

ONE

THE WORLD SWAYED BENEATH CORA. She leaned her cheek against the tree's rough bark, overcome with a dizzy wash of vertigo that wasn't entirely unpleasant.

She was in the witch's tree.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled herself higher through the branches. When her straw hat got in her way, she tossed it toward the ground to wait beside her shoes, stockings, and garters. Once she'd gone as far as she safely could, she wrapped an arm around the trunk and leaned out, letting the sun play on her face between the broad oak leaves. The smell of green overpowered the heavy salt scent of the ocean, and she could just make out the cross from the church and the distant top of the lighthouse.

Minnie and the O'Connell boys hovered at the bottom of the hill, afraid to even set foot on the line that marked the witch's property. Cora was fifteen, far too old for climbing trees, but now she had done something her sister never would. Their summer-long series of dares had escalated to this, and Cora knew she'd won. She waved a hand and crowed wildly, flush with her own triumph.

In response, Minnie's face went white with terror, and the boys yelped and turned tail, fleeing into the woods.

Cora slowly turned her head. She'd come level with the second story of the house, where a single round window looked out like a dark eye.

The witch was standing behind it, staring right at her. Pale

face expressionless, she raised a hand and put it against the glass, fingers splayed wide.

At that very same moment, a bird flung itself at Cora, a cacophony of feathers and screeching. As she raised her hands to protect her face, Cora's feet lost their hold.

Before she realized she was falling, everything went black.

Cora awoke to blinding pain, contrasted by a cool hand at her forehead.

A sweet voice hummed an off-key tune, and Cora peeled her eyes open to see a dim, curtained room lit by pillared candles. The walls were lined with stacks and stacks of books, so many that she couldn't make out the pattern on the wallpaper behind them.

She was lying on a stiff sofa. Next to her was a woman, hair dark around her face but gradually lightening to blond at the end of a braid draped across her knees with the sleek twist of a snake. She wore merely a slip, no corset or stays or even drawers. A necklace with a dark green beetle charm nestled in the sharp hollow of her collarbone. The woman's eyes drifted down and then locked onto Cora's. A heartbeat too late, Cora thought to squeeze them shut again and play at being asleep. Sleep had been safe.

Once caught, Cora could not look away from the black depths of the witch's eyes. She was in the Witch of Barley Hill's house. No one — *no one* — had ever been inside.

The witch smiled, but it was disconnected, like her mouth and eyes had forgotten how to speak to each other. "Hello, little bird. You fell out of your nest."

"I'm sorry," Cora whispered. "Please don't hurt me."

"You don't need me for that, do you?" The witch's grin widened to reveal teeth that looked impossibly old and yellowed in her unlined face. "People are very good at hurting themselves. I never



have to do a thing.” She held up her fingers, which were dark with something.

Blood.

Screaming, Cora scrambled back along the sofa, falling heavily to the floor and knocking over a stack of books in an avalanche of dust and paper. As she lunged up and ran for the door, the witch’s voice came soft but inescapable behind her.

“No need to fear death, my dear. It’s already at your door. Better to be caught than to run forever.”

Cora’s sweat-slick hands fumbled, finally turning the door-knob. She fled into the sunshine, the cold sorrow of the witch’s voice clinging to her shoulders. Minnie, a knife clutched in her hand, was already halfway up the walk.

“Go!” Cora yelled, and, arms wrapped around each other, they stumbled back home, breathless and weeping with terror.

The next morning their father was dead.