

Chapter One: Ellen

ELLEN: The first time I saw her, I thought of mirrors. What I mean is, I've heard that magicians use mirrors to fool the people watching, to make it look like a cup is floating, or a man is standing on a stage when he's actually behind a curtain. I thought that's what they had done. To make her look like that. She was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen, but she couldn't be real. Not like that.

My name is Mary Ellen Sheridan, though I've always hated the name "Mary," so I pretend like it's not there. You can call me Ellen. My ma runs the rag and bone shop in the little alley off of Melmoth, just behind the church. She doesn't know I'm here. Obviously. I wanted to tell somebody what happened, though. And I know you'll keep it to yourself. You don't have a choice, right? I

It's not like old times. I know it's not wrong for me to be out and working for myself, no matter what Mr. Collins the tobacconist says. I'm not ashamed to make my own way. I know my ma would have it different, but I can't live under what she says forever. I'm not like them other ones. It's not that I need forgiveness for. It's not that I need to tell somebody.

I need to tell you how I met Dr. DeQuincey, why I went into that place to begin with. How I first saw those other...things...he keeps in there, the ones people pay to see. How I met Saoirse. But I suppose I'm doing it all backwards. Putting the cart before the chickens is hatched, my ma would say. Let me start over.

Forgive me Father, for I have sinned.

[Theme music; credits]

I'm not gonna pretend my ma ain't a criminal. I mean sure she runs a "shop," but that's not all she does. We all live in the three rooms above the shop--nine of us altogether if you count Samuel, and as he's there two or three nights a week, I do count him. There's four of us girls in the one room, and if you think it doesn't get close and hot in the summers, you haven't lived in this city for long. The shop sells whatever it can--papers and knives and teapots and bits of odds and ends. We move a good bit of bone, too, for fertilizer and for feeding dogs, I s'pose. I don't know why anybody'd want to buy old bones, but I've seen 'em do it.

But that's all front of shop business. Out the back of the shop, she sells other things. I don't know if she knows that I know, if you see what I mean, but I do. I don't like to think about the things I've seen back there.

The other kids aren't really my brothers and sisters. Or at least I don't think so. I always wondered about Roisin, cause she looks like me. Same dark hair, same angular face. I always knew my ma was my ma, but it was also pretty common knowledge that the rest of them are just vagabonds. Orphans, cast-offs. Everybody knows Mrs. Sheridan's is a place to go if you ain't got a place to go. She'll take you in. She'll put you to work.

This is all part of it, by the way. I'm not avoiding telling the story. I'm telling you why I left that day. See my ma wants all of us to come up in the family business. And for Roisin or Emma or Sean or Samuel that makes a certain kind of sense. They probably wouldn't be able to find another kind of work. Aidan could, but he's too mean to want to. But I know I can do better. I can read. I pick up things quick. I ain't braggin, that's just the way it is. And some of the stuff I've seen...well, the family business is not something I'm particularly keen to be part of, if you see what I mean. So I went out looking for work.

Well, if I'm honest, I had a big screaming fight with my ma about not helping out enough around the shop--like I don't sit behind that counter every goddamn day--and I left. Slammed the door and all. Very dramatic, which I come by honest. It wasn't the first time, and I know I can go back anytime. I've already left and been back a couple of times, and ma didn't say much. But now I don't know if it even matters because...

Anyway.

The city is like my back yard, see. I stormed off that day, and I just ducked into the crowd near the drinking-saloon (which is a high-falutin' name for a place like Old Dick's, but that's what the sign says). It was near dusk, but the streets was full of people, like always. I looked around for my friend Jack, but he wasn't on his corner. So I just walked.

I thought I might go all the way to the park. I love the city but sometimes I need a tree, if you understand me. I certainly didn't mean to end up where I did. But here's what happened. It's a damned headache to walk around this city if you're a woman, and that day was worse than usual. Two men, old enough to be my father, called out to me before I got to the corner, telling me what they'd like to do with me if they had me alone, between the two of them. They either thought I was a working girl, or they just wanted to get a rise out of me. I know ma would disagree, but I do try to keep my temper. I could hear them laughing behind me. I ignored them and kept walking. But I was on edge, you see. Or else I wouldn't have done it.

I turned onto Havisham, hoping to cut over towards the park through the square. But the street preacher was out by the railings, like he *always* is. I had to pass right by him, so I put my head down and tried to do it quick. But luck wasn't with me, and he saw me and called out. "Sister," he says, like he knows who I am, "you should not be walking the streets with your head

uncovered. God can see you." And I know I should have just kept walking, but I was still steamed at my ma, and them two old fellas, and I don't always think before I do things.

So I stopped and looked up at him. The preacher was standing on an apple crate, so I only came up to his belt. I had to squint against the setting sun to see his weasely little face. I said, "If my hair makes you so randy, maybe God oughta be watching *you*, you perverted old stick!" And then I kicked his crate. And like I said, I don't always think, and I didn't mean for the whole crate to slide, or for him to fall in the middle of the street like that.

He tried to get up, but his feet were all tangled in the crate. He started shouting: "Help! This whore tried to rob me!" Which is a damned lie. But he kept yelling and calling me "whore" and people started coming at me and I took off running across the square and into the alleys off behind.

Now, I don't get lost in the city. I know it like I know the shop. But I suppose I wasn't looking where I was going, and I'm not exactly sure where I ended up. I ran for a long time, dodging between promenading couples and sailors and costermongers and clerks on their way home from banks or wherever it is clerks do what they do. I know I'm too old to be running like that, like I'm a common street rat, but I did. I ran hard as ever I could. And I wasn't crying, because I don't cry, but I wasn't what you'd call easy in my mind. He probably wasn't even a real preacher. Father Froud would never have talked to me like that, no matter what I was wearing. You wouldn't, would you? Of course not.

After a while, I don't know how long exactly, I stopped and leaned against a lamppost. They got gaslight in most of this part of the city, but the sun wasn't quite down, and the lamplighters hadn't come around. It was dusky, and the shadows were stretching out across the street.

I was in a street full of houses. Biggish, some of them, fine and fancy. Houses that had been here a while, with servants and gardeners and all. Porches and real yards with real grass. Some of them were not quite as fancy. House that maybe once had been grand but now were fading and falling. Like a row of old ladies who still got dressed up for the ball. It was way more posh than the part of town I was used to, but it wasn't the poshest I'd seen.

I guess I felt sick from running so hard. My breath was stabbing my chest and I had a sharp pain in my side. My feet were aching, and I bent and loosened the laces on one my boots enough that I could rub my calf down to my ankle. I was all turned around. Like in a dream, you know what I mean, like things aren't where they ought to be, even though everything feels weirdly familiar? The light was wrong somehow. The sun had been setting when I left the rag and bone shop, and the whole sky was lit in orange and gold. Do you know that kind of light? It's almost holy, if that doesn't sound ridiculous. The undersides of the clouds are a purple smear, like bruises on pale skin, and that orange and gold glow spills all over the cobblestones. Sunset usually comes fast in the city--we get a few minutes of that orange and gold sky, and then the dusk falls. "The gloaming," my ma calls it. But there was no gloaming yet. I had walked for a little while, and then I had run for what seemed like forever. And the light hadn't changed. It was still that holy glow, like no time was passing.

There was no one else on the street, which looking back I realize is more than strange. I wasn't scared. I know how to find my way out of someplace strange. I picked a direction, and I started walking. I knew that I'd eventually find a cross-street or see a church spire or come across some kind of landmark that would show me my bearings and then I'd know how to get home.

So I wasn't even looking properly at the houses I was walking past. I don't know why I happened to look up at that particular one. But it was perfect timing. If I was ever in a mood to

see a for hire sign, it was right then. The sign was thin, white-painted wood with "Maidservant Wanted--Inquire Within" in spidery black letters. All I could think was how much better my life would be as a maidservant than what they had planned for me back home. I was on the porch before I knew what I was about, banging the brass knocker.

It was a two-story house with a big porch on the front. The yard wasn't huge, but there was a beautiful old oak tree on one side with some old rope hanging from it. The door was painted a bright green, like an emerald, and the brass knocker was shaped like a cat with a fiddle. It was funny. You don't expect that kind of knick-knack in a fancy street like that.

It took a long time for anyone to answer. I had time to think better of knocking, and I was turning to go back down the steps when the door opened. I was going to introduce myself, but when I saw the man standing at the door the words died in my mouth.

He was no taller than I am, but he looked as strong as an elephant. His chest was like a whiskey barrel, and his arms looked like the columns that held up the porch roof. He was wearing a suit like an undertaker, and I was worried that if he flexed his muscles he would rip through the jacket like paper. He smiled at me, standing there with one foot on the steps to leave, and his teeth were white as chalk.

"You're here for the position?" he asked. His voice was deep and rough. He had a faint Irish accent, not as strong as my ma's, but definitely there.

I said, "Yes, I was..." and who knows what I was going to say--"just passing by?" but it didn't matter because he interrupted me.

"Right this way, miss," and he went inside. I didn't even have time to laugh proper at him calling me "miss," I followed him inside the house.

He led me through a foyer into a big sitting room, way nicer than anything I was used to. Flowered wallpaper, big overstuffed chairs my ma would have broken laws to have to sell in her shop. Indoor gaslamps, and an honest-to-god *electric* light by the sofa.

The big man said "I'll fetch Dr. DeQuincey," and he left me there. I sat on the edge of the red velvet sofa, and took in the room. There was a big, gilt-framed mirror hanging across from me, and when I saw myself in it I gasped. My hair had come down all around, and strands of it was stuck to my face with sweat from my running. Buttons were undone on my dress. I had torn my hem. I looked frightful; nothing like a respectable maidservant.

I went to the mirror and tried to do something with my hair. I had most of pinned back up, and had rebuttoned my dress--it was my good blue one at least--when the door opened and the doctor came in.

My first thought was that Dr. DeQuincey was even bigger than the man who had answered the door, but I immediately realized that was a silly thing to think. He was taller, but he was just a regular-sized man. Not thin, not too fat, with a pointy waxed beard and thin mustaches. But he was one of the grandest gentlemen I had ever seen. He looked like he was dressed for the opera: spotless black tails, shiny black shoes, and a starched white shirt with stiff collars held with an emerald pin. His waistcoat was a crazy patchwork, all colors, bright and gaudy like a Romany quilt. It was the only thing about him that seemed out of place, but then I thought, he's a showman. He must be. He wasn't wearing a top hat, but I just knew there was one in the next room, waiting for him, along with a silver-headed cane and a pair of white gloves.

"I am Theodore DeQuincey!" he said, and his voice was much bigger than anything else in the room. "And you, my dear? You are?"

I said my name. I didn't know if I was supposed to curtsy. I tried and didn't fall over, so that felt like a success. I said, "I'm here about the maidservant position." And then I remembered to add "sir" at the end. I knew a few maidservants, and it seemed to me as long as you talked above your station and said "sir" and "ma'am" you were halfway there.

Dr. DeQuincey looked at me for a long minute. I started to feel uncomfortable, and for a moment I wondered what kind of house I had come into. The memory of those two old men had stuck with me. But then he said, "Do you know who I am?"

I admitted I didn't. But then he didn't know who I was either, so I don't see as it was uneven.

"I am an exhibitor," he said. "A curator of the impossible." And then he asked me if I had ever heard of the great General Tom Thumb. Of course I had. Everybody had.

"You run a freak show?" I said. That was the last thing I had expected. "You're like P.T. Barnum?"

He made a face that told me I likely shouldn't mention P.T. Barnum in front of him a second time. "Hardly," he said. "Barnum is a charlatan." Which I found out later means "fraud."

"I hold no truck with the sawdust floors of the carny fairgrounds," he said. Or something like that. It's hard to give you Dr. DeQuincey word for word. He usually talked like he was front of an audience, and like he wanted his audience to know he was a little smarter than they were.

"Within the walls of this house are *real* wonders," he said, "not the fakery and exploitation of men like P.T. Barnum."

I said "okay." Because what else should you say? Dr. DeQuincey told me that there were three "denizens" in the house. That's the word he used. And rich people would come to the house and pay money to see them. I asked what "denizen" meant. He said it meant they were very special, and that there had never been anything like them seen in America.

"If you come here to work for me, you will become part of our family," he said. "I will trust you with some very particular knowledge. Can you be trusted, Miss Sheridan?"

I thought about what I knew about my ma's back room dealings. Surely a swanky showman like Dr. DeQuincey didn't have any secrets that could even touch those kinds of things. I never peached.

"You can trust me, Dr. DeQuincey," I said. "Believe me, I can keep any secret you have."

He smiled when I said that. And even then, I had a quick thought: it was good to make Dr. DeQuincey smile. And it might not be so good to make him angry.

But that's any man, far as I can tell.

"I think you may be the sort of person we are looking for," the doctor said. "Would you be willing to work for a trial period? You would be paid the full salary of course, and you could take your meals here in the house with us."

Outside the window, the sky was still orange and gold. I still had that dreamlike feeling, like the things I was doing were just part of a play. Or an exhibit. I didn't know whether I liked Dr. DeQuincey or if I was afraid of him.

But I knew one thing above all that. This job would pay more than ma ever could. This job would have class, and it wouldn't land me in jail. Ma could never do this job. But I could.

"I'd like that very much," I said. And I curtsied again. Can't hurt.

"Then perhaps you should meet your charge," he said.

"My charge? Am I not to be a maid-of-all-work?"

He turned at the door. "Oh no my dear. You won't be cleaning windows and scrubbing floors in this house. We have a charwoman for that. One of our denizens is a young lady. She is

younger than you I would guess, though not by much. She is quite...delicate, and needs attending to in the manner to which she is accustomed. You are to be her personal maidservant."

I didn't know what to say to this. So I didn't say anything. What I did was follow him out of the sitting room and up the stairs to the apartments of this young lady denizen. I was thinking a thousand things. Personal maid to a well-to-do young woman--and she must be well-to-do or else she'd have no personal maid--was more than I had dreamed. What would it be like to be a companion? To have a companion? Would I need new clothes? How could I learn what I needed to do the job, without giving away that I didn't know it? I'm good at faking my way through things, living with ma you have to be, but this was a step higher.

But then all that went right out of my head. Just like you, in an instant my life changed forever. I knew I would never be the same, that everything I thought I knew about the world was about to be wiped away like street grime in the rain. I followed Dr. DeQuincey up the stairs, and he opened the door. And I saw her. And everything changed.

[Theme music; credits]

