



# HESTER

*A* Novel *Laurie Lico Albanese*

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Laurie Lico Albanese



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*For Kirk, Melissa, John, Claudia—  
I see the past and the future in your beautiful faces*

*She had not known the weight until she felt the freedom!*

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

## A NOTE TO THE READER

*Synesthesia is a unique sensory phenomenon that affects less than ten percent of the world's population. A person with synesthesia—or “joined perception”—often experiences multiple sensory responses when only one sense has been stimulated. Many creative people experience this comingling of senses: the painter Kandinsky saw colors when he listened to music, and the musician Billie Eilish reports a wide array of synesthetic experiences that include color, sound, texture, and temperature.*

*Two types of synesthesia are experienced in Hester. These are grapheme-color synesthesia, in which letters are associated with colors, and chromesthesia, in which sound evokes experiences of color, shape, and texture. Synesthesia was not widely known or researched until the early nineteenth century. Therefore, to the characters in this story, episodes of synesthesia are mystifying and inexplicable.*

## ONE

Salem was meant to be a new beginning, a place where the sharp scent of cinnamon and tea perfumed the air with hope; a place where the colors could be safe and alive in me. I was nineteen years old and Nathaniel Hathorne was twenty-four when we met on those bricked streets. His fingers were ink-stained; he was shy but handsome. The year was 1829, and we were each in our own way struggling to be free—he with his notebooks, I with my needle.

Some people will tell you that Nat spent the better part of a decade after Bowdoin College alone in his room learning how to write. But that is a fabrication meant for the ages.

The true story of how he found his scarlet letter—and then made it larger than life—begins when I was a child in Scotland and he was a fatherless boy writing poetry that yearned and mourned.

Sometimes I still picture him in my mind, a lonely nine-year-old boy with a bad limp and a mop of dark hair standing at the edge of the Massachusetts Bay waiting for a ship. He knows that his father has died of yellow fever somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, yet the boy is waiting with pencil at the ready. Something in him knows—I believe this, even after all this time—that although his father will never return, a story just as powerful is coming toward him. It is me, bent into the wind, fleeing home with my colors and my needle and my own set of needs and dreams.

It is me with my red letter secreted away.



LIKE ALL THE women in my family, I was born in a stone cottage in the town of Abington beside the River Clyde. I had red hair and green-blue eyes and was named Isobel for my grandmother, just as my mother was named Margaret for *her* grandmother. “For hundreds of years we’ve been



Isobel, Margaret, Isobel, Margaret—a chain of women going back and back through time,” Mam said, and I liked the way it sounded: all of us red-haired girls stitched together like paper dolls.

I lived in a world of magic and color then—my mother’s voice a sapphire stream flecked with emeralds, my father’s a soft caramel. In summer I ran barefoot through the valleys with my cousins and kin and saw their voices rise up in vibrant wisps of yellow and gold. The wind was sometimes fierce pink, and the sound of the waterfall on rocks glistened silver.

I didn’t know my colors were unusual and so I never thought to speak of them, just as I never remarked on the air, or the feel of a blanket at night, or the bark of my father’s laugh that I loved so well.

Every year at the summer solstice we burned a bonfire and danced around the maypole, and in winter we hung mistletoe in the cottage. Pap spoke of faeries who lived beneath the May trees, of selkie seals that swam ashore and enchanted the lovelorn, and of brave clansmen who’d died fighting the English.

“A horse with a shining wet mane is a kelpie come to take you away.” Pap’s voice spooled like caramel as he shook a warning finger at me. “And if you swim in the river and leave your clothes out for the *bean-nighe* she’ll steal your soul and that will be the end of you.”

“Don’t frighten her,” Mam scolded, and Pap put up a finger as if to warn me this was our secret.

But when we walked together looking for mushrooms in the spring, he spoke of sprites in white dresses who sat beside the river to wash the clothes of the dead, and of an unlucky lad who’d stumbled upon one and drowned the following day.

Mam grew tight-lipped when Pap spoke of magical creatures and mysteries beyond God, but I knew by the gentle way my mother trimmed his beard, and by the way Pap held her at the waist when they danced round the bonfire, that theirs was a love bond and that it would protect me. Their stories protected me, too.

★ ★ ★

I WAS MY mother’s first child. Five years later my brother, Jamie, came. While she was caring for him, Mam said it was time for my first sampler.

She showed me how to make my letters first on a slate with chalk, then with needle and thread.

“One day you’ll learn to read.” Mam squinted at a line of letters she’d made and the rougher ones I’d traced out beneath them. “I didn’t get far, but you, Isobel, will read books.”

I’d heard it whispered that one of Mam’s aunts had been locked away in a madhouse and never seen again. She’d left behind a rainbow sampler that hung behind my mother’s sewing chair. I’d studied it for hints of madness but found none; I looked at it that day and vowed I would make one even more beautiful in my time.

I experimented with a thimble made of seal bone, then settled on a plain tin thimble that fit my small finger. Tongue between my teeth, I worked carefully. When I fumbled and pushed the needle beneath my fingernail, I never cried out. Young though I was, I was full of obedient determination.

I was preparing a green thread for the letter *D* when Mam came up behind me.

“What have you done?” Her angry voice washed over me like soft blueberries and blackberries.

“Is it wrong?” I studied my work. It was neat and straight.

“I gave you black thread to make the letters in black.”

“But *A* is red,” I said quietly. Like the colors in the wind and the hue of my mother’s voice, this had come to me without intention or fanfare. “*B* is blue. *C* is yellow.”

“No, they are not.” My mother slapped my knuckles with her tambour hook. The blow was hard, and tears stung my eyes. She’d never struck me before.

“Never say that.” Her words flashed in blue-black bolts, and I saw the whites of her eyes. She wasn’t only angry, she was afraid. “They’ll call you crazy or say you’re a witch. They’ll say the Devil’s taken hold of you and they’ll want to burn it out of you—do you hear?”

I’d heard whispered stories of witches hanged and burned in the fields, of men and women who did not defend against the Devil and then found themselves full of evil and spite. Witches were spoken of in the past, but evil, insanity, and death were as plausible to me as Pap’s selkie seals and deadly kelpie seahorses come to take away the living.

“Isobel—do you understand?”

I nodded wordlessly, but my mother shook me by the shoulders so hard my teeth rattled. She meant for me to be afraid.

“You must defend against it, Isobel; you must pray and be strong—promise me.”

“Yes, Mam. I promise.”

Mam and I prayed together that night, but she didn’t speak of the colors again, nor did I. After that if my mother gave me black thread, I used black. If she asked for red, I used red. One day the sampler that hung behind her sewing chair was gone, replaced by a simple herbal chart my grandmother had stitched long ago. I dared not ask after the great-aunt’s work, for I had seen and felt my mother’s ire and did not want to see it again.

I told myself there were no colors in voices or letters and I refused my reading lessons, for the letters were not white on black slate but a rainbow of colors that I knew were wrong. Mam seemed to understand and did not push me further.

But even as I kept silent, the colors became more vivid and my dreams wilder. Whether the colors were good or ill, witchcraft or the Devil, I had no power to stop them. I tried praying and wishing them away, and once I left an offering of sugar for the faeries beneath the May trees, but nothing banished them.

Mam and I continued to work our needles together, and the following year when we finished a flowered smock for me to wear on Sundays, she took the red thread and made the letter *A* in the hem, small and neat.

“For Abington, the town where you were born.” Her face was smooth and serious as she folded the letter out of sight and began to stitch the hem over it. “And because our women have always hidden away their red letters.”

Until that moment it hadn’t occurred to me that the colors might run through our family the way our red hair and names cycled through time. If they did, what did it mean? Did my mother have the colors? Were there others like me?

I waited for her to say more, but she did not.

“It is gone now, Mam,” I ventured. “Letters have no colors. Words are just words.”

She put a hand to my chin and tipped my face to hers.

“You’re strong and wise, my sweet Isobel,” she said, and I understood

that I would have to keep my secret alone, that we would never speak of it again.

\* \* \*

MAM'S COUSIN WAS a dressmaker who kept a small shop in the town of Baggar. I was seven years old the year we traveled two hours by wagon cart to visit her.

“To clothe a woman is to hide her failings and frailties,” Auntie Aileen told me. “A dressmaker is talented with the needle, but above all she is a secret keeper.”

I understood this well, for I was a secret keeper, too.

I showed Aileen a doll's dress I'd sewn of green poplin with colorful flowers strewn across the skirt. Aileen turned the dress inside out to study the seams and the knots I'd made in the backs of the flowers. I held my breath to see if she would remark upon the tiny red A folded away, but either she did not know it was there, or she kept silent.

“The work is Isobel's,” Mam said. She was proud. “Not one stitch is mine.”

“She's well suited for the needle,” Aileen said. “When your girl is ready, I'll take her as an apprentice.”

I visited Auntie Aileen again when the merchants' wives came to order new winter dresses and sat on a three-legged stool holding her pins and chinks.

“The best dresses offer secrets but no surprises,” Aileen said when we were alone. “Little pockets and camouflage for flaws with no hint of what's hidden beneath the flare of a bell sleeve, the bones of a corset, or the inset of a shorting.”

She told me she'd disguised a lady's twisted arm beneath a thick bishop sleeve, sewn a hidden pocket into a shirtwaist, and much more. Before long I was able to see the ways that a woman hid herself with a cloak, a cap, or a shoe with a lift to hide a crooked knee. I drew these things in my book, sketches for preserving a lady's dignity.

“You work quietly,” my aunt said. “I like that.”

Her words didn't generally have hue or shape to them, but I saw these in the thick yellow of an egg yolk.

“Sometimes there's more power in silence than in speech,” she added.

“Our ancestress knew it and it served her well.”

“Ancestress?”

Auntie Aileen tipped her head when she looked at me.

“Isobel Gowdie, Queen of Witches—she’s your namesake.” Her words were still yellow, which I came to know as the color of truth. “She knew when evil was right there in front of her in the shape of man, and she knew when to be silent and when to raise hell to the heavens.”

At this, Aileen climbed onto a stool, raised a broom toward the heavens, and shouted, “‘Yea, I am what you say I am—I have lain with the Devil’s forked prick inside me, and if you kill me hell will reign on earth.’”

“That’s what she did when the men came for her,” Auntie Aileen explained, catching my shocked expression.

I felt a bolt of fear and excitement.

“And did it?” I asked. “Did hell reign on earth?”

Aileen blinked down at me, climbed off the stool, and straightened her skirts.

“You’ll have to ask your mum about it.”

★ ★ ★

WHEN I ASKED my mother, she was angry.

“Aileen is a fool—forget that nonsense and never mention it again.”

I fell to my knees as if to pray or beg for an answer, but Mam spun upon me.

“Right here in Lanarkshire County they killed hundreds of witches and more in the Highlands. King James wrote the law and the king could do it again.” I saw that fear in the whites of Mam’s eyes. “Today, this very hour, law or not, they’d put a woman to death if they thought she had the Devil in her. And if you’re not careful, such talk will bring Satan to you.”

“Am I bedeviled?” I whispered.

My mother took my wrist and held it hard.

“You must always beware. You must call on God and keep that strange talk out of your mind. Even strong women can fall, Isobel—you must beware of magic and all the things we don’t understand.”

I worried over my mother’s words for months. I didn’t want to fall into the Devil’s snare. I didn’t want to be put in an asylum or hanged from the gallows. I wanted to be a dressmaker, to live in a city and have a shop and

embroider dresses with flowers and birds.

I loved the needle and thread, and I feared losing them above all because they let me put my visions into cloth in a way that no one questioned, in a way that brought me praise. They let me keep my secrets in plain sight, where I prayed they would hurt no one, least of all myself.

Scotland, 1662

*A strong hand reaches through the dark and drags Isobel Gowdie into the hard autumn light. She staggers into Loch Loy square and blinks at the small crowd of jeering farmers, brewers, and cottars' wives. It's nearly noon—Isobel can tell by the position of the sun as it approaches the familiar kirk steeple. She has not had anything to eat or drink since the tollbooth door slammed shut two days ago, and the air shimmers in waves as the marshal raises a parchment and coughs to loosen his voice.*

*“Isobel Gowdie, wife of John Gilbert, ye are accused of witchcraft, of using charms, spirit familiars, and maleficence to inflict pain and illness upon the Reverend Harry Forbes and his sons, and of causing the death of five cows and one calf.” He levels his narrow gaze at her. “What say ye to these charges?”*

*Two years ago, Isobel gave Forbes's wife a brew to take away an unwanted child. Last year, the reverend came upon her in the fields at twilight and pressed her into the haystacks, fished his hands up her skirts, and threw her to the ground when she bit him.*

*Isobel lifts a shaking finger and points it at Forbes. She is frightened and angry now, her mind abuzz with flame and thirst.*

*“He is not a sacred man,” Isobel brays. “He is foul.”*

*“Bring the witch-pricker,” the marshal bellows.*

*The crowd ripples and John Dickson strides toward her wearing a brown cloak stuck with long needles.*

*“Strip her,” Dickson orders. A three-inch needle glitters in his gloved hand.*

*Isobel's knees are weak, but she does not fall.*

*She crosses her arms to protect her womb as rough arms seize her from behind to tear away her dress and petticoat. She is six-and-twenty and has never borne a child, but the seed of one has been planted and she means to keep it safe. They bind her hands and shove her up against the stockade, but she will not be harnessed like a cow—she shrieks and swings her head and that is where the first cut is made—her long red braid shorn off with a scythe, then her pubis grazed with a razor that raises blood across her belly and sharp hip bones.*

*“If she is a witch, she will not feel the blade prick her.” Dickson's voice is low, as if coming from the pit where the Devil lies in wait.*

*Dickson stabs at Isobel Gowdie and she screams.*

*“She saw you,” someone shouts from the crowd. “You have to put it in her arse where she can't see you.”*

*Again and again Dickson jabs at her until she sees it in slow motion, like the day her mother caught a fish with her hand, silver in the blue water, mouth gulping for air, dying without the river.*

*Isobel's body is streaming with blood when she falls to the ground.*

*Dickson stands over her and reaches for her ankle, pretends to pull out a needle.*

*“The barb sank and she did not know it,” he proclaims.*

*It is a lie, but Isobel's voice is drowned out by the shouting crowd, women who once sat beside her in the kirk joining their voices now with Dickson's and the reverend's.*

*Even Forbes's wife is screaming, the bright words leaving her black maw of a mouth: “A witch, she's a witch!”*

*“You will stand trial.” It is the Laird of Park and Loch Loy, his velvet boots unsoiled even in the mud. “You will stand trial for witchcraft.”*

*The words he speaks bloom like dark roses. Isobel has seen*



*this before—the colors, the words scraping across the air like blood on snow. She closes her eyes. She has not done what they accused her of, but she is surely cursed, for she sees the man's words in the color of evil as if it is Satan himself speaking over her in the square.*

## TWO

The blizzard came when I was eight years old. All day it blew snow sideways across the fields and turned the sky gray. My brother was asleep in a mound of pillows that afternoon when Mam nestled me into the fold of her arms.

“It’s time you learned about your namesake,” she whispered.

I had a gap in my smile where the last of my milk teeth had fallen out, and I pressed my tongue into that space. Mam was ready to speak of Isobel Gowdie; I didn’t ask why, although I understood later that she must have known what was coming.

“A long time ago, in the Highlands near Loc Katrina, your ancestress Isobel Gowdie had the colors like you,” Mam said. “People were comfortable with the faerie world then and spoke to God in one breath and the faeries in the next. They believed man lives in the realm between the two.”

Mam told me that Isobel Gowdie spoke freely of her colors to the people she loved. As long as the village was prosperous and her salves helped heal the sick and birth babes, the lord of her village was satisfied.

“She didn’t think her colors were evil, and she didn’t fear the Devil’s snare. But when the crops failed one year, and the village cows died, they blamed her,” Mam said. “They came to her cottage with torches and pitchforks and called her a witch.”

I felt I had heard this story before; there was Isobel Gowdie running for the safety of her cottage, her hair the same coppery red as mine, her gray shift decorated with fanciful flowers that seemed to fall off the cloth and leave a trail behind her.

“Women had been hanged as witches all across Scotland that year and the people feared the Devil was taking hold of her, too.” Mam was stitching a row of irises on a tea towel, but she put it aside. “They crowded

round her cottage and put fire through the windows and called for her to hang. There was nowhere for her to go but through the chimney and onto her rooftop, where she stood on the burning thatch and screamed—”

Here Mam raised her chin and repeated the same words Aileen had called out: “Yea, I am what you say I am—I have lain with the Devil’s forked prick inside me, and if you kill me hell will reign on earth.””

I felt terribly afraid, for I thought she would tell me the Queen of Witches had given her soul to the Devil.

“And what happened?” I asked.

“It’s said that Isobel Gowdie escaped—that’s all I know—and slipped away on a moonless night.”

In my mind I saw Isobel’s red hair hidden beneath a kerchief as she ran across the countryside from hilltop to valley and on and on through the night. I wanted to ask if she escaped by witchcraft or magic or some special charm, but mostly I needed to know ...

“Do you see the colors, Mam?”

My mother picked up her work and pulled a blue thread through the cloth before she spoke.

“No.”

“Did your mam?” I asked.

She smoothed my hair away from my face and pressed her cheek to mine. Her answer was barely audible.

“She learned to hide what she saw. Just like you, Isobel. But her sister was sent to the madhouse. I don’t mean to scare you, child, but you must understand.”

“Can you help me?” I was near to tears. “Why do I have them? What do they mean?”

Mam took my chin in her hands and blinked back her own tears, which surprised and frightened me.

“My mother was a good Christian woman. She prayed every morning and every night and she taught me to keep God close so that the Devil couldn’t find his way into my soul. You must do the same.”

“I’ve tried, Mam—can’t you make them go away?”

She tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

“I don’t have the colors, Isobel, and so I can’t help you understand them. You must be careful, for they can lead you to heaven or to hell and I cannot tell you which way is right or wrong. Remember what I’m telling

you,” she said. “Someday you may need great strength, just as Isobel Gowdie did. One day your time will come.”

I was too young to understand all that my mother was trying to say, but she was intent and I was attentive to her.

“When will it be my time? How will I know?”

“I don’t know, but when it comes you must be ready.”

Mam began to cough and I saw that I had taxed her as my little brother taxed her and the storm was taxing her, and so I made myself quiet and put my head against her bosom and listened to the blue beating of her heart as we fell asleep.

\* \* \*

SNOW KEPT COMING that night and through the next. It drifted against the cottage high enough to cover the windows and shutters. We had dry wood for fire and enough hard bread and pickled cabbage to sustain us. It was warm inside with my father and mother. Jamie stood at the window and watched the snow falling until the window was covered, and then he stamped a dance beside the fire that went on all day. By evening my mother had taught my brother to pound flour and snow into dough and mold it into small loaves of bread, and so his love of baking was born.

In the weeks that followed we were busy digging out from the storm, feeding the sheep, emptying the barrels of rainwater, and gathering up the scattered chickens. Mam told us to pay her cough no mind, but by spring there were splatters of scarlet on her bedsheets and sleeping gown.

Pap piled us into a wagon and his brother drove us up to Glasgow. For three weeks we waited in a small room while the doctor treated Mam with camphor and bloodletting. She was pale as the bedsheet—pale as a *bean-nighe*—when she called me to her.

“Pap told you stories of the faerie world.” Her voice was a whisper. I nodded fiercely and blinked back tears. “Some people can see it better than others, but remember, it’s best to keep those things to yourself. Keep your secret close, Isobel.”

Then she was gone, and my colors were gone with her. Letters were simply black, just as she’d taught me. Words were sounds and nothing more. My colors had been my inspiration, and then my curse, and after they left me there was no cure for my sadness.