

The
LOST BOOK
of
ELEANOR
DARE



KIMBERLY BROCK



HARPER MUSE

The Lost Book of Eleanor Dare

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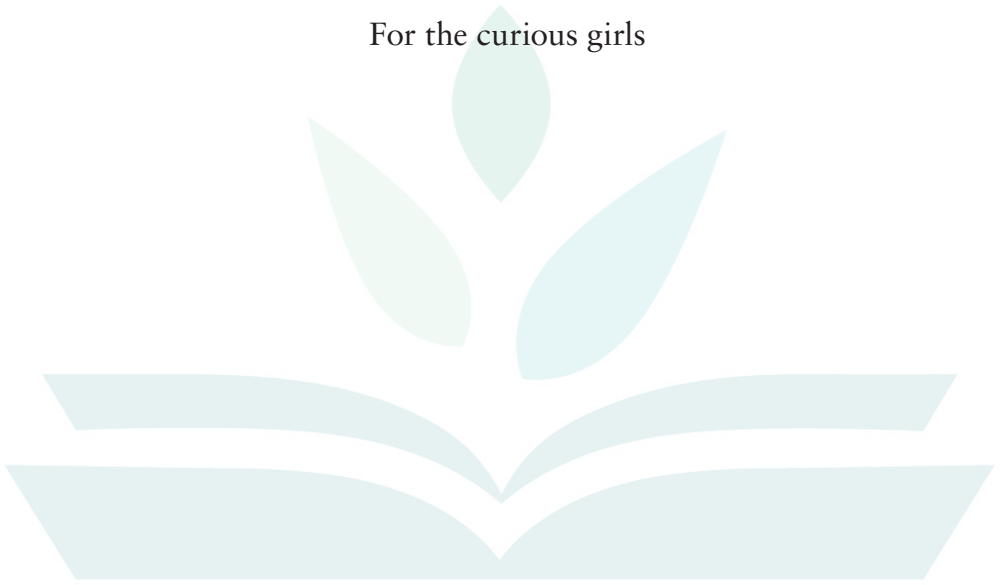
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For the curious girls



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*They say there are no real mysteries left in the world;
no silver-scaled dragons of the air; no fantastic
lurking monsters in the deep, nor invisible people of
the wood. But Eleanor White could have told you
with certainty that these things were real.*

Eleanor's Tale



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Prologue



The summer I turned thirteen, my mother took me into the forest to work a charm that was my right from birth. They say what happened there might have killed me. I think I might have killed her instead.

I thought I would be like her and all the women before me in my mother's family. For generations they'd come of age by inheriting a vision and learning of a myth, whispered from mother to daughter. But no vision had ever come. The charm that had been uttered for generations turned to poison in my hands. And when my mother died, the myth and all it meant went with her.

The story I was left with is one I've never told.

The truth is, things had taken a wrong turn even before the trail faded beneath the palmetto fronds, flooding out into swampy ponds as the light failed over the wetland. First, Mama lost her sense of direction. Then, in the night, she lost her mind. And while I'd slept beneath the hush of tall pines, secure in her love, she'd deserted me. It was a wonder, people later said, that I found my way home, surviving the sucking mud and the creatures that might

have devoured me. And in fact, when I ran into the yard the next morning, some thought I was a ghost.

To my horror, so did my mother. She took one look at me and said, “Who are you, child? Tell me.”

I had no answer for her.



My mother taught me that a story matters not because it is true but because it's been told. I don't know if I believe this, but I've been trying to find a way to tell myself the story of that night with Mama my whole life in hopes that one day the ending will change. For while we both came home that day, the truth is, both of us disappeared.

Once there was a girl who went into the forest.

Until now I'd tried to forget what happened. I'd never planned to go back to that place. But that was before I had a daughter of my own. Now she looks to me with the question all daughters are bound to ask their mothers: *Who are you?* And I hear the echo behind that question. *Who am I?*

Even if I have no answer, I am still my mother's daughter. And so, I will give to my own daughter the only story I know—and hope that if I tell it well, she will find the answers she needs.

Once there was a girl who always took a dare.

Once there was a girl who went to sleep and awoke someone else.

Once there was a girl who could always find her way home.

Chapter One



Alice

“I’m telling you, we’re not lost,” I said, but my daughter looked worried.

Really, we were stranded with a dead battery a few miles south of Savannah. We’d traveled all day, over three hundred miles to cross the length of the state, from the mountains in the north. But my planning had been poor, to say the least. I’d underestimated the distance, then taken a wrong turn that had cost us time. Now, as dusk settled around us, I felt sick as we stared at my daddy’s broken-down ’38 Ford pickup truck.

Penn said, “What’ll we do now?”

“It’s fine,” I lied, trying to sound more confident than I felt. “Come on. We can walk there.”

We’d passed Hawkes’s Feed and Seed about a mile and a half back, the only store on the road that might have been a help to us, although I dreaded walking into the place again. In any case, it was already closed up tight for the night.

The shadows stretched as the swampy air filled with a choir of indistinct insects and frogs, and I knew there were things in these wetlands that were dangerous. I reached under the seat for a flashlight but came up empty-handed.

I said, "I know this road. We're not far. We'll be there before it's really dark. We'll deal with the truck in the morning."

Penn pulled the strap of her satchel over her shoulder, looking around with hesitation. I shouldered my own thin bag. I hardly knew what I'd packed.

"I can't see anything. There's nothing out here," Penn moaned.

Clearly this was not the adventure she'd had in mind when we'd left home in such a rush late this morning. I'd shut Merely's, our family-owned service station, and told my stepmother, Imegine, not to open it to strangers. She'd rolled her eyes at what she deemed my unfortunate mistrust in my fellow man. I knew as soon as we left she'd be happily feeding hobos out the front door and they'd all love her for it. Imegine was honey where'd I'd always been turpentine.

"You wanted to come here, remember?" I teased Penn. "It'll be worth it. It's not that bad."

I was counting on it. I needed a way to snap her out of the dreamy, despondent state that had settled over her in the last two years, changed her from a daring daddy's girl to some shadow of herself. I feared where things were leading.

Three years ago, when she was only ten, Penn had become enamored with the Brenau Academy, the only all-girls college preparatory boarding school in Georgia, grades nine through twelve, a few hours from us. We'd just entered the war, but her daddy had enlisted immediately and gone overseas to fight. She was restless and worried and fed up with the dull education she was enduring in Helen, where local kids often dropped out around seventh grade to farm. Even though she wouldn't even be eligible until high school,

she'd called the school for an admissions packet and started writing an essay with a determination that could have won awards, begging to apply early to ensure her chances of a slot. The waiting list was years long. But I'd refused. I'd made excuses. I had reasons that were personal, secret reasons that reached beyond the financial challenge or Penn's chances of acceptance.

But then I'd watched Penn forget her dreams. And her heart-break was worse than anything I had feared. Last night, while everyone slept, I'd dropped her packet in the mail. Out of caution for her feelings, I wasn't sharing the extent of my plan until I knew for sure that I could pull it off.

It was now the spring of 1945 and my husband, Finch, had been killed in Italy two years before. The war had crept into the small rooms where we lived above the motor garage my daddy had owned on the outskirts of Helen, Georgia, a remote and failing logging community on the verge of becoming a ghost town with less and less traffic on the highway. The change was so quiet we hardly felt it at first, but with so few travelers, the need for our services was all but obsolete. Rations limited the food on our table and, although Penn didn't know it, the savings in our account.

We were like almost all the other families around us. The sorrow of neighbor women shone in the gold stars flying on flags outside our doors and we mourned the ordinary lives we once believed we would live. Mysteries were the meat on our tables. We didn't long for the unknown but fantasized about full pantries, dirty boots by the door, and the soft snores of sleeping men who would never breathe beside us again. Finch had been headed for a POW camp, but then the army learned later from an Italian POW who'd been present at the execution that he'd been shot and rolled into a mass grave in some farmer's field. The prisoner's memory surfaced only after Italy declared itself an ally in 1943, more than

six months after Finch's capture, and amounted to only a vague location, no other details. When the news finally came by way of a very young officer standing at our door, we'd been given hope that at least they might find remains and he'd be brought home. It would have been better had Penn not had that expectation, for it consumed her, though it appeared less and less likely the more time that passed. Whatever his dreams had been for himself or his family, Finch had taken them with him, and hers, too, it seemed. His pension was all that was left now, barely enough for us to live on. Not that it was any excuse for the choices I was making, but I'd been working hard to be both mother and father to Penn, and I was exhausted long before we'd ended up on this roadside in southern Georgia at the edge of night.

The service station was all we had, and all Penn had of her father, and I knew what it was to lose your home. For a while, I'd bartered rubber patches for fresh vegetables and took in wash to get cloth for Penn's clothes. I'd made do every way I knew as long as I could. And I had been foolish enough to think our lot couldn't be any sorrier, but then my daddy had died.

The church had still smelled of leftover lilies from the service a full week before. Barely a dozen people had been there for us. Afterward, Penn and I walked alongside Imegine through town, filing into the bank to collect the contents of my daddy's safe deposit box. At first, everything was orderly, sorted, exactly what we'd expected from my daddy. There'd been no sentimental notes, no official will and testament to be read, only an envelope for each of us, containing short lists divvying up his scant belongings. Imegine inherited Merely's and what monies he had saved, enough to keep her comfortable into old age. For Penn, there was his truck. No surprises.

Only my envelope remained. What I found there hit me between

the eyes—the deed to Evertell, along with the antique key to the rambling old estate. When I pulled out that paper, the key clattered to the floor. I'd grabbed it up fast, like I might have a sharp knife. It was maybe six inches long with an ornate handle and large teeth on the end of the shaft, and I'd closed both hands around it, my thoughts rushing back to the memory of Evertell. Days after they'd buried Mama, I'd whispered in Daddy's ear something to comfort him, sweet enough to make us forget. *"I'm nothing like her. I never want to go back."*

But now he'd left me with the choice. "I thought he sold it years ago."

"I guess it never was his to sell, Alice," Imegine said.

"You knew?"

"Of course not."

Imegine was the one I should have been comforting. Instead, she'd squeezed my hand as I stood there, dumbfounded.

"What's Evertell?" Penn had asked.

The unknown was powerful. It was the monster in the dark, the secret in the box, the poison in the wine. We'd kept everything about Evertell a secret, like so many things I'd never intended to tell Penn. But here was a question that would have to be answered. One she would never stop asking. I'd stared at the deed and felt my hands tingle.

"It's where my mama was from," I'd finally said. "Where I grew up. A farm."

There was a note scratched at the bottom of the document in my daddy's cramped handwriting, followed by the name of the estate's executor and an address for the man.

Upon my death, see O. Lewallen in Savannah, Georgia, for any business with this property.

“Savannah?”

“Yes, that’s where the house is, on the river.” I’d looked into Penn’s face. If we stayed in Helen now, I feared I would watch her opportunities wither. Her fate would set hard and fast like the other girls without choices. Surely she was destined for an early marriage to whomever this war had left to her, saddled too young with the burden of a widowed mother and grandmother. And me? I’d end up a gas chiseler, caught out soon enough. Or I could take what fortune we’d been given without dithering over my conscience and change everything again, this time for Penn. Farmland in Georgia wasn’t going for as much as some places, but I’d seen it listed for thirty-five dollars an acre. At that rate, I figured it up in my head, the property from my mama’s family would bring enough to cover school and then some.

Imagine leaned in to peer at the deed and put a steadying hand at the small of my back. “You don’t have to do anything with this, Alice,” she said.

But already my mind was running ahead of itself, thinking of new clothes for the fall and a future to look forward to, all suddenly possible for my daughter because of this forsaken legacy I’d believed was a curse.

“We have to go there,” Penn said. Imagine and I looked from the deed to Penn, then to each other. This was the first interest Penn had shown in anything in so long that we stood silent, as if we might scare away a wild thing. But she looked clear-eyed and eager, like herself. She had such confidence in her conclusion. I’d taught her that. Straight ahead. See for yourself. “I want to see it. I want to go.”

“Not now,” I said. “You have school.” Penn rolled her eyes. She’d always excelled in her classes and I’d let her stay home more than I should this last year and she knew there were only a few

weeks left in the school year. Her absence for a few more days wouldn't even raise an eyebrow from the powers that be, given she was a star student while other kids were dropping out left and right. All it would take was a note from me and Penn knew it. But she was thirteen, the age my mama had claimed was the year of visions for the girls in our family. The timing scared me. "Maybe sometime," I said, trying to placate her, ignoring her disappointment, seeing full well she knew I was lying. Knowing she would simply bide her time, grow up, and live for the day she could do as she pleased. I still thought I had things in hand.

But last week I'd sold a barrel of black-market gasoline out the back door.

Afterward, I'd run inside to vomit. Honestly, it wasn't the betrayal of my scruples that bothered me. I was fairly certain that in the scheme of things my pitiful crime wouldn't rate much, but these days people were quick to turn on one another to save themselves, and it frightened me that I'd compromised our fragile household. I couldn't bear the idea of being charged and separated from Penn. I'd been careful to keep the extra income secret and independent from the finances I'd managed for Merely's. But even as I'd stared down at the false numbers on the page, I was struck that this would be the account of my life. The only legacy I left to my daughter. And it turned out, that was the thing with which I couldn't live.



Still, I wasn't here to lead my girl down the primrose path. Stark reality was my aim. Evertell was no fabled kingdom. It was worth everything if it could pay the way for what she wanted, but in truth I hardly knew what to expect after being gone so many years. I felt

anxious and cranky, and it didn't take long before we both realized I was wrong about how far we were going to have to walk. We were starting to struggle to see the sandy path as the light diminished. The air was so slick it draped over us. For once, Penn was quiet. After a few moments she stopped short so I almost stumbled into her. "Is that it? Listen," she said. "I think I hear it."

"You can't hear the ocean. We're not close enough."

Penn had never seen the ocean and she was expecting it around every corner. I hadn't been able to bring myself to take her, to smell the salt or hear the gulls. She only knew the clear streams and high mountains of the northeast corner of this state.

"That could be it. I think that's it," she said. "What's that stink?"

"Fish. Mud. You'll see when it's light."

"Ew." Penn was getting nervous. I could hear it in her breathing. "Tell me again what we're going to do."

"We're going to visit so you can see where the other side of the family came from before we sell it. Then we'll put that money in the bank and you'll have a fat nest egg. Think of all the places you can go, all the things you can see, Penn. Travel, college." I'd said that before we left this morning and I liked the sound of it. Now I was laying out visions like sweater sets, waiting to see what she might choose. "What'll you do first?"

"I could go to Europe," she mused dully. I knew she was thinking of Finch. She'd once dreamed she would go to Italy and find him there. I tried not to worry she'd brought it up again. "But not until the war's over."

"Well, no, not until then. And there are plenty of places to see right here."

She sighed. "Tell me what you remember."

"Uh, well. Let me think."

I hadn't talked about my mama or Evertell in so long that at first the words wouldn't come to me, only brief images, like flickering photographs. There was a lot of ground to cover before we reached the estate, both physically and metaphorically. Some of it, Penn wasn't going to like.

"I remember a big white house on a saltwater marsh with a deep forest behind it, between us and the sea. It's old. The land was granted to our family by King George II."

"King?" Penn said, fully impressed. "Not really."

I nodded. I had to carry her back, gradually, through centuries of history, if I was going to get to the heart of our story. The house was only the beginning. "That's what I was told. Wars were fought over this land for years before our family came here, battles between the Spanish, the British, and the Creek and Cherokee. People are always loving and losing land. Makes the best and makes the worst of us, too, how we all want to call a place home and what we do to each other to have it. You'd think there'd be enough room on this earth for everybody."

This was a familiar idea for Penn, having grown up collecting arrowheads along the banks of the mountain rivers and streams near Helen and hearing of the Cherokee people being marched to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears.

"Our family came in 1758 with a religious group from South Carolina. They'd been asked to settle here as part of the British effort to establish a nearby port."

"We're from South Carolina?"

"And before that, lots of places. Florida, even before it was Florida. Then Barbados, because of pirate raids."

"You're joking. Pirates?"

"Pirates. One woman and her daughter—Catarina and Marguerite—were captured in St. Augustine and sold into service.

Marguerite's daughter, Françoise, was born out of wedlock. Later, she was hanged as a witch."

"But was she a witch? Really?"

I shrugged. "It's what they called her. A word for a woman who must have caused trouble for somebody. But I doubt she rode a broomstick. Lucky for us, Esme, her daughter, was sent to South Carolina and carried on, even after all of that."

"I can't keep them straight."

"I memorized their names when I was about your age," I said. "Esme married a religious man, a Congregationalist, and when she was a very old woman, she came here with her daughter, Garnet Lee, and her husband. They built a little tabby cottage, a farm, a church, and a mill, and we've been here ever since. The first house was just one room, really, built before anything was anything. Evertell was part of a land grant from the English king. Of course, what King George didn't count on, I guess, is that the folks he sent here would all eventually join the Revolution, including our family. It's a bloody history."

"Here? The Revolutionary War happened here? In Georgia?"

I shuddered to think what they weren't teaching her in school. "Yes, here. During that war, this place was sort of a no-man's land, so Evertell went unharmed aside from being a sanctuary for men from both sides who passed through and took their rest. And later, it was the same with the War Between the States. Over the years, the house grew around those first rooms. You can count the years of Evertell like rings in a tree, my mama said, if you know where to look."

"She told you all of this? What else did she say? What do you remember about Grandmama Claire?"

"I remember watching her catch fireflies. She was beautiful. She believed in signs and fate. She had a book that belonged to the

women in her family, passed down with the house. A kind of journal or scrapbook with poems and recipes and things. Their names are all listed there. I always wondered what happened to it.”

“All of this is in that book?”

“Some of it. Some were just stories people told.”

The book, like the estate, had passed from each lady of the house to her eldest daughter for centuries, making it an unusual legacy for unusual women, women who were both literate and property owners for generations. I recalled the evenings I’d spent with my mama, the ancient book open in her lap, the soft rustle of pages turning, the smell of her skin, vanilla and something sweeter, the perfume of jasmine blossoms. There’d been ink drawings of plants and constellations. There were entries about the weather and the changing seasons and the births of babies, all written in different hands by different authors over many centuries.

I took advantage of the dark when I wouldn’t have to look at Penn. I’d raised her in a world of engines and oils, machines that could be repaired, men who predictably woke and worked. Stories were novel, coming from my mouth. But as Penn and I marched on, I found it was easier than I thought to let the old tale whisper its way back into the world. “But what we know about our family started even before Evertell. My mama once told me she knew the fate of a woman named Eleanor White Dare. She was part of a first colony from England that disappeared. They were called the Lost Colony of Roanoke.”

“Oh, wait,” Penn said quickly. “You mean like the message on that rock at Brenau Academy?”

“That’s right.” Of course she knew about the stone. “The Dare Stone, yes. Eleanor’s part of the story.” Penn knew everything about Brenau but nothing of our history with that stone. I spoke carefully, gently laying out the details. “It turned up in 1937. It was found in

North Carolina. Some man just tripped over it one day and it was a big discovery, all over the news. Everybody said it wasn't real, just a big hoax."

Penn looked puzzled. I could see she was trying to make a connection, waiting for answers. "Grandmama Claire knew about Eleanor Dare? We learned about her last year in class, about the actual history. A whole bunch of poor English people got left behind on an island in North Carolina somewhere. And nobody knows if they were killed or went somewhere else to live with the Indians, right? Nobody ever found them."

I took a breath, slowing my pace a little. "Well, people think different things about that. But used to be, that stone they have at the college was placed in the forest of our property here."

"The same one?" Penn asked, confused but suddenly more animated.

"I think so. The pictures in the paper looked the same. It was carved with the same message. It was supposed to be Eleanor Dare's message to her father, telling him what happened to her. And if you believe that, the women in Grandmama Claire's family are what happened after that. The book has a list of descendants, starting with Eleanor's name and all the way through the ones who built Evertell, all the way to my mama. If you believe it, it's our family myth."

"You're making this up." Of course she didn't believe me. How much easier it would be if I could pretend it was all a joke.

"No," I admitted. For once, Penn said nothing, only listened. "The way it was explained to me, the women in our family knew where Eleanor first put that stone, but Grandmama Claire didn't think we ever had any business moving it here. It was a message to say Eleanor had survived, but it was also a gravestone. It marked the place where she lost her family." I could hear my mama saying

all this even now, an accusation, spitting it out like too much salt. I tried to tell it to Penn as I had been told. The names of the heirs marched through my head, and I did my best to keep the details simple for Penn.

“Bernadette Reece Telfair started it all,” I said. She’d been the heir who had finally completed Evertell in 1799. But over the years, she’d become obsessed with a hand-drawn map in the commonplace book, initialed EWD, showing Eleanor’s journey. She sent some men to find the place where the journey began in the wilds of the new world, to retrieve the marker Eleanor had left for her father, inscribed with the terrible fate of his family. The stone was found just where the map said it would be and brought to Georgia, to our forest, to protect it from anyone who might want to steal or deface it.

“Bernadette thought she was correcting a wrong, that she was honoring Eleanor’s legacy, bringing Eleanor home, I guess,” I said. “The trouble was, this was never Eleanor’s home, and it wasn’t long before people got fed up with Bernadette and how highly she thought of herself after that. They got a bad taste in their mouth about that stone, started whispering things about it, that it was asking for trouble to have it here.

“So when Bernadette’s daughter, Camille, had a little girl, then disappeared about three years later, just a few weeks after that stone came here, everybody blamed the stone. Maybe it was a coincidence. Maybe Camille took off with some man. Nobody knows. But even Bernadette believed she’d brought a curse on our family.”

Penn had taken my hand as we walked. “But Grandmama Claire loved Eleanor and tried to make peace with her. She visited the stone. She loved Eleanor’s book and all the things the other heirs had drawn or written there, their secrets and dreams. She wanted me to love them too. She believed that was what Eleanor

had wanted, for us to have the book. My mama said it was a book written by women, full of women's wisdom and mysteries."

Penn was listening intently. And I realized with a kind of wonder that I was enjoying being the storyteller, a disarming thought. "You won't find any of those stories in your history books, but I can tell you for sure that Eleanor Dare was a very real girl, just like you. Even if nobody knows what happened to her, just like nobody knows if the words on that stone were true or if we really are her descendants. That's why I said it's a myth."

"I want to read this book."

"We'll have to see. Maybe we'll look at it together. Girls read it after they come of age. Thirteen, like you. But it's not a game or a toy, okay? It's very old, something Grandmama Claire kept put away safe." I saw her ponder this. "Anyway, we left it all behind—the house and everything that went with it. There's no guarantee any of it is still there."

"Like the stone? If it was protected in our woods, how come they found it so far away? Did Pop give it away too?" she mumbled.

Here was the question I'd avoided. I meant to keep the answer simple. I didn't hesitate. "It was stolen."

It was my fault. All of it was. I lost your birthright. I lost so much.

"Why didn't you ever tell me any of this? When they found it? You don't believe in curses. I know you don't."

"No, I don't. But it had nothing to do with us anymore. And you were so little when it showed up again. Why would you have cared?"

"I wasn't so little. I was five."

"Five is little, Penn."

"Well, you could have told me anytime. You could have told

me when I wanted to go to Brenau.” She made a low sound of disappointment.

“Okay, I’m telling you now,” I said too sharply, then took a breath and tried for a calmer tone. Just the facts. A shiver ran through me. Curses might be dismissed as superstition, but consequences were very real. “I figured I’d tell you one day if you were ever interested. That’s all there is to it, really,” I said, trying to dust the story off my hands. “And here we are. Now you know.”

Even with all these revelations, I was holding back and Penn could sense that. I expected her to be angry. I expected her to feel like I’d lied to her or tricked her. She should have felt that way. But I didn’t expect what she said next.

“Eleanor Dare would like this, wouldn’t she? What we’re doing here.”

Penn’s mind turned in original ways that sometimes surprised me. “What do you mean?”

“We’re sort of the same as her, like you said. We have no idea what’s around the corner, but we’re going there anyway.”

“Evertell heirs always know how to find their way home. That’s what my mama said.” I felt hopeful in that moment. Penn was still young enough that every ordinary day could feel like a dream. “And I’m sure that you are just like Eleanor Dare. And if I know anything about Eleanor,” I added, “she’d have taken the cash on the barrel and never looked back. I am positive she had big dreams too. She ended up at Brenau,” I said. “How about that?”

Penn asked, “Did you believe it was real? When you were here? When you were little?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “At the time, I did. There was the stone and the book and Grandmama Claire’s stories. That seemed like all the proof I needed.”

“But about Eleanor and the curse? Do you still believe any of it now?”

“I don’t know.” That was true too. “I don’t know if it matters what I believe. Maybe it’s just a story to tell you.”

But there was still a lot of our story I didn’t know how to tell. Or if I ever would. And it started with the story my mother had written for me in the pages of the commonplace book: Eleanor’s Tale. If my mama was to be believed, Eleanor’s Tale contained the key to our true inheritance, a kind of mystical vision. She’d called it our Evertell, the inspiration that guided each heir. But she’d gotten sick, and when she died, both she and the conclusion had been lost. She’d never shared the ending of Eleanor’s Tale with me. No secret feminine wisdom had ever come to help guide my way. I was stumbling down this road in the dark, and my worst fear was that I’d never be the kind of mother to pass that kind of faith or magic to my daughter in such an uncertain world.

But the stories I did know seemed to satisfy Penn. She only slapped at a mosquito and said, “Can I have the key?”

“What?” I said, distracted.

“The key for the house, can I have it? When we get there, I want to be the one to let us into the house. I can’t believe it has a name. Evertell, Evertell,” she repeated.

I handed the heavy key over, an ache in my chest. The night seemed too quiet. “Listen, whatever we find here, if the house has fallen in, that’s fine. Don’t be too disappointed. It’s to be expected, right? If we need to, we’ll stay in Savannah for a few days,” I suggested brightly. “Or go out to Tybee Island, to the shore. Would you like that? Give Grandma Imegine a little peace and quiet.”

“Like an actual seaside holiday? We could do that?” I could hear the delight in her voice, but then hesitation too. “I don’t know. I don’t want to leave Grandma Imegine out,” she said, sounding

tired. “Not when she’s so sad.” She trudged along for a moment, thinking, then added, “I just wanted to see where you grew up. And maybe Pop’s man you’re supposed to see will know what happened to Eleanor’s book. He might have it,” Penn said.

“He might.”

I couldn’t pretend I hadn’t already thought of that myself. The very idea that I might hold that book again filled me with both hope and dread. It had been foremost in my thoughts from the instant I’d learned Evertell remained my inheritance. But there were other possibilities, things and people I hadn’t told Penn about yet. I worried what else might be waiting for us here. Penn had so many questions. There’d been a time when I was just like her, when I’d believed all stories had conclusions and all things might be known.

In the dying light, I could make out the look of consternation on her face. The best I could do now was walk beside her and help her find her way forward, so we could stop looking back. I’d never have come here otherwise. I believed that given the chance, Penn would dream wider and farther than this place. Maybe I would finally hold that book again and see what my mama had wanted me to see. Because there was truth to Eleanor’s Tale in at least one regard: the fate of the world is often driven by the curiosity of a girl.



Soon enough, we came to a low concrete wall that led to a narrow iron gate hidden in palmetto fronds and a wild tangle of jasmine vine that scented the night air with a familiar sweetness I’d have known anywhere. The entrance was old, barely wide enough for an automobile to fit through. Fashioned into the iron were neat, clear letters. Penn touched them with her fingers. I didn’t need to read them to know what they said.

Evertell.

“It’s real,” Penn said, pushing her way through.

“Completely real.”

I followed her, my own eyes searching for a glimpse of the house. On the night breeze was the bitter smell of the yew hedges and the shrill call of tree frogs. Everything was cast in deep shadow with only a crescent moon to light the way. The long lane of crushed oyster shells crunched underfoot on the straight approach until we reached a curve at the end and still, Evertell was hidden. I remembered the grand porch and the wide, smooth lawns. The towering pines and oaks and the rustling sounds of the palm leaves in the sea breezes. Nothing like the home we’d known in the shadow of old mountains in Helen.

The main house had been stunning in Italianate style with white wooden walls that rose from the stone foundation and the dark greens, blues, and browns of the landscape. The house’s crown was a dainty cupola, trimmed in lacy moldings, with a view of the fields that lay inland and the broad, glistening river and marshes snaking behind the house until they were hidden behind the deep green forest of oaks and palms that stretched to the sea. Once, Evertell had seemed enduring, but I feared the shape it might be in, presumably after twenty-three years of neglect.

“So real, I’m afraid we’ll be lucky if we have a pot to piss in,” I mumbled, growing more anxious with every step.

Only a breath later, Penn said, “There’s something. Look.” She pointed through the hanging moss and the low-growing limbs of the twisted oaks and I caught a first glimpse of the line of the roof and cupola.

I squinted, unsure if I was imagining things. Maybe it was a firefly. Or maybe it was something else, showing us the way, exactly as my mother had always claimed. My heart pounded beneath my

ribs. Already I was entertaining fanciful thoughts. I blinked to clear my vision, but it was still there. A faint glow shone high in the lead glass windows. A light inside Evertell.

“Holy mackerel,” Penn whispered. “Who do you think it might be? Maybe it’s haunted. Maybe there’s a ghost.”

“We don’t believe in ghosts,” I said as we came to stand below the porch.

“I might.” She giggled.

More of the jasmine vine grew up the railings and the side of the house, and the scent of the tiny white blossoms, like pricks of light in the glow of the moon, was so strong and sweet, I felt overwhelmed.

“Wait.” All at once, I didn’t know if I could take the last steps to the door. I thought of my last warnings to Imagine about strangers and realized I should have taken my own advice. “I should have thought better about this. We should have waited till morning to show up. It could be anybody squatting in there. Some old tramp. Some drunk with a gun.”

Penn dismissed all of this the way only a teenager can in the face of danger. “Don’t be crazy. You always think the worst. Nobody’s going to shoot us. We just have to introduce ourselves. They’ll see who we are. And we have the key.”

Before I could stop her, she leapt ahead and stood on the porch, so I had no choice but to scramble up beside her. I fastened my hand on her arm, stopping her. I looked at the heavy iron key. “Give me that.”

“But you said I could do it.”

I pushed Penn behind me, shushing her. My hand shook as I fumbled to fit the heavy key to the lock. With a twist, the door easily gave way and slowly swung open on well-oiled hinges. The air from the dark hall met our faces, carrying the scent of old wood

and abandoned rooms as we peered into the gloom. Whoever or whatever had cast the light from upstairs, there was no sign of them down here, but then I heard shuffling in the shadows of the stairwell. The sound bounced off the empty walls of the vast foyer and I stiffened.

“Who’s there?” I called. “Hello? I’ve got a key so I’ve let myself in. Didn’t mean to startle you. We didn’t know anybody would be here.”

When I looked, I could see only a small light moving closer, throwing shadows through the railings, against the walls. My own voice shriveled in my throat. Someone descended the staircase in a rush from the highest landing. One foot dropped heavily on each step, followed by a lesser scrape. It was such a burdensome effort that there could be no doubt of the determination it took for the person to reach us. I recognized the sound.

I knew it because when I lost Evertell and everything about who I’d once been, I’d lost him too.

HARPER
MUSE

Chapter Two

“Stopping by awful late in the day.”

For a moment it seemed the house itself had spoken. But it was a man. I knew the shape of him, even if it seemed impossible that he would still be here. I clenched the key, jagged teeth pointed out, so tightly my hand ached.

“You got business here?” he asked.

“So the deed in my pocket tells me. At least for a few days.”

“Weeks, you said,” Penn corrected me.

Sonder lowered the lantern in his fist as he crossed the hall. He stood before us tall, thin, head hung low, shirtfront buttoned wrong, exposing a lean chest. His was a long face with deeply set eyes and his hair fell over his forehead. When he spoke, his expression turned to one of quiet delight. The cool breath of memory crept across the back of my neck.

“Alice Merely? That ain’t you.”

I hesitated before I coughed up, “Mrs. Alice Merely Young.”

Penn spoke then. “She thought you were a tramp.”

“I’ve brought my daughter with me. This is Penn,” I said, giving

the back of her arm a small pinch where he couldn't see. "I never said you were a tramp."

Sonder shrugged, then lowered his chin. He was enjoying watching me backpedal the comment. "That's one I haven't heard in a while. To be a proper tramp, a man's got to be on the move. Been here so long now I've just about grown roots down into the ground." He looked at me closely then. I felt such an immediate familiarity and the impulse to hug his neck, but that would have been wrong. "You know me, surely?"

"I knew a boy. Barely said boo to anybody."

"She doesn't believe in ghosts," Penn said, watching him closely.

"Way I remember it, your mama's the ghost around here. Did a disappearing act that's still got people talking." He gave me a slow smile and I remembered that too. He took no offense at being called either a tramp or a ghost. He liked being a mystery. But he'd been a bit of both, hadn't he? Turned up without explanation to work for my daddy only a few months before we left Evertell. I'd been drawn most to his quiet ways and the unknown past that had taken him places I couldn't guess—and taken part of his left leg, too, giving him that limp from his prosthetic. He'd let a lonely little girl trail behind him on the water and in the fields and let me wonder about him.

"Come on home for a neighborly chat, have you?" he mused. "After all this time."

"Come by," I said. "But just for a stop. Forgive us waltzing in. We didn't mean to surprise you. We thought the place would be empty."

He peered past us into the dark and addressed me. "Something's gone wrong for you? Traveling on foot at night, without your husband?"

"Finch? Oh no," I said. Of course he knew nothing of my

husband and Penn's father, but the name filled the empty night around us until I could add, "It's just the two of us. Our truck quit on us awhile back." I lowered the key by using it to gesture back down the drive. I wasn't ready to get into too many of the details. "Husbands are scarce these days. He was taken prisoner and killed in Italy two years ago."

He bowed his head. "Sincere condolences."

"Thank you." I believed him, which, in itself, was miraculous but unnerving. I had to turn away and pretend to take in the dark hallway.

I'd grown something like a callus inside to protect from the sickly sweet, well-meaning expressions of sympathy and shared grief since Finch's death and it had served me well, kept me somewhat sane when I looked at the kind faces of those who could not imagine the reality of what I conjured in my mind for his last moments. A callus I was grateful for that prevented me from screeching at them or suddenly spewing forth the details of dreams of mass graves, of the monstrous thing that had become of his long, pale body, of waking with the smell of death in my nose.

Finally, I said, "Look at this place. I can't believe I'm standing here."

But when I glanced back, Sonder's attention was directed at the stairs. He wore a worried expression. We were interrupting something. For an awful second I was concerned someone might be waiting for him. Then there was the faint sound of warbling voices and Penn's eyes widened.

"What's up there?" Penn asked, her eyes bright in the lamplight.

He handed her the lantern he carried, then took a step back, and then another. "That's my work."

"Your work?" I asked.

But the question went unanswered as he took the steps as

quickly as his prosthetic leg would allow, leaving us standing in the great empty hall. We were all missing something here.

When he reached the second floor, Penn whispered, "If he had a parrot, I'd guess he's a pirate."

"Shh. Stop that." I muffled a laugh. "He's Sonder. He's the caretaker at Evertell, or he was. I guess he still is."

I could barely believe it, even as I said the words. I turned to Penn, but clearly her thoughts were no longer on the unusual man. An expression of astonishment made her face seem even younger than she was as she gawked at the shadowy foyer. She'd barely stepped across the threshold and already she was in love. The air was thick and sweet off the river, even inside. I wanted to weep for the familiarity of it, a kind of unexpected comfort for my weary heart, as if I'd come to lay my head on the sighing bosom of the great house.

And yet, Evertell was a shell of itself, empty of the noises of a family, no rich carpets on the floors, hollow and cave-like without its heirlooms so that every sound we made seemed intrusive. The house might still be in my name, but someone had cleaned it out. I had the ridiculous thought that though I had dreamed often of these walls, this place no longer knew me. But the names of the women who came before flooded my memory. Familiar names with foreign sounds that tasted of a wilder, far-flung world. I remembered them all. Above our heads, I noted the absence of the audacious chandelier that had once hung in the entry. I paused to peer into the front parlor, shocked to see the lonely outline of my mama's small writing desk still sitting beneath the tall leaded window where I remembered the light had once poured in through pale blue glass. Here, with her indigo blue ink, she must have written Eleanor's Tale into the book, I realized.

This was the oldest part of the original house, the only room

built of tabby concrete, the mixture of lime and crushed oyster shells so commonly used along the coast in those days. It had been my favorite room when I was a girl, always cool, and I'd spent hours discovering and tracing my fingers over decorative seashells that had been particularly embedded in the walls.

I moved deeper along the hall to the library, now empty, the lavish furnishings from my memory gone except for a small piano, waiting in silence. It made the room seem as desolate as the dining room with the long, empty table, which I could see just across the hall. I stopped to lean against the staircase banister, unwilling to see any more until morning.

"You didn't mean what you said about a pot, did you?" Penn urged at my elbow, hopping from one foot to the other. "I really need to use the bathroom."

"Back there." I pointed the way to the door at the end of the hall.

"You don't mean an outhouse?" Penn said, appalled.

I shrugged. "See for yourself."

She moved down the hall with the lantern while I pulled the front door closed. The house had once been famous for its early luxuries—a gravity-fed water system providing hot and cold water, and flushing toilets that had functioned as early as 1846. Acetylene gas lamps had illuminated the house by the early 1900s while the other homes along the coast had remained in the dark. My great-grandfather made and stored the gas on the estate, the same as miners used in their lanterns. All of this trivia I recalled dimly overhearing from the delighted conversations of visiting neighbors.

"You're messing with me," Penn called, discovering the toilet. "There's electricity too."

I heard the click of a switch and I peered down the hall to see light glowing beneath the door of the little room at the back of the house where I remembered there'd been a tub. Clearly a few

updates had been made. I was relieved. The gas had been volatile, and it was a miracle no one had inadvertently sent the house up in flames long ago. I knew this was the reason a small kitchen house stood out back several yards from the main structure. With a stove for cooking and heating the water that was piped into the house, it had burned to the ground twice before I was born.

With Penn settled for the moment, I turned my thoughts to the more pressing matter of a man in the house.

“I’ll just go see what’s going on upstairs,” I said, mostly to myself as I looked up into the dark. Creeping up the staircase, I stayed to one side of the thick runner, worn in the center, to avoid the exact places where a stair would creak, a pattern of steps I recalled without effort. I climbed to the top floor, then ascended a final, steep flight of steps to a small octagonal space in the rafters where the air poured through windows on all four sides. The cupola had been built for my grandmother, Calista Clerestory, a victim of tuberculosis. Once, I had looked out from those heights over the changing colors of the river and marsh and forest and I had belonged to this place. Tonight bright stars winked down at me like a thousand witnesses to my return, mine and my daughter’s. I wondered how they would judge us.

The only light in the cupola now came from the dial of a short-wave radio. It cast a dim glow over the small space. Dark curtains covered most of the windows, but one had been pulled back by a few inches, giving a narrow view of the drive below, and I realized this was the source of the light we’d seen. Sonder hunkered over a small table with a bunch of blank postcards. His eyes were closed. He was wearing a set of headphones, completely still in his concentration. I couldn’t hear anything of the radio conversation or the voices we’d heard earlier, but I took the opportunity to study him. His face was cleanly shaven, marked deeply with the lines

of middle age. I guessed him to be in his forties now. A thousand questions filled my head. Had he married? He wasn't wearing a ring. He seemed the most solitary figure I'd ever seen. That much hadn't changed.

"Sonder Holloway," I said carefully, hoping I wouldn't startle him. Just speaking his name aloud sent a shiver through me. "I thought you left here a long time ago. After us. I should have tried to call ahead before busting in."

He didn't move. He didn't look at me. A cigarette burned in an ashtray at his elbow, the smoke wending its way upward. "There's no phone."

"Still?"

I reached a hand out and he offered me a drag. "Thanks. I can't believe you have these. We haven't been able to stock them at home for weeks."

"All going for the GIs. I've been doling out my last two packs."

I took one more drag and nodded. It wasn't a habit in general for me, but it certainly helped in the moment and my thoughts organized themselves. I watched him grind the butt out as I exhaled. I'd promised to call Imegine to let her know we'd arrived safely, and I needed to get in touch with the solicitor. When I was a girl, we'd walked to Hawkes's to make calls. I'd have to wait until morning, another thing to be sorted out along with the truck. "At least there's electricity," I finally said. "Penn found the switch downstairs. When did that happen?"

"In '33. They ran the wires out this way to Tybee Island, so the lighthouse operates on electricity now, if you can believe it."

"You're still using a gas lantern," I pointed out.

"Ah, old miner's habits. Except for the radio." He reached to jiggle the cord that ran to an outlet in the wall.

An awkward silence followed. Whatever he was listening to, his

expression was blank. I fixed on a detail: he'd been a miner. For all I knew, he'd left here to work in a mine since I'd gone. I wanted to ask now, but it would have been wrong to begin an interrogation of the man. He certainly owed me no answers.

Then, without warning, he sat forward. He began feverishly writing on a small notecard. I watched all of this, intrigued. I couldn't help wondering what else he'd been doing all this time. Suddenly I realized what I was looking at and stated the obvious.

"POW messages? That's what this is? From the Berlin broadcast? I thought everyone knew they're just propaganda." I said all of this loudly so he could hear me. His expression made me regret the criticism. "I'm sorry. It's really none of my business what you do."

People were warned about enemy broadcast news coming over the shortwave and cautioned not to be victimized by unscrupulous persons attempting to sell such information. The government told us over and over that the names of our soldiers and the messages that were read over the foreign airwaves were merely bait in the Axis propaganda war, tailored to weaken the resolve of grieving, fearful Americans. The programs were laced with innuendo and conspiracy theories to undermine our patriotism and faith in the fight. I hadn't been able to stomach the thought of listening to them even when Finch was missing.

We'd gotten a postcard from the provost marshal general, informing us they had just received word from the International Red Cross that Finch was a POW in Italy, with a promise to check the accuracy of the information. Then we were told to wait for further word from them and not to trust civilian monitoring or any other unofficial source. Families were prone to send money as thanks to these volunteers, and we were told not to fall for a scam, that we couldn't trust a postcard like the ones I saw on Sonder's desk.

Sonder didn't respond to my argument, making it clear where he stood. I was made more aware of how little we knew of each other now and grew uneasy with the thought of him staying up here while we slept.

I quickly said, "Look, we're tired from the trip. Do you know how long you'll be? Or do you stay in the house?"

He pushed one of the headphones off his right ear and looked up. "Half an hour or so and I'll be out. I sleep at the millhouse, like always."

I nodded dumbly, recalling the room above the millhouse. Nervous, I blurted, "My daddy died. It's been two months now, but that's why I'm here. It seems out of the blue, but it's really not." He was watching me, not speaking. I could see my news wasn't a shock. He'd already heard. "Anyway, you'll have to tell me if he paid you, that sort of thing. I'm sorry to bring it up. I guess you should know straightaway that I'll be seeing his executor for the details on selling." It seemed wrong to keep my plans from him, but I certainly hadn't had time to think about what it would mean for him.

"It can be sorted out. Just stopping by, you say?"

"I'll have to see how things shape up."

"Right. All the same, I can move the radio down to the front room if you want use of it," he offered. "I've kept it up here because the overseas broadcasts come in stronger, but you might want the news on the regular. Some folks like to listen to programs in the evening. Doubt you want to climb all the way up here. I can see you don't like the monitoring in general. Some people don't. But if you could see your way to let me carry on, I'd appreciate that. You can say you never knew a thing about it."

I quickly dismissed his concern. "Oh no, no. Really, you don't need to move it. It's just we'd prefer a little privacy once we've settled for the night. You understand."

He nodded in agreement and I thought he looked a bit relieved. “Sure. Like I said, thirty minutes and the broadcasts end.”

“But do you really believe any of them are the real thing? How can you trust them?”

“How would I know? All the same to me whether it’s bunk or some poor soul wants to let his mom and pop know he’s still breathing and wishing he was sitting at the kitchen table eating pot pie. Just seems if somebody’s bothering to send them, somebody ought to at least bother to listen. Ought to at least try to send the message along so it’s not left floating out in the air for all eternity. That’s what I trust, that it’s just the right thing to do. Let somebody else sort out the rest.”

I nodded, feeling overwhelmed by the forthright declaration and wishing I had the courage to see the world in such a way.

“I’ve got to tell you,” he said, “this house is not accustomed to company these days.”

I flinched. “I noticed. Good thing I’m not much for company.”

He chuckled. “There’s a little settee downstairs in the front room and the main bedroom still has furniture. Can’t promise you won’t be sharing the mattress with a mouse.”

“Really, we’re not expecting the four-star treatment.” I almost asked if he knew what had become of the rest, of Eleanor’s book. My tongue was pressed to my teeth.

Penn called from below, “Mama, where’d you go?”

Leaning over the stairwell, I threw my voice down to her. “Come on upstairs. We’re staying in the front room.”

“You’ve got a girl,” Sonder said.

I stared at him for a long second and saw that the deep brown pond of his eyes hadn’t changed. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and went about lighting a fresh smoke, taking a long drag and offering one to me. I shook my head. A single hit for

the nerves was one thing, but better not start something I couldn't finish.

"I do. She already has ideas about you."

"Way I heard it, they were your ideas. What's your take now you've seen me up close?" He sat back in his chair, presumably to give me a better look.

Because I was embarrassed of myself, there was a need in me to get a rise out of him. I jerked my chin at the radio and his stack of cards. "I guess you look to me like a regular old spy."

"Think so? Not a ghost, then? Or a tramp?"

"Not really," I admitted. "But I've never seen a ghost, so how would I know?"

"Call it like you see it. You'd be right though. Just the messenger," he said, spreading his hands in a gesture of surrender. It made me smile.

"Good to see you, Alice. You've not changed a whit."

It was the saddest fib I'd ever heard, and I stood there suddenly feeling the weight of my age, my widowhood, and my responsibility to Penn in the full knowledge that he could see it all. I wished it was true that I could still be the girl he'd known, so certain of her opinions.

He was distracted again, one ear cocked to the headphone still covering his left ear, listening to catch whatever was coming across the air that I couldn't hear. He held the cigarette in his lips. "If you don't mind, I don't want to miss any of these."

I smarted at the dismissal. He'd told Penn I'd performed the greatest disappearing act, but my reappearance after all these years had barely rated a five-minute conversation and a drag on a stale cigarette. His compliment had been meant as a simple kindness, a little flattery. It was a thing he would say to any passing stranger. In it, I heard a meaning: *you might have come back, but you haven't*

come home. This house might have been mine, but no one had saved a space for me.



In the front bedroom on the second floor, Penn found a bare mattress on the big bed. I hated the idea of lying down on it and poked at the dingy ticking. At least there were no signs of mice.

“Which side of the bed do you want?” I asked.

Penn surveyed the space and perched gingerly on the edge of the bed. “There’s a whole fireplace in here,” she said, clearly awed and comparing the extravagance of such a thing to the tiny space we’d shared at Merely’s.

“All the main rooms have them. There are three chimneys. It’s how the house is heated. Or it was.”

“I think we’re rich, Mama. Admit it,” she said.

“Oh yes,” I said, giving the mattress a slap so the dust puffed up and made us cough. “Everything you ever wanted, mice and mildew.”

“This furniture,” she noted, “it’s huge. I mean, like giants lived here. It matches Pop’s wardrobe at home, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, that awful thing.”

“Was this your room?”

“No. Your grandparents’.”

While Penn prowled through the furniture, I unpacked what little we’d brought with us and pulled the drawers open on a standing dresser. *No book.* I exhaled. It was spooky being back inside these walls, and I half expected to find my mama’s clothes still folded there as Penn reached to run a fingertip through the layer of dust on the dresser next to the bed, exposing the shiny black walnut. It was a child’s expectation, irrational and egotistical, as

though the world inside this house should have frozen when I left it. Less than an hour back here and already I wasn't thinking straight.

"There must have been a ton of stuff in a house like this." Penn had an uncanny way of always seeming to read my thoughts. "What was it like before?"

"Full."

Penn frowned. I thought about the little desk, the lonely piano, the dining room table covered in dust. It was as if I were somehow existing between two realities. I reminded myself it was only a quick stop, a few nights here and gone.

"But where did it all go?"

"I wouldn't know. I never asked. Maybe Bridie Quillian. She had a resale shop in town that Grandmama Claire liked to prowl through."

"You should've asked. It was yours. You should have brought things with you. Maybe we can ask that man upstairs. Or the one you're meeting. What's he called?"

"The executor. Mr. Lewallen. I can ask, but whatever was in this house, it's long gone. And good for us we don't have to deal with that too. We brought the wardrobe. That's what Grandmama Claire wanted me to have. I guess Pop sold the rest."

"I wonder if we can get any of it back."

"We didn't come here for that," I reminded her. "And where would we put it? We hardly have room for the three of us at Merely's as it is. We'll look for the book. And that wardrobe is already yours if you want it. It comes apart, you know? It's built to be moved. It's a traveling wardrobe so it can go with you wherever you decide. Like that?"

"Sure," she said, still pondering. "Aren't we going to call Grandma Imegine? We said we would. She's going to worry."

So many questions. I reminded myself that this was what I'd

wanted, her interest, her attention. “I know. I’ve already thought about that, but there’s nothing we can do tonight. We’ll find a phone. There’s a store that has one we can use. That’s a can of worms that can wait until morning.”

“Why is Grandma Imegine a can of worms?”

“Not Imegine, the man who runs the store. If he’s even still there. He wasn’t a friend of the family,” I said. “No, Imegine’ll be fine. She’ll understand. She knows where we are, that things may be complicated at first.”

Penn chewed on the end of her hair and watched me. Honestly, I felt completely drained and rather relieved to put off having to give Imegine a rundown on our misadventures.

“And what about . . .” Penn pointed overhead, only mildly concerned. “Will he murder us in our sleep?”

She was droll as a seasoned old maid. She’d grown up at Merely’s where men were in and out of the service station all day long, and it occurred to me that it wasn’t the typical life of a young girl, as I’d liked to believe.

“He’s not a murderer; he’s a messenger,” I said, deciding this was as good a way as any to think of him. “He’ll be gone in a minute. And he’s harmless. He came to work for Pop when I was little,” I said.

She got a look on her face and teased me. “So you’re saying we have a servant?”

I laughed. “Hardly.” But I knew the question was just the start of Penn trying to understand the complicated history of this house. “Your daddy worked for your pop. Was he a servant?”

Penn’s mood shifted to somber. Just mentioning Finch and my daddy, I felt panicked and alone, astonished at what I’d done, running back here.

“But what’s he really doing up there?”

I adopted a breezy tone. “Right now? He’s recording POW messages off the broadcasts from Berlin coming over the shortwave. You know how people do? He listens in and writes down what he hears on postcards that he sends to the families.”

“Wow. And you’re going to let him?”

She was intrigued. She knew we’d never listened for Finch. She knew Americans were warned not to trust the messages. Now they were coming in right over her head.

“You know what I think about it, that people are gullible. They’ll believe anything when they’re scared and hurting, and those messages just take advantage. That’s what the government says. The Germans aren’t doing us a neighborly favor, letting prisoners call home to say hi. They’re the enemy and it’s a horrible trick. But it’s none of our business what Sonder Holloway does up there. Let him listen. We don’t have to. It’s not hurting us.”

“He seems nice.”

“He is nice. We’ll just live and let live while we’re here. Maybe it makes him feel better to think he’s really helping those families. Maybe it makes them feel better to think those messages are really from their boys.”

“*A story doesn’t matter because it’s true but because it’s been told.*” I heard my mama’s words echoed in my own. But I really was telling Penn the truth where I could. I had no idea what had happened to the things in this house. Bridie Quillian would have loved to get her hands on every last stick of furniture in Evertell and I hoped she’d made a fortune off of it. Bill Hawkes was no friend to this family and I hated that he’d enjoy watching me sell the family home. And Sonder Holloway was a nice man in the attic.

I worked the window open before I flopped on the bed beside her.

“How can it be this hot?” Penn fussed. “We may burn right up in here.”

“In the morning I’ll find a fan. Do you think you can rest?”

“Who wants to rest when we’re finally here with myths and ghosts and spies in the attic?”

She was happy about the mystery. I thought of Sonder’s words: “*You’ve got a girl.*”

I did indeed. She was all arms and legs at this age, especially coltish. Like me and all the women in my mama’s family, Penn was tall so she stood out. She embraced this trait, determined to be unusual. While we shared the same propensity for height and thick, dark curls, mine were an unruly riot I was always pushing out of my face. Penn’s hair shined and wound in coils over her shoulders. She was beautiful in a classic sort of way that drew the eye of other girls who envied her pale skin and fine cheekbones and of the boys who’d begun to stammer in her presence. She was unaware of this effect on people, something that worried me for her future. She insisted on wearing a pair of old black boots she’d found at a local rummage sale, mostly because I didn’t approve. She could pick any lock in under a minute and hot-wire a car almost as fast, both tricks she regularly performed to the delight of the customers at Merely’s. She irritated her teachers with constant questions about the curriculum. *Talks too much* was written in every report from school. *Won’t stay in her seat.*

Life with Finch had been easy, uncomplicated. And I’d expected when I had Penn that we would be an island unto ourselves, insular and content, never needing anything more from the outside than the all-consuming love that came with motherhood. She was my world. But Penn was born reaching, and from that moment, like it or not, she brought the world to us. It had frightened me. But since Finch’s death, she’d struggled, grown moody, withdrawn, alienated the friends she’d had at school, and I’d known true fear. She started to pretend illness, to beg off attending class. Instead of bouncing

out to fill gas tanks or wipe down windshields while trading jokes with the customers who passed through the service station, she lingered in corners or crouched in the kitchen to be near Imegine. She'd seemed confused at times, often talking of dreams from the night before as though she had trouble knowing where her imagination began and ended. I started to see a family resemblance that chilled me, the shade of my mama. I'd brought her back to Evertell, hoping that what had been the curse might also be the cure.

"Did you believe what your mama said about us? Who we are?" she asked, shaking me out of my reverie.

"I don't know. Penn, I just want to rest my eyes," I said, trying to put the thing off, at least until morning when my head wasn't feeling so heavy, so full of memories that didn't all fit together nicely.

"You can talk with your eyes shut."

I threw up my hand and let it land on my face, but she wouldn't let it rest. I knew that much about Penn. I leaned up on one elbow to see her better, her sweet face. I hadn't realized how tired I would be.

"We'll talk about this for a few minutes, but then I want to get some sleep. We have lots of time to talk."

Penn nodded earnestly.

I sighed. "My mama had a disease that made her confused. She thought a lot of things about Evertell and Eleanor and who knows what. For one, she thought she was having visions. She thought we should all be having visions. She had a charm in the book, a way to help see the future, I guess. A future. I think it was mostly wishful thinking."

"Did she? Did you?" Penn asked, her voice slightly breathless. We were sharing secrets.

"No, Penn. No," I said, a little sad. "Of course not. You know better."

“So then she was just crazy?”

Penn looked down at her lap, drawing little patterns on her thigh with her fingertip while she listened, probably embarrassed to learn there'd been madness in our family.

“I think it was just the kind of person she was, fun and hopeful, and she liked living in her imagination.” Here it was, the moment when I would lay out Mama's details like a dress pattern that would fit Penn just right. I kept my explanations crisp and impersonal. “But later, things changed. The doctors said she'd started having seizures in her brain. There was nothing anybody could do.”

“But they tried?”

“They tried. We all tried. Nothing worked. When Pop put her in the hospital, she died from the medicine they gave her. It was an accident. A few days later, when he came to get me, Pop closed up the house and we never came back. That was it. She was gone and he couldn't stand to be here. Neither of us could. Honestly, I was so glad to leave, Penn. I didn't think I'd ever see this place again until we found that deed. I didn't want to see it.”

“That's why the man upstairs said you were a ghost? Because you disappeared?”

“That's about the size of it.”

“I know why you didn't talk about it. It makes me sad.” She sighed.

“It makes me sad too.”

“Does this mean—”

“No. No.” I interrupted her before she could finish the thought, draw the wrong conclusion. I grabbed her hand. I needed her to hear me. “Nothing like that is going to happen to me. Or to you. We are perfectly fine, Penn. It's sad, but I've tried not to think about it, that's all. And now we're here, it's an unexpected gift. We

can make something happy where it's been so unfair. We should try to think about the good things. What we have. About what the future will be for us. We should be planning something wonderful. Grandmama Claire would want that."

But Penn only looked as tired as I felt. Her eyes were dark now. "It's been a big day," I said.

"I want to remember the good things, like my daddy and Pop. And I like being a Dare descendant. That's who we are, right? We can believe it for right now, can't we? The good things? That's kind of an Evertell vision, isn't it?"

I didn't argue with her. "You're the best thing, Pennilyn Rebecca Young," I said softly.

After all, it was me who had named her Rebecca, for my mama—Claire Rebecca Clerestory, before she married my daddy. When I said Penn's name aloud, I witnessed the first glimmer of joy I'd seen in my daughter in many months. I felt an overwhelming maternal need to make it stay. I couldn't bear the thought of telling her what had happened in the forest, what it had cost my mama, the end of our story. Instead, I hoped we'd find Eleanor's book and an ending to her tale that would give us both the courage for a new start. A new dream.

A distant, wild call broke the silence of the night and Penn sat up straight. It came again and I groaned.

"What is that?" she said, startled. She hurried to the window and I joined her there. The call came again, even as I answered her.

"That," I said, "is a peacock." That was the sound of Evertell in my childhood. It was what I'd been listening for on our long walk, without even realizing it. A strange voice raised against the day or night, as if delivering an urgent message for the universe. *Eee-ooo-ii! Here I am!*

She turned her face to look at me, stunned, then burst out laughing. “You’re making that up.”

“I wish I was.”

“There are peacocks here? Really?”

“One peacock. One hen. Or that’s what was here when we left. Who knows now. The peacock makes all the noise. The hen is probably trying to sleep and cussing that fool.”

Penn laughed. “Where is it?”

“In a tree somewhere, sounds like. They roost up there at night to keep safe. You’ll see them in the yard, but they can fly up and perch on the roof too.”

The bird’s call came again, an eerie, desperate screech that floated down from some high place beyond the house. “This place is crazy,” Penn said, but she meant she was fascinated.

“Crazy is what it will make you. Get used to it because that guy will do this all night. All spring. Good luck sleeping. When we moved to Helen, I had trouble sleeping without that sound. Like when people move away from train tracks and say they can’t get a wink because they miss the racket.”

“I love it. It sounds like we’re in a whole different world. You don’t like them?” Penn said.

“They don’t like me. We’ll have to watch out for them. They’re not friendly birds.”

“Well, I don’t care. They’re so pretty. I can’t wait to see them. Nobody has peacocks, Mama. *But we do.*”

She was delighted. But she was tired. After a few minutes, the novelty of the bird’s call wore off. Thankfully, Penn yawned and settled in beside me on the bed again. I stroked her forehead as I’d done when she was small, and in that effortless way only the young enjoy, Penn’s breathing grew slow and deep, and, faster than seemed possible, she fell asleep. I can’t say I wasn’t relieved. I knew when

she woke, she'd be full of questions, ready for battle. Laughing or crying, Penn never had hidden a thing she felt. It was one way I knew she was stronger than me.

I lay awake, hearing the peacock's intermittent call, and when that finally quieted, I listened for the soft, uneven descent of a man with a limp as he moved through the hallways and down the stairs. It wasn't long before I heard him. I slipped from the bed and moved to the window to catch a glimpse of Sonder Holloway, a shadow in the moonlight. I watched him cross the lawn, the sounds of the cicadas a chorus rattling in the trees, and remembered the girl I'd once been.

Once there was a girl who disappeared . . .

I hadn't been lying when I told Penn I didn't believe in ghosts. I couldn't afford to. But that didn't stop me from feeling like one.

HARPER
MUSE