

Chapter 1

The Woman in Black

Hastelbrook village, southern England by the sea, Thursday June 2nd 1735

The shadow steeped courtyard split with light as the kitchen door opened, and Marta Denlund peered outside. A wearied young woman in bonnet and apron over her skirts, Marta eyed the bleak rolling sky with suspicion, holding back a diminutive pair of tawny headed girls as they tussled to see around their mother. “Inside my girls! There’s a dreadful chill about . . .”

A large man in working vest and rolled sleeves stood in the cluttered courtyard, searching about him by the meagre flame of a hooded lantern. “Ah, here be the sodding thing,” he grumbled, moving an ill-mended cradle to take up a well-worn axe.

“Again tonight, the cats won’t go out,” Marta said, watching as he dug up a leather satchel.

The man grimaced, slinging the bag over his shoulder. “That’ll be enough of your superstitions.”

“There’s a curse about, mark my words,” Marta insisted, “witch lights up the hill by the big house, walkin’ shadows in the cemetery; you ask those boys at the log yard if they haven’t heard the same!”

“Nay woman, you’re the only curse on this village,” he snapped, stepping closer. “I’ll be on my way now, and I’ll have those biscuits.”

“You’ve et them all, leaving none for the girls I might add.”

“Then I’ll be coming home to that stew hot, and the squealin’ brats abed,” he said, lifting her chin with his finger. “Not a bite gone missing, or you’ll feel my boot again so help me.”

Marta cleared her throat, barring the children behind her. “I s’pose we’ll make do; wages tomorrow after all,” and taking a heavy growler jug from its shelf she passed it with deliberate care into the grasping hands of her husband.

Hefting the axe the big man turned to lope away, his lantern clinking against the jug.

Marta watched the bobbing light as it faded around the fence. “Philip Denlund, you mind your drinking tonight!” she called, gathering her courage. “And no cards with the lads; tomorrow’s for buying what’s needful, not refillin’ your spirits! I’ll not have my girls sleeping for their suppers, do you hear me?”

Chasing the girls to their bed she kissed them both, and after a wary stare at the front door she unwrapped a stout carrot that had been kept out of the stew, breaking it for them to share. The little ones crunched quietly as a scrawny cat leapt upon the windowsill to hiss at the dark. Rising from the bed Marta removed her bonnet, and she took her seat in the old rocker, to creak by the fire as the wind rattled the panes.

With a crack of splitting wood the guttering lantern jostled on its hook, and the broad backed Mr. Denlund lay his axe against the wall of the woodshed. The sky tumbled starless overhead, the night being blessedly cool though the work was slow, and with a weary sound he set another log on the stump, pausing to rub well calloused hands.

The log yard had a good view of the estate road, and in the distance, beyond narrow lakes and garden parks, the vast chimney studded stronghold of Hastelbrook Hall, which rose from the hill in three uneven storeys of natural stone. The seat of power for Mr. Hiram Morley, squire of the parish and lord of the manor, it was a house Denlund knew for the grandest ballroom in Sussex, though he’d never been inside, nor had he seen the storied greenhouse

behind it, domed in facets of glass, except from the road. Tonight the great manor twinkled from ground floor windows to dormers in the unfinished garret high above, though his eyes were drawn to the candle flicker of one room in particular, his favourite to watch: the upstairs apartment of the eldest Morley daughter, the beautiful Emelyn.

“Long day for our fire-haired princess?” he said with a smirk. “Dressing for bed now I’ll wager . . .”

A sharp gust moved through the wood, murmuring about him, and looping the growler handle he tilted the jug for a long spicy draught, spluttering with a satisfied cough. Stacked high against the fence, the wood remaining to chop taunted him, and wiping his mouth he breathed a curse, snatching the axe from its rest.

“Extra guests for the season,” he huffed, kicking the new split logs aside. “Oh please my lord, let me chop all night!” and he brought down the axe, splintering the waiting log into thirds. “Can’t have the gentlefolk chilly in their downy beds now can we . . .”

A light rain began to tap the ground, and Mr. Denlund mopped his brow. “The cats won’t go out,” he repeated, wheezing with chuckles as he raised the axe, but a chill ran its fingers over his back, and he turned to find a solitary hooded figure, standing in the middle of the yard between himself and the gate. By her liteness of shape it was a woman, swathed in black, with untamed raven hair long and loose about her shoulders.

There was a stillness to her he did not like, but he stood the axe in the dirt, leaning on the handle. “Is that Miss Emelyn Morley, come to make my happiness?”

“Philip Denlund,” the woman said. Her voice was soft and silken, and as she came into the light he found her suddenly alluring, though eerily so, as though he looked upon the cold porcelain features of a beautiful doll.

Denlund leered at her. “Not Miss Morley then, but common baggage,” he said, determined to find nothing strange in the encounter. “Long way from home I’ll wager . . . How d’you know my name?”

“I have never tasted the village,” she said, watching him with an unblinking stare.

“Too right you haven’t.” Denlund chuckled with scorn, unstopping the growler for another swig. “Little wretch wants a keeper does she? But you’re in the wrong place love, or shall we wake the constable?”

“You are rotten,” the woman said, her eyes opaque as ink in the low light.

“All right keep it up!” he bristled, dropping the jug. “I’ll take you for free if I likes.”

“Rotten,” she repeated, drifting closer.

“Bugger off!” he growled, hefting the axe, “lest I cleave those little bird bones!”

But in a blink she was upon him, and he lost his feet. Turned and pressed into the woodshed he dropped the axe, fangs like sharpened steel plunged into his side below the arm, and his cry died breathless, smothered against the icy crush of her hand.

Blood surged from his veins as the woman in black drank deep. Darkness encroached, the pulse of life abandoned his body, and she pulled him close. “Thank you, Mr. Denlund.”

Laughing voices punctuated the air, a group of young men approaching the gate with cheerful lanterns. The vampiress dropped her prey, turning with a hiss, and like a whip of shadow she was gone.

Friday June 3rd

Emelyn Elizabeth Morley opened her eyes, finding herself still on the cushioned bench in the bay windows of Hastelbrook Hall’s corner library, her well-worn journal open across her lap, a copy of the *London Gazette* folded in the centre, with a stack of books at her side. For several blinks the recurring dream lingered in her mind: haunting, sonorous voices on the wind, a ghostly woman shrouded in black, both enchanting and frightful, leading her always through a high iron gate on a mist creeping road toward some foreboding place she never reached before waking . . .

At twenty-three years of age, and the eldest daughter of three, Emelyn was by all accounts a great beauty, if unapologetically red of hair which, contrasting her green eyes was aflame in the early evening light, gathered up tightly

with a few rebellious strands trailing to the neck of her day gown, smartly cinched with bell sleeves.

Today's *Gazette* was uncharacteristically dour, citing a sharp rise in cases of murder and grave robbery along the Thames. After reading this and a survey on the ravages of gin addiction among the poor, Emelyn felt a touch unwell, and sorrowing for the afflicted she gazed across the drive at the wet leafy walls of the garden labyrinth, and the angel topped fountains standing sentinel by its entrance, their waterworn bodies smooth and dark. Of sharply pruned hedges in towering concentric rings, Hastelbrook's verdant maze blocked her view of the vale and lower gardens, where the carriage drive would wend its way around, bordered by flowering paths until it broke free to find the tenant village over and beyond the lakes.

Putting the newspaper aside for a stretch, she caught sight of a pair of collared doves as they circled the old Greco-Roman gazebo; its domed limestone pavilion marking what once had been the centre of an even grander boxwood maze, until an eccentric ancestor had churned up the sloping southern half, to plant open groves between hill and water. A soft daydream settled in, and she imagined how the gardens would appear from so high above, popping rows of bushy colour splashed on a canvas of green.

But at a noise in the hall she sat up, marking the conspicuous footfalls of her youngest sister, the elfin blonde Isabelle Marie. Fresh from her debut in society at newly sixteen Isabelle was still round-faced and childlike, and though she did not share Emelyn's renown or quite her celebrated beauty, in haste to vocalize her thoughts she was without peer.

Flush with frustration, as was often the case, Isabelle dashed to her elder sister's side. "Emie I will not bear it!"

Emelyn concealed a yawn with the back of her hand. "Hello Bell, but are you returned already? Have the shops taken a holiday?"

Isabelle blinked at her. "No, Mama refused us to go; did you not hear the bells this morning?"

"I came down late, was there a fire?"

"Not a fire, no; some terrible accident in the village last night."

"Accident?" Emelyn asked, bestowing her full attention. "What sort of accident?"

"Mama wouldn't say. But it doesn't matter; my spirit is tattered, and it shan't be repaired."

"Oh dear, and who has tattered your spirit?"

Isabelle took a great breath. "Sarah is a spiteful gnash-gab! She raves on about *ghosts* or *somesuch*, and I only told her to stop, and she tells *me* to shut my mouth about John Lawford! When she knows how I ache for him! She's a beastly sister and I shall never speak to her again."

Emelyn puzzled at her. "*Ghosts or somesuch?* My dearest Bell, I'm sure she only wants you should find a man worthy of your affection, as do we all."

"Well she's a hateful way of showing it; my Mr. Lawford has been much maligned."

"He injured a gentleman," Emelyn said, standing from the bench, "in a brawl of his own making."

"A lawyer, not a gentleman," Isabelle scoffed. "But he will exonerate himself, I know it!"

"Come now, it's been three months. You needn't long for your lawless lost Lawford any longer."

"You're making fun of me," Isabelle said, rubbing her eye.

Emelyn marvelled to see her so affected. "I don't mean to . . . here," she said, handing her a kerchief. "But you deserve better than the likes of John Lawford, that's the truth."

"Do I?"

"Isabelle Marie Morley is not to be trifled with," Emelyn said. "Now, you must forgive Sarah as soon as you decently can, and I should like to write a bit more, before the clouds get any darker."

Isabelle shrugged with a sniff, dabbing her face. "Fine then I shall go; what have I to do but attend my broken heart."

"I will pray for your swift recovery," Emelyn said. "But before you go, I can't imagine Sarah raving; whatever do you mean *ghosts or somesuch?*"

Isabelle dropped the kerchief on the bench, wrinkling her nose. "She insists she saw one, or something scary

out her window, north up the hill among the headstones.”

“Did she? Well I’m sure it was only a nightmare.”

“But are we not plagued by foul rumours enough without her inventions?” Isabelle flustered. “I’ve never seen a ghost, and I should very much like to . . . Oh and I’ve meant to ask, shall I have your room when you move away?”

“What? Heavens Bell I’m not engaged yet; I’ve not even a prospect. You shan’t have my room while I’m making perfectly good use of it.”

“Then I shall move to the rose room,” Isabelle said with a shrug. “I don’t want Sarah’s next to mine,” and she turned to swish away, back into the hall.

Emelyn stared after her, and as rain began to play upon the windows she resumed her place on the bench, taking up her journal to continue:

‘Accident in the village last night. Sarah seeing ghosts? And Isabelle still on about John Lawford. But I could never do as she does, drop my heart at a man’s feet, in hope that he bends his knee to return it. The sooner she forgets him, we’re all the better for it.’

The little droplets washed higher on the panes, and she watched vacantly a few moments, before resuming:

‘Yet for all that, Bell speaks true. Have I not promised before God and family to be married by summer’s end? So I must be grateful for life and present liberties, at least until third week September.’

Emelyn tapped the pencil on her lip, and casting about for distraction she dwelt again on the dream of the woman in black, which by now had all but faded, leaving only a persistent sense that she’d met the woman before, somewhere.

The rain increased, shadows lengthened over the wind washed gardens, and clutching her leather-bound journal to her chest Emelyn determined that should her supernatural visitant appear again while she slept, every detail must be put to paper.