ONE

"*Dead!" a woman screamed. "It's the Dead!"*

My heart shot into my throat, and shocked cries rippled through the station. The woman sounded nearby—as if she was also in line at the telegraph office.

But . . . this couldn't be real, could it? The Dead? At the Centennial train depot?

The woman shrieked again, and I saw her, four customers behind me, her face white and eyes huge. A breath later, somber bells rang out, and I knew it was all very, very real. That was the Dead alarm.

I'd heard of corpses awakening—hungry and dangerous though still quite dead. The purpose of bells in coffins was, after all, to warn us; but if the word on the street was true, then in the last week more than a few bodies had escaped their graves.

My heart picked up speed, my veins throbbing in my neck. I did *not* want to be here when the Dead came. I'd never seen a walking corpse, and I saw no reason to change that.

"It's the Dead!" screamed a scruffy boy beside me. His shrill voice was barely audible in the panicked crowds. "Get out—come on!"

But I couldn't. Workers and passengers alike pushed and heaved to be the first out of the distant doors.

My breathing turned shallow. I backed up against the wall. The crowd was moving fast, tugging at my skirts and threatening to pull me away like a treacherous riptide.

I glanced around. The abandoned office told me I'd get no telegram today. For that matter, I wasn't even sure I would escape today.

A woman's parasol jabbed into my ribs, and my petticoats ripped beneath an old man's boot. I pushed myself harder to the wall, frantically searching for a gap in the flow of bodies.

A thought flashed in my mind: *I can go in the office*. It was empty and an easy relief from the panic. I could wait inside for the crowds to thin, and then I could make my own escape.

I took a steeling breath and shoved off the wall, aiming for the office entrance. Once I reached the door, I pushed through and slammed it shut behind me. My muscles shook and I had to lean against the door, but I was safe. I could ride out the storm here.

I scanned the tiny cubicle. Before the clerk's window was a desk with the telegraph machine and stacks of paper. One of those stacks was labeled *new*—where my brother's telegram would be if he'd sent one.

He'd been three years abroad, and today was the day he was finally coming home.

Or it was supposed to be, but the blasted boy hadn't appeared on the New York train. And now my wait in the telegraph line—a wait to find out if he'd sent a message or not—had been interrupted.

By the Dead.

Long moments passed. The screams and pelting footsteps didn't fade. This could be a long wait, but at least I was protected from the stampede. Though not perhaps from the Dead.

What did the stories say? The Dead hunt endlessly until they're laid to rest or their bodies are destroyed.

Shivers ran down my spine. Maybe it was best Elijah hadn't come home—though I *did* want to know why he hadn't been on the train. Of course . . . now that I was here, I could get Elijah's message myself.

I shot a quick glance through the clerk's window. The crowds were still packed outside, so I dropped my parasol to the floorboards and grabbed for the papers. After skimming the top message, I moved to the next, and then the next.

But I reached the end, and nothing was for me. When Elijah had missed the train a week ago, he'd instantly telegraphed. But now something was wrong. I could feel it. There *should* have been a message from him.

I threw the papers back on the desk. *Where else can a telegram be?*

My eyes caught on a crumpled sheet of paper nearby. I snatched it up, but it was only a newspaper page. The headline read: "Walking Dead Still Rise in Laurel Hill Cemetery." I pushed the paper into my pocket to read later. I'd ignored the recent Dead reports, thinking they wouldn't affect me. Foolish—the Dead were more than just specters to frighten unruly children. The Dead were very real.

And the Dead were *here*. I tried to swallow, my throat pinched tight. I needed to get out!

The frenzied cries of the crowd's escape were fading. Now was my chance to run. I stooped down to retrieve my parasol.

That was when I noticed the smell. The stench of carrion.

My hands froze over the parasol. I lifted my gaze with deliberate caution and met the face that now waited outside the window, where only minutes ago *I* had waited. It was a corpse. One of the Dead.

Time stopped as my mind took in the creature before me.

Lidless eyes with creamy, decomposed irises. Half a mouth revealing yellow teeth. The tatters of a brown, wool suit hanging loosely over waxy skin. Brittle, gray hair. And now the corpse lifting his arm.

I shrieked and clambered backward. My feet tangled in my petticoats, and I crashed to the floor in a flurry of skirts.

No, no, no!

Whimpers burst from my mouth as I struggled to stand, but my corset hampered my range of movement and balance. I couldn't draw in a decent breath.

The corpse's arm was now fully extended through the window, its rotten fist only inches from my head. It stiffly unfolded its fingers, and a sheet of paper fluttered to the counter. Then, in a slow, convulsive turn and with shambling footsteps, the corpse left.

Seconds passed and still I could not seem to breathe. Why hadn't it attacked?

I watched the window. Was the corpse coming in the office? Were there more Dead? I listened closely but detected no sounds over the somber tolling of the alarm.

Was the corpse really gone?

The stink lingered, so perhaps it was waiting outside the window. A few flies had hitched a ride on the body, and they buzzed around me. I only gave them a cursory swat. I was trapped in here until—

I heard a loud crack like thunder.

My heart jolted, and my whole body jumped with it. What the devil was that?

Then, suddenly, the alarm stopped. I heard voices from within the depot. Living people.

The danger must have passed; I was all right. But I couldn't stop the shaking in my hands. My whole body felt like jelly.

It took several minutes for my breathing to settle, for my

heart to stop its frenzied pounding. It wasn't until a full five minutes had passed and silence reigned in the depot that I trusted myself to try standing.

My legs wobbled, and I pushed my chin shakily forward. I didn't want to approach the counter, but I ached to see what the Dead had left behind. A piece of paper, yes, but what was on it?

I inched closer, seeing it was a letter.

I inched closer again until the words of the letter were clear.

My breath hitched, and I grasped the counter for support.

The paper was for me, and it was from my brother.

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Thanks for reading—and forgive the newbie nature of this opening scene! If you appreciate what I do, please consider buying the new book and discovering the updated, rebooted version of Eleanor's journey: **susandennard.com/strange**