

Biltmore Estate
Asheville, North Carolina
1899

Chapter 1

Serafina opened her eyes and scanned the darkened workshop, looking for any rats stupid enough to come into her territory while she slept. She knew they were out there, just beyond her nightly range, crawling in the cracks and shadows of the great house's sprawling basement, keen to steal whatever they could from the kitchens and storerooms. She had spent most of the day napping in her favorite out-of-the-way places, but it was here, curled up on the old mattress behind the rusty boiler in the protection of the workshop, that she felt most at home. Hammers, wrenches, and gears hung down from the roughhewn beams, and the familiar smell of machinery oil filled the air. Her first thought as she looked around her and listened out into the reaching darkness was that it felt like a good night for hunting.

Her pa, who had worked on the construction of Biltmore Estate years before and had lived in the basement without permission ever since, lay sleeping on the cot he'd secretly built behind the supply racks. Embers glowed in the old metal barrel over which he had cooked their dinner of chicken and grits a few hours before. They had huddled around the cook fire for warmth as they ate. As usual, she had eaten the chicken but left the grits.

"Eat your supper," her pa had grumbled.

"Did," she had answered, setting down her half-empty tin plate.

"Your whole supper," he said, pushing the plate toward her, "or you're never gonna get any bigger than a little shoat."

Her pa likened her to a skinny baby pig when he wanted to get a rise out of her, figuring she'd get so furious with him that she'd wolf those nasty grits down her throat despite herself.

"I'm not gonna eat the grits, Pa," she said, smiling a little, "no matter how many times you put 'em in front of me."

"They ain't nothin' but ground-up corn, girl," he said, poking at the fire with a stick. "Everybody and his uncle likes corn 'cept you."

“You know I can’t stomach anything green or yellow or disgusting like that, Pa, so quit hollering at me.”

“If I was a-hollerin’, you’d know it,” he said, shoving his poker stick into the fire.

By and by, they soon forgot about the grits and went on to talk about something else.

It made Serafina smile to think about her dinner with her father. She couldn’t imagine much else in the world—except maybe sleeping in the warmth of one of the basement’s small, sunlit windows—that was finer than a bit of banter with her pa.

Careful not to wake him, she slinked off her mattress, padded across the workshop’s gritty stone floor, and snuck out into the winding passageway. While still rubbing the sleep out of her eyes and stretching out her arms and legs, she couldn’t help but feel a trace of excitement. The tantalizing sensation of starting a brand-new night tingled through her body. She felt her muscles and her senses coming alive, as if she were an owl stirring its wings and flexing its talons before it flies off for its ghostly hunt.

She moved quietly through the darkness, past the laundry rooms, pantries, and kitchens. The basement had been bustling with servants all day, but the rooms were empty now, and dark, just the way she liked them. She knew that the Vanderbilts and their many guests were sleeping on the second and third floors above her, but here it was quiet. She loved to prowl through the endless corridors and shadowed storage rooms. She knew the touch and feel, the glint and gloom, of every nook and cranny. This was *her* domain at night and hers alone.

She heard a faint slithering just ahead. The night was beginning quickly.

She stopped. She listened.

Two doors down, the scrabbling of tiny feet on bare floor.

She crept forward along the wall.

When the sound stopped, she stopped as well. When the sound resumed, she crept forward once more. It was a technique she’d taught herself by the age of seven: move when they’re moving, stay still when they’re still.

Now she could hear the creatures breathing, the scratching of their toenails on the stone, and the dragging of their tails. She felt the familiar trembling in her fingers and the tightness in her legs.

She slipped through the half-opened door into the storeroom and saw them in the darkness: Two huge rats covered in greasy, brown fur had slithered one by one up through the drainpipe in the floor. The rats were scavenging around a pile of old, mold-covered rose trellises strangled with dead vines. The intruders were obviously newcomers, foolishly scrounging for cockroaches when they could’ve been slurping custard off the fresh-baked pastries just down the hall.

Without making a sound or even disturbing the air, she stalked slowly toward the rats. Her eyes focused on them. Her ears picked up every sound they made. She could

even smell their foul sewer stench. All the while, they went about their rotten, ratty business and had no idea she was there.

She stopped just a few feet behind them, hidden in the blackness of a shadow, poised for the leap. This was the moment she loved, the moment just before she lunged. Her body swayed slightly back and forth, tuning her angle of attack. Then she pounced. In one quick, explosive movement, she grabbed the squealing, writhing rats with her bare hands.

“Gotcha, ya nasty varmints!” she hissed.

The smaller rat squirmed in terror, desperate to get away, but the larger one twisted around and bit her hand.

“There’ll be none of that!” she snarled, clamping the rat’s neck firmly between her finger and thumb.

The rats wriggled wildly, but she kept a good, hard hold on them and wouldn’t let them go. It had taken her a while to learn that lesson when she was younger, that once you had them, you had to squeeze hard and hold on, no matter what, even if their little claws scratched you and their scaly tails curled around your hand like some sort of nasty, gray snake.

Finally, after several seconds of vicious struggling, the exhausted rats realized they couldn’t escape her. They went still and stared suspiciously at her with their beady, black eyes. Their sniveling little noses and wickedly long whiskers vibrated with fear. The rat who’d bit her slowly slithered his long, scaly tail around her wrist, wrapping it two times, searching for new advantage to pry himself free.

“Don’t even try it,” she warned him. Still bleeding from his bite, she was in no mood for his ratty schemes. She’d been bitten before, but she never did like it much.

Carrying the grisly beasts in her clenched fists, she took them down the passageway. It felt good to get two rats before midnight, and they were particularly ugly characters, the kind that would chew straight through a burlap sack to get at the grain inside or knock eggs off the shelf so they could lick the mess from the floor.

She climbed the old stone stairs that led outside, then walked across the moonlit grounds of the estate all the way to the edge of the forest. There she hurled the rats into the leaves. “Now get on outta here, and don’t come back!” she shouted at them. “I won’t be so nice next time!”

The rats tumbled across the forest floor with the force of her fierce throw then came to a trembling stop, expecting a killing blow. When it didn’t come, they turned and looked up at her in astonishment.

“Get goin’ before I change my mind,” she said.

Hesitating no longer, the rats scurried into the underbrush.

There had been a time when the rats she caught weren’t so lucky, when she’d leave their bodies next to her pa’s bed to show him her night’s work, but she hadn’t done that in a coon’s age.

Ever since she was a youngin, she'd studied the men and women who worked in the basement and knew that each one had a particular job. It was her father's responsibility to fix the elevators, dumbwaiters, window gears, steam heating systems, and all of the other mechanical contraptions on which the two-hundred-and-fifty-room mansion depended. He even made sure the pipe organ in the Grand Banquet Hall worked properly for Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt's fancy balls. Besides her pa, there were cooks, kitchen maids, coal shovelers, chimney sweeps, laundry women, pastry makers, housemaids, footmen, and countless others.

When she was ten years old, she had asked, "Do I have a job like everyone else, Pa?"

"Of course ya do," he said, but she suspected that it wasn't true. He just didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"What is it? What's my job?" she pressed him.

"It's actually an extremely important position around here, and there ain't no one who does it better than you, Sera."

"Tell me, Pa. What is it?"

"I reckon you're Biltmore Estate's C.R.C."

"What's that mean?" she asked in excitement.

"You're the Chief Rat Catcher," he said.

However the words were intended, they emblazoned themselves in her mind. She remembered even now, two years later, how her little chest had swelled and how she had smiled with pride when he'd said those words: Chief Rat Catcher. She had liked the sound of that. Everyone knew that rodents were a big problem in a place like Biltmore with all its sheds and shelves and barns and whatnot. And it was true that she had shown a natural-born talent for snatching the cunning, food-stealing, dropping-leaving, disease-infested, four-legged vermin that so eluded the adult folk with their crude traps and poisons. Mice, which were timid and prone to panic-induced mistakes at key moments, were no trouble at all for her to catch. Voles were pudden-headed and easily tricked. And, of course, moles were known for their slowness of foot. It was the rats that gave her the scamper each night, and it was on the rats that she had honed her skills. She was twelve years old now. And that was who she was: Serafina, C.R.C.

But as she watched the two rats run into the forest, a strange and powerful feeling took hold of her. She wanted to follow them. She wanted to see what they saw beneath leaf and twig, to explore the rocks and dells, the streams and wonders. But her pa had forbidden her.

"Never go into the forest," he had told her many times. "There are dark forces there that no one understands, things that ain't natural and can do ya wicked harm."

She stood at the edge of the forest and looked as far as she could into the trees. For years, she'd heard stories of people who got lost in the forest and never returned. She

wondered what dangers lurked there. Was it black magic, demons, or some sort of heinous beasts? What was her pa so afraid of?

She wanted to go, but she didn't. She never did. She might bandy back and forth with her pa about all sorts of things just for the jump of it—like how she refused to eat her grits, slept all day and hunted all night, and spied on the Vanderbilts and their guests—but she never argued about this. She knew when he said those words he was as serious as her dead momma. For all the spiny talk and all the sneak-about, sometimes you just stayed quiet and did what you were told because you sensed it was a good way to keep breathing.

Feeling strangely lonesome, she turned away from the forest and gazed back at the estate. The moon rose above the steeply pitched slate roofs of the house and reflected in the panes of glass that domed the Winter Garden. The stars sparkled above the mountains. The grass and trees and flowers of the beautiful, manicured grounds glowed in the midnight light. She could see every detail, every toad and snail and all the other creatures of the night. A lone mockingbird sang its evening song from a magnolia tree. The baby hummingbirds, tucked into their tiny nest amongst the climbing wisteria, rustled in their sleep. The roses and azaleas lay quiet tonight, the fireflies luminescing above them.

It lifted her chin a bit to think that her pa had helped build all this. He'd been one of the hundreds of stonemasons, woodcarvers, and other craftsmen who had come to Asheville from the surrounding mountains to construct Biltmore Estate years before. He had stayed on to maintain the machinery. But when all the other basement workers went home to their families each night, he and Serafina hid among the steaming pipes and metal tools in the workshop like stowaways in the engine room of a great ship. The truth was they had no place else to go, no kin to go home to. Whenever she asked about her momma, her father refused to talk about her. So, there wasn't anyone else besides her and her pa, and they'd made the basement their home for as long as she could remember.

"How come we don't live in the servants quarters or in town like the other workers, Pa?" she had asked many times.

"Never ya mind about that," he grumbled in reply.

Over the years, her pa had taught her how to read and write pretty well, and told her plenty of stories about the world, but he was never too keen on talking about what she wanted to talk about, which was what was going on deep down in his heart, and what happened to her momma, and why she didn't have any brothers and sisters, and why she and her pa didn't have any friends who came 'round to call. Sometimes, she wanted to reach down inside him and shake him up inside to see what would happen, but most of the time her pa just slept all night, and worked all day, and cooked their dinner in the evening, and told her stories, and they had a pretty good life, the two of

them, and she didn't shake him because she knew he didn't want to be shook, so she just let him be.

At night, when everyone else in the house went to sleep, she crept upstairs and snatched books to read in the moonlight. She'd overheard the butler boast to a visiting writer that Mr. Vanderbilt had collected twenty-two thousand books, only half of which fit in the Library Room. The others were stored on tables and shelves throughout the house, and to Serafina, these were like Juneberries ripe for the picking, too tempting to resist. No one seemed to notice when a book went missing and was back in its place a few days later.

She had read about the great battles between the states with tattered flags flying and she had read of the steaming iron beasts that hurtled people hither and yon. She wanted to sneak into the graveyard at night with Tom and Huck and be shipwrecked with the Swiss Family Robinson. Some nights, she longed to be one of the four sisters with their loving mother in *Little Women*. Other nights, she imagined meeting the ghosts of Sleepy Hollow or tapping, tapping, tapping with Poe's black raven. She liked to tell her pa about the books she read, and she often made up stories of her own, filled with imaginary friends and strange families and ghosts in the night, but he was never interested in her tales of fancy and fright. He was far too sensible a man for all that and didn't like to believe in anything but bricks and bolts and solid things.

More and more she wondered what it would be like to have some sort of secret friend who her pa didn't know about, someone she could talk to about things, but she didn't tend to meet too many children her age skulking through the basement in the dead of night.

A few of the low-level kitchen scullions and boiler tenders who worked in the basement and went home each night had seen her darting here or there and knew vaguely who she was, but the maidservants and butlers who worked on the main floor did not. And certainly the master and mistress of the house didn't know she existed.

"The Vanderbilts are a good kind of folk, Sera," her pa had told her, "but they ain't *our* kind of folk. You keep yourself scarce when they come about. Don't let anyone get a good look at you. And whatever you do, don't tell anyone your name or who you are. You hear?"

Serafina *did* hear. She heard very well. She could hear a mouse change his mind. Yet she didn't know exactly why she and her pa lived the way they did. She didn't know why her father hid her away from the world, why he was ashamed of her, but she knew one thing for sure, that she loved him with all her heart, and the last thing she ever wanted to do was to cause him trouble.

So she had become an expert at moving undetected, not just to catch the rats, but to avoid the people, too. When she was feeling particularly brave or lonely, she darted upstairs into the comings and goings of the sparkling folk. She snuck and crept and hid. She was small for her age and light of foot. The shadows were her friends. She

spied on the fancy-dressed guests as they arrived in their splendid horse-drawn carriages. No one upstairs ever saw her hiding beneath the bed or behind the door. No one noticed her in the back of the closet when they put their coats inside. She watched the glittering women in their beautiful gowns stroll through the grand rooms of the house, and she watched the men in their handsome black coats and top hats in the courtyard. When the ladies and gentlemen went on their walks outside, she slinked up right next to them without them knowing and listened to everything they were saying. She loved seeing the young girls in their blue and yellow dresses with ribbons fluttering in their hair, and she ran along with them when they frolicked through the garden. When the children played hide-and-seek, they never realized there was another player. Sometimes she'd even see Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt walking arm-in-arm, or she'd see their twelve-year-old nephew riding his horse across the grounds, with his sleek black dog running alongside. She had watched the young master. She had watched him many times. She had watched them all, but none of them ever saw her, not even the dog. Nary a time did they glimpse her, let alone get a good look, but lately she'd been wondering just what would happen if they did. What if the boy laid eyes on her? What would she do? What if his dog chased her? Could she get up a tree in time? Sometimes she liked to imagine what she would say if she met Mrs. Vanderbilt face to face. "Hello, Mrs. V. I catch your rats for you. Would you like them killed or just chucked out?" Sometimes she dreamed of wearing fancy dresses and ribbons in her hair and shiny shoes on her feet. And sometimes, just sometimes, she longed not just to listen secretly to the people around her, but to talk to them, not just to see them, but to be *seen*.

As she walked through the moonlight across the open grass and back to the main house, she wondered what would happen if one of the guests, or perhaps the young master in his bedroom on the second floor, happened to wake and look out the window and see a mysterious girl walking alone in the night.

Her pa never spoke of it, but she knew she wasn't exactly normal looking. She had a skinny, little body, nothing but muscle, bone, and sinew.

She didn't own a dress, so she wore one of her pa's old work shirts, which she cinched around her narrow waist with a length of fibrous twine she'd scavenged from the workshop. He didn't buy her any clothes because he didn't want people in town to ask questions and start meddling; meddling was something he could never brook. And he didn't *make* her a dress with his own hands, because his fingers were too thick to hold a needle. She herself was useless with tools of any kind.

Her long hair wasn't a single color like normal people had, but varying shades of light brown. Her face had a peculiar angularity in the cheeks. And she had large, steady, amber eyes. She could see at night as well as she could during the day. Even her soundless hunting skills weren't exactly normal. Every person she'd ever encountered, especially her pa, made so much noise when they walked that it was like

they were one of the big Belgian draft horses that pulled the farm equipment in Mr. Vanderbilt's fields.

And it all made her wonder, looking up at the windows of the great house: What did the people sleeping in those rooms dream of, with their one-colored hair, and their long, pointy noses, and their big bodies lying in their soft beds all through the glorious darkness of the night? What did they long for? What made them laugh or jump? What did they feel inside? When they had dinner at night, did the children eat the grits or just the chicken?

As she glided down the stairs and back into the basement, she heard something in a distant corridor. She stopped and listened, but she couldn't quite make it out. It wasn't a rat. That much was certain. Something much larger. But what was it?

Curious, she moved toward the sound.

She went past her pa's workshop, the kitchen, and the other rooms she knew well, and into the deeper areas where she hunted less often. She heard doors closing, then the fall of footsteps and muffled noises. Her heart began to thump lightly in her chest. Someone was walking through the corridors of the basement. *Her* basement.

She moved closer.

It wasn't the servant who collected the garbage each night, or one of the footmen retrieving a late night snack for a guest—she knew the sound of their footsteps well. Sometimes the butler's assistant, who was eleven, would stop in the corridor and gobble down a few of the cookies from the silver tray that the butler had sent him to retrieve. She'd stand just around the corner from him in the darkness and pretend that they were friends just talking and enjoying each other's company for a while. Then the boy would wipe the powdered sugar off his lips, and off he'd go, hurrying up the stairs to catch up on the time he'd lost. But this wasn't him.

Whoever it was, he wore what sounded like hard-soled shoes—*expensive* shoes. But a gentleman proper had no business coming down into this area of the house. Why was he wandering through the dark passages in the middle of the night?

Increasingly curious, she followed the stranger, careful to avoid being seen. Whenever she snuck up close enough to almost see him, all she could make out was the shadow of a tall, black shape carrying a dimly lit lantern. And there was another shadow there, too, someone or something with him, but she didn't dare creep close enough to see who or what it was.

It was a vast basement with many different rooms, corridors, and levels, which had been built into the slope of the earth beneath the house. Some areas, like the kitchen and the laundry, had smooth plaster walls and windows. The rooms there were plainly finished, but clean and dry, and well-suited to the daily work of the servants. The more distant reaches of the understructure delved deep into the damp and earthen burrows of the house's massive foundation. Here the dark, hardened

mortar oozed out from between the roughly hewn stone blocks that formed the walls and ceiling, and she seldom went there because it was cold, dirty, and dank.

Suddenly, the footsteps changed direction. They came toward her. Five screeching rats came running down the corridor ahead of the footfalls, more terrified than any rodents she had ever seen. Spiders crawled out of the cracks in the walls.

Cockroaches and centipedes erupted from the earthen floor. Astounded by what she was seeing, she caught her breath and pressed herself to the wall, frozen in fear like a dark, little rabbit kit trembling beneath the shadow of a passing hawk.

As the man walked toward her, she heard another sound, too. It was a shuffling agitation like small person—slippered feet, perhaps a child—but there was something wrong. The child's feet were scraping on the stone, sometimes sliding . . . the child was crippled . . . no . . . the child was being *dragged*.

“No, sir! Please! No!” the girl whimpered, her voice trembling with despair. “We're not supposed to be down here.” The girl spoke like someone who had been raised in a well-heeled family and attended a fancy school.

“Don't worry. We're going right in here . . .” the man said, stopping at the door just around the corner from Serafina. Now she could hear his breathing, the movement of his hands, and the rustle of his clothing. Flashes of heat scorched through her. She wanted to run, to flee, but she couldn't get her legs to move.

“There's nothing to be frightened of, child,” he said to the girl. “I'm not going to hurt you . . .”

The way he said these words caused the hairs on the back of Serafina's neck to rise. *Don't go with him*, she thought. *Don't go!*

The girl sounded like she was just a little younger than her, and Serafina wanted to help her, but she couldn't find the courage. She pressed herself against the wall, certain that she would be heard or seen. Her legs trembled, feeling as if they would crumble beneath her. She couldn't see what happened next, but suddenly the girl let out a bloodcurdling scream. The piercing sound caused Serafina to jump, and she had to stifle her own scream. Then she heard a struggle as the girl tore away from the man and fled down the corridor. *Run, girl! Run!* Serafina thought.

The man's steps faded into the distance as he went after her. Serafina could tell that he wasn't running full out but moving steadily, relentlessly, like he knew the girl couldn't escape him. Serafina's pa had told her that's how the red wolves chased down and killed deer in the mountains—with dogged stamina rather than bursts of speed.

Serafina didn't know what to do. Should she hide in a dark corner and hope he didn't find her? Should she flee with the terror-stricken rats and spiders while she had the chance? She wanted to run back to her father, but what about the girl? The girl was so helpless, so slow and weak and frightened, and more than anything, the girl

needed a friend to help her fight. Serafina wanted to be that friend; she wanted to help her, but she couldn't bring herself to move in that direction.

Then she heard the girl scream again. *That dirty, rotten rat's gonna kill her,* Serafina thought. *He's gonna kill her.*

With a burst of anger and courage, she raced toward the sound. Her legs felt like explosions of speed. Her mind blazed with fear and exhilaration. She turned corner after corner. But when she came to the mossy stone stairway that led down into the deepest bowels of the sub-basement, she stopped, gasping for breath, and shook her head. It was a cold, wet, slimy, horrible place that she had always done her best to avoid—especially in the winter. She'd heard stories that they stored dead bodies in the sub-basement in the winter when the ground was too frozen to dig a grave. Why in the world had the foolish girl gone down *there*? If they were going to be friends and allies for long, the girl was going to have to be a lot smarter than that.

You've got to help her, Serafina told herself. *Otherwise, what kind of friend are you? You've got to do this, Serafina! Go!*

Finally, she made her way haltingly down the wet, sticky stairs, lifting and shaking off her foot after each slimy step she took. When at last she reached the bottom, she followed a long, slanting corridor where the ceiling dripped with brown sludge. The whole dank, disgusting place gave her the jitters something fierce, but she kept going. *You've got to help her,* she told herself again, *You can't turn back.* She wound her way through a labyrinth of twisting tunnels. She turned right, then left, then left, then right until she lost track of how far she'd gone. Then she heard the sound of fighting and shouting just around the corner ahead of her. She was very close.

She hesitated, frightened, her heart pounding so hard it felt like it was going to burst. Her body shook all over. She didn't want to go another step, but friends had to help friends. She didn't know much about life, but she did know that, knew that for sure, and she wasn't going to run away like a scared-out-of-her-wits squirrel just when her friend needed her most. Trembling all over, she steadied herself the best she could, sucked in a deep breath, and pushed herself around the corner.

A broken lantern lay tipped on the stone floor, its glass shattered, but the flame still burning. In its halo of faltering light, a girl in a yellow dress struggled for her life. A tall man in a black cloak and hood, his hands stained with blood, grabbed the girl by the wrists. The girl tried to pull away. "No! Let me go!" she screamed.

"Quiet down," the man told her, his voice seething in a dark, unworldly tone. "I'm not going to hurt you, child . . ." he said for the second time.

The girl had curly blonde hair and pale white skin. She fought to escape, but the man in the black cloak pulled her toward him. He tangled her in his arms. She flailed and struck him in the face with her tiny fists.

"Just stay still, and it will all be over," he said, pulling her toward him.

Serafina suddenly realized that she'd made a dreadful mistake. This was far more than she could handle. She knew that she should help the girl, but she was so scared that her feet stuck to the floor. She couldn't even breathe, let alone fight.

Help her! Serafina's mind screamed at her. *Help her! Attack the rat! Attack the rat!*

She finally plucked up her courage and charged forward, but just at that moment, the man's black satin cloak floated upward as if possessed by a smoky spirit. The girl screamed. The folds of the cloak slithered around her like the tentacles of a hungry serpent. The cloak seemed to move of its own accord, wrapping, twisting, accompanied by a disturbing rattling noise, like the hissing threats of a hundred rattlesnakes. Serafina saw the girl's horrified face looking at her from within the folds of the enveloping cloak, the girl's pleading blue eyes wide with fear. *Help me! Help me!* Then the folds closed over her, the scream went silent, and the girl disappeared.

Serafina gasped in shock. One moment the girl was struggling to get free, and the next she vanished into thin air. The cloak had consumed her. Overwhelmed with confusion, grief, and fear, Serafina just stood there in stunned bewilderment.

For several seconds, the man seemed to vibrate violently, and a ghoulish aura glowed around him in a dark, shimmering haze. A horribly foul smell of rotting guts invaded Serafina's nostrils, forcing her head to jerk back. She wrinkled her nose and squinched her mouth and tried not to breathe it in.

She must have made some sort of involuntary gagging noise for the man in the black cloak suddenly turned and looked at her, seeing her for the first time. It felt like a giant claw gripped her around her chest. The folds of the man's hood shrouded his face, but she could see that his eyes blazed with an unnatural light.

She stood frozen, utterly terrified.

The man whispered in a raspy voice. "I'm not going to hurt you, child . . ."