



Serafina stalked through the underbrush of the moonlit forest, slinking low to the ground, her eyes fixed on her prey. Just a few feet in front of her, a large wood rat gnawed on a beetle he'd dug up. Her heart beat strong and steady in her chest, marking her slow and quiet creep toward the rat. Her muscles buzzed, ready to pounce. But she did not rush. Swiveling her shoulders back and forth to fine-tune the angle of her attack, she waited for just the right moment. When the rat bent down to pick up another beetle, she leapt.

The rat caught a glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye just as she sprang. It was beyond her ken why so many animals of the forest froze in terror when she pounced. If death by tooth and claw came leaping at *her* out of the darkness, she'd fight.

Or she'd run. She'd do *something*. Little woodland creatures like rats and rabbits and chipmunks weren't known for their boldness of heart, but what was freezing in sheer terror going to do?

As she dropped onto the rat, she snatched him up quicker than a whiskerblink and clutched him in her hand. And now that it was well past too late, he started squirming, biting, and scratching, his furry little body becoming a wriggling snake, his tiny heart racing at a terrific pace. *There it is*, she thought, feeling the *thumpty-thumpty* of his heartbeat in her bare hand. *There's the fight*. It quickened her pulse and stirred her senses. Suddenly, she could detect everything in the forest around her—the sound of a tree frog moving on a branch thirty feet behind her, the reedy buzz of a lonely timberdoodle in the distance, and the glimpse of a bat swishing through the starlit sky above the broken canopy of the trees.

It was all for practice, of course, the prowling and the pouncing, the stalking of prey and the snatching hold. She didn't kill the wild things she hunted, didn't need to, but they didn't know that, darn it! She was terror! She was death! So why at the last moment of her attack did they freeze? Why didn't they flee?

Serafina sat down on the forest floor with her back against an old, gnarled, lichen-covered oak tree and held the rat in her clenched fist on her lap.

Then she slowly opened her hand.

The rat darted away as fast as he could, but she snatched him up and brought him back to her lap again.

She held the rat tight for several seconds and then opened her hand once more.

This time, the rat did not run. He sat on her hand, trembling and panting, too confused and exhausted to move.

She lifted the terrified rodent a little closer on her open hand, tilted her head, and studied him. The wood rat didn't look like the nasty gray sewer varmints she was used to catching in the basement of Biltmore Estate. This particular rat had a scarred tear in his left ear. He'd encountered some trouble before. And with his dark little eyes and the tremulous whiskers of his long, pointy nose, he seemed more like a cute, chubby brown mouse than the proper vermin on which she had earned her title. She could almost imagine a little hat on his head and a buttoned vest. She felt a pang of guilt that she'd caught him, but she also knew that if he tried to run again, her hand would snatch him up before she even thought about it. It wasn't a decision. It was a reflex.

As the little rat tried to catch his breath, his eyes darted to and fro for a way out. But he didn't dare. He knew that as soon as he tried to run, she'd grab him again, that it was the nature of her kind to play with him, to paw him, to claw him, until he was finally dead.

But she looked at the rat and then set him on the forest floor. "Sorry, little fellow—just practicing my skills."

The rat gazed up at her in confusion.

"Go ahead," she said gently.

The rat glanced toward the thistle thicket.

"There ain't no trick in it," she said.

The rat didn't seem to believe her.

"You go on home, now," she told him. "Just move slowly away at first, not too fast—that's the way of it. And keep your eyes and ears open next time, even if you got a beetle to chew on, you hear? There are far meaner things in these woods than me."

Astonished, the torn-eared wood rat rubbed his little hands over his face repeatedly and bobbed his head, almost as if he was bowing. She snorted a little laugh through her nose, which finally startled the rat into action. He quickly got his wits about him and scampered into the thicket.

"Have a good evenin', now," she said. She reckoned he'd bolster his memory of his courage the farther he got away from her and have a good story to tell his wife and little ones by the time he got home for supper. She smiled as she imagined him telling a great and twisty tale with his family gathered around, how he was in the forest just minding his own business, gnawing on a beetle, when a vicious predator pounced upon him and he had to fight for his every breath. She wondered if she'd be a beast of ferocious power in the story. Or just a girl.

At that moment, she heard a sound from above like an autumn breeze flowing through the tops of the trees. But there wasn't a breeze. The midnight air was chilled and quiet and perfectly still, like God was holding his breath.

She heard a delicate, almost gossamer, whisper-like murmur. She looked up, but all she could see were the branches of the trees. Rising to her feet, she brushed off the simple green work dress that Mrs. Vanderbilt had given her the day before

and walked through the forest, listening for the sound. She tried to determine the direction it was coming from. She tilted her head left and then right, but the sound seemed to have no position. She made her way over to a rocky outcropping, where the ground fell steeply away into a forested valley. From here she could see a great distance, miles yonder across the mist to the silhouettes of the Blue Ridge Mountains on the other side. A thin layer of silvery white clouds glowing with light passed slowly in front of the moon. The brightness of the moon cast a wide-arcing halo in the feathery clouds, shone through them, and threw a long, jagged shadow onto the ground behind her.

She stood on the rocky ledge and scanned the valley in front of her. In the distance, the pointed towers and slate-covered rooftops of the grand Biltmore Estate rose from the darkness of the surrounding forest. The pale gray limestone walls were adorned with gargoyles of mythical beasts and fine sculptures of the warriors of old. The stars reflected in the slanting windowpanes, and the mansion's gold- and copper-trimmed roofline glinted in the moonlight. There in the great house, Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt slept on the second floor, along with their nephew, her friend, Braeden Vanderbilt. The Vanderbilts' guests—family members from out of town, businessmen, dignitaries, famous artists—slept on the third floor, each in their own luxuriously appointed room.

Serafina's pa maintained the steam heating system, the electric dynamo, the laundry machines powered by spinning leather straps, and all the other newfangled devices on the estate. She and her pa lived in the workshop in the basement down the

corridor from the kitchens, laundry rooms, and storerooms. But while all the people she knew and loved slept through the night, Serafina did not. She napped on and off during the day, curled up in a window or hidden in some dark nook in the basement. At night she prowled the corridors of Biltmore, both upstairs and down, a silent, unseen watcher. She explored the winding paths of the estate's vast gardens and the darkened dells of the surrounding forest, and she hunted.

She was a twelve-year-old girl, but she had never lived what anyone other than herself would call a normal life. She had spent her time creeping through the estate's vast basement catching rats. Her pa, half joking when he'd said it, had dubbed her the C.R.C.: the Chief Rat Catcher. But she'd taken on the title with pride.

Her pa had always loved her and did the best he could to raise her, in his own rough-hewn way. She certainly hadn't been unhappy eating supper with her pa each evening and sneaking through the darkness at night ridding the great house of rodents. Who would be? But deep down, she'd been a fair bit lonely and mighty confused. She had never been able to square why most folk carried a lantern in the dark, or why they made so much noise when they walked, or what compelled them to sleep through the night just when all manner of things were at their most beautiful. She'd spied on enough of the estate's children from a distance to know she wasn't one of them. When she gazed into a mirror, she saw a girl with large amber eyes, deeply angled cheekbones, and a shaggy mane of streaked brown hair.

No, she wasn't a normal, everyday child. She wasn't an *any* day child. She was a creature of the night.

As she stood at the edge of the valley, she heard again the sound that had brought her there, a gentle fluttering, like a river of whispers traveling on the currents of wind that flowed high above her. The stars and planets hung in the blackened sky, scintillating as if they were alive with the spirits of ten thousand souls, but they offered no answers to the mystery.

A small, dark shape crossed in front of the moon and disappeared. Her heart skipped a beat. What was it?

She watched. Another shape passed the moon, and then another. At first, she thought they must be bats, but bats didn't fly in straight lines like these.

She frowned, confused and fascinated.

Tiny shape after tiny shape crossed in front of the moon. She looked up high into the sky and saw the stars disappearing. Her eyes widened in alarm. But then the realization of what she was seeing slowly crept into her. Squinting her eyes just right, she could see great flocks of songbirds flying over the valley. Not just one or two, or a dozen, but long, seemingly endless streams of them—clouds of them. The birds filled the sky. The sound she was hearing was the soft murmur of thousands of tiny wings of sparrows, wrens, and waxwings making their fall journey. They were like jewels, green and gold, yellow and black, striped and spotted, thousands upon thousands of them. It seemed far too late in the year for them to be migrating, but here they were. They hurried across the sky, their little

wings fluttering, heading southward for the winter, traveling secretly at night to avoid the hawks that hunted the day, using the ridges of the mountains below and the alignment of the glinting stars above to find their way.

The flighty, twitching movement of birds had always tantalized her, had always quickened her pulse, but this was different. Tonight the boldness and beauty of these little birds' trek down the mountainous spine of the continent flowed through her heart. It felt as if she was seeing a once-in-a-lifetime event, but then she realized that the birds were following the path that their parents and grandparents had taught them, that they'd been flying this path for millions of years. The only thing "once in a lifetime" about this was *her*, that she was here, that she was seeing it. And it amazed her.

Seeing the birds made her think of Braeden. He loved birds and other animals of all kinds.

"I wish you could see this," she whispered, as if he was lying awake in his bed and could hear her across the miles of distance between them. She longed to share the moment with her friend. She wished he was standing beside her, gazing up at the stars and the birds and the silver-edged clouds and the shining moon in all its glory. She knew she'd tell him all about it the next time she saw him. But daytime words could never capture the beauty of the night.

A few weeks before, she and Braeden had defeated the Man in the Black Cloak and had torn the Black Cloak asunder. She and Braeden had been allies, and good friends, but it sank in once again, this time even deeper than before, that she

hadn't seen him in several nights. With every passing night, she expected a visit at the workshop. But every morning she went to bed disappointed, and it left her with biting doubts. What was he doing? Was something keeping him from her? Was he purposefully avoiding her? She'd been so happy to finally have a friend to talk to. It made her burn inside to think that maybe she was just a novelty to him that had worn off, and now she was left to return to her lonely nights of prowling on her own. They were friends. She was sure of it. But she worried that she didn't fit in upstairs in the daylight, that she didn't belong there. Could he have forgotten about her so quickly?

As the birds thinned out and the moment passed, she looked out across the valley and wondered. After defeating the Man in the Black Cloak, she reckoned herself one of the Guardians, the marble lions that stood on either side of Biltmore's front doors, protecting the house from demons and evil spirits. She imagined herself the C.R.C. of not just the small, four-legged vermin, but of intruders of all kinds. Her pa had always warned her about the world, of the dangers that could ensnare her soul, and after everything that had happened, she was sure there were more demons out there.

For weeks now, she'd been watching and waiting, like a guard on a watchtower, but she had no idea when or in what shape the demons would come. Her darkest worry, deep down, when she faced it true, was whether she'd be strong enough, smart enough—whether she'd end up the predator or the prey. Maybe the little animals like the wood rat and the chipmunk knew that death was just a pounce away. Did they think of

themselves as prey? Maybe they were almost expecting to die, ready to die. But she sure wasn't. She had things to do.

Her friendship with Braeden had just begun, and she wasn't going to give up on it just because they'd hit a snag. And she had only just started to understand her connection to the forest, to figure out who and what she was. And now that she'd met the Vanderbilts face-to-face, her pa had been pressuring her to start acting like a proper daytime girl. Mrs. V was taking her in, always talking to her with a gentle word. Now she had the basement and the forest and the upstairs—she'd gone from having too few kin to having too many, getting pulled in three directions at once. But after years of living without any family besides her pa, it felt good to be getting started with her new life.

All that was fine and good. When danger came, she wanted to fight, she wanted to live. Who didn't? But what if the danger came so fast she never saw it coming? What if, like an owl attacking a mouse, the claws dropped from the sky and killed her before she even knew they were there? What if the real danger wasn't just whether she could fight whatever threat that came, but whether she even recognized it before it was too late?

The more she thought about the flocks of birds she'd seen, the more it rankled her peace of mind. It was plenty warm, but she couldn't stop thinking that December seemed far too late in the year for birds to be coming and going. She frowned and searched the sky for the North Star. When she found it, she realized that the birds hadn't even been flying in the right

direction. She wasn't even sure they were the kinds of birds that flew south for the winter.

As she stood on the rocky edge of the high ground, the dark ooze of dread seeped into her bones.

She looked up at where the birds had been flying, and then she looked in the direction they came from. She gazed out across the top of the darkened forest. Her mind tried to work it through. And then she realized what was happening.

The birds weren't migrating.

They were *fleeing*.

She pulled in a long, deep breath as her body readied itself. Her heart began to pound. The muscles of her arms and legs tightened.

Whatever it was, it was coming.

And it was coming now.



A moment later, a sound in the distance tickled Serafina's ear. It wasn't sparrow wings, like she'd heard before, but something earthbound. She tilted her head and listened for it again. It seemed to be coming from down in the valley.

She stood, faced the sound, and cupped her hands around the back of her ears, a trick she'd learned from mimicking a bat.

She heard the faint jangle of harnesses and the clip-clop of hooves. Her stomach tightened. It was a strange sound to encounter in the middle of the night. A team of horses pulling a carriage was making its way up the three-mile-long winding road toward the house. In the daytime, there would be nothing unusual about that. But no one ever came to Biltmore at night. Something was wrong. Was it a messenger bearing bad

news? Had someone died? Was the North going to war with the South again? What calamity had befallen the world?

Pulling back from the rocky ledge, she hurried down into the valley and made her way through the forest to one of the arched brick bridges where the road crossed over the stream. She watched from the concealing leaves of the mountain laurel as an old, road-beaten carriage passed by. Most carriages had one or two horses, but this carriage was pulled by four dark brown stallions with powerful, bulging muscles, their hides glistening with sweat in the moonlight and their nostrils flaring.

She swallowed hard. *That isn't a messenger.*

Braeden had told her that stallions were wild and notoriously difficult to deal with—they kicked their handlers and bit people, and especially hated other stallions—but here were four of them pulling a carriage in unison.

When she looked at who was driving the carriage, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. The carriage bench was empty. The horses were all cantering together in a forceful rhythm, as if by the rein of a master, but there was no driver to be seen.

Serafina clenched her teeth. This was all wrong. She could feel it in her core. The carriage was heading straight for Biltmore, where everyone was fast asleep and had no idea it was coming.

As the carriage rounded a bend and went out of sight, Serafina broke into a run and followed.

She ran through the forest, tracking the carriage as it traveled down the winding road. The cotton dress Mrs. Vanderbilt

had given her wasn't too long, so it was easy to run in, but keeping pace with the horses was surprisingly difficult. She tore through the forest, leaping over fallen logs and bounding over ferns. She jumped gullies and climbed hills. She took shortcuts, taking advantage of the road's meandering path. Her chest began to heave as she pulled in great gulps of air. Despite the trepidation she had felt moments before, the challenge of keeping up with the horses made her smile and then made her laugh, which made it all the more difficult to breathe when she was trying to run. Leaping and darting, she loved the thrill of the chase.

Then, all of a sudden, the horses slowed.

She pulled herself short and hunkered down.

The horses came to a stop.

She ducked behind a clump of rhododendrons a stone's throw from the carriage and concealed herself as she tried to catch her breath.

*Why is the carriage stopping?*

The horses anxiously shifted their hooves, and steam poured from their nostrils.

Her heart pounded as she watched the carriage.

The handle of the carriage door turned.

She crouched low to the ground.

The carriage door swung slowly open.

She thought she could see two figures inside, but then there was a roil of darkness like she'd never seen before—a shadow so black and fleeting that it was impossible for even *her* eyes to make it out.

A tall and sinewy man in a wide-brimmed leather hat and a dark, weather-beaten coat emerged from the carriage. He had long, knotty gray hair and a gray mustache and beard that reminded her of moss hanging from a craggy tree. As he climbed down from the carriage and stood on the road, he held a gnarled walking stick and gazed out into the forest.

Behind him, a vicious-looking wolfhound slunk down from the carriage onto the ground. Then another followed. The hounds had large, lanky bodies, massive heads with black eyes, and ratty, thick blackish-gray fur. Five dogs in all came forth from the carriage and stood together, scanning the forest for something to kill.

Afraid to make even the slightest sound, Serafina took in a slow, ragged breath as carefully and quietly as she possibly could. The beat of her heart pounded in her chest. She wanted to run. *Just stay still*, she ordered herself. *Stay very still*. She was sure that as long as she didn't break cover, they wouldn't see her.

She wasn't certain what it was—maybe his long, frayed coat and the worn state of his carriage—but the man seemed as if he'd traveled a long distance. It surprised her when he shut the carriage door, stepped away, and looked at the horses. The stallions immediately broke into a run like they had been whipped. The carriage soon disappeared down the road, taking whoever remained inside onward toward Biltmore but leaving the bearded man and his dogs behind in the forest. The man did not appear to be dismayed or upset by this, but acted as though this forest was exactly where he wanted to be.

Saying words Serafina could not understand, the man gathered his pack of dogs around him. They were foul beasts with massive paws and thick claws. They didn't seem like normal dogs that sniffed the ground and explored the forest. They all looked up at their master, as if waiting for his instructions.

The man's face was shrouded by the bent brim of his hat. But when he tilted his head upward toward the moon, Serafina sucked in a breath. The man's silvery eyes glinted with power, peering out from his weathered, craggy face. His mouth came slowly open like he was trying to suck in the moonlight. Just when she thought he was going to utter words, he let out the most terrifying hissing scream she had ever heard. It was a long, raspy screech. And right at that moment, a ghostly white barn owl appeared out of the trees, flying overhead, the beat of its wings utterly silent, but then it answered the man's call with a bloodcurdling scream in return. The sound sent a terrible burst of shivers down Serafina's spine. And as the owl flew by her, its eerie, flat-faced head pivoted toward her, as if searching, hunting. She ducked to the ground like a frightened mouse.

As the owl disappeared into the midnight gloom, Serafina peeked back toward the road. Her heart stopped cold. The bearded man and his five hounds were now looking out into the forest in her direction, the man's eyes still gleaming with an unnatural light despite the fact that he had turned away from the moon. She tried to convince herself that it was impossible for the man and his dogs to see her concealed in the leaves. But she couldn't shake the horrible fear that they knew exactly where she was. The ground beneath her seemed to become

slippery with some unknown dampness. The ivy on the forest floor seemed to be moving. She heard a *tick-tick-ticking* sound, followed by a long, raspy hiss. Suddenly, she felt the touch of the man's breath on the back of her neck, and she spun around, cringing violently, but there was nothing there but blackness.

The man reached into his pocket with one of his knobby, leathery-skinned hands and took out what appeared to be a scrap of torn, dark-colored cloth.

"Breathe it in," he ordered his dogs, his voice low and sinister. There was something about the stranger's rugged face and beard, his rustic clothing, and the way he said his words that made her think he was an Appalachian man, born and raised in the rocky ravines and thorny coves of these very mountains.

The first wolfhound pushed its muzzle into the folds of the dark cloth. When it drew its nose out again, its mouth gaped open, its teeth bared and chattering, dripping with saliva. The dog began to growl. Then the second dog and the third nosed the dark cloth, until all five had taken the scent. The wicked, snarling malevolence of the hounds stabbed her stomach with fear. Her only hope was that the trail of the cloth's scent would take them in the opposite direction.

The man looked down at his pack of hounds. "Our quarry is near," he told them, his voice filled with menacing command. "Follow the scent! Find the Black One!"

Suddenly, the dogs howled, savage like wolves. All five of them burst from their haunches and lunged into the forest. Serafina jumped despite herself. Her legs wanted to run so bad that she could barely keep herself still. But she had to stay

hidden. It was her only chance to survive. But to her horror, the hounds were running straight toward her.

She couldn't understand it. Should she keep hiding? Should she fight? Should she run? The dogs were going to tear her to pieces.

Just when she knew she had to run, she realized it was too late. She didn't have a chance. Her chest seized. Her legs locked. She froze in terror.

*No! No! No! Don't do it! You're not a rat! You're not a chipmunk! You've got to move!*

Faced with certain death, she did what any sensible creature of the forest would do: She leapt ten feet straight up into a tree. She landed on a branch, then scurried along its length and hurled herself like a flying squirrel in a desperate leap to the next tree. From there, she bounded to the ground and ran like the dickens.

With howls of outrage, the hounds gave chase, running and snapping at her. They coursed her like a pack of wolves on a deer. But they were *wolfhounds*, so they weren't born and bred to chase down and kill anything as small as a deer. They were born and bred to chase down and kill *wolves*.

As she ran, Serafina glanced back over her shoulder toward the road. The craggy-faced man looked up at the owl as the haunting creature came circling back around. Then, to Serafina's astonishment, he threw his walking stick up into the sky. It tumbled end over end toward the owl. But it did not strike the bird. It seemed to blur and then disappear into the darkness, just as the owl flew into the cover of the trees. Serafina had no

idea who the man was or what she had seen, but it didn't matter now. She had to run for her life.

Fighting off a single jumping, biting, snapping, snarling wolfhound was bad enough, but fighting five was impossible. She sprinted through the forest as fast as she could, her muscles punched with the power of fear. She wasn't going to let these growling beasts defeat her. The cold forest air shot into her pumping lungs, every sense in her body exploding with a lightning bolt of panic. Coming up behind her, the first hound reached out its ragged neck, opened its toothy maw, and bit the back of her leg. She spun and struck the dog, screaming in anger and searing pain as the dog's fangs punctured her flesh. The smell of the blood excited the other hounds into even more of a frenzy. The second dog leapt upon her and bit her shoulder, tearing into her with growling determination as she slammed her fist into its face. The third clamped its teeth onto her wrist as she tried to pull it away. The three of them pulled her down and dragged her across the ground. Then the other two dogs came in for the kill, their fangs bared as they lunged straight for her throat.