

NOVEMBER 11, 1944

Alta Pulaski covered her husband and son's dinner of *halushki* and *rogale* for dessert with a dishtowel and set it on the kitchen table with a note: *Gone up the hill for a bit*. Walter was at work underground, and Abel—who would be thirteen in two weeks but was already as tall as a man and ready to be one—was going rabbit hunting with his friends. She tied a green woolen scarf around her pinned hair, still short while other women had started to let theirs grow longer to contrast the war rationing and the somber mood of the day. She gathered up her metal paint box and an empty Ball jar, and closed the rattletrap back door with a slam on the heavy scent of butter noodles and cabbage for the bracing quarter mile hike.

All the way up she thought of her painting. She'd started it already, rendering individual leaves on dampened paper—red and yellow sassafras, scarlet-orange hornbeam, bright yellow witch hazel, rust and crimson oaks. She loved translating the scents and colors of leaves into textures. Dry brush, stippling, a dash of salt from her kitchen, a scratch of veins into wet paint with a bobby pin pulled from against her temple. To make it seem more real, she used water from the mountain brook near her secluded perch. Used dry leaves from the ground for blotting.

Her mind had long forgotten her girlhood fantasies of the forest beyond the southern coalfields of West Virginia. Instead, she focused on the trees.

A hush of early November wind inclined them toward her, as though they were watching their own portrait appear limned in watercolor on the home-stretched paper she held on her lap. Among the prattle and gush of the leaves and water, she could hardly

discern any other sounds. Small animals moving through foliage, returning to whatever they knew as home in the low, flattering light; katydids and tree crickets tuning their wings for their evening love serenades. It all blended into a cool-white rush of noise that lulled her into that part of herself that was neither dutiful wife nor artist but essential to both. There was no way she would have heard the slow footfalls of heavy boots that stopped a maple tree shadow's length behind her.

John Esposito had trudged up the mountain with his mind occupied by the burden of bachelorhood, and with a rocking chair slung across his shoulders. Going home to Myrthen wasn't like going home at all, so he'd decided find someplace else to call his own—a place where he could escape and paint and, when Myrthen's house was ready and he could stop paying rent to Blackstone Coal for the house they'd shared for almost fourteen years, a place where he could live.

His uncle, long dead now, had built a double-barrel shotgun shack on a hill in Whisper Hollow shortly after the Eighteenth Amendment forbade the sale of liquor. The uncle had happily abandoned his pickaxe and crept into the forest, making a three-stage still out of sheets of copper, putting up corn mash and running whiskey until he died one day under the full, hot sun. He'd built the cabin out of white pine logs, and added a porch, and it might have been a fine place to live except for the stench of the moonshine that seeped into the wood. The years and the wind had blown that nearly all away though, and now John was filling it up, carrying things over one at a time, away from any idle, prying eyes on the low side of the mountain.

The cabin loomed in the near distance. The sweet, fecund scent of red and yellow leaves crushed underfoot swirled around him as he stood, abruptly stopped, rooted like an oak, then swaying, gently, like a willow. There, sitting on a maple stump, was a woman.

Alta's back was to him, lithe and strong and bent over her paper. She sat on the severed tree stump with her tray of paint next to her. He could see, barely, the picture emerging on her lap. He saw it like a song, felt it like a scent: a moment of recognition stretched into knowing in the amount of time it took for him to realize that the chair slung across his shoulders was beginning to dig. Still he didn't move. He held his breath and watched her dip her brush into the jar of mountain water and scrub it into the paint and move it across the emerging tumult of leaves that was somehow more real than the landscape beyond her.

She put down her brush and straightened up. She tilted her face to the wind and—he imagined—closed her eyes. She stretched her shoulder blades back like a butterfly flexing its wings, and moved her head from side to side, releasing something as each ear approached a narrow shoulder. Then she untied the scarf from underneath her chin, balled it, and wiped it across her brow.

Within that fragile, infinite moment that she tossed the dark green wool onto the ground beside the stump and picked up her brush again, he knew somehow his life would be forever changed.

His eyes still on her back, he slowly he let the chair slide down one shoulder and drop to the ground. The sound it made was blown behind him by the wind, and Alta evidently didn't notice the thump of its weight or the scattering of leaves under the rockers. She bent back over her painting and appeared from behind to be completely

absorbed in her work. John didn't want to disturb her, but nor did he want to leave, so he eased himself down into the chair and leaned back to watch and to wait.

Something about her looked familiar, but without being able to see her face, he didn't know who she was. Her long arms and neck, the elegant and sure way she moved, the graceful stillness she seemed to possess when she didn't all seemed vaguely reminiscent, perhaps from the time he spent in London and Paris when he was in the Army. He'd seen something similar in those elegant women lounging in bistro chairs at outdoor cafes or strolling along the Thames and the Seine and Montmartre in the evenings. But he'd seen none of them toss a sweaty scarf onto the ground and hunch over a stretch of paper and imitate life into art the way he, himself, would do. He'd kept his own desire to paint a secret from his father, who saw no purpose in and had no use for such idle distractions, and later, out of habit or perhaps a lingering sense of shame, from almost everybody else as well. Myrthen had known, of course, but she, too, had always seen it as pointless, and although she didn't say it out loud, had been given to heavy sighs whenever he spread out his oil paints across the kitchen table to work.

He took a deep, cool breath and closed his eyes, briefly, after a zephyr blew gently into his face, which lingered like a kiss and made him relax against the four lumbar slats at his back. When he opened his eyes again, he saw the figure of Alta, still bent, only her hand moving with the tiny strokes of her brush. There was an inexplicable comfort to that, seeing her upon opening his eyes. He tried it again. Closed his eyes against the breeze, longer this time, allowing himself to breathe—more deeply than he typically did, he realized—listening to the faint rush of stream in the distance, the leaves. Then he opened them, and there she was, still, again. He smiled. When he closed his eyes

once more, he kept them that way for some time, rocking and listening and absorbing and enjoying and relaxing until everything he'd been carrying—both on his shoulders and in his mind—had tumbled down onto the downy, leaf-covered mountain and left him to fall into a deep and peaceful sleep.

A moment later, or so it seemed, he awoke, smacking away the stickiness in his mouth and opening first one eye and then the other. He blinked quickly, remembering what his eyes sought upon opening, and saw the tree stump on which she'd been sitting. But she wasn't there. *No!* He sat up straight, toward the end of the seat, gripping the sculpted arms of the rocking chair. There was the impulse to run after her, but his sleep-washed mind was slow to decide in which direction. Then, from his right, he heard her voice:

“You sound like a bear when you sleep.”

She was sitting down, Indian-style, with her palms pressed onto the ground behind her. Her head was tilted to one side in a reflective way, and a distant smile occupied her mouth. “I heard this terrible roar and turned around. I thought it was a bear. But it was just a man, asleep in a rocking chair in the middle of the woods.”

He thought her eyes looked the color of a sea after a storm, and just as powerful.

“How long have I been out?”

“Well, I've been watching you for about twelve minutes,” she said, looking at her watch—a men's model from the 1930s that had belonged to her Uncle Punk. “No telling how long you were out before that.”

“I tend to fall asleep quickly.”

“And snore like an animal.”

“Will that bother you?”

Her eyes widened and her eyebrows lifted. A second passed, and she let them slide back down into place, pressed her lips together, then bit the right side of her lower lip, trying to anchor a smile. But it drifted out to the sides of her face anyway, and the calm sea of her eyes sparkled with the setting sun, and she said, “No.”

They looked at each other like that for a long moment, strangers approaching something from opposite directions, moving quietly with their gazes locked. The wind blew at them, cooler now, and she tilted her head toward it, tucking a short piece of her light brown hair behind her ear. A shadow lengthened between them. Finally he spoke.

“I know you,” he said.

She smiled again. “Yes,” she said. “You do.”

She leaned forward off her hands and dusted them together. She extended the right one toward him. “I’m Alta,” she said. “How do you do?” And he leaned toward her from the edge of the chair, and slid his hand against hers until the webs met. Her palm was as warm and dry as the leaves drifting like vermillion snowflakes from above, and she held his as firmly as she did his gaze.

“I know,” he said. “And I’m John.”

A slow smile lifted her mouth. “I know.”

Finally, she let his hand go. She looked up the hill toward the abandoned cabin, the direction in which he’d been going. “That cabin yours now?”

He nodded.

“That chair will be nice on the porch. Faces the sunset. Are you moving in?”

“In a sense,” he said. He might’ve offered more, but he hardly knew her. He could’ve said he was separated and was making an old uncle’s cabin into his own permanent residence, but instead he said, “I’m a painter, too.” It was the first time he’d ever called himself one aloud, although he’d been doing it for two decades, had spent countless spare change on supplies, had a stash of drawings and paintings in a flat box beneath his bed.

She tilted her head again, as if to regard him from another perspective. Then she stood up and dusted off the seat of her wool trousers.

“I need to go. My husband’s waiting.”

“Wait,” he said. But she had started already toward the tree stump. He stood up and followed, watched her empty the now dark and cloudy water from the jar, shake out her brush and place it back into the metal box. She touched the surface of her painting lightly, testing. Satisfied, she rolled it into a loose tube. Then picked up her scarf and, despite the chill that had come down the mountain and settled around them, tucked it along with the paint box under her arm. She turned back toward him, stood with her free hand on her hip.

They faced each other, almost the same impressive height, like saplings among the mature trees.

“Come see me,” he said.

“What about your wife? You’re still married, I suppose?”

“Barely.”

“Myrthen is her name, I recall.”

“She won’t know,” he said. “Probably wouldn’t care anyways.”

“I’m married,” she said. “I have a son. He’s twelve.”

“I’m sure we’ll get along famously.” A spray of fine lines fanned out from the corners of his eyes when he smiled. “How about you just come and paint? I’ll even get another chair.”

She bit her lip again. “Someday,” she said.

“Soon,” he countered.

She smiled again, faintly, and nodded. Then she turned and began the short hike down the mountain, back to her husband and son.