

EXCLUSIVE CHAPTER SAMPLER



SERAFINA and the SEVEN STARS



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#1 *New York Times* Best-Selling Author

ROBERT BEATTY

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SERAFINA and the SEVEN STARS

ROBERT BEATTY

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Biltmore Estate
Asheville, North Carolina
1900



Serafina raced through the forest, her sharp panther claws ripping into the leafy autumn ground, propelling her long, black-furred body through the underbrush. She scrambled up moss-covered rocky slopes and dashed through shaded meadows of swaying ferns, making her way swiftly home.

The sound of rapid footfalls charged up behind her.

She burst forward with new speed, leaping over the trunk of a fallen tree, then tearing through an open field.

But now two of them were on her, snarling as they lunged at her sides.

The first mountain lion pounced on her back with a ferocious growl and tumbled her to the ground. The second slammed into her head.

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She spun on them with a hissing bite, pushing them away with her legs and swatting them repeatedly with her claws retracted, then broke free and ran.

You silly cats need to get out of here, she thought as she leapt the stream that marked the back side of Diana Hill. *We're getting too close to the house. You've got to go back.*

She surged forward, trying to put enough distance between her and her young half sister and half brother that they would finally return to the depths of the forest. But seeing her attempts to outrun them, they became more invigorated than ever. Her sister bounded ahead of her, growling playfully as she looked back at Serafina over her shoulder, challenging Serafina to chase her.

Slow down, Serafina thought as they reached the top of the hill. *You need to be careful here.*

But in that instant, the air exploded with the loud, wrenching sound of twisting metal, bending wire, and a mountain lion yowling in pain. Her sister had been running so fast that she never saw the wire fence in her path—didn't even know what a fence was—and slammed right into it. The terrified lion kicked and clawed, trying desperately to fight this strange, coiling attacker.

The other mountain lion circled his sister's flailing, wire-entangled body in agitation, but was utterly unable to help her.

Serafina's heart lurched in panic. She quickly shifted into human form and moved toward her struggling sister.

The more the young mountain lion fought against the wire, the more entangled she became.

Serafina grabbed the rat's nest of metal with her bare hands and tried to tear it away. But the lion kept fighting, pulling against the wires, scratching and biting and growling.

"Just stay still, cat. I'm trying to help you!" Serafina told her sister in exasperation, but as the entwined lion stared up at her with her golden eyes, Serafina knew her sister couldn't understand her.

"I told you we were done playing for the day," she said as she pulled and pried at the wire. "You shouldn't try to follow me home. We're too close to the house."

As she worked to free her sister, she glanced around to get her bearings. A short distance away, surrounded by the vine-wrapped stone columns of a small gazebo, stood Biltmore's Roman statue of Diana, goddess of the hunt, with a bow in one hand, a quiver of arrows on her back, and a deer standing at her side.

We're far too close, Serafina thought again as she struggled with a length of wire that had ensnared her sister's legs. Her brother and sister might get themselves into all sorts of trouble if they passed into the grounds of the mansion; the last thing she needed was for someone to spot a mountain lion running across Biltmore's lawn.

From this high position atop Diana Hill, Serafina could see Biltmore House below her, with its pale-gray limestone walls and leaded-glass windows gleaming in the light of the setting sun, the steeply slanted slate-blue rooftops piercing the sky, and the misty ranges of the Blue Ridge Mountains rising in the distance.

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The house was a beautiful sight, tranquil and serene. But she didn't trust pleasant feelings. Or beauty. And she definitely couldn't cotton to the nerve-racking peace and quiet that had been slithering around the estate for the last several months. This mishap with her sister aside, nothing sinister had happened at Biltmore in a long time, but she hadn't been able to shake the feeling that it soon would.

She finally managed to get her sister out of most of the wires, but there was still a bad one wrapped around her front leg. The lion kept yanking her paw away at the worst possible moment, anxious to get free, but hindering Serafina's efforts.

"Just hold on, girl," Serafina said, stroking the lion's head. "I'm almost done."

There were small cuts on her sister's shoulders and legs, but Serafina wasn't sure how she could help her. She didn't have any bandages, and even if she did, there wasn't any way to keep them in place.

I need Braeden, she thought in frustration. He would calm the lion and heal her wounds.

But Braeden was gone. And the shock of it still throbbed in Serafina's heart. After all their struggles, fighting to stay together and to stay alive, they had been undone by a few words on a wretched piece of paper in a city far away. She had wanted him to stand up, to fight, to slash at his uncle's words.

But he couldn't fight it. He knew he *shouldn't* fight it.

And now she was once again alone.

As she wrenched the last of the twisted wire from her sister's leg, the lion rose to her feet and rubbed her whiskered face

appreciatively against Serafina's cheek. And their brother came over and rubbed his shoulders against them as well.

It seemed as if maybe they were a little sorry for their rambunctiousness, and she was sorry, too. She should have stopped running sooner than she did and warned them of the dangers of the man-made world. Biltmore's groundskeepers must have put up the wire fence to protect the stand of small maple trees they had planted at the top of Diana Hill. The cubs were full-grown now, but they were still young and inexperienced.

But as she was hugging her brother and sister, a shift in the breeze touched the bare skin on the back of her neck, and put a chill down her spine.

Startled, she turned and scanned the line of trees surrounding the distant house, looking for any sort of danger: a mysterious figure or encroaching enemy—anything that might signal that trouble was a-prowl.

She studied the balconies and towers of the house for unusual movement, and then the gate, the road, and the paths leading into the gardens.

Over the last few months, she had patrolled the grounds day and night, sleeping only when she had to, for her memories of her past battles never slept.

No, she told herself as she gazed down at the house and out across the mountains, she wasn't going to let any of this beauty and pleasantness fool her.

Something was wrong.

Something was *always* wrong at Biltmore.

Black cloaks and twisted staffs, shadowed sorcerers in the

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murky night—she didn't know in what form it would come, but she was the Guardian of Biltmore Estate, and she knew she had to stay alert, or people were going to die.

When she heard a sound drifting through the forest from the north, goose bumps rose on her arms.

She tilted her head and listened.

The whispers of the wind moved through the boughs of the trees.

She didn't trust wind. Or trees.

In the months since her past battles, the slightest creak of a distant stick or the faint rustling of leaves had sent her into a twitch and a shifting glance. And now, as she stood on the hill and heard the sound of the whispering wind coming toward her, she wasn't sure whether it was truth or lie, but a crawling sensation crept up her sides.

Pulling a long breath in through her nose, she smelled something on the breeze, a trace of sulfur and charcoal that she hadn't smelled in a long time. It reminded her of death.

And then she began to hear the sound more clearly: the *clip-clop* of trotting hooves, a carriage coming up the Approach Road toward Biltmore.

The logical part of her human mind told her that not all carriages were filled with demons and murderers. But her lungs started sucking in air, as if they knew they would soon be needed.

This could be nothing, she tried to tell herself. *It could be a carriage full of kind and gracious gentlefolk coming for a pleasant visit.*

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But her heart pounded in her chest.

The beauty. The forest. The wind.

She quickly turned to her brother and sister. “Now listen—get on out of here, right away! Run!”

For once, the two big cats did exactly what she told them, hightailing it into the cover of the forest.

Serafina ran to protect Biltmore even as a carriage and its team of horses came barreling through the main gate into the courtyard. Before she could even see who was inside, a second carriage came rolling in behind it, and then a third, until there were thirteen carriages in all, their drivers steering them straight toward the front doors of the house.



Serafina reached the front terrace and ducked behind the stone railing just as the carriages came to a stop.

Still trying to catch her breath from the sprint to the house, and staying well hidden, she peered out.

The carriages were disgorging a flood of passengers into the courtyard.

Some of the women wore long city coats with sweeping, upturned collars, but most of the new arrivals, both the ladies and the gentlemen, wore brown tweed jackets, autumn gloves, and leather lace-up boots for hiking and shooting.

A dozen of Biltmore's footmen and other manservants hurried out to attend to the new arrivals, unloading their strapped

leather luggage, their riding gear, and their shotguns and hunting rifles protected in long oak cases.

The smiling Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt stood in the archway of Biltmore's open doors, shaking the hands of the new guests as they came in, embracing many of them—friends and family and acquaintances new and old—inviting them into their home.

Her eyes searched the new arrivals one by one. *How will the intruder cloak himself this time?* she wondered as she studied them. *How will he twist himself into our lives?*

The happy smiles and soothing charm of laughter didn't deceive her. There was an enemy among them, a killer, a kidnapper, an arsonist, she was sure of it, or maybe a doppelgänger, a haint, or a wraith-in-the-night come to drink their souls. She felt it twisting tightly around her mind, strangling her thoughts.

One of the new strangers was a distinguished, silver-haired, finely dressed man who gazed around at the surrounding forest and mountains as if he'd been dropped off in the middle of the wildest and most uncivilized place he had ever seen.

Another was a broad-shouldered, barrel-chested man in a khaki jacket and heavy boots wearing a stern hunter's gaze, as if he was just about ready to shoot anything that moved.

"Be careful of those rifles!" he shouted at one of the footmen unloading the stack of cases from his carriage.

As the very last figure stepped out of the thirteenth carriage, Serafina's senses seethed with anticipation. She was sure

this was going to be the villain. But it was a young, dark-haired girl, maybe fourteen years old, in a plain, clean gray dress, a journeying satchel over her shoulder, and a pair of brass binoculars in her hand.

The girl looked around the surrounding forest, as if checking the trees for species of birds she had not yet seen, and then gazed at the lions, carved from Italian rose marble, sitting on guard on each side of the house's great oaken doors. Finally, she lifted her eyes up toward the immensity of the house.

The girl's face filled with an expression of awe as she took in not just the mansion's grand size, but all the details of its facade. Serafina watched her gaze up in wonder at the hundreds of ornate carvings of gargoyles and mythical creatures that adorned the walls, gutters, and steeples of the house. And then the girl's face bloomed into a smile of delight as she spotted the statue of Joan of Arc, a beautiful warrior in full plate armor carrying her banner into battle, and beside her, the statue of the chain mail-clad St. Louis holding his cross and longsword.

As Serafina saw the excitement in the new girl's face, the fierceness that she had been feeling moments before began to fade. None of these people looked like treacherous killers. And none of them looked like murderous demons. It had just been her old fears come a-boiling up again.

You're such a flinchy-clawed scaredy-cat, she scolded herself. This ain't nothin' but thirteen bushels of everyday folk.

She crumpled down onto the floor behind the railing, pulling her knees to her chest in discouragement and hugging them,

her muscles twitching against enemies of the mind that she could not see and could not fight but that forever battled her.

Over the last few months, when guests in the house tried to strike up a conversation with her, she found herself watching the shadows at the edge of the room. She often startled at the clink of a teacup or the crackle of a warm fire. If someone touched her arm or brushed her shoulder, she flinched.

She was supposedly the Guardian of Biltmore, but she and Braeden had defeated all of the estate's enemies, and no new enemies had appeared. She had thought when this time of peace finally came, she would bask in the glow of trouble-free days. But nothing glowed. It *burned*.

What good was a Chief Rat Catcher once all the rats were caught?

What use was a warrior once the war was fought?

What worth was loyalty to a friend who had taken the train north to a different world?

I should have known, she thought as she glanced through the railing at the arriving guests. *The carriages weren't carrying enemies. They were just Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt's friends and family coming for the fall hunting season.*

They had come not just for the shooting, which was a long tradition among the ladies and gentlemen of wealthy society, but for the formal-dress dinners in the Banquet Hall, the elegant lantern-lit evening parties in the Italian Garden, and the late-night games in the Billiard Room. What better way to celebrate their own prosperity, and the arrival of a new century, than with the renowned company of the Vanderbilts?

And they had come for another reason, too. The night before, while sneaking through the rooms of a couple who had already arrived, she had overheard them whispering about getting their first glimpse of Biltmore's smallest and most beloved new resident.

Serafina had been waiting just outside the nursery with Braeden, Mr. Vanderbilt, and the other friends and family members when little Miss Cornelia Vanderbilt came into the world, a tiny bundle of wriggling coos in the arms of her loving mother. Serafina had heard Baby Nell's first cry, and she had played with her in the nursery many times since. During the night, Serafina had often lain on the balcony outside the nursery window, looking out across the grounds, swishing her long black tail back and forth in a guardian's contentment, while Baby Nell slept safely inside. She remembered thinking that Cornelia was the first Vanderbilt to be born in the mountains of North Carolina. Did that make her and Cornelia sisters of a kind? What would she be like? How would she speak? How would she see the world? Would the Vanderbilts of the future become people of the Southern mountains?

All through the summer and autumn days there had been an air of tranquility at Biltmore, a sense of new beginnings. She knew she should be happy. Just as everyone else seemed to be. She enjoyed her life in the workshop with her pa and her life around Biltmore, but when she was supposed to be sleeping, she tossed and turned. When she was walking the grounds, a mere squirrel dashing out in front of her would drench her limbs

with fear. Several times while patrolling the forests around the house she had shifted rapidly into panther form, sure that an attack was a split second away, only to find nothing but a babbling brook or wind in the trees.

And now Braeden was gone as well.

“Sit down,” Mr. Vanderbilt had said to her and Braeden as they came into his office that dreadful day. “Braeden, you know that in the time since your parents passed away, you have become like a son to me. I love you with all my heart.”

Braeden sat quietly beside her, unmoving, as if he knew there was nothing he could do about what was about to happen.

“Your father specified in his will,” Mr. Vanderbilt continued, “that his children should attend the school that he and the other members of the Vanderbilt family have attended for generations. It is incumbent upon both of us to put our personal feelings aside and do our duty to fulfill your father’s last wishes. I’m afraid the time has come for you to leave Biltmore and return to New York City.”

Braeden’s brows furrowed, and he wiped his eye with trembling fingers. He looked more somber than she’d ever seen him. But he lowered his head, slowly nodded, and said very softly, “I understand, Uncle.”

And now she found herself hiding, crumpled up behind a railing, without him.

School? Of all the godforsaken, no-good places on earth, why did he have to go to *school*? What kind of aunt and uncle would do that to a *child*? What good would school do for him?

He was already one of the smartest people she knew! And if he absolutely had to go to school, why did he have to go to school so far away?

She hated it. She hated everything about it.

When the day came that Braeden had to leave for New York, she went to the train station with him and Mr. Vanderbilt. She remembered standing on the platform in front of Braeden, not sure what to say to him. And she could see that he didn't know what to say to her, either.

For the last year, they'd been together almost constantly, but it had all come to this bitter end.

How do you say good-bye?

With all the various passengers shouldering past them and climbing hurriedly into the massive, steam-hissing black machine, she and Braeden looked at each other, their gazes locked. They had defeated their darkest foes, but they could not defeat this.

"I'm going to miss you, Serafina," Braeden said, very quietly.

"I'm going to miss you, too," she said in return, her voice shaking.

There were so many things she wanted to tell him, so many memories she wanted to recall together, but all the thoughts gathering in her head got stuck in her throat and she couldn't speak.

As the train whistle blew, he seemed like he was going say something to her as well, like he wanted to say good-bye, but he just kept looking at her as if he was struggling to find the words. When the conductor hurried by, shouting, "Last call!

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All aboard!" Braeden muttered, "I've got to go," then climbed the steps into the train car and disappeared.

Standing at Mr. Vanderbilt's side, she watched the train pull away, the low rumble of its boiling engine and thumping wheels churning in her body.

She did not move.

She did not scream.

But she felt the pound of it in her chest even now as she remembered watching the train roll down the long, clicking steel tracks, and disappear.

I'm not just useless, she thought. I'm lost.



After the new guests had all gone inside, and the last two footmen closed the front doors behind them, Serafina picked herself up and made her way to the far side of the house.

How do you say good-bye? she wondered. *And how do you live after you have?*

She walked alone onto the South Terrace, near the windows of the Library, with the view of the mountains in front of her, and the thick vines of wisteria growing in the lattice above her head.

As the sun set and night fell, she remembered the time Braeden had sat alone on this bench in the darkness, wrapped in his woolen blanket, recovering from his wounds, and

looking out at the stars. She had walked up behind him as pale as moonlight and put her wisp-of-a-spirit hand on his shoulder.

It seemed so long ago.

“Now *you’re* the ghost,” she whispered.

She gazed out across the forested valley at the view of the Blue Ridge Mountains as the sky darkened. There were not yet any stars, but the brilliant dot of Venus was setting over the silhouette of Mount Pisgah on the western horizon. The bright ball of Jupiter gleamed above, followed by the tiny pinprick of Saturn, and then the reddish orb of Mars rising from the mountains in the east. It was a rare, blue glowing moment when she could see all four planets wheeling across the sky at once, as if spinning on a great invisible disk.

With Braeden gone, the planets had once again become her companions. And a few minutes later, thousands of stars began to fill the dark, moonless sky.

Once Venus had disappeared behind the mountain, it was Jupiter that burned the brightest and the longest, and she imagined that it was her long-lost friend. She tried to imagine his life in New York City. He had told her that there were so many electric lights there that it was hard to see the stars, but she imagined that he must be able to see Jupiter. *At least Jupiter*, she thought, looking up at the planet.

“Wherever you are, Braeden,” she whispered, “stay bold!”

It was hard to imagine what her life at Biltmore was going to be like without him. He was not only her best friend, he was the only person in her life who knew who she truly was.

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She still had her pa, who had found her in the forest when she was a baby, and who had loved her ever since, but even her beloved pa had never seen her in her true feline form like Braeden had. She'd been far too scared to tell her father anything about that.

Her pa was in charge of building and fixing the mechanical contraptions at Biltmore. He believed in tools and machines and iron things made by man, and in normal, everyday human beings, not strange and unnatural shape-shifting creatures of the night like her.

She loved to run with her feline brother and sister through the forest, but they were pure mountain lions, not catamount shape-shifters, so she couldn't strategize with them, sneak through the house with them, make secret plans, devise ingenious traps, kill demons, or do any of the things that normal friends did together.

After she and Braeden defeated their enemies months before, time had frayed, and the world gone slow. The days had become long, like feathery gray clouds with naught but murky shape stretched across the sky. And now that he was gone, it made it all the worse.

What worried her now was whether after all these months of peace at Biltmore she would still be able to distinguish a real threat from a startled jump. With her friend and ally gone, how would she gather and sort out the clues of a mystery? What would she be fighting for if there was no one at her side?

And on many nights, she missed her catamount mother, who had taught her so much of the forest and the mountains.

Her mother was a shape-shifter like her, but had been imprisoned in her feline form for so many years that even after Serafina had freed her, she was unable to fully rejoin the human world. She had gone off into the Black Mountains in search of new territory, more animal than human now.

Glancing through the windows into the Library, and down the long Tapestry Gallery, she saw the glow of the lamps and candles, and heard the mingling voices of the evening's revelry, with the women in their long, glittery dresses and the men in their black jackets and white ties, all smiles and grand hellos, sipping their champagne.

All this happiness here, she thought. Is this my world now?

But she knew there were other places out in the world that weren't as safe and protected as Biltmore. Earlier that summer she had gone to see her old friend Waysa, who lived in the Great Smoky Mountains, and she saw the plight of his Cherokee kindred, and many others as well, struggling through a violent attack on the forests there. Hordes of men with great steel saws and steam-powered winches were slashing down the ancient trees. She and Waysa had barely managed to escape. Was it right for her to stay here at Biltmore in this quiet, peaceful, empty place when she knew there were others who needed help?

Months before, there had been a frightening, soul-splintering time when she had shifted into mist and dust and other forms. But she had turned thirteen years old now, she had her feet on the ground, and all that was behind her.

But sometimes, late at night, when she was in her panther

form, it felt as if she might go out running through the forest and just keep going, like her mother had.

And sometimes, more and more when she was in her human form, it felt as if her senses and her brain, and even the core of her body, were changing in dark and primal ways, like she was becoming less human and more panther every day.

She knew it was the way of her solitary, feline kind to wander, to explore, but how could she just leave her home? How could she leave her pa? And what about her brother and sister living in the surrounding forest, and Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt, and little Baby Nell? She could never do it. Even if there was a way in her mind to say good-bye to the Vanderbilts, she knew in her heart she could never leave her pa. She had to stay in this lonely, empty place whether she belonged here or not.

As she was standing on the terrace, consumed in her thoughts, she heard the step of a foot in the gravel behind her. Startled, she spun around, her heart lurching as she raised her hands to defend herself.

She could see right away that there was indeed someone standing behind her.

But he wasn't attacking her.

He was just looking at her.

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

It wasn't a stranger.

She knew that what she thought she was seeing was impossible.

He seemed to be standing in front of her, his skin pale in the starlight, his touse of brown hair more disheveled than

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usual, his brown eyes brighter than she remembered, and his face filled with tenderness. But there were dirty scuff marks on the shoulder of his jacket, the knees of his trousers were badly torn, and traces of crusted blood streaked his face.

Her heart shuddered in her chest as a terrible thought leapt into her mind.

Had there been a train wreck?

Was this his spirit coming back to say good-bye to her one last time before he left the living world for good?

Or had all her startled jumps and scaredy-cat fears finally shattered her mind?

She felt a slow aching dread filling her insides as she tried to open her mouth to speak. "Are . . ." she began to ask the apparition. "Are you real?"

Gazing at her with soft eyes, he gently asked, "Are you all right, Serafina?"



About the Author

Robert Beatty is the #1 *New York Times* best-selling author of *Willa of the Wood* and the Serafina series. He lives in the mountains of Asheville, North Carolina, with his wife and three daughters. He writes full-time now, but in his past lives he was one of the pioneers of cloud computing, the founder/CEO of Plex Systems, the cofounder of Beatty Robotics, and the CTO and chairman of *Narrative* magazine.

Visit him online at www.robertbeattybooks.com.



A HEROINE LIKE NO OTHER
makes an epic return in the hotly
anticipated fourth installment of Robert
Beatty's #1 *New York Times* best-selling
Serafina series:

Serafina, the Guardian of Biltmore Estate, has won battle after battle against the dark forces encroaching on her home. Now, tranquility has returned to Biltmore. Serafina doesn't trust it. She patrols the grounds night and day, hardly sleeping, uncertain of her place after her best friend Braeden Vanderbilt's departure for boarding school in New York.

When Mr. Vanderbilt, the kind master of Biltmore, asks Serafina to move upstairs into one of the house's grandest rooms, she's sure it's to keep an eye on the guests who have arrived for the estate's annual hunt. But as Serafina investigates, she becomes more and more unsettled by what Biltmore has become—a place haunted by nameless terrors where no dark corridor is safe.

Then Serafina witnesses a crime that turns her world upside down. How can all that once seemed good and worthy of protection now be evil? And how can she guard those around her when she can't even be sure of the truth of her own heart?

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