

WHAT
SHE
FOUND
IN THE
WOODS

Books by Josephine Angelini

The Starcrossed trilogy

Starcrossed

Dreamless

Goddess

The Worldwalker trilogy

Trial by Fire

Firewalker

Witch's Pyre

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MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS



First published in the UK 2019 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5290-1771-7

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Book design by Eileen Savage
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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11 JULY

I've always felt relaxed in airports.

I don't know why, but the chaos that eats away at everyone else's well-being creates a dome of serenity around me. I guess that's a terrible thing to say, but it's true. In airports, I'm compact. Boiled down to the few items I've chosen to take with me. I know where I'm going, I know what I have with me, and I don't need anything else.

Airports used to be my favourite place to write. The solitude that I feel when I'm completely surrounded by strangers is better than uppers. I have a notebook hidden in my coat pocket, but I don't take it out. I don't have time, anyway. My grandparents are already at the airport, driving around so they don't have to park. I poke my head out between other seekers and find them.

Always there's that jolt – that moment when you put all the features together, and a stranger becomes your relative. Makes you wonder how big of a difference there actually is between the people you've known your whole life and someone you've never met. I wave, and they pull over.

Hugs first, and then, 'You got so thin!' from my grandma.

'I haven't lost a pound,' I say, shrugging. 'They weigh you every morning.'

My grandfather shrinks away from me, and from the unfortunate circumstances that have brought me to stay with them for the summer. And, possibly, forever. But he soldiers on, tacitly letting me know we will not talk about it. Not even if I need to.

'Let's get your bags in the car,' Grandpa says cheerfully. 'Where are the rest?'

'This is it,' I tell him, wheeling my carry-on to the back of their Range Rover.

'But, you're staying for the whole summer, right?' Grandma asks, confused now. She's the type of woman who changes her clothes for every new part of the day. Morning frock. Gardening ensemble, complete with wicker hat and mud clogs, and she still dresses for dinner. Always wears jewellery to the table. Nothing ostentatious, but enough so you notice.

My grandfather tries to help me with my bag, but I won't let him. 'I got it, Grandpa,' I say with a smile, and then I hoist it into the trunk easily.

'You pack light,' Grandma says while I settle into the back seat and put my seat belt on.

'Summer clothes,' I say. 'If I remember right, it gets hot out here when it isn't raining.'

Trust the weather to soothe their Waspy souls.

Grandma and Grandpa eagerly launch into a diatribe about the weather in the temperate rainforests of the Pacific Northwest. They have all their descriptive adjectives honed. Every simile has been carefully chosen. They lavish the never-ending rains of western Washington State with all the fiery contempt of true love. The weather is their solace. As a topic of conversation, it safely delivers us back to their summer home on the edge of the forest.

It's not the largest house set back from the street. There are other big constructions dotting the fringes of the wild, but my grandparents' Tudor revival place has a cosy storybook feel to it. And it's buried the deepest, tucked right in between the ocean and the forest, which are the two things that make this a summer destination for the stupid wealthy. The working-class people who live in this town year-round would never have a house right here. They couldn't afford it. We go down their long drive, and the updated two-storey springs into view among the tangle of trees and moss.

'Your garden is lovely, Grandma,' I say. It looks almost wild, except for the artfully placed splashes of colour and the perfectly tiered native ferns and perennials.

'I could use some help with the vegetables out back,' Grandma offers, making it clear that the flowers in the front are hers. That suits me.

'I'd be happy to help,' I say.

My grandmother punches a long code into the alarm

panel, and we go inside. We have Long Island Iced Teas in the salon. Mine is virgin. Theirs definitely aren't. My grandparents hold firm to their inalienable right to cocktail hour, like it's written somewhere in the Constitution.

I look around at the Chippendale furniture, Great-Grandma's collection of Fabergé eggs, and . . . oh yes, the Degas that hangs so casually on the far wall in its hermetically sealed protective frame as I listen to my grandparents talk. They're thinking of selling after this season and buying a new summer home in Santa Barbara.

'The area's changed a lot . . . That reminds me. I'll have to give you the code for the door,' Grandma says primly. 'It's not like it used to be when we summered here with your mother, or even when you were younger, and you used to spend July with us.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I tell them. 'Everyone says Santa Barbara is lovely, though,' I add. It's bad manners to linger on depressing things. In my family, you are expected to change the subject as soon as anyone says anything unpleasant.

When I've finished my refreshment, I take myself to the guest room I used the last time I stayed with them four summers ago. As soon as I open the door, I'm immediately transported back to my thirteen-year-old self.

I laugh under my breath at the frilly bedspread and the smell of powdery, girlish perfume that still emanates from a neon bottle left on top of the vanity. I was so

determined to make it my signature scent back then that even the walls soaked it in.

All the furniture is white. The wallpaper is thick, alternating pink and white stripes. It's not a tacky room. My grandparents would never allow me to choose tacky furniture. But how strange that this used to be me. Or the me I wanted to be, I suppose.

'There are still some clothes in the dresser,' my grandmother says quietly. 'And a lot of pretty sundresses in the closet that you could still wear.'

I open the closet at Grandma's urging and notice that, yes, it is stocked with very pretty sundresses. They're young-looking, but they'd still fit. I grew up not out as I got older, and most of that length was in my legs.

'Everything is perfect,' I say. 'Thank you for keeping it just as I left it.'

Her eyes shoot over to the writing desk, tucked snugly into the dormer window, betraying her misgivings about leaving it.

'Did they give you a schedule for your medication?' she asks quietly.

I smile reassuringly. 'I take all of them once in the morning. It's not like it was when Mom was my age.'

She looks relieved, but still troubled. 'She had to take so many . . .' Grandma breaks off and smiles back at me suddenly. 'Come down when you're ready, Magdalena. We'll play cards tonight after dinner.'

'Great.'

WHAT SHE FOUND IN THE WOODS

Grandma finally leaves me. I take my phone out of my bag and plug it into the wall, but I don't bother to turn it on. Nothing to check, anyway. I deleted my social media accounts months ago, and I have no friends any more.

I sit on the bed and think about being thirteen. I'm not going to change anything about this room, I decide. I'll let it stay frozen on the inside. Like me.

15 JULY

I sleep a lot.

It's the pills. They knock me out. That is what they're designed to do, I guess. I'm also getting more exercise than I've ever had before, so I need the rest. I garden in the late morning with Grandma, and after lunch I usually go for long hikes in the woods.

I'm not super outdoorsy or anything, but it's hard not to get swept up in the magic of this place. Every day, I pack up one of those picnic blankets with the water-repellent bottoms, some books and a canteen, and I hike up into the hilly rainforest. My grandparents' property is right next to the edge of a lovely trail. Of course. Why buy a summer home that's so far away from the trail, you're too exhausted to hike it once you've got there?

I've got a few set paths I usually take, but today I go left instead of right, thinking about that Robert Frost poem.

And I find it.

A stream cuts its way downhill. A small, flat bank fans out to the side of the tiny waterfall, creating a shelf of

green oxalis among the moss-covered Sitka spruces. Perfect for a picnic blanket. I wade through the little stream and spread out my blanket on the soft bank. The hill raises sheer behind me to nearly a seven-foot drop, and the waterfall sluices down the rocky face of it pleasantly. I nestle into this little cove of green and listen to the water.

I take out *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau and think about what it means to 'live deliberately', as he'd intended when he moved into the woods. I'm not really reading. I don't know if it's because I don't like transcendental philosophy or because Thoreau is boring as hell, but I wish I liked this book better. I wish I had the sort of mind that could slog through the dull bits and follow along with the navel-gazing of a philosopher.

But I don't. I need plot. So I'm just letting my eyes pick out phrases here and there to mull over. Things like '*to suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life*'. I like how high-minded Thoreau is. How deeply he believes in the innate goodness of conscious individuals. I like to pretend I agree with him.

I try to read, but it's page after page of this guy obsessing about the beans he's growing in his garden. I skim for a pithy quote to think about, but I've lost the thread.

There's always my notebook. I take it with me wherever I go out of habit, but I haven't written in it since it served its final purpose. I have to admit, it scares me. It

scares everyone around me. But that's so silly. They're words, not bullets. I could just jot down a few lines about this place. I only want to see if I can describe it accurately. I pick up my pen and hold it over the page.

The dappled sunlight and the sound of falling water overtake me. I sleep.

When I wake, all I can remember of my dream is a sense of fellowship. I'm smiling while I pack up my things and head back to my grandparents' house.

I see an unfamiliar car parked in the drive. I don't know a lot about cars, but I know it's a Porsche. I have no idea what year it is or anything like that. I saw it in an eighties movie once, I think. *Top Gun*.

'You're finally back,' my grandma calls. I take off my hiking sandals and join her in the living room. A young man stands and turns to face me. 'Do you remember Robert Claybolt?' Grandma asks. 'His family has summered down on the beach for years.'

I smile at him as I enter the room and join my grandmother. 'Hi. Wow. Robert.'

He laughs, rolling his eyes. 'You don't remember me,' he teases.

'I do,' I say defensively.

Huge blush because I don't remember his face, but the name is familiar. Whoever he used to be, he didn't used to be this good-looking, or I definitely would have paid more attention to him. That and the meds I've been taking for a year have left gigantic gaps in my memory.

I barely remember who *I* am most days, let alone some random guy I haven't seen since puberty.

'But it's been years, and you've . . . filled out,' I say, trying to turn my faux pas into a compliment. That seems to please him.

'You never come here any more,' he says, letting me off the hook. He already has a tan, and his teeth are white and straight as he grins at me. 'I guess New York City is tough to leave.'

I'm nodding a lot. Too much. I must look like a bobble head.

'You want to get coffee?' he asks.

'Yeah, but I think we're about to have dinner,' I say, turning to my grandma.

'Oh, there's plenty of time,' Grandma says, pushing me towards Robert. 'You go and enjoy yourself.'

She's awfully eager. 'Ah, OK,' I say. I look down at what I'm wearing. Frayed shorts and a dirty T-shirt. 'Let me wash up real quick? I was hiking.'

'Hiking?' Robert makes a face. 'I still haven't figured out why people do that.'

Something clicks in my head. 'Rob! That's right! You're the kid who refused to go camping with all of us because you hate the woods. You always wanted to do something on the beach.'

He rolls his eyes. 'Finally.'

'I'm sorry,' I say sheepishly. 'You've changed a lot.'

'You haven't.' His eyes warm. He definitely means that as a compliment. Oh boy.

'I'll be right back,' I say, bolting up the stairs before the silence can get any more fraught.

I strip down and rinse off, holding my long brown hair out of the shower spray as I turn a few times under it, and then I quickly towel off. It's warm out, so I opt for one of my old sundresses. It's a little tight around the bust and a little short along the hemline, but not egregiously so. I slip into flat sandals before I run out of my room. As I'm going downstairs, I feel a long-forgotten tube of lipstick in the pocket of my dress. On a whim, I swipe a bit of it over my lips. It's the first time I've worn any kind of make-up in months.

Rob is sitting and talking with both my grandparents in a comfortable way. He looks up at me and grins. His eyes crinkle up when he does that.

'I remember that dress,' he says. 'Fourth of July.'

I look down at the blue dress with the red whales embroidered on it. I have no idea what he's talking about, but I go along with it anyway.

'I'll be back in an hour,' I tell my grandparents.

'No rush,' says Grandpa. 'You two should catch up. Don't worry about dinner.'

'OK,' I say uncertainly. 'Bye.'

I'm frowning as we walk to Rob's car. He opens my door for me, but I don't get in just yet.

'Did my grandparents call you and ask you to take me out?' I ask.

'Yes,' Rob answers. I turn away from him and make for the house. He grabs my arm to stop me. 'And I almost crashed my car twice, I was so excited to see you again.'

I breathe out a surprised laugh, and he laughs with me.

'Yeah, so, that's pretty much *all* my cards on the table,' he mumbles. He realizes he's still holding my bare arm and lets go.

'What did they tell you when they called?' I press.

His brow creases with concern. 'They told me your parents are going through a brutal divorce, and you're having a really hard time with it.'

I widen my eyes at him, urging him to continue.

'And that you got into some trouble at school.'

'Is that it?'

He shifts uncomfortably. 'Is there more?' I don't respond, so he makes a frustrated sound and runs a hand through his hair. 'Look, I'm not here to do a good deed and comfort the sad girl with asshole parents,' he says, making me laugh again. 'I'm here because I want to see you.'

I smile and look down. 'OK,' I say.

'OK.' He gestures to the open car door. 'Let's get something greasy to eat.'

Rob takes me to a little place by the ocean called the Snack Shack. We sit outside. The sun takes forever to go down while we eat French fries and drink iced tea. He