



CHAPTER ONE

The Way It Began

YOU CAN'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU HEAR, not even in Sidwell, Massachusetts, where every person is said to tell the truth and the apples are so sweet people come from as far as New York City during the apple festival. There are rumors that a mysterious creature lives in our town. Some people insist it's a bird bigger than an eagle; others say it's a dragon, or an oversized bat that resembles a person. Certainly this being, human or animal or something in between, exists nowhere else in this world. Children whisper that we have a monster in our midst, half man, half myth, and that fairy tales are real in

Berkshire County. At the Sidwell General Store and at the gas station tourists can buy T-shirts decorated with a red-eyed winged beast with VISIT SIDWELL printed underneath.

Every time I see one of these shirts in a shop, I casually drop it into the garbage bin.

In my opinion, people should be careful about the stories they tell.

All the same, whenever things go missing the monster is blamed. Weekends are the worst times for these odd thefts. Bread deliveries to the Starline Diner are several loaves short of the regular order. Clothes hanging on the line vanish. I know there's no such thing as a monster, but the thief has struck my family, as a matter of fact. One minute there were four pies sitting out on the kitchen counter to cool, and the next minute the back door was left open and one of the pies was missing. An old quilt left out on our porch disappeared one Saturday. There were no footprints on our lawn, but I did have a prickle of fear when I stood at the back door that morning, gazing into the woods. I thought I spied a solitary figure running through a thicket of trees, but it might have only been mist, rising from the ground.

No one knows who takes these things, whether pranks are being played, or someone—or something—is

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truly in need, or if it is the creature that everyone assumes lives within the borders of our town. People in Sidwell argue as much as people do anywhere, but everyone agrees on one thing: Our monster can only be seen at night, and then only if you are standing at your window, or walking on a lane near the orchards, or if you happen to be passing our house.

We live on Old Mountain Road, in a farmhouse that is over two hundred years old, with nooks and crannies and three brick fireplaces, all big enough for me to stand in, even though I am tall for twelve. From our front door there's a sweeping view of the woods that contain some of the oldest trees in Massachusetts. Behind us are twenty acres of apple orchards. We grow a special variety called Pink. One of my ancestors planted the first Pink apple tree in Sidwell. Some people say Johnny Appleseed himself, who introduced apple trees all over our country, presented our family with a one-of-a-kind seedling when he wandered through town on his way out west. We make Pink applesauce, Pink apple cake, and two shades of Pink apple pie, light and dark. In the summer, before we have apples, we have Pink peach berry pie, and in the late spring there is Hot-Pink strawberry rhubarb pie, made from fruit grown

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in the garden behind our house. Rhubarb looks like red celery; it's bitter, but when combined with strawberries it's delicious. I like the idea of something bitter and something sweet mixed together to create something incredible. Maybe that's because I come from a family in which we don't expect each other to be like anyone else. Being unusual is not unusual for the Fowlers.

My mother's piecrust is said to be the finest in New England and our Pink cider is famous all over Massachusetts. People come from as far away as Cambridge and Lowell just to try them. We bring most of our pies and cupcakes to be sold at the General Store that's run by Mr. Stern, who can sell as many as my mother can bake. I've always wished that I was more like her instead of my awkward, gawky self. As a girl my mother attended ballet lessons at Miss Ellery's Dance School in town, and she's still graceful, even when she's picking apples or hauling baskets of fruit across the lawn. But my arms and legs are too long, and I tend to stumble over my own feet. The only thing I'm good at is running. And keeping secrets. I'm excellent at that. I've had a lot of practice.

My mother has honey-colored hair that she pins up with a silver clip whenever she bakes. My hair is dark;

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sometimes I don't even know what color it is, a sort of blackish brown, the color of tree bark, or a night that has no stars. It gets so tangled while I'm out in the woods that this year I cut it out of frustration, just hacked at it with a pair of nail scissors, and now it is worse than ever, even though my mother says I look like a pixie. Looking like a pixie was not what I was after. I wanted to look like my mother, who everyone says was the prettiest girl in town when she was my age, and now is the most beautiful woman in the entire county.

But she's also terribly sad. If my mother smiles it's something of a miracle, that's how rare it is. People in town are always kind to her, but they whisper about her, and refer to her as "poor Sophie Fowler." We aren't poor, though my mother has worked hard since her parents passed away and she came back to take over the orchard. All the same, I know why people feel sorry for her. I feel sorry for her, too. Despite the fact that my mother grew up in this town, she's always alone. In the evenings, she sits out on the porch, reading until the sun sinks in the sky and the light begins to fade. She reminds me of the owls in the woods that fly away whenever they see anyone. When we head down Main Street, she hurries with a walk that is more of a run, waving if one of her old high school friends calls hello but never stopping to chat.

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She avoids the Starline Diner. Too sociable. Too many people she might know from the past. The last time we went in together it was my birthday and I begged for a special treat. Maybe because I've always had piles of cakes and pies and cupcakes, the dessert I yearn for is ice cream. It is perhaps my favorite food in the world, what I imagine real pixies would eat, if they ate anything at all. I love the shivery feeling eating ice cream gives you, as if you were surrounded by a cold cloud.

My mother and I sat in a corner booth and ordered ice cream sodas to celebrate my turning twelve. Twelve is a mysterious number and I'd always thought something exceptional would happen to me after that birthday, so I was feeling cheerful about the future, which is not usually my nature. I ordered chocolate, and my mother asked for strawberry. The waitress was a friendly woman named Sally Ann who'd known my mother growing up. She came over to our table, and when I blurted out that it was my birthday she told me that she and my mother had been best friends when they were twelve. She gazed sadly at my mother. "And now all these years have passed right by and I never hear a word from you, Sophie." Sally Ann seemed genuinely hurt that the friendship had ended. "Why are you hiding up there on Old Mountain Road when all your friends miss you?"

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“You know me,” my mother said. “I always kept to myself.”

“That is not one bit true,” Sally Ann insisted. She turned to me. “Don’t believe her. Your mother was the most popular girl in Sidwell, but then she went off to New York City and when she came back she wasn’t the same. Now she doesn’t talk to anyone. Not even me!”

As soon as Sally Ann was called back to the counter, my mother whispered, “Let’s go.” We sneaked out the door before our ice cream sodas appeared. I don’t know if my mother had tears in her eyes, but she looked sad as could be. Even sadder when Sally Ann ran after us and handed us our sodas to go in paper cups.

“I didn’t mean to chase you away,” Sally Ann apologized. “I was just saying I missed you. Remember when we were in ballet class together and we always went to the dance studio early so we could have the whole place to ourselves and dance ourselves silly?”

My mother smiled at the memory. I could see who she once was in the expression that crossed her face.

“I always liked Sally Ann,” she said as we drove away. “But I could never be honest with her now, and how can you have a friend if you can’t tell her the truth?”

I understood why my mother couldn’t have friends, and why my fate was the same. I couldn’t tell the truth

either, though sometimes I wanted to shout it out so much my mouth burned. I could feel the words I longed to say stinging me, as if I'd swallowed bees that were desperate to be free. *This is who I am.* That's what I'd shout. *I may not have a life like you do, but I'm Twig Fowler, and I have things to say!*

On most evenings and weekends we stayed at home and didn't venture out. That was our life and our fate and it wouldn't do any good to complain. I suppose you could call it the Fowler destiny. But I knew Sally Ann was right. It hadn't always been this way. I'd seen the photographs and the scrapbooks in a closet up in the attic. My mother used to be different. In high school she was on the track team and in the theater club. She always seemed to be surrounded by friends, ice-skating or having hot chocolate at the Starline Diner. She raised money for Sidwell Hospital's children's center by organizing a Bake-a-thon, baking one hundred pies in a single week that were sold to the highest bidders.

When she finished high school she decided she wanted to see the world. She was brave back then, and independent. She kissed her parents good-bye and left town on a Greyhound bus. She was young and headstrong and she'd dreamed of being a chef. Not someone who cooked in the Starline Diner, which she did

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on weekends all through high school. A real chef in a world-class restaurant. Pastries were always her specialty. She ran off to London and then to Paris, where she lived in tiny apartments and took cooking classes with the best chefs. She walked along foggy riverbanks to farmers' markets where she bought pears that tasted like candy. At last she wound up in New York City. That was where she met my father. The most she would tell me was that a mutual acquaintance had thought they'd be perfect for each other, and as it turned out, they were. My father was waiting for her when her plane touched down, there to help her find her way in Manhattan. Before the taxi reached her new apartment, they'd fallen in love.

But they split up before my mother came back home for her parents' funeral—my grandmother and grandfather had been in a car crash in the mountains during mudslide season. It happened in the Montgomery Woods, where the trees are so old and tall it seems dark even at noontime and there are several hairpin turns that make your stomach lurch when you drive around them. It was terribly sad to lose my grandparents, even though I was just a little girl. I can remember them in bits and pieces: a hug, a song, laughter, someone reading me a fairy tale about a girl who gets lost and finds her way

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home through the forest by leaving bread crumbs or following the blue-black feathers of crows.

When we came to Sidwell I was in the backseat of the old station wagon, which barely made it to Massachusetts. I was only a small child, but I remember looking out the window and seeing Sidwell for the first time. My mother changed our names back to Fowler from whatever my father's name was and she took over the farm. Every year she hires people traveling through town who need work. They pick apples and make the cider, but she does all the baking herself. If she's ever invited to a party or a town event, she writes a note politely declining. Some people say we're snobs because we once lived in New York and we expect life to race by with thrills like it does in Manhattan, and others say we think we're too good for a little town where not much ever changes. Still others wonder what happened to the husband my mother found and lost in New York.

People in Sidwell can talk all they want. They don't know the whole story. And if we're smart, they never will.

When we came home from New York I wasn't the only one in the backseat of the car.

That's why we arrived after dark.

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Though I'm shy, I know most people in Sidwell, at least by name, except for the new neighbors who were just moving into the house at the edge of our property. I'd heard about them, of course, at the General Store. I'd biked over to the store to deliver two boxes of strawberry cupcakes that were so sweet I had what seemed like an entire hive of bees trailing after me. There's a group of men who have their coffee at the General Store before they head out to work. I secretly think of them as the Gossip Group. They're carpenters and plumbers, and even the postman and the sheriff sometimes join in. They have opinions on everything and comments about everyone and they tell jokes about the monster they seem to think are funny: *What do you do with a green monster? Wait for it to ripen. How does a monster play football? He crosses the ghouline.*

When the talk turns serious, some of the men vow that one of these days there's going to be a monster hunt and that will be the end of things disappearing in town. That sort of conversation always gives me the chills. Thankfully, most of the recent talk has been about whether the woods will be turned into a housing development—over a hundred acres owned by Hugh

Montgomery. People see even less of him than they do of us. The Montgomerys live in Boston and only come to Sidwell on holidays and weekends. They used to spend summers here, but now people say they're more likely to go to Nantucket or France. Lately, there have been trucks up in the forest, early in the morning, when the hollows are misty. Soon enough folks figured out that the water and soil were being tested. That's when people in town became suspicious about Montgomery's intentions.

I had other things to think about, so I didn't pay too much attention. The woods had always been there and I figured they always would be. I was more focused on the fact that new neighbors were moving into the property next to our orchard. That was big news to us. We'd never had neighbors before. Mourning Dove Cottage, deserted for ages, always had doves nesting nearby. You could hear them cooing when you walked up to the overgrown yard that was filled with brambles and thistles. The cottage had broken windows and a caving-in roof that was covered with moss. It was a grim and desolate place, and most folks avoided the area. It's not just the Gossip Group fellows who say a witch lived there long ago. Everyone agrees that the Witch of Sidwell was a resident until she

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had her heart broken. When she disappeared from our village, she left a curse behind.

Kids may stand at the edge of the lawn and listen to the doves, they may dare one another to go up to the porch, but they run away when one of those rare black Sidwell owls flies across the distance, and they never go inside. I made it onto the porch one time. I opened the front door, but I didn't step over the threshold, and afterward I had nightmares for weeks.

Every August a play about the Witch of Sidwell is performed at Town Hall by the youngest group in the summer camp. When I was little, the drama teacher, Helen Meyers, wanted me to be the witch.

"I have a feeling you'll be the best Agnes Early we've ever had," she told me. "You have natural talent, and that doesn't come along often."

It was an honor to be given the starring role and I was proud to have been chosen. From the time I was tiny I longed to be an actress, and maybe even write plays when I got older. But my mother came down to rehearsals before I'd said my last line—*Do not pry into my business if you know what's best for you and yours!*

Upset, she took Mrs. Meyers aside. "My daughter is the witch?"

“She’s a natural,” Mrs. Meyers cheerfully announced.

“A natural witch?” My mother seemed confused and insulted.

“Not at all, my dear. A natural actress. Not many have true talent, but when they do, it’s usually the shy ones. They just bloom onstage.”

“I’m afraid my daughter won’t be able to continue on,” my mother told Mrs. Meyers.

I was so shocked I couldn’t say a word. All I could do was watch, speechless, as my mother informed the drama teacher that I would not be in the play, not even as a member of the chorus. I had a friend back then, my first and only one, a boy I shared my lunch with every day. We were both shy, I suppose, and we were both fast runners. What I remember is that he came to stand beside me on the day I left camp, and he held my hand, because I had already started to cry. I was only five, but I was so disappointed that when we got home, I sobbed until my eyes were rimmed red. My mother sat beside me and tried her best to console me but I turned away from her. I didn’t understand how she could be so mean. At that moment I thought of myself as a rose cut down before I could bloom.

That night my mother brought dinner to my room,

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homemade tomato soup and toast. There was a Pink peach berry pie, but I didn't touch my dessert. I could tell that my mother had been crying, too. She said there was an unfortunate reason I couldn't be in the play. We were not like other people in town. We knew well enough not to mock a witch. Then my mother whispered what a witch could do if you crossed her. She could enchant you, which is what she did to our family more than two hundred years ago. Because of this curse we were still paying the price. I could write my own plays and perform them up in the attic, making up stories, dressing in old clothes I'd found in a metal trunk. But I could not ridicule the Witch of Sidwell.

My mother had a look in her eye I'd come to know. When she made a decision, there was no going back. I could beg and plead, but once her mind was made up that was that.

We baked the Pink apple cupcakes to be served at the party after the play, but we did not attend the performance. Instead we sat on a park bench in the center of Sidwell as the dark fell across the sky. We could hear the bell above Town Hall as it chimed six. We could hear an echo as the audience applauded for the new witch once the play had begun.

I think that evening was the beginning of my feeling lonely, a feeling I carried folded up, a secret I could never tell. From then on, I didn't cry when I was disappointed. I just stored up my hurts, as if they were a tower made of fallen stars, invisible to most people, but brightly burning inside of me.

It was late spring when the new people moved into Mourning Dove Cottage, the time of year when the orchard was abloom with a pink haze. For months there had been carpenters hammering and sawing as they worked away on the cottage, fixing shingles onto the roof, removing broken glass, and restoring the tumble-down porch. Some of the Gossip Group had been employed by the new owners of Mourning Dove, and they loved to tell people at the General Store how much they were charging the newcomers for their renovations. They were city people, outsiders, and so they paid top dollar for their rebuilt roof and a non-sagging porch. I thought this wasn't very neighborly, and I could tell that Mr. Stern felt the same way.

"If you're honest with someone he'll be honest with you," he told the men who gathered near his checkout counter, but I think I was the only one paying attention.

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In this season I always collect flowering branches, enough to fill every one of our vases so the scent of apple blossoms will filter through our house, from the kitchen all the way to the attic. I spend hours curled up in my favorite tree, an old, twisted one that is thought to be the original apple tree planted in Sidwell. It's knobby, with velvety black bark, but I think the branches are like arms. I read books and do my homework up here. I take naps under a bower of leaves. In my dreams men and women can fly and birds live in houses and sleep in beds. Sometimes the doves nest above me and I can hear the cooing of their fledglings as I doze peacefully.

I was up in my favorite tree the day I heard the moving van rumbling down the dirt road beyond our orchard, with a car following behind as our new neighbors headed toward their new home. Dust rose in little whirlwinds as the truck came closer, and from the car's open window there was the sound of girls singing.

I sat still and squinted. It must be like this to be a bird looking down at the strange things people do. The newcomers had rooms full of oak furniture and silky rugs that shimmered with color. There were two parents who looked friendly as they bustled in and out of the house, and a shaggy collie dog they called Beau. The older of the two sisters was named Agate. She appeared to be about

sixteen, with blond hair that reached to her shoulders and a laugh I could hear all the way across the orchard. The other one, Julia, was my age. She raced about collecting boxes that had her name scrawled across them from where the movers had placed them on the grass. “Mine,” she’d call out as she lugged each newly discovered box up to the porch. At one point, she kicked off her shoes and did a little dance in the grass. She looked like someone who knew how to have fun, a lesson I needed to learn. I couldn’t help but think that if I were a different person, I would want her as a friend. But a friend might want to come to our house, and when I said that wasn’t possible, she might want to know why, and then I’d have to lie and I’d feel the stinging in my mouth that I always had when I didn’t tell the whole truth.

I couldn’t tell anyone about my brother, so there was no point to it really.

No one even knew I had a brother, not my teachers or classmates, not even the mayor, who vowed he knew every single person in Sidwell and had shaken every hand. I’d seen the mayor not long ago at the General Store, where he was discussing the weather and the future of the Montgomery Woods. He hadn’t come out for or against the plan to develop the woods and put

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in houses and stores and maybe even a mall, although there probably weren't enough people in Sidwell to shop there. Being wishy-washy seemed to keep the mayor in office. The last time I'd seen him in town, he'd shaken my hand and looked into my eyes in a piercing way, then insisted I tell him my name and age, even though I had met him half a dozen times before. "Twig. Twelve years old, and tall at that! I'll remember your face and your name and your age because that's what a mayor does!" But every time I saw him after that he'd narrow his eyes as if trying to think of who I might be. I didn't blame him. I considered myself to be a shadow, a footstep in the woods that disappeared, a twig no one noticed. It was better that way. My mother always said the only way for us to stay in Sidwell was to live in the corners of everyday life.

I was tucked so far into a corner I was just about invisible.

I probably would have never met the Hall sisters and we might have remained strangers forever, if I hadn't fallen out of the tree and broken my arm. I leaned forward on a branch that was split through. Ordinarily, I

would have been more careful, but I was concentrating on my new neighbors, and the wavering branch broke the rest of the way with me on it. I went down hard and fast. I cried out before I could stop myself. The collie came running over, followed by the Hall sisters. There I was, sprawled out on the ground, so embarrassed I could only stutter a hello.

My full name is Teresa Jane Fowler but everyone calls me Twig because of how much time I spend climbing apple trees, although now it seemed climbing was over for me, at least for a while.

“Don’t move! Our father is a doctor,” the older sister, Agate, announced. She raced back to the cottage, leaving me there with the collie and the girl my own age.

Julia introduced herself, and when I told her I was Twig from next door she nodded thoughtfully and said, “I wished there would be someone living right near us who was my age and it happened!”

She was dark, like me, only not as tall. I felt even worse about cutting my hair so short. Hers was long and straight, almost to her waist. We looked like opposite versions of each other.

“Does your arm hurt?” she asked.

“I’m fine.” I wasn’t one to let my feelings show. “Perfect, as a matter of fact.”

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Julia's face furrowed with concern. "I once broke my toe. I screamed so much I lost my voice."

"I'm really okay. I think I'll just walk home now." I was trying to be nonchalant, but my arm was throbbing. When I tried to move I gasped. The pain shot through me.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"I am so not all right," I admitted.

"Scream. You'll feel better. I'll do it with you."

We let loose and screamed and all the doves floated up into the sky. They looked so beautiful up above us, like clouds.

Julia was right. I did feel better.

Dr. Hall ran out and examined me right there in the grass. He was tall and wore glasses. It was obvious that he'd had lots of practice making people feel better even when they were in pain.

I liked him right away; he seemed very knowledgeable but not overly worried, the way my mother was whenever something went wrong. She panicked at the idea of asking for help, but Dr. Hall made it seem like helping another person was the most natural thing in the world.

“We’re going to take care of this before you can blink,” he assured me. He had bright blue eyes and his hair was a little gray. “Can you move your fingers like a spider on a tabletop?” he asked. When I could he said, “Perfect!”

“You did say you were perfect.” Julia grinned at me.

“Well, not in every way. Just in climbing trees. Or at least, I was.”

“What about lifting your arm?” Dr. Hall asked. “How perfect is that?” I tried to raise it and winced. It was like an electric shock going through me.

Dr. Hall told me I probably had a small fracture. My arm would have to be x-rayed, then most likely set in a cast. The folks at the hospital would need my mother’s permission. I told him our phone number, but when he tried to call no one answered. My mother was probably in the summer kitchen, a separate building beside the house where we had two huge ovens. The cider press was out there, and we usually stored baskets of apples that lasted through the winter. My mother didn’t take her phone along in order to give her baking her full attention. Dr. Hall left a message for her to call the hospital as soon as she could, and then meet us in the emergency room. “No worries,” he assured her in his message. “Nothing that can’t be fixed.”

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“Let’s go,” he called out to everyone. “Time waits for no broken bones. Hospital run.”

The whole family piled into the car, including the very comforting Mrs. Hall, who said, “Call me Caroline. No stuffy stuff for me.” She had dark hair, cut short like mine, but she didn’t look like a pixie, she just looked fashionable, as if someone in a movie had wandered into Sidwell.

They drove me to the hospital, with the dog, Beau, along for the ride. I looked out the window, afraid to talk too much. They chattered away, a real family, and I may have been a little jealous. I always wished my family could have done even the simplest things together. Just going for a car ride all together seemed extraordinary to me.

When we passed the General Store I noticed something you don’t see every day in Sidwell: graffiti sprayed onto the brick wall. I had to blink to make certain I was seeing straight. There was a painted mouth with fangy teeth, all jagged and fierce. The jarring oversized words underneath read: *DON'T TAKE OUR HOME AWAY.*

It was such a sad and angry image a shiver ran through me. Some members of the Gossip Group were out there examining the paint and they didn’t look too pleased. I thought Mr. Stern would just about faint when he saw his store defaced, and I wondered who in Sidwell

would have the nerve to paint that message. I was relieved that the Halls didn't notice when we passed by.

At the hospital, everyone seemed to know Dr. Hall. We were rushed into the emergency room because my mother had already phoned to give her permission for me to be treated. She was on her way. I was certain she was worried beyond belief. Julia sat with me while the orthopedist examined me. I had X-rays, then the doctor applied the cast to my arm. When she was finished, we waited for the cast to dry, tapping on it to mark its progress.

Julia was the first to sign my cast, with a purple marker she had in her backpack. *To my friend the tree climber, from Julia Hall.* Then Agate came to sign it as well. She smelled of jasmine cologne. Julia whispered it was the scent her sister always wore. Agate pushed back her long pale hair and wrote *Agate Early Hall, your neighbor* in tiny, beautiful script.

All three of us were drinking hot chocolates that we'd bought in the vending machine when my mother came to fetch me. She'd left home as soon as she got the message and arrived wearing a raincoat over her old bak-

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ing clothes, which were splattered with flour and cinnamon. She had pulled on the high rubber boots she used on rainy days. Since it wasn't yet apple season, she'd been in the middle of baking strawberry rhubarb pies. Her hands were pink and flour was dusted across her face in powdery white streaks. Despite the worry all over her face, she was still the most beautiful mother in town.

She couldn't thank Dr. and Mrs. Hall enough, insisting she would bring them a pie to express her gratitude. She hugged me tight and I hugged her back with my good arm and assured her I was fine. Or at least, I would be soon.

"She's perfect," Julia said. I grinned at her because being perfect was now a joke just between the two of us.

My mother wanted to see for herself. She came closer so she could examine my cast. I thought she would tell me how disappointed she was in me for bringing our neighbors into our situation, but instead she frowned when she saw the names written out. Julia said hello and introduced herself and started talking about how much she liked Sidwell, but my mother didn't seem to hear a word. She was staring at the beautiful Agate.

"Agnes Early," she said in a cold voice.

I'd never heard her sound like that. There were

blotches of red on my mother's cheeks. Her eyes were narrowed with suspicion.

"It's Agate." Agate left out the part about her middle name being Early, most likely because of the dark look on my mother's face.

My mother collected my belongings and tugged me toward the door. "We have to be going," she said in a nonsense tone. "Right now."

"Thank you!" I called to Agate and Julia, who both seemed confused over our hurried departure. We went right past Dr. and Mrs. Hall in the corridor as if we didn't even know them, when they'd pretty much saved me. "We hope to see you soon!" Mrs. Hall called. "Maybe for dinner!"

My mother waved, but didn't answer, not to say *Great, we'd love to*, nor to tell the truth, *No, we never accept invitations*. We went into the elevator and stood in silence as the doors closed behind us.

In the parking lot, Beau woofed at me from the back of the Halls' car and he wagged his tail, but we had already clambered into my mother's car and we quickly pulled away, back onto the road.



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That night I was told never to go to Mourning Dove Cottage again. My arm had been broken, my mother said meaningfully. Who knew what might happen next?

“That house brings bad luck to our family,” she announced. “And likely those people do, too.”

“But they’re really nice. And Julia’s already invited me. If I don’t go, she’ll think I’m a snob.”

“I wish it was different, Twig, but our families can never have anything to do with one another.” My mother gazed at my arm. “I do not expect you to see those girls again. They’re related to Agnes Early.”

She was the Witch of Sidwell, who had lived at Mourning Dove, the relative Agate was named after.

The one who’d set a curse on our family over two hundred years ago.

