

# ONE

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*Nan is very particular about tea.*

She orders a personalised blend from an under-the-counter botanica on the wrong side of town, and it gets shipped to her in bulk, a large wooden crate filled with vacuum-sealed packages. Nan decants them one by one into a floral tin with creaking hinges.

Halmoni bought her an electric kettle years ago, but Nan refuses to use it. She fills an ancient cast-iron kettle with rainwater from the tank outside the back door and lights the gas burner with a match.

Nan doesn't ask if I want tea. The kettle is already on, with curls of steam and faint whistles escaping from the spout. I have made the journey downstairs from my bedroom, now there will be tea. Tea is non-negotiable.

I push aside five cross-stitched cushions, Nan's knitting basket, and two cats to make a space on the couch, and sit down. Princess Bari stalks

away, offended, her tail twitching, but Gwion Bach clambers into my lap and starts kneading my thighs. His claws sink through the thin layers of my dress and the brand-new stockings that Halmoni bought me just for today. I imagine the pinprick holes widening and splitting into ladders, and I feel a brief surge of wicked satisfaction. But these stockings are fancy enchanted ones and will not ladder, so I will remain neat and respectable. *Put together* is how Dr Slater would phrase it. Today, I have to be put together, even though I'm falling apart.

Nan takes a pinch of tea from the floral tin and leans out the back door to sprinkle it on the doorstep, over the deep engraved marks of overlapping circles and daisy wheels that keep our house free of mischief. She opens another tin and fishes out a handful of thrupenny biscuits, which she plunks onto a china plate without ceremony.

'Orright, Miss Maude?' she says to me.

Gwion Bach finally deems my lap sufficiently moulded to his requirements and settles himself into a furry brown puddle. I rub behind his ears, and he purrs.

Nan reaches up to an open shelf cluttered with canisters, vases and ugly little figurines of big-headed shepherdesses and frogs playing musical instruments, and takes down cups and saucers, painted with pink and yellow roses. A reading, then. When it's just tea, Nan uses Halmoni's Buncheong stoneware cups, but white porcelain provides better contrast for reading tea leaves.

The kettle on the stove begins to whistle in earnest, a plume of steam billowing to the ceiling. Nan briefly holds each cup over the steam – to cleanse them of any deceit – then lifts the kettle and splashes boiling water into the teapot.

Nan's teapot is the stuff of family legend. It's large enough to hold up to ten cups, and it is truly the most hideous thing I've ever seen. It's pastel-pink china, in the shape of a sippy-looking cat's face. Huge baby-blue cat eyes stare unblinking, fringed with curled painted lashes. An open grinning mouth leers beneath feverishly rosy cheeks.

She replaces the kettle, where it resumes its shrill whistling, then swirls the water in the teapot to warm it before emptying it over the sink. After that she takes her tarnished silver caddy spoon, its handle engraved with entwined pennywort and milk thistle, and measures out four spoons of tea leaves – one for her, one for me, one for Halmoni, and one for luck. She fills the pot halfway with boiling water – it's too big to fill all the way, unless we have company. Then she pops on the lid and leaves it to steep.

'Now, then,' she says, smoothing the front of her tweed skirt, which flows neat and sombre over outrageously pink Lycra leggings. 'How you feeling, love?'

Her crinkled, watery eyes see too much, so I look away, over towards her workbench, where bunches of drying rosemary and sea holly hang over row upon row of little jars – crushed eggshell, salt, rusty pins, feathers, bits of bone, rowan ash. There's a half-finished poppet there, button-eyed and bound with red and silver thread. A love charm, probably, for some moonsick client. Or maybe good luck for a student – exams are coming up soon.

Nan's still watching me. 'Fine,' I tell her. 'I'm fine.'

She is clearly not satisfied by this answer, but she doesn't say anything. She pulls a bottle of milk from the fridge, and Hangul and Huw appear as if from nowhere, winding themselves silkily around her ankles. Gwion Bach twitches an ear but doesn't move from my lap. Princess Bari

slips in from the garden and positions herself next to the milk saucer and makes loud, yowling demands. Nan bends creakily and splashes milk into the saucer, and Gwion Bach leaps heavily to the floor and pads over to join his siblings, his fat belly swaying below him like a furry pendulum.

Nan carefully pours milk into the teacups. Milk goes in before tea, to protect the drinker from any malicious contaminants that may have found their way into the tea caddy. Always whole milk, never skim or almond or (good people forbid) soy. Sugar, lemon and honey are strictly forbidden. Also banned from our house is Earl Grey, decaf, herbal teas for anything other than medicinal purposes, and those fancy charmed tea bags where the brew doesn't oversteep and the little paper tab never falls into the cup when you pour the water in.

Nan does allow Halmoni a canister of hyeonmi-nokcha, which I secretly prefer, but Halmoni drinks mostly coffee anyway.

The cats' saucer is emptied, and Gwion Bach leaps back up to my lap and settles down, then decides I've gotten all out of shape again and rises to his feet to knead me back into position. Hangul and Huw tumble out into the garden to chase mice, while Princess Bari cleans her whiskers and watches, aloof.

'Are you ready for today?' Nan asks.

I don't know how to answer that question.

Nan lifts the hideous teapot with two hands and carefully pours tea, first into my cup, and then her own. No tea strainer, of course. A little splashes onto the kitchen counter as she sets it down, and she twitches a smile.

She presents me with my cup and saucer, and offers me the plate of thrupenny biscuits. I take one and dunk it into the tea, pausing to inhale

fragrant steam. The biscuit crumbles soggily in my mouth, warm milky tannins blending with sweet apple cider and caraway.

‘What even is a vigil anyway?’ Nan says conversationally. ‘Is it like divination? Are they expecting someone to have a vision of her?’

‘Dr Slater is going to lead us in contemplation,’ I tell her.

Nan makes a face. She’s not a fan of Dr Slater and his wellbeing regimen. ‘What right does he have? He isn’t her family.’

‘He’s the school principal. A community leader,’ I offer.

‘As if anything that man does is going to bring the poor girl home. And doing it on the eve of an egg moon too. People just don’t have any sense.’

My mouth is too full of biscuit to reply.

Nan falls silent as she sips her tea, and I glance out the window towards Halmoni’s stained-glass studio, wishing she’d come in.

‘You don’t have to go, you know,’ she says. ‘You and Odette haven’t been close for years.’

Four years. Four years since I got my period, my magic dried up, and my best friend broke my heart.

I’ve reached the bottom of the cup, the tea turned bitter and lukewarm. A few tea leaves wash into my mouth, and I press them between my teeth.

Nan puts down her own cup. ‘Right, then,’ she says, and reaches over to pick up my cup in her left hand. She swirls the dregs three times sunwise, then inverts the cup over my saucer. Muddy liquid seeps out around the rim. She taps three times on the base, then lifts the cup again and examines the remaining tea leaves clinging to the white china.

I shift uncomfortably, and Gwion Bach pauses his rumbling purr and flicks an irritated ear. I look around the little room bursting with overstuffed

armchairs, cushions and luridly coloured crochet rugs. The walls are crowded with framed pictures – flowers, more big-headed shepherdesses and family illustrations. I see Nan and Halmoni’s wedding portrait, the oil paint faded with age. There’s a watercolour of Halmoni visiting her parents in Pisi-Geiteu. Mam, wearing cap and gown as she graduated from university. Me in pen-and-ink as a fat-cheeked baby.

‘Something has been lost,’ Nan murmurs, squinting into the cup. ‘You have a wild road ahead, Maude.’

I didn’t need a reading to tell me that.

‘But there are good things too.’ She turns the cup so I can see it, and points. ‘See there? That’s a rose. Love is waiting for you. And here? This is the sun, which represents power.’

She goes small and silent, and I know she’s thinking about Mam. Power only leads to trouble. Power is illegal magic, wild and unpredictable. Power makes you end up in a detention camp, your mettle – magical life force – drained to make commercial potions and glamours until there’s nothing left and you return as a mindless husk, or a corpse laid out cold on the front door.

Nan lets out a faint, breathy sigh and turns back to the cup. She frowns, and despite myself I lean forward.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s . . .’ Nan’s eyes dart to mine, as sharp as thistles.

I peer into the cup. ‘It looks like a bird’s wings.’

Nan purses her lips but doesn’t respond.

I have a sudden, vivid flash of memory, of the chirping song of leaf warblers and the trickle of Cygnet Creek.

I was lying on my back, gazing up at the canopy of Peg Powler, the weeping willow. Odette hung upside down by her knees from a branch, her crackling white-blond hair brushing thick clay and exposed tree roots. We were about eleven, and Odette had just experienced her first-ever kiss, with Omar Courtenay. It had not come close to realising the romantic fantasies that we'd played out in our games, and Odette was feeling mightily disillusioned.

'The problem with getting rescued by handsome princes,' she was saying as she swung back and forth, 'is that boys are disgusting.'

I nodded in happy agreement. 'Vile.'

Real boys were nothing like the dashing heroes in the stories I spun for Odette under the willow – all noble, tortured souls with tragic backstories and dark, mysterious eyes. Real boys never spoke in poetry, nor were they utterly devoted to us, and us alone.

'On the other hand,' Odette continued. 'What if I get whisked away by a dark lord, or kidnapped by a dragon? Who will rescue me?'

'We could rescue each other,' I suggested dreamily, watching a leaf warbler flit from one willow branch to another.

Odette kept swinging from the tree branch. 'Tell me how you'd rescue me. If I was locked in a tall tower, with no hope of escape.'

'Well,' I said, sitting up and letting my mind start to weave together the threads of a new story. 'First, I'd climb the stairs—'

'There are no stairs, Maude,' Odette shrieked. 'No stairs, no ladders! The tower is so tall, the top is shrouded in cloud. Its walls are so smooth, there isn't a single handhold.'

I knew the answer even before she had finished speaking. I always knew how a story would go. Halmoni explained to me when I was little

that everyone had a gift, and that mine was storytelling. To me, telling a story felt exactly like doing magic – reaching for invisible threads and weaving them together to make something greater than the sum of its parts.

‘I’d find a witch to cast a spell on me, to give me wings so I could fly to the top of the tower.’

Odette grasped the branch with her hands, then flipped her legs backwards until she was standing upright again. Her hair took a second to settle, floating around her shoulders as if it obeyed totally different laws of gravity. Her face was serious. ‘That sounds like powerful magic,’ she said with a delicious shiver. ‘It’d come at a cost.’

Odette had no idea what magic was powerful and what wasn’t, but I nodded anyway, because in this case she was right. Wings – real, functional wings, not just a glamour – would take an impossible amount of mettle – of life force. Maybe more than there is in the whole world.

‘Would you give up your sight?’ Odette asked. ‘Your voice? Your firstborn? A happy memory?’

‘To rescue you? Of course.’

Odette chewed on a fingernail. ‘So you fly up to the tower, and I climb onto your back, but before we can jump out the window, the dragon returns. And it’s hungry. What happens then? What do you do?’

The gurgle of the creek seemed to dim around us, and the sun went behind a cloud. Peg Powler, always such a gentle embrace of a tree, suddenly loomed over us, long tendrils reaching, searching, clawing. A cold wind moved the branches, bringing the tree alive, a green dragon intent on devouring us, right down to crunching bone. A cloud of glimmer moths burst from the branches overhead, their abdomens glowing bright blue.



I looked up at Odette. She was beautiful the way princesses in stories are beautiful – big eyes, pixie nose, cascading silvery hair. But there was always something behind her beauty. A raging fire, seething with heat. People were drawn to her, like moths to a candle. But her fire could burn a person right up. Omar Courtenay wouldn't be the last boy who wanted to be with her. Ahead of us, there were parties and kissing and glammers and periods and all the other terrifying obstacles on the hard road to grey adulthood, every step crowded with grown-ups telling us to be nice, nice, nice.

It was far more terrifying than any imaginary horror I could dream up.

‘How do you defeat the dragon, Maude?’

In that moment, I wished we didn't have to take that grey road. I wanted to stay a child, playing games with Odette under the willow. We were wild – wild in the way that only little girls can be. No matter how hard people like Odette's mother and Dr Slater tried to shame us out of it.

I clenched my fists. ‘I would smash it with my wings.’

Odette grinned, tooth-bare and fierce, a growl sounding at the back of her throat.

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Nan stands up, still holding my teacup. ‘Where did you go, just now?’ she demands.

‘I-I was thinking about Odette,’ I say. ‘A game we used to play.’

‘She took the dark paths,’ Nan says, her voice oddly flat. ‘You mustn't follow her.’

There's something in her tone that makes me snap to attention. 'Do you know where she went?' I ask, trying to hold back my eagerness.

Nan's hands tremble, and the cup slips to the slate floor, shattering.

'Nan!' I leap to my feet.

The back door opens, and Halmoni appears, tall and graceful, dressed in asymmetrical navy with perfectly applied make-up, carrying an armful of white roses. She pinches Nan on the bum before noticing the broken china and the wild expression on Nan's face.

'Niamh?' she asks. 'What happened?'

Nan lets out a breath, and the tension in the room is broken. 'Nothing.'

I get the dustpan and sweep up the broken china, and Nan turns her face to Halmoni's for a kiss. Despite being a million years old, my grandmothers are still super hot for each other, and it's disgustingly adorable.

The china fragments are tiny, some little more than dust. I tip the contents of the dustpan into the rubbish bin.

Halmoni turns to me, her expression gentle. 'Time to go, Maude,' she says.

The way she phrases it, it's almost like a question. A sudden chill creeps over my shoulders, but I nod.

Nan takes one of the roses and turns to me. 'Pin,' she says.

I pull the little bone-pin brooch from my dress and pass it to her. It was my mam's – a thin sliver of bone carved with intricate whorls, scarred with nine pinpricks. Nan gave it to me just after I turned twelve. She said it would protect me from the darkness that took Mam, but that I had to wear it every day or else it wouldn't work.

I let Nan pin the rose to the front of my dress, like she does every

morning. It's a ritual I take for granted, but today I wish that I had known how to share my pin with Odette. To protect her too.

'You don't know where she went, do you, Nan?' I ask.

Nan looks me directly in the eye. 'Sorry, love,' she says, and I know she would never lie to me.

'I just wish I could *do* something,' I say.

'I know, love. But promise me you won't follow any dark paths looking for her.'

For someone who practises magic for her job, Nan is hugely paranoid about it. Fair enough, I suppose, after what happened to Mam. But I wish she'd trust me. It's not like I'm going to get mixed up in any illegal magic business – I've got no magic, so what on earth can she be worried about?

'Niamh?' Halmoni puts a hand on her shoulder.

'Promise me, Maude.' Nan's voice is low and firm.

'Nan, you're being ridiculous,' I tell her. 'I haven't spoken to Odette for months.'

But that isn't true. I feel a flush reach my cheeks and wonder if Nan notices. Of course she does. She notices everything. Knowing secrets is her gift.

'Promise.'

'Okay, I promise,' I tell her.

'Good girl. Now go and fetch a cardigan in case it gets cold.'

I still have questions, but the expression on Nan's face says I will get no answers. So I head upstairs to my room.

'We'll be waiting in the car,' Halmoni calls after me.

I slip the bone pin from the rose and place it on my dresser while I shrug on a grey cardigan. Then I slide open a drawer and pull out a

keepsake box, sandalwood inlaid with mother-of-pearl. It contains bits and pieces from childhood – a broken necklace, a folded paper moth, one of those cheap fortune-telling rings. And a photo.

Me and Odette. We're maybe eight or nine, back when we didn't care about how we looked. We're dressed up like princesses, in long, trailing gowns, our arms flung around each other, gap-toothed, tangle-haired and grinning.

I hold the photo between my finger and thumb, marvelling at how so much life can be captured on such a flimsy piece of paper. Odette found the camera in her mother's office and brought it over to try out. I'd never been photographed before. I have no idea why Odette's mother would own a camera – there was no way she'd ever let anyone see her without a glamour. We got Halmoni to take the photo for us, then waited breathlessly for the image to appear on the little plasticky square, squealing as our faces came into focus.

I slide it into the pocket of my cardigan. I replace the keepsake box in the drawer, and reach out to pick up the bone-pin brooch and the rose.

My fingers brush the paper moth. Funny, I don't remember taking it out of the box. It feels fragile under my fingers, like it's very old. It's a glimmer moth. Mam used to love watching them flit over the hedge-rows at twilight, their little furry bodies glowing bright blue. The shape of it is so familiar – I know every crease. It's been here for as long as I can remember.

'Maude?' Halmoni calls from downstairs.

I used to be scared of the dark. When I was little – when Mam used to leave all the time but before she left forever. I would wake up in my bed,

surrounded by darkness and silence. My storytelling gift would fill the night with all sorts of horrors – ghosts and goblins and things with teeth and claws.

Halmoni wouldn't let me have a night-light – she said it interrupted circadian rhythms. So I made my own. I would wear my boots to bed, to protect my ankles from under-the-bed monsters, then slip out and clomp over to the window, sticking my head out and drawing on the threads of mettle that I could feel floating in the night air. I called for glimmer moths, but they never came. The candle snails did, though, creeping onto my windowsill, leaving glowing silver trails behind them. It used to drive Nan mad, cleaning the sill the next morning.

'It isn't covenant magic,' she'd mutter. 'We'll have auditors at the door.'

'Leave her be,' Halmoni would say. 'She's only a babe.'

One night, I was watching the snails turn in lazy circles on my sill when a figure appeared in my bedroom doorway.

Mam.

She'd been away for over a month. I didn't know where. Nan and Halmoni wouldn't talk about it in front of me, although I sometimes caught them whispering when they thought I wasn't listening, and one time I saw Halmoni crying, which seemed so awful and impossible to my child-self that I just pretended it had never happened.

Mam pushed the hood of her cloak back, and I saw her high cheekbones, paper-white skin and dark eyes. As she came closer, I could smell some kind of unfamiliar magic on her – crushed vetiver and disrupted storm air.

I could see it, too – threads of mettle that seemed dull and limp, not the bright silver I was used to.

Whatever magic Mam was caught up in was forbidden.

I was expecting a hug, but instead she padded right past me, to my windowsill, and touched a varnished black fingernail to a glowing blue snail shell.

‘Did you do this?’ she asked, her voice deep and husky.

I didn’t know whether I was in trouble or not, but I nodded anyway.

‘I wanted glimmer moths,’ I told her. ‘Because they’re your favourite.’

Mam gazed out at the night. ‘Moths won’t come here,’ she said. ‘But let’s see what we can do.’

She took a sheet of paper from my desk, and swiftly folded it into the shape of a moth, neat as anything. Then she whispered something to it, and its abdomen began to glow cerulean, just like a real glimmer moth. She placed it on my windowsill, then turned back to me, her wine-dark lips stretched past overcrowded teeth in a smile that warmed me to my toes. She lifted the covers and slid into bed beside me, the rough wool of her cloak scratchy against my skin. Her breath on my face was soft, her fingers cool on my cheeks.

She withdrew a tiny vial from her cloak and showed it to me. It was filled with a bright, silvery liquid.

‘This is pure mettle,’ she murmured. ‘Pure magic. Can you feel it?’

I nodded. The silvery liquid seemed to be alive, almost throbbing, in the little glass vial. I turned witch-eyed, the way Mam had taught me, and could see the bright threads of mettle swirling inside.

There was a frightening hunger in Mam’s eyes as she gazed at it. Her hands trembled as she slid it under my pillow.

‘Keep it,’ she whispered. ‘Don’t give it back to me, even if I ask.’

‘Why not?’

‘You are powerful, Maude,’ she whispered, kissing my hair. ‘I’m going to teach you everything – our deep lore – and one day you will be a thousand times more powerful than me or your nan. You will be the greatest witch of our times.’

‘But witches aren’t powerful, Mam,’ I told her. ‘Dr Slater says that’s just stories.’

Mam hissed at his name. ‘That man wouldn’t know power if it bit him on the arse.’

I giggled.

‘Maude, people like him have taken our power away. They tied us up in invisible chains and gagged us with iron and steel. There aren’t many of us left. But you will lead the resistance, as fierce and relentless as thunder. You’ll show those petty warlocks and oath-breakers what true power looks like. They will cower before you, grovel for your mercy and your favour. And you will make them pay for what they have done to us.’

I was too little to understand what she was talking about. I didn’t know about the prohibition years, when the government had banned magic completely. I didn’t know about the Battle of Goose Spring, a protest that turned ugly where over four hundred magical folk were killed – including my father, before I was even born. There was such roiling hate and hunger in Mam’s eyes as she spoke of these things. I remember the chill that ran through me. I wasn’t sure I wanted that kind of power. I didn’t want to make anyone grovel. I didn’t want to make anyone pay.

‘Tell me the story,’ I said instead. ‘The one about the swan prince.’

I felt Mam relax beside me. ‘Are you sure you don’t want a different story?’ she asked. ‘You’ve heard that one a thousand times.’

I shook my head. ‘The swan prince.’

Mam chuckled and told me about the tyrannical king with a heart of iron and the simple peasant girl who turned him good with a magical knife carved from the breastbone of a swan. The story stained my dreams with rosy wonder, and I woke up the next morning still feeling the glow of it.

Nan found the vial under my pillow – I could never keep a secret from her. She snatched it up and locked it away in a drawer of her workbench. Later, I heard her arguing with Mam.

*Irresponsible. She's just a child.*

I could hear Mam begging for the vial back, a thick longing in her voice.

*You don't understand. If they get their hands on the knife, it will undo us all.*

In my head, she was talking about the knife from the story. The magical knife carved from the breastbone of a swan prince.

Nan stayed firm. I thought it was just as well – I would have handed the vial over instantly if Mam had asked.

The threads of Mam's mettle grew more dull, although her face remained as pale and beautiful as it always had. Sometimes I saw her stumble in after being away for months, stinking of hemlock, her eyes bottomless black, and I'd wonder if she was turning into a monster, like the ones from stories. Mam told me that all stories had been true once, that there were real monsters before humans wiped them out. Would it happen to me too, if I gave in to the tidal roar of magic? Better to be a covenant witch like Nan and just do the spells allowed by the government – legal, minor cantrips to boost confidence or find lost keys.



I was almost glad when my magic dried up. Because it meant I was safe, that I wouldn't get sucked under the way that Mam had. Of course, when it happened I didn't realise that losing my magic would also mean losing Odette.

I can still turn witch-eyed and see mettle, but I can't manipulate it anymore. Can't draw the threads together and bind them into magic. So I don't look anymore. What's the point? Better to be like ordinary people, blissfully unaware of the currents of life force flowing through everything.

But I focus my attention on the paper moth in a way I haven't done for years. And I see them, the threads. Dull and dark.

Mam made this. It's not the same one she made that night with the candle snails and the mettle vial – Nan threw that one in the bin. This one is folded from what looks like a page ripped from a children's book.

It feels important somehow, but I can't remember why. I close my eyes and get a glimpse of a high stone wall. Dirt under my fingernails. The thick, dark scent of roses.

'Maude!' Halmoni's tread on the staircase. 'Are you coming?'

The vision evaporates. 'Yes,' I call back. 'I'm coming.'

I slip the paper moth into my pocket, then pin the rose to the front of my cardigan and head downstairs.

# TWO

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*The day is* warm, the air heavy with the scent of Nan's roses, but my arms have broken out into goosebumps despite the grey cardigan. I can hear birdsong, but it's distant. Birds never come into our garden. Nan says it's because of the cats. Jeremiah appears and bolts out the front door into the garden, nearly bowling me over. He chases Hangul and Huw, barking furiously, a blur of matted chocolate fur. But when he comes face to face with Princess Bari, he skids to such a sudden halt that he tears up part of the front lawn. His tail descends between his legs, and he slinks back to me, small and humble.

Princess Bari haughtily watches him go, licks a paw, and starts to wash herself.

I shoo Jeremiah inside and shut the door, then hurry down the garden path and climb into the back seat of the car.

Nan looks over her shoulder at me. ‘Orright, love?’

*No.*

‘Yes.’

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It’s not a long drive into Inglenook, but it feels like it. Halmoni makes a few half-hearted attempts at conversation, but nobody wants to join in. Nan is silent and small in the passenger seat. Away from her kitchen, she seems to shrink, a towering force of nature diminished into a wizened little old lady.

It’s a gorgeous day, and people are out in droves, enjoying the sunshine. Couples link arms and bow their heads close to each other. Children race one another on bikes and scooters. The line for an ice-cream truck goes halfway around a block. None of them notice me in the car going by. Why would they? I’m nothing special.

We pull up outside the town hall – imposing bluestone and ivy. Halmoni climbs out and goes around to Nan’s door to help her.

I open my car door and emerge into the warm afternoon. Rufus Sheldrake is standing nearby, looking gangly and weird, like he always does. He’s attempted to tame his mop of orange hair into a ponytail, but it’s already escaping into a fuzzy halo. He’s wearing a collared shirt and tie, and looks even more ridiculous than usual, all legs and elbows and freckles. He spots me and strides over, giraffe-like.

‘Hi, Mrs Jenkins,’ Rufus says, grinning a mouthful of braces at Halmoni. He nods at Nan. ‘You too, Mrs Jenkins.’

‘Nice to see you, Rufus,’ Halmoni replies.

Rufus narrows his eyes at the rose pinned to my cardigan. ‘Roses still blooming, I see.’

Nan winks at him. Everyone in Inglenook knows about Nan’s roses. They bloom all year and never succumb to pests or diseases. Rufus is obsessed with botany, and generally resistant to magic, in the way that all natural redheads are. It’s why we started hanging out – we’re both social outcasts. He because glamours don’t work on him, I because my mother was a traitor.

‘Are you going to take that off?’ Halmoni asks, nodding at my cardigan. ‘In a minute,’ I tell her. I’m still cold.

Rufus looks at the ground and scuffs his foot, obviously trying to think of something to say. What is he even doing here? He and Odette weren’t friends. I don’t think they ever spoke to each other.

‘Maude,’ says a voice behind me, and I turn to see Tilly, Anesu and Roshni, each clutching a perfectly embroidered lace handkerchief in a white-gloved hand. They look like they’ve just stepped out of a *Country Idyll* catalogue, all pale gingham and petite pastel flowers.

‘Isn’t it terrible?’ Tilly says, her voice trembling.

Anesu lets out an elegant sniff and dabs the corners of her eyes with her handkerchief. Roshni lays a consoling hand on her arm.

‘Her poor mother,’ Tilly continues. ‘She must be so worried.’

‘As are we all,’ Roshni adds.

Tilly nods. ‘Oh, indeed. I haven’t slept for *days*.’

I want to claw their stupid eyes out. They don’t care about Odette. They just want to be *seen* here, looking appropriately demure and concerned.

‘You and she were friends, right?’ Tilly asks.

‘When we were little,’ I reply, awkward. ‘Not so much recently.’

‘Of course not,’ Roshni says. ‘She got so wild in high school. So . . . lost.’  
‘Such a shame,’ murmurs Anesu. ‘So much potential.’

As if any of them ever tried to help Odette. As if any of them ever spared a kind word for her – or for me.

The girls glide on by, and I’m grateful for Rufus, who shudders as they pass.

‘They’re like living dolls,’ he says. ‘Horrid.’

Nan nods at him with approval.

‘What’s going on in the lab?’ I ask.

His expression brightens with relief, now that we have something ordinary to talk about. ‘I’ve been trying to replicate an experiment on plant cognitive ecology,’ he says, and starts to tell me about how mimosa plants have a sophisticated cellular signalling network that indicates associative learning. He goes all bouncy, the way Rufus does when he’s talking botany. His arms fling out as he tells me about dropping the little mimosa plants in order to stimulate their defensive leaf-closing reflex, and his fingers curl and twitch as he explains how after being dropped multiple times, the plants learned that there was no danger and stopped closing their leaves.

‘In the original experiment, the plants remembered being dropped for nearly a whole month – that’s a longer memory than a bee has!’

Nan snorts. ‘Don’t need an experiment to tell you that,’ she mutters. ‘A tree remembers every spring it’s lived, and every winter.’

My eye is drawn to the steps outside the town hall, to a straight-backed figure with sleek platinum hair. Odette’s mother, her features a cold, perfect mask of beauty, a shiny black handbag hanging from the angular crook of her arm. I can see the edge of a glamour patch on

her bicep, peeking out from under a capped sleeve. She's standing with Dr Slater, tall and imposing in a black suit and tie.

Odette's mother's gaze shifts, and for a moment we lock eyes. I raise a hand to wave, but her eyes slide over me like I'm invisible. Dr Slater turns, and his face tightens in disapproval as he sees me in my grey cardigan, without a glamour patch and plain as oatcakes. It's a familiar expression, one I've been seeing my whole life. *Pull your socks up. Show some respect. Where are your manners? That isn't very ladylike.*

I remember seeing that expression on the first day of grade two. Billy Bass cornered me in the playground, showing me a newspaper with a photo of Mam and the word **TERRORIST** printed in angry red letters across her face.

The photo was deeply shocking to me – it was barely recognisable as Mam. Her cheeks were gaunt, her eyes small and hollow. My guts churned as I realised the photo had captured her as she truly was – unglamoured, the beauty I knew so well nothing but an illusion. She looked weak and haggard.

'My da says they're gonna execute your mam,' Billy Bass jeered. 'He says good riddance.'

I was speechless, caught between bursting into tears and throwing up my egg-salad sandwich.

Then Odette appeared, a straggle-haired stranger to me at that point, the frilly ensemble her mother had dressed her in that day already torn and muddied. She wrenched the paper from Billy's hands and stuffed it into the rubbish bin, then launched herself at him.

Dr Slater strode up, towering above us, severe and radiating authority, his face as cold as stone. 'You should be ashamed of yourself,' he told

Odette. 'Nice girls don't fight.' My cheeks burned with mortification, but Odette's expression was triumphant as she and Billy were dragged to Dr Slater's office, Billy snivelling with a bloody nose.

I rescued the newspaper from the bin and headed to the back of the playground, where a hunching crabapple tree provided some privacy. I crouched there, tracing the word *terrorist* over and over with my index finger. I read the article but didn't understand much. *Carys Jenkins arrested on charges of high treason . . . attempting to steal a historical artefact . . . taken from her home by auditors . . .*

Odette reappeared, wearing an old witch's hat for her punishment, but seemingly unscathed and unabashed.

'Is it true?' she asked. 'Is your mother really a resistance witch?'

I shrugged and told her I guessed so.

Odette shook her head in admiration. 'That is so cool. I heard it runs in families. Does that mean you're a witch too?'

Nan had told me not to tell anyone, but I wanted to repay this brave, strange girl, this knight in shining armour. I wanted to give her a gift, and what better gift to give than a secret?

I nodded. 'Don't tell anyone.'

Odette ran her fingers along her lips like she was zipping them up. 'I swear it. I've never met a real witch before. Do you have a magic wand, or a cauldron? Do you fly on a broomstick?'

'No,' I said, laughing. 'It doesn't work like that.'

'How does it work?' she asked.

It was hard to explain. 'There's mettle in living things, and in things that are special,' I told her.

'Metal?' Odette asked. 'Like iron or steel?'

'M-E-T-T-L-E,' I spelled out for her. 'It's everywhere. If you are witch-eyed, you can see it.'

'Witch-eyed?' Odette asked. 'You mean a witch?'

'They're not the same thing,' I explained. 'People who are witch-eyed can see mettle. Actual witches can manipulate it.'

Odette looked around as if expecting magic to leap out of the ground. 'Can you see it now?'

'Not all the time,' I said. 'It'd be too much. Too hard to concentrate on other things. But I . . . sort of focus my eyes differently, and then I can see it.'

'Do it,' Odette ordered.

I did, and saw the silvery threads spring to life, twining around the crabapple tree, streaming from damsel flies that flitted in and out of sunlight patches. Below it, I could sense the vast network of mettle that spread beneath the soil – an intricate lattice of fungi, ancient soil and stone.

'Do I have it?' Odette asked.

'Of course,' I replied. 'All living things do.'

Odette's mettle was strong – thick and vibrant, swirling around her like a silvery cloud. She looked pleased.

'So how do you get it to do stuff?' she asked.

This part was harder to explain, but I tried.

'It's like telling a story,' I said. 'You take all the different threads and weave them together to make something new.'

'You touch it with your hands?'

'Sort of. Not my real hands, though. It's like I have . . . another pair of hands that exist only in my mind.'



'You imagine them.'

I nodded. It wasn't exactly right, but it was close.

'And how do you know what to weave together?' she asked.

I hesitated. I had only just met Odette. Could I trust her?

'You know there's covenant magic,' I said slowly.

'The hundred spells.'

'Yes. You learn those. There are instructions. Which things to combine, and how to do it.'

She could tell I was holding something back. 'There's other magic, though, isn't there? Other spells. Do you learn them too? Is there a big secret spell book where they're all written down?'

'Some of them are in grimoires and other old books,' I said carefully. 'Others get passed down from witch to witch. And some . . . some I just know. Some things just *feel* right.'

Odette's grin was canny and infectious. 'Show me.'

I glanced around to make sure nobody could see us. Then I picked up a crabapple that had fallen to the ground and held it in my palm. I reached out with the hands that were not my real hands and gently tugged on the threads of mettle in the soil, carefully explaining to it what I wanted. I felt roots pulse, deep below. The crabapple started to glow, a rosy golden light radiating from it.

'Can I touch it?' she asked.

I passed the crabapple to Odette. The rosy light was reflected in her wide eyes, and I totally forgot my misery from earlier. I felt a swell of pride in my chest, and I knew I was going to devote the rest of my life to making Odette happy.

Dr Slater murmurs something to Odette's mother, then makes his way through the crowd to us. He nods to Nan.

'Mrs Jenkins.'

Nan nods back, stiffly. Halmoni leans forward. 'Nice to see you, Dr Slater.'

'Mrs Jenkins.'

His cold eyes turn to me, and his smugness sours my stomach.

'Poor little Odette,' he says. 'Always getting herself into trouble. I'm so glad to see you're making wiser choices, Maude.'

To him, I am a work in progress. A daughter of witches, made civilised and bland. All the wildness leached out of me and replaced with polite smiles and top grades. I am a good girl. A nice girl. Humbled and forever making amends for my traitorous mother.

Dr Slater nods over at Tilly, Anesu and Roshni. 'If only Odette could have followed the examples of girls like them.'

I wish he'd stop talking about Odette in the past tense.

'I've been meaning to talk to you, Maude,' Dr Slater continues. 'I've been watching you closely, and I want the best for you. Which is why I've secured you a sponsor and a place at a settlement institute.'

He says it like I've won the lottery.

I hear Nan start to say something, but she gets hushed by Halmoni.

I stare at Dr Slater blankly as the life he's offering me flashes before my eyes. A year out in the country, learning to be a 'good' adult with a bunch of other 'nice' young people. Lessons with representatives from all the big magic corporations, where I'd learn which mettle-boosted laundry detergent would get stains out most effectively and which charmed baking soda would ensure that my sponge cakes never fail.

I'd meet some unremarkable young man there who would offer to marry me, and we'd live a safe, unremarkable life.

It's nothing like the possible futures that Odette and I used to spin stories about, full of adventure and glamour, and passionate love affairs.

'This is a simple country,' Dr Slater says. 'Simple and green and good. We live simple, happy lives. Nobody gets left behind. Nobody suffers. We are so lucky to live here in Anglyon. Don't you agree, Mrs Jenkins?'

He directs this last part to Nan, whose lips have gone white with fury. Dr Slater knows full well that this country wasn't so lucky for our family.

'Think about it,' Dr Slater says to me. 'I believe it is the right path for you.'

He inclines his head slightly, then heads up the steps and goes inside.

Rufus snorts. 'Imagine you at a settlement institute,' he says.

Nan looks fit to burst, but Halmoni lays a hand on her arm, and she clamps her lips instead.

Halmoni sighs. 'We'd better put on our brave faces,' she says. 'It's time to go in.'

But I can't move. Going in there isn't going to help find Odette.

For the first time today, I really *feel* something.

Anger, white-hot and burning. Anger at Odette's mother. Anger at Dr Slater and every time he tried to contain us. Anger at everyone here. Because they don't care.

They're acting like she's dead, not missing.

I'm angry at Odette for running away. I'm angry at her for dumping me, four years ago, when I lost my magic and she decided she didn't need me anymore. And I'm angry at her for turning up on my doorstep two weeks ago, out of the blue, begging me to go on an adventure with her.

And most of all I'm angry at *me*, for turning her away. Because *I* was the one who was supposed to save her. I was the one who had to make sure she always got found, who brought her back from the dark paths, who would sprout wings in order to rescue her from her tower.

But I didn't.

I was too busy playing *nice*.

I turn and start walking away – from Nan and Halmoni, from Dr Slater, from Odette's mother, from them all. Dimly, like I'm moving through water, I hear Rufus calling my name and Halmoni's voice saying, 'Let her go.'

I don't turn back.