

BEWITCHING

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Bewitching

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First Edition



If you read fairy tales, and who doesn't, you might believe there are witches all over the place—witches baking children into gingerbread, making princesses sleep hundreds of years, even turning normal teenage boys into hideous beasts to teach them a lesson. But, actually, there are only a few of us. The reason it doesn't seem like that is because we're pretty long-lived. We live hundreds of years, as long as we don't find ourselves fueling a bonfire.

Which leads us to another quality of witches: We move around a lot. It's easy for us to get into trouble, and sometimes, we need to beat a hasty retreat (in the dead of night or on the business end of a pitchfork) to another town or another country. So that explains the existence of many tales from different times and places, many of which involve the same witch.

In quite a few cases, that witch was me. My name is Kendra, and I'm a witch.

Here's my story—well, some of it. It involves romance, drama, even death.

It started in England, many years ago; 1666 to be exact. When I was a teenager, the first time.



Girl to Woman to Witch: England, 1666

When Mr. Howe called from the street to ask if I had any dead for him to bury, I told him I did. The chore did not tax me, not physically, though I was but four and ten and small for my age. Little Lizzie, my youngest sister, weighed barely more than a sack of flour even before the plague ravaged her body and our village. After months of hardship, she weighed even less. I hated to give her over to the gravedigger, but what choice did I have? I had no parents left. I had next to no one.

“Are ye alone now, Kendra?” Mr. Howe asked me.

I shook my head. “No. There is still Charlie. And Charlie will be well.”

He seemed doubtful but only said, “I am sorry.”

I nodded and did not wait for him to take her. I could not. I was

accustomed to death now, accustomed enough to know not to dwell upon it. It was the only way to survive.

The first to leave had been Sadie, my older sister. How we had wept and regretted, not merely because Sadie was kind and good, but also because she was only a month from marriage to Henry, the dairyman's son, who would have kept our large family supplied with sorely needed milk. Young Henry had not even come to Sadie's funeral. Too scared was he of catching the dread disease himself. He caught it anyway, though, and was gone in two months' time, too long to blame Sadie. People in our town were all looking for someone to blame for what happened.

The reverend had told us to have the funerals out of doors, that we should not spread the disease, but it had not helped. The reverend also told us to stay in the village, so as not to spread the plague abroad, but those with means had left nonetheless. Those with means did as they wished. The reverend lived still, but his wife was gone.

Next was my youngest brother, John, a mere babe and barely known to us. Still, we said a few words over him. Babies dying was sad business, but not unusual.

By the time Mother died, there was no funeral, no time for prayers for the dead, only prayers for the living—that they might stay that way.

They did not. The month past had been a whirl of vomiting, fever, complaints of painful limbs and swelling blisters on arms and legs, cracked lips begging for water and death, so much death. One by one, all who I loved were ripped from this earth as I stopped being a child and became a woman, a sad one. By the end of it, Father and another brother and sister were lost to me, their bodies dragged out between checking to see if the hen had laid and tending the cow.

Two days ago should have been a particular blow, for it was James whose body Mr. Howe took from me, James, my twin, whose shadow I had been even before we were born. But I had no thought for James

or any of them. Had I thought of anything besides how to get food, had I thought of why I, alone, was given the dubious gift of health, I would have lain down beside those once-loved bodies and succumbed myself. Yet the good Lord, if good he was, did not see fit to have me die. He saw fit to have me find scant milk from the cow and no eggs from the chicken and to care for my sick brother—my now only brother—Charlie, age eight, in the luxury of a house that had once held nine but now needed room for only two.

Human beings, I had learned, could become used to anything.

This morning, when I went out to collect our one egg, I found, instead, that the hen had died. Then, all the losses I had suffered came down to this one loss. I sat in the sparse hay, buried my head in my hands, and sobbed.

And then, I plucked that stupid chicken and cut and boiled it for, at least, if Charlie was going to die too, he could die with a good, hot chicken soup in his belly.

But Charlie was too sick to eat, and as I turned away from him, I knew I must try Lucinda.

Lucinda Baker was our town's healer, a woman who knew how to use herbs to cure illness. Once, she had been my friend, but when the plague struck us, Mother had warned me away from her. There were those, Mother told me, who said Lucinda was a witch and that witches were the ones who had started this plague. She worried that, were I too much in Lucinda's company, suspicion might fall on me by association, particularly because I had always been thought strange due to the odd bright green color of my eyes and a moody nature that differed from the other village girls. Perhaps Mother knew that Lucinda had begun to instruct me in the use of herbs. Lucinda told me that she saw the gift in me and believed I could someday be a healer like her.

Were healer and witch one and the same? Perhaps. It mattered

not now. If a witch was what my brother Charlie required, then a witch was what I needed. There was no mother to caution me otherwise. There was no one but me now, and I would risk all to save Charlie, even being seen in the company of a known witch.

Thus, I made my sad way through the town, a town which had once been a bustling village of over three hundred, now so empty and silent that I could hear the wind in the trees, even at midday. I passed one, maybe two others, trudging as wearily as I did, but there was no talk, no laughter, no wagon wheels, nothing to drown out the wind.

My step quickened as I came to Lucinda's house, and for the first time in weeks, something other than despair gripped my heart. Hope held my hand and tugged me closer. Lucinda could help Charlie. I was sure of it. I only wished I had come sooner.

The cottage, made of brown bricks, neatly laid, was strangely silent. Only one black crow perched on the eaves, staring down at me. I approached the doorstep with a fawn's cautious steps and gave an almost silent knock.

Nothing.

I knocked again. Still nothing but the crow's caw.

"Who is that?" A voice from the street shook me in my shoes. I turned and thought for a moment I saw a ghost.

But no, it was Mrs. Jameson, mother to Anne and Alice, two uppity girls who had teased me about the ugliness of my flaxen hair. Still, I felt close to weeping at the sight of a familiar face.

"Mrs. Jameson! It is Kendra Hilferty!"

"Kendra!"

I ran down the stone pathway to embrace her. But when I reached the street, Mrs. Jameson's arms were closed. "Kendra, what are you doing here?"

I faltered. "I was . . . visiting . . . Lucinda."

"Visiting?" The expression on Mrs. Jameson's face was strange.

I thought it best to change the subject. “How are dear Anne and Alice?”

Her face crumpled like papers in flame, and I knew.

“Gone,” she said, “all gone.”

“All?” I was sorry now to have thought them snobbish girls. “Mr. Jameson too?”

She nodded. “Of my family, only I have been fated, nay cursed, to survive.”

“I am the same,” I said. “My brother Charlie, he is the only one who lives yet, and I may find him gone when I return.” It was the first I had thought it, and I glanced back toward the house. Had death become so routine for me? Was I turned to a monster?

Then, she did take me in her arms, and we held each other and wept and wept as if weeping were the cure for our troubles.

Finally, I said, “I beg your leave, Mrs. Jameson. I was searching for Lucinda, that she might have some herbs for Charlie.”

She looked at the house, and her eyes seemed to burn. “Lucinda Baker was a witch who brought the plague upon all of us!” she spat.

Was that what was being said? “’Twas George Viccars who brought the plague from London on a bolt of fabric. Besides, Lucinda is my friend.”

“If she is your friend, you may be a witch as well, and should be hanged as one.”

“How can you say such a thing to me? My family is as dead as yours. I only want—”

“Oh, Kendra.” Her face broke, and she began to sob again. “I know what you want. Would that you could have it, but it is too late. Lucinda is gone.”

The crow on the eaves cawed and turned its black head away.

“Some say she left in the night to avoid those who threatened to try her by water. Others say she came to a different end.”

I glanced in the window, which was black and empty. Lucinda was gone and, with her, every last impossible hope. I wanted to fall to the ground and weep, but I had not time for that. Instead, I said, “Perhaps there is something left in her garden for Charlie.”

Mrs. Jameson nodded. “I am sorry for your losses, Kendra.”

“And I for yours. Perhaps . . .” I stopped. I had been about to say that perhaps she could come and live with us, that we might not each be alone. Yet I knew I would not be staying in the village. I must leave the site of all this tragedy and go far away. “Perhaps I will see you again.”

She nodded again and moved on.

I ran to Lucinda’s garden and gathered what I could of the different herbs. I tried to remember the uses for each. Yarrow, to heal wounds and reduce fever, dandelion for boils, horsetail for strength. I piled all into my apron. In the back of the garden was an herb I did not recognize, yellow and pointy as a cat’s claw. The crow swooped down upon it, as if pointing it out. I did not know its use, but something told me it was the most valuable of all. I took a bunch.

The crow cawed as I shuffled away home.

Charlie lived still, and slept. I watched as a shiver wracked his frail body. Without stopping to check for fever, I went to the well, then the stove. I spent my morning brewing teas and making salves, and the afternoon forcing them on him.

By nightfall, he had improved not at all. Lucinda’s herbs had failed me, and Charlie’s chills had worsened. The boils on his neck seemed redder. Abandoning medicine, I took his hands and began to pray, pray as hard as I could, even knowing that it would not be enough. God, it seemed, had not time for us, certainly not time for me. Who would blame him, for there were so many sick, not only here but in all England, maybe all the world? As I prayed, the telltale odor of rotten meat met my nostrils, and I knew it would not be long before Charlie too was dead, before I was alone, all alone in the world.

And then, along with my tears, my prayers became more fervent, more desperate, only the words changed to something beyond my comprehension. I leaned forward, holding Charlie's hand, and felt my own fingers vibrate with a strange energy that combined with the words and flowed from me to Charlie, from Charlie back to me, until the room spun and filled with a strange, sparkling light. I was light-headed from hunger and despair, arms throbbing with the effort of saving him, bizarre ancient words coursing from my lips. I did not know what was happening. I only knew that something was, something stronger than prayer, something stronger than grief had hold over me.

Finally, I collapsed from exhaustion.

I woke to the morning sun's first rays and to Charlie's voice.

"Kendra? Kendra? I am tired of always lying around."

I started. "What?"

"I am tired of lying in bed. I want to go outside and play with Tommy and James."

He was alive! Alive, and wanting to run and play. I rushed to put my hand to his forehead. His fever was gone and the boils on his neck were gone, gone as if they had never existed. I lifted the covers and examined the rest of him. All gone. He was well!

"Stop it, Kendra. What are you doing?" He squirmed away from my touch. "Where is Mother? She will let me go out."

"Shh. Mother is very sick, in her bed over there." I gestured at the pile of empty blankets and hoped he would not look too closely. Charlie was alive!

Now, what should I do? I decided there would be time enough for the grim task of telling Charlie of our parents' demise. I said, "If you can be quiet all day today, I will bring you some chicken soup and tell you a story and tomorrow, yes, tomorrow, we will go outside."

He nodded and said, "I am hungry."

Warm the soup. I must warm the soup. But I stood too quickly.

I stumbled, and the room spun purple around me. I thought of Mrs. Jameson's words: *You may be a witch as well.*

Three thoughts whirled past me, over and over:
Charlie was cured. I had cured him.
It had been a spell I had cast.
I was a witch.

Once, about a year before, I had been on the way to town, bringing eggs to sell for Mother, when I heard footsteps behind me. Then, a voice.

"Hey, there. You, Kendra."

I turned. It was William Butterworth, an older boy, six and ten perhaps, who thought himself important, for his father was a merchant who did business in London, while my father was only a farmer. I did not care for him. Yet, he was running to meet me.

"Can I walk you to town?" he asked from behind me.

"Thank you. But I am in quite a hurry. I have no time for talk." It was true. I had taken a shortcut through the woods to save time. I thought it strange that he followed me.

"I can hurry." He was a big boy with a piggy little nose, and already he was panting to catch up with me.

I walked faster, as fast as I could without the eggs jumping from their basket, but finally, he ran and was before me, blocking my path.

"Gotcha."

"Indeed." I stopped walking. "What do you want from me?"

Now that he had cornered me, he seemed at a loss for words. "Nothing . . . I mean, I see you at church, you're . . . I wondered if, maybe we could take a walk together sometime?"

"We are walking now," I said, trying to step around him, to continue on the path.

He moved left, to impede my progress. "No, but . . . of a Sunday,

maybe. I could walk you home from church, or come to your house?"

He liked me, thought me pretty, perhaps. It was a compliment. I should have said yes, or made some polite excuse, such as Mother believing me too young. But I was unaccustomed to being a girl boys liked, so instead I said, "I do not think so."

"Why not?" he asked, and when he did, his piggy face twisted into an expression that scared me.

"I have to go." I tried, again, to walk around him, but, again, he blocked my path, and I was forced into the trees.

"Think you're too good for me then?" His voice was a low growl.

"I said nothing of the sort. Please let me go by." I started to run. The eggs jostled against one another, and one fell, but I did not care. I had to get away.

He grabbed my skirt, then my arm. I dropped the basket, all the eggs crashing to the ground. He pulled me toward him. With one hand, he forced my arm behind my back. I screamed in pain, but there was no one to hear. "Turn me down, will ye?" With his free hand, he pawed at my bodice. His tongue protruded from his mouth. He twisted my arm harder until I thought it would break. The pain was unbearable. I concentrated hard on pulling my arm away. My vision blurred, then went all colors and then black.

And then, next thing I knew, he was on the ground, doubled over, clutching at his stomach in apparent agony and screaming foul words. I stared at him in amazement but did not offer to help him. I was free, though I did not see how. In fact, my arm did not even hurt.

The basket of eggs had fallen a few feet from where he lay. I scooped it up and ran as fast as I could through the woods to town.

I went to the shop even though I no longer had wares to sell. Mother would have my hide for breaking the eggs. And yet, when I reached the threshold, I notice that they had not dripped through the basket to my skirts. I opened the cover.

Every single egg was intact, as if they had never been dropped. Even the first egg, the one I had seen smashed, was back in place.

Had I imagined it, William in the woods?

Impossible. And when I saw him the next week at church, he avoided my eyes.

I told no one about the incident. There had been other signs, like my talent with herbs or the way some animals, particularly crows, seemed to follow me, or the fact that, indeed, bad things seemed to happen to those who tormented me, but none were this blatant.

Until now.

“Where are we going?” Charlie demanded as we left our house before dawn the next morning. I had plied him with soup and stories all day long, not daring to leave his side lest he rise and learn the truth, that our entire family was gone, or lest he become sick again. But, as the day wore on, he became stronger and louder and more demanding. My wispy hopes became solid things. After nightfall, I began my work.

I had decided I must leave town. Mrs. Jameson knew Charlie was sick. If he was suddenly cured, she would tell others and then, there would be suspicion. In our town, there were some, like Mr. Howe, who, like me, never sickened with the plague, and there were those who died, but none who had gotten it and survived. That alone would be looked upon as strange, an act of witchcraft in a town looking for someone to blame for their woes. But if William remembered how I had defended myself against him, that would make it worse.

It occurred to me that if I could cure Charlie, I might be able to cure others. I doubted, however, that I could do it before they drowned me for witchcraft.

“The truth of it,” I lied to Charlie now, “is that the others are very sick still. We have little food left and must walk to the next village to find more.”

I took with me a jug of milk and the last of the chicken, then tied

Bossie outside with a note that read “Please take care of this cow. You may have the milk” and hoped that the village would forgive me. I took, also, the last of the wheat.

“Once we leave town, sprinkle this on the ground. Then we can follow the trail to find our way back.”

Charlie nodded. I knew we were not coming back. We would find another village, a new life.

We headed past the boundary stone and out of town. I hurried Charlie toward the hills, the better not to be seen by anyone passing by. We would not be able to enter any other town if the people there knew we were from the plague village, as it had come to be called. I encouraged Charlie to run.

We stopped only for a lunch of chicken when the sun was highest in the sky. Hours later, my stomach growled again. There was no village in sight. There was nothing, no food, no one to help us. We would survive the plague only to die of hunger.

“Let us lie down, Charlie. We will search more tomorrow.”

“But I am hungry.”

“I know. I am hungry too, but there is nothing to be done for it. We will gather berries in the morning.”

“Berries? I thought we were going to a village. What about Mother and the others?”

“Tomorrow will tell. The good Lord will provide.”

His very hunger must have persuaded him to stop arguing, for he lay down beside me. I sat longer until the sun faded in the sky. I wondered if I might use magic to conjure food. I tried to remember the mystical words I had said the day before, to make the magic come once again. Doubt overcame me, and finally, I too fell asleep.

The dawn’s light pried open my eyes, and I looked for Charlie. He slumbered still. I allowed myself the luxury of worry. What would we do? Where would we go? I had been so certain of my powers, and yet,

I must not be a very good witch if I could not even conjure a bit of food. We would starve. It was over.

I looked to my other side. Did my eyes deceive me?

I shut, then opened them again.

They did not deceive me. It was a house—a darling little house of brown with white on the eaves and a sort of fence around it. Perhaps we were saved after all.

I crept across the craggy ground. As I approached closer, I noticed something strange about the little house. It did not appear to be made of wood or brick and certainly not of stone. Instead, it was made of something smooth and golden brown, with trim of every color. Closer still, the most delicious smell met my nostrils. Was I delirious? Was I so near death from starvation that I had lost all sense? Still, smell brings memory, and this scent held a memory so sweet, so dear, a memory of a long-ago trip to Shropshire with my father.

A sob caught in my throat. Father!

He had called it gingerbread and said it was made with a spice from the Far East and had strange, medicinal uses.

I inhaled. Was someone baking gingerbread in that house? With not a glance back at my sleeping brother, I ran to the cottage, searching for a window. Maybe I would be turned away. Still, I had to try. The alternative was starvation.

I snuck closer. The smell grew stronger, drawing me toward it like a mother's arms. I found my window. Dared I look in?

As I rested my hand on the house, I noticed something very strange. The smooth, brown wall was soft. What strange material was this? And, when I pressed it, my thumb sank inside. I sniffed. Gingerbread. Could the whole house be made of gingerbread?

Impossible. The smell was overpowering because I was so hungry, not only for food but for memory, my parents, my past. I inhaled deeply and remembered walking through the marketplace, a slab

of gingerbread in one fist, Father's hand in the other. I pressed my thumb deeper, and again, the wall gave way.

Impossible! And yet, it had to be gingerbread. Either that or I was sinking into an enjoyable delirium. I hunched down, searching for an inconspicuous spot to nibble. Perhaps this was the magic I had tried to make. What else could it be? But if I could heal the dying and make food, what more could I do? The possibilities were endless! Endless!

And yet, I could not bring back my family.

No, but I could save the one left.

I grasped a windowsill and twisted. Bits crumpled in my hand. I chomped into it.

It was! It was gingerbread. I took another bite, then another. I was like an animal, ravenous, incapable of satisfaction.

"Hey!"

I jumped. Could it be the house's owner?

"Kendra, what is that you have?"

It was only Charlie. I crowed. "Sweet boy! The house is made of biscuits!"

I handed him a piece. He seized, then bit it. I watched as the grin bespread his face.

"We are saved!" I cried. Then, I grabbed him, and we did a dance around in circles, round and round, up and down, like the children we used to be, the children we maybe were again at this moment. When it was over, we fell back, eating ravenously, until our faces felt likely to break from the effort of it. We were saved!

By some tacit agreement, we both decided to eat from inconspicuous parts of the house, so as not to break it too badly. Still, we each had to try a bit of the frosting eaves, the candy trim, and of course, the low-sloping gingerbread roof.

"Gotcha!" It was a woman's voice.

I was roped, trapped in some sort of spider web. Someone or something was pulling me away from the lovely house, even as my jaws kept chewing, chewing automatically.

“Teach you to eat someone else’s house! And now, the other!”

Before I could even twist to see who was speaking, I heard Charlie scream. She’d got him too. I struggled to free myself from the web of threads that seemed to multiply even as I assured Charlie, “I will save you.”

“There is no saving him,” the voice said. “Yourself either. You stole from me, you greedy children. I will take you both and bake you into gingerbread for my fence.”

Too late, I got a close look at the fence that encircled the house. The strange-looking pickets were not pickets at all. Rather, there were faces at every post. They were gingerbread children—baked children!

Trying to shut out Charlie’s shrieks, I twisted further, as far as I could, and made out a woman, a beautiful woman with flaming hair. Though Charlie and I both struggled, she seemed to use no effort to hold us. Rather, she was laughing.

“New gingerbread for my little fence.” Her eyes sparkled green as ivy, a glowing, inhuman green that seemed all too familiar. I knew what she was.

“You’re a witch!”

“Perhaps I am, but protecting what is mine doesn’t make me one.” She pulled us closer. Charlie was crying, but I tried to keep calm.

“I know . . . it is only . . .” I stopped. I had been about to tell her I was a witch too, but I sensed that, perhaps, it was best to keep something hidden, particularly because I was still unsure of my skills or if I had them at all. Perhaps Charlie’s survival had been mere luck. “My brother has been very sick. He could be contagious.”

“A likely story. I will not let you go.”

“See for yourself. See how skinny he is.”

The woman—or witch—shook her head. “I will not catch any disease. However, you are right that he is too skinny to make a proper addition to my fence. You both are.”

I glanced around at the tortured gingerbread children. “If you release us, I promise we will run far away, and you will never see us again. We apologize for eating your house.”

If she let us go, we would run, our bellies full of food, as far away as we could, perhaps to the lonely moors near Yorkshire or even Shropshire, anywhere but here.

The witch appeared to think, and as she did, her eyes grew more intensely green. Then, they flashed scarlet.

Suddenly we were someplace else.

The scent of gingerbread was, if possible, stronger. My hands were bound, as were my legs. In fact, the only parts I could move were my eyes. They sought Charlie.

He was tied, hand to leg, like a calf for branding. I tugged at my own bonds. They would not give. If anything, they tightened. I tugged again. Pain seared up my arm.

Charlie said his first words since we were caught. “Kendra, what will you do?”

It all seemed to collapse in on me then, and I wanted to scream at him that it wasn’t my fault. I had rescued him from the plague. I had changed everything about myself.

“Don’t worry,” I whispered. “I will get us out.”

“Ah, there you are, lovelies, ready for the fattening.”

“Let us go!” In spite of myself, I pulled at the threads. When I did, they clenched around me so that my arms felt cold, as if they had no circulation.

“Let you go?” The witch laughed. “But you are so hungry, and it is so far to the next village. If I let you go, you will starve. No, no,

I would be a poor hostess were I to let you go unfed. This will be better.”

From the air, she produced two spoons of gleaming metal, the likes of which I had never seen before. She waved her hand, and the spoons filled with something gray and soupy. They began to move toward Charlie and me.

“Open up, dear children. Have your porridge!”

My mouth began, involuntarily, to open. “Hey!”

Too late. It was filled with oatmeal that tasted exactly like Mother’s, just the right bit of sweetness. I wanted to cry. If I were baked into gingerbread, would I join Mother and Father in heaven? Or would we stay on earth as cookies? There were those who said that witches had no souls. Had I sold mine to save Charlie? Or was I a witch whether or not I engaged in witchcraft? Had I been doomed from the start?

I could think of it no longer. All I could do was chew and swallow, chew and swallow as mouthful after mouthful of porridge slid down my throat.

“Stop! Stop!” Charlie was gurgling as the spoon approached him over and over.

I tried to shut my lips. It worked for a moment but then, some stronger magic forced them apart. The witch nodded, satisfied, and left.

The spoons continued force-feeding us, barely allowing time to swallow one bite full before presenting the next. I tried again to shut my mouth. This time, in my mind, I brought myself back to the day I had made Charlie well. I had been praying. But then, my prayers had turned into something else, turned to words coursing from deep in my belly, words in an ancient language I did not understand. Yet, I did, and that understanding had caused the magic to flow from me.

Perhaps it was merely a matter of concentration.

With all my might, I stared at Charlie, stared at the only one I had left in a world where even a hen could not survive. His mouth struggled against the spoon's intrusion, and his eyes pled with his older sister to stop it. Soon, I could not bear to look, nor could I look at my own spoon. Instead, I rolled my eyes far back inside my head the way I used to when I was a little girl and wanted to irritate Mother. I took myself back to our house, that once-dear place. I willed the witch part of me to the surface.

She came. I felt the room spin around. I opened my lips wide despite the wretched spoon, and I felt words course out of me, around my head, and spiraling through the room like a magician's scarves. That was how they appeared to my mind's eye, words of scarlet, emerald, and gold, words swirling out of me and around the room, and somehow, I knew what they meant even though I did not. I was calling upon ancient spirits to do my bidding, to move earth and make thunder, and suddenly I realized I was no longer being force-fed. I heard the spoon clatter to the floor. Then another one, Charlie's.

"Wha . . . what happened?" he asked.

I looked forward, shaking my head. "I do not quite know."

"Did you make it happen?"

"Of course not, silly." I made myself laugh. It would be better for him not to know.

"You did it," Charlie insisted. "You talked to the spoon, and it stopped. How did you—"

"I did not."

"You did. Stop saying that. Can you untie us too?"

I shook my head again. Then, my whole body was quivering, not only with hunger and fear but with the enormity of what I had done. Charlie's cure could have been a coincidence. This was no coincidence. I had summoned magic, and magic had come. I was a witch.

But was this what witches did? Trapped children? Baked them into gingerbread? If it was, I did not want to be one. The sweet smell of gingerbread invaded my nostrils and sickened me. I knew that, should I survive, I would never eat it, never use magic. Saving Charlie was enough. But did I have a choice? I was unsure.

Perhaps witches could use their powers only for good, to help those in need or to punish wrongdoers. That was the sort of witch I wanted to be. I vowed that, if Charlie and I survived, this would be the sort of witch I *would* be.

Yet, all I had ever heard of witches told me they were evil, daughters of Satan, devil's harlots. I did not want to be like that.

"Can you untie us now?"

I did not want to be evil. I did want to free Charlie. What choice had I?

None. I held my head as stiff as I could and whispered, "Yes, yes, dear. But tonight, when she cannot hear us. In fact, we should be quiet now, just in case."

"I want to go home!" His voice quavered, as if he was trying not to cry.

"I know, I know." I went cold in my heart, remembering the ruined place that had been home. "Soon. But be a good boy for now. We will escape tonight."

"Kendra!" He nodded at the abandoned spoons and bowls. I would need to clean those up somehow, before the witch saw.

"I know. Let us play a game, the game where we see who can go longest without speaking. You always win that one."

He never did, but I could try.

With one look around, he said, "All right. Go."

We were silent, very silent, but my thoughts would not lie down as easily. My eyes darted around the room, searching for a possible escape. The only windows were the spun sugar ones we'd seen from outside the house, but they were near the ceiling. Yet, the walls were

still made of biscuits. We could tunnel through.

Trouble was, the room was empty but for the bowls and spoons. The witch had given us little means of escape. Perhaps the spoons might be useful for digging, could I but conceal one. I concentrated on the bowls, wondering whether I might be able to cast a spell without words if I waited long enough. I did not recall saying anything the time I escaped from William. I would try. I listened for footsteps. There were none. With no danger imminent, the cocoon of webs felt almost safe, like a blanket, or my mother's arms.

Mother.

Would she be angry to know I was a witch or grateful I had saved Charlie?

She would be frightened, as was I.

I grew used to the scent of gingerbread. I watched the light change and gave Charlie my eye every time he ventured to speak. I had to concentrate.

I stared at the bowl and felt, rather than thought, the meaningless words I had said before. I blocked out Charlie's whimpers and only stared. After many moments, my vision blurred, then blackened. The room seemed to tip on its side, and I closed my eyes to prevent the sick feeling. But that was worse, for the room seemed to spin. When I opened my eyes, the bowl was empty, and I felt the spoon, stuck into my hand.

I had done it. I could do it. I must only wait until it was dark.

Seconds later, the witch entered the room.

"Ah, you have finished, pretties. Did you enjoy your porridge?"

"Let us go, you witch!" I tried to shush Charlie, then thought better of it. Were we too complacent in our imprisonment, the witch might suspect my escape plan.

"Please let us go," I said. "Our parents are looking for us. They will find us so."

"Your parents are dead. You've come from the plague village

yonder. Almost everyone there is gone.”

Charlie let out a cry, and I met his eyes, begging him to be still.

“Nay, Mum.” I could not let her know our family was dead. “We are not from Eyam, but from Shropshire. We—our whole family—are on our way to London on holiday. We stopped to sleep, but my brother and I woke early and wandered off. Our parents will be searching for us.”

“I doubt it.”

“If they find your house, they will alert others. The law will not look kindly upon . . .” I pictured the baked children’s faces and blanched. “. . . what you have done.”

“The law will not find out, nor will your parents, who are dead as doornails. Stay, my lovelies. I will be back soon.” She stooped to get the bowls. “What is this? Where is the spoon?” Her eyes searched mine.

I clenched the bowl of the spoon in my fist. “How can I know? I am tied up.”

She giggled. “Indeed, you are. Ah well.” She took up both bowls and one spoon. “It matters not. I will return shortly.”

I heard her departing footsteps. When they faded into the distance, Charlie said, “Is it true what she said, Kendra? Are Mother and Father gone?”

I could not stand this. I could not stand one more thing. I tried to make my voice sweet, rather than scalding, and said, “Of course not, Charlie. Did you not see Mother in her bed?”

“I must know the truth, Kendra. I am a big boy and can bear it.”

But I could not. “Let us put our minds to the situation at hand, and then we will worry about getting home to Mother.”

“And Father?”

“And Father.” My voice almost broke when I said the word, but I held it steady. “Now, please be silent. I must hear what she is doing.”

But I heard nothing, and many hours passed. Charlie, apparently satisfied, as children will be, with lies that favor the way they wish the world was, slumped over and fell asleep. Finally, the room grew dark, then light again as the moon rose. My arms, bound together, ached as if I had been at the washboard for days. I had heard of men being pulled apart, drawn and quartered. Was this how it felt? I yearned to use magic to remove my bindings, but I dared not. The witch had said she would return. I must wait.

Then, I heard a voice. "Hello?"

Through the dim, I looked for Charlie. He slept still. The voice was my imagining.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

It *was* a voice, a girl's voice from outside. Someone was here! We were saved!

"Who's there?" I whispered.

"Miranda. I am one of the . . . the gingerbread girls."

"You can speak?"

"Aye, and hear and see and everything but run away. 'Twill be the same for you, if you do not escape."

"I wish to escape. I was merely waiting for the witch to leave before I tried."

"Wait no longer. She is gone now, to consort with her fiendish sisterhood. I saw her leave. If you wait, it will be too late."

"You are sure?" Beside me, Charlie stirred in his sleep.

"Yes. Get to it," said the tiny voice. "You have little time."

My heart thundered like horse's hooves on the empty road. I had to concentrate. Concentrate! I blocked out Charlie, Miranda, blocked out my aching, throbbing arms, everything. I sat, face turned skyward, and tried to summon the magic.

It was easier this time. In seconds, I could feel the bindings unravel. I stretched my arms. I stood. Now, Charlie. Outside, I heard

the small, strident voice of the gingerbread girl. I ignored her, carried away by my own voice, my magic. I stretched my arms toward Charlie.

“What is this!”

I stared, fingers outspread. The room was bathed in light, not moonlight nor candlelight. Rather, the room simply glowed.

I turned. The glow came from the witch. Outside the window, I now heard Miranda’s cries. Too late. “Stop, stop! She is back!”

“How did you do it?” the witch demanded. “How did you escape my bonds?”

I did what any child in trouble would do. I lied. “I wiggled out. Anyone would keep from being baked.”

“Anyone wouldn’t, couldn’t.” The witch surveyed the fallen webs. “My knots are magical ones. If you untied them, you must be a witch yourself.”

Despite my fear, I made myself face her. I had to decide. Tell the truth? Or argue? Was it good to be a witch? Perhaps she would let me go if she thought I was one of her kind. What was it Miranda had said, her sisterhood? But then again, she might see me as a threat.

I had no choice. She knew.

“Tis true. I untied the knots, not by wiggling, but by magic. I am a witch.” I looked down, trying to decide what to say next. To admit my inexperience was risky. Yet, to pretend to powers I did not possess might be more so. Still, it would be better for her to think me powerful. “I untied myself, and now, I will untie my brother.”

She cackled. “Unlikely.”

“Very likely.”

I began, as before, to concentrate on the mystical words, on what I now knew was a spell. I willed the ropes to unbind Charlie as they had me. Yet, something was different, as if a powerful force bore down upon me. When one moment my concentration wavered, the

witch's greater powers overcame me. I was tired, so tired from weeks of struggling against death, disease, hunger, and grief. I had had enough. I wanted only to lie down, to stop fighting, but if I stopped fighting now, it would all be for naught. Charlie would die. I might die, or as good as die—be all alone in the world.

I pushed back. It was passion that had given me power, the passion that came from danger. My passion was my power and my power was my passion, and I shoved with all my might, my mind, my heart, until I could feel the blood coursing through my body, my head, about to flow out my mouth and onto the floor. I willed myself to untie Charlie. I could not see, could not hear anything but blood. Yet, it must work. It must! I had to save my brother.

Then, just as I was about to collapse on the floor, weak and helpless, I felt a grip upon me loosen. That and something else. I felt Charlie's hand in mine.

Power and passion wrapped around me like a mother's arm. Though I was inexperienced, I knew now that I could summon the power. I had conquered death itself, had I not? Suddenly I had wings if I needed them, wings of darkness like a giant bird, had fire and water and all the powers of light and darkness at my disposal. If only I could use them in private and not have to fight against this other witch. But I did. Our spirits fought invisibly, and I felt Charlie's hand slip from mine. I grabbed it, grabbed it fast. I pulled.

"Enough!" the witch screamed. I thought she meant to trick me, make me relax my grip on Charlie, that she might own us both. Instead, she relaxed her own. I felt the power fly from the room. Charlie's grip upon my hand tightened. I opened my eyes and looked up at her. In the dim light, her eyes glowed fearsomely, and her lips seemed red with blood.

"So it is true," she said, "the girl does have powers."

"She does." I straightened my shoulders. "Yes, she does, and she

does not intend to let you kill her, or her brother. I have worked too hard to save us. Now, will you let us go?"

"Yes, let us go!" Charlie screamed.

The witch pointed a long, red-clawed finger at him, and he immediately fell asleep. She turned her attention to me. "I cannot have children getting out and about, telling tales of me and my little picket fence. No, I am afraid that, once captive, you must stay here forever."

"Stay? Forever? But I have no intention of dying."

"I have no intention of killing you. Witches cannot be killed by ordinary means anyway."

Ordinary means? "There was a witch in . . . our old town. They say she died by water."

"If she did, then she was no witch. Witches do not drown. Those who do are merely unfortunates. Our kind are stronger."

It chilled me to hear her say "our kind" and know she meant herself and me. I did not wish to have kinship with the likes of her.

"No." She drew a long finger across her forehead. "There is only one way to kill our kind."

"Which is?" Even as I said it, I knew the answer. I mouthed the word as she spoke.

"Fire. The only way to sacrifice a true sister of darkness is by fire."

I tucked this knowledge away in case I lived long enough to use it. "Indeed? And do you not intend to kill me in your oven, as you have the others? I hope not, for you see, I will not give up easily. I may be young, but I am strong. I have power born of passion."

"Passion. An odd way to phrase it. 'Deed, you are an odd girl. But I have no intention of baking you. You alone of all my children would give me something else I want."

"And what is that?"

"A family." In that instant, her eyes softened to the green of new shoots, rather the color of my own eyes, which disturbed me. She

seemed to be not a monster, but a woman, a woman like many I knew in our village, like Mrs. Jameson and Mother. "A witch's life is a lonely one. We live forever unless killed."

"We do?"

She wagged her finger at me. "Did you not wonder why you, of all your family, were spared from the plague?"

I started to protest again, that we had no plague, but with her hand she stopped me. "Waste not your breath with lies, pretty girl. I know the truth. I recognize the scars on your brother's body, the haunted look in your eyes. I have lived through many a plague, buried husband and children. I have seen that expression in my own eyes. A witch's existence is lonely. To be immortal is to belong to no one, no time. I have met few of my kind, fewer still I would call friend. Those who are not witches do not wish to consort with us, lest they be hanged by association. Besides, they die. But a girl such as yourself could be the daughter I lost, better than a daughter. Together, we could live forever."

Inwardly, I blanched. I did not want to be this woman's—this monster's—daughter. Yet part of me felt strange sympathy for the witch too. I knew loss. Perhaps I had not yet lost Charlie, but if what the witch said was true, if I were to live forever, I would lose everyone over and over. Be alone. Could hundreds of years alone drive one to madness? To child baking? *Judge not and ye shall not be judged.* That was a verse the reverend often repeated at church, though few heeded it. Perhaps I should not judge the witch too harshly until I had lived her life. Or perhaps this was merely an excuse because, as I gazed into her eyes, I realized she could be of use to me. I had never been a stupid girl. Rather, my mother often pronounced me too smart for my own good, too smart to find a husband. I was also smart enough to know opportunity when I saw it. The witch was bad, possibly deranged, but she was older, wiser. She knew how to cast spells not merely from passion, not merely when danger bade her to,

but from intent. She wished to be my mother. Though the thought revolted me, I knew what mothers did. They taught their daughters. If she thought I respected her, she would teach me. I pushed back the thought of my own dear mother. It was worthless to think of such things. Mother was gone. My powers had come too late to save her. Besides, Mother would not wish me to die, to let Charlie die. I was sure of it. Equally, I was certain that, if I refused the witch's request, she would kill Charlie. I did not know, did not care either, what she would do to me.

And once I learned all I could, once I had gained her trust, I could escape.

“And what would it entail, to be your daughter?”

“Entail?”

“What would I have to do, and what would you do for me? And for Charlie?”

The witch drew in a breath. “I had not thought that far.”

“Then think.”

“It has been a great while since I had a daughter.” She stopped and stared ahead, eyes growing misty. “I lost the last of mine these two hundred years.”

“But when you had daughters, what did you teach them?”

“Ordinary things, baking and . . .” My neck snapped toward the wall through which I had heard Miranda's voice. “Not that sort of baking. I wasn't about that then. Regular baking, bread and cakes and, yes, gingerbread. It was rather a favorite of my dear Adelaide's and, of course, she helped with the sewing. Not mending. I used magic for such dull work, but fine sewing, quilts and samplers. We discussed her future, the husband she would find, the babes she would carry. Of course, none of that came true. She too died of plague.” She shook her head.

“Ah, I see. So you want companionship. If I were to provide it, you would give me advice and guidance . . . like a mother?”

It was all I could do to force the word *mother* from my lips, but it had its desired effect.

The witch's blood red lips formed a smile. "Of course, my dear. I wish to be your mother in every sense. If you were my daughter, I would teach you to be a better witch. This is what I want, and what you want also." She reached to arrange a hair that had fallen across my face. "I want you to love me."

I tolerated her touch. I had to. "And my brother?"

She hesitated long enough for me to know that he was not to have been part of the bargain. Finally she said, "I will take care of him too. Like my own son."

I smiled. "Then I will do as you wish."

And this was how I became, in fact if not in heart, the daughter of a witch. I did not forget my real mother, but I was so busy learning many new and useful things that the pain of losing her, of losing all of them, lessened. I had lost my family, lost my home. Yet, I had gained something else, something few women of that time ever possessed.

I gained power.

And I learned how to use it. Each morning, instead of making breakfast or milking the cow, the witch would teach me a new trick to make short work of it, so that the cows milked themselves or the butter self-churned. Then, in the time we saved, we studied more serious spell work. I learned to make magic, not merely through passion but by design, not merely by chance repetition of magical words but by movement of my mind. I gained power over objects to make them dance about the room. I made plants grow and animals obey my command. The only power I was unsure of possessing was over people. There were no people upon whom to test power, other than Charlie, and I did not want to do that to him.

Charlie was a bit of a problem. At first, while he was still recovering, he was content to sleep many hours a day, giving the witch ample

time to school me in her—my—craft. As he recovered, though, he wished to run and play like other boys, not to be cooped up in a cottage (even one made of gingerbread) with two women. The witch used magic to hold him, magic to keep him from leaving the house. She could use no such magic on me now, for I knew how to break this simple spell. She knew me well enough to know I would never leave without Charlie. Still, Charlie sulked and sometimes ran and played and broke things. Sometimes, the witch used spells to buy his sleep, but the price was steep. As every mother (or sister) of a new babe knows, a child kept sleeping too long by day will repay this by waking at night.

This annoyed the witch greatly because, by night, she wished to tell me the exploits of her centuries of life, of her work in the court of Henry VIII (“Had he but asked for my help, he could have had a son”), and her dalliance with someone named Vlad somewhere called Wallachia (“a cruel one, he—liked to impale people on sticks”). “Being a witch can be a curse, Kendra,” she told me, “but never forget, it is a blessing as well. Women, we are powerless, often at the mercy of a father or husband. When I lost mine, I might have been forced to take in laundry or . . . worse. But because of witchcraft, I survived and survived well.”

“Kendra.” Charlie pulled at my skirt.

“What does that boy want?” the witch snapped.

“Not now, Charlie.”

“But Kendra, look. Look what I found.”

“What is it, Charlie?”

He opened his hand and held out a black and green beetle.

“Ugh,” the witch said. “I will turn you into a beetle if you do not watch out.”

“He is but a child,” I said.

Yet, I sensed the witch becoming more and more perturbed.

Due to the witch’s trust of me, or her blackmail, I was permitted

to venture outside on occasion, to gather magical herbs and flowers. It was on one such trip that I strolled past the corner of the house and heard a small voice.

“You! Girl!”

I started. I had heard no voice other than the witch’s and Charlie’s for weeks now.

“Please, please, Miss! You are in grave danger. Or rather, your brother is.”

Now I recognized the voice of the gingerbread girl, Miranda.

I turned to face her. She was a child, close in size to my sister Sarah, who had been but ten. Her ringlets must once have been golden. Now, they were of white frosting. Unlike the other gingerbread children, whose faces were frozen, she could move and speak.

“Danger? Why?”

“The witch! This morning, before you woke, she was outside, gathering wood.”

“Wood? She has no need of wood.”

“Exactly. She has no need, for she makes her meals and warms her home by magic. She needs wood for one purpose only. The oven! Where she makes the gingerbread.”

“But why?”

“I know not. Perhaps it is special witch-wood, the better for baking children. All I know is, one morning she went out, gathering wood. That very afternoon, I was in the oven.”

I shuddered. Powers, when used to cure the sick or even lighten the workload, were wonderful things. To use them otherwise was disgusting. But could I have one without the other?

I would have to find out. But first, I had to make sure the witch didn’t bake my brother!

I reached for Miranda’s gingerbread hand, again thinking of dear little Sarah. Had I refused to lend her my hair ribbons? Spoken a harsh word? I was sorry.

“Thank you, little friend. Thank you for telling me. May I ask . . . ?” I hesitated, not wanting to heap insult upon injury.

“Ask me anything. It is lonely never to be asked anything anymore.”

Lonely. That word again. Could it be that the world was merely a collection of lonely existences? If so, perhaps mine would not be any worse.

To Miranda, I said, “How is it that you can speak and move, and the others cannot?”

Her brow furrowed so much I worried it would crack. “I believe I was undercooked. ’Tis hard to believe, for the cooking was so painful that, when the witch came to check to see if I was done, I determined to be quite still. In that way, I was released from the oven half-baked. ’Course I cannot do much.”

“I am sorry.”

“No. ’Tis better this way. I was able to warn you. I wish someone had warned me.”

“How did you get here?” I glanced around, the better to make sure the witch was not coming, not listening. But no. She was resting. Charlie had kept her up all night, singing and banging pots, and then she had gone out early.

“I ran away,” Miranda said. “My father was cruel. He beat me and worse, so one night, I ran. I had grand dreams. I would go to London and meet the king! But, by the first night, I was powerful hungry. The next morning, I saw this house.”

So like my own story.

“I meant to take a few bites only and leave. I was not raised to steal. But the gingerbread was so good, and my stomach growled so. So I took more. Then more. And then, the witch was upon me. She trapped me in a room and, next thing I knew, was gathering wood to bake me.”

“I see. And where did she do this?”

Miranda winced. I could see that the memory still pained her.

“Please,” I said, “I must know.”

“Of course. I am sorry. It is just that I can practically feel the flames, licking my arms.”

Involuntarily, I clenched my own arms. “But I have seen no such oven in her cottage.”

“No, Miss. ’Tis not there, but over yonder in the woods.” Miranda pointed to a spot beyond the house.

The woods! I was seized with an idea. To take Charlie to the oven, the witch would have to release him from the spell. Then, we could escape. It was a small hope, but it was the only hope we had.

“Thank you, Miranda.” I squeezed her hand as hard as possible.

“Please, Miss, do escape, and if you do . . .” She squinted. “Perhaps you can tell someone about us. I feared my father, ’tis true, but I wish my mother knew what had become of me.”

I touched her frosting hair. “If we escape—when we escape—I will tell them.”

When I returned to the house, I did my best to act natural, and also to keep Charlie quiet. I required time to think.

That night, I prepared a special potion that put Charlie to sleep, then approached the witch, offering to read to her from her book of Irish mythology, which was her favorite. It had been my practice to read each night until she was quite tired, but on this night, I stopped midway through, saying, “Madam, you have been very good to me, teaching me the ways of witches.”

She reached to caress my hair. “It is no less than any mother would do.”

“It is wonderful.”

“Do you love me as much as you once loved your real mother?”

I hesitated. I remembered mother, making my dresses, adjusting my hair ribbons, and teaching me not to lie. Still, I suspected she would permit an exception in this one case. “Of course I love you.”

“Call me mother then.”

“M . . .” The word stuck in my throat like spoiled meat from a long-dead cow. I coughed it out. “Mother! But one thing you have not told me about is the gingerbread ornaments which adorn this house. How came they do be here? And why?”

The witch screwed up her face, trying to decide whether to tell me. “The why is simple. I was lonely and wanted company. That is why I built my house of gingerbread. Soon enough, children did come, the brats of travelers, nibbling upon my walls. I wanted merely to play with them, to hold them, as I could not hold my own. Yet, the children would not agree to this. If you can believe it, they wished to escape my loving embrace despite the promise of gingerbread.”

“They wanted their own parents.”

“Exactly! Oh, perhaps you will say ’tis understandable, but what was I to do—bear more children only to see them perish, see them age and die while I lived on for centuries? Besides, once the children escaped, they would alert their parents, who then found the authorities. Soon, the townspeople were upon me with a hangman’s noose or, if I were unlucky, with torches.”

“This happened?”

“Aye. More than once. My first gingerbread houses were in Germany. When I was chased out of that country, I built the next here. But this time, I knew better.”

I nodded. I saw what she had done.

“Now, when I caught a child, I baked it into gingerbread, the better to keep it here. I may not have my own Adelaide or Karl, but I have Maggie and Henry, Oliver and Em, all around the house. They are mine forever.”

I shivered. The air had grown suddenly cold. I remembered the reverend saying that colder weather would lessen the plague. Too late for us.

“But they’re dead,” I said.

“Not dead. Frozen. Safe. Safe from the world, my own darlings.”

She smiled, and I knew I must not argue, must not—as Mother said—talk back to my elders. Good advice, as mothers often gave. It would not do to let the witch know that I was disgusted by her doings. I must pretend to agree with her.

So I clapped my hands and smiled like the sort of insipid girl I hated. “How wonderful! I suppose if you went away on holiday, you might bring them with you for companionship.”

“Aye. Though I have not often been on holiday. I am an old woman, in mind if not in body. I prefer to stay here, with these, my children.”

She glanced toward the window at the cookie children. I could see one, a boy smaller than Charlie. His hair stuck up on his head, and I thought how he must have struggled when stuffed inside the oven. Yet now, his face seemed placid, accepting of his fate. His frosted lips even turned up in a smile.

“They seem so happy,” I said.

“Oh, they are. In this way, they too can live forever.”

I tried again. “Will you teach me to do it?”

The witch’s brow curled under. “Why would you wish that, my dear?”

I reached to touch her shoulder. “Because, M-Mother, since you have taken me in, I have felt very close to you. Like all daughters, I wish to be exactly like you. But perhaps . . .” I stepped away. “I presume too much. You may not feel the same toward me. Forgive me.”

The witch took my wrist in her fingers. “No, no, I adore you as my own and would teach you all I know. It is only that I have no children to bake.”

“Truly?” My eyes met hers now. They were still as shockingly green as the first day I saw her.

“Deed. Of course, when I first captured you, I did intend—and I say this with every apology—did intend to add you to my picket

fence. It would not have worked because, since you are a witch, the flames—even magical flames which keep other children alive—would have killed you.”

I nodded.

“However, now, I would no sooner bake you than I would sear my own flesh. So you see, my dear Kendra, I have no dough for my gingerbread.”

“Ah.” I remembered what Miranda had said about the wood. Could she have been wrong? I needed to test it. “Of course. I know you would not harm, er, bake me, but I thought perhaps . . . my brother.”

“Your brother? You would not be angry?”

I screwed up my mouth as if in thought. “I would miss him . . . at first, I suppose. But he can be a trial. Besides, he would not live forever anyway. Indeed, were it not for magic, he would be dead already.”

The witch’s chin twitched. “’Tis true enough. I will admit I had thought of baking him. Boys yell and run about so. But I thought you would be angry.”

The witch’s fingers felt like worms, crawling, ready to chew my eyes out. I glanced away. It was true what Miranda had said!

I collected myself. “I have learned much from you, Mother. I will do what you think best. You have lived so much longer than I. Besides, if Charlie is baked, we could have him as part of our family forever. Otherwise, he will only grow old and die. Right?”

I dared not move. Yet I wanted her hand off me. It was a relief when she finally released her grip.

“Oh, Kendra! I had hoped you might see it that way. Yet I know children are sentimental. I can tell you all now. I had prepared the oven, and this morning, I gathered the wood. I was only waiting for an opportune moment to take him. I had planned to tell you he had

run away, but now, I will not have to resort to such trickery. I am so happy!”

“I am too.”

“We can do it tonight,” she said.

“Tonight?”

“Why not? The oven is prepared.”

“Why . . . yes. That is true.” The sleeping potion I had given Charlie would prevent his escaping if we went tonight. I had to think of a reason to delay. “It’s just that he sleeps. I gave him a sleeping potion. I was tired of the noise.”

“That is quite all right. It is easier if he sleeps.”

“Yes, but . . .” What to say? “I suppose you were right before, about sentiment. I am not so sentimental as to wish my brother alive at the expense of valuable training. But . . .”

“What?” Her disgusting worm-hand once again sought my hair. “I wish you to be happy, Kendra. I wish us to be happy together.”

“I only want to see Charlie once more, awake. I know it will not matter in a hundred years. Still, I have a childish wish to say good-bye.”

She blinked, then again. “And yet, you wish to bake him. You wish to see it happen? Perhaps it would be better if I accomplished it without you.”

“No, no! I wish to learn. It is a childish desire, but please indulge me . . . Mother?” I made my eyes wide, pleading.

It worked. The witch stroked my hair. I tried not to shudder. I must not react.

“Of course, my dear. I forget that you are still a child, for you are so wise. Let us to bed, Kendra, and when morning dawns, I will tell you my last secrets, teach you as only a mother can.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

I went to bed at Charlie's side, but I did not sleep. What if she had lied to me? Or changed her mind? This could easily happen if she thought I was reluctant.

The matter of escape consumed me also. I knew I would likely have to kill the witch in order to free us. It should have been a trifle. I had now little fear of death, after all I had seen. But death was one thing, murder quite another. Killing the witch was justifiable, but would that make a difference when I was forced to impel her into flames? She was a human being after all.

Or was she?

She was. If she was not, I was not either, for we were the same. She was human, but she was evil. She meant to harm Charlie. I had to stop her.

As the dawn broke, I squeezed Charlie's hand. He stirred in his sleep.

"Dear brother," I whispered, "there is something I must tell you. Listen carefully, for I cannot repeat it or speak too loudly. Nod if you understand."

Charlie nodded but made no sound. I had cast a spell upon him to bring about his silence. I could take no chances.

"Good." I tiptoed to the door, cracked it open, and looked out. The witch was not to be found. I returned to Charlie and whispered, "The witch intends to cook you today."

Charlie turned a bit white but still said nothing. I continued quickly. "Of course, I will not allow this to happen. I will protect you as I have so far."

Now Charlie's expression indicated I had not done a very good job so far.

"She will take us out to the woods. You may get an opportunity to run, but remember, she is powerful. If you fail, there will be no second chance. You must wait until I distract her."

He nodded. I heard a noise, the creak of a door. The witch was awake. I gave Charlie one last look, then laid back and pretended to sleep beside him. I was so weary. Yet my pulse pounded, and I hoped this would serve to keep me alert.

The door opened, and the witch came in. "Wake up, dearies. You are in for a treat."

"We want no treats from you, Madam," I said. "Our last treat got us trapped here."

The witch winked at me. She was dressed in what must have been her finest, a green satin gown with a purple feathered hat. "Ah, you will like this treat then, for you will be untrapped. Free. It is a fine morning. We will have a walk in the woods. Get up."

I did not want to go. Thoughts of all that could go wrong flew around me like so many blackbirds. I wished that I could stay right there. Or, better yet, since I was already wishing the impossible, I wished I could turn back the strangling hands of time, not a day, not a week, but two years, to before our capture, before all the death, before the wretched plague. Had we only known! I wished to be a girl of twelve, concerned only with my weaving and whether I was being given more than my fair share of chores.

But I was a witch, not a genie. My life, once lived, could not unlive itself.

I stood. "That does sound fun. Come, Charlie." I tugged at his arm, and slowly, he rose.

The path we walked was covered in pine needles, but clear of grass and weeds. The witch had walked this way often; once, at least, for each child-picket in her fence. I squeezed Charlie's hand. Several times he tried to break away, but I tightened my grip. Not yet. I only hoped I was correct in anticipating a better opportunity. Pine trees marched on all sides of us, like threatening guards. Finally, we

reached a clearing. I knew it by the smell of gingerbread. Gingerbread and something else. Seared flesh. I thought of little Miranda and the others. Would that there were a spell to quell my emotions, silence my thoughts. There was none, only my own talent for artifice. “So this it is?” I asked the witch, smiling.

“Indeed, it is, love.”

I turned to Charlie. “This is where she makes the gingerbread.”

The oven, made of black iron, was the size of our lean-to at home. The door had a lock upon it. Charlie’s eyes widened, but he said nothing.

“Perhaps you should stand over there, Charlie.” I pointed to a spot far away.

“No!” The witch grabbed his arm and pulled him back. “I need him beside me.”

“Of course.” I laughed. “How silly of me.”

“A bit too silly.”

“I apologize.” I made my face pretty. “Will you teach me how to do it, Mother?”

“Of course.” The witch gestured toward the oven. “Perhaps you and your dear brother could crawl inside and light it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Me and Charlie? Light the oven?” In a tree high above, a crow sang its homely song. I looked up. When I finally found it, I noticed its feathers were not solid black, as I had been used to thinking, but rather reflected purple and green. As I watched, its song changed from its usual caw to a different tune, one Mother had sung:

*Dear love, call in the light;
Or else, you'll burn me quite!*

Burn! Was I delirious? Or was this bird warning me away? I needed no such warning, but perhaps the bird was suggesting a

strategy by reminding me of Mother.

Or perhaps it was Mother?

“Indeed,” I said to the witch. “I wish to help, but I cannot light the oven.”

“Cannot? Of course you can.” The witch grabbed my elbow. “You are a big girl and must be able to accomplish such work.”

I shook my head. “I cannot. My sister Sadie always did it. I never learned.”

“You will learn now.” The witch pulled me toward the oven. Charlie followed along. I could not let go of him, else the witch would surely throw him inside alone.

Above, the bird sang:

*My bonny lass, she smileth;
When she my heart beguileth.*

Beguile.

“Please.” The tears in my eyes were real. “Please, Mother, I am afraid of the fire. I was burned once as a girl. You are so much wiser. I know you can show me how to do it.”

“Silly girl!” The witch reached for the oven door. “Any fool could do it.”

“Then I am less than a fool, for I cannot. Please, show me. We shall be together many years, forever. If you show me now, I will do it many times henceforth.”

The witch sighed but said, “You need only take a stick, make fire as I have shown you, then light the wood inside.” She plucked a branch from the tree. “Crawl in, and do it.”

Now, the crow flew down from its perch. It circled around, singing the refrain:

Fa la la la la la la la la

It dove at the witch's head.

"Oh! Horrible creature!" With the hand that didn't clutch my wrist, the witch battled the crow. This gave me an idea. I let go of Charlie's wrist and nodded at him to run.

Yet he did not move. Why did he not? The witch was engrossed in fighting off the swooping, singing bird. He could escape.

He waited for me, I realized.

The oven door was fully open now, and I said to the witch, "Perhaps if you made the fire, I could light the oven."

"Oh, of all . . ." Yet she obliged, waving the stick in the air. It burst into flame. As she did this, the bird swooped again, causing her to duck and stumble. "Oh!"

Only then did Charlie move out from behind me. With both hands freed, he shoved the distracted witch through the oven door. The flame inside had not lit, but as she was propelled into the oven, her skirt caught, glorious red and orange. She shrieked, "I'm on fire! I'm on fire! Kendra, help me!"

I stood, frozen, until Charlie stomped on my foot. Then I flew toward the oven door. The witch turned back, clawing at me, but it was too late. Her hands, even her face, were melting before my eyes like butter. I slammed the door and threw my back against it. Charlie locked it. All the while, the witch's screams echoed through the silent wood. Black smoke belched from the sides of the oven door.

I stood there a long time, feeling the heat on my back, until the witch's shrieks waned, and I knew she was dead. I touched my eyes then, and found I was crying. Then I was wracked with sobs. I did not speak, nor did Charlie. Finally, there was silence but for the cawing of the crow above. I glanced up. It flew down and perched upon my shoulder, singing:

When she her sweet eye turneth;

Oh, how my heart it burneth!

Fa la la la la la la la!

I was shaking, but I stroked its head. “Yes. Yes. You are a good bird.”

I remembered the crow at Lucinda’s house, the day I’d saved Charlie. Probably just a coincidence.

I turned to Charlie. “Why did you not run?”

He gestured toward his mouth, and I realized he still could not speak. Quickly, I uttered the words to the counterspell. He said, “Had I run, the witch would have cooked you.”

“Not true. ’Twas I who persuaded her to light the fire.”

“But ’twas I who stuffed her into the oven.”

I sighed. “I suppose. But, Charlie, if ever again I tell you to run, you must run.” I had a premonition, as I had stood with my back to the oven, of the difficulties that lay ahead for a witch like me. “Promise, Charlie.”

“I will protect you.”

“No. You will protect yourself first. Promise.”

Finally, reluctantly, he agreed.

With nowhere else to go, we trudged back to the witch’s house. When we arrived, the sun was high in the sky, the better to see the change that had occurred.

“Where is the picket fence?” Charlie asked.

A smile spread across my face as I now fully believed that the witch was dead and gone. “The children, they are free. They are free!”

“Girl?” A small voice came from behind the house.

I knew that voice. “Miranda?” I ran to her. She was a sweet little thing, with red-gold curls and freckles.

“You . . . you killed her?”

“Charlie and I did. And now you can go home, to your mother.”

“All the others have left already, but I, I wanted to thank you.”

I embraced her. “You will be safe?”

“I think so.”

“Then you should leave.” I broke off a bit of gingerbread from

the windowsill. “Here. For your trip.”

And then, she left.

Charlie and I, with nowhere else to go, entered the gingerbread house. We were free! We were alive. The house was on fine, farmable land, and I knew that we would leave behind our dismal past, build a real house, and live happily for many years to come.

EPILOGUE

Or a few days, in any case. For, you see, one of the escaped children ran straight to the next village with his tale of a gingerbread house and the witch who resided there. Of course, the constable would not believe such a wild story . . . until it was corroborated by a second, a third, a tenth child. Perhaps little Miranda tried to tell them what had truly happened, but her voice was too small, and too late.

They showed up in a pack, with nooses. I knew there would be no trial, least of all a fair one. I only thanked Providence they had not brought torches.

“Run!” I told Charlie. “Do not look back, and if anyone asks, tell them only that you escaped an evil witch who would have baked you into gingerbread. Do not mention your sister. They will not believe you. Or they will think you a wizard too.”

This time, he listened. At least, I think he did, for he left. They came moments later.

They hanged me. It hurt, but I did not die. The next morning, as the sun rose, I felt a crow, pecking, pecking at the rope around my neck.

And that was how I came to leave England. The bird turned out to be my friend, Lucinda. She advised me to travel. I did, first to Scotland (where I met the witches who had inspired Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*), later to Spain and Italy, Greece, and eventually France, where I lived many years. Lucinda showed me how I too might

change to a bird to escape, a useful skill.

I never saw Charlie again.

That's another thing about witches.

We are often lonely.

And so, to alleviate my loneliness and to honor the vow I made in the gingerbread house, I've made it my life's work to help people. There are many who do so, using their own special talents for reading, baking, or envelope stuffing. I try to use my own talent for witchcraft. Unfortunately, as you might have noticed in this story of the gingerbread children, using my talent sometimes backfires. Actually, my failures kind of outnumber my successes. Over the years, I've been banished from more countries than most people ever see. For this reason, I have learned to choose my victims—er, people I help—carefully.

It's hard for me to make friends. People don't, I am surprised to say, usually like me, and those who do tend to grow old and die. I haven't had a real friend in many years.

I can change my looks at will. I've used magic to stay young and pretty, the way other people use Botox, and I've found it easiest to stay in school as much as possible. I don't need school, of course. I can make the necessities of life from thin air, and after all these years, the curriculum is a bit dull. (Can you imagine taking Algebra Two more than once?) This is particularly true of history, as I've lived it. It irks me how often the books get it wrong, and reading Shakespeare is dull when one has seen it performed in the great theaters of Europe (though, for reasons I will perhaps explain later, I was unable to see the great Sarah Bernhardt when she was in France). Even the people are, for the most part, boring. The school queen who thinks she's one of a kind would be surprised to learn she is one of a million, and bullies have plagued every generation. But

teenagers make good companions. Absorbed as they are in their own worries, they tend not to notice me much.

And, occasionally, I find, if not a friend, a deserving (or not so deserving) soul who needs my magical assistance. Or correction.

Like now. There is a girl named Emma. She lives in Miami, and I've had my eye on her for quite a while. She's had some problems involving a member of her family, her stepsister. I'd like to help her out, but first, I have to decide if she's worth the risk.

Her story? Well, here it is.



Part One
Lisette and Emma





My mother, in her sweet way, always reminded me that Daddy wasn't my real father. "Be on your best behavior, Emma," she'd said since I was old enough to remember. "He could ditch us anytime." Sooo comforting. I don't know why she said those things. Maybe she was jealous. True, Daddy and I looked nothing alike. He was tall and slim, blond and hazel-eyed, while I was short and clumsy with frizzy hair the color of rats. Yet on days like this one, as we sat across from each other at Swenson's Ice Cream, it seemed impossible that I wasn't Daddy's and Daddy wasn't mine. We had been together since I was three, after all; ten years since he and Mother had married. If I'd known my other father, the father that *had* left, I didn't remember him. This was the only dad I had.

It had been his idea to spend the day together, "Daddy-Emma

time,” without even Mother. I’d found out just the night before. He’d come home from work and told me he’d gotten tickets to the national tour of *Wicked*. It had been sold out except for nosebleed top balcony seats. At least, that’s what Mother had said when I’d begged to go. But Daddy told me one of his clients had given him second-row seats and he was taking me as a special surprise.

I’d breathed a secret sigh of relief. He and Mother had been arguing all week behind closed doors, alternately whispering and yelling, the sound muffled by television shows I knew neither of them watched. I’d sat in the family room, worrying in front of endless *Full House* reruns. Maybe Mother was right and they were getting a divorce. Maybe I’d end up like Kathleen, this girl in my class who’d had to be a flower girl in her own mother’s wedding. Maybe I’d lose Daddy. Occasionally, I’d hear my own name. Mother would say something like, “What about Emma?” and Daddy would reply, “What about Emma? I’m thinking of Emma.” Thursday night, Daddy had said, “I won’t discuss this anymore, Andrea!” and the house had gone silent.

But now, I understood. The whispered conversations had been about this. Mother was obviously angry because she’d wanted to go to the play herself, but Daddy was taking me. Me!

Our seats had been so close I could see the actors spit when they sang, and the play had been perfect, perfect for me because the ugly girl, the weird girl, the girl no one understood was the heroine. I identified with Elphaba, the outcast, except for the part about magic powers. Perfect, also, because Daddy had taken me, which meant he got it. He understood me as my mother never could.

After the matinee, we went for dinner, and even though I’d ordered an adult cheeseburger instead of the kids’ meal Mother would have pressured me to get in the name of “portion control,” Daddy let me get a Gold Rush Sundae too. “Not much of a meal without ice cream,” he’d said, and I agreed. I tried to eat slowly, like a

lady, and also to make the day last longer. Plus, I had on a new dress, BCBG, and I didn't want to stain it. Dad said, "What do you want to do now?"

"Now?" A bit of fudge dribbled onto my lip, and I caught it quick with my napkin. Mother would have said it was piggish, but Daddy didn't wince.

"Sure. I told your mom we'd be late. Gameworks, maybe?"

Most people I knew would rather go there than anywhere, but the sounds of *Wicked* still filled my head, and I didn't want to drown it out with pulsing game music. So I said, "Oh, I don't know. Maybe the bookstore instead?" I loved going to the big bookstore, selecting a pile of novels, then spending an hour or more examining them over tea. "Would you be bored?"

Daddy grinned. "No, I can read. They prob'ly even have some of them there magazines with pitures in."

"I didn't mean that." The kids at school all thought I was a nerd too.

"I know you didn't, Pumpkin." He glanced to the side. "Hey, don't look now, but you've got yourself an admirer."

"Yeah, right."

"Right. Nine o'clock. Redhead's been looking at you since dessert arrived."

"Guys don't look at me."

"See for yourself."

I shook my head. Parents lived in some happy place where everyone my age dated or had guys in love with them when, in truth, only popular girls like Courtney and Midori did. I looked around. To one side was a crowd of stick-thin girls in Greek letter shirts, pigging out on Earthquake Sundaes. But when I got to Daddy's "nine o'clock," I was surprised to see he was right. Someone *was* looking at me. It was Warner Glassman, a boy from school, a smart boy who'd won a playwriting contest. As soon as I saw him, I wondered if my face

was clean, if I had whipped cream on my lips. It wasn't like I could lick them now, though, not in front of Warner. I'd look like a perv. I fumbled with my napkin. Warner looked away.

"He's a boy from school, Daddy. He's looking at me because he knows me, that's all. He's probably trying to figure out where he's seen me before."

Daddy took a sip of his coffee. "You are a beautiful girl, Emma."

"Mother says I'd be pretty—pretty, not beautiful—if I lost ten pounds and did something about my hair."

"Mothers are too picky. You look great. Boys are going to be swarming."

"Right." Still, I straightened my shoulders and resolved to eat extra neatly until Warner and his family left. Maybe, if they passed close enough, I'd say hi. I took a minuscule bite of ice cream and glanced at Warner again. He *was* looking. This was the coolest day ever!

I knew I wasn't ugly or fat either, just plain, like the heroines in books I loved, like *Jane Eyre* or *Little Women*. Of course, those girls usually ended up getting the guy.

"There's something I have to tell you, Emma," Daddy said.

"Sure." I took another nibble, trying not to look at Warner. Still, I could sort of see him out of the corner of my right eye.

". . . and her name is Lisette," Dad was saying.

"What?"

"I said her name is Lisette."

"Whose name? Start at the beginning." I slurped up the ice cream that had melted to soup on my spoon. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I said I wasn't sure if you remembered that, before I married your mom, I had another wife, and we had a daughter named Lisette."

Remembered? I was three. But, yes, I knew he'd had a wife before Mother, in some foggy part of my mind. The daughter was news,

though. I'd have remembered a daughter. "Where?" I choked out.

"She's been living in Lantana with her mom."

Lantana. Lantana wasn't far. We passed it all the time when we drove up to visit my aunt. My aunt was two hours away, and Lantana was closer. How weird was it, that I'd never met her? Had my father had a secret life all these years, like one of those guys on talk shows who turns out to have two families? What else was there, what else I didn't know?

". . . here on Friday," Dad was saying.

"Wait? What, again?"

"She's coming here on Friday."

"Coming? To visit?" No wonder Mother had been freaking out. She wasn't big on things that weren't all about her.

"No. To live. Aren't you listening, Emma? Her mother passed away, and Lisette is coming here. You should get along great. She's exactly your age."

The chocolate ice cream fell from my open mouth and onto the front of the BCGB dress. I glanced down at the huge splotch, then at Dad, then at Warner.

Of course, everyone was looking right at me.



The first time I saw my stepsister, Lisette, she was crying. A battered white economy car with patches of rust so big it looked like a calico cat pulled into our driveway. The door opened and it disgorged its contents: a girl who was, as Daddy had said, my own age but taller; a carry-on, which I later found out held all her clothes; and a black plastic garbage bag, which I later learned held everything else. All her stuff in one suitcase and one garbage bag? We gave more than that to the Salvation Army. We threw more than that away.

It was Friday afternoon. I was in the tree house Daddy had built me when I was five, reading *Vanity Fair* (not the magazine, the novel by Thackeray, which Daddy had bought me after I got my jaw undropped from our talk), waiting for Lisette, but not waiting. Mother said I was too old for tree houses, that it ruined her landscaping. It was Daddy who said we could keep it and was always too busy to take it

down when Mother complained. I liked to go there to read. And hide.

I was doing both that day, plus spying on Lisette. Mother was out, even though she'd told Daddy she'd be home. She'd wanted me to go too, but I said I had homework. I wanted to see Lisette. Since my conversation with Daddy, I'd been wondering what Lisette would look like. Would she be pretty? Prettier than me? Taller? Thinner? I hoped she'd be plain too, so we could be friends. Would she look like my father? Would he like her better? Would she think I was a geek? Would we be like sisters?

I peeked out from between the branches. Lisette tugged the black bag across the bright green lawn. Whoever had driven her didn't offer to help. The engine started and the car was gone before Lisette was even halfway to the door.

Her head was down, so I couldn't see her face. What I could see was her hair, gold-blond like Princess Aurora's at the Disney character breakfasts we went to on vacation and spiraling to her waist. My fingers stole to my own frizz. She wore a black dress a size too small and black sneakers that were too large, but even in that, I could see that she was skinny, skinny and graceful, like a ballerina. She stopped to check a hole in the bag, which had something sticking out of it, a bit of sapphire-colored fabric. Her hand reached to stuff it back in but, instead, lingered on it, and that was when she began to sob.

Something black soared into my peripheral vision. I turned my head and saw it was a turkey buzzard. Two of them, actually, diving and bouncing at some dead thing in the street.

I should have welcomed Lisette, or at least introduced myself. That would be the normal thing to do. But I wanted to put off the time in my life when I became Lisette's stepsister.

As long as I didn't meet Lisette, everything could be the same. Everything could be possible. My father would still like me best, even though Lisette was his real daughter. I could still imagine that Lisette and I would be best friends. As long as I stayed in the tree

house, there was still the possibility that Lisette might love me. But as soon as I approached her, that would all end. She'd take one look at me, with my curly hair and freckles, and realize I wasn't worth knowing, just like girls at school did.

I ducked my head lower and went back to reading about Amelia Sedley and Becky Sharp, BFFs even though Becky was evil, and about Dobbin, the grocer's son, who was in love with the wimpy, goody-goody Amelia and stood by her for years, even when she married his unworthy friend George. I had a secret crush on Dobbin and pictured him looking like Warner Glassman. The book was eight hundred pages long, and it was the second time I'd read it since Sunday.

Which I knew Lisette would think was completely weird.

Everyone did. Most of the kids at school, even in the smart classes, which I was in, didn't read books that weren't assigned, certainly not classics. Sometimes, I'd try to act like them, force myself to slip a *Seventeen* or an *Elle* into my binder or spend the time before class texting. But always, by lunchtime, I'd be at the media center, begging for my Brontë or Austen fix. It was pathetic.

I pressed my face hard against the slippery slats of the tree house floor, looking down at her crying.

Mother and Daddy's arguing had continued all week, and I'd read and read to drown out the yelling, but it didn't always work.

"There must be someplace else," Mother had said.

"We've been through this. There are no relatives on Nicole's side."

"On your side, then. Maybe she could move in with your mother."

"Give me a break. My mother's eighty."

"There are other alternatives besides relatives."

"Don't go there, Andrea. I'm not putting my own daughter in foster care for your convenience."

"Not convenience, safety. Who knows what sort of upbringing this girl has had. She could be into drugs or . . . worse. But maybe you don't care about Emma."

“Of course I care about Emma. I’ve always taken care of your daughter.”

Your daughter. My father’s words were like a shard of ice through my heart.

“Besides, I’m sure Nicole’s done a fine job raising her. She was always a sensible woman.”

“Unlike me, I suppose.”

“Who said anything about . . . never mind. I know you’ll see reason in this. The girl is coming to live with us, and that’s final.”

And with that, a door slammed.

I’d known better than to ask Mother any questions, but the day before, she’d come into my room without knocking and sat on my bed. Taking me by the shoulders, she’d said, “Don’t worry, Emma. This is just temporary. Your father loves you. We won’t let anything change that.”

Which is when I started worrying that it would.

Now, I stared down at Lisette. I still couldn’t see her face. She’d pulled the piece of fabric from her bag. It turned out to be a shawl, which she sniffed deeply before draping it around her stooped shoulders. She knotted the broken bag, then pulled it the rest of the way toward the doorstep. Guilt tugged at me, urged me out. I knew I should go down the ladder. I didn’t. In my lap, my hands were working. I pulled out a page of *Vanity Fair*, then a second. Only when my hands were so full of the crumpled, ripped pages that I couldn’t hold any more did I stop. What was I doing?

Lisette rang the doorbell. No one answered. She rang a few more times, then she sat down on the garbage bag and cried some more, great, racking sobs that shook her shoulders. We sat that way for a long time, me in the tree house, Lisette sobbing by the door.

It struck me for the first time that my father was a jerk. A real jerk who’d left his wife and daughter and had never seen her again, just like my own father had. Lisette and I were the same.

Finally, the air was quiet. This was my chance, my one chance. I had to sneak down when she wasn't looking.

The tree house creaked as I made my way down the ladder. Instead of walking toward the porch, I went in the opposite direction, toward the street.

Just as I reached it, she looked up. She stared at me full in the face and smiled through her tears.

In that moment, I knew I hated her.

Lisette was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, more beautiful than Courtney or any of the popular girls at school, more beautiful than my dolls. She looked like a grown-up, like one of those people on *Inside Edition*. Her eyes were the same color as the sparkling, royal blue shawl, and her lips were large and a shade of red my mouth only got if I drank a red Slurpee. I knew the girls at school would soon make her their queen, and that made me hate her even more.

"Are you Emma?" she said, and I could only nod, frozen.

"Oh, God! I'm so glad!" She rose to walk closer to me. Her eyes fell on my book. I should have left it in the tree house.

But Lisette's eyes grew even wider. "Wow, you're reading that?" When I nodded again, she said, "You must be really smart."

I went through a big-time internal debate about whether to nod again or deny it. Finally, I said my first words ever to my new step-sister.

"Well, I'm bad at math."

"Really? Math's my favorite. I'm bad at English. Maybe we can help each other out." Then, she opened her arms and said, "Oh, Emma, I know we're going to be just like real sisters."

And, in that moment, I really wanted to believe her. A sister had to love you, right?



I brought Lisette up to my room. I debated doing this because, actually, it was two rooms, a suite with a bathroom between. At first, Daddy had suggested I give up one to Lisette, but Mother had vetoed that. “Bad enough she has to share her life with some stranger without having to share a bathroom.”

Finally, they decided that Lisette would take the spare bedroom, which was downstairs near the laundry room. Mother called it the guest room, even though we never had guests.

It had seemed like a good idea, but as I helped Lisette drag her garbage bag from the doorway, I thought it might have been fun to share with her. I remembered slumber parties I used to have with Courtney, when we’d put up tents and eaten Mike and Ikes. That was before she got cool in sixth grade and dumped me. I was almost

about to offer to share my room with Lisette, ignoring the fact that Mother would completely freak if I did (though maybe that wouldn't be a bad thing) when we reached the door of Lisette's room. She gasped.

"Is this . . . do we share this room?"

The room had one bed that took up half the space. I said, "No, this is your room."

She dropped her suitcase and took first one, then a second step in. "It's beautiful. I've never had a room of my own."

"But you're an only child."

She nodded. "But Mom . . ." She stopped, eyes flitting to her feet, then back. "We had a one-bedroom, so we shared. Then, at the end, she was so sick I took the sofa bed in the living room. This is so pretty, though. You're lucky to live here, Emma."

I couldn't meet her eyes. I was lucky because my mother had stolen her father and all his money too. But, apparently, Lisette was too nice to notice. Now, she threw herself onto the bed, her face sinking into the pillows, which were old ones Mother had removed from other beds.

I waited a moment before saying, "Can I help you put your things away?"

It didn't take long. Her clothes took up less than half the tiny closet plus a single drawer. She had no books, no dolls, certainly nothing expensive like a laptop, only a few stuffed animals, notebooks from school, and a framed photo of a fragile-looking blond woman, her mother. This, she put by the bed. There were no other photos of friends, no yearbooks either. I took more to sleepaway camp.

When we finished, I offered to show her around. At every door, her eyes widened. "Wow. My mother always said my father was rich, but I didn't think it would be like this."

Her words made me feel like I hadn't brushed my teeth in a

week. We weren't rich. Our house was average for the neighborhood, and I went to public school. It wasn't like we were the Kardashians. Still, I saw her taking in the flat screen TV, the pool, the Jacuzzi. I remembered her comment about sharing a room with her mom. Only poor people did that. Hadn't my father paid child support?

When we reached my room, I didn't want to go in. But Lisette said, "So this is yours?" and I had to admit it was. I saw the room the way it would look to Lisette, crowded with what now struck me as excess—expensive stuff, my own TV, which I barely even watched, American Girl dolls I'd outgrown, with houses of furniture, a rack for all my earrings. I'd even left the closet door open so she could see it was stuffed within an inch of its life with clothes.

She did notice. "Wow, it's like a mall in there."

"Yeah." I tried to push the door closed, but it rebelled, swinging back. "I need to clean it out. There's a bunch of stuff that doesn't even fit." I pushed again, then spied a pair of True Religion jeans Mother had brought home last month. Size: Tiny. Status: Never worn.

"Hey, you want these?" I pointed at them. "My mom got them too small. It was supposed to motivate me to lose weight, but . . ." I gestured at my size-seven hips. "Guess it didn't work."

Lisette looked at the jeans like they were booby-trapped. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. They'll never fit."

"Wow, thanks." She took them from me. "But you don't need to lose weight. You just have more of an athletic build."

Except I tripped over my own feet, even when I was standing still.

She held up the jeans and examined the stitching. "You sure you don't want to return these? Or sell them on eBay?"

"I have tons of stuff that doesn't fit me, if you want it." I held out a Hollister button-down that had been too tight in the bust last time I wore it. "Like this?"

She grinned. “Wow, thanks. I always hear about sisters sharing stuff.”

After that, I kept finding more clothes, clothes that were still new and things that had fit me before but wouldn’t now. I pushed back the envy I felt, knowing it would all look a thousand times better on my beautiful new sister than it ever had on me. Lisette had nothing. This was the least I could do. Besides, I wanted her to like me. It was obvious I’d misjudged her, based solely upon her looks. Didn’t I hate when people did that with me?

“Try this on.” I held out a Guess dress. “It’ll look so cute with your hair.”

But Lisette shook her head. “Later. I’ll put together an outfit for dinner. Does our father come home for dinner?”

Our father. “He should be here around six.”

“Cool. Hey, do you have any nail polish? We could do each other’s toes.”

This type of stuff was catnip to me. Actual girlfriend stuff, bonding over noxious chemicals. Before you could say “slumber party montage,” I had out my pedicure stuff my aunt had given me for Christmas. I spread out twelve bottles of polish on my Animal Planet Panda Exploration bedspread, hoping Lisette wouldn’t notice how babyish and lame it was. “Which one?”

She studied them, like an artist choosing a tone. “Oh, I don’t know. We should match, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely. I mean, sure.” I didn’t want to commit to a color. I’d let her pick.

“Come on.”

“Okay.” I selected some bottles from the group. “I narrowed it down to three. You pick one. That’s what my friends and I do when we can’t agree.”

I left out the fact that I hadn’t been hanging out with those friends

in middle school. Might as well let Lisette think I had real friends, not just people I sat with at lunch and never saw on weekends.

Lisette chose the royal blue polish *and* the one with silver sparkles. “Okay?”

“It’s like you read my mind.”

“I try.”

We sat with our feet dipped into the little blow-up footbath that came with the pedicure set. She said, “So, tell me about my father.”

I shrugged and curled my toes under. I felt like, maybe, he wasn’t who I’d thought he was, but I said, “What do you want to know?”

“Anything. Everything. My mother totes wouldn’t tell me anything about him. I’ve never even seen a picture—she cut him out of all my baby pictures. In one, there was just a left hand. I used to look at that hand and wonder if I’d recognize it if I saw it again.”

As she spoke, my eyes fell on a photo, me and Dad at my fifth-grade graduation. Mom had taken the picture, and Dad’s hand was draped over my shoulder. I looked away before Lisette could follow my eyes.

“Well,” I said, “he’s really into gardening. We have a butterfly garden out back.” Did that sound lame? “Once, last year, we had twenty monarch cocoons, and they all hatched the same day.”

“Wow, wish I’d seen that.”

I hoped I hadn’t sounded like I was bragging. “Maybe it will happen again. The monarchs lay eggs on a plant called milkweed. Sometimes, we catch them and put them in a butterfly house so they build their cocoons there.”

Lisette wiggled her toes in the warm water. I tried to think of something else to tell her, something that didn’t sound like Daddy and I were attached at the hip.

“Oh, and he has a sailboat. I’m not that into sailing, though. I get seasick, and the sun’s bad for my pale skin. I hate my skin.”

“Your skin’s fine. You could squeeze those little blackheads, but other than that.”

“The magazines say not to squeeze them.”

“Well, yeah, but are you going to walk around with a hundred blackheads? You just have to get them the second you walk out of the shower.”

I nodded, amazed at how stupid I’d been. Lisette had perfect skin, so obviously, she knew. This is why people needed friends.

“Ready for polish!” Lisette tapped my foot. “Stop curling your toes.”

“My feet are so ugly.”

“They’re okay. Having a second toe longer than the first is supposed to be a sign of leadership.”

“Your feet are tiny.” I remembered this book I read about foot binding in China, where the girl with the tiniest foot got the richest husband. And then, there was Cinderella. In older versions, the stepsisters cut off their toes and heels to try and trick the prince into marrying them. I looked at my big toes, and I knew which one of us would be the stepsister in the story.

“I hate my feet,” Lisette said. “I do ballet, and I couldn’t get pointe shoes until last year. My teacher said my foot was underdeveloped. Then, just when I finally got them, I had to quit.”

“Why did . . . ?” My voice trailed off. Of course she’d had to quit because of her sick mother. “That’s so cool that you do ballet. Maybe you can do it here.”

She shrugged. “I guess. I miss my old studio, though. I miss . . .” She looked away. “I miss everything.”

She glanced at the photo of me and Dad, so I knew she’d seen it. After a minute, she picked up the clear nail polish. “Okay, then!”

An hour later, we had identical matching fingers and toes, and Lisette had finished grilling me about Dad. That’s when Mother

came home. She walked in without knocking and took in the scene: me and Lisette as buddies. “Don’t you have homework?”

“I did it in class.”

She looked only at me, not acknowledging Lisette. “Wasn’t there a project in Ms. Dillon’s class?”

“Not until next Friday, and I’m half done.”

Why did she have to be so helicopter? I knew my mother had been a lawyer before she’d married Daddy. They’d met at work, actually. And sometimes, I felt like she really needed to get a job again, so she could stop obsessing about me all the time. I always did my homework with no nagging from her.

But Mother said, “I hate how you wait until the last minute. You might have other homework during the week. Do it now.”

“Can’t I even wait for my nails to dry?”

“Don’t talk back.”

“I wasn’t.”

She gave me that look, where it looks like her brain’s going to come shooting out her eyes, and I shut up. Only then did she finally look at Lisette. “Emma showed you your room?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then I suggest you go get unpacked. Dinner will be at six.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Mother stared at Lisette until she left, not taking any of the clothes with her. When she was gone, Mother went to the door, looked out, shut it, then sat on my bed.

“I’m warning you, Emma. Don’t get too chummy with that girl.”

“Chummy? We were just—”

“Talking? Painting each other’s toenails?”

“So?”

“I know her type, Emma. Did you hear her just now—‘yes, ma’am, thank you, ma’am.’ What thirteen-year-old talks like that?”

“So you don’t like her because she’s polite?”

“She’s trying to get something.”

“Oh my God. That’s just crazy.”

“No it’s not. No it’s not. She wants information out of you, something she can use against you with your father, *her* father. Did you tell her anything, anything private?”

I remembered how I’d said I didn’t like sailing, but I said, “Of course not. This is deranged.”

“I assume you like living in this house, Emma? Having nice things?”

“Can I just do my homework now?”

“She’s his flesh and blood, Emma.”

“Daddy loves me.”

She sighed. “Just watch out, Emma.” She stood and walked toward the closet. “And change your outfit. That one looks all sweaty. And do your project.”

I did work on my project, at least until I heard the shower start up in her bedroom. Then, I gathered the pile of clothes and also some books I thought Lisette might like, not nerdy classics, but the kind even the popular girls read, books about faeries. Maybe Lisette would be like a faerie visitor who would change my life in mysterious ways.

Okay, that sounded dumb, even to me.

I snuck downstairs and knocked on Lisette’s door. “You forgot these,” I said when she answered the door, red-eyed.

She gestured that I should come in. “Your mom hates me.”

“She’s just . . .” Just what? Selfish? What could I say that wouldn’t make her sound awful? Nothing. “She doesn’t like change.”

“I was trying to be so perfect, but she didn’t even give me a chance.”

I remembered Mother’s comment about Lisette saying “ma’am.” Trying to be perfect would explain that.

“Maybe don’t try so hard. She’ll like you better once she gets to know the real you.” I knew she wouldn’t.

“I hope so.” Lisette’s eyes darted to the garbage bag still on the floor. “God, I miss my mom.”

I held out the armload of clothing and books. “I brought you some outfits. And some books too. I thought maybe if we read the same things, we could discuss them, and that would help you in English.”

“Cool!” She took them from me. “The books look awesome! You’re so generous.”

“No big deal. I already read them.”

“Still.” She threw her arms around me. “Oh, Emma, I’m so glad you’re here at least.”

I hugged her back, listening for the shower to go off upstairs. I could not believe this cool girl was going to be my sister.