Lenna Carter

and the Cabinet of Curiosities



Radim Kaufmann

LENNA CARTER

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The Carter Family

PROLOGUE

Boston, 1897

The snow had been falling for three days.

Nikola Stepanov stood at the window of the Joy Street brownstone, watching the white silence settle over Beacon Hill. The gaslight from the street below cast pale circles on the drifts, making the world look fragile, temporary-a dream that would melt when morning came.

Behind him, the house creaked and settled. He had spent fourteen years learning its language: the way the third stair announced visitors, the way the study door stuck in humid weather, the way certain rooms grew cold for no apparent reason when the basement was disturbed.

The house knew him now.

And he knew the house.

"It's finished," he said aloud, to no one in particular. His breath fogged the glass.

Fourteen years of work. Of careful excavation and meticulous construction. Of late nights with blueprints and early mornings with mortar. Of hiding his true purpose from neighbors who thought him merely an eccentric immigrant architect with unusual working hours.

The passage was complete.

The Cabinet was secure.

The objects-those strange, impossible things that Jonathan Carter had shown him on that first overwhelming night-were protected now by stone

and secrets and systems that would outlast any single lifetime.

Nikola turned from the window and looked at the desk where his final document waited. The ink was dry. The seal was set. The instructions were clear enough for anyone who inherited this responsibility to understand.

Watch. Wait. Wonder.

The time will come when these seeds are meant to grow.

He didn't know if that was true. He didn't know if any of it would matter-if the objects would ever be more than curiosities locked in darkness, if the keepers would ever understand their purpose, if the fragments scattered across the world would ever be reunited.

But he believed.

That was enough.

He had spent his life building things: bridges that defied gravity, buildings that touched clouds, systems that seemed impossible until they weren't. Each project taught him the same lesson: faith preceded proof. You had to believe the bridge would hold before you could test it. You had to trust the calculations before you could see the results.

The Cabinet was his final project.

His masterpiece.

His leap of faith into a future he would never see.

* * *

The letter arrived at midnight.

A boy from the telegraph office, half-frozen and thoroughly annoyed, banging on the door until Nikola opened it. The message was brief:

COME AT ONCE. URGENT. AXUM.

No signature. No explanation needed.

Nikola had been waiting for this summons for three years.

He moved through the house one final time, touching walls and doorframes, saying goodbye in his own way. The Cabinet called to him from below-that faint hum of potential that never quite faded-but he didn't go down. Couldn't. If he saw it again, he might not be able to leave.

"Keep them safe," he whispered to the house. *"Keep them whole."*

The house groaned softly in response. Agreement. Promise.

He gathered his coat, his hat, his traveling bag already packed for this moment. The money he'd saved. The documents that would get him across borders and oceans.

At the door, he paused.

On the hall table sat a small brass tag-a key marker he'd crafted years ago, etched with his initials and the year: *N.S. 1897*. He'd meant to attach it to the Cabinet's master key, but something had always stopped him.

Now he understood why.

He set the tag down, leaving it for whoever came next.

A piece of himself, staying behind when the rest of him could not.

Then Nikola Stepanov walked out into the snow, closing the door gently behind him, and disappeared into history.

He was never seen in Boston again.

* * *

One hundred and twenty years later, a sixteen-year-old girl named Lenna Carter would find that brass tag in a cigar box in her grandfather's attic.

She would turn it over in her hands, wondering about the initials, wondering about the year, wondering why something so small felt so heavy with meaning.

She would carry it with her into the basement.

She would be holding it when the wall opened.

And she would understand, in that moment, that some doors wait a very long time for the right person to walk through them.

* * *

INTERLUDE

The Day Grandpa Showed Her



Boston, Summer 2012 - Five Years Earlier

Lenna was eleven years old the day her grandfather first hinted at the secret.

It was a July afternoon, hot and lazy, the kind of day when the brownstone seemed to expand with heat and the air moved thick as honey. Mira was at a friend's house. Mom and Dad had gone to some academic conference. Grandma was napping.

Which left Lenna alone with Grandpa in his study.

Robert Carter sat at his desk, surrounded by the accumulated chaos of eighty years of curiosity-books stacked on books, maps pinned over maps, photographs arranged in patterns only he understood. His hands, spotted with age but still steady, sorted through a box of old documents while Lenna sat cross-legged on the floor, pretending to read.

"You're not reading," Grandpa said without looking up.

"How do you know?"

"Because you haven't turned a page in seven minutes." He smiled, still focused on his papers. *"What's really on your mind?"*

Lenna hesitated. The question she wanted to ask felt silly, childish, the kind of thing that would make most adults laugh and say "What an imagination!"

But Grandpa wasn't most adults.

"The house," she said finally. *"It feels... different sometimes. Like it's paying attention."*

Grandpa's hands stilled on the documents.

"Different how?"

"I don't know how to explain it." Lenna pulled her knees up to her chest. *" Sometimes at night, I wake up and everything's really quiet. Not just normal quiet-really quiet. Like the whole house is holding its breath. Waiting for something."*

"What do you think it's waiting for?"

"I don't know. That's the part I can't figure out."

Grandpa finally looked up, his eyes-still sharp despite his age-fixing on her with an intensity that made her feel like he was seeing something beyond her face.

"Houses remember things," he said slowly. *"Especially old houses. They*

remember the people who lived in them, the things that happened inside their walls. And sometimes..." He paused, choosing his words carefully. *" Sometimes they wait."*

"Wait for what?"

"For someone who can hear them. Someone who asks the right questions." He stood, joints creaking, and crossed to the window. Outside, Joy Street shimmered in the summer heat. *"Most people walk through life without noticing the things that don't fit. The shadows that fall wrong. The rooms that feel deeper than they should. But some people-a very few people-see the world differently."*

"Do I see the world differently?"

Grandpa turned back to her, and his expression was complicated-proud and sad and hopeful all at once.

"I think you might," he said. *"I've been watching you, Lenna. The way you linger in doorways. The way you notice when things have been moved. The way you look at this house like you're trying to solve a puzzle."*

"Is the house a puzzle?"

"Everything's a puzzle, sweetheart. The question is whether you're willing to spend your life searching for pieces that might not fit together in any way you expect."

Lenna considered this.

"I think I am," she said.

Grandpa smiled-a real smile, warm and full.

"Then remember this," he said. *"Whatever you find-in this house, in your life, in the spaces between what people tell you and what's actually true-approach it with respect. Not fear, not greed, not the need to understand everything immediately. Just respect. For the mystery. For the things that existed before you and will exist long after."*

"Is that what you do?"

"It's what I try to do." He returned to his desk, moving more slowly than he used to. *"I haven't always succeeded. But I keep trying."*

They sat in comfortable silence for a while after that, Grandpa sorting his papers, Lenna pretending to read but actually thinking about puzzles and houses and the way some questions seemed to lead to bigger questions rather than answers.

Finally, she asked: *"Will you show me?"*

"Show you what?"

"Whatever it is you're respecting. Whatever the house is waiting for."

Grandpa's hands stilled again. He looked at her for a long moment-really looked, the way he had before, seeing something beyond her face.

"Not today," he said softly. *"You're not ready yet."*

"When will I be ready?"

"When the house decides you are." He smiled. *"It's not my choice to make. It's never been my choice."*

Lenna wanted to argue, wanted to push, wanted to know everything immediately. But something in Grandpa's voice told her this wasn't the time.

"Okay," she said instead. *"I'll wait."*

"Good girl."

He went back to his papers. She went back to her book.

But she didn't forget.

And five years later, when she found the paper in the library and followed its clues to the hollow wall and pressed the trigger that opened a door into impossibility-she remembered this conversation.

Approach it with respect.

For the mystery.

For the things that existed before you and will exist long after.

She remembered.

And she tried her best to honor it.

* * *

CHAPTER ONE

The Book No One Reads



Boston, Autumn 2017

The October wind had teeth.

Lenna Carter pulled her jacket tighter as she crossed the courtyard, weaving between clusters of students who seemed immune to the cold. Soccer players sprinted across the wet grass, their shouts echoing off brick walls. A group of seniors huddled near the stone benches, passing around a phone and laughing at something Lenna couldn't see and didn't care about.

She had other things on her mind.

Three weeks, she thought. *Twenty-two days since Mom left.*

The texts came every few days now-brief, cheerful, carefully worded. *"Fo und an amazing manuscript today. Miss you both. Tell Mira her turtle drawings made Dr. Bekele laugh."* Always light. Always deflecting. Never saying what Lenna really wanted to know.

What did you find, Mom? What's keeping you there?

"Lenna! Hey, Lenna!"

She turned. Sophie Chen was jogging toward her, backpack bouncing, red scarf trailing behind her like a flag.

"Did you finish the history essay?" Sophie fell into step beside her, slightly out of breath. *"Because I wrote three pages about the Boston Tea Party and then realized we were supposed to write about the Stamp Act and I think I'm going to cry."*

"Stamp Act," Lenna confirmed. *"But honestly? Mr. Harrison won't notice. He skims."*

"You think?"

"He gave Marcus an A-minus for an essay that was literally just song lyrics with historical names swapped in."

Sophie groaned. *"Why do I even try?"*

They reached the main building, warmth washing over them as the heavy doors swung shut. The hallway smelled like floor wax and someone's burned microwave lunch. Lockers slammed. Sneakers squeaked on tile.

"Where are you headed?" Sophie asked.

"Library."

"Again?" Sophie raised an eyebrow. *"You've been there every day this week. What are you looking for?"*

Lenna hesitated. The truth was complicated. The truth involved her

grandfather's cryptic notes, her mother's sudden trip to Ethiopia, and a feeling she couldn't quite name-a sense that something was waiting to be found.

"Research," she said finally. *"For a project."*

"What project?"

"Personal one."

Sophie studied her for a moment, then shrugged. *"Okay, mystery girl. Text me later? We're doing pizza at Marco's around six."*

"Maybe."

"That means no."

"That means maybe."

Sophie grinned and disappeared into the flow of students heading toward the science wing. Lenna watched her go, then turned toward the library.

* * *

The Westbrook Academy library was one of the few places in the school that felt genuinely old. Not preserved-old, like the headmaster's office with its antique desk and framed portraits. Actually old. The kind of old that had settled into the walls and wouldn't leave.

The ceiling rose two stories, lined with wooden galleries and iron railings. Windows stretched floor to ceiling along the east wall, letting in gray afternoon light that made everything look slightly faded, slightly dreamlike. The air smelled of paper and dust and something else-something Lenna had never been able to identify but always associated with secrets.

She liked it here.

No-more than liked. She *needed* it here.

At home, everything reminded her of absence. Mom's empty chair at dinner. The closed door to her study. The way Dad tried too hard to fill the silence with cheerful questions about homework and soccer practice.

Here, silence was expected. Valued. Necessary.

"Lenna."

Mrs. Patterson, the head librarian, looked up from her desk near the entrance. She was a small woman with silver hair and reading glasses that always seemed about to slide off her nose. She had worked at Westbrook for thirty-two years and, according to school legend, had once made a senior cry by criticizing his citation format.

Lenna liked her.

"Back again?" Mrs. Patterson asked, not unkindly.

"The history section," Lenna said. *"I'm looking for something on colonial architecture."*

"Third aisle, upper shelves. Though I'm not sure what's left-most of the good ones are in the special collection now." She paused, studying Lenna over her glasses. *"Anything specific?"*

Lenna considered the question. *"Old houses in Boston. The really old ones. Pre-revolution."*

"Any particular reason?"

"My grandfather used to talk about them." That was true, technically. *"He said Boston builds on top of itself. That you never know what's underneath until you dig."*

Mrs. Patterson nodded slowly. *"Smart man, your grandfather. The Beacon Hill collection might help-we have some original surveys from the 1840s. Very dry reading, but thorough."*

"I don't mind dry."

"No." A small smile. *"I don't suppose you do."*

Lenna thanked her and headed for the third aisle.

* * *

The history section occupied a shadowed corner of the library, far from the windows and the scattered students working at the main tables. The shelves here were older than the rest-dark wood, slightly warped, with brass labels that had long since tarnished to illegibility.

Lenna walked slowly, trailing her fingers along the spines.

Most were familiar. She had been through this section three times already, pulling books at random, searching for... what? She didn't know. A feeling. A connection. Something that would explain the questions that had been building since Mom left.

"The strangest things hide in plain sight," Grandpa had told her once, his voice rough with age. *"That's the trick of it. People look for secrets in locked rooms and hidden safes. But real secrets? They sit on shelves. They wait in drawers. They're so ordinary no one thinks to ask what they're doing there."*

Lenna had been twelve then. She hadn't understood.

Now, at sixteen, she was starting to.

She climbed the small wooden step stool and scanned the upper shelf. Colonial tax records. Property surveys. Municipal planning documents from the 1850s-dry, forgettable, exactly the kind of books no one ever touched unless required.

And there, between two identical hardbacks with cracked spines and well-worn pages, sat a book that did not belong.

Lenna noticed it immediately-not because it stood out, but because it didn't.

It was too clean.

The books on either side had lived. They'd been argued over, underlined, dropped in puddles, rescued from backpacks full of gym clothes. Their borrowing records stretched back years, filled with names and dates and the small damages of actual use.

This one was pristine.

It hadn't just avoided damage-it had avoided *attention*.

Lenna's heart beat a little faster.

That's not possible, she thought. *Every book gets borrowed eventually.*

She checked the card slot in the back.

Empty.

Not "no recent checkouts." Not "last borrowed in 2003."

Empty.

As if the book had simply appeared one day and waited-patient, invisible, untouched-for someone who would know to look.

Or someone who would know to *ask*.

* * *

The cover was plain brown cloth, no illustration, no subtitle. The title-*Arc hitectural Anomalies in Early Colonial Structures*-was stamped in faded gold, academic and uninviting, designed to repel casual interest.

Lenna carried it to a table by the tall windows.

Outside, the world continued-soccer players shouting, leaves skittering

across brick paths, the ordinary chaos of a Thursday afternoon. Inside, silence reigned.

She opened the book.

The first pages were exactly what she expected. Dense text. Diagrams of floor joists and foundation stones. References to structures she had never heard of-"the Winthrop cellar anomaly," "the Salem beam displacement"-and places she had never visited. Footnotes led to other footnotes, each one daring the reader to care about load-bearing walls in houses long since demolished.

Boring. Technical. Forgettable.

So why am I still holding you?

The question surprised her. She wasn't usually given to whimsy. That was Mira's territory-her younger sister who believed in ghosts and tarot cards and the secret lives of houseplants.

But something about this book...

Lenna flipped forward.

Then back.

Nothing unusual.

Just another forgotten academic exercise.

She was about to close it when she felt it.

Not saw it.

Felt it.

A faint resistance-like the last page of a book sticking slightly more than the others. Or like something thin and deliberate had been slipped between the sheets and forgotten.

Her breath stilled.

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