

THE
CHANGELINGS

CHRISTINA SOONTORNVAT

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for
Stiana and Verena

Norlorn
Mountains

Eastern

Mount
Mooring

Eidenloam
Valley

Avalon

River Noy

Liadan
River

The City Road

The
Gray Sea





Avhal
Mountains



The City Road

Yawning Top



The Forest River



Shank's



The
Edgewood



Wee Bretabairn, born in the caul,

Child of none, mime of all.

With dimpled cheeks and fine, white teeth,

Mother won't guess what hides beneath.

Father, too, will never know

His babe's a fey in man-child clothes.

*from The Bretabairn,
a fairy book of poems*



OVERHEARD AT THE JIGGLY GOAT

IZZY DOYLE STOOD IN the school supply section of the Jiggly Goat, coming to terms with her fate. She'd agreed to go with her mom and sister to the grocery store because she needed a new journal. As she faced her only options—yellow legal pad or inspirational kittens—the full weight of her situation came crashing down on her narrow shoulders.

This was it. Her new hometown.

Her little sister bounded down the aisle, blond curls swish-
ing behind her. “Guess what? They don’t have that gross healthy
cereal Mom likes, so she’s letting us get Kookoo Crunchies!”

“That’s awesome,” said Izzy. Hen could be happy living on
the surface of the moon as long as there were snacks.

Izzy turned her back on the measly journal offerings and
trudged after her sister toward the checkout counter. She still
couldn’t believe it. During the eleven years she’d been alive,
her family had lived in nine different cities, and her parents

had to choose this one to settle down in. Everton didn't even count as a city. Cities had museums and libraries. Everton had a grocery store named after a wiggling farm animal.

We're getting back to our roots, her parents had said. *Fresh air*, they'd said. *Nature*. Izzy hadn't connected the dots until now. When they said "nature," what they really meant was complete isolation from the rest of civilization.

Izzy's mom stood at the counter, chatting with the cashier. He wore a blue apron with a smiling goat on the front and a package of beef jerky sticking out of the pocket.

"I'm telling you," he said as he scanned the groceries. "That neighbor of yours is a witch, or I'm a bull toad."

Witch.

The hairs on Izzy's forearms stood up. She squeezed past the shopping cart to get closer.

Her mom smiled politely and took out her wallet. "I beg your pardon?"

The cashier narrowed his eyes and ran his tongue across a silver tooth. "You wanna know what she came in here and bought last week?"

"I can't ima—"

Beef tongue. Now I ask you, what kind of person buys that? Puts it in a potion or something, I bet."

Izzy's mom started lifting the sacks into the cart. "I'm afraid we haven't had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Malloy yet."

"Oh, it ain't *Mrs.* You think anyone would marry her?"

Shoot, no. Marian Malloy would sooner put a curse on a man than say hello.” The cashier leaned his elbow against the register. “If it were me that inherited that big house of yours, I’d sell it to the first fool who’d buy it from me.”

Izzy slid over to where Hen stood eyeing a display of Moon Pies. “Ask Mom to take you to the bathroom,” she whispered.

“But I don’t have to go,” Hen said.

“I know that! It’s just a diversion.”

“A what?”

“Ugh, forget it!”

Izzy tried to think of some other way to distract her mom so she could keep the cashier talking about the witch. Before she could come up with anything, their mom finished paying and herded them out of the store to the parking lot.

Their mom laughed as she unlocked the back hatch of the car. “Country people are so superstitious! Your dad is going to get a real kick out of it when I tell him we have to sell his mother’s house because a ‘witch’ lives next door.”

Izzy stood next to the car, drumming her fingers on the door handle. Having a witch for a neighbor would mean they actually hadn’t moved to the most boring place on Earth. She peered through the window into the back of the car. From the amount of groceries they bought, she could tell they wouldn’t be coming back for at least a week. If she wanted to hear any more about the witch, this was her best chance.

Izzy started to jog back across the parking lot. “Hey, Mom, I think I left something in there...”

“What? Sweetie, what did you leave?”

“Oh gosh, I left my favorite book! I’ll be right back!”

The sliding doors whooshed open, and Izzy hurried to the cash register. The cashier’s face was hidden behind a cheap tabloid newspaper. The cover read, *Aliens spotted at Tullahoma Waffle House.*

Izzy tapped on the counter. “Excuse me?”

“Whatcha need, sugar?” he replied without putting his paper down.

“Was everything you said really true? About our neighbor being a witch, I mean.”

The cashier crumpled the tabloid and leaned toward her. “Oh, it’s the truth, all right. And you little girls need to watch yourselves out there.”

“Why? What could happen to us?”

The cashier’s voice dropped to a whisper, and his eyes scanned side to side. “Folks seen her roamin’ them woods around her house, even at night. Anyone tries to go near there, she runs ’em off. She says she’s watchin’ out for the *fairies*, but I’ll bet you she’s hidin’ somethin’. Like a big pile of human bones.”

The front doors of the store slid open. “Izzy, your book’s in the car,” said her mom. “Come on. We need to get home to let Dublin out.”

Izzy reluctantly turned and followed after her. She stole one last look at the cashier. He was back to his tabloid, gnawing at a piece of beef jerky on a string. Izzy sighed. Not exactly the most reliable source of information. Still, if a witch wanted to hide away from civilized society, Everton was definitely the place. Fingers crossed, Izzy got into the car, and her mom started the long, pothole-riddled drive out to their new, old house.



A NEIGHBORLY VISIT

IZZY TRIED TO IGNORE the drops of sweat rolling down the bridge of her nose, but her little sister was making it difficult.

“It’s so hot it’s compressive,” whined Hen.

“You mean *oppressive*.” Izzy wiped her forehead on her sleeve. Even though it was technically the first day of fall, summer still held Everton tight in its sticky grip. “If you’re going to complain, then just go back home.”

Izzy knew that would silence the whining for at least a few minutes. She and Hen sat huddled behind an azalea bush at the end of the long gravel driveway leading up to Marian Malloy’s house. They’d been waiting for a glimpse of the old woman for almost an hour. If she didn’t come out soon, they’d have to go home for dinner with nothing to show for their patience.

Hen picked up an acorn and chucked it into the drainage ditch beside them. “If you want to see her so bad, why don’t you just go knock on the door?”

“Are you crazy? You don’t just go knocking on a witch’s front door!”

“Mom says she’s not a witch,” said Hen. “She says we should be nice to her, because she’s just a lonely old lady.”

“So was the woman in the gingerbread house, but that didn’t stop her from trying to eat Hansel and Gretel, did it?”

“Dad says she was friends with Grandma Jean.”

“That’s even more reason to be suspicious of her!”

Izzy and Hen had never met their father’s mother. After Izzy was born, Grandma Jean had turned into a complete recluse, refusing their visits and never answering their letters. She didn’t even leave them the Everton house in her will. If Izzy’s dad hadn’t hired a lawyer, the musty, old house would have gone to the state, and Izzy would still have her own room instead of having to share one with a seven-year-old.

Izzy rolled up her T-shirt sleeves. “Hand me Dad’s binoculars,” she whispered. “Maybe I can see something through the windows.”

Hen slipped off her sparkly purple backpack and started rummaging around inside.

“Shhh! You’re making too much noise!” Izzy reached over and took the backpack. Inside, her fingers ran over strands of costume jewelry and a jumble of plastic toys. “Wait a second—what’s this?” She pulled out a handful of small paper cones with short strings coming out the top.

Hen scratched the side of her freckled nose, the way she

always did when she was lying. “Huh, now how did those get in there?”

“Hen! You know you’re not allowed to have fireworks!” Izzy tossed the cones into the ditch. Hen had an obsession with all things combustible, and this wasn’t the first time Izzy had caught her with a secret stash. “Do you want to blow us both up or something?”

“Crackle Caps can’t blow anything up,” said Hen sadly. “I thought we could use them to create a *diversion*. You know, for the witch.”

“We have to spot her first,” said Izzy. She held the binoculars up to her eyes and peered around the bush.

Marian’s house was nestled far back from the road, close to the dense tangle of woods that separated the old woman’s property from theirs. Rows of fat, golden corn and vibrant vegetables surrounded the house, filling up most of the large yard. Brown-and-white goats bleated softly from their pen behind the house. Everything else was quiet.

Izzy hoped they hadn’t started out too late. Today was the perfect day to spy. Their dad had driven to Nashville to do research for his new book, and their mom had shooed them out of the house so she could paint the living room. Who knew when they’d get such a good chance again?

From the side of the farmhouse, Izzy heard the creak of a rusty hinge. She swiveled the binoculars in time to see the garden shed door swing open. An old woman emerged, carrying a bucket in one hand and a spade in the other.

“She doesn’t really look like a witch to me,” said Hen.

“You can’t tell anything about her just by looking,” whispered Izzy, but she had to admit that Hen was right.

Izzy had hoped for an ancient crone or an icy sorceress—the kind of witches she’d read about in *Faerie and Folktales of Yesteryear*. But the tall woman tromping into her garden looked more like a farmer than anything else. Her pants were tucked into mud-stained boots, and her rolled-up sleeves revealed splotchy, tanned arms. Despite her wrinkles, she looked strong and didn’t stoop the way most old people did.

The woman plopped the bucket down beside one of the vegetable beds and started sprinkling a red powder over the lush plants.

“Can I see?” whispered Hen at Izzy’s shoulder.

“There’s nothing to see yet,” said Izzy. “She’s just gardening. Wait a second—now she’s standing up again.”

Marian Malloy marched to the edge of her garden, where the trees of the surrounding woods cast her vegetable beds into deep shade. Izzy thumbed the dial until the old woman snapped into focus again. She stood facing the woods with one hand resting on a tree trunk. She lifted up her crumpled hat and passed a hand through her short, white hair. Eyes shut, she took in several slow breaths. It seemed to Izzy like she was listening, waiting for something.

The old woman opened her eyes. She frowned and shook her head, then bent down to tend to something at the base

of the tree. Izzy stretched up a little taller, angling the binoculars down at the thing at the old woman's feet. It looked like a short stack of stones. Izzy swept the binoculars over the rest of the yard. More of the strange stacks of rocks stood at regular intervals all along the perimeter of the old woman's property.

"That's so weird!" she whispered to Hen.

"Can I see? What is it?"

Izzy lowered the binoculars and held them against her chest. "She's got all these funny little stone towers around her yard."

"What, like that one?"

Hen pointed to the old woman's mailbox, just a few feet away from them. A stack of stones lay nestled in the long grass at its base.

"Exactly like that one."

Before Izzy could say anything, Hen scooted over to the stones and picked the top one off the stack.

"Careful! They could be laced with poison or something like that," said Izzy. She shuffled closer and leaned forward, peering over her sister's shoulder.

Underneath the rock lay a single oak leaf, pressed flat, its edges still fresh and green. Hen lifted up the next rock, then the next. A different species of leaf lay sandwiched between each stone, five in all. The back of Izzy's neck tingled. If this wasn't witch behavior, then nothing was.

“What do you think it is?” whispered Hen.

“Could be anything. Maybe some kind of trap to lure little children to her house. Or a signal so other witches know what she is.” Izzy raised the binoculars again to watch the old woman. “Maybe we can catch her saying an incantation or something like that.”

Hen reached up for the binoculars. “I want to see. It’s my turn to look.”

“Not yet.”

“You’ve had them forever already!” Hen lunged for them and slipped, crunching her tennis shoes into the gravel.

Izzy winced and glanced back up at Marian Malloy, who stood up quickly and darted her eyes around the yard like a wary bird. Izzy held her breath. The old woman brushed her dirty hands against her legs and turned to go inside her house. Izzy exhaled with relief.

She glared at Hen. “*Be quiet,*” she mouthed, reluctantly passing her the binoculars.

Hen peered through them at the house. Her tongue flicked the space where her top two teeth used to be. “She’s in the kitchen,” she whispered.

“What’s she doing?” asked Izzy. “Crushing herbs? Mixing a potion?”

“She’s...she’s...washing dishes.”

“Is that all?”

“Okay, wait, now she’s doing something else. She moved

away from the window.” Hen scanned the binoculars side to side. “I think she went into a different room or something...”

Izzy frowned and squinted at the house. Now that she’d seen the stone towers, she wanted to catch the old woman doing something even witchier. Hadn’t the Jiggly Goat cashier said something about a pile of bones? That would be perfect.

Izzy heard the unmistakable sound of wet, fast breathing a moment before something warm and heavy bowled her over.

“Dublin!” said Hen, opening her arms to let their black Labrador lick her face.

Izzy grabbed the dog by his collar and pulled him down beside her. “Sit, Dublin, sit! Hen, what is he doing here? I thought I told you to lock him inside!”

“I did!”

“You obviously didn’t! He’s going to give us away.”

A gruff voice above them said, “You gave yourselves away long before he showed up.”



LEAF AND STONE

IZZY FELT HER STOMACH jump right up into her eyeballs. She whirled around to see the old woman towering over them, a deep scowl etched into her face. Hen screamed and let the binoculars clatter to the ground. Izzy lunged backward, knocking over the stack of stones next to the mailbox.

“I’ve been waiting for you girls to come around,” said the woman, taking a slow step toward them. “Come here and let Old Malloy get a look at you.”

Hen sprung up off the asphalt like a click beetle and took off running down the road. Izzy scrambled to her feet, somehow managing to scoop up the binoculars and backpack at the same time. She flew down the pavement after her sister, her legs whirring beneath her, hair whipping her face.

The old woman’s voice rang out after them. “Wait! You girls come back here!”

Dublin rocketed past them, a black blur on the tar road.

Izzy didn't dare turn around. She pumped her legs at high speed as they ran down the hill, past the woods, and up their gravel driveway. Even then, she didn't stop until they were safely back in their kitchen with the door shut behind them.

"That was...the scariest...I've ever been...in my life!" said Hen, panting and laughing at the same time.

Izzy leaned against the pantry door, clutching her stomach. Once she caught her breath, she grabbed *Faerie and Folktales of Yesteryear* off the kitchen island and took it to the table.

Hen leaned in beside her. "What are you doing?"

"I want to see if I can find anything written about those stone towers," said Izzy, flipping to the index. "I wonder if they're some kind of magic talisman or a charm or something like that."

"Wow, yeah, I bet they are," said Hen, bouncing on her toes. "This is so awesome. Izzy, isn't it awesome?"

"Isn't what awesome?" asked their mom as she walked into the kitchen. On the stove, a pot clanked and burbled, and the room filled with a stewed, green smell. "And why did you lock Dublin inside? The poor guy was crying like a baby until I let him out."

"I *told* you!" said Hen, sticking out her tongue. "It's Mom's fault we got caught by the witch, not mine."

"Witch?" Izzy's mom spun around from the stove. "Isabella Doyle, have you been bothering that poor old woman after I specifically told you not to?"

Izzy glared at Hen. She shut her book and stood up to face her mom. “We weren’t bothering her. We were just watching her. She wouldn’t even have known we were there if Hen hadn’t made so much noise.”

“Well, you shouldn’t hog things all to yourself,” said Hen.

Their mom began pulling dinner plates out of the cabinet. “She probably thinks we’re the worst neighbors in the world. I’ll have to take her a zucchini loaf as a peace offering.” She filled up the drink glasses and handed them to Hen. “You two are not allowed to go over there again unless you’re with me, all right?”

Izzy helped lay out the place settings. Why couldn’t Hen ever keep her big mouth shut? Marian Malloy was the one interesting thing Everton had going for it, and now they’d never be able to spy on her again.

“I knew I should have gone by myself,” she grumbled.

“You always want to leave me behind,” Hen whined as she carried the glasses to the table. “You’re not the only one who wants to have an adventure, you know! You don’t have to be so—oops...”

Izzy looked up in time to see a full glass of lemonade tumble out of Hen’s hands and right onto *Faerie and Folktales of Yesteryear*.

“Hen! *What* did you do?”

“It’s okay, just need to soak it up a little...” Hen opened the cover of the book and dabbed at the sticky pages with a wad of paper napkins.

“Stop it! You’re making it worse!” Izzy dropped the silverware. She grabbed the book out of Hen’s hands, and a soggy page ripped away.

“Don’t look at me,” said Hen. “That was your fault.”

“It’s *your* fault for being so clumsy!” shouted Izzy. “And just stop touching it! You’re not allowed to come near this book anymore.”

Hen’s lower lip began to quiver. “But—but you said you’d read me *Sir Gawain and the Jolly Green Giant*.”

Izzy held the wet page against her chest, trying to dry it off. It stuck to her shirt and ripped in half. “Ugh, you always ruin everything! I wish I’d left you behind and let the witch eat you!”

“Girls, that’s enough!” said their mom, slamming the butter dish onto the table. “If you two are going to argue, then you need to take it in the other room.”

Hen shoved her way past Izzy and stomped up the stairs, snot dribbling out her nose. She shut their bedroom door so hard that it shook the pictures on the walls.

Their mom looked up at the ceiling. When she turned to Izzy, her voice was full of disappointment and anger all mixed together. “Isabella Doyle, what in the world has gotten into you? You need to go and apologize to your sister!”

“Me? What about what she just did?”

“It was an accident. Besides, it’s just a book. You take those stories of yours way too seriously.”

“You always take her side.”

“That’s not true,” said her mom. She walked over to Izzy and placed her hands on her shoulders. “Listen. You know how much Hen looks up to you. It’s not easy moving to a new place, and she needs her big sister right now. And you need her too.”

Izzy rolled her eyes. She needed Hen like she needed appendicitis. “If it’s all so hard on her, then why did we move in the first place? I never wanted to live in this town.”

“This house is very special. You know that. Your dad was born here. And you were too, let’s not forget.” The phone rang. “That’s probably your dad,” said her mom with a sigh. “Izzy, this move is a chance for all of us to make a fresh start, you included. But that means you’ll have to stop hiding behind your books all the time. Okay, sweetie?”

Izzy groaned and tramped onto the side porch. The screen door slapped behind her as she flung herself into a chair. The sun had just set, and already the insects thrummed their nightly chant. She sat there a while, plucking the wicker out of the armrest.

A fresh start. What a joke. Monday would be Izzy’s *tenth* fresh start at a new school, and she had no reason to expect things would go any better than they had before. Her sister, on the other hand, would make a whole flock of new friends by the time the bell rang. Fitting in was written into Hen’s DNA. Somehow that gene had skipped over Izzy.

She twisted a fraying piece of wicker until it snapped off.

It didn't matter. She didn't need friends. She for sure didn't need her baby sister hanging around her heels. All she needed was *Faerie and Folktales of Yesteryear*. But now the book that she'd carried with her to every new hometown lay in a sticky, ruined heap on the kitchen table.

Dublin let himself out onto the porch and nosed his head into Izzy's lap. She rubbed him under the ears.

"You know they're more than just stories, don't you, Dub? Of course you do. You're on my side."

At least someone was. Right now, Izzy wished it were all reversed—that the stories were real, and this life was just a nice little fable she could close the cover on whenever her family drove her crazy.

Dublin suddenly swung his head away from her lap. He skittered to the edge of the porch, barking loudly at the front yard. He must have smelled a rabbit or a skunk. Their city dog had no idea what to do with himself now that he was surrounded by wildlife.

"Go on, Dub. Go catch it," said Izzy.

But the dog wouldn't leave the porch. He just kept yelping and looking over his shoulder at her.

"Izzy!" called her mom from inside the house. "Get him to settle down! I'm trying to talk to your dad."

"Dub, you are such a fraidycat," said Izzy, getting up from her chair. "Come on!"

She jumped down off the porch onto the grass, with Dublin

following behind. In the failing light, she saw something cross the yard and head for the trees on the edge of their property. Something much bigger than a rabbit.

Izzy hung back within running distance of her house while Dublin bolted out into the middle of the yard, barking at the darkness in all directions.

“Dublin, be quiet!”

As Izzy scanned the shadows, she saw a dark shape cross the bottom of their driveway. She took a step forward, but before she could get a good look, the shape disappeared into the blackness of the road. It moved so fast, she couldn't tell what it was. A deer, maybe? Dublin had stopped barking and walked in tight circles, sniffing the grass.

“Come on, boy. Let's go inside,” said Izzy.

But Dublin wouldn't come. He stood snuffling at a spot in the middle of the yard. She didn't want to leave him outside in case the shadow she saw was another dog. Dublin would get destroyed in a dog fight. She walked to him and grabbed his collar.

“I said come on, Dub.”

But before she could yank him toward the house, something on the ground caught her eye. She bent down and pulled the blades of grass apart with her fingers. It was a tower of five flat stones. Izzy picked the top stone off the stack. A single fresh leaf lay beneath it. Izzy's neck prickled again. This was just like the towers she'd seen at Marian Malloy's house.

That shadow she'd seen was no animal. Was their neighbor trying to put a curse on them for spying on her?

Izzy looked back down at the road just as the lights of her dad's car turned into the driveway. She held onto Dublin while her dad rumbled up the gravel drive and parked beside the house. Her first thought was to run up to him and tell him all about the stone towers and the shadowy figure she saw. But then she remembered what her mom had said. They would probably tell her she was just imagining things, that she'd been reading too many fairy tales.

They wanted her to be normal, to get her nose out of her books. Maybe it was time to give them what they wanted.

"There's my girl," said her dad as he shut the car door and walked toward her. He took a deep breath and let it out with a smile. "You and Dub must be out here listening to the sweet sounds of peace and relaxation." His beard prickled her forehead when he bent down and kissed her. "What's for dinner?"

"Broccoli surprise, I think."

"Eesh." Her dad made a face, then winked at her. "Hey, sweetie, is everything all right? You look like something's on your mind."

With a flick of her toe, Izzy scattered the tower of stones. "Nope. Everything's perfectly normal."

Then she followed her dad into the house with Dublin at her heels.



COME AWAY, O HUMAN CHILD

THE NEXT MORNING WAS Sunday. Izzy lay in bed with the blanket pulled up over her face, expecting Hen to pounce on her any minute, just like she did every day. When it still hadn't happened, she yanked the covers down and sat up. Hen's bed was an empty, rumpled mess of sheets and stuffed animals. Izzy sat for a minute, listening for the sound of her sister belting out Christmas carols even though it was three months too early. But the house was quiet. At her feet, Dublin rolled lazily onto his side.

Izzy slid out of bed. She found a pair of jeans and a T-shirt in one of the moving boxes labeled *School Clothes*. The thought of walking through the doors of yet another new school the next morning nearly made her crawl back into bed.

Dublin rubbed up beside her. "You're right, Dub. Not like we haven't done it before. Come on. Let's get you some food."

At the mention of food, Dublin raced ahead of her down the stairs. On their way to the kitchen, they met her mom in the front hall, carrying two cans of paint.

“There you are.” She leaned over and planted a kiss on Izzy’s cheek. “I was just about to come wake you up.”

“What time is it?” asked Izzy.

“Eight thirty. There’s toast and orange juice still on the table if you’re hungry.”

Izzy scooped out food for Dublin, then sat down at the table. “Hey, Mom? Where’s Hen?”

“She’s playing outside, sweetie,” her mom called from the living room. “When you’re done eating, can you go out and keep an eye on her? She said she packed some food for you to have a picnic later.”

Izzy looked down at the end of the table where *Faerie and Folktales* lay open, all the pages now permanently wrinkled. She slid another piece of blackened toast onto her plate. Her sister could wait.

As she choked down the burnt toast, Izzy looked around the dining room, still decorated with her dead grandmother’s knickknacks. A collection of porcelain owls lined the shelves, and strands of tiny silver bells crisscrossed every window. Izzy couldn’t believe she was actually born here. Her parents had been on a surprise visit to her grandmother when her mom went into labor a month early. From what she knew of her birth story, it was a pretty nerve-racking night. But everything

had turned out okay, aside from Izzy always being small for her age. That was the first and last time she had set foot in the house until they moved to Everton.

After Izzy filled in the crossword her dad had left unfinished, she went to the back door and slipped on her high-tops while Dublin bounced around her with his tongue hanging out.

“Yes, yes, you can come this time,” said Izzy.

“Take a sweater!” called her mom.

Izzy cracked the door. It had to be almost ninety degrees out, but she yanked her sweatshirt off the coat rack anyway, tied it around her waist, and headed outside. She strolled out through the open field behind the house, heading for the boulder pile on the edge of their property and the forest. A cool breeze cut through the humid air and blew a scattering of yellow-tipped leaves across the grass. Izzy heard a *pop, pop, pop*, and then Hen’s mess of golden curls appeared over the top of the boulders. Izzy couldn’t help smiling. Her sister must have squirreled away a serious stash of Crackle Caps.

Izzy raised her hand to get Hen’s attention but stopped in midwave.

She heard music.

She cupped her ears and pointed them back at her house. But this didn’t sound like her mom’s usual Broadway soundtracks. It was a flute. The song was sweet, a little sad, and familiar somehow, though Izzy couldn’t think where she would have heard it before. She turned back to the boulders, where Hen

scratched at the rocks with a stick, nodding her head to the same tune.

Izzy started walking toward her sister again. “Hey, Hen! Mom said you wanted to play.” For some reason, the words came out sounding shaky.

Hen didn’t look up. Instead, she turned around and faced the trees, clapping her hands to the music. Izzy looked down at Dublin, but he just panted along beside her as happy as she’d ever seen him. Izzy told herself she was being silly, but she started walking faster anyway. A thick feeling had crept into the back of her throat, the same feeling she had when she knew something terrible was about to happen on the next page of a story.

“Hen? Hey, come here for a second.”

Hen continued staring into the trees like someone who’d been hypnotized. Then she scrambled over the top of the boulders and disappeared down the other side.

Izzy swallowed, but the thick feeling in her throat wouldn’t go away. She jogged straight for the boulder pile, with Dublin close behind.

“Hen, I’m not mad at you, okay? I’m ready to play with you now!”

The music grew louder—it was definitely not coming from the house. It drifted toward them from *inside* the woods. Izzy scanned the undergrowth for the source of the notes but didn’t see anyone.

As she rounded the boulders, she called again, “Hen, come here! Please!”

With a lurch in her stomach, Izzy watched as Hen skipped right into the forest.

“Stop! *Wait!*”

Izzy sprinted to the tree line. A sudden breeze blew out of the woods onto her face. With the next train of notes from the flute, the heady smell of flowers filled her nostrils. She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. What was happening?

Dublin sat at her feet, no hackles raised, his ears not even perked up. He lay down and set his head on his paws. Izzy grabbed his collar and pulled him toward the woods.

“Come on, you lazy dog!”

Dublin grunted and closed his eyes. Izzy wrenched on his collar as hard as she could, but he wouldn’t budge. She let go of him and plunged into the woods, crashing through the brambles. She ran to the spot where she last saw her sister, but she couldn’t find her. She swung her head back and forth, searching the forest. Finally, she spotted Hen zipping through the trees, following after the receding notes of the flute. How could she already be so far away?

Izzy lifted her feet high so she wouldn’t trip on the stones jutting out of the ground. Thorny vines caught at her sweat-shirt and clawed her ankles and hands. The harder she pushed ahead, the more they pulled her back. All the while, the familiar music played on in the distance.

“Hey, wait for me!”

She fumbled frantically to yank herself free from the thorns. Hen was now far away, a tiny dot of red between the trees.

“Hen, you stop *right now!*” She tried to sound authoritative, but she could hear the fear in her voice.

Izzy ran. The tangled undergrowth blocked her way like razor wire as she darted one way and then the other. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t close the distance between herself and the little fleck of red flitting deeper and deeper into the woods. Gasping for breath, she stopped and leaned over with her hands on her knees.

“Hen? Hen!”

The speck of red was gone. She had lost her.

Panic bubbled up inside her chest. Izzy turned around, searching for the way she came, but the trees looked the same in every direction.

“Hen! Mom! Mom!”

She tore through the trees, not caring which way she went. All she wanted was to get out of the woods. Her foot caught on a root, and she tumbled onto her hands and knees. She scrambled up to her feet, but the tops of the trees twirled in a rapid circle, and she fell down again. This time, the side of her head hit a rock with a sickening, dull crack. As blackness flooded over her, Izzy heard the sweet, sad music fading into the distance.



THE WITCH'S HOUSE

IZZY OPENED ONE EYE and quickly shut it again. She held very still, wishing the rest of the world would do the same thing. She reached up to feel the side of her throbbing head and winced. It was painfully tender, but there wasn't any blood.

All at once, the fear came flooding back. Hen! Where was she? Izzy opened her eyes and looked around. She lay on a sofa that wasn't her own, wrapped in a checkered quilt. The room smelled like sharp cheese and freshly cut grass. She sat straight up, which instantly made her feel sick. She tried to focus on the coffee table in front of her to make the room stop spinning.

Dirty teacups, photo albums, and stacks of ancient-looking books covered the little table. The book titles were written in Latin or French or some other language Izzy didn't understand, though she could pick out a few words: *Enchantement*, *Fey*, *Magia*. Something peeking out of the pages of one of the albums caught her eye. Even though it was only the corner

of a photo, she had a weird feeling she'd seen it before. She slipped the picture out of the album.

Izzy gasped. A small girl with mousy brown hair smiled back at her.

It was her own kindergarten school picture.

Her hand shaking, Izzy reached out and opened the cover of the photo album. Her school portraits covered the first page. The next sheet was dedicated to pictures of Hen. Izzy flipped the thick pages faster and faster. Ballet recitals, artwork, Christmas cards. The album was a scrapbook of her and her sister's lives. Izzy looked around the strange room. Garlands of tiny silver bells hung in the windows, just like at her grandmother's house. Where was she?

Outside, a goat bleated softly. Boots clomped over the wood floor in the next room. Izzy searched for the door. Before she could stand, Marian Malloy walked around the corner. She spotted Izzy and hurried toward the couch.

Izzy shrank away from her. "No! Stay away from me!"

The old woman stepped closer.

Izzy tried to run for the door, but the walls spun around, and she sank to the wooden floor. The next thing she knew, she lay next to the couch, covered in cold sweat, with Marian cradling her neck.

"Easy, dear, take it easy," the old woman said gruffly. "Or you'll make yourself sick all over my good rug."

She helped Izzy back to the sofa and smoothed the hair

away from her damp forehead. Izzy gave up on resisting. She felt too dizzy to move. She lay still while Marian gently took her face in her hands and turned it to the side, looking closely at her injury.

The old woman smiled, and a hundred tiny wrinkles appeared at the corners of her blue eyes. “You’ll be just fine. But you’ll have a devil of a headache tomorrow.”

“Where’s my sister?” Izzy croaked. “What did you do with her?”

“Do with her? What makes you think I did anything with her?”

Izzy pointed a trembling finger at the photo album. “You have all those pictures of us.”

Marian sighed. She reached down to the album and turned it so Izzy could see the words embossed on the spine: *Jean E. Doyle*. Her grandmother’s name.

“She gave it to me just before she died,” said Marian.

Fighting the dizziness, Izzy sat up. “No, that’s a lie. Our grandmother wouldn’t have something like that. She didn’t care about us. She didn’t even know us.”

Marian’s eyes seemed to hold years of sadness. “She did care for you, child. More than you could possibly know.” The old woman picked up Izzy’s kindergarten photo and slid it into an empty pocket of the album. “Your grandmother told me to keep this safe. She made me promise to keep you girls safe too.” She smiled again. “That’d be easier to do if you didn’t go

around knocking your head against rocks. I found you lying in the woods, just behind my vegetable garden. Does your mother know where you are?”

Izzy felt so confused. She knew she should be afraid of Marian Malloy. The old woman was a stranger. And according to the cashier at the Jiggly Goat, she was a witch who ate children and spit out their bones. But now that Izzy sat face-to-face with her, she didn't think Marian seemed like a witch at all. At least not the child-eating kind.

Marian picked up a mug from the table and handed it to Izzy. “Drink a little. For the nausea.”

Izzy took a tentative sip of the brown liquid inside. It tasted like mud with metal in it, but it instantly made her dizziness go away.

“Better?” asked Marian.

Izzy nodded and took another sip.

“That a girl. Now, let's get you back. I don't have a phone, or I'd call your mother to tell her we're on our way. Is your sister home with her?”

“No, she's lost. My sister's lost in the woods.” Saying the words out loud made Izzy's throat tighten up. “We have to find her! We have to tell my mom!”

Marian squeezed her hand. “Of course we will, of course. Don't worry. She can't be far. And I could find a thimble at midnight in these woods.” She helped Izzy to stand up. “I'll even bet she's already back at your house, worried about what's happened to *you*.”

Izzy took a deep breath and let it out again. Maybe Hen was back at home, eating a snack at the kitchen table right now. But then Izzy remembered the music she'd heard earlier. The melody still played in her head, and it gave her a strange, uneasy feeling.

"Marian? Was that you playing the music in the woods?"

Marian's smile vanished. "*What* did you say?"

"The music. I heard music in the woods when Hen ran off."

Marian leaned down, searching Izzy's face. "Do you remember what it sounded like?"

Izzy thought for a moment. "It sounded like a flute. The music was sweet, like a happy song. But underneath the notes, I think it was actually a little sad." Izzy shut her eyes. She hummed the part of the melody that she could remember. "I think it was something like that."

When she opened her eyes again, she was shocked to see that Marian's face had turned ghostly white.

The old woman put her hands on Izzy's shoulders. Her words were slow and serious. "Did you see anyone else? A thin man with black hair?"

The thought of someone else in the woods with her sister sent a chill up Izzy's back. "No. There was no one."

"What about another child? Or an animal that seemed out of place?"

"What? No, I didn't see anything!"

Marian rubbed her chin and started pacing in front of

the door. She talked to herself, the words coming so fast Izzy could hardly catch them. “The Piper... Could it really be? But what could he be up to? He left no one in Exchange...” She stared at the photo album, cracking her knuckles over and over again. Suddenly, she jerked her head up. “September! Of course! Oh, I have to hurry!”

The old woman bolted past Izzy into the kitchen. Izzy followed after her.

Marian yanked open cabinets and started pulling everything down onto the counter. A full sack of flour tipped onto the floor, but she didn't even notice. She grabbed a canvas satchel and began stuffing jars and fistfuls of dried herbs inside.

“What else, what else...” Marian muttered. She dumped the salt out of its shaker into her palm, then let it fall to the floor. “Not enough! Shoot, there's no time to get more!”

Izzy grew increasingly anxious the more she watched the old woman. “Marian? What's going on? Is Hen all right?”

Marian snatched a jar of brown seeds off the counter and shoved it into her bag. She marched over to Izzy and patted her shoulder. She smiled, but it was a thin smile that didn't hide the worry written on her face. “I think your sister may be lost after all. But I don't want you to fret. I'm going to look for her.”

“And you'll find her? Won't you?”

Marian frowned and slung the bag over her shoulder. “Come along. Let's get you home.”