



## Colden, Massachusetts, 1879

The stately houses of Winslow Street looked utterly safe and respectable in the hot summer evening. Mikhail knew all that was about to change.

He surveyed the neighborhood through the carriage window's narrow opening. Immense sycamore trees sheltered the homes, with only the chattering of a few sparrows to break the tranquility of the evening. A trickle of perspiration slid down the side of Mikhail's face and his fist tightened around the club on his belt. Beside him, Lady Mirela remained rigid as the carriage bumped and rolled over the gently worn cobblestones. Everything about this neighborhood spoke of wealth, stability, and decorum. It hardly looked like a place for the pitched battle that was about to occur.

On the opposite bench, his two boys were playing a game of thumb-wrestling, oblivious to the turmoil roiling inside Mikhail, for he had always sheltered the children from the danger and uncertainty that was so much a part of his world. His gaze flicked to Turk. The man's bulk could barely fit inside the tight confines of the carriage. The wooden box cradled in Turk's ham-sized fists looked ridiculously delicate, but the contents of that box were

too precious to be jostled with the rest of the family's belongings piled atop the lumbering carriage. The only ornamentation on the box was the elegant brass hinges that held the lid securely closed. Nothing about its plain appearance hinted at the priceless vials stored within.

The carriage slowed to a halt and Andrei looked up eagerly. "Are we here?" he asked, excitement brimming in the twelve-year-old's eyes. Did the boy's voice crack just a bit? It was the second time Mikhail had noticed that husky tone breaking through the childish voice, indicating his son was on the verge of becoming a man. Normally, Mikhail's heart would have swelled with pride at the symbol of his son's impending manhood, but not this evening.

"Yes, we are here," Mikhail said, forcing his voice to remain calm as he gazed at a stately house, looming three stories tall in the gathering darkness. An elegant wrought-iron fence surrounded the property, but there was no lock on the gate. Embellished with fancy scrolls and spindly bars, the fence was for decoration, not protection. Such a useless gate spoke volumes about the sense of security these people took for granted. His mouth thinned and years of training urged him to wrap his hand around the revolver tucked in his pocket, but he stifled the impulse. Tonight called for clear-headed courage, not brute force. He looked at Andrei. "I want you to stay in the carriage and look out for Lady Mirela. Is that clear?"

Andrei would probably rather look after a hive of bees than stay with the ominously silent woman who accompanied them, but Mikhail gave the boy no choice. "Okay," Andrei finally said.

Mikhail locked eyes with Turk, the only other person in the carriage who understood the magnitude of what they were up against this evening. "Guard the box," he said to Turk as he twisted the handle of the carriage. "I will take only Joseph with me. There is no need for too much manpower on our first approach. Tonight, we will rely on the law to get what we want. Force is our last resort," he said as he stepped down into the street.

The green, woodsy scent of hawthorn trees surrounded him as he emerged from the carriage. It was a good omen, yes? A place that smelled this fine would surely be a safe place to bring his family to live.

The carriage springs creaked and groaned as Joseph climbed down from the driver's seat. Mikhail and Turk were both large men, but Joseph was a giant. Like Mikhail, Joseph wore a coat constructed of battle-worn leather and heavy boots that were just as rugged. Beneath their coats were knives and loaded pistols, and Mikhail carried the same blunt battle stick that had served him through two wars in the Balkans.

"Let me do all the talking," Mikhail said as they strode up the path leading to the silent house. Reaching through the useless gate, he unlatched the double doors to stare at his home. It was so much more impressive than it appeared in the faded photograph he'd carried with him all these years. The grainy picture could not capture the dramatic contrast between the red bricks and the crisp white trim, nor did it show the beauty of the three stained-glass windows gracing the top story of the house. There were no lights burning behind the windows, and the long evening shadows meant it would be dark inside the house.

Mikhail's and Joseph's boots thudded on the wooden planking as they mounted the steps of the porch. Mikhail slid to a window and peered through the delicate lace draperies that did nothing to shield the interior of the house from prying eyes. He would have to fix that once the house was his, but he could not be concerned with such trivialities now. The well-being of his entire family depended upon the next few minutes, and Mikhail's eyes narrowed as he peered inside.

His breath caught, and he could not believe his good fortune. Dustcovers draped the furniture, making the pieces look like ghosts in the vacant room. The fireplace was closed off with a wooden screen, and there was no sign of life inside the home. Relief surged

through Mikhail as he made the sign of the cross over the front of his body.

"Slip around back and make sure no servants are home," he whispered to Joseph. Mikhail stepped away from the window, noting the spider's web stretching across the upper corner of the front doorframe. By the time Joseph returned, Mikhail was confident that the house had been vacant for some time.

"No one home," Joseph said quietly. "The house looks closed up for summer."

Mikhail removed a stiletto from his boot and began working the lock. "Then the house is ours. Go get the others."

At another time he might have been more careful with the task. He could have picked the lock, but he needed to get his family and the precious wooden box inside quickly. With a turn of his wrist he wrenched the lock from its moorings and pulled it free. A musty odor seeped from the house the moment he opened the door, but that did not stop the rush of triumph that flooded his veins as he stepped inside.

He turned to watch for the others and his heart swelled at the sight of his son helping Lady Mirela from the carriage. Mirela was not the easiest person to deal with, but his son was behaving exactly like a man should as he held his hand out to the fragile young woman descending from the carriage. His younger son was not so cautious. Lucca took a flying leap down from the carriage, tumbling to the grass on his hands and knees, but springing up with a huge grin as he was liberated from the tight confines of the carriage they had been riding in since leaving Boston. Mikhail squatted down to catch his son as Lucca came flying into his arms.

"Is this our new house?" he asked, gaping through the open front door.

"This is our *home*," Mikhail said with conviction. He set Lucca down and stood to watch Turk step carefully up the pathway, holding the wooden box as gingerly as if it were made of eggshells. Everyone was exhausted from eleven months of travel. They had traveled over the war-torn lands of the Balkans and endured weeks of misery as they crossed the Mediterranean Sea and finally the mighty Atlantic Ocean. These last few days traveling overland should have been the easiest part of the journey, but knowledge about the pending encounter kept Mikhail on edge. Now that he had taken the house so easily, half the battle had been won.

He looked Lady Mirela directly in her eyes and winced at the anxiety lurking within them. "Never again will we be driven from our land or fear marauders in the night. I will defend this home with my life. You will be safe here."

Mirela did not respond, just stood in that listless manner of hers, her deep blue eyes looking decades older than her paltry nineteen years.

"Can we go inside?" Lucca's childish voice asked.

It would soon be dark and they needed to get moved in as fast as possible. "You and Andrei go find a bedroom for the pair of you. And one for Lady Mirela as well."

Both boys scampered inside, racing up the wooden staircase that graced the front hallway. Mikhail would give his right arm if he could siphon off just a tiny fraction of their energy into Mirela's vacant spirit, but perhaps it was still too early for her. Repairing something that had been shattered into a thousand pieces would take time, but patience was not Mikhail's strong suit. If his children needed food, he would kill a stag and drag it home. If his family was cold, he would chop down a tree for wood to warm them, but the dragon tormenting Mirela could not be conquered so easily.

Mikhail's boots clomped loudly against the parquet floors as he walked into the parlor. He pulled a sheet from a high-back chair, the whisper of fabric slicing through the quiet. Dust motes swirled in the air as he tugged another sheet from a table.

Whoever lived here had strange taste. The mismatched furniture and curious portrait above the fireplace were testament to

that. The oil painting showed a thin, balding man with a fringe of wild gray hair who was staring straight out of the frame. In one hand the man held a strange contraption of disks and wheels—a gyroscope? Mikhail had heard of gyroscopes but never seen one. The wobbling disks and wheels were used for measuring momentum, but how strange to hold one in a portrait. The man's owlish eyes seemed to glow with delight as he held the gyroscope aloft and stared straight out of the portrait. Possibly the oddest picture Mikhail had ever seen.

The walls were painted a curious shade of pale green and covered with strange contraptions: an oversized compass, an assortment of maps, and something that looked like a mechanical fan.

Turk stood in the doorway, holding the small box in his mighty hands. "Turk, get that box inside and find a safe place to secure it. Stand guard over it and don't leave it for a second. Joseph and I will unload the baggage."

Three trunks, four satchels, and a single cherrywood box holding four glass vials. Aside from the house he had just claimed, these items amounted to all Mikhail had left in the world. The muscles of his shoulders bunched as he hauled a trunk from the top of the carriage. With a mighty heave he hoisted the trunk over his shoulder, shifting its weight so it sat more securely.

No, these were *not* all his worldly goods. Mikhail grinned as he trudged through the ridiculous gate, carrying his burden. The most precious things in his universe had just scampered up those steps along with Lady Mirela, who was now a part of their unconventional family. He had always liked Mirela, and now that she was under his care, he was determined to see no future tragedy would ever tarnish her luminous spirit.

As the others carried the last of the baggage inside, Mikhail stood on the porch gazing at the broadleaf trees that surrounded his house and shaded the street. The trees were some form of hawthorn, but he had never seen that precise shape of leaf. So many

things were different here in America. For one thing, in Romania he would have to chop all these trees down. It was impossible to protect a house from invaders who could skulk behind a profusion of leafy foliage and wide trunks of the trees.

A movement caught his attention. The drapes in the house across the street had just moved. The fabric pulled to the side and the curious face of an elderly woman peeked out at him. Remaining motionless, Mikhail scanned the windows in the other houses up and down the street. Only the old woman behind the drapes and a man trimming a hedge two doors down were watching him. Mikhail forced himself to relax as he adopted a negligent pose and leaned against the doorframe. He smiled and nodded at the woman, as though he had every right in the world to claim this house.

Which he did. The legal documents carefully stitched into the lining of his jacket were proof of that, and soon everyone on Winslow Street would know it. Now that they were safely in America, he would ask Lady Mirela to remove the stitching so he could have the papers ready.

When Mikhail entered the house again, he wished he had not been so hasty when he destroyed the lock on the front door. That would need to be repaired in short order. He closed the door and hauled a heavy walnut table in front of the doorway to provide a barrier overnight, then followed the sound of voices to the back of the house, where Joseph and Turk were in the kitchen. The spacious room was lined with cheerful yellow tile and white enamel equipment that stood in sharp contrast to the battle-ax, club, two hunting knives, and double-barreled shotgun his men had laid on the kitchen table.

"Where is the box?" Mikhail asked.

Without a word, Turk opened a cupboard to reveal the cherry-wood box stored safely out of sight.

"We'll take turns standing guard overnight," Mikhail said. "The neighbors have already noticed we are here."

## THE ROSE OF WINSLOW STREET

The second half of the battle would begin tomorrow, and Mikhail was under no illusions it would go as easily as the first.



Four-hundred twenty-three American dollars.

That was all he had remaining to his name after paying for use of the carriage and transportation from the port of Boston to the small town of Colden, Massachusetts. Mikhail put the money back in his billfold and slid it into a cupboard in the parlor, right beside the precious wooden box. Last night, he and his men decided to move the box to the parlor, as the risk of a fire in the kitchen was too great a hazard. The box would be safe in the parlor cupboard during the day, where it would be easy to guard, and Mikhail would take it to his bedroom each night.

Mikhail had given Joseph a few dollars to buy something to eat in the marketplace, but food was not going to be his biggest expense. He had no idea how much an American attorney would cost, but he was going to need one to secure his ownership of the house. His gaze tracked across the fine interior of the sitting room, bathed in early morning light filtering through the lace draperies. Stripped of the dustcovers, it was an extraordinary house filled with a huge array of curiosities. Whoever had been living here was going to fight to regain possession, so Mikhail could not afford to scrimp when hiring an attorney.

A clatter of footsteps sounded from the stairs, and Mikhail swept his worries aside. He lowered his voice. "Don't tell me our new house has rodents," he growled. "Who else would be up this early other than some bothersome dormouse?"

Both boys came bounding down the stairs and Lucca leapt into Mikhail's outstretched arms. At eight years old, the boy was still young enough to worship his father, and Mikhail savored every moment of Lucca's adoration. The war against the Serbs had robbed him of these years when Andrei was young, but he would never again be parted from either of his boys. He buried his smile in his son's light brown hair, the identical shade as Mikhail and Andrei.

"You know it is just me," Lucca said in Romanian.

"Yes, I do," Mikhail said slowly, carefully enunciating the English words. He had been teaching his boys the language on the tedious voyage across the sea, but he still worried Lucca might not be ready for school come September. He tilted the boy's head back so he could smile down into his face. "I love you, but you are still a bothersome mouse," he said in the same, slowly pronounced English. "I could eat you for breakfast and still be hungry."

The thud of Joseph's tread at the front door signaled his return. "I've got food," he said as he held aloft a loaf of bread and a round of cheese. Joseph ripped the bread into chunks and tossed them to the boys, who grabbed them and began tearing into them like hungry animals.

"Give me that cheese," Mikhail said. He carried it to the kitchen, but saw no proper cutting knives in plain view. He was famished and his hatchet was propped against the kitchen wall. There was a massive wooden drainboard beside the enamel sink that would serve perfectly well. Michael set the round of cheese atop it and rendered it in two perfect halves with one clean stroke of his hatchet. The boys were delighted.

Mikhail winked at them. "Do you think I can chop the rest of it into even pieces?"

"Do it, Papa! Do it!" Andrei said. A moment later he had eight perfectly split wedges of cheese. It was not until he lifted the cheese that he saw a fresh crack splitting the center of the drainboard. The force of his hatchet must have been heavier than he'd intended.

Andrei's eyes grew as round as saucers. "Are we going to get in trouble for that?"

Mikhail winced at the sight of the cracked board. The house now belonged to him, but he had no claim to the belongings and should have been more careful. Still, the damage was done and there was no undoing it. "No, boy. But from now on we will prepare our food with the proper tools."

Andrei ripped off a huge chunk of bread with his teeth. "Okay." Marie, Mikhail's late wife, would have been horrified at such manners, but fancy etiquette had never been Mikhail's strong suit. Perhaps now that Lady Mirela was living with them, they should all make an effort to become a little more civilized.

He straightened. There were many things that were going to change now that they were in America. He snapped his fingers. "Now, listen up, boys," he said in his voice that meant business. "I want you to begin calling Lady Mirela by a new name. In America, she is to be known as your aunt Mirela. Is that clear?"

Andrei furrowed his brow. "But she is not our aunt."

"She is now," Mikhail answered. He did not want to go into the complicated family history that these boys were too young to comprehend, but it was vital that the outside world perceive them as a closely knit family. "I want you to call her Aunt and forget she ever used to be known as Lady Mirela. I have already spoken with her and she agrees it is best that way. She is a part of our family now, so I think this is appropriate."

The boys seemed a little puzzled, but they would do as he directed. "And another thing," he continued. "We are Americans now, and I want to be known as Michael. It is a good name for an American."

Both children looked confused. "Mikhail is not an American name?" Andrei asked.

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "It is not as American as Michael. It is the name I wish to be known as." He tugged a lock of Andrei's hair. "Though you should still call me Papa."

"Is Lucca an American name?" his younger boy asked.

Michael thought carefully before he answered. For over a decade he had dreamed, fought, planned, and struggled to make

his way to America. In all those years he had kept a picture of this house and a tattered copy of the Gettysburg Address in his billfold to remind him what he was fighting for. He had plenty of time to envision how his life would change once he finally made it to America, but his children were still bewildered by their new world. "America is a land of immigrants," he said. "You can use a Romanian name or an American name. It is very important that a man has a name he is proud of. Lucca is a good, strong name. A saint's name."

"How do you say it in American?" Lucca asked.

Michael considered the question. "I suppose the Americans would say *Luke*." He laid his hand on his boy's head and met the child's eyes. "But this is your choice, son. You can choose to go by Lucca or you can go by Luke. They are both names any man would be proud to bear."

His son stood a little taller. "I want to be Luke."

"Luke it is, then." Michael turned his focus to Andrei, who had his arms crossed over his chest.

"I'm not changing my name," he said. "My name is Andrei and I'm not changing it just because we had to come to America."

Michael noticed the edge of belligerence in the boy's tone, but he approved. This boy was no mollycoddle who would be pressured to change his ways to suit others. He was proud his son had the power of conviction and would stick to it. "If a man feels strongly about his name, he should fight for it. Luke and I have chosen new names, but I think it is right for you to be Andrei. It is your choice."

It seemed to settle the boy down a bit, but the sound of voices from outside caught his attention. "We have company," Michael said in a low voice.

Turk and Joseph both stood and walked a little closer to the weapons, but Michael held up his hand. He could see the worry in his children's eyes and did not want them to be afraid. Darting

to the front room, Michael peered through the lace curtains. A bit of tension drained from him at the sight of two old men and a young man who barely looked old enough to shave standing on the front sidewalk.

He strode back to the kitchen. "It is likely just some neighbors, coming to say hello," Michael said to his sons. "Still, this is best handled by adults, so run upstairs and see if your aunt Mirela is awake." He tossed a piece of cheese to Andrei. "Give her this for breakfast and keep her abovestairs for now."

After the children were gone, Michael pulled on his leather jacket, briefly touching the slit where Mirela had unstitched the pocket to provide ready access to the legal documents. He peered through the flimsy drapes to scrutinize the trio standing on the walkway, indecision in their stances as they put their heads together to talk. They carried no weapons, and their light summer clothing made it unlikely they had anything of substance hidden beneath. Finally, the young one began moving in hesitant steps up the walkway, the two elders following behind.

"Stand guard over the box," Michael whispered as the footsteps thudded on the front porch. A knock on the door sounded a second later.

Michael adjusted the collar of his shirt before he answered the door. "Good morning," he said to the three men. The young one stood in front, and to Michael's surprise, the lad had a badge pinned to his shirt. Was the town of Colden so short on warriors they were recruiting boys to be sheriffs?

"Good morning," the young man said. "I am Sheriff Albert Barnes, and this is Mr. Stockdale, who lives across the street, and Mr. Auckland, the town librarian."

Michael nodded to all three. "I am pleased to meet you," he said in carefully enunciated English. He added no other comment, and the silence was broken only by a sparrow chattering in a nearby hawthorn tree. The sheriff cleared his throat, his Adam's apple bobbing on his thin neck. "And you are . . . ?"

"I am Michael Dobrescu, just arrived from Romania. I am very pleased to meet you," he said simply.

All three men appeared anxious, glancing at each other, then finally back to Michael. "Forgive me, Mr. Dobrescu," the sheriff said, "but do you have Professor Sawyer's permission to use his house? We were under the impression that it would remain vacant for the summer."

Professor Sawyer. So this was the name of the man he would be battling for ownership of the house. He forced his voice and face to remain calm, for he had no disagreement with these men. "Why would I need someone's permission to use my own house?"

The young sheriff's eyes widened and he cleared his throat again. "Professor Sawyer has owned this house for years."

Mr. Stockdale, the elderly neighbor who lived across the street, stepped forward. "The professor has lived here for twenty-three years," he said. "He moved in the year after my youngest son was born."

Michael's resolve hardened. "Then he has been a trespasser in my house for twenty-three years."

Mr. Stockdale took another step closer and peered directly into Michael's face. In particular, he scrutinized the thin scar that ran from the corner of Michael's eyebrow and down the length of his face. "Are you right in the head, man? Everyone knows this house belongs to Willard Sawyer. He raised his family here. That is his portrait hanging over the mantelpiece."

So the peculiar man holding the gyroscope was the person he would do battle with. The elderly neighbor had not stopped speaking. "The professor has lived here for twenty-three years, and I have been here thirty-one years. It was February of 1848 when I moved in, the same day the Mexican-American War ended."

Michael had not expected anyone to have lived on this street

for such a length of time, but that was all to the good. "If you have lived here that long, then perhaps you remember Constantine Dobrescu?"

Mr. Stockdale snorted. "Crazy old Cossack, of course I remember him. The man planted corn and potatoes in the front yard. Strangest man I ever knew. Professor Sawyer bought this house after the old Cossack died."

"That is not possible," Michael said calmly. He extracted the papers from his pocket and held them aloft. "That crazy old Cossack was my uncle and he left this property to me. These papers prove that. This house is mine."

Michael knew he sounded blunt, but his English was not good enough to express it any better. His own homeland was no longer a suitable place to live, and he had access to a perfectly good house in America. No longer would his sons or Lady Mirela live under the cloud of warfare, not if there was a safe place for them in America.

Mr. Auckland, the town's librarian, rubbed his chin. "Come to think of it, I remember this house falling to pieces after the old Cossack died. The yard went to ruin and the gutters were falling from the roof. The town had the house declared a nuisance."

Recollection bloomed on the neighbor's face. "You're right. It was a disaster. Professor Sawyer had to spend a fortune setting the place to rights again."

Michael's eyes narrowed. The fact that the professor spent a considerable sum to repair the house did not bode well. It was a complication, but one he would overcome. "The wonderful thing about America is your legal system," Michael said. "I have long admired your courts, and I believe the U.S. Constitution to be the greatest document ever written by human hands." He replaced the copy of his uncle's will in his breast pocket and laid his hand over it. "I have researched the law in America and know I am entitled to this house. I am prepared to let the courts review the evidence

## ELIZABETH CAMDEN

and accept their decision. Until then, I bid you a good day," he said as he closed the door in their bewildered faces.

Michael did not move a muscle until he heard the footsteps of the three men retreat from the door and descend the steps.

Turk's voice came from behind him. "They will be back soon." Grim resolve hardened Michael's features. "I know."



All apothecary shops had a distinct odor, and not a particularly good one, but Liberty Sawyer savored the scent because it meant she was buying supplies for her paints. Ready-mixed paints were an option, but there was something about grinding her own pigments and mixing them with solvent and glycerin to coax out the perfect shade of color that soothed her. Some people dreamed of buried treasure or handsome princes—Libby dreamed of watercolors.

When they arrived on St. Catherine's Island last month, she thought she had mixed enough paint to last for the summer, but in recent weeks swarms of neighborhood children had taken to following her about the island and she could not resist letting the little ones dabble in her paints. No sooner had she selected a subject to paint and set up her easel than the children began to find her. Sometimes they simply watched her, other times she gave them the brushes and encouraged them to experiment. Was there anything more dazzling than watching a child discover the beauty of the world? The summer was her best season for painting because the rest of the year was consumed with helping her father on his mechanical designs. The professor never allowed children in their house on Winslow Street for fear they might damage one of his

contraptions, but on the island Libby could enjoy the children's natural exuberance as they spattered paint and created outrageous color combinations.

Libby's gaze tracked across the bottles lined up on the apothecary's shelves, her expert eye for color and texture honing in on exactly what she needed. She held one of the jars to the light and wiggled it, knowing that gum arabic had a slightly different viscosity than gum karaya.

"Libby? Liberty Sawyer?"

Libby whirled around to see elderly Mr. Alger approaching her, pleased surprise on his face. "I had not expected to see you here, but perfect... perfect!" he exclaimed. "My roses are dying and I don't know what to do."

Libby set the jar of gum arabic back on the shelf. A few years ago, Mr. Alger had admired one of Libby's paintings of the fabulous double-blooming Gallica roses she grew at her house on Winslow Street and she had supplied him with cuttings. Gallica roses were famous for their opulent display of petals, but they could be as finicky as a young girl preening for compliments. It was no surprise that Mr. Alger was having trouble with them in this beachside climate.

"What seems to be the problem?" she asked kindly. After all, she was flattered Mr. Alger had asked for cuttings from her mother's garden. She loved that rose garden so much it was hard to tear herself away each summer to go to the beach house. After her mother died, no one else shared Libby's intense interest in the world of plants, so she was thrilled when Mr. Alger asked for the cuttings.

"They have looked peaked for weeks, so I added a little more fertilizer to the soil. It didn't seem to help, and now I have tiny white insects clinging to the underside of the leaves."

Libby bit the side of her thumb, contemplating the problem. With the sandy soil on the island, roses needed a massive amount of fertilizer, but it was possible Mr. Alger had overdone it. "What did you use in your fertilizer mix?" she asked.

Then Mr. Alger did the most humiliating thing he could do to Libby. He removed a small slip of paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and handed it to her. "Here is the recipe. The apothecary recommended it, but perhaps you know something better?"

Libby stared at the page. The letters wavered and jumped before she could make any sense of them. Mr. Alger was waiting for her answer, but instead of a kindly old man, it felt like her father was looming over her, berating her in that harsh voice. Heat broke out across her body and an itchy sensation prickled beneath her dress, but Libby forced herself to concentrate on the list. She knew the likely chemicals that would appear in a fertilizer recipe, so she narrowed her eyes and stared hard, trying to recognize a single word among the flickering, jumpy letters.

At twenty-eight years old, Liberty Sawyer would rather walk down the street stark naked than admit to her illiteracy. Everyone in her hometown of Colden had been witness to her colossal failures in grammar school, but no one on St. Catherine's Island knew. Why couldn't one of those tidy apothecary jars tip over and conveniently burst into flame? Anything to divert attention from her inability to make sense of the neatly printed list in her hand. Her heartbeat thumped so hard she was certain Mr. Alger could hear it as he looked at her with expectation.

"Can I help you?" Peter Davidson, the apothecary, asked as he stepped forward. Libby breathed a sigh of relief and passed the list to him. "Mr. Alger reports that his roses are still ailing. Now they are suffering from aphids as well."

Who would have guessed that her salvation would come in the form of a balding, bespectacled apothecary? The fist squeezing her heart eased and her body resumed its normal temperature.

"I suppose you might add more phosphate to the mix," the apothecary said after studying the list. He continued to outline suggestions for the fertilizer, but had no idea what to do to discourage the aphids.

"Try a little garlic oil," Libby suggested. "Spray it on the roses on a cool morning. It will stink for a few hours, but the aphids hate it."

Mr. Alger thanked them and purchased the necessary supplies. Libby continued to walk down the shelves, ignoring the labels on the glass jars and picking out what she needed based on the item's shade, texture, and scent. She was accustomed to the adjustments her illiteracy inflicted on her and made her purchases without difficulty.

One of these days her mortifying secret would probably be discovered by the people of St. Catherine's Island, and when it happened, there would be a subtle shift in their attitude toward her. The invisible walls would be erected, the bewildered shaking of heads and whispering behind hands would begin. Such a clever girl, they would murmur. Why did she never apply herself in school? More than her next breath of air, Libby longed to be a normal woman who could have a family and children who would fling their chubby arms around her despite her flaws.

It would never happen. No doctor could promise Libby that her children would not inherit her mental defect, so it was wiser to lavish her love on the children who flocked around her in the neighborhood. Libby stepped outside into the cloudless May morning, knowing it would be a perfect day for painting. Last evening, the tide had washed ashore a fabulous specimen of driftwood she ached to paint. The twisty, craggy striations that arched across the surface of the silvery wood were a marvel of the Lord's work. How curious that sometimes objects became more beautiful as they weathered the storms and traumas of the world. What caused some wood to rot and decay into nothing, while other pieces of wood became burnished, splendid, and tougher under the relentless assault of the pounding ocean current?

Whatever the answer, Libby would celebrate the spectacular piece of driftwood by capturing its image in watercolor. If a handful of the island's children interrupted her, so be it. She would share her paints and try to teach them to see the splendor in the humble piece of driftwood.

If her artist's eye had given her nothing else, it taught her to see beauty where few others noticed it.



Michael moved from room to room, assessing the strange contents of the house and trying to learn something about Professor Willard Sawyer.

All Michael could conclude was that a crazy man had been living there. The house was stuffed with oddities. Measuring scales, telescopes, and gadgets littered the home. On a table where most people would have placed a vase of flowers, the professor had a contraption that seemed designed to automatically sharpen pencils. All those levers, flywheels, and pulleys to sharpen a pencil? But when he pulled a lever, a whir of clicking sounds triggered the machine to life and loaded up one pencil after another for sharpening.

In the middle of the formal dining room sat a bizarre pedaled contraption with cables connecting it to a fan encased behind a wire cage. Turk was fascinated and settled his huge frame into the chair to pedal the fan to life. Luke stood beside it and laughed as the cool breeze lifted his hair. The house had a personality, there was no disputing that, but the only thing that really bothered Michael was hanging in a closet in an upstairs bedroom.

A woman lived here. The wardrobe was filled with dresses and neatly arranged ladies' shoes. He felt bad about dispossessing the people who lived here, as they had taken care of the house and felt entitled to it, but it was business and it needed to be done. A man would be able to understand that. Women were far more fragile, and if there was one thing Michael could not bear, it was a woman's tears. Seeing the telltale rim of moisture pooling at the bottom of a woman's eyes was all it took to make him helpless. When a woman's voice wobbled with impending tears, all his extravagant

strength and courage collapsed like a withered leaf in a gust of autumn wind. This had made living with Lady Mirela these past few months a particular challenge.

"Papa, come look!" Andrei's voice beckoned him from the home's library. He had told Andrei to search for some books that were written for children. As much as he would like to find some simple reading material for his boys to practice their English, he dreaded discovering anything that would indicate a child lived in this home. Men became fierce when protecting the security of their children, and he prayed Professor Sawyer had none. He strode to the room that was entirely covered with bookshelves.

"Look what we found under the sofa!" His boys were sprawled on the floor, and between them lay an oversized painting, a florid botanical painting unlike anything Michael had seen before.

"Is it real?" Luke asked. The silvery green petals were lush as they unfurled across the parchment, surrounding a huge saffron bloom so lifelike it looked three-dimensional. Another bud in the lower corner of the plant was still closed but on the verge of blooming. Any moment he expected those ripe petals to break away from the bud and animate the page.

"It's not real," he said, still fascinated by the painting. Unbidden, his hand reached out to touch one of the leaves. He almost expected to feel the velvety flesh of a leaf, so exquisitely had the tiny silver hairs been layered atop the mossy green density of the leaf. Some of the leaves curled away to show a delicate tracery of veins stretching across their underside.

"Can I touch it too?" Andrei asked.

Michael withdrew his hand and shook his head. "Paintings do not like to be handled, and I should not have touched it. We must be very careful with this, as whoever owns it must treasure it very much."

Although it was completely vulnerable beneath that sofa. There was no matting or frame to protect the heavy parchment. Luke

twisted around and poked his head beneath the sofa. "There are more of them under here. Come look."

Michael dropped to his hands and knees and saw the stack, of which only a few were framed. Using as much care as his large hands could manage, he slid the stack out into the light of day.

"Wow," Andrei whispered as he looked at the painting on the top of the stack. A profusion of herbs sprawled forth in a riot across the page. This painting was even more fabulous than the one before. At first glance Michael thought it seemed like a tangle of green herbs, but closer inspection revealed tones of purple, silver, and blue tingeing the leaves. There were soft fleshy petals of thyme, waxy needles of rosemary, and the serrated edges of spearmint. So lifelike was the painting he almost expected the pungent scent of herbs to seep from the page.

The paintings were unsigned, but whoever the artist was, Michael knew he would like the man. The artist had more than artistic talent. It was obvious he had an affinity for the botanical world, and Michael recognized a kindred spirit. He lifted the painting of the herbs to reveal a bloom as elegantly executed as the others. Vibrant burnt-orange petals filled the page in an opulent display.

"What is that flower called?" Luke asked.

"I don't know," Michael admitted. "Many of the plants in America will be different from what we are used to back home."

"I like these pictures," Luke said. "Let's take down the picture of the scary old man and put up one of these instead."

It was not a bad idea. Michael disliked looking at Professor Sawyer every time he entered the parlor, the man's blank stare as he held the strange gyroscope a constant reminder of the family he was evicting. Michael picked up a framed painting of a spectacular amaryllis. "Let's hang this one up over the fireplace," he said. "Slide the others back under the sofa and keep your hands off them. Grubby boys and fancy parchment are not a good mix."

He lifted the picture gently, knowing that he must not damage

anything in the house. He still felt bad about the drainboard he had cracked while cleaving the cheese into pieces, but it had been worth it to see the delight in his boys' eyes. He had been showing off his skill with the hatchet, which was stupid, but it felt good to be a family again. For a few hours that morning he had felt like a normal man waking up in his home and sharing a laugh with his children. He had been only twenty-four when Andrei was born, but the war meant he rarely had a chance to enjoy the simple pleasures most men probably took for granted. Now, at thirty-six, Michael would finally learn what it was like to be a normal father who did not have to fear separation from his children ever again.

He took down the portrait of Professor Sawyer and gave it to Andrei to hold.

"What are you doing?" Mirela asked from the far side of the room. She had been there all this time and no one even noticed her.

"Just swapping this picture out for a better one," he said.

"And Joseph and Turk? Where are they?" Sometimes it was hard to tell if Mirela was being bossy or if she was afraid. Or, most likely, a combination of the two. Had there ever been a woman with such a unique combination of kindness and autocratic will-power as Mirela?

"I sent them to town for supplies," he said. "I have discovered an old greenhouse in the backyard. It is in disrepair, but it can be fixed and brought back into service."

Mirela's eyes narrowed. She had the exact same shade of stormy blue eyes as Michael, but that was where the resemblance ended. Mirela's skin was like ivory and her hair a glossy black sheen she brushed a hundred strokes each night. "Michael, please don't make any more changes to this house. We can't afford it, and a greenhouse is a luxury."

He shook his head. "We need that greenhouse. I will be able to plant the seeds I brought from Romania. Too much of our fortune is wrapped up in those seeds to be careless with them, and the greenhouse is a godsend."

Andrei looked at him curiously. "Why can't we just plant them in the ground? Why do they need a greenhouse?"

Michael cast a wary glance out the window. It was a hot, humid day in late May, but autumn was coming and he knew the winters of New England would be harsher than anything they had known in Romania. "Our seedlings will be too young to survive the winter without a little help. A greenhouse can do that for them."

Mirela sank down onto an oversized leather chair. She looked as fragile as a porcelain doll as she was enveloped by the carved sides of the wing-back chair, but she smiled a bit as she curled her legs beneath her like a little girl. "I'm sure you'll take good care of your plants, Michael. Just like you look after all of us. I wish I could do more to help."

He swung his head in her direction, looking for any trace that she might be on the verge of breaking down. In the last few months, Mirela had finally regained a semblance of normalcy, but every day had been a struggle. On the ship across the ocean she had been forced into close proximity with hundreds of strangers, but she never once complained, even though she sometimes clenched her fists until her knuckles went white.

"You *have* helped us," Michael asserted. "Look at how quickly the boys are learning English now that you have been teaching them."

"You don't have to say that just to make me feel good," she said. It was true that Mirela had been a burden since the day she fled to his house last year, but considering the type of life she had been born to lead, her courage in following them into the unknown was extraordinary. Still, the hopeless tone in Mirela's voice was obvious, and Michael rubbed the ridge of the scar that marred his cheek, wondering what life would have been like for Mirela had she chosen to remain in Europe. He pivoted and strode to kneel down beside her chair. His voice was low but firm.

"Stop saying you are not helpful to us," he said. "You complete our family merely by existing. We would be a pack of barnyard animals if you were not here to keep us in line." She dropped her gaze as though she did not believe him, which was maddening because Mirela was the finest person he had ever known.

He grabbed her hand, imploring her to look at him. "Mirela, you were two weeks old the first time I saw you. I remember when your baby carriage was wheeled into the garden. You wore the most extravagant baby gown I've ever seen, with little pearls and lace covering every inch. The sun was shining and your tiny face was squeezed up like you were sucking a lemon, but for me, it was love at first sight. From that moment I would have stepped in front of a stampeding cavalry for you. You are the reason men fight battles and write symphonies. We *need* you, Mirela."

And for the first time in almost a year, when tears started to pool in the bottom of Mirela's eyes, they were tears of happiness. How many months had he watched Mirela wobble on the thin edge between reason and despair? If she could pull through this suffocating wall of despondency, Mirela's true spirit would emerge like a piece of white hot metal that had been tempered and strengthened by the firestorm she had endured. "You belong with us," he said with conviction. "You are my sister. We are a family, and we are *home*."

Two fat tears grew larger and spilled down Mirela's cheeks as she traced a finger down the scar on Michael's face. "I never really felt like I had a family until you took me in," she said in a fragile voice. "All of you have been so kind to me. I could not ask for a better family."

Michael swallowed hard against the tug in his throat and a suspicious sting behind his eyes. If this sentimental talk did not stop, he was going to be un-manned in front of his boys. He gave Mirela's hand a good shaking. "Tell me I am the best brother you have eyer had."

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She gave a watery gulp of laughter. "That is certainly true!" "The most handsome too."

A glint of humor showed in her eyes. "Dearest Michael, I am afraid you are now pushing things."

And Michael breathed a sigh of relief. For now, Mirela was back on an even keel.