

BLANCA & ROJA

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
New York

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ROJA

Everyone has their own way of telling our story.

Some say it began generations ago, with a girl lured by the white birds in the woods. The moment she reached out a small hand toward their wind-fluffed feathers, a swan bit her, poisoning her blood.

Others say it started with a flock of swans gliding over our great-great-grandmother's house. They flew overhead at just the right moment to hear her cursing her own family's blood. So the swans cursed her, and all the daughters after her.

Some insist it was two sisters, squabbling for years over who was more beautiful. A bevy of swans in a nearby pond grew so weary of all the noise, and struck them with a spell that would take one of each of their daughters.

The worst one tells it this way: Once, a *del Cisne* woman—probably one of our great-great-great-grandmothers—stole a groom from his bride on their wedding day. The bride's family hated our *bisabuela* and her name so deeply they cursed her brown skin and her dark

hair to become white feathers, and for the same fate to befall a del Cisne daughter every generation after.

These are the stories they tell, tales of winter storms or spiteful witches. Because when there is a family in which one of every two daughters grows an ink-black bill and a pale-feathered neck and snow-bright wings, people like to think they know why.

Few think to ask us.

This is the story we believe to be true:

A mother once raised her daughter among swans, hoping they would teach her their grace and beauty. And this daughter, with the swans for her sisters, grew lovely in both appearance and manner. When she married, she bore only sons, three and then five and then ten sons. And though she loved her sons, she wanted a daughter, so that she, too, could raise a girl with the grace of swans.

So she went to the swans she had once called her sisters.

"Please," she told them. "All I want is one daughter."

"We will give you better than one. You will have two," they said, with a magnanimous bow of their necks. "There will always be two daughters. But we will always take one back."

"Which will you take?" the woman asked.

They lowered their wings. "That will be for us to decide."

There may be as many versions of the story as there are daughters our family has lost to it. But this is the one my sister and I know. A woman wanting something so badly she did not understand the weight of the swans' pronouncement.

There will always be two daughters. But we will always take one back. The swans would take not just one of the woman's daughters, but one of her daughter's daughters, and one of her daughters, and one of hers. There would always be one daughter taken, and one left

watching the sky in winter, wondering if a far-off flick of white was a coming snow or her lost sister.

Even when there were sons, there were always daughters alongside them, two sisters, whether they had brothers or not. Always two, always enough that the swans could take one and leave behind the other. My bisabuela had already raised three sons, sure she was too old for more children, when her daughters arrived. My great-great-aunt, intent on having one child, delivered, to her surprise, twin daughters. My second cousin thought she had defied the swans by having a single son and a single daughter, until the child thought to be a boy declared herself as the girl she had always been.

The way our aunt and our great-aunts tell it, our family never knows which daughter the swans will take.

But I've always known it would be me.

If I wanted to, I could believe everything was decided when we were born.

But I've always known it was earlier than that. And not just because the colors of girls are decided before they're born, though that's something I know to be true.

What I believe instead is that, in the moments of my sister and me becoming our own little lives, it was already written into us.

In the wisp of blood and not-yet-breath that was Blanca before she was born, there were already the beginnings of how her hair would grow as gold as October leaves.

Her eyes would be brown, the same as the rest of us, and that was something our mother would consider a great misfortune. But they were a brown as light as acacia honey, like amber. A brown that could be forgiven.

A few months after Blanca was born, I was a new wisp of blood

and not-yet-breath. My own colors were already waiting. By then, Blanca had grown a crown of hair as fine and blond as a duckling's down. Her tiny hands patted the growing round of my mother's belly, where I was, slowly, becoming.

While my sister had a face as fair as the almonds my mother blanched each fall, mine would turn out as brown as the almond's skin, dark and delicate, that my mother swept off the counters. I would have eyes and hair as dark as the coffee grounds my father spread over his roses in winter.

My hair grew not only dark as those coffee grounds, but red. Not the copper or strawberry of green-eyed girls, but deep red, a red so dark it looked wet. It was a red that wouldn't take dye, not even the black walnut the señoras gave my mother. "Blood-soaked hair," they called it, my mother shuddering at the words, my father saying them back with as much pride as if they were a new knife, fine and just sharpened.

My father counted it as such a point of pride that he named me for it, setting his hand on my small forehead and declaring me *Roja* while my mother slept off a birth fever. The kind of birth fever, the señoras reminded me on my birthday every year, that Blanca hadn't given her.

If I wanted to, I could believe it was our colors that decided Blanca would be the gentle sister, pure and obliging, and I would be the cruel one, wicked and difficult. She would be the blessed daughter, the one the swans would spare. And I would be the one the swans would take.

But my sister saw our story ending another way.



BLANCA

I was five, maybe six when I first saw the swans. I remember because Roja was still having her tantrums, so she couldn't have been older than four. Our parents were trying to train them out of her, our mother by clutching her arm when she wailed for more than a few minutes, our father by crouching to meet her eyes and talking in a voice that was low, and neither harsh nor gentle.

"You can scream and cry if you want," he said. "But what you have in you is power."

His words were so level and sure, they made Roja quiet. Her tears froze on her cheeks.

"You let it wring you and throw you around like you're a doll," Papá said. "And if that's all you let it do, you'll be a fool forever. Because that power, that anger in you, that is the best thing you have." He gave her a nod as proud as if she were a son. "So claim it. Pick yourself up and use it."

My mother pulled me into the kitchen. Not like I was seeing something I shouldn't. More like she wanted to guard me from my

sister. As though Roja might throw off shards of glass that would catch me if I got too close.

The kitchen still smelled like pomegranates from when my mother and I had split open the rinds that afternoon, spilling the jewels inside. Mamá had seemed happy, the two of us sitting at the table, her legs crossed at the ankles, my bare feet swinging off the chair. She was patient when my pudgy fingers squished the pith into the fruit. She laughed, rubbing sprays of red juice off my forehead and showing me how cutting the fruit into quarters and then plunging them into water made them give up their seeds.

Now Mamá stopped a few steps from the back door.

"Do you want to see them?" she asked.

I didn't know what she meant. I nodded anyway, nervous but thrilled by the promise of a grown-up secret.

From the living room came the flat sound of my sister driving her fists into the carpet. She wasn't crying anymore. Her face was against the floor. She had worn herself out.

The sound of her fist on the braided rug was as familiar as my own voice. I could almost smell the salt of her tears. The warmth of the wool under her flailing body. The thick vanilla of the hierbas in my father's pipe, which he lit as though to say he had nothing but bored patience, that he'd wait all night for her to pick herself up off the floor.

All these things smothered the pomegranate smell like a blanket over a flame.

My mother took me outside with her. The night air was a little sweet from the Ashbys' flowering trees, waking up from winter and turning blush-pink.

My mother must have smelled the swans' feathers on the air, because we had just set our feet onto the chilled ground when their

shapes crossed the moon. The flashes of their silhouettes flickered over the gleaming round, and then they were gone.

They did not fly lower. They did not sweep down into the trees and toward our corner of the woods.

That, according to our great-aunts, would not be until Roja turned fifteen.

Then the swans would come for us. Los cisnes, birds as beautiful as they were terrifying. Their arrival always marked the season when they would decide which daughter would remain a girl, and which they would take.

From where my mother and I stood, those swans looked as distant as if they lived on the moon. That was what Roja and I would be to each other one day, after los cisnes finished with us. One of us would stay rooted to the ground, the other bound to the sky.

The thought of it felt like my veins being ripped from my heart. Roja was not just my blood. She was the sister who chased garden lizards like they were kittens, but hid in her bed every time a cricket got into our room. She saw my fear during thunderstorms and told me lightning was nothing but ribbons, no different than the ones we set in our hair, just made of stars.

I could not let that kind of distance spread between me and the girl I'd mapped the woods with, both of us learning them as well as each other's faces.

The next morning was still pale silver when I got Roja up out of bed. I buttoned her into the berry-red coat our father had bought her for Christmas, and I put on the cream wool one my mother had picked out for me. I brought her outside, and from the garden we took everything I thought might save us. White roses and red ones. Sour berries and sweet. Herbs with every kind of leaf.

We started with the herbs. I gave Roja the ones with rounded leaves, to smooth her out. I ate the ones with prickly edges that looked like ripped paper, so I'd grow sharper edges, too. Then the berries; I gave my sister the ripest ones while I let the sourest pucker my tongue, to make her the sweeter one.

And last, the roses. We slipped the petals onto our tongues like the communion wafers at church. I swallowed the red ones, and Roja the white, each of us eating the opposite of our names.

"Why are we doing this?" my sister asked. Not impatient. Not whining. Just because Papá had taught her to ask questions.

"If the swans can't tell us apart," I said, "they can't decide which of us to take."



PAGE

I'd heard how everyone talked about the del Cisne girls. At best, they whispered about them with a storyteller's thrall, like they might have about a lake filled with vicious mermaids.

The feathers are in them already; they're born with them under their skin. That's why their mother took them out of school last year, so everyone wouldn't see their wings coming in.

I heard when the moon's full their father doesn't sleep. That's how he gets all his work done.

Don't ever go into their house. Angel's trumpet and bittersweet berries grow through their floorboards.

At worst, they blamed the del Cisnes. If lavender bushes didn't take, or jam didn't thicken, mothers threw their hands up, shrugging that it must be swan season. If blond, water-eyed girls' barrel ringlets fell out before dances or ballet recitals, they hissed the name *del Cisne*.

I saw one of the del Cisne girls out in the woods once, after they weren't going to our school anymore.

She had hair almost like mine, but the yellow of hers was so vivid

and rich that I couldn't think of it as anything but gold. It had weight and warmth, like the last threads of sunlight before the sky deepened.

But it wasn't her hair that stopped me.

It was her eyes, a brown so shining and deep I found their glint from across the forest pond. They caught the light even in the trees' shadows. Like blueberry honey, or the topaz on my mother's favorite bracelet. A hundred facets, brown and glimmering.

I watched her through the aspen leaves, their flickering yellow hiding and unveiling her.

She was looking out over the pond. I couldn't tell why. I kept waiting for her to skip stones or throw pennies in for wishes.

It got cooler and darker, and she buttoned the extra buttons on her sweater. When she crossed her arms over her chest like she was still cold, I knew she was about to go inside. Her family didn't live far. I didn't know that from following her. Everyone knew that, how the del Cisne girls lived in a house deep in the trees.

I waited for her to turn away from the pond, her hair fanning out in a sweep of gold.

But then her gaze lifted off the water. Her eyes moved across the screen of trees.

They stopped where I stood.

That brown caught me. Against the aspen-yellow of her hair, the color was as startling as it was beautiful. This girl was her own woods, gold and brown.

She didn't flinch. She didn't glare at me.

Her gaze didn't break even as leaves fluttered between us. Heat spread over the back of my neck, and I wondered if she'd known I was here the whole time.



YEARLING

The first time I ever talked to Page Ashby was when he found me in back of the school and hit me in the jaw.

He did it fast, no warning, and he did it while saying words my brain was too rattled to register. Something about how my grandmother had besmirched the honor of his grandmother. I didn't catch everything he said but I caught that much. He really did say it like that, too. *Besmirched her honor*. I half expected Page to pull out a glove, slap me in the face with it, and challenge me to a duel.

What, exactly, could Grandma Tess have done to *besmirch* anyone? Let alone Lynn Ashby. The only thing I could think of was something about the fruit the Ashbys grew. The best apples for a hundred miles came from their trees, and everyone knew it. Any insult to them was grave as cursing their mothers.

But Grandma Tess liked them as much as anyone else, and if she ever didn't, she wouldn't have mentioned it. *Not worth it all around*, she would've said.

Page Ashby stood in front of me, waiting. He was small, even adjusting for how I had two years on him, fourteen to his twelve. Under

his overalls, he wore a plain shirt—white, cotton, the kind my mother said should never be seen in public because they were underwear. It darkened at the sleeve hems, the tint of dust and dirt off his family's orchard. His hair was light as the unfinished wood of the apple crates. It looked like he'd cut it himself, a try at a nondescript boy's cut that didn't look half bad in the front but went uneven in the back.

He stood with his hands in the pockets of his overalls. Unafraid, like he either knew I wouldn't fight back or was ready for it.

"You call that a hit?" I asked.

Sure, it had hurt at first, but the pain landed shallow, and faded fast. It was all snap and first impact. There was no force behind it, no solid path.

I wondered if the insult would make him hit me again, but he just blinked at me.

"Come on." I stood next to him. "Let's teach you to do this right."

"You're going to show me how to hit you better?" he asked.

"I hope not," I said. "But I can't let you go around doing that again."

He looked too surprised to argue.

"Show me how you make a fist."

He did.

"Do you want to break your thumb?" I asked.

"No."

"Then don't put it inside your fist."

He slipped it out and set it alongside his curled fingers.

"Didn't your father teach you this?" I asked.

"He's not really the fighting kind."

"Lucky you." My laugh was supposed to sound thoughtless, like shrugging something off, but it came out bitter. "Okay, now imag-

ine going past whatever you're trying to hit. If it's me, you're not aiming for me, you're aiming for the brick behind me."

That was a trick Liam had taught me. Good of him, too, since he was usually the one I was trying to punch through.

Page charged his fist into the air in front of him, slow, but I could see him imagining it.

"Throw from your shoulder, not your arm," I said. "If you think too much about your hand, you end up bending your wrist."

He squared up his stance, unrounding his shoulders.

I stood in front of him. "Feel like trying again?"

"You want me to hit you in the face again?" he asked.

"How about you go for my arm?"

"What if I hurt you?"

That was a nice change from two minutes earlier. If Liam and I could have shut down our fights this fast, we would've both had time to learn the violin.

I touched my sleeve halfway between my shoulder and elbow. "You won't."

He did it. It hurt, the pain spreading out through the muscle in my arm.

"Better," I said.

He heard it in my voice, that pain I held at the back of my throat and the pride of knowing I'd taught him to do that.

"The next guy you sucker punch doesn't stand a chance," I said.

His face brightened into a smile.

"I'm Barclay," I said.

Page set his mouth like this was some kind of test. "I know."



ROJA

I surfaced to the sound outside, gasping awake. “They’re here.”
In the space of those two words, Blanca was up and out of her bed. It made me wonder if she’d fallen asleep at all.

“They’re not,” she said.

I sat up, my hands propped behind me. “I heard them.” I tried to tune in to the sound that had reached through my dreams, a clicking and stirring like wings. But now I couldn’t find it. “Didn’t you hear it?”

Blanca turned on the lamp and sat on the edge of my bed. “It’s just the trees.”

She picked up the cream ribbon that had fallen onto my pillow. We slept with each other’s colors in our hair, a white ribbon tying off the end of my braid, a red one nestled into her blond hair like a headband. It was one more way we tried to make ourselves so much the same that los cisnes could never choose one of us. It was the same reason Blanca sprinkled gardenia perfume under my pillow and the lightest dusting of chili powder under hers.

That feathery sound kicked up again. I sat up straighter, listening.

"It's the wind." Blanca tied a bow in the ribbon like when we were little. "It's nothing."

At the sureness in her voice, my breath evened, my heart steadying.

The brush of her fingers in my hair was as warm and familiar as the smell of pan dulce or the feel of my father's books.

When the swans wedged their way into my nightmares, it was not the thought of losing my own body that pinched the breath out of me. It was not even how much I imagined it would hurt, my skin growing feathers, my neck thinning and stretching.

It was the loss of Blanca, of being her sister. I could count the ways I loved her like charms in a jewelry box, how they weighed against the reasons I might have hated her.

The way anything more than a thimbleful of Tía Verónica's xtabentún left her dream-eyed and stumbling made it impossible for me to begrudge how our mother looked at her and not at me.

How she'd taught me to loop twinned cherries over my ears in summer, our earrings before our parents let us get piercings, left me unable to envy the candle-gold of her skin.

Her certainty that, together, we would survive the swans made me forgive her for having had the luck to be born with yellow hair.

She slipped back to bed, clicking off the light.

"Blanca?" I asked through the dark.

"Yeah?"

"What if the swans still come?"

"They won't," she said.

"How do you know?"

"You've been fifteen for months," she said. That had always been the moment del Cisne girls dreaded, the day the youngest sister

turned fifteen. The swans never waited long after that. "If they haven't come yet, they won't."

"But what if they do?" I set my fingertips against the cold glass, reaching toward the charge in the air, that bristling cold like before the first snow. "Something's happening out there."

"Not everything is about us, Roja." Only Blanca could say such words without any tint of meanness.

The soft certainty in her voice was so familiar to me that I knew its meaning on the first syllable, how she meant it as comfort, not reprimand.

Stop swatting at the air. The bee's not going to sting you unless you bother it, Roja.

Don't you think a ghost would have something better to do than move around the bowls in our cupboard?

The coyotes are more afraid of you than you are of them, Roja.

Blanca settled back onto her pillow, the red ribbon bright in her hair.

Just before she closed her eyes, she said, "Not everything that happens out there has to do with you and me."