

Angels Carry the Sun

excerpt: Chapter One, In the Woods

by Phoebe Wilcox

Chapter One

In the Woods

Everett Finn liked white-bread sandwiches. In June, Flora forfeited all her free cafeteria lunches to sit with him during his quiet lunch breaks in the classroom.

"Eleven more days until graduation," she told him. He sat at his big teacher's desk; she sat on a chair pulled up along side, watching sunlight from the window slant across his amazingly hairless arms.

"And you'll forget all about me," he replied. He was beautiful, all dark locks and blue eyes.

He couldn't possibly mean that.

"I would never forget you," she murmured.

"You say that now, but you'll find someone at college who entirely dazzles you." His hands rested on the green desktop pad. In one hand he held a pencil up by its tip while the forefinger of his other hand absentmindedly stroked it.

"I can't even *think* of anyone else."

"You will, Flora." He laid the pencil down and opened his lunch bag, spilled potato chips out onto a napkin, and gestured for her to take some.

For some reason she remembers with absolute clarity the stratification of roast beef, cheese, and mayonnaise in his sandwich as he sat there eating and she sat there wanting him. It was almost over for them.

His wife, Lottie, is a seamstress. She has a little tourist-trap boutique down in Eggersville where she sells her own designs. Pink pillbox hats, leopard purses, diaphanous blue gowns light as air; her shop has the feel of an enchanted attic. She has a flair for color combinations and vintage styles. The tourists adore it. Flora even used to stop and admire the stuff in her windows herself before she realized whose shop it was and recognized Lottie as the deserving recipient of unmitigated loathing. It's too bad. Her dresses are so pretty. But given the situation, it only makes Flora hate her more.

Besides being ridiculously talented, Lottie also happens to be beautiful, looking a little like an actress Flora learned about at school, Louise Brooks, who starred in the old silent film, *Pandora's Box*. Her eyes are dark and lustrous, and her bobbed hair is black like her husband's, as straight as his is curly. She's always down in Eggersville, either in her store sitting behind the glass case with her chin in her hand waiting soulfully for customers, or running to the supermarket or the library, always in her 1920s or '30s getup like she's God's gift to eccentricity. Her retro look is just pretty and whimsical, like the gentle incarnation of a punk-rock wardrobe, without the more violent accoutrements of hardcore. Once, Flora saw her loading bags of kitty litter from under her shopping cart to the back of her Rabbit while wearing a peach pajama jumpsuit, high heels, and a crocheted shawl. The pajamas were silk and sleeveless, and the legs had three rows of ruffles at the bottom. No matter what she's doing, it's like she's always wearing flower petals.

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When Mary Shelley was nineteen she wrote *Frankenstein*. Flora's going on nineteen but all she ever does is lug a vacuum cleaner and plot seduction. And the vacuum's clunky. One of its wheels is twisted and it won't roll right. The seduction hasn't always rolled right either, but it's a work-in-progress. She wrestles the vacuum back into the hotel linen closet to accompany stacks of bath bars and cans

of furniture polish and returns to the upstairs hallway with a rag to dust a corner table.

To her right, guest room doors line the hall. It's late and the guests will soon finish their sightseeing and start to trickle back into the hotel, to made beds and tidied rooms. A low August sun beams through windowpanes, and Flora stands in a checkerboard of light.

As she raises herself from dusting, voices come from behind room 16's door, a young woman's rising.

"I'm sick of this." The woman's shrillness hasn't quite broken into the realm of yelling. "Why don't you just tell her?! You said you wanted to wait until after Christmas. Well, *it's many moons* since then, and you still haven't told her!" A pause in which Flora stands very still in front of the door listening. Then, "What if I were pregnant? Would that change anything?" Something thumps against a wall, a loud, defiant sound, followed by sudden tears.

Flora thinks she knows which couple this is; busing breakfast in the dining room this morning, she saw them sharing a table overlooking the river. A dark-haired, thirty-something woman and an older man with silver in his hair, sipping mugs of coffee, he, tight-lipped and impassive, she, searching his face for answers. As breakfast ended with the last of the clearing away and wiping up, they had stared dismally out the window at the beautiful, unheeding river, a comfort to her, not them.

His voice gathers sentences like folds of cloth, tightly, into a ball. "Amanda, please. You're not pregnant. Calm down. If you can't contain yourself enough to keep your voice down, the entire hotel will know our business."

No response.

Flora strains to hear but all is quiet. Perhaps the woman has slipped out the back door to be alone by the river. Given Flora's situation, it's all too easy for her to empathize with her frustration. She imagines that in a suicidal desperation the woman has thrown herself into the river, allowing the churning water to sweep her body away, to harness it with twigs and bark, to mark the tattoo of a wet leaf upon her brow. She's considered it, maybe, as Flora has. Flora

bets her situation is worse than theirs though. This woman's lover may be married, but they're certainly closer in age than Finn and she; he couldn't possibly be her high school English teacher.

The dark-haired woman is probably just lying face down across the bed while the salt-and-pepper guy sits in the corner wicker chair waiting for her to snap out of it. Flora hears a match strike. During her cleaning rounds, she leaves Hotel de la Fleur matchboxes in all the guests' ashtrays. Earlier this afternoon, it repulsed her how quickly the little flowered matchbox in room 16 had been replaced by a mound of ashes and butts.

The smell of smoke creeps from the room into the hallway, and the man takes an accentuated staccato drag. Flora is afraid that one of them will burst through the door at any minute and catch her eavesdropping, but she's too curious to tiptoe away.

"Do you want out?" He exhales smoke. "It's at your discretion."

"I don't want out. I want you. Just you." Her voice is a water-saturated whine, as if she actually *has* returned from the torrent just beyond the patio and has kept some of it with her.

"If that's what you want, you'll sink like a stone," he spits. "It's a package deal. I've got kids. There are more variables here than just you and I."

"You're so selfish. I'm a low-ranking fourth."

"You knew the situation when you got into this."

"I knew I loved you."

"Well, maybe you should rethink that."

"You don't rethink a *feeling*, you bastard."

"You need to get a grip on yourself. I'm going out."

Flora hears one of the easy-slide drawers of the dresser slam shut and the sound of a newspaper thudding into a waste can like a punctuation mark. He'll be out the door any second. She scampers back to the linen closet on her tiptoes.

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The dining room is a long porch lined all the way down with windows overlooking the river. Flora vacuums crumbs from among wrought-iron table and chair legs. The afternoon refreshment crowd has left behind torn packets of sugar, empty iced-tea glasses and chocolate-chip-cookie crumbs, mostly in the vicinity of the buffet table. At least the downstairs vacuum is better behaved than the upstairs vacuum. Wonder of wonders, it actually rolls! She glances at the river. A moving mosaic of browns and greens, the Delaware brims its banks from recent rain. The silence of its current reminds her of how loud the creek behind Finn's house is. She imagines him lying nude in the moonlight on his porch hammock while the Shohola rushes by, purling nocturnal music.

If Finn were hers, she wouldn't have to vacuum this crumbly brick floor. No, they'd take their breakfast buffet and á la carte dinners here with the wealthy New York weekenders. At dinner, pheasant-laden tables would be candlelit while outside the pedestrian bridge would unfurl itself, a cabled web. She'd press her feet against his, eyes shining....

Okay, Flora thinks, cut the crap.... This Finn thing is over. It's O-VER. I'll be starting college in a matter of weeks. It'll be a whole new life. There's no turning back. So ... although I've just mentally lit every one of the virgin-white candles, now I have to blow them all out. Poof. Poof. Poof. All out. Romance dispelled. I have plenty of other things I can think about. The Rest of My Life is always an option. And of course, let's not forget crumpled napkins and cookie crumbs. Let's not forget VACUUMING.

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All summer long, Flora's Mom has been giving her rides to and from the hotel. Flora waits for her at a picnic table on the towpath, looking out over the river flowing by in its afternoon tree-juice color. Mom's always late, but even with that and with the road behind her, Flora knows it's her when she pulls up. She can always tell by the tootling sound of the Volkswagen. The Bug is the color of a ripe

juneberry, with a butterfly Mom painted hovering on the fender. Her mother is the starving-artist type. That's why Flora got the free lunches at school.

"Hi." Flora wedges herself into the junk-filled car. The back seat has been thrown down to make room for hay bales. It smells like summer.

Mom starts talking right away. She hardly looks at Flora or acknowledges her presence. She just starts blabbing. Flora shoves her Ball jars of beans and cabbage over on the seat until they hit an astrology book at the parking brake.

"Those two boys in my physics class are at it again, cheating on their assignments, and they're so blatant about it, flaunting it, like it's a big joke. Jeff was practically simpering today when he said what a hard test it was. She just overlooks everything they do. They're under her wing. They don't really know how to work out the problems and they should know this stuff for their major. They're going to be nuclear physicists. She intones 'nuclear physicists' with emphatic disdain. Mom's an activist intent on ending the arms race. She still doesn't look at Flora as she pushes the shift through the gears and the car fills up with wind.

"Maybe she doesn't really know they're cheating," Flora says, defending Mom's professor. Her mother is a serious student who works hard at her community college courses, but sometimes it seems to Flora that over the last, oh, eighteen years or so, ninety percent of her commentary on the human race has been negative.

"She knows, all right." Mom is vehement. "She looks the other way while they copy. And she's always rescheduling tests if anyone whines the teeniest bit. It punishes the people who are actually prepared. And when I suggested we spend more time in class going over the homework, she completely ignored me. She doesn't like me. When I ask a question, she's patronizing and tries to make me look stupid. And her left headlight is out, so I know she thinks I'm supplying drugs to campus." She sounds pretty sure of herself. Flora wonders how someone so out of touch with reality can still manage a class like physics. For months now, anyone with a headlight out has

been out to get her. It's like she thinks they're NARCS or something. If they're NARCS, they're exceptionally clueless NARCS, because Nora McDermott has got to be the only hippie on the east coast who *doesn't* do drugs. She's kooky enough without them.

Outside the car, the afternoon light has deepened to a heavy soporific gold. From the foot of a mountain, a cornfield grows to the edge of the road. Among its shafts and tasseled ears, hollow spaces shift shape with the breeze, hiding places.

"I stayed late at the library Thursday night," Mom continues, squinting her eyes accusingly, "the night it rained so much. She was right behind me when I pulled out of the parking lot. She thinks I'm a dealer."

Flora doesn't think Mom has ever trimmed her hair—at least not in *her* lifetime. A chestnut tendril of it escapes her ponytail, twirling in the wind. Flora follows the twirling down to the constellations of freckles on her arms and hands. Her hands are spatulate and flat-nailed, pale, like the rest of her. She doesn't wear any rings. No one ever married her.

Flora's dad, Jack, lives in Massachusetts. She doesn't remember a time when he ever lived with her. He always tells her, "Flora, you are a survivor." The letters he sends her are like Styrofoam life preservers thrown over the edge of a big boat. They never discuss Mom's mental health. He would probably be justified in getting in a few jabs now and then because Mom's always slandering him. He just defends himself and tells his side of the story. Flora is left stranded between two versions of every scenario, never knowing the truth. Nora may be paranoid, but sometimes she's actually not that far off the mark. And *besides*, Flora thinks, *she is my mother*.

And she's still talking.

"We have to make sure we lock the door at night because if word gets to Whiskey Jim that she thinks I have drugs, he might try to come back," she warns. As if Whiskey Jim would leave the enticements of sunny Florida to cause trouble over a delusion lost to anyone but herself. As if he really cares.

"Okay, Mom." Flora gives her one of her disaffected, "you're-crazy-but-I'll-humor-you" looks.

Mom steers the Bug down their long, gullied driveway, trying not to bottom-out at the end. The three of them, Flora, Mom, and Alice, live on a mountaintop. In some parts of the country it might be called a hill, but in Pennsylvania it's a mountain. Their "house" overlooks a sloping field and a valley with a peach orchard that blooms pink in spring. The river, which marks the border between Pennsylvania and New Jersey, is obscured, tucked into the lowest stretch of land below. Distant mountains spread out in blue symmetry along the horizon. If it weren't for the house, which Alice and she refer to as "this hellhole" or "the snake pit," the place would be perfect.

The house is basically a cinderblock Lego with a tar roof. Very Cubist. Mom just used whatever paint she could find around in any of the junk cars or outbuildings when it needed touching up. So it's blue, pink, brown and beige ... a kind of spectacular eyesore. Some hippie tenant of the past left a huge, round acid painting peeling itself into psychedelic decay next to the tool shed. The painting is one of the first things you see when you approach the house. It caught Flora's glances through four years of high school as she walked past, through weeds or snow, on her way to and from the bus stop. Good morning, undulating magenta sunburst. Good afternoon, dancing tigers.

When they squeeze through the screen door into the kitchen, Alice is talking on the phone with a friend. There's a pot of tomato sauce simmering on the camp stove and a box of spaghetti on the table. Alice is a pretty girl. She doesn't look at all like Flora. Her hair is straight and blond, her eyes, light blue. She looks like the girls in magazine ads. Flora's hair, under favorable, brightly-lit conditions, is titian. It's also a frizzy, uncontrollable mess. Her eyes are green, her complexion not the hottest, and sometimes she thinks her nose is porcine. And Alice is more popular at school than she ever was. She gets more phone calls and she has dates. She's not

shy like Flora, and she would not even *consider* a teacher romantically.

"No, I want to wear my black mini-dress," Alice purrs into the phone.

"I'm going to meet him down at The Double Scoop. We're going with Jan and Greg," she continues. She's setting up some kind of date.

"Oh my God, she's hanging out with the Brady Bunch now," Flora says spitefully. Alice hangs up the phone.

"How was work?" Mom asks Alice. She sounds truly interested. Alice is working at the local ice cream joint, The Double Scoop, this summer.

"A cop pulled someone over out front today."

"Oh?" Mom says.

"Yeah, everybody was watching to see if he got a ticket while they ate their cones. One of his blinkers was out," Alice answers.

"One of his blinkers was out?" Mom looks down at her hands and frowns, perhaps wondering if malfunctioning blinkers have any special significance.

"He just got a warning."

There's a pause. "Jan takes good care of her car, doesn't she? I don't want you driving around in a dangerous car."

"Yeah, her dad takes care of it," Alice replies and then blurts, "Oh Mom, can you help me make a flower garland for my date Friday? I want to wear it with my hair crimped and freak everyone out."

"Sure, what kinds of flowers do you want? Asters and goldenrod are out now."

"Oh yeah! That would be awesome!" Alice's eyes widen. She knows that when Mom expresses herself artistically, it always turns out great. Like when she made that giant stuffed Volkswagen pillow with a matching eight-lane superhighway comforter for Flora and her when they were little.

"You'll look like a fairy!" Mom's eyes sparkle as she beams at her favorite child. She clatters the saucepan off the camp stove. The three of them sit around the table eating while Alice chats on about

a boy at school who got a brand-new car for his birthday, an '82 Chevy Camaro. Flora gets up to take her dirty dish away. The kitchen sink (which happens to be in the bathroom next to the shower) is monopolized by a soaking load of Alice's laundry, so she just sets the dish to the side. The "unisink" they call the sink, since it serves both kitchen and bathroom functions.

"I got a washboard for us," Mom says proudly. It pokes out of the unisink like a greeting from the last century, "Lewis and Sons" in letters the color of dried blood across its corrugated face.

"I see it," Flora says, not impressed. Why doesn't she just take them to the Laundromat? It's not *that* expensive.

Flora picks her way through the obstacle course of piled magazines, bags of recycling, bureaus with open drawers and clothes hanging out, like little boxy dogs with fleshy tongues, and makes her way to her bunk bed in the other room. She hoists herself up-and-in and lies back facing the ceiling insulation. Flora has wrapped a sparkly Christmas tree garland in coils around one of the bunks' support beams. She always tries not to step on it when climbing into bed because Finn gave it to her. It was collecting dust in his barn; it's hot pink.

Lying on her side, she looks across the room at the wall above Mom's bed. Mom's overloaded bookshelves sprout from the walls like the fungus Flora recently noticed growing in the shower. Through the window the backyard is quiet. Only Alice's chirping and Mom's quiet responses come from the other room.

Outside, their pony, Star, given to them by a girl who mistakenly thought she was a pony-person, stands by his shed watching the day disappear. Evening brushes over the flowers of the rose of Sharon tree, turning them from white to blue. Flora is heartened to hear Mom and Alice's voices rippling along quietly, but at the same time still deeply saddened at having to leave her one and only love. She longs for his sweet darkness, the softness of his hands, the sinking of his stone inside her.

The sun is gone and it's nearly dark outside. The room is dim. She lies back against her pillow and opens her hand upon the sheet;

palm up to catch the things that hover in the atmosphere: thoughts of Finn, sinking stones, whatever might flit by in twilight. The room and she grow dark together.

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A light with a dented aluminum lampshade is clipped to the shelf above Mom's bed. She sits poring over her astrology books in the last hour before sleep. Alice is at the other end of the room with her feet up on her school desk painting her toenails. Flora has descended from her bunk to sit on Alice's bed and write in her journal. Alice finishes her nails and heads into the kitchen. Flora hears the yank of the antique fridge's door handle and her sister's curse as it delivers its customary low-level electric shock. One would think that with such aversion-therapy going on all the time, they would eat very little, but the McDermott's appetites remain undiminished. Alice pokes around for a bedtime snack and slams the refrigerator door.

Mom looks up at Flora with an expression both critical and concerned.

"Did you sleep with him?" she asks. Her eyes drill-press Flora like one of the shop machines at school.

Flora pretends she doesn't hear and stares down into her composition book, as if there's something very engrossing there, and not just a clean new page. She'll just ignore her; maybe she'll get up and join Alice in the kitchen. They do have peaches.

Well, just because Mom asks, doesn't mean she has to answer. She decides to stay right where she is. She poises her pen over her paper, wearing as inscrutably sweet an expression as she can possibly muster. She's sure she must look just like the *Mona Lisa*. Are there any daughters out there who actually tell their mothers things? Perhaps so, but she does not count herself among them.

