people weren’t gathering to watch the race already. . . .

I threw a backward glance to check the Creole still followed—he did—and continued my careful trek. It was taking me a lot more effort than usual to get one foot in front of the other, much less keep my innards where they belonged. But at least with all my efforts focused on reaching the *Sadie Queen* in one piece, I didn’t have much space for thoughts on my approaching unemployment.

Fury rose heavy and hot in my throat— Oh wait, that wasn’t fury. I rushed to a hibiscus, and with barely enough time to double over, I lost my stomach. Right onto the huge pink blossoms and right as the cathedral’s bells sang half past five. By the time I finally straightened and wiped my mouth on my sleeve, I felt better.

I swung left and found the Creole gentleman watching me with barely concealed disgust.

“What?” I snapped, forcing myself to stand completely upright. Vomiting might have eased my pain somewhat, but most of last night’s whiskey was still churning a bit too high in my gut. “While we’re standin’ here, why don’t you explain why you helped me? I got nothing to offer you, you know.”

Anger flashed across the man’s face. “I realize the color of my skin might suggest poverty, but I can assure you that my wealth exceeds even that of the *Sadie*



*Queen*'s captain. My education too."

"Now, hold up." I lifted one hand—my other hand occupied with clutching my stomach. "That ain't what I was saying, and you're getting awful defensive about it. My point is that wealthy people"—I dipped my head toward him . . . and instantly regretted that decision—"don't go out of their way to help people like me. Not unless they want something."

The gentleman stayed silent for several seconds. Then he sighed and lifted one shoulder. "You are right." He waved to my uniform. "I wish to board the *Sadie Queen*."

"What?" My face scrunched up. "Uh . . . why?"

"Because I am Joseph-Alexandre Boyer." The man swooped off his top hat and offered a graceful bow. "The Spirit-Hunter."

"The who and the what?"

"Joseph Boyer," the man repeated, puffing out his chest. "I hunt spirits. Or anything from the realm of the Dead, for that matter."

"The Dead. Really?" I eyed him skeptically. "I've never heard of huntin' a spirit before."

"Because I am the first to do it."

I snorted. "Convenient." Then, with a jaw-cracking yawn, I stumbled back into a walk. My curiosity was undeniably piqued . . . but I was also going to be late for my watch if I didn't conduct at least some of this conversation on the move.

Joseph followed beside me, his top hat back in place. "I am still establishing the profession and making a name for myself. Since people do not know to seek me, I must find the ghosts and walking corpses myself."

"Ah." The puzzle clicked softly together in my brain. "You read the article in the *Picayune*, I take it?" When Joseph didn't answer, I peered at him slantwise. "I reckon you read about the haunting, and now you want to stop it. Am I right?"

Joseph nodded slowly. "*Wi*. I recognized your uniform last night—I saw you on the pier."

"And you were on the pier why?"

"Because I was hoping to board the *Sadie Queen*, but the captain is not . . . interested in my services."

"That's not a good start to your tale, Mr. Boyer." I stared down at the cracks in the mud road. Each step was bringing a bit more life into me. "It also doesn't explain why you're talkin' to me."

"I saw you at the pier last night . . . and I followed you."

I whipped my face up. "Pardon?"

"I realize how it must sound," he rushed to say, a flush darkening his cheeks. "Yes, I followed you so I could gain passage, and yes, I was too ashamed to

mention it last night. Then, of course . . . the police arrived, preventing me from mentioning it at all. But do you not see? I can do much to help the *Sadie Queen*.”

I grunted. “If you’re telling the truth.”

“Of course I am,” he retorted.

I ignored him, my mind already leaping ahead to what would happen if the ghosts could actually be purged from the steamer. It would mean no more nightmares, no more voices. It would mean passengers and employees would return. Business would pick up, and Cass could stop worrying about Ellis’s hospital bills.

My pace slowed slightly as I turned down a new street—and the First District piers came into view. I slid my eyes to Joseph’s. “What exactly is in this for you, Mr. Boyer? I can’t pay you to destroy the ghosts.”

“I do not want payment. These ghosts are here, and I am here.” He motioned vaguely to the piers. “And . . . as I said, I am still making a name for myself.”

I blinked. “Oh. I get it. Why, that’s very sly, Mr. Boyer.” I barked a laugh. “Trying to board the *Queen* right when there’s a race. That’s a lot of publicity for you. . . . But what about me? Why should I help you?”

“You . . . do not care about the ghosts?”

“Not enough to sneak you on board when you’ve already been turned away. But”—I pointed a finger at him—“I have an idea that might work for both of us.”

He winced, as if bracing for a punch. “*Wi?*”

“I am soon to be in a position of unemployment. It seems to me that a man like you must have connections.” I cocked my head toward him, a jaunty step taking over my stride. “Why, if you could find me a new job—any kind of job—after the race, then not only will I sneak you onto the *Sadie Queen*, but I will guide you to . . . and through the ghosts.”

“A job is all you ask in return?” He dodged around a woman insisting we try her pralines.

“A good job,” I countered, shooing the praline-monger away. “And preferably a permanent one.”

“I believe I can manage this.” Joseph scratched his chin, nodding. “*Wi, wi*. A steady position in exchange for stowing me on the *Sadie Queen*.” He slowed to a stop and held out his hand. “We have a deal, Mr . . .”

I twisted around just in time to stop and clasp his hand. “Sheridan. My name’s Daniel Sheridan.”

“Well, Mr. Sheridan, would you care for coffee and beignets?” Joseph smiled and released my hand. “I know a place on the way to your steamer.”

My face split with a grin. I was already late to my shift—a few extra minutes wouldn’t change that.

“I never say no to free food.” I spread my arms wide. “Lead the way, Mr. Boyer.”

# CHAPTER FOUR



*By the time I reached Canal Street and the Sadie Queen's* red smokestacks came into view, the street was crawling with people. Rich, poor, black, white, American, and foreign—they swarmed in front of shops and on the iron-fenced balconies above. Many were on their way to jobs or freshly landed on the morning steamers.

But most were spectators already lining up to see the race.

“And the race doesn’t even start for ten hours,” I muttered as I darted in front of a carriage. I’d parted ways with Joseph after breakfast—the man needed to gather his “supplies” before boarding the *Queen*.

A Spirit-Hunter. The whole concept seemed ridiculous. But also impressive—if it was true, of course. To be able to stop hauntings or fight the walking Dead sure sounded exciting. And leagues better than tending a steamboat engine. Maybe I could convince him to hire me.

A streetcar clanged past and I charged with the flow of traffic around it, ducking left and twisting right. The closer I got to the water, the more elbows and parasols and sweaty bodies I had to slink around.

Then church bells clanged out six o’clock. I was now officially late to my watch.

I lengthened my stride, not bothering to apologize for stepped-on toes or jostled gentlemen. At last I popped out on the edge of the street with a full view of the *Sadie Queen* spring-lined to the pier—and a full view of her nearest paddle box, on which smiled the painted face of Cassidy’s mother.

I met her once—Cassidy’s ma—at the same time I met Ellis. They both lived up in St. Louis, where Ellis was in a special hospital with other children like her. Hodgkin’s disease was incurable—nothing could change that—but at least her suffering was eased. And though it had been a brief visit, I would never forget how happy Ellis had been to see Cass. Or how pretty Mrs. Cochran had looked. All round cheeks and Native American Choctaw glow.

“Danny.”

I jumped, spinning around to find a younger version of that very same glow standing behind me. “Uh . . . Cassidy.”

“Where have you been?” she demanded, slinging off her uniform cap and thrusting it in my face. “Father is furious. He knows you went out last night, and now you’re late to your watch. If you keep this up, you’ll lose your job!”

I sighed and twisted around to resume my hike down the pier. She stomped hot on my heels. “What has gotten into you, Danny? Why are you acting so strange?”

I didn’t answer that question, and she didn’t press. We were having a hard enough time just walking, thanks to the sheer number of roustabouts. They were everywhere, taking apart the steamer piece by piece to lighten the load. Lots of boats did it for a race—carted off furniture, yanked down walls, and even pulled out floorboards—because without the excess weight, a steamer could sometimes double its speed.

I sure hoped we doubled ours.

We reached a row of reporters standing near the gangplank, their pens furiously recording everything. I shoved through the men . . . and then felt a hand on mine. I didn’t have to look to know it was Cassidy’s, trusting me to get her through the crowds.

I pushed onward until at last we reached the steamer. But when I tried to release her hand and kick up the gangplank, she yanked me back.

“I can sneak you into the engine room,” she said, her voice soft and urgent. “We can pretend you were there all along, and maybe Father won’t realize—”

“Don’t bother, Cass.” I wrenched my arm free. “It won’t make a difference.”

“Oh.” Hurt flashed through her eyes. “I’m . . . I’m sorry for caring.”

My stomach sank. “It ain’t like that, Cass. There’s something you don’t know. . . .”

She wasn’t listening. She was shoving past me and striding up the gangplank. A groan burned up my throat. I shouldn’t tell her this—I should just leave tomorrow and make a clean break from this life.

*Then why did you kiss her?* my conscience demanded—and dammit, I knew it was right.

“I’m leaving!” I shouted after her. “After the race. I’m leaving.”

She froze midstride, halfway up the gangplank. Her face swiveled toward me, all the blood gone.

I stalked up to her. Deckhands were waiting to get down the plank, so rather than have it out with her right there, I towed her up the remaining length. She didn’t resist as I guided her toward the main stairwell that split down the ship’s center and led to the Passenger Deck.

“I knew you weren’t happy as a striker,” she mumbled, “but do you hate it this much?”

We reached the stairs, and I pulled her behind—into the hallway to the engine

room.

“Is it Murry?” Cass asked, still stumbling along. “Is it my father? The boring food? The same scenery every day?”

“What is this?” I muttered. “Do you keep a catalog of all my complaints too?”

“Is it . . . is it me, then?” Her voice cracked. It was the first time I’d ever heard anything but iron and grit on her words.

It damn-near killed me.

“Hush,” I whispered, pulling her to a stop before the clerk’s tiny office. I eased the door open and peeked inside—but it was empty, of course. The clerk had quit two months ago along with all the other crew. There was just enough space for us both to stand, so after a quick glance for observers—there were none—I pushed Cass inside and yanked the door shut. Only a few slivers of light shone through a dust-covered porthole on the door.

“Your pa is cutting me loose,” I said bluntly. “That’s why I’m leaving. And that’s why I’ve been acting strange.”

“That’s not funny,” she said sharply.

“And I ain’t joking.” I squinted, trying to see her face. “Your pa told me a week ago. As soon as we win this race, I’m gone.”

“Wh-why?”

I swallowed, trying to find the right words—but there were no right words. There was only the truth . . . or part of the truth. “He thinks I’m no good for you,” I said. “He . . . thinks there’s something between us. Murry claimed he saw us kissin’.”

Her breath whooshed out, and for a moment she was silent. Then I saw the shape of her arm rise. Before I could stop her, her fingers brushed along the side of my face. “He did this to you, didn’t he? My father gave you the black eye.”

I held my breath.

“I wish you’d told me.” She ran her fingers down my jaw, toward my chin . . . toward my lips. “I could have spoken to him.”

I caught her wrist. “It’s no use. The captain’s right. I am no good for you.”

“I decide who’s good for me.” She jerked back her hand. “Not you and not him.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me. A lot from my past that I can’t . . . I can’t escape.”

“We all have secrets.”

“Mine are worse than most.”

“And I don’t care.” She brought her face closer to mine. “Did you even mean what you said last night? Are we a team?”

“I meant it.” My gaze flicked from her mouth to her eyes . . . and back to her

mouth. “But even if I’m your other half, that won’t keep me on the ship. Your pa said he’d kill me if I didn’t leave. If I . . .”

“If you what?” Her voice was a whisper. I could barely hear it over my thumping heart.

“If I . . . kissed you again.”

“Then he’ll have to kill me too,” she said matter-of-factly.

I wet my lips. “What are you sayin’ right now, Cass? Do you feel something for me?”

“Like what?” She leaned closer.

I pressed my forehead to hers. *Just say it.* “Like . . . something more. More than friendship.”

Her hands slid up my chest. I didn’t move—didn’t breathe. Not even when she hooked her fingers behind my head. Not even when she rolled onto her toes and brought her lips to mine.

Not until I heard her whisper, “Yes, Danny. I feel something more,” did I let myself kiss her back.

But once I heard those words—once my heart had surged into my skull and then down to my gut—I backed her against the wall and I kissed her with every ounce of need and fury that was inside me.

And she kissed me back.

I was late—really late. Cassidy kept me occupied in that clerk’s office for longer than either of us had intended, but I didn’t mind. And I didn’t mind when Murry’s red-scarred eyes spotted me coming into the engine room or when his toothless mouth dropped wide for one of the foulest monologues I had ever heard. For the first time since Murry had dragged me to the blacksmith office a week ago, I didn’t have the urge to knock his teeth in.

Hell, I didn’t even mind when I had to squeeze myself into the boilers for another nine hours—or more—of scraping and cleaning.

Not a damned thing could knock me off my throne today—not after Cassidy Cochran had said she felt more than friendship.

By the time I clambered from the last boiler, the deckhands who had unloaded furniture were hunkered down to rest while the firemen carted hundred-pound sacks of coal aboard to keep the *Queen*’s furnaces constantly fed. Being a fireman was probably the only job on the steamer worse than mine.

With my fingers fumbling to unbutton my coveralls—blazes, I needed a fresh uniform—I stumbled down the hall. It was time to meet Mr. Boyer, and what had seemed like a brilliant idea by the gray light of dawn wasn’t lookin’ so shiny now. Now that Cassidy Cochran might be mine, I didn’t want to lie to her. . . . Then again, if this fellow could actually do as he claimed, a little subterfuge might be

worth it in the end.

I shambled by the main stairwell and as I stepped onto the deck, I blinked in surprise. There were electric lights all around the engine room; their yellow glow was nothing compared to this searing afternoon sunshine.

Of course, once I could see again, my mouth tumbled open. On the second floor—the Passenger Deck—where normally the saloon wall stood with its multipaned windows . . . there was nothing. I could see clear through the empty saloon and out the other side. If that wouldn't increase the *Queen's* speed—removing drag and letting the air funnel right down the center—I didn't know what would.

Then I caught sight of Canal Street, and my mouth fell even wider. There was no surface uncovered. Everywhere people stood on the roads, slouched against walls, and even hung on streetlamps. And they were all watching the *Abby Adams* and the *Sadie Queen*.

That was a hell of a lot of a pressure on one race.

With a deep breath I dragged my eyes away and resumed my trek to the gangplank. I constantly scanned for the captain, but he was nowhere in sight. In all likelihood he was up in the glass pilothouse, surveying the crowds and glaring bullets at the *Abby Adams*.

I reached the edge of the gangplank and instantly spotted Joseph at the foot. His fancy top hat and physician's bag stood out among the dingy roustabouts and firemen. As if sensing my stare, he looked up, and I motioned for him to board. As soon as his foot hit the deck, I tugged him into a fast clip toward the main stairwell.

"I'm taking you straight to my cabin," I said in a low voice. "I've got first shift on the race, so you'll have to hide out until midnight." I wagged a finger in his face as I hauled him up the steps. "If Captain Cochran catches you skulking around, then both of us will be gator bait."

"I understand." Joseph bowed his head. It was absurdly polite, considering I was dragging him along like a badly behaved child. "But once your shift ends," he went on, "I must be wherever the ghosts are. Will you take me?"

I led him over the Passenger Deck and toward the next stairwell on the right side of the ship, and as we walked, I considered his words. If there was one skill I retained from my younger days, it was the ability to creep in shadows. I could get Joseph to the ghosts unseen, but would I? There was nothing in it for me now that I knew Cass loved me and might—just might—be able to defy her father.

*But you'll still help him.* The answer flamed through my mind. Obvious and insistent.

Before I could voice it, though, we'd mounted the next set of stairs, and Joseph



had pulled something from his bag. “These can verify I am no charlatan.”

“Huh?” I glanced at what he held: a sheaf of newspapers.

He mistook my blank expression. “Can you not read?”

“I can read,” I ground out. I didn’t mention I’d learned only two years ago. Snatching the papers from him, I stomped onto the Hurricane Deck, skimming the newspaper headings as I marched straight ahead to the final set of steps.

“Joseph Boyer Stops Highland Hospital Haunting,” “Local Man Returns General to Grave,” “Joseph Boyer Battles Mobile’s Cemetery.”

The edge of my lip quirked up, impressed. Maybe this young Creole could clear out the ghosts, and maybe the *Sadie Queen* could go back to her glory days. . . .

*And maybe Cass and I will live happily ever after*, I thought bitterly, thrusting the pages back to Joseph.

As if reading my mind, he said solemnly, “I will stop this haunting, Mr. Sheridan.”

“I hope so, Mr. Boyer. For both our sakes.” I glanced back at him. “I really hope you do.”

I was ashamed of the state of my cabin. A man like Joseph probably slept on a velvet, four-poster bed. Yet my meager bunk wasn’t made, the wash basin was almost empty, and my copy of *A School Compendium of Natural and Experimental Philosophy* lay in a pile of loose papers on the bureau.

But I didn’t have time to dwell on—or apologize for—my housekeeping skills, for right then a whistle pierced the cabin. It was the final call for the crew to board.

The race was about to begin.

I stripped out of my coveralls in moments, and once I had fresh pants on and my arms in sleeves, I threw a hard glance at Joseph. “You. Stay. Here.” Then I snagged my uniform coat and bolted from the cabin. By the time I hit the Main Deck three floors below, rocketing past the firemen and enormous sacks of coal, I had my shirt buttoned and my coat pulled on.

I paused only once—to throw a glance up to the very top of the ship. To where Cassidy Cochran stood in the glass-domed pilothouse, sunlit and beautiful. Her spyglass was to her eye, her posture straight. My heart warmed; my lips twisted up.

Fastest team on the Mississippi. That was us—and we were about to prove it. Together.

I kicked back into a run and finally burst into the engine room, and the thunder of the moment crashed into me full force. We were about to race. The next eight hours of my life would be absolute and total hell—whether Cassidy and I were a

team or not.

Murry, stationed at the engine on the right, looked up when I barreled in, and when his scorched face turned to me, he bellowed, “Start the left paddle! Now, Striker, now!”

So I did. But I barely had the engine valves open, the steam bursting from the boilers to set the pistons turning—which then got the paddles going—before the distant boom of a cannon signaled the race had begun.

Then the firemen began to sing. But the shanty’s rhythm didn’t match the increasing *thwump-thwump-thwump* of the paddles, and nothing matched the clanging of the command bells.

Never in my apprenticeship had I heard such a discordant jangle come from the bells beside each engine. They connected to the pilothouse, and such a battle of bells could only mean a lot of tricky turns and deft maneuverings at the steering wheel.

As engineers, we had to get both paddles moving at exactly the right—though not always the same—speed to match whatever the pilot needed. Cassidy was our eyes, steering the *Sadie Queen* around curves, and we were her muscles, pushing and stopping and twisting through a river we couldn’t see.

And I could just imagine Cass up there, her eyes locked on the distant horizon. Her grip firm and sure on the wheel . . .

*Focus!* I ordered myself . . . but every three seconds a new thought of Cass would weasel in. . . . The way her breathing had turned to shallow gasps when we’d kissed. The way her waist felt when I’d grabbed—

*FOCUS!*

Thick and fast, the commands from the pilothouse rang one after another—stop, come ahead, back, and again to stop and back and come ahead full steam. I had no idea where we were, only that we weren’t at the pier anymore. Only that me and Cassidy really were one hell of a team.

And only that thinking of her made this a lot more bearable. It wasn’t miserable when I knew she was up there, waiting on me. . . .

“Club!” Murry screamed, and I dove for the wood shaft, thrusting the club into the enormous uprising piston arm that drove the paddle.

I bolted backward just as steam erupted. With a shriek like an angry bull the engine moved to maximum speed.

Time blended into a myriad of bells and levers, steam bellowing and explosive exhaust, thumping strokes and distant singing. Hours or maybe only minutes blurred past until suddenly all the bells ceased ringing save one.

It was the tiniest of them all, placed next to a long brass tube. The speaking tube. I darted to it and pressed my ear flat against the mouth.

Cassidy's voice snaked down. "Wide channel. Just past Carrollton. Keep her full steam."

I tugged my own bell rope—it would ring a confirmation in the pilothouse—and then turned to Murry, whose chest heaved like a dying man. I winced. He was too old to be doing this.

"We're to Carrollton," I relayed. "We're supposed to keep her full steam."

"Only Carrollton?" His shoulders dropped. "That's no more'n eight miles out of New Orleans. By the Shadow of Death, how will I get us all the way to Natchez if I'm already this beat?" His eyes narrowed, making the scars pucker. "Years o' thankless work, Striker. That's what engineering is. It's years of *no* gratitude. Why, Cochran might kill me yet." Then he shambled to the door, where a breeze licked in. "Yep, if we have to keep this pace, Cochran might just kill me yet."

It wasn't often that Murry elicited my pity. The man was spiteful and lazy, and he'd done me a bad turn last week—lying to Cochran about me and Cass. But there was no denying that Murry had once been a great engineer. Nor denying that he'd had more than his fair share of suffering in an engine room. And no denying that the life of an engineer was as thankless as they come.

With a sigh I shifted my attention back to the engines. Even with no change in speed, I had to keep an eye on all the gauges and valves, had to keep the steam pressure from building up. . . .

And had to keep from dwelling on a short-tempered, gorgeous girl four stories up who'd let me kiss her . . . and who had kissed me back even harder.

# CHAPTER FIVE



*At midnight the blond, pink-faced Second Engineer* Schultz came to relieve me. For half a moment I considered offering to take Murry's watch—let the old man have a break.

But then he opened his mouth, and I remembered how much I hated him. And why.

“Blast you, Striker,” he snarled. “You ought to take my watch. You're a quarter of my age, and you're barely even tired.”

“I already did two shifts today, Murry.” I inspected my fingernails as if I wasn't about to collapse from exhaustion.

“A third won't kill you.”

“And a second won't kill you either.” I scowled. “I did most of the work on the last watch, so you should be dandy for only a half shift more.” I turned to Schultz, bobbing my head. “See you in three hours.” Then I spun on my heel and ambled—as jauntily as I could—toward the door.

“Stupid dog of a striker,” Murry snapped after me. “That's what you are. A piece of crap off the bottom of my . . .”

His words were lost in the thrum of the engine, and as I sauntered through the door, I let out a bright whistle—just so he'd know I was completely unperturbed.

Of course, once I knew Murry couldn't see me anymore, I gave an exhausted groan and my posture wilted in half. I shuffled down the hall and toward the boat's bow. Each step brought me closer to the blazing furnaces and chanting firemen. These men were fresh, having just started their watch. Though that didn't keep them from flinching every time a ghost drifted by.

“Half-twain, half-twain, half-twain!” The singsong bellow of the first mate, Barnes, grew louder and louder until, just as I rounded the front of the ship to aim for the stairs, I caught sight of the hunched old man—not that he bothered acknowledging me. His attention was focused on the weighted leather rope that measured the Mississippi's depth. The lead line.

“Half-twain, half-twain!” his reedy voice carried up to the pilothouse. “Half-twain, mark twain! Mark twain, mark twain, no bottom!”

Those were the magic words for a pilot—the chance to breathe for a bit with

no risk of running aground. I would wager my soul that Cass had just made one of her sly, private grins. My favorite kind.

“No bottom, no bottom!” Barnes continued, and I shambled the rest of the way to the stairs. But then gooseflesh prickled on my arms and neck. I made the mistake of looking back.

A mangled girl in a shredded frock followed behind me. “Blood,” she hissed at me . . . but in the factory guard’s voice. It transported me back to Philadelphia. “You killed me.” The image of him flashed through my mind. His bright red uniform blackened with blood . . . blood I had spilled all over the dynamite factory’s floor . . .

I ground my teeth. I was not gonna think of him now, goddammit, and not ever.

I resumed my ascent until at last I staggered onto the Texas Deck. But then footsteps clicked ahead of me, and a soft voice called out, “Daniel Sheridan?”

My head whipped up. Coming toward me was a Chinese boy in navy and red livery.

I gawked—it couldn’t be . . . Could it? Was this the boy—no, girl who’d cheated me last night?

Judging by the smug grin on her face and the swagger in her step, it was the same kid. Pure, boiling fury surged through me. “You!” I lunged for her throat, but before I had gone two steps, the world flipped before my eyes.

And pain—there was a lot of pain in my wrist. Somehow she had yanked my hand behind my back . . . and then pulled the floor straight up to my eyes.

I was trapped on my stomach, and dammit if I didn’t want to really destroy this girl now.

He—no, *she* shoved her knee into my ribs. “You got a problem with me?” she asked.

“You bet I do.” I groaned. “What are you doing on the *Sadie*—” my wrist gave a sickening crack. A howl broke through my lips.

“I’m working,” she answered calmly.

“As what?” I wheezed. “At being a son of bi—” The pain doubled, and sparks burst in my eyes. But I wasn’t about to back down because of a little pain. “Because if so,” I squeaked out, “you’re a real crack shot at it.”

The girl shoved her knee farther into my ribs and tears sprang from my eyes.

“I’m Mr. Lang’s footman,” she said in a bored tone. “You know, the owner of this boat? The man who pays you? Well, he’s on board for the race, and right now, he wants to speak to you.”

Somehow, despite the agony, comprehension unfurled in my brain. I had recognized the girl’s livery at the bar because it was the same colors as the Lang Company flag on the jack staff.

“Is this how you usually . . . summon his guests?”

She chuckled, and leaning forward, she whispered in my ear, “I only do this to the people who know I’m a girl. And”—she breathed the word in a way that would terrorize my sleep for the rest of my life—“if those people tell, do you want to know what I do to them?”

She nudged my wrist an inch farther. It took every ounce of self-control to keep from shrieking. At some point—I wasn’t sure when—sweat had started dripping off my face.

“I . . . get it,” I squeezed out. “You’ll . . . kill me if I tell.”

“Exactly,” she whispered. Some of the torture eased, and in a normal voice she added, “You’re clever, yeah?”

“My ma . . . always told me so.” I gulped in air. “I’m glad . . . to hear you agree.”

That earned me a laugh, and—thank the Lord Almighty—the pain subsided a bit more. “You’re funny too,” she went on. “I like funny people.” Ever so slowly she let my wrist return to its God-given position, and the weight on my rib cage vanished.

I moaned and laid my cheek on the floor. “You’re evil.”

She gave a throaty chuckle. “There are worse things to be called. . . .” Her voice faded off.

And ice slid across my back. I opened my eyes. A ghost hovered a few feet away, and even though it had no eyes, there was no denying its empty sockets were locked on the Chinese girl crouched nearby.

“You left me,” it snarled in a raspy male voice. “You left me to die.”

The girl gulped.

“You ran when you should have stayed.” Then the words changed to a different language—Chinese, I guessed—and the girl started to shake.

I pushed to my feet. “It can’t hurt you,” I said softly. She didn’t seem to hear. She just watched the ghost and trembled. Then it advanced on her, still hissing in the same singsong language.

“No,” she whispered, backing up. “No.”

I grabbed for her elbow. “Ignore it. Don’t listen.”

“How?”

“Look at me. Look at me.”

Her eyes, wide and panicked, locked on mine.

“Good. Now we’re going to walk away.” I tugged her toward the captain’s suite at the front of the ship, and she didn’t resist. Ten steps later the ghost’s cries were almost inaudible. Twenty steps, and we couldn’t even see it anymore.

“How do they do that?” she asked quietly. “How do they see into our

secrets?”

“I don’t know,” I answered flatly. “But they do. They see everything we want to forget.”

A shiver shook through her.

“They don’t go to the back of the ship,” I added. “I don’t know why, but they never seem to be there—just in case you want to avoid ’em, I mean.”

She turned her face toward me, her lips twisting ever so slightly. “Thanks. And . . . sorry about that.” She jerked her thumb backward.

I grunted. “Anything else you want to apologize for?”

“Nothing comes to mind.” She laughed. “I’m Jie, by the way.” She thrust out her hand. In response I donned my most pathetic expression and dangled my injured wrist toward her.

At that her mouth popped wide with a cackle—and I was pleased to note that she didn’t stop laughing until we reached the captain’s suite.

My lungs felt like they’d been stuffed with cotton by the time I’d worked up the nerve to enter the captain’s suite. There was also a throb behind my eye—the eye that Cochran’s knuckles had crushed—that I didn’t think was entirely in my imagination.

With my cap wringing in my hands, I poked my head in the door. This was the room where Captain Cochran ate, entertained, and kept the ship running. It was as finely furnished as the passengers’ quarters, with painted landscapes on the wood-paneled walls and plush armchairs in each corner. However, the usual panoramic view of the river was currently blocked by velvet curtains—so as to contain the light and keep from blinding Cass.

The captain and a man with dark, curly hair I could only assume was Kent Lang sat at the round table in the center of the room. The captain’s eyes landed on me, and his black eyebrows plummeted. “Striker,” he growled, shooting to his feet. “What the hell are you doin’ here?”

“I invited him.” Lang’s voice came out cool. In charge.

“May I ask,” Cochran bit out, “why you have invited the striker into my suite?”

Lang ignored him and glided smoothly to his feet. Then he shifted toward me and flashed a goofy smile.

I started. The man was young—no older than twenty—and with his round, boyish features he looked like a mere babe.

“Do come in, Mr. Sheridan. We have much to discuss.” His expression hardened. Nothing about him looked boyish now. There was power at play in this room—pushing and pulling like the tide on a river—but I didn’t know who was playing for what or what was at stake. So I did as I was told, and with my cap gripped tight, I moved toward the table.

From the corner of my eye I could see Cochran's neck bulging—see his face turning scarlet. “Why,” he snarled at Lang, “is this boy in here?”

“I daresay,” Lang declared, his voice overloud, “but do you not have a shift in the pilothouse?” He leveled a gaze of flint and steel at the captain. “Miss Cochran remains at the helm, yet I do believe I heard the watch bell chime a full . . .” Lazily he withdrew a pocket watch and examined the time. “A full twenty minutes ago, Captain.” Lang bared a fake smile. “I will admit I am still learning the ways of ship life, but I do believe that makes you late.”

I held my breath, unable to look away from Cochran. Fury trembled through his face, and his shoulders rose and fell in time to his breathing. But just when I thought he would let loose like a tornado, he pushed away from the table and stormed to the door. It slammed shut behind him, rattling the lamps and paintings.

My air hissed slowly out, and when I finally turned wide eyes on Lang, it was to find the young man completely unruffled. “Do have a seat, Mr. Sheridan. And also, please help yourself to the food.”

That was when I saw a platter of breads and sliced meats on the table. My stomach growled as I dropped into a seat, and dammit if my bones didn't sink right into that soft leather.

Lang pushed a biscuit at me. “Now we may speak freely. And you may eat.”

“Thank you. Sir.” I brought the flaky bread to my lips. The buttery smell alone could kill a man, and after a huge satisfying chomp, I stared expectantly at Lang.

But the young man wasn't finished surprising me. “Coffee, Mr. Sheridan?”

I almost choked. “Uh,” I grunted through a full mouth, “sure. Thanks.” Then I watched in absolute awe as the heir to an enormous company and even more enormous fortune poured me coffee.

“How long have you been a striker?” Lang asked once he had set the pot back down.

I wiped crumbs from my mouth. “Uh, goin' on a year now.”

His eyebrows arched high. “Only a year? And yet you're already more adept at working the engines than the Chief Engineer. And Miss Cochran says you cover more than your fair share of engine duties. Is that correct?”

I didn't answer, gulping back coffee instead. No, I didn't like Murry much, but it also didn't feel right to mud-sling. “We all do more than our fair shares in the engine room,” I finally said. “Ever since the other striker left.”

“You're too nice.” Lang smirked. “Let me be frank with you, Mr. Sheridan. Are you interested in getting your engineer's license?”

Now I did choke. Getting my license would make me a full engineer—and that would mean higher pay plus a permanent position. “Are you jokin'?”

He laughed. “Not in the least. And really—what a silly question. Of course



you want your license.” He leaned back in his chair, lacing his hands behind his head with the easy poise of a man with everything. “The thing is, Mr. Sheridan, the Lang Company needs talented engineers like yourself. The steamship industry is having a difficult time competing with locomotives for business, but we’re having an even more difficult time competing for workers. As such, when we find an individual with skill, we like to keep him. Why, you could have your license and be a Second Engineer in under a week.”

A week. I mulled that over, chewing at my biscuit until it was all gone—until Lang pushed another my way. I stared at the golden top with unseeing eyes. . . .

I could be the one giving orders. Me, Daniel Sheridan, could be a Second Engineer in one week. I should be overjoyed at the prospect. Being a licensed engineer was a lot to offer a sixteen-year-old. It was certainly more than I had ever hoped for, and it was a million miles away from the prison cell I’d left behind. . . .

So why did it feel like the biscuit was burning a hole through my stomach?

“What about Schultz?” I asked at last, glancing up at Kent. “He’s the Second Engineer now.”

“Ah, yes.” Lang’s hands dropped to the armrests. “I can see why you might assume I meant you’d be Second Engineer on the *Sadie Queen*, but no. You will not be replacing anyone here. In fact, once the race is over, there will be no *Queen* upon which to engineer.”

“Pardon?” I sat up taller. “I thought if the *Queen* won, then she’d get to stay on the water.”

“No.” His lips pursed and he shook his head sharply. “That was never the plan.”

“But then why have the race at all?” I leaned toward him, speaking faster and faster. “Cass—I mean, Miss Cochran seems to think that if we can win the race, the *Queen* will stay on the Mississippi.”

“Hmmm.” His forehead knit, and he looked genuinely concerned by this information. “I am not sure why she thinks this since I never said—”

“Cochran thinks the same.”

Lang winced. “That is a problem.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “The whole purpose of this race was to publicize the Lang Company—not bring business back to the *Sadie Queen*. When we reach Natchez, we intend to use the momentum and energy from the race to announce that I am the new company president. Additionally we intend to announce the removal of the *Sadie Queen* from the river.”

“You’re dismantling her?” My voice came out high-pitched. Incredulous. “Why wouldn’t you tell the captain that?”

“Because we aren’t dismantling her,” Lang rushed to say. “We are merely moving her to a lake outside New Orleans. We hope to turn her into a tourist attraction, you see?” At my blank expression he traced his hand through the air like a newspaper headline. “Come see the *Sadie Queen*! Ghosts to chill and thrill even the strongest man!”

At those words anger brewed in my chest, hot and explosive. “That’s just as bad as dismantling her.”

“But we expect it to draw quite a crowd.” Lang spoke as if trying to convince himself more than me.

“What about the crew?” I growled. “What’ll happen to us?”

“Most of you will have jobs on other Lang Company steamers. You”—he nodded at me—“will be welcome as Second Engineer on any of our luxury boats.”

“And Miss Cochran?” I pointed straight up, toward the pilothouse. “What about her?”

“I have . . . plans for her as well.”

“And Captain Cochran?”

“Yes, well . . .” Lang swallowed. “He is too difficult to work with, and his temper has made too many enemies for the Lang Company. After that incident with the Chief Engineer and the furnace, I fear Captain Cochran does not have a future with us.”

“No future with you?” I couldn’t believe they were going to keep me—promote me, even—and then fire Cochran. For half a breath triumph warmed my chest . . . a sense of justice and revenge.

But then the full impact hit me. If Cochran lost his job, things for his family would only get worse. Ellis, Cass—they would be affected too, and no matter how much I hated the captain, I didn’t want his family to suffer. I didn’t want Cassidy to suffer.

“Do you even know if Cochran actually burned Murry?” I demanded.

“Yes.” Lang’s eyes thinned. “Five years ago he shoved the Chief Engineer’s face in the boiler furnace because he thought—as our official company report states—that Murry had ‘looked inappropriately at Mrs. Cochran.’ That, Mr. Sheridan, was more than enough grounds upon which to release Cochran from the Lang Company’s service. However, we foolishly agreed to keep him, pending no further incidents. Yet there have been incidents. Many, in fact.” Lang stared meaningfully at my face, and I had the uncomfortable feeling he knew exactly how I’d come by my aging black eye.

But still, I couldn’t let the whole Cochran family suffer because the head of the family was a monster. “What if,” I said slowly, “the ghosts disappear?”

Lang's eyes narrowed. "I beg your pardon?"

"If the ghosts disappear," I repeated, more firmly this time. "If the hauntings were gone, then what would you do with the *Sadie Queen*?"

"Ah, well." He straightened in his seat, his gaze turning distant. "I suppose, in that case, we would keep her on the river. She was our most lucrative steamer until two months ago. Plus, the appeal of traveling on a formerly haunted steamer would bring in heaps of new business." His lips twitched up, and I could practically see the dollar signs floating behind his eyeballs. But then he shrugged and his gaze swung back to me. "Of course, that is not likely to happen. It is not as if one can dispose of a haunting."

"Right," I mumbled, biting into my biscuit. "I guess one can't." But even as I spoke, I was formulating a plan. Joseph Boyer had some spirit-hunting to do—and he needed to do it fast.

# CHAPTER SIX



*I stayed with Lang a few minutes more, swallowing* back as much ham and coffee as I could before excusing myself for some shut-eye. “Consider my offer,” he called after me. “One week, and you could be a Second Engineer.”

I was two steps from my cabin when Cassidy materialized around the corner. She rushed toward me, pausing two paces away. “What happened?” she whispered. “Father was practically frothing when he came into the pilothouse.”

“Lang offered me a job.”

Her eyes bulged. “What?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but her hand shot up. “Wait. We need privacy.” She threw a glance behind her, then grabbing hold of my wrist, she towed me to her cabin. It was hard for my heart not to pound when she pushed me inside and then locked the door softly behind her.

This would get me killed if Cochran found out.

But I was far more interested in how close Cassidy was standing. In how she pushed me over to her bed and then ordered me to sit.

“Mr. Lang offered you a job?” She plopped down beside me, her voice low. “Doing what?”

As I relayed the story, her eyes grew wider and her lips pressed tighter. But when I reached the part about the *Sadie Queen*’s new future, my voice trailed off. Did she need to know the race was all for nothing? If this Joseph fellow could banish the ghosts, then there was still a chance for the old steamer.

And after that I could take Lang’s offer, get my license, and maybe find work on a different steamer. I’d be away from Cass, but that didn’t mean we couldn’t see each other. Hell, for all I knew Lang’s plans for Cassidy were a license of her own on a steamship with me. We were the fastest team on the Mississippi, after all.

“What are you going to do?” She searched my face. “If you accept, then maybe you could stay here. Replace Schultz as—”

“That ain’t happening, Cass.” I groaned, and set my elbows on my knees.

“Why won’t it happen?” she asked softly.

I cleared my throat, not liking that I had to lie . . . but feeling pretty certain it

was the right thing to do. “I, uh, sullied you, remember? If Cochran ever does agree to keep me, it won’t be ’cos of a license. If anything, the fact that Lang took a shine to me has only made your father hate me more.”

She exhaled loudly. Then she draped my arm over her shoulders and curled up against my chest. It was . . . nice. And it was everything I’d ever wanted from Cassidy.

*Clack-clack-clack, thwump!* I watched her long calloused fingers extend the spyglass . . . then shut . . . then extend it again. Those callouses hadn’t been there a year ago, when she’d first started her apprenticeship. Now her hands told a story—a tale of dodging mudflats and braving hurricanes.

*Clack-clack-clack, thwump! Clack-clack-clack—*

The temperature plummeted. My breath suddenly laced out with steam.

“Blood.”

Cass and I jerked right—and then scrabbled off the bed.

An old man, his head snapped off and dangling by a single tendon, hovered on the bed. His form flickered and faded like fog. And when he spoke, it was in the voice of a little girl. “My neck—my throat—it hurts. It hurts!”

Cassidy clapped her hands over her ears.

“It hurts! Make it stop—make it stop!” The voice wailed through the room.

“It isn’t my fault,” Cassidy growled, her eyes screwing shut. “It isn’t. It isn’t.”

“Hey.” I laid my hands over hers.

Her eyes cracked open. “It isn’t my fault.”

“And that ain’t your sister.” I tried to pry her hands down, but she resisted. Then suddenly she wrenched away from me and screeched at the ghost. “Go away! Go away! We wouldn’t be in this fix if it weren’t for you!” She swung her spyglass out. “Go away!”

But the ghost didn’t move. Didn’t stop crying in Ellis’s voice.

“Shhh.” I reached for Cassidy. “Someone’ll hear. And it ain’t the ghosts’ fault that Ellis is sick.”

“But it is their fault.” She slid away from me. *Clack-clack-clack*. “If not for the ghosts, my family wouldn’t be out of money. If not for them”—*thwump!*—“then we could still afford Ellis’s treatment. Then it wouldn’t matter who I loved. Father wouldn’t care, and . . . and . . .” She stopped speaking and clamped her lips together. Then she stalked back toward me, her voice low. “It is their fault, Danny.”

“Cass,” I said hesitantly, “what do you mean about Ellis’s treatment? You can’t afford it anymore?”

She gulped and shook her head once.

“Have you stopped treatment already? Has Ellis left the hospital?”

A slow, ragged nod.

“Shit,” I breathed. “When? And why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it wouldn’t have made a difference.” Her voice was a bare rasp—more steam than actual words. “Ellis is going to die. I can’t stop that . . . and I’m tired of people’s pity. It isn’t me they should want to help—it’s her.”

I stepped away from Cass, gripping the sides of my face. This was so much worse than I’d ever thought. No wonder Cass was putting so much pressure on the race.

But of course, it didn’t matter if we won the race or not—nothing was going to keep the *Sadie Queen* on the river. Nothing was going to put money in the Cochran family’s pockets . . .

Except stopping the ghosts.

“Shit,” I hissed again. “I wish you had told me.” *Then maybe I would have found Joseph on my own—found him before Ellis had to leave the hospital. . . .*

I stopped pacing and turned toward Cass. She stood frozen in the middle of the room, her eyes locked on the floor, the spyglass hanging limply in one hand . . . and the ghost still moaning, “You did this to me. You want me to die.”

“Cass,” I said.

Slowly she turned her head, but her gaze was vacant. In two long steps I reached her—and I wrapped my arms around her, tight. “We’ll figure this out, all right? I promise. Me and you. You and me. A team. You got that?”

She nodded into my shoulder. “Me and you. A team.”

After giving Cass a final embrace, I left her to sleep before her next watch. Then I hurried to my own cabin—but I entered to the sound of a rattling, desperate cough.

Squinting in the moonlit dark, I saw Joseph sprawled out on my bunk. The man clutched at his throat.

“Mr. Boyer?” I hurled myself at him. “Wake up, Mr. Boyer. Wake up!” My voice rose in volume, and just as I reached down to shake his shoulder, the Creole’s eyes popped open.

He gaped up at me, heaving in air. Then his eyes flickered with recognition. “Mr. . . . Sheridan.” He rose onto his elbows.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

Joseph sat up all the way. “I am now.”

“Nightmares?” I asked.

He nodded. “They are . . . vivid.” Then he sheepishly scrubbed at his head. “I fear I fell asleep some time before midnight. How many hours did I miss?”

“It ain’t past one yet.” I stared at him, my jaw working. “Listen, I need you to stop the ghosts. Tonight.”

He blinked quickly. Then he pushed onto his feet. “Earlier, you did not care if I hunted the spirits. You were more interested in a new job. What has changed?”

“Everything,” I muttered. “Everything’s changed, Mr. Boyer.” I cocked my chin at him. “And we don’t have a moment to waste. There’s a lot of ghosts where I’m taking you, and I need them all gone by morning.”

His only response was to wave at the door and murmur, “Then by all means, lead the way.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN



*The spirits congregated in the saloon. Hundreds of* them. I had no idea why, but for every two ghosts floating on the decks there were ten in the saloon. They stoutly avoided the ship's rear, yet packed themselves into this room. Maybe they—like those of us who were living and breathing—just enjoyed the paneled skylights overhead or the lush carpeting underfoot. It was the main place for passengers to dine, dance, and generally entertain themselves, so, best as I could reckon, maybe the apparitions were inclined to do the same.

When we finally scooted into the saloon via an empty passenger cabin, the temperature plummeted. Chill bumps exploded on my arms and neck, and I suddenly had to squint to see. The room shone unnaturally bright—not simply because the moon streamed through the missing front and back walls, but because the ghosts glowed bright as blue candles everywhere I looked.

Joseph gasped, and I couldn't help but shudder. It was an impressive sight. Horrible, uncomfortable, and cold, but impressive all the same. Mutilated ghosts floated the entire length of the saloon, unaffected by the gusts of wind that funneled through every few moments. Their cries for blood laced together in a sound like bone rubbing on bone.

I had to cover my ears as we walked alongside the larboard wall, aiming toward the ship's front.

But then I saw Joseph doing the same . . . and curiosity got the best of me. I lowered my hands until that scratching burn of voices was loud enough for me to understand.

"I will make you pay," said one of the ghosts in a Creole accent like Joseph's. "You will pay for what you did to me." Then the other ghosts pressed in, hissing their judgments in that same swinging voice: "You killed me too late. All those people died because you could not see the truth in front of you. Their blood is on your hands, and my blood is on your hands. Blood everywhere."

It felt like fingers slid down my spine. I shivered. What secrets was Joseph Boyer hiding? How many people had died—

"You did this." A charred face drifted before me, its mouth hissing in the guard's voice. A voice I'd only heard once . . . before I'd killed him. "You beat



my skull in—”

My hands clamped back over my ears. *Joseph ain't the only one with secrets*, I thought, looking back to the other young man. He had come to a stop ahead of me, halfway down the saloon and right next to a passenger cabin door. His back was pressed against the door as if to let the ghosts pass. . . .

And it actually seemed to work. The spirits drifted by him as if no longer aware. I hurried to join him, and soon enough, I also had my back against the wall. “Now what?” I asked, a slight wheeze in my voice. And always, always, clouds of steam.

“This is the first time I have ever seen ghosts with voices,” Joseph said flatly. “This is unusual.”

“Huh?” I snapped my face toward him. “That doesn’t sound good. Does that mean you don’t know how to stop ’em?”

“Hmmm” was his only reply, but then he rolled onto his toes and sank even farther against the wall.

I lurched back just in time. A little boy and girl slithered past, their arms eaten off. My heart did a sickening flip.

Joseph gave an audible gulp. “If these apparitions are able to speak, and they also have the ability to dredge into our pasts, to haunt us with nightmares and voices, then . . . I wonder . . .” His eyes fluttered shut, and with his hands rising, palms up, he left the safety of the wall. For several minutes he simply stood there with his arms outstretched and his brow knit.

Then, as one, the spirits pulsed. Every single one shifted backward several feet, as if pushed by an invisible wind.

“Holy hell,” I whispered, gawping at Joseph. “Did you just do that? And can you do it again?”

He exhaled sharply, and his eyelids popped up. “It requires a great deal of effort to join with spiritual energy.” At my questioning glance he added, “Spiritual energy. It is the electricity that makes us who we are—our soul. Some people are born with an ability to . . . to connect to it.”

“You’re one of those lucky people, I presume?”

Joseph waved a hand. “Under normal circumstances, *wi*. However, I cannot connect to these apparitions. They slip away like snakes.”

“Am I right to guess they shouldn’t slip away?”

“*Wi*.” His lips puckered up, worried and thoughtful. “Typically apparitions are the easiest spirits to deal with.”

“Oh?” I ducked back tight against the wall just as a legless woman came drifting by. . . .

But I wasn’t fast enough.

“You will hang for this,” she said in a gruff male voice. His voice—always the guard’s voice. “My blood is everywhere. On your hands. In your soul. And you will hang—”

“Why,” I blurted out, shouting over the ghost, “did you become a Spirit-Hunter, Mr. Boyer?” I forced my head to shift toward Joseph and away from this spirit.

But the apparition had reached him now.

“You did not save us.” Now she spoke in many voices—children and adults, all coming from the same ghostly throat. “We died because you refused to see the truth. You will pay for our blood. You will pay.”

Joseph’s teeth gritted, and his gaze bored into the apparition’s as he said, “I made a very grave mistake once, Mr. Sheridan. Lives were lost because I could not see what was plainly before me. There is no atoning for that mistake. All I can do is prevent it from happening again.” His eyes flicked sideways and finally met mine. “To ignore the past and to ignore the Dead—that is no solution. Unflinching and unafraid is the only way to move forward. Now, is there any other place the ghosts swarm?”

I shook my head, but my mind wasn’t thinking about the ghosts anymore. All I could think about was what Joseph had just said: *There is no atoning for what I did. All I can do is prevent it from happening again.*

It seemed to echo through me. The only path forward was to face my nightmares unflinching and unafraid. To own up and then move on. I had ruined lives. I had stolen and I had cheated. Nothing could change those facts. Nothing could change Clay Wilcox and his bounty either. All I could do was keep pushing forward.

Such a simple phrase, yet so . . . true.

“We may return to your cabin now,” Joseph said.

“Already? But you haven’t done anything.” I couldn’t keep the edge off my words. “You said you could stop the haunting.”

“And I can.” His eyes thinned to slits. “But I have seen enough to know that we are not dealing with normal apparitions.” He motioned for me to lead the way, so I set off at a slow pace, sticking as close to the wall as I could . . . and hoping that if I took long enough, Joseph might change his mind. He might do something now. Fix this problem. Fix everything.

But as we trekked, Joseph explained how his Spirit-Hunting methods worked—and it became clearer that he could do nothing to stop the ghosts. Not yet, at least.

“There is electricity around us, Mr. Sheridan. I think of it as the earth’s soul.”

I thought back to page 258 in my textbook. It showed the earth with lines

pulsing outward—lines of electricity. “You mean electromagnetism.”

“Precisely.” Joseph paused midstride to flatten himself to the wall—and avoid a bloated man as he whispered past. “I gather all this electromagnetism into myself and use it to blast the Dead to bits. The broken soul then travels back to the spirit realm.”

“Land sakes,” I breathed. “It’s like a cue ball in billiards. But then . . . why not just bypass the whole electric field entirely? Why not use raw electricity? Surely it’s more powerful.”

“Such as lightning?”

“Yeah. Or even electricity from a steam engine . . .” I trailed off, freezing in place as a ghost with a torn-out neck swept in front of me.

“Blood,” it hissed. “Blood everywhere.”

Like flies to a shit pile the rest of the spirits swarmed. They twisted around and flew toward us, their dead throats wailing for our blood.

“Mr. Boyer,” I roared over the cacophony of shredded voices. “I think we’re gonna have to run for it.”

“What about stealth?” he shouted back.

I didn’t bother answering. My back was slammed so hard against the wall that I could feel my shoulders bruising. And I could feel the guilt rising in my throat and threatening to break loose. I’d rather be gutted by Cochran and tossed overboard than be swallowed up by the tongues of my past.

“You killed me.” It was the guard’s voice again. Layered a hundred times and pouring from a hundred different mouths.

I latched hold of Joseph’s sleeve. “Run!”

Cold, cold, cold. Ice forming on my lashes and scorching down my throat. Through ghost after ghost Joseph and I ran—until at last we reached the Passenger Deck and crumpled to the floor beneath the stairwell, shivering.

My teeth chattered. I was so damned cold, and that man’s voice wouldn’t leave my ears. *Not real. It’s not real.* For several gasping breaths it was all I could do to hug my arms over my chest and keep from crying out. *It’s not real.*

The need for Cassidy ached in my throat. Behind my eyes. I just wanted her here for a second. To pat my head. To smile at me. To remind me what it felt like to be alive . . .

My one consolation was that Joseph was no better off. The Creole rocked back and forth with his hands pressed to his ears. “These are no normal apparitions,” he whispered, again and again. “These are not normal.”

Joseph gave a soft groan and rubbed at his eyes. We’d been in my cabin less than an hour, the only sound the rapid flipping of pages and slapping of book covers.

I paced—back and forth in front of the door. “What’s wrong?”

“It is as I feared.” He tapped the page in his current book. “These apparitions and nightmares show all the signs of a lodestone curse.” At my confused expression he added, “They are curses stored in an object.”

“What kind of curses? And in what kind of object?”

“The type of curse that opens a hole in the spirit curtain and draws the Dead through—and into the real world.”

“Like a lodestone to a magnet,” I murmured, understanding the curse’s name. I stopped walking and rubbed my eyes. “So you’re tellin’ me that ghosts have been drawn through? And that’s why they’re here?”

“*Non*. These are still only apparitions.” Joseph slowly closed his book, his gaze turning distant and unfocused. “Have you ever seen a magic lantern show, Mr. Sheridan?”

I blinked, surprised by the subject change. I *had* seen a magic lantern once. It had been completely by accident three years ago. I was supposed to crack into a safe at the McVicker’s Theater, and there just happened to be a magic lantern show going on when I snuck in.

I remembered it vividly—like it was yesterday. It was one of the few memories I welcomed. One of the only moments in my life that stood out as good.

The magic lantern show had featured images of Paris, and there was one picture—of an art museum that had once been a palace—that I could still imagine with absolute clarity. It had been the most beautiful building I’d ever seen . . . and I had vowed then, while I was tucked away on a ceiling beam, to see it one day.

“I’ve seen a magic lantern show,” I said, stuffing my hands in my pockets. “Why?”

“So you know how the machine works?” Joseph pressed. “A small image is projected onto a wall using lights and mirrors.”

I bobbed my head.

“With this lodestone curse,” Joseph went on, “the spirits are being projected here from the spirit realm. A true apparition is nothing more than an image of the deceased—exactly like the magic lantern. Should the curse be cast, however, then the ghosts will no longer be apparitions. The ghosts will become real.”

“Wait.” I lifted my hands. “You’re saying all those ghosts down there would suddenly be . . . real? As in solid?”

Joseph gave a long, acknowledging blink. “It would be as if the pictures of the magic lantern were to suddenly transform into reality. The image of a dead woman would become the dead woman.”

“So . . . we would have hundreds of—” My stomach clawed into my throat, choking off my next word. “Hundreds,” I tried again. “We’ll have hundreds of

Dead. Walking corpses?”

“Not the actual corpses, but a solid form— *Wi*. The ghosts will be able to touch us.”

“And hurt us. Oh shit.” Lacing my hands behind my head, I resumed my pacing—faster this time. I had seen solid ghosts before. Black forms with claws of ice and pinprick eyes of endless gold. The forest outside Mr. Roper’s house had been haunted by one. So had McVicker’s Theater. I had seen it the very same night I had watched the magic lantern show.

Images of ghosts were one thing. Ghosts that could kill me were quite another.

“How the devil do we stop it?” I dropped my hands. “If the curse hasn’t even been cast yet, how do we make sure it stays that way?”

“We must find the curse—find the object that contains the spell.” Joseph exhaled a heavy sigh and shrugged. “Do you perhaps know when the ghosts first appeared?”

“Two months ago. In April.”

“Then the curse could be in any object that came aboard two months ago.”

“But that could be a million things.” I groaned. “Hell, I bought these boots”—I kicked up my foot—“in April. Maybe it’s them.”

“Except a necromancer had to have held the object long enough to put the spell inside. It would have taken days.” Joseph tilted toward me, urgency in his voice. “My guess is someone hired a necromancer to make the curse. Thus, it was brought on by someone who likely hated Captain Cochran—but it must also be someone who did not want to kill the crew or destroy the steamer completely. Not yet, at least, for otherwise the curse would have been cast already.” Joseph opened his hands in a helpless gesture. “I realize it is not much of a clue.”

“Or maybe,” I said slowly, thinking back to a conversation from the night before. *We beat the Adams’s time back in April—why else d’you think that captain hates us so much?* “Maybe it is a good clue. The Natchez horns—we won those from the *Abby Adams* back in April.” My words picked up speed as certainty coursed through me. “That’s two months ago, Mr. Boyer, and if there is one person who will benefit from the *Queen’s* downfall, it’s the captain of the *Adams*. He’s our rival—not just in the race but for business too. And,” I added with an emphatic fist at Joseph, “once the hauntings began, who do you think took over as the most popular luxury steamer on the Mississippi? Captain Dunlap wouldn’t want us all dead, but he would want our passengers.”

Joseph’s lips pressed into a thin line. “And these horns—where are they?”

“On top of the jack staff, just below our Lang Company flag.”

“We must get them down.” Joseph rose unsteadily to his feet. “Is there some way to climb this flagpole?”

I winced. We normally used a ladder to get to the top of that fifty-foot pole. “I’m stealthy,” I said with a shake of my head, “but I ain’t an acrobat, Mr. Boyer. Except . . .” I trailed off.

Maybe *I* couldn’t climb the jack staff, but there was someone on this steamer who I would bet could.

I jumped up, aiming for my bureau. “I got an idea, Mr. Boyer.” I swept aside gears and screws until I found what I needed: pliers. Then I jerked my hand toward the door. “I know someone who can help us get those horns down.”

# CHAPTER EIGHT



*I found Jie exactly where I expected. It was within* shouting distance of Lang but also where I'd said the ghosts would avoid: the back of the Texas Deck.

She sat on the balustrade with her legs hanging off dangerously and her hair falling from her braid. If she'd wanted, she could jump right off the boat—and fall three stories to a watery grave.

Her body tensed when Joseph and I approached, but she pretended not to notice us until we stood directly beside her. I knew she was pretending because I'd done the same ear-perk a thousand times. A pickpocket always knew who was around him—but more important, how to act like he wasn't paying attention.

Of course she dragged this game out, and it wasn't until I gave a loud cough that she pulled her eyes from the wake trailing behind the *Queen*. She gave me a once-over. "How's your wrist?"

I bared my teeth. "It's just peachy. Thanks for asking." Then I cocked my head toward Joseph. "Jie, this is Joseph Boyer."

She turned her face toward Joseph, a languid, catlike movement. "Hullo."

Joseph stiffened. "You're the boy who cheated us at cards."

She barked a laugh and snapped her fingers. "I thought you looked familiar. Though . . . where'd your nice hat go? And your pretty white gloves?"

Joseph's nostrils flared, but before he could open his mouth, I cut in, "Don't be a smart aleck. We need your help."

"My help, yeah?" She swung her legs around to face us. "With what?"

"Something important."

"Very important," Joseph intoned.

"And very secret," I added.

Jie's eyebrow slid up. "Let me guess: it's also very illegal. Sorry, but I don't break the law."

"Yet you are willing to cheat at cards?" Joseph gave her a penetrating glare—the sort of glare that said, "*Do not get on my bad side.*"

Jie seemed to understand the look because she said—albeit grudgingly—"What do you want me to do?"

"Climb the jack staff," I answered.

She hopped off the balustrade. “Why?”

I motioned for her to follow and guided her to the edge of the Texas. Far to the front of the boat, we could just glimpse the tall pole with the Lang Company flag waving at the top. “See the glint just below the flag? It’s a pair of gilded antlers. Can you get them?”

“Can I get them?” She snorted derisively. “Of course I can. The question is will I. What’s in it for me?”

“What’s in it for you?” I clicked my tongue. “I reckon you owe us, Jie. After cheatin’ us—and damned near knocking me out.” I was grateful when Joseph didn’t mention that I had also demanded “what’s in it for me?” less than twenty-four hours ago. “Why,” I continued, “we could just tell Lang about that bar fight last night. I bet he doesn’t like his footmen startin’ brawls.” I tugged the pliers from my pocket and held them out to her. “Or you can climb the jack staff and get the horns.”

“Hmph.” Her expression didn’t change, but she did snatch the pliers from my hand. “All right,” she said at last. “I’ll help. But”—she pointed to the pilothouse—“I’m pretty sure the captain’s gonna see me.”

I huffed out a relieved breath. “Don’t worry about the captain. I’ll deal with him and you deal with getting those gilded antlers down.”

“What of the first mate?” Joseph inserted, looking from me to Jie and back. “He is stationed at the boat’s bow and can also see you.”

“You mean that old man yelling about twains and bottoms?” Jie arrogantly tossed her head. “He’s too focused on that rope of his to notice me. I’ll be up and out of sight before he can even read the next depth.” She rolled her shoulders and turned to me. “I’ll count to two hundred before I climb. That means you have exactly two hundred seconds to get that pilot distracted. You can count, yeah?”

“Make it three hundred,” I said. “There’s someone I gotta see first, and it might take a few minutes of . . . persuading to get her to my side.”

Jie nodded, twisting as if to go—but then she paused and wagged her finger at us. “If I lose my job because of this, you’re both dead.”

“Should anything happen,” Joseph said, “I will compensate you.”

“Fine.” She swatted at me. “Go on! I’m already to three in my head. And you, Mr. Boyer”—she turned to Joseph—“are coming with me to explain exactly why I’m risking my neck for a pair of golden deer horns.”

I hurried over the Texas and counted—fourteen, fifteen. Three ghosts floated toward me. My pulse kicked up. I ducked into a shadow and flattened myself against the wall. They slid past, hissing for blood. . . .

How much blood would they take if they could actually touch me? The thought flashed in my mind . . . and my gut knotted up. The idea of a hundred spirits



demanding I pay—a hundred spirits piercing me with guilt and physical agony . . .

It wasn't the way I wanted to die.

The apparitions passed out of view, and with a fortifying breath I forced my feet back into action. Twenty-two, twenty-three . . . Once I reached Cassidy's cabin door, I briefly debated knocking—but then decided I didn't have the time.

So I barged in.

"Eek!" She sat up in bed, still in her uniform and her sheets clutched to her chest. Then she realized it was me. Her breath whooshed out and her shoulders slumped. "Heavens, I thought you were . . . I don't know. Someone who shouldn't be in my cabin."

My lip quirked up at that—knowing she qualified me as someone who *should* be in her cabin—but then I shook my head and forced my mind back to the matter at hand. Thirty-five, thirty-six.

"Listen, Cass. There's something I need to tell you, and there ain't much time to tell it." I scooted to her and knelt at the foot of her bed. Then I told her all about Joseph. I told her how he had found me on the street—sixty-four, sixty-five—and how I agreed to let him on the *Queen* in exchange for a job. I told her how I'd seen him touch the ghosts—seventy-nine, eighty—and how they were here because of a curse. A curse that could, at any moment, rip a hole between worlds and make the spirits solid.

I lost count shortly after one hundred. After I told her we needed the horns off the jack staff . . .

After, she started trembling, and her knuckles turned as white as the linens she gripped. "Why didn't you tell me about the curse?" she whispered. "If we could all die from it—"

"Joseph just figured it out." I pushed off the floor, slid my arm around her shoulders, and pulled her close. "And I didn't tell you about Joseph because I thought you might feel the same way as your pa—that you wouldn't trust him. But I should have told you. It wasn't right for me to keep it secret."

"I'm not mad, Danny." She inhaled deeply, her chest expanding. "But I assume you came in here for something more than just confessing your sins."

I cringed and drew back to grip her biceps. "I need your help, Cass. We need you to distract your pa—and fast. He's got to be out of the pilothouse long enough for Jie to get the horns off the jack staff."

"Without a ladder?" Her eyes grew large. "How can the boy manage—"

My hand shot up. "Trust me. He can do it. But . . . can you help?"

"Of course I can." She slid off the covers, and her stockinged feet hit the floor. "But who will steer the *Queen*?"

"You."

“Ah.” She scooted off the bed and strode to her boots. As she stuffed her feet in without bothering to lace them up, she asked, “And what do I tell Father?”

I pushed off the bed. “Tell him the command bells are stuck. Remember that time outside Memphis when the bells weren’t working? He stormed down to the engine room himself.”

Cassidy’s face scrunched up, unsure. “I don’t know.” She moved to the door and cracked it. “He’ll know the bells aren’t broken since the paddles will be working according to what he orders, and—”

“CASSIDY!” The captain’s voice thundered from above.

In the dim room we stared at each other, unmoving.

Then Cochran’s voice roared out again. “Cassidy, come here! The bells aren’t working!”

Cass gasped, and her mouth bobbed open and closed. “Did you do something, Danny?”

“No,” I said quickly. “This has nothing to do with me! But go! It’ll work just fine.”

“Right.” She nodded decisively, and my heart swelled. To see her with her jaw set like that—to see the way she carried herself purposefully through the door . . .

It was no wonder she had tamed the Mississippi.

And it was no wonder I was in love with her.

After her cabin door had swung shut and her drumming footsteps were out of earshot, I crept to the window and peeked behind the curtain. Eight long, tight breaths later, Cochran’s broad form stomped by and swooped down the stairs. Once his head vanished I counted to ten—enough time to get him too far ahead to see me—and then squeezed out the door. With my head constantly darting left and right I surged over the Texas and down to the Hurricane Deck.

But as I raced to the next set of stairs, a flicker of movement at the front of the boat caught my eye. A body at the middle of the jack staff. My stomach hitched. Where was Cochran? If he was still stomping in the same direction as me, he could see Jie too. . . .

Two heavy heartbeats thumped past. I didn’t move. But then Jie reached the top of the pole, and I realized that me standing still and holding my breath like a Nancy wasn’t going to change a damned thing.

I sprang into a run. Once we had the horns, I needed to get Joseph and Jie out of sight—stowed away somewhere safe and private to deal with the lodestone curse.

I bounded off the final steps and onto the Passenger Deck, my breaths coming in shallow and fast. Ghosts swooped and snarled, but I skittered left, right, left,

and soon reached the main stairwell.

It was then, just as my feet hammered down the last set of stairs and the Main Deck opened up before me, that Cassidy's voice screamed out, "Depth! Barnes, I need a depth!"

I jolted, almost tripping down the remaining steps.

"Depth!" Cassidy shouted again, her voice now shrill. Panicked.

Why wasn't the first mate answering?

For that matter, where was the first mate? I jumped off the last steps and aimed right, toward the edge of the Main Deck where the old man should be. . . .

But he wasn't.

I skittered to a stop, my arms flying out to keep my balance. Then I twisted around, cupped my hands over my mouth, and hollered, "Cass! Barnes ain't here!"

For several moments the only sounds were the beating paddles and thrumming engine. Then Cassidy's voice shrieked out, "Get me a depth, Danny!"

A quick scan of the first mate's station showed his lead line was gone, so I swiveled around and dove toward the hallway behind the stairs . . . to a series of hooks where the extra lead lines should have been. They weren't.

"Hey!" said a girl's voice. "We're over here!"

I flung a sideways glance, caught sight of Joseph and Jie hovering beside the clerk's office, but all I could do was nod at them and then charge back onto the Main Deck.

"Cassidy!" I yelled up. "Full stop! Full stop! Now!"

Jie and Joseph rushed out behind me. "Where's the first mate?" I asked them. "The man hollering depths—have you seen him?"

Jie shook her head. "He wasn't here when I climbed down. The horns weren't there either," Jie added softly.

That stopped my shouting. "What?" I rounded on her. "Not there?"

"There's only one set up there." Jie lifted her hands defensively. "And it said Memphis on it."

"Someone must have taken them down recently," Joseph said. "Jie claims the wood is damaged."

She nodded. "Maybe someone got to 'em before the race started."

"Danny!" Cass's voice ripped into my brain. "I need a depth!"

"The lead line ain't here!" I bellowed back. "You have to call for a full stop, Cass! Full stop!" My gaze dropped down to the paddles, waiting for a slow in their rhythmic beat. If Cassidy didn't know the depth and the boat ran aground at full steam . . . it would rip a hole in the *Queen's* hull that would sink us in minutes.

Worse, it would jostle the boilers, and jostled boilers were a guaranteed

explosion.

“Full stop!” I roared, and this time she roared back, “I’m trying! Murry ain’t responding!”

Black fear uncoiled in my chest. The command bells were broken—Cochran had said that. . . .

But *why* were they broken?

My eyes locked on Joseph. On Jie. We were going to die, and they saw it in my eyes.

As one, we burst into a sprint for the engine room. Behind the main stairwell, past the blacksmith, and finally into the electric-lit engine room.

But what met my eyes was far, far worse than I could have imagined. Sprawled just inside the doorway, blood seeping from the front of his head, was Second Engineer Schultz. I pulled up short, spinning my arms to keep from falling on him—and then I caught sight of Barnes, also in an unconscious heap a few paces away.

There was no sign of Murry. Or of Captain Cochran.

“Are they alive?” Joseph asked. He didn’t wait for an answer before crouching to check Schultz’s pulse.

And my attention whipped to the far greater emergency at hand: the paddles. Both pistons had clubs lodged in them—the valves were completely open and steam shrieked into the engine. But worse, the clubs were wedged twice as far as they were ever supposed to go—too far to be pulled back out. If the steam didn’t lessen, we could never slow the ship down.

I twisted toward Jie a few steps away. “Stop the firemen,” I ordered. “No more coal on the fires—none!”

Nodding once, she rocketed from the room. I jumped over Barnes, Schultz, and the kneeling Joseph, and scrambled for the speaking tube. I yanked desperately at the pilothouse bell. “Murry’s gone,” I screamed into the tube. “Schultz and Barnes are knocked out, and we got two engines jammed at full steam.”

I pushed my ear to the tube, and when Cassidy’s voice slid down, my heart stopped.

“Then God save us all,” she said.

A half breath later, the whistle screeched through the night, stabbing over the engines and shaking through the speaking tube. It would alert everyone on board to the emergency.

Then Cass was back on the tube. “Are Schultz and Barnes all right? And where’s my father?”

I glanced at the prostrate men. Joseph was applying pressure to Schultz’s head wound, meaning the engineer must still be alive, and Barnes’s chest moved

steadily.

“You’re pa ain’t here,” I told Cass. “Schultz and Barnes will survive, but they can’t help me unjam the pistons.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said.

“I’ll be too slow if I fix the paddles alone,” I argued. “But if someone could help me—”

“Danny,” she snapped. “It doesn’t matter. We’re coming up on Devil’s Isle, and I can see from here that the water’s low.”

My eyes clenched shut. Devil’s Isle. A vicious sandbar that ran more boats aground than any other bar in the Mississippi. Even if the river wasn’t low, it would take constantly changing speeds, constantly shifting directions, and constant maneuvering to get around that bar.

And we couldn’t maneuver if the ship was stuck in full steam ahead.

“How close?” I asked, my voice pinched.

“Less than half a mile,” she said. “Even if the furnaces aren’t fed and we release the extra steam, the ship can’t stop in that little a time. Not without the paddles in reverse. There’s only one thing to do, Danny, and that’s get everyone off the ship. Now.”

For three pounding heartbeats I didn’t answer. There was really nothing I could say.

Because of course we couldn’t get everyone off the ship and Cass knew that. The roustabouts had cleared away all the excess weight—including lifeboats.

A ghost flickered in front of me, rasping in the voices of my past, but for once I was too distracted to care.

“Cass,” I started. But then Jie’s voice exploded in the engine room: “The horns!”

I flinched, my body snapping around.

“The engineer has them!” Jie cried. “I saw him up on the Texas.”

Joseph pushed up from his crouch beside Schultz. “You are certain?”

“Yeah.” She nodded quickly. “Big man with white hair and coveralls like his.” She pointed at Schultz. “He was heading toward the pilothouse.”

That was when it all locked into place—when I suddenly knew who had cursed the horns. The answer had been staring me in the face all along. There was only one man on this boat who would benefit from a haunting on the *Sadie Queen*. Who had a real, vicious reason to hate the captain. A man who wouldn’t care about passengers but would want revenge.

“Murry,” I said roughly. “He’s behind this. He’s locked us full steam into Devil’s Isle. He knows we can’t escape, and that’s exactly what he wants.” I rolled my head back, my throat tightening until I could barely breathe.

“You must pay,” the ghost whispered, still floating beside me. Its frozen breath sent ice down the side of my face. “You killed me, and now you will die.”

“If the engineer has the horns,” Joseph said, coming up beside me and staring at the ghost, “then we can only assume the horns do possess the curse and that he intends to cast it soon.”

I didn’t react. I found my body had slipped into a place of cool resignation and it had no desire to move. The inescapable weight of the situation was heavy. We would die no matter what.

The ghost was right, and I deserved this.

Jie, however, did move. She stomped across the room and planted herself in front of Joseph. “How do we stop the curse? There’s got to be something we can do, yeah? We aren’t dead yet.”

*Aren’t dead yet. Something we can do.* The words kicked around in my skull, overpowering the dead man’s endless whispers of guilt and retribution.

And then I blinked. Jie was right. As long as I was still alive, as long as breath burned in my chest and my fingers could curl into fists, then there was always something to be done.

I tipped up my chin. “You’re right, Jie. There is somethin’ we can do: get the horns and stop the paddles.”

Joseph nodded, his expression stiff. Severe. And absolutely unafraid. “I will get the lodestone and stop this curse.”

“I’ll help,” Jie said.

I swung my head toward the pistons. Toward the club. “And I’ll get these paddles stopped. Before it’s too late.”

Without another word we split up. Joseph and Jie to the stairs and me to the blacksmith cabin. I spotted what I needed on the wall, an ax that was rusted but still sharp. I hauled it off, pleased by the weight of it. It was comforting. And capable of doing just the amount of damage I needed. I loped back toward the engine room—only to instantly stop.

The electric lights were flickering. Then they started dimming. Fear swelled big and heavy in my throat.

But it was the apparition in my path that almost turned my bowels to water. A spirit I had seen three months before. Her exposed skull still shone. Her scorched fingers still flexed—clawing for me.

“Blood,” she rattled, moving toward me. “I will have your blood.”

The air crackled with cold and static. The hair on my arms rose. My ears popped.

Then the spirit spoke in my mother’s voice, “You left me to die, Danny. You will pay.” A stench invaded my nose, coated my tongue. It was a pungent, dank

smell that stung my eyes, that made me think of dirt and inescapable death.

This was the smell of the Dead. Of spirits returned.

Of vengeance unquenched.

This was the stink of suffering. “You left me to die, Danny.”

I nodded numbly—I had left her. Once Ma had hacked her last, blood-spraying cough, I had kissed her forehead and left her dead body lying in the alleyway we called home. Her blood had covered my hands, my shirt, my soul.

And now she wanted payment for leaving her—

The electric lights flickered again, jerking me back to the present. For a moment the apparition seemed to grow solid. To grow into real bone and real blood.

But then a surge of power slammed into me. The lamps exploded. Glass sprayed.

And an inaudible scream burned into my brain.

*Blood everywhere!*

The curse had cast. With the lights out I couldn’t see—but I didn’t need to. Somehow I knew the ghosts were solid now. And I knew this ghost wanted my blood.

*Die*, she shrieked in my brain, no semblance of my mother’s voice left. Just this ghost’s own personal rage.

Ice stabbed my neck. I screamed and swung my ax like a baseball bat. The cold pierced deeper, but then I used my momentum to wrench from the ghost’s grasp. My blood poured down my neck. I felt her claws reach for me once more. . . .

But I dropped to the floor and rolled, the ax clutched to my chest. Then I was back on my feet and sprinting toward the engine room.

Moonlight shone on the machines as I skittered through the door—careful to avoid Schultz and Barnes. With a single kick and a desperate prayer I shut the door before the ghost could rush through.

It seemed to stop her, for though the ghost’s screams grew louder in my mind, her form didn’t appear. But how long would this work?

“Mr. Sheridan.”

I whirled around, hefting the ax high. But it was only Kent Lang. He stood in the middle of the room, his eyes bulging. Sweat matted his curls to his forehead, and he looked as if he might piss himself at any second.

“What . . . what’s happening?” Lang asked in a rough voice. “It’s as if hell has broken loose.”

“Because it has.” I lowered the ax and staggered toward him. “All the apparitions—they’re real now. They have forms. They can kill us.”

“I . . . I know.” Lang gestured to his forehead, and I realized it wasn’t sweat that matted the man’s hair. It was blood. “Miss Cochran sent me here,” Lang continued, “to help in any way I can.”

“I’m not sure there’s much you can do.”

Lang hesitated, clearly at a loss. “I . . . But what are you doing? Surely I can help.”

I crossed toward the larboard engine and pointed. “You see that wood stuck beneath that lever? It’s holding the steam valve open.”

Lang nodded.

“I’m about to take this ax and beat that club to pieces. Every time the arm swings up, I’ll move in. Then I’ll dive back out before it swings down and breaks my neck.”

Lang’s mouth bobbed open and closed. His Adam’s apple trembled, and I was all set to dismiss him—there was work to be done.

But then he said, “Let me do it.”

“Huh?” I grunted.

“I said,” Lang pushed out his jaw, “let me do it. I can break out that club and you can go where you’re needed.”

“I don’t think that’s a—”

“Let me,” he snapped. He was a man who was not used to being disobeyed. “I know how I look to you, Mr. Sheridan. I’m some rich fellow with no grit. And I cannot lie, I’m scared to death. But I am not useless. I can help. You just have to give me that ax and trust me.”

I eyed the other man, a strange respect unfurling in my chest. I kept judging him by his looks—pretty and soft—instead of his actions. He had dominated Cochran up in the captain’s suite, so why couldn’t he dominate the engine too? It *was* something the other man could do, and I was needed elsewhere.

So I inhaled until my lungs pressed against my ribs, then I made a decision. “All right. Take this.” I thrust the ax into his hands. Then I grabbed his shirt and yanked him close. “You gotta be fast, Mr. Lang. If that arm hits you, it’ll kill you.”

He swallowed. But he didn’t flinch. And he didn’t turn away. “I understand.”

“Good.” I gave him a final once-over. Then I pointed at a tall brass lever. “When you get the wood cleared away, you hit that. It’ll shift this paddle into reverse and stop the boat. I’ll feel it when we stop, and then I’ll come get the *Queen* where she needs to be.”

Lang nodded. “Be careful.”

“Same to you.” I gave the other man a tight smile. Then I added, “And I’ll see you soon. Real soon.”



# CHAPTER NINE



*When I scrambled onto the Main Deck, I came face to face with a battleground. Spirits swooped and grabbed, making streaks of black across my vision. Firemen ran, screaming, swinging at opponents they couldn't possibly beat.*

Over the panicked cries and constant shrieks for blood, over the relentless thump of the paddles and the roar of fires that still blazed too bright, I heard a new sound. Loud cracks like lightning came from overhead. From the saloon.

Cass—I needed to get to her. If Murry had been on the Texas with the horns, he might have been headed toward the pilothouse. . . .

But what could I do against Murry? *Joseph*, my brain nudged. *You need to find Joseph first.*

A spirit—pure black and stinking of ancient, dank grave dirt—screeched at me. I ducked but not fast enough. Its icy fingers sliced into my scalp; my blood sprayed the deck.

I shoved the pain aside, instantly back on my feet and pumping my legs toward the main stairwell. As I skittered around the banister, I caught a glimpse of Devil's Isle on the horizon. The sandbar was high—higher and wider than it should have been, thanks to a summer dry spell. And approaching much too fast.

*Come on, Lang. We're running out of time.*

I leaped up the stairs, two at a time, then hit the boiler deck sprinting. Spirits lurched for me, their arms of rotted evil somehow growing longer as they clawed for me.

More stabbing pain—in my shoulder, in my back—and more blood, yet on I ran. The popping electricity grew louder, washing me in waves of static as I raced for the next set of stairs.

But then I skidded to a stop. A spirit blocked the steps. A spirit I knew, even if she was just a gaping mass of energy now. The targeted hunger in her screams had been there ever since I'd first seen her in the boiler.

She wanted my blood.

There was no way around her. In a move too fast to see she left the stairs and slammed into me. I flew backward, hitting the deck—hard. My head bounced

against the wood; my vision went black.

Then her talons were in my neck, the cold piercing my skin.

A howl erupted from my throat. I kicked. I punched. I tried to roll. But it was useless. Where my hands grabbed, she slithered away. Where my foot rammed, she buried it in brutal cold.

And where her fingers squeezed, my neck ripped slowly apart. She wasn't strangling me; she was trying to slit my throat. Each putrid finger seared through my flesh. Slowly. Cruelly. Reveling in the pain exploding through me.

I roared louder.

*Blood.* The word ripped through my mind. Behind my eyeballs. Blood, everywhere.

And there was. My blood wept down the back of my neck. I fought harder, punching and wrestling and not caring how much the cold and stench scalded.

My eyes locked on hers. Pinpricks of yellow flame filled with more pain—more rage—than I had ever known.

And somehow I knew that if I died like this, I would become just like her. Angry. Vengeful.

“No!” I roared. “No!”

*Crack!* Blue light and scorching heat sizzled over her. My eyes squeezed shut. This was it. This was the end.

But then the heat snapped away. The burning light broke off. And the ghost was writhing off me. Away.

My eyes fluttered open. My vision swam as Jie's face appeared over mine. “You all right? Mr. Boyer fought that ghost off you.”

“No,” I groaned. “I'm not all right.”

“Well, get up anyway.” Her arms slid beneath my back, and with surprising strength, she hefted me to my knees. Joseph leaned against the wall nearby, his body slouched and his hands on his knees.

“Mr. Boyer?”

“He's exhausted,” Jie said. “Already. The saloon is just . . .” She shivered.

I shoved fully upright. My uniform was striped with blood, but my injuries would have to wait. Besides, I could still breathe and my fingers could still curl into fists. I couldn't stop now.

“Mr. Boyer.” I stepped in front of Joseph. “You can't stop all these ghosts.”

Joseph's head lifted. He gave a heavy, clenching blink and nodded. “*Non.* If I could only get the lodestone, then I could destroy it. That would . . .” He drew in a ragged breath and straightened. “That would stop the ghosts. Blast them to oblivion all at once.”

I twisted to Jie. “Have you seen the horns?”

Her head shook once. “We didn’t get that far— Hey!” She dove past me. Her arms flew around Joseph. “I told you not to stand without my—” Her words broke off. Joseph’s arms had risen. A blue glow collected around his flexed fingers.

Then his hands flung forward. Electricity erupted from his fingertips. It crackled over the deck, two bolts of lightning that rammed a mass of black oozing down the stairs.

Lines of light sizzled over the spirits, showing one, two—I lost count. There were so many ghosts.

The light snapped off. The air shook with the sound and the heat.

And Joseph toppled forward. But Jie’s grip was true; she kept him from collapsing. I lunged to her side—awe pulsing through my skull at this man’s ability—and together we held Joseph upright.

“Mr. Boyer,” Jie snapped. “You gotta stop. Save your energy for the horns.”

“I cannot,” Joseph mumbled. “Not when lives . . . might . . . be . . .” His words died on his tongue as his eyes rolled back into his head.

I cursed. Joseph was fading too quickly—the man needed more power.

He needed raw electricity.

And with that thought I knew exactly what to do. “Come on. We’re takin’ him downstairs.”

Reaching the hallway to the engine room proved harder than I expected. Ghosts and firemen were everywhere. Joseph had at least regained his feet by the time we reached the main stairwell, but Jie had to slap the man—three times—to keep him from using his power.

And when we passed the firemen, hurt and fighting a foe they couldn’t beat, I stopped and bellowed my rage at the ghosts. But as I lunged for them, Jie’s arms slung around me, her voice howling in my ear to stay on track.

We reached the Main Deck’s darkened hallway at last, and I towed Joseph and Jie to the first exploded lamp. While Jie situated Joseph in a half-lean, half-crouch, I wrapped my fist in my sleeve.

Then I grabbed the lamp and braced myself with a foot against the wall. Pain lanced up my arm, into my chest. Blood flecked on my shirt. I yanked again.

“What’re you trying to do?” Jie yelled, suddenly beside me.

“Get.” Yank. “The lamp.” Yank. “Off.”

“Move,” she snarled. I skittered back, just in time to see her crouch low and spring directly up. Her arm crooked midair, and then her elbow crashed into the lamp.

The sconce fell from the wall, sparks flew, and Jie’s feet hit the ground. She threw me a glare. “Next time just ask.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, already moving to the now-empty expanse. Two wires

jutted from a hole, and their tips sparkled with electricity. My hand still wrapped, I grabbed the sparking wires and tugged them out.

Joseph lifted, and understanding flashing in his eyes. “Raw electricity.”

“Raw electricity,” I confirmed. “And you’re gonna use it. But you have to stay here. Jie and I will get the horns, bring them to you, and then you—”

Joseph’s hand clamped on the wires, cutting me off. The Spirit-Hunter’s eyes blazed blue. His hand shot up. Lightning boomed from his fingertips, crashing into another tangle of spirits. Electricity hissed and burned so bright that I had to squint to see.

Then it vanished—the electricity, the ghosts, the thunder.

Jie swore under her breath, her eyes popping from her head. This man had a skill I had never even known was possible. . . .

“Well, Mr. Sheridan,” Joseph said, a fresh vigor in his voice, “your theory regarding raw electricity holds true. Now, if you could please bring me the lodestone.” The edges of his lips twitched into an almost cruel smile. “I have a curse and shipload of spirits to hunt.”

After exchanging a glance, Jie and I set off. Back through the carnage, back through the spirits.

We reached the Main Deck in seconds. I craned my neck as we ran for the next set of stairs, trying to see inside the pilothouse. But I could make out nothing at this angle.

“The next floor is bad!” Jie shouted, loping onto the first step. “We gotta run, yeah? Fast.”

“I am runnin’ fast!” I yelled. My pulse banged in time to my feet—*bam, bam, bam* up the steps.

“Not fast enough!” Jie shrieked. “Drop!”

I toppled forward. My hands slammed onto the steps right before my teeth hit—and right before a tornado roared overhead, screeching for blood.

Then we were back on our feet. We barreled up the final steps and hit the Passenger Deck.

But my legs almost gave out. Everywhere I looked, I saw black nothingness. My fingers were numb, my nose overwhelmed by rotting soil, and my brain—the hunger for blood hammered in further with each scream. It lodged in my chest. Awakened a craving of my own—for blood and vengeance against everyone who’d ever crossed me.

Jie’s braid whipped ahead of me, diving and flowing. Back and forth, over and under, she eluded spirits like a snake.

I didn’t know how she did it. Every time I spun aside to avoid a ghost, I careened into another. My flesh ripped open, my ears exploded with pressure, and

I wanted to hurt someone—I didn't care who.

But then Jie's braid flicked ahead of me, higher than before. She had reached the stairs.

I tumbled onto the first steps, horrified by the blood that splattered across the wood. My blood.

"Come on!" Jie's voice spiked through my brain—stronger than the ghost cries for blood. Stronger than my hunger for vengeance.

I pushed myself up, fighting the claws that sliced into my legs and tried to hold me down. Then hands—warm, human hands—clamped on my wrists. My gaze ripped up and met Jie's eyes. She yanked. I followed.

Up we went, picking up speed until I didn't need Jie anymore. Until the pain from my cuts had faded into an annoying hum at the back of my mind.

We reached the Texas Deck. I staggered after Jie, my eyes instantly leaping to the pilothouse now that I was finally close enough to see inside.

There were three shadows. The lithe one at the wheel was Cassidy—thank God she was still alive, still all right. The broad man beside her had to be Captain Cochran . . . and the other man—the one beside an open window—was Murry.

"He has . . . a pistol." Jie panted, squinting. "I can see the shape of it pointed at the others, so we can't just run up there."

"You're . . . right." My breath sawed in and out. "But look at the open window."

"Yeah?"

"If I go up alone, I can get the horns. Toss them out to you." I lifted my eyebrows. "Can you get them to Joseph?"

"Of course I can," she snapped. "Just don't get shot, yeah?"

"I've taken enough damage for one night," I wheezed. "Now go wait below the window until you see the . . ." My voice faded off. A ghost had joined us on the Texas. A ghost that really wanted my blood.

*You left your mother to die!* she screeched directly into the darkest corners of my brain. *You left her, and you will pay!*

"No." My fists clenched. "You didn't know my mother—you have no idea what happened, and I sure as hell didn't leave her—" Fury shattered through my skull, and a scream burst from my throat.

But with that scream came a beautiful stroke of clarity. A deadly idea that might just work.

*Please, Lang,* I prayed. Get that paddle in reverse. I burst into a sprint, away from Jie and away from the ghost. Toward the boat's bow and the stairs to the pilothouse. Pain stabbed through my head—each step echoing with one word: blood. The ghost was giving chase.

And that was what I wanted.

I hit the end of the cabins. My hand lashed out, grasping the edge of the building, and my momentum carried me around the corner. A storm of ice hurtled past. Then I was at the stairwell and bounding up, up, up, my knees crunching from the impact. “Look out!” I roared. “Cassidy, duck!”

I charged into the pilothouse and dove for Cass. My arms snapped around her waist, and I yanked her to the floor.

The ghost erupted in the room.

And as I’d hoped, Murry dropped the pistol. It clattered to the floor—almost within reach of my fingertips. I grabbed for it. The captain did too.

Then the ghost flew at me.

“Move!” I yelled at the captain.

But the captain didn’t move—not fast enough anyway. The ghost slammed into him. Cochran flew up, off his feet, and his head crashed into the glass. The window splintered, cracking dangerously outward, but did not break.

Then the captain slumped to the floor, blood spreading from his head like a halo.

“Father!” Cassidy struggled to get up, but I shoved her back. The ghost wasn’t finished. It cycloned around, knowing it had missed me.

But then Murry stepped in front of me and thrust out the horns—stabbed them at the ghost. “Stop.”

The ghost froze in midair. For several breathless moments I didn’t move. I simply gaped at the spirit. My mind reeled, still stuck in the panic of flight. In the blood that ran from the captain’s head.

Then Murry snatched the gun off the floor and rounded on me. “You’re a goddamned idiot, Striker. If you hadn’t come up here, I could’ve ended this without violence. We could’ve all reached Natchez happy.”

“Without violence?” Cass cried. “We’re on a collision course with Devil’s Isle and ghosts are killing us!”

Murry didn’t answer. He cocked the pistol with a soft *click* and aimed it at the captain’s head. “I know you’re awake. Open your eyes, Cap’n.”

Cochran’s eyelids snapped up. “Coward,” he snarled. “You’re just an old, yellow-bellied coward.”

“Coward?” The scars around Murry’s face stretched taut, his eyes twitching with rage and the horns shaking in his left hand. “You’re the coward—you’re the one who did this to me. You ruined my sight forever!”

“So why did you stay?” Cochran’s lips spread in a nasty grin, his teeth covered in blood. “You could have run off with your tail between your legs, but you chose to st—”

“And miss seein’ you suffer?” Murry barked a harsh laugh. “Not a chance in hell. You’re finally getting what you deserve.”

“But why hurt the *Queen*?” Cassidy asked, her words clipped and furious. “Why destroy your own life along with—”

“My life was destroyed five years ago.” Murry sneered at her. “All those ‘glory days’ everyone praised Cochran for—those were thanks to me.” He pounded his chest. “I’m the engineer. I work twice as hard as him. I’m the one who gets the *Queen* moving, but no one ever thinks of me, do they?” He wrenched his face toward Cochran. “I got you the fame you wanted by always keepin’ that engine strong, and how did you repay me? By burning off my face. Well, I’ll be damned if I let you get your glory days back—”

“He won’t.” My words were hoarse, but I lifted my voice, saying, “The *Queen* is leavin’ the river as soon as this race ends.”

“What?” Murry growled. His blind eyes darted to me.

“Once we hit Natchez,” I said, thrusting out my jaw, “the Lang Company is shutting us down and they’re firin’ Cochran. It doesn’t matter what you do—or don’t do—to us.”

“Liar,” Captain Cochran spat. Blood flecked from his mouth. “You’re a liar, Striker.”

“You can go ask Mr. Lang yourself. He’s promotin’ me”—I tapped my chest—“and firing you.”

“Is this true?” Cass whispered beside me. Her fingers latched on to my arm. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because he’s a liar!” Cochran roared, drawing in his legs and pushing upright. “He’s a murderer too. A fugitive with a big reward on his head that I intend to—”

*Crack!*

The pistol fired. Blood blossomed on Cochran’s shoulder. His jaw fell open. He staggered back and hit the floor once more.

Cassidy screamed. “Father!” She dived toward him, and I wrenched my gaze to Murry—to the barrel of the gun, still smoking.

But then the boat jolted. Everyone toppled sideways, and the *Queen* tipped dangerously left.

Lang had kicked the paddle in reverse. This was the moment I’d been praying for.

I attacked. My fist smashed into Murry’s nose, and in the same movement my left hand knocked the pistol from his grasp. It clattered to the floor, and I wrenched the horns from his other hand. Then I spun, flung my arm out, and let the horns loose. “Jie!”

The gilded antlers dropped from sight.

“Stupid,” Murry shrieked beside me. “Stupid, stupid, Striker! You just killed us all.” Before I could round on him, he had reached the stairs and was barreling down. I flung a glance at Cassidy, but she was at her father’s side, applying pressure to his shoulder.

Cochran would be fine. So would she.

Which meant I could go after Murry.

In a burst of power I jumped down the stairs—three at a time—until I hit the Texas Deck. Murry wasn’t in sight, but neither was Jie. I could only guess she’d gone down and Murry had followed. . . .

So down I went too. Exactly the same way I’d come up but twice as fast. Half the spirits were frozen in place—just like the ghost in the pilothouse. Long-armed shadows trapped in time and sizzling with electricity. All my hairs stood on end as I hurtled past.

But half the ghosts weren’t frozen—and they still streaked for me, screaming for blood. I skittered and twisted and ducked. Fresh slices opened up along my scalp, my back, but I barely felt them. I just had to keep Murry from getting the horns back.

As I raced down the final stairs, I caught sight of Devil’s Isle—it wasn’t moving. We weren’t moving. The paddles still thumped at full speed, but Lang had pulled through and gotten that one paddle into reverse.

“No!” Murry’s voice ripped out below me. “Give it back!”

I jumped off the final step and skidded behind the stairs, into the hallway by the engine room. . . . Into Joseph’s new domain.

The young Creole stood exactly where I’d left him, the exposed wires sparkling in his open hand. Jie waited beside him, her fists up and her stance low.

Murry, his back to me, strode toward them. With his arms outstretched and clawing like the ghosts, he shouted, “You’ll kill us all! Drop it—give it back.”

Joseph’s eyebrows lifted ever so slightly. “I will kill us all?”

With a roar Murry surged at Joseph—and I surged at Murry. My hands flew wide as I launched myself onto his back. Then I gripped his neck, and I didn’t let go.

He bucked and jerked, screaming at me. Screaming at Joseph. I tried to kick at the back of his knees. Tried to ram his kidneys and his spine, but it took everything I had to hang on. Murry was fueled by an unnatural strength, a frantic need to survive.

But then light flared. It burned from Joseph’s eyes—lighting his skull up like a jack-o’-lantern.

“Move!” Jie shrieked. “Now!”



I released Murry—flung myself off and away as fast as I could. Then I flattened myself against the wall.

And just in time. Electricity exploded down the hall, slicing through the spot I'd just abandoned. Slicing over Murry like a thousand spiderwebs of light. It was as if he was locked in place—like the ghosts. Electricity thundered over him, as loud as it was bright, and he didn't move. Didn't blink.

And as the electricity streamed past, the weight of it filled my head and crushed my skull. The thunderous volume. The crackling heat. It collapsed my lungs. Made me feel like a thousand stones were slowly grinding me apart.

So heavy. So loud. So hot.

I strained to see the Creole. He glowed brighter than Murry. Brighter than the sun . . . Brighter than everything except the horns. I could barely breathe, and somehow looking at Joseph . . . at the horns—that only made it worse. Made the burn and the weight almost unbearable.

But then the heat pulled back. It started pulsing in waves, less and less with each ragged heartbeat.

Until as quickly as it had erupted, the light stopped. The thunder vanished. All that remained was a vibration in the air. An echo in my brain. And, of course, my gasping lungs.

I was alive. Albeit, just barely.

I forced my eyes to crack open—and saw Joseph's knees buckle. He swayed forward. "Mr. Boyer!" I shoved off the wall, grabbing for him.

Jie was faster. She jumped from her crouch nearby, her arms swooping beneath him, and caught him by the stomach. I reached her side, and together, we eased the man onto his back. He was breathing.

And smiling. "That," he rasped, his eyes fluttering briefly open, "went better than I had expected."

# CHAPTER TEN



*Murry was dead. His scorched eyes stared vacantly at* the ceiling. His hair was burned, his fingertips charred. As Joseph, Jie, and I stood around him, staring down, I felt like I ought to be sad . . . or at least regretful of how things had gone.

But the only thing I felt was relief that the night was over. Relief and a bone-deep exhaustion.

At last Joseph heaved a sigh and rubbed his forehead. “His soul must have been bound to the curse. When I banished the lodestone’s power, I banished his as well. It is a shame . . . and yet those who dabble in black magic will always meet a tragic end. It is a lesson I learned too late.” His eyes met mine and then Jie’s. “Necromancy and black magic will always end in death. Remember that. Now, come. Let us tend the wounded and clean up as best we can.”

The three of us made it our duty to check on each and every deckhand and fireman. So many injured men sprawled across the decks. Most of them had suffered only minor injuries—they were strong, after all—but a few were severely hurt.

And two were dead.

The *Abby Adams* caught up to us before I had even finished wrapping the wounds of the fifth man. Cassidy blew the whistle and hailed the *Adams* to our side.

Then began the long process of explaining what had happened, of moving our injured to the *Adams*’s cabins (that actually had furniture). Of borrowing a lead line. And of eventually waving the *Adams* onward so she could cross the finish line first.

Oh, and of moving Cochran to the *Adams* as well. Fortunately he was unconscious and couldn’t put up a fight. He would make it to Natchez—but not if he had to stay behind on the slow-moving *Queen*.

Cassidy was white-faced, her mouth set in a grim line, as she helped carry him onto the *Adams*. I tried to speak to her . . . but she only snapped at me to get to the engine and “get the steamer moving again.”

I did as she ordered, and with a low heart and weary body, I made my way to the engine room. Where I found Kent Lang still at his post. The young man was

soaked through with sweat, and several new slashes bled across his chest. Most impressive of all, though, was that he'd fallen asleep.

I shambled over and nudged him with my toe. Lang's eyes snapped wide. He tensed, clearly expecting death. But then awareness sagged through him. "Thank God," he breathed. "It's you—and you're still alive."

"I'm still alive." I sank to the floor beside him, sighing at the sheer pleasure of getting off my feet. Then I explained what had happened—and what we had to do now: get the *Queen* moving. Get her all the way to Natchez.

Lang huffed out a breath, but he didn't argue. He simply attempted—somewhat pathetically—to drag himself to his feet. "I swear, Mr. Sheridan"—he gave a deep wince—"I never knew these muscles existed in my body. Now I not only know they're there, I know that I hate them."

"Consider it a life lesson, Mr. Lang." I hauled myself up and extended my hand. "A chance to get to really know what goes on in your fleet."

And at that Lang laughed. A full, rolling belly laugh that helped carry him upright. "You are absolutely correct, Mr. Sheridan."

Before he could release my hand, though, I strengthened my grip and forced him to meet my gaze. "The *Sadie Queen* gets to stay on the Mississippi now. Right?"

His eyes flickered away from mine, and I could see the gears spinning in his head as he planned logistics and counted money. . . . But then he gave a slow nod. "If the ghosts are truly gone—"

"They are."

"—then I see no reason to end the *Queen*'s career just yet." He cast me a tired smile and pulled his hand free. "I'll have to find a new captain, of course, but there are several in our fleet that will do."

I stiffened. "New captain?"

"When I said Cochran would be fired as soon as we hit Natchez, I meant it." Lang's lips twisted down. "As the new president, I will not stand for behavior like his, and I have to make that clear from the start."

"But he was just shot. A bullet got him right here." I poked Lang in the shoulder with more force than I intended. The man winced, but that just fueled my words further. "That doesn't matter to you, does it? You're goin' to fire him, and you don't even care what the consequences are."

Lang's nostril's flared. "I am sorry Cochran was injured, Mr. Sheridan, but if you wish to make me regret my decision, I suggest you stop. The captain lost support from the Lang Company long ago."

"What about his sick daughter?" My voice roared out, louder and angrier than I wanted . . . but I couldn't seem to keep it under control. We had all fought so

hard, and for nothing. Ellis wouldn't get treatment, and Cassidy's heart would break. "You'll punish her more than you'll ever punish Cochran. But oh! What am I thinkin'?" I flung my arms wide. "You don't care about your crew or your boats or anyone but yourself, Mr. Lang. You are just like every other rich man out there. All you care about is money and publicity—"

"That," Lang snapped, shoving his face in mine, "is quite enough. You have no idea for what I do or do not care. I have plans for Cassidy Cochran—plans that will keep her sister comfortable. As soon as Miss Cochran told me about her sister, I wrote to England—to the Royal College of Surgeons. One of their doctors is the leading researcher for Hodgkin's disease. With the right amount of . . . *donations* to his research, he has agreed to travel here and treat the younger Miss Cochran."

My mouth bounced open. Royal College of Surgeons? England? Was Lang serious? "Why?" I asked, shaking my head. "Why would you do that? What's in it for you?"

"Nothing is in it for me." An offended scowl creased his forehead. "I happen to care for Miss Cassidy Cochran. If I am a lucky man, then one day she might harbor such feelings in return. And if not, then at least I know I helped a girl in need."

He had feelings for Cass? Had I that heard that right? But when I gaped at his face, I saw only a stubborn slant to his jaw.

I jumped back like he was on fire. "Are you gonna marry her?" When his expression didn't change, I reared back another step, gripping the sides of my face. "So you're bribing her feelings by helping her sister—"

"No." Lang's voice was barely a whisper, but the twitch in his nostrils and the grinding of his teeth—I knew I had crossed a line. . . . And like a punch to the throat, I choked. He did care about her.

And goddammit, I didn't know what to do with that. "Does she . . ." I gulped back nausea and dropped my hands. "Does she know how you feel?"

Lang's chin lifted. "No. Not yet. A girl like her is on the Mississippi more often than she is not. Yet that does not mean she shouldn't be courted properly. I would never buy her feelings, Mr. Sheridan. Never. And as for her father, I will pay for his medical treatment and provide him with a healthy pension. But I will not change my decision—no matter how I feel for his daughter."

I stared at him, not sure what to say. My stomach wasn't sitting right. It was moving into my chest . . . spinning into my throat. . . .

But Lang seemed to misunderstand my gawking. He gave a frustrated groan. "I am the president of a company, Mr. Sheridan. As much as I might wish for Miss Cochran's affection, I must think of my employees first. Of their safety. Or . . . am

I wrong to assume he gave you that bruise?” Lang motioned to my face—to my still-healing eye. “I may seem like a man who cares only for himself, but that could not be further from the truth. Now.” In an elegant arc he swooped down and snatched up the ax. “I believe we have an engine to fix, and if you have finished lecturing me about Captain Cochran, then I suggest we get started.”

Again, all I could manage was a stare. Because Lang was right, and I didn’t know how to handle that. I couldn’t go to Cassidy and beg her to pretend Lang wasn’t a better man. . . .

And that hurt the most—*that* made my stomach feel like lead. I couldn’t compete against Lang. He was an heir with education and poise; I was a pickpocket off the streets of Chicago. He was the president of a company; I was a fugitive with a bounty on my head. He intended to court Cassidy proper . . . and I had just taken her with no thought for what she wanted.

With a tight exhale I forced my head to rise, fall, and rise in an accepting nod. “You’re . . . right, Mr. Lang.” I swallowed and held out my hand. “We have an engine to fix, and I’m wastin’ time. Give me that ax.”

“I can manage—”

“You deserve a break,” I growled. “Plus, I feel like smashing the hell out of something.”

It took us another eight hours to navigate past Devil’s Isle and into Natchez. With most of the firemen gone it was hard to keep the furnaces burning. And hard for me to manage both engines by myself. Lang tried, but the man didn’t know a throttle from a gauge. And he sure didn’t know the command bells.

It was just as the sun reached the middle of the eastern horizon that the city landscape finally shifted from dismal black forest to a hill of bright green. Natchez’s enormous mansions and brick-front shops watched us from high atop its hill, and a brilliantly blue and cloudless sky floated overhead. The dirty wharf below was unusually packed with steamers as we approached. I could only assume they were visitors here to see the race.

The *Queen* had traveled two hundred and sixty-eight miles in twenty-two hours and fourteen minutes—a full four and a half hours behind the *Adams*. But the fanfare that met us suggested that no one cared. Spectators lined the hilltop city’s edge and the muddy wharf below, and their wild shouts and exultant music drifted out to the *Queen* the instant Natchez came in sight.

It was a complete contradiction to everything that had happened only a few hours before. It made me feel . . . heavy. At odds with the world.

Lang took his leave the instant we hit shore—he was over four hours late to his own presidential party. But before he left, he paused in the engine room door and offered me his hand. “Please accept my apology for earlier, Mr. Sheridan. I

let my temper get the best of me.” He pumped my arm once. “You were only looking out for your friend. Loyalty like that—and a concern for others—is a quality I appreciate. So, if you can move past your frustration with my decision over Captain Cochran, then please know the offer still stands for your license.” He then tipped an invisible hat at me, his goofy grin flashing briefly, and he left.

I watched him go, massaging my still-bruised eye. Sure, I could forgive Lang for firing Cochran—I could even acknowledge it was the best decision for his fleet.

But I couldn’t forgive him for loving Cass. He was a man who could give her everything she wanted—everything her sister wanted too. Even with my engineer’s license and a tidy salary, I could never afford that.

And even with a steady job I could never outrun who I was. If Cochran had caught wind of Clay Wilcox’s reward for my head, then it was only a matter of time before someone else did. That wasn’t fair to Cass. Hell, it wasn’t fair to a man like Lang either. He trusted me more than I deserved and wanted to hire me long-term—not just until my prison sentence caught up.

As I scrubbed at the engine, washing the same brass workings I had washed for the past year, I pretended that it was any other day. That everything had gone according to plan and that Cassidy would be waiting for me when I left the engine room. That we would keep on stealing kisses in the clerk’s office. Keep on braving the river as the fastest engineer and pilot on the Mississippi.

But I knew by the weight dragging at my shoulders. By the burn in my stomach. And by the growing ache in my chest—like I couldn’t get enough air. Like I would never get enough air again. Like the world was falling down around me and all I could do was watch it topple.

I knew that this would be the last time I ever cleaned an engine.

I rubbed at a grease stain—a stubborn spot that had been here since I had come on board—and the black blurred before my eyes.

God, I had been such a fool to think I could escape who I was. To ever hope I might become someone better. I wasn’t and I couldn’t. I was the same piece of shit I had been in that alleyway nine years ago. The day I left my mother’s corpse cooling and turned to a life on the streets as easily as if I’d been born to it.

I couldn’t change who I was. I couldn’t fix me or clean me like I could an engine. I had tried, hadn’t I? And I had failed.

I scratched harder at the engine—harder and harder at that grease stain—until the cuts on my neck opened up. Until new cuts cracked wide on my knuckles. Until the burn of soap dominated everything else.

But the grease never did come off. It probably never would.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



*I found Joseph and Jie away from the crowds and* fanfare. They sat on a whitewashed fence at the top of the hill, the city of Natchez before them and the wharfs at their backs.

At my approach Joseph stopped reading his book and looked up. He smiled. “Mr. Sheridan.”

“You can call me Daniel.” I hopped onto the fence beside Jie.

“And I suppose you can call me Joseph, then.” He snapped his book shut. “I have been thinking about what you said about a portable power source. There is no denying that raw electricity is effective.”

I nodded. “I’ve been thinking about it too. There’s a device called an influence machine, see? It would allow you to make a spark wherever you are. And I could, ah . . .” I scratched the back of my neck. “Well, that is to say, I could make you one.”

“That would please me immensely, Daniel. But first”—he jabbed a pointed finger in the air—“this reminds me. I believe I owe you a job.”

“A job?” Jie asked. Her heels stopped clicking on the fence and her ears seemed to perk up.

“I don’t need you to find me a job,” I said gruffly.

“Did you find a new position, then?” Joseph sounded surprised. “Already?”

“Not quite.” I rested my elbows on my knees. I was done leaning on others for help—done dragging them into my messes. “My future ain’t your problem. You did a lot of good on that boat, and it don’t feel right to ask you for anything more.”

“Ah.”

Something about the way Joseph said that word—the weight to it—made me twist toward him. “You sound . . . disappointed.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I suppose . . . that is to say, I had hoped perhaps you might wish to . . . work with me.” He gulped and sat up taller. It was the first time I’d ever seen the young man look anything but perfectly poised. It made me grin.

“Are you tryin’ to hire me?”

“*Wi*. I suppose that is precisely what I am doing.” He sighed, running a hand

over his head. Then his gaze met mine. “Your ideas about electricity are beautifully simple, yet I never thought of them. If a full-time position does not appeal to you, then perhaps I could hire you for a brief time—as a consultant.”

At that word Jie cracked her knuckles. “You could hire *me*. I can be your fighting consultant.” She threw him a hopeful look. “You wouldn’t even have to pay me. I’m fine with only room and board.”

Joseph’s eyes thinned. “You are tired of being a footman?”

She made a face. “The pay is good, but the work is dull, yeah? What you do”—she nudged Joseph with her elbow—“is exciting. And, I dunno. I felt like . . . like I was doing something right.” She bit her lip. “I know it sounds silly, but it’s true. Last night it seemed like the three of us had done something that only the three of us could do.”

At those words the dried mud on the road suddenly leaped into focus. And Jie’s words knocked around in my brain . . . before finally sliding down my spine and settling in my lungs. Something only the three of us could do. My breath hissed out. Then, without thinking, I blurted, “I’ll take the job.”

Joseph almost fell off the fence. “You will?”

“Yeah.” I set my hands on my knees and nodded slowly. “I reckon a consultant’s position might work. For a little while at least.” Until my past catches up again. “And this way, I can make you that influence machine—make sure you’ve always got raw electricity. But . . .” I angled my face toward his, my lips quirking up.

“*Wi?*”

“You have to hire her too.” I jerked my thumb at Jie. “Like she said, the three of us do well together.”

“Ah.” Joseph slid off the fence. “This seems a fair enough bargain. We did function well as a team, and I believe I can find enough funds to— Wait.” His eyes suddenly popped wide, and he rounded on Jie. “Did he call you a ‘she’?”

“Oh, uh. About that.” She jumped off the fence, her knees bending with the impact. Then she sheepishly rose, her gaze locked on her feet. “I’m not really a boy, Mr. Boyer. I just dress like one.”

Joseph gulped. “Oh my.”

“‘Oh my’ is right,” I drawled. Then I slid off the fence too. My new plans were all good and well . . . but there was still one more person I needed to speak to. One more thing that needed tending before I could head off with these Spirit-Hunters.

But Cassidy wasn’t easy to find. When I showed up at the hospital, it was to learn she’d gone to a hotel (paid for by the Langs). When I arrived at the hotel, it was to hear she had returned to the *Queen*. It was just as the sun was setting on the



Mississippi's west bank that I finally managed to find her.

She was in the pilothouse—I should've known.

*Clack-clack-clack, thwump!* The spyglass opened and closed in her hands—louder than my footsteps as I ascended the stairs into the room. *Clack-clack-clack, thwump!*

I reached the top step and had to squint to see through the sunset. It filled the pilothouse like a prism, and wind licked through an open window. When I swung my gaze right, I got a full view of Natchez. When I twisted my head left, I saw nothing but burning sun and endless green forest. A man could pretend he was king of the world up here. Pretend the gleaming steering wheel could take him anywhere he wanted to go.

*Clack-clack-clack—*

“Cass,” I said.

*Thwump!* She snapped the spyglass shut, surprise jolting through her shoulders. But she didn't look at me.

“You're . . . angry.” I crossed the small space toward her but paused a step away. “Is it because I didn't tell you about the reward—”

“It's because you didn't tell me about my father!” She whipped around, her eyes blazing. “You didn't tell me that he would lose his job. Or that the *Queen* was getting pulled off the river.”

“But now she ain't being pulled off—”

“But Father still lost his job!” Her voice screeched out, bouncing off the glass before flying from the open window. She had been letting this anger simmer all day. “You had no right to keep that from me, Danny.”

“Maybe not.” Lifting my hands, I dug my knuckles in the corners of my eyes. I had expected her displeasure. I hadn't expected her rage. “I just did what I thought was right.”

“And is that what you did when you killed that man? That factory guard in Philadelphia? What you thought was right?”

My breath wuffed out. My hands fell. “That man's death was an accident.”

“Oh? Then why does that Wilcox family want you so bad? Father told me about your secret. About your prison sentence.” *Clack-clack-clack.* “And what other secrets are you keeping from me? What else don't I know about you?”

“I only have one other secret, Cass.” I inhaled until my ribs were fit to crack. Then I let it all rush out. “I'm leaving the *Sadie Queen*. I ain't takin' Lang's offer.”

Her cheeks paled. The spyglass *thwumped* shut. “Are . . . are you joking?”

I shook my head. “After I gather my things, I'll be gone. For good.”

“Why?” she breathed, shoving the glass in her pocket and stepping toward me. Her eyes searched my face. “I don't really care about your past, Danny—I was

just surprised is all.” Her hand reached for my cheek.

I didn’t move. Not even when her calloused fingers brushed down my jaw. I just stood very still.

She flinched as if I’d slapped her. Her hand wrenched back. “You mean it. Oh God, you mean it.” She clutched her stomach. “But what about being an engineer? What about me? I thought . . . I thought we were a team. You. Me. Engineer. Pilot.” Her breath hitched, making her chest kick up. “What about . . . what about feeling something more than friendship? Did that just vanish?”

“No,” I ground out. “That’s still here. Probably always will be.”

“Then why would you go?” She stumbled back a step, toward the open window. “I need you now—more than ever, Danny. Please.” Her voice dropped to a murmur. “Please, don’t do this.”

I looked away. There were tears in her eyes, and I couldn’t watch them fall. I stared at the front of the ship. At the jack staff. At the Lang Company flag. “I’m no good for you, Cass. I told you that before, and it’s still the truth. You know it is.”

“And I told you that’s not your decision! I make that choice—”

“Kent Lang wants to court you,” I interrupted, lifting my voice over hers. I had to get this out before she started crying. Before I changed my mind. “He’ll be good for you. He can give you what you need.”

“And you don’t decide that!” she shrieked. Her body tilted toward me like a tree in a hurricane. “You have no idea what I need, Danny Sheridan. Not you, not Father, and certainly not Kent Lang.” Fists clenching, she stomped closer. “You think I care about your past? You think I care about money or position? You know I don’t. Those are just excuses for you to leave. All I care about is what I feel here.” She pounded her chest. “And what I feel here is you. You’re my other half, and I won’t let you go.”

“And that ain’t your choice.” I swallowed. “You can’t keep me here, Cass. You can’t make me stay.”

She balked. Her fists unfurled. Then faster than I could react, her hand lashed out. She slapped me.

White pain exploded on my cheek, and stars flickered before my eyes. Then she was shouting at me, and I forgot all about the pain. All about what I’d come here for.

“So you kiss me like you plan to stay forever and then you leave? I am ashamed I ever let myself believe you cared!” Her lip trembled, and she shrieked louder. “You don’t love me. I should have known better—should have seen you were just playing with me. Well, I learned my lesson, Danny—”

“Don’t.” I shook my head in warning. “Don’t you dare say I don’t love you. Not when you know it ain’t true. I kissed you because of how I felt—how I feel.

But if I stay with you, Cassidy, I will be forever hated by your father. I will be forever lookin' over my shoulder, wondering if my past is gonna bring you down too. I will be forever worried about Ellis not having the money she needs. And . . ." I drew in a ragged breath. "I will forever feel as if I'm holding you back."

"Holding me back?" she repeated, incredulous. Then she narrowed the space between us. "You don't hold me back, Danny. You push me forward. On the river—in my life. You're my engineer, and I'm your pilot. We're a team."

And just like that, what remained of my resolve crumbled. We were a team. I couldn't just walk away. I couldn't pretend this was an easy decision. I couldn't pretend I didn't care.

I did care, and I didn't want this either.

Then before my brain could switch back on—before my conscience could worm its way into the room—I gripped the sides of her face . . . and I kissed her. I pressed my lips to Cassidy's with such ferocity and such need, that I lost all sense of the world. All I could think and feel and breathe was Cassidy.

Her teeth cut into my lips. I tasted blood. I didn't care. Then her hands were behind my head, and we were kissing like we might die tomorrow. Like we were dying right now. And God, I never wanted to leave this moment. I just wanted to fall into Cassidy forever.

But then I tasted salt, and the tang worked its way into my thoughts. I touched Cassidy's cheeks; they were slick with tears.

"You're crying." I drew back. My eyes ran over her shining, flushed face.

She nodded, dazed. "So are you," she rasped.

I blinked and touched my own cheeks. She was right.

Then Cassidy's arms slid around my waist and brought me back into the moment. Brought me back to her. "I don't want this, Danny."

"Me neither." I rested my chin on her head. She was holding me so tight that it hurt. But I liked the pain—it kept my mind where it needed to be. "But leaving is the right thing to do, and . . ." I licked my lips. "I'm determined to do the right thing, Cass."

She tipped her head back, her grip releasing slightly. "I can't change your mind." She spoke it as a statement, but there was a questioning in her eyes.

"No," I said simply.

Her grip released completely. But she didn't pull away. Not yet.

"Please don't forget me." Her voice was small. Barely a whisper. "Please, Danny."

"Are you serious?" I huffed a laugh. "How could I ever forget you, Miss Cassidy? You are . . . everything. Everything I ever wanted. And you made me

more than I ever thought I could be.”

She nodded, as if satisfied by that response. “Will you write?”

It was such an ordinary question—I was grateful for that. “I’ll write,” I answered, “if you promise to write back.” I trailed my fingers down her face and then gripped her chin. “And only if you promise . . .”

“What?”

“Promise to let me know if Lang ever proposes.” I cracked a smile. A sad, painful smile. “Or if you tell him ‘no.’ I’ll come back for you.”

She sniffled and pulled away—out of my grasp. Out of my reach. “If I tell him ‘no’ now, will you stay?”

I shook my head. “He isn’t a bad guy. He might even be a good one.”

“But he isn’t you.”

My eyes winked shut at those words, and I had to focus on sucking in my next breath. I was doing the right thing—I knew I was.

*Clack-clack-clack, thwump!*

My eyelids snapped wide. Cass had the spyglass in one hand, and she was holding it out to me. “Take it.” At the jump in my eyebrows she added, “So you can’t forget me. No matter what happens, you’ll look at this, and you’ll remember how it was. You’ll remember the freedom of the river and the power of the *Queen*.” She reached out and stroked the steering wheel fondly. Then her eyes, still puffy and overbright, slid back to mine. “And no matter what happens, you’ll remember me. Cassidy Cochran. The fastest pilot on the Mississippi.”

I reached out, surprised to see my hand trembling, and ever so slowly I closed my fingers around the tarnished brass. Briefly I touched the palm of her hand—warm, rough, and unforgettable—and then I eased the spyglass from her grasp.

*Clack-clack-clack.* I drew it open, examining it. Old fingerprints coated every inch of the brass. *Thwump!* I let it fall closed, and my gaze lifted to hers. “Good-bye, Cassidy Cochran. I wish you all the best. And I . . .” My voice faded, and before I could summon more words—before I could conjure more excuses to drag out this moment—Cassidy popped onto her toes, grazed a kiss on my cheek, and whispered, “Good-bye, Danny Sheridan.”

Then, in that long-legged lope of hers, she strode past me, down the stairs, and out of my life forever.

For a long moment I didn’t move. I didn’t even breathe. . . . But then I heaved a lung-ripping sigh and shambled to the open window. With the spyglass in hand I watched the final rays of daylight sink behind the horizon.

And as I watched, I pretended that I *was* king of the world. That this gleaming steering wheel was taking me exactly where I wanted to go.

I rolled my head back and let the breeze cool my cheeks. Let the sunset sear

through my closed eyelids. And as I stood there, I felt a shift in the wind—a shift that rattled deep into my bones.

It started with a prickle in my shoulders—like little pins and needles stabbing me from the inside out. Chill bumps rolled down my arms despite the sun, and all I could think was when had I gotten so cold? When had I forgotten what it felt like to enjoy a brief patch of sunshine?

And then, just as suddenly as the cold had come, a wave of heat crashed over me. All my hairs shot straight up, and a painful joy stabbed through me. Through my chest. Through my gut. My knees almost buckled.

Because I was alive. And no matter what came for me today or tomorrow, during last night—with Joseph and Jie—I had done something right. I had made a choice and I had fought for it until the end. It was more than I had ever done in my life. More than I'd ever known I could do.

So let Clay Wilcox come, I thought. I would face him unflinching and unafraid. I would face anything life threw at me. Because breath still burned in my chest and my fingers could still curl into fists.

There was no atoning for what I had done, but I could always keep it from happening again.

And I would. I would.

# EPILOGUE

## PHILADELPHIA, 1876



*I scuffed toward the bottom of the hospital stairs. They* led me to a wide, marble-floored room, and though I knew I ought to walk quietly, I didn't. I was too preoccupied to worry about stealth.

Because I wanted to go back to Eleanor. I really wanted to go back. My hand slipped into my coat pocket—to a familiar piece of brass. I withdrew it, slowed to a stop on the final step, and examined it in the dim moonlight.

Cassidy's spyglass. Three years since she'd given it to me. And almost two years since I'd managed to get the thing open. I didn't know if I had left it untouched for too long or if it was well and truly broken. I had barely looked at in two years—two years and four months, to be exact. Ever since I'd seen an article in a St. Louis paper declaring the happy union of a Miss Cassidy Cochran and a Mr. Kent Lang.

Lang gave her a brand-new steamship as a wedding gift, and last I heard, the *Sadie Queen II* had won the Baton Rouge, Natchez, Memphis, and even the St. Louis horns. I had done the right thing by leaving Cassidy behind . . . but that didn't make the old ache hurt any less.

Except . . .

I cocked my head to one side. I hadn't thought of her in weeks. Months, even. Not until right now had my old best friend and other half flickered through my mind.

I flipped the spyglass over. Tossed it from one hand to the next. There was buoyancy in my chest. Maybe I'd finally let Cassidy Cochran go. And yes, the more I dug at the old wound, the more I realized it didn't sting anymore. Actually, there was a new hole in my heart—a bigger, blacker hole than Cassidy had ever left behind.

Because I wanted to go back to Eleanor. I really wanted to go back. She had pushed me in ways I hadn't been pushed since . . . since Cass. And, the truth was, Eleanor had pushed me even harder. Pushed me even further.

And God, that kiss beneath the streetlamp—it had left me dizzy from wanting

her. Breathless and so hungry, I thought I would die from the inside out if she ever stopped kissing me . . .

Hell, I might die now, just thinking about it. She was so . . . so fierce. Fierce when she smiled. When she fought. When she called me a scalawag . . . And fierce when she kissed.

“Goddammit.” The word whispered off my tongue as I stared at the spyglass. Then, louder. “Goddammit.” Because why couldn’t I be the one for Eleanor? Why did I have to be in love with a girl leagues above me and miles more deserving?

With a growl I tugged at the spyglass—not because I expected it to open but because I had pulled it from my pocket and didn’t know what else to do with it. I yanked once. Hard.

The spyglass moved. I blinked.

But then Jie’s voice slapped into my skull. “You coming?”

My head bounced up. She slunk from a shadow beside the front door. “Yeah,” I murmured, and as I eased off the final step, my gaze dropped back to the spyglass. It had moved—I’d felt it move.

I crossed the hall and tried tugging it again. This time, it snapped free.

*Clack-clack-clack!*

My jaw sagged. It was even more tarnished than three years ago, but it had opened. My eyes leaped to Jie’s. “Did you see that?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged one shoulder. “So?” Then a bored yawn cracked through her jaw. “Can we please go? Joseph is waiting.”

“Sure,” I mumbled, nodding absently. But I quickened my stride, and just as I reached the door, I tried shutting the spyglass.

*Thwump!*

Then again. *Clack-clack-clack, thwump! Clack-clack-clack, thwump!* A laugh broke through my lips. After three years the spyglass had magically opened again. It was . . .

Incredible. That’s what it was.

“Let’s go,” Jie groaned, shoving the front door wide.

“Right. Sorry.” I shoved the spyglass back in my coat pocket and followed her from the hospital. Our heels clicked on the front steps then sank into the grass as we jogged toward the street. Toward a top-hatted silhouette waiting beneath a streetlamp.

But I felt eyes on my back. I knew Eleanor watched me . . . and it made my chest tighten. With need. With desire. With regret.

My feet slowed to a stop. My fingers curled into fists that clenched in time to my pulse, and I couldn’t seem to keep my head from twisting around to stare at Eleanor’s window on the second floor. I couldn’t keep my eyes from finding her

—a pale spot in the shadows.

I turned around, took two steps toward her. My body was acting without me—moving of its own accord.

*Stop!* I screamed at myself. My feet ground to a halt.

But then I realized I could make out her eyes, gleaming in the moonlight, and before I knew it, I'd taken two more steps.

Now I could see her lips and the twitch of a smile.

Incredible. Fierce.

In that moment I had her attention, and she had my heart. I had never thought I would give it away again.

So I swooped off my cap, dropped to one knee, and bowed my head—declaring fealty to the one I wanted but could never have.

Her laugh tickled my ear, and at that sound heat boiled through my chest. Then ice. Then heat again. My mouth was dry. My heart started hammering . . . and I couldn't keep from grinning. Her laugh was such a happy sound. It spoke of futures where pain might fade and a life might take its place.

I wanted Eleanor to be happy. Like Cassidy had done with Lang, I wanted her to find someone to take care of her. Someone with money and good intentions.

I stood and my eyes found hers. Then I waved, a strange feeling rising through me. A notion that maybe it would be me.

I flopped my cap back on and spun around. At the very least it was a nice dream for all the wicked dawns ahead. A warm fantasy I could hold tight. Me and Eleanor: a team.

But as I jogged to the street, my mood surprised me by lifting higher and higher with each step. By the time I joined Joseph and Jie beneath the streetlamp, my heart was practically beating out the top of my skull.

Because I had this deep certainty that I would see Eleanor again. That our story wasn't over yet. That one day I might be the man she needed . . .

Sure, I had my work cut out for me, but I had come this far, hadn't I? I just had to face this next future unflinching . . . unafraid.



# Excerpt from *A Darkness Strange and Lovely*



After denying his love for Eleanor, Daniel is reunited with his fiery Empress months later in Paris—as well as a whole new slew of evil darkness. To see how it all plays out, check out this excerpt from Susan Dennard’s *A Darkness Strange and Lovely*.

## CHAPTER ONE



*When Jie's letter came in the mail, I was so elated I forgot I had no hand.*

"Oh, thank heavens!" I cried, reaching for the battered envelope in the postman's grasp. "I've been waiting for this for over a . . ." I trailed off. My eyes locked on the postman's horrified face—and his eyes locked on my wrist.

Yet it was not the poor quality of my gray gown's lace sleeve that prompted his expression but rather the bandaged stump poking out from beneath.

I yanked back my wrist, and the postman's face erupted in red. "P-pardon me, Miss." He thrust the letter at me.

"Of course," I squeaked, snatching the letter with my left hand. Then I bolted from the post office into the Philadelphia morning.

Holding the hard-earned letter like a visor against the sun, I strode into the bustling Chestnut Avenue traffic. The road's cobbles were layered in a sticky, dried mud from yesterday's rain. It clung to my boot heels as I crossed into the rattling carriages, clopping horses, and distracted pedestrians.

As I passed by shop after shop with their giant signs overshadowing the offices wedged between, I cursed myself for my stupidity. Almost three months with no hand, and one would *think* I would remember. The empty wrist ached all the time—itching in the night as if my fingers were still attached, reminding me constantly of how much more than a hand I'd lost. If not for that wretched injury, maybe I could put all the summer's horrors behind me. Maybe I could push through each day instead of barely keeping my head above the darkness.

It always hovered there, threatening to drown me in memories of Elijah . . . and Clarence . . . and Mama. . . .

But it was not to be. Just as my hand would never return, this grief would never leave. Life—and death—did not work that way.

Though sometimes, if I squinted hard enough, I fancied I could see a blue sparkle of spiritual energy, as if the ghost of my hand wanted me back as much as I wanted it. What with all the flickers and flashes of spirits I'd started seeing in the past few months, it wouldn't have surprised me to learn that I *was* actually seeing the ghostly remnants of my hand.

As my brother, Elijah, had told me, if he had necromantic powers, then whether I wanted them or not, I did too.

I dabbed at my brow with my sleeve. Summer might have been fading into fall,

and the thunderstorms with it, yet the heat seemed determined to stay. The usual breeze carried from the Delaware River was missing, and I wished—not for the first time—that I hadn't left my parasol at home. The annoyance of holding it in my clumsy left hand was nothing compared to the sweat oozing down my back and beneath my bonnet.

I spared a glance at the envelope, and my breath caught. In Jie's meticulous print, it read *Paris*.

Paris! I hadn't heard from Jie in more than a month, and the Spirit-Hunters had been in Chicago then. I'd hounded the post office every day since, desperate for some message that would tell me where they were—in hopes that I could join them—but no word had come. Until today.

Heavens, if I only could go to Paris—leave Philadelphia so far behind the past could never, *ever* catch up to me.

I scampered out of a buggy's path and onto the opposite walkway, where I found the welcome shade of a storefront. It was Mrs. Binder's trimmings store, where Mama and I had once bought sewing supplies. With no concern for propriety, I clasped the envelope in my teeth and used my left hand to rip it open.

And for the first time in ages, my heart actually lifted—and, *blazes*, it felt good.

*Eleanor,*

*Of all places the Dead would bring us, I never thought it would be Paris. This city is the strangest place I have ever seen. One minute people are screaming over the Dead (or les Morts, as they call them) and then the next minute they're sipping their champagne and laughing at the latest scandal. Daniel calls them mercurial. I call them annoying.*

I snorted. I could just imagine Jie's scowl as she declared the Parisians all manner of undeserved foul things.

*But it's not just the Parisians who are strange. The Dead are bizarre too. Not only are they walking corpses, but they're recently dead. Murdered. Joseph thinks it's some sort of sacrifice, but he can't tell what exactly. He spends all the moments he's not out fighting the Dead or speaking before the Sénat with his nose stuck in a book.*

*Our host, the Marquis du Bazillac, is generous enough, but he's demanding too. He seems to want Joseph and Daniel everywhere so he can show them off like prize cows. Daniel just saw me write that, and he's telling me to scratch it out. I told him I'd scratch out his eyes if he didn't go away.*

I barked a laugh . . . but almost instantly, my stomach clenched. I missed Jie and Joseph and Daniel so badly it *hurt*.

With a tight swallow, I kept reading.

*You should see Daniel these days—you wouldn't recognize him. He's got this book on manners he carries with him everywhere; and not only does he always wear a suit now, but he's got a top hat to boot! Prize cow, indeed.*

*I hope you're well, Eleanor, and I wish you were here with us. I know your mother still needs you, though. Is she doing any better? Is she still at the asylum? And how is your hand feeling? Well, that's enough questions for one letter. Besides, Daniel wants to add something, and I'm almost out of space. Write me back and send it to the Hotel Le Meurice in Paris.*

*Regards,*

*Jie*

Squeezed below Jie's letter, in Daniel's loping, slanted scrawl, it said:

*Empress,*

*Stay out of trouble. I can't rescue you from across an ocean.*

*Daniel*

My fingers tightened around the paper, and tears stung my eyes. Daniel might've broken my heart, but he was still one charming scalawag. A scalawag I missed . . . and *wished* could be—

I shook my head. "Stop. Don't think of him, Eleanor."

But it was too late. The regret trampled over me, aching in my throat. He had told me he didn't love me months ago; and yet at every note he added to Jie's letters, I inevitably turned into a pathetic ninny. Why was it that no matter how many times I scolded myself for caring, none of my stupid feelings would fade? Although . . .

I glanced at the letter again. Suits and a book on manners? What did *that* mean?

"Eleanor Fitt!" a girl's voice squealed. "Is that you?"

I stiffened. I knew that shrill voice—just as I knew the husk-ier one that followed.

"I daresay, it has been *ages* since we last saw you!"

Wincing, I stuffed the letter into my pocket and hid my bandaged wrist in the folds of my skirts. Then I turned to face Mercy and Patience Cook—or the Virtue Sisters, as I preferred to call them. Squat Mercy bustled over to me, beaming in her lavender gown, while lanky Patience, pucker-lipped and pink clad, ambled behind.

"How are you?" Mercy asked, grabbing my arm. "We have missed you at all the parties!"

I very much doubted this, but I merely bowed my head and said, "My mother is . . . unwell. As such, we have not been getting out much."

"Oh yes!" Patience said. "We had heard that." Her nostrils fluttered as if she

smelled a particularly good piece of gossip, and I knew immediately what question would come next. “Is she still at Kirkbride’s? Is she still . . . *unstable*?”

My chest tightened painfully, and a thousand nasty retorts flew through my mind. Yes, my mother was at Kirkbride’s Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane because *yes*, her mind had cracked. Mama’s health was the only reason I hadn’t chased after the Spirit-Hunters the minute my wrist had healed enough to travel. Kirkbride’s was lovely, what with its progressive ideas on mental health and its beautifully flowered grounds; but it was also expensive.

Yet these weren’t emotions I liked to dwell on, and *damn* Patience for forcing me to.

Fortunately, Mercy clapped her hands just as I opened my mouth to sputter something utterly inappropriate. “Oh, we were just in Mrs. Binder’s, Eleanor, and we saw the most wonderful pistachio muslin! Didn’t we, Patience?” She poked her sister.

“We did,” Patience simpered, “and it will look lovely with Mercy’s skin.” She turned a smug smirk on me. “Mother has the latest *Harper’s Bazaar*, you see, and it shows all the newest walking gowns for fall. We are going to have them made.”

I grunted, unable to conjure any other response. As far as I could tell, there was absolutely nothing wrong with their current gowns. I was in the same gray walking gown I’d worn every day since June, and it was still perfectly functional.

My eyes raked over Patience’s pink silk—I *could* get fifty dollars for that dress at Mr. Rickard’s. And Mercy’s lavender grenadine was easily worth seventy-five. After selling all of my own dresses to pay for Mama’s hospital bills, I’d become quite adept at estimating what a dress would fetch at Mr. Rickard’s Pawn Shop. I was also quite good at haggling for the best price.

However, I was not particularly adept at controlling my facial expressions.

“Eleanor,” Mercy said, alarmed, “are you ill?”

I quickly schooled my face into a smile, but as my lips parted to reply, Patience cut in.

“Have you seen Allison Wilcox lately?” She lifted her eyebrows. “We have called and called, yet she is always away—that, or she is avoiding our company. Perhaps you have had better luck in your own calls upon the Wilcox home?”

Now I gaped at her and did not bother to hide my emotions. How *dare* she ask about Allison Wilcox when she knew perfectly well what had passed between our families.

Mercy seemed as horrified by her sister’s question as I, for she reached for Patience’s elbow. “Hush.”

But Patience wouldn’t be silenced. “Oh, but of course *you* wouldn’t have seen

Allison,” she cooed. “Not after your . . . ah . . . how to phrase it delicately? *Scandals* with the Spirit-Hunters.”

“Patience, stop that!” Mercy hissed.

“But it is true, is it not?” Patience batted her eyes innocently. “The Fitt family and the Wilcox family are no longer on friendly terms? I daresay, the fact that you were seeing both Clarence and the man who *murdered* Clarence would not reflect well—”

“Enough!” Mercy dug her fingers in Patience’s arm and yanked her away. She flashed me an apologetic grimace. “I’m so sorry, Eleanor. I hope your mother gets better.” Then, without another word, she hauled her sister into the busy street and disappeared from view.

I was rendered speechless. I couldn’t even breathe. Tears I had fought every second of every day now rose in my eyes like a tidal wave.

I stumbled back until I hit Mrs. Binder’s window. “You are better than she,” I whispered to myself, blinking the tears away. “Stronger and better.” If I could face an army of Dead, then the insults of Patience Cook should be nothing.

But they weren’t nothing—not when they echoed with so much truth.

So I did as I always did: I forced my mind to dwell on other things. Normal, day-to-day things.

Spinning around, I stared into the shop’s window. My eyes lit on a frilly parasol in the display’s corner.

And the tears came boiling back with such a vengeance, I couldn’t contain them. All I could do was keep my face hidden and let them drop.

Daniel had given me a parasol like that one. Back when I’d thought he might love me. Back when I’d thought Clarence was just a narrow-minded suitor . . . and my brother was just a victim. Back when I was naive and stupid and thought the world a good place. The world *wasn’t* a good place. I knew that now, and no amount of distraction would let me forget.

As soon as I was in control of my emotions once more, I went to the bank to deposit my latest funds from Mr. Rickard. It was a small sum on which to manage living. I had stopped paying Mary, my mother’s maid, long ago; and though I wasn’t sure why she stayed with me—pity, friendship, or (most likely) guilt—I was grateful for the company all the same. My childhood home, emptied of furniture and devoid of life, would have been too much for me to bear on my own.

It was just as I strode between two columns and onto the marble steps leading down to the street that my right hand—no, the empty space where my hand had once been—began to tingle.

I froze midway. I knew this feeling, the feeling of electricity. Of soul.

I glanced down, certain I’d see a shimmer of starlight, like a little wrinkle in

the world where my hand used to be. But nothing was there. Just the usual cloth bandages . . .

Which meant some *other* spirit was jangling at my senses.

Holding my breath, I whirled around to scan the crowded street. Simply because I knew I could sense the Dead didn't mean I was used to it. And it certainly didn't mean I enjoyed it.

My eyes raked over traffic and across building fronts, but I saw no unusual shimmer or flash of blue. I gulped, my throat tight.

Why wasn't this throbbing going away? If nothing Dead was here, then . . .

Pain stabbed through my right arm, sharp and burning. A cry broke from my lips, and I yanked my arm to my chest.

Then light flared from my wrist, and for half a breath I could actually *see* my missing fingers. They shifted from static blue to solid pink and back again.

A screaming howl filled my ears. I whipped up my head, my heart lurching into my mouth. But when I scanned the area for some rabid hound, all I saw was the usual clattering carriages and purposeful walkers. The tobacco store across the street, the saloon next door—they all looked the same. Not a dog in sight. The cab drivers trotted by, their horses ambled on, and everyone continued as if they heard nothing.

Which meant I was the only person hearing this!

Then the pain shrieked louder, taking control of my mind and blurring my vision. Another howl came. I gasped. Two howls, then three, all roaring over one another like a pack of wolves on the hunt. Yet I still saw nothing.

I lurched around, certain I had to run. To warn others—and to *hide*. But I couldn't think straight—the dogs were so loud, they swallowed everything. I heaved up the steps and back toward the bank's door.

Then my gaze locked on a pair of eyes. Yellow eyes, gleaming from the shadows behind the bank columns.

I flinched and stumbled back as new fear erupted in my chest. The last time I'd seen yellow eyes had been on Marcus Duval. If he was here, then I was as good as dead. There was no way I could fight him—not by myself. He was a necromancer so powerful even Joseph had lost to his magic.

Oh God, oh God—what could I do?

The howling crescendoed. Louder and louder. A sudden wind blasted my face. Icy and damp, it clawed into my throat and froze my lungs, yet I couldn't move. I was rooted to the spot, held by those yellow eyes.

Then the bank door swung open. A customer walked out, and like a hypnotist's snap, my mind and body were suddenly freed. I burst into action, ripping my gaze away from the shadows and darting down the steps, toward the street.

Instantly the dogs stopped, replaced by the shouts and rattle of normal morning traffic.

A heartbeat later, the agony in my wrist ended with no trace of pain left behind.

But my panic didn't go. If I was right—if that had been Marcus in those shadows—then every second I stayed was a second closer to my death.

I kicked into a run, bounding into the street and aiming for home.

Not once did I check for the yellow eyes. I knew they would be as gone as the wind and the howls and the pain. Yet as I rushed down the street, my mind ran through scenario after scenario, trying to explain what had happened. It must have been black magic. Those yellow eyes—identical to the ones that haunted my dreams and my memories—*must* belong to Marcus.

And the only people who could help me were an ocean away in Paris.

But I was prepared for the day I would face Marcus again. He was a nightmare wearing my brother's skin, and I had vowed to destroy him. I wanted to fight Marcus—wanted to watch him *die*—but I would need the Spirit-Hunters to do that.

So I had to leave Philadelphia. I had to lead Marcus to the Spirit-Hunters. An ocean away or not, I could not let the distance or expense stop me. Not if I wanted to stay alive.

Eventually I managed to hail a streetcar on Market Street. By the time I reached my own tree-lined avenue, I was soaked through with sweat. I barreled down the road, finally reaching the low, wrought iron gate leading into my yard. The grass was tall and overgrown, the hedges wild. Only the white house I'd grown up in and the cherry tree out front looked the same.

I flew down my front path and up the steps, but before I could even fumble through my pocket for a key, the door burst open.

Mary, her chestnut hair falling from its bun, gaped at me. "Eleanor! Why're you running like the devil's after you?"

"Because," I panted, "he is. Marcus is here!" I shoved my way into the foyer and slammed the door behind. "Get my carpetbag. I've got to go."

Mary didn't move. She just stared, her eyes bulging. She was the only person in the world other than the Spirit-Hunters and Mama who knew the full story about my brother's necromancy and death. She knew how dangerous Marcus was—and she knew of my plan to find the Spirit-Hunters once Mama and my finances had been settled.

"Did you hear me?" I asked. "Marcus is *here*." Still she didn't budge. I stepped forward. "Mary, what is it?"

"You . . . you . . ."



“What?”

“You have a guest.”

I stopped, my heart dropping to my stomach. “Who?”

“Me,” said a new voice.

I jolted, my head whipping toward the parlor door. There stood a gaunt young woman in black, and though she looked nothing like the rosy-faced girl I’d once known, I instantly recognized her.

Allison Wilcox.

The last time we’d seen each other had been moments before I learned her brother, Clarence, had been murdered.

But the rumors behind his death were wrong: he had not been killed by the Spirit-Hunters. No, the truth behind Clarence’s death was far, *far* worse.

For Clarence Wilcox had been murdered by *my* brother.

## **About the Author**

SUSAN DENNARD is a writer turned marine biologist turned writer again. SOMETHING STRANGE AND DEADLY is her debut novel. Among the traits she shares with her heroine Eleanor are a weakness for Shakespeare quotes, a healthy appetite for baked goods, and an insatiable curiosity. Sadly, Susan does not get to wear a corset or wave a parasol on a daily basis. You can visit her online at [www.susandennard.com](http://www.susandennard.com).

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