

# HEARTWOOD BOX



ANN AGUIRRE



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,  
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the  
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A Tor Teen Book  
Published by Tom Doherty Associates  
120 Broadway  
New York, NY 10271

[www.tor-forge.com](http://www.tor-forge.com)

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The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-7653-9764-5 (hardcover)  
ISBN 978-0-7653-9765-2 (ebook)

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First Edition: July 2019

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# 1

This is where hope goes to die.

That's what I'm thinking as I step off the train onto the sparse platform. There's absolutely nothing here, not even a ticket machine, let alone someone I can ask for directions. Few people were left on the LIRR when I got off here, though one woman did flash me a glance like she was asking if I was sure.

I'm really not.

The area gives off a strange vibe, rural but also industrial, with green fields interspersed with machinery and equipment. It's a bit too far to walk to my great-aunt's house where I'll be staying for the next year, but I planned to get a cab when I arrived. I assured my parents I'd be fine—they could proceed to Venezuela without worrying about me—but now I'm having second thoughts.

It's not late, just past four, but there's nobody in sight. A shiver crawls over me, nerves and exhaustion. I've had a long-ass day, beginning with a tearful parting from my folks in front of an OXXO at Benito Juarez Airport in Mexico City, then a six-hour flight to JFK, immigration, customs, baggage claim, then two more hours on two different trains. I'm so tired, and the quiet here is eerie. I'm so not used to being alone.

As I walk along the platform, MISSING posters flutter in the breeze, drawing my eye. The way I understand it, this is a small

town. Why are there so many flyers up? It's not just children either. Grown men and women, teenagers, little kids as well. I stop to read one of them at random. *Ronell Leon Salazar, age 11, last seen . . .*

The chill doesn't go away as the wind kicks up. I've been warned about international data usage, but I have to turn it on long enough to use a ride-sharing app. There's a driver ten minutes away who can pick me up, and I wait on the platform without seeing another soul, just the flutter of those MISSING posters to keep me company.

It's funny how technology has changed the caution our parents tried to instill in us as little kids. *Don't get in the car with strangers!* But I'm doing that as my driver rolls up and I ID him based on data from the app. He doesn't say much, only takes me past a lumberyard and a lot where police vehicles are repaired. By car, I'm only fifteen minutes from my great-aunt's place, but it would've taken me forever to walk.

The town isn't much to look at, and it gives off a strange, old-fashioned air, like time stopped here fifty years ago and they'd rather keep it that way. The driver lets me out in front of a ramshackle Victorian monster house that stares me down with its dirty windows. I gaze up at the peeling violet paint and the chipped stained-glass windows, the overgrown ivy digging into the walls.

This is the kind of neighborhood where I shouldn't loiter. There's not much space between these historic houses, and a curtain is fluttering next door, a sign I'm being watched. Soon, somebody will ask what my business is here. To avoid that on my first day, I gather my courage, hoist my belongings, and mount the four steps to the sagging porch.

Before I can knock, the door flies open, and an old woman stands staring at me. I never cared for Charles Dickens, but this woman could've stepped straight out of *Great Expectations*.

I almost say, “Miss Havisham?” but there’s no reason to piss off my guardian first thing.

“Um, hi,” I start, but she cuts me off with a Venus flytrap of a hug, just all snap and here I am, against her bony bosom, breathing in talcum powder and lilac.

She’s a tall woman, thin and gristly, with papery skin and lipstick bleeding into the cracks around her mouth.

“No introductions are necessary,” she says, pushing me back to arm’s length for deeper scrutiny. “You can only be Araceli, dear Simone’s daughter. You’re quite like your mother in your features, but you’ve got your father’s coloring.”

None of that is wrong, but it sounds strange, and I don’t know if it’s supposed to be a compliment. Still, I say, “Thank you,” just in case it is.

“Did you have any trouble getting here?” she asks, ushering me into the house that time forgot.

I don’t mean it in a cruel way, but everything is just so faded and dated that it feels as if I’ve stepped back in time. Not even to the fifties like I thought about the rest of the town, more like 1917, when the Victorians gasped their last breaths and ladies cut off their hair and learned to smoke cigarettes. I take in the worn carpet and the peeling wallpaper in discreet glances, hoping she won’t realize how creeped out I already am.

This is such a tall, *narrow* house, and the old wood has a distinctive, musty smell. I’m not used to that. We always lived in small two-bedroom places, whatever we could find for rent closest to the town center. The walls were usually solid, cement or block, built to stand against earthquakes or bombardment. I can’t remember ever living in a freestanding house. There will be no rooftop garden parties here, no barbeques that draw out the neighbors so that we grill whatever’s on hand and I take beer from the cooler without anyone asking how old I am.

“No. I took the train from the airport.” More than one, but she probably knows that, if she’s ever visited NYC.

That’s the most appealing aspect of living here. This hamlet has less than six thousand people, most of them white, but after a couple hours on the train, I can be in New York City. There will probably be all kinds of fun things to do on weekends, if Great-Aunt Otilie gives me some latitude.

Now she’s staring at my luggage like she wants to hug me again. “Oh dear. Is this all you have?”

I glance at my single suitcase and backpack. Moving once a year is a wonderful way to streamline your worldly goods. “Yeah, that’s it. Could you show me where I’ll be staying? And thanks for having me.”

“It’s truly my pleasure. I’m a bit set in my ways, after living alone for so long, but I hope we’ll get along well.”

I’m curious how long she’s been alone—and why. She starts up the stairs slowly, showing signs that she has a bad hip, and I immediately feel guilty. “It’s fine, you can just tell me, you don’t have to—”

“Nonsense. My room is downstairs, so once I get you settled, I won’t be traipsing up here to bother you often. Let’s attend to the formalities and then be good housemates, shall we?” Great-Aunt Otilie flashes a smile over her shoulder.

Okay, maybe I can deal with her.

There’s also one other bright spot. Though I’ve attended six schools in seven years, I’ve got some awesome online friends, and I’m about to meet one of them for the first time in real life. We first “met,” like, six years ago when I was starting junior high, and we were both fans of 7TOG, a K-pop band who debuted around then. I joined a fan forum to connect with people who loved their music. I got close to NotJustAny-Won, which was her forum handle, and just before I moved to the US, our chat convo went like this:

NotJustAnyWon: OMG, that's so wild, you're moving here?  
That's where I live!

Me: GET OUT, does this mean we'll be at the SAME SCHOOL?!

NJAW: Possibly? Reality is so wild, I can't wait!

If it hadn't been for the prospect of hanging out with NJAW in real life, I might have fought my parents when they suggested the Great American High School Experiment. At least I'll have one friend here when I start over. Again. Belatedly, I realize my great-aunt is staring at me from the stairs, waiting for me to speak or follow, something.

Uh, what were we talking about?

"How long have you been on your own?" I ask, thinking this is a harmless question.

Her thin mouth tightens. "Twenty years. Before you ask, my husband didn't pass away. He simply vanished. And no, I don't wish to discuss it further. This way, please."

Well, shit. That's just enough information to get my imagination going. If ever a house could devour a person and leave no trace, it'd be this one.

Shivering, I follow Great-Aunt Ottilie into the shadows of the upper story.

## 2

Narrow stairs wind upward, branching off at a dark hallway lined with closed doors. I can only imagine how dusty it must be, with only one old woman taking care of this place. The runner is frayed at the edges, little spiderweb threads creeping across the scuffed hardwood floor.

Great-Aunt Otilie opens the first door on the left with a flourish.

The room is . . . quaint. I guess that's the right word, not one I use a lot. At least it's spacious. And decorated in vintage style, from the wrought iron bed with an antique quilt to the weathered bookshelves lined with leather-bound volumes like *The Mad Count* and *Ophelia's Ghost*. White lace curtains hang at elongated windows, perfect for fluttering in the middle of the night and making me suspect spirits. The walls are painted pale yellow, a fair contrast to the dark wood trim. Other than the bed and bookshelves, there's just a dressing table with a cloudy mirror and an upholstered bench, where I can picture a woman with fabulous forties hair plotting some intricate revenge.

"It's nice," I say, because she's waiting for my reaction.

"I moved most of the bric-a-brac into the next room. You're free to have a look, see if there's anything you'd like to use."

There's no closet, I notice. Something to do with the age

of the house, probably. The six drawers in the dressing table should be enough for my stuff anyway. “Thank you.”

“Let’s go over a few rules, and then I’ll let you rest. I’ve never raised any children, but I’ll tell you what I can do for you. I won’t be making breakfast, but I’ll put a hot meal together in the evenings. It’s up to you whether you eat or not. I won’t have drinking or smoking in my house. You’re free to come and go as you please, but I expect the courtesy of being informed of your plans. That’s common sense too. People disappear all the time, even without those precautions.”

Like your husband, apparently. It’s impossible not to wonder if he took off and is living a good life somewhere else, under a new name. But maybe not. I recall all those MISSING posters at the deserted train station.

“I don’t have a problem with any of that,” I tell her.

“Then I suspect we’ll muddle on together well enough. I took care of your school registration, though they’re still waiting on some of your records. You can walk to Central from here. I can draw you a little map if you like.”

“That would be good.” It’s such a cute, low-tech offer.

Even Ma and Papi met online back when it was divided up in newsgroups and bulletin boards. They met on something called CompuServe. Otherwise my mother, who was from a tiny town in Kentucky, and my father, who was born and raised in Monterrey, Mexico, would never have even met, let alone fallen in love, gotten married, and had me.

“All right, then. Final order of business, I’m sorry to say there’s only one bathroom and it’s downstairs, closer to my room. I take my baths at night, so if you can work around that, I don’t think we’ll have any conflict.”

Already I’m not looking forward to creeping through this house late at night to find the downstairs bathroom she

mentioned. On the other hand, I'll have all the space and privacy I could want around here. Maybe that's not such a good thing since I've mostly been raised in bustling cities, where I could walk to the zócalo to get hot coffee and fresh pastries or buy hand-squeezed juice from a bicycle cart.

"I'll try not to bother you," I promise.

"That's not at all what I meant," Great-Aunt Otilie grumbles. "Anyway, I'll leave you to rest and unpack. Come down in about an hour. I've got a pot roast on."

So, that's what I'm smelling; it doesn't get more American than that. My mom never made stuff like that. Wherever we were living, she'd always learn new dishes from the locals and sometimes her food was terrible, but it was never boring.

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Good." She moves to the doorway and pauses only long enough to say, "I really am glad to have you here."

That sounds sincere enough that I feel bad about how reluctant I've been to come. It must suck to get old and feel forgotten. Great-Aunt Otilie shuts the door behind her with the delicacy of someone who has crept through life, never causing a fuss. With a soft sigh, I leave my suitcase on the floor and plop my backpack on the bed, then head over to the window to survey my new world. From here, I can see a tangle of trees in the yard and the rooftops of shorter, newer houses across the road.

I miss the tiered houses built into hillsides, buildings painted in bright hues, and terra-cotta roof tiles shining in the sun. Today, it's the green and yellow of a fading summer. Whatever, even if I can't get used to living here, it doesn't matter. I'll just put in my time, study hard, and lock in the college fund my parents promised.

Unpacking takes five minutes because I truly don't own much, and suddenly, I'm worried about that. At other schools,

half the time I was wearing a uniform, but I don't think that will be the case here. People will judge me based on what I wear (or don't), what brand of stuff I use. Or at least, I suspect that might be true. Most of what I know about living in America, I'm basing on old Disney shows.

The full-sized bed beckons, so I stretch out on it for half an hour and fiddle with my phone. There's no Wi-Fi in this house, just faint signals that must belong to the neighbors. I might be able to use the internet at school, but there will probably be blocks. Music it is. I listen to a few songs until it's time to eat dinner.

Really, I just want a shower and to crawl in bed, but the sooner I fall asleep, the sooner tomorrow will come. It would be a lie if I said I'm not nervous.

A creaky floor and squeaky steps announce my arrival, so Great-Aunt Otilie is already pouring me a glass of water as I step into the kitchen. It's not an expansive room either, barely space for the table tucked beside the window. Wearing oversized oven mitts, she brings the pot roast to the table with wobbly arms. Probably I should've offered to help, but I'm walking that awkward line between family and guest, so I don't know what she expects.

Clearly, she's not a big talker. She eats silently, and I do the same, staring at the gravy trickling toward the edge of my plate. I block it with a scoop of potato. This isn't bad, but I'm already homesick—for my parents, if not for the last place we lived together. A building isn't your home anyway; that's wherever the people you love most are.

Once she's done, I carry my dishes to the sink. "I can wash up."

Otilie shakes her head. "Not on your first day, sweetheart. If you want to do it starting tomorrow, I can allow that since I'm cooking, but you deserve one day off at least."

She might look stern, but it seems like she's nice. I try a smile. "Then I guess I'll go up, if that's okay?"

"No problem at all. I won't see you off when you leave tomorrow. It takes me a while to get up and around these days, but I'll leave the map I promised on the table. I don't think you'll have any problem finding the high school. But if you're worried, there's a neighbor boy who goes to Central. I could call his mother—"

"No, thank you," I cut in quickly.

The last thing I want is for some rand-bro to think he should keep an eye on me because we live on the same street. I'd rather slide in quietly on my own. Besides, I've taken the subway in Buenos Aires (much simpler than the buses), so how hard can it be to navigate a few blocks here? Otilie studies me for a few seconds before apparently concluding that I'm trustworthy.

"Then make sure you leave by half past seven. I'm told school starts promptly at eight. I'd drop you off if I hadn't lost my driver's license last year. It wasn't my fault at *all*. That pig never should've been in the street." She tips her head, visibly curious. "Do you drive, by any chance? I have a perfectly good car in the garage, gathering dust."

"Sorry, I never needed to learn."

"Then perhaps you should ask at school if they still offer driver's education."

"Ah, sure." I'm the last person who would know if that's still a thing in American school, but with budget cuts, I predict probably not.

And I don't much want to dedicate my time to learning that anyway—*oh*. Maybe she could use the help for running errands or for transportation to doctor's appointments. Apart from the train station that runs an extended service to NYC,

there's no public transportation out here. If that's the case, I guess I'll get a driver's license. Somehow.

"Good night, sleep tight," Great-Aunt Otilie says, patting my shoulder. "Don't let the bedbugs bite."

Yeah, I've seen bedbugs. I may never sleep again.