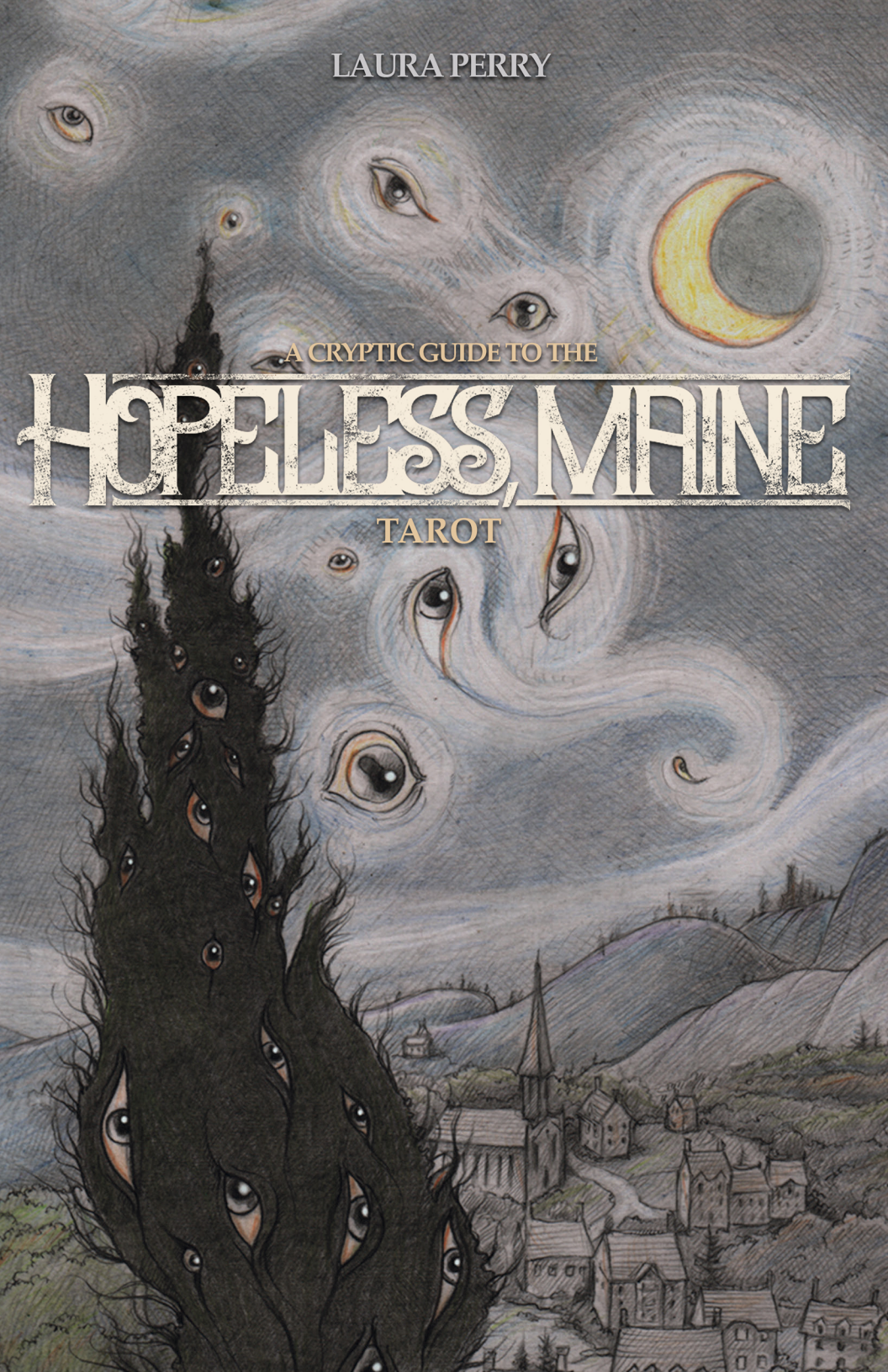


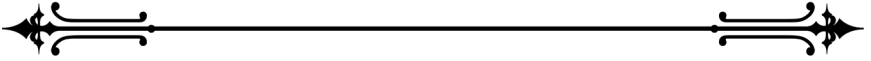
LAURA PERRY

A CRYPTIC GUIDE TO THE

HOPELESS, MAINE

TAROT





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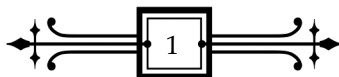
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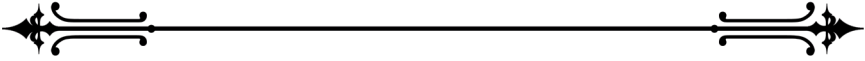
TAROT



WRITTEN BY
LAURA PERRY

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Book Design & Layout by Jeremy D. Mohler
Published by Jeremy D. Mohler

Hopeless, Maine Created by Tom & Nimue Brown



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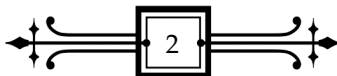
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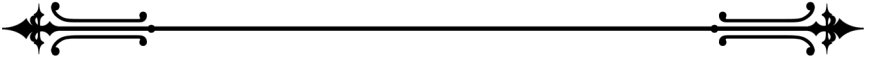


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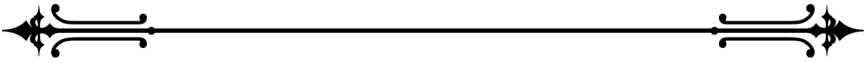


THE CHECKERED HISTORY OF THE DECK



It was a particularly gloomy afternoon, the fog hanging thicker than usual along the craggy coastline, but Madame Portentia didn't mind. If people were going to see her outside her artfully decorated parlour, she wanted their experience to be picturesque. Whenever anyone passed by her as she was out on these walks, she would close her eyes and begin quietly chanting "Om limpid puddles om" half under her breath. Never pass up a marketing opportunity, she thought to herself as she prodded the rocky shingle with the tip of her walking stick.

She stooped to dig a beer bottle cap from between the pebbles with a fingernail, then dropped it into her basket along with the other bits and bobs she had found that day. Business being what it was—the island's population never seemed to increase and, in fact, she had the feeling a few of her clients had recently been eaten by some of the more interesting creatures that lurked



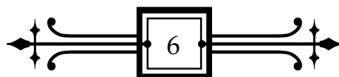
in the local environment—she had taken to supplementing her professional income with whatever she could turn in at the Hopeless, Maine Recycling Center (If It's Going to Come Back to Haunt You Anyway, You Might as Well Make a Few Pennies Off It! the sign over the entrance declared). Hence her daily stroll along the shore, an activity born of practical necessity.

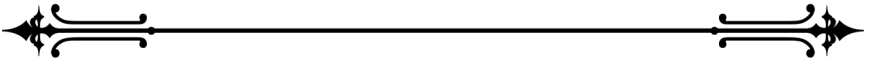
She was, however, a professional, she reminded herself. She had the sign hanging on the front of her home to prove it:

Madame Portentia Omen-Darkly
Tarot, Runes, Crystal Ball
Newt Entrail Readings by Special Appointment

She was descended from a long line of psychics and seers who stretched all the way back to the Cumaean Sybil. At least that's what her late Great-Aunt Esther had told her, and she was quite willing to believe it, especially since Great-Aunt Esther still spoke to her (on alternate Wednesdays, séance starts promptly at 7, no children or pets, stock market predictions extra).

This past Wednesday, however, had only brought one client to her: the Squid and Teapot's popular landlord Rufus Lypiatt, who was hoping to have a chat with his late grandmother and find out where she

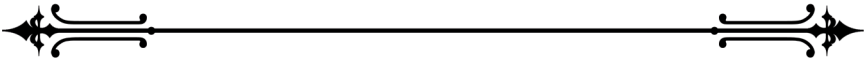




had hidden the family silver during one of her bouts of dementia. He was planning to add on an extra room to the S&T, or so he told Madame Portentia: a private space that people could book for birthdays, wakes, and other festive events. However, it turned out that his grandmother's ghost was every bit as demented as the old bat had been while she was alive. So Mr. Lypiatt had stomped away disappointed and hadn't plunked down the customary extra tip for good service that Madame Portentia had come to rely on for her tentacle-and-biscuit money.

So here she was, dredging the shingle for bottle caps and trying not to think about what the fog was doing to her hair. She preferred the well-coifed look since people tended to take her less seriously when the strands were flying out in all directions—and heaven knows, getting anyone to take a professional psychic seriously was hard enough these days. Not like back in old Cumae with the Sybil and her kin, Madame Portentia muttered to herself as she kicked aside a couple of slimy stones.

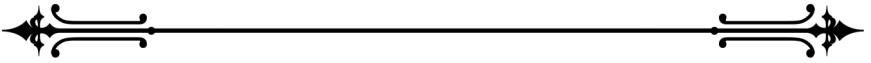
She peered in her basket: three bottle caps, the twisted remains of a tin candlestick, and a well-worn Master Scutcheon's Hairy Coffee medallion (a special prize given to those who survived the initial public tasting). That wouldn't bring nearly enough from the



Recycling Center to replace the grimy, dog-eared Tarot deck Madame Portentia had been using for so many years. Mind you, it had served her well through many a client. But she had recently been forced to discard three cards altogether when they practically disintegrated in her hands. And seeing as how one of them was the Death card, she wasn't sure how she was going to be able to give her clients the type of reading they had grown accustomed to—dismal, hopeless (ahem), and woefully accurate.

So instead of turning around and going home to have her tea, she trudged onward, farther along the shingle than she normally ventured. She was so busy gazing at the ground and prodding the stones with her walking stick that she didn't notice the tentacles sliding toward her out of the water until one of them began to wrap around her ankle. Startled, she shrieked and beat at the writhing appendage with her stick. It let go just enough for her to pull her foot free and launch herself headlong over a pile of boulders in an attempt to escape. Thankfully, the creature didn't appear eager to follow that far out of the water.

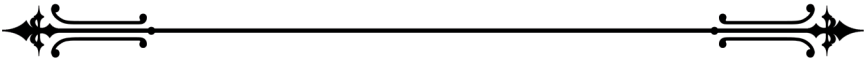
Madame Portentia lay sprawled against a boulder, catching her breath and cursing the fact that all her day's finds had fallen out of her basket as she had taken that leap.



Now how on earth was she going to afford another Tarot deck? It would be horribly embarrassing to have to scratch that word off her sign, given that she didn't have the funds to have a new one painted. And heaven knows how much business she would lose—very few people were interested in runes anymore, and she couldn't remember the last time anyone had booked a newt entrail reading.

Resigned to her poverty-stricken fate, she straightened out her clothes, picked up her basket and walking stick, and stood up. Then immediately fell back down again, her jaw hanging slack, her eyes wide, and her fingers reflexively pinching her nose tightly shut. There before her stood the most wondrous, most awful, most pungent structure she had ever laid eyes—or nose—on. Right away she knew that she had stumbled on the remains of the Stinking Shack, the home of the fabled Kelp-Master of Tentacle Point.

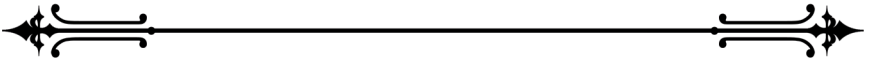
Generations back, the Kelp-Master had washed up on shore surrounded by the splintered remains of his boat and made his home there. Literally made his home, in fact: built it from bits of algae-coated driftwood, fish bones, dried-out seaweed, even the occasional whole fish or washed-up tentacle. Hence the unique odor that,



thankfully, usually wafted out to sea thanks to the prevailing winds. But Madame Portentia was on the wrong side of that wind just at the moment. However, her curiosity (and financial need) outweighed even this amount of odor. She couldn't forget the tales that threaded through island conversations, stories of the incredible riches the Kelp-Master had hidden in his shack and left there, ownerless, the day a writhing tentacle had dragged him back under the waves.

Clutching her empty basket with one hand and pinching her nose with the other, she stepped through the twisted doorway and into the tumbledown shack. Gingerly she prodded at the algae- and seaweed-coated piles of items with her walking stick, jumping back as a couple of spoonwalkers and a clockwork crab scuttled from beneath the mess and out the door.

Still holding her nose, Madame Portentia poked at the door of a derelict cupboard in the back corner of the Shack. The door promptly fell off, landing with a squish in a pile of rotting seaweed and fish bones. What it revealed had the fortune teller scrambling over jumbles of slimy driftwood that might once have been rough (and somewhat smelly) furniture, in a bid to retrieve the object the door's collapse had revealed.



Moments later she sat on the floor, the stench of the place all but forgotten as she examined her prize: an old wooden box with corroded hinges and a strange emblem carved into the lid. But what had caught her eye was the lock on the front. Surely any sturdy wooden box that the owner had bothered to lock must contain something of value, possibly a great treasure. Enough for quite a few tentacles and biscuits, a new Tarot deck, and maybe even a replacement for the rusty newt skinner that wasn't quite up to the job anymore.

A few moments' work with her hairpin and the box was open, revealing the most wondrous treasure of all: a Tarot deck nestled in a faded velvet lining. She could tell it wasn't the standard deck she had used all these years; the tentacles in the image on the top card were a dead giveaway. But she didn't care. The deck appeared to be complete, all the cards in like-new condition. She discarded the rusted lock, latched the box, tucked it under her cape, and made her way back home as fast as she could.

After a quick bath to remove the lingering odor of the Shack, Madame Portentia sat down at her séance-and-fortune-telling table to examine her new treasure. She laid the cards out on the tabletop one by one and admired their glowing darkness. It