

ONE

There is nothing so vexing as a person who has decided to miss an appointment.

It's especially frustrating when you've waited two hours, your mother's at home waiting as well, and the temperature *where* you're waiting is rapidly approaching the hottest pits of Hell.

But there I was, at the Centennial Train Depot after not one but *two* trains from New York had arrived and departed—and neither had possessed my brother Elijah on board.

I was going to murder him.

This was not a new fantasy of mine (murder) but one that had ballooned over the last few years, thanks to countless letters from Elijah declaring, *No, no. He couldn't come home yet! There was work to be done, books to be read, professors to be debated with...*

Surely Mama and I could understand? And also, could I please cable him another fifty dollars to the following address?

Yes. Murder most foul sounded appealing. Especially since my corset chafed, sweat pooled under my hat, and my bustle had gained four hundred pounds from the humidity.

I abandoned the tracks and marched toward the telegraph

counter at the far end of the depot. Perhaps my brother had at least bothered to send a message.

The depot itself was a new installation, built for America's first world's fair—the International Centennial Exhibition—which stood directly across the street. Mama and I had *planned* to visit its displays and halls and gardens tomorrow with Elijah.

Alas, we would be disappointed.

Again.

Twelve people were ahead of me as I merged into the telegraph line. Most looked as sweaty and red-faced as I, and I couldn't help but stare with envy at a little girl in a short skirt, no bustle, and no idea that one day her ribs would be entombed in steel and whalebone.

It was as the line slid from twelve to eleven (not including the child) that a scream split the depot.

It bounced off the walls, pinged through iron rafters. Incomprehensible at first—so shrill, so panicked.

Then the scream came again—louder this time, and with actual words to go along with it. *Dead! It's the Dead!*

Seconds later, the woman doing the screaming tore by in a pale pink gown.

I gawped after her, my jaw slack. Because although I'd read the papers and therefore knew—in theory—that the corpses of Laurel Hill were rising *en masse*...

Coming to life in a cemetery was one thing. Shambling several miles to a train station was quite another.

DEAD! she continued shrieking. *It's the DEAD!*

Still, all I could do was stare and think, *Huh. How very strange this is.*

It would seem the rest of the depot had a different reaction. Suddenly, *hundreds* of people were trying to move at once. Everyone in my queue, everyone off the train, everyone boarding the train, and even the telegraph clerk himself.

A parasol jabbed my ribs. A boot stamped my toes. I was heaved, pushed, elbowed as all of humanity fought to be the first outside.

Then I heard fresh screaming. *Papa! Papa!*

It was the little girl I'd envied earlier. She was shrieking somewhere to my right.

Papa! Papa!

I shoved that way. Where was she? Where was her little body? I could hear her. I could hear—

There. She was before me, and without thinking, I scooped her up. "Hang on," I shouted once she was clutched against me, her brown eyes bulging and mouth wailing. "We'll find your papa! Hang on!"

I attempted to shove once more into the throngs.

It did not go well.

We were tossed about like a boat in a storm, and although the child *technically* held on, she was like a sack of bricks against me. I was terrified I might drop her. Lose her. *Kill* her.

Which was why I did what I did next: I gave up.

Rather than continue the fight, I pushed to the edges of the chaos. Then right out of it, by way of an open door.

The girl and I were spat into the telegraph office.

Bodies and heat swelled behind us. The girl clambered off me and raced for the telegraph desk at the window. "No, no," I shouted after her. "No, don't go under there. We can't stay here."

She didn't listen. Not in the slightest. She simply crawled under the desk, hugged her knees to her chest, and warbled, "Papa! Papa!"

Right.

So that was that, then.

I grabbed the door and slammed it shut. Then I stared, heart hammering, at its lock. I had no idea if corpses could turn knobs, but to leave it *un*locked seemed a very stupid choice.

So I locked it.

Then I spun around and aimed for the desk ten paces away. "Please, come out," I said as I sank to a crouch before the girl. "Your papa must be so frightened. He doesn't know where you are—oh, please. Come out."

The girl did not come out, and when I tried to grip her, she only squeezed more tightly into the darkness.

And also sobbed like *I* was the corpse walking from its grave.

I bit back a groan and shoved to standing. On the desk was a telegraph machine and stacks of telegrams. Past that was the clerk's window, lined with iron bars.

"Excuse me!" I shouted as a man in a bowler hat rushed by. "Can you help me, sir? I've found a little girl here. Excuse me, do you see her father? *Hello*?"

Neither the man nor the three fellows and two women sprinting after him responded.

"Hey!" I shouted, adding a forceful swipe of my parasol against the bars. *Clank, clank, clank.* "Help us! Please! Someone! There must be a man looking for his daughter out there?"

Long moments passed. *Clank, clank, clank.* No one even glanced my way.

"Hey!" I tried one last time—at a newsy running by, trailing papers like I imagined an Egyptian mummy might trail its wrappings. "Hey, you! Do you see a man looking for his daughter?"

Nothing. And now there was nary a soul left to come to our aid. The depot was empty, and wherever the child's father was, it wasn't here.

I plopped back onto the floor. The little girl hadn't moved at all.

"I'm Eleanor," I tried with my brightest smile. "And everyone has cleared out. So!" I lifted a pointed finger. "I think we should make our own escape and search for your father ourselves. What do you say?"

I offered her my gloved hand. (And noticed a rip in my sleeve. Drat.)

The girl whimpered.

"What's *your* name?" I tried instead. "Let me guess. With those adorable dark curls and somber eyes...Cecily? Petunia? Honeycakes?"

She didn't laugh at my joke.

And I sighed. A big, corset-straining sigh as a fly zipped past my head. Then a second fly, even fatter than the one before.

I flinched, swatting on instinct, which sent my parasol in a careless arc above me...and smashed it right through the nearest stack of telegrams.

Papers flew. The first flies dispersed—along with at least three others—and a smell spooled into my nose.

A smell like carrion.

I went very still. Papers fluttered around me as my gaze slid upward, upward to where, yes, a corpse in a tattered brown suit now stood on the other side of the iron bars as if it were nothing more than a customer who needed to send a message—forthwith!—to Hell.

Its gray hair wisped like a crown around its head. Meanwhile its nose was half rotted, and its lips were *fully* rotted, revealing crooked, yellow teeth. It was the eyes, however, that I fixed upon. Lidless, creamy eyes that stared at me in a way no living human ever could.

Distantly, I wondered if I ought to stand and poke it with my parasol.

Instead, I pasted a smile across my lips and dragged my gaze back down to the little girl. "I've made a mess with the telegrams, haven't I?" I said cheerily. "My mother always complains I'm clumsy, and she isn't wrong. Although she's hardly a graceful sprite herself. I'd wager you're quite graceful, aren't you? And that you love dancing. Am I right?"

The little girl stared at me with as much intensity as the corpse was staring—and yes, I could *feel* that it was staring. Just as I could *see* from the tops of my eyes that it was pushing one of its arms through the iron bars.

A bony fist thrust slowly across the wooden counter.

Skeletal fingers creaked apart.

And another sheet of paper whispered down. Falling, drifting, joining all the telegrams I'd knocked to the floor.

The little girl shifted, as if finally noticing the stink—or perhaps the newly added telegram. She began to unfurl.

"Do you know the story of *The Tempest*?" I blurted. "It's about a magician who lives on a magic island with his daughter. Shall I tell it you?"

The girl blinked her dark lashes. She sniffed.

And above her, the corpse's bony fist slowly withdrew.

"The magician was a nobleman who was betrayed." I pitched my voice louder. *Louder*. Trying to mask the sound of the Dead as it now shambled convulsively away. "Prospero was his name, and he turned to magic to regain his stolen title. But my favorite character was always his daughter. Miranda."

"Miranda." It was the first thing the girl had said that wasn't a weeping *Papa*.

And I leaped at it. "Miranda!" I cried. "Is *that* your name? Oh, how excellent. Then come on out here, Miranda. You can sit on my lap for a bit...yes, yes. We will face *this* way"—I swiveled about so we were *not* directed at the window—"and I'll tell you all about sweet Miranda. She falls in love with a handsome prince named Ferdinand, and it's *very* romantic. He confesses his love on the beach..."

I trailed off. For to my left, where my skirts were now pooling on the floor (and quite shredded at the hems), was the paper the corpse had delivered. It looked identical to all the other

telegrams strewn about, in that it was a form filled in with messy handwriting.

This paper, however, was also covered in dirt.

And *this* paper had a fly resting on its corner.

And...oh yes, strangest of all, it would seem *this* paper was meant for me.

For it had been sent from my brother.

Western Union Telegraph Company

Received at:	Centen Depot
From:	Broadway New York
Dated:	2 June 8:16 AM
To:	Eleanor Fitt
From:	Elijah Fitt

CANNOT COME STOP DO NOT TELL MAMA STOP WILL WORRY HER FOR NO REASON STOP SEND MONEY TO USUAL PLACE STOP WILL BE HOME SOON TO DO WHAT IS NEEDED STOP ELIJAH

* * *

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed this or appreciate what I do, please consider buying the full book and discovering the rest of Eleanor's journey: **susandennard.com/strange**