



A HOUSE *of* COLD IRON

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CHAPTER I
HERE, ALL ROADS LEAD UP

HAUNTED DEEP

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PART I

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS, FIRES WITHIN FIRES

CHAPTER ONE

HERE, ALL ROADS LEAD UP

Jacob woke to a familiar bout of nails searing into his spine. Rain pattered the canvas overhead and his neck popped in tune as he stretched and flexed the aches away. Other sounds joined the melody. Soft snores of huddled women. Shrill winds buffeting their wagon. An occasional chirruping belly, more common as the road grew long. And...something else...*What else?* The question dredged him from the brine sloshing between his ears. *What else? What...*

He rolled his shoulders and stretched as best he could, but the cab overflowed with limbs and bodies quilted twice, thrice over, end to end, pinning his legs nearly to his chest, his back flat against the wall. No blanket for Jacob, only his worn greatcoat, layered shirts, breeches, and mud-rusted cavalry boots staved what little of the cold they could. His gun belt weighed slack against his thigh like a numb limb. The chill and damp wove between every layer, clung to his flesh, heedless of leather and iron both.

He laced his fingers, cracked the knuckles beneath his gloves. He breathed warmth onto his palms, flattened them against his cheeks, but could not abate the shards burning there. *Morning soon*, he reminded himself, imagining his cheeks blooming from roses to gore. He hugged his chest, leaned back into the wagon frame, spine wriggling over and under though he knew the unforgiving pine would not bend for him. Rain washed down the canvas

outside; he felt it like ghostly fingers brushing down his neck, hair tingling on end as if to meet the wispy tendrils on the other side. The chill crawled once more down his spine.

“Gods a’mighty,” he muttered.

The rain ignored him, continued its patter...Patter, snores, wind, bellies and...wheels?

Jacob’s hand shot to the floor of the wagon, shocked as if the slats had turned to gold, the wood motionless beneath his fingers. The creak of the wheels nowhere to be heard, the pounding hooves, the groaning yokes, the trundle and sway...

The wagon sat motionless.

He wracked his mind for the time but the dark of the cab looked no different than the dim that greeted sleep. His fingers slid toward his pistol as he rose among the slumbering bodies filling the wagon and worked his way to the front, hopscotching fingers with clumsy grace, shifting bodies with toe and ankle. He braced a hand against a rib overhead as he reached the front of the cab—the other gripped the familiar curve of his iron. He grabbed his cloak out of an open footlocker, whirled it about his shoulders all without removing his hand from his gun. He pulled the hood down over his brow and ignored the beads welling there. Cautiously, he peered through the canvas drape leading up into the driver’s box. Forefinger caressed trigger guard. A leaden knot clotted his stomach.

The downpour assaulted the awning guarding the driver. Wind flung sidelong coated polished wood in streaking rivulets. And there sat Abel, a drenched and dripping thing, bundled chin to shin in a cloak and blankets of his own, haloed orange with lantern light. He shimmered like a figure carved from glass. The brim of his slouch hat caught the rain, poured a steady stream down his back, his head angled into the impermeable night. The lantern swung with an iron song on its hook, but its paraffin light scarcely cut the dark. Jacob scanned the surrounding pitch, ears sifting the torrent for hoofbeats, trampled mud, snapping twigs—What stopped them? Where

were they hiding?

“Abel,” Jacob called, a silent breath against the drumming rain. “Abel!”

The man jolted, whirled on Jacob. Rainwater sloshed off his hat, slapped Jacob across the eyes.

“Ah! Sorry, Jake, I—” Abel pushed back his hat. “I—I—”

“Why aren’t we moving?” Jacob wiped his face with a corner of his cloak.

Abel swallowed his stammer; it vanished like coins down a well. His eyes grew blank and wide, distant. Lips moved beneath his sodden mustache but shaped no words. Instead, he gestured into the darkness swallowing the road head. Jacob could see nothing—the night a wall, a thrumming blackness spitting hoary gusts into his eyes.

“Gods a’mighty, Abbie, what—?”

Lightning cracked the sky.

A stake, too tall and bare to be a tree, had collapsed across the road, splintering a cobbled fence. Its peak pointed straight at Abel’s heart, held aloft by the device mounted there.

A wheel.

A wagon wheel, wide as the span of a man’s arm, a little more maybe. Within the wheel hung a body, a woman, a corpse, burned. Heavy bones sagged into charred and blackened flesh. Arms and legs stretched outward toward the rim, wrists bound around firm iron spokes with wire made for fencing. Shriveled arms bent and jutted at ungodly angles like nails under a clumsy hammer. Tatters of a gown still clung to her. Outlines of a ribcage, hip bones, gnarled, knobby legs splayed north and west, all bound up with wire. Wire fused with flesh, melded—melted together—like veins gone traitorous. Her head pointed south southeast, the bolt’s blues and whites carving a skull out of the blackness. Wisps of hair, charred and crumbling, coiled the spokes. Her lips peeled away like rotting orange rind, her teeth and jaw stabbing up from shadows. Empty sockets stared down into the flooded trenches running astride the road, a gaping visage stared back up, trapped in a scream.

Beyond the cobbled fence, more stakes stood tall in the mud, upright as the lords intended. More blackened heaps lay skyward under wire bonds, their sinful vessels baked by the sun, scourged by the rain. Above them all, passed rows and rows and rows of standing wheels, the peak of a church tower stabbed the clouds. Sharp and clean. Bowed at its feet, log-striped lodges, sharp-toothed sawmills, hills of stripped and soaking pine, all in rows. Rows and rows and rows. A rod caught the lightning on the church's steeple, its base mounted atop an iron wheel. A sacred breaking wheel. Black and cold.

The image shone a blink before the night consumed the world again, but every detail danced on Jacob's eyes. Thunder followed, rolled out into the deep, before the hammering silence of the storm resumed.

Jacob closed his eyes and thought.

Abel waited, reins in hand, like a child twisting a teddy in his fists.

"Mm. Lovely garden they've made for themselves, aye?"

Abel sobbed, hard and sharp, a single wracking breath. He collapsed in his seat, cradled his face in his hands, reins pressed into his brow. Jacob chewed his lip and wished he had more than sardonics to offer. He lost the grip on his pistol, dropped the drape behind him, and climbed up into the box with Abel. He clasped a hand over one of the man's broad and trembling shoulders. *My man*, he thought, *such a mountain of a man. How could he be made so small?* Jacob could feel the chill on him through his gloves. Sidelong rain pelted their faces like a whelp flicking water off their fingertips. Ahead, the oxen lowed impatiently.

"Ah, now, love," said Jacob, "this won't be the first hole of fanatics we've scotched over, aye?" He smiled pleadingly. "'One for sorrow, two for mirth,' and all that."

Abel shook his head, still cradled in his hands. "A stake or two up in the square," he spoke into his palms, "that—that I can understand. We all have to show our devotion...but, damn the gods, Jake..."

Jacob's lungs fluttered in his chest as a face rolled out of the darkness.

Hannah. Hannah Holbrook. Her skin rolled away like ash's bark in winter, all black and char beneath. Her eyes poured down her cheeks, lips mouthed words he could not hear. He snapped his eyes shut, but she remained, followed him to the place behind his eyes. Swam its depths like an abyssal sea. Like she lived there, hearth and home, in the place behind his eyes. With all the other horrors.

He'd caught her name off a fishmonger when the burning was done, as the crowds drifted away, the evening's entertainment gone. *She liked the herring*, he'd said, *or maybe it was the cod or some'ing else...what any the boys haul up these days, aye, right? They's settin' down more rot than roe these days, if y'catch m' meanin'.* He forced a hard chuckle out his throat, but his eyes held no joy. *Such a nice girl*, he said, husky and sad. *Pretty, too. Never smelt a whiff a' hex on her afore now, swear it. No, sir. Poor...poor thing. Poor wretched thing.*

Jacob's fingers eased off Abel's shoulder.

"I know, love, but...we can't turn 'round now. We're more'n, what? Ten leagues out from Walpurga, another fifteen from the nearest crossroad that'd get us back south. And too far west, too near the highways, rangers'll sniff us out from under the heaviest, blackest rocks what grow from these mountains."

Abel clutched the reins in his hands, wringing the leather in his grip, eyes shut so tight Jacob expected blood to trail his cheeks any moment.

"Like as not, these woods, these roads, that—" Jacob pointed into the abyss, through the fields of breaking wheels and broken women, toward oncoming civilization, "—that goddamn village of log riding bitch burners is our only way south to the Pass."

Abel threw down his hands, glared Jacob in the face. "Don't—" but the din swallowed the word as it hitched in his throat. "Don't call them—"

"They'll be called worse'n that when they're up on a fucking wheel!" The rolling fire in Jacob's chest became a searing poker as the words flew from his lips. He wished he could snatch them out the air and swallow them back down no sooner had they escaped. But if they burned, Abel did not flinch;

he only shook his head slowly, downcast features etching in and out of the orange glow. He turned away, faced the darkness again.

Jacob swallowed the apology swelling in his throat. The rain filled the void his lips could not.

As moments rolled away, Jacob realized he was shivering. How long had he been so cold? How long had these shakes filled his fingers?

At last, he seized a thought from the air.

“We—”

“I see him sometimes.” Abel rested his chin on laced-fingered hands. He stared down the darkness like a brawler in the pit. “A man. I see a man off the road, just...standing there. The fields...all flooded over like a lake, you know, like the lake back home, and I see him standing over it, walking it.” Fingers unfurled to rub his eyes. So hard he might pluck them out. Jacob winced at the sight, gritted his teeth. “Like my gran used to tell us.” He looked at Jacob then, his eyes whiskey amber through the bloodshot, the same as they’d ever been, the only thing unchanged from the boy Jacob knew so many brief and endless years ago. “All those stories.” Nostalgia creased his brow and a smile shaped his mustache, lips hidden beneath the copper cord of it, his beard glimmered metallic, too, alight with rainwater. “How he walks on the flood brought by storms, bringing...sickness and sin. He made the river run over one spring and, ‘O Sweet Kath!’ her favorite dress vanished off the line, or the Goyers lost three sheep to the bluetongue, and ol’ Roz got caught in the stables—again!—with the Baker’s boy this time.” He laughed, low in his throat, while his smile hung desperately to his cheeks, whiskers shimmering. “The man on the flood came...and brought all his wickedness...I see him following us.”

The Drowned One, Jacob heard, unbidden echoes spiraling up his skull. He would not whisper his name. He refused. Not because the speaking gave it power, mind. No, sir. Of course not. The speaking merely marks a fool, you see. But he knew the name nonetheless. Remembered old Jossey’s stories as well as Abel, aye. Deep in the pit of him they lived. With so many other

childish things.

Jacob gazed into the surrounding pitch. He saw nothing there. Nothing at all. *Black like a shadow he walks, a shadow out of shadows, glidin' 'cross still waters.* Jossey worked a knife around a potato while Jacob clumsily worked his own. He could dress a deer quicker and cleaner than anyone in town, he reckoned, near as well as his pa, but spuds confounded his thumbs. *Shunned from land, shunned from the Deep, he walks atop the glassy seas, followin' rain, followin' storm. It were him that put the wrath in Joseph Keatch, you know, mhmm—bloodied up his boy so bad the hearin' fell out the lad's ears. Poor dear.* Skin flew over the grass beneath their feet. *It were him that put the fever in Julie Hannover, too. More'n a week I spent on my knees aside her ma, speakin' the words, keepin' them close, unsewing the knots in our hearts the Drowned One put there, till that fever broke. For that, he took a jar a' my best dried currants and gave it to Cooney, the miserable scourge. That dog wound up dead within a week.* Across the way, Jacob's father haggled with Abel's over the price of some deerskins while Abel mended their ailing cart beneath the awning of their shop. Jacob had tanned the skins himself, put the arrow through the buck's heart, too. *It were him that put the voices in yer mama's head.* A wild slice opened Jacob's thumb. Blood streaked his callused palm. *It were him that turned your father from the light, the fire, and the Mother.*

Jacob breathed deep of dampened air. *Ain't no gods*, he told himself. *Ain't no gods 'cept what's dead in the sea.*

"You need sleep," said Jacob. He could slap himself. They all knew that well enough, the shadows under Abel's eyes especially.

Abel nodded slowly. Whether to him or the night Jacob did not know. He could not bear more silence to pass between them.

"We gotta bed out this storm, lamb. Ain't no way we'll make twenty more leagues in this rain. Either the oxen drown, or the mud buries us." *Or we drown in the mud*, he thought—a chill scurried up his spine.

"I know," said Abel, a man on the gallows with the rope wound about his neck. Loose yet heavy.

He shuddered one last time like a tree shaking autumn's last flock of

sparrows before the winter stillness. He straightened and looked Jacob in the eye—sweet whiskey amber. The lantern light reflected in Jacob's eyes; he saw it glittering in the corner of Abel's. Jacob ached. In the heart. In the gut. In his frozen knuckles. Abel nodded and returned to the road.

He stretched the reins out between his hands, an art in his gesture, like a fiddler with a bow. He flicked.

"Hayyup!" he cried like a pistol, a shot even the rain could not swallow.

The ox train surged. Hooves beat. Teeth champed iron bits. Muscles groaned into wood and leather. Jacob gripped his seat, hoped the mud hadn't swallowed up their wheel. But with a sucking lurch, the wagon rose like a ship against a swell and fell forward. They were out. The wheels and hooves joined the rain's pounding rhythm and Jacob felt the world balancing under his feet as the wagon swayed and bumped.

Abel guided the oxen around the fallen stake, around the mounted wheel. As the lantern swung, the curve of it swam up out of the night like a kraken's scything tendril, straight for Jacob's throat, then vanished once more into the void.

Jacob's grip loosened. He pulled his hands into his lap, limp and aching. Lightning found the church's rod again, steeple outlined like a black dagger against the sky, staked wheels at its base. All in rows. Jacob's gut knotted as the vision lingered in the back of his eyes. He watched it fade but the knot remained. Chill crooked through his shoulders and his spine grew taught, too taught. *Enough*, he thought. *Enough*. He pushed himself up, careful of the jostling boards beneath his feet. He leaned into Abel, gripped the man's shoulder again. Abel looked at him, a knife-sharp outline in orange, little streams spilling off his hat. Jacob tipped up Abel's hat, leaned in close, pushed his face into that bramble of copper coils pouring from the man's cheeks. His lips found Abel's mustache, Abel's lips found his. A hearth's worth of warmth flared over his cheeks. He pressed deeper, tickled by whiskers, hungry like a man starved, aching in places he didn't know could ache. He pressed his chest into his man and the damp soaked through his

cloak and into his breast, but Jacob did not care. He'd found the one spot of warmth left in the world and it killed him to let it go.

But he did.

He always did. He always had to be the one to end it—Abel never would. His lips trailed after Jacob's, so Jacob halted him with a caress, thumb running just below those amber eyes. He felt rainwater stream down his cheeks.

"We've survived worse storms than this, aye, Abbie?"

"Aye," said Abel, a smile in his voice, lips once more hidden beneath his corded mustache.

Jacob's heart sank to see him turn away, back to the oxen and the road and the night ahead. He climbed back into the wagon, drape collapsing across his back and shoulder like a shroud.

The lantern robbed him of his night eyes, but the snores assured him the huddled mass had not vanished in his absence. No doubt they'd crept into the niche he'd crawled from like spilt molasses, so he stayed where he sat on the threshold, rain-pattered canvas draped across his shoulders. He threw back his hood. Wiped his face clean.

He buckled. Clenched hands over his heart.

The damp on his chest had burrowed deep, pierced his breastbone like an icepick. He huddled into himself, shivering, arms clutched round as if to throttle the cold from him like air from a windpipe. The bloom on his cheeks had died. The chill returned, and it brought a wracking pain that threatened to tear bones from muscle. He trembled for long, ceaseless moments, seconds dilating to minutes. When he felt his limbs would obey him for one damnable moment, his fingers searched the pockets of his coat; and against their tremors, out from the folds came a matchbook and a brass tin. Thumb clumsily found clasp, the tin popped open and the caramelized cinnamon scent of Maidenhead leaf filled his nostrils. The chill could not rob his fingers of their skill, it seemed. A cigarette found his lips and a match burst alight as if hexed aflame, stem pinched between thumb and forefinger, both entirely

numb. *These limbs are not my own*, he thought madly. He wanted to chuckle at his own lunacy, but his chest could scarcely hold one lonely breath.

He held the flame to the cigarette, breathed deep, held a syrupy billow in his lungs. Flesh that quivered like mainsails in a maelstrom numbed, grew calm and heavy against his bones. He exhaled, and smoke dragged the chill out of him. Wisps drifted up his nose, his eyes gone lazy, unfocused. He shuddered, last of the shakes escaping, tasted cinnamon warming his throat, and unwound. His head fell back against the drape, ghosts of the rain tickling his neck. Despite everything, he felt himself relax a little and rested his eyes.

Third till last, he thought. The two that remained stared up at him from their tin, thin little beauties in their black leaf dresses. They knew they wouldn't survive to Fort Ramage. Jacob would be a fidgeting mess for weeks on end before they found a town with decent smoking tobacco. And he'd be damned before he put the mulch-stuff coffin nails that passed for smokes around these mountains between his teeth.

The match still burned between his fingers. He savored the heat seeping through his gloves though his fingertips would soon be burning.

Wardwell, he thought, gazing into the flame, and a laugh bounced in his chest. "One for poor, two for mirth," he whispered.

Barely a smudge on the map. Nestled in the mountains where a road crossed a river.

"Three for a funeral, four for birth."

They make wood. They make charcoal.

"Five for silver, six for gold."

Jacob twiddled the match up his fingers, giving the flame every whittle. Good heat was scarce as good smoke in this storm. The wood grew thin and black but refused to crumble.

"Seven for a secret, never to be—"

He tensed. The little flame filled the cab with warm glow. Iscah St. Tryphine sat across the landscape of quilts and blankets between the front and back of the wagon. She lay against the canvas, one elbow rested on the

tailgate, thumb and forefinger absently plucking at her lower lip. Silver coiled rings decorated her fingers, an obelisk mounted on her thumb marked with some Hohenhaller symbol—a seal, maybe, intricate and knotted.

The road had tested her wardrobe, but her finery proved a match thus far. The stitching of her coat joined raven-feathered silks with coal black leathers, stretched but not yet frayed. Across her shoulders, floral brocades, black on black, shimmered in and out of time with the shifting light. Fur trimming still stood on end as if fresh skinned off whatever bristling panther gave them up.

Jacob taunted her for those luscious curls. Those waves of velvet black cascading her cheeks, tickling the small of her back, they'd never last the journey, lass. She'd have a nest for rats not two—hell, *one*—week on the road. But, fool Jacob, they remained a rolling tide adrift in time, dancing only with the bounce and glide of her gait.

She sat in the matchlight as if unaware; the glow stroked her face like gentle, hungry fingers, her eyes unfocused, dreaming into distant lands hidden beyond the walls.

Then she looked at him as if she felt his gaze, locks dancing as the flame waltzed in her eyes. Not blue, not violet, but some godforsaken word Jacob could never...*indigo*. Of course, that damn shade of purple the 'Corde bloodied its slaves' hands to the bone for.

How much had she heard?

What would it matter? She'd seen enough wheels already. They all had. What's one more? What's a hundred? Jacob shared her gaze for long moments as the match continued burning. It singed his gloves, the fingertips beneath. Iscah's fingers lightly stroked the swell of her lip, the only pink on her porcelain face. *You are dull*, her eyes seemed to say, *dreadfully dull*. Jacob felt threads of smoke drifting up his cheeks from between his parted lips. He inhaled sharply, made them vanish. He flicked his hand.

The pitch returned. SnORES filled the cab. The rain coated the world. The trundle beneath his feet unwound the knot in his stomach. Sleep would not

come for the rest of the night, but lucid half-dreams pushed through the chill and the damp. He saw a man amid rain, a shadow out of shadows. He saw a church steeple against a bolted sky. He saw the wheels.