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Between Branching Paths

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Between Branching Paths

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
Of Bard College

By

Amanda Silva

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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For Thomasina

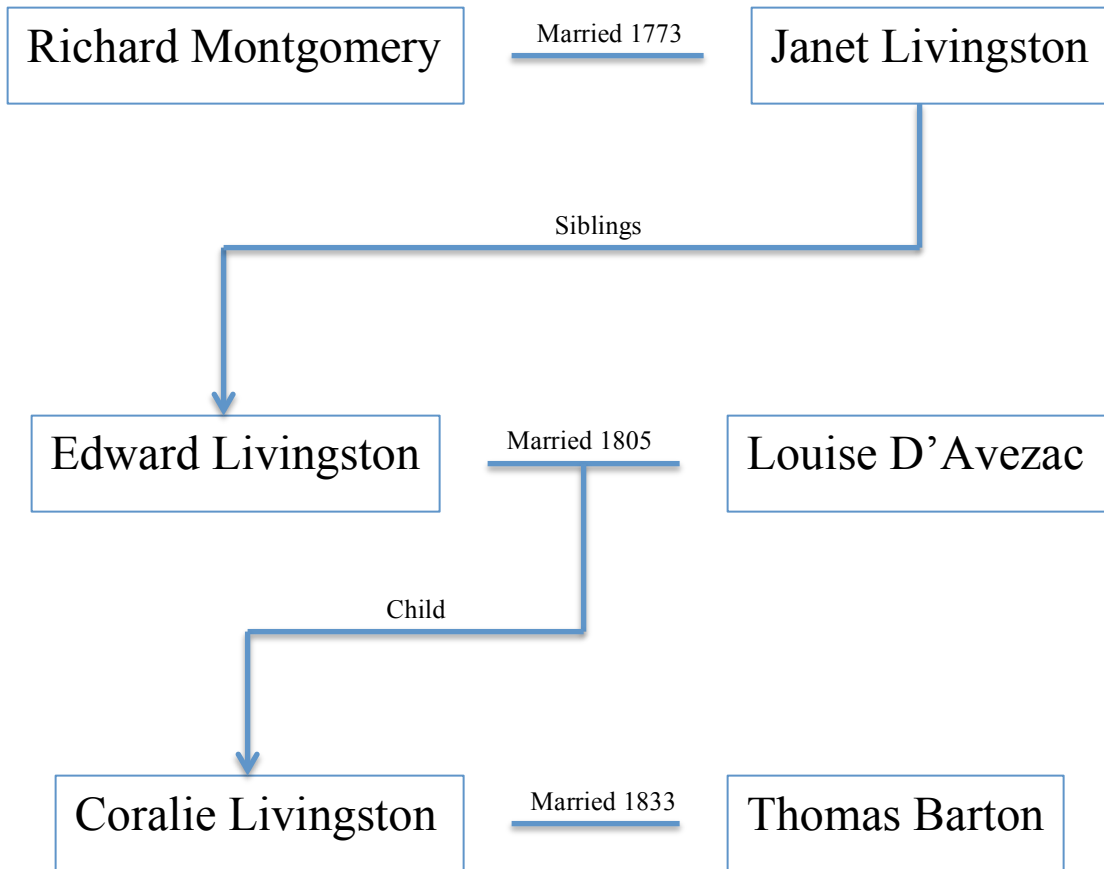
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ILLUSTRATION:
The Arch



LIVINGSTON FAMILY TREE
Passage of Montgomery Place



PROLOGUE

Some time ago, I received a letter from a dead girl. She knew she was dying when she wrote it, and from the content of the letter, I got the impression that she was neither distraught nor entirely at peace. Her name was Cora, and she had been the first and closest friend I made during the year I moved to New York's Hudson Valley.

Our friendship, which lasted only a summer, ended on poorer terms than I'd care to admit; and while I was hardly satisfied with its conclusion, I had resigned myself to the idea that I would never—could never—see her again. Given enough time, I might have forgotten her all together. Now, though, I cannot help but wonder at the fantastical circumstances that briefly brought us together—first in our youths, and again as adults.

The letter was sent early in May, but I didn't receive it until several weeks later. I travel a lot, and even when I'm not away, I never "settle down" for very long. As a result, the letter had a long way to go—from old address to old address—before it finally reached me. In it, she asked only one thing of me: to come back to Montgomery Place, one last time. She did not write, "to say goodbye;" only that there was something she wanted to show me.

Montgomery Place was among the oldest properties in the Hudson Valley, and had served as a summer home for generations of New York's most elite. But by the time I came to it, it was just an old house, every few decades sold and resold, ever decreasing in value. I was a child then, and all I knew was that my mother had been hired by the historical society to be a sort of "everyman" around the estate as it was changing hands.

I had seen all seasons come and go in the year I spent at Montgomery Place, but I only remember the summer with any fondness. I remember everything in bloom, from

the gardens to the arboretum to the ever-encroaching woods. I remember the crispness of the mountain air, the semi-sweet scent of apples that drifted down from the orchard that lined the perimeter of the estate. In the Fall, when summer's green had melted into coppery orange and yellow and red, the last of the crop would be pressed into warm cider and sold from the stall at the side of the road.

I was not surprised to learn that Montgomery Place still stood, gazing over the Hudson, as vacant as I had ever known it; but this letter was impossible. Even as I whirled about my apartment, stuffing only essentials into my largest suitcase, I feared that all my efforts were in vain. I knew I was too late.

Coralie Livingston Barton was born on the 16th of June, 1806, and died on May 23rd, 1873. I was born in 2004 and, at the time of my writing this, I am still alive. Yet somehow, through some miracle or cosmic alignment, we shared one spectacular summer.

CHAPTER ONE

It was June when we first arrived, our second hand Subaru rumbling up the gravel drive, my mother behind the wheel and my eyes fixed defiantly on my sneakers. I was frustrated to be there, and belligerent in the way children can be when they feel they have been slighted. I had let my mother know—first vocally, and then through extended silences—that I wanted nothing to do with this move. I had lived my whole life on the same street, in the same neighborhood in the city. I already missed my friends, with whom I should've been spending another legendary summer break. I missed our small apartment, and my Tía María and all my cousins who lived in the same building. Most of all I resented my mother for losing her third job in two years, and taking this one, a hundred miles away from everyone and everything I'd ever cared about.

Needless to say, the drive was unpleasant. The air conditioning in our car was busted and it happened to be swelteringly hot that day, so even with our windows down, the two-hour drive up I-87 was nearly unbearable. To make matters worse, my mother kept trying to get me to talk to her, which only aggravated me and furthered my resolve to continue the silent treatment. By the time we pulled up to the estate, I had shrunk so far into my seat that I didn't even notice we had arrived until the car rolled to a stop.

"Mira mijo, we're here. This is our house," my mother said.

Our house was not *the* house. Our house was a tiny Swiss cottage on the southwestern corner of the property. There were only two bedrooms, and of those mine was more of a pantry. Under different circumstances, I might have been thrilled that my mother and I now had a whole house just to ourselves—but I was determined to stifle any positive emotions.

I hopped out of the car and helped my mother unload. It had taken hours to cram everything we owned into the spacious trunk of the old Subaru, but in the midday heat, the task of unpacking seemed even more daunting.

My sour mood only festered when we stepped through the front door for the very first time. There was no air conditioning here, either; only a box fan in the living room window that rattled when we turned it on, and a ceiling fan in the kitchen. Even so, the air inside our house was stiffer and hotter than outdoors.

We had pizza for dinner that night. I tried not to like it, out of spite, but I did. We ate in silence. Finally, when we were finished, my mother let out a long breath, as if she'd been holding it in all day.

"You gotta give me something here, *mijo*. It's not perfect, but I'm trying. Please, can you try?"

She wasn't trying to fight me, like the last few times we'd talked about this. She sounded tired, and she looked tired. I thought I could be close to victory, if I held out a little longer. I said nothing.

"Tomorrow we can go into town and buy some real food. And we can unpack the rest together. If you help me with the TV, I'll let you watch whatever you want, okay?"

I knew she was feeling guilty because I was only allowed to watch TV on weekends. I shrugged in response.

"Aiden, please."

I didn't like how she said my name, like she was begging. We were sitting on the living room floor, because we didn't have chairs for the kitchen table yet. We were eating our pizza straight out of the box because all our plates were still hidden away

somewhere in the pile of boxes we'd left by the front door, and the whole room felt terribly cramped and unfinished. I didn't feel so righteous in my silence anymore. I looked her in the eye, and that was a mistake, because she looked really sad, and then I felt worse.

My mother scooted across the floor to me, until our knees were touching. "It's not forever. A few months, maybe a year. Maybe. If you hate it, we can leave at the end of summer."

"Promise?" I whispered.

My mother smiled. "*Sí, te lo prometo,*" she said, and pulled me into a hug. "It will get better than this, we can be better here. But I can't do it without you, *sabes?* I need you to be strong."

"Okay," I said. If we had to be here, at least we were together. This move couldn't have been easy on my mother, either, but at least now I knew she was on my side. It was time to be the man my mother needed me to be.

With this goal in mind, I brushed my teeth and went to bed. The heat persisted well into the night, and I struggled to sleep even with the windows open. My room was small and strange in its newness. Nothing smelled quite right, and the shadows seemed darker somehow. There was no street outside my window, no city lights shining through my curtains. The darkness was absolute, and the silence was just as intrusive. The only sounds were crickets chirping distantly and the gentle hum of my bedside fan. I didn't know the night could feel so foreign without the slightest indication of human life. In the deep, musty stillness, I could have believed I was the only person on the planet.

Mrs. Peterson came in the morning. She was a middle-aged white woman with unnaturally colored hair—so dark red it was almost purple—quaffed in a perfectly round shape over her head. When she smiled, the jolly apples of her cheeks rose so high on her face that they obscured her eyes and made them squint. “So nice to finally meet you!” she exclaimed, wrapping her puffy hand around my mother’s bony one and shaking hard, “How was the drive?”

“It was fine,” said my mother.

“It was long,” I corrected.

My mother shot me a look and pushed me forward by the shoulder, “This is my son, Aiden.”

“Well I sure am pleased to meet you too, I-den?” Mrs. Peterson attempted.

“Aiden,” I said, wincing at the imitation of my mother’s accent, “Just Aiden.”

Mrs. Peterson smiled. “Happy to have you. How do you like the place so far?”

My mother was still glaring at me over her shoulder, so I said, “It’s good.”

Mrs. Peterson patted my mother lightly on the arm. “Well if you need anything, dear, just ask. These old houses can be tricky. Speaking of which, let me give you the grand tour. Will your son be joining us?”

“Of course,” my mother answered, “*Ponte los zapatos, mijo.*”

“I have to go too?” I asked.

“Yes, you should see the house. Learn something about your new home.”

It was not my home, I thought, but I said “Fine.”

I had been hoping to use my mother's absence as an excuse to lie on the couch and watch TV all day, but apparently that wasn't going to happen. I jammed my feet into my sneakers and reluctantly followed the women out the door.

We walked slowly along the gravel path from our little cottage to the historic mansion. Mrs. Peterson prattled on to my mother about their goals for the summer, her short legs barely keeping pace with my mother's. I followed a few steps behind, kicking pebbles out of the way and covering my white shoes with a thin coat of dirt.

"I assume my husband told you we're looking to sell the land. We already have a buyer in mind, but negotiation is a process, and we have a long way to go," said Mrs. Peterson.

"So, it's your house? You live here?" I asked.

"Oh no sweetheart, no one has lived in this house for a very long time. My husband and I work for Historic Hudson Valley, we oversee upkeep on estates like this one. But wouldn't you know it, big old homes like these are expensive, and house museums just don't generate revenue these days. We get by on grants, and they help. But we've had to make too many cuts, we're down to mostly seasonal workers now, though we do have one more permanent opening at the Rockefeller Estate, have you had a chance to visit?"

"Not yet," my mother answered.

As we walked, we passed a man in a pick-up truck slowly rumbling in the opposite direction. I waved to him, and he nodded at me.

"Oh, that's our head gardener, Henry," Mrs. Peterson said to my mother, "Introduce yourself if you have the chance, he's a sweet man. But you won't see much

of him working in the house, or helping out in the archives. The curator will be here tomorrow, and I'll make an appearance from time to time. Aside from us, I hope you don't mind working alone. You'll have plenty to do, mostly odd jobs, I'm afraid."

"I was a housekeeper before I found my last job. Full-time. I can handle anything," my mother assured her.

"No wonder they hired you," Mrs. Peterson chuckled. We circled the mansion as she talked, and I caught my first glimpse of the front of the estate. It wasn't enormous, but it was easily the biggest house I'd ever had the chance to enter: I counted three stories, eleven windows on the front, and a porch with four white columns over the front door. The façade was the color of sand with green shutters—friendly colors, inviting.

Even so, I felt a shiver run through me as we approached. The place looked old and vacant, like the skeleton of a long-decayed beast. I could see that the windowpanes were coated in dust, many of them cracked and splintered in places. They seemed oddly empty, neat white curtains partially obscuring the view. Anyone—or anything—could be peering out at me from inside, and that possibility chilled and excited me.

Mrs. Peterson marched up the front steps and ushered us inside. An intricate chandelier lit the foyer, its candles long since replaced by tiny light bulbs that glowed and hummed slightly, illuminating the spaces natural light did not reach. The wallpaper was stained and peeling in places, the air smelled of dust, and the heat hung dense and wet over my skin. But the furniture looked expensive and remarkably well-kept—mahogany and marble end tables with figures carved into the base, resembling Grecian statues.

"Montgomery Place was built in 1804 by Janet Montgomery," said Mrs. Peterson. "When she died, it passed to her sister-in-law, Louise d'Avezac Livingston,

who later left it to her daughter, Cora Livingston Barton. Cora died without an heir, so the house went to her cousins for several years until it was passed down to a distant niece, Violetta Delafield—the last true owner. Montgomery Place fell more or less into disrepair after her death, until relatives sold it to Historic Hudson Valley in the ‘80s, and it’s been in our care ever since. Now, let me show you what we’ll have you do...”

I tugged on my mother’s sleeve, “Mom, can I look around? I’m bored.”

“*Ten paciencia, mijo*. We don’t want to be rude to Mrs. Peterson,” my mother said.

“Oh it’s all right, dear,” Mrs. Peterson interjected, “Take a look around, just stay on the tan carpet. And don’t touch or lean on any of the furniture.”

“I won’t,” I promised, but I could tell from the nervous fidgeting of my mother’s hands that she had little faith in me.

Adjacent to the foyer was the Montgomery room, which had been decorated—I would later learn—in memory of Janet Livingston’s late husband, Richard Montgomery. There was a large, ornate bookshelf along one wall, a couch, a small writing desk, and a few smaller pieces of furniture. The walls were decorated with various portraits and mirrors over another ugly floral wallpaper.

The parlor was decorated in mostly white and gold, and I was hard-pressed not to plop down on the white satin sofa and lounge like a king. Somehow, I resisted. Above the sofa hung three ornate portraits in golden frames, the largest of which—the center one—held the picture of a beautiful blonde woman. She had tiny red lips and a long straight nose and dark, pretty eyes. The expression on her face unsettled me; it was as if she were studying me, waiting for me to slip up and do something I shouldn’t.

In the dining room, there was a portrait of another woman, her hair darker and her gaze less penetrating. Her big, dark eyes weren't looking at me at all, in fact, but somewhere in the distance to my left. The opposite wall was all floor-to-ceiling windows, and the view gave me pause. It was the first time I had seen this side of the property, and from that angle, I understood why everyone made such a big deal about the place. Beyond the dining room windows, the rear lawn rolled down the side of the mountain. At its base was a small body of water—a fishing pond—and beyond that the woods, which sloped down out of sight to the base of the South Bay, narrowly separated from the Hudson River by a line of train tracks. And the how the Hudson shone under that summer sky, reflecting sunlight like a mirror. And rising out of the river, tall as giants, the purple and blue shadow of the Catskills mesmerized me—if only for a few minutes.

When the majesty of the view wore off, I found myself in the library: a small room with even more bookshelves, another couch, and another writing desk. There was no ornate chandelier here, as there had been in nearly every other room, but there was more floral wallpaper.

At last I was back in the hall that led to the entrance, where my mother and Mrs. Peterson were still chatting. As a child, no agony could exceed that of waiting for adults to finish talking to each other. But if I were going to be a man, I reminded myself, I would have to act like one—surely I could muster the patience to tolerate a little boredom. I circled through the house once, twice, three more times—growing more and more frustrated with each cycle, irritated to be confined to the lengths of tan carpet, unable to either explore in earnest or leave. Still, the women prattled on.

I was aware that it was mostly Mrs. Peterson speaking, and I briefly hoped for some sign that my mother was as annoyed as I was. Perhaps if I could rescue her from this conversation, she would be grateful, and we could go home happy. Surely, that would be the mature thing to do—but as I looked on, I saw that my mother had relaxed considerably, and appeared to be enjoying the conversation. Defeated, I looked for a place to sit down and wait them out.

All of the chairs and couches were part of the display, however, and therefore out of my reach. I eventually found a staircase just around the corner from my mother and Mrs. Peterson, and I settled onto the second step from the bottom. I tried my best to stay entertained, picking the dirt out from the crevices in my shoes.

It occurred to me, after some time, that perhaps I had not finished the tour. There was no tan carpet on the stairs themselves, but perhaps the path continued on the second floor. I looked around and listened. My mother and Mrs. Peterson had moved into the next room, and were discussing proper cleaning procedures. I sensed no other sign of life inside the house. Cautiously, I made my way up the stairs, testing every step before I placed my full weight onto it, aware that a single squeaky floorboard was all it would take to give me away.

At the top of the stairs, I found myself in a surprisingly dark hallway with cream-colored walls and several dark wood doors on either side, all closed. It was quiet up there, and I was even more acutely aware of the sound of my footsteps. There was no tan carpet on the floor.

I knew I wasn't supposed to be there, but I had come so far already. What harm could there be in looking around a little? I tried to open the first door on my right, but it

was locked tight. Further down the hall, I tried a door on my left. This time the knob turned, but stuck. I rattled it, and the door budged a little. I was getting excited now; I leaned into it, turning the knob and pressing into the wood with my shoulder.

“What do you think you are doing, young man?” a voice asked behind me. I whipped around, panicked, only to see a very tall man standing over me. His skin was dark and his face was wrinkled around the forehead and mouth, and when I looked into his eyes his scowl paralyzed me.

“You do not belong up here,” he said.

“Sorry,” I stuttered.

“Who are you?”

“I’m the new caretaker’s son,” I said, and then, a little indignant, I asked, “Who are you?”

“I am the caretaker of this estate, and you may call me Mr. Alexander,” said Mr. Alexander. He placed a cold, firm hand on the back of my neck and led me to the stairs. “I do not want to find you here again, do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” I said, though the sir was more of an afterthought. I was too busy stumbling down the stairs at top speed, some primal instinct in me certain that I was being pursued by a predatory threat.

My mother rounded the corner just as I slipped into the foyer; I nearly ran her over in my frenzied escape.

“Ah, there you are. Where did you go?” she asked, her eyes drifting to the hall behind me.

“Nowhere,” I said, daring to peek over my shoulder. I was sure Mr. Alexander would be coming down any second to tell on me, but he did not appear. “I—is there someone else in the house?”

Mrs. Peterson joined us then, stepping around my mother. “No dear, it’s just us today.” She frowned. “Is everything alright? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I thought I heard someone walking around upstairs,” I fibbed, consciously backing away from the stairs.

Mrs. Peterson shrugged. “It was probably just the house settling. These old buildings make all kinds of noises, honey.”

Her words did nothing to ease my panic. I could not help the feeling that I had seen something I shouldn’t have. I knew my mother could sense my anxiety, because she said, “Maybe we should go.”

“Oh sure, that was all for today. You should have everything you need to get started this week. But don’t be a stranger, dear. Let me know if you need anything at all,” said Mrs. Peterson.

“Mom, let’s go,” I insisted, not so subtly edging towards the door. We left in a hurry, Mrs. Peterson jovially waving us off as we retreated. I did not look back.

When we were out of earshot, my mother leaned down and whispered, “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Listen to me *mijo*, this job is important. If you touched something, broke something, I need you to tell me now. I won’t be mad. But I need to know.”

“I told you, I didn’t do anything,” I repeated.

My mother looked me hard in the eye. “Okay, I believe you,” she said, but I knew she was still suspicious.

I hardly slept that night. Each time I closed my eyes, I saw that grand old house looming over me. I imagined someone or something peering hungrily out of those dark, soulless windows. I was shaken, and I was angry with myself for feeling that fear. It’s only a house, I told myself, just the same as any old mansion—creepy, but not malicious. My mother would have to work there every day, and she wasn’t frightened. So what did that say about me? What kind of a man was afraid of a house?

But then there was Mr. Alexander. Why had he scowled at me like that, and rushed me down the stairs? What was he hiding up in those dark corridors? And why hadn’t Mrs. Peterson known he was there? My mind scampered from thought to thought, unable to fully articulate why I had been so unnerved in the first place.

I must have fallen asleep eventually, because I awoke to a strange whistling sound outside my window. When I checked the time, I saw that it was just past 3AM. The whistle was rhythmic, intentional: high note, low note; high note, low note. It could have been the sound of the wind through the trees, or a squeaky hinge shifting in the breeze. But the night was still, the usual whip of the mountain winds—to which I would soon become accustomed—all but inaudible. Hesitantly, I pushed myself up on my elbows and peeked out my window. Past my lawn, I could see the dim outline of the gardens, and beyond those the woods to the south of the property. And there, between the trees, the outline of a man.

I blinked. I waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. I wondered if I might be dreaming, and I thought about how they say you're supposed to pinch yourself to wake up from a bad dream. I gave it a try, but nothing changed. The man was still there. I clenched my eyes shut and pressed my palms against my ears. When I opened my eyes again, I couldn't see him at first, and I thought perhaps I'd imagined him. But then I heard the whistle again, and as my eyes focused, I saw more of them: basic silhouettes, completely motionless, either facing directly towards or directly away from me, at the very edge of my vision.

The longer I looked, the more I saw. There were maybe a dozen of them—some as close as the gardens, some at the very edge of the woods, hovering between the trees. They were almost imperceptible, only a few shades darker than the night, and each time I spotted one it seemed as though more emerged at the corner of my eye. They could have just been shadows, a trick of the mind. But in my child-brain, I felt an absolute certainty that they were watching me—just like the windows of that dark and haunting house.

I only looked for a minute or two—I couldn't bear much longer—but it was enough to convince me that I was not hallucinating. The moment I accepted that these figures were real, I froze. This night was as thick and hot as the first, but I no longer needed a breeze through the open window to cool me. I felt ice in my fingertips as I fumbled with the latch, terrified that even the slightest sound would draw more unwanted attention from the shadows. As soon as my window was shut and locked, I dove under the covers. Animal instinct kept me perfectly still, as if any subtle movement could damn me to an unimaginable fate.

I don't know how long the sound of the whistling continued, muffled through my closed window and the pillow I pressed firmly over my ears. I do know it was bright out when I woke, my mother shaking me from my troubled sleep. She had let me rest, but she would be late to her first real day of work if she waited any longer. Breakfast was on the counter, and it would be up to me to entertain myself that day.

Before she left, I did ask one thing: had she heard anything strange that night? Strange how, she wanted to know. Like voices, outside the window, I said.

“Voces? No, mijo. Es tu imaginación. Es solo el sonido del viento en la noche.”

CHAPTER TWO

Left to my own devices, I had the freedom to lie on the couch and do nothing. I turned on the TV, but I was disappointed to discover that my mother hadn't called the cable company after all. As it was, I had access to five local channels: two news stations, the weather, one channel that seemed to only play old black-and-white Westerns, and PBS Kids. I stuck with PBS, which was mostly playing decade-old re-runs of Arthur.

By lunchtime, I was ready for a change of pace. I decided to take a walk up the dirt road that led away from the cottage, to explore the grounds in earnest. The path branched in two possible directions: North, toward the ancient and fearsome house; or East, to the gardens. To me, the choice was obvious.

Separated from the mansion by a thinly forested outcrop, all my fears were out of sight and mind. To my left, the trees formed a shady canopy over an odd fixture in the ground. It seemed to be a very small pond, but perfectly flat and encircled by a metal rim. It was called an ellipse, and the water inside was pitch black. I guess it was supposed to look like a place where magic could happen, but it was too hard and round and perfect for my tastes.

Across from the ellipse, to my right, the Formal Gardens were contained within a series of brick and gravel paths. It was much sunnier here; there were no trees, only various green and leafy plants, zig-zagged through with red brick and tiny white stones. I felt a pang of loneliness as I traipsed through the garden that day; what wouldn't I have given to have a friend to race me down those paths and hide behind the plants? But I pressed on, with only my shadow by my side.

It was mid-June, and everything was in bloom. Still, I was actually surprised there weren't more flowerbeds in the garden. Everything was green—the hedges, the grasses, the ivy climbing the sides of the greenhouse. But if I couldn't see the flowers, I could certainly smell them. The garden's scent was so strong I could nearly taste it, like chewing on rose petals. Even from the cottage, I could sometimes smell them. When the wind blew just right at night, their sweetness crept into my room like something secret. I could just picture giant bushes full of hydrangeas and stalks of sunflowers, but I knew if I peeked out my window all I'd see was the dim outline of the garden's hedges, green turned to indigo under the starry sky.

The greenhouse adjacent to the gardens was of less interest to me; its stone walls seemed barely capable of supporting their own weight. Vines clung to the roof and the cracks between the stones, clearly untended. A rather large black spider had made its web directly over the front door, and anyone taller than me would have to duck to get past him.

The gardener, Henry, did this every day. When I asked him why he didn't simply wipe it away, he laughed at me.

"That little bastard's been here longer than I have. If I take down his web, he'll build another one. If I kill him, one of his friends'll take his place."

"Why don't you just get some Raid?" I asked.

"Shit kid, you think anyone's gonna pay me to de-bug this place? They barely pay me to mow the lawn. Besides, spiders are useful little sons-a-bitches. It's mosquito's that'll kill ya out here. And ticks."

I quickly discovered that Henry could be found in the greenhouse most days. It was empty on the inside, except for an array of old woven baskets that hung from the ceiling, and several rows of empty, over-turned flowerpots. In the winter, they would dig up the more sensitive plants from the garden and fill the greenhouse with them; but for now, it was just a sad, empty room.

Henry only worked at the estate three days a week. When he wasn't tending the grounds, he came here to chain-smoke and listen to Weezer or Nirvana on the local "Top 90's Hits" radio station. He also liked to tell stories, and though I doubt he would admit it, I think he appreciated my company as much as I enjoyed his.

Once I thought to ask him what he did when he wasn't working at Montgomery Place.

"Well, of course I have other clients. I'm not one to sit on my ass all day, not unless I'm getting paid for it. I've been mowing lawns up and down the county since I was 18 years old. But I make most of my paycheck off of ol' Montgomery and one other big-ticket client."

When I asked him who this other client could have been, he stubbed out his cigarette and gave me a shit-eating grin.

"Must be your lucky day, kid. Wouldn't you know you're talking to the gardener of the richest man in the Hudson Valley?"

"I didn't know that," I said, "good for you."

"Well, I haven't seen the guy much since May, but we go back. I'm out there just about every summer, picking blades of grass out of his lawn by hand."

"You must be joking," I said.

“Not at all. See, they’re not all empty, these big ol’ riverbank houses. Some people still like to live where they can’t be bothered. But these folks usually have expensive tastes, ya see. Well, I’d done a few jobs for the richest man in the Hudson Valley here and there, and one day he comes up with a special request. ‘Say Henry, whaddya know about peat moss?’ he says to me. I tell him I know enough about it. He says, ‘I’m thinkin’ about tearing out my lawn.’ I ask him, ‘Why the hell would you wanna do that?’” Now, this lawn we’re talking about is the size of a football field and a half, maybe more. He’s got the greenest grass a guy could afford, which is pretty damn green. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘it’s a real drain on my water bill every summer, and it’s not very soft to walk on.’ He says he wants to replace his whole lawn with moss because it’s softer and nicer to step on.

“I don’t know much about the richest man in the Hudson Valley, but I know he has plenty of time to feel the grass between his toes, so maybe this is a priority. ‘Well, there’s just one problem,’ I tell him. You can’t get rid of grass by mowing it down. If you don’t tear out the roots, it’ll just grow back and crowd out the moss you planted. So what you gotta do is uproot the whole damn thing. Only problem is, each blade of grass is kinda like its own organism, with its own root system. So you can either smother the whole thing with poison and risk fucking up the soil, or you can get in there with your hoe and pick the place apart one scoop at a time.”

“Sounds like a nightmare,” I said.

“Oh no, I love the job,” Henry emphasized, gesturing with a fresh cigarette, “Keeps me fed and clothed for the season. Could only do it in the summers, of course, ‘cause the grass dies off quick up here once the weather turns cold. And I warned him, I

said, ‘Mr. Richest Man in the Hudson Valley, I’ll take this job all right, but it’ll be years before your lawn is all peat moss. Anyone who tells you different is cheating you.’ And I guess he trusted me, because he hired me. Sweetest summers a guy could ask for, let me tell ya. I get to lay in the grass listening to music all day every day, or at least whenever I ain’t pruning rosebushes at ol’ Montgomery.”

Henry wasn’t like Mrs. Peterson or my mother. He was the first adult I felt I could confide in as an equal, and it wasn’t long before I told him about my encounter with Mr. Alexander in the mansion, and the strange feelings I had about the place.

“I don’t know who all they bring on to work at the main house, but I never met any Alexander. Could just be a regular staffer, that’s my bet. The guy’s got a point, though. Best you keep out of places you don’t belong.”

“But what if he didn’t belong there, either?” I asked.

Henry thought. “Well, if he ever gives you trouble again, you come and tell me. We’ll see if we can’t do something about it.”

That made me feel a little better, but Henry was also the first person to confirm my greatest fear about my new home:

“Is Montgomery Place haunted?” I asked.

“‘Bout as haunted as a crypt on Halloween. Real old places like this have been counting ghosts for centuries, kid.”

“What kinds of ghosts?” I asked.

“Oh, you know. The walking-the-halls-in-a-white-nightgown kind. Lotta rich old bats owned the place over the last hundred-and-something years, and I guarantee you they all come back here in the end. You wanna know why?”

I absolutely did.

“Because this was just the summer home! They only ever came here on vacation. Wouldn’t you like to spend your afterlife on permanent vacation?”

I did make one other friend during my first week at Montgomery Place. At first, my mother and I were disturbed to find the little “presents” he left on our doorstep: mostly mice and other species of small mammals, their necks broken and their guts spilling onto our stoop. Despite her experience as a housekeeper, my mother never quite got over her fear of little creatures like these, and she would shriek as she nearly stepped on one on her way out the door. Even worse, she made me get rid of them. I had to scoop the claw-marked critters into a shoebox using the dustpan we kept in the kitchen, and carry them out to the edge of the woods and toss their tiny bodies somewhere we wouldn’t see them again.

The fifth time it happened, I caught the culprit himself. He was lying on the step, licking his paw, the little mouse bleeding on the wood beside him. The orange cat seemed quite content with this arrangement.

I thought he would bolt when I stepped out of the house, but he just arched his neck and looked up at me. His eyes were a soft yellow-green. They communicated no fear, only vague curiosity. I sat cross-legged on the porch and looked at him. He loped over to me and rubbed his chin against my knee. Hesitantly, I reached down and scratched him behind his ears. The large orange cat purred against my knee.

After that, I started to look forward to his visits. He still left us gifts every few days, but they were less gruesome to me now for some reason. I began to see him around

the estate, chasing dragonflies through the gardens or scampering up a tree in the arboretum.

He was a little strange though. I'd never had a pet before; our building in the city didn't allow animals, and even if it had, our apartment was too small to be a good home for a cat or dog. But my aunt had a cat named Lady, and I'd always liked her. She was fat and gray with little white feet, and she mostly just lied around all day, taking naps on any lap she could find.

This cat was different. He was lithe and curious, and would never stay put for more than a few minutes, even when I pet him. He was friendly with me, as if he'd known me for years, but he always seemed to have something else on his mind. I'd be patting him and he'd get up mid-stroke and walk away, as if he had somewhere to be, as if he wanted me to follow him.

So I followed, and he led me all over the grounds. He didn't appear every day, and when he didn't, I wandered on my own, usually back to Henry. I asked him once if he'd seen the cat around, or if he knew who belonged it belonged to. He shook his head.

"There's strays all over the goddamn place, you can't hardly mow a lawn without runnin' one over. It's an infestation if you ask me. We oughta put some of them down, for their own good."

I didn't ask Henry any more questions about the cat after that.

But whenever he made an appearance, I resolved to follow the tomcat wherever he would take me. One day, we meandered down the hill behind the mansion and up to the pond at the edge of the property. The cat seemed perplexed, cautiously tapping his paw against the surface of the water. I couldn't see what he was after at first; it wasn't

until I looked very hard that I noticed the tiny minnows flitting back and forth, just beneath the surface.

Another time, he walked me up to a small, crumbling stone formation. It looked like it had been a building once—maybe a very short silo, or a very tall well. He stepped inside a gap in the wall, and swiftly disappeared. I tried to climb through after him, but the vegetation was so thick, I couldn't even see him inside. He had disappeared, just like that, into thin air.

CHAPTER THREE

One day, I was following the cat across the grounds, walking side by side like old friends, when we came upon a sizeable gap in the trees at the northern edge of the property, across the lawn from the visitor's center. It was a path, I noticed, and the cat seemed determined to follow it—but I paused.

I had lived at Montgomery Place for a couple weeks by then, and during my early days of exploration, my mother had made it quite clear that I was not to step foot into the woods for any reason.

“Es peligroso, mijo. It's not just squirrels and birds in these trees. Hay osos en este bosque.”

I swore to her that I would stay within the grounds, always close by if not in direct sight of the manor. She had assured me that if I should wander into the woods alone, punishment would be swift and severe.

Even so, my curiosity and my cat eventually got the better of me. In all my youthful wisdom, I was confident that I could take whatever lions and tigers and bears were lurking at the edges of our new home. It was the house I couldn't stand—the great, looming mansion on the hill above the Hudson. Besides, I reasoned, I was never alone with my furry friend by my side.

The orange cat wandered down the path without hesitation. He didn't seem to care that I followed him, which made him a rather enjoyable guide. I had never wandered so far into any forest on my own, and I couldn't help but revel in the thrill of it. Finally: someplace to really explore.

Once, several summers before, my mother had saved up enough money to send me to camp for a week. We took a bus north of the city, towards the Catskills. That first night, the camp counselors led us on a walk down a simple mountain pass through the woods alongside the campground, and that fresh mountain air inspired in me an exhilaration I have always struggled to describe. Even now, I struggle to relate the absolute freedom and majesty of that experience. Tragically, we were hit with a bad rainstorm the following day, which continued throughout the week. Most of our outdoor activities were cancelled as a result, and I returned home empty-handed. That was the last and only time my mother could afford to send me to summer camp.

Now, though, I didn't need a camp in the Catskills, or a counselor to usher me down pre-approved and overpopulated trails. I was alone in the wilderness—the true wilderness—with only a feral cat as my guide. I imagined myself quite the rugged outdoorsman, perfectly at ease in a habitat that could consume the worldly traveler in one swift bite.

In reality, I was walking down the Sawkill Trail, a well-cleared and not unknown path that never strays too far from the mansion and its grounds. My cat-guide paid me no heed as he stepped along, gracefully prancing over the loose roots and rocks that tangled between my feet. The canopy overhead diverted the day's harsh sunlight and gave everything around me a surreal, green glow. In the distance I could hear rushing water—a sound that became steadily more apparent the farther we walked. Slowly, the path widened out beside a creek, which tumbled into view like a gentle avalanche. The rocky creek bed was coated in mud and obscured somewhat with foliage, but I could tell it was deep—maybe even deep enough to swim.

The creek twisted around a slight bend, and at this point my companion veered off the path. He pounced gracefully down a steeper slope, and I followed. I reasoned that all great journeymen had to blaze their own trails from time to time, and if anything, *this* was the start of my adventure. We cut through the brush until the ground leveled out again. I ignored the brambles that scraped against my jeans and caught in my shoelaces. To my right, the creek had taken a sudden dive over some jagged rocks—a little waterfall, splashing into waters deeper and darker than I'd seen before. It rumbled louder now too; I could barely even hear my own footsteps.

We only walked a little further before a gentle shadow fell over us, and I paused. The orange cat had led me to a tumble-down stone wall. There was an arch in the center of the wall, just tall enough for a grown person to pass through. Overhead, the path from which we'd diverted continued on, illuminated by the sunlight sparkling through the trees. The sun was lower now than when I'd left, and its rays slanted in my direction, not quite reaching me.

I could see no light through the arch. From where I stood, I couldn't see out the other side at all. This unnerved me. It was the first man-made structure I'd encountered on my walk, and I didn't like it. My ambitions of manliness were ruined by this reminder that yes, human civilization had come this far, had crept into my wilderness long before I was even born.

I didn't like the look of this place. There was something ominous about this patch of shadow in my sunny forest. The carefully placed stones were dark grey and imposing. Green things clung to the exterior wall, but inside I could only see cobwebs and brown leaves rotting on the ground.

My cat companion expressed no qualms about passing through the arch. He stepped over the dirt and foliage with intent, as if he knew exactly where he was going. I hesitated, instinct holding me back. Don't be stupid, I thought to myself; it's just a wall in the woods. It couldn't hurt me. So, I followed him through.

The passage turned out to be only a few feet deep, but I could feel the temperature drop several degrees when I stepped inside. I had to duck to keep my hair from brushing the webby roots and vines that hung from the ceiling. But when at last I stepped back into the sunlight, I was disappointed to see that everything was more or less the same. The trees were still trees, the creek babbled on. Only the smell of the air seemed at all different—smokier, maybe; like a distant campfire.

And then, I heard her scream.

I whipped around to see a girl about my age standing above me on the path. She was wearing a pale blue dress that perfectly matched the color of the sky at that time of day. Before I could get a good look at her, something came flying at my face. I didn't even have time to put my hands up, it slapped me across the nose and landed in the dirt at my feet. It was a little white satin slipper—she had thrown her shoe at me.

I heard the leaves rustle ahead of me, and when I looked up, I saw that she had turned and fled.

"Hey, wait!" I shouted. I picked up the slipper and took chase. I ran after her without a second thought. I was bewildered, and I couldn't understand why she would throw her shoe at me and run away. "Where are you going?" I called. She glanced over her shoulder, and when she saw that I had given chase, she ran even faster. We were

sprinting up the path in the opposite direction from which I had come. It was all uphill now, and I could feel my heartbeat in my throat.

She was quick, but with only one shoe and the fullness of that skirt weighing her down, I was decidedly faster. Just when she was finally within reach, the ground beneath our feet leveled out and the tree line gave way to open space. I slowed down reflexively, almost blinded by the view.

It was Montgomery Place. I had circled the house from the arboretum out front and came out beside the fishing pond at the back. The view was unmistakable. And yet...

I was struck by a sensation that hollowed out my gut. The house was there, but there was something terribly wrong with it. It was smaller, more square and demanding. I did not have the vocabulary to describe the Federal Style architecture, but I could see as clear as day that the porches were missing from either side of the house, and the windows reflected the light of the sun like magnifying glasses—not a single pane was so much as scratched. The whole building looked as if it had just been cleaned, diligently scrubbed and painted. The grounds around the house were different as well. The lawn was primly manicured, the edge that separated the wild woods from the estate much clearer than I remembered. The whole place shone with a brilliance I could never hope to capture in words alone, and it haunts me now that I never thought to try and take a picture of it.

As I struggled to reconcile the sight before me with the grey and empty image of the house in my memories, the little girl shot out of my reach.

“Aunt Janet! Aunt Janet, come quickly!” she shouted as she ran. A woman rounded the corner to meet her. Her clothes were unlike anything I’d ever seen in person:

she was dressed all in black, in a long elaborate dress with a bonnet to match and an old walking cane. She moved slowly, with a subtle limp, and leaned heavily on the cane as she walked. She looked as though she had stepped directly out of a black-and-white photograph and into the brilliant color of this new Montgomery Place.

“Aunt Janet, Mother...” the girl continued to call, but she was getting farther and farther away, and would soon be out of earshot. She pointed to me, and the woman turned and began to walk in my direction. I had been frozen in awe, but now I was petrified. Only with great mental effort did I convince my legs to turn and run.

This time, the girl chased, or so I imagined. I dared not look back as I bolted down the forest path. Twice I nearly tripped when the rocks underfoot wobbled but thankfully did not give way. I couldn’t hear my own thoughts over the deafening thud of my heartbeat. I did not know what I had just seen, but I was shaken by it for reasons beyond my comprehension. At long last I rounded the bend over the creek and shot straight through the stone archway, unhindered by the apprehension with which I’d entered it. I didn’t stop running until at long last the trees parted and I could see the estate once more, this time from the front lawn. Once again, the windows glared out at me: dark, empty, and splintered.

My chest heaved, and I collapsed on my back on the grass. I felt as though I’d been swept up in a tornado and briefly dropped into another world. I didn’t know what exactly I’d seen, or what it meant, but I was transfixed. Was I dreaming? Had I wandered onto a neighboring property, and only mistook it for my new home? Or had it all been a trick of the light, my brain wildly misinterpreting ordinary images as a supernatural anomaly? And what about the girl?

Something rustled in the bushes behind me. My eyes darted to the path. Had I been followed? How could I have forgotten that I was being pursued? Just as my panic began to swell again, the orange tomcat pounced from the bushes and trotted towards me. He rubbed against my leg and settled onto my chest, casually licking one dainty paw.

I scratched behind his ears, relieved. The sun would be setting soon, and my mother was likely already on her way home. I pushed myself back onto my feet, much to the dismay of the cat, and began the walk back to our tiny cottage. My thoughts were racing, and I couldn't get the image of that girl out of my head, her pale blue dress bouncing around her knees as she ran towards the house. I had no idea what I'd stumbled into, but I knew I would be back.

My mother was sitting in the kitchen when I got home. "You're late," she said, "I told you to be home before sunset."

"Sorry. I was playing in the gardens with Henry," I lied.

"Well, your dinner will be cold tonight. And don't bother Henry so much, he must get tired, working so late."

"I was helping, and I forgot what time it was. I'm sorry."

"*Bueno*. Don't let him keep you so long next time. Sit, eat." Her tone was scolding, but I notice the crease in her brow relax a little. "What is that?"

I looked down at my hands, and I realized I was still holding the girl's shoe. "I—found it," I fibbed again.

My mother took it and wrinkled her nose at it, as if it smelled vile. "Don't bring filthy things inside like that, put it back where you found it or throw it away."

I took the shoe back from her and stared at it, puzzled. It was pure white and satiny smooth in my hand. Even the dirt that clung to the sole was neatly packed and hardly noticeable.

I didn't know what to make of my mother's reaction, but I thought it best to obey. I placed the shoe out on the porch for the night, and I resolved to do exactly as my mother had told me: I would return it to its rightful owner at the next opportunity.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next opportunity arose the following day. I slept in again that morning, and my mother was gone before I woke up. I made myself a bowl of cereal for breakfast. At that age, few pleasures could surpass the joy of an unsupervised meal. I ate all the Cocoa Puffs I could stomach before setting off on my day's journey.

The orange cat was sniffing at the slipper when I stepped outside. He looked up at me as I approached and blinked lazily. I scooped up the shoe and looked it over again. It was just as I remembered: unsoiled white satin. I couldn't understand why my mother had told me to throw it away, but her reaction had disturbed me. I asked her over dinner if she thought Montgomery Place could be haunted.

"Haunted? No, *mijo*. Has Henry been telling you stories again?"

"No," I said, "It's not a story, I think it's true. I think I saw a ghost today." I described my experience with the girl as well as I could, careful not to include any details that could get me in trouble—like my walk through the woods, and that strange, other-Montgomery Place I had glimpsed for only a moment. My mother listened patiently, shaking her head as I spoke.

"Whatever you saw, it's not a ghost. The girl was just a girl, probably a local."

"But she looked... weird. Like really old fashioned."

My mother shrugged. "This isn't the city. People look different, dress different. We have to get used to that."

"But Mom, what if she—"

"Ghosts are not real, *mijo*," she interrupted, and that was the end of the discussion.

But none of what my mother said had satisfied me. The girl, the maid, the house—I had seen them with my own eyes, and no logic could soothe the little itch in my brain that told me there was something *wrong* with that scene.

The orange cat rubbed against my leg and flopped down at my feet. “Are you coming?” I asked him. He rolled over and began to lick his paw. Clearly, he had other priorities.

Somewhat disappointed, I set off on my own. The walk to the stone arch felt longer and less spectacular than I remembered; already it seemed the majesty of the forest was wearing off, replaced by the monotony of walking a familiar trail. I nearly missed the subtle dip in the path beside the creek that would lead me to the arch, but I caught myself before I had gone too far. Once again, I felt a stone-cold shiver wriggle down my back at the sight of the place—this tiny, shady gap in nature stirred a very old and nameless feeling inside me. I stepped through slowly, reverently silent.

The humidity struck me the moment I reached the other side. It had been a warm day, but cloudy and overcast. Now the sun was bright and sharp, the air wet in my lungs. The transition was so sudden, it took me a moment to realize that I was no longer alone.

“Stay where you are,” the girl commanded. She wore her dark brown hair in high, tight ringlets that framed her face. It wasn’t a pretty face, necessarily; her nose was long, here her lips thin and stern, her large eyes just a little too close together. There was no doubt in my mind: this was the same girl. She was wearing a similar dress, too—this one pale yellow—and brandishing a stick the size of a tree root in my direction, pointed at my head like the barrel of a rifle. I was stunned—I hadn’t expected to find her so easily.

“I brought your shoe back,” I said, offering up the white slipper as a sign of truce.

“I do not want it,” she said.

I frowned. “Well, I don’t want it either,” I said.

“What have you done with it, creature? Have you put a curse on me?” she demanded.

“What?” I was beyond perplexed.

“A hex! A charm! Do you take me for a fool?”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know what you are, and you are not welcome here. Go now and never return, faerie!”

“I’m not a fairy,” I said, indignant. “Fairies aren’t real.”

She lowered her stick a little. “Well then, what exactly are you?”

“I’m a person,” I said, “What are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you a ghost? Are you trying to haunt me?”

“Certainly not.”

“How do you know?”

“If I had died, I believe I would have noticed.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, “You’re dressed like an old dead lady.”

“Stop! I am no phantom.”

“Then prove it,” I said, “Come here, touch my hand and prove you’re not a ghost.”

“Very clever, faerie, but I will take no orders from you.”

“I told you, I’m not a fairy,” I said, exasperated

“Then I suggest you ‘prove it’,” said the girl. She pointed her stick at the ground in front of my feet. I noticed then that I was standing at the center of a small circle, drawn in some sort of grainy white substance. I knelt down and pinched a bit of it between my thumb and forefinger, sniffed it, touched it to my tongue.

“Salt?” I asked.

“No spirit can cross a salt circle unharmed,” she said with absolute confidence.

“Easy,” I said. But would it be? A speck of trepidation drifted into my mind. I was fairly certain I wasn’t a fairy, but I didn’t know the rules of this place; maybe a ring of salt on the leaves really could hurt me somehow. If I were to believe in a magic arch or a ghost girl, what other impossibilities might I discover?

She saw me hesitating, and I saw the panic in her eyes. Strangely, her anxiety gave me courage. I lifted my foot over the thin boundary and placed it, gently, on the other side. The second foot followed. I had made it, I was fine, but the girl looked ready to run at the first sign of danger.

“Wait!” I said, “Don’t disappear.”

“I am not a ghost!” she insisted, stepping gingerly over the roots and twigs towards me. She began to extend a hand, then pulled it back. She was wearing a pair of white gloves, the same shade as the shoe in my hand. She removed her right glove and extended that hand towards me, palm down.

“Do you see now? I am very much alive.”

I took the hand in my own, turned it over, studied it carefully. Her skin was warm and, as far as I could tell, perfectly human. Satisfied, I let the hand go. She held it there a moment longer, hovering in the air.

“You have no manners at all, have you?” she asked, “Do you not know it’s customary to kiss a lady’s hand when it is offered to you?”

“That’s weird,” I said, “They don’t do that where I’m from.”

“Well, what do you do?”

“Not kiss people. Shake hands, maybe.”

“Very well.” She took my hand in hers again and shook it firmly. “My name is Coralie Livingston. You may call me Cora. Pleased to meet you.”

“My name’s Aiden,” I said, and let go of her hand. We began to walk up the path side-by-side.

“Aiden. How strange,” she said.

“Your name’s pretty strange too,” I said.

“My name is French, it means ‘coral’. My mother named me in honor of the beautiful coast of her home in Saint-Domingue.”

“Cool,” I said, “I’m named after my dad.”

“Where do you come from, that you speak so strangely?” she asked.

“You talk weird too,” I said, “I’m from the city, but I just moved here with my mom.”

“Oh, I do adore New York City, my father has told me so many wonderful stories of the people who live there, I should love to see it some day. Do you miss it terribly?”

“I do,” I answered, but even as I said it, I felt it less.

“May I tell you a secret?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“I miss my home, too. I was born in the city of New Orleans, and I live there most of the year. But my mother and I spend our summers at Montgomery Place, with my dear Aunt Janet.” She breathed deep, and gazed up at the canopy of leaves over our heads. “I do love it here, though. The fresh air is simply marvelous for one’s health.”

She was right. Even under the thick, wet, midday-heat, the air felt lighter in my lungs than it had in the city. “Yeah, it’s nice,” I said.

We were approaching the house now, the woods thinning out ahead as we stepped in tandem along the path. I could see a corner of the mansion peeking through the trees. It was strange again, smaller on this side of the wall. I began to doubt myself once more. What if it was a mistake, and this was not the same house at all?

“This is Montgomery Place, right?” I asked.

“Of course it is, have you been listening at all?” She paused. I could tell by the glint in her eye that she still didn’t trust me.

The view of the river was gorgeous that day, the sky was bluer than anything I’d ever seen, the Hudson as still as a painting. Furthermore, this was, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the same view I’d seen so many times during my adventures around the property. The angle was exact, the mountains were the same; only one small but not insignificant detail caught my eye.

“Where’s the pond?” I asked.

“The pond?”

“There’s supposed to be a fishing pond there, right there,” I said, pointing downhill, towards the river. “And the house is wrong. It’s too small and square. It’s supposed to be more mansion-y.”

“What an awful thing to say. How would you like it if I insulted your home?”

“Wait. This isn’t your home, nobody lives in this house anymore.”

Cora stared in confusion. “Are you ill? Is something wrong with you?”

“I’m not ill, I’ve been inside. I know what I’m talking about. It’s like, a museum now.”

“Surely you are mistaken.”

“No. Come here, I can prove it.” I took her hand and began to run.

“Where are we going?” Cora called behind me.

“I have to show you my house,” I shouted. It wasn’t far from the back of the estate to my cottage. I was certain that if I could just get there, I could make sense of all of this. If I could show her my home, she would have to understand, and we could clear up all this confusion once and for all.

I didn’t slow down until we rounded the bend, and the little Swiss cottage should have been in sight—but it wasn’t there. There were fields where I remembered grass. I looked up the slight incline to the gardens, but they were missing as well. The greenhouse was gone. Our car was gone. Everything I knew to be here was missing, in its place only a small stone hut and a silo near the edge of the south woods.

“It’s supposed to be here,” I said.

“The farm?” Cora asked, breathless and bewildered.

“No, my house, it’s just a little cottage, it’s just—supposed to be here. Right here.”

“There is no cottage on this property, you must be confused. You must be thinking of somewhere else.”

“I’m not! I live here!” I insisted, “I just moved in with my mom and, she works up at the house and—” I felt a twist in my stomach, and before I knew it, the Cocoa Puffs were rising in my throat. Why had I eaten so many?

My knees buckled. My head was swimming, and I was certain I was about to vomit.

“Aiden? Are you alright?” Cora asked. I shook my head no, then yes—suddenly mortified by the thought of puking Cocoa Puffs in front of a girl.

“Stay here. Let me get help,” she said, and out of the corner of my eye I saw her shadow retreat.

I sat several long moments with my head between my knees, willing my stomach to calm and the ground to stop spinning. I pinched my eyes shut and waited until my breathing had slowed to its regular rhythm. When I was pretty sure I could stand again without falling over, I felt something warm and soft brush against my left shin.

“Meow,” mewled the orange cat.

“Hey buddy,” I said, rubbing behind his ears. His presence calmed me significantly: if I had followed him here, I could follow him back. He seemed completely at ease—as comfortable in this Montgomery Place as in my own. At his own leisure, he wandered out of my reach and up toward the house. I followed him all the way up to a

small garden beside the mansion. This was nothing like the gardens on my side of the wall; just a few herbs and vegetables I didn't recognize, all lined up in neat little rows.

The orange cat was on a mission. He circled the little garden with predatory grace, his eyes scanning the plants intently. There was a light rustle, and I caught sight of his target: a tiny mouse flitting between the plants and nibbling on their leaves. The cat's eyes dilated, his haunches raised, waiting for the perfect moment. When he saw his chance, he sprung forward and caught the little creature between his teeth, snapping its neck with a shake of his head.

"Shoo, shoo!" a stern voice shouted from the other side of the garden. It was an older woman in an apron and a long grey dress—clearly a servant's uniform. I froze, unsure if she were referring to me or the cat.

"Go on, get! Get away, you scamp!"

The cat paid her no mind, but I thought it best to retreat.

"Sorry!" I said, jogging around the side of the house and safely out of view. I soon slowed to a meandering pace, my stomach not quite content and the weight of the humidity hitting me all over again. I had no idea where Cora had disappeared to, and I couldn't take much more of the heat.

My cat-companion seemed to agree, because he began to stride towards the gap in the woods from which we had emerged. We'd nearly disappeared back into the trees when I heard Cora's voice:

"Wait!" she called, stepping out onto the lawn. I paused and waved, but the cat continued on.

“Come with us,” I said, and continued to follow him. Cora hesitated, gazing back into the house as if she were being spoken to, or scolded. But, to my relief, she turned away and walked swiftly back to me.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I don’t really know,” I admitted. “I’m just following a friend.” I gestured to the cat, which had paused just before the bend as if to see if we would follow.

She tilted her head curiously. “Theodore?”

“Who?”

“Here, Theo,” she said, bending down and clicking her tongue at the cat. He let the mouse fall from his mouth and bounded over to her. She scooped him into her arms and he mewed gleefully as she stroked his fur.

“I’m so pleased you’ve met,” she said, “he is my oldest friend.”

“Of course,” I said, more to myself than to Cora. “I followed him here, yesterday.”

“You followed him, from your home?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“How simple, then! We need only retrace your steps, and surely we will arrive at your home, just as you left it.”

“I guess,” I said—still cautious, but reassured by her confidence—“sure, yeah, let’s go back. We have to go through the arch, the wall in the woods. I’m pretty sure my house is on the other side.”

“Excellent,” said Cora, “But, I know that path, it leads back to my home, not yours.”

“Just trust me,” I said, taking her hand. Theodore leapt to the ground and reclaimed his prize, scurrying ahead of us down the path. I helped Cora over the roots and unsteady rocks along the slope; the way she gripped my arm made me feel like a real gentleman.

“You have to promise not to freak out when you see it, okay? Things are pretty different on my side.”

“I do not know what you mean, but I will try.”

We scurried down from the path, our feet sliding over leaves and loose dirt, up to the arch set in stone under the hill. Even here, it looked worn and decrepit, like a skin shed by some much larger, older creature. The cat, Theodore, stepped through without hesitation. I took both of Cora’s hands in mine and looked her straight in the eye.

“Promise you won’t freak out,” I said.

She took a breath. “Very well, I promise.”

“Okay,” I said, and let go of her hands. The short tunnel under the arch was too narrow for us to pass through side by side, so I walked ahead of her.

As soon as I stepped out of the arch, I noticed the same shift in atmosphere I’d felt on the way through that morning. The air was still warm, but crisper, not as dense. The wind blew faintly, and I thought I smelled the sweet and smoky scent of homemade barbecue from somewhere in the distance.

“Okay, so let me explain,” I said, turning to Cora. But when I looked behind me, I was startled to see that she was gone. “Cora?” I called tentatively, and then, a little louder, “Cora!” The arch was empty. She was nowhere to be seen, on either side.

“What exactly do you think you are doing, young man?” A familiar figure stood on the path above me, glaring down.

CHAPTER FIVE

“What are *you* doing here, Mr. Alexander?” I countered. “I thought you were supposed to work at the house.”

“It is my duty to look after the house and its grounds, and that includes its occupants, and that includes you.”

“I can take care of myself,” I said, marching up toward him as if to prove my point.

“And what would your mother think, if she knew I found you here?” he asked.

I stopped in my tracks. My mother and I had been getting along well in the last few days, the best we had since we’d moved. But now, one word from Mr. Alexander could change all of that. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. Please, please don’t tell my mom.”

Mr. Alexander looked at me gravely. “I suggest you keep your word, young man. It would be unwise to make a habit of wandering alone in these woods.”

“Okay, I promise,” I said. Mr. Alexander kept staring at me. His eyes were strange. One sat just a little higher than the other on his face, and the way he looked at me and the way he spoke gave me the impression that he knew exactly where I’d been.

“Well, I’m going home now. Goodbye,” I said. Mr. Alexander did not bother to reply as I stepped around him. I hoped against all hope that he would leave and I could return to Cora, but when I peeked back over my shoulder he was still there, standing motionless, watching me go. Why did that feel like such a threat?

But Mr. Alexander wasn’t the strangest thing I’d seen that day, and I supposed I had bigger questions to answer. Not the least of which was, of course, where Cora had

gone. Had she chickened out at the last second and not followed me through? But no, I'd heard her footsteps behind me as we passed under the arch. When had they stopped? Had she made it through after all, seen Mr. Alexander before me, and hid? Was she still back there? But where could she have hidden that I hadn't seen her? And to disappear so quickly, without a sound...

I rounded the bend and the house came into view once more. Its windows were dark and empty, its wings in place. Even the fishing pond was back again, at the foot of the hill that sloped toward the river. There was no doubt that I had returned to my world once more, without Cora. Still, the thought of the farmland on her side of the wall, where my cottage was meant to be, stuck in my head. I hadn't liked the looks of all that empty space where I was supposed to belong.

I picked up the pace, half-running across the lawn toward my home. I didn't need to worry, though. The cottage was there, our car was there, and everything was all right again. I could hear the tension leaving my body as I breathed a sigh of relief and made my way to the porch. I didn't even see Theodore until he was underfoot.

"Sorry Theo!" I said as I nearly lost my balance in an effort not to step on his tail. He meowed indignantly and scampered out of my way, right as my foot came down on the corpse of the mouse. Now at least I knew where he was getting them.

I flopped down on the couch and turned on the television. Still no cable. I wondered if my mother ever intended to fix half of what was wrong with this house. She could pick up and move us across the country for a job, but she wouldn't dream of asking Mrs. Peterson if we could have an extra air conditioner. The kitchen sink drip, drip, dripped to the rhythm of my thoughts, and I realized I couldn't wait until my mother

came home. I had too much on my mind, and I needed to take it to someone who might actually listen to me.

I found Henry in the greenhouse this time. He hurriedly stubbed out a cigarette on an overturned flowerpot as I entered.

“Shit kid, don’t scare me like that. I thought you were one of the Petersons.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I have a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“Do you remember when you told me Montgomery Place was haunted? With like, lady ghosts in white dresses?”

“Sure, I remember that,” he said.

“Have you ever seen one?” I asked.

“I used to think so, just once,” he said.

“What did it look like?”

Henry paused, remembering. “Like a girl. Long brown hair, big eyes. I think she was wearing white.”

My breath caught in my throat. Could Henry have met Cora too? Or was this some other phantom? “What did she do?” I asked.

“She didn’t do nothing. See, I was out working on the lawn out back, and I keep getting this funny feeling. Real funny, like something’s watching me, up by the house.”

“I know what you mean,” I said.

Henry nodded. “So I’m working, and I try to ignore it, but I can’t shake this feeling. And when I’m almost done, the sun is going down over the mountains, and shining right over those windows on the second floor. And in one of those corner

windows, I happen to look up, and that's where I see her. Now I don't ever leave a job unfinished once I've started it—that's a principle of mine—but let me tell you, I never mowed a lawn so fast in my life. I was outta there before the sun was halfway set.

“Well, a couple weeks go by and of course I'm thinking about it. I'm no coward, but I'm doing that lawn first thing in the morning and I ain't stepping foot near the place after dark. Then one day there's a big commotion up at the house, police are involved, the whole nine yards. I ask somebody what's going on, and they say it's because of a bunch of students. I ask what the granola-eating hippies are up to now. They say there's been a couple of 'em breaking into the house at night, risking their asses for some film project. Well, trouble caught up with them all right.

“To be fair, this was about twenty years ago. It was easier back then to get in where you weren't supposed to be; I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't even lock the place before all that. They were asking for it.”

“Oh,” I said, disappointed. “And you never saw the girl again?”

“Sure didn't. But that doesn't mean the place isn't haunted. There's a whole lotta history of spiritual stuff on this land. Especially the woods.”

“The woods?” I asked.

“Yeah, let me show you,” he said. Henry took my shoulder and we stepped outside. “See that? See how the lawn just stops right there?”

“Yeah?” He was right. The primly manicured gardens ended in a clean, firm line that ran straight down the southern edge of the property. On the other side of that line, the great green wild spilled down the mountain, unhindered.

“I don't touch anything south of here, and you shouldn't either.”

“Why?” I asked

“That’s my contract, kid. But it’s not just mine, it goes all the way back to when the Livingstons bought the property. Something about an Indian burial ground, sacred land. So whatever you do, don’t go playing down the south side of the mountain. Haunted or no, it sure as hell is treacherous.”

“What about the north woods?” I asked, thinking of the arch.

Henry frowned. “Probably best not to go wandering in any woods, but you know that.” He reached into his pocket and produced a cigarette, lit it, sucked on it. “All I can say is, Montgomery Place is special. Folks’ve been coming here for decades for reasons even they don’t understand. The place used to be a haven for artists and creative souls back in the day. You know why that is?”

“Magic?”

“Yeah, alright. Or maybe they just liked the view.”

I thought about what Henry had said. And as I thought, I realized I didn’t want to tell him about Cora. She wasn’t a ghost; of that, I was convinced. But something magical had happened to me that day, and I didn’t want any more skepticism thrown at my story, even if it was well intended.

Henry exhaled and rumbled deep in his throat. “Shit kid, I gotta get back to work. Did you need something?”

“No,” I said, “I’m good. Thanks.”

As he retreated to the greenhouse, something new caught my eye. There were four white squares sticking out of the ground at the edge of the woods, where Henry had

warned me never to go. I stepped forward hesitantly. As I came closer, I could see that they were made of stone, implanted deep in the ground. There were indents along the side, what might have been an engraving. I could almost make out what it said, if only I moved a few steps closer...

“¡Coño!” The nearby scream startled me, and I whipped around instinctively. It was my mother; I could tell by the colorful stream of Spanish profanities. She was standing on the porch of our cottage, clearly visible from where I stood. I rushed towards her, no other thought in my mind than to rescue her.

“Mom!” I shouted as I approached, “What’s wrong?”

“Can you believe it, *mijo*? *Ese hijo puta*’s done it again!” she said, pointing to the wet, red stain at her feet. I saw then that Theodore was to blame for my mother’s distress; she’d mistakenly stumbled onto his generous gift, just as I had done that afternoon. “I swear to god, if I ever catch that cat...” She scraped the bloody bottom of her shoe against the step, then examined it carefully.

“It’s okay, I’ll take care of it,” I said, eager to ease her panic. I quickly ran inside to find the shoebox, but my mother stopped me.

“Don’t, it’s dirty,” she said. “Leave it until we get back.”

“Back from where?”

“We’re going out to dinner. I thought it would be good to celebrate our new home, I wanted to surprise you.”

“You did surprise me,” I said.

“Come on,” she said, running a hand through my hair.

I was excited to go into town for the first time, but the ride was longer than I expected. We drove off the estate onto a road that twisted through the woods and onto a small highway—the only straight line, it seemed, that dared to cut through the trees—and then the stoplight, and the hill that, to me, felt like a mountain. Our Subaru wheezed and rumbled higher and higher up, and only when it seemed as if we couldn't possibly go any farther, the road dipped, and we were coming down, just as the sun would soon begin to set over the tiny town of Red Hook.

It was pretty, in a pastoral sense. The houses were big and spread out along this stretch of road. On our left, we passed a large red barn, with a farm of some sort stretched behind; to our right, a small baseball diamond, where a team of boys a few years older than myself was practicing. With the windows rolled down, I could hear them shouting indistinctly to one another. Just across the street there was an empty football field, adjacent to a large, red-brick building. “Linden Avenue Middle School,” a sign read. The school itself sat far back from the road; I had to lean far forward in my seat to catch a glimpse of the tall, imposing building.

“What do you think?” my mother asked.

“About what?”

“The school. Looks nice?”

“Not especially. Just looks old.”

We came to a stop outside of a small, white restaurant. “Mrs. Peterson says she loves the tacos here, I thought we should give it a try,” my mother said. My mouth watered at the thought. Our apartment in the city was just down the street from a

fantastic little taquería, and kids ate free on Tuesdays, so my mother would take me there practically ever week.

We took a seat outside and placed our orders with the tall, blonde waitress. She smiled at me when she took our menus, and I felt the heat rise in my cheeks and I had to look away.

We talked while we waited for the food to come, and my mother told me about her work. “You would not believe how good it feels to clean an empty house. *Pues*, not really empty. There are so many little things to work around, precious things. You’ve seen inside, you know what I mean. And I’m still learning, there are a lot of rules I have to follow, but it’s not too different. It’s nice not to have someone... hovering all the time, you know? Always looking over my shoulder. It’s a relief.”

I was happy for her, genuinely. And it felt good to talk. Evening was falling fast; the air was cool and peaceful, and I was glad to see my mother so at ease. When our food came, I was less enthused. The meat was covered in all sorts of weird vegetables—pickled onions and radishes and some strange coleslaw. But my mother seemed to like it all right; or at least, she didn’t let on to any dissatisfaction.

As I picked at my food, I watched the passers-by on the street: mostly women, I noticed, darting in and out of all the little shops before they closed. A man with a long beard was walking a golden retriever from one end the street to the other. Practice must have ended at the baseball diamond, because a group of four or five boys in cleats and uniforms walked past, chatting and laughing to one another.

Something about them made me uneasy. I felt incredibly apart from those boys: a sort of unprompted realization that I was not one of them, and never would be. It wasn’t

just that they were bigger, older. It might have been the way they walked together, almost in unison. It might have been as simple as color: they were all white—every one of them—and I was something else.

Looking back, my elementary school in the city was nowhere near the best, but it was never the worst either. We lived in a pretty mixed neighborhood, and I grew up around all kinds of kids—fat ones and skinny ones and tall ones and short ones and smart ones and dumb ones. There were white kids and black kids and brown kids, and ambiguous kids, like me, who slid somewhere in between those lines. Above all, there were always more kids—hoards of us, more than the thirty allotted desks and chairs in any given classroom could contain, more than five grades and six stories of brick and mortar could hold.

Like most kids, I got picked on from time to time. Usually, it was because of how I talked, or read aloud in class. My grades were mostly okay, but reading came slow to me; as I got older, I learned that it's not unusual for bilingual children to struggle with verbal skills early on. It took me longer than most of my peers to learn to speak, but I was vocal enough by the time I came to school. Reading was much worse. When asked to read aloud in class, I had to sound out each word, syllable by syllable, stumbling over myself the whole way. I absolutely hated it. Sometimes, when the overworked and often distracted teachers weren't paying attention, I would be mocked, and told I sounded like a robot. One boy, Matthew Denner, used to sit behind me, and would imitate me while I read, so that other kids would laugh.

That was mostly how it went. Sometimes there would be louder digs, insults shouted across the playground. Sometimes they were about my dad, or about how my

aunt always had to walk me home from school, because my mother was working. But I was a pretty easy-going kid overall, and I was tall, and I always had enough friends to dissuade most bullies from targeting me.

I certainly wasn't afraid of being bullied by the baseball boys. I didn't have any reason to fear or dislike them. Maybe it had nothing to do with race or age or the dirty threads wearing thin at the knees of my jeans, or the way my mother scrutinized the bill when it was set on our table. Maybe it was their white pants and their striped shirts and their matching baseball caps. Maybe it was only an envy that I had no close friends here, with whom I could simply walk down a street at the end of a game, and laugh.

My mother saw that I was distracted, and followed my gaze to the group of boys. "Do you want to say hi?" she asked.

"What? No," I said, immediately embarrassed.

"Why not introduce yourself? You might even make a friend."

"No thank you."

"I'm just saying, it couldn't hurt to know a few familiar faces on the first day of school."

"I have friends at school, at home," I reminded her. My mother dropped her gaze back to her food. "Besides," I said, reminding myself as well, "I already made a friend here."

"Who?" she asked.

"That girl I told you about. You were right, she's a local," I lied. "Her name's Cora."

"Cora, *como corazón*?"

“Yeah, I guess.”

My mother smiled. “That’s pretty. Do her parents know that she comes to play with you at Montgomery Place?”

“We don’t *play*, Mom,” I said indignantly, “but yes, they do.”

“*Bueno*, I’m happy you have a friend. Just please, don’t get into any trouble. Either of you.”

“We won’t,” I promised, and I meant it.

CHAPTER SIX

Several days passed before I was able to see Cora again. After my latest encounter with Mr. Alexander, I was paranoid; several times I had ventured out in the direction of the path, only to lose my nerve at the last second. By then I was seeing Mr. Alexander around the grounds with some regularity, always strolling across the lawn or peering through a window, and I was usually able to keep a safe distance. But now, I was more disturbed when I couldn't see him. He could be hiding around any corner, behind any tree, ready to step out and condemn me at a moment's notice.

Eventually, however, my loneliness got the better of me. I missed Cora, and I wondered if she thought of me as often as I thought of her. When I finally did get up the courage to go through the wall in the woods again, she wasn't waiting for me. I was disappointed, but I could hardly blame her; how long had she waited for me since we last met, only to be disappointed as well?

When I didn't find her in the woods, I made my way up towards the house once more. The fields on this side of the wall were far more extensive; in my world, Montgomery Place was all sweeping lawns and carefully manicured trees—the remnants of leisure grounds no longer preserved for pleasure but for history's sake. But the land here was sewn with crops and plants I couldn't recognize on sight, the soil tilled and turned by active farmhands hard at work in the fields. I hadn't noticed them before, but as I circled the property, I saw half a dozen or so figures pacing rows of corn and wheat where the Arboretum would one day stand. I kept my distance from them, not wanting to draw any attention to myself. Somehow I knew I wouldn't find Cora here.

When I was satisfied with my inspection of the fields, I walked around the back of the house, and I immediately noticed that the doors and windows were open. It was an especially hot day, almost unbearably hot, but a soft breeze had drifted up the mountain from the river, and the sheer white curtains danced in the wind. I briefly considered stepping up to the threshold and through the side door in search of Cora, but what would she think of me if I just walked into her home unannounced?

As I debated what to do, a woman stepped out onto the porch. She was wearing a floral dress and her golden blonde hair was tucked neatly away under a white hat. I recognized her immediately, though I couldn't say where from. Her face was uncomfortably familiar; it was like seeing a celebrity at Starbucks, a face you'd only seen in movies now walking down your street.

That vague familiarity unsettled me, but she was the first person I'd run into, and I figured I might as well ask for her help. She was reading now, lounging on a chair on the porch. She did not look up as I approached.

“Scuse me,” I said.

The lady did not respond.

I cleared my throat. “Excuse me. I’m looking for Cora,” I said.

The lady turned a page of her book and kept reading, as if I weren't there at all.

“Hello? I need to find Cora,” I said, louder now, “I mean, Coralie? I think? Do you know her?”

Nothing.

I reached out a hand and waved it in front of her face, desperate for any reaction. But as I leaned in, I finally realized where I had seen this woman before: her portrait

hung in the sitting room of the house on my side of the wall. She was the beautiful lady whose eyes seemed so full of secrets.

The woman did not react to any of my efforts to get her attention, but when I recognized her, I gasped, and quickly yanked my hand away, accidentally knocking her book to the floor.

A dainty little “Oh!” escaped her lips as the book fell, and when at last she looked up, her eyes seemed to miss me. Her brow creased in confusion as she looked around, her gaze passing over me as if I were completely invisible.

“Ma’am?” said a voice to my left. I was startled to realize that another woman had been standing beside us this whole time, still as a statue and completely silent. Now she bent to retrieve the book and hand it back to the lounging lady.

“Sorry,” I said, but this woman didn’t acknowledge me either. She returned to her original position, and I saw now that she had been standing at an angle to help shade the lady from bright, hot sun; little bubbles of sweat were forming on her skin and slowly dripping down her face.

The seated woman had taken up her book again, but now she was looking past it, focusing on something in the distance behind me. As I watched, her features softened, and she waved a delicate hand in my direction. I turned to see Cora waving back from the foot of the hill. I was relieved to see her, but ever more confused by the interaction that had just taken place. I hurried down the hill towards her.

“Come here, quickly,” she said.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," I said as I reached her, "Hey, look at me." Cora had turned and began walking further down the hill. She would not meet my gaze as we walked.

"Hush, not yet. Wait until we are out of my mother's sight."

"That's your mom?" I gawked. "Wow. She's really pretty."

"Oh yes, everyone thinks so," muttered Cora.

"Oh," I said, "What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing is wrong with my mother," said Cora, "What on earth is wrong with *you*?" Cora explained what she'd seen as we passed through the arch, how I had been right there and then gone in the blink of an eye—exactly how she had disappeared from me. We slowed our pace as we moved further from the house, but Cora kept glancing back over her shoulder from time to time.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing at all," she insisted, but I could see as plain as day the concern on her face. The wind swept at our clothes as we walked and tangled Cora's dark hair, which she wore low over her shoulders that day—I remember it so clearly; it was one of the only times I saw her with her hair down. The sky above us was bright and blue, but as we continued downwards I saw that a thick grey fog had settled over the mountains on the other side of the river; the clouds were dark, unnerving me further.

"All right," she said, settling into the grass at the foot of the hill.

"What are we doing here?" I asked, exasperated.

"Picking violets, of course." She gestured to the flowers that surrounded us on all sides, purple-blue bursts of color rising up out of the green and dancing lightly in the

breeze. Cora began to pick them, one at a time, and place them into a small whicker basket.

“Pretty,” I said.

“They do look lovely, don’t they? How lucky we are, violets don’t normally bloom so late in the Spring. These gardens are the absolute pride of the Valley. Here, will you help me?”

“Sure,” I said. We picked flowers in silence. I glanced over at Cora, but she wouldn’t look at me. Something was wrong. “Cora, are you mad at me?”

“Of course not. What a silly question.”

“Don’t lie, come on,” I pressed, tossing a handful of flowers in her direction.

She huffed and placed her hands in her lap. “I searched for you for five days. What kept you so long?”

I told her about finding Mr. Alexander on the other side of the wall, and the strange feeling that I was being watched wherever I went. “I wanted to come sooner, I swear,” I said, “It’s just complicated, you know?”

Cora looked at me at last, and gave me a little smile. “Very well, I understand. I have encountered certain complications these past days as well.

“Like what?” I asked.

“I told my mother about you. She says you are a figment of my imagination. I told her that cannot be true, but she doubts me.”

“I don’t think she can see me,” I said. “I tried to talk to her, but she acted like I wasn’t even there. It was weird.”

Cora bit her lip. “She failed to see you last week, as well. She scolded me for running off, and I told her I was only following my friend. ‘What friend have you made?’ she asked me, and I said, ‘Surely you must have seen him, we were together all morning.’ She said ‘No, my love,’ and scolded me once more for lying. She feared I had run off with a young man, which would be most indecent. I entreated my dear aunt to help, and I fear I have upset her terribly; ‘It is most unhealthy for a woman of your age to play with imaginary friends,’ she said. “A young lady ought not to speak with people who aren’t there.’ None of the servants have seen you; I asked everyone I could find if they had met my companion, and they all said no. When you disappeared, I thought, ‘Maybe he was never real at all.’ But here you are, and I have no idea what to think.”

I took Cora’s hand and squeezed it. “I’m real,” I said. “I don’t know what’s going on, or why nobody else can see me. But I’m definitely real.”

Cora looked at me very seriously, her brow furrowed, her eyes as deep and dark as the flowers in her hands. “We shall have to be more careful. If this friendship is to continue, it must be in secret.”

“How secret? What do you think would happen if your parents found out about me?” I asked, becoming steadily more worried for her.

Cora paused, and pressed her lips together in thought. “In truth, I do not know. But I believe my mother could make life most unpleasant for me, if she wished.”

I thought of my own relationship with my mother. “Yeah, I get that,” I said.

“Please don’t think poorly of her, though,” Cora amended, returning her attention to the violets. “My mother is a lovely person, and my closest friend. But it might be fun, for once, to keep a secret from her.”

“Okay,” I said, “So how do we do that?”

“We shall meet in secret, under the cover of night,” she said.

“No way,” I said, “I can’t sneak out at night, my mom would hear, and I’d never make it out the door. Besides, if nobody can see me here, we can just hang out when you’re alone.”

“‘Hang out?’ How do you mean?”

“You know, spend time together. Just like this.”

“That could be present a challenge. I am not often allowed to wander, as I have done these past few days. I mustn’t upset my mother any further.”

“Well, what does your mom think you’re doing right now?”

“Picking violets, of course.”

“And she’s okay with that?”

“Certainly. An appropriate activity for a young lady.”

“Then I’ll meet you here.”

“Very well,” she said, snapping the stem of a flower and gently tucking it into my breast pocket. “I will set a vase in my window and fill it with flowers—roses to meet by the rosebushes up the hill, violets to meet by the violets.”

“Perfect,” I said, “but what if you can’t meet?”

“In that case, I will leave the vase empty.”

A single drop of rain fell onto the petals of the flower with a thick, wet plop. We looked up in surprise, and I noticed that the sky had grown dark and grey; the clouds had moved across the river, and they were heavy with rain. A few more drops splattered over my cheeks as we knelt there in the grass.

“Oh, excellent!” Cora exclaimed, jumping to her feet. “The violets will be grateful for this rain.”

Just then I heard a distant rumble, like the snore of a sleeping giant. “Did you hear that?” I asked.

Cora shook the dirt from her dress and offered me a hand. “We had better go inside, I suspect we will need shelter soon.”

“Are you sure your mom won’t mind?” I asked, eyeing the house from where we stood.

“I think it will be alright. My mother would not dream of leaving a guest out in the rain.” She scooped up the basket of flowers, adding a few stray violets to the pile.

“Besides, how can anyone mind you if they cannot see you?”

The rain was falling faster now, and we covered our faces with our hands as we ran towards shelter. As we approached, the windows of the house were closed almost in unison by unseen hands, as if Montgomery Place itself were shutting us out.

I couldn’t shake my anxieties as we entered; this was the first time I would see the inside of the place as Cora knew it. It was darker than I expected, the chandelier in the foyer lit by real candles that flickered excitedly as we opened and shut the door. The furniture was simpler, less scattered and eclectic than I remembered from my brief tour.

A servant woman, the one I’d seen in the garden the week before, met us in the foyer. “Your mother’s in the dining room, Miss Cora,” she informed us.

“Thank you, Aunt Sally,” said Cora.

“That’s your aunt?” I asked, eyeing the woman dubiously. Her face, her hair, her skin, her stature—it was all wrong. She looked nothing at all like Cora.

“No, of course not, we only call her that. She’s been in the family for ages,” Cora scolded.

“Miss?” asked Aunt Sally.

Cora recovered herself quickly, and handed over the basket. “Take these to my room, if you please. And put some on the table for dinner.”

“Yes Miss,” Aunt Sally replied, and shuffled quickly out of the room. I briefly marveled at the authority with which Cora could speak to an adult—I couldn’t imagine what would happen if I tried to command a grown-up like that. But she quickly took my hand, and I was once again preoccupied by my anxieties as I followed her through the house. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a few other men and women dressed in old-fashioned servant’s uniforms, but none of them seemed to notice me or object to my presence. They simply stood in the shadowy corners of the house, not moving.

Cora’s mother was peering through the floor-to-ceiling windows in the dining room. “Hello my love, are you finished in the garden?” she asked.

“Yes, mother,” said Cora.

“Excellent. This rain will do wonders for our violets, we shall keep our gardens long into the summer this year.” I noticed a subtle lilt in her voice when she spoke, the slightest trace of an accent. It reminded me of my own mother—though that’s as far as the resemblance could go. Mrs. Livingston was nothing like my mother, I thought: she was the picture of grace, standing in the window in her evening gown and gloves, her hands clasped, her hair perfectly gathered atop her head.

She turned back to the view. “Come here my love, you simply must see this.”

Across the river, the mountains were now completely invisible, obscured by an opaque mist. The water reflected the grey sky, its currents visibly disturbed by the choppy winds. Just then, only for the briefest of moments, a bright purple flash illuminated the sky and echoed in the water, igniting the scene with tendrils of electricity. Five seconds passed, then six, then seven—then the thunder struck, louder than before. I felt Cora's hand tighten in mine, and I realized I'd been holding my breath.

Mrs. Livingston's hand fluttered to her chest, where it rested pensively. "The winds are strong enough today, this tempest will soon be upon us," she murmured.

"*The Tempest!*" Cora exclaimed. "Mother, may I go to my room?"

"Yes, alright," she replied, "But come down dressed for dinner at six, promptly please."

"I will," Cora assured her. Already we were backing out of the room, through the kitchen, and up the stairs. Cora hesitated at the top of the stairs, just outside the door I'd tried to open during my first visit to the house.

"How inappropriate. I am not meant to entertain guests in my private quarters," she said.

"What about imaginary friends?" I tested.

"I am not meant to have those at all," she said, "But... I suppose it might be all right, just this once. If only you'll promise to be a gentleman."

"I promise," I said without hesitation.

Cora grasped the glass doorknob and twisted; it swung open without resistance. The room was smaller and plainer than I'd imagined. Cora's bed was large but not ornate, and occupied most of the space. It had a broad wooden headboard, white sheets,

and a pale pink quilt with a pattern of cream-colored roses. There were two bedside tables, a dresser along the far wall, and a small vanity with a mirror and a stool. Her curtains were gauzy white, and masked the view of the turbulent river.

“Can you keep one last secret?” she asked.

“Who could I tell?”

Cora smiled. She took a waxy yellow candle from the nearest nightstand and lit it. Gingerly, she set the candle on the floor beside the bed and knelt down. She pulled back the bed skirt with one hand and gestured for me to have a look. I saw piles of books, dozens of them, all with thick, intimidating spines.

“These are my treasures,” she said.

“There’s so many, where did you get them?” I asked.

“Father’s library,” she said. “I am not meant to keep them here.”

“You do all sorts of stuff you’re not supposed to,” I said.

“Hold your tongue,” she said, nudging me playfully.

“Where is your dad, anyway?”

“Father has gone to France. He may be needed there all summer, on urgent matters of the state, you see.” Cora sighed. “I miss him terribly.”

“Is he gone a lot?”

“No—well, perhaps he is. More often than I would like, in any case.”

“I know the feeling. I never met my dad.”

“Oh, my condolences,” said Cora, “Did he pass?”

“I don’t know, I never met him. I don’t know anything about him,” I said, but that wasn’t entirely true.

I had asked my mother about my father only twice. I think I could sense, as if by instinct, a vast and profound sadness in her. It seemed to me as though his presence, if only in thought, could cause more harm than his absence. So, for the most part, I held my tongue.

The first time I asked, when I was very young, it was only to know if I had a father at all.

“You used to,” she said, “but not anymore.”

“What happened to him?” I asked. I don’t think she ever answered that, exactly. She just bit down on her lips until they turned white, and distracted me with something else.

When I was older, after much trepidation, I dared to ask a different question: “What was my dad like?”

This time, my mother gave me a little more information, and a photograph. The man in the picture was standing on a pier, his back turned to the ocean, his hands in his pockets. His long, light hair partially obscured his face, as if blown by the wind. Even to my adolescent eyes, he looked far too young to be a father.

Cora frowned. “How can that be?” she asked, “Who takes care of you and your mother?”

“Well my mom works, and I take care of her, so I guess we kind of take care of each other.”

“And you live alone, just the two of you?”

“That’s what I said, yeah,” I snapped.

Cora recoiled, and I immediately felt bad, but I didn't like the way she was looking at me. "I see," she said, though I could tell she didn't understand. "Do you ever feel lonesome?" she asked.

I nodded. I didn't know how to say: why else would I be here? Why would I risk my mother's fury, and whatever Mr. Alexander had to unleash, if I didn't so desperately need your friendship?

"Then, I know how you feel," Cora said. "You know, both of my parents were married before they met one another, and both of their spouses died. Between them, my mother and father had six children by their previous marriages, and not one of them survived infancy. I am the sole heir to each of my parents, and they dote upon me. And yet, I often feel as though I am an heiress to tragedy and loneliness, nothing more."

For a long moment, I marveled at Cora. I'd never heard anyone talk like that, like the heroine of a Victorian novel. I said, "I'm sorry."

She took my hand. "As am I."

The storm was on us now. The wind whipped against the windowpanes as it blew, and the rain pelted the roof above our heads. Lightning pierced the sky and briefly illuminated Cora's little bedroom. Moments later, thunder rolled through the building and rattled the panes in the windows—not yet cracked or eroded, but under the assault of the storm I was all too aware of their fragility. Cora's hand tightened instinctively around mine; then, remembering herself, she let go and looked away bashfully.

"'Hell is empty, and all the devils are here'," she said, and laughed at herself.

"What?" I asked.

Cora dug around under the bed for a moment and retrieved a slim book with a dark blue cover.

“Have you read any Shakespeare?” she asked.

“No,” I said, “I don’t really like reading.”

“Perhaps this will change your mind,” she said, handing me the book. “*The Tempest*.”

I turned to the first page and immediately panicked. My brain flashed back to all the times I’d struggled to sound out a reading in class, only to be mocked by my peers and dismissed by my teachers. I couldn’t stand to humiliate myself in front of Cora like that.

“I don’t know what any of this means, I can’t read this,” I complained, growing ever more insecure.

“Surely you can, let me show you,” Cora insisted, taking the book back from me. “This is the story of a ship lost at sea, caught in a horrible storm. Listen carefully,” she instructed, and she began to read.

She spoke with a smoothness I couldn’t hope to achieve, and as the words passed her lips, I was captivated by their power. The rain hammered into the roof harder and harder as she read, as if to escalate the scene. Cora had to raise her voice to be heard over the relentless roar of the wind beyond the thin walls of her bedroom. Rivulets of rain streamed over the glass windows in an incessant downpour, and each time lightning struck, the thunder followed sooner, as the storm barreled over us.

““Down with the topmast! Yare! Lower, lower! Bring her to try wi’ th’ main course,”” Cora commanded.

As if in protest—or merely to punctuate her reading—lightning struck. It was the brightest blast so far, and for a moment, the room looked like it was spilling over with pure white light. At exactly that moment—or so it seemed—thunder ripped through the sky, and tore through the walls of the house so hard they shook. I looked at Cora as we both slapped our hands over our ears, and I have a perfect picture of that instant frozen in my mind—Cora’s hands over her ears, one of them still grasping *The Tempest*, her hair falling into her face, and her eyes as full of fear as mine.

And then it was over, and we were alone in the dark.

CHAPTER SEVEN

We were stunned and blinded by the abrupt burst of lightning, and we sat blinking in the dark for several long seconds. The next thing I heard were footsteps on the stairs, and Aunt Sally's voice:

"Miss Cora, Miss Cora! Are you alright?"

"Yes, yes, I am well," she said.

"Hurry down, miss," said Aunt Sally, "You ought to see this."

Cora stood to leave and I followed. We stumbled through the dark house, our hands tracing the walls as we descended the stairs. All the servants had gathered in the foyer, where the front doors stood open, exposing us to the pelting rain. It was clear to see what had caused the commotion:

"The trees are on fire!" Cora gasped. It was true: one of the large old elms that lined the road to the house had burst into flame, and now its neighbor's branches were beginning to catch as well.

"Not to worry," croaked a woman's voice. Behind me, settling into a chair that had been placed there for her, sat a plump older woman with a sagging under-chin and small eyes and a large, bulbous nose. She folded her hands over her walking cane, and I recognized her as the woman who had come to Cora's aid the first time we'd met. When she spoke, she spoke with absolute authority: "These locust trees are taller and sturdier than our home. Their purpose is to catch the lightning that would strike us dead, and deliver it into the ground. They are our sentries against the storm; that they should catch is evidence that all is as it should be. We are perfectly safe."

“Are you certain, Aunt Janet?” Cora asked. So this was the aunt Cora had told me about, the one who owned Montgomery Place, who had scolded her for making imaginary friends. I could see why she had been intimidated; Aunt Janet was a monument of a woman, stern and imposing.

“Yes child, see for yourself,” said Aunt Janet, pointing one bulbous finger at the burning elms. As we watched, the flames began to recede, little by little, tamped out by the incessant rain.

“There you are, my love,” said Mrs. Livingston, stepping delicately into the foyer—the way she moved, it was as if she had been blown in by the wind. “I see you haven’t dressed for dinner, after all. What am I to do with you?”

“Is it six already?” Cora asked. I shot her a panicked glance—how could it have gotten so late so fast? I knew that if I stayed out much longer, my mother would have a heart attack.

“I have to go,” I said. Before Cora could find a way to respond, I braced myself, and sprinted out into the rain.

Finding the path to the arch was more challenging than I’d expected with waves of ice cold water obscuring my vision, and every second I stayed out in the open, I was exposed to the electricity in the air and the threat that, if at any moment the odds went against me, it could strike. On the path, under the cover of the forest’s canopy, I could see a little bit better, but my footing was all the worse. The often-wobbly rocks and hidden roots along the path slid around and poked out in new ways as the rain washed over everything. I nearly lost my balance more than once; every time I saw lightning, I

consciously slowed my pace in anticipation of the inevitable, ear-shattering thunder to come.

Just as I was beginning to fear that I would never make it out of the woods, that I would be found frozen or drowned the next morning, at last I came upon the arch. Never in my life had I felt more relieved to find shelter, and stepping beneath the sturdy old stones, I immediately felt the rain recede at my back.

On the other side of the wall, the sky was clear, and the sun had yet to set. I looked around, remembering my paranoia over Mr. Alexander, but the old man was nowhere to be seen. I ran the rest of the way home, and stepped breathless and dripping into our little house.

“Qué te pasó?” my mother asked, startled by my sudden entrance.

“I, uh, fell into the pond,” I blundered.

“The pond?”

“Yeah, the fishing pond behind the house.”

“What were you doing there?” she asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Just walking around,” I shrugged. I was afraid she would interrogate me further, but to my surprise and relief, she let it go.

“I’ll get you a towel, don’t move,” she ordered, stepping into the bathroom. Only then did I realize she hadn’t been alone; we had company.

“And how are you doing today, young man?” asked Mrs. Peterson. She was seated at our kitchen table, across from an equally old and round man.

“I’m good,” I said. My mother came out of the bathroom with our fluffiest towels and proceeded to pat me dry in front of our guests. “Mom, stop, I can do that,” I objected.

“You won’t do it right, stop moving. Take off your shoes, I just cleaned the floor. I’m so sorry about this.” She said the last part directly over my head, to the Petersons.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Mr. Peterson, “We were finished here anyway.”

“Thank you so much for the tea, dear,” said Mrs. Peterson, “And we’ll be in touch about the—well, you know.”

And just like that they excused themselves, and bustled past us out the door. “Thank you again,” my mother said as they left. Mrs. Peterson raised a single hand to wave back at us.

“What did the Petersons want?” I asked, “Did they finally fix the cable?”

“No, not that. It’s a little complicated,” she said. She looked me over and, satisfied that I was sufficiently dry, ushered me towards the table. “*Sientate, mijo*,” I have something to tell you.”

I obeyed, suddenly nervous. “What’s going on?” I asked.

My mother cleared her throat. “I’m working with the Petersons more lately. They stopped by to make sure we were comfortable here. I told them we’re very comfortable. I told them about my jobs before, in the city, and how much better it is here. Mr. Peterson wanted to know if I’d like to keep working with them, after the sale, and I said yes.”

She let that “yes” linger between us, and I felt my stomach drop. “So, what? We’re gonna stay at Montgomery Place? For how long?”

“Not exactly,” my mother said, “We’ll stay here until the property changes hands, at the end of the year. But Mr. Peterson said they’re looking to fill a more permanent position at the Rockefeller Estate, not far from here. They said if I want the job, Mrs. Peterson can help me apply.”

“For how long?” I asked.

“*Qué?*”

“If you take that job, how long will we stay?”

“*No sé*. Two years, at least—”

“So, three years. This year, and then two more.”

“Yes.”

“You promised me we wouldn’t stay,” I said. I was fuming. “First you said it was just for the summer. Then you said one year, tops. You promised.”

My mother closed her eyes. “It’s just an idea, *mijo*. Nothing certain yet. I thought you should know, I’m thinking about it. That’s all.”

“What about what I think? Don’t I get a say?”

“Of course you do. But you need to understand, this is a good job. Really good. This could change so much for us—”

“*You* want things to change, not me. I was happy at home.”

“We needed to leave, Aiden. And we may not be going back. It’s time to consider that possibility.”

“Why?” I demanded, nearly jumping out of my seat, “Because we lived in a shitty apartment? ‘Cause you wanted to get away from Tía María? I liked my life, I didn’t want it to change, just because you think you’re better than everyone.”

“Cállate,” my mother shouted back, “Go to your room. Now.”

I stormed out of the kitchen without another word. Of course, I knew it wasn’t that simple. I knew my mother wanted the best for me, for both of us. But I was furious, and how could I have understood? My mother had worked hard to preserve my innocence; I had no idea what we had left behind, what we were running from.

My mother had worked a variety of entry-level jobs throughout my childhood; she was a maid for a while, and a secretary before that, and before that she mostly worked retail or food service—never any one at once, because it took two salaries just to pay the rent. From time to time she’d land a better paying job, usually in an office of some sort, but they always cut her loose before she would be available for benefits and gave the job to someone “more suited to the position”—usually white, usually male. Then, there were the Whitney’s.

The Whitney’s were a middle-aged couple, wealthy, WASP-y, who lived somewhere on the upper east side. My mother answered an ad for a full-time caretaker position for the elder Mrs. Whitney, Mr. Whitney’s mother. Mrs. Whitney had Alzheimer’s, and did not remember where she was most days. The couple wanted to make sure that she would never be home alone, and they were willing to pay generously for my mother’s assistance. She thought it would be a new start for us.

The Whitney’s had a teenaged son. His name was Jacob. My mother would not tell me anything else about him. One day, my mother came to the house just after the Whitney’s had gone to work, like she always did. Jacob should have been at school, but he wasn’t. He was in the kitchen, waiting for her.

We moved to Montgomery Place the following summer, but only once I was an adult did she tell me any of this. I still don't know exactly what happened with Jacob Whitney, and I'm glad she spared me that knowledge. But my ignorance was not bliss for either of us back then, as I locked myself in my bedroom and refused to join my mother for dinner, not for the last time that summer.

My rage burned out once my head hit the pillow, and I soon fell asleep. It was doomed to be a troubled sleep, however, as I heard the whistling again that night. So much had happened since I'd heard it last, I'd nearly forgotten the sound and the strange figures that accompanied it. This time, I looked out my window as soon as I heard it, and they were there again—barely visible, just dark enough to stand out against the blackness of the night. I was startled to see that, this time, they were closer to the house. One was close enough to me that I could see it wasn't standing straight—its back was arched, hunched slightly, as if it were looking at something on the ground, or like the stance of a very old man. Once again they didn't move, but they were hard to focus on; like a distant star, almost too dim to see.

I was still scared of them, unnerved by the strange whistling sound, but this time I wasn't paralyzed. I thought about what Henry had said about the South Woods, and I remembered the four square stones I had found. Were they somehow related to these specters? Even as my mind whirled through the possibilities, I managed to fall back asleep. And in my dreams, I saw Mr. Alexander glaring down at me, as he always seemed to do. He told me he needed to show me something, but his words were slow and slurred, as if he were underwater. He beckoned for me to come closer, but I was at the

bottom of the hill, and when I turned I saw Cora. She was covered in little purple blossoms—the violets—and they surrounded her, growing everywhere.

When I woke the following morning, I couldn't tell how much of that night had been a dream, and how much I had seen with my own eyes. But I had questions, and I thought I might know someone who could answer them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

One conversation with the Petersons was all it took to set my relationship with my mother back by months. In the weeks that followed, I did my best to make my frustrations known. I stayed in my room until she left for work each morning—a simple enough task, since she seemed to head out earlier and earlier every day. Up until now she had been making a sandwich for me each morning and leaving it on the counter as an easy lunch, but in protest I decided I would throw each sandwich in the garbage, and make my own meal. After the first few days she caught on to this, and stopped making them. Dinner was tense, to say the least; she was clearly trying to avoid another fight, but I craved confrontation. As a result, she spoke to me less and less.

There were certain advantages to my mother's silence. For one thing, she no longer tried to ask me where I'd been each day, and I didn't have to lie about sneaking off to see Cora. My paranoia over being caught lessened significantly; after all, what did I have left to lose? I could imagine no punishment more cruel than our current predicament.

As the summer progressed, I came to spend as much time as possible with Cora. She was my one salvation: the only purely good thing in my life. Our system worked pretty well: I would come through the arch whenever I could, and she would leave a flower in her window to tell me where to find her. She was mostly braiding violets at first, but later in the summer I would more often find her tending the rosebushes. They were pale pink and thorny, and I was too clumsy to help.

We spent most of our days in Cora's gardens, picking flowers or reading or exploring. Cora loved to read me Shakespeare, and while I still struggled to sound out the

words, she knew how to catch my attention. *The Tempest* was her favorite, and so it became mine.

“You’re just like Miranda,” I told her one afternoon.

“Miranda?” she scoffed, wrinkling her nose, “How dull. I would much prefer to be Prospero: the great and powerful magician. How on earth do I resemble Miranda?”

“You can’t be Prospero, you’re a girl,” I reasoned, “And you’re not magic. But you are kind of like a princess, like Miranda.”

“Then who, pray tell, are you?”

“Ferdinand?” I offered.

“Oh? You fancy yourself a handsome prince, do you?” she mocked.

“Maybe,” I said.

“You are nothing of the sort. You ought to call yourself a Caliban, you creature, you prowler of the woods!”

“I am not!”

“Oh yes you are.”

“Whatever,” I said, hurt, but determined not to show it.

“Come now, don’t be cross. Sit with me, and we will finish our book.”

That’s how it went with us: we could tease and squabble all day, but we were always quick to reconcile. I never had a sibling, but I imagined Cora was something close to a sister for me. Sometimes she reminded me of my cousins back home, but that dynamic wasn’t quite right either. I grew up in a neighborhood full of kids; there were always dozens of us, and we were always up to something. If one of us couldn’t come out for a day, you might not even notice they were missing. But at Montgomery Place, I

had no such community of peers. I only had Cora. I needed her, and that made her special to me.

I confided in her about things I hadn't told anyone else—I told her all about my mother, and she consoled me when I realized I may not be going home after all. She told me about her own family, and the occasional conflicts that would arise between her mother and Aunt Janet. We quickly became each other's primary confidant—a secret bond that would keep us close for the remainder of the summer.

I did ask Cora if she knew anything about the figures I'd seen outside my house, the dark silhouettes on the lawn and the whistling sound that accompanied them.

“Never have I seen such a thing, nor heard any such tune. I shall have to keep a more vigilant watch in the night, though I do sleep soundly.”

“I can't figure it out,” I said, “I'm the only one who's seen them, only at night. That has to mean something, right?”

“Do you suppose they might be playful spirits, come out of the woods to taunt you in your sleep?” Cora suggested. “We do have such mischievous sprites about the gardens, and they like to shrink the rosebushes. Only yesterday I went to measure them, and they had lost six inches from last week's measurement. Perhaps whatever spirits are at play on our land have come to pester you as well?”

I knew Cora wanted to ease my concern, but I could tell she didn't understand. The feeling I associated with the dark specters was not playful or mischievous; it was much more grave than that. It was the feeling that struck me whenever I passed the house at my Montgomery Place, with its dead, empty windows. It was the feeling that lingered occasionally around the adults on Cora's side of the wall, whenever we came too close to

them. It was a feeling that told me something was wrong, like a dark spot at the corner of my vision, never there when I tried to look directly at it.

Still, for the most part, Cora was my respite from that worry, and I cherished every second I could get with her. There were plenty of days I couldn't see her, of course. Whenever it would rain on either side of the wall, I had to stay home. Some days the property was abuzz with contractors and other workers—all friends of Henry's, it seemed—and there were too many eyes on me to make a subtle escape.

Weekends were the worst. My mother and I were stuck in the house together, and while she made an effort to give me my space, we couldn't avoid each other entirely. There was no way I could sneak out to see Cora without being questioned, and I couldn't even sit in the living room and watch TV without bumping into my mother. As a result, I spent most of my weekends locked in my room, or out chatting with Henry. But as the summer wore on, even he became steadily less available.

Sometimes I would go to Cora's, and the vase in her window would be empty. Those days were disappointing, but I knew there was no point in sticking around if she couldn't come out to see me. Cora was rarely unavailable for more than a few days in a row, and when she reappeared she always had some small adventure to share.

But there was one long stretch late in the summer that Cora did not appear at all. Every day for a week, I went to check the vase in her window, and each time it was empty. At first I was unconcerned, but when the weekend passed with no sign of her, I began to worry. What if she was in trouble? What if she had forgotten me?

A few days into the second week of the empty vase, I was ready to lose it. Home was miserable; when my mother wasn't at work she was in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning aggressively. She kept the television stuck on the Weather Channel, where a smiling weatherwoman reported on a hurricane making its way up the coast, soon to turn inland.

I couldn't stand it for long, I couldn't sit around and do nothing. I tried to go to Henry with my worries, but he brushed me off. "Sorry kid, I got goals to meet by the end of the month. Can't slack off now if I want to keep my job."

I stormed off, exasperated, only to be met by the most peculiar sight. Mr. Alexander was standing on the lawn beside the South Woods, just beyond the gardens. He was kneeling, and holding a large white basket.

"Hey!" I called, running up to him, "What are you doing?"

He looked up as I approached, but did not move. "A favor," he said, "for a friend."

He was kneeling over the four white stones I had discovered earlier that summer, and as I watched, he placed four purple blossoms over each of the perfect squares.

"What are those?" I asked.

"Graves," he answered; and, when he saw the shock on my face, "Animal graves, for the pets of the men and women who have called this estate their home."

"So this is a pet cemetery?"

"Not only this. There are small headstones like these all over the property. If you look, you can find them."

Mr. Alexander rose and, as if to excuse himself from the conversation, began to walk away. But these were the most answers I'd received to any questions about Montgomery Place, and I would not let him get away so easily.

"Where'd you get all those flowers?" I asked, half jogging to keep pace with his long stride.

"Somewhere far away."

"Don't they grow here?"

"Not at this time of year."

"When, then?" I asked, hoping to have caught him.

"I was once the Master Gardener of this estate. Suffice it to say, I have my ways."

"You said you were a caretaker, not a gardener. What are you doing here, Mr. Alexander?"

His expression darkened, and he loomed over me as he said, "Perhaps it would be in your best interest to leave me be, as I have chosen to leave you in peace these past months."

I thought carefully about Mr. Alexander's words. And I thought about his clothes, his posture, the way he spoke—and how I'd never seen him speak to another adult, or heard anyone mention his name.

"You're not from here—or now—are you?" I asked, piecing it together. You're like Cora, you're from her world."

Mr. Alexander's gaze shifted, softened. "I once knew a Lady Cora. She was an employer and a friend to me, but we were never of the same world."

“Then, you’re like me,” I said.

“No.”

As we walked, I noticed little purple-blue buds throughout the vast property, ducking and blowing in the breeze. I imagined Mr. Alexander had placed them there, marking invisible graves.

“Do you know about the ghosts?” I asked.

“What ghosts do you mean, specifically?”

“The ones that come out of the woods at night, and stand on the lawn and whistle. The ones that look like silhouettes.”

We had come to a mound in the earth along the eastern side of the property, beside the road that would take us to the orchards, and past that in to town. On top of the mound was a big old tree, and beside the tree was a rock. The rock was large and flat, like a boulder that had been squished between two enormous hands. Mr. Alexander approached the rock with his basket of flowers and said:

“The ghosts don’t come from the woods, they come from here. They were born here or brought here, but they all died here. And then, they were buried.”

“What do they want?” I asked, ecstatic that my experiences were finally being validated but horrified by the implication of this concretely haunted Montgomery Place.

“Vengeance, perhaps. Or justice. Or possibly only to be remembered.” Mr. Alexander began to pull the violets from his basket one by one, and I saw that they had been uprooted wholly. “That is what I ‘do’ here; I remember that which others choose to forget.”

Gingerly, he knelt before the rock and, cupping the dirt with his bare hands, he began to plant the flowers.

“What is it,” I asked, “what did they forget?”

Mr. Alexander smiled secretively, “Just another grave.”

CHAPTER NINE

I needed to talk to Cora. After everything I had learned from Mr. Alexander, I felt like I was on the verge of a revelation; like the fog was beginning to clear around the mysterious old house, and if I squinted just right, maybe I could finally make sense of everything I'd witnessed. But I knew I couldn't figure it all out on my own.

I woke up early that morning and hurried through breakfast before my mother had even left the house. She eyed me suspiciously as I ate.

"I'm going to work now," she said on her way out the door. "Do me a favor, *mijo*. Stay home today. They say the storm is going to hit this afternoon, I don't want you out in the rain."

"Fine," I said.

"Okay," she said, "I love you."

I did not respond. She left, and ten minutes later I was out, on my way to Cora's. I was still angry with my mother, and while I knew I could get in trouble for disobeying, I thought I could get away with it. If I was quick, I could be home before the first raindrops fell.

It was a sunny day on Cora's side of the wall, nothing like the drippy grey clouds that hung overhead moments before, omens of the impending storm. The walk felt longer in the heat, but when I did emerge onto the lawn of her Montgomery Place, I wasn't surprised to see that the vase in Cora's window was once again empty. Fortunately, I noticed something even better: Theodore the cat was sitting in the window, his tail swishing back and forth, peering down on me.

If he was there, she couldn't be far. I did the one thing I could think to do: I plucked a small stone from the ground at my feet and tossed it. It clacked against the windowpane, startling Theodore. Moments later, Cora's head popped over the windowsill, her hair only half-curled.

"Aiden?" she called.

"Hi, I need to talk to you," I said.

She peered over her shoulder, examining something in the room behind her.

"Very well. I shall come down momentarily, stay where you are."

I settled in underneath a tree below Cora's window. I knew it could be a while, but my brain was buzzing with everything I had to tell her, and I could hardly contain myself. I almost didn't notice the subtle whistling in the distance, growing steadily louder, closer.

When finally my brain registered what I was hearing, I froze. It was the same sound I'd heard at night, when the ghosts appeared—there was no doubt in my mind. But the day was bright, and I was wide awake. Slowly, I turned my head to see a man walking towards the house carrying a large rake. He entered through the servant's door at the side of the house and disappeared. He had looked as though he were just going about his day, whistling while he worked—but I was struggling with the dissonance of hearing that whistle from this stranger, in the middle of the day, on this side of the wall.

Cora appeared not long after, Theodore in toe. She looked around to see that we were alone and unwatched and, when satisfied, pulled me into a quick, tight hug.

“Oh Aiden, I fear I must apologize, for I have been most indisposed this week. My family and I... well, there has been a small crisis, and my attention has been needed here. Mother and Aunt Janet are most distraught.”

“Oh my god, what’s wrong? Are you okay?” I asked as we settled down beneath the tree. Theo draped himself over Cora’s lap and purred noisily as she scratched behind his ears.

“Yes, I am perfectly all right; or, at the very least, I will be soon.”

“Then, what happened?” I asked.

“It’s awful, simply awful; we have been betrayed,” she said, lifting one delicate hand to her cheek, as if to console herself, “One of our farmhands, a slave who belongs to Aunt Janet, has escaped.”

“What?” I asked.

“He ran away, in the dead of night. We have written to the city council and posted advertisements, but as of yet, we’ve found no trace of him. But we will get him back in time, Aunt Janet is sure of it. He cannot go far, not without a deed of sale.”

“No, back up,” I said, the cognitive dissonance now overwhelming, “This doesn’t make any sense. You—your family owns slaves?”

“Well of course we do, have you not noticed?”

I felt dizzy. Behind us, the man I’d seen earlier emerged from the house and we fell quiet, as we always did when adults were around. He continued whistling, but there was no joy in that tune now, not to my ears. “That is messed up, Cora,” I said, “That is seriously messed up.”

“Well then, spare me your sympathy,” Cora quipped, clearly annoyed, “Might I remind you that my family has been robbed?”

“You were *robbed*?” I repeated, aghast, “Your slave ran away and you think *you’re* the victim?”

“Come now, be rational. You must understand that labor is no cheap commodity in this part of the country; we have suffered a great loss.”

“Do you hear yourself right now? Cora, you can’t own people. How do you not get that? How do you not see that this is wrong?”

“You misunderstand, we are not cruel masters; my mother and father treat all who serve us with the utmost kindness and generosity, Aunt Janet as well. In fact we rather dislike the institution of slavery and were inclined to offer this young man his freedom, if he had served us well.”

“As if that makes it any better.”

“Surely it must; we are intensely loyal to all of our servants. Is it so wrong to expect their loyalty in return?”

“It is if it’s forced.”

“Will you stop looking at me like that, like something foul?” Cora snapped. I lowered my gaze. “What do you want me to say? How can I help you understand?”

“I don’t think you can,” I said, “I will never understand what makes you think it’s okay to own slaves.”

“A slave saved my mother’s life! When she was a child, her slaves escorted her to safety during the uprising in Saint Domingue, and brought her to this country. My family and I owe our lives and livelihood to our slaves, and we are not ungrateful.”

“My family were slaves!” I said.

Cora paused—recoiled, almost. “Truly?”

“Some of them, at least. Look at me,” I said. I felt her dark, intense eyes on me: taking in my hair, the shape of my face, the color of my skin—not black, but also not white. She could see that now, I knew; I could tell from the look on her face that she was seeing me in a way she never had before—and I understood it, because I was doing the same. I had seen her as something magic, something beyond the social categories I’d always known. Now I saw that I was wrong: she was like Henry, and the Petersons, and everyone else here. No, that’s not right; she was something worse, like the Whitney’s.

“Well, I was not aware—” Cora stumbled.

“Well, now you know.” I stood. I felt like I needed to run, but I forced my feet to stay put. “I’m not like you. I don’t live in a mansion. My mom wasn’t rescued by anybody, my family escaped to this country on their own, and we didn’t have to enslave anyone to do it.”

I turned to leave, but Cora was not done with me. “Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Wait, please. Come back and let’s talk,” she said, grabbing ahold of my arm.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I said, shaking her off. And then, just to spite her, “I hope they never find him, the one that escaped. I hope he goes somewhere far, far away where he never has to see any of you ever again.”

Cora looked like she wanted to slap me across the face. “How dare you speak to me like that, like some heinous villain! I have been nothing but a friend to you, offered

my companionship in exchange for yours. Would you have me take it all back now, though I have done no wrong?”

“Done no wrong?” I repeated, incredulous. “Bullshit.”

I turned away from her, and this time she didn’t follow me. I took the long way back to the path, past the field where my cottage would someday stand, past the house and its lawn and gardens. For the first time I wondered, who had built them? Whose hands had placed the stones of this enormous house? Were they the same hands that I now saw tilling the fields, that belonged to these bodies hardened by years of labor, sweating under the sun? How many times had I seen them as I came to visit Cora, and thought nothing of them? How many servants in the home, how many of the women I’d seen waiting on Cora had been slaves? I had seen them so many times, and taken their presence for granted. In school, we were taught about slavery in the South, about massive plantations and human rights abuses. I never would have imagined that there were slaves at Montgomery Place, and I was kicking myself for it now. How could I have been so blind?

The walk to the arch was agonizing. I had some answers now, but none of the ones I’d wanted. The weight in my chest was like a black hole, sucking me down into a spiral of guilt and confusion and horror. I wanted to run away, to forget everything I had learned. Still, when at last I came to the arch, I hesitated. This place would never be the same to me again, and I had to wonder if this would be the last time I’d cross this threshold.

I let myself sink to the ground, my back against the arch, and for a long time I sat, my knees pulled up to my chest, holding back tears. I must have dozed off, because I

remember waking to Theodore rubbing against me, sniffing my toes. It was still light out, but I could see that the sun was beginning to lower ever so slightly. I reached out a hand to stroke Theodore, and his fur felt wet. Only then did I remember the hurricane.

I shot to my feet, struck by a sudden and absolute clarity: my mother was going to kill me. The shift in atmosphere as I passed through the arch had never been so severe. The storm was more than a thunderstorm, more than rain and clouds and lightning. The moment I stepped out of the arch, the wind knocked me to the ground. It felt like I'd been hit by a car, and it took me a long time to find my footing. Twigs and rocks and dirt flew past my head, and I held up my arms to protect my face. I could barely see the path from where I stood. It would be a steep climb, but I had no choice. I needed to get home. Drenched and covered in mud, I stumbled blindly upward, doing everything I could just to keep my balance. When it seemed as though the path were mere steps away, my foot slid, and all of a sudden I felt myself sinking, careening backward.

Just when I was about to fall, a hand reached out of the darkness and caught me by the wrist. I was pulled roughly up onto my feet, steadied on more solid ground. I looked up to see Mr. Alexander, drenched with rain. He gripped me by the shoulders and ushered me forward.

"Go," he shouted directly into my ear, and I ran. I didn't think, I just moved. More than once the wind nearly knocked me over, but I found my balance and kept going. Near the end of the path, where the woods yielded to the lawn, I saw a light moving back and forth through the trees. I ran towards it, and as I ran I heard my name, muffled under the wind and rain. The light was a flashlight, and it was held by a very wet Henry.

“Jesus, kid,” he said, “Get in the truck.”

Inside, Henry’s pickup was dry and warm. With the doors shut tight beside us, the sounds of the storm were immediately muted, hushed under the swish of the windshield wipers and the hum of the air conditioner. The tires spat mud as Henry hit the gas, and for half a second I thought we were stuck—but then we were moving, rumbling up the road towards our cottage.

“Listen,” Henry said, not taking his eyes off the barely visible road. “This was not the greatest day to go exploring. You gave us a nasty scare. Your mom is, uh, well. You might wanna brace yourself.”

Henry’s intentions were good, but I knew his efforts to prepare me were in vain. I shrank into my seat as we pulled up to the house, certain that I would be better off at the mercy of the hurricane than my mother’s fury.

The moment she saw me, she grabbed and pulled me into a spine-crushing hug.

“*Gracias a dios que estás bien! Adónde estabas?*” I had never seen my mother so panicked; her hands shook as they gripped my shoulders, as if she couldn’t hold me tight enough. As if I would disappear the moment she let go. “I was so worried about you. What the hell were you thinking, going out in this weather? It’s been storming for hours!”

I was speechless. How could I tell my mother that I had been safe beneath the pure blue sky on the other side of the arch?

“*Di algo!*” my mother demanded, shaking me harder.

“*Lo siento,*” was all I could manage. I couldn’t bring myself to meet her gaze.

“Do you know what you put me through today? And Henry, and the Petersons? We had a whole search party looking for you!”

Poor Henry stood in the doorway like a deer in headlights, probably resisting the urge to light up a cigarette in our stuffy living room.

“I’m sorry,” I said to him, embarrassed that he had to see this exchange.

“Sheesh kid, it’s alright. You’re safe now, that’s what matters,” said Henry.

“I’m okay Mom, I promise. I just...” I didn’t know how to finish that sentence. I didn’t know how to convince her that all the time she’d spent worrying, I had been perfectly safe. “I’m okay,” I repeated.

“Look at me.” My mother’s voice was steadier, but when I finally looked into her eyes, I saw that they were red and wet. I had seen my mother cry before, but I had never seen her terrified. It was too much for me, and I felt a lump rising in my throat.

Henry cleared his throat. “I’ll be on my way now, Ma’am. Have a good night.”

“Stay! At least until the rain lets up—” my mother protested.

“I’ll be alright ma’am, don’t you worry about me. Take it easy, kid,” said Henry, relieved to escape the emotional scene at last. My anxiety only increased as his footsteps receded; I felt the screen door slam like a fist to my gut.

My mother still had not let go of me. We stood for several moments in silence, her arms wrapped around me like a fortress. Lightning lit the sky outside our windows, and for a second the electricity faltered in our tiny cottage, the feeble yellow glow of the lamp blinking and buzzing momentarily.

“Where were you?” she asked at last.

“I – I just took a walk. And I got lost. It wasn’t raining at first, and I didn’t realize how late it was, I’m sorry—”

“What walk, where did you go?” she insisted.

“Just down the little path by the arboretum, through the trees—”

“In the woods?”

“Yes.”

“Where you promised me you wouldn’t go?”

“I didn’t go *into* the woods, I was on the path the whole time—”

“Do not get smart with me, young man, not today. I told you not to go in there.”

“I had to go, it was important, I had to—I didn’t go far!”

“You got lost! You’re lucky Henry found you. What would you have done if he hadn’t? Where would you be now? Did you ever think about that? Do you ever think about anything I tell you to do or not do?”

“Yes,” I spat back, my shame shadowed by anger. “I was fine. I *am* fine. I can take care of myself.”

“Clearly you can’t! Look at you, you’re soaked through and through. And you’re freezing cold. You’ll be lucky if you aren’t sick for a week! You need a hot bath.” She was right; I was soaking wet and covered in mud, dripping all over the carpet. But underneath all my guilt and frustration, I could hardly feel the cold.

“Well I can’t take a bath, can I? Because the tap doesn’t work. And it’s never going to work, is it? Nothing is ever going to get fixed. You keep saying it’s going to get better, and it doesn’t.”

“Watch it, Aiden.”

“And it’s not just that, it’s so much worse—we’re not safe, we don’t belong here.” We don’t belong here, Mom! I know you feel it too, but it is so much worse than you think—”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You know! I know you know! We don’t belong here, Mom.”

“That’s enough.”

“I hate it here!” I shouted. “You said, if I hated it, we could go. You said we could leave at the end of the summer. You promised!”

“Aiden, stop. This is our home now. Even if we don’t stay here, we’re not going back. You need to accept that.”

“I should’ve stayed in the woods, I should’ve run away when I had the chance!” I screamed.

That seemed to do the trick. My mother let go of me and backed away, placing herself between me and the door, as if I might try to run. I could see the pain on her face and I thought: this is it. Now that I have her attention, finally, something is going to change.

Instead she simply said, “You’re grounded.”

“What?”

“If I can’t trust you to do as I say when I’m not around, then I can’t trust you to leave the house by yourself. You’ll stay here when I go to work, and you’ll be here when I get back.”

“Or what?”

“Or you can come to work with me and sit in the corner where I can watch you all day. Those are your options. End of discussion.”

“Fine!” I stomped to my room and slammed the door shut. I could feel fresh, hot tears spilling over my eyes. It was so unfair. Even when it seemed as though things couldn’t possibly get worse, my mother found a way. And Cora, who had been the one good thing about this place, had turned out all wrong. Even if I wanted to see her again, there was no way I could with my mother on high alert—and who’s to say she would ever want to see me again, after everything I said?

At the time, it all seemed hopeless. I was certain that whatever happiness I’d managed to find that summer was gone for good, and I allowed myself to wallow in that misery. Little did I know, Montgomery Place wasn’t finished with me just yet.

CHAPTER TEN

I was destined to meet Cora one last time. It was August by then, and even after the storm had passed, the sky remained wet and dreary, but still full of that summer heat. Alone in the house, I sweltered, nearly suffocated. My freedoms had been restricted; I was not allowed to leave, not even to play in the gardens. To ensure that I remained in captivity, my mother had instructed Henry to check in on me from time to time, which amounted to about once a day. I was happy to see him, but he never stayed for long. I could have easily outmaneuvered him, and snuck away unnoticed—but I no longer had anywhere to go. Completely isolated within my own personal prison, I began to plan my escape.

I had to get it right on the first try; knowing my mother, any botched attempt to run away would result in bars on my window and a door that locked from the outside. I would need food, and money, and the stamina to walk to the train station overnight, before my mother had the chance to wake and find me missing. If I could only make it home, to Tía María's house in the city, everything would be okay.

Come Monday night, I was ready to go. I excused myself from dinner early and went to bed, where I lay perfectly still, listening, waiting. After a couple of hours, I heard the TV click off, and my mother's footsteps receded slowly back to her room. I waited, I listened. When the house was quiet and dark, I very carefully slipped out of bed, tied on my shoes, and grabbed my backpack—already packed, ready to go.

I eased open my bedroom door, praying the hinges wouldn't squeak and give me away. They didn't. My mother's door was shut, and no light peeked out from

underneath. If I held my breath, I could hear the subtle purr of her snoring in her sleep. This was my chance.

Before I could sneak out, however, there came a sharp, unceremonious knock at the front door. I froze, but my mother's slow breathing didn't falter. I tiptoed up to the door, and opened it only a crack.

"Cora?" I whispered, appalled and amazed. She was wearing a pale blue robe and matching slippers, her hair in ringlets, standing on my porch as if she belonged there.

"You were telling the truth, you *do* live in a cottage," she said, her intense eyes taking in every little detail of the threshold between us.

"Shhh," I hissed, checking over my shoulder to be sure my mother hadn't heard. As quietly as I could, I slipped out the front door and shut it behind me.

"What are you doing, how did you get here?" I whispered.

"I had an idea. I thought, when I tried to follow you here, we had gone about it all wrong. I thought, perhaps I ought to come through the same way you do, from the other side of the arch."

"It was that easy?"

She shrugged. "I'm here, am I not?"

"Cora, this is a really bad time. You have to get out of here, now."

She held up a hand, as if to silence me. "I do not wish to argue with you. I will be on my way shortly, I assure you. I have simply come to make peace, and say goodbye."

"Oh," I said, "Are you going somewhere?"

“Yes,” said Cora, “Father has returned from France. Mother and I will go to meet him in New Orleans, we leave tomorrow.”

A jealous pang stung my chest. “Good for you,” I said.

“Yes, I suppose. It will be good to see him again.” We stood in tense silence for a long moment. “Well, I shall be going then. Goodbye, Aiden.”

I hesitated. I was still confused and angry with her, but I didn’t like the sight of her walking away from me, alone, through this place she didn’t belong.

“Wait up,” I said, “I’ll walk you back.”

Cora smiled. We stepped in tandem down the road toward the mansion.

“So this is your world,” she mused, her eyes sweeping over the dark landscape, illuminated only by the crescent moon. Her thin slippers were no match for the bumpy rocks and gravel of the unpaved road, and she had to walk very carefully so as not to bruise her feet.

“Here,” I said, offering a hand. She hesitated before she took it, and her grip was restrained.

The house came into view slowly, and as we approached we stepped off the road, onto the lawn before the arboretum. “This is not Montgomery Place, you know,” she said as we walked, “It can’t be. This house is beautiful, but it looks nothing like my home.”

“It’s the same house,” I assured her, “just bigger and older. Like I said, things are different here.”

“May we go inside?” she asked.

“No, they lock the doors at night.”

“Who does? Who lives in there now?”

“The staff do, nobody lives there,” I said, “It’s full of stuff, but it’s empty.”

“How sad,” said Cora. “What of the land? Where are the fields?” She gestured to the empty lawn ahead of us, where once her aunt’s crops had flourished, cultivated by the men she’d owned.

“Not here anymore,” I said, “It’s mostly trees, some orchards down that way.”

“So the farm failed. What a waste,” she said. “Are there gardens, at least?”

“Yeah, but there aren’t too many flowers, not like you have. Do you want to see them?”

Cora bit her lip, and I saw that it was quivering. “This is wrong, all wrong. This cannot be Montgomery Place.”

“It is,” I said, “This is what it’s always like for me.”

She took a deep, deliberate breath. “No, I do not wish to see the gardens. I think I would like to go home now.”

“Okay,” I said. We continued through the arboretum, and Cora admired the trees as well as she could through the dark. I stayed silent for the most part; I was no longer enchanted with her, in the way that I had been all summer. There was so much I wanted to say to her, but the words evaded me. Mostly, I wanted her gone, back through the arch, so that I could go and make my escape. We couldn’t have walked fast enough for my tastes, but Cora was in no hurry.

“You know Aiden, I believe I am going to miss you very much,” she said, her eyes fixed on the ground ahead of us.

“Hey, Cora?” I said. I don’t know what I was going to say next, because when she looked up at me, she looked over me, and her eyes filled with fear.

I turned around to see a shadow figure looming over us. It was the same deep, dark outline of a man I'd seen time and time again, but never so close. I did not wait to see what it would do next.

"Run!" I shouted, and pushed Cora forward, towards the path through the woods. I did not see the light turn on inside the cottage behind us.

More of them appeared as we ran, materializing out of the dark night air. I had never seen so many; there were at least a dozen, maybe more. At this distance, I could see not only men's shapes, but women's as well, and one smaller, like a child's form, seemed to reach out to us as we sprinted past. I could not look at them for very long; I feared if I did I would lose my step, and I didn't want to know what would happen if I fell behind.

It felt like ages before we made it to the path, our arms pumping, feet thudding against the dewy grass. It was harder to keep up the pace through the woods, and I could feel my full backpack weighing me down. Cora shrieked and nearly tripped over a root—I caught her by the wrist and yanked her back, before she could tumble down the slope, and disappear into the dark. In the distance, I could've sworn I heard something or someone moving towards us.

There was no time to wait. As soon as the wall was within view, I helped Cora down from the trail, her hand now gripping mine like a vice. The arch was right there, and somehow I knew that if we could only pass through it, we would be safe. Even through the dark, I could see the detritus that clung to those ancient stones, and a surreal calm came over me. I slowed, following Cora. I felt the cool shadow of the arch envelope me as we stepped inside, and a shiver ran through me.

“Cora, wait,” I said, and she paused.

Beneath the arch, we were somewhere in the space between branching paths, in the shade, in the cracks where things could slip and disappear, or come out the wrong side. That’s what we had done. Very briefly, we held our hands and our breath, and I was there with Cora. Then I blinked, and she was gone.

I blinked again. I squeezed the space where her hand had been, but my fist was empty. I passed through the arch, and she was nowhere to be seen.

“Cora?” I asked, to no avail.

Back on the path, I heard footsteps crunching through the woods behind me, and a voice calling my name—my mother’s voice. *No*, I thought, she can’t be here. I continued up the trail, slowing against my will under the weight of my backpack and my own exhaustion. I didn’t stop, though; I didn’t stop until I re-emerged onto Montgomery Place property.

To my horror, everything was the same. The house was unchanged, the pond still visible at the foot of the hill. My body went rigid.

“No,” I said aloud, “Cora!” I spun in a circle, frantically searching for her. I could not stand the thought that I had lost her for a second time, and I hadn’t even said goodbye. The shadowy figures were no longer pursuing me—they had disappeared without a trace, but the sound of the footsteps had not faded.

“Aiden!” my mother called, emerging from the woods. Her eyes were frantic, her hair a mess, bits of leaves and muck clinging to her pajama bottoms. I wanted to run from her, but I no longer had the energy. “*Qué haces? Qué te pasó?*”

I didn't have an answer for her. As she approached, I felt myself collapse, finally, under everything that had happened to me that summer. My mother caught me as I crumbled, and held me to her chest as a sob ripped through my body.

"What's wrong, *mijo*?" she asked. I couldn't say anything; I couldn't even look at her. The illusion was gone, and I was no longer the man I had imagined myself to be. That night, for the first time all summer, I was only a child, crying into my mother's arms. For her part, my mother didn't say anything else. She only rocked me gently on her lap, just as she'd done when I was little, to soothe me after a bad dream.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

That was the last I saw of Cora. I assume she left for New Orleans the following day, but I can't know for sure. I was never again able to pass through the arch in the way that I had that summer. I tried many times over the course of the year, to no avail—it seemed whatever magic brought us together had left with her.

It was a hard year. I was enrolled in the local middle school and, in time, I adjusted. But none of the friendships I made lasted after my mother's job moved us to Tarrytown the following June, where we would remain through my high school years. My mother was lonely, I could tell. She had little to do outside of work, no friends in the area, and very little in common with the local housewives who would have been her peers. But I was no longer her enemy, and I suppose that was a relief to us both.

Winter was unforgiving that year. The heating in the cottage was ancient and hard to control. There was only one dial for the thermostat—in the living room—and my mother seemed to fret over it constantly: too high and we won't be able to afford the bill, too low and the pipes would freeze on us.

It was too cold to go outside most days, but often my mind would slip past the harsh boundary of the front door and wander down the little trail through the woods to the arch and beyond, to the house as I remembered it in Cora's time. I knew there was nothing left for me there, no point in even trying to go back. But when I imagined the house on these long, winding trips, I would imagine it as it was in the summer, the snow melting as I passed through the arch, the sun warm and close, everything alive.

Those memories gave me some comfort, but they did not change the reality of the tiny cottage where I was doomed to wait out the winter, stuck inside with my mother and her nervous fingers, ever hovering over the thermostat.

When we left Montgomery Place, I swore to myself that I would never forget or second-guess my experiences there. But the older I got, the more muddled my memories became, and I began to question whether I hadn't imagined at least some of it after all. The ghosts, the arch, the changing house—had I really seen them? Cora was real, I knew. That much I had discovered through my own research. She, her mother Louise, and her aunt Janet had occupied Montgomery place some two hundred years before my mother and I moved in. I even managed to find a copy of her portrait as a young adult, painted years after I knew her. It was the same portrait I had seen on my second day at Montgomery Place, of the girl with the big eyes, hanging in the dining room. The resemblance to the little girl I'd known was clear as day—or, so I thought.

In truth, as an adult, I tried my hardest to leave the Hudson Valley behind me, and Cora along with it. Then came the letter. I had been summoned, and I had no choice but to return.

The house was the same as I remembered, its gaze as dead and empty as it always had been on my side of the wall. Whatever preservation techniques my mother helped introduce had done their job; aside from a few new cracks in the walls, the house was identical to the Montgomery Place in my memories.

It was the house, but it was not Cora's house. I thought back to all the times I had tried and failed to pass through the arch since that summer, every attempt met with more and more disappointment. And all the years of growing and aging that clouded my

memories until I could no longer remember the conviction with which I had defended those memories in the first place—where had they led me now?

“Looking for something?” a voice asked behind me. It was a deep and familiar voice, paired with a familiar face.

“Mr. Alexander,” I said.

“You look well,” he said.

“You too.” In fact he looked as though he’d hardly aged a day in the years since I’d seen him last.

“Come with me,” he said. We began to stroll across the lawn, through the arboretum. I had a feeling I knew where we were going.

I took the letter from my pocket. “Did you send me this?” I asked.

Mr. Alexander nodded. “Yes, she asked that I extend the invitation. She had hoped to see you once more, before the end.”

“So she’s dead.”

“Of course she is. She died more than one hundred and fifty years ago.”

“But I mean, you know...”

We came upon the path through the woods, and I fell silent. I remembered the colors of that summer: rich browns and greens, speckled sunlight through the leaves and a bright blue sky somewhere far above. But Spring came late this year, and those colors were just now beginning to return, the ground still a wet brown, many of the trees yet to bloom.

The path curved steadily downward and wound on, and on, and on. I dreamed that it would never stop, that it would not lead where I knew we had to go. But soon I

could hear the trickle and bubble of the creek in the distance, coming closer and closer with every step. And then I could see the water, all brown and grey, rounding the edges of the rocks as it ran. Soon it would be warm enough to swim in the alcove where I had dipped my feet on especially hot days. And then, at last, the arch. If I hadn't known, I would have missed it. But even all these years later, I recognized the dip in the path, and I didn't need Mr. Alexander to lead me through the brush.

The arch was cold and quiet, its crumbling stones grown through with moss and vines. It was the same as I remembered. And yet I worried it would not take me where I had to go.

I turned to Mr. Alexander. "Will it work?"

"There is only one way to know, young man."

I took a deep breath, and braced myself. As I stepped into the shade of the arch, I felt Mr. Alexander place a guiding hand on my back. "Pardon me," he said, but his hand remained until we were through.

Emerging from the arch, the sky seemed brighter, and the air felt lighter. I knew instantly that I had made it, but I also knew that this time, it was not by chance.

"You did that," I said, turning to Mr. Alexander, "You pushed me through."

"You came on your own, I have only shown you the way." We marched up the slope, back onto the path that would lead us up to the house.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You may."

"How did you know about the arch?"

“You and I have more in common than you might imagine. I also lived at this estate as a child; I discovered its potential then, just as you have.”

“I see,” I said, “Can I ask you one more question?”

“Yes.”

“You... worked for Cora.”

“That is not a question.” We fell silent. After a time, he said, “If you mean to ask if I was her slave, the answer is no. I was born into slavery, and I was sold as an infant to Ms. Janet Livingston, alongside my mother. I was educated, taught to read and write. I showed an early aptitude for horticulture, a lifelong passion that Ms. Cora and I shared. After I was freed at the age of sixteen, I was employed at the estate, where I worked first for the elder Mrs. Livingston and later for Ms. Cora. At the time of her death, she entrusted the care of this estate and its gardens to me. I have nearly fulfilled each of her requests; you are all that remains.”

“Me?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, glancing sideways in my direction, “She spoke of you often, toward the end.”

I felt a pang of guilt in my chest; for all the time I’d spent attempting to forget her, she had remembered me.

“Here we are,” said Mr. Alexander. True enough, the tree line gave way to the lawn, and once more Montgomery Place was in view—not the dead, grey house of my time; and not the brick, federal-style building of Cora’s childhood, but a hybrid in-between: a clean tan and green, the wings freshly constructed, everything bright and new.

“Wow,” I said, “It’s beautiful.”

“Come,” said Mr. Alexander, “There is more to see.”

We walked around the front of the property. I could see that the trees in the arboretum were small and young, but they were completely shadowed by the enormous, colorful, sweeping gardens. I had never seen gardens in this location, but they were more beautiful than any others. The whole place smelled of Cora’s violets, but there were far more exotic flowers in their beds, plants I couldn’t even recognize. Behind them stood a tall glass building—an enormous greenhouse. And at the center of the scene, the focal point of it all, stood a strange, tall plant that looked something like an infant palm tree.

“What is that?” I asked.

“This is what Cora wanted you to see,” said Mr. Alexander. “It was planted before any of us were born, and will only bloom once in one hundred years. It is called a century plant.”

“Did she get to see it bloom?” I asked, “You know, before she died?”

Mr. Alexander shook his head. “It was her last request that, when the plant should flower, the estate be opened to the public, that all may come to see. Yourself included.”

I looked up at the towering plant. Standing in its shade, I felt so small, like a child again. Mr. Alexander put a hand on my shoulder. His touch was reserved but gentle, and strangely warm—the way a father might console a grieving child.

“Where is she buried?” I asked.

“At the cemetery in Rhinebeck, with the rest of her family.”

“Can we go to her grave?”

Mr. Alexander hesitated. “I do not think that would be wise.” I knew what he meant. I had always associated the magic of Montgomery Place with Cora, but even after her death, it was here—perhaps tied to the land itself. If I were to leave the property without traveling back through the arch, there’s no telling where I might end up.

“She’ll still be there though, right? When I go back, her grave will still be there?”

“I do believe so,” said Mr. Alexander.

“Then this is enough,” I said.

We stood under the shade of the century plant in silence for a long, long moment. The violets that blossomed over the lawn saturated the air with their sweet perfume, a truer blue than the sky itself. Somewhere in the distance, scarcely audible, someone was whistling a tune. Mr. Alexander loosened his grip on my shoulder, nodded to me, and turned back toward the house. I watched him go, shielding my eyes from the bright Springtime sun which glinted and glared off the surface of the river beyond, nearly blinding me. And then, I followed.