

The yard was empty, the quiet somehow unnatural, even though Marchesa had just put the hens in the coop for the evening and could hear the faint clucking as they settled down to roost. It was just Marchesa. Just Marchesa and her father, moving ever closer to the edge of their cleared land, to the gathering darkness of the woods beyond. It had been the two of them alone for months, since her ankle broke and her mother left.

Their farm was twenty miles from town, the surrounding land bunched into uneven hills veiled in a blanket of trees. Her father had agonized over every detail of the barn, the house, the shed, the coop and still he glared at it with a certain disdain. Marchesa knew that regardless of her father's dinnertime prayers, he was not satisfied.

Perhaps it was the hint of his discontent that prompted her to follow him, past the barn and the house, out into the heavy darkness of the woods beyond. The trees were in full leaf and stepping underneath the canopy was like forgetting the sky existed. Her attention fixed on the jolting figure ahead, Marchesa darted around trees and over strewn bits of brush, dead branches catching at her dirty jeans like bony fingers. He walked with heavy purpose, the branches above gasping for illumination as the sun set in the distance.

She stayed several paces behind him, noticing after awhile that he seemed to know exactly where he was going. Her ankle, newly healed, became more than a passing complaint and she lagged further behind. A growing unease told her she didn't know how to get back, and so she persisted after him, each step sending a jagged throb up her calf.

Ahead of her, faint evening light began to stream through a lifting in the branches, the sky emerging like a deep breath. She stopped and stared after him as he continued forward, alarm pulsing through her head as he crossed the clearing. A form began to take shape, a cottage. It was dark and she hadn't seen it at first, but her father strode toward it with easy purpose. She sank to the ground, her hands around her ankle, easing her fingers over the bones that were once broken as she recovered.

A horrible notion came into her head, one that could easily destroy what remained of her life. What if he had kept a mistress? The word sounded so foreign and unnatural even in her head, an antique dusted off for rare occasions like tarnished silver. But what if he had a whole other family hidden away in that tiny house? What if that was what had teased away his attention, what had caused the distance that no one spoke about? And now Mama was dead. He could be with them, if Marchesa was gone too.

But he didn't stay inside. And there were no lights. Wouldn't there be lights if he had a family hidden in there? She strained to see if he carried anything, but his arms hung down at his sides. Moving to her feet, she stepped back into the shadows of the forest as he came closer, her breath caught in her lungs.

Marchesa stumbled after him through the dark back to his workshed. She wasn't quiet on the way back because she was focused on not getting lost in the woods, but it didn't matter. He went to his workshed and she almost just gave up and took herself up to bed but a stroke of stubborn determination rose up in her and she came to stand in the doorway of the workshed. He stood at the table staring at a little box it as if he was listening for something. "Papa?"

His head jerked up, hands on his hips. His eyes bored into her, but she had the same sensation as before, that he didn't see her, couldn't see her. Before she could speak again, he turned away and began to examine the joining angles of the box, testing them for strength. Satisfied, he stood with one hand on it, the other moving to rub at the creases along his forehead.

His movement was so normal, his features relaxed and calm. It caught her offguard, and she moved to touch his hand. He shook his head and returned to himself, his eyes focusing on her face.

"Hello, Peach," he said, his face rearranging into a tired smile as he gave her fingers a little squeeze. But instead of comfort, the nickname reminded her of the sadness she'd been able to push away and ignore, that deep pit that threatened to swallow her if she didn't manage it. She hadn't heard her name since Mama had died, and while she had always hated it – a remnant of her father's Italian heritage – she missed the way her mama said it, like more than a hand-me-down, something precious.

Her eye caught on the box behind him, and she shied away. He frowned, then shrugged. "Better be getting inside, I guess." He waited for her to turn and leave ahead of him, and Marchesa couldn't help but steal a glance over her shoulder. There it was, small and satisfied on the table, the lid slightly skewed on top so that a rim of darkness beckoned.

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His love was gruff, and hard, like an old horse that bites when you get close enough to stroke its nose. She remembered loving him so much she would squeeze him as hard as she could, holding on until he unlocked her arms from around his waist. Now there was something odd about him, a strangeness that perhaps she had noticed before but thought nothing of. His

face, once open and lively was gaunt and drawn, his shoulders hunched as if bearing a great weight. Marchesa tried not to look at him.

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Summer was the noisiest season, and the noisiest place in the world to have it was on the farm. It was a bevy of cicadas and crickets, snapping and chirping and a constant hum that sometimes drove Marchesa crazy, as if she needed to escape her own head but couldn't. She could hear the hum all the time, no matter what she was doing: running with headphones in her ears, watching television, doing laundry. It was when the drone began that she saw her papa retreat into his workshed again with a furtive glance over one shoulder. She was in the house, at the kitchen sink peeling the potatoes for dinner. Wiping her hands on a towel, she hurried outside without a second thought, although the drop in her stomach forbade her to continue.

Her steps were careful and silent as she crossed the yard, dry dirt clinging to her legs in an itchy cast. Her ankle was so much better, recovered from the previous trek through the woods. She balked at the memory, telling herself she was only going out to his shed to see it empty, her papa working on chest or a jewelry box. She hadn't ventured to the shed since that night, and the needy ache in her gut gave her away, even to herself.

He was there, standing dead still, as if he was waiting for something. She tripped as she came to the door, catching herself on the doorframe and looking up guiltily. But nothing happened, and she looked up to see that he hadn't moved, not an inch, not a muscle. The table was empty, the box gone.

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She couldn't remember exactly where the cottage was. Somehow in all of her wanderings and adventures as a child she had never come upon it. But she was determined to find it again, even if she got lost and had to sleep in the woods for days.

When she came upon the clearing, her heart stopped. The cottage still stood as it had when she had first seen it, but now a dim light emanated from the windows, faintly illuminating the ground beneath it. It was barely dusk, and Marchesa steeled herself forward, shoving away the thoughts of killers and witches in the woods. She had to know. That was that.

Placing her hand on the door, she turned the old brass knob, dented from age, so slowly she could barely feel it move. Her breath caught in her throat as she pushed in, the door swinging open with a plaintive groan.

She stood at the threshold, one hand on the doorknob. At the sight of what lay behind the now open door, she squeezed her eyes shut, hoping for a different picture when she opened them.

Nothing changed: one room, lined and piled with boxes. *Coffins*, she corrected herself. She couldn't lie any longer. It was a room full of coffins like the one she had seen in her papa's workroom, a box meant to house the dead, to keep them in the ground. But these were finished: each different, carvings so ornate that had she not known their purpose they might have been breathtakingly beautiful. Her eyes burned and her stomach roiled as she tried to count how many there were, but she couldn't focus and had to start over before she noticed the one standing next the door. It was just slightly taller than her, its rough wood fashioned into delicate rows of curlicues and leaves and graceful arches that reminded her of the vines that grew up to cover the west side of their house in springtime.

Marchesa gave up trying to count after that. She took a deep breath and released it. She had wanted to know. She didn't have to come here. No mistress, no family. But at the sight of her father's hidden coffin fetish, she found herself wishing it *had* been a whole other family.

Next to her feet a small cardboard shoebox was shoved against the wall. She recognized it as the box her papa's work boots had come in a few years ago. Without stepping into the room, she leaned over and bent to lift the lid, unsure of what she might find. It was nothing but a collection of small spiral notebooks. Intrigued, she picked one up and flipped through, finding pages filled with her father's tight scrawl.

A muffled thud from the woods broke through her stupor, and she turned to see something moving just beyond the place where the trees started. She grabbed the box and jumped away from the door, forgetting to close it altogether as she ran around the side of the house.

She knew it was him before she even saw him emerge from the shadow, her gut twisting, *runrunrun*, but she was frozen still, plastered against the side of the house. Why hadn't she gone straight into the woods? But he had nearly reached the cottage, and if she moved she knew he would hear her. She knew he would hear her and come after her. She knew it as certain as she knew that each of those coffins was meant for someone, and that one of them was meant for her.

His boots clomped up to the cottage. She could tell from his uneven gait that he was carrying something, no doubt another coffin – he must have dropped it in the woods, and that was the crash she heard. She listened with desperate ears, her pulse thudding a distracting

rhythm. A slight pause before the door. A grunt of displeasure, the hollow ring of boots on the wooden floor. A faint bump as something heavy landed. Scraping, wood against wood.

Then nothing.

Before she could decide not to, she tore away from the side of the cottage, her feet sliding beneath her, betraying her to this man who built coffins and hid them. She knew he came out as she reached the woods, and begged that he not see her, that he lose her, that he forget her. He hadn't seen her before, and she prayed that she was invisible now, running as hard and as fast as her ankle, throbbing now, would allow, until she finally saw the crest of her bedroom window rising between the trees.

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Marchesa heard him come in long after she had run up the stairs to her room, throwing the box into a corner of her closet. He called up to her for dinner, but she ignored him. She couldn't face him across the table. After the house settled and she heard him climb the stairs to his room, she pulled out the box of books from the back of her closet, opening the one she'd left on top. None of the pages were dated. *Lena nearly found me today*, it said. *She opened the door to the barn and there I was, planks in hand. I told her I was building a cradle for the neighbors' new baby, and she believed me. I must have a place for these things. They must be hidden.*

She dropped the book. Had her mother found them? Had he killed her? All Marchesa knew was that there was some kind of accident. It felt like an accident when they were struggling to get out, her mother coughing in the smoke for Marchesa to run, faster, when she fell through the floor and her ankle snapped. Maybe her father had meant for her to die as well.

There had been no coffin for her mother – there had been nothing to bury.

It was early spring, and they were cleaning out the hayloft. It was something that happened every year, something Marchesa enjoyed. The sunshine streamed in through the open doors and the smell of horses and musty air reminded her that the cold and gray was almost over. Mama was in the loft, raking out the old bits of hay and throwing them down for Marchesa to rake out behind the barn. Papa had been sharpening his tools, and the high-pitched screech of the sharpener grated on her nerves, though she tried to ignore it since it didn't seem to bother Mama.

What happened seemed like a blur, and there wasn't very much that Marchesa actually remembered with the exception of her surprise at the fire that sprang up.

A sick fear clenched her stomach. She stood and crept to her door, turning the lock as quietly as she could. Was her father a murderer? No. He was sad, and tired, and lonely. He couldn't be a killer. But the fire...her mother...the coffins...

She stayed awake, propped against the wall, the box hunched next to her like contraband. She couldn't bring herself to read any of the other notebooks. She was certain something was watching her from the corner, but when she glanced up, her eyes rested on the framed picture of her mother. The night was full of scratching and hints at sounds and shadows she couldn't really see. She couldn't bring herself to move to her bed or turn off the light. She lay down on the floor, quiet and terrified of something she couldn't name.

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He was waiting for her. It was in the taut, uneven line of his shoulders, the strain of his body, desperate to turn and face her. But he couldn't drag himself away from the occupation of his hands: the split planks fitted together in a perfect line, level to a tee. This one was bigger, and Marchesa shivered. One coffin was too many, and the cottage was lined with them.

Taking a deep breath, she touched her pocket for the matches she'd grabbed on her way out, moving to the corner of the shed where her father kept a spare can of gasoline. He didn't look at her, didn't turn or say anything. But she knew he could sense her. She moved about her business as if she was feeding the hens, tossing the liquid like it was chicken feed and she was free and happy the way she had always been.

Satisfied, she struck the match, the first one snapping in her shaking hands, the second lighting before she dropped it in the dirt. Finally, she held the lit match in her hand and chose, throwing it down into the puddle at her feet.

It moved slowly at first, the flame. It crept along the path she had laid for it, eating the ground like a starving animal. She heard the hammering inside but stood rooted. She had to make sure. And then, suddenly, the flames leapt, the shed consumed and red and lit from the inside. There were no screams. She knew there wouldn't be.

She stood watching, her eyes glinting in the heat.

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When the fire department came, alerted by a neighbor who had spotted a thin finger of smoke in the sky, the workshed was a neat pile of ashes and rubble. Marchesa crouched crying quietly next to it. She told the fire chief she didn't know what had happened, she had been inside

cooking when she glanced up and saw the flames. As the team unearthed the charred remains, he shook his head and left to confer with the police. She watched him leave, and when they looked up at her, she turned away, desperate to run into the woods and escape into the darkness.

When they left she went inside, releasing the weight of her body to her father's chair. After a moment, she went upstairs and brought down the box, upending it on the table. She plucked up the newest one, judging from the clarity of the green dye on the cover, and opened it to the middle. *No one knows. No one knows my obsession. Lena is dead, but Marchesa will live. I couldn't tell her the truth, not that her mother is dead because of me. There is nothing to say.*

Vindicated, Marchesa set it down. So he had been crazy. And a killer. Driven by something impatient and curious within her, she grabbed another one, starting at the first page. *I thought I had it under control. Only one a year. But recently, I can't help myself. My hands itch and I can't think of anything else. I should be dead, I will be dead, it is my destiny. The thought makes me heavy and I know Lena feels it too, though she won't push me. I told her about the psychic and what she said. I didn't tell her about my obsession – I didn't want her to leave, but mostly I didn't want to frighten her.*

Marchesa's heart skipped a beat.

*He was a killer.* He had killed her mother, his own wife. He had a collection of coffins, he had planned to get rid of her as well. All of the evidence was there.

Marchesa paced an uneasy circle around the kitchen table, her fingers grazing the tops of the chairs. She stopped in front of the window, her eyes resting on the shadows of ashes that stained the ground where the workshed had stood.

The wind picked up and howled around the house, shaking the trees with a ghostly fury. Slamming open the cupboard where her father's tools were kept, she grabbed the hammer. She took some nails. She tore out of the house and into barn where a collection of scrap wood was kept. She picked up the pieces and began to fit them together, nowhere nearly as precise as her father. But it was her coffin, and she would build it as she liked.