



**JAIME JO WRIGHT**

Christy Award–Winning Author

*The*

VANISHING

*at*

CASTLE

MOREAU



*The*  
VANISHING  
*at*  
CASTLE  
MOREAU



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*The*  
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*at*  
CASTLE  
MOREAU



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*To my other mom,  
Joanne*

The one who rescues,  
who loves,  
and who stands in the gap.  
God knew I needed you.

# The Girl

MAY 8, 1801

When I was a little girl, my father would often come to my bedside after my screams wakened him in the night. He would smooth back my damp ringlets, the mere feel of his callused and strong hand inspiring an instantaneous calm.

“What is it, little one?” he would ask me.

Every night, the same question. Every night, I would give the same answer.

“It is *her* again, Papa.”

“Her?” He would tilt his head, giving credence to my words and refraining from scolding or mockery.

“Yes.” I would nod, my head brushing the clean cotton of my pillowcase. “The woman with the crooked hand.”

“Crooked hand, hmm?” His query only increased my adamant insistence.

“Yes. She has a nub with two fingers.” A tear would often trail down my six-year-old cheek.

My father would smile with a soothing calm. “You are dreaming again, *mon chéri*.”

“No. She was here.” He must believe me!

“Shhh.” Another gentle stroke of his hand across my forehead. “She is the voice of the mistress of your dreams. We all have one, you know. Only yours needs extra-special care because she isn’t beautiful like the rest. She is the one who brings the nightmares, but she doesn’t mean to harm you. She is only doing her best with what she has been given, and what she has been given are her own horrors.”

“Her hand?” I would reply, even though we repeated this explanation many nights in a row.

“Yes,” my father would nod. “Her hand is a reflection of the ugliness in her stories. Stories she tells to you at night when all is quiet and your eyes are closed.”

“But they were open,” I would insist.

“No. You only *think* they were open.”

“I am afraid of the ghost, Papa,” I urge.

His eyes smile. “*Oui*. And yet there are no spirits to haunt you. Only the dream mistress. Shoo her away and she will flee. She is a mist. She is not real. See?” And he would wave his hand in the air. “Shoo, mistress. Away and be gone!”

We would survey the dark bedroom then, and, seeing nothing, my father would lean over and press his lips to my cheek. “Now sleep. I will send your mother’s dream mistress to you. Her imaginings are pleasant ones.”

“Thank you,” I would whisper.

Another kiss. The bed would rise a bit as he lifted his weight from the mattress. His nightshirt would hang around his shins, and he would pause at the doorway of my room where I slept. An only child, in a home filled with the fineries of a Frenchman’s success of trade. “Sleep, *mon chéri*.”

“Yes, Papa.”

The door would close.

My eyes would stay open.

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I would stare at the woman with the crooked hand, who hovered in the shadows where the door had just closed. I would stare at her and know what my father never would.

She existed.

She was not a dream.

*one*

---

## Daisy François

APRIL 1870

The castle cast its hypnotic pull over any passerby who happened along to find it, tucked deep in the woods in a place where no one would build a castle, let alone live in one. It served no purpose there. No strategy of war, no boast of wealth, no respite for a tired soul. Instead, it simply existed. Tugging. Coercing. Entrapping. Its two turrets mimicked bookends, and if removed, one would fear the entire castle would collapse like a row of standing volumes. Windows covered the façade above a stone archway, which drew her eyes to the heavy wooden door with its iron hinges, the bushes along the foundation, and the stone steps leading to the mouth of the edifice. Beyond it was a small orchard of apple trees, their tiny pink blossoms serving as a delicate backdrop for the magnificent property.

Castle Moreau.

Home to an orphan. Or it would be.

Daisy clutched the handles of her carpetbag until her

knuckles were sure to be white beneath her threadbare gloves. She stood in the castle's shadow, staring at its immense size. Who had built such an imposing thing? Here, in the northern territory, where America boasted its own mansions but still rejected any mimicking of the old country. Castles were supposed to stare over their fiefdoms, house lords and ladies, gentry, noblemen, and summon the days of yore when knights rescued fair maidens. Castles were not supposed to center themselves inside a forest, on the shore of a lake, a mile from the nearest town.

This made Castle Moreau a mystery. No one knew why Tobias Moreau had built it decades before. Today the castle held but one occupant: Tobias's daughter, Ora Moreau, who was eighty-six years old. She was rarely ever seen, and even more rarely, ever heard from. Still, Ora's words had graced most households in the region, printed between the covers of books with embossed golden titles. Her horror stories had thrilled many readers, and over the years, the books helped in making an enigma of the reclusive old woman.

When the newspaper had advertised a need for a housemaid—preferably one without a home or ties to distract her from her duties—it was sheer coincidence that Daisy had seen it, even more of a coincidence that she fit the requirements. And so it was a surprise she was hired after only a brief letter inquiring after the position.

Now she stood before the castle, her pulse thrumming with the question *why*? Why had she accepted the position? Why would she allow herself to be swallowed up by this castle? The stories were bold, active. Women disappeared here. It was said that Castle Moreau was a place that consumed the vulnerable. Welcoming them in but never giving them back.

Daisy stiffened her shoulders. Swallowed. Tilted her chin

upward in determination. She had marched into hell before—many times, in fact. Castle Moreau couldn't possibly be much worse than that.

## Cleo Clemmons

### TWO YEARS BEFORE PRESENT DAY

**T**hey had buried most souvenirs of the dead with the traditions of old, and yet what a person didn't understand before death, they would certainly comprehend after. The need for that ribbon-tied lock of hair, the *memento mori* photograph of the deceased, a bone fragment, a capsule of the loved one's ashes—morbid to those who had not lost, but understandable to those who had.

Needing to touch the tangible was a fatal flaw in humanity. Faith comforted only so far until the gasping panic overcame the grieving like a tsunami, stealing oxygen, with the only cure being something tangible. Something to touch. To hold. To be held. It was in these times the symbolism attached to an item became pivotal to the grieving. A lifeline of sorts.

For Cleo, it was a thumbprint. Her grandfather's thumbprint. Inked after death, digitized into a .png file, uploaded to a jewelry maker, and etched into sterling silver. It hung around her neck, settling between her breasts, just left of her heart. No one would know it was there, and if they did, they wouldn't ask. A person didn't ask about what was held closest to another's heart. That was information that must be offered, and Cleo had no intention of doing so. To anyone. Her grandfather was her memory alone—the good and the

bad. What he'd left behind in the form of Cleo's broken insides were Cleo's to disguise. Faith held her hand, or rather, she clenched hands with faith, but in the darkness, when no one was watching, Cleo fit her thumb to her grandfather's print and attempted to feel the actual warmth of his hand, to infuse all the cracks and offer momentary refuge from the ache.

Funny how this was what she thought of. Now. With what was left of her world crashing down around her like shrapnel pieces, blazing lava-orange and deadly.

"Pick up, pick up, pick up," Cleo muttered into her phone, pressing it harder against her ear than she needed to. She huddled in the driver's seat of her small car, all of her worldly possessions packed into the trunk and the back seat. She could hear the ringing on the other end. She owed it to Riley. One call. One last goodbye.

"Hey."

"Riley!" Cleo stiffened in anticipation.

". . . you've reached Riley . . ." the voice message continued, and Cleo laid her head back against the seat. The recording finished, and Cleo squeezed her eyes shut against the world outside of her car, against the darkness, the fear, the grief. This was goodbye. It had to be.

The voicemail *beep* was Cleo's cue. She swallowed, then spoke, her words shivering with compressed emotion. What did a person say in a last farewell?

"Riley, it's me. Cleo. I—" she bit her lip, tasting blood—"I-I won't be calling again. This is it. You know. It's what I hoped would never happen. I am so, so sorry this happened to you! Just know I tried to protect you. But now—" her breath caught as tears clogged her throat—"this is the only way I can. Whatever happens now, just know I love you. I will *always* love you." Desperation warred with practicality.

*Shut off the phone.*

There was no explaining this.

There never would be.

“Goodbye, Ladybug.” Cleo thumbed the end button, then threw the phone against the car’s dashboard. A guttural scream curled up her throat and split her ears as the inside of the vehicle absorbed the sound.

Then it was silent.

That dreadful, agonizing silence that came with the burgeoning, unknown abyss of a new start. Cleo stared at her phone lying on the passenger-side floor. She lunged for it, fumbling with a tiny tool until she popped open the slot on its side. Pulling out the SIM card, Cleo bent it back and forth until it snapped. Determined, she pushed open the car door and stepped out.

The road was heavily wooded on both sides. Nature was her only observer.

She flung the broken SIM card into the ditch, marched to the front of the car, and wedged the phone under the front tire. She’d roll over it when she left, crush it, and leave nothing to be traced.

Cleo took a moment to look around her. Oak forest, heavy undergrowth of brush, wild rosebushes whose thorns would take your skin off, and a heap of dead trees and branches from the tornado that had ravaged these woods decades prior. The rotting wood was all that remained to tell the tale now, but it was so like her life. Rotting pieces that never went away. Ever.

She climbed back into the car and twisted the key, revving the engine to life. Cleo felt her grandfather’s thumbprint until it turned her skin hot with the memories. Memories of what had set into motion a series of frightful events. Events that were her responsibility to protect her sister from.

*Goodbye, Ladybug.*

There was no explaining in a voicemail to a twelve-year-old girl that her older sister was abandoning her in order to save her. Cleo knew from this moment on, Riley would play that message, and slowly resentment would seep in as she grew older. Resentment that Cleo had left and would never come back.

But she couldn't go back. Not if she loved Riley. Sometimes love required the ultimate sacrifice. Sometimes love required death. Death to all they knew, all they had known. If Cleo disappeared, then Riley would be left alone. Riley would be safe. She could grow up as innocent as possible.

So long as Cleo Clemmons no longer existed.

*two*

---

Cleo

#### PRESENT DAY

**I**s that it?"

The pointed question came from a young woman, her nasal septum pierced with a ring, her nose studded, and her left eyebrow sporting a row of rings that, if Cleo was honest, looked painful.

"Umm . . ." Cleo swept her gaze over the gas station's counter. She had gum, a candy bar, a bag of chips.

*Don't do it. Don't. Do. It.*

"Do you have whiskey?"

The attendant raised her ringed eyebrow with a hint of bored curiosity. "Take your pick." She pointed to the shelves on the wall behind her and the rows of alcoholic beverages lining them. "And welcome to Wisconsin."

Cleo offered a nervous laugh. Wisconsin. She hadn't ever been here. Once, her grandfather had taken her to Missouri. Until now, that was as close to Wisconsin as she'd been. "I'll

take that one.” She pointed to a bottle of whiskey in a locked glass-case display.

The girl raised her eyebrow again. “You sure?”

“Yes.” Was she supposed to opt for the shot-sized bottles not being kept under lock and key? Cleo tapped her foot impatiently. Biting back the words that made her grab at her necklace for comfort. The ridges of her grandfather’s thumbprint rubbed against her own. She caught strength from it—strength and guilt. Awful, consuming guilt.

*And quick, before I change my mind.* Cleo was breaking her New Year’s resolution.

“That’ll be one hundred and forty-two bucks and eighty-one cents.” The attendant sniffed, and Cleo briefly wondered how a person blew their nose with a ring stuck through the middle part of its cartilage.

“My truck is a gas guzzler.” Cleo swiped her card, making small talk.

“Yeah, and whiskey isn’t cheap,” the attendant muttered.

Cleo reached for the paper-bagged whiskey and her snacks that had been tossed into a plastic bag. “Thanks.” She threw a lopsided smile toward the beringed woman, who stared after her without saying a word.

Cleo pushed on the door that led outside, then quickly shuffled to her right as an older woman stepped through the same door.

“I’m sorry,” the woman mumbled.

“No worries,” Cleo responded.

“Hey!”

Cleo paused and looked over her shoulder, not sure if the “hey” was directed at her or the woman who was headed toward the aisle of bagged junk food. The attendant was eyeing Cleo, leaning on the counter, her elbows propping her upper body. “I’m Stasia.”

Cleo stared at the young woman for a moment, trying to compute the reason behind the sudden personal introduction.

Stasia's smile slanted, but her dark eyes sparkled and changed the sullen appearance of her face into someone quite pretty. "I noticed your out-of-state plates. You going to be in town for a while or just passing through?"

Cleo adjusted the bag on her arm, shooting a quick glance at the other woman, whose head was bent over a bag of Doritos, apparently to find out their caloric count. *Just buy them and to heck with the calories.*

She shifted her attention back to Stasia. "Umm . . ." Stasia's sudden interest was unsettling. "I'll be in Needle Creek for a bit." She hesitated to explain further but did anyway. "At Castle Moreau."

"Castle Moreau?" Stasia's eyes sharpened. "Really?"

"Yes?" It was a question in return for Stasia.

Stasia chewed her bottom lip, flicking the lip ring against her teeth. "Well, it's Castle Moreau." She held her hands up as though Cleo should just naturally know what she meant. "A landmark of Needle Creek. Mysterious and delectable with its—" Stasia paused for effect, waggling her eyebrows—"its deadly charm," she concluded.

The explanation did nothing to assuage Cleo's nerves.

"Okay." Stasia waved her off with a once-again serious face. "Be safe." With that, she slid backward and off the counter, picking up her phone to stare at its screen.

*Be safe.*

The words ripped through Cleo with the solemnity of what they implied. To be safe meant danger loomed. She'd been dodging that for the last two years. Two years. Cleo Clemmons was no longer; she was Cleo *Carpenter* now. Better to keep her first name or she'd completely mess up her

cover. One would think she was running from the mob and not a twelve-year-old girl.

Actually, Riley would be fourteen now.

Cleo opened the back hatch of her black Suburban and set the whiskey in a plastic crate so it wouldn't tip over or slide around as she drove. She wasn't sure what Wisconsin's alcohol laws were for transporting it, but Cleo figured it was better to have the whiskey well away from the front seat if she happened to get stopped by a patrol officer.

Settling in behind the steering wheel, Cleo reached out and scratched the furry forehead of her long-haired tabby cat. He was various shades of gray and black tipped with brown, with eyes a luminescent yellow. Murphy had found Cleo one morning near her car. He'd been sitting on the pavement just outside the driver's door with an anticipatory expression, his delicate nose tilted upward and his tufted ears at attention.

Murphy had been Cleo's sidekick ever since. She'd put little effort into finding his original owner. He was just too cute, and although Cleo had been raised to have integrity, she figured checking to see if Murphy was microchipped was effort enough. He hadn't been. No tags. No phone number. So, Murphy was hers from day one.

Pulling out of the gas station, Cleo glanced at the phone that was positioned on the dash. It wasn't hers. It'd been supplied to her and the very presence of it made her nervous. All phones had GPS in them now, right? Granted, who would know she carried a phone that had been prepaid and purchased by her long-distance employer? No one. It was why she'd agreed. She could maintain her anonymity from her old life while still being able to communicate with her current one.

The phone pealed, startling Cleo enough to make Murphy

trill deep in his throat. A questioning sound the cat was prone to make anytime Cleo gave off the aura of discomfort.

Cleo jabbed the Bluetooth button on the steering wheel.

“Hello?”

“Cleo Carpenter?” Deacon Tremblay had the voice of a radio DJ.

“Yes, it is.”

“Good. I was hoping to hear from you today.”

*Don't gaslight me into feeling guilty for not calling.* Her defenses rose instantaneously. “I haven't arrived at your grandmother's yet,” she said instead.

Although it couldn't be that far away now. She'd already left the small town behind and was traversing the back roads that dragged her deeper into the wooded acreage of rural Wisconsin. She still didn't quite believe any of this was happening. It felt . . . risky. The Tremblay family was well known, influential. They were American aristocracy. But desperate times called for desperate measures. Granted, it'd been desperation the past two years, and frankly, she was tired. Tired of odd jobs, of waitressing, of cleaning toilets at gas stations for cash under the table. The advertisement had been enticing with wages that would pay for her gas, her groceries, and, well, the bottle of whiskey. She'd found out it was *that* Tremblay family later—after she'd pursued the advertisement. Deacon Tremblay, however, had made it clear he was managing it all from New York. The idea he'd show up in Podunk, Wisconsin, wasn't much of a concern.

“I wanted to give you a few pointers.” Deacon's voice jerked Cleo back to the conversation at hand. “Grandmother can be . . . well, she won't be thrilled about this.”

“They never are.” Cleo applied pressure to the brakes as a stop sign approached. She winced at her dry comment. How would she know?

“Yeah, well . . .” There was a moment of awkward silence, and Cleo was quick to catch on.

She tapped the steering wheel as she looked both ways at the four-way stop. Woods, woods, and more woods. A soul could get lost here.

“Your grandmother doesn’t know I’m coming, does she?” Cleo was going to have to keep careful track of the broad picture and make sure the major pieces didn’t crash and make it all fall apart.

Deacon cleared his throat, and it reverberated through the vehicle’s stereo system. “No. She isn’t aware of your arrival.”

“I’m sure one more person won’t upset things too much.” Cleo fixed a smile on her face so it would somehow translate through the phone and make her sound more optimistic than she felt. Maintain professionalism, even with rich people like Deacon Tremblay. Although she had to hand it to him. At least he was personally invested in his grandmother’s situation versus having an assistant make all the calls.

“One more person?” he asked.

There was silence.

Tires crunched on the asphalt road that was barely compressed gravel and strewn with sticks from a recent wind-storm.

“Well, I mean . . .” Cleo fumbled for words. She really didn’t have to explain what she meant, did she? “Her family . . . they’re there, right?”

More silence.

Deacon cleared his throat again.

“Mr. Tremblay?” Cleo slowed down and pulled onto the side of the road beneath a canopy of oak trees. She needed to focus.

“I am her family. Grandmother lives alone. I thought I’d made that clear.”

Cleo stared at her phone as if she could see Deacon through it. She was glad this wasn't a video chat. She had a weird thing about talking to drop-dead gorgeous men, and she'd seen enough of him on celebrity sites to know what he looked like. Famous like an American Kennedy, loaded like a Kardashian, and having dated a few celebrity women, Deacon Tremblay was the epitome of desirable. Desirable men made her nervous and shattered her confidence.

She tempered her breathing as she pondered her next words. "Well, that's fine then." Really, the less people the better. It just seemed weird that Deacon Tremblay would pick an obscure, no-name like her to dig into the privacy of his grandmother's belongings. There were companies designed to do that sort of work. Large ones. Professionals.

"My grandmother's residence needs organization, as we discussed, but you are on your own as far as coordinating what you'll need. I want this done quietly, efficiently, and no talking to the press."

That last part was no problem. "Sir, I'm an expert at keeping things quiet."

"My grandmother is a hoarder. The public would have a field day with that information. It's why I hired *you*." Deacon Tremblay's tone had grown sterner.

The emphasis brooked no assumptions. The online advertisement had been basic. Home organizer needed for elderly woman. Cleo had responded to the employer, who'd listed themselves as D. R. Brown. It wasn't until later that she found out it was the infamous multimillionaire playboy from New York City and the heir to the American Tremblay fortune built during the post-Revolutionary War era. The Tremblays were one of the best-known original American families still to exist. Deacon had been flying low under the radar in his job posting. Obviously, anonymity and obscurity were important

to him—as they were to her—yet Cleo couldn’t dispel the anxious panic that rode just beneath the surface. Someone as careful as Deacon Tremblay would *not* hire a person equally obscure with no visible past. Cleo Carpenter did not exist. A simple background check would give her away. He *had* to have figured that out.

“Ms. Carpenter?” Deacon’s deep voice snapped her back to the conversation. “Is this job going to be too large for you?”

She could picture it now. Boxes stacked to the ceiling and falling over. Garbage rotting in corners. Mounds of clothing. Crates filled with collectibles and junk simultaneously. Rat skeletons buried under ten years’ worth of newspapers. She did *not* want to clean out dead rats for a living, but she also didn’t have the option to be finicky.

“No, no, I can do it.” Cleo mustered as much patience as she could. “But what if I need outside help? Like a dumpster or something?”

“Then arrange it,” Deacon replied.

“Arrange it?” With what money? Did she call Deacon? Were they doing this project under the Moreau-Tremblay estate or under an assumed name to avoid nosy reporters and paparazzi?

“Yes, arrange for whatever you need to get the job done,” Deacon added in a tone that implied it was the most logical next step. “That’s what I hired you for.”

“No.” Cleo couldn’t help the irritation that leaked into her voice. “No, you hired me to help organize your grandmother’s home.”

“Isn’t cleaning up a part of organizing?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“And you’re an organizer?”

“Well—”

“So, *organize* whatever help is needed. I’m paying for it.

You and I will work on this and no one else. If you need money, let me know. I can't manage the project, though. That's what you're for."

"I'm not a project manager!"

"Ms. Carpenter." Deacon Tremblay was all business now. "Do you or do you not want the job?"

"I do, but—"

"Great," Deacon said, cutting her off. "Now, back to my purpose in calling you. Like I said, Grand-mère is not aware of your arrival. When you pull into the property, you'll want to go to the side entrance. You can ring her there, and when she comes, make sure you immediately tell her I sent you."

"You sent me." Cleo felt like a parrot. She also felt her self-confidence draining away.

"Yes. Let her know I'm covering all the expenses—that will be her first concern 'cause she's stingy with family money. And let her know that if she bars you out, I'll give you the authority to break in."

"Break into her house?"

"The castle." It was no-nonsense, the way Deacon Tremblay declared it.

"A castle?" Cleo met Murphy's gold eyes in an exchange of doubt and concern. She had visions of King Arthur's Court and that old movie starring Sean Connery and Richard Gere.

"No one ever said my family was conventional. Neither are our homes."

Deacon's admission might have warmed Cleo on another day. It might have given her that slow-nod moment where she admired his veiled apology for flaunting their wealth. It was a rich man's attempt at humility. But it did not impress her now. She was stupefied.

"A castle," she repeated, tapping her fingers against the steering wheel.

“Built in the early eighteen hundreds. Apparently, my great-great-whatever-grandfather missed his homeland.”

“He was English?” Cleo assumed without thinking.

“French actually. You’ve seen the photographs of French châteaux?”

“No.” Or maybe she had and just hadn’t paid attention.

“Oh. Anyway, we French have a rich history in them alongside the proverbial English domination of the architecture.”

Cleo waited because she really had nothing to add. Not a thing. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel while Murphy perched on the seat next to her, his tail slapping the leather.

Deacon cleared his throat. “Nevertheless, my grandmother lives in Castle Moreau, and I expect she’ll insist you breach the walls in order to deal with her toxic mess.”

“Why is it called ‘Castle Moreau’ if your last name is Tremblay?” Cleo asked.

Deacon chuckled at her question. “My great-great-great-grandfather’s surname was Moreau. He had a daughter. She married. Names shifted. But the castle retains the original name.”

“Ah.” Cleo nodded.

Murphy uttered a little *meow* in his throat, pushing up to all fours and stretching. Cleo gave the cat a comforting pat on his head. She wished someone was in the car to do the same for her.