

# Basajaun

Rosemary Van Deuren

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WOODEN  
SMITH  
BOOKS

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*For Guy  
For his unfailing support,  
encouragement, and love*

*And for Hazel  
Without whom this book  
would not have been written*



◇ CONTENTS ◇

1 .:	1906 ~ THE AUTUMN OF THE RABBIT MAN	1
2 .:	THE NECKLACE AND NELLIE	33
3 .:	THE CHIEF	64
4 .:	HENRY AND THE GRAIN CELLAR	89
5 .:	ARTULYN	124
6 .:	FRIENDS	154
7 .:	POISON	177
8 .:	BOXY	207
9 .:	INTENTIONS	229
10 .:	THE KEY	246
11 .:	MAJU	273
12 .:	TENURE	295
13 .:	VINDICATION	331
14 .:	PERMANENCE	353

“Yet each man kills the thing he loves  
By each let this be heard,  
Some do it with a bitter look,  
Some with a flattering word,  
The coward does it with a kiss,  
The brave man with a sword!

Some kill their love when they are young,  
And some when they are old;  
Some strangle with the hands of Lust,  
Some with the hands of Gold:  
The kindest use a knife, because  
The dead so soon grow cold.

Some love too little, some too long,  
Some sell, and others buy;  
Some do the deed with many tears,  
And some without a sigh:  
For each man kills the thing he loves,  
Yet each man does not die.”

—Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad Of Reading Gaol*

Basajaun

## CHAPTER ONE

### 1906 ~ THE AUTUMN OF THE RABBIT MAN

Cora stared at the rabbit, and the rabbit stared at her. "Here, I brought you a root," she said, and edged the sweet vegetable toward the cluster of bushes. The rabbit blinked. She wanted to grab the rabbit up in her arms, squeeze it and hold it tight. It took enormous self-control to keep her knees pressed into the dirt. "It's good. I know you like these." The girl laid a palm against the earth and leaned forward until the prickly branches almost touched her face.

"What are you *doing*?"

A kick sent the root flying out of Cora's hand. The rabbit zipped into the brush and disappeared. Cora turned and looked up at the boy from the grain farm

across the street. He was one of many who tended the largest farm in town, but only two years older than she was.

"This is *my* rabbit," she said. "I'm giving him a root from *my* garden. It's mine to give."

"You don't *give* food to the vermin! Are you crazy?" The boy slapped Cora's empty hand. She scowled at him and scrambled into the grass. "And it's not your rabbit, anyway." The boy stood over her. "They're all the same!"

Cora put her cheek against the ground, peering into the knotted vines below the foliage. "Well, then they're all mine! And this one, especially!"

"I'll tell your father! I will! I'll tell him you tried to feed the rabbits!"

"Go ahead, I don't care."

"The Pennebrows are hungry!" The boy pointed to his right, up the dirt road. "How can you offer food to the vermin? They take it all as it is!"

"No, they don't!" Cora stood and clenched her fists at her sides. "They don't do it for spite, they are hungry! And they never get in the fences—hardly ever!"

"People are hungry," the boy said. "People all around you."

"I know that!" Cora yelled. The boy backed up a little.

"You can't." He shook his head. "You just can't."



Cora looked at her feet and held out the root. She didn't watch him take it. "You better actually give it to the Pennebrows and not just keep it for yourself," she mumbled. The boy cleared his throat and shifted the root from one hand to the other, but Cora kept her eyes on the buttons of her shoes. She waited until she saw the boy's feet turn away, then walked to her father's milk house and shut the door behind her. Dragging a limestone and clay block away from the tin pails, she heard her stomach rumble. She sat down on the big brick and started to cry.

Cora's jagged breathing huffed in her ears as she tried to swallow. She gulped, wiped her dirty hands over her wet cheeks, and straightened her back. Inhaling deeply through her nose, she tried to force calm into her rasping breath. It was still so loud.

So loud. Cora stopped and peered into the dim room. The echo of her breathing had been reverberating in the air since she sat down in the center of the chilly outbuilding. But now she was silent, composed, and still the breathing echo rolled all around her, coming off the silty walls and billowing over the ragged shale floor. Cora lifted her feet off the ground and listened. Was it possible for an echo to continue on so long? She had been holding her breath for the last several seconds.

She gripped the edges of the cinderblock as she exhaled. Something was strange. The echo wasn't moving in time with her breathing. In fact, it labored,

concentrated tone didn't even sound like her own. Cora could see every wall and corner of the building's cramped, enclosed structure from where she sat. Her eyes darted over the dark corners with the hairline cracks, behind the milk drums. She was alone. She felt alone. There was no one there. But the breathing that sounded nothing like hers kept on, husky and steady. Her own breath quickened as she crept to the milk house door and peeked out.

"Go away, I gave you the root!" she yelled, sounding much less surly than she'd planned. There was no reply.

She crept back onto the grass. Outside, the breathing was no louder and no softer; it seemed to be coming from all around. Bent and ready to spring, she scanned the glen. There was a myriad of short shrubs and thickets someone could easily be hiding behind, but how could they sound so close?

"Hello?" she finally said. "Who's there?"

The sound faded until it was a whisper and then—nothing. Cora stayed crouched until all she could hear was her own breath again. And after only a few moments, the strangeness of what she'd heard began to dissipate. Cora relaxed her pose, suddenly feeling self-conscious. This was silly. There was no foreign noise; she clearly had imagined or misconstrued it somehow. She waited a while longer listening to the silence, just to be sure.

“C’mon little lady, wake up. It’s been light for almost a half hour now.” Cora’s father smiled and pulled open the girl’s linen bedroom curtains the next morning. The sunlight flopped into the room and Cora sat up in bed, digging the heels of her hands into her tired eye sockets.

“We have to try and look smart today,” the man said. As Cora squinted and tried to focus through her dark lashes, she saw her father lay a yellow, cotton dress across the foot of her bed.

“My yellow dress?” Cora said. “I’m wearing my yellow dress? What’s happening?”

“A man is coming to town.” Wayne sat next to his daughter. “He’s arriving today. He’s supposed to be an expert in the rabbit problem. I guess he’s seen it before.”

“Oh.” Cora frowned at the dress. “Why do I have to wear my yellow dress for some rabbit man?”

Cora’s father rubbed a hand over her hair. “Because we want to look educated, not like some bumpkins. People don’t think you’re intelligent if the first thing they see you in is work clothes.”

“But I would never wear my good dress just around the house and fields. And I bet no one else at the meeting will be dressed formal-like.” Cora looked toward her chest of drawers. “I can wear my print blouse with the little bluebells,” she pointed, “it’s all starched and everything. That would look respectable. And my knickerbockers. I bet those are what girls in the city

wear." She peered at her father out of the corner of her eye.

"More like what the boys in the city wear." He kissed her on the forehead. "But I think that will do just fine. Wash up and get dressed. I want to have a chance to talk to the constable before this man arrives."

Cora watched her father leave. She got up, stood in front of where her dress lay on the bed, and skimmed her hands over it, rearranging the creases on the skirt. She folded the dress into a square and carried it back to her chest of drawers, taking care to keep the cloth smooth as she placed the dress in the bottom drawer under the linens. She washed nervously. Every few moments she ran to her window to check the yard for rabbits, and each time she was both disappointed and relieved to find there weren't any to be seen. "If you're going to hide, today's the day," she thought. She pulled on her thickest socks, the ones that didn't have any holes, and the short, puffed trousers. Using her washbasin to wet her hands, she smoothed her palms over her chestnut-brown frizz, flattening the waves at her crown. She tucked the wily hair behind her ears and walked to the window for one last look.

"Oh no!" She tugged on the linen curtain.

A rabbit sat still in the center of the yard.

"Go away!" Cora motioned into the thick glass. "There's a rabbit man coming! He'll be here any minute.

You have to hide!” She hated to startle the poor animal—she knew how easily rabbits panicked—but saw no other way. She banged the window with her fist, loud. The rabbit didn’t even flinch. He plucked a stray, green bit of grass out of the brown forage and ate it quickly. He bent his nose back to the earth to look for more.

“You have to go back to your home! You have to *hide!*” Cora said again, waving one arm and using her other fist to beat the glass as hard as she could without cracking it. The rabbit leaned to one side and used its long hind leg to scratch the back of its ear.

Cora dropped to her knees in front of the window and sighed. She was going to have to go outside and chase the rabbit away, to a covered part of the yard. How she hated doing things like that. Her breath fogged the glass in front of her face and the girl slid a couple inches to the left, to look out of a clear spot.

“I wanted so much for you to come back.” Cora fingered the ridges in the windowsill. “You have no idea how much. But why today?” The rabbit raised his head to smell the air. “Daddy says there are so many of you, the chance of me seeing the same one twice is ‘astronomical’, but you always seem the same.”

The rabbit twitched its nose.

“But really, even if you aren’t the same one every time, I don’t mind. I like you all, I—” Cora stood. She could hear it again—the breathing. This time in her own

room. She spun circles around herself and scrutinized her four walls even though she knew there was nothing there to see. It was the noise from the milk house, she was sure of it. And this time she was absolutely certain she was alone. She turned to look back out the window.

The rabbit. The air around the animal suddenly began to look soft, like water. It waved and rippled, distorting the bits of glen Cora could still see through it. She pressed her forehead into the glass until her nose flattened on its cold surface. The rabbit seemed oblivious as the air undulated around him; he was intent on a few strands of clover he'd discovered nestled in the dry grass.

The breathing was growing louder but there was a deeper sound too, harder and resonating. Not like a passing cart, or horse, or even a cluster of cows. Cora put her hand on her chest. The noise thumped rhythmically with a pulse she could feel in her joints, through the floor and into the soles of her feet. She could be mistaken, Cora was sure she could be mistaken, but it sounded exactly like a heart beating.

Under her hand, Cora's own heart bumped her ribcage steadily, alternating in time with the new sound she could hear all around her. She stopped looking around the room and instead held perfectly still. She was hoping her stillness could coax the source of the sound into view or at least coax her own senses to prove or disprove whether she was really hearing it at all. Cora

risked a small step toward the window to look at the rabbit again.

She gasped. Where the soft air had been swaying there was now an orange glow—thick, bright color like the flesh of a peeled fruit or the summer crocus when the rain beat it into the sodden ground. The glow encircled the rabbit, not covering but surrounding him, and moving easily with him whenever he shifted. This emanating light pulsed in unison with the beating noise, brightening and dulling with shuddering little bursts as though it, too, were alive. Cora forgot to question whether she was imagining these things any longer. As she thought to call her father, she took her hand off her heart and laid it gently against the window.

Inside the blushing, orange halo, a thin ring of blue appeared. Delicate as one of the slender veins in Cora's arm, it traced an outline of the rabbit's shape like a chalk outline on a child's slate. The rabbit flapped his ears and stretched the muscles of his back with a little shake. The vivid blue outline, unmarred and unnoticed, followed his every movement exactly. Cora wondered if she had time to go fetch her father before something else happened.

All at once the rabbit bolted upright with his front paws at his chest, eyes wide and ears as tall as they could go. A grinding sound crunched outside, coming closer. The sound of a hay cart creaking along the dirt road nearby was a noise Cora knew all too well, but the

frightened rabbit shot into a cluster of bushes. The glowing light seemed unprepared for this, or so Cora thought, because it streaked in long, clumsy wipes behind the animal, like fingers dragged through globs of paint. The rabbit was gone. The light was gone. The heartbeat was gone too. Cora put her other hand on the window and stared out at the empty grass. The silence now seemed not a relief, but a taunt somehow. Even if she were imagining it all.

“Come back,” she whispered into the glass.

“Daddy, I saw a—” Cora had run all the way to the kitchen doorway, but now she stopped. A stack of large parchment sheets covered the slatted wooden table, hanging over its edges like a tablecloth. Cora looked to the side and saw the sugar and salt cups, which had barely left the table during her twelve-year life, pushed next to the kitchen basin on the wooden ledge. “What are those papers?” she said.

Cora’s father strode over to her and put his hands on her cheeks. “Listen Cora, this is very important, and it has to go well. You don’t want the rabbits to be hurt, do you?”

“No.” Cora shook her head.

“I want to try and fix it so they aren’t, and it will be a challenge. But what I want to tell you is this.” The man kneeled down so he and his daughter were eye to eye. “Don’t talk to this man. Don’t address him. I know it will



be hard, and I know whatever you'll be thinking to say he will probably deserve. But we have such a small chance, and if you talk, and say all those things I know it will be paining you to say, our chance will get smaller and smaller, until there's no chance at all. I think you're the smartest girl in the world, but this time you'll have to just trust me and be quiet. Can you do that?"

"Yes." Cora nodded.

"Just trust me, believe in me, because right now, I am the only chance your rabbits have."

"I will. I trust you. Daddy," Cora put her hands on her father's arms, "do you want me to stay here?"

"No. You need to see this, all of it. Because if, God forbid, we don't succeed, you will need all the knowledge you will get today. And I need you there for moral support." He hugged her with one arm as he used the other to grab one of the sheets sliding off the table. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Cora's father gathered up his parchment pages and rolled them into a long, stiff paper cylinder. Cora held his hand as they walked out onto the dirt road, but the man stopped and started unrolling the papers.

"Oh, honey, would you run back to the house and look in the top cupboard drawer in my bedroom? I think I left the small outline in there." He crouched and laid the open sheets across his knees, flipping pages and changing

the order, moving back ones to the front and front ones to the back.

“Oh yup, I’ll be right back!” Her heart thumping from the seeming desperation of their task, Cora ran as fast as she could, much faster than she even needed to, back into the farmhouse. She stopped short in front of the old oak cupboard and yanked the top drawer open so quickly, it almost dropped to the floor. Next to her father’s tin moneybox was one of the strange papers. She tipped her head and scrutinized the rows of words and dashes before pulling the sheet out and banging the drawer shut. Running past their bare kitchen table, Cora threw the front door closed behind her with such force, it bounced back open. But she was already off down the dirt path, and didn’t see.

The little town was awash with commotion. Cora had never seen all the people living around her together in one place. Keeping silent would be easy in the face of such an overwhelming crowd; the loud, bustling hum of the usually quiet surroundings daunted her. She could hear people trading grievances about the problem at hand—concerns about rabbits burrowing into crop fields and complaints about them eating their way into grain bags. Voices decrying the rabbits as vermin, saying that they were “lawless”. Cora ran off to scan the north field while her father knocked on the dark, glossy door at the right side of the cobbled courtyard. Unlike most of the

weather-beaten, grey wood buildings in the town, the constable's office was new mahogany, with clean, even slats. Streamlined and modern, it was a stark contrast to the old-world style of the farm homes that had been handed down for generations.

With all the noise, Cora expected most of the rabbits to be in hiding, but there were none visible at all. That was very odd. She looked harder across the rolling plain to the squat wall of bushes at its edge. She swore she saw the orange light again, this time coming through the foliage, and glimmering ever so faintly, but she couldn't be sure.

She turned back to the town and saw the constable shaking her father's hand on the office steps. The two men stood close together as they spoke. Cora could tell her father was nervous; he dropped half the sheets he was holding. Over the buzz of the crowd she heard the sound of several horses approaching, moving in unison. Most of the carts in the farm town were drawn by only one or two horses, and the army-like din of hoof beats that approached quieted the chattering townsfolk, announcing the sound of many but the arrival of one. Cora leaned back against the fence.

The coachman rushed off his stoop and ran to the front door of the stagecoach, his stock whip still bobbing in his sweaty grip. But before he could take hold of the door, a whitish, sinewy hand popped out of the window.

The hand flicked its wrist in the coachman's face. He scurried back up to his box seat behind the horses and sat, hunched, without looking at the crowd, while the stagecoach door opened. And the man—the other man—stepped out of the dark, walnut coach. He was lean and knobby, with pale skin that clung and wrapped around his bones like a wet sheet. He reached up to smooth his fingers over the crunchy, white wisps on his head and when he did so, the cuffs of his stiff, black frock coat crawled back to expose two ropy, blue-veined wrists. The man pinched the edges of the cuffs between his fingertips and pulled them back down, shifting his shoulders under his clothing.

He raised a hand to the crowd and forced a smile. There was a moment of silence, followed by a smattering of applause. The man smiled bigger, as though the amount of applause he heard was much greater than what Cora heard. Closing his eyes, he spread the fingers of his open hand, and the clapping stopped. He walked to the second, rear door of the carriage and pulled it open. The head that came out was that of a girl, a teenager, maybe sixteen. Her grungy, off-white bonnet cast a shadow over her eyes; Cora only saw pink lips and a couple chunks of greasy, tan hair. Cora watched as a flat, brown slipper emerged from the carriage, the dirty, light blue dress laying stiff and heavy against the girl's broad calf like paper. The girl stooped as she stepped onto the

light dirt, and when she turned, she stayed hunched. She moved to the man's side, positioning her feet alongside but six inches back from his.

As the man picked at a crease on his coat front, the girl finally raised her head just enough to peek out from under her bonnet. She remained perfectly still but her eyes darted all over the crowd, moving impossibly fast as she surveyed the townspeople. Her cloudy blue eyes were ringed with dark circles that showed through the translucent skin around them. These eyes, like tiny globes or large marbles, swept over the people again and again, scanning the same sea of faces and searching for something they seemed not to find. The man didn't look at the girl once. Her head lowered again as soon as he spoke.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have come to rescue you from the vermin. I have come to smash them down, conquer them, and annihilate them all for you, so you will finally be free." The crowd didn't know how to respond to the man's dramatic address, but there was a murmur of assertion.

"I have come from the far away land of Australia," the man gestured upward, "where there were vermin so numerous, the likes of which you have never seen. They tore through the fences, they ripped up the crops. And when their bellies were full, still they ripped up the crops, just for their own gratification. Just to lay waste to the

people's toil and ensure everyone was left hungry. But my friends," he raised both his hands in the air, "if you put your trust in me, I will stop this plague and restore peace and prosperity to your homes and families here, just like we stopped the demon vermin in Australia."

The crowd erupted into a cheer. Cora felt a sickness in her gut and scanned the crowd for her father. She ran, bumping between big arms and dirty elbows, until she reached her father's side. Cora tugged his sleeve and looked up at him, and when he turned down to her, she saw his face had gone quite white.

"Pastor Harding," the constable bowed and extended a hand, "may I present Wayne Clyde, our town milkman?"

The pastor turned from his new admirers and tilted his head slightly at Cora's father, before peering down at Cora. She beamed and did a curtsy. Cora's father hadn't warned the girl to guard her expressions against showing her hand, but she had figured that out for herself, assuming that scowling would be nearly as bad as speaking out. Her father knew, or thought, that the man would pay little notice to his daughter beyond a polite introduction, wherein he would see the girl was clean, neat and respectful, which was all men like that wanted or expected from children.

“Pastor, it is such an honor.” Cora’s father shook the man’s hand. “And how good of you to travel so far from home on our account.”

“But I am not native to Australia.” The man smirked. “Can’t you tell by my accent?”

“I beg your pardon, sir. I should not have assumed.” Cora’s father nodded a bow again.

“You’re a country boy, then. Don’t travel much?” The man squinted and showed his teeth. Cora could smell now the overpowering odor of perfume coming off the man’s skin and clothes. Woody and earthy, but also sweet, like vanilla. It was so pungent and cloying, it almost made her gag.

“No, sir, opportunity has not permitted me. I have lived here all my life. But as a reading man, I have found much to learn about the world in books.”

“Not enough, apparently. Although books are only words on a page, and thus don’t allow any man to learn much about regional accents. I am from the United States. Massachusetts. Not that it matters. And remember, sir, opportunity is what you make of it. Don’t blame fate for denying you what hard work and perseverance would undoubtedly reward.”

“Yes, sir, you are quite right,” Cora’s father said. The pastor began to turn away, and Wayne Clyde had to step forward to be heard. “Oh no, sir, I—”

“Yes?”

“I wonder if I might take up another moment of your time. You see, I have been sketching out some plans—”

“Plans?”

“Ideas. About erecting a large fence around the town, to keep the rabbits out.”

“A fence? How archaic! We are not heathens, my good man. This is the twentieth century. Would you have us erect a great wall? Seal ourselves away from the rest of the world? Would you have us work harder to arrange our lives around that which is troubling us in the first place?”

“No, sir—”

“Well, we have more modern ways to eradicate our problems than hide from them behind a fence.”

“Oh yes, there are many ways to approach a problem. But perhaps, sir, if you looked at the plans you might see this idea as a viable option. I was trying to think of a plan that would realistically work, and the added benefit of this one is that it would be gainful to all and harmful to none.”

The pastor put one hand in his coat pocket. “Oh I assure you, none of what I will do will bring harm to you or anyone in this town.”

“I mean, sir, not harmful to people or rabbits.”

“Not harmful to rabbits! Are you joking? The intent of your salvation is to *be* harmful to rabbits. Spending time, energy and manpower to preserve life in the



antithesis of all we're fighting against is not only absurd, it's immoral."

"But, sir, isn't it true that a great fence is what is being planned in Australia right now to keep the rabbits out? Why would you oppose a precedented tactic taking place in an area whose rabbit problem far surpasses ours?"

"The problem is the problem, regardless of its size, and—" the man leaned closer to Cora's father, "where did you hear about that?"

"I read it, sir, in a newspaper."

"That reading again. It will get you into trouble, young man," the man said. "Listen to me, reading means nothing. What you have read means nothing. I am the one who has traveled the world, seen firsthand the destruction and wickedness these monsters can bring, and," the man's voice dropped low, "there are other forces at work here, things you know nothing about."

Cora studied the man. He wasn't speaking for the benefit of the mingling onlookers anymore, his angry lips were so close to her father's ear, she could barely make out what he was saying. She saw him mouth the word "mysticism" but didn't know what that meant. She was slipping closer to listen when she heard it again—the breathing, and the heartbeat too. Cora gripped her fist in her other hand and looked into the crowd. She wanted to hear what the pastor was saying and winced as he jabbed

a finger against her father's ribs, but she was desperate to track down the cause of the strange sounds that seemed to appear wherever she was. What if they were coming from somewhere in this crowd? Somewhere she could finally discover? Cora's eyes narrowed and the heartbeat echoed in her ears.

Then she saw the girl. The blue-eyed girl in the dingy bonnet, standing behind the pastor only a few feet away. Cora glanced all around her. How long had the girl been standing there? And how could Cora have missed her approaching? Both Pastor Harding and Cora's father seemed unaware of the girl's arrival, or else they didn't care, for they still stood close together as the pastor's hostile whisper drummed quietly into Wayne Clyde's ear.

The two girls looked at each other. The teenager's arms hung at her sides and her slackened face mirrored Cora's own stunned expression. The girl put her fingers over her lips and the breathing heartbeat stopped. Cora stared, motionless, and as she did, the shock or surprise or whatever it was left the face of the light-haired girl, leaving an almost-sadness in its place. The girl looked down at the cobbled court and shook her head. Then she moved to the pastor's side.

He stepped back from Cora's father, his voice recovering its former cadence. "Keep your nose out of it," he hissed. "You're in way over your head."

Wayne gaped. He blinked twice. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“The rabbits will be stopped, and I would advise you to never press your pagan intent on me again.” The pastor was already moving back toward the crowd. “Go back to your books, and leave the real problems of the world to me.” The man turned and gripped the teenage girl’s hand. She gave Cora one more look before he dragged her away.

“Where have you been?” the pastor growled at the girl as they walked, jerking her arm so her whole body lurched in his direction. “You stand where I tell you to stand.”

The pastor cast a glance over his shoulder, and Cora couldn’t help it, she scowled. Her father didn’t notice, but the pastor did.

“He’s insane,” Cora’s father breathed. “He’s stark, raving mad.”

“But, Daddy, he has all the control. What is he going to do? What are we going to do?”

“Tell people. Don’t worry, once everyone realizes how mad he is, they’ll laugh him out of town.”

Cora got out of bed the next morning and ran to her window, scanning the grass for her rabbit. Nothing. She dressed and went to the kitchen for breakfast, but found her father was gone, and that he’d left a note for her.

*Cora—*

*Went out to talk to the constable. Be back soon.*

*Love, Daddy*

Cora heated some bread with jam and carried it outside. She broke off a few small pieces and placed them near the bramble pile, where she'd half-buried a rusted-out pot in the ground the week before so that the little field mouse family she'd seen running around could use it as a house. The big yards of all her neighbors were empty. She looked around and squinted toward the sun; it was nearly seven a.m. She had overslept, yes. Had everyone else, too? Then Cora noticed a dull, even roar in the distance. She was moving toward the sound when her father, alone, came rushing at her down the path.

"What's that noise?" she said.

"Come with me, Cora." Her father put an arm around her shoulder and hurried her toward the house. "I want you to stay inside today."

"But why? What's wrong?"

"Just, stay inside. I'll tell you later."

Once inside the house, Cora sat down in one of their scratchy kitchen chairs and folded her hands on the table, waiting. But her father barely looked at her. He walked to his room and shut the door. Cora sat at the table for a few moments, looking back and forth between her father's door and the chair across from her, where he usually sat.

She stood and walked toward her bedroom, passing her father's room slowly. She thought she heard him . . . crying.

"Daddy?" She touched the doorknob. "Are you okay?"

"Some other time, Cora, please."

Cora tried to open the door, but it was locked. She rattled the knob. "Dad? Please let me in."

"Go to your room, honey. I'll be there in a minute."

Cora walked to her room, sat on the bed, and waited. And waited. Time passed. The sun moved across the wall and Cora sat, her eyes fixed on the empty, open doorway. She didn't move and scarcely thought, just focused on her father walking in. But he never came.

Cora woke. She felt her bed around her, but could see nothing apart from an orange light that made her sleepy eyes water. She rubbed them. She had been dreaming about a quiet voice, gibbering as it rambled words she wouldn't have understood even if they'd been loud enough for her to decipher. Cora could still make out the voice in her half-awake state but it sounded calmer now, more feminine as its urgency slackened. Cora groped at the light. It was hard to open her eyes against such brightness. The drifting whisper lilted a lullaby tone as the light dissolved, revealing Cora's room just as it

always was. It was dusk. Her bedroom door was shut, presumably by her father.

Cora dragged a knuckle across her eyes and sat up. “A dream,” she thought. “Just a dream.” The breathing, the heartbeat, the voice that was singing—Cora imagined chasing them down and catching them, demanding to know what they were up to and insisting they tell her exactly that before they ran off again. But the idea of chasing a voice and a light and a heartbeat? Preposterous. And even if one were to attempt it, where would one begin? Cora flipped her legs over the side of the bed. She stopped.

A rabbit was sitting in the middle of her bedroom floor. Just sitting there. Cora looked around the room and back at the rabbit. Laid out neatly on the floor around him was a ring of pinecones, circling him like a little wreath. The rabbit tilted its head at her. Cora opened her mouth to call her father, but then closed it again. She leaned forward. As she did the pinecone ring trembled and began to shift. The little cones were starting to slowly roll away from the rabbit, each moving only millimeters, but moving entirely on its own. Cora breathed in slow astonishment and sat back down on the bed. The pinecones rolled back smoothly to reform their original circle around the animal.

The rabbit blinked. Cora sat forward and the pinecones shifted again, shuddering slightly before

beginning to roll outward in all directions. She sat back down and each pinecone returned to its designated place. For several moments Cora sat forward and back over and over, watching the pinecones drift and roll with her movement—away from the rabbit when she tried to stand, and back to him when she sat again. She pressed her teeth against her lip. She squeezed her left thumb, like she always did when she was thinking hard. Finally, she bolted up to a standing position and watched in shock as the pinecones tumbled, almost bouncing, all the way to the edges of the room. Without hesitation they rolled until banging into the facing walls. And each one, one-by-one, burst into a tiny explosion of silver dust as it hit, and disappeared. Cora didn't breathe until the silver shimmers disintegrated.

“My gosh,” Cora said. “How did they—?”

The rabbit was watching her.

“Did you see that?” she said to the rabbit and pointed at the wall. The rabbit blinked. Cora's pointing hand dropped to her side. “Uh, how did you get in here?”

The rabbit hopped a step closer to the bed. Cora put her hands back against the mattress and eased herself to a half-standing position. When the rabbit didn't flinch, she slowly crouched down next to it and laid a hand against its back. The rabbit's eye was completely black like a shiny marble, and Cora noticed a small, white highlight

which formed a tiny crescent on the eyeball's glossy top. The rabbit watched the girl watching him.

"You're not scared of me at all, are you?" She gave the rabbit a gentle stroke. She saw the rabbit's jaw shifting and heard a little chattering noise. She pet him, rubbing her hand over his ears and his soft, but slightly bristly coat. She looked around the room again, pausing at the places along the walls where the pinecones had vanished. "I wonder how you *did* get in here." She reached down and scooped up the rabbit. She was surprised by the ease with which the animal allowed her to handle him. Wild rabbits were normally skittish and cagey, like tiny deer, but this rabbit was not that way at all. Bracing the subdued animal gently against her chest, Cora carried him out of the room and down the short hall.

"Dad?"

Cora's father was sitting at the kitchen table with his back to her room. He turned around. Cora smiled apprehensively.

"I—I found the present you left for me." She lifted the rabbit closer to her face. Her father stared.

"Do you like him?" he asked.

"Oh yes. I love him. And he's so nice. He really likes me too, I think." She rubbed her cheek against the rabbit's ear.

"Where was he when you found him?" the man looked past his daughter, toward her room.



"Just sitting, in the middle of my floor, as nice as can be," she eyed her father, "with the pinecones."

"Pinecones?" her father said.

"Yes," Cora replied cautiously, "the ring of pinecones."

"Oh, right." Wayne smiled.

"How did you get them to do that?" Cora said.

"Oh, it was no trouble," Wayne said quickly. "Hey, it was a good thing he didn't run and hide under your bed, otherwise you wouldn't have found him right away!" He smiled.

"Yup, I was surprised." Cora looked hard at her father. She held the rabbit toward him. "Do you want to hold him?"

"No, not right now." Wayne raised his hands over his chest. "Some other time when he's more settled. He seems quite taken with you."

Cora smiled down at the rabbit and turned to walk back to her room. "Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you, so much."

"Well, don't thank me. You certainly deserve it."

Cora put the rabbit back on the floor, where she'd found him. She made a lot of fuss and bother crafting him a bed out of a little wooden crate and some soft hay. The rabbit hopped next to the bed and started munching the

hay, and Cora cooed, chuckled and spoke to the animal while she brought it a dish of water and a piece of lettuce. The rabbit seemed quite happy, and Cora lay on her side on the floor, watching him eat. She put her cheek against the floorboards to check one more time for any sign of the pinecones or the silver dust they'd flared into.

"I wish you could tell me more about those pinecones," Cora said to the rabbit. "Were they yours? Somehow, I don't think Daddy knew what I was talking about." The rabbit didn't reply, but watching him munch a lettuce leaf made Cora smile.

She played with the rabbit until her father told her it was time for bed, and the girl fell into a joyful sleep. She had no unusual dreams that night and when she woke, she found the rabbit had snuggled in bed next to her, with his head under her chin. How impressive, she thought, that he could jump up onto the bed.

Cora's father told her she must keep the rabbit an absolute secret from everyone, for the rabbit's safety, and that hopefully the animal didn't mind spending most of its time indoors. He built a large, shed-like box with no top and no bottom, but a little door so Cora and the rabbit could play safely 'outside', enjoying the sun and grass while concealed from the townsfolk. He placed it in the bare yard next to the cow pasture, where no one but Cora and her father ever went anyway. He even built the rabbit a cage to fit under Cora's bed—concealed behind her long

bedskirt—so the animal would be safe and hidden when they were out of the house.

The girl hadn't had the heart to ask her father again about the day he came rushing back from the mysterious noise in the town. He had been so kind and focused on fixing a place in their life for the rabbit he'd given her; she didn't want to seem ungrateful. But as he turned a head of lettuce around and around in a bowl of water, Cora spoke.

"Daddy?"

"Yes?"

She pretended to be focused on a dark dent in the kitchen ledge. "What is going to happen to the rest of the rabbits?"

The man sighed. "Nothing good, I'm afraid."

Cora rubbed a blemish on the wood, waiting for the rest of his reply. He was quiet. "Isn't there something we can do?" she said.

The man turned the head of lettuce more slowly. "I wish there were. I would love to think of some way, but the fence idea was the best I had. And I am only one man. The townspeople," he paused, "they already think me a threat now, or a madman, or both. They won't listen to a thing I say, and I dare say my safety is best preserved if I lie low for a while." He looked into the bowl. "I'm sorry."

"Your safety?" Cora said. The thought hadn't even occurred to her. "It was that man, wasn't it?"

“No, actually,” Wayne said, “it was the people. They just turned on me. They were so agitated about everything and—” he cleared his throat, “the man, Pastor Harding, he stayed them, protected me. Like a father stopping his child from squashing a bug.”

“The people are crazy!” Cora said. “How could they? That’s terrible!”

“People are terrible when misguided. And how to guide them better, I do not know.” Wayne kneeled to face his daughter. “I know it might seem to you that I am doing nothing, but—”

“I don’t think you’re doing nothing,” Cora said. “You’re doing a lot. You’re doing a lot for *my* rabbit.” She smiled.

“That is because it is in my power to do. I know what you’re thinking, you think bad of me for not having a plot to save the rest—”

“No!” Cora shook her head hard and her dark curls flew back and forth.

“That’s very kind, but you don’t have to say it. I know you, and I know how things appear. I used to envision more beyond my power, but it’s hard now. I’m older. And tired. Sometimes you get tired of fighting, and you just want things to be easy. You’ll understand, someday.”

Cora blinked.

“If it were just me, things would be different. But I have to stay safe for you because without me, you are alone. I will not leave you alone.”

“Daddy?”

“Yes?”

“What you’re doing for my rabbit, that’s a risk.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Why are you doing it?”

“For you.” Wayne pointed at Cora’s bedroom. “That rabbit is special.”

“Is he?” Cora said. “I mean, I thought he was. It’s just different hearing you say it.”

“It is obvious, even to me. What I am doing now may not seem like much, but you’ll see—someday I’ll do something for you that’s really great.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE NECKLACE AND NELLIE

Cora lay on her stomach on her bedroom floor, with her hands folded under her chin. The rabbit hopped up to her and put its nose against hers. Then it walked around her side and hopped up to sit on the small of her back. Cora giggled and covered her mouth, trying not to make a noise. The rabbit stood up on its hind legs and looked around the room. Cora tried to hold still because if she moved at all, she could feel her pet shift his footing. The rabbit jumped down and took off running circles around the floor, around her, kicking out his back feet, which sent his hindquarters weaving and bobbing behind him. Cora laughed. The rabbit leapt again, jumping as he ran, and then flopped down on his side, stretching his legs out

behind him. He plucked a stray piece of hay off the ground and Cora beamed at the sight of the hay getting smaller and smaller, until it receded into his mouth. The girl and the rabbit lay like mirror images, bookended in the bright afternoon light that shone through Cora's window.

"You know, I haven't heard the breathing or the heartbeat since you came," she said. "Will I hear them again? Or were they coming from you all the time?" She reached out and laid her fingertips on the rabbit's small front paw. The animal lowered his head and rested his chin against her knuckles. He blinked. "Well, I'd much rather have you here anyway. You're better than any mysterious sound I can imagine." Cora inched closer and placed a soft kiss on the bridge of the rabbit's nose. The rabbit clicked his teeth and pressed his nose into Cora's chin.

A gunshot. The noise shattered the still afternoon and the rabbit bolted up, jerking his head around. The sound was distant, but Cora startled too. The rabbit ran frantically around her room now, not hopping but stomping his back foot and honking with a squeaking sound.

"It's okay, it's okay, it's far away. It can't hurt you," Cora cooed and reached toward her pet. She wanted to stroke and soothe him, but the rabbit stopped in front of her and looked her in the eye. "What?" she said. "What is

it?" The rabbit looked toward the window, and back at her. Then at the window, then back at her again. Cora followed his sightline to the window, afraid of what she'd find, but all she could see was her own yard, just how it always was. "I don't see anything." She turned back to the rabbit. He directed her gaze to the window again.

The grass was clear, the sky bright and sunny, the whole scene picturesque in their little microcosm. The rabbit stared into it, past it, searching the horizon. Cora looked too, to try and see what he was seeing. There was nothing, but the longer she looked, the more she felt her thoughts reaching toward the dreadful things that were happening not far from where they were. And images came to her, of her father locking himself in his room, of Pastor Harding, the rabbit man, and of what more—she could only imagine. Who knew what was going on beyond their reach? She had some idea, though, and she began to feel ashamed for not thinking of it. Not for trying to avoid it, for she really couldn't begin to imagine what to do, but she was ashamed she had found hiding from everything so easy. The rabbit came to her side and sat down with his hip up against hers.

"All your family, and all your friends, they're out there, aren't they?" she said. The rabbit stared ahead. Cora put her hand on the animal's tiny shoulders and they watched the far away hills together, thinking.



Cora pulled a cart filled with blocks of butter and cheese, and pails of milk. She could feel the disapproving scowls that surrounded her, barely concealed behind windows and hat brims. Each of the customers on her route, her neighbors, thanked Cora with polite courtesy as they snatched up their order, only to shake their heads and sneer as soon as her back was turned.

The light-haired girl in the dingy bonnet sat pressing her bare feet into the grass of Pastor Harding's new yard. She smiled, watching the blades of grass move between her toes. Across the street, two adolescent boys observed her, giggling and pointing at the lace petticoat visible under the girl's knees. They were whispering to each other, red-faced, but even as their sneering grew louder, the girl seemed completely oblivious. Cora looked back and forth at the scene and the boys began to gesture.

"Hey, get out of here!" Cora ran to the boys and shoved the larger one in the center of his chest.

The boy looked Cora up and down, "Oh? What're you going to do?" he gave her collar a little tug.

"I suppose you want the pastor to see you?" Cora folded her arms over her chest.

The boy took a step back. "Ah, she's an ugly cow anyway," he sneered at the blonde girl. But as he and his friend walked away, he peered toward the cottage window.

Cora waited, hoping the girl would notice her. She shuffled back toward her cart and as she passed in front of the grass, Cora curved closer and slowed to a saunter by the girl's feet. It wasn't until Cora lifted the cart handle that the girl looked up.

The girl walked over to Cora and stood before her, ethereal and unmoving. Since the girl was older than she was, Cora waited a moment for her to speak first, but the girl was quiet. For all Cora knew the teenager was mute—she almost didn't seem real.

Cora lifted one of the pails off her cart. "Um, this is some milk for you," she over-enunciated the words. "You can have it—here." She held the bucket forward, pantomiming her meaning. The girl spoke.

"Hello."

"Oh, hi," Cora said.

The girl took the pail. "Thank you." She brought it to her lips and took a sip. "It's good."

"Thanks. Or I guess you should thank my Dad. Or the cows, heh."

"I'd like to," the girl said.

"Oh?" Cora fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. "Uh, how do you like our town?"

"I don't know, yet. I haven't been here long enough."

"Oh, yup."

The door to the cottage behind the girl swung open. “Do we have a visitor, Nellie?” Pastor Harding strode across the grass. Cora jumped.

“Begging your pardon, sir,” Cora said, “I just thought your—”

“Niece,” the pastor said.

“Your niece might like to have some of our local milk. Good for health and all.”

“Yes, good for health. Although, I wouldn’t concern myself with hers if I were you. You see, it’s not polite to do so.”

“My apologies, sir.” Cora bowed. Underneath her blanket of dark waves, she scowled. She could smell the woody headiness of the man’s candied, milky fragrance. It hung heavy and invasive in the air, filling her nostrils with its sickening odor.

“You are the milkman’s daughter.”

“Yes. Proudly, sir.”

The man laughed a little puff of air through his nose. “Yes, I expect so. We should all be so proud of the men in our family.”

“Yes, sir.” Cora held her bow and waited for the pastor to say something else. The muscles in her legs began to quiver as she struggled to stay upright. Finally, she stood back up straight and pushed her hair out of her face. The pastor was scrutinizing her, running his fingers and thumb along the pocket edge of his black coat.

“Don’t you ever wear a dress?” he said.

“Not when I’m working, sir.”

“Hm.” The man puffed through his nose again. “Yes, well, move along.” He waved his fingertips. “You can come back for the pail.”

“Yes, sir.” Cora pulled her wagon away and watched the girl walk around the side of the pastor’s cottage.

“And, girl?” the man said. Cora turned around on the road. “You needn’t concern yourself with charity here. We have brought our own milk along with us. You shall have to find some other way to make yourself feel important, elsewhere. But thank you for the sample.”

Cora thought she should wince at the comment, but for some reason, she felt quite calm. “You’re welcome, sir.” The pastor hardly seemed to hear, and disappeared back behind the cottage door.

The tin pails rattled as Cora pulled her cart away. Nellie watched the young girl move along the road, slow, determined and sad. Nellie stood, bouncing her knees under her dress, waiting until she heard the pastor’s feet hit the floor of the lumber room.

Cora heard the sound of someone running at her back, and she wheeled around. Nellie was kicking up clouds of dust as she sprinted down the small road. She almost skidded when she stopped in front of Cora.

“I’m not a beggar,” Nellie blurted out.

“No!” Cora waved her hands in front of her. “No, of course not. I didn’t mean—”

“What I mean is,” the girl reached into her shirt, her hand fumbling under the cloth at her chest, “I have something for you. For trade. To thank you.”

“Oh! Well, you don’t have to—” Cora stopped because whatever the girl had to give her, she wanted it very much. Nellie pulled her fist out of her dress and yanked a black, looped cord over her head. She opened her hand to Cora. In the middle of the girl’s taut palm lay a shiny stone, tan and brown with swirling patterns that weaved and looped into one another like a fingerprint. A rounded bit of thick, copper wire stuck out of the stone’s top, and laced through that was the cord.

“It’s special,” Nellie said. “Go home, then put it on. It will give you a better understanding of the one you love. Whoever you see first.” The girl placed the necklace in Cora’s open palm.

Cora jumped. The stone was pulsing. Smooth, tan, and warm, it looked motionless, looked perfectly still, but Cora could feel a throbbing inside it that pulsed against her hand. She looked at Nellie.

“The heartbeat,” Cora said.

“What heartbeat?” Nellie said.

“The stone,” Cora held the necklace out, “it’s pulsing.”

Nellie frowned. “You don’t want it?”

“No, I do. I just—where does the heartbeat come from? Can you feel it? What does it mean?”

“I told you it was special,” Nellie said.

Cora hunched toward the girl, whispering. “But I’ve heard this heartbeat before. Does it always come from the stone? Is that what I was hearing?”

“I’m sorry.” Nellie reached for the necklace. “I’ll take it back.”

Cora took a step backward, holding the necklace against her shirt and out of the light-haired girl’s reach. “Can’t you tell me anything about it?”

Nellie blinked her large, marble eyes. “It will give you a window into the one you want to understand.”

Cora sighed. She turned the stone over and over in her hand.

“Can’t you tell me anything more?”

“I can take it back if you don’t want it,” Nellie whispered in a low, lilting voice like a lullaby. So familiar. Cora’s eyes widened and her lips parted in mute surprise. “Here.” Nellie’s slender fingers touched Cora’s.

“No.” Cora closed her own hand over the necklace. “I don’t mean to be ungrateful. Thank you, very much.” Cora slipped the beating stone into her pocket. “I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” Nellie smiled. It was the first time Cora saw her smile.

“Well, ‘bye,” Cora said.

“Bye.”

“I know your—”

“Uncle,” Nellie said.

“Uncle said you had milk with you, but if you need anything, just let me know.”

Nellie cocked her head to one side. “I will.”

Nellie watched the adolescent girl turn and rush down the dirt road as fast as her cumbersome cart would allow. She continued to stand there, watching, until the mass of deep brown ragamuffin curls disappeared over the hill altogether. Then Nellie turned and walked back to the silent cottage.

“Hi, Daddy.” Cora ran past her father in the kitchen.

“Hi, Cora,” he called back. The girl was already in her room.

“Oh my gosh, you won’t believe what happened to me today,” Cora said to the rabbit as she pulled open the door of his cage. “The girl, the one I told you about, I talked to her! I gave her some milk. She gave me this.” Cora pulled the necklace out of her pocket and held it up to the rabbit’s nose. He sniffed it and rubbed it with his chin. “Can you hear that? It’s the heartbeat. This stone has got something to do with everything, I’m sure of it! And that girl, she has the voice from my dream—my dream the night you came. What do you think that means?” She dangled the necklace between herself and the rabbit. “Do

you think this is safe to put on?" The rabbit bumped it with his nose. Cora smiled. "I guess it seems so. And I won't know until I try. Plus, she had been wearing it. So it was safe for her, right?"

Cora walked to her mirror. "And maybe, just maybe, it will work on Daddy." She took a deep breath and slipped the necklace over her head.

Nothing happened. Cora looked down. She lifted the stone to her nose and smelled it. Studying her reflection she straightened the cord and re-centered the stone at her chest. "Rabbit, I think I've been very silly, getting caught up in these imaginings; imaginings of sounds or feelings. Things that—I can't even explain why they are unusual. Maybe it's all nothing," she turned to face the rabbit, "but the necklace is beautiful anyway."

The rabbit stared at Cora. And Cora swore she heard a low hum or drone rising in the room. The heartbeat in the necklace grew louder and steadier and Cora looked down at her chest. The necklace was glowing—orange and vibrant with a blue outline tracing its shape. The rabbit watched the girl who watched the stone. The placid, lilting voice trailed into the room, filling the air, and Cora heard someone yell, "Cora, look out!" as she suddenly tumbled over.

"Are you okay?" a voice said.

Cora squirmed. She felt as if she were covered under a pile of pebbles. They were easy to shake off even though



there were a lot of them, and she sat up. Ruffling little bits of debris out of her hair, Cora raised her arms and looked at the waist-deep pile that still buried her legs. Acorns. She was sitting in a pile of acorns. In her bedroom. It took several moments for her to realize that the acorns had rained down over her, knocking her off balance. But how, and from where? She looked at the ceiling. It was smooth, solid, and like any ceiling, had nowhere for a barrage of acorns to fall through. She plunged her fingers into the pile, feeling and listening to the hard shells clacking together. First the pinecone ring, and now this. Cora picked up one of the acorns and examined it closely. It looked completely ordinary. She looked down at the stone.

It wasn't glowing anymore. Cora squeezed it. It wasn't beating either. It was—dead. Still. Just like a necklace. A plain old necklace. Cora looked up at the rabbit, panicked. He watched her expectantly.

Cora jumped to her feet. "Oh no!" she said. "Rabbit, what if I missed my chance?" The acorns tumbled off her legs and began to burst into little silver puffs of dust—one by one—as they hit the floor. Cora rushed over them across the room. "I have to go. I still have to try. What if I missed my chance to have a better understanding of my father?" Cora lifted the stone and dropped it under her blouse, just as Nellie had worn it, before opening her door. The rabbit watched her leave.

Cora found her father still in the kitchen. "Hi, Daddy."

"Well, 'hi' again." Wayne set down his cup of coffee. "How was your day?"

"Good." Cora sat next to him. "What'cha' doin'?"

"Oh, just organizing the stock list."

"That's nice. Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Why did you lock yourself in your room that day and never come out?"

The man's face went sullen. "Cora, that's complicated. I would rather not talk about it."

"Oh." Cora looked at her thumbs.

Her father put his hand on hers. "We haven't seen each other all day. Can't we talk about something cheerful?"

Cora tried to smile. "Of course, Daddy. I'm sorry."

"Naw, don't be sorry." He rubbed her head. "Never be sorry for asking questions."

Cora shifted in her chair and waited a polite amount of time before she went back to her room, mumbling, "Rabbit is waiting." She shut the door behind her and sat down on the floor next to her rabbit, pulling the necklace out to look at it.

"Maybe it's not working right," she frowned, "or maybe I missed it." Cora ran a hand over the rabbit's fur. "I thought Daddy would finally talk to me, like he used

to. I know he's just trying to be nice, but I want to know things. I don't know what to do. All the things in the town, everything that day, I don't know what to do." Cora lay down and hugged the rabbit, resting her forehead against his back. She felt the rabbit put a little paw on her wrist, and then she heard a voice.

"I'm sorry."

Cora raised her head and looked at the rabbit. His face was just inches from hers. "What?" she said.

"I'm sorry," the rabbit repeated as he stared at Cora with his dark, shining eyes.

"You—you can talk?" Cora blinked.

"Yes," the rabbit said. "I have been. Haven't you been listening?"

"I—" Cora stammered. "I never heard you talk. I never heard that."

"You seemed like you did," the rabbit said. "When I spoke, you acted like you understood."

Cora continued to watch the rabbit's mouth in amazement as he spoke. She could barely concentrate on forming her own words to answer him. "I—I don't know what you mean. What did you say? What did I do?"

"Well, if I tell you I'm hungry, you bring me some hay. Or when I heard the death noise outside—you knew I was worried."

Cora sat up slowly and spoke even slower. "But when you're hungry, you hop around in a certain way.

And the gunshot—I just assumed. I never heard you say anything. Oh gosh.” Cora paused. “Am I mad now? Is that why I can hear you? I knew it. The strange noises, it’s not my imagination, it’s worse. I’ve gone mad—now fully mad! I can hear a rabbit talk!”

“Well, I don’t think you’re mad,” the rabbit said. His eyes moved to Cora’s chest and he gestured a paw at the necklace. “It’s that, isn’t it?” Cora lifted up the stone and began to turn it over in her hands. The rabbit went on. “The girl said it was special. Perhaps it has given you better hearing?”

“No.” Cora shook her head and stroked the smooth stone. She closed both her hands around it and squeezed it tight, holding it to her body. “It has given me much more than that.” She looked at the rabbit. “A window into the one I want to understand.”

That night as Cora slept, she heard a rapping on her bedroom window. The rabbit leapt up, tossing back the top of the quilt, and hopping onto Cora’s chest. Cora sat up in bed and lowered the rabbit to her lap. She still wore the stone, tucked into her nightgown.

“What? What is it?” Cora said.

“It’s Nellie.” The rabbit said, “the girl who gave you the necklace. Look.”

Nellie moved her face closer to the window outside and a faint glow outlined the girl’s nose, cheeks and

forehead. Without her bonnet—her tan hair stuck, lank, against her crown—Nellie’s pale eyes looked even more moonlike peering in from the black outdoors.

Cora lit the oil lamp on her bedside table. She scooped the rabbit into one arm and held him against her chest as she pushed the window open with her other hand. Nellie’s fingers came over the sill.

“What’s wrong?” Cora said. “Are you okay?”

“I ran all the way,” Nellie gasped. “I got a message from my beloved—he’s here! He’s here to see me! I don’t know how he did it, but he left me a message to find him. Here—” she threw a folded scrap of paper into Cora’s hand. As her pale arm came in through the window, Cora saw a cluster of little, blue bruises up the girl’s forearm. “Do you know where that is?”

Cora read the note. “Yes. I haven’t been there recently—Daddy doesn’t want me to go there anymore—but I can find it.”

“Will you? Can you take me there? I don’t know where anything is here. Pastor Harding never lets me out of the yard.”

“Uh, okay. Now?”

“Yes, now. Please.” Nellie looked over her shoulder. “In fact, as fast as we can go. Is that okay?”

“Sure, let me get dressed.” Cora placed the rabbit back on the bed.

“Can I come?” the rabbit said. Cora looked at Nellie.

“I see you have a friend.” Nellie smiled. “What’s your name?”

“Cora,” Cora said.

“Basajaun,” the rabbit said.

“Oh, I thought you meant—” Cora stopped and turned to her pet. “Hey, you never told me that.”

“You never asked,” Basajaun said.

The two girls started down the hill with the rabbit hopping next to them. He was flipping his head left and right, because it had been days since he’d run so freely in the grass. Cora wasn’t used to finding her way around town in the dark, but she found everything looked nearly the same, just shadowed in deep blues and greens.

“Is your beloved from Australia too?” Cora asked.

“Yes,” Nellie said.

“How did he get here?”

“I don’t know.”

“When did you get the note? Was it a special wire?”

“No. I wrote it,” Nellie said.

“Huh?” Cora stopped and turned to the teenage girl.

Nellie kept walking as she spoke, forcing Cora to run alongside to catch up to her. “They’re his words, but I wrote them. I knew he was near.” Nellie took a deep breath and her lids began to droop. “As I was lying in bed tonight, I could hear him calling for me. I sat on the chair in my room with a wood block on my lap, put a piece of

paper on it, and held a pencil. I asked him how I could find him.”

“Oh.” Cora looked at the piece of paper. It had been in her palm, but now she fingered it between her thumb and forefinger. Basajaun looked at her.

“At first I wasn’t sure about asking you to come with me,” Nellie said, “but then I thought, ‘How lonely do you have to be, to come to me?’”

Cora led them toward an old thicket where she used to play. “We can cut through here,” she said. “It’s dark but it will be quicker than going around.” She was counting on following her old landmarks within—the big and little “mama and baby” boulders nestled side by side, the tree with the “v” shape—but she hadn’t anticipated the unfamiliar overgrowth that had popped up during her absence. There were some plants she remembered, but her usual paths were dense and obscured. The two girls wrenched bramble and tree limbs aside, cracking small branches and pulling out the little, picky thorns that got stuck in their clothes.

“We’ll take a different way back, I’m sorry,” Cora said, and wondered why she had expected everything to remain unchanged in the time she’d been away. Nellie didn’t reply. She seemed unfazed by the dark, the distance, and the tenacious bramble that crackled and poked every time the girls moved. Cora didn’t think there

was any obstacle in the world that could deter the strange girl from reaching her destination that night.

Just when Cora was beginning to worry she'd gotten them lost, she pushed aside a final cluster of shrubs and stumbled onto open ground. She was turning a circle to get her bearings when Nellie began running in a zigzag pattern across the patchy clearing.

"He's not here," Nellie said. She ran a little more, just to be sure.

"Are you sure this is it?" Cora studied the scrap of paper.

"It is," Nellie said. "I can feel it." She closed her eyes toward the sky.

"We could wait a little while, I guess." Cora sat down in the grass.

"No." Nellie frowned. "He won't be here tonight. He may be in some sort of trouble. I'll just have to wait until he calls me again." The girl walked back to the thicket and pulled aside the brush.

"Oh no." Cora pointed toward some short trees. "That way will be easier. And it probably won't be that much longer since we won't be fighting the plants. But, are you sure you don't want to look around some more? The clearing goes farther down the hill, and we came all this way."

"It's no use," Nellie said, and walked in the direction Cora had pointed.



Cora and Basajaun shrugged at each other and followed Nellie, keeping a few feet behind. Basajaun nudged Cora's leg and she lifted him up. She felt his breathing slow as he fell into a half-sleep in her arms.

"When was the last time you saw your 'beloved?'" Cora said.

"In Australia, before I left with Pastor Harding."

"Is he really your uncle?" Cora stared at the back of Nellie's head. Nellie didn't reply. "Do you like him?"

"No. Do you?"

"Of course not," Cora said. She waited for Nellie to say more. The girl's shoes shuffled against the grass. "Do you miss him? Your beloved, I mean?"

"All the time."

"I'm sorry." Cora hugged Basajaun close and he rumbled a contented little grunt.

"Me too," Nellie said. "He's coming for me, though. I know he is. He will find me, and we'll finally be together again."

"What about the pastor?" Cora asked. "Will he let you go?"

"Then, it won't matter," Nellie said.

The two girls were walking in silence when Cora noticed an acrid, oppressive odor. She stopped. "What's that smell?" she said. Basajaun's ears shot up.

"What is that?" he barked, shaking, and kicked his back feet off Cora's chest, bolting out of her arms.

“What?” Cora looked in the direction Basajaun was running. “What’s—? Oh my God—”

The pile was massive, near a thousand. More, far more than a thousand. Shapes at the top of the mound were discernable in the moonlight, but lower and closer to the ground the outlines meshed into a mass of dark brown. Basajaun’s eyes moved over the pile, then stopped at its center, glassy and stunned. He was so small compared to the mountain of bodies that lay heaped against the night sky.

“Who has done this?” he yelled. “Who?” He let out a piercing cry. It seemed loud enough to shock life into the lost, but after the ringing stopped, the rabbits still lay motionless.

Cora kneeled and put her arms around her rabbit. “Oh Basajaun, I’m so sorry.” She hugged him and tried to pull him to her but he stayed rooted, muscles rigid, staring at the pile of death. Cora slumped forward and put her hands over her face.

“Are they not even to be buried?” she cried to Nellie. “Are they just to *lay* here like this? Why?”

“Pastor Harding says it’s a warning,” Nellie spoke low, “and a prediction of what will come next.”

“That pastor is a horrible, horrible man!” Cora reached for Basajaun and he pulled away. “How could he slaughter them like this? They are living things! They think, and feel, and they are a million times more noble

and admirable than he is!" She pointed to the pile. "He should be there, not them!" Cora tried to stifle her angry gasps, and waited for Nellie's response. The teenager folded her hands at her chest and bowed her head. Her sleeves fell to her elbows and exposed again the cluster of bruises on her arm. Fingerprints.

"We should've done something," Basajaun growled. "We should've done something!"

"I didn't know," Cora said.

"Yes, you did," Basajaun hissed. "*You* could've done something."

Cora looked at the ground. "I didn't know what to do," she whispered, and choked on her tears because she felt too ashamed to cry.

The two girls and the rabbit stood. Each of them thought a few words for the deceased—regrets, apologies, promises. And after a while, Nellie turned and walked slowly down the path. Cora's eyes were still on the ground. Basajaun stared at the profile of his friend and nudged his nose against her leg. Without looking at him, Cora picked him up and followed after the older girl. The three of them walked home in silence.

In the morning, Cora brought Basajaun his breakfast on a little plate. She set it in front of him and took a few steps back to sit on the floor. He munched a piece of

lettuce, staring into her. For the first time since the previous night, he spoke.

“That Nellie, she is strange, isn’t she?” he said.

“Yup.” Cora pulled a lock of hair in front her face and studied it. “I don’t know what to think of her. Do you think she’s crazy?”

“Yes,” Basajaun said. “But I like her. She’s nice. Her smell reminds me of being young and safe. I feel a kinship with her, or comfortable, or something like that.”

“Me too. I don’t know why.”

Basajaun sat next to his plate. “If she did make it all up, and imagined her beloved was coming from so far away simply to find her, that’s very sad.”

“I know. But she must have made it up, right?” Cora said. “What she said, it’s not possible. And then he wasn’t even there. It is very sad. He probably abandoned her and never thought of her again.” She fingered Nellie’s necklace under her shirt. Basajaun folded his feet under his body and Cora edged closer to stroke his back. “I didn’t even know your name, Basajaun. What does it mean? Tell me about yourself, about your family. There must be so much to know.”

“Too much. And my name—it is just a rabbit name. I’m surprised you haven’t asked how I found you.”

“I did wonder. But I had been watching you for so long, and you came to me sometimes. It seemed to follow.”

“My father told me about your father,” the rabbit said. “He said your father is a great man, and not like the others in the town.”

“Really?” Cora said. “Really?”

“Yes. It was him I came to the house looking for, but I found you first. You were friendly and soothing. I liked you right away. And then you gave me food, I couldn’t believe it. By the time I found your father, I was already so focused on you that I . . . he was very nice, your father, very good. But he didn’t look at me the way I imagined he looked at my father, the way you looked at me. Like you knew me.”

“So you let him bring you in to be with me.” Cora tipped her head at the rabbit and smiled.

“What?”

“To be with me, to live here. You let him bring you in and place you in my room. I’m so glad he did.” She smoothed Basajaun’s ears.

“Oh,” Basajaun said. “Yes.”

“What? What is it?”

“I’m sorry, but your father didn’t bring me in. It was Nellie.”

“What? But I thought—how did she get in?”

“I don’t know, I was sleepy when she found me. Funny thing is, I stayed sleepy too; that never happens. Normally when a human is anywhere near, I’m awake in an instant. But with her not only was I unconcerned, I

was relaxed. Anyway, she also meant me for your father, I think. As far as I can remember, she just came in the front door. But then his room was locked. She left me in the hall in front of his bedroom, but when I was alone I saw your room was open, so I went in. I recognized you." Basajaun watched Cora trying to work out what he was saying. "Did your father tell you he was the one who brought me in?"

"Yes. Well, maybe. I don't know." Cora's face scrunched. "I thought he did it. I *assumed* he did it, for forgiveness or niceness for leaving me alone. He just let me think it, I guess." Cora frowned, and Basajaun felt sorry for letting out the truth. He moved closer to her.

"Your father is a very good man, Cora. You should think well of him."

"I do," she said. "I really, really do." But she grew quiet, and looked doubtful. "And I knew it wasn't him. Deep down, I knew. I just wanted it to be."

The rabbit studied the girl's sad profile. "You know, what you said yesterday, about not being able to hear me before?" he said. "I didn't notice the difference at first. I thought we were always just talking, since I came here. But I can tell the difference now; things are much clearer. I do like this better."

"Me too." Cora inched closer to the rabbit.

"I felt so ashamed of myself last night," Basajaun said, "living this happy life with you. Forgetting all my

kind and leaving them to die. Pretending not to think about them or that they exist. It hurts, to have done such a wrong. Hurts, and something deeper I can't explain. I'm sorry for what I said to you. I meant it about myself."

"What can we do?" Cora said. "You are just a rabbit, and I am just a girl. I feel so powerless."

"I am a prey animal. When I see someone bigger or stronger than I am, I flee. I have bravery, but to use it like a man would be foolish. What good does honor do me if throwing myself into danger causes me to fail? Having the sense to run from a force that could lay you out in one blow does not make you a coward. No, we need a strategy. A plan. Although I think if I had the chance, I could kill him with just my paws, and I would dance in his blood."

Cora started at Basajaun's comment, but she couldn't blame him. And it was no less, she thought, than what the pastor deserved. Still, the bloodlust in the small animal's voice disturbed her a little.

"What about the acorns," she said finally, "that fell all over me from nowhere? And those pinecones around you that first night? Where did those come from? And how they all disappeared into silver dust; what does that mean?"

"I thought that was *your* trick," Basajaun said.

Cora blinked. Her voice dropped. "You don't—" she began. Basajaun shook his head.

“Those questions I can’t answer,” he said. “I was going to ask you some of them. But whatever it all was, it wasn’t me.”

Cora sighed. “The breathing. The heartbeat. You’ve never heard them before, or at all, have you?”

“I’m sorry, but no.”

“Cora, I have to talk to you.”

Cora laid a plate on the wooden counter-ledge and turned around, drying her hands on the kitchen cloth. She had been hoping to avoid her father that morning, or at least until she got her thoughts straight. “What?”

“Did you—” Wayne touched his jaw, “well, do you have enough money?”

“Money? What do I need money for?” she tossed the cloth onto the plate. “I mean, yes, I have enough. What’s wrong?”

“Cora, did you take some money out of the cupboard in my bedroom?”

“What? No. I don’t even know where that is.” She paused. “How could you think I would do that, anyway? You think I would steal from you?” She had never before addressed her father with such an indignant tone.

“No, honey. It’s just, it’s gone. I thought maybe you needed some money to go out with your new friend.” He kneeled.

“Basajaun?” Cora said. “Ooops,” she thought.



“What?”

“I mean, my rabbit,” she replied quickly. “That’s what I decided to call him.”

Her father smiled. “Wherever did you think of a name like that?”

“It’s just a rabbit name.” Cora shrugged.

“I meant that girl who came with the pastor,” Wayne said. “The teenage girl.”

“Oh. Nellie.”

“Nellie?” her father said. “Yes.”

“What do you think of her?” Cora asked.

“She seems a nice girl. I feel bad for her, trapped with that pastor. I think it’s good you’re making an effort to be kind to her. She seems such a sad and lonely thing.”

“Have you talked to her?”

“No. Pastor Harding doesn’t let her speak hardly at all. At least not when he’s appearing. Lord knows what they talk about when they’re alone.”

“I can’t imagine they talk at all,” Cora said. “But the money, Daddy. Some money is gone?”

“Yes, missing. I don’t know where it went. I dare say someone might have taken it, but I don’t know how. We’ll have to get an extra lock for the front door, and be more careful to be sure we don’t leave any windows open.”

As soon as she had a moment to spare, Cora brought Basajaun to their secret, outdoor playhouse next to the cow pasture. She had things to tell him, although she

regretted she still hadn't come up with anything that resembled a plan to deal with the real problem, the one that mattered.

"What do you think, Basajaun? If Nellie got in the house to bring you to me, she easily could've gotten in to take the money."

"Nellie would never steal, I'm sure of it," Basajaun said. "What would she do with it, anyway? How could money help her?"

"I don't know."

"What about the pastor? He could have taken it."

"Yes, it could've been a ruse," Cora said. "That whole thing was so strange and suspicious. If Nellie and the pastor were working together, it could've been a trick to get me out of the house so he could take the money."

"But your father was still home," Basajaun said, "and the money was in the cupboard in *his* room. Getting you out would be no benefit to the pastor to steal it."

"That's true. But Nellie has ways into the house." Cora pointed into the grass, "She could have gotten it at some other time."

"It's not Nellie," Basajaun said again. "It's just not. And she wasn't able to get into your father's room the day she brought me in your house, anyway. Why don't you trust her?"

"I do. In my heart I do. It's just hard to because, I don't understand her. She's so strange. She's so pretty.

And she didn't even seem sad when we saw . . . you know—"

"She was sad. She just shows her sadness in different ways," Basajaun said. "It could be the pastor though. You know, some other way. But we need to know more."

"There's a town meeting about it tomorrow," Cora said, "and I'm going to go."

"Your father is letting you?"

"Oh, he opposed me on it, boy did he ever. But I'm going. He can't tell me what to do, anymore." She folded her arms over her stomach.

The rabbit leaned closer to her, "Be careful, Cora. Don't do anything rash."

"How else are we going to learn more about what's going on? I'm not just going to sit in my house and hide anymore. And you want me to go. You can't deny that."

"You're right," Basajaun said. "I just worry. Remember, being headstrong and loud does not make you a hero."

"Yes, but closing your ears and eyes to all evil does not make it go away," Cora replied.