

THE
FABLED
EARTH

A Novel

KIMBERLY
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HARPER MUSE

The Fabled Earth

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To Amy Sue Nathan

HARPER
MUSE



“There were fish in the rivers of Eire, there were animals in her coverts. Wild and shy and monstrous creatures ranged in her plains and forests. Creatures that one could see through and walk through . . .

“I ranged on the tides of the worlds. Green and purple distances were under me: green and gold the sunlit regions above. In these latitudes, I moved through a world of amber, myself amber and gold; in those other places, in a sparkle of lucent blue, I curved, lit like a living jewel.”

—*James Stephens, “The Story of Tuan mac Cairill”*

“Folklore is the boiled-down juice, or pot-likker, of human living.”

—*Zora Neal Hurston*

Chapter One

CLEO



THE EAST RIVER, SOMETIMES SHINING, A MIRROR TO THE LUCENT blue firmament above, was laid out for Cleo Woodbine's sharp green eyes, with nothing moving over its calm surface on this morning but her, a reeling seabird, a passing fishing boat. She knew the nature of barrier islands and the mysteries that swam beneath the changing waters, the paths cleared through maritime woods by deer and wild horses, the nests of the loggerheads buried in the dunes, even the trails of the damn hogs. She hated the wild hogs and feared them. The truth was she would be glad to never see man nor beast again, if she had to look on the bright side today.

She paid attention to the color of the water and the current as she made her way. She knew to be careful of the depth. She'd been traveling these waters in her flat-bottomed johnboat almost thirty seasons now, since the summer of 1932. As with life, the river bottom was always changing. The depths could surprise people, even those who knew every bend in the salt creeks through the Georgia marsh as she did. And even Cleo had to admit that there were some changes she couldn't see coming, like the news that had arrived with the basket of produce she exchanged on the regular with the inn on the mainland, her name scrawled across the envelope in letters a child might have written.

It was rare for a piece of mail to find her. And Cleo didn't properly know any children. The ones she was aware of were more likely

to throw a mink pelt at her door on a dare than to send her a letter. It had occurred to her that the handwriting had not been made by an unpracticed hand, but an unsteady one. She'd opened the mail to find a sympathy card, and from it, a clipping of an obituary had fallen into her lap. She'd sighed, expecting the passing of Dr. Marius Johnston, who would be nearing eighty by now. But it had been a different name she read there. Cleo had been so affected she'd passed out. The shoals had risen up like something biblical and she woke to find herself contemplating a world that had changed so drastically that she'd ended up at the bottom of the steps.

Joanna Burton had been dead and buried almost a month.

There'd been a girl, alive in Cleo's memory all these years, in an iridescent green swimsuit that glimmered like scales, like light on the river on a grand summer day. Cleo had barely known Joanna, but their stories had intertwined, theirs and those of the young men who came to Cumberland that season. Two of them had drowned and the rest had scattered to the four corners—but to Cleo, the end to Joanna felt like the end to all.

In the wake of that news, Cleo left Kingdom Come. Situated with water on all sides, it had never been more than a lick of land with the river bounding the east shore and the sea to the west, a temporary realm that would one day be joined with the greater seventeen-mile Cumberland Island. She could walk around the entire thing in thirty minutes, and she'd been measuring out her remaining days before it was an island no more. For the last few seasons, the silt that rose from the riverbed with every tide meant she'd had to navigate more carefully through the waterways so she wouldn't mire her boat or drag the hull over a sandbar. She knew that locals liked

to lay bets on how much longer her cottage would stand against the shifting foundation, and on the day Cleo Woodbine would come walking back into town. Farther east and north of Cumberland lay the mainland and Revery, a sleepy little fishing community known for its own long history and picturesque main street, where she'd been born. On a clear night, she might see the lights twinkle there like a few more stars from the sky, miles up the coast, still a quiet little place in 1959. That was as much as she'd cared to see of the larger world in a long while.

Taking her usual route, Cleo meandered south to moor her boat near Dungeness, the largest of the old Carnegie mansions, before she'd turn around and head north to pass the other summer homes still standing their ground against the passage of time—Greyfield, Stafford, Plum Orchard. She liked that they had names like grand old gals and often felt she could almost count herself among them. A few still housed family, either visiting or living there for parts of the year. Others were completely abandoned. But after a century, the Carnegies' strange kingdom by the sea was going to seed, crumbling beautifully, like everything eventually did on Cumberland.

Cleo herself was a small, strong, practical woman. Not yet fifty, she was most comfortable wearing a pair of denim pants with plenty of pockets, a cotton button-down worn soft, and muddy Red Wing boots. Her auburn hair was a thicket, snipped at with kitchen scissors to keep it chin-length. She was not stylish or modern or relevant in any way. She had made a life that was far from sensible as an artist and a forager. No one would miss her, she supposed, aside from the heirloom fruit trees and shrubs scattered between the estates, from which she gathered produce in order to barter for necessities. On the whole, Cleo lived her days out the same as those trees. She answered to no one, and she honestly preferred it

that way.

It had been a good year for muscadine and loquat and the Ruby Sweet, a favorite of hers. She took a plum from her pocket, had her breakfast, breathed out, then turned her face to the sun. It was the late summer light that always got to her, made her hate to think of leaving this place. She'd learned you could love your prison. You could make a sanctuary of it.

Long before she took up as artist-in-residence at Woodbine Cottage, her grandfather had been the first to hold the post. The Carnegies of Plum Orchard had been his benefactors, those old gods with their wild fortune, now dwindling away. Dooley Woodbine was a first-generation Scotch-Irish immigrant whose family had settled in Kentucky. There, he'd been a childhood friend of Marius Johnston, who later married Nancy Carnegie. When he'd invited Dooley to Georgia, Dooley brought his own wife, a practical girl from Brunswick, and his favorite Scotch-Irish folktales and fables in his red head, like some people bring relatives who cling and settle too close. And while living in the cottage, he'd fathered one son, Cleo's father, and written and illustrated a book of his own stories, *Woodbine's Treasury of Glories and Grimms*. There'd been two hundred copies printed and he'd kept only one, which he'd bequeathed to Cleo, along with his love of the shoals.

Cleo herself had never traveled farther than the miles that separated Kingdom Come and the place where she'd been raised by parents who had worked in the mills and canneries of Revery before both dying young. After the heartbreaking loss of their only son and daughter-in-law, Cleo's grandparents had left Woodbine Cottage and come to town to care for her. Only after all her family was gone had Cleo returned to the island, holding out just enough hope for her own future as an artist.

She'd loved to sit on Dooley's knee and listen to him intone the poetic language of ancient Irish myths and Appalachian ghost stories. He'd shown her a book of illustrations by Arthur Rackham, the artist who had most influenced him. He'd gifted her with her own pen and India ink, a set of paints, and a fresh pad of special paper, and supplied new ones every year until he'd died, when she was ten. She'd copied the illustrated characters in *Woodbine's*, filling up the pads of paper almost as soon as she received them. Then, sometime after Dooley passed, her favorites of those characters took on a life of their own and began to tag along beside her—a friendly spirit named Little Hannah, a ghostly fiddler, and a lonely graveyard guardian, a dog known as the grim. She'd only added to the canon once since she'd come to the shoals, a gentle giant who slipped through the deep forests and in and out of the light, whom she thought of as the spirit of the island.

Dooley had said that all stories were ghost stories, an exchange of spirit between the world and the human heart that rode on an inhale and an exhale. Stories, to Dooley, were elemental. Cleo couldn't have doubted that truth if she'd tried. She'd imagined all those stories he'd told drifting past her heart, slipping around the forest of her bones. It was no wonder the figments of her imagination trailed at her heels. They were good company as she loitered near Dungeness. Little Hannah stayed close as a shaft of that summer light, and the melancholy fiddle tune carried over the shoals. *A serenade?* No. A reminder she was not alone in her grief. Cleo was grateful for the ragtag bunch of childhood memories she'd dragged out here with her, and she'd continued to paint them so they might be remembered even after she was gone.

Cleo liked to think of the Timucuan when she came to Dungeness, to remember their story, a native tribe that had long ago made

their home in this area and down into Florida. You couldn't find one now if you tried, although centuries ago, they'd surely never have imagined that would be the case. They'd built a shell ring right where she stood from the discarded oyster shells from their tables. Later, when the next fellow came along, the place they'd marked as sacred had simply looked like the perfect high spot to build a big house. The way Cleo saw it, there would always be somebody wanting to put his foot on this wild place and claim it. The Carnegies were the latest bunch to think they could do it, but Cumberland would never allow it. Every creature and every structure were temporary guests. So far as she could understand, Dooley had had that right: a story was eternal and, so far as Cleo was concerned, the very element that made up Cumberland.

Poor old Dungeness stood witness to some of those stories today with empty eyes that stared out at the river like it couldn't remember how on earth it got there. Kids regularly snuck around taking a piss on what had once been a grand dream. Whenever she passed this way, which was more often these days, she'd slip inside and up to the empty library with its empty shelves. Nothing stirred there now, but she liked to stand at the window and look out over the river.

"Joanna is dead, but I guess you don't need me to tell you that," she said aloud, speaking to the memory of a boy called Lumas Gray, who had loved the forsaken library at Dungeness and, briefly, been her friend. "I just needed to say it."

She let herself recall the days when it had seemed their whole lives waited beyond the horizon. But their story had turned out to be a fable, a cautionary tale.

Near to the dock, she hopped in her banged-to-hell pickup and took the Grand Avenue, the main road that ran down this part of the island, to where she stopped in a quiet glen of bleached bones of creatures and palmetto fronds, all tangled in morning glory vine. Cleo bent to collect the hard brown pods beneath the dying blooms, the more the better. Even the sap from the broken vine could go to your head, but today she ignored precautions like gloves and welcomed the soft glow that came to the edges of her vision from exposure to the plant's gentle poison, the first taste of what was to come. Not a test of courage, for this was surely the coward's way out and she knew it.

Cracked open, the tiny seeds inside the pods looked like the pips of an apple. Ground in her mortar, they could be made fine as cinnamon. *Add that to your drink for colorful thoughts, more for walking dreams, a lot more for no dreams at all.* Any old mountain man might tell you so. Her grandfather had taught her to use it in her paints like a blessing. Her own choices had taught her it could be a curse.

It had been almost thirty years since she'd come to collect glory from this vine, but there was no real trick to it. Morning glory seeds grew in every fencerow and in the cracks of sidewalks and in vegetable gardens. The vines were pulled up for weeds. But Cleo had knowledge she often wished she'd never learned. And so she grabbed as many of them as she could find, far more than she would need, fully intending to eat every seed she could stuff in her mouth without bothering to grind them down. She'd had years to decide that this was the way she would go; it only came as a surprise that it would happen so soon. She'd thought she might be an old woman. She'd thought by now Joanna Burton would have come to witness her misery, as was her right. But there'd be no satisfaction now, no

peace between them.

Her hands were dirty and stinging by the time she had filled her pockets and she felt her head begin to ache. She didn't dare eat the seeds until she'd gotten to the place she was going. The last thing she wanted was to accidentally end up wandering Cumberland like a lunatic until some neighbor or tourist found her and somehow sobered her up. Or worse, scramble her brain only to live another day, someone's burden. Cleo did not mean to become a ruin; she meant to disappear.

She took the truck out to Plum Orchard to the sandy shore on the river where the tides met in a place called the dividings. Years ago she'd told a tale of something in the water, Joanna's story. Today, the memory was like a slippery dream with details she had started to forget. The river had been so high that night, no one could judge where the night sky began. The rushing tide, rising in the reeds, had sounded like some great creature drawing breath, sucking life. Cleo had hardly needed to convince anyone at all that some reckoning had come upon them. And she hadn't been able to stop it either. She'd lived on the shoals long enough now to know exactly what she'd seen and been ready to tell it all to Joanna Burton, but it was too late.

Cleo bent at the water's edge to fill an empty jug. She dug every hard black seed from her pockets and filled her mouth. She breathed through her nose and bit down, only to find she could not chew them. Horrified at what she was doing, she rushed before she could change her mind and tried to drink them down with a long swig of the water but choked.

Eyes flooding, she gagged until she vomited and then dropped to her knees at the river's edge, stunned at her clumsiness. Her mouth burned. The seeds had been wasted and she'd barely con-

sumed enough of them to do anything more than make her sick to her stomach. Cleo let out a miserable howl. She'd believed in stories and things unseen when she'd come to Cumberland as a girl and longed for inspiration, but she'd been too afraid of glory to risk applying it to herself. Now, she thought, when at last she sought oblivion, if she had any courage at all, she'd walk into the river with a clear head.

But then she spied the glimmer of something golden lying nearby, just inside the stone ring where there'd once been a summer bonfire. She wiped her eyes to look again and wondered if she might be hallucinating. But Cleo knew she could never mistake the bright reflection of the sun bouncing off a broken watch's face, a watch she'd returned long ago. If it had found its way back to her here, then so had Tate Walker.

"I know you're out there, Tate Walker," she yelled, anxious he was watching her. She coughed. Her throat felt raw.

Tate had been Dr. Johnston's man years ago, and he'd been the one to save her life. She remembered him as he'd been, the lanky young man with steady eyes who had been in charge of the hunts, always at the edge of the group, like her, both of them about to make a mess of their lives. Never had she expected to see him again.

Cleo crawled closer to scoop up the watch. She looked at the face of the old timepiece. It had stopped tracking the passing of minutes and lay quiet in her hand. It occurred to her in that silence that she'd made a mistake, maybe done something she couldn't take back.

Cleo grabbed up the water jug, filled it again, and drank it down until she'd emptied it and her stomach sloshed. She sat on the shore, catching her breath, wiping her eyes until she could see straight. It seemed a good sign to her that she still had her senses.

She listened for the fiddle tune, but there was only the sound of her own heartbeat racing in her ears. She knew the river was just a river. She knew the tagalongs were only a trick of her mind. She knew Joanna Burton would never forgive her.

And she was certain now that she was not alone.

“Did Dr. Johnston drag you back here too?” she called. “Well, if you want this watch, you should come and get it.”

She waited, but there was no sound. No sight of him. She dropped the watch into her pocket where the seeds had been before.

If the man had heard anything about her over the years, he might think twice before accepting such an invitation. Cleo knew plenty of stories got out about the recluse on Kingdom Come. The best was about the hogs. Trespassing men were said to disappear, that the wild hogs on the shoals sometimes favored wayward sons and drunk uncles, thanks to whatever Cleo Woodbine grew in those gardens and glens. None of it was true, but it had kept many an unwanted visitor away. Tate already knew the very worst truths about her, before he left long ago, but he might surprise her now. Other things had, like the way she turned her boat toward home again then, on this day when she'd set out to die.

Chapter Two

FABLE



THERE WERE VERY OLD FAIRY TALES THAT SPOKE OF OTHER worlds beyond this one. Anyone would have thought of them now, even in the summer of 1932. After this earth lay the Many-Coloured Land. Next came the Land of Wonder, and after that the Land of Promise. To reach the Many-Coloured Land, water had to be crossed. And there was no bridge connecting Cumberland Island with the mainland, and no one could doubt it was a storied place.

Cleo Woodbine had heard many of those stories from her granddaddy. She tried to remember them all as she was ferried across by private boat, then carried in a pickup truck over the Grand Avenue, a sandy, rutted lane so rough she clenched her teeth so she wouldn't crack a tooth. The way was flanked by a thick maritime forest, and she felt as if the day were late, although she knew it was barely noon. Saw palmettos scratched the fenders, a sound that made her skin prickle. Ancient live oaks loaded down with gray moss created an endless twisting canopy that seemed to breathe above the other trees. She quietly named them—pines, magnolias, laurel oaks, sweet gums, sassafras. Her grandfather had spent time there when the Carnegies had supported his work as an author and illustrator. Now twenty-three years old, she was coming to Plum Orchard herself, in hopes of patronage for her own work.

Situated at the midline of Cumberland Island on the banks of

the East River, Plum Orchard was one of the largest of the Carnegie summer homes—vacant for parts of the year and other times bustling at the seams with family and guests. But Cleo had only heard of it in stories until now. She arrived, not exactly staff or guest or family member, but something in between these titles: companion. For courage, she held a well-loved copy of her granddaddy's book. She'd learned to read from this book, then learned to paint as he had. His work seemed to have sprung to life on the page. Cleo hoped it might be something like that for her.

She'd been told the other guests were a group of young men in their twenties, heirs to various fortunes from elite families in far-flung cities. It was to be a gathering for an annual midsummer bonfire, inspired years ago when her grandfather and Dr. Johnston liked to try to best one another in oral storytelling. Cleo wondered what she would make of Dr. Johnston, if he might remind her of Dooley, a complicated and charismatic man who had adored her and whom she'd idolized and still missed so much.

Her knuckles were white from gripping the edge of her seat. To look at, she was just one more nervous girl preparing to face a pack of gentrified boys set loose on a wild island, but Cleo wasn't afraid. Cleo was not easily intimidated. In fact, she was thrilled. It hadn't come as a surprise when, after her flinty grandmother's passing, she'd received kind condolences from the famous island family. But she had been delighted when, weeks later, after she'd taken the chance to inquire after the artist's residence where Dooley and her grandmother had lived, the response had been an invitation to come to Plum Orchard. She would be there for the late-summer gathering to be a companion to a Ms. Joanna Burton, daughter of a merchant in Asheville, North Carolina.

Cleo had been so lonely she'd accepted immediately, then

waited a month for the date to arrive. Now she worried she'd have nothing in common with the girl, but if this was a sort of test of character, then she intended to rise to the occasion and earn the family's good faith. She rode stalwart as her grandmother had ever been, confident in the belief that her life was about to change. However, with her first look at the house, she feared she had never fully appreciated the outrageous wealth.

Around a curve, the house rose from an expanse of flat lawn more than two hundred yards wide. Graced with balustrades, ornate terraces, French doors, railed porches, and arched floor-to-ceiling windows, it was like nothing Cleo had ever known. Palatial and blindingly white, the house's four columns supported a gabled roof two stories high. It seemed out of place in the wilderness of such a remote island. Animals roamed the lawns, including banty roosters, bony horses, and something large that flew low and black before folding its wings to settle in one of the oaks. The bird watched the truck's approach with a shiny eye. A buzzard. They came to a stop and Cleo took a breath before climbing out. The sandy drive was soft under her shoes. Beyond the house, the East River gleamed in glimpses through the trees that edged the riverbank. The air smelled of Spartina grass, clean and fresh, briny as the sea.

Cleo tried to imagine the people who lived there while the driver, a Negro boy, carried her single suitcase around the truck to a door beneath the grand portico. He had stayed quiet on the ride, but now he said, "Mrs. O'Dowd will have heard the car come up the drive. She'll be out to meet you."

"I won't mind a minute to take this in." She was glad it was only him there. She'd have a moment to get her feet under her.

His face was smooth and sweet and youthful. And he seemed

interested in the book she carried. “Lumas Gray,” he said. “You like to read?”

“Cleo Woodbine. And yes, sometimes. My granddaddy illustrated this book when he lived here as artist-in-residence, actually. He was famous friends with the family here at Plum Orchard. Dooley Woodbine?”

The boy’s mild interest remained unchanged, his expression composed. Cleo felt a bit irked. Dooley had crowed over his position here often enough that she’d had no doubt his reputation had cut a wide path. He’d made it sound like his place in this family was one of honor and so was his place out on the shoals, the cottage where he did just as he pleased night and day. He’d longed and longed for it, and he had made Cleo long for it too.

His youth would be the excuse for not having heard of Dooley, she decided. Though she guessed he was a good bit younger than her, the boy was taller by more than a head and wore slacks and a white button-down shirt that were most definitely a uniform and not what he was most comfortable in based on the way he tugged at the sleeves.

“How old are you?” she asked, just to settle it.

“Seventeen.”

“Before your time, then.” Her grandparents would have already been gone from the island before he was born. “But surely you know Kingdom Come? Woodbine Cottage? Dr. Johnston had that built at the turn of the century as a place for visiting creatives. That’s why it has our name now, in honor of my granddaddy. I hope to be the next to make a studio there and paint.”

“About the same time as they built my daddy’s house. You’re an artist?” He took a closer look at her and seemed doubtful.

“Ink and watercolor.” He looked at her hands, and she hoped he

mistook the stains there for paints. No matter how she'd scrubbed them, her fingers were still discolored from the fruit pulp she'd strained for the syrups she'd made to sell with her grandmother until a few weeks ago. "Dooley always said that the light at Woodbine Cottage was the best he'd ever seen. Things just came to life for him here. But Dr. Johnston wants me to be sure it suits me, life on an island, before any decisions are made." She couldn't seem to stop herself from driving home the point that she was not staff, and if she embellished a little, it was only because she didn't want there to be any mistake. "Some people can't stand it, you know. Others are born to it."

He nodded. The idea of being born to an island life he seemed to understand. "I wasn't born to it."

"You don't like it here? Where better could you go?"

The buzzard in the tree talked to his friends, three of them now, hanging in the limbs above them, eavesdropping, waiting to hear what he might dare say back. Lumas Gray's eyes were deep and quiet, and there was nothing cruel about him. In fact, when he looked at her there, clutching Dooley's book, wearing her only dress and her black shoes that should have been replaced two seasons ago, his gentleness made her feel sorry for being so high-handed. He could have hurt her back, embarrassed her. Instead, he was kind.

"There's sure lots of places I'd like to see. But I have my favorites here. If you want, I'll show you around. If you like books, there's a library out at Dungeness House like you'll never believe," he said. "It's my favorite old haunt on Cumberland. Nobody's lived out there a while now, except maybe ghosts."

"Really?" She could almost believe anything of this island.

He shrugged. He was teasing, but she liked him. And she was

desperate for a friend. But she was embarrassed for him to see that and reminded herself that a whole party of friends were on their way, including a girl she'd been assigned to keep company, which meant she'd likely never be alone. Sadly, she doubted she would be spending her social time with a Negro boy now or in the future, not if she was given residency at the cottage.

"I guess I don't know if I believe in ghosts," Cleo said. He took a step back and nodded.

The buzzards stayed put, glaring down at her. She imagined they wondered who she thought she was. Only hours before, she'd left the little house where she'd lived with her grandparents across from the cannery in Revery, setting out like she was some kind of Southern Anastasia that these sorts of people would embrace. Part of her wished she could follow Lumas Gray and go to see a library to beat all she'd ever seen, where no one would judge her by her worn shoes or the freckles already popping out on her fair skin. But she held the book tighter, remembering why she'd come.

The door opened and a middle-aged woman stood there, Mrs. O'Dowd, Cleo assumed. "You must be Ms. Woodbine," the woman said. "Welcome to Plum Orchard."

The boy tipped the little driver's cap on his head and set off. And Cleo turned to set foot inside the grand house, clinging by her fingernails to every tall tale Dooley Woodbine had ever told her about himself and the Carnegies. She tried not to listen to the little voice in her head that reminded her she had no idea how much of it was true.

The housekeeper, who seemed like a kind woman, led the way up a fine staircase. Cleo was dumbstruck by the differences between

the elegant entrance and the tract house where she'd grown up. At Plum Orchard, the room she was given was neat and bright and felt luxuriously spacious. Mrs. O'Dowd was watching her take it all in, and Cleo tried not to appear as astounded as she felt. The housekeeper was likely in her thirties but looked older to Cleo, who couldn't see a friend in her but smiled when the woman laid out a smart navy dress.

"For dinner. Dr. Johnston asked me to pull a few things out for you so you'd have choices. It's not a formal occasion, but the family and guests do dress for meals. This should be a pretty good fit. You're close to the same size as one of the nieces. You'll find others in the wardrobe and the dresser. Let me know if there's anything else you need."

Cleo couldn't hide that she was uneasy with the gesture. She didn't know what she'd expected, that she'd be appearing alongside ladies and gentlemen of this class in her own shabby clothes?

"Will I meet Dr. Johnston tonight?"

Mrs. O'Dowd supplied the practical information. A few of the other guests had already arrived, along with Dr. Johnston's stepson, Morrie, but the doctor himself had been delayed and would not be joining them for a few weeks.

"The young men have been out for a duck hunt all morning. Several more are expected this evening, but your Ms. Burton's plans have also changed. I'm afraid she won't be joining until Dr. Johnston arrives. When it was clear that the doctor would be delayed, her parents felt it would be better to wait until there was proper supervision." She couldn't hide the bit of chagrin that Cleo saw creep over her expression. She added, "But I'm to let you know that you're welcome to enjoy the house and the island, to come and go as you please, until she arrives. Only, Dr. Johnston would like

you to wait about seeing Woodbine Cottage. He wants to escort you out there himself.”

Now it was Cleo who tried to hide her disappointment at having to wait to see the cottage.

“There are only four of us staff in the house right now, but you can find one of us day or night,” the housekeeper said. “There’s myself, Mrs. Butler in the kitchen, and Mr. Meeks in the garden. We live on the grounds in the cottages. And you’ve met Lumas Gray. He’s the driver and runs the boat and any other errands, but he lives up at Brick Hill. There’s a settlement up there. A lot of the colored folk once worked for the Candler hotels on the north end, but that’s mostly shut down now and a lot of them have moved off the island. There’re others coming and going, but they’ll be out at their own work on the estate so you might meet them or not. And you’ll be busy with your girl soon enough. She’ll want someone to help with her hair and her clothes and maybe just be a friend. She’ll be the only one here in this pack of heathen boys. I imagine you’re meant to be a bit of a guard dog.”

Cleo realized it must be obvious she’d never worked as a companion before, or maybe Mrs. O’Dowd had been told this. “Thank you. I appreciate the advice.”

It was a lot to take in at once, but clearly there were no immediate demands of her. Cleo declined to come down for dinner, opting to take a tray in her room. It wasn’t a lie when she said she had a headache from the trip. But she also wasn’t prepared to face a room of unknown young men by herself tonight.

“Well, you can find me down the hall if you need anything tonight,” Mrs. O’Dowd said. She was kind enough, but she looked askance at Cleo and it made her wonder what the woman had heard about her. “For now, you get your rest.”

When Mrs. O'Dowd ducked out and Cleo lay across the cotton coverlet on her twin bed, she wondered if she'd made a mistake saying she wanted to rest. Now she'd trapped herself inside the lovely little room for the whole night. She didn't feel free to wander alone no matter what she'd just been told. Her stomach complained, reminding her she hadn't eaten much all day. She waited for hours, looking through the clothing that hung in the wardrobe and trying to imagine what Joanna Burton would be like, then taking the tray Mrs. O'Dowd brought up. She nibbled at the chicken dinner, but her stomach wasn't happy with the heavy cream casserole. Not long after dark, she regretted she hadn't eaten more.

Finally, after waiting to be sure the house seemed to sleep, she gave in to curiosity and snuck down the stairs. The little clock at her bedside had said it was just after ten o'clock. Maybe she could find a bit of cheese and some crackers. She prowled through the back halls until she came to a doorway and stepped into the front hall.

She could feel her heart race when she thought of morning and the smart dress she'd been given and how it would be to explore and bide her time for the next few days. The smells of damp soot, tongue oil, mint, and leather lingered and mixed with an overwhelming sweetness, the scent of what must have been hundreds of lilies. Cleo had seen them growing in profusion when they'd pulled up to the house. Blooms seemed to fill vases throughout the space, although it was too dark to see clearly. But overall, she had the impression of a very elegant hunting lodge and thought maybe the blossoms were for her benefit, perhaps an effort by Mrs. O'Dowd to soften the more savage shadows of this place. Cleo tried to imagine Dooley in a house like this, and what eccentricities she might find in these spectacular rooms when morning came.

She knew Dr. Johnston had his main estate in Kentucky, where he raised thoroughbreds. He'd traveled broadly, including expeditions to the Antarctic and Africa. Dooley had spoken of him as a kind man, thoughtful, brought here to serve as a doctor to the family and then marrying into it. And like Dooley, he was famous as a storyteller, beloved by the children and adults alike. Cleo was looking forward to meeting Dr. Johnston, someone else in the world with whom she might remember her granddaddy. Dooley had told her once that should she ever come to Plum Orchard, Dr. Marius Johnston would clap his hands, beg her to stay like some prodigal returned, and say, "A Woodbine is back at the cottage and all is right with the world."

"You give him that book. He'll remember those old stories of ours—the little ghost girl, the fiddler, that old black dog. He'll remember how we put that dusting of glory in those paintings and it will lift his heart. He'll be sure to fix you right up," Dooley had said, jovial as always.

She was wise enough to understand that while the glory had started as something he'd only used in his paints as a charm or a blessing, like the old magic of Appalachian superstitions he'd known as a boy, soon enough he'd had a taste of it for himself, something better than liquor or tobacco, and grown to depend upon the drink. In the end, there'd been a cost to living in that golden haze. She tried not to think of Dooley under that influence, when he'd slipped too far into his own mind, when he could not bear a moment of reality, when he'd abandoned her and her grandmother for that dreamy oblivion. Her time with him before those changes had been so brief, only a few short years, but she preferred to remember her grandfather as he'd been when he was still a vibrant man with flowing hair that had grayed at the temples and a thick beard

he kept trimmed and dark eyes that danced when he talked to her. She'd believed they'd invented the word *enthraling* purely because Dooley Woodbine had existed and needed to be described.

After Dooley died, she'd spent years alone in the care of her grandmother, a woman who had rid them of every speck of glory, and Cleo had sworn never to use it for herself. And now that she was here, Cleo could only hope she'd be judged not by memories of Dooley or glory but by her own merits.

Someone gave a soft whistle in the dark. The hall was vast and the sound small, but the person who made it was very near.

"Can't sleep in a strange bed?" a voice said. "Did you want to go outside and have a smoke before I head home?"

As if he'd stepped straight out of the floral wallpaper, Lumas Gray appeared in the shadows. Cleo was charmed, and so glad to have someone to talk to.

"It's late. Everyone's asleep. What are you still doing here?" She remembered the housekeeper saying he didn't live at Plum Orchard but farther north on the island. It was hard to know if that was any real distance since she wasn't familiar with the place, but she still thought it strange he was hanging around so long after everyone had gone to bed.

"It's not that late. Anyway, you think these people sleep? They'll be out all hours at the Casino playing cards. That's the pool house up at Dungeness. People don't watch the clock here, you'll see. You're on island time now."

She could make out the shape of him in the dark and thought of the ink outline as she would draw him, the driver's cap pulled low, the slope of his shoulders, the toes of his boots. He stepped closer to her, silent on the worn rug. He had his hands jammed into the pockets of his overalls and his slim shoulders drawn up to his ears,

waiting for her answer. He was only a kid, really, like an overgrown puppy. She felt much older, but she'd never had a cigarette in her life. Cleo might have pretended to be shocked by his smoking or by the invitation to join him had she not so desperately needed the company. He'd caught her snooping in her new employer's house, not making much of a start, and thank goodness he also offered her a sandwich wrapped in a napkin.

"You're a lifesaver," she said. In the dark, her stomach and her nerves won out and pretense dropped away.

They slipped outside and into the salty wind and let the island hide them, something they would do again and again in those first days, before Joanna Burton came. Time on Cumberland seemed, as Lumas Gray had said, to move differently. A thousand years might have passed from the time she'd left her grandmother's tidy kitchen and locked the door on that dull life. And in those first days, when she woke in her bed at Plum Orchard to the sound of the young men barreling through the foyer below and outside onto the wide lawn, Cleo felt she'd wandered into the fantastic world Dooley had painted for her after all. And Cleo felt that it was her that had come to life.

Chapter Three

FRANCES



WHERE THE MARSH TIDES SPLIT, THE WATERS OVER THE SHOALS off Cumberland Island moved in both directions. It was possible, when the water was low, to walk a quarter mile across the exposed mudflats of the river to a narrow barrier island that was slowly shifting toward the shoreline. There was nothing mystical about this occurrence, only a natural progression. Frances Flood had read all about it in the pamphlet she'd just acquired before stepping onto a ferryboat run by the park service.

What the pamphlet didn't mention was anything about Cleo Woodbine, the woman living out on that island, the reason Frances had made this trip, the person her mother had spoken of while lying on her deathbed almost a month ago.

Shortly after Joanna's first stroke, she'd shown Frances a news clipping about a group of young people who had reported seeing something in the water near Cumberland Island, Georgia, in 1932 after telling tales round a summer bonfire. That night, two boys had drowned and the local myth of the Revery river siren had been born. Inexplicably, Joanna had cried over the memory and grasped at Frances and said that she and Cleo had been with that party only the day before the terrible incident.

"Cleo Woodbine still has my pearls," Joanna had said. Frances had been astonished. She knew of both Cleo and her grandfather. The latter had been an illustrator and author, famous for a single

book of folktales. All her life, Frances had loved to stare at a copy of the rare book that was kept behind glass in her family's antique store. And Cleo Woodbine's paintings, inspired by the characters in her grandfather's stories, were known for being nostalgic favorites for nurseries all over. But Frances could not imagine what any of that had to do with her mother.

"All this time, I left them with her," Joanna said. "She'll think it's because I was angry, but, Frances, I made my choices and look what a life I've had. I've had love. I've had you. Please tell her for me."

And then Joanna had asked one more thing, that Frances go to Cleo and commission a painting in her memory. Confused, Frances promised her mother she'd do both, wishing there was time to learn more. But a succession of strokes followed, and whatever Joanna hoped Frances would understand was lost.

There'd been everything practical to manage in what seemed like an unending stream of decisions and demands over the next few weeks. To cover the costs of the hospital and the funeral expenses, she'd accepted an offer from a local developer who wanted to purchase Joanna's house and a group of properties adjacent to it, then sold or stored what she didn't need. She'd rented a room with a kitchenette and private bath at a boardinghouse near downtown Asheville and spent only one night there before boarding a bus to the Georgia coast, the first trip of many she hoped to finally take. Frances had given herself a full week before she'd have to be back for the closing. She intended to fulfill her mother's request and also finally allow herself some rest before she'd return to sign papers. Then she'd see where the wind would take her.

She had not realized how exhausted she was until she found herself relieved to allow the bus driver to carry her along the ten-

hour bus ride overnight. She slept a good part of the trip along highways and twisting two-lane roads through the mountains of North Carolina and the entire state of Georgia, until she'd finally arrived in Revery late on a hot Sunday morning, a town that felt like it sat at the ends of the earth. There, she'd immediately stepped onto a ferryboat with a half dozen tourists to cruise the deep green waterways and then landed at a dock off Cumberland Island, a place that felt like it existed entirely out of time. Only then did Frances realize that she'd planned poorly.

Having no other means to cross the mudflat from Cumberland to reach the slip of land and the artist who lived in a strange sort of exile there, Frances now found herself walking the quarter mile across while the tide was out.

"It can be done," the boat captain had confirmed when she'd asked after any other options. His lined face seemed to favor the terrain, darkly tanned and craggy. "Kids do it on dares all the time, or used to when I was growing up. Just stick to the lighter mud where it's solid and dry. You'll sink up to your knees in the dark stuff, where it's soppy. You'd better make it quick. You've got to beat the tide coming back in. And don't stay long. Figure on getting back here before we pull out. This is the last boat for the day."

The hard gray pluff mud was as foreign to her as the face of the moon. The salty sea air dried like starch on Frances's skin. Her sundress was more suited to a trip to the grocery, but the breeze eased her along. The sun glittered over the narrow streams that spread like a silver web over the landscape. She wondered at cockleshells and gnarled pieces of driftwood. She had her field notebook, her binoculars, and new boots wearing blisters on both heels. Her mousy brown hair, which she always kept fastened neatly at the nape of her neck, had come loose and flew around her face. It was

not Joanna's beautiful blonde hair but favored her father's side. Also like Owen, she wore glasses. She pushed the cat-eye frames back up each time they slipped down her nose, and she could feel her fair skin start to burn.

She thought this was the kind of place that would inspire people to imagine the most outlandish things. Sightings of impossible creatures in the sea could usually be explained as migrating right whales in winter or calving manatees in summer, yet the myths persisted. Frances's theory, what she thought might one day become her dissertation, went like this: Humanity needed to believe in something as fantastic and terrible as they could stand. Or perhaps blame. Something they could love. Something that might choose them. And so a siren almost always appeared in their stories. Female. Something other, but what? The same seductive dread that swam the world over, the mythological consequences of risking everything for love. She ought to know; she'd spent plenty of time thinking about it.

Thanks to a familial love of a particular German myth, "The Lorelei," Frances was well versed in water siren mythology, an obsession that had begun in her childhood and left her always scribbling notes and theories into a notebook. If anyone asked, which they rarely did, she received her master's degree in English with a concentration in folklore from the University of Chapel Hill and had been entertaining the thought of continuing on for her doctorate. It seemed a charming and artsy preoccupation for a twenty-seven-year-old woman. But certainly they would have been troubled by her scribbles about scales and teeth, seduction and drowning. Love and grief.

As she stepped onto the unfamiliar shore, Frances felt at that moment she'd been asked to take this journey at a risk she barely

understood. She knew the way these stories would always go, and here was how this story began: Beyond the dunes lay the maritime forest. There lived a recluse. A woman who had claimed to see a river siren. A woman who had kept her mother's heirloom pearls, and maybe her secrets, for almost thirty years. What Frances wanted to know was why.

She'd polished off the salted pecans in her bag. The sea breeze had picked up, so she raised her face to it, eyes closed, and tried to steel her nerves when a voice spoke to her. "You're on private property."

Frances pushed up her glasses and shielded her eyes to get a look at a very small figure standing a few yards from her in clothing so like a man's that Frances had to look hard to realize it was a woman. She came directly toward Frances in a way that made her reach for a hand, expecting help to stand, but then she felt silly when the woman only snatched up the empty bag. She gave it a brisk shake to free it of sand and tucked it beneath her arm.

"Don't be a litterbug," she said. She was gruff, but Frances was intrigued. This woman's face was darkly tanned from the sun; not old, only formidable. Her burnished hair was cut at chin's length in a haphazard sort of way. "Usually it's only little boys who try to walk out here in all that mud without a boat and get stuck so somebody has to go to the trouble to haul them back home. You look old enough to be smarter than that."

"Looks can be deceiving. And I didn't really have a choice."

"I don't agree with either of those statements. What do you want?"

Frances swallowed hard. There were a million questions she wanted to ask, but she started with the one Joanna had sent with

her. "I've come to ask about your artwork."

"If you want a painting, you've gone to a lot of trouble for nothing. You'll have to get one like everyone else over at the Gilbreath House Inn. I don't sell them out of my home."

"I'm asking for my mother. She sent me." Frances paused.

Cleo frowned. "Who are you?"

"Frances Flood. You won't know me, but I hope you will remember my mother. Joanna? She would have been Joanna Burton then. She was here the summer you saw the river siren. My mother told me you kept her pearls. She told me she regretted never coming to get them back from you. She wanted you to know that."

The woman did not answer right away. She looked out over the water for a time and scanned the horizon as though she expected to find something there, turning until she no longer faced Frances before she said, "I'd heard Joanna passed. I put the pearls in the mail. I sent them to that antique shop her family owned. It was the only address I had. I'm sorry for your loss, and that you've come all this way."

There was real sympathy in her tone. And Frances didn't think she imagined that Cleo Woodbine was holding on to as many questions as she'd brought with her today.

"Thank you. I'm still trying to get used to it, to make sense out of any of this," Frances said. "She tried to tell me about you, but the strokes came one right after the other. It happened fast. She wanted me to come here, I know that much. I just don't understand how you knew one another."

It felt to her that Cleo might have leaned toward her then with her own need to know about Joanna. But Frances felt herself withdrawing, unsure what she wanted to share. She didn't know what to think of this person. She didn't know what to think about any-

thing. Joanna had kept too many secrets for this to be simple. Cleo must have felt Frances's hesitation. She looked away, giving Frances time to collect her thoughts before getting down to Joanna's request.

"She wanted a painting, a kind of memorial."

A noise of disbelief came from Cleo's throat. "What? Why on earth would she want that from me?"

"I wish I could tell you." Again Frances paused, making room for Cleo to jump in with anything she could offer to help Frances understand. Frustrated, Frances finally said, "That's fine. I think I'm going to have to get used to not knowing things." She couldn't help the exhaustion that had crept into her voice. Cleo looked sorry for it. "Can we just work out whatever it would cost, a painting?"

"Twenty-seven years."

"I'm sorry?"

"That's what it costs. Twenty-seven years." Cleo Woodbine ran a hand roughly through her hair. "Joanna sent you to me?" she said, as if it were still unclear.

"She did."

Cleo Woodbine had striking green eyes, and Frances watched them smartly sizing things up as she came to some decision. "I guess if we're going to talk about this, we ought to do it out of this sun. You'll want something to drink before you dry up." She turned decidedly to march back the way she'd come. Frances got to her feet and struggled to keep up.

Ahead, they stepped out of the dense forest that crowded the west edge of the scant island and onto a scrubby lawn. A small tabby structure huddled against the dunes encroaching from the eastern side where the sea was hidden from view. With windows open so sea breezes could waft through, the house was almost completely

obscured by live oaks, but through their limbs, light and shadow cast their play across the exterior. The roof peeked out from the trees. Frances loved the house immediately. She imagined it would be like living inside a shadow box. Once inside, her assessment was confirmed and she discovered it was outfitted comfortably with running water and power from some unknown source. A little TV sat in one corner and a transistor radio was tuned to a news channel on a shelf in the kitchen. Cleo switched that off. The smells of dried herbs and fresh fruits and coffee blended around them, comforting Frances. And she saw that the main room was dedicated to a long, wide table where the artist worked with her watercolor paints. Cleo put a few jars to the side, then put clean jars in front of them.

“You like sun tea?” she asked. Frances nodded and Cleo filled their glasses.

The tea tasted of iron from some deep well.

Cleo said, “This is something, Joanna sending you to my door so I can answer for myself. She didn’t do the work for me, did she?” She smiled a sad smile.

“I’m sorry if it seems that way.” Frances drew a breath and dove in. “I don’t understand any of it. What was she doing here? She wasn’t some society girl. Was she here for a job? Is that how you knew one another?”

If people came to this river to search the waters for signs of a great mystery, surely she and Cleo Woodbine searched one another in the same way now. And the other woman clearly saw something when she looked at Frances, although she was doing her best to hide it. She threw back the rest of her water in one long gulp.

“Joanna was a guest at Plum Orchard. That’s one of the Carnegie summer homes over on Cumberland. She was my job, actually. I was there as her companion so she wouldn’t be alone in a group of

young men. She'd been promised to a boy named Ellis Piedmont."

Frances was truly shocked. "Ellis Piedmont? The boy who drowned? She was here for a husband? Is that what it was all about?"

"It was for her. I came here because I wanted a benefactor for my art. I wanted to live in this cottage and become a renowned painter, like my granddaddy had been before."

"So it worked out for you." Frances felt bad for how sour the remark sounded. She added, "Your paintings are beloved. People put them in their nurseries, for heaven's sake."

Cleo let out a laugh like a bark.

Frances only felt more confused. "It's true. And Dooley Woodbine's illustrations are considered a masterwork. There were so few of them and they're collectors' items. We keep a copy in a locked cabinet at our antique store. But your work improved upon his. It's an honor to meet you." Frances flushed, trying to calm herself. "Until now, I had no idea that you and my mom knew one another."

Cleo's brow smoothed as she began loading a basket with fruits. She settled her gaze squarely on Frances. "I never knew about you either, if that makes you feel any better." Cleo took a breath as if to ground herself for what came next. "We were living in our own little world down here that summer. It was a long time ago. I guess I'm not surprised your mama didn't tell you."

"Well, she told me I'm supposed to forgive you. It was the last thing she said, actually. She didn't say why, but I guess it's not really my business, is it?" Frances felt herself listing to the side and put her hands flat on the table, then realized it was the room that was off-kilter, not her.

"Is that what she said? Forgive me? I think it's more likely she wanted me to have to face you because she knew it would be so much harder than facing her."

Frances considered what a strange thing that was to say and the pain in Cleo's expression. She wanted to grieve for her mother, and instead she worried she'd never known her. She felt tricked somehow, even used. And something else was taking shape, a terrible suspicion about Ellis Piedmont and Owen Flood. Frances was counting up the months from that summer in 1932 to her birthday later that year. She'd come here hoping what she would learn would finally help her feel a stronger connection to her mother. Joanna had been so hard to know.

Frances saw Cleo almost reach for her, but Frances moved her hands to her lap. At this point, her teeth were on edge. She wanted out of the little house that had seemed so comfortable only minutes ago. "When do you think you'd be able to finish the painting?"

Cleo shrugged. "I don't know. I wouldn't even know where to start. Or that I ever could."

Frances felt bereft in a way she hadn't since Joanna's passing. Something about this conversation made her mother's death suddenly seem real. She didn't have the energy to argue with this woman. "I plan to stay in Revery at least until the end of the week. I'll be at the inn you mentioned, actually. But will you do it?"

Cleo nodded. "When it's finished, I'll mail it to that same place in Asheville, save you the trip back out here."

Frances realized then that she'd let the time get away from her. "I guess I've missed the return ferry by now."

There was sorrow in Cleo's eyes as she pushed the basket of fruit toward Frances, and a thousand secrets, an inner world not unlike her paintings. "You'll be all right. Take this. Head down behind the house to the river. You're going to come up on a man with a boat pulling in traps; he's the owner of the inn. He'll be waiting around for my basket. He'll carry you back to Revery."

The conversation had lasted less than thirty minutes, but she felt as if days had passed. She made her way behind Woodbine Cottage to the water, disoriented in space and time. She could understand how a group of young people around a bonfire might conjure up monsters on these wild shores. The same fables meant to keep children safe from the water seemed to draw them to it.

When Frances was young, the myth of the Lorelei had been a sort of bond between her and Joanna. But when she became a sullen teenager, the distance between her and her mother only grew. She'd read every book in the local library on sea serpent myths and legends, and when she'd gone through them, she sent away for other volumes. She'd built an extensive collection on a bookshelf in her room, safely away from the children in the day care her mother ran out of their home, called Mother's Helper. She thought of that collection now, boxes and boxes of books, papers, research, art, all ready for storage. And she imagined all those creatures and characters of folklore shut away, conversing, working out a plan for their escape. It made her smile, even if it was silly. The truth was, she truly had no idea where she would go from here. She could go anywhere. And oh, that was risky.

Now Frances's imagination really did run away from her. It seemed her mother had likely married Owen Flood, a much older Irish immigrant who had come to work for her father that spring, in a shotgun wedding, perhaps carrying another man's child. But Owen had raised Frances and loved her as his own, and the thought made her ache for him even all these years later, right alongside the complicated grief for Joanna. And that meant there was every possibility that the real myth might turn out to be what she'd believed

about her own family.

Frances trudged down to the dock, exhausted and relieved to see a man pulling in his fishing line as Cleo had promised. He'd seen her first.

"Hey, hey," he called.

She lifted the heavy basket in greeting. "Cleo Woodbine sent this. She said to give it to you and you could get me across to Revery."

This boat was just big enough for two people, an aluminum vessel with a motor attached to one end. She could see where it might have had a bench at its center, but that had been removed. There was a cooler and some fishing gear and a banged-up tackle box. The man running it was young, shirtless, wearing tattered shorts and boat shoes, maybe a few years older than Frances, and squinting in the sun. He was strong-shouldered and tattooed on one bicep, an inked mermaid with vivid blue-black hair and scales. She figured him for a sailor and maybe a soldier. He ran a hand over his hair, cropped short, black and dense. He had a nose that hadn't gone unbroken, but he was clean-shaven.

"When folks ride with me, I get to ask them one question," he said. "That's my going rate."

"One question? Who are you? Billy Goat Gruff?" she asked.

He laughed, raising a hand to shield his eyes from the light.

"Sorry, that came out wrong. I didn't mean you look like a goat," she apologized. "I'm a folklorist. Bad joke."

"I've been called worse," he said with good humor. "But technically, I'm a tour guide. History during daytime hours. Ghosts after dark. You're here for the Revery siren, then, I imagine."

"And other things."

"I have to say, you've really got a look about you. You'd make a

fine specter.” He said this as if he were paying her a great compliment.

“I’m not sure how to take that.” Frances laughed.

“Take it from me,” he teased. “An expert.”

“Cleo also said you own the inn. Is there anything you don’t do?”

“I own the movie theater too. It’s air-conditioned.”

She laughed but was impressed. “Well, I’ll remember that. But what I’d really like is to see Cumberland Island and the river basin, hear all of the local lore. Can you do that sort of tour?”

“To cover that sort of ground, it’s out at dawn and back by late afternoon. To see everything, you’ll want to take two or three tours, and I’d need to book that sooner rather than later.” He had the voice of a good barker. “I’ve got a full day tomorrow. How about the day after to start? Will you be staying that long?”

“At least till the end of the week.”

“All right, then. I’ll meet you at the inn at 10:00 a.m.”

“Consider me booked.”

He helped Frances step aboard and settle on the floor. He winked at her and her heart stuttered. She rarely got that sort of attention from a man her own age. “Nice to meet you, Booked. I’m Ambrose Devane. Call me Rosey.”

“Frances Flood.”

“Flood, you say? Irish?”

She nodded, but it was hard not to start imagining, hard not to think of a summer romance gone wrong and what it had been for Joanna to come here, a young woman looking for her future in this outrageously beautiful place with these wildly wealthy people.

They watched the landscape pass as they cruised slowly along the western edge of Cumberland with its awe-inspiring maritime

forests like some Paleolithic world. The mainland lay two or three miles distant as they traveled north on the river, skirting the broad expanse of salt marsh where *Spartina* grasses waved, bright green, then turning west, pulling away from Cumberland's shore and that Georgia hinterland into the wider water, bearing toward Revery, as yet unseen. Seabirds rode the wind currents overhead, following the boat with an eye for a meal, and the air was fresh and sweet. Frances turned her face up to the sun. The water was a calm gray beneath an azure sky, and her heart settled with the thrum of the boat's motor and the easy crossing. She thought she could believe any myth about this place.

"I don't believe I'd ever get used to this," she said.

He shook his head, eyes cast over the terrain as though he were regarding an old love. "Been here forever but it changes every minute. Kingdom Come will connect with Cumberland one morning, the world made new. One more good summer storm ought to do it."

"Kingdom Come?"

He pointed back to where they'd been. "Used to be called Little Marsh Island, but Cleo's granddaddy renamed it and folks have called it Kingdom Come ever since." His words now sounded rehearsed. Frances could imagine him saying the same thing every time he carried someone back to Revery, timing it so the islands were just a mirage behind them. Frances took a closer look at him. Every fellow to take this trip must have imagined himself Rosey's new best friend. Every girl he'd carried back must have imagined herself half in love with him by the time he took her hand to help her out of this boat.

"How do you know Cleo?"

"I don't. I came to commission a painting."

“I bet I know what she said to that.” Clearly, he knew Cleo.

She wasn’t ready to share anything more about what had brought her to Revery or Cleo Woodbine. She simply waited and watched them draw nearer to the mainland. “Could you point me in the direction of the inn?”

“Sure. Where’s your luggage? I can help with that.”

“They kept it at the bus station for me, but I only have the one bag. I can manage.”

“Ah, well. You won’t have to go far from the waterfront or the bus stop to Gilbreath House. Whole town’s only a two-block affair, three main roads. And as I say, everything leads to the sea or it’s leading the wrong way.” She saw he had a crooked eyetooth. It did not make him less handsome. “My mother opened the house for lodgers when I went off to serve in Korea, but I grew up in that house. Now my little cousin’s taken over since my mama passed.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I lost my mother a few weeks ago.”

“Condolences,” he said sincerely. “It’s been almost a year for me. It will get so you can stand it. My cousin’s a sweetheart. Had some tragedy herself a few months back, up in Macon where she was married and her folks still live. Barely wed before she was widowed. Guy tried to beat a train on his motorcycle. But she’s got lots of folks in this town looking out for her while she gets back on her feet.” He steered them back toward the lighter mood. “I’ll give you a tip. Ask Audrey for my old room. It’s the nicest. Top floor, east corner, looks out on the river.”

She pushed her glasses up and tugged at her hair, hoping he didn’t see her color rise. She had no idea how to flirt, but when he looked at her squarely, she felt bashful.

He said, “I’m going to make you a proposition.”

A gulping sort of laugh jumped out of Frances.

“You misunderstand me,” he said, gesturing apologetically with his hands. “It’s just, you’ve got an old-timey look to you. While you’re in town, you really ought to come out and be a part of the ghost tour in the evenings, just for the fun. There’s nothing special you’d need to do. There’s an outfit. I’ll show you the ropes in five minutes, tops. And during the day I’ll take you out for your tours, no charge. It’s only a thirty-minute gig each night around nine o’clock. No big commitment.”

“Where have I heard that before?”

“You’d truly be helping me out,” he said. “Audrey’s turned me down and I’m short a Wandering Merry for the ghost tour.”

“What happened to the last one? She wander off?”

“They always do,” he lamented with a grin. He tied off at the dock and she tried not to think of other girls taking his steadying hand to step out, the rasp of his skin against theirs, causing some foolish reaction that made their hearts hitch. Frances held on too tightly. Rosey Devane did not let go. “I’d hate to think of you sitting at the inn every night, sad.”

“I am sad,” Frances said. “I miss my mom.” And she did dread the idea of nights at the inn, alone. She thought, too, of what he said about his cousin having people in this town who were supporting her. Frances had no one like that, just her studies. But here, there was nothing to do to pass the time, and this was a harmless way to keep busy. “If I say no, do I have to pay for the ride? When I got on the boat you said you get to ask a question of anyone who gets a ride.”

“Well, in your case I think I’ll save that one up.” He gave her hand a squeeze before releasing her. “But I’m telling you, you’ll regret it if you let this chance slip by. You were born for this role.”

About the Author



Claire Brock Photography

Kimberly Brock is the award-winning author of *The Lost Book of Eleanor Dare* and *The River Witch*. She is the founder of Tinderbox Writers Workshop and has served as a guest lecturer for many regional and national writing workshops including at the Pat Conroy Literary Center. She lives near Atlanta with her husband and three children.

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