

Chapter 1

Hetty



New London Connecticut, 1868

“Gregory Hilton has offered for you.” Father’s eyes flicked up from the open ledger book amid the litter of papers on his desk. With a sigh, he pushed himself sharply away and leaned back in his chair, pinning me with his gaze.

I caught the laugh that had bubbled to my lips just in time. Father’s brow was crinkled into those million little frown lines that meant he was serious. *Dead* serious.

Oh. Dear.

Sweeping up a pile of invoices from the rickety deal chair beside his desk I sank down on its hard wooden seat. It was that or swoon to the floor. I’d had a bad feeling as soon as I’d entered the room.

I glanced over at Samuel, slumped in the corner and

studiously avoiding my eyes. And I should have known something was up by my younger brother's smirk when he'd called me into Father's office. The exact same smirk he was still wearing right now.

I cast my eyes around the tiny upper room of the inn that Father used as his office, my heart beating wildly. This couldn't be happening.

Samuel calmly inspected his fingernails, ignoring the glare I threw at him. Settling back in the overstuffed chair, he languidly crossing one silk-stockinged ankle on his opposite knee and turned a beatific smile on Father. Samuel was enjoying this particular disaster far too much.

"*Gregory Hilton?*" I managed to keep the screech out of my voice. My stomach silently weighed in with its own ominous lurch.

Father's dark eyes on fixed mine, his lips pressed together. His nod was tight and short. "Came to see me this morning. All very proper-like."

I heard myself gulp.

Of all the boring-but-eligible bachelors in town, Gregory Hilton was without a doubt the boring-est and least heart-fluttering. Oh, he did own a small house out on the post road. And he had managed to keep a job at the mill for over ten years now.

But the hair atop his head was mostly grey – what was left of it, anyway. If he bothered to bathe it was none too often. Barbers were evidently not in his budget, either; over-long curls tended to spill over his collar. One front tooth had grown a bit too long and its mate was a bit too short, begging a resemblance to a quizzical squirrel. And his breath!

"You told him no, of course?" The tick-tick-tick of the grandfather clock downstairs echoed my heartbeat

as the silence stretched out uncomfortably. "Didn't you?"

Heavens above! What was he *thinking*?

It shouldn't even be a question. Father could never run the inn without me. Who would watch the vendors, keep the books? Who'd do the ordering, keep up the inventory? It wouldn't be Samuel. Certainly Father understood that Samuel's recent fascination with the inn's finances had far more to do with his own mushrooming gambling debt than with any new-found love for the family business.

And *surely* Father wouldn't promise me to – to *Gregory Hilton*, of all the potential mates in the State of Connecticut! His answer had been a polite but resounding no.

Hadn't it?

Father's expression didn't change. He bent forward again and snapped the ledger book in front of him closed with a bang. "You're nearly 25, Hetty Marie Pritchard. You've dawdled long enough." The forefinger I'd dreaded as a child came out, leveled straight at me.

"You've turned away one good man after another. None ever seems to suit. Well, I wouldn't be doing my job as a father if I don't put a stop to it."

Turning back to his desk, he picked up his pipe and knocked it against the windowsill beside him a tad harder than would seem necessary to dislodge the ash.

"It's time you found yourself a husband, Hetty."

I could barely breathe. "You told him – yes?" My stomach was on the verge of full revolt, now. Thank heavens at least my long skirts hid the way my knees were shaking.

My hands gripped each other tightly for comfort as my eyes flicked around the familiar walls. The inn was my home. This was where I'd grown up. I was needed

here. I belonged. Or so I'd thought until right now.

I exhaled a silent prayer. Noooo. *Please, no!*

Father pried open the lid of his tobacco tin and plucked out a pinch of the dry crumbles to pack in the bowl of his favorite pipe. He dug around in the desk drawer for a moment before producing a safety match and scratching it across the sole of his shoe to create a tiny flame.

"It's three months 'til your 25th birthday." The growl in his voice was unmistakable. Sad, but resolute. "I know you'd far rather pick a man of your own choosing. But you can't be so choosy you spend your life as a spinster. I won't allow it."

He sucked on the pipe stem, drawing the flame down into the bowl, then blew out a cloud of white smoke. It hung in the air for a second, the woodsy scent familiar and peaceful. The exact opposite of how I was feeling.

"If you've not found someone you like better for a husband by the time of your birthday three months from now, Gregory it'll be."

And that was that. With a wave of his hand, the conversation was over.

Chapter 2

Hetty



Marriage. Who needs it? That's how I'd always felt.

A steady trickle of eligible bachelors had started coming to call as soon as I turned 17, surging to a veritable high tide when I reached 22. One by one, I'd ticked off their faults as soon as the front door slammed behind them: Too tall. Too short. Too quiet. Too talkative. Too eager. Too listless.

In truth, my real objection to each and every one had been the same: too *boring*.

Before her untimely death, Mother had assured me that when I met my true love there'd be sparks. Thus far, not even a faint ember-glow. And definitely no sparks.

My visceral reaction to each and every one of the posy-wielding gents who'd appeared on our front stoop had been more like a tired yawn. Father was right about

one thing, at least: I was running out of polite excuses. But if the last seven years had proven anything, it had shown me to a certainty that there were far worse things than becoming an old maid. Being married to someone who bored me to tears – now *that* notion gave me shudders.

New London is a small town. Word got around. The steady flow of hopefuls bearing bright bouquets had finally dwindled to an irregular drip about a year ago. *Thank goodness*. Gregory Hilton, unfortunately, evidently hadn't gotten the message.

Now that I think about it, Samuel had taken me aside a few months ago to share the town's behind-my-back whispers – because, of course, any bad news about me always made it to Samuel's ears. The real problem, the gossips were saying, was my outspoken independence.

I hadn't bothered to stifle my laughter back then, much to Samuel's chagrin. If independence was a disqualifier for marriage, I'd told him, I would gladly embrace spinsterhood.

Never in a million years had I imagined that I'd be *pushed* out. I shook my head, as I stumbled down the narrow stairs from Father's office to the first floor of the inn. *Hmmm*. And my dear younger brother, it seems, had everything to do with Father's sudden marriage ultimatum. I should have seen it coming.

The sweet, comforting smell of simmering stew mixed with old, sour ale hit me as I stepped across the threshold to the kitchen. Steadying. Familiar. A chair scraped loudly across the wooden floor of the dining room just beyond the kitchen. The regulars were arriving for supper already, taking their usual seats at the long oak tables and trading news of the day.

The news of *my* day had rocked me to my core. What

would my future look like as Gregory Hilton's wife? My lips twisted in disgust. I didn't even want to imagine.

I busied myself with the familiar routine: slicing the bread; readying the plates, bowls and spoons. My hands flew with the speed of long practice. My mind was flying, too, off in a hundred crazy directions.

Begging and pleading would only stiffen Father's resolve. Samuel would be no help – particularly since he'd apparently had a strong hand in creating the whole mess. He probably saw my upcoming doom – strike that, *nuptials* – as a convenient way to weasel his way into the inn's finances, and boost his standing in Father's eyes. "The good son who stayed to work the inn." As if Samuel would ever really *worked* at anything besides his own pleasurable vices.

For a second, I wondered if I should simply run away. I'd always yearned for a bit of adventure – a reprieve from the small-town drudgery of New London. A life beyond serving dishes, ale pitchers, and the company of loud, half-drunken sailors. There must be more exciting adventures out in the world to explore. Certainly better than the tender embraces of Gregory Hilton! My nose wrinkled again at the thought.

Perhaps I could seek a position as a governess with a fine family in the big city of New Haven. Or the even bigger metropolis of New York!

Gathering up napkins and bread baskets to distribute among the tables, I let loose a sigh. These were crazy thoughts, for sure. Leaving home without a chaperone? No proper family would have me. Employment options for single women were slim to none, without a reference. Growing up here by the harbor had given me a clear-eyed view of the sad fate that awaited the denizens of Harlots' Row.

I grabbed a slender taper, flicked a flint, and set about lighting the wicks of the kitchen lamps, then moved on to the dining room.

Beyond the tall, narrow windows fronting Bank Street, dusk was closing in fast. The familiar row of shops, warehouses, and fellow inns across the way had merged into a single, solid mass of grey, broken only by the white stone Customs House in the center. The riverbank itself, for which Bank Street was named, had long ago been blocked from view by the tightly-packed buildings. Once upon a time there must have been a fine view of the deep-water harbor behind them. "Once upon a time" being a good century ago, when New London was still a thriving whaling mecca.

The gathering gloom felt peaceful, quiet – an odd counterpoint to my inner turmoil. For once, the cobblestone street outside was quiet, too. Rain had trickled down all day, leaving enough puddles and mud to deter any but the most determined traveler. Across the way, a bedraggled deliveryman threw his hands up and stomped away while I watched, abandoning his wagon to the mud.

It was almost too quiet, really. The air felt strangely heavy. Odd. Surreal. Pregnant with – *something*.

An involuntary shiver skittered down my spine. I tried to brush off the queer sense of foreboding that had settled around my shoulders.

What *was* this odd sensation? Simply a quirk of my mental restlessness? Or possibly a repeat of my visceral reaction to the notion of marrying Gregory Hilton? Because, of course, my future was now firmly set. Father was not about to change his mind. And there was exactly zero chance I would stumble across Mr. Set-My-Heart-On-Fire in the next three short months.

This queer uneasiness was making the little hairs on my forearms rise, like the feathery touch of the ghost of things to come. Much like the crazy form of “knowing” my Welsh mother used to talk about.

“There’s a parting of the heavens coming, I just *know* it,” she used to say, tugging her shawl tighter around her shoulders and glancing upward, as if the heavens themselves were whispering in her ear. “I’ve got the Welsh gift,” she’d nod to me, narrowing her eyes. “A change is definitely coming, something a-blowing our way.” And strange though it sounds, she’d almost always been right. A “witch,” they’d called her in town.

This was hardly first time that I’d wondered if I might have inherited a touch or two of her strange “gift.” It was the first time I’d felt the sensation so strongly, though. Tiny pulses rippled through my core, like a storm gathering strength. From my earliest days she’d whispered that someday I’d feel it, too.

But my mother’s “gift,” if such it was, was not one I ever wanted. The ethereal stuff of dreamers and dream-spinners, like my will-o’-the-wisp mother herself. And her magic – if magic it was – had failed to protect her when she’d needed it the most.

Me, I much prefer to keep my feet firmly planted in logic and common sense, thank you. And logic tells me there’s no such thing as second-sight. My Welsh blood or no.

Enough. Pushing the peculiar buzzing in my belly away, I snuffed out the taper and stomped back to the kitchen. A full night’s work lay ahead to tend to, and Heaven knows I had plenty to worry about already, without muddling things up any more with crazy thoughts.

Whipping a clean towel around one fist, I lifted the whistling kettle from the big stove to pour myself a

strong cup of tea. Suddenly I had a headache brewing – a bad one, by the feel of it. That familiar stabbing pain was making itself known behind my left eye, accompanied by a rumbling of nausea in my belly. Another sick headache was on the way. I mashed my lips together in frustration, realizing tomorrow might be spent in bed. Samuel would undoubtedly have something unflattering to say.

But a headache – at least that would explain the strange prickly feeling I'd mistaken for a touch of the fey. Not that I enjoyed pain. But a headache was a far more comforting thought than imagining myself saddled with my mother's "gift."

My hand shook slightly as I poured out my tea, but I managed to fill my mug and settle the kettle back on the big cast iron woodstove without spilling it. That must be it. Another awful headache. Far more logical an explanation than magic fairy dust and otherworldly premonitions.

I gulped down a swallow of the dark, thick tea and squared my shoulders. Headache or no, supper guests were arriving. Men's voices were laughing and calling out to each other in the other room. There was a fresh keg of ale to tap, loaves of bread to set out, stew to ladle up. I wiped my hands on my apron and pasted on a smile.

As for Father's ultimatum and my future life with Gregory Hilton – well, I still had three months ahead to enjoy what was left of my freedom.

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An hour later, the noise in the dining room had reached a crescendo and a few of the drunker ones were banging their plates for seconds.

I threaded my way back and forth among the long

wooden dining tables, distributing steaming bowls of soup, then freshened the bread baskets in the center of each table with more crusty, round loaves.

As usual, patrons grabbed at my skirts as I sidled past, calling out for more whiskey, more rum, another tankard of ale. I slapped wandering hands away as good-naturedly as I could, a smile fixed on my face. There was no harm or malice in it. No harm, that is, as long as I didn't encourage it beyond the joking stage. Father had taught me long ago to keep well away from the worst of the drunken ones. And the sheer size of the crowd that packed the smoky dining room was its own form of protection. The more sober guests – and Father himself, of course – never allowed things to progress beyond a quick, hopeful tug at my arm or a teasing suggestion about a late-night rendezvous.

I greeted this familiar face and that one by name, making sure everyone's bowl was filled and their glass was topped. Even the customers I didn't know by name I at least recognized by sight. They all were familiar to some degree – sailors and longshoremen, townsmen and peddlers. Some stopped in nearly every evening to eat and throw the dice. Others appeared three or four times a year whenever their ship returned to New London's deep harbor, rowing ashore for a good, hot meal on dry land after weeks eating hardtack at sea.

But tonight as I turned back to the kitchen with an armful of dirty plates, I spotted an unfamiliar face deep in the shadows of the far corner. This burly sailor wasn't one I'd ever seen here before.

Steely grey eyes sparkled above a sailor's beard. A nose sharp and straight. A rough blue pea coat that did nothing to conceal his broad shoulders. Even seated, he towered a full head over the companion beside him on

the bench.

He sat perfectly still, as if deep in his own thoughts, one large hand wrapped casually around a half-empty glass of rum. As I stared, those fiery grey eyes caught mine, and one corner of his mouth quirked upward into a tiny smile.

My eyes skittered away. No need for him to think I was directing any special attention his way. But as the night wore on, my eyes kept flicking back, searching him out in the shadows.

There was *something* about this rakish man. Something that made the skin along my arms prickle. Those calloused hands, those sparkling grey eyes, that broad chest – he was nothing like the boring men I'd met from town.

When it came time to serve up the bread pudding, my rounds of the tables brought me back again to that same darkened corner. And there he was, still slouching against the wall, and yet another full glass of rum in front of him.

“Will you have some bread pudding?”

Those grey eyes turned to me. A tiny flutter erupted in my chest.

“Aye, I'll have a bowl!” his companion interjected, slapping the wooden table in front of himself. “What's the matter, Cap'n?” He turned to peer intently at the man beside him. “Cat's got your tongue?”

The Captain – for evidently that's what he was – cocked his head slightly and looked me over slowly. “Would that something sweeter was on the menu.”

I found myself blushing and turned quickly away. He was a charmer, that one. One to stay far, far away from. With those eyes and that smile, he'd have a woman in every port – and likely a half-dozen children as well.

Still, it was as if the corner held some magnetism. My gaze kept searching out the bearded form slouching in the corner. And if I wasn't mistaken, those disconcerting grey eyes were following me, as well. There was something oddly familiar about him. If I didn't know any better, I'd say we'd been friends long ago.

Mother would have said we probably known each other in some previous life. A *looking-back*, she would call it. Sort of the reverse of premonitions. Both just a crack in the tough, thick walnut shell of reality that let glimpses of the before and after filter through.

Were they real? Well, she certainly swore by her premonitions. But she hadn't managed to foresee her own ugly death three years ago.

I brushed the thought angrily away and snapped my head up. No use dwelling on bad memories.

I circled the room again, working my own usual magic with the guests – smiling at this one, tugging teasingly on another's pipe. Beside the handsome stranger, his companion was now snoring lightly, chin settled comfortably on his chest.

The captain had already plowed his way through glass after glass of amber liquid as the evening wore on: four, five, six. Why? I couldn't help but wonder. To forget, perhaps? And if so, to forget *what*? Like every innkeeper under the sun, Father was in the habit of watering his rum slightly. But it was no small miracle that the man's handsome head was still north of the table.

Suddenly a crash erupted behind me. I spun around. A pair of inebriated patrons were grappling on the floor, fists and legs flying.

Friends of the respective combatants started pushing the long wooden tables aside to make their own way into the fray. In a heartbeat, the room disintegrated into

a frenzy of bodies: pushing, swinging, grappling, roaring. A stool sailed through the air to crash against the inn's sturdy wooden front door.

A dockworker lurched toward a cluster of men pummeling each other, knocking me sideways. I managed to maintain my balance but my eyes hastily scanned the room, searching for a path to reach the stairs. The way was blocked by a tangle of bodies writhing on the floor.

Another second body slammed into me from behind – the Captain's smaller companion, now awake though hardly sober, lurched across the room to join the fray.

To my right, the kitchen door edged open an inch. I could just make out Father's eyes and nose through the crack before it slammed shut again. He knew better than to attempt to wade into a fight at the height of the fury. Fisticuffs were one thing. But knives could well come next.

I clutched my skirts tightly about my legs and tried to edge through the fracas toward the safety of the kitchen door. Just then a brawler cocked his arm back, striking me solidly in the shoulder with his elbow. I stumbled sideways, my upper arm throbbing. It would *not* be a good thing to fall in this confusion.

A different pair of brawlers locked in an angry embrace barreled their way straight into my torso, shoving me roughly backward. Hands came out, fingers bent into claws, as the men reached for each other.

Suddenly an arm snaked around my waist, dragging me backwards until my backside was pinned against a solid, unmoving body. My fingers dug frantically into the limb around my waist, tearing at the sleeve and sinking my nails into the fingers gripping my waist.

"Let me go!" Even to my own ears, my voice was lost in the chaos of the room.

“Don’t worry, you are safe.” The deep voice was a chuckle in my right ear, redolent with the heavy odor of rum. A soft tickle of whiskers brushed my cheek. Still twisting and writhing, I craned my neck to catch a glimpse of my adversary.

Those same grey eyes I’d been staring at all night were now inches away. A tiny smile twisted his lips but the mysterious Captain didn’t loosen his grip in the slightest. Instead, step by tiny step, he began maneuvering us both through the crowd, my back still pinned firmly against his chest.

His lips remained fixed beside my right ear. “Shh, now,” he breathed as we glided a few steps closer to the wall. “We just need to find a safe spot to wait this storm out.” A body came hurtling through the crowd. One meaty arm shot out to deflect the attacker and the Captain curled his other shoulder more tightly around me for protection, turning me slightly so my cheek was now leaning against his rock-solid chest.

The storm of fear in my stomach began subsiding ever so slightly. Drunk though he must be, improper though his grasp was, this very large man seemed intent on protecting me from the unruly crowd. For now. And after that?

We were nearing the edge of the chaos now. That tree-trunk of an arm loosened slightly for a second. Then both arms were encircling me: one around my waist, the other about my shoulders. We were pressed so close together I could feel his heart thumping against my side. His warm breath washed my neck and cheek as he pivoted this way and that, scanning the room for trouble.

After all he’d had to drink, it was more than a little amazing the man was even able to stand. Still, the rum had taken its toll. His body swayed ever so slightly as

we continued to inch our way, step by step, through the mass of flailing fists and jumbled bodies.

We were nearly to the wall, now. I glanced up again and thought I detected a mischievous twist to those full lips so near my own. He seemed to be enjoying our predicament a bit too much.

"You may release me now." I made it a yell, hoping to be heard over the din. My fingers began prying again at the steely arms encircling me.

Suddenly, a disheveled figure emerged from the crowd, barreling directly toward us. Time seemed to slow down. I took in the man's eyes, red and rheumy. The neck of a heavy glass bottle clutched tightly in his upraised hand. Felt my brows lift in horror as an ugly grin spread across his face. My lips opened in a scream as he swung the bottle high overhead.

A heavy hand gripped my shoulder and spun me away, toward the wall. I caught the merest glimpse of Captain's face, lips twisted in a hard line, as he and launched himself full-force into the oncoming attacker.

My outstretched hands slammed hard against the wall. Not hard enough to break my momentum, though. The rest of my body followed, and my left cheekbone cracked painfully against the plaster.

That's going to leave a nasty bruise in the morning, I just had time to think.

And then – everything went black.