



OUT
of the
WILD NIGHT

Blue Balliett



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Daniela Barreto (bell), and Aleks Melnik (trumpet)



CHAPTER 1

 **The Crier is here. Ding, ding!**

My story begins at dusk, on the edges, by the shore and around the graveyards. Let me tell you, this is a Nantucket November like no other.

On the good side of being in my current state is that time works like the pages of a book made from fog or snow. You can flip this way or that and things are always changing order. Flowing. Regrouping around the motion of your hand.

On the bad side?

Being dead.

But wait, that may not be all bad. Being dead has its advantages, especially around here.

My name is Mary. Mary W. Chase. Chase as in *Run, I might be behind you!*

I died one hundred years ago, plus a few days.

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Today I was shaken awake. A tremendous rumbling, a roar of vibrations, jolted me back from wherever I've been. I don't remember dying, nor do I remember what happened immediately after.

I wake, I sleep; I wake, I sleep—such is the life of someone like me.

Just now I was tossed back with no warning into the rough, pitch-and-tumble world of the living.

Wait, don't move! I feel danger everywhere, a rush of fear that we who've lived know well—an awareness that all might be over in a pounce. A prickling. Am I alone?

I try my voice, but don't know if it makes a sound anyone else can hear. "Hello," I whisper. "Hellohellohelloooo!" Louder this time.

A board creaks beneath my feet. I look down but see nothing.

I've been resting, present but not, inside the walls of my old home, happy in the familiar company of wood and plaster. Free of worry. Settled.

Being a curious but shy soul in life—a watcher and a spy—I always did wonder how an egg could be so perfect and yet so easily broken. Life is miraculous but fragile, filled with risk and danger—and is death, too?

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B-BAM! Rrrroar! What is the noise I'm hearing? Is it the end of all we know?

"Help!" I gasp. If I'm already dead, why should I hold back? "Help me, someone!" I call out, louder this time.

My voice creaks like a rusted hinge.

Does *anyone* hear me? "HELP!"

Two children pass by my front window. I rap on the glass, but neither one turns to look. The girl has hair like seaweed, all dark ripples, and the boy is the color of sand.

RRRoarrrr! The grinding and rattling start again. The girl and boy clap their hands over their ears. My heart sinks.

"Helphelphelp!" I yell, surely loud enough to wake the world.

No answer. The children walk quickly and don't glance back.

Now I recognize my fingers, pressed against the window. I wiggle my toes and look down to see dark stockings. And there! My boots are by the door. I'm no longer invisible, at least to myself.

But why am I here?

It must be the children.



I once lived in this town and still do, although I'm no longer the one who sweeps mud and horse dung from the

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front steps of my home. My rotten teeth no longer bother me. I realize now that I'm back as the island's Town Crier, a bold job I was much too timid to have done when living. *Crying* doesn't mean *weeping* here; it means *calling out*. I'll ring my handbell for attention and shout the news through a copper horn.

We Criers can be loud.

In my day, Nantucket had a living Town Crier, a famous and skinny man who walked up and down our streets and lanes, making an endless amount of noise.

His name was Billy Clark.

Everyone stopped to listen. We'd hear when a boat was on its way into the harbor, if a person was born or had just died, where to buy wool, fresh mutton, or salted cod. Since we didn't have any other way to share instant news, the Crier was essential.

In life, I spoke only when spoken to. I was guarded inside and pleasant on the outside. I kept my skirts tucked close and my hair pinned tight. My mouth was as small as a flounder's and my eyes were step-on-me pebbles. My entire family died one year in a terrible fever when I was young, and I was taken in by a grumpy aunt. I soon married a silent man, the first who asked. My husband, Daniel, was a lifelong fisherman who hardly noticed me. We never had children, but I kept that sadness tucked in the

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pockets of my apron. Over and over, I scrubbed and baked. I wanted to be heard and cherished, but wasn't.

I never dreamed I'd become so important one day. The Town Crier! Am I back in order to warn?

As I look around my home, the floorboards vibrate beneath my feet and the walls shiver. What monsters lurk outside?

"Billy," I call out, joking but not. "You can keep your job!"

No reply.