

Eleanor Discontented

ALLENSWOOD. Linden. wadleigh.

I repeat the names silently, like a prayer, while I wait for Grandmother to finish reading a letter over her afternoon tea. Too nervous to eat a biscuit, I sip from my cup instead and rehearse my approach to a subject that Grandmother no doubt thinks was settled long ago.

Allenswood Academy in London, the school of my dreams.

Linden Hall in Pennsylvania, a perfectly acceptable alternative.

Wadleigh High School for Girls, the one she'll have no reason to say no to.

Nibbling on her tea biscuit, Grandmother turns the sheet of stationery over to the other side, and her eyebrows climb above the rim of her spectacles. whatever is in this letter, she seems to be devouring it with relish. My grandmother corresponds regularly with elderly ladies up and down the Eastern Seaboard, passing along news of who has died or is likely to die, who is ill, and who has fallen on hard times.

My toe taps a staccato rhythm on the floor while I wait for the right moment to speak. Grandmother's generation doesn't believe in higher education for girls, and she thinks that in my thirteen years I've had all the "book learning" necessary for my station in life. I can argue that public opinion on girls' education is changing, but she'll counter by telling me there is no money for me to attend school, that what little she has is going toward the education of my little brother, Gracie. I have an answer for that.

Across the room, the mantel clock ticks. The wallpaper fades a little bit more. Mice in the walls are born and others die.

Finally, Grandmother lays down the letter and takes off her reading spectacles. "It seems your cousin Alice has been banished from Washington and sent here to New York."

Your cousin Alice. The way someone else might say *Billy the Kid*.

I set down my tea, the last swallow sticking in my throat like a lump of sausage. Another subject of the old ladies' letters is *whose children are behaving badly*, and my first cousin Alice Roosevelt's name has appeared with frightful regularity. "What has she done now?"

"What *hasn't* she done? Chewing gum in public. Breaking curfew. And she's apparently taken up with a gang of boys, riding bicycles, lighting firecrackers under bushes, and I don't know what else!"

"Why is she coming to New York?"

"Your uncle's second wife can't control her. with all the other children that woman has, I suppose she has no time for one that's little more than a wild animal put into good clothes. They're sending her to your aunt Bye in the hope that she can stop the girl from running riot."

My shoulders sag. That is what I feared.

“Keep your distance, Eleanor,” Grandmother says. “I don’t want you picking up any of her unsavory habits.”

“I don’t think Alice will want to spend time with me.” When I last saw Alice, she called me an old stick in the mud because I wouldn’t spit off a bridge with her. “But Grandmother, Aunt Bye and I have been working on a quilt for the baby.”

Grandmother dismisses our quilt with a wave of her hand. “Let Alice learn to use a needle. Although, if you ask me, it tempts fate to quilt a blanket for a babe one doesn’t yet have in one’s arms. Especially at Bye’s age.”

This isn’t the first time my grandmother has predicted a tragic end for my aunt’s late-in-life marriage and impending motherhood. She revels in the troubles of other people the way a pig wallows in mud, which is an unkind comparison, but I don’t feel particularly sorry for it. Especially when she proves me right by taking up another of her favorite topics.

“Truth be told, I would prefer you spend less time in the deathtrap they’ve made of that house. Electric lights! what newfangled foolishness. Mark my words. Your aunt will be lucky if her entire family doesn’t burn up in an electrical fire!”

My shoulders hunch around my ears, even though this isn’t the first time she’s predicted that fate and probably won’t be the last. It’s a good time to change the direction of the conversation, and I plunge forward with my planned opening. “Grandmother, did you see the recent editorial in the Tribune written by the president of the New York City School Board—”

The chime of the clock interrupts me, and Grandmother flinches. Shifting in her chair, she squints at the mantel. The dim February sun does little to light the parlor, but Grandmother won’t allow the gaslights on until seven, no matter how dark it gets. “Five o’clock already?” My heart sinks when she sets down her teacup, knowing my opportunity has come and gone. “I’m going upstairs to rest before supper, which will be cold meat, served at eight. Tell Rosie.”

“I will,” I promise, even though supper is always cold meat, served at eight.

Grandmother rises from her chair, as tall and sturdy as a mountain. “I’ll see you at supper, then, Eleanor. Return the tray to the kitchen and mind the teacups.”

And I always return the tray and mind the teacups.

Grandmother hustles from the room, moving faster than one expects from a woman of her age and girth. She wants to be shut in her room by the time her son—my uncle Valentine—climbs the stairs at precisely sixteen minutes past the hour carrying a shotgun and a bottle of Wild Turkey.

I gather dishes on the tray, and I don’t mind the cups as much as I usually do. I’m angry at myself for not addressing the question of my education *before* she opened her mail. The truth is, I dawdled on purpose because . . . until I ask, she cannot say no. If I ask at the wrong time or in the wrong way, I might lose any chance of making my case. Tonight at supper will not be a good time to try again. Grandmother enjoyed her criticism of my Roosevelt relatives far too much to be in the mood to change her mind about anything.

I blame Alice, who will apparently be moving into Aunt Bye's house for the indeterminate future. I imagine her sitting in my favorite yellow chair, taking a needle to the fabric patches I cut, and, a few months from now, wrapping the finished quilt around the baby I want to cuddle. Why couldn't Alice behave and stay in her own home, where she has a half sister and four half brothers of her own, the youngest still a baby himself?

I don't even have Gracie, now that Grandmother has sent him away to school.

It's not that my aunt won't want me visiting while she has Alice to keep her company. Aunt Bye loves a full house and would have hosted all my Roosevelt cousins last Christmas if she hadn't been ill at the time. It's that Alice won't welcome me there. She'll never say it directly, but a thousand little looks and gestures will make it obvious what she thinks of my outdated clothes, my old-fashioned manners, and every awkward word that comes from my mouth.

The haven I enjoy at my aunt's house, the one place where I'm never treated like an orphan and a burden, will become Alice Roosevelt's domain.

In the kitchen, I hand the tea tray over to Rosie, who assures me that she will slice chicken for our supper before she takes her evening off. Then, as the clock in the parlor chimes the quarter hour, I climb the front stairs to sit on the second-floor landing and wait for Uncle Valentine. It doesn't matter to him, but it makes me sad to think of him without anyone to mark his presence.

A minute later, the temperature drops, as if someone has opened a giant icebox. The ghost of my uncle, Valentine Hall III, appears at the bottom of the staircase and mounts the first step.

He looks frayed around the edges, like one of our tea towels. I can no longer read the label on the bottle of whiskey, and the shotgun over his shoulder is little more than a shadow. When he reaches the landing, I tilt my head to look up at him, wondering if he'll speak to me. Because Uncle Valentine died before I was born and his ghost is an Unaware, oblivious to his own death or anything since, he doesn't know who I am. Sometimes he says, "Hello, Annie," addressing me by my mother's name.

"Hello, Uncle Val," I whisper. "What are your thoughts on the education of girls?"

The ghost walks past me without acknowledging my presence or my words. He's fading. Soon there will be nothing left of him but a ball of light making this trek upstairs, where Uncle Valentine planned, on his last day of life, to shoot pigeons from the attic window. After that, he'll disappear completely.

I drop my head back against the wall. In Alice's shadow, I feel the same way.