

WHAT THE
MOUNTAINS
REMEMBER

JOY CALLAWAY

HARPER
MUSE



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What the Mountains Remember

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For Jed, Hannah, and Reece—
May you always realize the importance of your story
and the light you shine in the world.



CHAPTER ONE

APRIL 14, 1913

ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

Women of elevated social status did not camp nor spend more than an hour or two in the elements. It was unnatural. There were silks and comfort and odor to consider, after all, and when one had the choice to recline on goose down and remain warm next to a coal fire stoked by servants and have a bath—infused with rose oil—drawn at her bidding, the notion that she would choose to freeze while sleeping on a canvas cot was preposterous. Scandalous, even.

Marie Austen Kipp, daughter of Augustus Kipp, my stepfather's favorite cousin and inventor of some sort of polymer that Henry Ford was using in his autos, was clearly of this mind. We had been each other's closest companion for years—some families required proximity even if it provoked madness—as well as these last four hours riding in one of Mr. Ford's blue Model T Town Cars. Marie Austen kept giggling and whispering about living in the elements as though it was something incredibly naughty. Instead of rolling my eyes, I played along as I had for the last six years, feigning the heiress innocence required of the stepdaughter of gasoline magnate Shipley Newbold, and grinned and giggled with her.

“Hi! Hi, all of you lovelies! We're going camping! We're sleeping out of doors,” Marie Austen proclaimed through the closed rear window to the gaggle of ordinary folk gathered in front of what appeared to be a clapboard general store. From the moment we'd dis-

embarked at the train station in Johnson City, Tennessee, and were situated in autos behind the procession of our fathers, who had been traversing the open country since mid-March on the camping vacation Mr. Ford called the Vagabonds Tour, we'd encountered thousands of onlookers. The paper men had done their jobs well, alerting every small town along our route to Asheville that Mr. Ford, Mr. Firestone, Mr. Edison, and their friends were coming for a breeze-through visit.

"Don't just sit back and ignore them, Belle. Give them a little wave. It'll be the high mark in their day," Marie Austen said, nudging me. Believing that a glimpse of herself was enough to set a person's day right was the reason Marie Austen was in such an agreeable mood. So long as she was secured in her rightful place—the sun to the rest of us simple planets—she was merry.

"Don't you agree, Mr. Leslie?" she asked our driver, who stoically nodded. He was a perfect chauffeur. He said absolutely nothing. Marie Austen raised her arm and slightly twisted her gloved hand from the wrist as though she were Queen Mary and the gawking onlookers—who were mainly entranced by the autos—her subjects.

"I doubt it'll be the high mark of their day," I said. "Unless, of course, Mr. Leslie would like to pull over and give one of them this fine machine in exchange for one of their mules and buggies." Marie Austen laughed and Mr. Leslie pretended not to hear me. I leaned forward just slightly as we passed a rail depot nearly hidden by felled logs ready to ship. A crowd of men in flannel shirts and seasoned overalls stared. I waved and then settled back against the tufted leather seat.

I'd been avoiding the view on purpose since Tennessee. I hadn't bargained for the way my heart startled and buckled at the sight of the spring-green hills cloaked in cloudy smoke, the way my soul seemed to scream and fall to its knees at the smell of the earthy sweet of home. We weren't anywhere close to home, to the hills and hollers near Red Dragon, West Virginia, but to a girl who'd been living on the unending flat of an Indiana plain since Mother married Papa Shipley, the particulars of where the mountains were

didn't matter. There was a chance I'd cry my way through the week, that the hills would draw my father out of the recesses of our hearts where we'd hidden him. Or perhaps I'd find a way to continue in this parallel world where Belle Coleman had died completely and risen Belle Newbold.

"What do you suppose we'll do if a bear comes upon our tent in the night?" Marie Austen asked abruptly. "Father said it'll just be the two of us covered in a sheet of canvas. I don't figure that's much protection. I think I heard someone say that you should play dead or perhaps run away. I'm terribly nervous." She bunched her fingers in her midnight-blue satin skirt, likely imagining the need to gather the fabric in her hands before running wildly through the woods.

"You should be. They prefer red hair, I've heard," I said, barely keeping from laughing. I needed the comic relief as much as she did. "The color is reminiscent of salmon, you know, and—"

"Stop it, Belle," she said, slapping my arm. "Truly. You know how I get, and to agitate me at a time such as this is highly unkind."

"I apologize." I'd known Marie Austen for going on a decade and still found it difficult to determine her moods. At times she preferred her fears to be thwarted with merriment and at others, like now, she demanded earnestness. "If a bear nears our camp, which it is apt to do with all the cooking and the like, and it comes upon you, simply stay still. If you're standing, slowly wave your arms so it knows you're a human."

The mention of bears took me back to fishing on Elk Run with Father. It was dusk and I could see his weathered hands, stained black from coal dust, as they froze on the trout he was cleaning. "*Still, Belle. Still,*" he'd whispered, nodding to an enormous black bear that had just come down the hill to the creek. "*If he comes closer, just lift your hands and wave them real slow. Remind him you're a girl, not a predator.*"

"And how would you know?" Marie Austen charged. Her fear had been stoked into anger, displayed in the wash of blush across her nose.

I thought fast.

“Worth told me . . . in one of his letters.”

Mother had forbidden me to speak of the particulars of our former life the moment I met Papa Shipley. No one in my current acquaintance, save Mother, knew my true history, and they never would. I could say that I'd been born in West Virginia. I could say that my father had been in the mining business and perished in a roof collapse. I could not say he was a regular coal miner and not a manager or operator.

All of Red Dragon had watched Boss Elkhorn, the coal mine operator, turn out his first wife and banish her from town when he discovered that she'd grown up impoverished. He'd then swiftly married a rail magnate's daughter. Several months later, his first wife's emaciated body was found beneath a fallen tree she'd been living under eleven miles from town. She hadn't been able to survive the harsh mountain winter. When Boss Elkhorn refused to allow her burial in Red Dragon, the miners who found her buried her in the dirt below the felled tree, left forever alone. Though she never spoke of it, I knew Mother worried we'd endure the same fate if our past was revealed. It was one of my greatest fears too.

Mother hadn't meant for Papa Shipley, a millionaire who owned the majority of the gasoline wells in Indiana, to assume she was well-to-do; it had just happened that way. She'd been modeling a dinner dress for Hadley's Department Store's spring fashion show for extra money and was taking a break for water on the sidewalk when Papa drove through Red Dragon on his way to vacation at The Homestead and noticed her. He'd stopped and asked her to dinner. When she'd said she lost her husband a year before, he commented that the mining company was likely lost without his leadership. She didn't correct him because the paper had just called Father a leader in his obituary.

Nevertheless, it occurred to Mother that Papa Shipley wouldn't have stopped if she'd been wearing her threadbare cotton gown and apron. The fashion show dress had made her seem like she was used to fine things, like Papa and Mother were a sensible match. After he'd whisked her off to dinner nearly an hour away in Beckley—a

distance that allowed Mother to keep Papa secret from all of our friends—she immediately made arrangements for us to visit him in Gas City. The visit was made permanent by their swift engagement. Mother and Papa were married only a month and two days after their first meeting. We never returned to Red Dragon.

“Worth told you? Don’t you suppose that makes it worse? It’s his land we’re using for this camping experiment. Now it’s confirmed, Belle. There are bears.” Marie Austen’s voice squeaked on the last word, bringing me back to her fear. I reached to hold her hand. Despite being only eight months younger than me, at times she reminded me of a child. She’d been formed feral and desperate in the wake of her parents’ frequent disinterest and, as a result, clung to and repelled affection in a chaotic, unpredictable manner. I felt a particular responsibility for her well-being. She was my cousin, after all.

“I know it looks rather foreign here, completely unlike the terrain we’ve left in Indiana, but our fathers have been in the wilderness these last weeks with no incident,” I said. This seemed to calm her, and she heaved a breath and took her hand from mine to touch my lace sleeves. Papa Shipley had me fitted for fourteen new costumes for this trip alone on account of my seeing Worth Delafield for the first time in five years.

“He’s absolutely going to swoon when he sees you,” Marie Austen said softly, appraising my gown. It was made for a fine drawing room, completely inappropriate for a camping outing, but Mr. Ford told Papa that the ladies dressed just as well when their quarters were outdoors. The bodice was of bloused Brussels net with a blue taffeta jacket outfitted with ribbons over the breast and waist. When Father took me to sleep in the woods as a child, I wore trousers and long socks to keep the ticks from biting and whatever stained garment I could fashion into a shirt. This was a different sort of excursion.

“Worth doesn’t swoon,” I said. “At least he didn’t the last time I saw him.”

Marie Austen sighed.

“He did seem to be a serious sort at your stepfather’s birthday celebration that year, but he was only nineteen and the two of you barely knew each other then. You’ve been writing these last months and now you’re . . . well . . . whatever you are.”

“We have been writing here and there, but nothing romantic in the slightest. He simply tells me of his daily schedule, and I do the same.”

“And yet you’ve agreed to marry the man upon his proposal this week. You love him. You have from the start, all those years ago. You have to accept something as asinine as this,” she said.

It wasn’t the first time she’d questioned my arrangement with Worth—or my desire for a match based on sensible things instead of love. Marie Austen couldn’t fathom settling for anything less than both. But then again, she’d never known the ache of starvation or seen the effects of a deadening heart when it broke.

At first I’d regretted telling her about Worth at all. She’d responded with a strange sense of outrage—perhaps it was because when last we’d seen him, he’d appeared pleasant enough for some to deem handsome, and she couldn’t bear the possibility of my settling with a suitable, attractive man before she did. But now I didn’t pay her comments any mind.

“I don’t love him. I don’t really know him. But his values are the same as mine. He wants a family and his fortune will support us,” I said. We careened to the left, veering off the main road, and I startled, lurching into Marie Austen’s shoulder in an attempt to hide as we sped past a young man with red hair carrying a tin lunch pail.

“Are you all right?” Marie Austen asked, gently pushing me back into my seat. My heart was racing. The man looked just like my former neighbor in Red Dragon, Willie Smith, and that lunch pail was identical to Father’s, handmade by old man Cato who’d taken to collecting scrap metal in his elderly years.

I heaved a breath and nodded as we started down a narrow sort of trail canopied entirely by trees. Mother and I were safe. No one we’d known back home would come upon us here—Asheville was nearly three hundred miles from home, from the little holler where

the Smiths lived. It was only the familiar sight of the mountains washing my mind in memories, tricking me. I lifted my hand to the roof of the auto to prevent jolting as we bounced over roots.

“Marriage shouldn’t be a transaction, Belle,” Marie Austen said, bringing me back to her critique of my relationship with Worth. “You’re setting yourself up for misery. Perhaps I haven’t found my match, but I refuse to settle—regardless of what Father says.”

Both Marie Austen and I had been out for three seasons as of last year and neither of us had received any proposals—her because she refused to agree to a marriage that didn’t include both love and immense wealth and me because I was only part Newbold without the advantage of inheritance that came with blood. The moment I married or Papa died, I would lose the support of his pockets. Somehow, everyone in town knew the particulars. Mother would have some sort of stipend, but the majority of the fortune would go to my much older stepbrother, Hartley, to satisfy a promise Papa made to Hartley’s mother on her deathbed.

I was glad for my suitors’ trepidation and relieved when Papa called me into his study to discuss “an arrangement,” as he called it, with his late best friend’s son, Worth. Though I’d hardly voiced it aloud—save to Marie Austen—I did not want to marry for love. If it wasn’t for my desperately wanting security and a family so I would never be left alone, I would have refused Papa’s offer to sponsor my coming out at all.

I’d vowed the moment my father died and Mother took to her bed for eight long months, leaving me to grieve alone, that I would never love a man the way Mother loved my father. True love created such a bonded family that its separation felt like tearing limb from limb. Fondness, instead, could foster love and affection, but the sort that won pleasant remembrances instead of a wound that never healed. Mother and Papa Shipley had a comfortable sort of marriage. From what I recalled of Worth, he would provide me the same steady life free of the charm that could capture a heart.

“As I said when last we discussed this, it is your decision to wait for love, just as it is mine to accept a more practical union.” I cast

my eyes out the window at the forest. The late-afternoon sun dappled the ground, eluding the shadowy tree cover. Here and there pink-purple sprays of wild redbuds shocked the new-life green of the grass and trees and the brown of last year's leaves. The sight caused a strange sensation—an anxious churning in my stomach, a hollow grief in my heart, and an elation in my soul that made me feel weightless.

I turned away from the window and pressed my palm against my chest, but the pressure couldn't stop the tightness now clutching my lungs. I took a slow breath, glad Marie Austen had shifted her back toward me in her frustration.

"I disagree that my marriage will be miserable," I said. It was easier, better, to focus on Worth. "In fact, it is exactly what I've hoped for."

Worth had approached Papa asking if he knew of any young women agreeable to a sensible match. He was looking for a companion, a mother for his future children who didn't require the wooing of a lovestruck suitor—something he said he hadn't the time or the energy for after inheriting his father's land holdings. He was away from home often, buying and selling land from coast to coast, but he understood his time was short.

Already twenty-four, Worth knew if he didn't marry soon, he never would, and the Delafield name would ultimately render itself extinct. Papa had inquired of me for two reasons. He wanted me settled with a kind man with sizable pockets, as he couldn't ultimately finance me, and he was eager to have Mother to himself. Even so, he had approached the conversation with tenderness, allowing me the option to decline, but I had practically begged him to write Worth and accept straightaway.

"You're going to leave me in Gas City all alone." Marie Austen turned to me and her eyes filled. This was the real reason she'd challenged my match. Prior to my arrival in Indiana, Marie Austen hadn't been able to claim a single friend. She'd repelled all the other Gas City debutantes long before she was presented. When I arrived, a sudden cousin with a dubious past, equally snubbed

by our societal contemporaries, Marie Austen decided to embrace me—primarily because standing next to me, the least suitable match for any discerning Gas City gentleman, she hoped her worst qualities would be forgotten.

“The wells are drying up—of course we all know it, though your stepfather has tried to keep it quiet. That’s why he’s come alongside Mr. Ford hoping he’ll support the initiative for the drive-up gasoline stores. He’s not ready to slow down, but what choice will he have when it’s all gone?” She wiped the corners of her eyes. “It won’t affect his fortune or Father’s, but everyone else is going to leave. You first and then the rest of the world.” Marie Austen suddenly burst into tears.

Mr. Leslie, clearly sensing a drastic turn in our conversation, held a handkerchief over his shoulder as the auto lurched and stumbled over the bumpy path. Marie Austen took it and blew her nose.

“You could visit Worth and me in Charlotte. Perhaps your match could be found there? I’m sure Worth wouldn’t mind, and—”

“Father says the Delafields have land all over the country. Why Worth would settle in such a small town is baffling. I’d wager there are fewer prospects there for me than in Gas City. Perhaps I’ll just marry ugly old Ronald Swingle and take a lover. That would satisfy everyone, don’t you think?”

I gasped.

“Ronald Swingle’s breath is horrendous. Not to mention he’s terribly conceited for a man with such an unfortunate look.” My first season out, I’d taken interest in any unattractive man I could find. I’d assumed I could find an amiable match quite easily that way, but I’d been wrong. It seemed that the ugly wealthy men in Gas City often had a personality that matched their appearance. If it wasn’t their temper, it was their manners. If it wasn’t their manners, it was their pompousness. “I forbid you to marry Mr. Swingle.”

Marie Austen grinned and then laughed.

“Despite my fury at your abandonment, I’ve never loved you more than at this moment. You gasp at my ill-fated match with a suitable but disgusting society man, while you don’t bat an eye at

my proclaiming that I'd swiftly soil the union by taking up with a lover."

I stared at her, my mind flipping through the men I'd caught her kissing over the years—the French lawyer, the postman, the Chicago banker, the auto mechanic, the newspaperman. She was addicted to the thrill of a man's adoration, to the way their touch made her feel. She'd told me as much, which was why she was holding out for a man with both pockets and allure. Marie Austen's cheeks flushed as though she knew what I was thinking, and she leaned in close.

"I only loved the one, you know, and nothing went farther than I allowed."

"Of course not," I whispered back.

The auto made a soft clacking noise as it began a steep descent, and then a chorus of Klaxon horn ahoogas permeated the air.

"We've arrived, ladies," Mr. Leslie said. I looked over his shoulder, over the roof of Mother and Mrs. Kipp's auto descending in front of us, and at once felt my nerves settle. We were situated in a vast valley, nothing like the sky-scraping hills and center-of-the-earth hollers of home.

"It appears that the servants have already set up camp, right on time," Mr. Leslie continued. "I declare I'm greatly impressed each time I see it. At the beginning it was just Ford, Edison, Firestone, and Burroughs—and their servants, of course. Now, with the families all coming and with various guests each year at the excursion's midpoint, the operation has become a veritable moving town." He sighed. "This is such a lovely place. Some of the locations the men choose in the weeks before and after the families come are not suitable for camping—swampland, hillsides, swollen riverbeds, and the like. This beautiful valley will be to everyone's enjoyment."

Mr. Leslie was right. The landscape was delightful, and the camp was enormous, situated in a large rectangle, likely the size of two or three city blocks. From this angle it actually resembled the American flag. Two sizable tents billowed in the breeze side by side on the left end of the valley, anchoring three rows of a dozen smaller

tents stretching across the flat expanse. At least twenty autos—half looked to be roadster pickups—were parked in an orderly fashion in a large circle below the tents. In the middle burned a massive fire. The flames licked the bottom of several pots hung on metal chains from an A-frame.

“I imagine you’re all hungry. In an hour or two, you’ll take dinner in those large tents to the left. Chefs begin preparing almost immediately after setup is complete, and by the looks of it, they’ve been ready for some time,” Mr. Leslie said.

“Thank heavens,” Marie Austen said. “It’s always unfortunate to encounter my mother when she’s been too far between meals. This auto ride will have put her much behind her schedule.”

Mrs. Kipp scheduled her life around food. Eight in the morning, twelve in the afternoon, five in the evening, and a sweet at nine before bed. She’d had a bit of a sandwich at the station, but that was hours ago, and judging by the sun, it was nearing six. I felt sorry for Mother, who had likely had to endure her sniveling for the last hour. Then again, I’d had to endure Marie Austen’s sniveling for four and I doubted Mother felt sorry at all for my misfortune.

Mother didn’t seem to feel much of anything anymore. She had once been my confidante, but now we never spoke of our triumphs and sorrows. Now her expressions were muted but pleasant, her tone always even, her embraces stiff. Perhaps it was the burden of the secret we kept. She’d been vibrant, always laughing back in Red Dragon before Father died, but she was a society woman now, a different person, like me, and had absorbed into the role of Papa’s wife seamlessly.

She must have learned the proper ways of doing things from the Jane Austen novels she always read. Though I had been trained to say “yes, sir” and “yes, ma’am” and was versed in the table manners needed to prevent a tablemate from being repulsed at my position next to them, I had not been taught that there were right friends and a correct manner of speaking to those below your class as though they were just a little bit less important than you. Somehow, Mother had learned those things quickly. The Kipps were right company.

The Leftlings were right company. But Charity Simpson, the milkman's daughter, was not.

When I was seventeen, Mother had asked me to close my eyes to the past and forget the person I'd been, but now the mountains were dredging and sifting, unearthing memories of a miner's daughter and the miner left behind. The auto sputtered and stopped behind the circle of the others. Mr. Leslie stretched, clicked his door open, and offered a greeting to Mother, who had just been helped out of her auto by her chauffeur. Mr. Leslie opened my door and I stepped out. The spring chill was evident in the light that had begun to disappear over the distant hills, and I shivered.

"Do let me give you my jacket," Mr. Leslie said immediately, and before I could decline it, he had fit the wool snugly over my shoulders. The excited chatter of the newly arrived guests and the clicks and slams of auto doors echoed in the crisp air. Mother stood unmoving next to the auto, her gaze trained on the hills in the distance. Mrs. Kipp charged past her toward the cooking fire with Marie Austen close behind, but Mother didn't seem to notice.

I reached for her arm.

"Mother, it's—" I'd started to say it was going to be all right, that I felt him too, but she jerked back. Her gray eyes settled on mine. They used to look bright, like a cloudless blue sky when she wore any sort of matching shade. Her traveling gown was a spring plaid of navy and cornflower, but the color in her gaze didn't change.

"You are in tent number fourteen with Marie Austen," she said. "You young girls are on the south side while the young men are on the north." Mother had begged Papa to hire a dialect instructor to give her lessons when they were first married, and now the familiar drawn vowels, the flattened *i*, the clipped *-ing* were gone. Mine were too.

"Very well," I said.

"Papa and I are situated in six, next to Henry and Clara and Augustus and Sarah." Mother nodded to a servant as he pulled several trunks off a neighboring auto, confirming two were hers. "Your hair has come loose of its figure eight. I'll send Sylvia over to plait it

before dinner,” she went on, appraising me. “And do freshen up as well in case Mr. Delafield arrives earlier than planned.”

“Where do you suppose I could find the nearest creek?” I asked as Mr. and Mrs. Burroughs walked past us toward the tents.

Mother threw her head back and laughed heartily.

“Oh darling, can you imagine? Reclining in a creek.”

I stared at her, waiting for the couple to pass.

“Where else do you propose I wash the stink of exhaust from my body?” I asked pointedly.

“In the washbasin in your tent, of course,” she said under her breath. “There’s lavender oil on the stand too, just like at home. My goodness, Belle. You haven’t washed in a creek in six years. What would possess you to think you’d do it again now?”

I looked around, taking in the forest. This. This was what possessed me to assume that a bit of my former life was welcome, that for a week I could remember and reclaim a bit of what I’d lost. We’d always bathed in the creek in Red Dragon.

“We are not *there*,” she whispered as we walked toward the tents and into the crush of inventors and their families, thrilled at the thought of camping, though true camping wasn’t at all this elaborate charade of servants and finery. Mother’s hand clamped onto my elbow and pulled me back to her. “We are not *them* anymore. We have never been them. Do you understand me? Our lives depend on it. I shall not be shamed. Papa shall not be shamed. You are a Newbold.”

At once I heard an echo, the same determined tone. “*We will not starve. We will not give up. Do you hear me? Do you hear me, Belle?*” And at once I saw her face as it had been the day before the fashion show, the day before Papa. Her cheeks had been hollow. One hand holding a piece of stale bread while the other forced bits into my mouth. I’d been up for two days straight mending clothes for extra money without food. My vision had been hazy and my body weak.

“Belle! Come along! Come see our tent!” Marie Austen pushed past the Firestones making their way to the other side of the compound. She grasped my hand and the memory faded. I looked back

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to find Mother gone.

Marie Austen twirled, her lampshade tunic billowing out as she did.

“I don’t care about the bears. I’ve never felt so free!”



CHAPTER TWO

The reason for Marie Austen's merriment wasn't the feel of the mountain air or the vast wild that separated our camp from civilization. It was the realization that Peter Thorp was the reporter Mr. Ford had selected for this part of the voyage. He was a known features writer for many national and local papers including the *Star Press* in Muncie.

He was five or ten years our senior. It was hard to tell his age, really. In truth, it didn't matter. Mr. Thorp was charming and handsome and inquisitive—these were, perhaps, his greatest gifts and the reason he was so accomplished. He made readers believe—and by readers, I primarily mean society ladies—that they were the loveliest, the wittiest, the most interesting, and thereby every secret a woman was keeping was gladly revealed in his company.

This was simply an observation. I didn't abide charmers. They had been plentiful in Red Dragon, and charm, more often than not, was a cover for some ominous flaw. I'd warned Marie Austen, but she adored flirts and encouraged Mr. Thorp to an inappropriate degree. Only four months ago, during Papa Shipley's annual Christmas soiree, I'd gone up to my bedroom for a moment's peace from pleasantries and caught them alone, reclining on my fainting sofa. Her bodice had been unbuttoned to the corset and he'd been kissing her, his long curls tousled by her fingers. She claimed she loved him. Perhaps he loved her too. But nothing had ever come of the night. Mr. Thorp had left for a story in Sacramento the following day and he never wrote. Neither did she. She was too proud,

and he was too poor, besides.

“This must be the smallest, tiniest of worlds,” she proclaimed, yanking at the canvas flaps of our tent that had been opened for welcome and light. I stilled her hand.

“Don’t shut them. We won’t be able to see. The lamps haven’t been lit.” I gestured to the glass oil lamps on a small mahogany bedside stand between two cots laden with bobcat pelts and down blankets. A porcelain washstand complete with towels and a small vial of lavender oil occupied the right side of the space, while a generous carved cherry armoire stood to the left. The tent was nearly as comfortable as my room in Gas City, nothing at all like the bed of leaves I was used to when I slept out of doors.

“Fine,” Marie Austen huffed. She walked to the washstand, plucked the lavender oil from its place, and uncorked it with a small pop. I took Mr. Leslie’s jacket from my shoulders and set it on one of the cots. “I’ll simply keep my voice low. I saw him across the camp, near the gentlemen’s tents, with Mr. Burroughs and a striking Black man I didn’t recognize. They were passing ’round a large earthenware jug and drinking straight from the mouth of it. It was quite a peculiar sight.”

She tipped the end of the vial on her neck and then on both wrists.

“It’s likely local moonshine—spirits made in the mountains here,” I said. When I was growing up, the local shiner would bring his buggy down the mountain to the edge of the Red Dragon town line each week and sell out of jugs in a matter of minutes.

“Do you really think so? Father said North Carolina has outlawed alcohol these past five years. In any case, I’ve never heard of moonshine, though I gather it was quite known where you’re from in . . . oh, how terrible of me. I don’t recall at all where it is you were born.” She whirled around and snapped her fingers. “Virginia.”

“West Virginia,” I said, not at all surprised that she couldn’t recall my origins. “And yes, I do believe alcohol has been banned here, but we are situated well away from anyone who would sound the alarm. I’m sure there will be imbibing regardless.” I knew enough

of my company to know that no one would last long without wine.

“If that’s so, I’ll have to prevail upon the men to let me try the mountain spirits this week. Now, about the matter of Mr. Thorp. Suppose he took the assignment knowing I’d be here,” she said quietly, lowering herself on the edge of a cot.

At first, I said nothing. Of course it wasn’t the truth. The man had come because he’d been given a gift by Mr. Ford, an exclusive honor of covering the voyage of the Vagabonds, as Mr. Ford liked to call his camping group. Each year they explored a different section of the country. First they’d toured the Everglades, then the following year, the Panama–Pacific Exposition in California, and the year after that, the New England Adirondacks and Green Mountains. This year, they were planning to canvas several states. They’d already camped in Tennessee before arriving in Asheville. The Vagabonds trips were always of tremendous interest to readers across the nation. No stable-minded writer would think for a second about turning down this assignment.

Thinking of the opportunity brought Father to mind. An appointment like this had been his dream as a young man. He would have been both a prolific writer and a gentleman—a combination Mr. Thorp could never claim. Before Red Dragon swallowed him up in destiny, before he realized he had no choice but to become a miner like the three generations before him, Father had wanted to be a journalist.

When he was a young boy, a writer for the *Charleston Gazette* had come to town to cover the acquisition of a new mining company, and his stories, his adventures, had been an intoxication for Father. Even after Father was grown and the dream of writing for a paper long-lost, he continued filling notebooks and telling his stories—even if only to his family and friends. He’d gifted me a blank volume the moment I learned to write, and I’d begun cataloging and unraveling my thoughts by his example. Writing had once been my time of solace, but I hadn’t picked up a notebook since his death. I couldn’t bear it.

I swallowed and turned my attention back to Marie Austen. It

wouldn't do to dwell on what I couldn't change.

"Suppose he did take the post for you," I said. "What shall you do?"

She smiled.

"I'll tell him there's absolutely no chance we can continue on this way, and then I'll kiss him."

"And if he proposes marriage in front of your parents and mine and the Edisons and the Fords and the Firestones and the Burroughs?"

Marie Austen swatted my arm.

"Don't be ridiculous. It wouldn't get that far," she said. "I'm absolutely crazy for him, but as soon as a man with pockets and a face as fair comes around for me, I won't be anymore." She sighed. "I suppose the alternative is that I settle for someone hideous but tremendously wealthy and keep Peter on. I can't decide." Her eyes met mine. I couldn't understand how she could live this way without her heart getting maimed. I was too sensitive, too afraid to feel anything at all. I hoped I would never fall in love.

Outside, a group of lady's maids hastened past our tent. In the distance intermittent whoops were echoing in the valley.

"Shall we go see what that's about?" I asked Marie Austen. She nodded and stood, casting her gaze toward the mirror one last time.

"You and Worth Delafield are both pretty," she said, still looking at herself. I didn't know what she was after. "At least he was when last we saw him. Remember how his picture kept turning up in the papers? Of course, that was partly because his family is important, but mostly because he's attractive. And you're a natural beauty like your mother."

Mother was stunning, but I had never considered that we looked alike. I had her hair—thick chestnut with golden strands from tow-headed childhood days—and perhaps her delicate features, but my eyes were hooded and deep brown like Father's and I was tall, five feet eight inches.

"Thank you." I glanced in the mirror. My figure eight was indeed in shambles. I pushed the fallen strands back into the updo as best I

could and wandered out of the tent. I could stay and wait for Sylvia to do it back up as Mother had instructed, or I could see what all the yelling was about. I preferred the latter.

“Your father must have been handsome too,” Marie Austen said, catching up to me as we made our way down the aisle of tents toward the noise. Most of the tents on the female side were servants’ quarters. They were equipped modestly—a cot with a quilt and a metal water basin for washing—and were all vacant. The hour was likely the cause. Dinner was approaching and Mrs. Kipp and Mother and Mrs. Ford and the like would need tending or the tables would need setting.

The idea of servants had been completely foreign to Mother and me before. No one had employed any in Red Dragon except for the Elkhorns, the mine operator’s family who lived in a large brick home I’d once thought of as a mansion. I suppose that was who Papa Shipley thought Mother and I belonged to. Not the Elkhorns specifically, of course, but to someone in charge. Papa hadn’t even inquired of our last name until he proposed to Mother. She’d told him we were Montgomerys, her people, whose name had died out with her parents twenty years before. It wasn’t entirely false, and the knowledge was incidental regardless. All that mattered was that we’d come from someone important and that the woman he loved was his.

“Was he? Handsome?” Marie Austen pressed as we skirted the final tent and made our way toward the cooking fire. Right beyond the crush of parked autos was the source of the merriment—a grouping of our fathers and the other men surrounded by most of their families, five photographers, and Mr. Thorp. I couldn’t quite make out what they were doing, though Mrs. Firestone was squawking encouragements at her husband every few seconds.

“He was, though what is your point? Appearance is superficial,” I said.

“I’m trying to figure if children with an ugly man could still be beautiful.” Marie Austen raised her gloved hand to me to stop my reply. “Before you call me vain, do think about the advantage of

beauty in your youth. People are attracted to pretty in marriage, in business, in life. It is quite a benefit to be born with a pleasant face.” She shielded her eyes from the setting sun, now beaming bright gold over the western peak in the distance. “I’m considering my options. If I decide to keep Peter, I’ll need to find a suitable husband.”

We reached the gathering in time to see Mr. Ford and Mr. Edison burst from the nearby woods with handfuls of dead leaves and sprint toward the crowd with the vigor of ten-year-old boys despite their white hair and three-piece suits. Edsel, Mr. Ford’s son, stood beside Toots, Mr. Edison’s daughter, and upon seeing their fathers’ advancements, they shouted a series of hurrys. The two men beelined for one of the large stumps—there were seven, I suppose intended for seating—and the click and flash of the cameras began.

Wooden spindles and flat notched-wood planks sat next to each stump, and as Mr. Ford abandoned his leaf pile, set a piece of bark beneath the wood plank, and turned the spindle vigorously in the plank’s notch, I couldn’t help but laugh under my breath. Papa was never going to win this contest—if a contest was what it was.

“Does your father know how to make a fire in the forest?” I asked Marie Austen. I doubted Papa Shipley had ever set foot in the wilderness before this outing.

“Here come Mr. Burroughs and Mr. Carver,” Edsel commented to someone, perhaps the whole of the group. “I was betting on either of them to win this contest. They’re the environmentalists after all.”

George Washington Carver was undoubtedly the man who had caught Marie Austen’s attention earlier. He was dressed in a smart blue double-breasted suit, and though I’d never seen a photo of him, I’d heard his name plenty. Other than gasoline, Indiana was known for farming, and I’d heard his name mentioned often at parties and around the table on account of his work with soil regeneration.

“I’m sure you’re wrong. I’ll allow your blunder on account of your youth, but see here? My father is going to win,” Toots said on his other side. Despite Mr. Edison’s and Mr. Ford’s swift rotations with the spindle, their efforts hadn’t yielded even a whisper

of smoke. The wood was too wet or the notches were too generous. Given the chance, I would have bested all of them.

“I suppose I know who is not going to win,” I said to myself, shielding my eyes and looking toward the woods where Mr. Kipp and Papa hadn’t yet emerged.

“Don’t be too hard on your father, Miss Newbold,” Edsel said, apparently hearing me over the constant popping of the photographers’ cameras. “It’s his first time doing this charade. Our fathers find it great fun to initiate contests of wilderness know-how when they camp—especially when some of their guests aren’t quite as versed.” He began to laugh as Mr. Edison flung his spindle to the ground in frustration.

I thought the whole thing fun but strange. There was no need for these men to know how to start a fire when they’d brought such a staff of servants along. It must have been for the papers, which was why the cameras were going off with such fervor. It was advantageous for the everyman to assume they had much in common with this group of inventors and industrialists. If Mr. Ford and Mr. Firestone were actually common men and not only men of high society, surely the goal of a Ford Model T with Firestone tires was in reach for the loggers and miners and factory workers.

Finally Papa burst from the woods carrying his fistful of leaves. His hair, which only grew on the back and sides like a halo, had somehow been volumized in its inaugural trek through the trees and stuck out. Mr. Kipp was still absent.

The shouts around me grew louder as Mr. Carver’s plank began to smoke and then Mr. Burroughs’s.

“Do you suppose your father has taken a wrong way?” I asked Mary Austen, who hadn’t uttered a sound since our arrival to witness this spectacle. When she didn’t answer, I looked at her. She was gazing longingly at Mr. Thorp.

“He hasn’t felt me staring,” she whispered. “I need him to look.”

The reason for Mr. Thorp’s ignorance was his focus on the contest. He’d folded his lanky frame on the ground in front of the spectators, to the right of the participants, and was writing furiously in

his notebook, only pausing a time or two to push his eyeglasses back up on the bridge of his nose.

“Miss Kipp is going to look for Mr. Kipp. She’s quite concerned he’s been lost,” I shouted and pushed Marie Austen forward into the open. She startled but then nodded at me and crossed the semi-circle, striding past the men toward the woods. Mr. Thorp stopped writing then. His entire countenance drooped in shock and then enlivened as he watched her walk past.

As Papa approached, I realized no one was shouting his name. I glanced around for Mother but found her absent. Perhaps Sylvia was doing up her hair.

“Come on, Papa! You’ve not lost yet!” I yelled. He shook his head and grinned as he took his seat on a stump. He was different from Father in nearly every way, but he was a good man who cared for us well, and I truly loved him.

Mr. Burroughs and Mr. Carver were attempting to stoke the ember they’d captured from the wood. They’d both dropped and buried it in the pile of leaves they now held in their hands and were blowing into their palms.

Finally, a lick of flame lapped the crisp air from Mr. Carver’s hands, and Mr. Thorp, now released from the shock of Marie Austen’s appearance, lifted a thin silver whistle from a cord around his neck and blew. The shrill note elicited a groan from the losers—though not, of course, from Papa, who clearly had never thought he’d emerge the victor.

“Mr. Carver is the winner! And if I need a fire stoked tonight, I’ll know where to go,” Mr. Thorp proclaimed. Mr. Carver smiled and set the bundle of leaves on the ground, then stomped the flame out with his boot.

“It was a close race, a close race indeed,” Mr. Carver said, extending his hand to Mr. Burroughs, who shook it heartily.

“There will be more contests before we’re off to the next stop. Many more so I can win,” Mr. Ford said, chuckling. “Now, Mr. Thorp, when you write this up, do recall that I was the one to invite you to this fine excursion.” He stood from his stump and clapped

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Mr. Thorp on the back.

In the distance, Mr. Kipp had finally come out of the woods, and Marie Austen, her gaze still fixed on Mr. Thorp who had suddenly turned to look her way, was smiling.



CHAPTER THREE

Aside from the mountain breeze billowing the enormous walls of the tent and the absence of the three dozen Newbold family portraits, the dinner was exactly like the gatherings in our dining room in Gas City. The servants wore the same sort of black-and-white livery, the guests all wore the same beaded silks and fine tuxedos, and there was music, though this time it was Mrs. Firestone, draped in reindeer hide, singing an original number instead of me fumbling my way through “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” on the piano.

I yawned into my palm, took a small sip of wine, and then stared down the endlessly long starched white tablecloth at Marie Austen, who’d been seated next to a newcomer who’d arrived just before seating. The arrangement was obviously predetermined. The man, a Mr. Robert Gibbins, a congress hopeful from Bloomington who, I’d overheard from Mr. Kipp, had been introduced to Marie Austen when she was visiting her aunt and uncle a month ago and had just happened to be passing through this remote stretch of country outside of Asheville on his way to business in Washington, DC.

Worth had referred to this area particularly as Swannanoa in his letter, but I doubted Mr. Gibbins had any inkling where he actually was. Mr. Kipp had clearly telegraphed to invite him to join us. There was no reason for Mr. Gibbins’s presence other than to force Marie Austen to consider him. It was clear in the bits and pieces of conversation I was overhearing from the other end of the table—Mr. Gibbins was speaking mostly to Mr. Edison and Mr. Carver—that

he knew nothing of autos or science or nature while the other men of this party had gathered specifically for these shared interests.

Marie Austen, who had selected her *Maison Margaine-Lacroix* pale pink satin dinner dress with a slender silhouette to attract the eye of Mr. Thorp, was obviously pouting in his absence. She barely looked at Mr. Gibbins when he addressed her.

“I wonder what’s causing the delay. They’ve been working on preparations since our arrival at four,” Mr. Ford mused across from me. He cast a glare toward the tent entrance where the servants had appeared with our green turtle soup nearly half an hour ago. Now all of the white china bowls sat empty, some receiving longing glances.

“Perhaps the fish were overboiled,” Papa Shipley suggested beside him. “It’s quite an art, boiling fish. Overdone they are chewy and inedible.”

“Indeed,” Mother said. How difficult was it for her to remain silent in moments like this, when the subject matter involved something she’d once known so well, something that had once been a part of her every day? We had never had extra money for food, so each week Father and I fished in Elk Run from sunup until we caught enough catfish or trout to fill our basket, and then Mother would prepare them for us. Sometimes she’d fry them, but most of the time she boiled them and topped them with a pat of butter—if we had any.

“I suppose we can’t do anything about the meal, so we may as well fill our cups again,” Mrs. Kipp said next to me and snapped for a waiter who hastened from his post to uncork another bottle and deposit the contents into her glass.

“Hear! Hear!” Mrs. Edison said. “We can toast to a beautiful day in absolutely gorgeous country. Have you ever seen such a striking landscape?”

“I admit I haven’t, but the fact of it doesn’t surprise me. Worth Delafield has the smartest eye—I daresay even smarter than his father’s. In fact, I’d buy any land he recommended,” Papa said.

He was telling the truth. Papa had bought a ranch in Wyoming

from Worth last year, one he'd never seen.

"I don't doubt it," Mr. Edison said. "He's not an inventor like us, but he thinks like one. I noticed it the first time we were introduced. Miller brought Worth down to Fort Myers to appraise some land there over a decade ago. Worth was only thirteen or so but asked the smartest questions. Now he's one of the savviest businessmen of the next generation, and quite amiable too."

"I suppose it's good fortune that our Belle has made his . . . acquaintance then," Mother said. "Do you expect him this evening?" The particulars of my arrangement with Worth made discussing it quite difficult. We were practically engaged; both of us had agreed to the match, but he'd insisted that the actual proposal be done in person. He'd written that he thought a proposal made by letter unnatural. Though he hadn't said it, I also suspected he'd suggested a face-to-face proposal as a courtesy in case we found each other repulsive.

"Tomorrow morning, I believe, though I do wish he were able to join us this evening, before we men adjourn to toddies around the fire. He tells an engaging ghost story. Scared the life out of Burroughs once, but Burroughs won't admit it. He's quite a fellow. A fine addition to our motley crew." Mr. Edison extracted his napkin from his lap, folded it again, and placed it back. He'd done the same thing three times already. Perhaps it was a tactic to avoid screaming out in hunger.

Mother suddenly squeezed my hand under the table. It occurred to me in that moment that she could be relieved. Despite knowing I wholeheartedly thought Worth the right match for me and that Papa thought highly of him, she'd only exchanged a few words with Worth herself when he'd visited for Papa's birthday years ago. The knowledge that he was known as a respectable, kind man outside of our circle was more than welcome.

"I'm looking forward to Mr. Delafield's arrival as well. I feel immensely fortunate to have caught his eye," I said. It was a tender statement, one that would encourage others to think I was in love. Shouldn't they think that? And anyway, though it wasn't really

true—I had no reason to believe I’d captured his attention, considering his letter to Papa hadn’t asked for me specifically—I meant it. I did feel fortunate. He wanted something and I wanted something, and we were both able to find the person willing to give us what we desired.

“Indeed,” Mr. Ford said. “I don’t believe I’m speaking out of turn when I say he believes himself equally blessed to have turned your head, Miss Newbold. In fact, I ran across him at the train station in Detroit about three weeks back, and he looked brighter, near as happy as he was before the tragedy, thank God. He’d mentioned he was going to be in Charlotte after, speaking to an architect about expanding his estate.” His eyes met mine and his eyebrows rose in an expression I took to mean he knew I was going to be receiving a proposal imminently.

Instead of thinking of my impending match, my mind fixed on Mr. Ford’s comment about a tragedy. Papa hadn’t mentioned such a thing and neither had Worth in his letters. Then again, our letters read like the weather forecast in the papers. They were purely informative, a near listing of our daily goings-on and nothing more. I would find out about this tragedy in due time. It wasn’t beneficial to speculate, though I imagined it had something to do with the sudden passing of his parents three or four years back. I only recalled it because Papa had departed at once to attend the funeral. I turned my attention back to the conversation and tried to look pleasant.

“Charlotte is a fine town, but if I were Delafield, I’d settle right here. This area in general is becoming quite prosperous, known for healing. I can feel it, can’t you?” Mr. Kipp said, intentionally turning the conversation away from talk of matches. Marie Austen received her vanity from both parents, but particularly her father. To the Kipps, life was a contest to be won. If talk of romantic entanglements left out his darling daughter, Mr. Kipp often made it his mission to steer the topic elsewhere—never mind that he barely acknowledged Marie Austen’s presence otherwise.

“He’s keen to keep this land natural. Says he has no interest to turn to Asheville permanently.” Mr. Edison took a sip of wine.

Worth had never mentioned any affection for this piece of land in any of his letters. Now that I was here, I was heartened to know he viewed it as he did any of his other holdings. In this valley, the echo of heartache wasn't as strong. It wasn't like home. But if we were to reside here, I would have to venture into the woods, I would have to become reacquainted with the memories, and they would consume me. It would be better in Charlotte.

"He almost settled here once, but that was long ago, and I know for certain he'll know no other home but Charlotte," Papa said.

"Still, being here among the trees and hills and fresh air is such a balm. Don't you all feel it too?" Mrs. Kipp asked.

"Of course, that's why we suggested a stop here. Edwin Grove"—Mr. Ford turned to Papa—"You have heard of the man, of Grove's Chill Tonic renown? He is building a grand hotel called Grove Park Inn here along with his son-in-law, Fred Seely, an inventor of a genius pill cutter."

"I've heard of Mr. Grove. His tonic was a miracle to some I knew in childhood. It kept the mine running," I said, instantly wishing I'd remained silent. Mother gripped my kneecap.

I recalled the Chill Tonic well—the bitter taste that lingered, despite it being heralded as tasteless, the way the crystals would settle in the bottom of the bottle in a swampy muck, leaving the dark liquid at the top. There had been several cases of malaria in Red Dragon the summer I turned six.

A group of forty men had just arrived from a small mine in north-west Georgia, when several began to emerge from their shifts in the sweltering mines shivering. At first Doc Morgan had diagnosed them with flu and sent them to bed, but when some of them began to seizure and perish, when most exhibited jaundiced eyes, he had drawn blood and found malaria under the microscope. Boss Elkhorn had panicked then, despite Doc's insistence that malaria was spread primarily by infected mosquitos—of which we had none.

A large coal shipment was due to Canada in short order, a shipment that if forfeited could result in a large deficit and layoffs. To ease Boss Elkhorn's fears of a pandemic, Doc ordered cases of Mr.

Grove's Tasteless Chill Tonic for the entire town because it claimed to ward off malaria infection. After several weeks of choking down the chill tonic while Father worked shift after shift to make up for the population of miners who were ill, the temporary infirmary set up in Red Dragon's town hall closed. Most of the miners had been healed and returned to work in time for the deadline, yet the tonic remained a popular beverage for those who claimed its curative effects. I, thankfully, would never have to drink it again.

"Yes. It's quite a wonder. I take it daily while traveling in the deep South and haven't fallen ill yet," Mr. Edison said to me. "Mine, you say? Whereabouts? I operated an iron mine in New Jersey for a time."

"Belle's father was a fine coal man in West Virginia," Papa said. I smiled at Mr. Edison, confident in Papa's accurate description of Father.

"Well then, I do believe you'll be especially thrilled by tomorrow's surprise excursion, Miss Newbold. Those who have an appreciation for geology will be absolutely gobsmacked, I'm told," Mr. Ford said, lifting his glass to his lips.

The blood drained from my face. I'd always heard there wasn't coal in North Carolina. Surely I hadn't been mistaken. Surely we weren't visiting a mine. I could barely endure this week if it was only the woods I had to face, but I could not stand and survey the tipples, watching men disappear into the pitch-black mouth of a mine. Perhaps they were planning to make it one of their wilderness games for the papers, the eight of them competing to see who could harvest the most coal in an hour.

The thought made me nauseous. I knew Mr. Ford was known for his spontaneity on these excursions, at times surprising his guests only upon arrival at the day's destination. I couldn't risk the possibility of panicking. I reached for my wine, nearly toppling the glass before my fingers found the stem. I took a long sip and set it down. Mother was staring at me, but everyone else had turned their attention to the servants who were finally making their way into the tent with five enormous platters of salmon à la Chambord.

“Do you suppose you could share what this surprise will be?” I asked. My voice was strained. “I only ask because I’ll need to have Sylvia press my costume tonight, and—”

Mr. Ford smiled and stood from his chair. He tapped the bottom of his spoon against his now-empty crystal wineglass.

“Excuse me, all! If I could have your ear for a moment.” His voice boomed over us, a voice clearly practiced in commanding attention.

Marie Austen, who had been talking to Mr. Gibbins, stopped at once. Not because of Mr. Ford’s pronouncement, but because of the gigantic salmon platter deposited in front of her.

“Miss Newbold here kindly reminded me that there are ladies present on this leg of the Vagabonds excursion and that the fairer sex might prefer to be let in on the happenings of the following day in order to adequately prepare their costumes.” Snickers were heard from the men. “I know it’s not quite as exciting for us gents, but it’s a worthy price to pay when we have so ardently desired to show our wives and daughters the wonder of our ways.” Mr. Ford stepped back as a servant placed one of the platters on the table in front of his place. The salmon’s head, eyes bugged out, mouth slightly open, was facing me, and in the moment, as my stomach churned with nerves and my skin flushed hot and cold, I thought I might vomit.

“Mr. Delafield, the owner of this fine property, has kindly notified our friends Mr. Edwin Grove and Mr. Fred Seely that we are in town. They are building a most extraordinary hotel—a hotel built atop a mountain called Sunset, constructed almost exclusively of boulders harvested from the mountain itself. Worth has commented that it is a wonder of a build, a craftsmanship completely unique to anything we’ve seen anywhere else. Though Grove and Seely were planning to be departed on business in Atlanta by now, Worth has convinced them to stay for a few more days to give us a tour of the facilities. Half of us will go along on a tour with Seely and Grove, while the others will be introduced to the hotel by the foreman, Oscar Mills, and Seely’s temporary business manager,

Thomas Pierce.”

My shoulders slumped and I sat back in my chair, feeling as though I'd been brought back to life. The table erupted in cheers.

“We'll leave at eight in the morning, sharp, and will enjoy a picnic lunch on the hotel's recently constructed patio,” Mr. Ford concluded before sitting back down.

“Made of boulders, you say?” Mrs. Kipp said. “I can't quite imagine it. Built like the pyramids, I'd wager.”

“Quite,” Mr. Ford said.

I felt eyes on my face and looked up to see Papa staring, not at me, but at Mother. He was grinning widely, and she returned the affectionate stare.

“Salmon, crawfish, sole, truffles, fish salad, or all?” a servant asked Papa, leaning over the table with tongs.

“All, please. This is a special meal, and it warms my heart that you've happened to serve it tonight,” he said.

The servant nodded and extracted a crawfish that had been speared into the side of the poached salmon, then removed a fillet of sole checkered with black truffles and placed it on Papa's plate.

“Cook Serano served it the night Belle and I arrived in Indiana, the night—”

“I proposed to the love of my life,” Papa said, interrupting Mother.

At once I remembered the meal. I hadn't at first because I hadn't eaten it. Everything that whole first week had seemed like a dream or a nightmare depending on the angle, depending on the moment. We had left Red Dragon wearing our finest homemade dresses, carrying two bags, and boarded a train in nearby Whitesville bound for Indiana. I knew Mother had made an impression on Papa and we were going to visit him, but I'd thought we would come home after—at least for a while.

Instead, during our first dinner in Papa's palatial dining room, Mother had started crying and said she couldn't bear to return home, that she was sure the memories would suffocate her. I recalled the way her face pinched the same way it had when they'd told her Father died, the way my head spun with the implication

of her words. My thoughts had been disjointed as Papa soothed her—he'd lost his first spouse, too, to cancer—and she spoke of how miserable she'd been at home. I'd wondered if she'd decided we'd never return before we packed or if being at Papa's home, faced with the luxury of everything we'd never had, made her desperate to make it our own.

Returning to Red Dragon meant hard work, poverty, and the painful, ever-present reminder of Father's death. I'd had a bite of mint sorbet, a palate cleanser I'd mistaken for ice cream, when Papa Shipley fell to one knee in front of Mother's chair. "*I don't want you to go back,*" he'd said. "*Will you marry me?*" She'd whispered yes, and I said nothing. Neither of them had remembered I was there in the moment anyway.

I stared at the faces portrayed in the Newbold family portraits lining the walls and wondered what would become of our things we'd left behind, of the picture of the three of us we'd had taken at the Red Dragon parade the day before Father died, of the box of my notebooks detailing the wonders I'd noticed around me all my life, of my father's notebooks and journals—hundreds of them—filled with his stories. In the midst of my thoughts of losing Father's volumes and thereby his voice, the salmon à la Chambord had been served, and though the dish was laden with butter and herbs, all I could make out was the pungent stink of imported salmon.

"What if you hadn't taken that long drive through the hills?"

Mother's question startled me back to the moment. It was the same one she'd asked that night, after accepting Papa Shipley's hand.

"We would have been distraught forever, Belle and me," she kept on.

I stared at her, watching the familiar tenderness play on her face. Mr. Ford said something about second chances, but all I could remember was what she'd said to me later that night, after the proposal. "*I'm very fond of him, Belle. I know it has probably come as a shock to you, but I'm doing this for us both. He is kind. We will never want again.*"

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“I’m convinced that drive was destiny, my dear, that there was magic in those hills just as there is magic in these for our Belle,” Papa Shipley said. He smiled at me and I grinned back, despite the pang of missing Father.

Mother had been right. He would never be my father, but he was kind and he loved us. If I could find the same with Worth, I would be content.

