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Opening extract from

The Society of S

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Preface

On a cool spring night in Savannah, my mother is walking. Her clogs make sounds like horses' hooves against the cobblestone street. She passes among banks of azaleas in full bloom and live oak trees shrouded in Spanish moss, and she enters a green square bordered by a café.

My father is seated on a stool at a wrought-iron table. Two chessboards spread across the table, and my father has castled on one when he looks up, sees my mother, and drops a pawn, which falls against the tabletop and rolls onto the sidewalk.

My mother dips to pick up the chess piece and hands it back to him. She looks from him to the two other men sitting at the table. Their faces are expressionless. They're tall and thin, all three, but my father has dark green eyes that somehow seem familiar.

My father stretches out a hand and cups her chin. He looks into her pale blue eyes. "I know you," he says.

With his other hand he traces the shape of her face, passing twice over the widow's peak. Her hair is long and thick, russet brown, with small wisps that he tries to smooth away from her forehead.

The other men at the table fold their arms, waiting. My father has been playing both of them simultaneously.

My mother stares at my father's face—dark hair falling away from his forehead, straight dark eyebrows over those green eyes, lips thin but shaped in a cupid's bow. Her smile is shy, frightened.

He drops his hands, slides off the stool. They walk away together. The men at the table sigh, and clear the chessboards. Now they'll have to play each other.

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"I'm going to see Professor Morton," my mother says.

"Where's his office?"

My mother waves her hand in the direction of the art college. He puts his hand on her shoulder, lightly, letting her lead.

"What's this? A bug in your hair?" he says suddenly, pulling at what seems to be an insect.

"A barrette." She takes the copper dragonfly from her hair and hands it to him. "It's a dragonfly. Not a bug."

He shakes his head, then smiles. He says, "Hold still," and carefully slides a lock of her hair through the dragonfly, then pins it behind her left ear.

They turn away from the college. They're holding hands now, walking down a steep cobblestone street. It's growing dark and chilly, yet they pause to sit on a cement wall.

My mother says, "This afternoon I sat at my window, watching the trees grow dark as the sun went down. I thought, *I'm growing older. I have only so many days left to watch the trees darken. Someone could count them.*"

He kisses her. It's a brief kiss, a rough touching of lips. The second kiss lasts longer.

She shivers.

He bends to cover her face—forehead, cheeks, nose, chin—with small, quick brushes of his eyelashes. "Butterfly kisses," he says, "to keep you warm."

My mother looks away, amazed at herself. In a matter of minutes she has let so much happen, without hesitation or protest. And

she isn't stopping it now. She wonders how old he thinks she is. She's sure she's older—he looks about twenty-five, and she has recently turned thirty. She wonders when she should tell him that she's married to Professor Morton.

They stand up and walk on, down concrete steps leading toward the river. At the bottom of the steps is a closed cast-iron gate.

"I hate moments like this," my mother says. Her shoes can't climb gates.

My father climbs over the gate and opens it. "It wasn't locked," he says.

As she passes through, she has a sense of inevitability. She is moving toward something entirely new, yet predetermined. Without any effort at all, she feels years of unhappiness being erased.

They walk along the strand beside the river. Ahead they see the lights of the tourist shops, and as they reach them, he says, "Wait." She watches him go inside a shop that sells Irish imports, then loses sight of him through the door's wavy glass. He comes out carrying a soft wool shawl. He wraps it around her, and for the first time in years, she feels beautiful.

Will we marry? she wonders. But she doesn't need to ask it. They walk on, a couple already.



My father tells me this story, twice. I have questions. But I save them until he's finished for the second time.

"How did you know what she was thinking?" is my first question.

"Later she told me her thoughts," he says.

"What happened to Professor Morton?" I ask next. "Didn't he try to stop her from leaving him?"

I'm thirteen, but my father says I'm going on thirty. I have long

dark hair and blue eyes. Except for the eyes, I take after my father.

"Professor Morton tried to keep your mother," my father says. "He tried threats. He tried force. He'd done it before, when she talked about leaving him. But this time she was in love, and she wasn't afraid. She packed up her things and moved out."

"Did she move in with you?"

"Not at first. No, she took an apartment downtown near Colonial Cemetery, an apartment that some people still say is haunted."

I look hard at him, but I'm not going to be distracted by the haunted apartment.

"Who won the chess game?" I ask.

His eyes open wider. "That's a very good question, Ariella," he says. "I wish I knew the answer."

My father usually knows the answer to everything.

"Could you tell she was older than you?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I didn't think about it. Age has never mattered much to me." He stands up, goes to the living room window, draws the heavy velvet curtains. "Time for you to sleep," he says.

I have a hundred more questions. But I nod, I don't object. Tonight he's told me more than ever before about my mother, whom I've never seen, and even more about himself.

Except for one thing—the truth he doesn't want to tell, the truth I'll spend years trying to understand. The truth about who we really are.

ONE

In My Father's House

Chapter One

I stood alone outside our house in deep blue twilight. I must have been four or five, and I didn't usually wander outside alone.

The bracketed windows of the upper house were gold rectangles framed by green vines, the lower hooded windows yellow eyes. I was gazing at the house when suddenly I fell backward onto soft grass. In the same instant, flames shot from the basement. I don't remember hearing any explosion—one second, the night was filled with blue and yellow light; the next, red fire lunged at the sky. Someone swooped me up and carried me away from the house.

That's my earliest memory. I remember the way the air smelled that night—smoke mixed with the scent of lilacs—and the roughness of a wool coat against my cheek, and a sensation of floating as we moved away. But I don't know who carried me, or where we went.

Later, when I asked about the fire, Dennis, my father's research assistant, told me I must have been dreaming. My father simply turned away—but not before I saw his face, eyes remote and guarded, lips set in an expression of resignation I had come to know too well.

One day when I felt bored, as I often did as a child, my father said that I should keep a journal. Even a dull life could make worthwhile

reading, he said, provided the writer paid sufficient attention to detail. In his desk he found a thick notebook bound in blue, and he pulled a copy of Thoreau's *Walden* from a shelf. These he handed me.

And so I began to write. But all the details in the world couldn't make my first twelve years worth reading about. Children thrive on monotonous routine, I'm told, but I had more monotony than most. And so I'll try to tell what is necessary in order for you to understand what will follow.

I lived with my father, Raphael Montero, where I'd been born, in a Victorian house in Saratoga Springs, New York. If you ever want to hide from the world, live in a small city, where everyone seems anonymous.

My father's house had many rooms, but we lived in few of them. No one used the cupola at the top of the house (although much later I did spend several hours gazing through its oculus window, trying to imagine a world beyond the town). At the base of the tower, a long corridor ran past the doors of six vacant bedrooms. A broad front staircase led downward, interrupted by a landing with a recess beneath a stained-glass window; a carpet inside was strewn with large Moroccan cushions, against which I often lay to read and stare up at the glowing red and blue and yellow geometric panes of glass. Stained glass was much more interesting than the actual sky, which in Saratoga Springs appeared ashy most of the year, turning in summer to harsh cerulean.

Mornings began when Mrs. McGarritt arrived. She was a small, slight woman with thinning reddish hair; her narrow face had etched into it worry lines and smile lines in nearly equal measure. She almost always had a smile for me, during those days.

After getting her own flock off to school, Mrs. McGarritt came to our house and stayed until quarter of three, when her several

children came home again. She cooked and cleaned and did the laundry. First she made my breakfast: oatmeal, usually, served with cream, or butter and brown sugar. Mrs. McGarritt wasn't much of a cook—she managed to undercook and scorch food at the same time, and she never added salt. But she had a good heart. And somewhere, I sensed, I had a mother who understood food.

I knew a great deal about my mother that no one had ever told me. You might think I'd made it all up, to compensate for having never met her. But I felt certain that my intuitions were sound, based on facts to which I simply wasn't privy.

Mrs. McGarritt said that she'd heard that my mother became ill after my birth and went into the hospital. Dennis, my father's assistant, said she'd "been taken from us for reasons no one understands." My father said nothing. They all agreed on one thing only: my mother disappeared after my birth and had not been seen by us since.

One morning after breakfast, I sat in the library, studying, and I smelled something sweet mixed with the usual scent of starch. Mrs. McGarritt had a fetish for using heavy starch when she ironed my clothes (and she ironed everything I wore, except underwear). She liked the old-fashioned kind that you boil on the stove.

I took a break and went into the kitchen, a hexagon-shaped room painted apple-green. The oak table was covered with flour and bowls and spoons, and Mrs. McGarritt stood next to it, peering into an oven. She seemed dwarfed by the enormous old stove—a Garland, with six gas burners (the ever-present pot of starch boiling on one), two ovens, a broiler, and a griddle.

A cookbook with yellowed pages sat on the table near me, opened to a recipe for honey cake. Someone had drawn three stars

in blue ink next to the recipe and had written the words: "Best when made from our lavender honey in July."

"What do the stars mean?" I asked.

Mrs. McGarritt let the oven door fall shut and turned around. "Ari, you always make me jump," she said. "I didn't even hear you come in." She wiped her clean hands on her floury apron. "The stars? I guess it was your mother's way of rating a recipe. Four stars are tops, I think."

"That's my mother's handwriting?" It slanted to the right, with even loops and curlicues.

"It's her old cookbook." Mrs. McGarritt began to gather up spoons and measuring cups and bowls. She put them in the sink. "And it will be yours. I should have given it to you, I suppose. It's always been on that shelf"—she gestured toward a wall shelf near the stove—"ever since I came to work here."

The recipe called for one-half cup each of flour and honey, three eggs, and assorted spices. "'Our lavender honey,'" I read again. "What does that mean, Mrs. McG?"

Mrs. McGarritt had turned on the tap, and when she turned it off I repeated my question.

"Oh, that's honey made from bees that drink from the lavender flowers," she said, without turning from the sink. "You know that big patch of lavender by the fence outside?"

I knew it. The same flowers were on the wallpaper of the room upstairs that had once been shared by my parents. "How is honey made?" I asked.

Mrs. McGarritt began to make too much noise splashing the dishes in soapy water, and I knew she didn't have an answer. "You should ask your father, Ari," she said finally.

When I went back to the library, I pulled out the small spiral

notebook I always carried and added the word *honey* to the list of questions I'd already made for the afternoon's lessons.

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Every day at one p.m. my father came upstairs from the basement. He spent mornings working in his lab; his biomedical research company is called Seradrone.

He taught me in the library from one until five, with two breaks in between: one for yoga and meditation, one for snacks. Sometimes, if weather permitted, I'd walk in the garden and pet Marmalade, the neighbor's orange tabby cat, who liked to sun herself near the lavender plants. I'd come back inside to join my father in the living room, where he read his journals (some scientific, some literary; he had a peculiar fondness for 19th-century literary scholarship, particularly work concerning Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe). I could read anything I liked from the library, but I mostly chose fairy tales.

At five we moved into the living room. He sat in the deep-green leather chair, and I sat in a dark red velvet-covered slipper chair that fitted me perfectly. Sometimes he asked me to open an envelope; he had trouble opening things, he said. Behind us stood a fireplace that had never been used, as far as I knew. A glass fire screen with butterflies embedded in it stood on the hearth. I sipped rice milk, and he drank a red cocktail that he said was "Picardo." He wouldn't let me taste it, saying, "You're too young." It seemed I was always too young, in those days.

Here I want to describe my father: a tall man, six foot four, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, muscular arms, beautiful feet (I only realized later how beautiful, when I saw how ugly most people's feet are). Straight black brows and level dark green eyes, pale

skin, a long straight nose, a thin mouth whose upper lip curves in a bow and lower lip turns down at its corners. His hair is satin black and springs back from his forehead. Even when I was small, I knew instinctively that my father was an extraordinarily good-looking man. He moved like a dancer, light and lithe. You never heard him come and go, but you sensed his presence the moment he entered a room. I felt that if I'd been blindfolded and deafened I'd know if he were there; the air around him took on a palpable shimmer.

"How is honey made?" I asked him that afternoon.

His eyes widened. He said, "It begins with bees."

And he traced the process, from nectar to comb to collection. "The workers are sterile females," he said. "The males are largely useless. Their only function is to mate with the queen. They live for a few months, and then they die." His mouth moved stiffly around the word "die," as if it were from an unfamiliar language. Then he described the way bees dance when they return to the hive: he used his hands to loop and waggle, and his voice made it all sound too beautiful to be real.

When he got to the part about beekeepers, he went to a bookshelf and came back with a volume of the encyclopedia. He showed me an illustration of a man wearing a large-brimmed hat, a veil masking his face, holding a device with a nozzle to smoke out the hives.

Now I had an image of my mother: a woman wearing thick gloves, draped in a long veil. But I didn't mention that to my father, or ask him about "our lavender honey." He never answered questions about my mother. Usually he changed the subject. Once he said such questions made him sad.

I wondered what lavender honey might taste like. The only honey I'd eaten came from clover, according to the label on the jar, and it conjured the green flavor of summer meadows. Lavender, I

thought, would have a stronger, sharper taste, floral with perhaps a hint of smoke in it. It would taste violet blue—the color of a twilight sky.



In my father's world, time had no meaning. I don't think he looked once at the grandfather clock in the library. Yet he kept a regular schedule—largely, I suspect, for my sake. Every evening at six he sat with me while I had the supper that Mrs. McG (I'm tired of writing out her name, and that's what I called her, anyway) always left in the warming oven: macaroni and cheese, or tofu casserole, or vegetarian chili. It all tasted undercooked at the bottom and burnt at the top, bland and wholesome. After I'd finished, my father ran my bath.

Once I'd turned seven, he left me alone to bathe. He asked me if, as a big girl, I still wanted him to read to me before I fell asleep, and of course I said yes. His voice had texture like velvet. When I was six he'd read me Plutarch and Plato, but Dennis must have said something to him, because after that he read *Black Beauty* and *Heidi* and *The Princess and the Goblin*.

I'd asked my father why he didn't dine with me, and he said he preferred to eat downstairs at a later hour. There was a second kitchen (I called it the night kitchen) in the basement, along with two enormous furnaces, a laboratory where my father worked with Dennis, and three bedrooms originally intended for servants. I rarely visited the basement; it wasn't explicitly forbidden me, but sometimes the upstairs kitchen door to the basement was locked, and even if it wasn't, I knew I wasn't wanted there. In any case, I didn't like the smells: chemicals from the laboratory, gamey cooking from the night kitchen, mixed with the odor of hot metal from the furnaces. Yes, I preferred the smell of starch. My father's cook and all-purpose assistant, the loathsome Mary Ellis Root, ruled the

basement domain, and she always looked at me with eyes that radiated hostility.



"How did you like it?" Mrs. McG hovered over the breakfast table, twisting a towel in her hands. Her face was shiny and her glasses needed cleaning, but her spotless red and green plaid housedress, belted at the waist, had been ironed, and its skirt fell in crisp folds.

She was asking about the honey cake. "Very good," I said—almost truthfully. The cake, a slice of which I'd eaten for dessert the previous evening, had a wonderful dense richness; if it had been baked a bit less, and if the pan had been greased more liberally, it might truly have been delicious.

"If I'd made it at home, I'd have used lard," she said. "But your father is such a strict vegetarian."

A moment later Mary Ellis Root slammed open the door that led to the basement and stormed in.

"What did you tell the courier service?" she said to Mrs. McG. Her voice sounded hoarse and low.

Mrs. McG and I stared blankly at her. It was unlike her to set foot upstairs, and never this early. Her black hair bristled with static, and her eyes blazed, yet she never made eye contact with either of us. On her chin three long dark hairs grew from a bumpy mole; they quivered when she spoke. Sometimes I imagined yanking them out, but the thought of touching her made me nauseous. She wore an enormous black, greasy-looking dress that smelled of metal and strained to contain her, and she paced the room like a beetle—impervious to anything but its insect agenda—pausing only to slam her fat fist on the table.

"Well, are you going to answer me? It's almost ten and no one has come."

The silver courier van stopped at our house two or three times a week, bringing supplies for my father's research and taking away flat white cartons labeled SERADRONE. On the van's doors and sides were the company name and logo: GREEN CROSS.

Mrs. McG said, "I don't know what you're talking about." Nonetheless, her left eyebrow and right hand twitched.

Mary Ellis Root made a low-pitched sound, a kind of growl, and slammed her way back to the basement, trailed by a lingering odor of metal.

"I never talk to the Green Cross man," Mrs. McG said.

The deliveries always came to the back door that opened into the basement. Mrs. McG's face said that her day had been ruined in the space of a minute.

I left my chair. I took my mother's cookbook down from its shelf and leafed through it. "Look," I said, to distract her. "She put four stars next to this one."

It was a recipe for cheese bread made with honey. Mrs. McG peered over my shoulder at the recipe, her face doubtful. I leaned back slightly to feel the warmth of her body, without touching her. I felt that this was as close to a mother as I was likely to come.

Being home-schooled had some advantages, I suppose. I didn't have to worry about what to wear to school or how to make friends. Periodically I had to take a state-mandated examination, and every time I answered all the questions correctly. My father had stuffed my brain with knowledge of history and mathematics and literature; I could read Latin and some Greek and French and Spanish, and my English vocabulary was so advanced that I sometimes had to define for Mrs. McG the words I used. Occasionally Dennis taught me science; he'd been a medical student at one time, he said,

but switched to biology, which he taught part-time at the college not far away. Because of his training, Dennis served as our family doctor and dentist, except when I was very ill, as I was two or three times; then Dr. Wilson was called in. But Dennis gave my father and me vaccinations and annual checkups. Luckily, I had strong teeth.

Dennis taught me how to swim, using the college pool, and he was my friend as well. He was the only person in our house who liked to laugh and to make me laugh. (Mrs. McG was too nervous to do more than smile, and even then it was a nervous smile.) Dennis had dark red wavy hair that he had cut every month or so; in between it grew almost to his shoulders. His freckled nose curved like a hawk's beak. Like my father, he was tall, around six foot three, but Dennis was stockier. He had a temper, too; he never hesitated to tell off Root when she was particularly rude or abrasive, and that made him a hero to me.

One late winter day when I was twelve, Dennis told me "the facts of life." He blushed when I asked him questions, but he answered every one. He patted me on the head when I couldn't think of any more questions. After he'd gone back downstairs, I went to the bathroom mirror and looked at myself. Dark hair like my father's, blue eyes, pale skin. Something stubborn in my face.

Later that same afternoon I sat and watched the icicles that hung like awnings outside the living room windows slowly drip drip drip. For months the days had been one color: gray. Now I listened to the coming of a new season.

Outside, my father stood in the driveway. He seemed to be talking to himself. From time to time I'd see him there, oblivious to the weather, deep in conversation with no one.

